



### Prelude

## **The Borderlands | Dalkaria**

Along the great borderlands of the Dalkarian Empire is a megalithic temple ensconced within the cliff face of the Allura caverns. Here, the sage Kiyoltik Masurai meditates before the panoramic threshold of the Fallharian Deadlands.

In the foreground of this scene, a consul of the royal court enters the ellipsoidal chamber, adorned in simple shades of thick fabric, the intrinsic geometric patterns of his flesh illumines a phosphorescent white. “Erethrendai, Gran Keltea Masurai.”

The Gran Keltea, firmly planted in his lotus posture, nods his head and gestures to the cushion beside him. “Erethrendai consul Vilhahn. Welcome.”

Vilhahn shambles into the indicated seat, shuffling his garments around as he makes himself comfortable. Meanwhile a servant enters with a ceramic tea set and places it noiselessly before the Gran Keltea.

The elderly man begins pouring tea for the consul member. "How fares my nephew?"

"His exalted is in good health," Vilhahn begins. "However, I am afraid recent audience with the Gran Celestial has unsettled him."

Setting the kettle down, Masurai hands the cup to Vilhahn. "All things in the world perturb those in authority." The elderly man raises his cup in unison with the consul; "good health."

The two sip in silence for a time. When both their cups are lowered Vilhahn speaks. "The Gran Celestial Kalakurik of Zastasia has informed the council of recent activity involving the ancient pillars."

Before his response, Masurai ruminates for a moment. "Such a shard is beyond destruction and construction, as it appears, it will disappear. This deifacted artifact is not swayed by natural law." He sips from his cup. "Those were the words of Eldaeon's progeny; Ketroas."

"Even in modernity, daeitik shards of such technological make and advancement are yet to be realized." Vilhahn comments. "However, there is no denying the anomalous impact of the ancient pillars." The consul considers something before continuing. "We've accounted for all deifacted shards on record, yet none encapsulate the nature of the pillars."

Masurai refills their cups. "If such a record exists, it will not be in possession of the Cultural Heritage Repository."

"If not the repository, where else might one seek out this information?" Vilhahn brings the steaming cup to his lips. "Surely not the Euridian records?"

Masurai blows the steam from his cup. "The scholarly sages of Euradai are deeply rooted in Alvarrian methodologies." He sips. "Consider the particular emanation of the pillar's Daevik and Sattvik infusion."

The consul's eyebrows raise in mild astonishment. "You're not suggesting..." he pauses, reconsidering his thought processes. "It does stand to reason..." he mumbles to himself. "Daskalania?"

"Of this I cannot be certain, however, nowhere else does Daevik energy deeply root itself outside of Dalkaria." Masurai sets his cup down.

"Regarding these Dalkarian matters Gran Keltea, his exalted has petitioned your wisdom on a particular daeitik artifact."

The elderly man indicates his full attention with a nod.

"There are whispers among the Drahstrahelion ambassadors, of a thief in the night whomquisitioned, quite skillfully, the Dusk Shard." Vilhahn settles his cup with a reverb that dominates the soundless atmosphere.

Gran Masurai does not speak until the contents of his cup is drained. "Your thoughts?"

Vilhahn's gaze pores over the wasteland. "This time I am in agreement with his exalted's perturbation. Kalakurik is not one to assert the potentiality for danger without proper reasoning and deductions.

"Before my departure from the capital, the little doubt that persisted were erased when celestials from Eujehanim shared news of Drahstrehl's sudden, unannounced self-isolation."

"Such self-isolation is not totally unheard of." Masurai responds.

"Indeed, however, in times of peace..."

"Times of peace exist only alongside those times without."

"What do you suggest, what shall I confer with his exalted?"

"Observation for the time being. I will present myself to the appropriate authorities of the world on my nephew's behalf, and in time I will make an appearance to my nephew himself. Advise him that Dalkaria will not interfere in this particular affair."

In that light of the panoramic threshold, the Gran Keltaea rises from his lotus posture.

# VOLUME

-I-

## Irithelle | The Silver Alps: I

In the early brisk of Dawn, the woods are teeming with the sounds of wildlife. Noaki wakes in a makeshift encampment feeling at odds with his surroundings. He possesses no recollections from the day prior, and all aspects that make up his identity has been swiped cleanly from his mind.

He checks his person for anything that might induce a memory. The pockets underneath his bearskin overcoat reveals three hefty sacks of gold and silver coins. A ball of animal fat, dried meat, nuts, and berries all tightly compacted together and wrapped in parchment. The last of these items, a leather pouch, contains a dazzling opal radiating gentle pulses of luminous energy. He studies the stone a few seconds before returning it to its pouch.

Though rather interesting items, nothing on his person induces a memory.

On the ground beside him lays an obsidian longbow with an intricate woven design. He slings the bow over his shoulders, and though no memories come to mind, the additional weight feels familiar to him.

Slivers of morning sunlight begin to slip through the thick treetops. In the west he makes out the outlines of towering silver mountains, their peaks capped in snow. The golden curtain of dawn steadily climbs down their sloping forms.

Propelled by a sudden spark of energy, Noaki decides to retrace the imprints his footsteps left behind from a time he cannot recall.

His footprints lead him to a roaring creek fresh from the spring melt of the eastern mountains. Here his footprints end at the borders of budding verdure. After mulling over alternative routes he proceeds to follow the downward current of the creek.

This leads him further south, on a path that propels him to clamber awkwardly over thick vegetation and slippery moss covered boulders. Where he finds himself stepping in pools of icy water, thick mukluks protect his legs.

The creek empties into a large river with the width that spans a few kilometers flowing southward. By now the sun reaches its apex and Noaki wonders how far he'd trekked. Gratefully where the creek ends he comes across a winding road that trails alongside the river.

He rests atop a wide stone bridge conjoining the road over the creek. While he considers his predicament he nibbles a good portion from the ball of compacted foodstuff wrapped in parchment. The foodstuff tastes familiar. Not a single memory exists before waking up, if they did, they were unrelenting to be known.

The serene sounds of the water and forest are soothing to his ears and stave off the growing anxiety in his chest. He considers the time and if eventually he can't find civilization, he'd once again find himself rising from the forest floor. He attempts to put this thought in the back of his mind.

Sufficiently sated and rested, he continues his journey southward, testing his fortune downstream. Without the burdening difficulty of navigating through natural land formations, he makes decent progress within a few hours.

Far off from the treetops he makes out plumes of smoke from a nearby residence.

Noaki rouses himself to close the distance quickly when not a few minutes later he comes upon a few acres of land enclosed by short stone walls. The land appears to have been recently cleared for agriculture, and a few paces off, he sees his first familiar face plowing the fields with the assistance of a bull. He doesn't hesitate, as soon as the face brings some form of recognition into his mind, he hops over the wall to greet the youth with sandy brown hair.

It doesn't take long for the farmer to take notice of Noaki's approaching. A similar look of recognition flashes across his face, then confusion, and finally a wide crooked grin. "Noaki!"

"Moritz!"

The two quickly close the gap, instinctively lock their forearms and embrace. "Am I glad to see you." Noaki pulls from the embrace. "I haven't been able to remember anything since waking up this morning."

Moritz's expression turns grim. "You too?"

These were not the comforting words Noaki expected to hear. "So this is also happening to you..."

A long silence passes between them until the bull snorts in protest at being left idle. This brings Moritz to his senses who then introduces the bull to Noaki.

"This is Steel, he's pretty tame."

Noaki scratches the beast behind the ear and receives a giant lick to the face as response. Moritz and Noaki break in light laughter.

"I told you, he's pretty tame." Moritz strokes Steel's sheen coat. "I woke up yesterday morning to Old Dallen cursing me in a fit of rage for sleeping in." Moritz returns to



the plow's handles, its blade stained from soil. "It took me awhile to figure out how to harness this thing, I couldn't have done it without hearing another earful from the old man."

Stroking the magnificent beast, Noaki nods in silent response. Moritz made significant progress with the field, it seemed only an hour or so remained before he finishes.

That's when it hits him, a small detail he almost missed. "So yesterday you lost your memories?"

Moritz nods, when it dawns on him too. "And you lost yours today."

This new information didn't give them anything to lead off of, but it did give them a false sense of progress. Noaki casts his gaze upward, only a few hours of daylight remaining. "When are you free to talk?"

Moritz inspects the remaining lot. "In about an hour or two."

"Is there anywhere we can meet?" He considers where he might be sleeping for the night.

"There's a town a few kilometers south. I overheard the old man mention it in conversation while he helped me." Moritz muses for a moment. "There's an Inn, the Silver Fox, we can meet there."

With the small fortune in his pockets, he utters a silent prayer to himself, he wouldn't be sleeping in the woodlands tonight. "I'll wait for you there."

"I'll catch up to you as soon as I finish up here."

The two agree to their rendezvous and part ways.

Approximately half an hour passes when Noaki enters the large town of Irithelle. The sudden emergence of civilization takes some time adjusting. Irithelle encompasses the east and western banks of the river, conjoined by an impressive bridge with multiple arches and lanterns. The cobblestone streets bustle with pedestrians, and the clamor of human activity replace the soothing serenities of the forest.

He presses onward with caution. Apartment complexes covered in thick vegetation tower above cozy foundations of shops, cafés, restaurants, and various businesses ignorant to Noaki. He browses the food stalls wafting delicious aromas, and after considerable selections, he chooses a vendor specializing in manju.

The attendant smiles politely. "The special?"

Noaki nods and while he waits patiently for the vendor, he asks for directions leading to the Silver Fox.

After processing the transaction, he thanks the attendant with a slight nod and proceeds to walk down the streets when a pedestrian in a similar bearskin overcoat confronts him with a huge grin. "No'aki!? Many lunar cycles it has been, when did you come?" He speaks in a different but familiar language.

Fortunately Noaki could process the language, though he couldn't recognize the young man. "Sorry, I lost myself."

The young man frowns. "You hit your head?"

Noaki considers this for a moment. "I don't know."

The young man nods sympathetically. "Not good to tell these people, come, where are you going? I will walk beside you and tell you what you should know."

As they walk the young man introduces himself as Kaien but claims to be familiar to Noaki as Kai. Kaien recounts their shared past, revealing to Noaki his two brothers and younger sister, his father and mother. He describes the woods where they hunted, the names of rivers and lakes where they fished and swam. He tells him they belong to one of the many tribes in that region referred to as the Wildlands. "Though our people are commonly known as the Okari."

Noaki could remember none of it.

"Losing yourself in this way," Kai mumbles deeply. "Not good."

"By that, what do you mean?"

"Someone or something with great power has tried to erase you."

Something in the way Kai accentuates 'erase' chills Noaki. "Why would anyone do this?"

Kai shakes his head. "Without something from your past, we will not know."

They halt outside the gates of a large building protruding with multiple chimneys billowing smoke and many windows. A large sign depicting the bust of a silver fox gilded in silver, hangs between two street lamps linked together in an arch.

Kai holds Noaki's shoulders. "How long before you leave?"

"I don't know." Noaki returns the gesture.

"Tomorrow, before dusk, we should speak again."

Noaki nods in agreement. With a final nod farewell, Noaki approaches the Silver Fox Inn.

The moment Noaki enters the Inn he is met with a boisterous crowd of merchants, travelers, and hunters all drinking amicably together. He has difficulty reaching the port innkeeper, navigating himself through a circus of traipsing waiters, dancers, and entertainers. The innkeeper nods to Noaki with recognition. "Your belongings are still safely locked."

Noaki is about to ask what belongings he spoke of, only to recall Kai's warning not to mention his amnesia. He thanks the innkeeper and requests his room key. The innkeeper hands him a large brass key with the odd symbols imprinted into the handle. After thanking the innkeeper he escapes into the hallway before a passing line of dancers can block his path.

The wide halls are nicely decorated with floral arrangements and large potted shrubbery positioned beneath large open windows.

He locates the appropriate room at the end of the hall, the symbols matching those on the key are illuminated clearly beneath an overhanging lantern.

His room contains a large four poster bed positioned between two windows with potted shrubs and a dresser at the foot of the bed. Either side of the fireplace are two smaller entrances leading into the lavatory and washroom. Three sofas and an oval coffee table are symmetrically arranged around the mantelpiece with an overhanging landscape painting. He takes a moment to familiarize himself with the room, hoping to jog his memory with futile results.

Before returning to the commons area he drops his hunting gear onto the dresser and locks the door on his way out. The commons area has grown in size, making it difficult to locate a free table, and after some consistent straining he

settles himself in the corner hidden behind more potted shrubbery. He nibbles on a manju while he waits for Moritz. He doesn't finish the manju when a disheveled Moritz enters, his clothes rumpled and stained with dirt.

Noaki calls out to Moritz and waves him over.

Moritz sits opposite Noaki with a sheepish grin. "I snuck off early, no one seemed to notice." He waves a passing waitress over and orders two mugs of ale. "Learn anything while I was gone?"

Noaki nods and recounts his encounter with the hunter Kaien. Moritz listens intently as he guzzles the contents of his mug.

Scrunching up his nose in disgust, Noaki sets his aside. When he finishes Moritz doesn't say anything.

His friend just stares at the frothing of his mug with a far off gaze. "This whole thing, it's really messed me up." He murmurs when the music stops. "Nothing about this feels right, and I'm not just talking about losing our memories. I mean being here, in this place, it feels... wrong."

Noaki empathizes with him; from the moment he woke on the forest floor, he felt displaced. "Almost like you entered someone else's body."

Moritz shudders visibly. "Yeah, exactly."

Noaki considers this. "Then again, if that were the case, how would I have known you?"

"I don't know." Moritz downs the rest of his drink when his eyes go wide with horror. "Dude."

Noaki follows his gaze and dread weighs on his shoulders.

A masculine redhead with a trim beard enters the inn, followed by another masculine figure concealed beneath a dark hooded cloak.

"Garrett" they groan in unison.

Instinctively Noaki knew a confrontation with the redhead and his dark hooded friend would put them in a dangerous position. "We can hide in my room. Stay low, but not too much to draw suspicion." Noaki motions for Moritz to follow and the two scuttle into the corridor. Fortunately the other two were preoccupied in a conversation with another familiar face.

Once inside his room, Moritz immediately plops down on Noaki's bed. "Man this is *way* more comfortable than mine." His voice is muffled from the sheets.

Noaki smiles and nestles himself in the lounge. Upon inspecting the room he recounts his interaction with the innkeeper to Moritz who rolls onto his back, arms and legs stretched as far as his limbs would allow. He gazes at the patterning ceiling.

Moritz leans onto his elbows and studies the landscape painting intently. "So the you with memories was already here?"

Noaki nods. He shifts his attention to the painting. It resembles the forest he found himself in earlier. The river, the forested valley, the silver mountains, all depicted in the full bloom of spring. A thought occurs to him. He reaches into his coat and retrieves the leather pouch containing the opal. He tosses the pouch to Moritz who deftly catches it midair without peeling his eyes from the painting.

Moritz stares at the pouch, then at the painting, then at Noaki with a questioning look.

"When I woke up that was one of the items I had on me." Noaki explains.

Moritz turns the pouch upside down and lets the opal fall into his palm. He inspects the stone with intent curiosity.

"Not sure-" Noaki freezes mid sentence. The light blue of Moritz eyes glow a frosty mixture of blue and white. Little speckles of ice crystals start manifesting and disappearing around his head.

"This is awesome!" Moritz tosses the stone in the air. When he notices the expression on Noaki's shocked face he frowns, the stone landing in his palm. "What?"

"Your eyes, they're beautiful-" Noaki stops himself. "They're glowing" he quickly adds, thoroughly embarrassed.

Moritz chuckles. "Stop, you're making me blush."

"No, they're actually glowing." Noaki searches the room for a mirror. He leaves a bewildered Moritz to check the lavatory and washroom without success. When he returns to the main room Moritz is perched crossed legged on the sofa with an ordinary looking chest set before him on the coffee table. "Where'd you find that?"

Moritz points to the dresser. "Sorry, I was having a look at your gear when I noticed one of your drawers wasn't closed right."

"It's alright, I would've probably missed it. Find anything else in there?" He asks, checking the contents of the drawers himself anyway. The drawers contain a few change of garb, hiking pack, and an assortment of grooming items. He itches his chin unconsciously, still no mirror.

"Whoa!" Moritz exclaims in astonishment, the stone in his hand, and the chest wide open.

The chest contains thousands of gold and silver coins each veined in what Noaki presumed to be crystal. Though this didn't appear to be what Moritz had responded to. A mirror had been attached to the bottom side of the lid and Moritz had seen his reflection.

For a long moment, which might have been only a few seconds, Moritz gazes at his reflection. He swats at one of the speckled crystals and it vanishes, then reappears. Finally he exchanges a puzzled expression with Noaki. "Here, you try," he holds out the stone.

Noaki takes the stone.

"Whoa, you're glowing too," Moritz grins. "Here, have a look." He shifts the chest and pats the sofa.

Noaki seats himself next to him and sees his reflection for the first time. His eyes are glowing a violet hue. An almost invisible force rotates around his head in the shape of a sphere. He interacts with this invisible spectrum and feels the faint impression of his finger. He pulls away and the impression vanishes. "Whoa."

"Whoa indeed." Moritz inspects one of the gold coins. "I didn't take you to be wealthy."

"I didn't either." Noaki places the stone atop the coins. Immediately the veins in the coins erupt in white light. The coins in close contact with the opal shimmer a little more brilliantly.

Moritz touches the opal with the gold coin between his fingers and the coin ignites. When he pulls it away the coin dims to a cooler glow. "That's cool."

When nothing more can be said, Moritz returns the coin to the chest, retrieves the opal, and shuts the lid. A mechanism locks itself automatically. "You open it with this." He waves the stone and hands it back to Noaki along with the leather pouch.

"Thanks" Noaki returns the stone to the pouch and stuffs it in his pocket.

Neither speak for a time, their minds wondering if what they witnessed really did happen. The chest sits on the



coffee table looking ordinary. Noaki paces the room a few times while Moritz remains seated in his crossed legged posture, contemplating. When the last remnants of sunset settle over the horizon, Moritz finally breaks the silence.

"So what do we do about Garrett and the others?"

Upon hearing this, Noaki finally settles down and nibbles on another Manju, he tosses one to Moritz. "I'd forgotten about them. Did you notice who they were talking to?"

Moritz shakes his head, his mouth occupied in chewing.

"It was James."

Moritz shudders. "I don't know what he looks like, I haven't seen him, but I remember that name, and it gives me a bad feeling." He pauses before taking another bite, as if considering what he was eating. "I hate not knowing anything," he admits and finishes the last of the manju.

"Are you going back?" Noaki asks after noting Moritz's persistent glancing outside.

Moritz shrugs helplessly. "I don't know if I should."

For a long moment then, it hadn't really occurred to Noaki how distressed Moritz appeared. Here sat someone who he knew by intuitive impression but didn't know the history behind that insight. How could he be sure they were even good friends? He didn't have that kind of information, his memory came up blank whenever he attempted to recall any lost time with this light freckled youth.

Moritz catches Noaki staring and his face flushes. "What? Stop staring, it makes me feel weird."

Noaki erupts in a fit of laughter.

"Are you alright?" Moritz chuckles awkwardly, like he'd been let in on a joke he didn't understand, but laughed out of politeness.

Noaki beams brightly. Since that morning there had always been a hint of memory imprinted somewhere inside him, he didn't consider picking up on this because the part that noticed these subtleties was also a part of the same imprint.

That's how he functioned naturally with and without his memories. By intuition. "We're friends and we've been friends before. I don't know how to explain it, but I just know."

Moritz blinks. "That doesn't explain anything."

"I never said it would." Noaki smiles at himself, then at the room and finally, at his friend. "Nevermind."

"Okay..." Moritz nods in reassurance. "What do you think I should do?"

Noaki muses for a while, locking his gaze on the painting. His eyes study a bird in flight, a hawk or an eagle maybe, and then he comes to himself. "We should go somewhere else, explore the world, I have this wealth." He gestures to the chest. "We can go pretty far with that if we use it right."

"Where would we go?" Moritz asks, bewildered by the suggestion.

"Who cares?!" Noaki jumps from his seat. "Let's go to the city."

Moritz considers this. "Alright. It's settled."

With that initial looming depression out of the way the two turn out for the night. Moritz occupies the sofa for his slumber and Noaki the bed. Though neither get much

sleep, they were comfortable and no longer feeling at odds in each other's company.

## O'taomon | The Empire of Eraat | Interlude

"O'taomon was founded approximately twelve-thousand years ago," Olivia reads aloud. "It says here; Sultan Rejishhad Haziir sieged the city from the then proselyte nation of Etraea. A momentous event that shifted the war in Eraat's favor." She sighs. Reading in this old language taxed her, but she couldn't stop now. This information could be invaluable to her amnesiac state. "When the war ended," she continues. "The sultan's secular reforms were integrated into city life. Then upon the sultan's death in thirteen-thousand-five-hundred-twenty-two, a referendum was submitted for the city's secession from the empire." She pauses at an unusual word.

"So did it?"

Logan's voice startles her. She'd forgotten all about her companion snoozing away on the windowsill, leg casually dangling over a six story drop. His hair had taken on a tousled look from the spring breeze.

"What's that?" She asks dreamily.

"Did they secede from the empire?" He rises onto his feet and stretches his limbs comfortably in the dangerous view of the city. He wore a cotton sirwal tied down at the waist with a scarlet sash, his torso he left bare. The lean muscles making up his constitution contorts as he stretches.

Surprised and a little self-conscious that Logan had been listening to her poorly enunciated translation, she scans her summarized notes for an immediate answer. "The

referendum was vetoed, however, after the death of the twenty-third sultan, it finally passed, though at this point much of Eraat's forces were warding off the growing intensity of the old war. O'taomon officially became a city state in the year thirteen-thousand-nine-hundred-forty-five."

Logan hops down from his perch and changes into his leather breastplate gilded in gold and silver. "Why is the Sultan's palace here if this technically isn't Eraat?"

This, gratefully, Olivia could answer off the top of her head without the use of her notes. "That never was the Sultan's palace, after conquering O'taomon, the Sultan gave the humble title of Grand Vizier to the Chancellor who had previously been employed under the Etraean empire." She shuts her eyes to recall something. "The Grand Vizier always served as a buffer between O'taomon and whatever empire decided to lay claim to it. The Grand Vizier comes from a powerful family much older than Eraat or Etraea."

Logan retrieves the spear fastened to the wall with metallic clips. He twirls it with deadly skill. "Must have slept through that part." He admits shamelessly. "This entire time I'd been thinking that old geezer was in charge of this great empire." He retrieves a peach from the reed basket in the pantry. "Kind of disappointing."

Olivia giggles at his callous comment. "He's still an important influential figure, in some ways more than the Sultan."

He hops back on the windowsill, the wind picks up and ruffles the curtains. "As long as I'm paid I suppose." With that the sun finally settles beneath the horizon. He gives Olivia a lazy salute and drops into the streets, weaving the wind with his spear to cushion his landing.

In the past six years Olivia had grown accustomed to his dangerous stunts. Logan could take care of himself, he did long before she came along, before her memories were swiped cleanly from her mind. She reminisces those early days with fondness. The difficulty in finally being able to settle and begin arduous academic work had taken a while, somehow it turned out alright.

Shirhashhaat was one of the three official languages of O'taomon, and the most widely spoken globally. When she first awoke without any memories, she couldn't understand a word of it. Had it not been for Logan who found her struggling to get around, things might have turned out for the worst fast.

Of course that was then, now she could read, something Logan couldn't do well. Despite her fluent verbal comprehension, her textual comprehension needed significant improvement.

Privately she hoped studying the history and language would reignite memories of her previous life, though to no avail. She didn't like to think about her amnesia that much, it bothered her that she might have friends and family who were searching for her and she couldn't unburden their search.

She distracts herself with the northern view of the desert metropolis. O'taomon subsisted on a strait connecting the Ashhad and Ehthrisian seas. Their little humble apartment was located at one of the higher altitudes in the southern part of the city, far from the shoreline. Logan was preferential to this humble abode and Olivia could see why. Here they could observe the vast urban sprawl. Buildings old and new were organically condensed to keep the narrow streets cool.

She returns to her desk and rummages through the collection of books she set aside for leisure reading. The name Mahtammel Aljhebrai stands out, she grabs the book, nestles herself on the lounge and begins reading.

## Irithelle | The Silver Alps: II

Noaki wakes before the breaking of Dawn. Moritz is snoring softly near the fireplace.

When idling is uncomfortable, he rises from bed and shambles to the washroom where he douses himself in cold water. His mind now thoroughly alert, he quickly dries himself and dresses into a pair of clean garments. While lacing his mukluks Moritz stirs and yawns.

Moritz stretches, groaning in pleasure. "Good," he yawns, "morning."

Taking note of Moritz's sorry state of attire, he tosses his remaining clean garments onto Moritz's torso.

Moritz examines them. "What's this for?"

"You can wear those, the washroom is on the left." Noaki capes his weighty coat around his shoulders. "I'll meet you in the commons area, I'm going to find something to eat."

Moritz's gut audibly grumbles. "Good idea."

The commons area has cleared out significantly from the night prior, save for a few hunters who, like Noaki, were perhaps in the habit of early rising. A custom the innkeeper did not appear to share.

A serving woman readily takes his order. She returns with a basket of fresh steaming loaves and two bowls of creamy mushroom and vegetable soup.



"Thank you." Noaki settles into his seat. "Do you know when the innkeeper will be available?"

The waitress smiles politely. "Mr. Walters would be in not long before noon, though you should catch him at a later time. Should I leave a message?"

Noaki shakes his head. "It's alright, I'll catch him later." He gestures to the food. "How much?"

"Not to worry, everything is billed to your room." She bows her head slightly. "Anything else?"

"No, thank you." He mimics a bow of his head.

While she walks away, Moritz emerges in fresh clothing, his hair disheveled from toweling it dry. Noaki waves him over and gestures to the opposite seat.

Moritz seats himself, and the two begin breakfasting.

"So what are our plans for today?" Moritz asks in-between bites.

"Don't you have to tell whoever you work for you're abandoning your employment? We should probably start there." Noaki tears a loaf in half. "If you want to, that is."

"Makes sense." Moritz slurps his broth. "Though I don't really want to."

"Mister Dallan that intimidating?" Noaki teases. He notes the vegetables' consistent texture.

"Mister?" Moritz chuckles. "*Old* Dallan is alright, I just don't want to go back there and feel the guilt of leaving."

Noaki dips a piece of loaf into the creamy broth. "I'm sure they can find someone else to replace you, it's a big town."

"It *is* a big town." Moritz glances out the window. "I nearly jogged myself out of breath trying to find this place."

"Well, when it comes down to it, you'll feel less guilty if you do tell them." Noaki finishes another loaf. "Who do you work for?"

Moritz thinks for a moment, then shrugs. "I know it's some rich guy, Old Dallan mentioned his name in the middle of a long rant about serving a great benefactor." He brings the bowl to his face and slurps it down. "Lord Hosleare?"

Noaki finishes the rest of his soup in imitation.

"You're right about me being easily replaced. I haven't seen his house but from afar it's almost as big as a palace." Moritz contemplates for a moment. "When do you think we'll leave? I'm not really comfortable knowing James and his gang are nearby."

Noaki agrees. "We can't leave until we know where we're going. I don't know what we'll need." He points at Moritz. "You need more clothes, the ones I gave you don't quit fit."

Moritz rolls his sleeves up his forearm. "When I was putting this on, I noticed this." He indicates the monogram underneath his left cuff, '*Ethel*'.

"What about it?" Noaki inspects the same cuff on his own sleeve.

"When I was trying to find this place I passed a boutique under the same name." He unfurls his sleeve, reconcealing the monogram. "We should visit the place, you might remember something."

Noaki nods. "Good idea. But first," he stands up, "we should break the news to this *Old* Dallan."

Despite the early hours before daylight, the streets are ripe with activity. The storefront businesses are closed, but street vendors roam about peddling to passersby.

With Noaki's familiarity of the route, they exit town in good time. En route, Moritz points out the boutique he mentioned earlier, although nothing in Noaki's memories stirs when they pause to examine it.

When they reach Moritz's cabin, a kilometre from the fields, they are greeted by a grumpy looking old man. "You've got some nerve walking off like that," he grumbles.

Moritz returns an impish smile and apologizes to Old Dallan.

The old man accepts this apology and notices Noaki for the first time. "Ah! A wildlander. What did you get yourself mixed up in this time? No, wait, come inside. I just made tea." Before either of them can respond, the old man enters the cabin.

The cabin, in spite of its size, is roomy with multiple bunk beds neatly fixed up. A fireplace with a mantelpiece of river stone is centralised in the cabin.

A kettle, wafting an aroma of freshly brewed tea, steams over a crackling woodstove in the kitchenette. Opposite to the stove are six chairs arranged in perpendicular order around a sturdy wooden table.

Old Dallan sets out three cups and fills them from the kettle, fragrant black tea.

After the three are seated the old man speaks. "A wildlander. We don't see much of your kind this far south." He examines Noaki's coat. "Welcome to the Silver Alps at any rate."

"Thank you" Noaki takes a hesitant sip.

Old Dallan holds Noaki's gaze and nods to himself as if reassured of something. He shifts his attention to Moritz and frowns like someone familiar with a delinquent. "You're leaving?"

Moritz blinks. "What?"

"You plan on leaving?" Old Dallon nods knowingly. "Not to worry lad, we've enough workers. I only put you out in the fields for sleeping in again."

"How did you know?" Moritz blows the steam from his cup.

"I've known you since you were a mischievous little scamp. Before she left for the Holy Lands, my niece asked me to watch you." The old man smiles sadly, "of course you don't know this, do you?"

Noaki almost chokes and starts coughing. The two look at him. He quickly regains his composure. "Sorry, Continue."

"How did you know I meant to leave?" Moritz gulps the scalding tea.

The old man motions to Noaki. "A few days ago, an incident happened on the estate concerning a wildling. I hoped you had not gotten mixed up in it."

Noaki sinks into his seat in an attempt to make himself small. This news makes him feel like a criminal. "What happened?"

"Something of Lord Hosleare's property has been stolen, though I only call it his property out of respect. I suspect Lord Hosleare stole it from your people."

The glimmering Opal comes to mind and Noaki shares a knowing expression with Moritz.

Before either can to speak the old man waves them off. "It's alright, I won't pry, I don't want to get involved. Nasty business, but you'd be wise to leave as soon as you're able. The butler and his servants are out looking for you." He indicates to Moritz with a nod. "As for you."

Moritz innocently sips his tea.

"I had my suspicions but I wasn't certain until you had a deep confused look about you." The old man sighs. "Then I knew you'd been involved. So I sent you to till the fields and keep you out of sight and as punishment."

"Thank you," Moritz finishes his cup.

This sincerity appears to surprise the old man who shifts uncomfortably. "Your best way to the next town is taking the ferry downriver to Borintas." The old man exchanges a meaningful look with Moritz. "You don't have many belongings, never really cared for gathering them." He chuckles, "including your wages."

Moritz responds a wide grin. "I figured as much. Thanks again, Old Dallan."

The old man smiles and faces Noaki. "Keep an eye on this fool for me, make sure he doesn't get into trouble."

Noaki nods reassuringly. This seems to satisfy the old man's impressions.

The old man rises. "To throw off your trail I'll inform Lord Hosleare you'd gone off to live with your relations in the north." He pauses at the entrance. "Though you'd best leave as soon as you can. Alright lads, take care." With those words he exits the cabin.

While Moritz is packing his belongings, Noaki finishes the rest of his tea. Moritz doesn't take too long, he packs a few trinkets into a small pouch and stands ready for departure. "I should probably replace most of this stuff, a lot is tattered or worn out" he says, tossing a measly sack of coins into the air.

Noaki reaches into his pocket and tosses Moritz one of the three sacks of gold and silver.

Moritz's eyes widen. "No way."

"Between the two of us, you're the most unprepared for a journey. It's fine, I'm starting to wonder if I stole them." Noaki downs the rest of his tea. "Well" he rises from his chair, "shall we be off then lad?" He exits the cabin, swiftly followed by Moritz.

The two take the beaten path concealed behind the cabin. Not once does Moritz look back. Compelled by a mysterious force, Noaki rubs and pats Moritz's shoulder. His friend regards this gesture with an appreciative smile.

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The two spend their spare time searching for the ferries with the advice of a street vendor, they manage to locate the docked ferries without much difficulty. "I mean where else would it be aside from the river?" Moritz announces. The docks consist of a series of stone platforms constructed next to old ghats that are still in use.

"The ferries transporting passengers north are on the eastern embankment and the ferries transporting passengers south are on the western," the vendor had explained.

A good way across the bustling bridge, Moritz nudges Noaki and points towards the ferries. Two distinct masculine figures catch their attention amidst the crowd. Garrett and his dark hooded companion appear to be pressing a wary looking helmsman.

"Are you in the mood for confrontation?" Noaki gibes.

Moritz's laugh earns a few curious glances from passersby. That's when Noaki recognizes Kaien heading their

way, hefting two heavy looking sacks over his shoulders.  
"That's Kaien," Noaki indicates to Kaien and waves..

The wildlander grins, revealing four impressive fangs.  
"No'aki!" He readjusts the sacks comfortably.

Noaki introduces Moritz who bows slightly. "It's nice to make your acquaintance."

Kaien shifts the sack to shake his hand when Noaki offers to carry one for him, "thank you." In a relaxing demeanour he shakes Moritz's hand firmly. "Kaien."

"Here let me carry the other one," Moritz offers.

Kaien obliges and passes the sack into Moritz's arms and rotates his shoulders. "Much appreciated, I've been carrying those since first light"

"What's in them?" Moritz heaves the sack over his shoulder.

"Feed." Kai answers. They proceed to walk in the opposite direction of trouble.

"You're a farmer?" Noaki asks, taking in Kai's strange apparel.

Kai laughs. "No. I help this old couple outside of town deliver their feed to customers."

Moritz glances back, making sure they hadn't been noticed. "So who are these for?"

"The butcher Hoyte, a regular for the old couple." Kai shifts his fanged smile to Noaki. "Have you decided what you will do?"

Noaki nods. "I'm going to leave and explore the world a bit."

Kaien considers this thoughtfully. "Elder Yuen might agree with you, even if your memories don't return you'll

create new ones." He observes the sky. "Like clouds, we change shape through time."

"That idea is neat." Moritz comments.

Noaki shares an expression with Kaien and responds in their native tongue. "I will carry with me those words."

Kaien's face brightens.

After twenty minutes they arrive at the end of the bridge. Kaien proceeds to guide them southward when the three pause for a quick break to watch a departing ferry, its passengers wave eagerly to a gathering crowd. Moritz leaves the two to relieve his bladder.

"You will have to be careful traveling," Kaien advises in their native tongue. "Without your hunting skills, it will be difficult."

"Did I hunt well?"

"Your eyes were the best," Kaien's eyes glow. "A predator in the Guild of Hunters."

Noaki smiles. "When I woke, there was a black bow.."

Kaien's eyes widen. "You must show me when we are done with these," he indicates the sacks. "I am not laboring today."

When Moritz returns they proceed for an hour, navigating the streets at a leisurely pace until they arrive at their destination.

Hoyte, a burly middle aged man with a kind face, greets them with warm smiles. Preoccupied in curing a slab of meat, Hoyte orders an apprentice to take over and leads Noaki and his companions to a silo in the backyard where he instructs them to put down the sacks.

"You're Noaki?" Hoyte washes his hands from a pump. "Kaien mentioned you. What brings you to Irithelle?"



"Just passing through, I did not expect to see Kaien," Noaki answers

Hoyte glances at Moritz. "Have I seen you in passing?" He scratches his beard, "lot of people from the valley pass through Irithelle, so I suppose it's not that uncommon for an Okari to come through, certainly not the first time."

Moritz shrugs. "I used to work at the Hosleare estate, so you might have."

Hoyte nods. "Aye, then I've likely seen you." He retrieves a silver timepiece from his pocket and sighs. "Ah, well that ought to be it for me. Thank you lads for bringing the feed." He turns to Kaien, "I'll be needing you bright and early tomorrow."

Hoyte leads them back to the entrance. The butcher's shop wafts a fragrant familiarity to Noaki. They utter their farewells and begin the return stroll to the Silver Fox.

"Man, I'd take working the fields any day to that place." Moritz inhales the air deeply. "Er... no offense" he apologizes to Kaien.

"It's not for everyone," Kaien waves his comment off. "Where will you two journey?"

"Southward, to Borintas." Moritz answers.

They turn a corner, narrowly avoiding a run in with a carriage. "The last ferry leaves around sunset."

Noaki inspects the sky, it appears to be sometime around noon. "I suppose we will leave today. If that's alright with you," he says to Moritz.

Moritz shrugs. "I haven't gotten anywhere else to be."

Kaien pats both their shoulders. "I'll see you two off then."

The commons area of the Silver Fox is filled once again. Noaki hands Moritz the key to his room. "I've got to speak with the innkeeper, I'll catch up."

The innkeeper had been expecting Noaki. "Erin said you needed something to talk about?"

"Yes," Noaki nods. "I wanted to add another person to the bill, last night I shared the room with my friend."

The innkeeper nods. "Your honesty is appreciated."

Noaki scratches his head. "Not a problem, I'll be leaving town in a bit, so I'd also like to check out."

"So soon?" The innkeeper rummages beneath the counter and produces a large leatherbound book with the embossed number sixteen. He does a few calculations in his head and scribbles something down. "That'll be it then." He returns the book and retrieves a chest, takes out three silver coins and hands it to Noaki.

"You can keep it," Noaki declines. "The service has been excellent."

The innkeeper nods and returns the chest. "So you'll be leaving then. Where to?"

"Borintas."

"In Borintas you can't go wrong with Prowler. I'm familiar with the owner Mr. Akron, if you meet him, tell him Mr. Walters sends his regards" The innkeeper slaps the counter. "I'll be here to receive your key when you leave."

Noaki thanks the innkeeper and returns to his room.

Moritz and Kai are marveling over Noaki's bow when he enters. "It takes some skill to use this kind of instrument," Kaien is explaining when he notices Noaki. "Ah, this bow is just as I thought."

"What's that?" Noaki joins them.

"This is a heartstring instrument." Kaien pulls on the string and a luminous violet arrow appears. "If you're skilled, you do not need an arrow." He gently sets the string into place and the arrow vanishes.

"Whoa!" Moritz's eyes widen. "Can I try?"

Kaien laughs, "only those who bear the hunter's kreddos can use *this* instrument." He hands the bow to Moritz for inspection.

Moritz attempts to manifest the arrow without result. "How does one go about getting one of those?"

Kaien holds Moritz's shoulder sympathetically. "I'm sorry friend, but one is born with that kreddos. Just as Noaki and I were." He pulls away from Moritz and lifts his shirt to reveal the insignia of three crystalline stars imprinted into the flesh above his hips. It illumines a faint violet.

Noaki and Moritz exchange perplexed expressions. .

Kaien gives them a doleful look. "I forget you've lost yourselves."

Moritz looks away and scratches his head. As he turns his head Noaki holds Moritz neck, holding it in place.

"What?!" Moritz squirms.

"You have one too." Noaki points out to Kaien the cluster of hexagonal shapes on the back of Moritz neck.

Kaien inspects it admiringly. "You bear a fusion."

Moritz attempts to feel the insignia with his fingers. "I don't feel anything," he shrugs. "What's a fusion?"

"When someone bears two natures they sometimes fuse into one." Kaien lifts Noaki's shirt from behind and point to where his shoulder blades converge. "Here is Noaki's"

"What's it look like?" Noaki haunches forward awkwardly from his shirt being strung so high.

"It looks like the moon." Moritz traces the large curving outline along Noaki's back so he'd get a sense of the shape. "There are three of them, they're glowing, like your eyes did."

Kaien releases his shirt so the three are face to face again. He runs his hands along the bow. "You must have been through much to receive this." He lifts the bow and hands it to Noaki. "Try it."

Noaki grabs hold of the bow awkwardly. He aims it towards the wall and attempts to pluck the string. A violet arrow flickers in-and-out of existence.

"This is not good." Kaien sits on the dresser ruminating. "You must learn to use this again."

Noaki sets the bow down, leaning it against the bed frame.

Moritz fiddles with his neck. "What am I capable of?"

"I'm not familiar with that kreddos, it must belong to the storms." Kaien answers. "You two should pack and head to the docks soon." He hops down from the dresser, making his way to the lavatory.

Noaki takes his advice and retrieves his belongings from the dresser. His clothes had been washed, dried, and folded neatly in his absence. He packs them into his hiking pack, along with the chest.

"All of this is strange." Moritz admits. "None of this feels right."

Noaki doesn't respond. He doesn't know how to process the situation, so he distances himself emotionally. There weren't any easy answers, or any answers for that matter. He tightens the straps on his pack and inserts his arms through the loops.

Kaien pats Moritz on the shoulder comfortingly. "Be glad, my friend, that you're not alone in this." He indicates to Noaki with his head.

Noaki gives Moritz a reassuring smile. "Shall we be off then?"

The others agree and they exit the room for the last time. Noaki hands his room key to the innkeeper and thanks him for his hospitality. The innkeeper waves them off with a warm smile and reminds him to seek out Prowler. They leave the Silver Fox a little after noon, and begin towards the docks, guided by Kaien who explains as much as he can to Moritz regarding natures and their abilities.

Noaki keeps a lookout for any trouble. With these bustling streets Noaki wonders what the cities might be like. They purchase their tickets for the next fare departing in an hour and a half, then proceed to find a place to lunch.

Moritz and Kaien warm up to each other and when it finally comes time to leave, they embrace like old friends. From the shoreline Kaien waves encouragingly with a bright fanged smile.

Noaki settles on a bench lulled by the gentle waters. When the view of Irithelle disappears, Moritz plops down next to him and quickly falls asleep, leaning against Noaki's hiking pack for support.

While Moritz sleeps, Noaki gazes into the sky. They weren't expected to arrive in Borintas Until nightfall. His eyes droop languidly and somewhere along the way he falls asleep, his head next to Moritz.

## Borintas | The Silver Alps: I

*'Noaki'*

Thirteen familiar faces. Where had Noaki seen these people?

*'Noaki'*

From a distant perspective, Noaki sees the entire scene play out.

In the backdrop of an arid canyon blooming with pine and juniper, are thirteen people in varying stages of their adolescence. They're surrounding an old forgotten shrine. Its pedestal shines brilliantly, emanating gentle pulses of luminous energy.

Noaki's eyes are a familiar luminous violet.

Everyone surrounding his body appears in a stupor, why were they all gathered here? Maria, Moritz, Jason, James, Marko, Justin, Logan, Olivia, Garrett, Yivonne, Loraunt, Nikolai, David.

Before the identities of these people reveal themselves to him, his sight is blinded by a flash of violet. This burns his retinas. Blood runs from its sockets, yet he feels no pain.

*'Noaki. Wake up.'*

*'Remember.'* He murmurs to himself. *Who are they? Who am I?* The light fades and leaves tendrils of violet bordering his vision like the swirls of sea shells humming and vibrating.

"Noaki?"

Noaki jumps from his sleep, his eyes feeling sore from such a vividly intense dream. He grabs Moritz by the shoulders, eyes wide and looking crazed.

"I remembered something," he hisses fervently.

Moritz nods knowingly. "Not here, later."

Noaki examines his surroundings, quite a few passengers widen their distance from the pair.

Noaki murmurs an apology to no one in particular.

"Weird dre-" He stops, mouth agape.

In the night sky three celestial lunar bodies dominate the heavens. *There should be one moon*, he thinks to himself.

"I know. One right?" Moritz points toward the south.

In the foothills of a towering mountain is a luminous cluster of lights glistening on the surface of the river. Like fireflies, a swarm of river vessels dot the river.

The atmosphere of night is breathtakingly vast.

Noaki sits silently, soaking in the massiveness of it all. He gawks at everything, incapable of peeling his eyes from this sight.

The sounds of night are alive with the clamor of nocturnal life.

As far east and west as his eyes would allow him, he can make out the luminous clusters of farming villages and towns.

Before, the full scope of this valley had been concealed in thick forested vegetation.

Further southward near the shadows of the eastern mountains, an enormous monolith penetrates the sky etched with symbols luminous with the same intensity of the lunar bodies.

Noaki's eyes water, but he did not dare to blink for fear it might all disappear. "What is this place?" He murmurs to himself.

For the remainder of their journey, the pair remain in awed silence. The passengers who'd distanced themselves before, are taken in by their reactions and gather around them like bees to flowers. The light chatter of different languages fill into the backdrop and Noaki gently returns to his senses. His eyes illuminate a very faint violet and Moritz a faint frosty blue.

Neither speak until debarking the ferry. One wide and luminous main street leads them to a map of the surrounding district. With the interpretive assistance of random passersby, they locate the Prowler atop a hill a few kilometres inland.

The further they hike, the more of the town is revealed. Large foothills of botanical structures and pine groves conceal the majority of Borintas.

The streets are carved into the foothills of the mountain, shaped into terraces and platforms that support a network of buildings.

Further inland nearer the base of the looming mountain are waterfalls cascading into a lake, illumined by the surrounding town verging in size of a city.

The Prowler sits atop a steep hill sporting an excellent view. Noaki is thoroughly exhausted by this point despite his earlier slumber. They enter the smokey inn packed with the boisterous clamour of its guests.

A meek young man in formal uniform and round spectacles greets them. "Good evening! My name is Mr. Akron, will you be wanting a room?"

"Yes, sir." Noaki bows in greeting. "Mr. Walters has asked me to send his regards Mr. Akron."



Mr. Akron's face brightens. "Mr. Walters! I'll pass on the message to my father."

Mr. Akron motions for them to follow, "come in! Let's get you settled."

He leads them to the counter. "I Apologise for the crowd, we're quite busy this time of year, migrant workers you see." He produces a thick leather book embossed with strange symbols. "Ah... I thought as much," he scribbles something down then returns the book behind the counter and retrieves another with similar symbols. "No, that won't do either," he mumbles to himself then replaces it with another book seeming to forget Noaki and Moritz.

"Erm..." Noaki stammers.

Mr. Akron looks up and smiles apologetically. "Just a moment."

They wait three minutes until Noaki processes the transaction and is handed the key to their room. Mr. Akron signals to one of the liveried footmen on standby. "Room negative fifteen-A." He bows slightly to Noaki and Moritz. "Thomas here will guide you to your room, I hope you will enjoy your stay."

After Noaki thanks Mr. Akron, Thomas leads them through a series of subterranean corridors and stairwells before arriving into an oval chamber with a vaulted ceiling dangling a single lantern. The chamber contains two heavy wooden doors embossed with strange symbols. Thomas opens the door to their right and lets them in.

"If you've any enquiries, please refer to this handbook," the footman hands Noaki a pocket sized booklet. "Or a passing footman." Thomas bows. "Thank you for your patronage, we hope you enjoy your stay here at Prowler."

With that, the footman exits the room, shutting the door with a heavy thud.

Their room contains a decorum of vegetation and thick pillars to support a complex architectural marvel. Within the common room, a large oval fireplace is luminous with burning black stones.

River stone and wood comprise the mantelpiece with an accentuating landscape painting of Borintas' lakeview.

An oval oriental rug carpets this area and weighed down by a glass coffee table supporting a centerpiece floral arrangement wafting pleasant odors. A sofa and three lounge settees are symmetrically arranged and illumined by an overhanging lantern.

Two arching entryways beside either end of the mantelpiece leads into their rooms that are then conjoined by a corridor further leading to the lavatory and washroom.

The furnishings and architecture of their rooms mirror each other. Black stones blaze in the fireplace with an accentuating landscape art piece. The sheets and pillows covering their low-profile beds exude pleasant forestry odors.

They take their time exploring the place before meeting in the common room .

From a carafe set out for them, Noaki pours himself a glass of wine. An additional entryway of the common room leads onto a terrace with a botanical pool vibrant in aquatic flora.

A long time passes before either speaks.

Moritz jumps onto the sofa, erupting in laughter.

Noaki smiles at his friend's delight, refills his glass, pours another and offers it to Moritz.

Moritz accepts with a nod of appreciation and drinks. He stands beside Noaki, taking in the view of the lake. The vessels drifting languidly are draped in spools of festive lanterns.

Moritz rests a hand on Noaki's shoulder. "I don't know how to take all of this in."

Noaki laughs, sharing in his friend's sentiments. Where they were, and how they'd gotten here. In this situation, time and place, not knowing why they were here. They had no reason to be here but they were, and they could only be here in spite of meandering thoughts.

Noaki finishes his glass and pours out another. The spices within the wine counter its nullifying effects, keeping his mind mildly alert. It wafts a faint aroma of flower petals.

When they were both sufficiently intoxicated, they settle onto the sofa.

"So the dream?"

Noaki sets aside his glass and exhales a heavy sigh. As it always is recalling a dream, the details are obscure. He shuts his eyes and tries to recall the last moments before waking.

He describes in as much detail as he can remember; the familiar arid landscape, towering pines, canyon setting, and the shrine followed by a blinding flash. All of this, Moritz listens to in silence.

"There are others too. You were there. Er... Maria."

Recognition flashes on Moritz' face..

"These twins, Jason & Justin," Noaki recreates that moment in his mind. "James, Garrett, Yvonne," he pauses. "David and Olivia."

"They're siblings." Moritz murmurs to himself. "Sorry, keep going."

"Now that you've mentioned it, it does sound right. Er... there were three others. Loraunt, Marko, and Logan." He first confirms with himself that he hadn't missed anyone before continuing. "I'm pretty sure that's all of them, before the dream could continue I woke up, or I woke up because the dream ended. It was confusing."

"I know those names, some a little more than others." Moritz drinks with a soured expression, he reconsiders his glass and sets it aside. "James and his cronies on the familiar end. Though that might just be because we saw them."

In that moment, a heavy wave of exhaustion settles over Noaki. "I think I'll call it a night, if you'd like, we can talk about this tomorrow."

Moritz nods absently, his mind seemingly occupied elsewhere. Not long after Noaki closes the door to his room, Moritz empties his glass and drags himself to bed having had too much to drink.

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With no hope for a restful sleep, Noaki wakes once more before the breaking of Dawn.

He spends a good deal of the morning stretching his limbs and warming up his muscles with basic calisthenics. This clears his foggy-headed symptoms and elevates his mood.

After washing, drying, and changing into a pair of clean clothes, he checks on Moritz who snores softly. His body splayed at the foot of his bed, limbs tangled in sheets and pillows haphazardly scattered about.

Noaki leaves his last pair of clean clothes on Moritz's dresser and exits their room.

On his way to the commons area, he encounters a myriad of pacing liveried footmen and servants busily going about their duties. The commons area is just as lively as the night before. Noaki settles himself with a view of Borintas.

Not feeling particularly hungry, he orders spiced tea. While waiting, he catches himself gawking at people.

Most notable among them is a very tall and lean man whose complexion resembles that of red ochre. His face is etched in geometric tattoos. He catches Noaki staring and sends him a pearly smile, his eyes flashing a pinkish hue.

Gratefully, a waitress intervenes this awkward situation with a large steaming cup of tea.

"Thank you," Noaki murmurs.

The waitress nods absentmindedly.

Noaki allows the liquid to cool before stirring in a few spoonfuls of honey.

"Might I join you for breakfast?"

Noaki looks up from his cup to the pearly smile.

"Please," he gestures to the empty seat opposite to him.

"Erm..." he begins. "I'm sorry for staring earlier, I've never seen anyone like you."

He scrutinizes Noaki with genuine interest. "You've not encountered a Dalkarian before?"

Noaki shrugs. "I might have, I'm not sure. I've lost my memories." Noaki immediately realizes his carelessness. "I might have hit my head," he adds quickly.

The dalkarian scans his face with a look of genuine concern. "Have you seen a physician?"

Noaki chuckles and grins sheepishly. "It never occurred to me, I suppose I will later today.."

"You're an Okari?"

Noaki nods.

"I know of an Okari physician practicing in the Guild of the Vitae. You might be more comfortable with her."

The dalkarian introduces himself as Orion, an experienced traveler.

When Moritz enters the commons area groggy eyed, the sun had risen well over the horizon and Noaki had finished a few cups worth of tea. Noaki waves him over and introduces him to Orion.

Moritz nods absentminded, shakes Orion's hand, mumbles his name and places an order from a passing waiter.

Orion smiles. "It has been nice to have met you two, I better check on the rest of my party. Farrahn Noaki, Moritz." Orion lowers his head in a bow and leaves the two.

Moritz watches him off curiously. "Interesting, I've seen someone like him the other day."

"He calls himself a Dalkarian," Noaki finishes his cup. "He's been to a lot of places."

The waiter serves Moritz' his coffee. "Thank you," Moritz takes an enormous gulp and smiles. "Much better. So," he looks at Noaki. "What are our plans for today?"

Noaki nibbles on a bite sized pastry. "I'm thinking we need to find a place to replenish your wardrobe. Orion also suggested seeing a physician for the amnesia, I'm still considering it."

Moritz laughs, "I can't believe I missed that." He downs the rest of his mug. "Alright," he burps. "I'm not gonna eat, if I do it'll just come back up, should we go?"

Noaki agrees and the two return to their room to fill their pockets with gold and silver. In the handbook the footman provided, Noaki discovers a folded map of Borintas. He pockets the map in the coat draped around his shoulders.

After few minutes meandering the streets, they find themselves navigating beside the lakeside.

They enter a plaza so Noaki can compare his map to the large billboard of the district, though neither Noaki or Moritz could read the symbols.

With the assistance and crude guidance from amiable street vendors and passersby, they find themselves outside a reputable boutique they immediately recall as 'Ethel'.

Noaki and Moritz share a glance and enter the boutique. The two hardly have time to browse the well fashioned mannequins or fabrics on display, when they're approached by a smartly dressed tailor.

"A-Ha!" The tailor begins examining Noaki's outfit, tisking every now and again at his apparent sorry state.

Noaki inspects his clothes wondering what could be wrong with them.

"Ah! So you'll be wanting this restored." The tailor indicates Noaki's coat.

"Well..." Noaki meant to say something but stops himself upon noticing the tailor's serious expression.

Moritz grins at Noaki from behind the tailor.

After a few more murmured ramblings and tisking, the tailor seems to stare straight into Noaki's soul reproachfully. "Have you no decent sense to care for art?"

Before Noaki finds something intelligent to rebuke, the tailor twirls on his heels and faces Moritz, whose smile fades under his inspection. "You two. I would have you switched for the careless way you're handling excellent garments." He steps to the side to speak with them both. "Alright, no problem, we can have you all fixed up. What can I help with you two today?"

"These are his clothes," Moritz starts.

Noaki receives another reproachful look from the tailor. "You'll be needing a new wardrobe I presume?" He asks Moritz.

Moritz nods.

The tailor shifts to Noaki. "As for yourself?"

"I'm looking to replace a few things." Noaki mumbles.

"Good, very good, and we'll have to do something about this," the tailor gestures to his coat. "A fine work of art, you must take better care of it."

Noaki nods, not exactly sure what could be wrong with his coat, it functions fine. Though he refrains from reflecting this aloud.

"Well, have a look around. Let me know what piques your interest. The mannequins on display are specialised for these regions. If no designs are to your taste, you can have a look through our catalogues." He gestures to the large books on display throughout the store. "As is usual, all orders will be processed within a week, larger orders will take longer."

"Thank you," Moritz smiles.

The tailor bows slightly and leaves the two to browse on their own.

Moritz and Noaki split.

Noaki inspects the fabrics on display. He bumps into a mannequin and chuckles at himself for apologizing out of habit. When nothing from the mannequins intrigue him, he proceeds to flip through one of the catalogues. The models interest him more than the outfits or the unreadable text.

Illiterate as he was, the catalogues were easy to navigate. The designs organized by climate, region, and specialising activities.

"Find anything interesting?" Moritz hovers over his shoulder.

"There's a lot, not sure what works." Noaki stops on a page with a masculine dalkarian sporting an outfit for intense activity.

Moritz grins. "Maybe you'd best ask for advice."

As if eavesdropping, the tailor appears ready to proffer his professional advice. "You need advising?"

"Ah.... yes." Noaki hesitates. "Honestly, I don't exactly know what we'd need, though we will be traveling."

The tailor silences him with a wave and begins flipping through the catalogue, bookmarking pages with the



ballpoint pins he produces from his sleeves. "I apologize for our lack of okarian fashion." He opens his first bookmarked page and lets Noaki inspect the design. "The closest styles we have are designed by the Yya'khaa."

Noaki examines the navy kaftan with camel legwear the tailor defines for him as 'sharovary.'

The tailor continues with subtler details, such as where it would be most appropriate to be worn. Many of the designs shown were inclined for the summer.

Noaki was preferential with inconspicuous casual designs.

Throughout the exchange Moritz eagerly adds suggestions agreeable with the tailor. Before long Noaki stands to the side while the two are in animate discussion.. Suggestions were thrown about followed by the tailor bookmarking new pages, or removing a few pins, and towards the end he begins scribbling down information known only to him.

A good deal of time passed before the tailor starts taking their measurements. Noaki came to a standing height of two-hundred-four centimeters and Moritz two-hundred-eight.

The tailor scribbles all this down while leading them to the counter with a display of formalwear wafting misty auras.

"What are those?" Moritz enquires.

"Hm?" The tailor turns around. "Ah! Kyutashin, you've never seen one before?" The tailor scrutinizes them curiously.

"Nothing like these." Noaki interjects.

The tailor takes this as a compliment. "You've fine taste, there might be hope for you yet," he nods at the suits admiringly. "Though the celestials would hardly give these a second glance."

Noaki nudges Moritz with his elbow to restrain him from asking another naïve question. When the transaction is processed, an anguished Noaki hands over sixteen gold crystaires and Moritz Eighteen. He departs with his coat for mending, settinf him back silver crystaire.

Delighted at receiving the full payment upfront, the tailor obliges markings on their map with directions to the nearest recommended eatery and to the Guild of the Vitae.

After stopping by the suggested eatery for a light meal, the pair follow the marked route to the vitae. The elevation of the foothills dropping and rising at irregular intervals. They meander through alleyways, narrow streets, along civilian housing, civil buildings, and lesser known shops.

With no worries of getting lost, Moritz and Noaki stroll at a leisurely pace.

They arrive at the furthest district inland, right next to cascading waterfalls and thick pine groves. As everywhere else, this district persists in large botanical terraces with a healthy mix of groves and masonry buildings.

To set this district apart from the others, it begins at the base of a steep rising cliff face and beyond which are distant oppressive looming mountains, their peaks concealed behind a gathering storm.

The streets narrows and introduces their feet to many stone steps, ramps, and lengthy walkways carved into the cliff face.

The pedestrians here were fewer in number, however, the people they did encounter were finely dressed in light garments.

Through the subtle interactions with passersby, Noaki notes the diversifying locals. He meets a few Dalkari, and dark and light contrasting races of equally tall gaits. All greet them with amiable smiles and graceful bows. Noaki is feeling increasingly out of place here.

Concealed behind a curtain of cascading water is a large semi-circular plaza illuminated under moonlit lanterns. Here, the two decide to rest a bit while Noaki consults their map with the plaza's large billboard of the district. Moritz leaves him for a peddling street vendor and returns with two sorbets in paper cups.

"All done?" Moritz steps beside him.

Noaki shakes his head. "This district rises in levels, I think we'll have to ask someone for directions."

Moritz hands Noaki a sorbet. "Who are we looking for again?"

Noaki accepts the paper cup. "I didn't ask, he did say she was an Okari, I don't think there are a lot of them around. We haven't encountered one yet. Or at least one that I'm aware of."

"There's one right here." Moritz points toward Noaki.

Noaki chuckles and spoons a mouthful from his cup. "Aside from me."

The two take a seat in one of the stone benches in the translucent shade of the waterfall. "I think we'll need an atlas if we're ever going to figure out where we'll go next."

"If this is a town, I can't even imagine what the cities will be like." Moritz comments. He finishes his sorbet and folds the paper cup.

Noaki scarcely finishes his iced dessert when they're approached by Orion draped in a bundle of loose silken garments embroidered with gold and silver floral design.

"I thought I might find you around here." He beams his pearly smile.

Noaki returns the smile. "Orion! We're lost."

Orion smiles apologetically. "It passed my mind that I should've given proper directions to where master Eiko takes up her practice. I can escort you two if you'd like"

Noaki readily agrees to Orion's offer. "If it's not too much of a bother, it would save us a lot of trouble." He empties the rest of his sorbet into his mouth.

Noaki notes the patterns on Orion's face glowing the same moonlit aura of the plaza's lanterns.

"It's no problem at all." Orion gestures with his hand for them to follow. "Come."

Noaki and Moritz make an effort to keep up with Orion's long strides and light footsteps. He stood a good deal taller than the two and lowers his head to answer Moritz' many questions.

In reaction to one of Moritz's enquiries regarding the other races, Orion laughs. "You must truly have lost your memories if you've never met the alvarri."

His laughter fills Noaki with warmth. "Will Master Eiko be able to help us?"

"I do not know." Orion ponders in a moment of silence. "Master Eiko's perception is one of the best among the Vitae."

"Vitae?" Asks Moritz..

"A universal guild dedicated to the healing practices. The most influential of the guilds." Orion leads them down a rising street.

They climb three sectors of the district before they see the faint illumination of daylight. "We're almost there."

Noaki's eyes adjust to the daylight as they emerge from the subterranean district.

They emerge onto a large plateau spanning a few kilometres and flooded in a translucent lake replenished by enormous waterfalls from the mountains.

Noaki's legs wobble from the surrounding mirrored reflection of the sky in the water.

The street widens and provides alternating geometrical pathes through the languid churning waters.

Beautiful buildings of thick stone slabs and wooden beams align the borders of the plateau. They proceed down a path leading towards the mountain's base, where buildings of similar architecture cluster.

With his eyes, Noaki traces one of the alternating routes leading further into the woodlands and a few leading to large towers encroached with thick verdure. "What are those?"

"The conservatories housing physicians and their apprentices. This plateau belongs to the Vitae." They continue for some time before taking an alternative path leading into a grove near the mountain.

"This place is enormous." Moritz groans. "How do people get around?"

"You humes are amusing." Orion chimes. "We won't be long now."

Half of an hour passes before they enter the grove. The sunlight here shines through the foliage in vibrant gold. Noaki catches sight of a strange elk-like animal observing them from a distance, its wide antlers protrude from its head gleaming with gemstones.

"The erukai. Do you recognize them?" Orion asks Noaki, the patterns of his face are now golden hue.

Noaki shakes head.

"They are sacred among the Okari, only with them have they established a cordial partnership." He explains. "The medicinal properties of their antlers are highly valued."

They enter a large circular plaza surrounded by stucco buildings conjoined with arched walkways and terraced platforms. The plaza bustles with the Dalkari, Alvarri, humes, and most commonly, the Okari.

The Okari take an interest in Noaki, bowing and smiling as they pass. Though these Okari lack Noaki's

wildling garments, their fanged smile gives them away. Many don simple garments of natural hues.

Orion leads them to the main building with an impressive arching entrance. Inside they are greeted by a young woman.

"Orion, you're back so soon?" She inspects Moritz then Noaki. "These are the two you were asking about before?"

Orion bows his head gracefully. "Yes, with my recommendation I suggested the two be examined by Master Eiko."

"Master Eiko has gone to engage the Erukai, she should return soon. Follow me." She leads them down a corridor and into a private terrace lounge with a fire pit alight with black burning stones..

"Thank you Ayumi," Orion bows to the young woman. Ayumi returns the bow and leaves the three alone.

"This place is like another world." Moritz inspects the room with intense interest.

Noaki shivers a little, it certainly does feel like another world. He hoped the problem of their amnesia would be resolved once and for all.

On a narrow table, between two floral arrangements, Noaki discovers a pitcher of water beside a stack of crystal glasses. He pours out a glass for himself and his companions.

"Thanks," Moritz accepts the glass eagerly.

Noaki settles himself opposite Orion and hands him the second glass.

The drink refreshes his body and clears his head. He sniffs the water, wondering if anything might have been added.

An hour passes when Moritz makes himself comfortable in a reclined lounge, he falls into a light sleep.

Orion watches Moritz curiously. "Have you been traveling much?"

"We only just came down from Irithelle, though we haven't had proper sleep for two days." Noaki pours himself another glass.

"All paths in the Silver Alps converge in Irithelle, including the streams and creeks that join the great river Saras. Though in the common tongue it is the Gamuush."

"You're quite well traveled and seem to know a lot. How long have you been travelling?." Noaki returns to his seat.

"I haven't really considered keeping track," Orion muses for a moment. "Many years."

"That dalkarian is as unchanged as when our pathes first crossed." An okari woman with silver braided hair and a kind face appears in the doorway. "That was when I was a little girl."

Noaki jumps at her sudden appearance.

"You exaggerate Master Eiko, I was quite youthful then." In a graceful movement Orion stoops over the Okari woman and kisses her forehead. "Look at you, still as vibrant as then as you are now."

"Now *you* exaggerate Orion. I'm beginning to feel age wear down my joints and limbs." She shifts her attention to Noaki. "So this is the northerner?"

She inspects Noaki through luminous lilac eyes. "This adolescent appears quite well Orion. I've been told you lost your memories young one?"

Noaki nods, feeling exposed under her scrutiny. "Yes, two days ago I woke and couldn't remember a thing."

The lines of Eiko's forehead crease. She proceeds to inspect Moritz who is still fast asleep. Before Noaki can wake him, Eiko is kneeling over Moritz's head. "This one is quite exhausted, his mind is disturbed."

Very gently she shifts his head, her fingertips irradiating streams of violet energy. She places her fingers along his cranium and shuts her eyes.

Noaki watches this silently.

Eiko opens her eyes and briefly bathes the space in a brilliant flash of violet. She reveals a look of concern. "This is not good, with all my experience I can do very little but ease his mind for a time." She shuts her eyes once more and a silhouette of frosty light engulfs Moritz and fades into the epicenter of his cranium. Moritz stirs little and seems to pass into a deeper sleep with a pleasant smile.

"What did you do?" Noaki murmurs

Eiko motions for them to follow her out of the room and down the corridor.

"As I said before, I can do very little but ease his mind for a time." She glances at Noaki. "You're an Okari?"

Noaki nods. "So I've been told, though I don't know what that entirely means myself."

Eiko smiles. "You need not worry too much, our people give little regard for identities. Their use is limiting. In more ways than one we are taught from early childhood to abandon these silly ideas."

"A wise practice even to the dalkari," Orion comments.

Noaki remains silent, unsure how to respond. They climb three flights of stairs and halt briefly in a hall for Master Eiko to leave passing instructions to an attendant.

She leads them down a naturally lit corridor with many potted plants attended by apprentices looking busy in Master Eiko's presence.

She ends their journey into a brightly lit operation room with a long oval stone slab raised five feet from the floor. Orion stands beside Noaki. Both watch Eiko work curiously.



Eiko instructs Noaki onto the slab, straightens his limbs into a corpse pose, and places two orbs in the palms of his hands. "Let them sit and try not to move too much," she says firmly.

"Alright."

She sets something above the crown of his head and between his feet. "You'll want to stand back a bit," she warns Orion who takes three graceful steps back.

Master Eiko raises her arms over her head and her fingertips ignite in violet flames. It takes Noaki sheer force of will not to scurry from those flames.

She places her right thumb where his collarbones meet and fans the rest of her fingers downward. She then lays her left thumb where his eyebrows meet and fans her fingers across his crown. Then she shuts her eyes.

A sudden surge of energy erupts from Noaki's cranium and surges to the base of his spine, dispersing down his legs and entering whatever had been placed between his feet.

She holds this pose for a minute before pulling away.

Noaki glances at Orion whose eyes are luminous pink, the patterns of his skin glow a mixture of pink and milky white.

"I'm going to activate your perception, do not be startled by what you see." Eiko looms over Noaki's head. She wraps her fingers around his cranium like she did Moritz. "No'aki, your sight will return once again." She closes her eyes.

Noaki has little time to react when cerith tendrils of intense vibrating light borders his vision, they hum and reverberate in his head with such intensity the very world hums along with him.

These cerith tendrils engulf his vision entirely and he falls into an infinite abyss of infinite churning swirls of all violet shades and hues.

Above, the borders of his vision flash a brilliant burst of blinding white light. Then darkness.

"Open your eyes."

Noaki lifts his heavy lids slowly.

A large capsule of translucent energy encompasses his body. "What is this?" He whispers.

"A shield that channels excess energy," Orion explains. Eiko removes her hands and fiddles with the orbs in Noaki's palms. A stream of red and blue energy climbed the translucent capsule mixing together and finally settling down with a live imprint of Noaki's body. "Using this method I can thoroughly diagnose your health." She uses her fingertips to interact with the screen.

Noaki watches her work in awed fascination. "This is amazing."

Orion chuckles.

Eiko remains deep in concentration, her luminous eyes darting around the shield. "Your health is fine, though your body is accustomed to more physical activity. You seem to be under less mental stress than your friend... fortunately. I might be able to see all the physical aspects of one's physicality but psychological matters are a different area of well-being, though they are at times deeply entwined."

Noaki and Orion watch the screen shift and morph with Eiko's interactions.

Master Eiko fiddles with the orbs and the capsule returns to its base translucent state. She removes the orbs and the objects above his head and below his feet. The capsule vanishes. "You can rise now."

Noaki sits up, feet dangling over the stone slab.

"Nothing is wrong with you physically; you're in better health than most, though that should be taken lightly. One shouldn't compare themselves to those who seek out physicians." Eiko meets Noaki's eyes in meditative rumination. "Your amnesia is no symptom of intentional physical harm or accident. It is something beyond what is presently understood."

Orion and Noaki listen intently to Eiko's diagnosis, though it seems to make more sense to the dalkarian than Noaki, who was uncertain how to process this information.

Eiko sighs deeply. "There are many kinds of memories, the body remembers everything, this is always so. However, if I were to attempt to activate those memories, it would severely damage your psyche." Eiko peers into space. "Because your conscious mind at present delineates along a parallel to the consciousness of the person you were before, it would conflict with an already fragile balance of physical and conscious memory holding itself together on a thread yet to snap. It is a miracle your hume friend has not broken under this."

Noaki did not comprehend any of this. He admits it aloud to the others.

Orion shakes his head.

"This is not unsurprising. A force with an intelligence that exceeds the collective knowledge of many civilizations at present, has interfered with your consciousness." Eiko gazes toward Noaki, though Noaki feels her perception linger somewhere beyond his own. "At present there are very few, less than a handful of people who I can suspect with such a capability. Though what use they would have with a hume and Okari, I do not know."

Orion appears genuinely disturbed by Eiko's words. "You're not suggesting.?" He trails off.

Eiko nods. "Though that is speculation. Interference from such beings would be difficult to assess"

Orion's expression darkens.

Noaki breaks their rumination. "I still don't understand any of this. So there is nothing that can be done to regain my memories?"

At this Eiko reacts with an alienated look that makes Noaki shiver.

"Which memories?" She says darkly. "The memories of your physical form as you are now? Or the memories of those outside this body?"

Noaki's face prickles.

"The problem from what I can perceive, is that this body you inhabit as a conscious being, is not your own. It is something you have slipped into and taken over, not unlike a parasite. What became of the original is unknown." Eiko grimaces. "You no doubt know nothing of your former consciousness outside this body because those memories in itself is merely a reel of physical memory, without which you lose yourself. However, because this body's memory was not yours to begin with, it too is unknown to you. Its instinctual function is there to assist in some ways, however, even this is limited." Eiko sighs deeply then levels her gaze with Noaki's. "Such a surgical procedure of this nature is unheard of, to meddle with consciousness so precisely as not to break the psyche deeply entwined with the physical, is medicinal knowledge that exceeds our collective comprehension by centuries. The kind of energy required is so immense and meticulous that no deifacted shard I'm aware of exists to assist with such a procedure, and a deifacted shard is required for this kind of operation."

Noaki loses himself in her inquisitive eyes. Eyes that look upon him like some anomaly.

"So what is he to do in his present state?" Orion adds.

"That is entirely up to you No'aki. The Okari way of life has already been imprinted through cultural cultivation, As such, your burden is less than the hume who sleeps downstairs." Eiko clasps his shoulders, "I think that is enough for now. Rest." She kisses his forehead and Noaki drifts into a dreamless slumber.

## Atmedanyeh | The Shakkhari Steppe | Interlude

*I've long abandoned counting the days since finding myself lost and confused in the streets of Naayir-Nahtama.*

*It's been a few years and I still don't understand it.*

*Whenever I try to understand it, my thoughts and emotions become hazy, like distant memories concealed in heavy fog. Well, ruminating on this has never proven helpful in recovering my memories.*

*It has been a long while since the amnesia crossed my mind, I've been too preoccupied with my labors and studies.*

*For a few days now my dreams have gotten more vivid in frequency. I wonder often about the others.*

*I haven't heard much from Marko, although we hardly spoke aside from light talk and a few nods in passing. When he finally left to apprentice as a swordmaster, I was a little disheartened but also bittersweet to see him off. He promised to get word to me if he made any breakthroughs.*

*Considerable time has passed since then and I still wait to hear from him. I do hear news through my correspondence with Nikolai, who's taken up work under an alvarrian merchant master.*

*"The work is difficult" he'd written in one of his many letters. "The wages are worth the labor, but it's the adventure and traveling that propels me. Civilization has flourished in many odd places. In the voluminous caverns of active volcanic chambers, whose molten fires are harvested by powerful shards. In the desolate deserts, with seas of sand.*

*Even within the regions of the far north & south, amid the harsh arctics, life flourishes."*

*Due in part to frequent traveling, Nikolai's letters come at irregular intervals, but are always a delightful surprise to my otherwise mundane temple life. Though they're not as frequent as I'd like, they often come in a thick bundle, providing me many hours of adventure and news, occasionally they're attached with a parcel containing a souvenir from his travels.*

*Once, I received a dalkarian sweet called lokum. I've taken to it so much I can't visit the seaside city without a brief detour to the confectionary..*

*The temples have been quite busy these past few days, monks of all ranks shuffling about preparing to host an important figure. Rumor is this person is an alvarrian celestial from Euradai, though I've only heard of that place a few times. There's also rumors that this celestial is on equal footing with Gran Master Kurolos, though how much truth can be taken from rumors I don't know.*

David, crossed legged and hunched over his journal, is interrupted by Aranle, his lithe cat familiat with a coating of dark fur.

He pets the purring beast. "I haven't seen you in a while, where've you you been off to?"

Aranle skulks between his wrapped legs and coils herself comfortably.

"You come at the most inopportune time Aranle, I've only a few minutes." He scratches behind her rotating ears. "You little minx."

He closes the leather bound journal settled on the short-legged table and returns his fountain pen into its corresponding case. With his spare time, he meditates.

Before the temple bells ring, he gently wakes the feline and nudges her away. She glares at him reproachfully but affectionately rubs herself against him before skulking onto the window sill to finish her afternoon nap.

He rises onto his feet and warms his legs. His small room contains little furnishings. A potted reed plant, a small short legged table, a wardrobe containing a few collection of clothes, and a rolled up sleeping mat. Just a few accessories to the life he lived here.

The bells chime in a melodious rhythm that echoes throughout the corridors and temple grounds. A little beyond, those tending to the fields and patties began making their way to the temple.

David feels refreshed and the mind fog he'd been carrying all morning fades. Though it never truly went away. It had been some time since he could think as clear as this.

Before leaving the room, he grabs a thick straw hat from his wardrobe and waves goodbye to Aranle. She flicks her tail in response. David smiles and navigates his way through the temple and beyond the botanic arcades. He bows slightly to any passing monks who were all in contagious good spirits.

Throughout the rest of the afternoon, David labors with a feeling of sweet bliss radiating from his chest, he felt well, worked well, and thought well. His limbs did not tire, and when the time came to rotate shifts, he'd enough energy to continue his labor throughout the night if he'd like.

When dusk approaches and many engage themselves to leisurely activities, all of Atmedanyeh has been taken over by some ethereal bliss. Everyone radiates this bliss unquestioningly.



David returns to his room. Aranle rises from her perch, stretching her limbs. He joins her on the ledge and notices one of Atmedanyeh's ferries reserved for prestigious guests. It crosses the waters, sailing northward to the main temple.

David and Aranle observe the vessel curiously. It irradiates pulses of crystalline celestial energy, reverberating throughout the canyons. The pulsing energy reveals to them the source of that afternoon bliss.

## Borintas | The Silver Alps: II

Early that morning, after breakfasting with Orion, two liveried footmen delivered to their rooms many different parcels containing their new clothings.

The two made time to familiarize themselves with the new additions of their wardrobe. They were amazed by the fit and quality.

Moritz, in his light blue linen shirt, camel hemp trousers, and cork-leather sandals, did not appear oddly proportioned as he did in Noaki's clothings.

When Noaki inspected his mended coat, he found a note in one of the pockets. It'd been written by the tailor probably emphasizing better handling of his coat, or maybe further chastising.

After tossing the note in the fireplace, he spends a few admiring the tailor's craftwork. The coat was transformed into a rich dark sheen with the faint aroma of pines. It looked and felt alive when he tried it on. Though, the days were getting warmer so he left it behind and wore something very similar to Moritz, save for the shirt which had been dyed mauve.

With the excitement of that morning passed, they were now drifting along the Gamuush in a sturdy rowboat they'd rented from a local fisherman. Their backs were turned toward each other with a pair of angling rods dangling over their small vessel. Neither had any luck with their lines, but were enjoying the languid afternoon.

Noaki imagines themselves fitting in the backdrop of some scenic painting.

A little over two weeks have passed since Master Eiko's first diagnosis. Master Eiko, as Noaki later learned

from Orion, had activated Noaki's dormant perception. Since then, he began experiencing strange phenomena.

A few days acquainting themselves with Orion compelled the Dalkarian to part from his original traveling party to join theirs. For this, Noaki was immensely grateful, without the Dalkarian's presence their ignorance might have propelled them into some uncompromising situation.

With a little prodding from Master Eiko, Orion personally oversaw the basics in their education alongside training.

Noaki reels in his line and sets the rod aside. He reaches into their lunch basket and tosses pieces of leftover bannock to the aquatic birds. They eye him warily at first, but were soon scrambling to devour the bread.

Before he realizes what's happening, the lower borders of his vision flare tendrils of violet and the world slows. Within a limited radius, he makes out the faint violet outlines of every living creature.

In the reeds along the embankment, in the depths of the river, and in the space of the air.

Noaki watches in haunted fascination when a large serpent undulates past their vessel and captures its prey. A particular plump bird barely has time to respond when its entire form bulges inside the serpent's body.

The world resumes its natural pace and Noaki keels over the boat, his afternoon lunch drifting down the river.

"Gross!" Moritz laughs beside him, patting him on the back. "I told you to go easy on the wine."

"Did you see the size of that thing?" Noaki wipes his mouth with a cloth from the basket. "It was twice the length of our boat!"

Moritz shifts his attention towards the serpent's departing undulations.

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In the commons area of the Prowler Inn, Noaki and Moritz seat themselves with a view of Borintas. The town is submerged in the light of an ethereal gold sun. In the shades of absent sunlight, street lanterns illumine more so than is usual.

Noaki and Moritz dine over an assortment of local delicacies, and to Moritz's delight the main course consists of roasted duck with a helpful serving of diced vegetables.

They feast well past sunset when they are joined by Orion and a new companion.

"Noaki, Moritz, it's my pleasure to introduce to you, Gavin Whitehawk." Orion beams, his patterns take on a pale moonlit hue.

The physiognomies of this middle aged man, Gavin, were rough. His silver eyes, piercing. Salt and pepper stubble sprouted along his jawline and his jet black hair grew thick and untamed. A white bearskin overcoat conceals his brawny figure.

Despite his size, his movements, much like Orion, were assured with a touch of grace. He was among the few people they encountered who could meet Orion's eye level.

Noaki and Moritz are stricken with awe and wonder with this intimidating person.

Moritz was the first to regain his composure and to introduce himself with a handshake.

Noaki mimics his friend's introduction, his hands were small in Gavin's but accepted with equal respect. .

"Aye, you'll have to forgive me lads, I'm not as silver tongued as my dalkarian friend here." Gavin occupies the remaining seat at the table.

"Would you two like something to drink?" Noaki sips from his mug. "Moritz and I've already eaten, I'm afraid."

Gavin nods gratefully. "Aye a mug of ale ought to do it. Selinoff?" His eyes meet Orion's.

"I'll share a drink for this special occasion." Orion nods to Noaki.

Noaki waves to the waiter and places their order. "I expect you might be too busy for private lessons tonight?" He asks Orion.

Moritz shifts in his seat. "It's alright if you are, we did ask for the day off."

Orion chimes a chuckle, easing the hidden tensions between them. "Well Gavin, it seems you won't have time to settle in from your long journey."

Gavin observes Noaki keenly. "You're the Okari with the heartstring instrument?"

"Yes, though I'll admit I'm not very skilled using it." Noaki shies away. Gavin's perception is unnerving him, not unlike Master Eiko.

"When I heard news Gavin Whitehawk was residing in Port Min-khashiib, I sent a post." Orion pauses to receive his ale, he thanks the blushing waitress before continuing. "No'aki, I sent word to him on your behalf. You'll not find many suitably skilled to apprentice for."

Noaki observes Gavin down his mug in a few gulps.

"I'm afraid you won't learn much under my tutelage, and master Eiko is quite busy with her practice," Orion admits.

Noaki remains silent, he looks to his friend for advice.

Moritz shrugs a response. *You must learn*

*to use this again*, Kaien's words echoes among his thoughts. "Could you teach me to use the bow?"

Gavin peers into Noaki's eyes. "Perhaps ... if your abilities are exceptional."

Noaki shrinks in his seat. "I'd like to learn a little before we leave."

Orion downs his mug without spilling a drop. He slams it down with a solid clunk. "Shall we be off then?"

---

The four split off into separate pairs, Noaki with Gavin and Moritz with Orion.

"We're not training in the arena?" Noaki trails after Gavin's silent figure. His bow slung over his shoulder with its familiar weight, though it felt strange to be carrying around.

Gavin ignores his question. "Selinoff's said you've lost your memories? "

Noaki doesn't answer, he didn't like to think of his amnesia much. He gazes into the sky, one of the three lunar bodies did not rise, it was the largest of them. "It happened some two weeks ago," he finally answers. "I don't like to think about it much, Moritz and I never really talk about it."

Gavin nods. He slows to match his pace with Noaki. "You find anything of your past?" Noting Noaki's hesitation he follows this with a reassuring smile. "It's alright lad, I know we've just met, but you can trust me, On Selinoff's honor."

"I..." Noaki still hesitates. When he mulls it over, he recounts everything since waking up on the forested ground. He figures if Orion could trust this man to lead him off into the woodlands, why shouldn't he?

Gavin listens intently and does not interrupt, only interjecting questions concerning events Noaki worded oddly due to his ignorance.

When he finishes his tale, Gavin doesn't speak until they reach the borders of the town and enter a forest. "This opal, do you have it on you?"

Noaki reaches into his coat pocket, retrieves the leather pouch and hands it to Gavin who handles it gingerly. In that instant the strange phenomena of Noaki's perceptual experience activates and the world slows.

Gavin drops the opal into his palm, the instant the gem is in contact with flesh, the weight of an incredible, invisible force overwhelms Noaki onto his knees.

A translucent sphere manifests and ensconces Gavin's head. Millions of microscopic white lights bespeckle this sphere. The silver of his eyes flare white and the entirety of his physical form irradiates a luminous moonlit aura, and furs of his overcoat dance in some invisible field of energy.

It appears Noaki as if the two are submersed in the depths of some crystalline ocean.

The moment Gavin drops the stone into its leather pouch, the experiential shift in reality resumes its intrinsic atmosphere.

For a long while, Gavin eyes the pouch with a grim expression.

He hands it back to Noaki, "Aye, just as I suspected."

Noaki pockets the leather pouch. "What do you mean by that?" He clambers onto his feet, his knees wobbling.

"It is deifacted," He murmurs. "This shard is from the primordial ages."

"I think Master Eiko mentioned something like it before." Noaki recalls on that time. "You don't think this is why I've lost my memories do you?"

"I don't know lad," he responds. "Deifacted shards are powerful, unpredictable, and anomalous to existence. This primordial artifact comes from an age long forgotten to time's embrace."

"Would it be too much of an explanation if I asked what shards are?" Noaki heard that term countless times, though he never really understood what it all meant.

"They are like the name, shards. These shards are created from that which never existed." Gavin nods.

"That doesn't explain anything!" Noaki laughs.

Gavin grins, revealing four sharp fangs.

"You're an Okari?!" Noaki points to his own fangs. "I'm starting to realize we've all got these."

Gavin nods. "Aye I am, and surriyin alvarrian."

Noaki recollects his surroundings. "We're a bit ways from town."

Gavin halts. "Aye, We've wandered further than I'd been meaning. No matter, we won't be out long."

To Noaki's bewilderment, Gavin manifests an intricately woven recurve, he aims the obsidian bow downward. "Whoa!" Noaki steps back.

"You'll be wanting to use your hunter's perception lad." Gavin's eyes flare white.

Noaki understood, at least this much he could manage on his own. He shuts his eyes for a moment, and immediately the world begins to slow down.

Gavin's entire form burning and enormous white flame. The exuding field of energy encompasses such a radius, Noaki's perception can't pinpoint its circumference.

Gavin pulls the string back and a brilliant white arrow appears, its tip burns with an intense white fire.

Noaki could feel the dense power of that fire, his pores perspire from heat.



Gavin angles his bow. Noaki would have missed the release if he'd so much as blinked.

The arrow surges toward the peaks of the western mountains and erupts in a brilliant blaze that illuminates the night sky.

Witnessing that demonstration, Noaki's fears of James and his cronies were silly in comparison. His heart beats and his pores prickle from the sheer magnitude of potential destruction.

Adrenaline amplifies his perception as he's witnessing that explosion in slow detail. So mesmerized was he, were it not for Gavin stirring Noaki, he might have frozen himself in that spot.

Noaki deactivates his perception and gazes into Gavin's dormant eyes. Deceptive eyes that hid a power far beyond his imagination.

"What..." Noaki endeavors to bring words to his tongue. "What are you?"

Gavin steadies Noaki onto his feet. "Sorry lad, I infused too much energy into that demonstration."

Noaki shakes his head. "What you did there, it's frightening."

"This is a potential I see inside you." Gavin holds Noaki in his gaze.

"I doubt that very much, I can only see things." Noaki's abilities feel small, limited, and useless by comparison. "That range in your perception alone is so... I can't even see the periphery."

Gavin smiles warmly. "Once I'd been where you stood. I was much older." He urges Noaki down the path they came. "That oughta be enough for the night."

"Shame I didn't practice much," Noaki murmurs to himself. Upon seeing Gavin's expression he quickly adds, "I did learn a lot though. I appreciate your straightforward answers, everyone seems to be answering in vague riddles."

"Your ignorance is to blame for that." Gavin removes his hand from Noaki's shoulder. "I did not say anything untrue Noaki, I do see potential in you."

Noaki gives a muted response.

The recurve in Gavin's hand vanished in a brief flash of white fire. "Will you be my apprentice?"

For a long while, Noaki considers this. "What do you mean by that?"

"We'd travel together, Orion's arranged for the four of us to journey together, until the both of you can make it alone."

The woodlands are thinning, and Noaki can make out the lights of town. "I have to ask Moritz first." Noaki matches his pace with Gavin.

"Orion suspects the lad will agree, and though the dalkarian lacks our perception, he's rarely wrong. In fact," Gavin has a ruminating look on his face, "I've never known him to be wrong."

"I'll agree if Moritz also agrees with Orion." Noaki considers his friend before continuing. "If my intuition is correct, and they've yet failed me, I suspect Moritz will also wait want to ask me first"

"I understand, I'm pleased to hear it." Gavin hastens his pace. "Let's return soon. I've not rested much since Min-Khashiib."

---

Moritz was in the midst of learning a new technique when an invisible force pressed down on him. This appears to also affect Orion, as immediately after, the dalkarian's eyes are luminous pink.

"What *was* that?"

"Spiritual energy." Orion closes his eyes. "A powerful kind. "

The weight of energy lifts from Moritz's shoulders. He repositions himself and focuses with intensity on the atmosphere surrounding him.

The night illumines a brilliant white, followed by an explosion.

Moritz and Orion gaze upward in unison, the remnants of some white explosion gradually dim.

"Now what was that?"

"Surriyin fire." Orion smiles. "Whitehawk's demonstration."

---

Noaki waits long into the early dawn before Moritz returns looking worn and disheveled. It appeared Orion didn't spare much on behalf of his absence.

Noaki pours out a glass of wine for his friend who drinks it eagerly.

"Noaki," Moritz pants, after taking a few gulps of the fermented beverage. "Orion asked me to be his apprentice."

Noaki nods for him to continue.

Moritz downs another glass. "I told him I'd wait until I heard what you had to say."

Noaki's face beams. "Gavin made that same proposition, and I told him I'd ask what you'd say."

Moritz laughs. "I suppose this means we're both uncertain." He pours himself another glass.

Noaki pours himself a glass as well, partially to numb his experience of Gavin's demonstration, and to loosen

himself just enough to recount everything he learned in regards to the opal.

Moritz doesn't speak for a long while yet, only nodding in solemn silence. "I suppose we don't have much choice do we?" He finishes his fifth glass. "If you really think about it." Moritz sighs, "there's still a lot I don't know and want to know, learn stuff. You know?"

"Like how to read?" Noaki recalls his frustration in that particular area.

Nodding, Moritz takes a sip. "Yeah, sometimes I forget we can't. It reminds me too much..."

"You learn anything new?" Noaki cuts in.

Moritz face glows, "you won't believe me until I show you." He takes another sip, "I'm still learning, but it essentially works like this..."

Like this they continued their exchange long into morning, irresponsibility consuming copious amounts of wine until they fell unconscious.

## The Hosleare Estate | The Silver Alps: I

Nearly three weeks have passed since James rose from a plush bed, his body adorned in a floral satin robe belted around his waist over a matching pair of satin shorts. He'd forgotten himself entirely and roamed the enormous palace alarmed and fierce.

A mysterious force had coaxed him into the botanical arcades where he encountered a large serpent with beautiful obsidian scales and sporting three sharp horned ridgings running down its spine.

James had little time to register what was happening to him when he felt a sharp pain in his neck. He freezes and surrenders to his fate, collapsing onto his back with an audible thud.

The heavy serpent slithers under his neck, raising his head. Slowly the serpent places its glottis on his forehead.

A dark cosmic veil from above and below the borders of James' vision and senses close in around his consciousness.

*'Do not sleep, there will be great pain, and then ecstasy.'*

He lay there in paralyzing wonderment of that voice until he realizes it belongs to the serpent. He feels incredibly heavy. His body is turning into liquid.

Then a pulse. That single beat of his heart moves the venom through his veins. It creates an indescribable pain, so

unbearable he was grateful for his paralyzation. If he'd so much as twitched, it would speed up the procession of venom.

Each heartbeat was an endless electrical discharge of pain. No fear, no happiness, no anger, no anxiety, no guilt, no aspects of the mind could overpower this kind of pain.

Time slows down, shattering his perspective, and lifetimes pass before another painful beat, then another.

Very slowly everything he considers as himself, his many perspectives, unconscious and conscious, erodes. Then that too, subsides. The one feeling pain no longer exists, only the subtle pulses of a heartbeat.

He understands for a time, drifting in the waves of his beating heart, drifting in the infinite sea of ecstasy.

Before him, far away, the gold outline of the serpent emerges from depths of darkness. Its head comes closer, and closer, and closer.

The serpent is enormous and loops around him in wide circles, its obsidian scales draws him in. He drifts into them and witnesses himself in the crystalline depths of each scale playing out like four dimensional film.

A harmonic reverberation explodes all around him, engulfing everything in and outside of him.

He could feel once again. Feel the subtlest particles taking the form of those harmonic sounds. Trillions of trillions of subtle particles. Then larger particles take form of the subtler particles taking form of sound. Like this it continues, until the outline of his physical form appears.

The surface of his physical form vibrantly glows every possible shade of blue with dancing white swirls. The gold outline of the obsidian serpent is added with white, and the

inner dimension of its scales show him the entirety of his lifetime up until losing it.

The looping form of the serpent thins and at last its tail drifts past.

He hypnotizes himself as it slowly vanishes into a single point far into the depths of space.

Suddenly he feels himself falling backward, his speed steadily climbing to such an intensity that he incinerates.

James jolted upright, his senses so refined, there existed no delay in his mind or actions. His movements are swift, deliberate, and light. He stands surprised to find the serpent draped around his shoulders. It raises its head to meet his eyes.

"Nagashya."

The serpent flickers its tongue and slithers down his body. He assists her down in a comforting and familiar motion.

Nagashya undulates into the garden to resume hunting.

He knew at that moment the serpent had done him a service he could never repay.

Had it not been for his familiar, he would have been through quite an ordeal, and although he now knew he could never truly regain his true memories or identities, he knew enough of his former life here to resume his position at the Hosleare estate without raising suspicions.

James sits in a slightly hunched posture, poring over the details of the past year recorded in a journal he discovered locked away in the top drawer of his desk.

His former identity had recorded only the most important events, including the most troublesome servants and guards, in detail. According to it, he had only been employed at the estate for three and half years. Five years prior to that, he had caught the attention of the Marquis Dion Al'ahn Hosleare.

At the time the Marquis had taken him in as a playmate for his daughter Lucille, though that period he chose to ignore, seeing as this Lucille wasn't around and he'd yet to meet the Marquis in person.

The most important task in need of attendance was the theft of a chest containing a fortune. Though this fortune, James had emphasized in his journal, was of little importance. It was the shard inside the chest.

He shuts the journal.

Every day since that first awakening, when all matters of the estate were attended to, he isolated himself in Hosleare's study with Naga to keep him company. He spent long hours into the night reading and poring over thick tomes, the journals of the estate's previous owners, and of their high ranking servants. Last night in particular he'd read long into the night, the brandy in his crystal tumbler untouched.

In the journals of one of these former owners, she had mentioned a dazzling gemstone she referred to as 'deifacted shard,' this immediately galvanized him onto his feet, his gaze instinctively searching the collection of literature housed in the bookshelf aligning the wall.



He climbed the rolling ladder, picked out a few books he assumed might contain pertinent information, and tossed them onto the ground, startling Nagashya coiled next to the marble fireplace.

James climbed down and by another stroke of luck, had accidentally slipped out an onyx tome with a title that read 'Sohmnias.' When he stooped down to return it, he noticed it had no author to claim it.

With increasing curiosity, he flipped through the pages and realized this also was a journal, although not the typical kind that recounted mundane events and details. This one contained diagrams, detailed text, instructions, and theoretical data that made little sense to him. It included maps of unknown regions.

By that point all concerns of the deifacted shard disappeared from his mind. He nestled in the damask wingback next to Nagashya and began absorbing the journal. When he finally closed the book the first light of dawn filled the study. His eyes were exhausted but his mind was still alert, always alert, even in sleep.

There came a knock at the door, followed by Garrett's announcement of himself. "Enter," James responds, returning the tomes to their proper places.

A portion of the bookshelf shudders and opens to reveal a masculine palatial guard in liveried uniform.

"Welcome back Garrett, any worthwhile news?" James barely acknowledges him with a curt nod.

Garrett scratches his rough ginger beard. "They're in Borintas just like you expected."

The corner of James' mouth twitches. "And you apprehended the thieves like I'd ordered?"

Garrett doesn't answer.

James grabs the tumbler from the desk. "Care for a drink?"

"Yeah, I wouldn't mind." Garrett seats himself where James had been reading. "I just came back, been traveling all night."

James hands him the tumbler, then lounges in the chair behind the desk. "So why have you failed me this simple task?"

Garrett brings the tumbler to his lips and sighs. "Listen man, they're armed and I'm not gonna risk my life for something *you* know nothing about."

James frowns. "The Marquis has ordered it, not me." He smiles. "You were hired to protect it, and when he returns from the Summit, *I* won't be the only one punished, all of the guard will." He pours himself a fresh tumbler of brandy and offers to refill Garrett's drink.

The ginger nods and waits for him to finish pouring. "I didn't ask for any of this, the me with memories did."

"Quite unfortunate I know," James places the brandy bottle on the mantelpiece and occupies the matching chair next to Garrett. "However, that uniform, including the handsome salary that comes with it, requires a certain degree of service which is expected of you." He sips from his tumbler.

Garrett inspects the gold liquid in his tumbler. "I know, and I'm sorry." He downs the glass, reaches the bottle and pours himself another. "If it were just the two of them, I could take them, but they're always with this tall guy with red skin and weird tattoos that never stay one color."

James becomes alert. Nagashya smells this sudden change in his body's chemistry and shifts in her coiled position.

This alarms the ginger and he deftly catches the brandy before it shatters.

"That 'guy with red skin' is a dalkarian. The oldest peoples of Eldaeoryai."

Garrett sends him a blank unblinking stare.

"Never mind. You were right not to confront them." James finishes his drink and gestures for the ginger to refill it. "Probably the wisest thing you've done since we met." He grins toward the ginger and ambles to the tracery windows with drink in hand. "This unnecessarily complicates our predicament."

At that moment there came another knock at the door followed by barely audible footsteps.

"Loraunt!" James exclaims. He doesn't turn around to greet the dark hooded figure concealing his face beneath a dark neck gaiter. "Take a seat, would you like a drink? That is, if Garrett hasn't emptied the bottle." He returns to the desk and stacks the journal of Sohmnia onto his own.

The towering figure of Loraunt is awkward next to Garrett, drink in hand, and Nagashya coiled at his side.

The serpent only tolerated certain people, and Garrett's hyperactive chemistry annoyed her.

Loraunt lowers his mask, revealing a dark complected triangular face with perceptive amber eyes that sparkles in the dawn light.

"I take it you haven't had any luck in the north?" James states more than asks.

Loraunt nods curtly in response.

Of the three of them, Loraunt had woken at an earlier time, six years earlier to be precise. Only through a fortuitous coincidence had he been hired as a secret operative for the Marquis. Though in spite of the extra time

he had to adjust, he claimed to have made little to no progress with his amnesia.

James had his suspicions the krishkalvarri had the foresight to see that the butler who did not recognize him at the time, would one day wake up in a familiar state of amnesia. Though he'd never ask Loraunt this himself, to him, their former lives weren't necessary, they couldn't regain them anyway.

"Garrett has confirmed my suspicions that the two went south. The savage looking wildling mentioned in my journal, and the peasant Moritz, are in Borintas."

Garrett shifts in his seat. "I had a good look at the other guy with Moritz, and there's no doubt it's Noaki."

Loraunt and James' eyes flash with recognition.

"Ah, that might make things easier for us." James sips. "However, if they revealed this shard to their dalkarian companion, our predicament is made even more difficult."

"Dalkariyahn?" Loraunt says with a heavy accent, he finishes his glass and gestures to Garrett for another. "I've had dealings vith dheir kind."

"As you already know, I haven't. Tell me, with our combined strength-" Garret coughs. Ignoring him, he continues. "Will we have a chance to take them head on?"

Loraunt's expression becomes thoughtful. "D'at vill depend on many variables." He empties his tumbler and gestures for another. "Dalkari, like Alvarri, live very long." He empties another glass and gestures for another. "I meet some alive longer dhan d'is many," he raises three fingers, "generations of 'eums. Your lives, very short." He grins, finishes his glass, and gestures for another.

Garrett, visibly annoyed, hands him the bottle.

Loraunt pats Garret's shoulder in an amiable fashion. "If 'ee is strong Dalkariyahn. Fire-ed 'ear, no chance." He points to his chest. "Me, no chance." With open palms indicating James, "and serpent lord, no chance." He reaches down to pet Nagahshyah, and to Garret's surprise the serpent allows him. "Nagahshyah, best chance. "He enunciates her name in perfect alvarrian. "Vise, strong, even all us, no chance against Nagahshyah. Ja?"

The serpent nudges her head affectionately against Loraunt's wrist before coiling herself again.

Loraunt pours himself another glass, his Alvarrian metabolism hardly afflicted by the brandy. "No. We need to use," he taps his temple with a finger.

James expected as much and thanks Loraunt for his input, he knew the Krishkalvarri did not like to speak because of his accent.

James did not speak for a long time, his mind rapidly processing information. The only sounds were coming from the fireplace and the clinking of glass. While his thoughts go through multiple scenarios, he leans his elbows on the desk, his fingertips meeting in wide arcs. Through the gaps of his fingers he sees the Sohmnia's journal. His mind speeds in rapid succession, everything comes together and he smiles.

When he finally speaks, the other two had emptied the entire bottle and were opening a new one. In spite of his earlier jab at Garrett, they all knew these bottles wouldn't be missed. In fact the bottles in this room would be replaced before they left for Borintas that afternoon.

James straightens his posture, cracks his neck, and lays out his plans.

## Naayir-Nahtama | Svernia | Interlude

In one of the private gearing rooms of the Koleyane Colosseum, Marko polishes the A'nurian blade of his katana.

Drawing from his lau'khet, the outlines of the blade radiates a phosphorescent azure. From any angles the blade can be perceived, this azure outline did not dim or falter in color and depth. Nor did this daemoniac aura distort all that's reflected in the blade.

Just as when it had been forged, the inscription of the blade glows a molten white. In traditional dalkarian the inscription reads;

### *Ayshehhilal*

Half of the seal that prevents the blade from drawing on his energy reserves begins from the hilt. He returns the sword to its onyx sheath inscribed with the other half of the seal. When he snaps the sword into place, the crystalline seal illuminates a dim moonlit blue.

For a time he sits crossed legged, eyes closed, sword resting on his lap, listening. A low rumble penetrates the thick walls, rising and falling with anticipation.

A week's passed since the Koleyane Colosseum hosted its seasonal taikhetudin death elimination.

Although the grand prize of two hundred gold and silver crystaires attracted many challengers far and wide, a great number of participants competed to advertise their

abilities to wealthy patrons, and a handful participated for possible recruitment from Celestial Orders.

Marko, however, participated on a passing whim. Originally he'd meant to continue northward and surprise David with a visit to Atmedanyeh.

Sometimes he'd wonder what his old friend had gotten up to. Were it not for the stringent disciplines of his apprenticeship, he would've kept regular correspondence. Knowing his friend, David would be delighted just to see him and to know that Marko was doing well.

A knock came at the door followed by an announcement of his next match.

Marko picks himself off the ground and slips into his ocean silk kurta with pearl embroidery, leaving the collar unlaced. After securing Ayshehhilal to his waist with a white sash, he proceeds onto the arena platform.

His opponent wears a white sirwal tied down with a silver sash securing two scimitars. His bare torso reveals a hairy masculine physique and up the length of his bulging arms, a crystalline insignia flares white.

From his opponent's insignia, Marko ascertains his opponent's nature to bear an essence of surriyin fire.

He did not need to wait for his opponent's name to be announced, he learned that from the ceaseless chanting of the spectators.

Al'tahn.

The encased emek shards aligning the arena over thick wooden poles, were rotating with fervent intensity. To stir up the barrier like this, Marko could only imagine what kind of spectacle the previous match must've been.

He and his opponent step parallel to each other.

Al'tahn draws his scimitars, their blades blazing in white flames.

It would be trouble if he managed to strike Marko.

Al'tahn positions into a wide vertical stance, one blade arcing overhead, the other pointed toward Marko.

Marko widens his stance and rests his palm on Ayshehhilal's hilt. This would be a short match, the shortest since the start of the week.

The gong rings.

Al'tahn catapults his arced arm, releasing a vertical inferno that incinerates everything in its path, save for the emek barrier protecting the spectators by transfiguring the flames into energy and siphoning it into the city.

Before the white inferno of his first strike leaves his blade, Al'tahn twirls on his feet and releases a horizontal inferno.

Marko simply steps aside from the first strike immersed in his lightning surge. His eyes are aglow a moonlit blue, bringing the world to a close standstill. His body surges with immense energy, allowing him to maneuver in this alternate perspective.

Before his opponent releases his second horizontal strike, Marko draws his blade.

The world resumes its natural pace.

Al'tahn's expression gradually fades into one of shock. Ayshehhilal's blade reflects the stubble beneath his chin, its razor edge pressed very lightly against flesh.

The spectators were at a loss, save for the few with perceptions who could glimpse Marko in his lightning surge.

Marko sheathes Ayshehhilal with a snap.

The corners of Al'tahn's mouth arch into a smile, then a grin, and finally, a deep rumbling laughter. The spectators



explode into a deafening roar of outrage, cheers, and applause.

## Borintas | The Silver Alps: III

Noaki wipes perspiration from his brow. Had Moritz always been this skilled? He readies his stance into a defensive position, drawing his bow, arrow aimed toward the ground. The arrows themselves were blunted for Moritz sake, but the hailstorms concealing the arena in a thick frosty cloud were real enough to damage flesh.

This was their final day in Borintas, and to celebrate, Orion and Gavin had decided to pit their pupils against each other. Noaki had a disgruntled impression they were also gambling on a winner.

Master Eiko and her assistant were on standby in case their medical aid was needed.

Noaki steadies his breathing, the initial blast of the hailstorm had knocked the wind out of him, as it does when you're facing an incoming storm. With his hunter's perception, the outlines of Moritz's body illuminates a brilliant frosty blue.

Moritz, appears to be steadily making his way toward Noaki. Noaki walks backwards, heading closer to the arena's perimeter.

In spite of the storm's power, it fades into some invisible barrier.

Aligning the arena were thick wooden pillars encasing some kind of stones that absorbed the storm in turbulent rotations, converting it into pure energy.

A spontaneous idea comes to mind and Noaki moves toward the nearest wooden pillar, Moritz not far behind.

Standing beneath the rotating shard gives him a small radius of breathable air. He calms himself and uses his perception to slow down the world. The ice particles appear to float midair. The source of the storm appears to be erupting from a sphere between Moritz's fingers.

Noaki's arms surge with violet energy. He draws his bow and a blunt violet arrow appears.

He listens to his body, it knew how far to draw the arrow back and the kind of force needed to propel it through the storm.

He aims and releases.

---

Moritz loses his concentration when the sphere, tightly grasped between his fingers, shatters.

The storm disperses to reveal Noaki looking sorry for not bringing his coat. His friend's movements were blinding, but Moritz had been prepared for this.

He learned that Noaki needed a few moments before he could draw another arrow, and in these precious moments Moritz slams his palms together in prayer formation. He breathes from the perimeter of the arena, and as he draws from the pool of energy in his gut, the crystalline insignia at the back of his neck illuminates a frosty blue. His nostrils flare as he exhales.

---

Noaki deeply regretted not bringing his coat when frost hits him with a shock. Portions of the arena's platform glaze over in a thin film of ice, and his perspiration freezes. It stings his nostrils.

The atmosphere became so unbearable he acquiesces his defeat with a shivering sign of his palm and jumps down from the platform and into the welcoming warm air.

Moritz releases his palms and the atmosphere of cold disperses, steadily reverting to the surrounding ambient temperature.

He meets up with the others where Master Eiko is fussing over Noaki.

Orion beams with a mischievous smile.

"Congratulations Moritz, you've earned me crystaire."

Gavin pats Noaki on the shoulder. "Aye lad, you'll beat him next time."

Master Eiko frowns at them. "You most certainly will not. Orion, what were you thinking teaching atmospheric techniques to that youth?"

Orion scratches his head with a sheepish smile. "I did not expect him to be able to use it."

Noaki grins at Moritz. "That was amazing! I didn't know you could do that. Ouch-"

Master Eiko curtly shifts Noaki's head back in her direction. "You're fine now, but if more energy had been infused into that, the fluids inside your body would have frozen."

"I didn't think..." Moritz looks horrified. "I'm sorry, I didn't know that could happen."

Master Eiko eases Moritz's fear with a calm expression. "Don't worry too much, your friend is hardier than most." As if to emphasize her point, she thumps Noaki on the head.

"Ouch."

"You see? Fine." She turns to Gavin. "If your student is ever going to use his abilities effectively, he'll need to activate eshyulno."

Gavin nods.

"What is eshyulno?" Asks Moritz.

"It's an essence surge that can only be used by people bearing an adrenal kreddos." This time, Master Eiko's assistant, Ayumi, answers. "Eshyulno, or in Noaki's case, adaptation surge, is an essence surge. It's one of the most difficult techniques to master, however, also the most rewarding.

"So long as one's lau'khet is not entirely depleted, the adaptation surge will allow the body to physically adapt into any environment with no ill effects to the user. That is, until the user empties the reserves of their laukh'et."

"It's a handy ability, and Gavin here is expert." Orion beams at Noaki. "You couldn't ask for a better instructor."

Their conversation is interrupted by a series of large explosions, followed by shouting and screaming. Master Eiko dashes for the entrance, closely followed by Ayumi and the rest.

The streets are a pandemonium of screaming and shouting. Large venomous looking serpents are undulating everywhere.

"Master Eiko?" Ayumi peers behind the safety of her master.

"The vitae will have antivenom, if anyone needs it, though it wouldn't hurt to have a few captured and replenish our stores." Master Eiko proceeds to enter the streets when she is halted by Orion.

Orion has a serious expression. "You'll need an escort." In a rare instance, Orion displays his abilities.

The dalkarian materializes a lengthy pewter staff in his outstretched hands. The ornamental rings at the end of the staff illuminates a phosphorescent white. "Gavin, you'll have to join the Veranandi and capture as many as you can."

Gavin had long departed before Orion finished, his silver eyes flaring white. The unlucky serpents lunging to attack incinerate before their fangs had a chance to meet his flesh.

Orion lowers the ornamental portion of his staff to the ground and the serpents nearby move aside. "Noaki, Moritz, you two will have to stay behind. It'll be easier for me to escort Master Eiko and Ayumi."

Orion shifts his staff and an approaching serpent is flung away. "Find higher ground." Orion leads his small party down the street before he has a chance to hear Noaki's murmur of "good luck."

Noaki closes the gates but doesn't lock it in case anyone else needs to enter.

They're both jogging back into the arena when Moritz comes to an abrupt halt and Noaki stumbles into him.

"Dude!" Noaki freezes, albeit not from Moritz but from the three figures looming on the platform.

"Noaki!" James opens his arms wide in greeting, a smirk plastered on his pasty, languid face. The jet black of his hair dangles from his forehead in clumps. He's wearing a

swallow tailed coat over a formal uniform. "It's a pleasure to finally see another familiar face."

. "Cut the crap James, what do you want?" Moritz interjects.

James blinks as if just noticing Moritz for the first time. "Ah... Moritz, I was under the impression you were with your *relatives* in the north? That was very naughty of you, shame I'd to sack that old geezer for lying."

"What did you do to Old Dallan?" Moritz growls.

James sighs impatiently. "You're even more dense than Garrett. I just told you." He clears his throat. "I'd. Sacked. That. Old. Geezer."

"What do you want?" Noaki interrupts. "To follow up that question, is now really the best time to bully us for whatever it is?"

James' eyes drift back to Noaki. "On the contrary, now is the perfect time with your body guards distracted. All I want is the gemstone from the stolen chest, you can keep the crystaires, what good it'll do you without the fragment key." His eyes scan Noaki's pockets. "That's a fair trade right? You get to possibly keep a small fortune in return for one lousy gem."

Noaki was tempted to hand over the opal but his senses were against the notion. He steps back.

"If it's so lousy, why are *you* going through all this trouble just to get it back?" Moritz asks, his eyes glowing frosty blue.

"Don't think your neat little parlor tricks will help you," James sneers. "We've a few wicked tricks of our own." He walks forward. "Besides, that gemstone doesn't belong to you."

"It doesn't belong to you either," Moritz challenges a step forward.

"Oh, I quite agree," James says in a faux reasonable tone. "It is the property of the Marquis Dion Al'ahn Hosleare, a gift to his daughter and heiress. Lucille will rightly be disappointed when she learns that a duo of petty thieves had stolen it."

Noaki's chest flares. "The Marquis is the real thief here."

"With that I also have to agree. However, it's a dangerous artifact, and your careless handling of it is a hazard to many innocent people."

Garrett, in liveried uniform, steps forward glaring at James. "You never mentioned any danger."

James holds up a hand for silence. "By all means Garrett, if you're that frightened of these two, you can try your luck with those serpents if you'd like," he faces Garrett coolly. "When you do leave, don't come back."

The masculine redhead stares daggers. "Whatever," he grumbles. He looks down where Noaki and Moritz stand, as if a pair of unused punching bags just appeared. "Why are you dragging this out anyway? Can't we just beat them up and spare us the trouble of this bogus negotiation."

Noaki tightens his grip on his bow. "If the shard really is a hazard, you're the last person I'd give it to"

James twirls on his feet, his eyes are a burning portal of contempt. "Shut up!" This sudden outburst startles everyone. "Get off your high horse. You know nothing of the forces you contend with. That shard is far more dangerous with you, to you, and all those around you."

Noaki holds back the urge to knock him a good.

"I'm doing you a favor by asking for it nicely, the people who will come after you won't hesitate to eradicate



your precious life, and believe me, they will come after you." James arcs his arms over his head, palms facing skyward. His right eye glows bright blue, his left bright white. A complex illuminating diagram blooms outward from his palms.

Garrett and the billowing hooded figure jump off the platform taking cover from a safe distance.

Noaki and Moritz are in petrified awe at the sheer intensity of James' spiritual pressure. The emek shards aligning the arena are rotating with fervent intensity.

Noaki starts to wonder how the barrier will hold when his eyes catch the serpent with obsidian scales emerging from James' collar. The outline of its body illuminates white.

Noaki was about to warn James when the serpent drapes itself around James' neck and shoulders then vanishes, leaving a white imprint on his pasty flesh.

An enormous serpent, larger than the arena, emerges from the illuminating diagram. The serpent also possesses obsidian like scales, and to Noaki and Moritz's horror, levitates. It splays fangs bigger than Noaki.

James collapses onto his knees, then onto his face. The fierce eyes of the serpent eyes them with an eerie intelligence, and with a flick of its tail thrusts James off the platform. The hooded figure deftly catches his body.

Although James' hooded companion's facial were unreadable, Noaki understood in the briefest moment that something had gone horribly wrong.

The hooded figure shouts "IDYOTS! RUN!"

The barrier doesn't hold. The emek shards shatter into blinding pillars of white light. Moritz shoves Noaki towards the exit and the two scramble away as fast as their feet would allow, not sparing a moment to glance back, even when the debris of the arena plummets from the sky.

In no clear direction they run for their lives, ignoring the horrified onlookers in the streets, pointing toward something in the sky.

Adrenaline pumps through Noaki's veins, his perception activates. "Moritz look out!" Noaki shoves his friend aside, and tosses a hissing serpent away with the end of his bow. He quickly catches up to his friend who looks ready to collapse.

Noaki nudges him down a street least infested with serpents where they also encounter a band of hunters bagging serpents, and piercing their writhing bodies with darts, crossbows, and arrows.

The pair stop to catch their breaths and ask one of the smiling hunters if anyone with Gavin's description passed by. She nods and points toward the lake.

They dash in that direction when Noaki narrowly misses being crushed from debris.

The levitating serpent had taken to the sky, its gaze penetrating the town. At that moment, Noaki and Moritz are forced onto their knees. An incredible force of spiritual pressure weighs everything down. A few people faint, many of the serpents slither away out of fear. Noaki was tempted to succumb to the pressure when it suddenly lifts.

Moritz climbs onto his feet and assists Noaki off the ground that was now slightly frozen in a thin sheet of ice.

They see Gavin, carrying a sack with writhing shapes. He didn't look pleased when the two caught up to him.

"You lads should have stayed in the arena."

"Nowhere's safe with *that* thing around," Moritz points toward the levitating serpent, lightning flashing around its elegance.

Gavin's eyes widen. "Aye, that'll do it."

"Do you know what it is?" Noaki pants.

Gavin waved over a grinning hunter and hands him the sack. "You'll be wanting these?"

"Oh?" The hunter smiles. "Gavin Whitehawk retiring from the guild?"

"I'll outlive all of you," Gavin chuckles. "I've got my eyes set on bigger game."

The hunter follows Gavin's gaze and whistles. "How much you reckon that Nagari venom will fetch ya? That's hundred-fifty gold crystaires at least."

Gavin ignores him. "I'll be going to the vitae, are you lot good here?"

"You were helping?" The hunter laughs, "I hadn't noticed."

Gavin chuckles. "Alright lads?" He nods to Noaki and Moritz. "You'll want to be running ahead of me, don't stop for anything, I'll take care of the serpents that come in your path."

Noaki alongside Moritz nod in unison and pace up the street, toward the vitae guild. The streets were being cleared out by uniformed guards, bands of hunters, and the local populace. A considerable number of the Vitae were pacing the streets, calmly distributing antivenom.

The subterranean plaza with the waterfall seemed to have been spared the serpent attack, but was crowded with people on stretchers and attendants of the Vitae.

They encounter Orion, his staff illuminating the area in a comforting light.

A flushed Master Eiko was examining a patient when she notices them approaching. "Good you two survived," she glances back at a huffing Gavin. "Any casualties in the Veranandi?"

Gavin shakes his head. "No casualties from what I know, most of them serpents were passive until the Nagari was summoned."

Orion's warming smile fades. "A Nagari? What of the summoner?"

Noaki shares a glance with Moritz, wishing now he'd just handed the shard over. He summarizes their encounter with James and the others.

"All this fuss for a shard?" Master Eiko crosses her arms.

Gavin clears his throat and lowers his voice. "Deifacted from the primordial age."

"At the very least we know the summoner did not intend to harm anyone." Orion pierces his staff into the ground, a few people are startled by this. "It appears my services are needed Master Eiko. Will you be fine here?"

"You mock me Orion," Master Eiko holds a glance with the dalkarian. "Exercise caution, primordial artifacts are known to be unpredictable."

Orion bends over Master Eiko and kisses the place between her brow. "Whenever have you ever known me to not to be, Erethrendai?"

Master Eiko channels and intense violet energy into a moaning patient. "Ayumi?" She calls out.

"Yes Master?" Ayumi appears with a large medicine box, looking exhausted but determined. "Is the antidote ready?"

Ayumi nods. "Fortunately the chemists had enough in stock."

"There's no need to sulk my pupils." Orion squeezes Noaki and Moritz's shoulders. "There are many ways to help,

even if all you can do is lend ears." He smiles with his eyes closed.

The gesture comforts Noaki and he hands the dalkarian the leather pouch. "Please, take it. It will be safer with you."

Orion's patterns take on a hue of luminous pink pearls. "I will not accept this No'aki, but with your permission I will ask to borrow it."

"You don't intend to use it?" Gavin frowns.

Orion smiles. "Ah, but I do." He gestures for them to follow. "Come."

The dalkarian leads them onto the Vitae plateau, the sky rumbles after the flashings of lightning. The spiritual pressure sends Noaki and Moritz onto their knees.

Gavin sets them onto their feet. "Selinoff, this had better not be a gamble."

Orion laughs warmly. "Erethrendai, just enjoy the show." The dalkarian paces further down the path towards the base of the looming mountains. The reflection of the lake ripples from the rumbling sky.

Orion arcs his palm skyward in a similar fashion to James. A black pewter staff materializes in his outstretched palm.

Enhancing his perception, Noaki can see Orion from a magnified perspective.

The dalkarian drops the shard onto his palm and at that moment an incredible force of spiritual pressure weighs down on existence. The ripples in the water come to a standstill, mirroring the sky perfectly.

Orion places the opal in the ornamental centerpiece of his staff. A calm pulsing of energy expands from the opal.

The dalkarian dances.

"What's he doing?" Moritz asks.

"Deavic summoning."

The three watch in silence.

The grace of Orion's movements are entrancing. He weaves his staff in flowing gestures. The luminous shard trails with his maneuver.

When the perspectives of time comes to a standstill, the dalkarian holds his staff upside down. He lowers the ornamental centerpiece and it meets the ground.

A diagram blooms to the furthest perimeter of the plateau, its beautiful patterns illuminating a pearly hue and reflecting in the lake.

Directly overhead, the Nagari emerges from the overcast.

Noaki fears for Orion who holds his ground with eyes closed and gleaming a peaceful smile.

The serpent lunges towards the dalkarian.

Orion arches his staff skyward, raising the diagram.

Not once did the dalkarian show signs fear, on the contrary he laughed delightedly when the diagram and serpent collided into an explosion that showered the plateau in petalled pearls.

When rays of sunlight parted the overcast, Noaki and Moritz race to meet Orion seated on the ground crossed legged and panting heavily with a beaming smile.

Noaki runs his fingers over the geometric print of his suitcase containing his belongings. He hoists it off the bed and carries it into the common room, standing it vertically alongside the other matching pair belonging to Moritz.

Master Eiko, Moritz, Gavin, and Orion are all arranged around the glass coffee table.

Moritz is sipping a glass of wine with a far off look.

Gavin and Orion are discussing something when they notice Noaki seating himself on the lounge opposite Orion.

"Any news about James?" Noaki asks concernedly.

Gavin shakes his head. "The Veranandi searched the rubble of the Arena, there were no bodies."

"So he's not dead? Shame," Moritz mutters. Seeing Noaki's expression he adds, "joking, but you can't blame me after what they did."

"I don't think his intention was for anyone to be hurt." Noaki pours himself a glass from a carafe. "What happened to him anyway?"

"Master Eiko and I have discussed the most probable cause is the overexertion of spiritual energy." Orion answers.

"I'm not convinced," Gavin adds.

"Why do you say that?" Moritz asks.

"It's the Nagari," Orion shares a glance with Gavin. "We were just discussing this, and I agree with Gavin. To summon those many serpents alone is no small feat, however, to influence their passivity," Orion shakes his head. "That requires a certain degree of mastery."

Noaki mulls this over when a thought comes to mind. "So with the skill level required, he wouldn't have collapsed from overexertion of spiritual pressure?"

Orion laughs and claps once. "This youth *is* perceptive."

"Where does the Nagari fit in all this?" Moritz asks, looking toward Noaki as if he might have the answer.

Noaki shrugs.

"Your friend just answered that," Gavin pours himself a glass from the carafe. "A summoner would not be able to summon a Nagari if one could overexert themselves."

"Are you implying they staged the whole thing?" Moritz looks doubtful. "The serpent tossed him aside like a rucksack."

"Around the same time the serpents became hostile," Noaki adds. "One almost got to Moritz."

"Not necessarily," Orion responds. "The summoner could have released his hold and influence over the serpents, leaving them to their natural state. The serpent that attacked Moritz may have been the result of an accident." Orion smiles. "At any rate, unless we directly inspect this summoner, it is all speculation."

Gavin empties his glass. "With all that's happened, where will we be to then?"

"I thought we were going to Port Min-Khashiib," says Moritz.

"I'm afraid there's been an alteration to those plans." Orion smiles sadly. "The primordial shard in your possession is concerning."

Noaki's attention drifts to the bulge in his coat pocket. "If it is so concerning, why don't you take it?"

"I would have no use for it," Orion nods. "Master Eiko and I suspect it is partially responsible for your predicament."



"You mean the amnesia?" Moritz pours himself another glass, his face noticeably flushed. "So if there's ever a chance to regain our memories, we'll need the shard?"

Gavin nods. "Yes, however, if there is a chance, we'll need to learn how to use it."

"Which is why we must make alterations to our original plans." Orion continues. "There are only a handful of people in all of Eldaeoryai who are expert in primordial artifacts."

"Do you know any of these experts?" Noaki empties his glass.

"A few, though the journey would be long, not taking into account the voyage overseas." Orion says thoughtfully. "However, Gavin has brought to my attention that we should first have the shard analyzed by Gran Master Kurolos in Atmedanyeh."

"Is he an expert?" Moritz asks Gavin.

"No," Gavin admits. "But Gran Master Kurolos' wisdom is respected by the Okari."

Noaki thinks back to their time in Irithelle. "If this shard is related to the Okari like Old Dallan mentioned, then he might know something about it."

Moritz's lips curl into a fond smile. "I'd forgotten about that."

The others look at them questioningly, so Noaki recounts their conversation with the groundskeeper.

"That is quite unlike the Marquis," Gavin refills his glass, "and troublesome."

"More troublesome than James?" Moritz mutters.

"If the Marquis is involved with this shard, then it also implies that the world government is involved." Orion

clarifies, then adds, "the world government is not a force you want to contend with."

*You know nothing of the forces you contend with.*  
James' words echo in Noaki's mind. "Should I have given it back?"

"If it's in your interest to spare yourself trouble, yes. If you meant it in the interest of the world, of that I'm uncertain." Orion's gaze drifts to the terrace. "Regardless of all that, if we want to leave Borintas before nightfall, we better decide soon." He pours himself the final dregs of wine. "It's a shame this region lacks leviahtan infrastructure."

Gavin raises his glass and downs the contents in a few gulps. "Shall we be off then?"

Noaki and Moritz share a look and nod.

"Oh?" A deep voice reverberates from the walls. "A peculiar traveling party." The atmosphere weighs with a heavy silence. "Gavin Whitehawk and Selinoff Orion?"

In a blinding flash, Gavin composes himself into a wide stance, his bow drawn and aimed toward the terrace.

Noaki activates his perception, the world slows, yet something in the atmosphere moves outside his perceptive ability, even outside of Gavin's. It possesses a power he could not understand.

"Ah. Master Eiko, what a pleasure." A lithe figure appears, draped in milky garb with silver embroidery threaded in swirls. A silver sash secures into place his eerie billowing garb, glistening with luminous crystalline gems.

A white Kafiya adorning his head, conceals much of his face, but Noaki glimpsed the stubble along his jawline. The man lowers his face to kiss Master Eiko's temple.

No one could react. The atmosphere fastens each of them into place. The space within the area seems to occupy a different time.

"Gran Celestial Orelle." Orion stands and bows, his movements unhindered by the man's presence. "Welcome. May I offer you a beverage? We've emptied the carafe I'm afraid, however, I'm certain a footman would be obliged to bring one down."

As Orelle skulks the room, his lithe movements appear submersed in some ethereal ocean. He glances briefly toward Noaki and Moritz with a curious expression. "No, no. I shouldn't expect to remain very long." He faces Gavin. "You can rest that instrument of yours my friend, I come on peaceful terms."

"A Gran Celestial." Gavin seats himself, his bow firmly in hand. "For what do we owe this great honor?"

Orelle shakes his head. "Quite the contrary, it is an honor for myself to be in the presence of legend itself." Orelle sails toward the terrace. "I was on errand when I happened to notice an uproarious commotion in Borintas. Unfortunate I did not arrive in time to settle matters myself." He shifts his attention to Orion. "Quite the abilities you've cultivated vyeha."

Though Noaki can barely see it, he feels a sudden unease fermenting in Orion.

"I am most honored for that compliment Gran Celestial. The event was merely the conjuration of an unpracticed summoner." Orion smiles warily. "Or so we speculate."

"I would be hard pressed to look into this matter." Orelle sighs. "Though, my services are requested in the Holy Lands at the moment."

“We wouldn’t want to delay you,” Master Eiko comments.

Orelle smiles. “I suppose not.” He steps onto the terrace. “Farrahn Erethrendai.” The atmosphere lifts. With that Orelle falls into the the endless sky until the last spec of his form vanishes.

Moritz gasps. “Who was that?”

With a grim expression, Gavin answers. “The Gran Celestial Orelle of Svernia's Holy Lands.”

“A Celestial of the highest ranking order.” Master Eiko adds.

“And one of the forces that is in our best interest not to contend with.” Orion comments gravely. “A celestial...” he shakes his head in disbelief. “It is fortunate he did not sense the presence of the shard.”

“Aye, though we should be wary from now on.” Gavin rises onto his feet, an uncertain look on his face.

Noaki and Moritz exchange inquisitive expressions but refrain from pressing the situation further.

## University of Euradai | The Isles of Athera | Interlude

Lucille slams the newspaper down with a piercing look in her sky-blue eyes. "So help me divine spirits, I am going to murder that idiot!"

Aria gives her best friend a wry smile. On Lucille's behalf she sends an apologetic smile to the chancellor on the dais. It was not often that her golden haired friend broke from her sweet disposition, so when she did, it always created a stir.

Lucille always had been abnormally tall for a hume, let alone for a lady, and she'd always been ostracized by her peer group for it. However, when she met the fair-complected alvarrian with flaming red hair for the first time, the two immediately bonded in shared experience. She hands the newspaper to Aria and points out the article responsible for her sudden outburst.

Aria reads the title; Serpent Attack in Borintas. She scans the article, eyes widening in disbelief. "There's no way!"

Lucille glares at the article as if it outright did everything to offend her. "There's no doubt about it."

"Lucille..."

"I am going to murder that twit," Lucille crushes the bagel in her hand.

"Who are you going to murder?" At that moment their freckled, dark haired dalkarian friend, Emmett, sits beside Aria. "Violence is never the answer."

Lucille laughs. "In some cases it is."

"It's her lover," Aria murmurs, slipping the newspaper under Emmett's nose.

"He's not my lover," Lucille flushes.

Emmett reads the article a few times, his eyes also gradually widening in disbelief. "There's no way," he reads it over a few more times. "Yeah, there's no way. It's not like him."

Lucille shakes her head. She desperately wanted to believe it was her James, but there was just no denying it. She knew of no one else in her homeland who was capable of orchestrating a serpent attack. Her eyes unconsciously veer toward the exit as if she might take off any second and it shows in her expression.

Aria squeezes her hands. "I know that look."

"What?" Lucille tries to look innocent. Judging from Emmett's snort, it wasn't working.

"That's the look of 'I'm looking for trouble.'"

Lucille returns the comforting gesture. "I just want to make sure he's alright."

"He'll be alright," Emmett adds reassuringly. "No matter what situation he lands himself in, he'll always be that handsome, somehow irresistible knave."

The three breakout in laughter. Lucille has to agree, the serious, bored disposition of James never changes. "You're right, still it worries me."

"He must've had a good reason," Aria scans the article again. "There weren't any casualties, the Vitae and Veranandi handled everything."

Lucille nods silently. She mostly worried how her stringent father would react to this news. Sending the thoughts to the back of her mind, she refocuses on her breakfast but decides against it. She doubts she could

stomach anything with the growing anxiety in the pit of her stomach.

Emmett squeezes her shoulders, though he appears like he feels awkward doing so.

Aria laughs. "So do we have anything planned after lessons?"

"Oh I don't know," Emmett smiles mischievously. "I was thinking maybe we all sign up for the study session in the library with Vannither."

Lucille coughs up a bit of her pomegranate juice.

Aria punches Emmett in the arm. "Not so loud, he might actually hear you."

As if on cue, Aria's slender older brother makes an appearance. He sits next to Lucille and begins the meticulous preparations for breakfast. "Sorry I'm late, I had to iron out a few wrinkles in my uniform."

Aria rolls her eyes. "We could do without your gaudiness Vannither."

"Now, now, Aria, is that any way to speak to your superior?" Vannither rebukes in a chiding tone. He spreads a judicious amount of red bean paste onto a thick slice of toast. "By the way," Vannither leans into Lucille, "I read the morning paper, sorry to hear about James."

"Geeze Vannither, you have such a big mouth!" Aria rips a piece of toast and flings it at his head.

Vannither deftly dodges the projectile and unconcernedly resumes his breakfast. "Careful now, you don't want to risk a disciplinary citation."

"So what *are* we going to do after lessons?" Lucille changes the topic of conversation.

"There's a sollikhetsu match in the evening," Vannither suggests. "I've been considering attending myself."

Emmett, Lucille, and Aria exchange surprised expressions.

"I'm half expecting tomorrow's news headlining: The Stars Have Fallen." Emmett prods his grits.

"Well, technically they are falling. Surriyohl is also falling, even the moons are falling." Vannither wipes crumbs from the corners of his mouth.

"Are they really?" Lucille asks curiously.

"It hasn't been proven yet, but there is evidence to suggest it."

"Can we save that stuff for lessons?" Aria interjects. "So are we all agreed on seeing this sollikhetsu match? What teams are playing?"

Vannither pauses for a moment, recalling something. "It's in the papers." He continues breakfasting.

Emmett flips through the paper, dexterously scanning the pages. "Found it." His eyes widen, "I have to see this!"

"Oh for Eldaeon's sake!" Aria snatches the paper from his grasp. "Eujhe-Hanim's Zephyrs versus Cyclaria's Talarians." She looks up from the paper. "So, how about it?"

Everyone looks at Lucille as if waiting on her verdict. She lirts a laugh. "Why are you guys waiting on me? Of course, anything to keep my mind off of-" she stops herself. "Well, this match does sound exciting. It's not everyday the best teams are matched against each other."

"Agreed," Vannither finishes his breakfast. "At any rate, I had better get going. I'll meet you at the leviastation after lessons?"



"Now that's something," Emmett comments. "You're going to travel with us?"

Vannither rises from his seat. "If that's alright with you three."

Lucille shares a knowing glance with Aria. "Of course it is," she rises from her seat, immediately followed by Aria and Emmett. The three exit the dining hall and proceed down the corridor to their respective lecture halls.

## The Holy Lands | Svernia | Interlude

"It is my pleasure to introduce you to a promising individual, Al'ekhhari Assettraelle Benari of Sera." An escort announces, concealed beneath white silken garments threaded in gold fibre.

The dalkarian adolescent next to the escort gives Orelle a deferential bow. "I am honored to make your acquaintance Gran Celestial Orelle."

Orelle acknowledges the youth with intense curiosity. "It is most intriguing and enlightening to make your acquaintance as well young lordling, I'm familiar with your family's position in the Serahn Isles." Orelle gestures to the settee opposite him. "Please, have a seat." While Al'ekh settles himself he continues. "My recruitment agents have informed me of your capabilities and I must say that I'm quite taken by your skills."

"The information you received may have been exaggerated," Al'ekh smiles modestly.

"Perhaps," Orelle muses for a moment. "At present I am preoccupied with matters concerning the order, so I cannot oversee your training personally."

With a hint of wariness in his voice, Al'ekh asks, "when should I expect that to change?"

Orelle shares a glance with the escort. "When matters are settled. We have a number of qualified instructors to occupy my place and oversee your training."

Al'ekh doesn't answer immediately but nods to acknowledge this change of events.

"Of course," Orelle drinks from a crystal chalice. "If it interests you, I propose a test to gauge the limitations of your capabilities." He sets the chalice on the table. "You would be observed by quintessential celestials of the highest order who will not interfere unless the situation requires it."

"I am ready to prove myself." Al'ekh responds, glad to pass his idle time.

Orelle nods and procures from his robe a booklet and hands it to Al'ekh who takes to absorbing the information upon receiving it. "The details of the mission are in this dossier. To summarize quite briefly; you are to retrieve and return a deifacted shard stolen from the Okari peoples of the Wildlands."

"The Lucaceous?" Al'ekh's eyes widen in surprise. "Forgive me, but this seems a bit absurd."

"It's rumored to be the Lucaceous, we are not certain, even less of its effects." Orelle pauses. "In the Silver Alps I came across a suspicious band of travelers led by Gavin Whitehawk, you might have luck there."

"Whitehawk..." Al'ekh murmurs to himself in an attempt to recall that familiar name. "If a deifacted artifact like this exists, would it not be wiser to keep it in the hands of the Celestial orders?"

"Normally, yes. Though due to the unpredictable nature of this shard, it is better cared for under familiar hands. Until recently, the deifacted shard had been in possession of the Okari for many generations."

Al'ekh nods hesitantly. "I suppose."

"I share your concerns," Orelle admits. "However, an incident involving the Lucaceous occurred a few weeks prior to today. At the time, it was being delivered by Lord Hosleare to the High King Solidore. The effects are still unknown by the Order. We've reason to believe that they were... drastic."

Al'ekh closes the dossier. "I will do my best to see that this mission is carried out successfully."

This seems to have impressed Orelle. He procures from his right breast pocket, a thin silver metal card embedded with the crystalline celestial insignia of Svernia. He hands it to Al'ekh, along with a crystal fragment key. "This should cover any necessary expenses, I'm sure you're familiar with it?"

"Quite familiar," Al'ekh nods.

"When you complete this mission, I should expect to have matters settled and will personally oversee your training." Orelle empties the contents of his chalice. "You are dismissed. The best of fortunes." Orelle nods to the dalkarian lordling and exits the room through a separate entrance.

Al'ekh lowers his head at the Gran Celestial's exit before pocketing the silver card and thoroughly reading the dossier. In the back of his mind he repeats the name vaguely familiar to him; Gavin Whitehawk.

## Eyangtui World Summit | Zastasia | Interlude

The Marquis, Dion A'lahn Hosleare, is formally attired in an ornamental robe and a silver circlet. He sits grimacing between his stony faced colleagues.

To his left is the High King Solidore in an elaborate ornate robe, lavishly embroidered in gold with silver trim, and a crown boasting three shards.

To his right is the Sultan Azurani in simpler gold and silver silk garments. A large white turban dangling with alvarrian crafted asurai fragments hugs his crown. The excess of his turban's fabric drapes over his shoulders.

The three were few among many of the world's royalty and high ranking government officials, all in attendance at the World Summit. The raised dais where they sit importantly is just one identical among many set in curved rows. *Not unlike a lecture hall*, Dion thinks.

For many days now, Dion has been suppressing yawns and stifling chuckles from the sultan's jibes at certain officials. However, after perusal of the morning papers, a feeling of unease occupies his thoughts. There is no doubt his trusted protégé and overseer of the Hosleare Estate, James, has been directly responsible for the 'attack' on Borintas.

Were it any other occasion, a simple disciplinary action would suffice and he could follow through this summit with unwavering disinterest. Though he knew the events in Borintas were linked to the Lucaceous.

The presence of Solidore didn't assist in easing his throbbing headache. He sneaks a glance to his left, the king

seemed entirely absorbed by the Drahstrehelion speaker. Dion forces his attention back to the speaker.

"Decreed by the imperial family, until further notice Drahstrehl will close off all ports in and out of the empire. Furthermore all visitations in and out of the borders has been strictly prohibited."

Dion snaps to attention. He leans to his right and whispers to the sultan. "Afraid I caught my mind wandering, what is this?"

"You've not heard?" Azurani whispers back. "The Drahstrehelion officials would never admit this, but there is rumour the Dusk Shard was been stolen by a thief in the night."

"Impossible." Dion considers the Drahstrehelion ambassadors, their expressions were too placate to form any speculations. He leans in once more. "Is there any more to this rumor?"

"The thief is rumored to par the ranks of the gran celestials." Azurani lowers his voice even further, "this thief is also rumored to bear the insignia of Drahsrhaeon."

Dion nods graciously.

Azurani leans in once again and in a lower voice he adds, "though I'm speculative if the two events are related, it is also rumored the Kossirian Empire has allied themselves with Sohmnian forces."

Dion considers this and begins to wonder if the Lucaceous has any correlation with the events happening behind the scenes. "Do you know of the Lucaceous?" He whispers to the sultan.

"I only know what I've heard from legends, why so curious?" The sultan and Dion briefly share a glance.

"Recently I've had it in my possession, though I suspect that's no longer the case."

The sultan considers this thoughtfully. "I don't know much, and few people do." He looks around the hall and gestures with a slight nod of his chin to a dalkarian in a simple robe with gold trim. "Kiyoltik Masurai, no doubt he will know."

Dion observes the respected silver haired Dalkarian of four hundred years. An evening soiree appeared to be in order.

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That evening, after meticulous preparations and the aid of his advisors. Dion managed to arrange an evening soiree with notable influential figures necessary to accomplish particular affairs for his majesty, the High King Solidore. He extended many invitations to familiar acquaintances and to of course the Gran Keltea Masurai.

Long into the evening, after completing tasks - with no assistance from the High King himself - he'd still yet to welcome the dalkarian.

Finally with the last departure of his guest. Dion departs for his study, matters of Ayildur weighing on his mind.

Though his study here did not compare to the one of his estate in the Silver Alps, its ambience was still suited for rumination.

The study was fashioned in the Zastasian style. Simple furnishings with native potted reeds and grasses. A minimalist fireplace surrounded by two white damasks

accentuated with matching carpet, and a sturdy writing desk situated between the windows.

"I understand you were wanting to speak with me Marquis?"

Dion jumps at the voice. He searches the room and sees the dalkarian seated in one of the wingbacks. His presence almost invisible amid the space.

"Gran Keltea," Dion bows respectfully.

"Please, you may call me Masurai. I'm wearied down coming here." Masurai motions to the damask beside him. "Have a seat. I asked your servants to bring us tea, I hope you do not mind."

Dion settles into the damask. "Of course not Gran Masurai, it's truly an honor."

The Gran Keltea chuckles. "So I've been told many times. You need not fret with formality Marquis, I've long retired from nonsensical politics."

"But surely you're here at the Summit?"

"I've not grown senile if that's what you're alluding to." The Gran Keltea's eyes twinkle with humor. "My nephew cannot be here in person so I've arrived on his behalf. Ah, that'll be the tea."

A lovely alvarrian serving woman enters with a porcelain tea set and places it onto the coffee table between them.

She begins to pour it out when the Gran Keltea stops her.

"I appreciate it young lady, but I'll handle it from here."

She glances uncertainly towards Dion who dismisses her with a nod.

"You've a humble disposition despite your ranking." Dion comments.



"Humble?" The Gran Keltea fills their cups. "I'm only pouring tea." He hands a cup to Dion, "there you are Marquis." The Gran Keltea raises his own cup. "Good health."

"Good Health," the Marquis nods and takes a refreshing sip. The tensions he'd been accumulating dissipate with each sip. "Vaj'ak?"

"I've always been preferential to the alvarri's taste in tea." The Gran Keltea smiles. "Now tell me what knowledge I can share?"

Dion readjusts his seating position. "It concerns a shard. The Lucaceous to be exact."

The Gran Keltea takes a few silent sips before speaking. "Are you familiar with the historical significance of Dalkaria's Fallharian war?"

Dion nods. "As familiar as with what is conventionally known."

The Gran Keltea settles his cup. "It so happened in that era of primordial conflict, that the Lucaceous was first documented. Those recorded events, according to our records, occurred after Ketroas succeeded Eldaeon's legacy. Though the details are referenced at minimum."

"Then perhaps it was only a coincidence that Ketroas should come across the Lucaceous." Dion takes a sip.

"So it would appear and Ketroas intended. Granted the title of Grand Keltea at such a youthful age, Ketroas was a genius never to repeat. The subtlest aspects from speech to movement were deliberate, existing outside the spectrums of time, a living divinity and supreme authority." The Gran Keltea gazes deeply into space.

Dion ponders his words. "That is not unusual, these are primordial ages after all. The vast majority of my generation are also unaware. The Lucaceous, in spite of its minimal mention from Ketroas, was monumental in the waning civilization of the Fallharians."

The Gran Keltea nods. "Yes, its records are from the height of the Fallharians' decline."

"Perhaps result of the Fallharian desolution?" Dion enquires.

"No. I've ruminated and meditated on this period, and its truth became apparent when I received information regarding the pillars." The Gran Keltea refills their cups.

Dion graciously accepts another cup. "The pillars? Are these Dalkarian legends?"

"Yes. Among our legends, there exists one in particular involving the traversing of distant worlds in the time of Ketroas. After the wasting of Hahvallah, the Fallharians are said to have used a deifacted machine to traverse from Eldaeor to another, a world predisposed toward sattvik energy alone." Gran Masurai sips.

"The subtlest energy." Dion remarks.

"The opposition of daevik and preceding Celestial energy in its likeness." The Gran Keltea adds.

Dion nods. "And where does the Lucaceous come into the picture?"

"The Lucaceous is an anomalous artifact, appearing and disappearing throughout time. It exists outside this spectrum of existence. It is a creation of Eldaeor, of daevik and sattvik infusion. It percolates anything we can presently comprehend." The Gran Keltea's resumes sipping.

"Impossible!"

"Yet you happened across it." The Gran Keltea raises his brow questioningly.

Dion ponders in subdued silence.

"It is a creation of the future. As such, it holds a higher authority than the supreme ones."

"Then I've been a fool to leave it in the hands of my protégé." Dion laments.

"Everything is happening accordingly. If it did not, it would cease its existence." The Gran Keltea reassures.

Dion ponders a moment. "What of in regards to the decline of the Fallharian civilization?"

"At the time, its power was utilized to allocate the Fallharians to a distant world. The vast majority departed Eldaeor. Although a few remained."

"This machine you've mentioned, the pillars between worlds, where can its ruins be found?"

The Gran Keltea settles his cup. "The ruins of its existence are present all over Eldaeor."

Dion laments further to his acquisitioning of the Lucaceous. "When I recovered the artifact, it was in possession of the Okari."

"The Okari are perceptive people and with the Lucaceous, they are able to enhance their perception, surpassing everything outside this existence." The Gran Keltea comments.

"If I'm not mistaken, everything that must be will be regarding matters of the Lucaceous?"

"To a point. The shard may have capabilities that succeed the supreme ones, but what can be accomplished is determined by the possessor." The Gran Keltea rises. "You must forgive me Marquis, but it is rather late and I'm quite an elderly man."

Dion jumps to his feet. "I do apologise! Certainly. You've elucidated certain things for me." Dion bows.

The Gran Keltea returns a slight bow and is escorted to the entrance by the Marquis.

Afterwards, Dion returns to his study, ruminating the Gran Keltea's words and the Lucaceous.

## The Hosleare Estate | The Silver Alps: II

James harbors no resentment losing the shard in Borintas. No doubt Noaki and his companions were now somewhere beyond his reach. This no longer mattered to him. The shard had always meant to serve as a bargaining item.

In all this, the only misgivings he had about the incident was how quickly he'd lost his temperament.

His infusion with Nagahshya amalgamated into her Nagari form. That transformation being the result of the combined efforts of innumerable serpents under his influence.

Though he did fail to reacquire the shard, he wasn't in the slightest sullen. The knowledge and theoretical experimentation confirmed what he'd read in the Sohmnia Journal.

Everything worked as he wanted, the acquisition of the shard would merely have been an accessory, a spoil of war in a sense. The failure of the attack had been a part of his little experiment, if his intention to harm was truly ingrained into the serpents, Borintas may as have been reduced to rubble. The Dalkarian's counteroffensive was truly the only surprising outcome in that incident.

There comes a knock at the door.

"Enter," James responds languidly.

Loraunt enters with a silver platter containing his single daily meal. The alvarrian sets it on the nightstand and pulls up a chair to his bedside.

A little over a week has passed and finally he'd recovered much of his strength from the overexertion of spiritual pressure. One other thing he did not account for, were the side effects of spiritual overexertion on his body.

Nagahshya had chastised him for his brash actions.

*"If you did not bear an innate vitae nature, your recovery would have been far longer."*

His familiar hasn't spoken much since then, regardless, she returns often to inspect the status of his recovery through his biological chemistry. The infusion of their natures were now strengthened through their conscious bonds. This he also deduced from the journal, though it had only been referenced briefly.

He thanks the alvarrian and proceeds to eat his diet of fruit, vegetables, and nuts. He'd noticed from observation that a vegetarian diet did not stress the digestive process which greatly accelerated his recovery.

Loraunt nods and asks the question brewing in the back of everyone's mind. "Vhat to do from 'ear?"

James considered this during the long hours of his immobility. There would be severe repercussions from the Marquis, with dismissals on all levels of the estate's employees. However, no matter how severe, he would be one among few not to be dismissed. His recent perusal of his journals from m the earlier years were evident of that.

Though he doesn't consider himself to be the same person who wrote those journals, nor did he consider himself to be the person before invading this body. Neither were him, he amalgamated into someone entirely different. Nagahshya helped him come to this conclusion.

When he finishes his meal, he sets the tray back on the nightstand. "I've been considering this for some time," he glances at his friend. "Though, I'd like to hear your thoughts on the matter, as it would require you to abandon your position."

Loraunt nods with a casual alertness.

"I've recently come across an old journal concerning a particular philosophy. Sohmneas, have you heard of it?"

"In passing, secret organization. Like 'ilal."

"Good, that saves me quite a bit of dialogue," James nods. "Although the journal is titled Sohmneas, it contains little information pertaining to the organization's intentions. I suspect it is a forgotten research journal that's been displaced over the years, however, from reading its contents I managed to extend my knowledge concealing my abilities."

"Is dhis 'ow you summoned dheer Nagari?" The alvarrian studies him curiously."

"Yes, although it doesn't precisely extrapolate on what would come about, it only provided a method. The Nagari was my own experiment of sorts." James thinks for a moment, recollecting some information. "Although the author remained anonymous, there was mention of a particular underground operation in O'taomon."

The expression on the alvarrian's face shifts as if he knew where James was going with this proposal.

"In all honesty, I'm not certain whether Sohmnia still operates in O'taomon, but considering their wide influence over Eldaeoryai, it is a relatively safe bet."

The alvarrian nods. "You wish us to join their organization?"

"Yes, and although reclaiming the shard would've secured our position here at the estate. I also considered using it to buy our way into the organization."

"Now, we have no shard."

James nods. "We do have the journal, and information. It might not secure us significant roles within the organization, however, they don't seem the sort to disregard potential assets. The abilities of summoners are not really known and rare, I suspect even rarer within the organization."

Loraunt grins, "you want to petition yourself for an experiment?"

James laughs, "in a sense yes. No doubt your resourcefulness and skill would also be at the top of their consideration."

"What of fire-ed?"

James frowns. He didn't think the alvarrian would have any concerns for the guard. "I sort of planned on him remaining here," he sighs. "I didn't intend to entirely abandon him, he would have been excellent eyes and ears, though now that I'm considering it, I doubt he would be a reliable source of espionage."

Loraunt nods in agreement.

"My original intention was to write a formal letter of resignation and take full responsibility for the theft."

"Noble of you," the alvarrian smiles.

"If I'm leaving, why not? My intention was meant to mitigate the repercussions of the incident so at least the ginger git would've been spared his position." He sighs. "Even if he's a pain most times." The two are silent for a time before James continues. "Perhaps, with the background of his experience, he could still be useful yet."

"Travel expense?"

"I've already accounted for that. The person I'd been had a knack for fiscal obligations. With the aid of the Marquis and key investments in the royal family, I'm comfortably wealthy." James refrains from mentioning his small fortune of four million gold and six million silver crystaires. "Rest assured I can accommodate for any expected or unexpected expenditure."

"Ah..." Loraunt has a smile that holds back private knowledge. "I vill consider dhis my friend, if fire-ed agrees I vill agree."

Before James could respond there came a fervent knock at the door. Something in the air makes him uneasy. He feels Nagahshya urgently returning to his side from the gardens. "Enter!" He calls out and a liveried footman enters with a lowered head. "Forgive me sir, but the estate has a visitor."

Loraunt and James exchange glances.

"It's a dalkarian who claims to be a member of the Celestial Order, he bears the Crest of Svernia's Holy Insignia."

James frowns. "Extend the estate's hospitality, inform him the master of the estate is on errand regarding matters of the High King. I will meet him after I've properly changed into something appropriate."

"I will sir," the footman bows.



"Dhis celestial," Loraunt begins after the footman exits the room, a hint of agitation takes expression in his voice. "It does not bode vell."

"I agree," James climbs from bed. He'd have taken a few tumblers of scotch to abate the pain, but Nagahshya wouldn't have it. "Would you entertain our guest while I ready myself?"

The alvarrian nods, "don't be long now."

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Upon approaching the dining hall with the assistance of a cane, James notes Garrett properly stationed outside as he'd instructed. The two exchange tense glances before Garrett opens the heavy wooden doors.

James spares a few seconds for his eyes to adjust to the natural luminosity of the dining hall. Well polished mirrors and ornate tapestries align the wall opposite the enormous arched tracery windows.

At the far end of the hall blazes a blue eternal flame beneath a lazul mantelpiece. The lengthy dining table with an impressive twenty-two velvet seats are divided equidistant. The cloudy marble slab of the table bears the insignia of House Hosleare in gold, its frame crystalline and luminous.

James enters the hall, decorous in edible, ornamental, and medicinal vegetation. Seated at the axis of the table rises a luminous dalkarian adolescent with jet black hair and crystalline patterns.

Loraunt imitates the dalkarian. James is briefly taken aback by the alvarrian's stormy silk kurta with reflective gold trim.

"I will first ask you to pardon my sudden unannounced arrival." The dalkarian bows. "I'm on urgent business for the order."

"Quite the contrary," James returns the bow. "The Hosleare estate will extend any assistance to the celestial order, that is if Lord Hosleare permits." He gestures to the dalkarian's chair. "Please return to your seat, I'll have the staff bring in refreshments." He nods curtly to the waiting staff who exits into the kitchen.

"Much appreciated." The dalkarian seats himself, followed by Loraunt and James opposite the dalkarian.

"Though the estate extends it's hospitality to any member of Svernia's Celestial Order, I'm afraid that's all my position will allow." James starts before the arrival of traditional dalkarian refreshments were set before them.

He waits for the waiter to pour shixu wine into their copper goblets before continuing. "Lord Hosleare is presently occupied at the World Summit."

The youthful dalkarian nods. "It's not the assistance of the Marquis or the estate's hospitality that I've arrived."

Loraunt and James exchange uneasy expressions. Through Nagahshya's sensory exchange, he confers Garrett's response behind the entrance. The dalkarian's youthful appearance was one of deception. James spares no caution as his mind accelerates to account for all subtleties.

*"Perhaps he comes for the shard?"*

Nagahshya suggests from the background of his mind just as he comes to the same conclusion.

The dalkarian sips from his chalice. "Serahn shixu?" He inspects the contents curiously.

"Ah," Loraunt grins. "Dhis vine is familiar?"

The dalkarian dilutes the drink with water. "Yes, it is a staple of my homeland."

The Serahn Isles of southern Daskalania. James knew very little of that particular region. "Quite the coincidence, I wasn't aware many dalkarians inhabited the Serahn Isles."

The Dalkarian's eyes flicker toward the door. "Your guard may as well come join us, as he appears to be straining to eavesdrop."

A flushed Garrett enters the hall and takes a seat next to James. Neither acknowledge each other. Though Garrett squirms a little as Nagahshya slithers past his feet. The dalkarian doesn't appear to be aware of the serpent.

"It's you three who were afflicted by the Lucaceous?" The dalkarian sets out a cup for the ginger and serves him a plentiful serving of wine.

"Thank you." Garrett nods in genuine appreciation. "Name's Garrett." He raises the chalice to the dalkarian and helps himself to refreshments.

"I'll be known as Loraunt young lordling." Loraunt raises his chalice before taking a sip. He motions with his arm to Garrett "ease on dhis one fire-ed, is brewed for Dalkari."

"Too late," Garrett grasps the table to regain his bearings. "Holy - this stuff is weird, and strong."

The dalkarian watches this scene with mild interest. "Lordling?"

"Is inappropriate for celestial?" Loraunt raises an eyebrow.

The dalkarian shakes his head. "No, just coincidental." He shifts his gaze toward James. "Everyone else has introduced themselves."

"James." He answers, setting his cup aside.

"I take it your names haven't changed then?" The dalkarian nods. "My name is Al'ekh."

Nagahshya coils herself near James' feet, wary of the dalkarian. James eases into his seat. "You know of our amnesia?"

"A little. It has been listed as one of the symptoms. Though that's the extent of my knowledge. Very little is known regarding the Lucaceous." Al'ekh scans the area.

James nods to the dalkarian. "You may speak freely, I've cleared the room beforehand so that it was only the four of us."

"Hmmm," Al'ekh nods. "Regarding the Lucaceous, I've been tasked by Gran Celestial Orelle - head of the Svernian Inquisition - to acquire it." The adolescent glances toward his periphery. "I'm aware it's no longer in possession of the estate."

"It was lost to an Okari thief with the help of the groundskeeper's adopted nephew." James refrains from using Moritz and Noaki's names, though the dalkarian didn't appear particularly interested, or perhaps he already knew.

"So it *is* traveling with Gavin Whitehawk." Al'ekh sinks back, drinking from his chalice. "That'll be a problem, though I don't foresee irresponsible usage with Whitehawk's presence."

"Afraid we can't be much help." James admits.

Al'ekh levels his gaze with James. "You see, that would be problematic for Sohmneas."

A restless Nagahshya binds her way up James leg and drapes herself around his shoulders. She glares at the Dalkarian.

Al'ekh responds to her with a curious expression. "You're Nagahshya?"

*"Before you had been, the other was an agent of Sohmneas. Before he had been lost, he made me vow I keep this silent."*

*"Through his writing you learned much of his life, but the secrets of Sohmneas he wisely never recorded."*

"I'm not entirely sure what you're here for Al'ekh, but the person I had been before the amnesia hadn't wished for me to know of Sohmneas, or at least know of his involvement in the organization." James' mind accelerates. "Although if you're willing to oblige me with this information, I'm willing to listen."

Loraunt sets his cup down. "First we should learn what this organization wants with you?"

James nods. "That first."

The dalkarian surveys the room before agreeing. "As I said before, very little is known regarding the effects of the lucaceous, however, that's only what I can infer with information accessible to me."

"The heads of Sohmneas have been aware of Hosleare's task to obtain the Lucaceous long before he set out. This elusive daeitik shard in particular is what the organization has been searching for many years. By a stroke

of coincidental luck you, or rather the pre-amnesiac you had been deeply involved within the organization and rooted even deeper in Hosleare's affairs.

"As an international agent of Sohmnia, you're pre-amnesiac state had been ordered to acquisition the shard upon arrival with Hosleare and to be delivered immediately to the closest headquarters in O'taomon."

Al'ekh pauses to pour himself another drink, taking his time as he stirs the diluted concoction. "Of course when the expected date of your arrival came and no one showed, the organization suspected an incident involving the shard was partly, if not wholly, responsible.

"As the nearest agent of the organization, I was then instructed to assess the situation with little to no information regarding the Lucaceous, granted the celestials of Svernia have acquisitioned a great deal more data." The dalkarian set his chalice down. "Now, I'm here."

Neither of the trio spoke for some time until the ginger downs an undiluted mixture. To James' amazement, he manages to stay cognizant. "That doesn't even tell us what the organization wants with this guy."

"So it would seem," James nods. "However, he did give us subtle hints as to the organization's intent."

"Are... are you sure?" Garrett has a concentrated look about him.

"Although I doubt they will openly outright admit this, the organization is quite desperate to get their hands on this particular shard. Any information they can collect is invaluable. With the vast network of influence and power that this organization has, any information regardless of how little, can go a long way.

"So we're it. The living effects of the Lucaceous' power and they want to poke and prod you for their experiments." James levels his gaze with the calm dalkarian. "Am I close?"

Al'ekh shrugs. "The Lucaceous means very little to me. Before I became involved, it was a mythical artifact alluding to vague and enticing properties." He pops a bite sized pastry into his mouth. "Though I could imagine why an organization like Sohmnia might seek it out." He yawns, "in any event, you cannot ignore their summons."

"My suggestion is that you all proceed to O'taomon at your own leisure." He rises from his seat. "Your hospitality is appreciated, however, it's imperative I seek out the Lucaceous as soon as possible. Farahn."

James watches Al'ekh exit the hall with an eased grace. He lets out a relieved breath when the remnants of the Dalkarian's echoing footfalls diminish.

*"Foolish."*

"Indeed."

## Port Min-Khashiib | The Silver Alps: I

Noaki wakes before the breaking of dawn and props himself onto his elbows. Moritz is snoozing away on the opposite end of the cabin, lulled by the swaying vessel. Their belongings are tucked away in the cupboard next to a barrel of water. Moritz stirs in his sleep. Noaki wonders how his friend gets by.

Taking a few deep breaths, he grabs his coat and stumbles his way above deck. Most of the passengers and crew members were still below, however, he finds Orion and Gavin conversing at the starboard. Their voices are lowered but not muted.

“Can’t sleep lad?” Gavin acknowledges his presence.

“Nightmare,” Noaki joins them, watching the trees drift by as the vessel continues its journey southward. They were silent for a time when Orion asks Noaki the details of his dream.

Noaki processes his thoughts before answering. “I’m standing in a place that feels familiar, but far away. There’s an old shrine and sometimes there are others. Moritz is standing next to me, but not all the time. It always ends with a pillar of light, then I wake up.”

Orion nods. “These others, how often do you see them?”

“Less often now, although I recognize their faces and names, I can’t put a history to them.” Noaki shrugs, “I feel empty when they’re not around.”

“This shrine, what does it look like?” Asks Gavin.



"It's a monolith with a crevice carved into it." Noaki shuts his eyes. "I don't know how I know, but it's really old."

"There are many forgotten shrines in the world." Orion responds in a solemn tone. "Perhaps it's within the woodlands where you lost your memories."

Noaki considers this, then shakes his head. "That place, it feels familiar but different."

"Is the shard in this dream?" Gavin suggests.

Noaki's attention shifts to the opal bulging in his pocket. He'd forgotten all about it. "Not that I know of, I never really considered it." He pauses to reassess the details of his dream. "I'll keep an eye out next time." At that moment a howl erupts from the forest, startling a flock of birds into the sky. With an active perception, he can make out a cacophony of violet forms lurking within thick vegetation.

"We've a few more hours before we see the city." Gavin notes.

"City?" Noaki attempts to extend his perception, but only manages to glimpse the area surrounding the vessel and bits of the river bank. "Back in Borintas, how did you know how to use the shard?"

"I took a gamble with that one," Orion chuckles. "Without knowing the properties of a shard, one might easily obliterate their existence."

Noaki stares at the dalkarian in disbelief. He retrieves the leather pouch from his pocket. "How is something this small so powerful?"

"Artifacts from the primordial ages are uncommon, I know only a handful." Gavin centers his gaze toward the silver peaks. "These artifacts from ages lost are not known by many."

"The properties of shards will vary, not all can be handled by anyone." Orion adds.

Noaki inspects the luminous opal. "You've any idea what this one does?"

Gavin and Orion exchange a knowing glance. "Aye, we have our suspicions."

"The one in your possession illuminates that which is unknown." Orion shakes his head, "we have thoroughly analyzed the shard to the best of our knowledge. Its existence is unsettling."

"We cannot say anything certain," says Gavin. "Until Master Kurolos sees the shard himself."

Noaki pockets the Opal and returns to their quarters. Moritz lays in bed, his eyes wide open. He watches Noaki settle into the cot, eyes also wide open.

"Can't sleep?"

Noaki nods.

"Did you have the dream again?" Moritz readjusts himself to face Noaki. "Were the others there?"

"No, just me." Noaki mirrors Moritz. "Can I ask you something?"

"Go right ahead."

"How are you handling this?" Noaki twirls his hand. "This situation."

His friend releases a long breath. "If I'm being honest, I'm anxious." He sighs, "what about you?"

"I feel lost, and afraid." Noaki admits, surprising himself. "However, I don't know what I'm afraid of."

"What if our memories never return?" Moritz lays back down, his gaze directed at the ceiling.

They're silent for a time, as the reality of their predicament weighs heavy in their minds. "I don't know, but I'm grateful I'm not in this alone."

"So am I." Moritz chuckles. "If only I could read." Upon seeing Noaki's expression he quickly adds, "to pass the time."

Noaki feels a pang of sorrow, and then confusion. He bolts upright, startling Moritz who watches him manically sift through the contents of the cabinet.

"What are you looking for?"

"Something to write with."

Moritz's eyes gradually widen with realization. They rummage the room for anything, when at last they produce an old tattered cloth and piece of compressed charcoal left by the room's previous inhabitants. Noaki and Moritz both lean in as Noaki writes his name. The two admire the crude but legible handwriting.

"Suppose I *can* read." Moritz tries his hand and spells out his name beneath Noaki's. "What language is this?"

Noaki shrugs. "One of the others might recognize it."

They make their way above deck as first light of dawn breaks the horizon. Orion and Gavin are set aback after seeing the wild expressions on their faces.

"Are you alright lads?"

Noaki hands over the cloth. "Do you guys know what it says?"

Gavin inspects the handwriting, frowns and passes it to Orion. The Dalkarian's face looks pained. "I'm sorry, I'm not familiar with this script" He returns the cloth.

"It's our names, and somehow we recognize it." Noaki looks the cloth over. "So there really might be a chance."

"Maybe," Orion smiles sadly. "We'll be docked soon, you should prepare your belongings."

The two descend to their cabin. They'd been journeying down the Gamuush for little over two weeks now. Bored and restless, they were glad to be meeting the journey's end.

"Do you really think there's a chance?" Moritz slips into clean garments.

Noaki exchanges his overcoat for a dark sweater. The weather has gotten considerably warmer since Irithelle. "If I'm being honest, I don't know. We *can* read and write at least."

"I never could have imagined it," Moritz agrees. "It's only too bad there aren't that many books around that we can read."

Noaki folds his older clothes and packs them away. The bulk of their belongings slowed them down considerably. They'd packed more than they anticipated they could carry.

"I'm about done, I only take out what I need." Moritz plops onto his bed. "Well, not when we were looking for that stuff earlier."

Noaki checks the state of the chest. The last town they stayed, someone had tried to fiddle with the lock. He brings out the troublesome gem and places it near the lock, it clicks and the coins are still there. He'd been meaning to start keeping account of it, but never found the time, or made it. On top of training with Gavin, there were only so many hours in the day.

"What do you plan on buying?" Moritz shifts his head.

Noaki shuts the chest. "Nothing, just checking. In Falore someone had messed with the lock."

"You're telling me this now?" Moritz gets up to inspect the chaffing from a hammer, as if they'd gotten frustrated with it. "You hid it right?"

"Yeah, I left it behind, with all of my things, I doubt anyone would have noticed unless they were going through my stuff." Noaki considers his belongings. The bow rests among those items. "None of my other belongings were missing."

Moritz nods gravely. "You don't think Gavin or Orion tried to get in?"

Noaki chuckles, "no, I doubt they'd want to. Unless they've got a bad gambling habit we're unaware of."

"You're right," Moritz laughs meekly. "Just a common thief then?"

"I suppose. This is something of a chest. Looks like they bashed it with a hammer and it hardly made a dent."

"I forgot you needed the shard to open it." Moritz runs his finger over the tiny indentation. "You carry it with you all the time, right?"

Noaki grins, "even when I bathe."

"Too much information, but still good to know," Moritz laughs. "Should we start lugging this stuff back up?"

"Maybe when the ship docks. It's all probably safer locked in the cabin." Noaki comments.

"Good point, come on, let's get something to eat."

"I just realized it has been almost two days since I ate." Noaki agrees.

"What are you in the mood for?" Moritz leads the way outside their room, locking the door behind them as they proceed into the cramped mess room just a few paces down the hall.

Noaki inspects the chef's menu. "I'm thinking maybe porridge, if you have it."

An adolescent wearing an apron nods. "We do got somethin' like it. What about yourself?" He indicates to Moritz.

"D'you have any mushroom soup?" Moritz ignores the menu.

"Aye we've got it. I'll bring it over to your cabin if you'd like, or you can have a seat."

They seated themselves near a porthole. The sun has fully illuminated the surrounding landscape and the spaces between the mountains were getting larger and the forest thicker.

"Have you been to the ocean before?" Moritz gawks out the hole. "I feel I haven't seen it myself."

Noaki shrugs. "I probably won't know till I see it."

A few minutes and the adolescent places their food before them.

"Thank you," Noaki says to the waiter. The adolescent nods. "If you need somethin' just ask, see what we can do."

Noaki indulges a mouthful. It wasn't oats, but something more filling. "Food always taste better when you've worked up a good appetite."

Moritz spoons a few mouthfuls of soup and smiles. "They made this fresh."

After they finish their meal and honey sweetened tea to finish off, they make their way back on deck, though Gavin and Orion were nowhere to be found.

Sometime by noonday, after a few rounds of dice with the crewman, the city comes into view.

The city, it appeared, existed on an entirely different scale. Borintas with its many terraced districts was nothing in comparison in terms of vastness.

They gape in admiration. The streets were many, like confusing mazes with plentiful forest bloom. The further inward they journey, the landscape steadily becomes rockier with stretches of terraced plantations fitted next to the dizzying mountainside.

"The sea, it's over there!" Moritz points toward the widening mouth of the river. Where the sky meets the sea, vessels of all shapes and sizes dot the horizon.

As they near ever closer, Noaki can smell the unfamiliar aromatic quality of the ocean. "It's incredible isn't it?"

"You had best gather your belongings now. You'll have enough time soon enough to take it in." Gavin's voice comes from behind.

The two retrieve their belongings, thrilled they'd be on land soon enough. After lugging their belongings across the gangplank and onto the pier, Noaki seeks out a carriage for hire, leaving Moritz to guard their luggage in the meantime.

The streets were wide and decorous in vegetation and courtyards. He arrives at a small shop, specializing in fragments. The shop illuminates many cubby cases housing glowing stones. A young kid comes up to him.

"The rest of my family is quite busy at the moment, but if there's something you need assistance with, I can be of some service." The kid with round spectacles and combed hair bows.

"Well, er... yes," Noaki smiles. "You wouldn't know of any carriage services would you?"

The boy looks over Noaki's attire. "I don't know about any carriage," he frowns. "You're not from here are you?"

Noaki nods.

"Then you wouldn't know about the canals would you? They used to be for farmland, but that's changed. They use it to get everywhere nowadays." He smiles. "Almost everywhere, but I don't expect you'll be going far outside the main districts."

With the kid's assistance, Noaki is directed a little further inland from the pier where he encounters a series of smaller ferry boats hollering for passengers.

Noaki returns to the pier where Moritz, Gavin, and Orion are engaged in conversation. Orion waves Noaki over. "Did you learn of the canals?"

"I probably should of asked if you'd known something about it first." Noaki nods.

"Gavin and I had some minor business to attend to." Orion gathers his traveling gear. "We'll discuss it later. For now let's settle in."

Noaki hoists his suitcase and gear. The bow he secures to the strap over his shoulders. Moritz fares a little better with fewer belongings and gratefully the walk to the canal and Inn had been short.

Moritz and Noaki were roomed together at the Tonnalayit Inn. Though a rather impressive brick and mortar establishment with a fine peristylum, many of the rooms were already occupied.

Their room had been furnished with two narrow beds, a pair of matching bedside tables, and a wardrobe stood beside an arched tracery window. Two damasks were arranged near a small fireplace, with an open entryway to a smaller room connecting the lavatory and washroom.



Moritz tests the bed. "Definitely not the Prowler, but it still beats my first bed."

Noaki agrees, "or the boat."

There comes a knock at the door and Noaki calls them in. Gavin inspects their room. "This is alright aye lads? You're wanted in the study."

Noaki exchanges an inquisitive glance with Moritz. They follow Gavin wordlessly through the corridors, up a spiraling staircase, through another corridor, and into a smokey room housing numerous collections of literature.

Orion is seated next to the fireplace interlocuting with an older gentleman dressed in an inconspicuous suit. The two have crystal tumblers in hand.

"Moritz, Noaki, have a seat. I believe Gavin will be occupied for the rest of the evening." The gentleman rises with a cordial smile and indicates to the sofa set before a coffee table. "Orion is an old friend of mine, and he's told me quite a bit about you." He pours himself another glass. "Care for a drink?"

They both decline his offer with a few words of appreciation.

"Very well, Orion?"

The dalkarian holds out his glass. "Just a bit more."

The gentleman tops it off. "I haven't introduced myself, my name Sir Roderick of House Khalladhir." He sets the bottle in its place. "Now I understand you're all in need of assistance?"

"Ah, yes, this is actually what I wanted to discuss with you two." Orion starts. "To reach Atmedanyeh, we need to voyage westward across the Ethrisian sea. Gavin and I attempted to have it arranged, but there aren't any ships willing to sail in that direction."

"Rightly so," Roderick comments.

"Why not?" Asks Moritz.

"If the problem is financial, I'm certain we can cover the cost," Noaki adds.

"It's not an issue of finances laddies," Sir Roderick explains. "If it was, I'd fund your expedition myself. The seas out west, all along Svernia's coast has always been a gamble on a sailor's life. The weather has gotten a good deal more dangerous, not many are willing to chance it."

"It will get better if we wait it out won't it?" Asks Moritz.

"The wait may be a lot longer than you might expect. It hasn't been this bad for some time." Roderick sighs, "with the incident of the Nagari in Borintas, everyone sees it as a bad omen."

Orion laughs. "I didn't take you as one to give into superstition Sir Roderick."

"You're right on that note, but with a lot of these celestials around, and that's not accounting the rumors of Drahstrehl. It doesn't put one who is familiar with brewing confliction at ease."

"Drahstrehl?" Orion frowns. "We had a confrontation with a celestial ourselves."

Noaki's stomach drops. "You mean Orelle?"

"Gran Celestial Orelle?!" Roderick coughs. "Nevermind, I think it's best I don't involve myself. Sometimes it is better to remain in the dark."

"This event in Drahstrehl, may you enlighten me?" Orelle takes a sip.

Roderick returns a nod. "Of course I can't verify these rumors. This one in particular can only be spoken behind

closed doors." Roderick refills his tumbler. "I'll be needing a bit of this. It happened, some say a few weeks, others a few months. Although I think it's more accurate to pinpoint near the date of Drahstrehl's self-isolation from every nation, including those in Daskalania.

"It's said a thief bearing the nature not known since Drahsrhaeon himself, stormed the royal palace, faced the emperor in taikhetudin, and took the Dusk Shard."

"This rumor is unsettling, almost too preposterous to ignore." Orion downs the rest of his drink

"What's this shard?" Noaki asks.

"How might one put this," Orion sets the tumbler onto the table. "It's one of the more well known Primordial Deifacted Shards. The source of the mighty Drahstrahelion empire's power."

"A force whose pillar of existence holds up Daskalania's shaky political atmosphere." Roderick inputs. "It is a ludicrous rumor. Drahstrehl with all it's resourceful advancements, to be squandered by a thief." He chuckles, although with a bit of uncertainty. "Well I think that ought to be enough for the young ones' ears. My estates are open to your party until the weather clears up."

"I can't thank you enough sir Roderick." Orion bows.

"Nonsense, your company has always been a pleasure--"

At that moment they are startled by Gavin's entrance. His face grim. "We can't stay long, we've got other problems."

"What is the problem Mr. Whitehawk? My estates are properly monitored, I imagine you'll all be quite protected." Sir Roderick sets out a tumbler, fills it, and hands it to Gavin. "Have a drink."

"Much appreciated, I'll be needing this after the trouble I ran into." Gavin nods to Noaki. "Have you run into anyone recently?"

Noaki shakes his head.

"Good, that means he's not yet aware you're here." He shifts toward Orion. "It's another dalkarian, young. Bearing Svernia's insignia. I heard him ask for me by name, and mention of the lads' description."

"Svernia? I don't see what the problem is." Noaki comments.

Sir Roderick shakes his head solemnly. "Mr. Whitehawk is right. If one bears the insignia of Svernia, he'll be another celestial."

A flash of memory comes to Noaki's mind. Orelle. He glances at his friend looking squeamish.

## Port Min-Khashiib | The Silver Alps: II

Noaki groans. He thought by now he was done with all these sordid events. No doubt James would turn up sooner or later.

He lay on his bed, the pillow smelling faintly of flowers. Moritz had gone off somewhere and still hadn't returned. Not that he minded being alone, sometimes it was better that way. When others were around one had to behave a particular way, Noaki didn't mind so much, but being in a state of agitation on of that would exhaust him.

The original excitement of the city had died down, having almost no time to himself in isolation with someone always just around the corner. He wrote these thoughts in a journal Roderick had gifted him, along with an assortment of writing instruments and ink.

Five days have passed since they were instructed to lay low. Though it didn't seem they'd be getting out anytime soon. Not a single ship, regardless of the crystaires he or Roderick would push on them, would agree to their voyage westward.

Noaki set aside the journal and attempted to sleep. He didn't get much last night or the night prior..

His eyes are shut, slowly he tries to slip off to sleep when Moritz enters the room.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I can leave if you want."

Noaki shakes his head. "It's alright, I'm not getting any sleep even if I wanted to."

"You're telling me, I've been having nightmares lately." His friend plops down on his bed. "I went to the port with Orion, we almost bumped into him again."

"Any luck?" Noaki asks, knowing the answer already.

"Nah," Moritz turns over onto his back. "The place is big, it will take us a few more days to get through everyone."

Comforted by the idea, Noaki covers the Ayshek lantern glowing on his nightstand. He murmurs, "good luck."

Moritz had mishears, responding, "goodnight."

---

Moritz squints his eyes to take in the view. The sun was particularly bright today. He didn't even know where to begin. Ships were always entering and leaving the harbor. The eighth pier he attempts is congested with a bunch of cargo, sailors, and merchants. One in particular sounded promising. Advice he'd gotten from a kid in the street.

"Excuse me?" He calls out to a passing sailor in dark tan uniform with green trim.

"Can I help you lad?" He looks Moritz over. "Looking for work? Captain Sahiib is always looking for new recruits."

"Er, well it's not that I wouldn't mind work." Moritz stammers. "I'm looking for another ship, I thought you might know where I could find the Arktik Trading Co.?"

The sailor scratches his chin. "Never heard of it, but I know 'Co.' Won't be the name of their vessel." He points to a boy on the verge of his adolescence. "That's the captain's

younger brother. Sanmaar is his name, he might help you. Got a big brain on his head."

Moritz nods, bows, and thanks the sailor. After the sailor leaves with a nod, Moritz approaches Sanmaar.

The kid wore a Bedouin with a head covering that seemed useful to a desert climate, his round spectacles were covered in dust, leaving Moritz to wonder how he could see.

Suddenly aware of Moritz, Sanmaar confronts him. "Can I help you with something?"

"I don't know, but I was told you might." Moritz shrugs, "I'm looking for a ship, it's got something to do with Arktik Trading Co."

Sanmaar considers this for a moment, Moritz thought he'd break a lightbulb when he finally nods. "I've heard of them, although they're not widely known, but we had a run in with them once. My brother got them out of a bind sometime back, I was a lot younger then, so the memory is vague."

Moritz nods.

"Their ship was named after a bird, I forget."

Moritz's shoulders sink in defeat.

Sanmaar continues. "Their office is here in the city, it shouldn't be too far off. They're a bit of a small crew, but reliable. I can show you if you'd like."

"I'd appreciate it, thank you!" Moritz wants to shout with glee, only to remember it wasn't always a guarantee.

"I'm Sanmaar." He leads the way.

Moritz introduces himself. "Are you from the desert?"

Sanmaar nods. "I don't know if you'd heard of it though. You don't seem like one who's been outside his farm." He chuckles nervously, "I don't mean any offense."

Moritz shrugs. "From what I know, which isn't much, this is the furthest I've been from home."

Sanmaar looks him over with amazement. "Well, it's not like you can take the leviahtran into the next country. Especially if you're from this region."

"What's a leviahtran?"

"You don't know?"

They reach the end of the pier and exit onto the road. "I've heard Orion mention it, but I didn't think to ask him at the time."

"I can answer it, but it's a bit of a mouthful." They shift directions and onto a wide street.

"I've got the ears for it," Moritz wiggles his ears.

Sanmaar laughs, "if you travel far enough to see one, you'd immediately recognize it." They turn another corner. "It's sort of like a carriage, attached to more carriages, in a line. Only they move really fast and on a very specific path, like a road but only leviahtran's can use."

Moritz tries to imagine this. "It sounds neat, how fast does it go?"

Sanmaar pauses for a second. "I don't really know, the conductor might know the mechanics better than I. I've seen it go quite fast. Ever seen a bird dive low? It's a lot faster than that." Sanmaar points down another street. "A conductor operates the machines that make the leviahtran move."

"So, people travel in this?"

"Yes, it's quite convenient. A lot faster than sailing." Sanmaar stops outside a dusty shop with large bow windows painted with what Moritz presumed read; 'Arktik Trading Co.' in gold. "This is the place."



Moritz thanks Sanmaar. "Now if only I knew how to get back." He chuckles.

"Don't worry, there's a canal right around the corner." He points down the street. "Just ask around or follow it. They all empty into the sea, if you know the direction to go."

"Again, thank you." Moritz waves the kid off and enters the dusty shop. The place smells of old paper. The desk on the opposite end of the room is piled with paperwork. The walls are decorated with paintings of the ocean. A display case had been arranged beneath a painting of a ship, inside it sits a smaller complicated looking vessel.

"Good afternoon sir."

Moritz jumps when a bespectacled man enters from one of the back doors. "What can I do for you?"

"My friends and I, we're looking for a ship for hire." Moritz points to the vessel in the case.

"If it's a ship you want for voyage, I think you'll be needin' a bigger one." The man grins. "Our services aren't often requested, we've got a small crew, how much is your party?"

"Four," Moritz answers promptly.

The man nods. "Something we can easily work with. Your cargo? If you've got it."

"We don't."

"Now this one is a bit tricky, where will you be wanting to voyage?"

Moritz's heart skips a beat. This is where he'd been turned down. "Atmedanyeh." The silence that follows unnerves him.

"You've been turned down before haven't you?"

Moritz nods.

"Then I suppose you know why. It's a bit off season to be traveling out west from here lad. Maybe a few months down the line." The man turns around.

"Please! Wait!"

He stops.

"What if you take us somewhere else? My friends and I need to leave this place." The words spill from his mouth. "We're in some trouble, I don't know what the whole details are because everyone's vague or doesn't really have an answer, but we can't stay here."

"The name's captain Egor." He approaches Moritz. "At your service."

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Moritz bursts into their room, startling Noaki. "I got us a ship and a crew."

"That's fantastic!" Noaki jumps from bed and clasps his shoulders. "When can we leave?"

The smile on Moritz's face wanes. "Well there's a bit of a catch."

"What's the catch?"

Moritz indicates to the damask. "You know we can't stay here."

They take a seat.

"Right"

"Then why don't we go somewhere else for the time being? Just to get away from this place, then we can wait it out until we can travel west."

"That's not a bad idea." Noaki nods. "Let's ask the others what they think."

Moritz relieves a sigh. They'd be out of danger soon enough. The two wait until Gavin checks on them, then they explain their plan.

"Aye that sounds good. I'm weary of the indoors." Before he leaves he instructs them to have their belongings ready.

Noaki and Moritz are about ready when Orion bursts into their room, the patterns of his flesh shining brilliantly white. "Gavin just told me of your plans. I think it's wise, are you ready?" He speaks fervently. "Let's be off then."

Moritz and Noaki meet Gavin in the Commons area. His expression in the dim light of the Ayshek lantern is grave.

"You lads are ready then? Orion shouldn't be long now."

"D'you know what happened to him?" Asks Moritz.

Gavin nods. "Was confronted by the celestial. The lad was just out of his league, he'll be out of it for now, but not long." His attention shifts to Moritz. "You had the vessel and ship arranged?"

Moritz nods. "Captain Egor said he could voyage anytime we needed. All we have to do is say when."

"D'you know the right ship, lad?"

Moritz wants to thwack his head. "I know his shop, said he lived there."

"Suppose he'll have a rude awakening." Gavin chuckles.

Moritz laughs to calm his nerves. "That he will."

Orion appears a few minutes later, in a fervent conversation with Sir Roderick.

"Shame I won't be seeing you off then." Sir Roderick nods to them. "It has been brief but a pleasurable time having you all in my company." He pats Noaki on the shoulder. "Keep journaling, I'm sure you'll have use for it someday." He turns to Moritz. "You're an amusing lad, I had Tully pack in those sweets you're fond of." Finally he nods to Gavin. "Keep an eye on 'em, honor having you Mr. Whitehawk."

Gavin bows his head.

Sir Roderick returns to Orion. "Selinoff," he grins and the two embrace.

It was a strange experience for Moritz overall. He'd hardly known Sir Roderick for more than a few days.

They wave very briefly, exit the portico, and off to the nearest canal.

It was a little late into the evening but a canal driver was always prepared for passengers it seemed.

Gratefully their journey to the Arktik Trading Co. went without event. Moritz knocks rapidly on the door, hoping it would be enough to rouse the captain. A few moments later Captain Egor, in a thick trench coat and leather boots opens the door.

He grins. "As soon as I heard the commotion earlier I thought it soon be time to sail. The ship is ready."

Moritz thanks the captain who leads the party down back alleys. "I didn't think you'd be traveling with a dalkarian." The captain nods respectfully to Orion. "Or the legend of the man himself."

Moritz couldn't see his face in the dimly lit alley, but he could almost imagine Gavin's face redden.

"We're nearly there now." They exit the alley and there in front of a shabby shack sways a decent looking ship imprinted with the glistening words that the captain translated as; The Tern.

"Oi, Veynir!" The captain calls.

A burly figure leans against the bulwark. "Is that you captain? I thought you'd gone back to sleep and gave us a ruckus for your own amusement." He laughs, the only sound in the silence. "Alright then, we're all ready to sail."

Captain Egor leads the way on deck. "Easy now, don't want any of you falling in." He cautions as they cross the gangplank.

Moritz makes it across first, followed by Noaki, Orion, and finally Gavin.

"I'll be introducing you to the crew later. For now," Captain Egor shouts "Moir!"

"Aye captain!" A voice responds from the crows nest, from where a figure leaps down with a soft landing.

Moir was a bald man with a long wispy beard. He wears light breathable clothes that remind Moritz of clouds. Not a second to spare, Moir shifts his feet one way and the next, in a sequential dance.

The windy shore stills and the sails are released. Moritz realizes then that Moir is directing the wind, like a conductor.

The ship rocks forward, steadily climbing speed, her captain at the helm.

"That's incredible," Moritz observes the billowing sails. "How does he do it?" Moritz shifts to Orion, then immediately forgets the question.

The dalkarian's patterns are dim, too dim and his crimson-like flesh pale. He faints face forward.

Gavin turns him over onto his back, elevating his head with his coat.

"This is not good," he whispers. "Afraid I can't do much in the way of medicine this far off land."

"What's happened to him?" Noaki crouches down.

Gavin shares a look with Noaki. Moritz watches this play out until captain Egor arrives on the scene.

"Your friend seems to have gotten himself into a bad scuffle." the captain's eyes scour the deck. "Veynir!"

"Yes captain?" The burly man appears from the cabin, the expression on his face relaxing when he notices Orion. "Seasickness?"

"A dalkarian seasick? No, especially not this one. Come here and help Gavin carry him down for Reyna."

Moritz stands idly by as the two lift Orion up like furniture. They carry him below deck and into a room devoted to medicinal practices. Though Moritz could only just make out a few instruments. Gavin appears in the doorway and instructs them not to enter.

Moritz and Noaki bear somber expressions. Neither speak for a time. In any event, the silence seems appropriate

## Atmedanyeh | The Shakkhari Steppe: I

David studies the unimpressive figure seated next to the wizened white bearded Master. The arrival of the Gran Celestial, Kalakurik of Zastasia, sent the monasteries into a frenzy. Barges of varying sizes clotted Lake Marna alongside luminous house boats, fishing vessels, and ferry boat all at maximum occupancy.

Akh'yun dragged a sulking David onto one of these ferry boats drifting toward the northern main temple.

"He's finally here!" Akh'yun leans over the railing to gain a better view of the luminous and intoxicating bubble of crystalline energy.

Aranle skulks on the railing next to David. He attempted to coax the feline behind but she managed to sneak aboard. A few other animals perch themselves around the monks who are all in contagious spirits.

"Careful you don't fall over, or you'll be sent back to change." David laughs. "Maybe I'll fall in myself."

Akh'yun narrows his eyes. "Then they'll send me back with you, to keep you company." He smiles. "There'll be lots to eat and drink, plenty of people to meet."

"Who is this guest we're all celebrating?" David wonders aloud.

Akh'yun gives David a disbelieving stare, then erupts in delightful laughter. "I forget you've forgotten," he grins.

"We're celebrating the completion of the Planetarium in Euradai."

The intoxicating air diffuses in his mind as the sobering weight of his predicament returns. Then disappears when Aranle begins purring. He pets the beast delicately and proceeds to partake in the festivities.

Though he knew very little in the beginning, his interaction with diverse and far faring travellers illuminated his mind to the significance of the planetarium. Many of the scholars now settled in Euradai to operate the planetarium, or partake in research, were once disciplined residents of Atmedanyeh.

Akh'yun introduced David to many of his old friends, they bantered and played together, indulged in well prepared food and good wine.

Not long after the opening ceremony did David start observing the festivities from a distance in a blissful mood.

From his perch high up in the courtyard verandah, he studies the unimpressive celestial seated next to Master Kurolos.

The two seem engaged in some serious discussion. Master Kurolos frowns every now and again. David rubs his eyes, certain the master had subtly gestured in his direction.

He yawns and proceeds to find a room to rest. The ferries would not carry another passenger till the breaking of dawn, and his last chance to depart for the west monastery had already passed.

The corridors reverb with music and laughter emanating from the many courtyards. The festival reached such a peak, the corridors themselves were boisterous with activity.



Illuminated by strung paper lanterns filled with ayshek fragments, David continues westward, into the verdure of lush gardens where a myriad of animals wild and domestic, roam freely.

David sits beside a fountain where a school of beautiful koi scurry forward in anticipation of food. He laughs and recalls Aranle, who had skulked off to some unknown region of the monastery.

The stars are alight in the atmosphere of the night sky. He's gazing into the cosmos in dreamy trance when he notices something flicker atop the canyon cliff face. He squints his eyes, then opens them wide.

His vision never showed him the world quite clearly. Sighing, he searches the courtyard for anyone. When no one was to be found he refocuses his attention to the flicker. It has moved.

He jumps when a lithe cat rubs against his leg, purring.

"Aranle! Where have you been off to?"

Aranle acknowledges him and follows his gaze:

*"Where do you imagine?"*

"A secret room with other kittens, drinking too much cream and cavorting in mischievous activities." David chuckles.

Aranle presses forward, turns around and stares mutely at David's blank expression. "*Are you coming?*" she continues forward, David trailing behind.

"Where are we going?"

*"You'll know soon enough."*

"Okay."

They exit the monastery grounds and into the forest, following a recognizable riverstone path. David's chest hums with saudade. "The upper Terrace?"

*Better view of that light.*

"Shouldn't we tell someone?" David looks around warily, the woods take on a menacing shade. He lets the feeling play out but continues. "What do you think of Kalakurik?"

*"Old alvarrian, brings troubling news, didn't seem all too pleased with what the master had to say."*

"I thought so too, what do you imagine they spoke of?"

They reach a stone slab of a bridge, just a few inches over a trickling stream. Aranle pauses, keels her neck to take a drink, then continues.

*"Didn't pay attention, I was talking with some friends."*

David chuckles. "A cat festival?"

*"To you it's a cat festival, to us it's just a festival. She pauses, rotating her ears. But yes, a festival."*

"My apologies."

*"We're here now."*

"Where else can one be?" David stops beside Aranle, marveling at the rising ramparts carved into the canyon walls. Portions of the path disappear into the wall, only to reappear somewhere out of sight. Brilliant Ayshek lamps illuminate the path upward. "Amazing isn't it?"

*"Convenient."*

They begin their ascent, rising slowly over the forest treetops where they are met with a gust of cool spring breeze. Gratefully David's garb was woven thick enough to keep him warm.

An hour or so passes when they pause their journey at one of the resting alcoves furnished with curved stone benches and a gushing drinking fountain.

Aranle drinks from the fountain, accompanied by David who cups his hands. Refreshed, he takes a seat for a short rest. "It'll be dawn soon, will we reach the top before sunrise?"

*"Yes, an hour or so remains."*

David nods. The view provides them with a scene of Lake Marna dazzling with the reflection of the monasteries and temples. While they rest, three antelope enter the alcove, ignoring them as they drink from the fountain.

A few minutes after the three antelope finish and exit the alcove, Aranle stretches her limbs and jumps onto the floor.

*"Are you rested enough?"*

David nods a response and they continue their journey upward. What gales the canyon exude at this dizzying height, tall guard railings worked with spherical geometric patterns break them apart. They continue this last stretch for what feels like an eternity.

The first azure of dawn floods the night sky. The two finally arrived. David faces the canyon's edge and opens his arms to the wind in a wide embrace, letting it pore through him.

Aranle stretches out her limbs beneath the entrance to the upper Terrace complex.

"Isn't this something else?!" The wind muffles his voice.

*"We should wait in the gardens."*

David agrees, the morning chill numbs the shivers in his limbs. Somehow he carries himself forward, enters the ceremonial open gate, and into the midst of the Shakkhari Steppe.

The gardens themselves were an assortment of the natural occurring vegetation, short and stout, wildly arranged by the environment itself, save for the added stone artwork and resting platforms.

Aranle suggests he wait while she investigates the light from earlier. Her stealthy constitution appropriate for the task.

David agrees, seating himself behind a particular stone platform diverting the morning wind. A few minutes later Aranle returns with a peculiar silence.

"Well? Did you uncover the mystery? The suspense is making me impatient."

*"Yes. Although, it will be revealed soon enough."*

David groans. "I might just have a peak myself."

"It is rather difficult to explain."

David's mouth falls open. That voice. He laughs. "Well, now the suspense is over, I think I'll return to the festival."

"And ignore an old friend?" A smile, old and familiar. Though now he was dressed as a traveler, adorned in trinkets glimmering with aseurik fragments. Nikolai, the face of his old friend is almost unrecognizable with trim stubble and lengthy hair tucked beneath a wide brimmed hat.

No hesitation. David embraces his friend, laughing uncontrollably.

"Isn't that a warm reception?"

David stops laughing. He whirls around, surely as his memory recalls. There is that handsome face, only a little rough with a mixture of calm. Marko, finely dressed in a blue kurta bearing a sword secured at his waist with a white sash.

He cannot help himself, David breaks into another round of laughter. "What's the occasion?"

"Sit down and we'll all catch up." Nikolai gestures to the seat where Marko is lounging. "It's actually a coincidence really. I met Marko at the Seaside City of Naayir-Nahtama."

Marko nods. "I didn't know myself until after the tournament, when he congratulated me in person."

"The tournament was really something." Nikolai continues. "The fleet had stopped by on business, along the way we took some damage and stayed for repairs."

"Is that why you had time to stop by?"

Nikolai nods.

"We'd been so busy ourselves, I'd forgotten all about the tournament." David faces Marko. "I wish I'd seen it."

"It was a mild affair, I needed the coin." Marko brushes the comment off. "Tell us what's all this excitement. We had to take the back path, the traditional route was too congested."

"The festival? I don't really know much myself because it happened before the amnesia. From what I can gather, it's to celebrate the completion of a new machine. A planetarium."

"In Euradai?" Nikolai says in genuine surprise. "I've seen a glimpse myself, from the ports during an excursion of Athera."

"What does it do?" Marko asks curiously.

Nikolai shrugs. "I don't really know, but the machine is a building. A lot of people in Euradai are excited, nothing like it has been done before."

"Why celebrate it here?" Marko wonders aloud.

Nikolai shrugs at this too, "I don't know."

"It has something to do with Master Kurolos, some of the older residents assisted in its construction. I suppose we're celebrating that. This happened before we lost our memories." David sighs, "by any chance have either of you made progress with it?"

Marko shakes his head, "I'd forgotten all about it."

Nikolai smiles apologetically. "I've been travelling so much, it kind of just slipped my mind."

"What about you?" Marko adds.

"I don't blame you two. For awhile I just stopped thinking about it myself. Not until recently did I start going through it all over again." Before the other two respond, David stands up. "You two have to be hungry, there's plenty to eat and drink at the temple, let's go."

Nikolai and Marko's stomach audibly grumble. They laugh and proceed their lengthy descent into the canyon.

---

Upon entering the monastery grounds, the festivities went on with considerable gusto. The newcomers delighted Akh'yun, who had taken a moment to register David's companions.

After a heavy breakfast, Nikolai and Marko acquaint themselves with their old friends and instructors, the latter of whom were intrigued with their new vocations.

"How long will you two be around?" David asks Nikolai later that evening.

"We haven't an estimate, the damages are minor but reparations will delay us. On top of that, the fleet is restocking its supplies. I'm still expected to work when I return to Naayir." Nikolai faces Marko. "What about you?"

Marko shrugs. "I haven't gotten anywhere to be anytime soon. I could stay for a bit."

Nikolai nods. "You know, it would be alright if you both came along. The fleet is always recruiting. The pay is

worthwhile for the work we do." He indicates to Marko his sword. "I overheard a few of the crew say Master Eraanos is in need of more guard. We do get into nasty scuffles at times."

"I never considered leaving the temple before." David murmurs to himself. "I'm not sure what I'd be able to do on a merchant fleet."

"There's lots to do, it'll be a bit rough in the beginning but I'm certain you'd take to it fast." Nikolai shrugs, "you have some time to think about it. We're not expected to voyage for awhile."

David and Marko both agree to consider it. In the meantime they made plans to journey to the Seaside City and see Nikolai off.



## Abdhya-Vazudhyoli | Ayildur | Interlude

*Circa - 13,986*

Upon entering this world, their minds became entwined. In the beginning they knew not whom they were in their slumber, ensconced within a shell of energy to fend off the elements.

Time flows on as an unwavering force, but their shared dream carries on. Slowly they came to know; when the echoing voices through time whispers to them:

*Jason, Justin*

Within this world they became once again. Their minds entwined as one. They arose as one in a bloom of ethereal light. At last, once more they tread the world as drifting clouds.

Soon it was revealed where they awoke. This place in which they realized themselves; I found myself in the presence and gardens of the High King Solidore.

The high king is bemused into silence.

From two my voice came as one. "Does my existence offend you father?"

"You," his exalted bends his knees. "You were never to have been."

"Aye, twice were not one within this realm. One alone could not have been." Surriyon parts the heavens and bathes us in his presence. *'So the fourth I became,'* I speak into his mind.

His exalted falters onto his feet. "My mind cannot elucidate this."

*"The return of the Lucaceous has given me form from the shard once in your possession."*

"How can this be?"

*"Within this realm, the son whom once you sired, mirrored an existence twice in another. In an age lost to time's embrace the ancestors of Ehtbrijn Eldaeor knew this realm as Privthi - the progeny of heumes."*

## VOLUME

-II-

## O'taomon | The Empire of Eraat: I

*"It is said the god of creation bore two sons with the goddesses of night and day. These sons bore themselves the children that populate the heavens."*

*A'ten Akhetaan  
'Musings' Volume I*

It has always been a comforting sensation when the leviahtran lifts and accelerates forward. Olivia enjoys being a passenger. That she could operate a machine of this kind sparked her imagination. Riding a ringed serpent, soaring across the sky to new and far off lands.

This thought tickles her and she has to stifle a giggle. She'd been reading too many fairy tales lately, something to occupy her mind. These thoughts come to mind when the leviahtran meanders the streets like a serpent.

She produces a book from her canvas satchel, a collection of short stories from various authors, and begins reading.

There were little to no passengers aboard, but as her journey progresses, the seats are gradually occupied.

Olivia has only a few moments to recognize her stop.

She parts the crowd, excusing herself as she narrowly misses the platform. A few onlookers bear concerned expressions.

"Are you alright madam?" An adolescent boy approaches her. "I saw you almost fall down."

"Quite alright, I almost missed my stop is all." Olivia straightens her scarf. "Thank you. I'm running late, good day."

She proceeds to exit the station, the crowd quickly forgets her blunder and moves onto other topics. The streets are, as she anticipated, filled with pedestrian traffic.

Olivia makes her way through an arched entrance, and into a capacious hall with plenty of entryways to occupy one for the day. Fortunately she'd studied the map prior and shuffles her way to the appropriate lecture hall.

It was empty.

She worries she might've entered the wrong hall by mistake when a voice comes from behind.

"I wouldn't be too worried about it."

Olivia jumps, she turns toward that voice when she recognizes it belonging to the adolescent from earlier. "Oh, it's you. Why wouldn't I be worried?"

"Professor Evrim never makes an appearance on the first day, she prefers her students to acquaint themselves with their other studies and have their affairs in order for the next lecture."

"So this is the correct room?" Olivia relieves a sigh. "Sounds to me the professor just doesn't plain want to be here."

"Oh that's not the case, it's always a bit rowdy in the beginning, everyone has other things on their mind, particularly on the first day." The adolescent bows. "My name is Halil."

"Well I suppose I *will* feel a bit at ease next time." Olivia returns the bow, "Olivia."

"Since we're both free at the moment, would you like to get something to eat?" Halil smiles politely.

"I could eat," Olivia agrees.

Halil escorts her through the streets and into a bustling park. "You have to try this," from a popular vendor Halil places and order of what Olivia recognizes as stuffed flatbread. Halil leads her into the shady cover of a tree.

An assortment of spices and flavors dance in her mouth. She catches herself smiling and thanks Halil for the food.

"It's no problem, I don't like to eat alone." Halil takes a mouthful.

"You're awfully young to be attending university." Olivia wonders.

"Am I?" He smiles, "there are a lot younger students. You'll see them."

They finish their meal until either speak. "Your accent is a little different, are you a foreigner?"

Olivia couldn't find the words to respond. Her story was just too strange. So she improvises. "Where do you think I'm from?"

"It's not from the city..." Halil bears a ponderous expression. "I'd say somewhere rural. In Etraea?"

"I suppose I am," Olivia laughs. Much of the literature she had accumulated were from the Etraen age. "Though I only recently learned Shirhashaht."

"You must be from the southern regions then? Why travel so far?" Halil listens with earnest interest.

Olivia collects her thoughts for a moment, it would make sense. She once recognized a few foreigners' speech as her own. "Yes I am, though I can't do much traveling

anymore. I'm sort of stranded here, so I'm trying to make the most out of this situation."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Halil says comfortingly. "Your Shirhashhaht is excellent."

"Thank you," Olivia bows. "May I ask where you're from?"

"I am from the city. Have been for generations." Halil picks himself off the ground, assisting Olivia. "We should be going back now."

Gratefully, Olivia had not missed her next lecture. She kept an avid routine throughout the day to keep her studious aptitude. By the end of it, she allows her mind to cease.

The commute home was pleasant enough, and with the stipend the university provided her, she purchases an assortment of food items from a street vendor along the way. By the time she enters their apartment, a few hours remain before dusk.

Logan has taken up his usual perch on the windowsill. He stretches his limbs when she shuts the door. "Well," he yawns. "How was your first day?"

"Almost missed my stop and almost missed my first lecture." She prepares some of the food items on platters.

"Sounds about right," Logan yawns again. "What have you got there?"

"Food, come on, let's eat." Olivia spreads out the platters on the floor. Logan joins her and the two dine.

"Make any friends?" Logan nibbles on a piece of beytil bread. "Or did you accidentally forget there were others?"

Olivia laughs. She sips on a bit of pomegranate wine. "I did meet this other person. Halil."

Logan pauses, "I'm sorry what was the name?"

"Ha-lil," she clarifies. "What did it sound like I said?"

"Oh, I just missed that last bit," Logan finishes his beytil and picks up another. "Were the professors nice to you?"

Olivia sifts through her memories. "They were okay, seemed more occupied with their lecture. It went quite well, not as difficult as I'd imagined."

"Don't get ahead of yourself now," Logan pours himself a drink. "This is only your first day."

Olivia finishes the contents of her cup and settles it at that for the day. "Are you on duty for the night?"

"Yes," Logan settles his cup and seals the wine.

"You haven't had a day off since... I can't even remember." Olivia stretches her legs. "Is everything alright?" She picks herself off the floor.

"It has, hasn't it? Everything is fine. We just had some trouble awhile back and everyone's on edge." Logan gathers the plates and brings them to the basin. "I've nothing better to do on my free time, other than getting sloshed at any rate."

Olivia sighs, "Alright," she packs the remaining food items she'd set aside earlier into a wooden box. "Everything has been so strange lately, I can't explain it."

Logan fills a large cauldron with water and sets it in the fireplace to heat. "This isn't about the amnesia, is it?"

Olivia secures the box in a firm wrap. "It's not just that. Whenever I am asked something, who I am, where I'm from, who's my family, I can't answer." She looks up, realizing Logan had been watching her work. "Well?"

"What can I say to that? I've been dealing with this a lot longer than you. Trust me when I say give it some time." Logan peers out the window. "Your own history will come, and you sort of just find your own way." He notices Olivia



listening intently. "Come on then. Tell me something you learned today while we wait for the water."

Olivia agrees on the premise she needed to revise her notes. She recites the bulk of her lectures with her own commentary when Logan suddenly springs off the ottoman and makes for the bubbling cauldron.

He handles it bare handed and sets it on the floor to cool. Then he grabs a pair of cloth and hoists it toward the basin where he pours enough to clean the dishes.

Olivia, wide eyed, watches this scene from the sofa.

Logan attends to the basin. "You can keep going," he turns around. "You said you needed to revise." He directs a soapy spoon at her, "revise."

Olivia stifles a laugh and proceeds to read from her journal.

---

Logan secures the lunchbox to his sash, slips into his leather breastplate, and unfastens the spear from the wall. He prods Olivia who had fallen asleep.

She opens her eyes groggily, "is it that time already?"

"Yes, I set out the stuff to dry. There's enough warm water if you're wanting to bathe." Logan hops onto the windowsill, staring down a six story drop. The wind tousles his hair and he jumps. He twirls the spear, guiding the wind to elevate his descent until he lands with a light thud.

"Running a bit late aren't we?" Khamul, a street vendor with a steaming trolley calls down the street.

Logan answers with a wave before taking off at incredible speed. Before colliding into a busy street, he jumps, landing on a rooftop. The viziers' palace gleams far across the strait of the Ashhad and Ethrisia.

He speeds forward, hopping over alley gaps, and billowing across wider streets, moving like a darting shadow.

Upon arriving at the shoreline, he catapults himself across the strait, penetrating the air with his spear. When at last he arrives on the opposite shore, he gives himself a second to catch his breath.

A few passersby are startled by his sudden appearance. Though they hardly have the time to register his features when he speeds forward, gaining enough momentum to propel himself atop another roof.

In the nick of time he lands in the guard's courtyard to the sound of applause. Logan catches a few people exchanging crystaires.

Halil, a swarthy guard with a thick beard slaps him across the back. "We all thought you weren't going to show."

"Did anything happen today?" Logan murmurs.

Halil's face takes on a serious glint. "Just the usual squabble." Halil lowers his voice to a whisper. "The captain is furious, he's considering a raid on their headquarters."

Logan indicates he heard this with a nod. Captain Emir had a temper, and a raid after the last few days did seem inevitable. "Let's hope it doesn't come to that."

Halil grins, "losing your nerves are we?"

"Not before you wet your pants." Logan laughs alongside Halil.

Fortunately, the Captain did not think it necessary for a raiding party. He tasks everyone to patrol the palace with a few groaning responses. Logan relieves a sigh. Simple work.

Everyone breaks off to their own devices. Fortunately, Logan was ordered to the highest level of the palace, where he could comfortably snooze away the hours if things didn't get interesting.

The celestial sisters Sohm, Seli, and Tsu, illumine the world from the nakedness of the night sky. Logan perches himself in an alcove far above the palace where all of O'taomon dazzles his panorama of sight.

Nothing eventful occurs long into the night, so he drifts his gaze toward the sky, recalling all the stories Olivia read to him. Mortal dreams of gods.

He yawns and unfastens the wrap she had prepared for him. With the company of the celestial sisters, he lunches. The box contains his favorite foodstuff, beytil, goat cheese, fig, and spiced tuna.

After securing the box to his waist, he jumps from the alcove. The night is getting noticeably chilly. The courtyards, streets, alleys, as they could be seen from above, appear to be empty, save for the patrol.

Logan takes a break from patrol and dangles his feet in the peristylum. The gardens inside were medicinal, he might have wandered in the apothecary's ward.

Shuffling footsteps.

Logan peers down, a suspicious figure draped in heavy garb with face concealed, skulks through the garden. Logan wagers his option to call the guard, but decides against it.

The figure scuttles about, analyzing each plant with the occasional lookout.

The temptation to confront the intruder subsides when another voice acts on his impulse.

"What have we got ourselves here?"

The voice belonging to the newcomer is adorned in black and white fabrics with three crescent moons embroidered down the back of his obsidian cloak, his face also concealed.

Logan commits every detail to memory.

"I might ask you the same." The first intruder holds a bundle of plants.

"Gathering herbs for a nice meal I don't suppose?"

"For a midnight snack, yes. Yourself?"

"I came for a different reason, something a little more... sinister."

"Well I'm not one to question shady characters, I'll just be on my way."

"But I see you've already gathered the ingredients I need." The second figure looks about ready to pounce. "A light snack you said?"

The first figure attempts to dash for the exit when the second produces a shroud of dark mist.

Logan rises onto his feet intending to alarm the patrol when the mist gathers to form the body of the dark hooded figure, locking the first intruder in an arm triangle.

"Now let's see what's under this mask." The dark figure tears the fabric from his victim's face.

Logan's heart skips a beat.

Garrett.

"Ahh," the dark hooded figure's voice reverbs. "So this is what is hidden." He produces an obsidian blade radiating a moonlit aura.

Logan takes a deep breath, brings his mid finger and thumb to his mouth, and blows.

The night shrills with a deafening ring.

The dark hooded figure shifts his attention to Logan, Garrett is limp in his arm. The two lock gazes for a time, until the patrol enters the vicinity. Garrett slumps to the floor, then the night is filled with dark mist.

"Careful of the mist!" Logan warns the others. But just as the mist came, it vanishes.

Logan's attention shifts back to Garrett with the vague recognitions of a time he'd long since forgotten. Looking lifeless.

## The Tern | Ethrisian Sea: I

If there is something unknown, you will find it in the sea. Noaki peers into the depths of the water, vast emptiness of darkness.

"How's it going lad?"

Noaki looks up to see Gavin standing next to him. His presence is domineering.

Noaki deactivates his perception. "Can you see the bottom?"

"Aye, it's a bit of work even for me, but I can manage a bit." Gavin studies the horizon. "It's a different world in the abysmal realms."

Noaki peers into the depths, entranced by the grace of the sea creatures.

Four days since the date of their departure, Orion continues to show no signs of recovery.

Reyna, a beautiful young woman with gold hair fashioned into a single braid, had done what she could, but admitted her medicinal expertise did not exceed her apprenticeship. According to the hushed whispers between Gavin and the Captain, Orion would never wake without proper medicine.

While being trapped on a ship in the vast ocean, Noaki had developed a new ability to hear far off, subtle sounds. He discovered it the second night while asleep. Moritz and the others in nearby cabins snoring and farting. Once, he heard the flapping of pages, it took him a while to register it as Reyna siphoning through her collection of medical books.

"How are you all doing? In the mood for a little refreshment?" Quentin approaches them.

Quentin came off as a breezy adolescent character, with light billowy garb, shabby hair, and an aquiline nose reminiscent of his brother Veynir.

"If you don't get something now, you won't be eating anything till breakfast."

Noaki's stomach rumbles, "I reckon I am in the mood."

"Well, come along then, the others are waiting."

Noaki trails after Quentin. The dining room was a cozy room able to seat twelve, though Noaki thought even that would be a bit of a stretch. The furniture appeared to be on the pricey end, though durable looking.

Noaki freezes.

Moritz, who had not left his cabin for three days, was seated near the porthole looking sulky.

Gavin gives Noaki an encouraging push from behind and the three enter.

Gavin occupies the opposite end of Captain Egor, who sits at the head of the table. To Egor's right sits Reyna and Veynir to her right. Opposite of Veynir sits the wispy Moir who acknowledges Noaki with a nod.

Noaki seats himself next to Gavin's left, directly across Moritz, who keeps his gaze on the table's ornamental flowers. Quentin takes the spot between Noaki and Veynir.

There were, of course, only two seats left, one for Rita, who would position herself between Moir and Captain, and Orion looking out of place between Moir and Moritz.

This arrangement seemed to suit everyone as the room gradually filled with light chatter and Egor's propensity for leaf.

At last Rita emerges from the kitchen, her hair tied back in a scullery bonnet. "Will you young lads come and assist? I made a bit more than I'd been expecting."

Moritz rises from his seat and enters the kitchen, followed by Noaki, Quentin, and Veynir. The aromas of a well used kitchen makes Noaki's stomach grumble. Rita begins handing out platters of food with instructions of where to place them.

"Thank you lads, yes right there. Yes, that's alright. Don't worry it Veynir." Rita removes her bonnet, her hair is disheveled. "Alright then, come on, have a seat."

Noaki and the others obey.

"This looks delicious Rita, you outdone yourself." Gavin comments.

Noaki agrees, the assortment of food items put together must've been some work, it was an effort to hold back the ravenous hunger, but he manages until Captain Egor graces the food with the divine.

"Here try this," Quentin suggests, handing a tray of small oval loaves with green vegetation. "It's called Beytil."

"Thanks, it looks tasty," Noaki hands the tray to Gavin.

"This is the fish we caught earlier." Quentin passes the tray. "Might not like this one, it's a bit heavy on spices." Quentin hands the tray over.

"Let him have a go, you're not his mother." Veynir comments.

"Alright, alright, I'll stop, I just don't want 'em getting seasick on us," Quentin responds defensively.

The table laughs at this interaction, and the procession of food continues. Noaki stuffs himself with a bit of everything.



At last, when the trays were taken back into the kitchen for another heavy breakfast, the wine and smokes were brought out and the aysheks dimmed with amber fabric.

Noaki, Quentin, and Moritz attempt to leave when Gavin stops them. "You'll want to be around for this lads."

Noaki wishes he hadn't eaten so much. Gavin's eyes says it all, this would be about Orion. With an encouraging tug from Quentin, Noaki finds the will to sit back down. Moritz returns without an expression.

"I've decided on a detour of our original course." Captain Egor begins. "Now, before you air your enquiries, this decision is final."

Noaki waits for the bad news.

"The dalkarian will not make it if we continue on our agreed-upon course. There exists only two places where he can receive proper treatment."

Veynir chokes on his drink. "Sorry captain, go on."

"Port Min-Kashiib, where we all know, is not a safe journey. The alternative, the Seaside City of Naayir-Nahtahma."

Noaki relieves the breath he'd been holding in. This had not been about the demise of Orion.

"Well, isn't that great news?" Quentin inputs.

"Lad, you know the seas are dangerous that way, and the safest route is due to delay us further," Moir interjects. "If I'm not mistaken my Captain, you mean us to sail through a turbulent zone?"

"Aye, that I do."

The room fills with dread, the full extent of their predicament only Moritz and Noaki are ignorant to.

"I cannot ask this of any who aren't up to gamble. A fleet of my old kin will pass this way tomorrow, if you're not feeling up to it. Anyone of you can board their vessel back."

Noaki looks Moritz over, his friend seems distant. He recalls his first meeting with the dalkarian's pearly smile. "I'm responsible for this. If this is the only means of his recovery, I'll sail with you." The words came out of the silence, Noaki never expected this from himself.

With lucid eyes, Moritz sees Noaki for the first time. "I'm with Noaki."

"Aye, and I'm sure you already know I stand by my apprentices." Gavin smiles. "What say your crew?"

"No need to worry about my crew Whitehawk, they pledged their loyalty many times, I know they're with me."

The ease in which they compose themselves inspires Noaki. Not a sign of fear or second consideration in any one of them. They were ready for a challenge.

"Well then, thank you Moritz for joining us. You'll all want to be resting, we'll be sailing through daemonic waters."

---

Orion looks to be in some state of inner turmoil, his patterns shimmering dark colors, Noaki had only ever seen them to phosphoresce white, or at times, translucent.

Moritz holds Orion's large hand between his own. The dalkarian's red-ochre flesh did not possess its normal glow.

"Moritz. This torture. We should go." Noaki places a comforting hand on his friend's shoulder. "We can't change what already happened."

The insignia on the back of Moritz's neck illuminates intensely. "That celestial will get his someday."

Noaki removes his hand and exits the room. He proceeds up the deck when Quentin signals with a piercing whistle followed by another. Noaki rushes above deck to see the commotion.

"Oi! Noaki!"

Noaki looks up to see Quentin peering down from the crow's nest.

"Look that way!"

Noaki directs his gaze in the direction indicated.

Hundreds of ships, reminiscent of gliding clouds, are sailing in their direction.

Moir hops from one of the masts, landing near Noaki.

"That's the fleet of the High King Solidore."

The rest of the crew emerges from below deck to gawk at the arrivals.

The majority of the fleet sails by, ignoring their tiny vessel by comparison. An impressive ship with intricate woodwork anchors dangerously close by.

A brawny figure in white uniform with gold epaulets and thick leather boots jumps across and onto their deck like a bird of prey. Captain Egor greets the newcomer.

"Vice Admiral Kotkya! It is an honor," Captain Egor bows.

Vice Admiral Kotkya looms over them and speaks in a brash voice. "Honor is all mine Captain Egor." He scours their

crew with keen interest. "Quite the crew you've got here. I hope you don't plan on proceeding in this direction."

"That I do, we've urgent business in Naayir." Captain Egor nods to Gavin.

"Must've fetched a pretty price for this route. I don't envy you." The vice Admiral comments.

"How bad is it?"

The Vice Admiral's face darkens. "If you've any sense, you will turn back now. We lost six ships and seven hundred."

Captain Egor is taken aback. "That is... most unfortunate. His Majesty?"

"As healthy and safe as can be at the World Summit. It's his *heirs* we be looking after." The Vice Admiral shakes his head. "Proper to say they be looking after us. We might have had considerable losses were it not for them."

Noaki notices a tad of unease at the mention of the king's heirs. He wonders what kind of people they were like.

The Vice Admiral bows. "If it's urgent business you be on, I'll be on my way. Athirianu Captain."

"Athirionum Vice Admiral," the captain bows.

A fierce gale engulfs the Vice Admiral before he leaps onto the deck of his ship.

Moritz nudges Noaki, whispering fervently. "Over there!" He points to a pair of lean figures dressed in ornate silver and gold robes with intricate begemmed circlets.

Noaki holds his breath, "Jason."

"And Justin," Moritz finishes.

As if hearing their names, the twins shift their attention to Noaki and Moritz in a uniformed movement.

Something seemed a bit off to Noaki. He

activates his perception and the world slows to a near standstill.

The twins exuded a luminous aurae. Justin faces them.

Noaki's perception deactivates of its own accord and Justin appears before them, startling him. His voice comes out deep, clear, powerful, and noble.

"No'aki, Moritz," he embraces them.

Noaki and Moritz exchange uncertain glances.

"The days have come and gone." He releases them. "I've anticipated all of your arrivals, but never did I dream this day would truly come to pass."

That must've been it, Noaki thought. Justin had gotten older, a lot older. "I can't believe it's you!" Noaki laughs.

Justin returns the laugh. "It is me, though I arrived much earlier than the two of you."

"That must've been awfully lonely," Moritz says concernedly.

Justin locks forearms with Moritz. "I was never alone, my brother had always been there." He releases and locks forearms with Noaki. "Just as you two have each other."

"I had a dream of all us," Noaki admits eagerly. "There was Maria, Yvonne, You two, Moritz, David, Nikolai, Marco, Olivia, Garrett, Loraunt, James, and Logan--"

"Have you seen my brothers?" Justin interrupts.

"Your brothers?"

"James and Logan." Upon seeing Noaki's face he adds, "who?"

"We sort of split off from James in Borintas," Moritz answers dolefully.

Justin pats Moritz's shoulder, "it is alright, I am elated to hear he's here. Now this dream of yours?"

"Well it sort of just ends there." Noaki shrugs, "there's also this pillar of light then we... sort of just disappear."

Justin appears mildly disturbed by this. "I understand. My brother and I have strange dreams ourselves, they've yet to manifest."

"Did you ever find out what happened to us?" Asks Moritz hopefully.

"I'm sorry, I have no answers." He holds Moritz by the chin and gently kisses his forehead. "We should meet again, I am interested to hear your stories." He places his palm on Noaki's chest, time slows, and Justin disappears.

"What?" Veynir picks himself off deck. "What just happened?"

The entire crew, apart from Moritz and Noaki, had been knocked unconscious.

"You mean, you missed all that?!" Moritz groans, "now you won't believe me when I tell you."

Noaki waves to the twins who wave back in unison. "I think it's better we don't say anything," Noaki murmurs.

"Alright then!" Shouts Captain Egor, "Moir, Quentin! he sails!"

With Quentin shifting the gales under Moir's supervision, their vessel rocks forward and they set off.

## O'taomon | The Empire of Eraat: II

Logan sits on a stool in the guard's courtyard, revising the details of his encounter to the captain. His mind occupied on their prisoner in the dungeons. When he'd recounted all the details he can remember, he stands up, the heat of day almost too unbearable after the night's events.

"I'm sorry captain but I've said all I can say."

Captain Emir sighs, "very well, you're dismissed. Take the next shift off."

Logan stops in his tracks. This would be the first night off in some time. "What's going to happen to him?"

"I don't know," Emir admits. "Theft in the Gran Vizier's palace. His prospects don't look good."

Logan nods and speeds off. The ceramic roof tiles are burning to the touch but motivating him to press forward. With his mind still occupied on Garrett, he hadn't realized when he leaped through the window of the apartment in record timing, his feet were steaming. He removes his uniform, fastens his spear to the wall, and finally drags himself into the cool breeze of the windowsill, falling asleep easily.

Professor Evrim, Olivia thought, was the most extraordinary person she had ever met. Her presence incited an ecstatic feeling within her. Everything from her posture, to her floral-like dress, enchants her attention.

"She's amazing," she whispers to Halil.

"That she is," he agrees. "She's very intelligent and well traveled. There's rumour a handsome, influential and wealthy royal once asked for her hand and she turned him down." Halil straightens up when the professor's gaze passes them over. "Of course that's just rumour."

The professor begins her engaging lecture on potential properties of primordial energy. Olivia takes vigorous notes, mentally hypothesizing with the professor's research. By the end of it, her unquenchable thirst for knowledge expounded into new dimensions that carried over to her next lessons. Never before could she fathom this state of studious academic vigor. The professors were all pleased with her thought provoking enquiries and hypothetical proposals.

"You were really something today," Halil says as they stroll back to the station. "I almost expected you to finish off the last lecture."

"I couldn't help myself," Olivia beams. "Professor Evrim is certainly something. Can you imagine a forest so vast it changes the climate?"

"Or the destruction of an entire ecosystem," Halil smiles sardonically. "Of course these are only potentialities of the undisciplined usage of primordial energies." They enter the busy platform. "Fahrahn Olivia."

"Fahrahn," Olivia waves and boards the leviahtran. She finds herself a nice seat where the bulk of passengers were



looking exhausted from the day's events. Olivia gazes out the window as the leviahtran lifts and accelerates forward.

The buildings blur by at their considerable speed. It would still be a while yet before she reaches her destination, so she sifts through her journal.

Upon arrival at her station she notices a disgruntled finely dressed man whom she thought she recognized though he disappeared into the crowd before she can catch a better glimpse of him.

En route to the apartment she stops by a grocer and selects all the food items she can carry alongside her books.

And on the trudge back, the gentleman from before weighs on her mind, she was certain she recognized him but couldn't place her finger on it. He attired like a wealthy southerner, perhaps a relation of some sort?

Back in the apartment Logan hadn't risen to greet her, she thought he seemed exhausted so she let him be. Instead she got to preparing dinner, or breakfast from Logan's perspective.

Amid her busywork, the neighbor's young girl strums her instrument. The traditional kind that soothes the place with inspirations of the desert. She plays the local favorite, the shepherd who had become entranced by the lovely weaver's tapestry.

"Sounds beautiful doesn't it?"

"Eldaeon, Logan! You startled me." Olivia twirls around to find Logan's dreamy eyed gaze soaking in the city from his perch. "Though yes, it is quite lovely."

She sets out the platters on the carpeted floor. "Let's eat."

Logan hops down, and joins her. They eat in silence for a time, savoring the filling of salted grain, spiced tuna,

Beytil bread, spiced wine, baklava, and an octagonal tin of dalkarian lokum.

"That was delicious, thank you Olivia." Logan sips from his cup, followed by a plop of lokum.

"Thank you, although I can't take all the credit." Olivia nibbles on a beytil.

"Oh? And who else might I have to thank?"

"The fishermen, farmers, pastry chefs, brewer, harvester, that's not to account for the animals involved." Olivia counts off all those involved in the logistics of getting the food before them.

Logan keeps his eyes on her as he drinks. "Thank you beasts of burden, harvesters and farmers, brewers of exquisite taste, and humble fishermen..." Logan lists off all those she mentioned. "Anybody I missed?"

Olivia laughs, "not that I'm aware of."

"I'm not expected to thank all those people whenever we eat together, am I?" Logan feigns a pleading look.

"All right then," Olivia warms her legs. "We've still got to get this cleaned up," she picks herself off the floor.

With Logan's help they had the place tidied for the next day. Olivia lounges on the sofa, finishing the last of her wine. Logan takes his perch on the windowsill. "Anything interesting happen today?"

Shaking her head, "I did meet this extraordinary professor. Though I can't say much of her, on account we only lectured." Olivia sets her cup aside. "Did you have an interesting night?" She gets a little unnerved when Logan doesn't answer, then she giggles.

"What?"

"Like that silence doesn't say anything. Come on then, let the bird out of the cage." She sits up eager to listen.

Logan rolls his eyes.

"Spit it out."

A creeping smile spreads on his face, "Alright. Well, I don't know how you'll take it."

"What d'you mean?" Olivia frowns.

"Well... it's a topic that concerns... you know... the amnesia. I just don't want you getting all mopey on me." Logan raises his hands defensively, "I'm only saying it's happened before."

Huffing, she fires back, "Well fine then, don't tell me."

"Fine with me," Logan shifts his attention out the window.

"I'm glad it's fine."

A moment later the two break into laughter.

"All right, if I promise not to get mopey about it, can you tell me?"

Straightening his back against the wall, Logan begins recounting last night. "We were on patrol duty and there was this thief, well two of them. The other came a little bit later. I noticed the first thief in the apothecary's ward. He's acting really suspicious, so I know he's not supposed to be there, but just as I'm about to confront him." Logan pauses to reconsider something, then decides against it and continues recounting the event. "I'm about to confront him, when the second thief beats me to it, they have this whole taikhetudin of words and Garrett is--"

Olivia bolts upright, "Garrett?!" That name rings clear in her mind, a memory she'd lost. "Sorry. Go on."

"Well I kind of ruined the surprise. The second thief uses this strange power I've never seen before, he catches Garrett and unmasks him, that's when I recognized him. The other thief brings out this blade from nowhere and Garrett looks in trouble. I didn't know what to do so I called the guard.

"They come in time and the thief disappears, meanwhile Garrett is knocked out cold."

"So he's alright then?" Olivia's chest flutters

"I don't know, he's in prison right now. They're still trying to decide what to do with him."

"Then you have to help him. Logan, he's our friend!"

Logan turns away. "We don't know that, even if I wanted to do something, I couldn't. Olivia. He wasn't supposed to be there."

"No? Then where was he supposed to be? *I* didn't know where I was supposed to be when I lost my memories. Perhaps he was just lost... or I don't know. Logan, please!" Olivia pleads.

Logan sighs. "I'll go see if they'll let me talk to him."

Olivia grabs her scarf.

"Where do you think *you're* going?" Logan bars himself in front of the entrance.

"What do you mean? I'm coming with you. I need to see him." Olivia tries to push Logan out of the way but he stands unwavering. "Logan. Move."

"You're not going. First of all, you're not even *allowed* in the palace on normal grounds, and especially not when security is this on edge."

Olivia marches to the sofa and lays down, concealing her face in the opposite direction of Logan.

Logan slips into uniform, grabs his spear from the wall and leaps from the window. He lands deftly on the neighbors' rooftop and speeds off, leaping from one roof to the next. He barely has the time to build momentum at the strait when he catapults himself over.

The lack of pedestrians on the other shore concludes security had established a curfew. Olivia was out of her mind thinking they'd let her enter the district.

Logan finishes his landing in the guard's courtyard to a series of applause. Captain Emir nods approvingly. Ignoring the usual banter with Halil, Logan approaches the captain. "My apologies captain, I know I was relieved of duty for the night."

"Yes, that you were, but you're a good soldier for showing up." The captain slaps him on the shoulder.

*Soldier?* Logan is uneasy.

"You made it just in the nick of time as always." Demir, an experienced guard, gives him a slap on the back. "That's all of them captain, the window of arrival is shut."

Logan retreats down the courtyard during the captain's speech. He scours the place for Halil who was nowhere to be found. While the captain is facing the other away, Logan rushes to Çetin, an old friend from his earlier days. "What's going on?" He whispers.

Çetin smirks. "I didn't know myself, we were both taken for fools. But you're now part of the Sultan's mighty force."

Logan swallows hard. "Where's Halil?"

"He didn't show, so he's out." Çetin pats him on the back. "The captain relieved everyone of duty, and those who showed up are now soldiers of his grace."

It clicks in his mind. The endless nights, one after the next. A test of loyalty. The captain had this planned all along. Logan wanted to dash from there but he was trapped, as a soldier, desertion was as good as death.

"Olivia..." He sighs under his breath.

The captain finishes his speech and everyone, as a right of passage, was on patrol for the last time.

After the assignment of duties, Logan approaches the captain.

"Congratulations soldier!"

Logan swears the title didn't suit him. "Thank you, captain," he tries finding the right words. "I was wondering if the sentence had been carried out?"

The captain sees something bothering him. "Not until morning. What's on your mind?"

"I was wondering if I might have a few words with him?" Logan tries to think of something to add when the captain nods. He relaxes.

"He's still in the dungeons. If anyone gives you trouble along the way, tell them to have a word with me. I'll set them out straight."

Logan thanks the captain and speeds past the guard, no interaction necessary. The dungeons are well furnished considering its use. Then again the best thing you can do for a person who's about to face death, is provide a little comfort.

Logan had nearly missed him. Garrett is slumped, back against the wall on a cushioned bed, still dressed in hefty garments, but looking fine.

"You enjoying the view?" Garrett mutters.

"Only surprised one could be as hideous as you."

Logan's retort stirs the redhead. He looks Logan up and down, as if considering something.

"Are *you* enjoying the view?" Logan smiles.

"Logan!" Garrett's face opens wide with surprise. He scurries to the bars. "My god, it *is* you!" He laughs and the two lock forearms. "Look at you. A guard of all things, I knew something wasn't right."

"You're telling me. What in the hell were you doing to get yourself in here? I for sure thought you'd died."

"Well. You see, that's complicated." Garrett begins pacing the room. "They told me the palace wouldn't be so heavily guarded, so I thought to myself; okay, this isn't so bad, nothing like the tasks they gave the others."

"What others?" Logan frowns. "Who said this place wouldn't be heavily guarded?"

"I can't say," Garrett looks about ready to burst. "Damn them!"

Logan sits cross legged on the ground. "Come on, sit down and tell me what you can."

Garrett considers this offer and obliges. "There's this organization we had to find, order's from a celestial I think, I forget his name. Only he isn't just one of the celestials, he's also part of the organization.

"We come here, and they act friendly, feed us, clothe us, that kind of stuff. I thought I would be working like my old job," he eyes Logan's uniform. "I used to be a guard like you. They told me if I really was a proper guard I'd know how to get past them, or something like that. I'm only summarizing of course.

"The organization told me if I could poach some rare plants from the apothecary's ward, only then would they take me in." Garrett thrusts his hands in the air, "that's the

short version. Getting here." He looks nauseous, "I think it's best I don't remember that."

Logan groans. "Please tell me this isn't the story you gave the guards?"

"What's wrong with it? It's honest," Garrett says defensively.

"They won't see it that way," Logan sighs. "Look. We've been having some trouble with some organizations ourselves. You picked a bad night to steal plants. But yes, normally we were expected to patrol the streets last night."

The two were in mutual silence.

Trying to find a way to get Garrett out of this situation on top of getting caught in a trap of his own as soldier, was work Logan didn't need right now.

"I know you can't say the name of these organizations, but *I* can. If either of these names are who you're talking about. Do not mention it, if you haven't already."

Garrett waits in anticipation.

"Hilal and Sohmnia."

Recognition flashes across Garrett's face.

"Do not mention either of them." They rise off the ground in unison. "I'll try and get you out of this somehow."

Garrett lets out a rumbling laughter. "I didn't tell them anything. I didn't know how."

Logan raises an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"You still don't realize?" Garrett laughs harder. "I can't even speak the language."



## The Tern | Ethrisian Sea: II

The captain wanted to be out of these waters as soon as possible, so they sailed long into the night and far into the afternoon. That's when they entered a ferocious storm. The darkness that was as dead as the night of new moons, engulfed them. Then the flashes came, one after another.

Noaki sees it then, the tremendous horrors of the sea. Great waves as tall as mountains. Belittling his existence with its ferocious raw power.

Their ship was due course to be swallowed by a wave, when an ocean of spiritual energy weighs down on them.

Captain Egor leaps into the air as a luminous whirlpool of azure and seafoam energy. He slams his palms together.

The sea shudders and the wave collapses. The captain lands with a hard thud, panting.

Noaki is impressed when the captain returns to the helm, maneuvering the ship through bigger waves.

Noaki retreats to the belly of the ship in haunted fascination.

He enters the cabin where Orion had been strapped down. Moritz and Reyna are attending to him. He presses forward, into the mess room where everything had been secured. The hulking mass of Gavin is sitting in the corner looking seasick clutching a bottle of hard liquor.

"Are you alright lad?"

"Doing a lot better than yourself by the looks of it." Noaki takes a seat next to Gavin, the chairs had all been boarded up. "How long will the storm last?"

Gavin takes a swig. "We've got a good deal more to come, this one is the smallest of the storms."

Noaki's face pales when another wave of spiritual energy comes down, followed by the shuddering of the ocean.

"Will the captain be alright if he keeps this up?"

"He will have his fragments if it comes to the worst." Gavin hands the bottle to Noaki. "It'll dampen the nerves a bit. I'll be heading back up."

Noaki downs the rest of the bottle and flounders his way above deck. There was plenty to do, but it seemed the most important was to secure the sails. Quentin and Noaki are struggling with one that had gotten loose. Moir quells the wind surrounding the mast and makes it easier to secure.

"When is this storm going to let up!" Quentin calls out to his instructor.

"When it wants to! Take care of it here! I'm gonna help the captain!" Just as Moir barks those orders, their hearts were all they heard.

One wave after wave. Each larger than the last. The captain himself appears defeated.

Noaki activates his perception. In a brief flash of lightning he imagines a glimpse of a shadow within the water. The next flash reveals nothing.

Moir and the Captain share a knowing glance and begin working in tandem. Moir channels the air currents, and Egor, subduing the waters around the ship. The atmosphere between the two irradiates pulses of luminous energy.

Moir halts his movements and the pulsing energy floats into the sky. Egor leaps into the air and slams the pulsing energy between his palms.

An incredible force forces all of them onto the deck. This is followed by a deep shuddering of the ocean. The waves break apart and sent backwards in a powerful shockwave. The storm breaks into a drizzle.

Egor falls uncontrollably toward the deck, though Moir cushions his landing. Everyone gathers around the captain. His body is steaming.

Moir erupts in a relieved laughter, followed by the captain. "I'll be out for a bit. Gavin, Veynir, mind you carry me to my quarters."

Rita scurries above deck cursing Gavin for reckless behavior, though she seemed relieved the ordeal had finally been over.

Moritz emerges a few minutes later, staring at the exhausted crew slumped next to anything that would support them.

"What happened here?" He scurries to Noaki who waves him off.

Panting, Noaki answers, "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

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Captain Egor indeed did take some time to convalesce before he could manage the helm. A day had passed with no serious events. Meanwhile, with Gavin's superb

astronavigation and Moir's experience of the ship, they were able to sail in the correct direction long through the night. All the while Moritz, Noaki, Veynir, and Quentin were worked to the bone preparing for the next storm.

It came the next morning, another storm and they couldn't possibly hope for another of the Captain's miracles. Even now returned to the helm, their chances were grim. Noaki, and Moritz did what they could but the storm raged far into the evening. The exhaustion showed on each of their faces.

Then it happened. The storm gave way to a drizzle.

Everyone collapses, attended and fed by Rita and Reyna while they still had the opportunity to rest.

Moritz and Noaki assist each other below deck. They dried and changed into a clean pair of garments, then slumber dreamlessly far into the proceeding afternoon.

Noaki is the first to rise, followed by Moritz not long after. Rita prepares them something delicious and they lunch together in the mess room.

"How much longer?" Moritz dips a piece of bread in clam chowder. "I don't know if I can handle another day."

Noaki sips on some really strong tea. "I don't know, but I don't think I can take another day either."

"We're almost done with the journey," Veynir enters the room scrounging for something to snack on. "The captain reckons we'll arrive tomorrow at noon, in the evening at the latest."

Noaki and Moritz groan. If anything they were certain of at this point, it was that a day really could feel like an eternity. They finish eating, thank Rita, and make their way above deck for a bit of fresh air.

"The weather seems nice at least. Not a cloud in the sky," Moritz shields his eyes from the sunlight.

"That means a big one's coming!" Moir calls down from the helm. "I hope you lads are well rested, this one won't be like anything yet."

"Where's the captain?" Asks Moritz, ignoring Moir's omen.

"The captain's getting his rest while he can, for the big one." Moir grins at them chillingly.

Quentin jumps down from the crow's nest. "Ah, don't pay him no mind. It doesn't do you any good to worry about it now. If we stay it'll come, if we move forward it'll come." He straightens out his wind-swept hair to no avail. "Best to just enjoy this calm while we can."

"Wish we could just fly," Noaki adds.

Quentin laughs. "Hey Moir! Imagine that? An airship."

The wispy bearded man bellows a laughter. "That's a good one lad."

"You really think there'll be another?" Moritz leans against the mast.

"No doubt about it. There are more stories and legends about these waters than I'd dare count." Quentin sits cross-legged on deck.

"Will you tell us one?" Noaki also sits cross-legged.

"Hey Moir! Have I got time for a story?!"

Moir waves Quentin off.

Quentin leans into his listeners. "There's this popular one, called the Great Calm. It is said long ago, in the primordial ages, these very seas were known for their calmness. Many great explorers voyaged these waters on their journey to the rest of the unknown world."

"Of course then, only dalkarian's dared to voyage the vast seas. The people loved these waters so much, one did not see it without feeling compelled to offer gifts. The times changed, and the people's devotion did too. The waters became polluted.

"They say Eldaeon himself came and proclaimed this calm brought him to tears. Of course that only brought more people, so next the fish had gone. Then it happened during the lunar convergence. The people asked the celestial sisters to restore the calm of ages long past.

"Sohm, Tsu, and Seli, gazed into the waters and saw the god Kulkuyule asleep in his shell. The sisters laughed and asked if the mortals were certain. They said they were, so the three sisters imbued Kulkuyule with their power.

"The sea trembled for three nights when at last Kulkuyule emerged. Enraged with the mortals for disturbing his realm he raised the sea. The people tried to flee into the highest peaks of Svernia, but it was no use. Kulkuyule raised the sea even higher. So the people of Svernia delved deep into the mountains, and there, they found their calm."

Noaki shivers. The shadow in the water, had he really imagined it? "This is only a legend isn't it?"

Quentin splays himself on deck. "I wouldn't know, this is my first time in these waters." He jumps onto his feet. "Oi Moir! Is Kulkuyule real?"

Moir scrunches his nose. "We'll find out soon enough won't we?"

Quentin waves Moir off. "That's the best we'll get out of him. You can ask the captain when he's up."

The calm had lasted into the evening and Rita deemed it safe enough to prepare another feast. The captain didn't look too bad but hadn't entirely recovered according to

Reyna. Noaki noticed she'd rekindled her interest in medicine. Everyone had been enjoying themselves when Moritz brought the topic of Kulkuyule to the captain.

"Where did you hear that legend?" Gavin brings a piece of fish to his lips. "Veynir, have you been trying to scare the lads?"

Veynir laughs apologetically. "I did tell my brother, he always tells it bad though."

"Oh? And you're the silver tongue yourself?" Reyna nudges Veynir.

Veynir flushes. "If anything, I learned it from Moir when I first started out."

"Why's everyone sharing the credit? I'm the one who told them." Quentin finishes off his loaf, then dives for another.

"To answer," the captain leans in, "I don't know. There are stories outside of legend, of the divine lurking in the depths." He leans back. "These are stories from my kin. I don't know meself."

After the table had been cleared, the furniture secured, and the cookware washed, Noaki roams onto the deck to catch the last fading glimpse of dusk.

He leans against the bulwark. The seas really were calm. If not for Moir or Quentin, their vessel might've stayed in place. He keels over a bit, listening to the surf as the ship bobs and sways.

The depths. Kulkuyule.

He brings out the leather pouch. The source of all their troubles and yet desired by so many. Certainly a gift worthy of a god.

"Noaki?"

Noaki deftly catches the pouch before it sinks. He stuffs the pouch back in his pocket. "Quentin?"

"I came out to apologize if that story did frighten you. With what we've seen so far, I can't blame you." Quentin leans back against the bulwark, his arms dangling over the side.

"It's not just the story that frightened me. In that first storm, right before the Captain did that thing with Moir."

"You mean fuse?"

"I suppose, yeah. Well, before it happened I used my perception to look into the wave and I saw this... great shadow, serpent like." Noaki's face prickles.

"Serpent?" Quentin gazes upwards, the stars are beginning to appear. "I always imagined Kulkuyule as a jiavalr."

"A what?" Noaki breathes a little easier.

"You've never heard of a jiavalr?" Quentin looks disbelievingly. "I've seen one myself when we voyaged Kossiria. It's sort of this giant fish, as big as a small island, they're very friendly. When they're angry though, I don't want to know."

That night Noaki dreams of the calm sea, swimming alongside the jiavalr, Moritz, and Quentin. Gavin, the captain and rest of the crew are on the shore waving at them, laughing. When suddenly he's lifted out of the water on the jiavalr, he laughs delightedly and waves back at everyone when all that was on the shore to wave back to were Jason, and Justin.

Moritz and Quentin were floating face down. Noaki tries to swim for them but the jiavalr carries him to shore.

That's when a flying serpent appears, followed by a terrifying storm. Justin, Jason, and the jiavalr try pulling him



onto shore but he couldn't leave them. Gavin, Moir, Veynir, Egor, Rita, Reyna. One by one they were engulfed by monstrous waves.

Noaki springs up from sleep. Woken by the violent rocking of the ship. He dresses as best as he can and scurries above deck to see everyone equally dismayed. Noaki activates his perception to better accustom himself with everyone's position. The waves hadn't risen like the first time, but that could always change.

Securing the sails well beforehand, everyone waits for the big one.

Then it begins, the ship catches in an enormous whirlpool. Noaki couldn't imagine how the captain would get them out of this one, and he definitely didn't look up to fusing.

Captain Egor guides the ship with the momentum of the whirlpool. The ship keels on its side, giving Noaki a frightening view of what awaited him. That's when he sees Moritz sliding across the deck. Noaki reaches out and clasps him by the forearms.

Moritz has a haunted look about him. It truly would turn out like his dream. "Hold on tight you lug!" Noaki hoists him up with all his strength when a wave swallows them both into the turbulent sea.

The currents thrusts them about and into calmer waters. Noaki's perception shows him Moritz drifting away.

Useless, useless, useless.

*"So long as one's lau'khet is not entirely depleted, the adaptation surge will allow the body to physically adapt into any environment with no ill effects to the user."*

*"The one in your possession illuminates that which is unknown."*

On the verge of his last breath, Noaki reaches into his pocket for the pouch. He can't hold his breath any longer. He retrieves the shard, but it's too late, his lungs demand air.

His perception explodes.

A bubble forms around his luminous body. He spits out a copious amount of sea water and wastes no time. His perception slows his perspective of time as searches for Moritz who is still drifting in endless darkness.

He catches sight of him and grabs him. He swims easily through the water and quickly grabs Moritz. Hugging him close to his chest he kicks his legs upward, his body surging with intense energy.

They break the surface and Moritz vomits onto Noaki's chest. Moritz takes one glance at his radiant savior and spontaneously embraces him in an unrelenting grip.

"Moritz?" Noaki looks down at Moritz. "I love you too, but we've got bigger fish to fry."

Moritz turns around and gawks at the blazing white inferno of energy fending off a titanic sapphire serpent. Like the Nagari it levitates but with rotating metal rings.

Noaki extends his perception to scope out the scene. The crew had somehow managed to subdue the whirlpool,

though with the captain passed out on deck, Noaki had a pretty good idea how. As for Moir and Gavin, they are in a duel with the serpent.

With the opal still in hand, Noaki slows his perspective further and uses this new energy to move quickly in this altered time. He slips out of and back into Moritz's tight grip, his arms now draped around his neck.

"Noaki? Now this is just too much," Moritz says over his shoulder.

"We can talk about it later, I need you to hold the shard against me." He passes the dazzling opal into Moritz's palm. "Whatever happens, don't let go."

Moritz presses the stone to his flesh, and Noaki feels another, incredible surge of energy.

"Hold your breath and hang on tight!" Noaki dives into the water, his perception guiding him and his movements with ease. Moritz would not be able to breathe underwater so he has to dive up every now and again for him to catch his breath.

Within just a few minutes Noaki reaches the ship. Someone had tossed down a rope ladder. Noaki, without ever realizing it, climbs onto deck with Moritz still hanging from his shoulders.

Veynir fills them in. "When you two were swept away, the captain used everything he had to calm the sea thinking it would be the best way for you two to make it. After that, things calmed down for a second when that leviathan came out of the water."

Moritz hands the shard back to Noaki. That floating white inferno spews out streams of fire, no doubting it was Gavin.

Noaki sprints to his room and returns, his bow ready. His perception erupts in an enormous sphere that extends hundreds of kilometers. He adds tension to the string and an obsidian arrow exuding a violet hue appears. A little more tension and energy swirls at the tip. Just a little more and violet streams of energy whirls around him. He narrows his perception on the leviathan and releases.

The arrow explodes on impact, engulfing the serpent in thick chunks of ice. The serpent collides into the sea with an enormous splash that sends the ship floating in the opposite direction.

Gavin returns to the deck looking towards Noaki with admiration and pride.

As for Noaki, the world blinks out of existence.

## O'taomon | The Empire of Eraat: III

Logan perches himself atop the roof of the Vizier's palace. How could he not have realized Garrett couldn't speak the language? Captain Emir questioned him afterward and only confirmed his suspicion. The only reason Emir had allowed him to have a word with Garrett was because he thought Logan wouldn't understand him anyway.

The recent events building up to this moment were a nuisance. All this work, when he had been perfectly fine lounging about in supposed peace times. Although if he'd been anywhere else, these events would still be happening behind the scenes. The only solace he could see that moment was that it was better to be aware of what went on.

Garrett.

Ordered by a celestial? Logan recalls the stories and personal accounts. If they were to be believed, nothing good would come of conflict. He used to imagine meeting a celestial would be a fantastic encounter, and it still might, but with all that was going on, he might just find himself on the opposite end of a celestial's blade.

Dawn breaks over the horizon and he returns to the guard's courtyard for a debriefing. The captain officially relieves everyone of duty for the next shift. Logan hoped this would be another test and one that'd he'd fail, with his luck, he didn't count on it.

They were dismissed and he speeds off. The energy inside his body is surging, this time he lets himself be guided

by the wind. Before, he would meet it face to face with resistance along a straight path. This new path led him to the same place only with a bit more meandering.

The streets were always busy, but this morning they were more animate. He halts atop the roof of a particular bathhouse, jumps down, pays the fare, and scrapes the grime from his flesh. He walks outside meeting the sweltering heat of the sun as if summer already arrived.

With the payment for the week's work and an added bonus on top of his new rank, he sits outside a small alleyway eatery. He orders a surplus of fried rice, tuna, beytil, and a copious serving of Shixu. The drink on top of delicious food settles in his stomach with waves of pleasantries. He pays the tab, thanks the staff, and strolls back to the apartment in no hurry.

"Is nice meeting again friend."

Logan whirls on his feet and locks forearms with the krishkalvarri. "Loraunt!"

Loraunt, draped in layers of white and black fabric embroidered at the placket with silver thread, returns the gesture. "Is been too long."

"That it has, what brings you back to O'taomon?" Logan leans against the alley wall. "How long will you be staying?"

Loraunt hesitates. "On business with benefactor. Maybe few days or week. Is benefactor's decision."

Logan nods, he'd heard Loraunt had gotten himself decent work in the Alps. "If you're not too busy, you should join us for dinner, Olivia has gotten better at cooking."

"I vill be there," Loraunt chuckles. Gesturing to Logan's spear he asks, "is still guard light foot?"

Logan grabs the spear, twirls it, and leans it against the wall. "Yeah, though I don't use it much. It's only for show really." *Hopefully it will stay that way.*

"Ah, maybe we spar sometime?" Loraunt enters the shade of a flimsy awning.

"Like a taikhetudin? I haven't been to the arena in ages." Logan grabs his spear. "If you're not too busy right now," he jabs the air between them.

Loraunt leaps into the air, crouching on the wall above Logan's head. The two lock eyes. "I race you." The alvarrian jumps onto the rooftop and sprints off.

Not wanting to be outdone, Logan builds up momentum and joins him.

That morning, the pedestrians of O'taomon, amid their gossip of the events taking place at the palace, are briefly interrupted by a whirlwind of shadows kicking up dust and debris. The trees rustle loudly, rooftops thud from something heavy, and birds flock into the sky for no inherent reason.

In the lead now, Logan distances the gap from Loraunt. No one could outmatch his pace-

A leviahtran zooms nearby with Loraunt waving as an unconventional passenger from atop.

Logan points out the fast approaching tunnel.

The passersby from the walkway above were pointing out Loraunt with terrified expressions. Loraunt jumps and lands sideways against the tunnel walls. He dashes forward and leaps onto the rooftops.

Now a bit behind, Logan attempts to close the gap by catapulting himself. He catches up with the alvarrian and sends a smug wave.

Loraunt points in front of them and leaps into the air, He lands on the looming wall in front of them and proceeds upward.

Logan skids to a halt just a hair's breadth in time. It would take too long to circumnavigate the district, so he jumps and spirals into the air with his spear. The ensuing cyclone thrusts him skyward.

Loraunt gawks from below, shielding his eyes from the sun.

Logan lands with a cloud of dust.

"Vell done friend!" Loraunt meets him with a single applause. "Almost beat me."

Logan waits out the dizziness, leaning on his spear for support. "I haven't had that much fun in a long time."

They enter the arena, pay the fare for a single match and spectate in the stands.

"When did you learn to walk on walls?" Logan sips water.

Loraunt leans back to recall the event. "Happen as accident, vas vorking for benefactor, almost fell off cliff and stone pull me in. I practice after."

"That must be some work. The most I have to do is patrol the palace, when the vizier's not around I patrol the streets and maybe break up a fight every now and again." A thought occurs to Logan. "I've always wondered, where did you go off to, after O'taomon?"

"I vent back to homeland."

"Drahstrehl?!"

Loraunt waves him off. "No, no, closer but still far. Tyahng Chahn, Zastasia."



"That's where you're from?" This information baffles Logan. "How on Eldaeor did you know that?"

Loraunt reveals a crystaire medallion delicately inscribed with a pictogram of a serpentine dragon. He passes it over for Logan's inspection.

"This has to be ancient, I've seen a few on display in the palace." Logan runs his thumb over the artifact. "Are those fragments?" He studies the embedded gems in the serpent's eyes and scales.

"Yes, is quite useful, so I keep."

Logan hands back the medallion. "Did you meet your family there?"

Loraunt tucks the medallion back in his shirt. "Yes, big family, old family. But all family is big and old."

Logan whistles, cradling his head in his arms. "I can't imagine the places you've been, I've never left the city."

Loraunt grins. "Is big world, I only see fragment."

When the adjudicator in crimson and black calls them down, they leap from the stands and take their places on opposite ends of the arena.

The emek shards churn gently in their posts. The adjudicator releases the ribbon and the match starts.

Logan sends a series of gales with his spear, the shaft centered near his body.

Loraunt's eyes radiate a phosphorescent amber. Anticipating every gale, he weaves his figure in an intricate stable dance.

The spiritual energy hits the barrier and the emek shards diffuse it rapidly.

A series of dark misty glyphs appear midair, Loraunt quickly infuses them with aseurik energy, manifesting an invisible shield.

Logan stands in awe for a moment, the alvarrian's dance dodged and prepared a manifestation. He wouldn't be able to break this shield without a powerful impact.

Loraunt begins his counterattack. With the shield in place he brushes his middle and index finger across the invisible surface, dark energy pools onto the invisible surface like ink. When the symbol is complete he infuses it with energy with his palm.

An electrical shockwave of darkness slams Logan backward.

Penetrating his spear into the arena Logan barely manages to keep himself falling out of bounds.

Cursing, he steadies himself and whirls his spear in consecutive motions, condensing the air around himself. The fragment embedded on the blunted end of the spear's shaft illuminates a light azure. When it's luminosity flickers, he releases.

The condensed air slams into the shield, shattering it. Loraunt narrowly escapes the lethal explosion that follows by leaping skyward.

The emek shards are in overdrive, diffusing excess energy into the city.

Loraunt diverts a ton of dark energy into his right foot, spirales midair, and slams his foot into the arena sending a regressing series of shockwaves.

Logan dodges by catapulting himself into the air. He infuses the spear with azure vaedic energy, the fragment flickers rapidly, and with a final whorl of air down the shaft, he launches the spear with a kick.

The typhoon is immense. Loraunt's garbs billow violently as he struggles to maintain his ground. When at last he can move freely, Logan lands on top of his spear, eyes fierce.

The adjudicator calls the match to an end on grounds the barrier might not hold if they continue.

---

"Is everything alright?" Halil asks Olivia over lunch.

They were seated beneath the shade of a date palm in the same bustling park where they'd first shared a meal.

The weather today had been particularly sultry for the season so the lecture halls were closed for self study, for which Olivia had been grateful.

"I had a bit of an argument with my roommate last night." She chomps down on a stuffed flatbread, the vegetation inside must've come right from the garden. "It's also what he said, and a whole lot of other nonsense," she glances apologetically at Halil. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to toss my rubbish on you."

Halil laughs jovially, the kind of laugh that hints at some local proverb. "I don't mind listening, it's good to discuss things, it means you're willing to work it out." He pauses for a second before continuing. "Which is what you should do with your roommate, I'm sure they'll agree there's no point carrying it out when it makes everyone feel unpleasant."

---

The library smells of books. That nullifying aroma of information is so intoxicating. There is a vast collection of tomes that occupy all the shelves, which makes Olivia wonder where they put the new ones. She and Halil are high up in a cozy alcove with a small porthole window opened wide.

Halil, with a stack of tomes, is responsibly at work with his studies. Flipping through papers and scribbling down information into a thick journal with multiple bookmarks.

Feeling a bit out of place watching the youth, Olivia directs her attention through the porthole. The date palms are swaying idly in the wind. A cool breeze wafts in invitingly and reminding her of Logan. she ponders Halil's words from earlier. He really was an insightful youth with an alacrity for academia.

Having enough, she excuses herself to the lavatory, though Halil seemed too preoccupied with his notes to notice. Along the way she unexpectedly bumps into professor Evrim.

"Eldaeon! My apologies, I'd been too preoccupied with my thoughts." Olivia bows.

The professor smiles beautifully. "It happens dear, may I ask what's been on your mind? Perhaps I can elucidate."

Olivia flushes. "Well, it's not particularly on the topic of academics."

"Nonsense!" She beams, "I'm always ears for lovely young ladies such as yourself. Come to my office for tea and we'll discuss it."

Olivia excitedly trails after the professor through a series of gardens and arcades, and into the professors' quarters. A quaint older building refurbished for the leisurely use of the professors. Blooming vegetation surrounds the perimeter.

They enter the threshold. The interiors of the halls, offices, and lounge, are all vaulted with a large ayshek lantern. The heavy wooden floors are carpeted with oriental designs, the furniture, while aged, appeared to be kept well.

Professor Evrim's office is furnished with floor vases containing large stalked grass and reeds. A variety of framed artifacts dangle along the wall. Opposite the end of the extraordinary collection of foreign and domestic books, is a small dresser with a large copper vessel and a kettle settled onto a small stone oven. Two elegant damasks with a coffee table are arranged before a sturdy desk with a matching damask. The three arched casement windows are opened wide to let in the cool breezes, they lead onto small balconies decorous in shrubbery and flowers.

"Your office is lovely," Olivia examines the collection of literature.

"It did take me considerable time to furnish it this way." The professor plops an unignited firestone into the small oven. She leans her head over the oven and blows, the stone catches alight in translucent flame. "Thank you dear. Feel free to explore, or have a seat." She fills the kettle from the copper vessel and lets it sit atop the oven.

"Mahtammel Aljhebrai?" Olivia runs her finger down the spine. "I have a copy myself."

"He was quite the scholar in his time, I owe quite a bit of my research to his discoveries." The professor comes up beside her, smelling beautifully like a vase of floral arrangements. "I've seen his study myself in Ankhe-Dür, kept just as he preferred. Though a university has taken much of his yard."

Olivia runs her hand across twenty six hefty volumes all authored by the man. She recognizes the copy in her measly collection, the twentieth volume. "This is the copy."

"Natural Forces & The Daetik Anomalies," the professor reads aloud. "I've not familiarized myself as much as a few of his other works. From what I do recall, he seemed to have gone off and documented as many Daetik shards as he could, and compared it with his erudite understanding of natural forces. It was after this publication the term Daetik had been re coined 'Deifacted.' "

The professor appears to be in some trance of sorts. She blinks, returning to her senses and attends to the kettle. "What are you in the mood for, my dear? Siya, yaseh, or perhaps yesil?"

Olivia tears herself away from the bookcase. "Yaseh is fine, thank you."

"No worries, dear." She produces from the dresser a Drahstrahelion ceramic teapot painted with black trees on a white background, a tin, and a strainer. "I think I'll be having Yaseh myself." She opens the tin, and scoops the contents with the strainer. Removing the lid she fastens the strainer inside and pours a gentle stream of steaming water from the kettle.

Olivia observes the professor elegantly preparing tea. Though as soon as the professor makes to grab the burning stone Olivia rushes to her side. "Oh, wait professor!"

Surprised by the outburst, the professor lilt a laugh. "My dear, it's alright." She picks up the translucent flaming stone and blows it out.

"I'm sorry, I... I didn't know."

"Young lady, you don't need to apologize. Have a seat and tell me what's been occupying your mind." The professor arranges the kettle and cups over woven palm stalks.

Olivia blushes, she'd forgotten the reason she was here. "I had an argument with my roommate last night over something important to me."

The professor soothes her by the hand. "Did your roommate compromise?"

"I suppose... yes." Logan did agree to try and get a word in with Garrett. "Though not until I agreed not to interfere."

"I see no argument. You came to an agreement did you not?" The professor pauses to serve the yaseh. "Let it cool a little. If an agreement is made, then the argument is settled. Could it not be the potential result of that agreement that befuddles your mind?"

A breeze sweeps in, reminding her of Logan. Everything clarifies, she and Logan were fine, it was the topic of the argument, Garrett, that distracts her. She smiles sweetly. "Thank you, professor."

"My pleasure, now." She picks up her cup. "Let's have some tea."

After a lengthy conversation with the professor, Halil appears in the doorway heaving his pack with Olivia's satchel and bookwork. "I thought I'd bring these up for Olivia, the day is about over for us, professor."

The professor glances at the clock rising from her seat. "Oh my! Look at the time. Thank you Halil." She kisses his cheeks.

Olivia relieves Halil of her burden and thanks the professor for tea.

The professor, putting away the set, calls back, "anytime dear, enjoy your time off."

Halil escorts her to the station using a shortcut through the back alleys of the university. "You were almost late there."

"I can't thank you enough Halil." Olivia skips over a protruding stone.

"It's no problem. I know what it's like, I nearly missed the time myself." Halil grabs her hand as they enter the street. His street smarts were something to envy, maneuvering through a chaotic crowd. Not long after, they were on the platform with Halil racing to catch his leviahtran.

Olivia only just made it in time herself. The doors seal shut and the leviahtran lifts. She scans the area and finds a seat near the front with a seaside view. Far across the strait, she can make out the palace with its turrets and domed architecture, reflecting the sun like a gem almost swallowed whole by the sands.

At the market she picks up a variety of ingredients that would take her some time to prepare. With the shopkeeper's input, she has everything she needs. Along the stroll back to the apartment, she keeps a lookout for that finely dressed stranger, hoping she hadn't imagined it, though all this passes with no event.

She unlocks the door, peaks inside and sees Logan fast asleep on the windowsill. Not wanting to disturb him, she



focuses all her attention on shutting the door as silently as she can manage. It clicks. She places the paper bag on the counter, unloops her satchel when she notices him on the sofa snoozing away in a finely woven fabric.

"Loraunt!" She drops her books and satchel, startling him awake.

"I fell asleep, sorry bookvyrn." Loraunt stands up to greet her.

Olivia is across the room in a second squeezing the air out of him. "Eldaeon! I can't believe it," she buries her face in his chest. "I can't believe it." She peels away, thumping his chest to make sure she isn't hallucinating.

"Is me, don't worry," he holds her hands reassuringly.

"Oh my god I can't," she turns on Logan. "When?"

Logan raises his hands, "I just met him this morning."

"When are you leaving?" Olivia grabs the items from the floor and tosses them onto the desk. "You have to stay for dinner at least."

"A few days, maybe weeks. Depends on benefactor." Loraunt smiles. "I will stay for dinner."

With Loraunt and Logan's help, Olivia concocts a feast unlike any other. The evening is reminiscent of those times they were together, struggling to get by. They set the platters on the floor and bring out the pomegranate wine.

Dalkarian lokum filled with a variety of nuts and dried berries. A large spiced tuna laid out on a muz leaf, melted ghee alongside an assortment of herb beytil, stuffed flat bread, and an assortment of pan fried vegetables with steamed rice. Olivia decorates them with glowing ayshek fragments.

Logan pats his grumbling stomach. "Are we going through the list again? Because, well... I haven't eaten since this morning."

"No, but you have to admit this looks rather delicious. Okay, what's the saying?" Olivia closes her eyes trying to recall the words. "We humble ourselves before this meal, divinity in all beings, simple and complex, for the sacrifices before us we appreciate?"

"That's the one, let's eat." Logan plucks a warm beytil from the basket, dips it in melted ghee, and savors it.

Olivia and Loraunt laugh, and proceed on que. They banter at old times, laughing at their own blunders and mishaps. With her friends and the presence of excellent food, Olivia couldn't ask for anything more.

The meal ends when no one can stuff themselves anymore and they sip on pomegranate wine to soothe their stomachs.

"I've been meaning to ask," Olivia says to Loraunt. "Did you find out anything?"

"After I left, I sailed that way." Loraunt motions toward the east. "To Zastasia Tyahng Chahn, where I meet family."

Olivia's heart stops. "Your family?"

Loraunt nods. "Old big family, they studied me with medicine, ancient and new. They say I can't get memories back if I wanted." He pats Olivia's hand. "I'm sorry. It was done by powerful instrument."

So then it was settled. Olivia always expected herself to feel sad, angry, frustrated, or anything. Yet she took this news without emotion. Now she didn't have to decide, she couldn't get her memories back anyway. She looks up to Loraunt, "thank you. Now I know I don't have to worry, there's nothing that can be done."

Logan squeezes her shoulders comfortingly. "I have some news to share."

Olivia's eyes widen. "Eldaeon, I almost forgot. Garrett!"

Loraunt sits motionless with his cup to his lips

"Oh right, you don't know do you?" Olivia sets her cup down. "Well, Logan ran into him the other night and now he's in prison. When he told me, I remembered that name too. He's like us."

Loraunt keeps his face expressionless. "Vhat happen?"

Logan recounts the details with the thieves, Garret's near death, and the imprisonment, including the conversation with him. "So they're having a difficult time prosecuting him because he can't outright admit or deny his guilt."

"I never considered," Olivia murmurs. "So it was the fault of this organization? Then you can just tell them that."

Logan sighs. "Olivia, it's not that simple. He willingly got involved."

"Yes but for survival," she protests. "Surely the empire isn't that cruel, they could employ him or have him do community service. Something."

Loraunt remains silent throughout this exchange. When at last they ask for his input, he sets his empty cup down. "I don't know," he responds in amateur shirhashhat. "If you want to save him, then you need plan. Good plan."

"You see?" Logan begins. "There's only so much I can do right now, especially now that they've ranked me as soldier."

This sets Olivia aback. "A what?!"

"Sorry, it slipped my mind, but yeah... I'm a soldier now."

"When did this happen? Why am I hearing of it now?" She demands.

"When you asked me to go see him!" Frustrated at his own outburst he follows this in a lowered voice, "it was a test, the captain said I was relieved of that shift, but I showed up. That was the test, he told everyone the same thing. All of those who showed up were immediately recruited."

"Oh Logan, I'm so sorry." She leans her head against his shoulder. "I shouldn't have asked you to go see him."

It was a rather peculiar night for Loraunt. These old friends. Living together for years, not realizing how strong their relationship had grown. To give them their intimacy, he fills their cups with water and hands it to them. "Go," he commands. "For stroll. Is nice out vith Seli and Tsu. I clean here."

Olivia scrambles onto her feet. "Oh no, Loraunt. I can't ask you to do that."

"Is fine, go."

Logan grabs his leather breastplate and Olivia's hand encouragingly. When was the last time they went out together?

## The Seaside City of Naayir-Nahtahma | Svernia: I

Daybreak and Noaki still showed no signs of improvement. Moritz feels a helpless scramble of emotions sitting at Noaki's bedside, waiting for him to wake up. The only solace was at least he didn't appear to be in any pain. His brown complexion had paled, and his hair lost its color, dangling across his forehead in clumps.

Moritz grabs Noaki's coat and drapes it over him. In spite of the warming weather, Noaki's body temperature had dropped. Considering his own nature, it felt odd to be worrying about the cold. He drapes the ayshek with an amber cloth.

Above deck Gavin, Quentin, and Veynir were gambling over a game of dice with Moir at the helm.

Moir had advised Quentin to take it easy unless the wind started being difficult. Moritz couldn't blame him, after last night's storm he was about to pass out himself. He stayed awake of course, to be prepared for another.

He sits down, leaning against the pole mast. The sun on top of a nice breeze would be a welcome to any sailor after that ordeal. Moritz shuts his eyes just for a moment.

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"Land Ho!"

Moritz jumps onto his feet dazed and confused. He races up the quarterdeck next to Gavin and sees it for himself. "It's a sight isn't it? That be the Seaside City of Naayir-Nahtahma."

Mountains are carved into terraces, like giant steps dotted with domed buildings glistening in the sunlight.

The mountain terraces are bridged by an impossible structure spanning at least twelve kilometres across with a large arch for ships to pass. The bridge leads to an extraordinarily compact city rising up and into three mountainsides. Thousands of vessels from fishing boats to cargo ships, dot the equally innumerable number of piers and ports. Foliage of groves and trees protrude from the city at various points.

Moritz jumps from the quarterdeck intending to grab Noaki when he remembers. He returns to Gavin's side who was a little too calm for Moritz's comfort. "Do you really think they'll get help here?"

Gavin's gaze didn't falter from the shoreline. "If there be any around these lands who can help, they'd be here."

"What if we don't make it in time? It looks awfully large." As they near, the true scale of this metropolis silences him.

"I already sent word, he'll be waiting for us."

Moritz waits in the same spot long after Gavin leaves.

When they pass the city's cobblestone causeway congested with traffic, a couple passersby, mostly children, are waving at them. Moritz and Quentin oblige them as Moir and the Captain dock the ship.

This was it. They were finally here. Moritz leaps from the quarterdeck alongside Quentin. The two were eager to jump onto the pier when they're pulled back by Veynir.

"Easy there, you guys can explore later, first there's work to do." He releases them. "Now come on, I'll take care of the heavy stuff and you two can team lift."

Moritz and Quentin groan but assist with the cargo. Veynir who was accustomed to this kind of work powerlifts two barrels over each shoulder. Though Quentin claims this was a show intended for the ladies. He and Moritz share a grin and continue their labor. By the time it had all been unloaded, Moritz and Quentin are slumped against a bollard, exhausted as they can be.

Moritz retreats back on deck when he encounters a youthful man sporting a good deal of dark stubble beneath his chin. He adorns his athletic frame in a high collared twill tunic, waisted down with a sash embroidered in intricately designed white and gold thread. A white cap bears down on locks of jet black hair.

"Gavin? There's a stranger aboard!" Moritz attempts a dash for the exit when he collides into Gavin's sturdy frame. The man hadn't budged an inch from the impact.

"Moritz. This'll be his grace, Chancellor Ali Abdhalhim," Gavin whirls Moritz toward Ali. "Now go pay your respects, he is the one helping our friends."

Moritz approaches the chancellor, unsure exactly how to pay respects. He stops. Now he has to do something. "Thank you, your grace," Moritz bows deeply, "for helping my friends."

A large hand raises him up from the chin, bringing Moritz to meet kind jade eyes. He speaks in a serene voice. "My friend, there is no need to bow here."

Tears come to Moritz. The resistances he placed in his mind, the struggles, and the hopelessness gives way. One look and this man knew it all.

"Come now, let us see what we can do for your friends." The Chancellor leads Moritz into Noaki's quarters, his presence soothing to the atmosphere.

Moritz observes when the Chancellor removes Noaki's coat and unlaces his shirt. With his mid and forefinger, he traces a straight line up his abdomen to his chest, an interaction that briefly illuminates his flesh in a series of white and violet swirls. Noaki's color gradually returns, his abdomen heaving normally.

"This okari is strong, without my intervention, he would have been fine. He just needs rest." The Chancellor covers Noaki with his coat.

Relieved, Moritz follows the man into Orion's quarters, furnished with all manner of strange instruments.

The Chancellor removes Orion's clothing, revealing a lean frame. Moritz is surprised to see patterns extending over his torso.

The chancellor proceeds with the same gestural procedure. Orion's flesh responds with a series of pink and light blue, with a mix of white. "The dalkari are peculiar people."

With the same fingers Ali illustrates a glyph of three lines facing down, a horizontal line above, a circle above that, a longer horizontal line above that and three lines fanning upward. The glyph occupies the entirety of Orion's torso. Ali places his palm directly onto the circle and the glyph ignites a luminous white.

Moritz imagines hearing a series of harmonic sounds, followed by the distant breaking of ice.

From the base of his torso, to his face, Orion's patterns glow molten white, this is followed by gentle pulses of energy.



Moritz holds his breath, when the glyph finally vanishes, Orion's patterns resume their pearl color, his expression no longer looking pained, and his breathing stabilized.

"This dalkarian will also be well, though he will slumber." The Chancellor places an encouraging hand on Moritz's back. "Come now, let us let them rest."

A nonchalant Gavin awaits on deck for them to emerge. "How is it?"

"They both will make full recoveries. Though the dalkarian will not yet see light for some time. A few days in length." The chancellor brings Moritz forward. "This one is as healthy as they come."

"Aye, and good company at times." Gavin walks up to Moritz and places a hand on his shoulder. "You're feeling alright then lad?"

For the first time, Moritz looks into the silver eyes of the brawny man in a white furred overcoat, looking tired but firm. He nods.

"That's a good lad." Gavin thanks the Chancellor with a casual pat on the shoulder. "I can't thank you enough, your grace."

"The pleasure is all mine, old friend." The chancellor gestures skyward. "I think there's someone you're long overdue to meet."

A fierce screech fills the air, followed by talons and white feathers.

Moritz is taken aback. A whitehawk.

"This is my companion," Gavin grins, raising his arm out for the bird to land on. "There's a proper lass," Gavin chuckles, nudging the bird under the beak. She screeches and pecks at his head and rubs affectionately against him.

"If you all will be here for some time. You are all welcome to my home." The chancellor stands before the gangplank.

"Aye, that we will. I appreciate it, your grace."

The chancellor bows and proceeds onto the pier and is immediately surrounded by guards whose faces are concealed beneath white masks. They wield dual curved swords and maces.

"Is all that security necessary?" Moritz studies the man who gathers a flock of followers applauding and tossing petals. "Nevermind, I have my answer."

Moritz leaps onto the pier where the captain is engaging some merchants, Veynir and Quentin are hauling cargo onto carts, and Reyna... where had she gone off to?

Moritz walks up to Quentin. "Need some help?"

"If you wouldn't mind," Quentin hands him a deceptively heavy crate. "Right then, that goes over there. Next to the people in blue. Yeah, that's the one."

"You know where Reyna has gone off?" Moritz heaves a small barrel of what he took to be rum.

"She's probably wandered off to stock up on medicine." Veynir answers. "That's gonna go over there, next to those other barrels."

When Moritz returns he hoists two sacks of grain over his shoulders. "Why'd she go and do that?"

"She feels inadequate right now with her apprenticeship." Veynir lifts three crates. "That'll go with the merchants weighing things down on the scale."

"It's not like there was anything she could've done." Moritz team lifts a heavy crate with Quentin.

"She left the Vitae with proper discipline to continue the practice on her own, but she's been neglecting it." Veynir walks beside them with a similar crate. They lower the crates down gently.

Moritz and the others spend a good deal of the afternoon hauling and loading the merchants' products with still no sign of Reyna. Early evening came along and they were officially finished with the cargo.

Veynir slaps Moritz on the back. "That's a good day's work, you and your friend would make a fine addition to our crew."

"Er... thanks," Moritz hobbles to Quentin. "That kind of hurt."

Quentin's laugh is cut short when he receives a nice smack on the back.

"You on the other hand, younger brother, I don't need to worry about, seeing as your Moir's problem now." Veynir tousles their hair. "Come on, let's grab a drink."

They walk on either side of Veynir.

"If I'm Moir's problem, why do I gotta help you?"

"Because my problems are your problems, it doesn't work the other way around though."

Moritz and Veynir break into laughter with a disgruntled Quentin beside them.

The streets are a cacophony of noise and lights. Maze-like with haphazard lanterns strewn about among other things. Music, vendors, delicious smelling buildings. Boutiques, venues, shops, confectionaries, bakeries, curio shops, Moritz can't name them all.

The parks and plazas are populous with throngs of people, old, young, middle aged, beggars, merchants, vendors, protestors, salesmen, performers. This city

encompasses all manner of activity that can occupy one forever.

Veynir guides them along knowledgeably through the streets and to the tavern named 'Altavera.' They enter.

The smoke filled tavern swarms with people of various castes, creed, and nationalities. The interior rises three levels of terrace balconies.

"Well?" Veynir leads them with hands on both shoulders. "What do you say? I've three other places in mind if this isn't up to speed."

"This place," Moritz strolls off, "it's magnificent."

"Sorry Quentin, the newcomer made his choice first."

Quentin points to the second balcony, "let's find a spot there. It looks like a nice view."

They follow the back staircase and onto the second terrace balcony. The place is packed but they manage to find a spot in the back corner.

Menus were brought to them which Moritz struggles to decipher. "Well that's a shame, are they all tasty?"

"Can't decide?" Quentin puts down the menu. "Some of the stuff on here isn't bad. I wouldn't go with foreign ones unless you're feeling adventurous."

"After our whole ordeal and you find eating new food adventurous?" Veynir laughs. "Alright. The third one is sort of like lamb chop, the sixth one, you'll recognize as steamed vegetable and rice."

Veynir continues listing the ingredients when Moritz vaguely recognizes a party of three next to the railing, though he can't put a name to them. One sports a sword, the other a monk's garb of some sort, and the third looks like... a pirate?

"So what d'you say?"

Moritz snaps back to attention. "Er... I think the steamed vegetable and rice, with a bit of ale if they got it."

"Alright then, let's treat ourselves to a bit of a men's night out ye?" Veynir takes their orders from a flushed waitress.

"I notice you staring at the one with a sword, what's up?" Asks Quentin.

Moritz tries to sneak a glance when the trio exits the tavern. "I don't know, but I think I recognize him."

Quentin follows them out with his gaze. "He's probably a duelist, that's where you might have recognized him."

"It is pretty popular around these parts," Veynir confirms.

Moritz doesn't mention his knowledge of dueling extended only to his time sparring with Noaki. Although he did just traverse the most chaotic streets he'd been in so far, perhaps he glimpsed the guy on flyers at some point.

The waitress returns a few minutes later with their drinks and that was the last of the trio in his mind.

---

Moritz opens his eyes to a familiar face. Cobalt violet eyes, giant furred overcoat, dark brown hair. He jumps from bed squeezing the breath out of Noaki.

"Mo-ritz... can't breathe."

Moritz releases him. "I thought you'd passed onto the other side."

"I might have with that hug," Noaki settles in the chair in the corner of his cabin. "I heard about Orion, he's looking a lot better."

"You should've seen him, the chancellor. How he worked. It was incredible!" Moritz recounts the details of what had happened since Noaki passed out. "Wait a minute."

Noaki leans in with a serious expression. "What?"

"You got out of work you lazy git!" Moritz launches his pillow at him.

"Hey!" Noaki thrusts the pillow back. "I'm the aristocrat here."

"Aristo-, you're a thief!" Moritz assaults him with a pillow. When Moritz runs out of steam, the two are on the floor flat on their backs engaged in laughter.

"I'm glad you're alright though. You did give me a scare." Moritz tosses the pillow back on his cot.

Noaki peels himself off the floor and assists Moritz up. "Not as scared as I felt when you nearly drowned. I'm glad you're alright too." Noaki locks forearms and the two embrace. "Now come on, I'm starving. Feel like I haven't eaten in days."

With crystaire weighing heavy in their pockets, they browse the streets for a decent eatery. They settle on a small alleyway eatery specializing in seafood.

"What do you suppose we'll do today?" Noaki prods at the bug-like dish.

A whirlwind of options come to mind when, "I don't think we can do much. We're expected at the chancellor's today."

Noaki plops the creature into his mouth and chews with progressive interest. "The chancellor, I forgot about him. I really ought to thank him."

Moritz picks at the steaming fish laid out on a leaf. "This is good, is the leaf edible?"

The chef stares blankly then bursts into tears. "No, is not edible, but here try with this, you to." He puts out two containers of miniature saucers containing a green sauce.

Moritz spreads it over his fish, the herbs change everything. "Thank you."

On their return to the ship Moritz stops abruptly. "There's one more thing I forgot to mention!"

"What's that?"

"Whitehawk isn't just Gavin's last name."

## O'taomon | The Empire of Eraat: IV

Logan and Olivia wander into an ancient courtyard with a dalkarian monolith marker glowing in the same luminosity of the moons. The place is overgrown with shrubbery, flowers, blooming fruit trees, and ornate twisting ones. The cracks between the layered brickwork protrude with strands of grass.

Olivia analyzes the grass. "The water has to be coming from somewhere."

"I thought these plants were accustomed to the climate." Logan plucks the blade of grass with careful dexterity, leaving the root intact. "Here," he hands it to Olivia.

"You didn't have to do that," she brings the specimen to her eyes. "But thank you, this does help a bit."

"Maybe moisture is soaked inside the stone?" Logan suggests, "it is a pretty thick wall."

"That does make sense," Olivia lays the specimen on the ground. "I don't suppose they're having a little outside assistance."

They roam toward the monolith. "What do you mean?"

"During my first lecture with Professor Evrim, she concluded potential life imbibing properties of particular shards that sustain entire ecosystems in an otherwise uninhabitable environment." Olivia stops to admire the monolith.

Logan slaps the monolith. "How old do you reckon this one is?"



"Perhaps sometime from the primordial ages, well over ten thousand years." The glyphs illuminate their surroundings. "Of course this could have been placed here far earlier as decor of some sort."

Logan scans the courtyard. "It would make sense, there are no Ayshek's here." He pats the monolith one more time, "It's pretty bright on its own."

An idea comes to Olivia's mind. "If you're not far off in some war getting your butt kicked, we should attend this site every lunar event and document our findings. I think the professor would love it." Olivia bubbles with excitement, "in fact I could invite her." Olivia chuckles. "I'm getting carried away."

Logan leans against the monolith looking directly at Olivia. "Getting my butt kicked? Have you seen me kick butt?"

Olivia holds back a giggle. "No but I've seen you sleep, I've never known anyone to sleep as much as you do."

"It keeps me young, keeps me healthy. In fact," he yawns, "I might just take a nap right now." He closes his eyes and feigns a snore.

"Oh come off it. You don't even snore." When he doesn't budge she strolls off. A few moments later he catches up to her, bringing with him a soft breeze.

"I can't just leave a lovely young lady walking home by herself now, can I?" Logan matches her pace.

"This isn't some lesser known city in Ayildur." They exit into a luminous street with paper lanterns, mingling themselves among jovial people. "What's it like?"

Unaccustomed to the crowd, Logan fidgets. "What's what?"

"The thing that you do, with the wind," Olivia has no particular abilities of her own. The insignia just above the center of her brows was a series of three crescent shapes balanced atop one another, cradling a small circle. She studied it herself many times, though never gained insight into its nature.

"Well for one thing, it's not a thing, it's an activity. To answer your question," Logan shrugs, "I don't actually know. It's sort of just yourself, like how you move your hand. You don't think about moving your hand, you just do it." To demonstrate Logan flounders his arms about like a maniac.

"Alright, alright, stop," Olivia's stomach hurts from laughing, "you're attracting attention."

When they both compose themselves Olivia regards his words to her own capabilities. Maybe it was something subtle, she'd heard of them but never looked into it. Setting aside the topic for the professor, they finish the stroll back in pleasant conversation.

Loraunt had tidied up the place well, arranging the furniture, dusting out the cupboards and drawers. Beating out the carpet, and organizing the clutter. The alvarrian is snoozing away on the ottoman, his back leaning against the wall.

"Should we wake him?" Olivia whispers.

Logan shakes his head. "Nah, we'll thank him in the morning." Logan jabs a finger at Olivia, "you on the other hand need to get to bed young lady."

"Indeed I do," Olivia agrees. "You'll wake me before he leaves? I'd like to say goodbye."

"Definitely, now go to sleep." Logan unfastens his spear from the wall and climbs up the windowsill. "I'm going to

see what news is in town." He jumps down, twirling the wind to cushion his landing.

Logan zooms off to the palace at remarkable speed, launching from one district to the next until at last landing on the opposite shore. From roof to tree, tree to roof, roof to wall ledge and a final catapult, he lands on the roof of the palace. The guards are nowhere to be seen inside, making his infiltration easier.

When he arrives outside Garrett's cell, the redhead has forgone his heavy outfit and lays in a vested red waistcoat over a silk button down shirt, dark cotton trousers and triple laced boots.

Logan taps the bar once.

Garrett jumps onto his feet, wide stance, fists at the ready. When he gets a good sight of his visitor, he relaxes. "Oh, it's you," he walks up to the bar. "Any good news?"

"Keep your voice down," Logan warns. "No news at all I'm afraid. Well there is one," Logan lowers his voice even further. "I met Loraunt today."

Garrett's face brightens. "That's awesome, you can tell him where I am and they'll get me out of here."

Logan frowns. "What? *They* who?"

Confusion spreads across his face. "Loraunt didn't tell you about James?" He steps back, "shit, I didn't know. Damn, James is never gonna let me down for this one."

The name registers in Logan's mind, "hang on." Then it clicks, "you're telling me Loraunt is part of the organization? That's why he's here? His benefactor is with the organization?" A spark of rage builds in his chest, he glares at the prisoner. "Don't worry, he already knows, I told him everything that's happened here."

Garrett grips the bars. "Look man, it's not like how you think it-"

"Logan?" Halil stands halfway down the corridor, spear in hand, a platter of food in the other. "What are you doing down here?"

"Inspecting the prisoner," Logan answers in shirhashhat.

Halil shakes his head with a look of betrayal. "I heard you speaking his tongue. You know what he says."

Halil drops the tray and makes to alarm the guard when Logan dashes off and wrangles his arms back.

"Traitor!" He spits.

"Shhh-shh-shh!" Logan soothes frantically. "It's nothing like that arkadash, please." He loosens his grip, "trust me."

Halil stops struggling. "Just this once," his voice drops, "no more."

Logan releases him.

Halil gathers the dry foodstuff onto the tray and attempts to wipe off the splatters with his sleeve.

Logan crouches down, "no Halil, let me-"

"Go!" The voice rattles the bars and trembles the ground.

Logan falters. A sinking feeling in his chest dampens the flaming rage to embers. He speeds off at breakneck pace, launching himself high into the sky and spiraling toward the shore.

For hours he sits beside the seashore. The bubbling sounds of the waves drowning his loss in the sea of infinite depths. A sand crab scuttles next to his foot, inspecting the new addition to the beach. Logan smiles and the

crab darts back to its burrow. A moment later it pops its head out, peaking. Logan blinks deliberately and it burrows back in, scraping out dirt. Logan laughs and lifts himself off the ground, patting away the dirt.

He snatches his spear and speeds off, launching himself back into the city. He'd wasted too much time, the first light of dawn trickles into the sky. He jumps and leaps over any surface, skipping his way back to the apartment to confront the alvarrian.

---

Olivia stirs from her sleep, to the gentle proddings of Loraunt's finger.

"Morning, bookvyrn."

Olivia sits up. "Oh, are you leaving?"

"Yes, I sleep too long," he smiles sweetly.

Olivia searches the room. "Where's Logan? I'm sure he'd want to say goodbye."

Loraunt holds her hand to his chest. "Is alright, he knows."

Olivia nods and embraces the alvarrian. She nestles herself into his embrace. How long would it be before they see each other again? "Please take care." She feels a pat on her head.

"I vill, and you take care."                      They lock eyes for a moment. He pulls away, hops onto the windowsill and waves.                      "Fahrahm, Olivia."

"Fahrahm, Loraunt," Olivia waves back and the krishkalvarri leaps into the streets.

Olivia retreats to the sofa and dreams of her friends. Saudade beating in her chest.

---

Logan leaps through the window, landing with an airy step, billowing the curtains in the room. Olivia turns in her sleep with a glowing smile.

Loraunt is nowhere to be found. Without disturbing her slumber, he drops back into the streets, kicking the wall behind him and launches himself toward the sunrise. He knew exactly where to find him.

He takes the course of the wind, letting it guide him. In a matter of minutes he arrives, landing in the midst of the arena platform.

"Spectacular!"

Logan lifts his head and glares straight into James' languid eyes.

James, attired in a sleek obsidian overcoat over a velvet silk shirt, with thick trousers tucked into dark laced boots, bears a disinterested expression toward his opponent

He soars onto the opposite end of the arena. "You couldn't have landed on this side?"

Logan releases a horizontal sickle of wind.

James jumps, landing with a little tap of a dance, arms open wide. "You didn't seriously think that would have done anything did you?"

Logan raises himself up with his spear.

"Not much of a talker? I understand." James starts pacing leisurely back and forth. "Myself? I can't shut my mouth sometimes. Sort of to er... quelch the nerves you see."

Logan grips his spear and releases a barrage of gales.

James dodges these attacks as if he were strolling through a chaotic street. "O! Almost had me there, close one." He stops. "I'd seen your performance with Loraunt earlier, is that really all you can do?"

"Where is he?" Logan points the spear with pinpoint accuracy.

"He does have a mouth," James feigns a convincing surprise. "I don't quite remember," he strolls further back. "You'll have to jog my memory a bit I'm afraid. I haven't had my morning exercise and that really helps get the blood flowing."

It happens in the blink of an eye. One moment James is standing there, the next his foot is making contact with Logan's chest, plunging him out of the arena and into the stands.

Logan barely manages to condense his internal energy to cushion his landing. The impact rattles him.

"You're not the only one with speed." James paces back and forth, "granted, I can't keep it up for an extended length of time."

Logan intends to speed off but is cut down from behind with a kick and thrust onto the platform. The pain... he'd never felt anything like it.

"Ah-hah, thought you'd get me with that one did you?" James removes his foot and strolls back to the end of the arena.

Logan leaps into the air, but James is right next to him, then above. A foot meets his back and he's sent back into the stands.

Logan's body surges with energy. He launches himself right back.

James maneuvers sideways and slams his foot into his back, sending him straight down.

Logan rolls into a crouched position.

James takes an easy landing. "Now, now, let's have none of those silly explosions. We don't want to attract attention." He smirks, "trust me, I learned the hard way."

If Logan ever doubted his speed more than now, he couldn't recall it. One after another, no matter how much energy he invested, James had the upper hand. At last, his own body gives up. He lays battered and limp on the floor.

"As the yokels say in the Silver Alps, 'now there's a good lad,' stay down, don't make trouble." James crouches near his ear, "Your duel with Loraunt yesterday. He held back quite a good deal."

Before Logan's vision fades, he sees the last dwindling silhouette of James walk off.

---

James steps onto the plaza outside the arena. The spicy dawn gleams just over the horizon, ever so opulent with her light. He walks casually forward, toward the ledge of the plaza with a daring drop below. The wind ruffles his hair and clothes.



Nagahshya appears in her Nagari form, undulating beautifully with the wind. James grabs hold of the large ring rotating around the base of her head, and climbs onto her back.

She sails skyward. Over the strait, toward the Grand Vizier's palace. Loraunt and Garrett are looking overwhelmed by numerous guards. "They look in need of some assistance. Why not scare them a little will you?"

Nagahshya dives for the soldiers who duck at her looming approach. When they finally have the courage to look up a few moments later, they find their prisoners have already vanished.

With Loraunt and Garrett dangling by her ring, they fly southward. Toward the Holy Lands.

## The Seaside City of Naayir-Nahtahma | Svernia: II

Moritz and Noaki tread a moss-covered path through the mountain, inside a cavernous hall with openings toward the sky. The path wound alongside a creek where ornate trees twist and turn to catch the incoming light and the shadows flicker with luminous insects.

"You sure we're headed in the right direction?" Noaki whispers to Moritz.

"This is the place," Moritz brushes a spider off his shoulder. "Why are you whispering?"

"Because," Noaki raises his voice, "it echos." His voice carries throughout the cavern.

"Only if you do that," they cross an arching bridge. "Honestly I thought this place would be more like..."

"A palace?"

"Yeah, but a cave. I just can't imagine it." Moritz steps over a resting snake.

The path leads to an opening and they are met with an incredible sight. They're gawking from high up the mountainside, staring into an enormous forested valley entirely isolated by mountains. Far off, above the foliage, rises steep cliffs elevating enormous plateaus populated with a collection of white buildings roofed in shimmering gold.

"Look over there," Noaki points toward plumes of smoke rising from the treetops. "There's people living here."

The path they tread did not lead into the isolated valley, but down a band along the mountainside, and into another cavern.

"I'm not so sure we're headed the right way anymore." Moritz admits.

"Should we turn back?" Noaki suggests.

"We've been walking for hours—"

"Halt! Who goes there?"

They stop in their tracks. A guard emerges from a booth in the shape of a monolith they assumed to be a marker of sorts.

"Moritz, and Noaki?" Moritz answers uncertainly.

"Guests of his grace, my apologies. On you go."

They walk around and meet behind the odd guard. The path abruptly ends at two arching metal doors with no lever or handle.

"Do we wait?" Moritz inspects the surrounding wall for a switch.

"Let me try something," Noaki pushes on the door and they swing open. He catches his step before falling face forward.

Before them radiates a palace carved from the mountain, gleaming in the light of the sun. Domed roofs, spires and turrets are gilded in gold. Before the threshold of the palace extends plazas of green and blue, fanning out like petals to the cavern floor.

Moritz groans, "look how far away it is! Then there's all these steps we have to get through, then we have to walk, and then we have to climb more steps."

Noaki nods in agreement. "Do you wanna just head back?"

"If you don't mind." They shut the doors and resume their journey back.

However, along the way they meet a wide eyed Quentin, Veynir carrying his and Reyna's packs, Reyna crossing her arms at the sight of the two, Moir shaking his head in disappointment, Captain Egor in tears, Rita pretending to be interested in a plant, and in the lead of the party arms crossed, looming over them, Gavin.

Noaki kicks Moritz.

"Well, we er... didn't want to burden the chancellor so we thought we'd head back. Right Noaki?" Moritz returns the kick.

"Huh? Oh yeah, I mean we can just send some gifts. I'm pretty sure he's busy and all." Noaki glances at the guard who curiously watches this exchange.

Gavin steps forward."Of course, I understand."

"Y-you do?" Moritz stutters.

"I do," Gavin tousles their hair. "But seeing as we're almost already there lads," he turns them around, "you might as well thank him yourself anyway, wouldn't you agree?"

"Well, I mean sure, but-" Noaki stammers.

"Great. Now get a move on," he pushes them forward followed by an outburst from the captain.

They trudge down the steps, though long, cumbersome with their heavy packs, and arduous, they are rewarded with a gushing fountain spring. They fill their canteens and rest.

"Well the easy part is down at least," Moritz nudges Noaki.

Bringing the canteen to his lips, Noaki freezes. "Easy?"

"I mean look at all those stairs," Moritz groans. "It's not even a straight path upward, so there's more walking. I can't even imagine what it's like in the palace, having to walk up more stairs just to get to our rooms and-" Moritz notices Noaki glowering at him sideways, perception active. "I'm sure it's all worth it though, with all the luxury and food."

Noaki searches the party. "Where's Quentin?"

After having a look around, Moritz shrugs. "I thought he was with us."

"Oi!!"

At the very top of the staircase Quentin is waving at them frantically. "I dropped something! Had to go back a bit!" He launches himself into the air and finishes with a breezy landing beside them. "Yeah, I dropped my canteen when..."

Moritz and Noaki glare at him.

"Er... I'll go fill this up now." He breezes off to the fountain.

Climbing up the first, second, and third plazas were fine. It was the fourth, fifth, sixth, and finally, seventh that did it for them. Noaki and Moritz went through a series of emotional stages before at last they stood in front of the behemoth of a palace, entrance guarded by two white hooded guards, faces concealed. The guards step aside in unison, pushing open the heavy looking doors with one hand.

As their party strolls through, something about those guards unnerves Noaki. The doors shut behind them with a series of clicking locks.

The grand hall rises to dizzying heights. Each floor is layered and identifiable as plazas. The lower level possesses courtyards, gardens, and crystalline ponds teeming with

aquatic flora and fauna. The aysheks ensconced in crystal spheres are almost too blinding to behold. In the dome of the frescoed ceiling of white clouds, illuminates a light so brilliant, Noaki dares not stare directly.

Staff of all ranks and races mill about in the protection of hundreds of guards.

Noaki leans into Moritz and whispers, "how much you reckon it cost to run this place?"

"I don't know, but didn't I tell you there'd be more walking?" Moritz straightens up. "Shh, that's him."

The chancellor, robed in simple white silk, greets Gavin, then the crew. "Welcome, it is an honor to have you all. I hope you've enjoyed the stroll here?"

"Excellent a sight as always, your grace." Gavin says over the sound of Moritz's grumbling.

Noaki stifles a chuckle.

"Wonderful, then before you all retire to your chambers, will you not join me for dinner?"

A platoon of footmen in black white and green emerge out of the blue to carry their belongings to their chambers. A servant asks if Noaki wants her to relieve him of his coat. Noaki declines with the shard in mind.

Their burdens lifted, they follow the chancellor through a series of galleries, corridors, courtyards, and stairs, until at last they enter the dining hall luminous with a panoramic view of the valley from earlier. A lengthy fireplace aligns the wall opposite to the view, blazing in blue flames.

Noaki notes Gavin looking uneasy with the fire. As he'd come to expect, the place is decorous in vegetation, large and small.

Large vases of fragrant floral arrangements are centered on the tabletop. The chancellor takes a seat at the head of the table, beneath a life-like portrait of the palace and before a potted black tree blooming white leaves.

Gavin and the Captain sit appropriately beside the chancellor. Beside Gavin, Moritz, then Noaki, and Quentin. Beside the captain, Rita, then Moir, Reyna, and Veynir.

"It is most unfortunate the dalkarian cannot join us this evening, but let us feast in his name." A squadron of servants enter, balancing a series of silver platters and trays. They pour from pitchers, a pearl like elixir into large silver goblets, ornate in lazul, white jade, and crystals.

The food set before them were a copious variety of leafy greens, roots, stalks, starch, beans, rice, grain, soups, seeds, nuts, berries, fruits, bread, pastries, sweets, and tarts.

"Check out Veynir," Quentin whispers.

Noaki watches the brawny sailor looking unimpressed by the selection.

Noaki whispers back, "I think he's just a bit down there's no fish or meat."

Noaki looks around the table pretending to inspect the food items when he sees both Gavin and the Captain equally trying hard to be pleased. Moritz was too enamored by the chancellor to notice.

Reyna and Rita had approving looks, probably after some difficulty getting the men to eat their plants.

Moir has a far off look, his wispy beard floating.

A clap from the chancellor brings them all back to attention, and he recites a soothing hymn;

*Etraea haht hanim*

*Enna urija khashah*  
*Arrehna urumahn nahn haht hanim*  
*Sohmtsuseliaum*

His voice reverbs throughout the hall, and the lanterns dim to the luminosity of the moons, allowing the atmosphere to be illumined from the light of the blue flames and the gold of the valley sunset.

"He's magnificent isn't he?" Moritz whispers, then spoons a white soup into his mouth. "This needs a little texture," he mixes in seeds, nuts, and a few stalks, stirs and tastes. "Delicious."

Noaki attempts a similar method with his green soup. He smiles, "you genius Moritz."

"Whoa!" Quentin grips the table. "You'll want to be careful of that one," he indicates at the pearl liquid.

Moritz tries a sip and his eyes flutter open. "Whoa, that's," he nudges Noaki, "just try it."

Noaki brings the chalice to his lips.

"No'aki, I'd like to know how you're feeling?"

Startled by the chancellor, Noaki had taken a lot more than a sip. Waves upon waves of pleasure fill the room. "Er. Yes, I feel fine. Thank you, I feel really fine. Too fine. Thank you."

Moritz and Quentin conceal their snickering behind wads of leaves.

"I'm glad to hear it, I'd like to meet with you sometime and diagnose you a little more, if that would be fine with you."

The room stabilizes as he regains his bearing. What had the chancellor said? "Yes, it's fine."



"Chancellor if you don't mind me asking," Reyna lays down her soup. "Along the way I noticed your library, I was wondering if I might have a perusal of your work later?"

"Absolutely, you're free to roam the palace as you please. Keep in mind, the guards will warn you if something is inappropriate." The chancellor takes a drink from his chalice, his adam's apple bobbing up and down for a good while, then he resumes his salad.

"Did he have the same thing as us?" Quentin reaches for the tart.

"Must have, I mean I saw them pour it out the same pitcher." Noaki slurps the rest of the contents from his bowl.

"I can't believe my eyes," Moritz admits admiringly.

"Your grace," to everyone's surprise the voice came from Moir. "Is that valley there what I believe it is?"

The chancellor smiles, "that it is. Abode of The Celestials, The Holy Lands of Svernia."

"Avayunahm," Moir's face glows, "I never believed I'd see this day."

Moritz drops his spoon, splattering the table with white soup.

It registers in Noaki. Celestials. They were in the den of the wolves.

"Noaki?" Quentin nudges Noaki. "Are you feeling alright?"

Noaki sips from his chalice, just enough to ease the tension. "Chancellor?"

The chancellor smiles peacefully. "Yes, No'aki?"

Gavin watches warily from the corner of his eye.

"Are you by any chance, one yourself?" Noaki takes another sip.

"A celestial? No."

Noaki breathes easy.

"When I became chancellor I had to abandon that title."

"I see, thank you, your grace." Not being able to stomach any more food, Noaki proceeds to sip from his chalice, the fear and unpleasantries gradually fading with time.

Stuffed, Quentin reaches over Noaki's shoulders and taps Moritz. Moritz looks up and Quentin indicates with his eyes at his brother, then takes a sip from his chalice.

A light goes off in Moritz's head and he smiles.

Moritz raises his cup to Veynir. "Hey, Veynir."

Grazing on three bundles of stalks, Veynir acknowledges his attention with a nod.

"What say you, Quentin, and I have another round? I'll wager three gold crystaires," Moritz raises his chalice.

Quentin raises his glass, "I'll wager three silver."

At the end of the table, the captain and Gavin drink from their chalice with amused expressions.

Veynir glances at his chalice. He'd forgotten about it, being a little more concerned with what to eat. The contents were an elixir of some kind, moon-like. He raises it up, "I'll wager ten silver."

The chancellor seems unconcerned with this gambling at his table and spectates with interest.

Moritz, in sync with Quentin, brings the chalice to his lips and watches Veynir guzzle the contents down like water.

Reyna deftly slips Veynir's soup toward her as he collapses onto a nest of leaves.

Aside from Noaki, the table breaks into applause.  
Moritz and Quentin produce their wagered crysteire  
from their pockets and hand it to Reyna for safe keeping.  
"Serahn Shixu?" Gavin enquires the chancellor.  
The chancellor smiles, "from the House of Benari."

---

After dinner Moritz and Quentin escort Noaki to his chambers. The okari, despite his appearance, is surprisingly heavy.

"Thanks Qwin, Mortz," Noaki stumbles forward.

"Well," Quentin huffs. "At least he's not a violent drunk, I've seen plenty of those."

Moritz tries to imagine a violent Noaki, the thought tickles him. "You reckon we're almost there?"

"Just a bit," Quentin repositions Noaki's arm over his shoulder. "More, I suppose."

"Can't you fly him over?"

"Not if you want him there in one piece."

With a few advisory directions from guards and staff, they find his room a good kilometre from the dining hall. Fortunately, they didn't have to attempt any stairs.

The room impresses a cozy atmosphere with incense and aromatic flowers. The place is decorous with animal pelts and paintings of forests, mountains, and plains. The fireplace burns with an orange intensity and is surrounded by low rise furnishings organically arranged.

A firm low rise bed takes up much of the corner, though with a nice view of the paintings along the wall.

"There you go, you great big lug," Moritz and Quentin lay him onto his back.

Moritz flops onto the bed, "Thank you, Quentin."

Quentin rests in a chair. "Not a problem. When I saw he'd emptied the chalice, I was surprised he was still able to stand." He stands up, "right. I'm going to find my room, are you coming?"

Moritz shifts his head toward Noaki. "I'll hang out here a bit, make sure he doesn't walk off." He jumps onto his feet, "you go on, I'll be alright."

"Right then," Quentin pauses beside the door. "Let me know if anything happens."

"I will," Moritz approaches Quentin. "Promise."

Quentin exits the room.

"You had to go off and get sloshed didn't you?" Moritz sits beside Noaki. "Wish you'd at least tell me what's bothering you first, then we could get sloshed together."

"I'm gon miss you Mortz," Noaki grumbles.

"We haven't even put up a good fight yet," he slaps Noaki on the chest. "We're safe with the chancellor, I doubt even James can break in here."

"You right," Noaki turns to his side, prodding Moritz with his finger.

"What? I'm here, yes." Moritz lays down on his side, peering into Noaki's distant mauve eyes.

Noaki fiddles with Moritz's ears. "You got fun ears."

"You think so?" Moritz wiggles his ears.

Noaki chuckles.

Moritz smiles, "you're not gonna vomit on me are you?"

Noaki returns the smile, "like you, when I saved?"

"This is different," Moritz laughs. "It was dark, the water was dark, the sky was dark, all of it." Moritz only remembers drifting off in endless black. "It was frightening."

Noaki rests his palm on Moritz's chest. "Without you, dark for me."

Moritz holds his hand and the two drift off.

## O'taomon | The Empire of Eraat: V

Olivia wakes to a knock at her door. Loraunt had gone and Logan still hadn't return. Another knock stirs her into action and she dashes to the door.

"Coming, sorry!" She opens the door to a grim troop of soldiers in blue and white uniform.

The man with a trimmed beard speaks. "Hi miss. My name is Çetin. I work with your... I work with Logan."

"Oh. Please, come in," she steps aside, grateful Loraunt had tidied the place. "Is he in trouble of some sort?"

Çetin signals to the younger soldier standing next to him. He offers her a leather breastplate gilded in gold and silver.

She accepts it gingerly. "What's happened?" She feels a growing desperation.

Another soldier offers a spear.

She accepts. "Did," she swallows, "did he die?"

Çetin shakes his head. "No miss, but he is hurt badly."

Olivia lays the breastplate and spear onto the ottoman. "Please, you must tell me," tears stream down her face.

The younger guards look around the room uncomfortably.

Çetin holds her gaze, "He is being transported to the Vitae in Hesessür."

"Hesessür," Olivia repeats. "That's... halfway across the country." She leans against the windowsill. "Logan."

"Miss," Çetin approaches her, "there is more." He unlaces a thick leather pouch from his waist and hands it to her.

Olivia sets the hefty sack alongside Logan's uniform. "What's happened to him?"

"He battled against a Nagari summoner, not even the guard could bring him down." Çetin reaches into his breastplate and hands her a small leather box, "I was instructed to give this to him by the captain."

Olivia opens it. Nestled inside a nest of coiled leather lace, lays a dark lazuli sphere encased in gold and silver framing. It pulses waves of gentle energy. "A shard?" She shuts the box, "what is happening?"

Çetin dismisses the other guards and the two are left alone. "I did not wish to say this miss."

"Olivia, that's my name." Olivia pockets the shard.

"Olivia," Çetin smiles, "Logan. These are foreign names." He resumes a serious expression. "There are powerful organizations in the city. Dangerous." He murmurs his next words, "Sohmnias. Hilal." Çetin straightens up. "You must bring this shard to him, be careful, fahrahn."

"Fahrahn." She sees him out the door, locking it during the process. She walks up to the window, and for the first time in a very long time, closes the shutters.

She opens the pouch and gasps. Gold crystaires.

She sets to work immediately, retrieving a forgotten leather bag from the dresser, and the box chest they stored their savings.

She packs a few clothing items and lays the box on top, unlocks it with the fragment key dangling on a hook at its side, and pours in the crystaires. She pockets a few for later, then adds in the shard, positioning it atop the coins.

Her mind explodes.

Her flesh shone midnight blue and she stood in place for hours, not knowing what anything is or was.

Time dilates her perception and she becomes no more. The walls, the city, it disintegrates into dust. Her memories, her quarrels and qualms, worries, fears, hopes, dreams. All dust. In this space of no space, outside existence and non-existence.

She returns to the dimly lit room, gasping for air like a fish out of water. She waits. Hours more. Until the breaking of dawn, when she can finally pick herself off the floor and drink from the vessel.

An hour more she sat, soaking in the experience. Then it hits her. Logan.

She shuts the chest, careful not to disturb the shard again. The mechanism clicks and she buries it under more clothes.

Locking the flaps to her pack, she straps it over her shoulders. Grabs her Satchel from the desk and empties out its contents, save for a few parchment and an old fountain pen. She lassoes the satchel over her shoulder.

To conclude her traveling gear, she ties the fragment that unlocks the chest around her wrist.

Stepping outside, she shuts the door, and turns the lock.



Olivia steps off the leviahtran and makes her way toward the university. The atmosphere of the streets fill with ecstatic energy, murmurs and whispers where there normally should be boisterous gossip, news, haggling, and bantering. The weather has cooled appropriately for the season.

The university itself flocks with scholars, researchers, and professors. Though Olivia still has another day yet for lessons, she attends each of her lecture halls and hands a formal letter to the professors excusing her absence for the next few days.

The professors send her off with two weeks worth of notes, reference guides (if she happened to come across a library), and words of good luck.

"Thank you professor Omer, farahn." Olivia waves to the balding bespeckled man who'd given her a considerable month's work to be on the safe side.

At her last stop, the hall is empty save for Professor Evrim poring over a hefty stack of paperwork.

Olivia knocks on the door frame.

The professor settles her work and looks up. "Thank you for giving me a reason to take a break," she smiles. "What can I do for you dear?"

Olivia offers her the last letter, delicately written along the way. "I apologize professor, there is some urgent business I have to attend to, I will be gone for a few days, perhaps more."

The professor's gaze drifts to her thick satchel and bulging pack. Her face glows with excitement, "you're off on a journey?"

"Yes, professor, please send Halil my regards," Olivia sets the letter down. She proceeds to hand her the letter for Halil when the professor stands up.

"I think I'm in need of a bit of a stroll. Care to join me? It won't be long dear."

The professor leads her past the courtyard, commenting on the weather and extrapolating on climatic phenomena. Before long they enter the library, and there above in a study alcove is Halil, hunching over a desk beside a tower of books.

"Halil dear?" The professor calls out.

Halil stretches his arms upward, cracking his spine. "Yes, professor?" He twists in his seat, peering down. "Oh, good morning Olivia," he waves.

"Good morning Halil," Olivia waves back.

"Halil, do you mind coming down for a bit? I'd very much appreciate it," the professor smiles affectionately.

"Of course professor, I'll be down in a minute." He vanishes into the stairwell, followed by a loud scream, a few moments later Halil appears fending for control of his legs and skids to a halt in front of them. "Er.... sorry professor, I lost my step. Maybe a few."

"I saw the demonstration, dear." The professor gestures to Olivia. "Olivia is off on a journey."

Halil's eyes widen, "that's wonderful! Where to?"

After a night of existential demonstrations, Olivia has a difficult time recalling the name. "Hesessür, I believe."

"In Eraat?" Halil frowns.

"For a few days I expect. I wanted to give you my regards," Olivia rummages through her satchel, and produces a letter denoted to the adolescent. "I hoped the

professor might have delivered this for me, but seeing as you're here."

Halil accepts the letter, "that's quite considerate of you Olivia, thank you. I can't say I don't envy you a bit. Must be nice to travel outside the city."

"Then why not join her?" Suggests the professor. "You're far ahead in your courses than you realize, and the other professors and I would agree you've earned it." She places her palm on his back, "give the other's a chance to catch up, and save us some paperwork dear."

Halil flushes. "Well I don't know about that, what if I fall behind?"

The professor levels her eyes with him. "Book work and fieldwork go hand in hand. Haven't you told me you never left the city?"

"I may have mentioned it."

"This is your chance, I'll excuse your absence as research on my behalf. The both of you," she nods to Olivia.

"If Olivia doesn't particularly mind."

Olivia shrugs, "of course I wouldn't mind. Personally I think you coming along would help me out quite a bit," she admits.

"I'll need to grab a few things from my place before we depart," Halil climbs up the winding staircase to gather his work.

"Professor?" Olivia begins, "is he really far along in his studies?"

"Quite, my colleagues and I are astonished beyond disbelief how much information that boy can absorb." The professor removes her milky scarf and hands it to Olivia. "You will be needing this dear."

Olivia handles the silky scarf gingerly, "Ethel?"

"One of the collections I had made for me on my first journey. Quality still holds up, doesn't it?"

Olivia wraps the lengthy scarf over her own. "Lovely."

Halil returns a few moments later looking eager with a pack and some books. "I'll leave this back at my place, are you ready?"

Olivia glows, "yes."

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It comes as a surprise to Olivia when they spend a good deal of the journey westward, deeper into the city where terrace farms and fruit groves flourish among quaint stucco buildings. The streets here were wider, and the air fresher. Trees of all sorts bloom in courtyards, plazas, and parks.

"Do you live here? It's beautiful," Olivia notes the people dressed in colorful handmade clothing.

"Yes, though for someone like myself, I could hardly find work out here."

The leviahtran decelerates to a halt inside a capacious station, with frescoes and marble flooring.

Halil leads her into an airy street hinting the subtle scent of spices, and down toward a modest building protruding with verandahs decorous in potted shrubbery.

Inside a well kept home with plenty to do, Olivia finds herself doted on by Halil's mother. Offering her refreshments of tea and dates.                      Noticing she hadn't had

anything since the morning prior, Olivia accepts her hospitality. "Your home is quite lovely."

Halil's mother blushes. "We built it ourselves, back before Halil was born. His father's grandfather and great grandfather, a masoner, carpenter, and farmer. With the help of some nephews, uncle's, cousins, and distant cousins. They all came together and built.

"We all help each other, that's why this side of the city is so beautiful."

Halil waits from the doorway, sporting a green and white cap with a tunic to match, thick linen trousers, and leather shoes. In addition he carries a leather traveling bag and suitcase.

His mother rises out of her seat embracing Halil affectionately. "You take care of this lovely lady Pasha. Eraat is fierce, be careful," she kisses Halil on the forehead. "Now go, the journey is long."

Olivia sets the cup down and hoists her satchel and pack. "Thank you for the tea, and the company."

Her words are met with a motherly embrace.

Halil's mother waves them off until they are no longer within sight.

At the station Olivia purchases a one way ticket for herself and two-way for Halil, in the event that she would be delayed a few more days.

They wait on the platform correlating with their leviahtran.

Olivia rummages through her pack and produces two mive fruits. "Would you like one?" She offers.

Halil accepts, "thank you. These are my favorite."

"Mine too," Olivia bites into the pink and white flesh. "I read somewhere that in some places these are called moon berries."

"I can see the resemblance," Halil holds it up to the sky. "Quite refreshing. The stone inside takes well to a variety of soil."

"It's also listed as one of the ingredients for Shixu wine. Logan likes to have it on occasion, I never tried it myself." She finishes off the fruit, inspecting the stone.

"Is that your roommate?" Halil pockets the stone.

"Yes, I failed to mention him before haven't I?" Where the stone first develops into a seed, it takes on an oddly crescent shape. "I think I'll keep this one myself," she packs the stone.

They meander back and forth on topics and literature when at noon their leviahtran arrives.

Inside they are directed to their compacted cabin with two comfortable seats beside a large window, and beds overhead. Beneath their feet, drawers were set in place for their belongings. Aysheks illuminate in apertures along the ceiling, sealed in by glass.

Halil shuts the drawer with his belongings. "I've never been in one like this."

"It is a lot more private than the city's. Not that I'm complaining, they're quite comfortable." Olivia sits down, the seat is a lot more comfortable than her sofa.

Halil joins her, "nervous?"

"A little," Olivia reviews the menu items provided. "Are you up for a meal? My treat this time."

Halil retrieves the menu tucked beside his seat. "I can't say no to that."

The leviahtran lifts and accelerates forward.

Olivia's stomach flutters. "Now I'm nervous. There's no turning back."

Halil peeks over his menu, "aren't you from outside the city?"

"I can't remember." She scans the menu and decides to try a foreign cuisine with pomegranate wine.

Halil decides on a tart salad with beytil, goat cheese, and pomegranate wine.

The two lunch together, zooming through a vast open countryside, with the occasional trees, lakes, rivers, and houses. After an early supper they engage themselves with a variety of topics, debates, and revisions of notes.

To Olivia's genuine surprise, Halil is well versed in just about anything she can bring to conversation.

A uniformed attendant comes by to collect their dinnerware. "Thank you sir and misses. The conductor has instructed me to tell all passengers," she gestures to the window, "Welcome to Eraat." She closes the door.

They gaze out the window and gasp as they move over a steep gorge, speeding toward even larger forest dotted mountains. If Olivia could fly, she imagined this is what she'd see. Far, far down way below, a series of twisting rivers merge and break apart, surrounded by thick vegetation.

"This is a detour to our destination," Halil tries peeling his eyes away, to no avail. "So we're leaving the desert for a bit." They enter the looming shadow of the mountains, "but we're no longer in the jurisdiction of O'taomon."

The great stone faces of the mountains, lush with verdure and cascading falls, fast approach.

They lean in, hearts beating. Olivia grabs Halil's hand, who accepts it gratefully.

Then darkness.



## The Seaside City of Naayir-Nahtahma | Svernia: III

Moritz wakes to someone's soft breaths tickling his hair, an arm wrapped around him is holding him steady, and his own arm holding that arm. A rumbling voice clears its throat.

Gavin stands at the foot of the bed, looking very amused. "Morning lads."

Moritz jumps up, raising his hands. "It's not what it looks like."

Noaki opens his eyes. "What's going on?" He looks around in a daze, "how did I get here?" He notices Moritz examining the paintings along the wall and Gavin chuckling. "Oh. Good morning. I'm usually up before anyone. How long have you been here?"

"Just now," Moritz responds quickly. "Yeah, just got here. No big deal, how are you feeling?"

Noaki notes the state of his bed, "like I wrestled a bear I suppose."

"The chancellor asked me to give this to you, says it will clear your mind." Gavin hands him a ceramic flask wafting something pleasant. "Gave one to Veynir and the lad's good as new. Instructions are to take it all in one go."

"Thanks," Noaki downs the contents and sets the flask down. "Not as tasty as it smells." His perception explodes. Thrusting him as far back as the silver Alps, the trees, the mountains, the valleys, all speeding past him, and it all comes back knocking him onto his feet.

The room stabilizes, his foggy headed symptoms are gone, limbs refreshed, eyes clear, and senses refined.

"What's in that?"

"I don't know meself, you'll have to ask the Chancellor." Gavin proceeds to walk out the room, pauses and lays a hand on Moritz's shoulder, "I understand lad, no shame in it," then exits.

Watching the exchange, Noaki sees Moritz's face flush. "What was that about?"

"Who knows?" Moritz points at the bed, "bear you said?"

"Hm?" Noaki looks in the indicated spot, "oh that? Yeah, I suppose."

"Thank you."

"What?"

"Nothing. I'm gonna head back to my room for a bit. I'll meet up with you later." Moritz walks toward the entrance.

"Alright."

Noaki removes his coat and waits for the latch to click before making sure the shard is still there.

Luminous and bright. He drops it onto his palm and his body surges with energy. He's starting to wonder if a jeweler might fashion it into an armband of some sort, when there's a knock at the door.

"Come in," he shoves it in his pocket.

A young serving lady in white and silver robes enters. She carries a tray of fruits, seeds, and nuts, and a cup of what Noaki hoped wasn't more of that moon water. "His grace has also asked that you meet him in the afternoon for your latest diagnosis."

"What?" He tries to recall the details of dinner that evening. "Alright, I'll be certain to remember. By any chance," he says before she walks out, "is there a washroom of some sort?"

The servant nods and along the portraited wall, in a fairly empty area, she presses a button, and a series of mechanisms begin moving, a moment later the wall opens into a chamber with two entrances. One to the lavatory, and the other, the washroom.

"Thank you for that," Noaki marvels at the precision of the concealed entrance.

He fumbles through the drawers where his clothes had been refolded and laid alongside an assortment of fine garments of various fabric.

The shower has no hand operation so he presses randomly along the wall when all at once, a cascade of cold water drenches him.

After a less than necessary adventure with simple ablutions, he dresses, capping his coat around his shoulders and heads out.

In a luminous plaza connecting all their chambers, Moritz and Quentin are in idle chit chat. Quentin is leaning back against the rail guard, with a drop that would take him right to the palace entrance. Moritz is keeping a good distance from the railing.

"It's about time you showed up," Quentin yawns. "Moritz has been angsty all morning."

"You reckon if we tossed you over, you'd survive that landing?" Moritz intimidates. He appears freshly groomed, clothed, and his hair disheveled.

Quentin glances down. "I suppose we can find out." He jumps, followed by an ecstatic scream that likely disturbed some of the residents.

They both lean over the railing trying to find him.

"I think you killed him," Noaki laments.

"How's that on me? He's the one who jumped. I say that's suicide." Moritz points toward Quentin hopping upwards from one level to the next. "Man, that must be so convenient."

Quentin ends with a breezy landing, his expression full of adrenaline. "Moir's got to try that, I might go again a few more times."

"Right," Moritz begins, "but first we got to figure out what we're going to do today."

"I have to meet with the chancellor later," Noaki shrugs to indicate he didn't know what it was about. "And I've got something to discuss with you."

"I also have something to share with you," Moritz faces Quentin, "on your way down, you wouldn't happen to have seen anywhere private we could talk would you?"

Quentin shakes his head. "Wouldn't do you any good, there are guards everywhere. There's one standing there right now."

Noaki and Moritz look at the spot indicated. Concealed between the thicket of two potted shrubbery, is a guard, mute, face hidden.

He moves and they all jump back. "Sorry to scare you," says a youthful voice. "There is a place in the library if it's privacy you seek."

"Have," Moritz points at the guard accusingly, "have you been listening this entire time?"

"It's my job, sir." The guard shrinks back.

"Your job is to guard, not eavesdrop, sir."

"Listening to potential threats is on my list of duties, sir." The guard fires back.

Something about the voice sounds off to Noaki, muffled to distract one from noticing. "You're not a guard are you?" Noaki states in the midst of their exchange.

"What!" He stomps his foot, "outrageous allegations! I will report this to his grace."

Noaki crosses his arms, "if that's your job, who can blame you?"

"I will," the guard made off to move, "that is unless you're willing to apologise, water under the bridge."

"Apologise?" Moritz looks scandalized, "when you were the one eavesdropping you little scamp."

"Alright," Noaki laughs, "who are you?"

The adolescent removes his head gear, revealing a handsome face with jet black hair and jade colored eyes. "Aalim, that's my name."

"A hah!" Moritz points triumphantly. "You weren't a guard and you were just eavesdropping."

"But you're still in the wrong. Guards do listen to people, it's their duty," Aalim rebuttals. "Though, to be fair, it's about the most interesting thing to do on duty."

"I think all bridges burned can be rebuilt," Noaki smiles, "if you show us where the library is."

"I can do you one better and answer any questions you might have along the way, I know a lot about this place." Aalim leads them down a corridor cleverly concealed behind a monolith.

"I've got a question," Quentin pipes in, "why is everything so white?"

Aalim considers this for a moment, "that's too long of an answer, next question."

Moritz recalls hours trekking the cavern. "Why does it take so long to walk here?"

"That's a good one," Aalim raises a finger. "Because you didn't take the shortcut."

"There's a shortcut?!" Moritz leans towards Noaki, "isn't that something? A shortcut."

"Honestly Moritz, I don't know what you're complaining about," Quentin cuts in, "I enjoyed the walk."

"So what did you two need to discuss in private?" Aalim intervenes.

"Hey! We're the ones who are supposed to ask questions." Moritz ignores Quentin.

"And I'm the one guiding you."

"So?"

"So if I left and said goodbye, good luck finding your way."

Moritz shrugs, "I think we can manage."

They reach a fork in the corridor, one directly leading left and the other, right. Aalim points down each. "Alright then, tell me which way to go?"

Moritz peers down the perfectly symmetrical corridors. "Okay, so I would get lost without your help. Where to next?"

Aalim proceeds down the left path.

Moritz walks beside their guide. "How did you know which way to go?"

Aalim indicates at the ceiling where small protrusions were in the wall, subtle but recognizable as glyphs. "These are markers, if you'd gone down the other path, you'd be assigned with a variety of tasks and duties by the guard."

Moritz glances down the opposite direction. "Does that happen often?"

"More than you'd think," Aalim leads them down a staircase, "care to find out?"

They continue for some time until they finally emerge into a large chamber with rows upon rows of bookshelves, illuminated at the far end is an open terrace view of the front palace.

"Down here," Aalim directs them to another corridor and into a study containing comfortable looking furniture, a blazing blue fireplace, and potted shrubbery. "This is one of the places where the scholars like to come when the library gets too loud."

"Too loud?" Quentin stretches, "I could sleep in there."

"Some of the guards come just for that purpose. The scholars don't mind, a few document their sleeping habits." Aalim waits by the threshold. "This is it." He stands there waiting for something.

Picking up on this, Moritz tosses him a silver crystaire. "Make sure you don't eavesdrop either! You know what," he turns to Quentin, "there's a gold crystaire in it, if you stand guard outside."

With drowsy eyes, Quentin shrugs and stands watch, Shutting the doors behind him.

"You need to be more careful with our finances," Noaki comments.

"Sorry, I know. How much do we have left by the way?" Moritz slumps on the sofa.

"We've used at least," Noaki attempts to calculate in his head. "At least a hundred gold crystaires."

"A gold crystaire is worth a lot it seems," Moritz says, impressed.

"It is. But it's also our only source of income right now. It hasn't been more than a few months and we've used up a lot." Noaki seats himself next to the fireplace, comparing the blue flames to Gavin's white. He rummages through his pocket and produces the shard. "Moritz we can't stay here."

Moritz tears himself away from the portrait of a man with jade eyes. "Why not?" He crouches beside Noaki. "All this trouble for a stone."

"Technically a shard, but it's the reason we can't stay." Noaki drops it into his palms, relishing the infinite rush.

"You know you're quite amazing when you do that," Moritz studies Noaki's violet eyes, "but also kind of terrifying. Like James."

"Sorry," he returns it to its pouch, "so what is it you wanted to discuss with me?" Noaki shifts in his seat, "is about what the chancellor said when you dropped your spoon?"

"It's part of it," nostalgia spreads across his face. "Remember what Old Dallan said before we left?"

"Keep you out of trouble?"

Moritz laughs. "No, not that. It's my mother, he said she came here." Moritz rises and faces the portrait.

Noaki remembers, remorse seeps into him. "Listen, Moritz. I'm not going to ask you to leave, but I can't stay with the shard." He walks beside Moritz. "I'll tell you what, I'll bring this to Atmedanyeh and leave it with this master. It couldn't be in better hands. Then," he stares at the portrait, "I'll come back and we'll search for your mother together."



"Thank you, Noaki, but it's not that. What if she died coming here? You know what the seas were like, I'd be gone if it weren't for you and the shard." The only memory he had of his past, aside from Old Dallan.

It sinks in, Moritz has family. It meant so much to him, what could Noaki do? Turn back time? He sighs. "It did save you, and I'd do it again, but not a third time," he punches him gently. "However, it's also the reason we're in this mess. I brought you into my own business, and that chest was in my room."

The door bursts open to an agitated Quentin and Aalim being restrained by the two identical guards who opened the entrance when they first arrived.

"Sorry, I tried to tell them you two wanted to be left alone but they wouldn't listen," Quentin raises his fist. "I've seen a few unfair fights in my day, but this is ridiculous."

"What's going on?" Noaki demands, "let him go."

The guards release Aalim who scurries to the corner glaring at them.

"He told us he's your private escort?"

"What of it?" Moritz challenges.

"That's all we needed to know." The guards exit, closing the door.

"What was that about?" Noaki folds his arms.

"Well," Aalim takes a sudden interest in the portrait, "I really am a member of the guard, and might have inadvertently used you as an excuse to get out of work."

"I suppose that clears up one thing then," Quentin adds in, "Moritz was wrong."

"Are you calling me a liar?" Moritz defends himself.

"No, I'm calling you a wrong."

Aalim looks perplexed. "That doesn't make sense."

Noaki watches the exchange go on for some time, before neither side is making sense. He laughs. They all look at him and demand in unison, "what?"

"Nothing." Noaki gestures to the portrait, "can you tell us who that is, Aalim?"

Aalim analyzes the portrait. "That's A'ten Akhetaan. He never much liked to get involved with the world and isolated himself in libraries. Father used to say, take him somewhere and he'd go straight to the library. No library? Find a book. No book? Meditate."

"Sounds a bit of a bore," Moritz comments.

Aalim smiles admiringly at the portrait. "Lots of people think so. To literary scholars, he's a lesser known *littérateur*. He also wrote, but worked as a scribe in his lifetime to survive. To the palace, he's a member of the royal family, and helped establish this library.

"Though father says he'd have wandered off and died reading if they hadn't complied with his demands." Aalim sees that Quentin had been vaguely paying attention, Moritz playing with the fire, and Noaki studying the portrait in detail. "So what do you think?"

"Sounds like someone who likes to read books," Moritz came over. "Well, royal escort," Moritz lengthens his posture, "is there anything fun to do here? Aside from staring at dead people?"

"Actually," Noaki removes his gaze, "could you show me where the chancellor takes up his practice?"

"It's a bit of ways down, but I can show you."

Aalim leads the party through a series of symmetrical corridors and galleries. Noaki notes the chambers and rooms gradually shift in their purpose to accommodate

medicinal practices. Along the way he glimpses Reyna attending a lecture among an assortment of other practitioners.

They proceed down a quiet corridor exuding a relaxing ambience. The corridor burns with incense and leads into chambers concealed behind thick velvet curtains.

The chancellor's practice is a cavernous chamber, glistening with luminous ore and a single opening above that allows a ray of light onto a stone platform, similar to the one in Master Eiko's practice.

Along a series of carved stone work, clutter vials and flasks of oddly proportioned shapes and sizes.

"Aalim," the chancellor emerges from a cleverly concealed chamber. "Thank you, for escorting my patient." He inspects the rest of the party, "I apologise, but I must diagnose him alone."

"Moritz, wait." Noaki unclasps his coat and hands it to him, "take care of it."

Moritz nods in understanding.

Noaki jumps onto the platform, legs dangling over the side. He removes his shirt as instructed and lays on his back as Eiko had once instructed.

"That must have been an important coat," the chancellor places an orb in both his palms. "I understand it's an okari tradition. Once you've earned it, you keep it until you've given up your time."

Noaki didn't know what the chancellor spoke of, he'd forgotten about his okari heritage along the way, it didn't seem to matter. "Are you going to put up the invisible shield?"

"If you mean Okhanahn, yes." The chancellor places an orb below his feet and head. "Its invention was aided by an okari such as yourself."

Noaki feels the chancellor's fingers brush from his lower abdomen to his collar. Then it manifests, an invisible force field that gradually fills with blue and gold light, and there he sees it, his heart beating.

"Your lau'khet has gotten considerably brighter, that is good," the chancellor interacts with the surface. "Your recovery is remarkable considering you recently woke."

Noaki tries hard not to move.

The chancellor shifts the live image to what Noaki asserts as his insignia, three crescents preceding the other, largest to smallest.

"Now I see, those bearing the adreno nature recover easily. That is why they make good soldiers, although," the chancellor places his palm on the insignia and infuses white energy.

Noaki's perspective blossoms of its own accord, he sees the violet outlines of plants, insects, and people.

"The hunters kreddos."

"I'm sorry?" Noaki lacks any understanding in any of this. He wants to move.

"Nature's yield different fruits. Your fruit is with the hunter's kreddos, though one need not be a hunter, it is only defined for organizational purposes." The chancellor shifts the screen, bringing to surface a strange sight full of wiggles and wobbles. The chancellor reviews the state of something only he could understand. "That's very odd."

Noaki stares at the screen, unsure what could be odd about it. "Am I broken?"

The chancellor chuckles, "you're well. Almost too well. In your biological memory, there is an abrupt change in cellular behavior. As if an entirely different person took hold of the body. Have you died recently?"

"Not that I can remember, no." Noaki wants to be done.

"It's so peculiar that this transition happened so fast. Normal biological memory is a gradual growth. Even through intense periods of life, you cannot change a person. One's lifestyles may alter, but they are aware just as they always were." The chancellor returns to Noaki's beating heart. "There have been few such instances on record that I'm aware of," the chancellor comes to his senses.

"My apologies, No'aki."

The chancellor fiddles with the orbs and the blue and gold retreat, quickly followed by the force field. After collecting the orbs and returning them to velvet cases, he approaches Noaki, guiding him by the chin to peer into kind jade eyes.

"Your perception is beautiful, it warms me to see another generation so unlike my own." The chancellor kisses Noaki's forehead.

Noaki notices a luminous curtain settle across his vision and vanish. The clarity of his mind is unsullied for a time. "Thank you," Noaki slips on his shirt, "your grace."

The chancellor smiles. "Please take care. Fahrahn."

Noaki bows and exits the chamber light in his step. Outside he meets the others in a heated debate between Aalim and Quentin.

"What are they arguing about?" Noaki asks Moritz.

"Something about a match, taikhetudin, I think they called it. Between, well I forget the names," Moritz hands

Noaki his coat, "you might want to consider washing it every now and then."

Noaki drapes it over his shoulders and settles the others' debate with lunch.

## Hesessür | Eraat: I

Within this sea of desert, Halil can feel himself drifting far from home. He knew the sweltering summers of O'taomon, but the climates of the Capital Empire were unforgiving. How this sultry region thrived, he could not imagine.

Miss Olivia still sleeps. He wonders if she knows what her life will be like here

Eraat. An empire founded on conquest rather than inclusion. He regards the news in circulation. The sultan's preparation for conflict does not sit well with anyone, and with whom they raise their blades toward is still yet to come to light. Ideologies, religion, prejudice, resources - what reason could one have to begin war?

Halil sips his tea, ruminating on the potential catastrophes around the corner. Somehow Miss Olivia plays a role in the events to follow, however impactful her part is.

---

Olivia stretches herself awake after having been gently lulled by the comfort of travel. She climbs down from her bed, straightens the creases in her garments and readjusts her scarf. Gratefully she didn't toss much in spite of her nightmares.

Halil appears to have been awake for some time. He's gazing through the window, sipping dark tea with a book in hand.

She nestles herself in the seat opposite. The landscape has changed considerably since their detour in Etraea - a beautiful country with scenic views, it was a shame Logan was not around to enjoy it with her.

She notes the book in Halil's hand. "What's that you're reading?"

"Musings by A'ten Akhetaan," Halil hands her the book, "Volume III."

Olivia is familiar with the author, though never understood the reasoning behind his popularity. She interpreted much of his written work as spontaneous tangent ramblings.

She flips through the book at random, her eyes widen when she realizes what she held in her hands. "Halil. This is the first edition. Oh, and how careless I've been handling it." She slams the book shut, then apologises and hands it back.

"It's not so rare, there are many around," he sets the book aside. "Birthed from a wealthy family, Akhetaan published plenty of copies in his time; most major libraries will carry first editions."

"Do you know how long we have left before we arrive?" The path of the leviahtran meanders along the Ilahvar river.

"We will arrive little before noon." Halil finishes his tea and resumes reading.

With the endless dunes to focus on, Olivia shuts down her mind's chatter and drifts off into the horizon. The event triggered by Logan's shard stirred something within her. She drifts off in endless trance.



The leviahtran decelerates, stirring her back to her senses. She gathers her belongings and attempts to exit when Halil bars the entrance.

"The scarf Professor Evrim gifted you," he indicates at the milky fabric. "You must wrap it around your head and conceal your face."

"Why?" She attempts to protest when Halil points toward the window. All the women, foreign and domestic, conceal themselves in fabric.

"It is customary to abide by their law here. This will only be temporary." Halil exits the cabin.

Olivia stands in silence, she had entirely forgotten the stories of Eraat.

For a time Olivia observes the passersby outside her window. Although she had forgotten how life is lived here, the professor hadn't. After garnering enough live examples, she wraps her head with the lengthy scarf and all distinguishing facets of her face, save for her eyes, are concealed.

Halil is patiently waiting outside when she exits the cabin. He inspects her handiwork and nods his approval. "While we're here, you cannot leave my side. I will have to speak on your behalf and escort you around."

Olivia nods her understanding. "Thank you, Halil. Professor Evrim was right to suggest your accompaniment." She gathers her stowed gear and the two set off.

As they are exiting the station, two masculine soldiers concealed in white cotton garb halt them. To Olivia's astonishment, either guard spoke a very different dialect to O'taomon. She can hardly understand it, however, Halil engages them just fine.

Halil pays a toll of twenty silver crystaires before they're allowed to exit the station.

The sun.

Olivia did not anticipate the heat. Though accustomed to arid climates, not even the sweltering droughts of O'taomon could compare to the oven sunbaked streets of Hesessür.

Perspiration did little to cool her down. Gratefully the streets were narrow and buildings tall. The infrastructure is reminiscent of the dalkarian style, white stucco walls and terracotta roofing. Plazas, parks, and courtyards are abundant with vegetation, ponds, and waterways replenishing and emptying into the confluence of the Ilahvarunnahn.

They continue down a street aligned with date palms, fruit trees, and berry bearing bushes. The inhabitants roaming the city are the wealthiest people she has mingled among.

After some time Halil finally leads her into an inn. The Commons area smells of herb and spice, decorous in potted reeds, grass, and succulents. The capacious space is illuminated with brilliant amber sconces and thick geometricized windows carved into the walls.

Olivia retrieves a purse from her pocket and hands it to Halil. "For the room and any other expenses."

"Any particular kind of room you have in mind?" Halil reaches inside and retrieves three gold crystaires. "I imagine this will get us a decent one."

"To be on the safe side, we should take up a room for two weeks." She waits for Halil on a settee hidden in the

plumage of river reeds. Halil returns a few minutes later with their room key and leads her down the subterranean levels.

In contrast to the weather outside, the subterranean levels are cool and lush in verdure. Along the way they pass a pair of elderly men keenly concentrating on a board game. Further in, Olivia glimpses a lavish dining hall, bathhouse, and quarters for servants.

The commons area of their room contains a small fireplace surrounded by low-rise furnishings, hanging amber lanterns and two alcoves housing a writing desk and potted reeds. At the opposite end of the entrance are two doors leading into modestly furnished rooms with oriental rugs and an entryway into lavatories.

Olivia occupies the room to her left, stores the bulk of her belongings in the dresser, and returns to the commons room where Halil is seated deep in thought.

"I don't suppose you happen to know where the Vitae is?" She settles on the settee opposite to Halil.

Halil nods. "Where the confluence begins, at the heart of Hesessür."

After a late lunch in the dining hall, Halil escorts Olivia through the meandering narrow streets. Though much of the activities around her piques her curiosity, her thoughts return to Logan.

In spite of the shade and breezy weather, the air is uncomfortably hot and seeps into her flesh. Olivia imagines herself slowly baking inside an oven. However, once she adjusts to the heat and cultural shock, Hesessür was very similar to O'taomon in some aspects. Save for the excess of guards concealed beneath white garb, the people were just as lively and active as those back home.

They arrive at a bustling subterranean leviahstation, a welcoming few degrees cooler than the surface. Despite the region's arid climate, the plazas, parks, and public courtyards were lush with fountains and intricate water works flowing to and fro the Ilahvarunnahn.

They meander through the city, in and out the subterranean stations for approximately two hours before arriving at the confluence of the Ilahvarunnahn where the station exits onto a large plaza decorous in edible arid vegetation and refreshing fountains teaming with aquatic wildlife.

Before them rises three enormous cylindrical towers carved into a rocky mountainside, all conjoined with walkways and courtyards. Their pathway into this splendorous edifice is aligned with brilliant spherical sconces illuminating vibrant mosaics depicting the Ilahvarunnahn and its environment.

The interior is bustling with the populace, practitioners, and astute guards wielding luminous tipped staves.

Olivia knew the wealth of the Vitae was unrivaled by any other guild and organization, but to bear witness the grandeur of it in person, she was speechless.

Graciously Halil was with her, had she arrived here on her own she did not doubt she would have struggled to navigate this foreign land.

After a few minutes interacting with a receptionist whom Olivia could fortunately communicate with, they settle themselves in a designated waiting area.

"This is quite an experience," Olivia comments. "Thank you, Halil. I'm not so sure I'd have made it past the station were it not for your assistance."

Halil nods. "I did think it was rather odd you were attempting to journey here alone." He studies a mosaic of a flock of birds amid colorful reeds. "Hesessür is regarded as bit more laxed when it comes to the stringent Eraatian traditions."

"I wasn't thinking very clearly at the time," Olivia admits.

It is some time before they are approached by a youthful practitioner in white and silver silken garbs. He bows to Halil and then Olivia. "You're here for the foreigner?"

"Logan?" Olivia stands and returns the bow. "I'm Olivia."

Halil imitates Olivia's introduction. "How is he?"

"Aside from bruising, he's in good health. Much of the damage he experienced was nullified with Vitaeik energy and we managed to stave off any severe internal damage." He motions for them to follow.

The practitioner leads them to the fifth floor of the second tower and into a room furnished with a bed, two settees, and a potted reed. Leaning against the railing on the narrow balcony stands a familiar person in a cotton sirwal tied at the waist with a white sash.

---

Approximately four days have passed since arriving in Hesessür. The bruises from his altercation with James were turning a sickly green tinge, indicating rapid recovery according to the young practitioner assigned to him.

Logan shifts from the view of the city, curious of the newcomers. A woman wrapped in a milky silk scarf, and an adolescent in a green and white tunic with a matching cap. He looks to the practitioner Hakhiim questioningly.

Before he or anyone else uttered a word. The woman is across the room and squeezing the air out of him, putting considerable pressure on his bruises in the process.

Logan grunts from pain but pats the woman on the head gingerly. "Ouch, er... thank you?"

"Logan, you idiot. It's me."

That voice slowly registers in his mind. "Olivia!" He holds her by the shoulders for his inspection. Amber eyes. The subtle insignia between her brows. "Eldaeon," he brings her into a tight embrace, nestling her into his chest. "I'm glad you're safe."

She returns the embrace with equal vigor, causing him to grunt again, but the pain is tolerable.

"You made me worried sick," she thumps his chest.

"Ouch."

"Look at you!" She examines his torso, "you're covered in so many bruises." She begins sobbing, "what happened?" She leans in for another hug, this one a little more gentle. A little.

"I was just as worried about you," he strokes her back. "I turned out alright didn't I?"

She thumps his chest.

"Not if you keep doing that." He holds her until her sobbing ceases. "That's it? I thought I earned a little more tears than that."

Olivia pulls away with a chuckle. "They made it seem like you were as good as dead."

Logan frowns. "Who?"

"The other soldiers," she dabs her eyes with her sleeves. "Çetin, I think his name was."

Logan sighs and acknowledges the adolescent with a nod. "We haven't met have we? I'm Logan."

Olivia, having just remembered herself, stands beside the adolescent. "This is Halil, my friend from the university."

Halil. Logan recalls her having mentioned that name once, mistaking it for Hilal. Something in the adolescent's composure hints at a precocious intelligence.

He smiles at Logan and bows. "It's nice to meet you, Logan. Sorry it's under these circumstances."

"Yes, thank you for accompanying Olivia." Logan nods, "this region is particular about their customs." Logan shares a glance with Hakhiim, "no offense intended of course."

Hakhiim waves him off. "Understandable, I'm not from Eraat myself but you should be wary around the guard."

"Thank you for everything Hakhiim, if it would be alright I'd like to leave now." Logan slips into the dark and light blue vest sent along with him.

Hakhiim nods uncertainly. "I'm not opposed to the idea, however, the two guards who arrived with you, Demir and Enes, were insistent you wait for their return in a few days' time."

Logan considers this with a puzzled expression, Demir and Enes? He faces Olivia, "where are you staying?"

"The Avaha Inn," Halil answers promptly. "You know of it?" He looks to Hakhiim who responds with a nod.

"When they return, can you direct them to that place? I suppose I can wait a few more days." Logan shifts his

attention to Halil, "if that's alright with you. I suspect we have some business here in Hesessür."

Halil shrugs, "it's your decision to make."

After thanking Hakhiim for his service and paying the small fee for treatment, the three of them set off to the leviahstation with Halil in tow.

Aboard the leviahtran, Olivia settles next to Logan. "Is everything alright?"

Logan shakes his head. "It's not a coincidence that I was sent here." His thoughts center towards Demir and Enes, veterans of the old guard. "Hakhiim expressed his confusion as to why the Vitae in O'taomon couldn't have treated me." He lowers his voice, "at first I didn't think much of it until he mentioned Demir and Enes."

Olivia nods in understanding, the perplexing nature of this situation. "Çetin gave me a few items that I think you'll want to see for yourself." Her thoughts wander as the leviahtran meanders through the city. The Shard, the gold, should've registered in her mind earlier but her thoughts were only on Logan at the time.

The leviahtran comes to a halt at their station and they diligently follow Halil in silence, their thoughts occupying their compulsion to speak. After Halil paid an additional fee for Logan's room and board, the trio set immediately into the confines of their commons room safe from prying gazes and eavesdropping.

Olivia immediately sets about and retrieves their savings chest from her room. "Çetin gave me a sack of crystaires and this," she unlocks the chest and gingerly dangles a luminous shard in front of them.

Logan groans in displeasure. "It's just as I suspect."



Olivia places the Shard down carefully, so as not to induce another psychic episode. "You'll want to avoid touching it."

Halil gawks at the Shard with intensity. "The Izlara?"

Olivia gasps. "No."

"It is," Logan gingerly retrieves the leather lace and inspects the lazuli sphere encased in gold and silver framing. "Avayunahm, why on Eldaeor would the vizier give me this?"

No one speaks for a time, their thoughts in consideration of the pulsing energy of the Shard.

"The Izlara...?" Olivia whispers faintly. "Impossible."

Logan recounts innumerable stories regarding the Eye of O'taomon, all alluding to grand feats beyond his reckoning. He sets it down delicately.

His stomach churns unpleasantly. "Of all people, why me?"

Olivia sits opposite of Logan. "What do you mean by that?"

"There's a hidden message behind it, isn't there?" Halil, who had remained silent the longest, finally speaks.

Logan nods. "The crystaires," Logan swallows hard, "is incentive to carry out a mission on behalf of the vizier." He slumps back in his seat. "I don't want this, why me?"

"Eldaeon," Halil murmurs.

"What's the mission?" Olivia's thoughts race to conclude the hidden message.

Logan shrugs, "that's why I'm here."

"None of this is making any sense," Olivia protests. "At any rate you still need to convalesce."

"The events that were happening in O'taomon," Halil interposes. "There is a connection here in Hesessür." He shares a knowing glance with Logan. "That's my theory."

"A plausible one," Logan agrees.

"We can't know the answer for certain until Demir and Enes make it clear." Halil shrugs, "regardless. I don't think it's wise to keep something so valuable here."

Logan attempts to reach for the Shard when Olivia slaps his hand aside.

"Ouch!" Logan retreats, "what was that for?"

"Trust me, that thing is not something you want to handle lightly."

Judging by Olivia's fervent look, Logan decides it better not to protest. "If the Vizier is behind it, then Hesessür is somehow deeply involved in Hilal and Sohmnia's."

Halil shifts uncomfortably.

"Oh right," Olivia snaps to attention, "Cetin also mentioned something. Though, only after dismissing his companions." Olivia looks at Halil, considering if she might say it in front of him.

"It's alright," Logan reassures her.

Olivia nods. "He emphasized those organizations."

Logan's head is pounding. Loraunt. He shoves the alvarrian out of his mind. "They're here in Hesessür."

"Who?"

"Hilal," Halil answers. "It is referenced by A'ten Akhetaan; Among the barren sea, in the pools of healing waters, the sisters sing in the wake of their births and deaths." Upon noting their puzzled expressions, Halil explains further. "The sisters are a reference to Sohm, Tsu,

and Seli. Each of their cycles, when it ends and is reborn, they are shaped like crescents."

"Hilal uses three crescents as their organization's symbol," Logan elaborates.

"Then that must mean," Olivia adds eagerly, "the Ilahvarunnahn is the healing waters. Or perhaps a reference to the Vitae."

"So what does that mean for the mission?" Logan asks no one in particular.

"It probably means they want you to find out more. They must've recently discovered Hilal operates here." Halil shrugs, "of course, that's only speculative."

Logan examines the Izlara pulsing luminous translucent energy. A power the Grand Vizier himself used sparingly. "Olivia, what happened when you touched the shard?"

"I had an experience," Olivia readily admits. "Though, I can't really explain what happened."

Logan reaches out gingerly and dangles it from the lace. "How long?"

"You're not seriously consider-"

"-How long," Logan interrupts.

She sighs, "a full day and night."

Logan's heart races. He loops the lace over his head and drops it onto his neck. The others watch him in anticipation.

Nothing.

It was all he became. Nothing, like air, no mind to think, no body to feel or desire. Nothing. Darkness meant nothing to him, light meant nothing to him.

Everything he thought he knew or was.  
Nothing.

Like so, he sat, day after day, in the midst of unfurling chaos eroding to time's embrace, until the absence of light.

Then it happens, the beyond of nothing and something, followed by the infinite freefalling of ecstasies.

---

Logan returns to his senses three days later. His senses are refined, wounds healed, and mind clearer than it's ever been. Olivia and Halil are deep in their academic research with a stack of hefty books between them.

Logan peers over Olivia's shoulder. "What are you working on?"

Olivia jumps up, startling Halil. "Eldaeon! Logan," she embraces him. "I didn't think you'd come around."

Logan gazes into her radiant amber eyes and tucks a lock of hair behind her ears, a glowing smile on his face. "Do you have water?"

She laughs and exits the room, returning a few minutes later with a pitcher and three cups. She fills all three, hands one to Halil and the other two to Logan.

It goes down so sweetly, his eyes watering in devotion. He hugs Olivia and squeezes Halil's shoulder, then resumes his spot on the settee.

The Ilahvarunnahn, its memory, its life, invigorates him. His cells burst in ecstasy. Tears stream down his face.

For hours on end he sits there, witnessing flowing waters, listening to the river sing. Night and day. Olivia would serve him deliciously sweet water and gradually, overtime, the lingering effects of the experience dissipates.

His movements are refined beyond recognition. In the blink of an eye, he could be at the furthest end of the room and not realize it. The speed involved required no effort, if he put in little effort a small windstorm would trail him.

By the fifth day, after growing accustomed to the effects of the Izlara, Demir and Enes did not make their appearance so Logan took to stalking the rooftops late in the night, scouring the streets for his companions. On the sixth night he finally encounters the veteran duo, concealed beneath white garb speaking very familiar voices.

## The Seaside City of Naayir-Nahtahma | Svernia: IV

Moritz picks at his teeth with his fingernail. Their filling luncheon now over, he couldn't imagine anything else they might do aside from aimless meandering.

They were expected to remain at the palace for a few more days until Orion's convalescence, though he'd much rather spend his hours exploring the seaside city.

Aalim proved himself a good addition to their troupe, getting along well with Quentin and Noaki.

Moritz sneaks a glance for any witnesses. When the coast is clear, he flicks a piece of lettuce leaf into a nearby shrub. "I don't suppose you'll be joining us for dinner?" He asks their escort.

"I suppose." Aalim leads them through a tunnel illuminated by fluorescent ore. "We're almost there."

Moritz and the others had convinced Aalim to show them the shortcut into the city that didn't involve traversing the caverns. A trek of six and a half hours. If an alternative route existed, Moritz wasn't going to pass up the opportunity.

Aalim leads the group into a capacious cavern with ancient stone work. Beside a raging river, a narrow channel had been carved into the stone floor, leading into a tunnel illuminated by more ore. In this channel was a lengthy oarless canoe..

Quentin's eyes open wide with excitement. "I know fun when I see it, let's give it a go!"

"You recognize it?" Noaki inspects the narrow vessel.

Quentin laughs, "no. But it's not hard to imagine how it works."

"I have a fairly good idea," Moritz inputs. "Though, it doesn't look all that safe."

"That's one of the reasons people prefer to walk." Aalim points out the channel, "once inside the vessel, you operate a lever that will flood this channel with water." He indicates to the space beneath the canoe's bottom, "once enough water fills the channel, it makes contact with the hull and carries you off to the city."

"I understand that part," Noaki points at the canoe, "but what happens to the boat?"

"Upon arrival on sight, there is an alternative channel at a higher elevation, you place the vessel there and it ferries you back to the palace." Aalim points to a parallel channel behind the boat. "Once you arrive, you disembark, collect your belongings, activate another lever, and it will float right back here."

Moritz marvels at the operation, although one question still hadn't been answered. "How fast does it go?"

Aalim's eyes sparkle, "enough to make your heart rush and your gut drop."

An eager Quentin jumps in, "can I give it a go?"

Aalim laughs, "not today I'm afraid. You're all having dinner with the royal family tonight. I'd be in some serious trouble if you were late."

"Maybe next time," Quentin jumps out.

An idea enters Moritz's mind, "Hey Aalim?"

Aalim indicates his attention with a nod.

"Are you familiar with the city?" Moritz gestures to Quentin and Noaki, "we could use a guide. There's an awful lot of streets, and we'd easily get lost."

"I'll submit a request to my superiors," Aalim responds, concealing his obvious pleasure at the suggestion.

"Should we head back now?" Noaki inspects the cavernous ceiling. "I know we've still got a ways till dinner, but it did take us a bit of time to get here."

Aalim's eyes widen. "You're right, come on," he leads the group up the path they just trekked not a few minutes prior.

---

Though not far off from the palace, the route back to their quarters in the upper plaza was a long one. Aalim split from their group with final instructions to proceed down the corridor while he changes into his residential garments.

"Nice guy isn't he?" Moritz asks no one in particular.

"He seems to know quite a bit," Quentin comments.

"He makes for good company," Noaki adds.

They exit onto the plaza. Beside the guard railing, Gavin and the Captain are engaged in some serious conversation. Moritz wonders what that might've been about, but decides to keep his curiosity to himself.

The three split off to their own chambers. Comparatively with the others, Moritz's is furnished much differently. His residency contains all the usual furnishings and decor but with an interior design reminiscent of the



Silver Fox with a touch of luxury, though nothing too extravagant.

He enters the washroom and makes faces with himself in the mirror before making considerations as to what would be appropriate apparel for this evening. The chancellor didn't appear all that concerned with his choices so far. Then again, the chancellor was a striking eccentric individual. He couldn't say the same for the rest of the royal family.

He'd left the bulk of his wardrobe back on the ship, so his options were limited to a few selections. His sky blue linen shirt and soil colored trousers were perfect for general activities, but perhaps not for making appearances to nobility.

He scours his belongings for some time before changing into a high collared navy shirt made of linen, and white linen trousers embroidered in patterns of silver thread. His footwear remains the same leather sandals. When he's finished he inspects himself in the mirror. Not the best selection, but he didn't have many options.

After an enjoyable ice-cold shower, he towels himself down and changes into his new outfit. He spritzs a bit of the cologne set out for him and begins wafting a faint aroma of firewood.

In the plaza Quentin is waiting near the railing, picking his nose. He had changed into a sleek white peacoat over black high collared shirt with matching trousers and combed out his hair with a wavy flair that suited his character.

"Whoa, look at you!" Moritz compliments.

"What? Oh this?" He flips the hem of his coat, "It was a gift from the Captain and Rita when I joined the crew. It's a bit restraining so I don't wear it much."

Tackling his fear, Moritz leans against the guard railing. "How long have you been in the crew?"

Quentin leans back beside him with a look of temptation. "Around five years," he peers down. "As soon as my voice started changing, I tagged along with Veynir. He was against it in the beginning, but quickly warmed up to the idea."

"It sounds like you've had a lot of adventures," Moritz remarks, "I'd like to hear about them sometime."

"Deal." Quentin points at the brilliant light in the midst of the domed frescoe, "what do you suppose that is?"

"I don't know, a shard of some kind perhaps?" Moritz tries to inspect the light but is blinded from gawking directly. "You'll have to ask Aalim later. If anyone knows, it'll be him."

"Definitely."

Like this, they continue back and forth for some time, until Noaki finally emerges from his dwelling, his bearskin coat caped over a dark, high collared linen shirt paired with dark cotton brown trousers. He replaced his mukluks with dark, high leather boots. He smiles, "sorry I took so long, I couldn't decide between this or the white clothes they had out."

"We've still got plenty of time," Moritz gauges the dimming sunlight. "I don't suppose we could get an early start? I haven't got much else to do."

Noaki walks between Moritz and Quentin, the latter finding himself falling behind every now and again with some distraction. "You think we'll meet him again?"

"Who? Aalim?" Moritz shrugs, "maybe if we pretended to be in on some secret business, we'll catch him eavesdropping."

"There's something about him that I can't quite put my finger on."

Moritz slows his pace, "what do you mean?"

"In the beginning I took note of it in his voice, something he tried to conceal behind his mask." Noaki looks to be in some internal analysis.

"You mean his face?"

Noaki laughs, "aside from that. It's more of a quality," he matches his pace with Moritz. "At first I thought I had him when I assumed he wasn't a guard, turns out that assumption was wrong."

Moritz tries to recall their first encounter. He'd gotten pretty heated, but in a way that expressed some convivial attribute he couldn't yet define. "I never picked up on it," Moritz admits. "Like Quentin said earlier, he does know quite a bit, especially for a guard."

Noaki nodded. "That might be it." He looked around, "where's Quentin anyway?"

"Probably already waiting in the dining room," Moritz searches the area. They were in a finely decorated corridor, with geometricized tapestries. Quentin couldn't possibly have lost sight of them, on top of that, nothing in the corridor appeared distractedly interesting. "Quentin!"

Noaki raises an eyebrow, "was that necessary?"

"Got any better ideas?" Moritz rebukes.

"Yes I do," Noaki closes his eyes.

Moritz had forgotten about Noaki's abilities. Sometimes he imagined what it would be like to see like

Noaki. Since Falore, his training had been put on hold. He couldn't do much without Orion's guidance, his abilities were too unpredictable without the guidance of proper discipline.

"I found him, he's headed this way with Veynir and Reyna," Noaki opens his eyes.

They resume their walk. "I forget how useful that is," Moritz comments. "So what did the Chancellor tell you from your diagnosis?"

Noaki hadn't spoken about his time with the chancellor. "It didn't seem all that different from what Master Eiko told me, though it seems Master Eiko sees a great deal more than the chancellor."

Moritz recalls those kind jade eyes, an insightful gaze imbued with compassion and understanding. He never spoke much with Master Eiko, she seemed more concerned with his mental state, which she admitted she could do very little. "Perhaps they specialize in different fields of medicine?"

"The chancellor seems to rely a great deal on elixirs, master Eiko uses her sight on top of lifestyle changes, with a bit of medicine, if necessary." Noaki smiles apologetically, "I suppose the two can't be compared directly."

Upon entry into the dining hall, they were surprised to encounter two identical figures seated at the center of the table. Moritz notes the twins are in their late adolescence.

The pair had narrow jade eyes with soot colored hair and goatees to match. They wore a familiar white robed uniform. The only distinguishing facet between the two was that one sported a trimmed mustache.

Moritz and Noaki exchange glances and resume their seats as the other evening. The four sit in silence,

uncomfortably aware of one another. A few minutes later, Quentin, followed by Reyna and Veynir, entered.

Veynir, clad in a sleek navy trench coat with white slacks and dark loafers, had combed his hair to the side. Reyna, adorned in an aquamarine short dress and milky heels, had fashioned her hair into a half-crown braid accentuated with a white flower. The trio returned to their spots from before, Quentin beside Noaki and Veynir beside Reyna.

A few minutes after light chatter amongst themselves a man with broad shoulders and regal bearing, entered. He wore a silkened dark-red and milky-white uniform with a white cape over one shoulder with silver and gold embroidery. Similar to the twins, his eyes were reminiscent of jade stones with dark hair.

The next to enter were two lovely ladies in lopsided ankle length white dresses with silver sparkles. They sat beside the one in uniform, and immediately began murmuring.

Gavin entered next. To their genuine astonishment, in a silver and white liveried uniform. Caped over one shoulder was his white bearskin overcoat. He sat beside Moritz.

Captain Egor entered in a black woollen trench coat with white buttons and seams. Escorted in his arm, Rita wore a plain white dress with her hair tucked beneath a white hat with a veil.

The chancellor entered in a lengthy pearl colored cloak with no embroidery, seams, patterns, or designs. Moritz marvels at the man as he takes his seat. The chancellor's sleeves were non-existence, he caught Moritz's eye and smiles.

One by one, the hall begins to fill with more attendees. The last of whom was Moir. Who dressed himself in billowy silver and navy garments, his wispy beard floating upwards every now and then. He nods toward the hall rather than anyone in particular, and takes his seat between Rita and Reyna.

The chatter of the room reaches a pitch where everyone can comfortably speak openly. Moritz and Noaki were discussing the details of fusions and abilities when a late arrival entered.

Moritz nudges Noaki, who sees and nudges Quentin.

Aalim, in a cloudy silver and white silk kurta, seats himself in the remaining seat between Quentin and an older gentleman with round spectacles.

"Aalim," the chancellor chides, "you're very late. I was afraid we would have to begin without you."

Noaki, Quentin, and Moritz share a look of realization. Noaki's assertions hadn't been wrong all along, he picked up on something Moritz never might have suspected. Aalim was part of the royal family.

"My apologies uncle," Aalim bows his head curtly.

The chancellor claps, attracting the hall's attention. "Welcome honorable guests and family," he opens. "I am pleased to see everyone here. These are busy times, so I extend my appreciation for your attendance." The chancellor signals to a staff member and the room fills with waiters and serving women, placing down dinnerware and filling their chalices with milky-pearl wine.

Moritz notices Veynir eyeing the drink warily. Noaki appears disinterested in the whole affair and focuses his attention on the people sitting around the table. While food is being set out, the conversations grow livelier.

Once more the chancellor claps everyone's attention and he recites the hymn, in that beautiful voice reverberating throughout the hall. The aysheks dim to a moonlit luminosity, and they are once more illumined by the light of the blue flames and evening sun.

"Aalim, I didn't know you were royalty," Quentin assembles his selections onto a plate, "why didn't you tell us?"

"I did not see why it mattered," Aalim responds flatly.

"Royalty or not," Noaki chews on a tough root, "you're still the same to us."

"That's right," Moritz adds, "an eavesdropper. A royal one at that."

"Did you get around to submitting that request?" Quentin dips a loaf of beytil in melted ghee, "it'd be a shame if you didn't accompany us."

"What request?" One of the twins, the one with a mustache, shifts his attention toward their conversation.

"It does not concern you," Aalim answers.

"I should've known you would find a way out of duty," the second twin sips from his chalice.

"We really would appreciate a guide throughout the city," Noaki defends Aalim.

"If I were you, okari, I'd lower my voice," the second twin responds flatly.

"The royal family is not allowed outside the city," the first twin explains. "Of course everyone finds their way into the city, we'd all have lost our minds by now if we didn't leave."

Moritz lathers yogurt onto a tart, "so you all break the rules anyway, everyone knows it, but no one tries to change them?"

"It is a customary rule set in place for the public," the second twin sifts through a series of leafy selections, "to show the public that tradition is still alive."

"I don't know," Moritz takes a sip of elixir, "the people seem to enjoy having royalties in their streets."

"Our uncle is a different matter altogether," the first twin plops a berry into his mouth. "Uncle is beloved by all. The rest of us," he drinks from his chalice.

"Would hardly be distinguishable in what the public attires themselves in," the second twin finishes.

"We're not too Disappointed brother," the first twin smiles. "Tomorrow's taikhetudin roster is looking to be quite the spectacle."

Quentin almost leaps from his seat, "there's a competition tomorrow?!"

"Yes, I don't suspect you'll all be attending?" The first twin downs the contents of his drink and gestures to the wait staff to refill.

"I can't speak for Noaki and Moritz, but I'll be there for certain." Quentin adds a mix of seeds and nuts into an orange soup, topped off with an herb of some sort.

Moritz recounts the argument between Quentin and Aalim during Noaki's diagnosis. "I think I'll attend myself, Noaki?"

Noaki comes to attention, as if he'd been preoccupied with something. "Yeah, it sounds exciting."

"So what say you Aalim?" Quentin asks the adolescent.



"I never submitted the request," he spoons a grainy paste over a beytil, "but that's never stopped me before."

"Most members of the family will attend in disguise." The first twin subtly hints at the chancellor, "our beloved uncle on the other hand."

"Is expected to attend," the second twin finishes, biting down on a savory piece of fruit.

"Why the chancellor?" Noaki submerges an assortment of seeds into a green soup.

"It's not apparent?" The second twin answers.

"Uncle is beloved by all for his medicinal expertise, a true genius in the vitae." The first twin downs the contents of his chalice and signals a servant to refill.

"A fragment of his popularity with the denizens of the city is his contribution to healing the taikhetudin duelists." The second twin dabs at his mouth with a napkin.

"Even that is just research for our uncle," the first twin downs the entire contents of the chalice.

"To the duelists, our uncle is their physician," the second twin exchanges a nod with his identical.

"To him, the duelists are insightful patients that allow him to concoct new medicine." They both rise in unison, bow to their uncle, conceal their faces and excuse themselves for the rest of dinner.

"That's what I couldn't put my finger on," Noaki laughs.

"Put your finger on what?" Moritz finishes a very bitter tasting root.

"Didn't you recognize them when they covered their faces?" Noaki sips his wine.

Moritz recounts their uniform and Aalim being restrained by two guards. "Those were the two guards from the library."

"I suspected something might've been off about them," Noaki slurps his soup.

The rest of the evening went without event, Moritz and Noaki equally had a bit more of that lunar concoction than they intended, and stumbled to their chambers with Quentin's guidance.

Moritz plops onto his bed, feeling out of sorts. If his mother had made it across the sea, was she still here? He sighs, rolls over and lands on the floor with a loud thud.

The Holy Lands, Celestials, levitating sea serpents, gems. This all felt like a fairytale he might enjoy reading, but not actually want to live. Yet here he was.

With eyes closed, he faces the ceiling and dreams the sounds of winter.

## Hesessür | Eraat: II

Although wearing nothing underneath his dark and light blue vest, and given the nighttime, the streets were uncomfortably hot. Logan wonders how any vegetation manages to flourish under these conditions.

He follows the disguised pair of Enes and Demir patrolling the streets. Biding his time for the perfect opportunity to confront them, and to be certain that those voices truly belonged to the veteran duo.

"They're starting to suspect us," the pair on the right says.

"Be that as it may, there are still things to do," the pair on the left remarks.

They turn a corner and Logan has to jump across the street to keep on their tail. He listens hard, they'd furthered their discussion while he was trying to close the gap.

"...scum. It's time we rid ourselves of them. Why isn't Eraat doing anything?" Says the one on the right.

"How do you imagine Eraat stays in power?" The left one responds.

The two continue to patrol in silence for a while before they enter an empty courtyard.

Logan relieves a sigh of relief when Enes removes his covering. Revealing thick dark eyebrows and a clumping mess of sweat drenched curls. The amber of his almond shaped eyes are looking fierce.

"It's so damn hot here. The only good thing about this city is the vitae." Enes dabs at his eyebrows. "We've not heard from them yet, shouldn't we contact them now?"

"Fool! Put it back on," Demir hisses. "Thirty years of experience and you're still acting like a youth."

"You can be too uptight at times," Enes dons his covering. "So how about it? Isn't it time we contact them?"

"The Etraean says they know we're both here. They'll find us when it's time." Demir responds in his unmistakable gruff voice.

With assurance that these two were Demir and Enes, Logan leaps from the roof, awkwardly landing between them. The flesh of his neck is dangerously met with the ends of their maces.

"Whoa! Easy, it's just me!" Logan hisses.

Enes glances at Demir. "Shall we teach the boy a lesson?"

Demir retracts his mace. "Surrounded by fools!"

Enes looks Logan up and down once more before retracting his mace. "Be careful next time, I might ask questions later."

Logan relieves a sigh. "What's gotten you two on edge? And why are we here?"

Demir nods to Logan. "You've recovered, the Nagari summoner almost took your life."

"You could've told me you two were here," Logan shakes his head. "I didn't find out until Olivia came."

Enes and Demir share a perplexed glance.

"Olivia?" Enes repositions his mace. "Who's Olivia?"

"His roommate," Demir answers.

"The lovely young lady? Why is she here?" Enes scopes the area.

"I'd hope you two would tell me," Logan retrieves the Izlara from his pocket. "Çetin told her to bring me this."

Enes' eyes widen. "Fool boy! Conceal it!"

Logan quickly pockets the Izlara.

"Çetin's position must have been compromised." Demir shakes his head. "We'll tell you everything, not here. It may not seem like it but the walls have eyes and ears."

Logan nods. "I'm staying at the--"

"-We know which inn." Demir interrupts. "Don't speak so openly."

Enes nods. "We learned of it three days ago. That Etraean practitioner informed us."

"We'd been expecting Çetin, not your Olivia." Demir's grip on his mace tightens. "This is troublesome. Go on, we'll rendezvous in the morning."

Logan assents and departs the two with whispered information of his lodgings.

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Back at the Avaha Inn Logan finds Halil snoozing away over a scattering of papers and books. He nudges the adolescent with his finger.

Halil opens his eyes. "Mister Logan?"

Logan is tickled at being called Mister. "Halil, just Logan is fine. You fell asleep at the desk again."

Halil sits up, glancing at his papers. "So I did."

"Why don't you go back to your room. I'll wake you if anything happens," Logan nods assuringly.

For the remainder of the night, Logan lounges on the lowrise sofa, cradling his head in his hands. Mulling over the details of this situation.

Before dawn breaks, there is a light knocking at the door. Logan arrives immediately to open it.

Demir's hard exterior greets him. He's out of disguise and in his blue and navy uniform from O'taomon. Standing beside him, watching the corridor, is Enes.

Logan ushers them inside and pours each of them water from the vessel, unconscious of his speed.

"Thank you," the aged Demir nods in appreciation and relaxes in his position.

"You saved my life boy," Enes grins and downs the contents of his cup. He rises to refill it.

"There isn't much to say," Demir begins. "Captain Emir told us to scout the area beforehand and wait for Çetin and the rest of the guard to come under pretense of escorting you back."

Enes takes a seat. "What's Emir playing at?"

"*Captain* Emir, is not playing at anything." Demir shakes his head, "something has gone wrong."

Logan leans his back against the wall. Çetin was supposed to come, not Olivia. His gaze drifts towards her room. "Were we supposed to infiltrate Hilal?"

Demir assents Emir's enquiring glance with a nod. The latter takes a drink before speaking. "Do you recall the night we captured the young man in the apothecary's ward?"

Logan nods. Garrett.

"After the translator finally arrived to help interrogate, we learned what medicine he intended to make off with," Enes drains the contents of his cup. "Though they're simply plants, the period of maturation takes an incredibly long time and is short lived."

"Couldn't you have asked the apothecaries which plants he'd taken?" Logan comments.

Demir shakes his head. "The master apothecary accompanied the Gran Vizier to the World Summit."

Logan nods.

"When we realized which medicine had been taken it was already too late. The thief that did escape had them." Enes gestures to Demir, "Demir had sense enough to follow the dark one."

Logan recalls those strange mist abilities. "How?"

Demir is silent for a time, collecting his thoughts. When he finally speaks, his voice is rife with foreboding uncertainty. "The Insignia of Drahsrhaeon, it is a metaphor for those... abilities."

For a time Demir sits in relative silence, collecting his thoughts. When finally he speaks, his voice is full of uncertainty. "I followed the mistings of the dark one."

"It lead me deep into the heart of old O'taomon where a dalkarian marker illuminated the area." Neither Enes or Logan comment, so he continues. "

Neither Enes or Logan comment so he continues. "I followed the mist, far beyond the city. He knew I was trailing him." Demir visibly shudders, "he was toying with me. Leading me deep into the desert where I became weak. It was only then that he revealed himself to me."

"He told me he was the progeny of Drahsrhaeon - from dalkarian it means the '*dark one*.' Those were his only

words and I was left to roam back to O'taomon." Demir shakes his head. "When I returned the captain and I relayed the urgency of the matter. The plants, only one of its kind grows at the palace and it's one of the ingredients for-

"-Amrita."

The three spring to their feet at the voice.

Halil silently stands in the corner, gazing into space.

"Halil," Logan begins. "You should get some rest."

Halil ignores Logan and gestures to the sofa. "May I join you?"

Demir scrutinized the youth for a moment and relaxes. "Yes, you're from O'taomon?"

Halil nods. "I study at the University."

Logan offers Halil a cup of water. "How long have you been listening?"

"Since the beginning." Halil accepts the cup. "I heard voices." He takes a sip of water before continuing. "It is for Amrita, yes?"

Demir nods.

"What *is* Amrita?" Logan glances at Olivia's door, wondering if she too was listening in on this exchange.

"It is an elixir of immortality." Halil shrugs, "that's the legend. No one entirely knows for certain what it is."

"Or how it can be used," Enes adds.

Halil nods in agreement. "It has only ever been concocted once, by the esteemed Mahtammel Aljhebrai.