

“THE WATER GARDENS” - NEW ZYGAXIA -

The journey eastward was long and grueling. The Moonstruck Madness caused by the Greblix Aurora made travel by night nearly impossible, so the Zygaxian caravan was forced to move only during the day. Under the relentless sun, they trudged through the Ivory Wastes, a vast pale desert where the horizon blurred into mirages of endless salt flats.

“This blasted heat is making my bones creak,” Durgin grumbled, wiping sweat from his brow. “I’ve seen magma flows that were cooler.” He was a dwarf from the cold mountains of Zygaxia, and they were built for hard earth and underground caves. Walking on the soft, shifting sands for so long had made them all a bit cranky and disoriented.

“At least magma has the decency to glow,” Farrick Sunsinger muttered, adjusting his spectacles. The Professor of Illusions from the Amber Arcanarium seemed particularly perturbed by the endless, featureless horizon. “There’s nothing here to measure our progress or mark our bearings. It’s like walking through someone’s fever dream.”

The fog followed, thick and suffocating like noxious smoke that hugged the ground. It was neither dense enough to shield them from the sun’s glare nor thin enough to allow clear visibility.

“Stay close,” one of the Raustri guides cautioned. His voice was low, his eyes scanning the swirling mist with unease. “The air here is full of tricks. It’ll lead you into a pit or worse if you do not follow the patterns in the fog.” Without their help the caravan would have surely gotten lost within days, wandering in circles as the illusions teased them with false paths of safety, only to lead into more treacherous terrain to the south.

Katria, who was also walking nearby, had never been one for deserts, and this only reaffirmed her stance on the matter. She would much rather be in the cool, dense forests of her homeland, where the ground was soft underfoot and the air

full with scents of pine, lilac, and cedar. The Ivory Wastes offered only endless miles of dry lakebeds that seemed to leech the life out of everything. Sorel, one of Katria's bodyguards, frowned as they passed by another petrified tree that not even Katria could restore with her druidic spells. The older winter fey looked as though he belonged in a snowy tundra, but any discomfort was hidden behind his rough demeanor. "It's unnatural. This land smells of broken magic."

Nearby Willibald Battlecrag spat, "This is no place for anyone with sense," and his face twisted in disdain. The Patriar of Clan Deepmantle was a hard man, untrusting and sharp-tongued. "Whoever thought this path was a good idea should be dragged back to the mountains and tossed in a ravine."

"We're following the Empress's orders," one of the caravan guards reminded him, though his voice lacked conviction. "We don't have a choice."

"Choices are for people who plan to live long enough to regret them," Willibald snapped, his eyes narrowed as he glared at the guard. "Keep that in mind before you go kneeling to some devil-blooded queen."

The entire journey was like this, with no end in sight for weeks, until one day something new finally greeted the horizon. The Waste gave way to a lush plateau that rose up like a mirage in the distance.

"Finally," Durgin said in relief. "A place that doesn't look like it's going to kill us."

"Allegedly," his brother Burgin sighed, trying to keep his spirits high.

Thesila. An oasis nestled between northern mountains, where glaciers fed rivers that pooled into lakes on the plateau before flowing southward into a great basin. Thesila, with its towering spires and beautiful gardens. It emerged like a dream at the desert's edge, and the group could see three great pyramids crowning the tallest hills in the city. Each was painted a color in reverence to one of the moons that had once graced the night sky.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Farrick observed, his eyes alight with academic interest. “A perfect image of paradise for sore feet.”

“Or perhaps it’s just another illusion,” Sorel said softly, his voice doubtful.

While the caravan’s arrival had not gone unnoticed, it was clearly guided with a royal precision that left little to chance. The Raustri desert guides took them along a private road, away from the prying eyes of common citizens. The path wound through shaded groves, where the air was rich with blossoming flowers, and the soft murmur of babbling water could be heard as they crossed several irrigation canals. Eventually, the road gave way to an unremarkable gate set into the outer wall of the city. Beyond it lay the shortest route directly to an area called the *Water Gardens*.

The group was allowed to keep their weapons and possessions, but the boundaries set by their host were clear, and the opulence of the gardens suddenly felt like a gilded cage. They were instructed not to leave the grounds while the Empire drew up their traveling papers and inspected their cargo and crew—a task that would take several weeks. This was mostly reasonable given the total size of their company and the isolationist policies of the Resplendent Empress.

The cool air of the Water Gardens was a blunt contrast to the searing desert they had endured. Here, the pools, fountains, flowers and trees were meticulously arranged, creating an idyllic space that might have welcomed children at play were it not for the presence of outsiders. The sprawling complex was also adjacent to the Illusion Wellspring—better known to the locals as the *Moonspire*. It was one of the intended destinations of the caravan when they first set out on their quest, and now it was so close, yet just out of reach.

“They’ve put us in a pretty prison,” Willibald remarked, looking around the gardens with a frown. “It’s lovely, but we’re still trapped.”

“Better to be trapped in beauty than in a place like the Wastes,” Durgin said, though his voice carried little comfort.

The Thescilan hosts were unfailingly polite, regularly offering reassurances that the Zygaxians were honored guests, although the confinement within the Garden and the constant presence of servants hinted at growing tensions. Fawke, ever the skeptic, couldn't shake the feeling that they were being watched, not just by attendants, but by something more elusive. At his core, he was a wizard of action, not a conjurer of patience.

"I don't like this," Fawke muttered to Nemiriel as they walked through the Garden. "There's something here, something they're not telling us."

"You think the Empress has plans for us beyond travel papers?" Nemiriel asked, her voice low enough to not catch the ear of a nearby cupbearer.

Fawke shrugged. "Maybe. Or maybe there's something worse than the Empress lurking in these walls."

Among the courtesies extended to the caravan was a collection of books and histories detailing more about the Ossinian Empire. The texts were rich with tales of grandeur, diplomacy, and hardship, however as the group compared their readings, something unsettling became clear.

"It's as if they've erased every conflict from their history," Farrick mused, frowning at the pages before him. "No wars, no enemies, no struggles—how could that be?" The histories were strangely silent on all matters of disagreement, painting an empire that, while grand, seemed to exist in an unnatural state of perpetual peace.

"Maybe they want us to believe they're perfect," Sorel suggested, his tone skeptical. "Or maybe the truth is a threat to the Empress?"

After a week the strange dreams started.

At first, it was just Ahdrian. He'd wake in the middle of the night, heart pounding, the image of a figure still fresh in his mind. It was the visage of a ghostly king wearing a crown and humble brown robes, with symbols marking his face that no one recognized. In those dreams, the king wandered the halls of

the Water Gardens, his steps silent on the marble floors, his presence both eerie and somehow sorrowful. Ahdrian didn't mention him at first, fearing it might be tied more directly to his own past and one of the many dead faces buried in the lost memories of his previous life.

But then Syndra spoke up about the king. She'd seen him too, pacing the corridors just beyond her door. Soon, others admitted they'd seen him in their dreams. The ghostly king seemed to appear to them one by one, each night choosing a new dreamer.

"It's not just a dream," Syndra said to Ahdrian one morning. "I think there's something he wants from us, something he needs."

"Or something he's trying to warn us about," Ahdrian replied, his voice low. "Either way, we need to figure it out if only to get a full night's rest."

The royal attendants and servants said nothing of the specter when it was brought up, and the language barrier did not help. However, their eyes betrayed them. They would exchange nervous glances, indicating deeply held superstitions that they dared not voice for fear of punishment. And any who seemed like they might finally speak were quietly replaced the next day; their absences explained with vague excuses that repeated like a spell of arcane echo.

It was clear that the ghost was no dream, but propriety held the Dreamwalkers' tongues when it came to pressing for information. Fawke couldn't help but recall the dire warning given during their audience with the Empress. It wasn't the words that stuck with him, but the way *Discipline* said them, making it clear that the Empress did not give second chances. Not to mention, it would be especially poor manners to interrogate the servants of a royal host.

Ceilan also couldn't shake the feeling that something was off. As she stared out over the gardens one night, the shadows grew long under the Greblix Aurora, but its effects were mild and she was beginning to grow accustomed to it.

“You’re troubled,” Sorel’s voice broke the solitude, his tone as cold and sharp as a winter wind. He stepped out from the shadows, his eyes reflecting the faint light of the Aurora. “What is it?”

Ceilan hesitated, her gaze lingering on the darkened corners of the garden. “The king...the one we see in our dreams. I think he’s trying to tell us something—something that might be vital to our quest. When I saw him last, he was pointing at the Moonspire tower and holding an emerald in his left hand. But I can’t make sense of it.”

Sorel’s expression darkened and his brows furrowed. “Dreams are considered warnings when you are not walking in them. And spirits trapped between worlds sometimes seek to guide or to mislead as well as any illusion.”

She nodded, her unease growing. “I fear we’re being watched, even when we think we’re alone. This place...it’s too perfect, too controlled. It’s like we’ve walked into a carefully placed fishing net.”

Sorel glanced around, his gaze sweeping over the seemingly tranquil Gardens. “A trap wrapped in beauty is still a trap,” he agreed.

For now, the answers were hidden behind a currency of politeness and the quiet of the Water Gardens, but Ceilan knew one thing for certain: they had not arrived here by chance.

And the ghostly king walked in their dreams. ~

“Gold Rush” – Planet-X –

It was the only news making its rounds across the ‘Verse. Broadcast stations ran around-the-clock coverage of the event on all frequencies. The headlines read:

ICE PLANET STRUCK BY COSMIC STORM, MIRACLE ELEMENT LEAKING FROM CORE!

An image displayed with the caption showed a large blue rock of a planet, with a sizable chunk of layers missing down to the core. A strange golden material was visible on the shattered side and large chunks of orbiting debris.

By the end of the first news cycle, every major company had ships, drones, and their finest lawyers enroute to the Franca Sector in hopes of staking their claim on the nameless ice planet. And by day three, Spacers were receiving the news on every personal starship and data feed within five sectors. It seemed that every merchant, rock collector, research group, and mercenary squad who could rub two bits together was trying to get a piece of the pie. And wherever wealth and power were up for grabs, the pirate bands followed—from Irra to Ceti Prime—they started making moves, expanding their ranks, and readying ambushes on those who had already done the “hard work” of mining the stuff.

A sea of freighters, cruisers, and flotillas comprised of smaller vessels had begun to mass on the edge of Franca Sector where their hopes, fears, and dreams had coalesced into a present day “Terran Gold Rush.” Eventually the comparisons were made to the discovery of Planet-X, and there was plenty of speculation on how this event would upset the status quo. It felt inevitable that one group or another would stand apart and be written into the legends of history.

Elsewhere in Planet-X, a secret meeting was taking place. Lightyears from the ice planet, a mysterious figure sat at the center of a holo-comm table half encircled by large monitors. The room was too dark to make out their appearance, but their attention was solely focused on a glowing handheld datapad. They were swiping through pages of documents, pictures, and drafts of schematics that would be meaningless to an outside observer, other than the sheer extensiveness of the project. They seemed relaxed, sitting in a lev-chair that hovered silently over a

polished metal floor. A red light flashed on their console, and they sat up straight and then pressed the button.

Immediately, the monitors around the holo-comm table lit up, displaying a series of generic-looking humanoid outlines in dark grey. They were numbered sequentially, starting with the number 3 on the left, then clockwise through to number 8 with 3, 5, and 7 positioned above the other monitors. A commlink denoted that this room was for person number 2. The number 1 was also not present on the displays, but there was a monitor in the center that showed no activity and had a small 'offline' in the upper left corner.

The figure in the chair spoke, and as they did a pulse of blue light illuminated the edges of the console table, thrumming in time with their speech. *"I've just finished going over the initial reports again and, I must ask, how confident are we that this is the result of...Dreamwalker intervention? Are we not certain that it could have been—"*

"We know it was Dreamwalkers, for a fact." A voice interjected, the monitor showing the number 5 lit up with a border of red light. The voice was masculine, but the speech pattern was not enough to discern any species. *"All of our reports on the Terran Empire's great prison have only Dreamwalker individuals tampering with the station. As well as that confounded Captain Krall, who none have seen since that incident."* The voice trailed off.

Another voice began, this time with the number 6 lighting up in green. The voice was feminine, but it was clearly being translated through a program, indicating that the speaker likely could not speak Galactic Basic. *"Regardless of the whereabouts of the infamous Captain, the beast within was released from its containment. We must prepare all available resources for dealing with this creature before it does to the rest of the Federation what it did to the Terran Empire. I move to initiate the Blackwing Protocol and—"*

Another voice interrupted. The number 8 monitor pulsed with a teal light; their voice robotic. *"Of course, you would bring up that Protocol. That is an archaic plan, one no longer suitable for the scenario we now face."* They paused for a moment, and none of the other monitors spoke. *"We have the flight pattern of this creature's course, correct? We need to confirm its whereabouts before"*

*we move to any major decisions that may result in our expending of, need I remind you, **incredibly** limited resources.”*

There was another pause, but then the number 3 monitor spoke. Another masculine voice, this one clearly Terran in origin. *“We do have the telemetry data, yes, though I will admit it is not perfect. The sensor arrays capable of following the creature’s unique signature are very outdated and in need of repair, but...ah yes, here we are.”*

The voice continued, now sounding as if reading from a report. *“Following the release of containment from the Null Area, the being marked only as TEN-1 made an almost direct path for dark space. It made little impact to any major stations, trade-ways or hyperspace lanes, and no current reports or sightings of it have been made by private or civilian entities. The only marked casualty was the striking of one ice-planet just on the edge of Franca Space, where the creature’s signature was then lost.”*

“Ah yes. The new idol of admiration for all across the galaxy,” spoke up a voice from another monitor, this one labeled number 4. The voice was soft and feminine but gave the impression of an aged being, one old for their species, no matter which they belonged to. *“Speaking of which, have any reports come back yet on the debris field? How was something so miraculous as an element not yet discovered by the rest of our collective worlds? Did none of us ever attempt deep impact probes?”* Another pause following the series of questions, when the figure in the room spoke again.

“Based on my readings, it would appear that this element is only being detected on the debris field in orbit about the planet, as well as the fissure on the surface. As of now, this element has no name and can’t be found anywhere else on that cold rock.” The figure placed the device on the table, displaying a map of the planet, and swiped their finger across it, almost flicking it around the room. The image was then displayed on a new monitor, shared with all in this meeting of sorts. *“Our finest team of scientists have been sent to claim what they can and get better analysis. And our legal department is performing what they can to get us possession of the rest of the rock. Once*

that is done, we will finally place a name to both this barren world and its newfound resource, then we will have unfettered access to proceed with our plan. That sector of space has many areas we can use to continue our construction projects without prying eyes.”

The screens all then turn to life, a chorus of voices all speaking over one another, the display monitors pulsing in a vibrant array of colors. The words are hard to make out between all the sounds echoing through the room, but you distinctly hear the words *“Tech”* and *“League”* among them. This goes on for a few moments, even as the figure in the room attempted to settle the members in this conversation, but to no avail.

Suddenly, the middle screen flashed to life, displaying a large number 1 across the monitor in the sea of screens. The voices all cut to silence, none so much as murmuring through their communicators. Number 2, who you gathered had been leading the call up until this moment, tried to recover from the surprise entrance of this guest.

“Ah. Sir, I apologize for the mess. We were simply...”

“No need Vog’neir. I know what our next steps must be.” The voice was deep and old, unlike any of the voices you had heard thus far. Masculine in nature, but the feeling of decay seemed to almost wash over you as they spoke. The frame of the monitor pulsed with a golden hue as the speech began. After a brief moment, the voice continued.

“Claim the planet if we can, but resources for that can come later. I want to focus our efforts into Project Armada as we approach the next phase. I’ll need our finest analyst working on the data to develop programs as soon as possible.”

There was a collective flash of colors as the voices agreed in unison.

“Yes, sir.”

Then, the screens turned off and the room went dark. ~

“Promo” - Mundania 93 -

The factory hummed with the clank of machinery and the woosh of hydraulic arms shunting boxes and partially assembled items along miles of conveyor belts. The workers were a strange sight—uniforms crisp and clean, bright neon greens, yellows, and cyan glowing under the dull industrial lighting and punctuated by plain white hard hats. But the people wearing them were nowhere to be seen. Only the movement of their empty sleeves and pant legs gave the clear indication of their wearer. There were probably a thousand invisible hands at work piecing together a seemingly haphazard range of products with no clear audience shared between them.

On the assembly line, dozens of **Bud! The Thylacine Kigurumi Suits** rolled by, each one stitched from striped fabric that mimicked the pelt of the extinct Tasmanian tiger. The suits were soft and comfortable-looking, but there was an eeriness about them, as though the stitchwork was made of something alive. An unseen worker carefully folded each suit, tucking them into brightly colored boxes that bore the slogan, "Wear the Wild!"

A flicker of static cut across the Soulforge vision, pulling the mind back to a time of garish 90s commercials.

"Hey kids! Do you want hair like a ghost? Get the new line of Shane Spectre Hair Finish! Frighten your friends with hair so soft, it's scary! Available at your local retailer today!"

The jingle played on, catchy and upbeat, but the images on the screen were distorted, the smiles of the children were too wide and their eyes a little too vacant.

Back in the factory, the **Shane Spectre Hair Care** products slid down the line, their ghostly blue and white bottles glowing like the neon uniforms under the factory lights. Another empty uniform worker wrapped the bottles in shimmering, translucent packaging and the bottles clinked gently as they were loaded into boxes.

Further down the line was the next product, an **HK-Cyborg by Night Card Game**. The cards, dark grey like gleaming metal, were slipped into jet-black boxes embossed with metallic figures—half-man, half-machine—locked in eternal combat under a pale moon. The cards themselves whispered as a worker inspected them and performed a test shuffle. It sounded like the faint rustle of dry leaves in the wind. Then they were sealed away too, the boxes stacked neatly on a pallet awaiting departure.

Another commercial cut in.

"Want to be the best dressed at Camp Mirage? Get your hands on the new Flora Fir Bracelet Kits, now with super spooky charms! Be the envy of all your friends when you wear the shotgun charm or bloody oar—but beware...there's something in the water! It's the fishman charm!"

The commercial ended with a splash, the water red as the camera pulled back, revealing a small bracelet of monstrous charms dangling from the limb of a gnarled tree.

The **Flora Fir Bracelet Kits** were next on the line. Shotguns, bloody oars, and other tiny macabre charms were carefully arranged inside a blue satin-lined box. The bracelets were coiled and placed into black satchels with embossed campfire scenes, the flames dancing as the box caught the light.

Near the end of the line, **Lala Ball-Jointed Figures** awaited their turn. These off-yellow stuffed creatures defied description, their vaguely animalistic forms unsettling in their ambiguity. Were they cats? Dogs? Something else entirely? Each figure was stitched with staring beady eyes that were too small and seemed to follow the invisible workers as they put them in their packaging.

An electric guitar riff grew louder, then another commercial took over the vision.

"Get ready for battle with Legend Force Action Figures! Your favorite heroes, ready to take on the forces of evil with their mystic powers! But watch out..."

The screen flickered, the image briefly distorting as if someone was adjusting the rabbit ears on the vision. For a split second, the action figure's face twisted into a grotesque, monstrous grin before the commercial resumed.

“...not everything is as it seems!”

The commercial crackled with more static, the action figures flashing on the screen in rapid succession, each one striking a dramatic pose, and then it was back to the factory floor.

The **Legend Force Action Figures** were assembled with military precision. Their body parts snapped into place with the satisfying click of freshly printed plastic before they were boxed in pairs. The packaging was decorated with lightning bolts and swirling mists bursting outwards as though the figures themselves were charged with some mystical energy that wanted to be unleashed.

Finally, the **Sam Street Microphone Voice Changer** was packaged, its sleek design reminiscent of old-time reporter microphones. The voice changer crackled with static as it was tested, the distorted voices that emerged sounding like they were from another world altogether, but the inspector checked off an approval. The microphones were each placed into hard shell red packages covered in outlined figures meant to represent the people you might interview; however, their designs made them look more sinister and grimmer than mysterious.

Once all the products were boxed and sealed, they were loaded in a trailer behind a massive pair of doors that seemed out of place in the factory—smooth metal panels painted black and white with no identifying marks. The invisible workers moved with mechanical efficiency, loading the trailer until it was filled to capacity. Then, with a final hiss of hydraulic release, the doors slammed shut.

The scene shifted, cutting to a distant view of a launch pad. The “trailer” sat in the center, now revealing its true nature—a space shuttle prepared for launch. The logo on its hull, once invisible, now shimmered into view: a distorted “93” that was difficult to look at directly, as though it didn’t want to be seen.

The shuttle roared to life, its engines screaming as it lifted off the ground, climbing higher and higher into the atmosphere. The factory below shrank into the distance, fading into the dark void as the shuttle pierced the sky,

leaving the planet and any semblance of familiarity far behind in the cold
expanse of space.

The journey felt long with mere glimpses of the shuttle passing planets and
stars across an unmeasured distance for an unknown number of days. But
finally, something appeared on the horizon—a planetoid with its sun eclipsed
behind it and its features hidden in the planet's own shadow.

As the shuttle approached, its bay doors opened with a creak that seemed to
echo in the silence of space. The boxes were ejected, floating gently toward
the hidden surface of the planetoid.

Then, without warning, mechanical tendrils erupted from the darkness,
gleaming with a cold, oily sheen as they moved with unnerving fluidity. They
snaked out with impossible speed, their segmented, almost insect-like
structure flexing as they wrapped around the floating boxes with a disturbing
precision.

And then...nothing. ~

“Keys to the Kingdom” - Atlantis -

The Lady of Eels knew this day would come. It’s why she was forced to deal with the Dreamwalkers. And while she couldn’t be sure what chaos might come from them using such an important artifact, it was at least safer with them than it would have been in her hands at this moment.

Lady Eels' ship pulled up alongside an ostentatious Byblos-style sailing vessel that gleamed in the sunlight. Every surface looked silvered, and given the importance of this meeting, she wouldn’t be surprised if it was actually carved from silver and made to float using Artirma, a unique style of Leviathan magic. She breathed deeply, then took her place towards the back of the assembled servants as the gangway was set between the two ships.

Across the gangway walked a small assemblage of Tereshi, dressed in their finest robes. A brief conversation was held between the leads of each group of servants, then the Tereshi were patted down for weapons before being offered food and wine as a rite of hospitality. Following this, the newcomers were led before Lady Eels' personal servants to be searched once more and then directed to the top deck at the stern of the ship. With all of the proper assurances taken against violence, the main event was ready to start.

A door to the lower decks opened, and the Lady Eel appeared, wearing the face of Odessa. She moved gracefully to a small, narrow meeting table positioned between herself and the Tereshi delegation. Her handmaidens quickly swarmed her, straightened her gown, poured her wine, and set out a variety of dishes—a sampling of delicacies and local cuisine.

Among the offerings were subtle fillets of Glimmerfin, a translucent fish that shimmered with iridescent colors, served alongside a vibrant seaweed salad drizzled with coralberry vinaigrette. There were also platters of Sheldrift clams, their pearlescent shells opened to reveal the tender meat within, and small bowls of azure caviar harvested from the deep Abyssal Trenches.

Once the flurry of activity subsided, a horn sounded from the Tereshi ship. Stepping onto the gangway was the Ahku. They wore elaborate robes with silver inlay, an equally intricate *nemes* covering most of their head and a

silver face mask obscuring the rest of their features. They seemed to float across the gangway before settling down at the narrow table just across from Odessa, their presence almost looming despite the openness of the sea all around them. Their own servants mirrored the others until both parties had food set before them.

"It is an honor to receive the great Ahku on our humble ship. Tell me, how were your travels? I know the sea between our port and Teresh can be quite treacherous if one isn't lucky. Were there any issues on your end?" Odessa's words were sweet, welcoming, and filled with concern. But beneath the surface, she was sizing up her guest, trying to gauge how much they already knew.

The Ahku did not move or make a sound in response to the question, but their head servant quickly spoke up.

"We encountered some small difficulties with local wildlife, but nothing we couldn't handle. I hate to cut the pleasantries short, but we have business to attend to elsewhere. Shall we proceed with the discussion of the crown?"

"Yes, of course, the crown," Odessa said, her tone almost dismissive.

"Unfortunately, we no longer have that item."

The deck of the ship fell silent. The only sound was the slap of waves against the hull.

"Yes, it's very unfortunate," she continued. "I wish we could have reached out to you before you made the journey to save us both some time, but I figured this was information you would prefer to hear face-to-face rather than in a written letter."

The head servant spoke up again, more insistent this time. "And what happened to it? The crown is still very important to us."

"Well, it was being kept in Sanguine," Odessa answered smoothly. "You know how it is—someone must have swiped it while it was being transported from one place to another."

"Lies."

This time it was the Ahku who spoke. The voice from under the mask was softer than Odessa expected, but that did not stop it from commanding the attention of everyone on the deck. The Ahku did not move, the unchanging mask staring at Odessa.

"What...?" Odessa was momentarily taken aback. She gathered herself quickly and continued, "You're clever. You caught me. We never actually had the crown. This entire operation was about forging a fake and selling it off to—"

"Lies!" The Ahku spoke more forcefully now, cutting off Odessa mid-sentence.

"Lies? Lies?!" Odessa's eyes narrowed, her voice growing sharper. "I know what the Tereshi think of us, but this is out of hand. Speaking over me, cutting me off—this is a serious breach of protocol! I may not be in charge of a nation, but I AM the LADY EEL, and—"

"LIES!"

The Ahku's hand shot out, wrapping around Odessa's neck in a single motion. They slowly stood, lifting her out of her chair as she tried desperately to pry herself from the Ahku's iron grip.

"Please...I can...explain...just let—"

With a twist of their wrist, the Ahku snapped Odessa's neck. As her body dropped limp, the magics of the Eternal Current began to wear off. Slowly, the slick grey skin was replaced by bright red scales, and fins melted away into a long tail. The Ahku tossed the body of the dead Leviathan aside and turned to address the assembled servants.

"It is most unfortunate these negotiations could not remain civil. I looked forward to working with the infamous Lady of Eels. A debt was owed for the grave disrespect shown to me. The debt has now been paid with blood, and you will be compensated for the loss of your follower. I resume the rites of hospitality. No further harm will come to this crew and those who have partaken of your food shall leave in peace."

The Ahku's voice was flat and devoid of emotion. They drew no joy from this display of force. The real Lady Eel, still blending in with the other servants,

made herself look distressed to match their facial expressions. In reality, she was more disappointed that she had lost one of her body doubles. Training up another would take time and effort. Perhaps it was time to retire Odessa as a misdirection. It might be wiser to have each double create their own specific looks from now on. That way, they could act more naturally, and perhaps avoid being found out so easily.

"I will find the crown and return it to its rightful place—atop the head of a true ruler of Atlantis. But for now, give word to the Lady of Eels." The Ahku addressed the servants directly, but the Lady Eel could feel the Ahku's gaze zeroing in on her.

"Do not attempt to fool me again. The next time we meet, I promise I will be less accepting of lies."

The Ahku then returned to their ship, quickly followed by their servants and crew. The gangway was lifted, and the Sanguine ship sailed off towards port.

The head servant stood next to the Ahku as they both watched the ship leave.

"Shall we follow them?" the servant asked.

"No. They do not have the crown. That much was true. But there are other ways of locating the object again," responded the Ahku.

"Are you not worried? The artifact could be in anyone's hands. What if they use it to ruin your plans?"

The Ahku chuckled softly. "Do not worry about that, young one. While the item is impressive, its true strength can only be unlocked at Poseidon's seat of power. We hold half of what is needed to enter Poseidon's keep. So, either we will sniff out whoever holds the crown, or they will reveal themselves as they seek answers under the waves. Either way, we will be ready when the time comes. Worry not."

The Ahku placed a gentle hand on the servant's shoulder before disappearing into their quarters below deck. ~

"WHERE THE HORIZON LIES" - NEO MUKAI -

This forest was still young by the standards of most worlds, but its trees already rivaled those once found in the ancient forests of the first realms. It had been growing since the *Doom of Mukai* and now covered a hundred miles in every direction. At the center, it had swallowed up thousands of concrete structures—once proud monoliths that had scraped the sky—that could still be glimpsed through the dense canopy if you knew where to look. Their skeletal remains were overrun by nature's relentless return, and below the surface, a network of caves and caverns twisted with memories of a forgotten civilization.

Standing among the branches, a figure stepped carefully to conceal himself in the natural camouflage and blend in seamlessly with his surroundings. He was dressed in light furs and armor crafted from tightly woven cords and hard leather plates that overlapped like the chitin of a thunder lizard.

Someone else approached this part of the forest.

"Thresher Caidan," a voice called from below, the name drifting up through the trees like a song carried by the wind.

"Thresher Caaaaay-dan!" They emphasized the syllables.

The voice belonged to a young person standing barefoot on the forest floor. Their teal hair was bound in decorative strands of plastic-shielded wire and clear woven tubing, a stark contrast to the natural world around them. They wore a plainly stitched canvas pack and a wide, flattened conical hat that shielded them from the sun. Their eyes scanned the trees, searching for the figure they knew was watching from above. But the figure had already slipped back into the camouflage of the forest, a ghost among the leaves.

A sudden snap of a branch behind the child, and before they could react, a hand reached out from the bushes, aiming for their shoulder. With lightning reflexes, the child grabbed the wrist of the unseen figure and threw them to the ground with a force that made the earth rumble. They dropped into a low fighting stance,

the ground beneath them growling in response, ready to defend against any threat.

But then, the child's expression softened, and they fell backward into a fit of laughter.

Thresher Caidan lay sprawled on the forest floor, a look of dazed embarrassment on his face. He grimaced, gritting his teeth. "Gia, why didn't you soften the ground if you were going to throw me that hard?"

"What if you were an *Urservi*? Would you want me to soften the ground for them?" the child, Gia, replied, extending a hand to help Caidan up.

"You know that's not what I meant. I think you bruised my ribs," Caidan grumbled, rubbing his side.

"I think you're exaggerating, Brother," Gia said with a mischievous grin, giving him a quick jab to the torso. "That's not pain; it's your pride that is hurt," they teased but then quickly changed the subject, "Why are you out here Cade?"

"Because Grandmother Shizuka asked me," he said, matter-of-factly, as though that alone didn't raise more questions.

Gia was quick to oblige. "Oh, did she see something in the Yumeka root? Was it more dome-dwellers? Are we being attacked by the poison-water spirits? Or is Atlas City ready to march?"

"Calm, Gia. Calm. I don't know what I'm keeping watch for, but I was told I would when I see it."

"Oh, well, that's boring. At least Varik gets to train with his flame silks."

"It's not a game, Gia. If Varik ever has to use that technique on more than wire dummies, it will be followed by great pain and sadness."

Gia shifted uncomfortably at the thought of Varik throwing a whip of fire at an *Urservi* warrior. "It won't come to that. Why would Anikami fight other Anikami?"

"Because people are complicated when it comes to their beliefs," Caidan said, resigning to change the subject. "Now, do you want to touch the sky or not?"

Gia's eyes lit up with excitement as Caidan took his younger sibling's hand and led them to the edge of the clearing. Caidan moved his hands in a circular motion, causing the air around them to ripple. A vertical line of cosmic magic appeared, like a crack in reality that hung in mid-air. He stepped forward, and the ripple passed over them, making them vanish from physical space.

A moment later, Gia was standing in the Spirit World. They extended their hand, marveling at the glowing outline that now surrounded their physical form. When they glanced over at Caidan, he had taken on a visage of armor that gave him the animalistic features of a panther, with arms that extended into long mantis-like blades where his hands should be. The spirit world felt warm, as lifeforce and soul flowed around them and up into a forest that was ten times the size of the one they had just left. They felt like ants standing at the roots of a great tree, and with an act of willpower, they were flying, moving forward with impossible grace and speed. Then, as quickly as they had entered, they stepped back into the physical world—this time, on top of a monolith of concrete.

From this vantage point, Gia and Caidan could see to the horizon. At one end was an unremarkable yellow dome that seemed out of place, as though a second sun had been glued to the ground without any light or warmth beyond a flat glow marking its intrusion on the natural world. Below them was a hundred miles of urban sprawl, now overtaken by the old forest. Gia couldn't fathom how so many people could have lived in one place and imagined how tightly packed the streets might be. A shiver of claustrophobia ran down their spine as they turned their attention elsewhere. At the other end of the horizon was the hurricane. Some called it the Everstorm, but an older story named it Nimbus, the sibling of the god-king. It was a story that had been told to Gia for their entire life and the lifetimes of their parents and grandparents—a tale of the hundred-year storm.

Gia squinted at the storm. "Cade, what is that?"

"Uh, the Everstorm? Nimbus? What riddle are we playing today?"

"Look!"

Caidan turned his head and saw a breach open in the storm, the clouds and hurricane winds moving around the gap. He could make out something just beyond it. He reached for his scope, but Gia was faster. As Gia peered through the lens, their mouth dropped open.

"It's a great windmill.....with a circling light on top!"

Toshi sat slumped in the corner of his cell, his back pressed against the cold, unforgiving metal wall. The room was a claustrophobic nightmare, a steel box with a single flickering bulb hanging from the ceiling like a dying sun. The air was thick with the stench of sweat and acrid fumes, a scent that had become all too familiar over the past month.

A month.

'Thirty days' since the Mora had dragged him from his sanctuary of oltek and CRT screens and thrown him into this hellhole. Thirty days of isolation, waiting for something—anything—to happen. His hair hung in greasy strands over his eyes, his clothing stained and rumpled. There was barely enough room to stand or lie down to his full height. He'd scratched a crude calendar into the wall but wasn't sure if he could trust it. So, he settled on calling it '30 days' to keep himself from losing his mind.

But today, something was different.

As Toshi stared at the floor, lost in his thoughts, a faint beep echoed through the cell. He looked up, his heart skipping a beat as he saw a tiny device roll across the floor, coming to a stop just inches from his foot. It was small, almost unnoticeable, but it blinked with a light that was as clear to him as a flare against the dome's night sky.

A message.

Toshi snatched the device off the floor, his hands trembling as he deciphered the blinking light. It was a code, a series of flashes that only someone like him could understand.

“Help coming. Stay strong.”

The words sent a jolt of adrenaline through his body, and there was a flicker of pixelation on his hands as the device vanished.

Then came a voice, cold and mechanical, echoing through the cell. “Prisoner Delta-8346-Delta. We just registered a sudden rise in your brain activity. Report.”

Toshi couldn’t feel the apparatus but he knew it was there, so he tried to mask his adrenaline spike by shaking the cell’s projectors.

“I am in a simulation. It’s not real!” he lied, more to himself than to the disembodied voice.

“So, you believe,” the computerized voice retorted, “Digital Terror Cells are illegal after all.”

The cell returned to silence. Toshi focused on his breathing, forcing himself to stay calm. He knew his body was being maintained by the system while his mind was projected into the cell. He knew it was a simple but effective method to make people talk if they allowed the simulation to trick them. He knew there were signs—the lack of muscular atrophy, the absence of hunger and other bodily functions. Breathing was simulated when you paid attention to it, but the smell was there to mask that truth, just like the grime on his hair and clothes, which never seemed to change. Either that, or he had already gone completely insane, but then none of this would matter anymore.

Toshi didn’t have time to dwell on that, though. He knew the Mora wouldn’t leave him alone for long, and if they found the device in a code sweep of the logs, his chances of survival would drop to zero. He focused on shaking the apparatus again. He felt an invisible wire in his left hand, and he urged his hand to pull it. If he could just..

The light turned red.

Yes! he mentally screamed. For the first time in a month, hope flared in Toshi’s chest, but he buried it deep down. It was a fragile thing, barely more than a flicker, but it was enough to keep him going. Whatever was coming, he would be ready.

All he had to do was survive a little longer. ~

“THROUGH THEIR EYES” – OPUS –

The bright lights of her vanity mirror really did make the Hex look beautiful, even with the shame it brought. There would be no hiding it now. The shimmering hexagonal scarring had spread from being easily concealed beneath a shrug to stretched over her arms and now it was branching onto her face. She could already feel it under her unmarred skin as she touched her face, hard angular scales just beneath the powder. She finished removing her makeup and noticed that her neck felt stiffer. She had known—but not acknowledged—for weeks that it was more than just her age that was making it hard to move.

As she looked at her reflection, memories of past performances flooded her mind. The way the crowd’s applause once filled her with life, the thrill of hitting that perfect note—it all felt like another world now. Her body had been her instrument, finely tuned, but now it felt like it was betraying her. Yet the Hex had thankfully stayed away from her throat and lungs. Far enough away that she could still sing. For now, at least.

Timidly, Thibault Sylvestre knocked on the door to her dressing room before pushing it open. The graying around her manager’s temples, which he always insisted made him look distinguished, only served to accentuate the concerned father act he was putting on—despite being only a few months older than her. Aurore remembered when they first met, how his confidence had been reassuring on her first big stage. Now, his eyes were full of the same concern she had seen when she fell during a rehearsal just a month prior.

“My dear, do you think it is wise to keep performing? I think it might be time we talk about...” Thibault trailed off, visibly steeling his resolve to actually say the words that Aurore had been dancing around since the Hex had crept over her shoulder last month.

He cleared the phlegm from his throat and pushed forward. “I think we need to seriously consider hospice.” His hand found hers and he held it without reservation, his face now full of worry.

Aurore just smiled that damn smile that would haunt him for the rest of his days. “Why Mr. Sylvestre, are you worried about little old me?” She laughed like she just had a cough, but there was a twinge of something sour in her voice.

Thibault looked pained. “Maybe if you stop performing—”

She cut him off. “You know that’s not me. One more show. Please, Thibault. If you ever loved me. Just one more, a real finale, and then I will let you take me to the hospital. I just...” She trailed off, seemingly out of energy, but then she smiled again, weakly, but so sincerely.

Thibault sighed, knowing full well that he was not going to convince her. “Of course, I... ..I’ll make up posters. Give me three days. You rest and I will make sure that we give them the best show you have ever done. And then!” he paused and took both her hands in his hands. “Then. We can take care of you. Please, Aurore.”

It had been a long time since he was in this room, Nikkeil thought. Perhaps the first time since he was a child, even, but really it looked so different from what he remembered of his aunt and uncle’s rooms that he couldn’t be sure. As it stood now, Queen Clavelina’s personal drawing room was decorated immaculately. He knew, of course, that she probably changed the decor regularly and that it was always equivalently perfect in its appointment. Today it was a large painting which was serving as the central focus of the room. The painting dominated the north wall, and it seemed that the rest of the room had been further arranged to enhance it and draw one’s eye to it. A small plaque near it was engraved:

“Shattered Skies”

by Lucien Arsenault

oil on canvas

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It was rather moving, he thought. Nikkeil had already seen it at the unveiling and following auction, but Clavelina’s arrangement of it seemed to have brought new life into the piece—a quality that even the artist himself might not have conceived of. He would have to let Lucien know next time he saw him.

Halfway through a sip, Nikkeil zoned back into the conversation. “—and I don’t know exactly what happened, but it was truly miraculous!” It appeared that Alexandre was telling the Queen of S.o.f.f.i’s visit to the hospice with him. Clavelina appeared intensely interested, which, come

to think of it, was highly unusual for her when her husband was speaking. Nikkeil's curiosity was piqued—Clavelina was not one to show such interest in anything related to hospice care, of all things.

As Alexandre finished his retelling of events, Clavelina looked at S.o.f.f.i and smiled. "How wonderful you were able to bring such peace and... healing, to those people. What was it that you sang to them?"

S.o.f.f.i looked thoughtful, making a face reminiscent of the painting of King Sylvaine hanging in the west wing hallway near the solarium. "I... do not believe I was thinking. I was just playing what felt right at the time." S.o.f.f.i nodded slightly as though to affirm its statement, at least in part to itself.

"That is just wonderful! Do you think you would be able to sing that song for me? Or do you not remember it?" Clavelina asked in a carefully casual manner, seemingly trying to hide her curiosity. Nikkeil wondered why his dear cousin was so interested in this but was not about to endanger his seat at the table by asking outright. S.o.f.f.i, for its part, went completely motionless.

Nikkeil noticed Clavelina's gaze hardening ever so slightly, a subtle change that only someone who had grown up with her would catch. It was as if she was trying to peer into the former statue's soul, seeking something that wasn't there—or perhaps something that S.o.f.f.i wasn't ready to reveal.

After a brief and uncomfortable pause, the conversation moved on despite S.o.f.f.i remaining firmly frozen in place. Alexandre began chattering about his plans to begin the allocation of funds for a new hospice in a presently underserved region, and Clavelina simply fixed her gaze on S.o.f.f.i as if she was trying to decipher a code hidden within the silence.

A small basket of neatly folded clothes was already sitting on a stool in the attached water closet of her room in the Dancing Girl Hotel when Theodore woke up. On inspection, they were of a dated but still distinctly familiar style and were most definitely of a make from Eternity rather than some local artisan. Not up to her normal standards, obviously, but they would have to do. The room and even the water

closet seemed to be made with accessibility in mind and gave her no trouble with navigating it in her chair or with getting herself cleaned up and presentable. She managed to make it all of the way here, the behind the scenes of her universe, but she would need to get her legs working properly if she wanted to slip past her guards.

Don't get ahead of yourself, she thought. You do not know that for sure. You just know something happened. What you need is actual data.

After a quick examination of her prosthetics to ensure that everything was still in working order, she pulled them on and, after attaching and triple-checking all of the proper connection points, tried to use Ambiance to make them work like usual. The problems began, though, as her usual activation sequence—more familiar than perhaps any of her other procedures—seemed as if it was trying to catch hold of the prostheses but instead slipped away as she went at speed through the process. After a few failed attempts, each more frustrating than the last, she slowed the entire sequence way down to make sure she was doing everything correctly and that she wasn't missing a step in her haste. The magic finally caught that time. It took, she estimated, about 50% longer than it usually did, but at least it worked. *Maybe it's just this place, she thought, you'll have to test it if you ever get out of here.* She stood, gingerly, as though the spell might lose cohesion, but after a moment or three of sustained verticality she began pacing back and forth across the apartment.

The click of a key in the lock and a subsequent knock on the door startled Theodore out of her contemplative reverie. She slowly walked over, trying to play up the shaky prosthetics that her thus-far only contacts had seen, and opened it to find an unattended tray cart with a coffee service and a plate with a clear glass cover, presumably to keep it warm. She brought it in, taking the opportunity to peer down the hall to see if she could see who left it. There was a corner around which a child's face with a full head of braided and oddly grey hair was peering back at her. The little girl appeared healthy, albeit strangely pale, and she squeaked and scampered away when she saw Theodore looking back at her.

Theodore took her food in, eating just enough of it to allow her the strength and focus to plan her escape attempt. She did make a preliminary excursion down the hall, mostly to see if the door would be

locked still, but stopped when she saw the girl again. The child was dressed in all black, a smaller size of the uniform that the woman who had shown her to her room was wearing, which emphasized the strange pallor of her skin and grey hair. This time the princess also noticed that her large eyes appeared to have solid white irises, with only the black dots of her pupils to indicate where she was looking. The girl froze with her mouth half open, as though she had been entirely expecting the hallway to herself, but even without any signs of being turned in for an escape attempt, Theodore thought it best that she returned to her room. She planned instead to try later at night to avoid the curious child.

When she went to bed, Theodore slept fitfully. She had meant to wake herself up later that night, but when she finally awoke it was already well into the morning. It must be her lack of attention to her physical form, she decided, and she proceeded to spend the day making sure she ate enough and stretched. As an attempt at gathering information, she read through the books which had been left in the room, but they were that sort of trashy romance that pervades all realms and while illuminating in regards to some odd physical differences, such as the presence of tails and horns in at least some of the population, it did not give much useful information on society in general, or really anything of use to her at all. The only other strangeness that she could pin down was that descriptions of color were almost nonexistent in the books. There were many specific shades of white, black, and grey, but it really seemed like outside of an astonishingly detailed greyscale that there was only one word ever used to indicate color, regardless of what that color was (and she couldn't decipher that well). But perhaps that was merely an error of the Soulforge's translation.

Theodore snuck out of her room late that night and successfully made it out of the hotel. The architecture was still such a juxtaposition of styles familiar and totally foreign that it was almost dizzying. She decided different was better and took off in a direction that looked the least like anything she recognized. It was slow going, unfortunately. Her legs were still just not working quite right, despite taking an extra day to practice, and her efforts not to be seen slowed things down even more. Luckily, it seemed that just being out of the Dancing Girl was enough to give her new data points. The street lights seemed to be partially familiar Lumenflora, even down to the species, but were interspersed with

strange structures housing glowing glass orbs that began to hurt her eyes if she looked at them for too long. When she peered into houses, she was amazed the lamps seemed to turn off with a switch or a pull without the shade closing.

About a block from the Dancing Girl, Theodore had to sit on a box in an alleyway, intending only to rest for a minute before continuing.

“Done with your jaunt, Princess?”

She jerked her head up and was greeted with the unwelcome sight of the man she had seen watching her hotel room when she used the Ballad of Broken Dreams, leaning against one wall of the alley. She did not have the energy nor wherewithal to fight him as he gently led her back to the Dancing Girl.

The next morning, early, the man she had heard called Loutrel appeared at her door. He once again wore a strangely cut white-on-black pinstriped suit. Something was off about how it hung, she noted, but it could have just been the cut, which was odd in how far it hung from the body. He smiled, somewhat mechanically, and told her he had booked her passage home and made sure there was someone there with train tickets back to Novais to meet her.

“Word to the wise,” he said as he pushed her chair through the deserted streets. “Best not to talk much about your...*vacation* here. In a good scenario, people think you’ve lost it, but worst case...”

He sucked his teeth and trailed off, pointedly leaving that scenario up to her imagination. Theodore felt a shiver run down her spine as the weight of his warning settled in.

They finally came to a strange-looking building, as if a well had been built up instead of into the ground, and Loutrel hurried her inside.

“Listen, Princess, this is not going to be the most comfortable. You were never meant to be here and we really don’t have any sort of proper accommodations for you, or frankly for anyone. It’s just not a pleasant method of transportation. If you get dizzy, just close your eyes and don’t look at the water; it’ll just make you seasick. Well. Close enough to seasick.” Loutrel turns her and pushes her chair backwards into the oddest elevator that Theodore had ever seen, essentially just a metal box connected to a rope disappearing up into the darkness above.

“I firmly hope to never hear from you again, Princess, because it will make both of our lives significantly easier. Forget this place, forget my face, and pretend none of this happened.” He tipped his wide brimmed hat and slid the door closed, and Theodore watched him through the window in the door as he started operating some series of levers on a wall nearby.

The box started to rise. It took hours. Through the glass in the door and the grated metal below her chair, she saw a glimpse of spots of light disappear below her, and then eventually a haze of light that shone across the window until finally she saw a rainbow mist obscure most of the view. When the box finally came to a stop, the door was opened by a waif of a girl and her full color felt like when Theodore woke up from the Dreaming.

“Princess Theodore! I’ve heard so much about you. I’d say it’s lovely to meet you, but it ain’t, and I’d introduce myself, but it’s better for us both if I don’t. Can you manage a flight of stairs? I can get the chair up ‘em, but not while you’re in it.”

Theodore stood, almost automatically, stepping out of her wheelchair and into a poorly lit but vibrant cellar. She was gestured up the stairs as the woman rolled up her sleeves and hoisted the chair out of the lift with only a mild amount of profanity. The top of the stairs came out behind an empty bar, but as she attempted to analyze her surroundings further, the thunk of her wheelchair hitting the ground behind her startled her out of contemplation.

“Alright, let’s get you out of here and onto your train before I get in any more trouble for chasing off business.” ~

“Lif”

The girl moved through the shantytown like a shadow, her bare feet kicking up dust on old streets made of patchworked asphalt and her heart pounding with the thrill of dawn breaking over a new day. She couldn't have been more than twelve, maybe thirteen, that age where childhood clings to you like summer's end, just before the cold winds of adolescence begin to sharpen you. Her name was Lif, but no one in this ramshackle, half-alive place knew her by that name. To them, she was just another street rat, a skinny thing with a mop of tangled hair and mischievous eyes.

The town was a mess of contradictions—carts and stalls overflowing with produce and fresh fish sat right alongside tech so advanced it seemed to hum with a life of its own. The kind of place where you could buy a loaf of bread and a neural implant from the same vendor if you had the caps. Lif had seen places like this before, but today was different. There was something new here, something that made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up, like a whisper carried on the breeze.

She ducked behind a stack of crates with a stifled giggle, her shoulders tensed with the effort of keeping silent. Ahead of her, just beyond the crates, two figures stood at the entrance to a concrete guard tower, leaning against a rusted railing that looked like it might give way if the wind blew too hard. The settlement had grown around the tower, with clotheslines and makeshift water collectors clinging to it like barnacles on the hull of a ship. The bones of old Paradiso and the scars of the eternal war were still visible if you knew where to look—the embellishment of three maple leaves, bullet holes and plasma burns that had faded with time, or the initials 'N.C.' marking the remnants of a long-dead republic.

The first figure had an arm that didn't belong to him, not really. It was too perfect, too fluid, a limb made of liquid metal that rippled in the sunlight. He was smiling, a look of contentment on a face that hadn't known rest for a life-age. The other was a woman—her skin had a bluish tint like she'd just stepped out of a freezer, and crystals clung to her like frost on a windowpane. Her eyes

were sharp, scanning the town with a predator's focus, even here, where most would feel at ease.

Lif hunkered down, straining to hear their conversation. Eavesdropping had become her favorite pastime since she had woken up from the long night—what some of the elders called the Endless Sleep. There was something about these stories that kept pulling her back, like a moth to a flame.

“Who'd have thought the tree and the town would flourish this fast?” The man with the metal arm—Tyr, she'd heard him called—spoke with a voice like gravel, rough and deep. “Well, outside of *those two*, of course.”

“You never saw our Yggdrasil when it was young, did you, Tyr?” the woman replied, her voice distant like the wind that blew off the mountains. “World Trees reflect the health of a realm, and this one's growing so fast even the old man was surprised.”

Lif followed their gaze, her eyes narrowing as she looked up at the massive shadow that loomed over the town. The tree—no, *the* Tree—was like nothing she'd ever seen, its daysilver bark gleaming in the sunlight, branches twisting up toward the sky like they were trying to claw their way out of this world and motes of light drifting down from the budding leaves. Kids played in the branches, and just an hour ago, she'd been among them, laughing as she gave chase to the little creatures—Sprites, the adults called them—that now swarmed the Tree like bees around a hive.

Something caught her attention. Lif focused on one of the lower branches, and for a moment, she could have sworn she saw the shadows twist and dance, forming a silhouette: a woman in a wide-brimmed hat, tipping it in her direction. But before Lif could be sure, a breeze rustled the leaves, and the shadow melted back into the tree, leaving her blinking in confusion.

The conversation above her pulled her attention back.

“I heard from one of the Remnants,” Tyr said, his metallic fingers tapping against the railing, “that someone burst into the meeting at the new capital building—*lðavöllr*, they're naming it—and gave everyone a scare.”

The woman, Skadi, glanced at him, her expression unreadable, but her tone carried a hint of amusement. “It's not often you hear about someone bursting

into a meeting at without it being bad news. I imagine the room went dead silent.”

Tyr chuckled softly. “It did, but for once, the news was good. Apparently, one of the Eidos leaders, Kazimir, woke up from the coma he was in. They finally had the tech to remove the shrapnel lodged in his brain.”

A crackle of static broke the moment as speakers throughout the town sparked to life. “Come one, come all, to our annual Beat Down Showdown! Watch as the Grind Champions take on the newcomers!” The announcement echoed through the streets, followed by the roar of motors and cheers that rumbled like distant thunder.

“Speaking of shows,” Tyr continued, a grin tugging at the corners of his mouth, “did you hear that madman Doomherald opened a casino? Some kind of finger-themed nightmare. The fact that he’s now the leading man in entertainment is baffling. But I guess you wouldn’t know much about it, seeing as you’ve been with the old man. How’s he holding up, anyway?”

Lif felt a tap on her shoulder and nearly jumped out of her skin. A pale raven perched beside her, its beady eyes watching her expectantly. With a sigh, she dug into her pockets and pulled out a handful of shelled peanuts, placing them on the crate. The bird pecked at them, seemingly satisfied, while she strained to catch the rest of the conversation.

“He’s been busy,” Skadi had replied, her voice tinged with rare warmth. “Awakening the rest of the sleepers, bit by bit. He also says the Dreaming is slipping away, so its threats to us are almost gone. And he’s excited about something, like he’s got that old spark back. When last we talked, he was on about an old Skidbladnir receiver suddenly coming back to life, picking up a signal. Only one of *those things* ever came back online, and he stashed it deep in the caverns to the northeast. This one’s different though. Instead of rusted metal, it’s an emerald green.”

Skadi paused, and for a moment, Lif thought she saw a smile flicker across the woman’s icy face. “The last time he got like this, he traveled to eight other realms and we didn’t see him for five millennia. The people here and our own refugees have barely settled and he’s talking about leaving again. The old man

has got that wanderlust in him, the kind that only comes when the world is at peace.”

The conversation drifted into more mundane matters, and Lif felt her attention waning. The raven beside her let out a sharp cry before taking off, fluttering away into the sky. Lif didn't waste any time; she sprinted to the edge of town where her hover bike was waiting, the white raven perched on the handlebars, looking almost smug.

She hopped on, revving the engine as she shot off into the plains.

What had once been a field of glass was now teeming with life—wildflowers and tall haygrass swaying in the breeze, the ground itself buzzing with energy. It wasn't long before she left the town behind, the landscape shifting as she neared a place they called the Farm. The Techno Farmers who lived there were a strange lot, polite but distant. Their crops grew with an unnatural vigor which meant the ground beneath their feet was always pulsing with a low hum of electricity. Lif usually liked to stop there for a snack, but not today. The raven squawked, reminding her of where she needed to go.

The broadcast dish loomed on the horizon, growing larger as she approached. Lif slowed down, her bike humming softly as she came to a stop. The raven hopped off and led her to an old radio tower, its skeletal frame wrapped in shadows that seemed to move on their own, as if storm clouds perpetually lingered above it. The place should have felt ominous, but to Lif, it was like coming home.

She followed the raven to a field of strange purple flowers that thrived in the shade of the tower. A man knelt among them, watering the blooms with a gentleness that seemed at odds with the frayed lab coat he wore. It was tattered, stained with the years, but beneath it, his clothes shimmered with a rich purple hue that seemed to denote his kingly demeanor. A second raven, this one as black as the Void, perched on his shoulder.

Before she could approach the old man, another figure emerged from the radio bunker—Beowulf, a woman whose name and deeds were legend. A single glance from the fabled hero pinned Lif to the spot. “You know better than to bother your grandfather while he's gardening,” she said, her voice kind but firm.

Lif pouted, kicking at the dirt. “Yes, Beowulf,” she muttered, sulking as she turned toward the tower. She threw a glance over her shoulder and quietly mumbled under her breath, “How come you’re the only one that gets to bother him?” But she wasn’t quiet enough.

Beowulf responded on the wind with a soft whisper that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at once. “Because I promised I wouldn’t leave again.”

The All-Father looked up from his flowers, a smile tugging at his lips, a spark of mischief in his eyes. He saw beyond the fields, beyond the tower, to realms and universes unseen but calling out to him, whispering promises of discovery and adventure. He could feel it—a budding story on the horizon, and this time he would not be alone.

But perhaps first, he might enjoy a little peace on this small world of miracles.

“Against impossible odds...

*...the realm of **Liflund** was saved.”*

~End