Broken Crown

### Chapter 1 : The Stranger (Prologue)

In the muted embrace of a moonlit forest, the silver light of the twin moons cast ethereal shadows, weaving a tapestry of serenity and whispered secrets. The cool air carried the unmistakable scent of autumn, the world on the cusp of change, holding its breath in anticipation.

Amidst this tranquility, a single golden leaf, edges adorned with the vibrant hues of twilight, broke free from its branch. It twirled through the still air, surrendering to nature’s whims. The descent came to an abrupt halt as it hovered, suspended in mid-flight. The leaf trembled for a moment, then crumbled in on itself, and disappeared without a trace.

As the leaf vanished, the first of the cracks appeared in its place, a delicate fracture in reality that shimmered like a spider’s web. An almost imperceptible shift in the atmosphere took hold, like the first note of a haunting melody. The air around the clearing shimmered, the ground trembled ever so slightly, and a barely audible hum filled the air. The sound grew in intensity, resonating with an energy that seemed to ripple through existence itself. Within moments, the crack multiplied, spreading across the clearing in a mesmerizing pattern. It was as if looking through a broken mirror, fragmented and distorted, each shard reflecting a twisted version of the world it once contained.

With a sudden, deafening crack, the fractures reached their breaking point, and an inky black void appeared in its center. It looked like a gaping maw in the fabric of reality, beckoning with an irresistible pull. The broken shards of the world trembled and swayed as if drawn towards the void, but never quite detaching from their tenuous connection to the forest.

A shadowy figure loomed within the void, a dark silhouette standing at the edge of two worlds. With considerable effort, the stranger forced a hand through the rift, as though chains sought to keep him bound within. As he emerged, the void’s surface contorted and stretched around him, straining to hold on to the intruder.

Finally, the visitor entered the clearing, pulling free from the grip of the rift, as the rift slowly closed behind him. The stranger wore metallic armor that covered most of his body. At the center of the armor, there was a circular emblem that gave off a faint, pulsing glow of soft blue light. Thin lines of energy extended from the emblem, spreading across the rest of the armor.

The figure surveyed his surroundings and then looked upwards to the smaller of the twin moons. As if addressing an old acquaintance, the armored figure asked,

“How is the view from up there?”

The forest appeared to hold its breath, the silence deep and reverent. The rift had fully closed by this point, leaving behind only the scars of the fractures, which were in the process of slow healing as well.

He extended two fingers, gently touching his temple. The armor encasing his face seemed to come alive, a river of liquid metal retracting and merging seamlessly with the rest of his armored suit. His face, now visible, had ash-blue skin and strong features.

His eyes, completely dark and without pupils, drew attention. A small, round object nestled in his temple caught the light. Pressing it gently, he spoke up.

“Hey, Lara, you there?” His voice was calm but expectant.

After a few more moments of silence, someone answered. It was a woman’s voice. She sounded as if she were standing right beside him.

“Ya, I’m here. Sorry Adem, we just found something interesting in the scans.”

She paused for a second then added, “The lab should be straight ahead of you, you can’t miss it”

Adem waited, and when he realized she wasn’t going to say anything more, he asked.

“And? Are you going to tell me what you found?”

“Oh, my bad.” Her reply was almost instant. Then continued, “You know how I told you this place was uninhabited?”

“Go on…”, his body unconsciously shifted into a defensive stance, as he focused solely on the voice.

“Well... turns out it’s not. We found a city close to your location.”

“So, what exactly am I walking into?”

She was quick to answer this time. “Oh, nothing like that. It’s just a bit strange, you know?”

The corner of his eyes twitched as he heard this.

“No, I don’t know, because you are not telling me anything”

Lara gave a small chuckle, then said in a carefree tone.

“It’s a human city. From the infrastructure, it seems like they’ve been here for a while. scans don’t show much activity anywhere else on the planet, so they mostly seem to live in that single city”

“Now was that so hard?,” He paused and thought for a moment. “Wait, did you say humans? What the hell are they doing here?”

“Hence the strangeness,”

“Huh. So, how did they get here?” Adem asked, his brow furrowing.

“How am I supposed to know? You know as much as I do now.” Lara said, with a hint of amusement in her voice. “It’s interesting, though. I don’t think they have a way to get off this rock..”

“Well see, I didn’t know that.”

“Can you just go do the job instead of annoying me?”

“Yes, boss.”

With that, Adem took a deep breath and focused, as the glow in his suit slightly intensified. He crouched down, then with a sudden jump propelled himself forward, covering a significant distance in just one step.

As he approached a tree directly in his path, he shifted his weight to the left in a fluid motion, narrowly avoiding the collision. He then shifted back to his original position, planting his foot against the tree and using the momentum to catapult himself even further. The force of his kick cracked the tree trunk, sending fragments of bark flying.

The surrounding forest became a blur as he moved from one step to the next. Every action flowed into the next, each stride increasing its velocity. His movements were seamless, adapting to the terrain like a living extension of the forest itself. He created a vortex in his wake, swirling leaves and branches that seemed to dance around him.

Adem’s eyes caught a glimpse of something intriguing in the distance. Through the gaps in the trees, he could make out the top of a towering structure, as if it were emerging from the depths of the forest. It was still quite far away, but there was no denying its majesty. The crystalline structure glistened in the moonlight, as a soft hint of violet materialized on its surface.

Catching sight of his destination, a grin spread across Adem’s ash-blue face. With a surge of energy pulsating through his armor, he propelled himself forward. Now, with the mysterious tower drawing nearer, anticipation hung in the air like the scent of an impending storm, hinting at the revelations and adventures that lay just beyond the horizon.

To be continued…

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### Chapter 2 : Better (Prologue)

“It’s a bit bigger than usual, huh?” Lara asked.

The tower loomed over him like a dark titan; Its deep obsidian hue was enlivened by a delicate, almost imperceptible outline of violet that seemed to materialize only when the twin moons’ light caressed its surface.

Its form resembled a crystal formation, with needle-like clusters extending into a long, slender column that pierced the heavens. Rising from the very heart of the landscape, as if the earth itself had birthed it. The irregularly sized crystal needles and the intricate tangle of jagged edges imbued the structure with a wild, untamed demeanor. Yet, beneath its chaotic exterior, there was an underlying intention to its shape.

“Bit?” He let out a small chuckle. “Well, that’s an understatement. What is this thing, anyway? And why is it so big?”

“I guess we’ll find out soon enough. As for its size... they probably built it this big just because they could. Isn’t that how it usually goes with these things?”

As he walked towards the structure, Adam thought back to the grandiose buildings he had seen in his past, serving no purpose other than to flaunt power and wealth. But when it came to the Ashtel, he found it difficult to imagine them as being driven by the same petty motives. This was a civilization that had spanned the galaxy, their influence reaching every corner of it. He couldn’t envision them as being that small-minded.

“I don’t know. I’ve always pictured them as somehow... better,”

“I can understand that, but,” her voice trailed off for a moment as if she was gathering her thoughts. “But, you know, it’s kind of amazing when you think about it. We’ve discovered over 200 different races so far, and if you ignore the surface-level differences, we’re all so similar. It’s like we’re all built from the same blueprint. What do you make of that?”

She paused, giving him a chance to respond. However, Adam remained quiet, Lara continued in a more thoughtful tone, “The leading theory is that the Ashtel was a common ancestor for all of us. That could explain why we share so many characteristics.”

She added with a hint of conviction in her voice, “So, I guess what I am trying to say is that there’s no real reason to think they were all that different from us because, we might actually be, their long-lost relatives. You know, only with blue skin rather than whatever they had.”

“The key word being ‘theory,’” he remarked, running his hand along the tower’s crystalline surface. “Anyway, I think I found our entrance.”

“Let me know when you are ready,”

The Ashtel used a unique, organic crystalline material to construct their structures. It was, in a way, alive and grew over time. Though the growth rate was incredibly slow, it had been accumulating material for a substantial period, giving it an overgrown appearance. They had to clear away this excess growth before they could enter.

Adam retrieved the emblem embedded in his armor and secured it onto the wall, where it clung without any additional support. He then leaped back, putting some distance between himself and the tower.

“I’m ready.”

“Starting resonance in 3... 2...1.”

As the resonance began, the surrounding air filled with a subtle vibration. Gradually, cracks appeared in the crystal spire, and large chunks of crystal began to break off. They fell to the ground with a series of resonant thuds, each impact leaving an impression on the earth without breaking apart the crystals themselves. It was as though the tower itself was shedding an ancient armor, discarding the colossal, irregularly shaped shards that once obscured its true form.

Piece by piece, the debris fell away, like a grand sculpture emerging from the chisel of an unseen artist. Once the final fragments tumbled to the ground, what stood before them was a breathtaking, otherworldly tower made of black crystal. Its presence seemed both bold and refined, an elegant tribute to the mysterious civilization that had crafted it.

Adam stepped forward, his gaze drawn to the place where he had placed the emblem. As the resonance had worked its magic, the wall itself had shifted and retracted, revealing an opening within the tower. The once seamless exterior now displayed a yawning passage that beckoned him to enter. Just as he was about to step inside, Adam felt a sudden shiver run down his spine. He halted in his tracks and scanned his surroundings, an inexplicable uneasiness taking hold of him.

High above the tower, a faint light flickered to life, its intensity growing slowly but steadily. The soft violet hue was likely a result of the light passing through the crystal structure. Gradually, the world around Adam was bathed in an ethereal violet glow.

“Uh, Lara... Something’s happening.”

Her silence only added to the unsettling atmosphere as the light continued to intensify. The air grew heavy, as if charged with electricity, making the hair on Adam’s arms stand on end. Within seconds the violet hue was overwhelmed by a brilliant radiance that seemed to engulf the world.Adam could feel his heart rate accelerating, the tension knotting in his stomach.

“Damn it, Lara, talk to me! What the hell is going on?” he shouted, shielding his eyes with his elbow.

“I... I don’t know,” she stammered, her voice shaking with urgency. “But it’s not just there. It’s happening all over the planet. At least four other towers that we can see are doing the same thing, and there’s probably more on the other side…. We must have triggered some sort of chain reaction when we...”

Just then, a powerful pulse emanated from the tower, and her voice was replaced by an onslaught of unintelligible murmurs that invaded his mind. Although incomprehensible, the mere presence of the voices sent a cold shiver down his spine, making the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end and his skin tingle with unease.

As the whispers twisted and snaked their way through his thoughts, they felt like a swarm of serpents hissing with ill intent. Each voice appeared to hold an undercurrent of terrible secrets, a tangible darkness that crawled through his consciousness, leaving goosebumps on his skin and a relentless feeling of unease gnawing at the fringes of his sanity.

Adam fumbled with the device in his temple, his hands shaking and slick with sweat as he struggled to remove it. The whispers seemed to grow louder and more insistent with each passing second, their chilling resonance reverberating through his very bones. Finally, with a mix of relief and sheer panic, he managed to pry the device out. The moment he did, the voices stopped, and an eerie silence settled over him like a suffocating blanket.

The light surrounding him returned to its initial violet hue and began pulsing in a steady rhythm, casting strange shadows that danced around him. The air seemed to grow heavy with unsettling energy, making it harder to breathe. The atmosphere now held a menacing, haunting quality, and he could still sense the lingering presence of the whispers, like a dark cloud hovering above him.

He stared at the device in his hand, and then hesitantly placed it back on his temple. The whispers were gone, thankfully.

“Lara, come in...”

There was no reply.

“Lara, come in...”

Still no reply. The communicator was functioning; he was sure of it, but there was no response. Had something happened to his crew? His mind raced with possibilities. For the first time in a long while, Adam felt truly alone. He was in an alien world with no way to leave or contact his crew.

A thought flickered through his mind. ‘Interference? Maybe.’ He glanced at the tower. Then, with a sudden burst of energy, he dashed towards the entrance.

To be continued..

### Chapter 3 : Amber

Autumn's chill draped the campsite like a cool, ethereal curtain. Within the sanctuary of her tent, Amber twisted and turned on her sleeping bag, her body seeking comfort in vain. With a gentle sigh, she surrendered to wakefulness, her eyes blinking open to the faint shadows dancing on the ceiling.

Two weeks. That's how long it had been since they had made this encampment their temporary home, and not once had she felt the sweet embrace of a good night's sleep. The air felt damp, seeping into her bones, as if it carried the weight of the unfulfilled dreams she had brought along on this expedition. Her mind replayed memories of cozy nights wrapped in a warm blanket, a stark contrast to the dampness that clung to her skin now. At first, she was excited when she learned she had been chosen for this venture beyond the city walls. Her first time stepping foot outside the familiar confines, the promises of adventure and discovery had felt too alluring.

But the reality of it all had hit her hard. The nights were restless, plagued by strange sounds that echoed through the forest. Most of all, she despised how everything was always wet. It seemed utterly relentless, as if Mother Nature had conspired to transform their camp into a perpetual swamp, determined to dampen not just their surroundings, but also her spirits. At this point, she wanted to go back. She longed to curl up in her bed, maybe even eat something that had some flavor to it.

And then there was their mission, or lack thereof. Studying the mysterious spire proved to be more of a test of patience than a thrilling adventure. The professors called it 'studying,' but to her, it felt more like an endless cycle of watchful waiting. No matter how hard they tried, it seemed they couldn't even scratch it, let alone take a sample. It remained resolute, untouched by their endeavors, as if it revealed in their frustration to unravel its mysteries.

Just as she was about to surrender to another attempt at sleep, a soft, violet glow seeped through the thin fabric of her tent. It started as a faint flicker, a delicate light that steadily grew in intensity. What unsettled Amber even more than the mysterious light was the sudden hush that descended upon the campsite.

The soldiers' banter and laughter vanished, swallowed by an eerie silence. It was as if the night itself held its breath, waiting for something remarkable to unfold. Curiosity mingled with trepidation, coaxing Amber to rise from her sleeping bag and unzip the tent, revealing the transformed world outside.

Stepping into the night, Amber's eyes widened in awe. The campsite had become an otherworldly oasis, bathed in a mesmerizing wash of violet and lavender hues. It was as if a cosmic artist had taken their brush and painted the entire landscape with an ethereal glow.

The air shimmered with an otherworldly luminescence, casting a soft, enchanting light on the surrounding trees and undergrowth. The foliage seemed to come alive, leaves and branches dancing with a vibrant iridescence. Every blade of grass, every petal on the flowers, emitted a subtle, otherworldly beauty that defied the ordinary.

As Amber marveled at the transformed scene, her gaze was drawn to the treeline in the distance. There, partially concealed by the tall trees, stood a sight that filled her with wonder. It was a colossal spire, reaching toward the heavens, its true majesty partly veiled yet captivating in its grandeur.

The spire emanated a pulsating light from its peak, casting an ethereal glow that bathed the surroundings. It seemed to be the source of the enchanting violet radiance that permeated the campsite. Amber couldn't help but feel a magnetic pull as if beckoning her to approach and uncover the truths that lay hidden within its depths.

Like a moth drawn to a flame, she meandered through the maze of tents until she found herself standing next to a familiar figure. Professor Harding, a man who carried his age like a well-read book, seemed entranced by the spectacle. His eyes, usually as calm, shimmered with electric excitement. Amber held her breath and stood beside him, her gaze mirroring his.

"What's happening, Professor?" Amber called out to Harding, her voice laced with a mix of confusion and concern. But he seemed lost in his world, oblivious to her presence. His silence left her with unanswered questions, yet something inside her urged her to remain silent as well, simply to observe and be captivated by the unfolding spectacle.

The intensity of the light emanating from the spire continued to grow, casting an almost blinding radiance. Harding reluctantly averted his gaze, unable to withstand its brilliance. Amber, on the other hand, felt a peculiar sensation within her. Her eyes burned, a discomfort that bordered on pain, yet she couldn't tear her gaze away from the luminous display.

A sense of terror washed over her as she slowly realized that she couldn't move. It was as if some unseen force compelled her to keep her eyes fixed on the blinding light. Her mind raced, trying to make sense of it all. Why was she unable to turn away?

As her heart pounded in her chest, Amber struggled against the invisible chains that held her in place, the weight of her powerlessness pressing upon her. For moments that felt like an eternity, Amber stood there, eyes locked on the intense glow. In the next moment, without warning, a powerful pulse emanated from the tower.

Then came the whispers, an invisible maelstrom that stormed her mind. Each murmur was a gust of arctic wind, causing goosebumps to ripple across her skin, each word a serpent slithering its cold scales through her consciousness. A sense of dread, as tangible as the chill in the air, gnawed at her sanity's edges.

She tried to resist, to push the whispers away, but the effort was like trying to stem a flood with a sieve. Her mind was no longer her own; it was a battleground where she was losing the war. The whispers were relentless, consuming every corner of her consciousness until there was nothing left of her but the echoing murmurs.

The urge to scream clawed its way up her throat, a desperate plea for relief. It echoed in her mind, but she wasn't sure if it had found its way out. If she had truly screamed, she wasn't sure if her voice was even hers anymore, or if the whispers had stolen it too.

Gradually, Amber felt the borders of herself start to blur, her essence slowly dissolving, merging into the limitless expanse. The whispers that had once consumed her now began to fade, like a storm subsiding into a gentle breeze. Then, abruptly, there was silence.

To be continued…

### Chapter 4 : Cosmic resonance

Coming back to herself was like waking up from a deep, dreamless sleep. The sensation was profoundly odd, as if she were there, but not in the way she used to be. She was merely drifting, a bundle of thoughts and emotions lost in a vast expanse.

No scent filled her nose, no light reached her eyes, no sound resonated in her ears, no taste lingered on her tongue, and no texture met her touch. It was as if she had lost her old senses but gained a new one. It was a sense of awareness, limitless and everywhere at once. Oddly, it didn’t scare her. In fact, it made her feel peaceful.

This awareness started warming her up from the inside. It was like a small sun had kindled within her and was expanding its reach. She couldn’t make sense of it, not at first, but she tried.

In her mind, she pictured a blank canvas. Then, slowly, she began to add color to it, filling the empty sketch with her new understanding. A hazy picture began to form. She saw herself floating in a silvery, glowing mist, like a feather caught in the breeze. She felt like she was in an endless, calm ocean, filled with untold possibilities.

As her awareness grew, the mist changed too, like a partner in a dance revealing itself one step at a time. It parted, revealing a beautiful blend of muted purples, deep blues, and brilliant silvers that flowed and weaved together like the northern lights.

She wasn’t just watching it. She was understanding it, feeling it, connecting with it on a deep level. It was like she was tapping into a pearl of universal wisdom, feeling the colors move around her, listening to their silent stories.

Amidst this cosmic dance, she felt others. They were formless, like her, echoing her state of being. They were sleeping, waiting, just as she was. She was not alone.

The canvas of her mind brimmed with the gentle whisperings of these unseen others, soft murmurs that surged and ebbed like the rhythm of the sea. It was strange, yet intimate, a connection sculpted not from shared words or memories, but from shared existence, a thread woven through the fabric of existence.

Just as she reached out, her thoughts fluttering towards these nebulous presences, she felt a tug.

The pull felt almost like a heartstring being tugged, a stirring that bore an uncanny familiarity. It hummed with a gentle insistence, coaxing her toward its source. It differed from the murmurs of the unseen others. It was more defined, more present, like a lone melody rising above a symphony’s hum.

Without a second thought, she began moving towards it. There was no conscious decision, no pondering. It was as if her essence was simply responding, resonating with the call of this other presence. It felt like stepping onto a dance floor, swept away by a rhythm that was irresistible, seductive.

The distance between her and the source of the pull diminished, not in terms of space, for the concept seemed to lose its meaning here, but in terms of resonance. She felt the other presence even before she saw it - a subtle vibration, a unique frequency in the vast symphony of existence.

As they neared, the connection intensified. It sparked, then roared, like a fire catching the wind. It was too much, too soon, and yet, it felt inevitable, like the tide drawn to the moon. The sensation was overwhelming, a surge of desire that threatened to consume her, to dissolve her into this intimate dance.

The mist, seemingly sentient, curled and twisted around them, reacting to the almost tangible energy that pulsed between them. It was as if their shared energy ignited the air itself, causing the surrounding space to glow with a surreal luminescence.

She extended herself, this ephemeral form of hers, towards the figure. Each movement felt like a plea, a yearning cry without words. She was too entranced to harbor any expectations or reservations. She was simply drawn, as if a string tied to the core of her existence was gently, but persistently, tugging her closer.

The fog around them swirled wildly, a tempest reacting to their close proximity. It danced and twisted, a maelstrom reflecting the storm of emotions whirling within her. The presence... It was a human, a man, Of this she was certain.

She sensed his confusion, his captivation mirroring her own, their resonance forming an intangible bond between them. It was as if they were reflections in a shared pool of existence, witnessing each other's intimate struggle, caught in the same powerful undertow.

She hesitated but only for a moment. Her resolve melted away, consumed by the powerful desire that stirred within her. She yearned to lose herself in this bond that was so overpowering, so inevitable.

Just as she was about to touch him, a voice sliced through the hush of their shared space. It didn't echo around them; instead, it emerged from the void itself, sharp and clear, a blade of sound cutting through the ephemeral silence.

"Get away from me."

The voice was male, young, laced with confusion—mirroring her own. The words reverberated through her, a shockwave that jolted her from a swirling sea of desire. The connection didn't falter; it still pulsed with enticing warmth, but now she found herself able to resist its powerful allure.

"What are you doing to me?"

His voice rang out again, filled with uncertainty and defensiveness. It came from the same strange void as before, the space vibrating with his resonant tones. This time, she was certain—the voice belonged to the boy. It carried his words, his emotions, yet it was the space around them that conveyed his voice.

Taking a moment to gather herself, she realized maybe she could do the same.

"I'm not doing anything to you."

Her voice was soft, feminine, seemingly emanating from everywhere and nowhere simultaneously.

Despite the uncanny situation they found themselves in, he believed her, and she could feel it. Like an open book, his emotions, doubts, and thoughts lay bare before her, and she wondered if her own were equally visible to him.

She extended her senses towards him, seeing a swirling vortex of emotions. Surprisingly, fear was absent. He seemed cautious but not afraid. It was impressive, his ability to adapt to this extraordinary circumstance.

It struck her then—how she had adjusted as well. Thrust into this unfamiliar reality, she hadn't panicked. Thinking back, she remembered the camp, the strange lights in the sky, and the unsettling whispers invading her mind. They all felt like a dream, a distant memory compared to the serenity she currently experienced.

"Fear? I don't feel fear," she blurted out.

He turned towards her, silently curious, prompting an explanation.

To be continued..