

Shadow Ocean

By Azakaela Erin Redfire

The Canvas is infinite... but it is not empty.

Iridescent waves of shadow rise into the sky, cresting and crashing upon shores of silver sand.

This is the Umbra, the First Prime Material—an ocean of shifting void, endless and unknowable. It is Sky and Sea.

A lone lighthouse Keeper watches from within the Sphere, their gaze lost in the tide. The whispers come as they always do—soft as static, heavy as prophecy. Secrets unspoken ripple through its currents, lapping at the edges of understanding. The Keeper listens. The Canvas speaks.

"She is waiting..."

Frame 1 - The Pilot - Ra'ala Duskbane

Ra'ala adjusted her grip on the control levers, feeling the familiar weight of them against her palms. The Journer vessel hummed around her, the steady pulse of the Zeal engine thrumming through the reinforced hull like the slow, measured heartbeat of something alive. Out here, at the threshold of the Below, that heartbeat was the only thing standing between her and oblivion.

In the viewport, the Sphere of Edeya loomed ahead. Vast and radiant, its colossal form was wreathed in sprawling coral-like structures that glowed with an ethereal luminescence. The Spheres were behemoths of alchemical forces that pushed back against the suffocating grasp of the Umbra. They created worlds that fostered life and civilization within their boundaries. The sight of such things, even commonplace to a seasoned Journer Pilot like Ra'ala, never lost their novelty. Each Sphere was different; each Sphere was beautiful. These massive structures contained the source of all life, *Caelux*, at their centers. The second Prime Material. Unlike the Umbra (which was a dark iridescent liquid), *Caelux* was Light and Air.

The closer Ra'ala drew, the more the crushing pressure of the Below seemed to ease—as the Sphere's presence carved out a fragile sanctuary amidst the shifting tides.

From the outside, the Sphere's *Caelux* core pulsed with luminescence, revealing the latticework of organic spires and mechanical scaffolding that jutted from its surface. Residual Umbra clung to its outer edges, shifting and sloughing away as the radiant energy repelled its encroaching grasp. This was both haven and boundary; the last threshold before the unknown swallowed all traces of certainty.

Ra'ala exhaled slowly, guiding the vessel forward. The Umbra currents pressed around her ship, shifting in unseen tides; an invisible force trying to pull her off-course. The pressure readings fluctuated for a fraction of a second—just long enough to make the breath catch in her throat—before stabilizing again. She gave the console a firm tap, muttering under her breath.

“Not today.”

The station's beacon made itself known through overlays on the viewport, marking the designated approach vector. Her ship's guidance system flickered, responding sluggishly. The Sphere's docking network wasn't transmitting the usual automated landing data, which meant she'd have to do this the old way.

“Fine.”

She manually aligned the ship's trajectory, relying on instinct and experience. The

ever-shifting layers of the Below pulled at her hull, but the proximity to the Sphere made the transitions smoother – the oppressive forces ebbing just enough for finer control. The ship's underbelly thrusters fired in short bursts — as Ra'ala adjusted their pitch and speed, smoothing out the approach. The familiar challenge of the maneuver settled her nerves.

Docking clamps engaged with a heavy metallic clunk, locking onto the vessel's hull. A moment later, the ship's systems adjusted, switching from deep-Umbra operations to port status. The engine powered down with a long, exhaling whine, leaving only the station's ambient hum filtering through the hull.

Ra'ala let her hands fall from the controls and flexed her fingers. Another journey completed. Another return from the dark.

But it was never that simple, was it?

She sat for a moment in the dim glow of the console, the lights flickering faintly as the ship transitioned to station power. Through the viewport, the Sphere's docking bay stretched outward, bathed in the soft glow of Caelux-fueled lanterns. Workers in maintenance rigs drifted along the outer hull, running checks, patching damage, and refueling the ships that had made it back.

Not all ships did.

With a final breath, Ra'ala unbuckled her harness and stood, rolling the tension from her shoulders. The rest of the crew would be waiting. Time to make port.

She stepped toward the airlock, feeling the faintest vibration beneath her boots as the docking umbilical extended, sealing them to the station. The hiss of the pressure equalization cycle began, a prelude to the transition from ship to shore.

As always, the thought followed her:

How long would it be until they left again?

Frame 2 - Ceremony of Arrival - Ra'ala Dusbane

Captain Ra'ala stood at the gateway, gazing into the icy blue eyes of her reflection. For a moment, she saw not just a pilot, but a leader. Her silhouette stood against the dim glow of the control room's lights, painted in shifting hues of gold and shadow—a figure of dormant emotion, bound by duty.

Her wavy black hair was pulled into a tail that draped over her left shoulder, a cap adorned her head, its fabric stitched with the sigil of Journey.

A symbol, a burden, a promise.

She raised a hand to the gate's control panel. The words of the ceremony surfaced in her mind, recalled not through thought, but through muscle—an invocation spoken a hundred times before.

For the span of a breath, she remained still. Then, with a hiss of hydraulics, the doorway slid open.

Lights flickered to life as she crossed the threshold.

The crew stood at attention just beyond the bulkhead, waiting in formation. The quiet anticipation was palpable, the air thick with the shared weight of survival. They had returned, and for that, they would honor the moment.

Ra'ala placed her hands behind her back, straightened her spine, and let her voice ring clear through the metal and the faint glow of the lanterns.

"We have traveled the tides of the Canvas and returned to stand beneath the light once more. The Sphere welcomes those who have crossed the threshold. May we drink, may we rest, may we set foot on solid ground and know that we have lived."

The words resonated, an echo of the countless Journeyers who had come before them. A long, reverent beat of silence followed before the crew exhaled as one. Some murmured quiet words to themselves. Others closed their eyes for a fleeting moment of stillness.

Then, as was tradition, they laughed.

A tension unwound; a nervous release of breath that carried relief and exhaustion alike. Journeyers did not weep at their return. They laughed, because they had defied the Below once more, and that was worth celebrating.

The crew dispersed, some heading toward the station's inner chambers, others clasping each other's shoulders in wordless understanding.

Ra'ala lingered a moment longer, watching them go. A thought surfaced in her mind, not unwelcome, but ever present:

How long could they pretend this place was home?

Frame 3 - Those Who Linger - Crew of the Wayfarer

Captain Ra'ala was not the only one who had remained behind as the others had made their way off the ship and into the welcoming arms of Edeya's lively port.

Three of her most valued crew stood nearby, the engineer, the alchemist, and the quartermaster.

Ra'ala let out a slow breath. The ceremony was over, but she could feel the tension in the air. They weren't done yet.

Saren was the first to speak.

"Captain, we've got a problem."

Ra'ala turned her head slightly. Of course, there was a problem. There always was. She met Saren's gaze, already bracing herself.

Engineer - Saren Holt

Saren stood with her arms crossed, her jumpsuit marked with oil stains and faint bioluminescent smears. The exo-prosthetic on her left arm flexed slightly as she adjusted the weight of her tool belt.

"The Zeal Engine's running thin." Her voice was blunt, no room for sugarcoating. "That creature's at its limit, and no amount of coaxing is gonna get us another full cycle out of it. We need a replacement. Now."

Ra'ala clenched her jaw. The Zeal Engine—the living heart of their vessel. It wasn't just a machine, and it wasn't something they could simply fix. If it failed, they weren't going anywhere.

"How long?"

Saren exhaled through her nose. "Maybe a day. Maybe an hour. Either way, it won't last another jump."

Ra'ala glanced at the docking bay beyond them. The Garden Sphere had the resources to keep the ship running—if they could make the right deal.

Veylan's voice cut through her thoughts.

Alchemist - Veylan Asra

The alchemist moved with deliberate precision, his robes trailing slightly as he stepped forward. He smelled of salt and crushed minerals, a scent Ra'ala had long since come to associate with his craft.

"Captain, the Sphere's market has what we need. But there's a complication." She tilted her head. "Of course there is."

Veylan smiled, but it was thin. "The Gardeners won't trade for raw coin. They deal in equivalence. If we want a Zeal Engine, we need something of equal alchemical value."

Ra'ala sighed. That complicated things. The cargo they carried had been meant for trade, but would it be enough?

Elara was already ahead of her.

Quartermaster - Elara Voss

Elara stood with her arms crossed, datapad in hand, sharp eyes scanning through shipment details. She had the look of someone who had already considered every possibility and was simply waiting for everyone else to catch up.

"Captain, we need to go over the shipment. Edeya is a Garden Sphere, which means regulations are tight. Our permits are good, but they'll be double-checking every crate. If we've got contraband, we need to know before they do."

Ra'ala's gaze flicked toward her. Their eyes met for a moment before Elara quickly looked away, tapping the side of the datapad.

"... Considering our engine problem, we might need to make some creative Negotiations."

Ra'ala inhaled, steadyng herself. The weight of command was always like this—a constant balancing act. A choice between what needed to be done and what they could afford to risk.

She exhaled, gaze shifting to the glowing horizon of the Sphere beyond the docking Bay.

"How much more will the Gardeners demand of us?"

They didn't disperse immediately. Ra'ala could feel the hesitation in the air,

unspoken thoughts lingering between them. It was Saren who broke the silence first. "Even if we secure a new Zeal Engine, we still need time to integrate it. This isn't a simple swap, Captain. We're talking about bonding a new Zealian to our ship—tuning its resonance, adjusting flow regulators, making sure it doesn't reject the system. That's days of work, minimum."

Ra'ala pinched the bridge of her nose. More time. They were already at the mercy of this Sphere's rules; now they had to contend with delays in repairs too.

Veylan folded his arms. "If the Gardeners refuse trade, we may have to consider alternative negotiations. They prize knowledge, Captain. Secrets, discoveries, even histories lost to the Umbra—these things have value to them."

Ra'ala raised an eyebrow. "And what exactly do we have that they'd want?"

Veylan tilted his head, a glint in his eye. "That depends on how much of our past we're willing to share."

Elara, meanwhile, was still scrolling through her datapad. "Before we start offering up our deepest secrets, let's confirm what's in our hold. If we've got something rare enough, we might not have to gamble with knowledge." Her fingers tapped against the screen. "There was an unlisted crate loaded back on the last Sphere. Something anomalous. I didn't pry then, but I think now would be a good time to take a closer look."

Ra'ala's expression hardened. "We're already dealing with a broken engine and a market that won't take our credits. And now you're telling me we also have a mystery crate in our hold?"

Elara smirked faintly. "I'm telling you we should check before the Gardeners do."

Frame 4 - Storm in the Hold - Ra'ala Dusbane

Ra'ala strode down the dimly lit corridor, her boots echoing against the reinforced plating. The ship had been powered down into port status, but the rhythmic hum of the backup systems filled the silence. Behind her, Saren, Elara and Veylan followed, their steps lighter but no less intent.

"You really didn't check what was in the crate before we left the last Sphere?" Ra'ala asked, side-eyeing Elara.

Elara hesitated, shifting her weight slightly. "I... I knew about it, Captain. But I didn't think it was a big deal."

Ra'ala stopped mid-step, turning fully to face her. "You knew?"

Elara exhaled, rubbing the back of her neck. "Yeah. Look, someone on the crew asked me for a favor. Said it was just a shipment for trade—something that'd go for a high price on the black market here." She grimaced. "I figured it was harmless. But now? Now I think I was played."

Ra'ala's eyes darkened. "Who?"

Saren shifted her weight and the soft sound of mechanical whirring accompanied her movement as she crossed her arms.

Elara hesitated. Her shoulders tensed, her jaw working as if trying to find the right words. Finally, she sighed, her voice quieter. "It was Beren."

Ra'ala's face hardened, but something flickered in her expression—anger, disappointment, maybe both.

"And where is Beren now?" Ra'ala asked, voice low.

Elara hesitated again, this time more cautiously. "He left with the rest of the crew. But..." she swallowed, "I doubt he plans to come back."

Veylan's expression darkened. "So he set us up, then ditched?"

Saren cut in, "Are you kidding me, Elara? By the Old Gods I swear you don't think! You did a favor for Beren?"

Elara was too ashamed to say anything.

Ra'ala let out a sharp breath through her nose, pacing a few steps forward before slamming the cargo bay's release panel. The hiss of air greeted them as the doors retracted.

The hold was a cavernous space, lined with crates of varying sizes, all methodically stacked. The crate in question looked utterly normal—standard, unmarked shipping storage. An unassuming, sealed container.

Elara folded her arms, shifting uncomfortably. "I didn't think it was this serious." Ra'ala crouched beside the crate, her fingers brushing against the latch before flipping it open. The lid hissed as the pressure seal broke. Inside, rows of small, dark-glass vials nestled in protective foam. The scent that hit them was unmistakable—something heady, potent, and absolutely illegal in Syndicate-controlled Spheres.

Veylan let out a low whistle. "Stormbrew." His tone carried equal parts amusement and concern. "That's contraband in half the Canvas."

Ra'ala's lips pressed into a thin line, as Saren glared at Elara. Stormbrew—an alchemical intoxicant, more potent than any conventional alcohol, known for its ability to heighten perception while dulling inhibition. High demand in some Spheres, outright banned in others. Elara took a step back, running a hand through her hair. "I thought it was just rare liquor. Something we could flip for extra credits. I didn't think Beren was setting us up to get grounded."

Ra'ala's fingers curled into fists at her sides. Her voice was low and edged with frustration. "And you didn't think to tell me? Elara, this is—"

Elara squared her shoulders, her usual charisma flickering through despite the tension. "Look, Captain, I made a bad call. But if I hadn't, we'd still be flying blind right now. At least now we know what we're dealing with."

Ra'ala took a slow breath, trying to quell the heat rising in her chest. Elara was her best quartermaster. She had instincts, charm, and a way of getting out of tight situations. She owed a lot to her, more than she cared to admit. But this? This was past the line. Still... Ra'ala couldn't help but to blame herself, perhaps she was too lenient, she thought.

"Beren knew exactly what he was doing," Ra'ala muttered. "And now he's probably as far from this ship as possible."

Veylan's gaze flicked between them. "Then we find him before someone else does."

Elara's voice softened. "And when we do?"

Ra'ala exhaled sharply. They needed that engine. They needed leverage. But if station authorities caught wind of this, her Journer status could be revoked. She snapped the crate shut. "First, we deal with this. Then, we make sure Beren answers for it."

"So tell me—how do we clean this up before it buries us?"

Frame 4.5 - Reverberation - Saren Holt

"Well?"

Ra'ala's voice had a bite to it. Saren had seen her Captain stressed before—she'd heard her angry. Even witnessed her heartbreak, her guilt. But this time, she didn't just hear the quaver in Ra'ala's voice—she *felt* it.

Command was sculpting her, Saren thought. Chipping away at her edges and reshaping her into someone Saren respected. But after everything they'd been through on this last Journey, something had shifted. Bad news was part of the job—Journeymen knew that. *But this? This was a crack forming.*

Saren's prosthetic twitched slightly. The soft whirring of its mechanics punctuated the silence after Ra'ala's question. The buzzing of the lanterns and the soft groan of metal all did nothing to consume the sound that betrayed Saren's emotions. It rang in her mind. To her, the rhythm of its echo was whispering a reminder of pain and perseverance—of reclamation and redefinition... of shame and loss.

Veylan began to speak, much to Saren's relief.

"I should go with Saren here to check on the Zealian" Veylan said, aiming to cut the tension.

Saren retorted, "Their name is Way."

"Right, sorry." Veylan grimaced.

Another silence arrived. The four of them simply stared at one another, and their collective gazes fell once more on the Stormbrew crate.

The same question was painted on all of their expressions...

But who had the answer?

Frame 5 - The Keeper - Kaena Datha

Dark iridescent waves of Umbra crashed against the shore in slow, rhythmic pulses. Even muffled through the thick stone walls of the Keeper's chambers, the sound was ever-present—a distant, ceaseless whisper. It was the very breath of the Canvas itself, and to the Keeper it was seemingly rising and falling in time with their own.

Or was it the other way around? The cadence felt strange today, like a half-remembered lullaby that lured the Keeper into a waking trance, their thoughts dissolving into the silence between each crash.

They inhaled. The shadow water crashed upon the cliffs. They exhaled... and the darkness receded.

The Keeper was not sleeping, though they longed for rest. But sleep had become treacherous. Each descent into unconsciousness felt like plunging into the Below itself, where their dreams twisted into labyrinths of sound, voices crashing against one another in an endless chorus. Questions, always questions. Demands for answers they could not give. Some voices pleaded. Others accused. But none were silent.

A knock at the door.

Sharp. Measured.

The Keeper stirred, blinking through the fog of exhaustion. For a moment, they merely existed in the stillness, willing their body to rise. The aches had settled deep in their bones—a familiar weight, like the gravity of something unseen pressing down.

The Keeper sat upright, rubbing their temples before swinging their legs over the bedside. The cold stone floor sent a sharp clarity through their senses. The room was dim, lit only by the soft glow of the resonance lantern on the desk, its golden light flickering in uneven patterns.

Another knock. More insistent this time.

Urgent.

The Keeper pushed themselves to their feet, nearly stumbling before catching their balance. The spiral staircase loomed before them, winding downward in a slow descent toward the entrance hall. The steps creaked beneath them, each one a quiet protest against the movement.

A third knock, more forceful now.

The Keeper reached the landing, hand hesitating just above the latch. Their breath slowed as a growing uncertainty began to devour the comfort of numbness. They unlatched the door, pulling it open just enough to see beyond the threshold.

Standing there, framed against the sky of Silv Glow, was Jareth Kyn. His alchemically protected goggles reflected the shifting light, obscuring his eyes for a moment before he pushed them up onto his forehead. His posture was relaxed but purposeful, one hand resting on the strap of the heavy satchel slung over his shoulder. His expression was a mixture of expectation and concern.

"You look worse than usual." Jareth's voice was gruff but familiar, laced with the dry humor of someone who had long since accepted the Keeper's state as part of life.

The Keeper frowned, their mind sluggish. A memory began to surface, but the waves of the Canvas washed them away. They remembered Jareth Kyn – a farmer, a frequent visitor from the nearby village... a caretaker... a friend. Their thoughts turned inwards as silence stretched between the two of them.

Jareth sighed, patient but firm. "Kaena Datha. That's your name." His tone softened. "You are the Keeper of Arasa's Lighthouse. You were an alchemist once, before the Syndicate exiled you here."

The Keeper swallowed hard, rubbing their temples. The memories settled into place like sand finding its level. Kaena Datha. The name felt distant, yet undeniable.

"And your condition?" Jareth prompted.

Kaena inhaled sharply. "Umbra Sickness." The words tasted bitter. "Visions. Voices. Hallucinations. Sometimes I don't remember things."

Jareth gave a small nod. "Good. You remember now." He exhaled, shouldering his way inside. "I brought supplies. Food, maintenance gear, fresh water. And before you ask—yes, I brought more tea."

The Keeper blinked, the fog in their mind lifting. "Tea..." They took a step back, motioning toward the table. "Sit. I'll make some."

Jareth shook his head, his demeanor shifting. "Later." He adjusted the strap on his satchel, his expression turning serious. "You need to come down to Kara Null."

The Keeper hesitated. They had not left the lighthouse in several cycles.

"Donde Beklo is dying."

A stillness settled over the room, deeper than the one before. The Keeper felt it in their chest—a slow, sinking weight. Their fingers twitched at their sides, as if unsure what to reach for.

"He doesn't have long." Jareth glanced toward the supplies as if searching for the right words among them. "His son, Barek, will be succeeding him. But Donde—he wants to see you before he passes."

The Keeper looked past Jareth, toward the open doorway. The sky had shifted, the Silv Glow deepening toward Cya Glow, the endless light of the Sphere of Arasa cycling overhead.

A visit to Kara Null. To the port. To the man who had saved them from execution, trading death for exile.

They inhaled slowly.

"I'll go."

Jareth nodded, relieved, though his expression remained serious. "Good. But for once, wear your damn goggles when you step outside. At least until you're out of sight of the Umbra..."

Jareth stared into Kaena's eyes, "Your pupils are huge. You've been looking into the Umbra again, haven't you?"

The Keeper felt a wave of shame wash over them and stammered out, "No, I..."

Jareth's response was quick, "You'll only make it worse if you don't at least wear the bloody things."

For a moment, Jareth looked as if lost in thought.

"I'll let Donde know you're coming... See you, Kaena."

The Keeper only nodded. Jareth exchanged a final glance with them before donning their goggles once more, leaving the satchel behind and departing.

The Keeper glanced at the pair of goggles hanging by the door, lenses darkened to protect against the Umbra's gaze.

They exhaled, feeling the weight of the moment settle in their bones.

How much of themselves had they forgotten?

Frame 6 - The Lighthouse - Kaena Datha

The Keeper moved with precision, hands steady as they unlatched the supply case. The resonance lantern flickered at their side, casting elongated shadows across the stone walls of the lighthouse's inner chamber. The air smelled of ozone and salt, tinged faintly with the crisp bite of alchemical reagents.

On the central pedestal, the Lighthouse's Core dimmed—a contained orb of shifting luminescence, flickering at the edges as though breathing its last. It was not truly light, not in the way one might expect. It was something refined, something alive in its own way—a fuel drawn from the Canvas itself, distilled through countless generations of alchemists who had refined the process into something repeatable. The Keeper's fingers brushed over the orb's glass casing. A weak pulse resonated beneath their touch. Dying, but not dead.

With a smooth motion, they unsealed the first vial. The liquid inside gleamed with a color that did not quite exist, shifting as the air met it. Carefully, the Keeper tilted it toward the core's containment chamber, watching as the fluid met the surface of the light, its edges blooming outward like ink in water. The glow stabilized, turning from flickering instability into something steady. A second vial, a third, each measured, each controlled.

Then, a final adjustment—a small metal tuning fork pressed against the orb's containment casing. A hum reverberated through the chamber, and the orb answered. It pulsed in rhythm with the Keeper's touch, settling into a steady, bright Glow.

The lighthouse lived again.

They exhaled, rubbing the exhaustion from their eyes. Simple, efficient. A necessary ritual, but not a difficult one.

Yet, there was always something unnerving about standing too close to the light after feeding it. It was like feeling a pulse that wasn't their own.

The Keeper lingered only a moment longer before stepping away, gathering their supplies, and securing the chamber behind them.

The rest of the lighthouse was quiet, save for the faint creak of old beams shifting with the wind. The air carried the scent of aged paper and salt-soaked wood, a mix of memories embedded in the walls. The Keeper moved through the narrow corridors, running their fingers along the metal railing as they ascended the spiraling stairwell leading to the observation deck.

Here, at the highest point of the lighthouse, the world unfolded in all its vast and surreal beauty. The Umbra stretched endlessly, a living tide that seemed both impossibly distant and

intimately near. From this vantage, the lighthouse was not merely a beacon but a fragile defiance against the unknown.

The Keeper leaned against the railing, feeling the weight of the day press upon their shoulders. The routine of tending to the lighthouse was second nature, but it never became mundane. There was a reverence to the act, an understanding that in maintaining the light, they were not merely upholding tradition but preserving something vital, something that stood between order and abyss.

They withdrew a small journal from the inner pocket of their coat, flipping through the worn pages filled with precise notations—fuel levels, light resonance, minor fluctuations in the Core's stability. A meticulous record of their work, as well as occasional thoughts scrawled in the margins. Some notes were entirely practical; others hinted at the quieter truths of solitude.

One entry caught their eye, written some time ago: "The light must never falter. Not for them. Not for me."

A gust of wind swept across the deck, ruffling the pages before the Keeper pressed them flat with their palm. They had been here for a long time. How long? It was easy to lose track.

Their fingers hesitated over another note, written in careful but unsteady script: "Donde Beklo once told me the light is not just for those who seek it, but for those who are lost and do not yet know they need it. I did not understand him then. I think I do now."

The Keeper closed the journal, staring out into the dark. The Umbra moved differently tonight—more restless, more intent. The glow had faded from the sky, shifting into the deeper hues of Shade. Viol crept along the edges, tinting the Umbra with an unsettling iridescence. The transition from Glow to Shade always carried weight, as if the world itself exhaled, sinking into a darker, quieter pulse.

They knew the cycle well. Glow brought movement, trade, the pulse of civilization. Shade, particularly in its deeper forms, belonged to those who thrived in stillness—the unseen, the contemplative, the lost. In Shade, thoughts became heavier, time stretched, and the whispers of the Umbra grew louder.

They adjusted their coat, suddenly aware of how much the shift unsettled them tonight.

Was it because they were leaving? Or was it something else?

Frame 6.5 – The Wavethreader – Jareth Kyn

For a time there were no thoughts, just the sound of an engine surrounded by the sounds of waves of darkness crashing onto a mirror... Jareth's Wavethreader etched a line that rippled out in a trail across the Umbra's shadowy waters, almost tracing the shores of Arasa. There were moments where Jareth lost sight of the silver sand when jagged rocks would rise into weathered formations along the shore; Though no cliff was as high as the Keeper's Station...

Jareth had taken this route at least 12 times a Cycle for as long as needed to ensure the Keeper could fulfill their duties. He gripped his hands tight on the wavethreader's handles as an outcropping of rocks stretched out, emerging like teeth from the Umbra's ceaseless tide. Jareth could have gone around them, but there was more challenge to finding the path through them. An art to it too, one that Jareth fiercely enjoyed, even if it became harder to react in time each trip. He could feel his age every time they met with the Keeper. Creeping guilt manifested in the back of their mind – He always had hoped that he grounded the Keeper, that they were okay. It was no longer just a job, but a duty. He felt as if Keeper of the Keeper. And it broke his heart to see the confusion and pain in the Keeper's eyes.

They maneuvered the Wavethreader on top of a worn boulder as if it were a ramp, and jumped over a row of spires peeking from iridescent waves. Jareth held a trigger down on the right handle as he reached the surface of the water once more, accelerating to compensate for the force of the landing. The Wavethreader skipped across into clearer waters and into a tunnel that burrowed through a cliff.

A sharp left turn, a sharp right turn in the dark, Umbra sloughed and splashed violently as the engine's thrum reverberated off the stone walls – A moment later, Jareth emerged from the other side, the Port of Kara Null and the Journers in wait there glimmered against the horizon, reflecting onto the Umbra's ever shifting surface.

Jareth kept threading the water, speeding off toward the port. Thoughts slipping away, receding to reveal nothing but a question he kept coming back to: **Will it ever be enough?**

Frame 7 - The Beach of Silver Sand - Kaena Datha

The Keeper pulled their goggles into place, the darkened lenses sealing them off from the full intensity of Viol Shade. Even so, the world before them was a landscape of shifting iridescence, an impossible panorama where the Unknown stretched in all directions. The Umbra was both sky and sea, an endless tide of undulating shadow, its surface broken by shifting fractal patterns that suggested movement—purposeful, yet without clear intention.

The silver sand beneath their feet felt cool, grains shifting like liquid metal as they walked. With each step, the sound was a muffled whisper, soft as breath, as if the shore itself hesitated to break the silence of this liminal space. The only other sounds

were the distant churn of the Umbra's slow, deliberate movement and the occasional sigh of unseen currents bending the reeds at the edge of the beach.

Beyond the shoreline, the landscape was monochrome but alive—spectral palms with fronds of mirror-black, their reflections twisting in the ever-changing light. Silver-threaded ferns curled and unfurled in time with a rhythm unseen, a subtle pulsation that matched the ebb and flow of the Umbra's tides. The air smelled of brine and something colder, something untouched by ordinary existence.

The Keeper's breath came slow and measured. There was no rush. Kara Null was far ahead, and the journey was its own ritual. To walk the Beach of Silver Sand was to walk at the boundary of understanding—where known and unknown met in endless conversation.

Somewhere above, the sky churned in unnatural gradients, a slow descent from deep violet to an indigo-black too rich to be void. The edges of the world blurred, unfixed, as if the Sphere was but a fleeting thought drifting on an endless tide. They walked in silence, absorbing the weight of the moment. Every visit to this place felt different. The tides moved in ways that could not be charted, and the sand beneath their feet might have once been somewhere else entirely.

Then, something caught their eye—a fragment of brightness against the silver. The Keeper stopped, boots sinking slightly as they turned their attention downward. Half-buried in the sand was a shell, its spiral ridges reflecting the deep hues of Shade. It was not like the others scattered along the shore. The shape was familiar yet strange, the markings along its surface too deliberate to be merely natural.

They crouched, brushing away the loose grains to reveal more of its form. As they lifted it into their palm, they traced the ridges with their gloved fingertips, noting how the light bent unnaturally along the grooves. The longer they stared, the more it seemed to shift—not in color, but in presence, as if it had always been here and had just now decided to be noticed.

A thought drifted to the surface of their mind unbidden: Not of the Sphere.

A relic carried by the tides.

The Keeper exhaled slowly. They had seen such things before, remnants from places that defied mapping, echoes of something deeper than the Canvas itself.

Their fingers hesitated at the edge of their goggles. The shell pulsed faintly in the dim light, its surface hinting at something just beyond perception. An urge flickered at the back of their mind—to see it as it truly was, without the barrier of protective Lenses.

The Keeper lifted their hand, pushed their goggles up onto their forehead.

The air shifted.

They traced the grooves again, their vision unfiltered, and the markings shimmered. No longer ridges, but something else—etched lines, deliberate.

A language?

A map?

A warning?

Then, a movement in the distance.

No, not a movement.

A pull.

They lifted their gaze.

The Umbra was waiting.

Would the Keeper resist its call?

Frame 8 - The Umbra Speaks - Kaena Datha

The Call of the Umbra..

It was vast, stretching without boundary, without sense of depth or scale. The tides did not roar; they whispered. Their voice was many. Their voice was one. The Keeper's breath caught as the sound unfolded within them, not heard but understood, a chorus of overlapping echoes pressing into their skull.

"You look... You linger... You see."

The voice did not belong to one thing. It was a tide crashing, a current pulling.

The Keeper's grip tightened around the shell, yet they did not move. They knew this Feeling.

"You have fed the light, but you have not fed yourself."

A surge of memories—not their own, not entirely. The weight of exile. The pulse of the lighthouse. The taste of something forgotten.

Their fingers twitched. Their vision tunneled. The Umbra shifted, and for a fraction of a moment, it was not an ocean. It was an eye.

A great, yawning iris, stretching endlessly, depthless, knowing.

The Keeper gasped and stumbled back.

"Go deeper."

They shook their head, pressing the heels of their palms against their eyes as if to block out the words. "What are you?" their voice came ragged, barely more than a whisper.

The Umbra did not answer. Instead, it showed them.

A city drowned in black fire, its spires sinking like teeth into the Below. A figure on a distant shore, faceless and waiting. A shattered mirror that bled light instead of reflecting it.

"Go deeper. And deeper still."

The Keeper swallowed hard. "Why do you call me?"

The Umbra rippled, shifting like breath over water. "Why do you listen?"

A sensation like falling through a dream seized them, weightless yet crushing.

Visions unfurled—places they had never been, voices they had never heard, and Yet...

They knew them.

"The lighthouse cannot burn forever," the Umbra murmured, soft as silk, cold as night. "All lights go out."

The Keeper clenched their jaw. "Not mine."

Laughter. Or something like it. A distortion of sound, an echo not meant for human Ears.

"Not yet."

Another pulse of images—a door standing alone in void, its frame weathered, its handle waiting. Hands reaching through water, searching, sinking. A heartbeat that was not their own.

"And deeper still."

The Keeper willed their breath steady, fighting against the pull, against the lure of unraveling. "What do you want from me?"

The Umbra paused. And then, impossibly:

"What do you want from yourself?"

The words slithered into their mind like ink spreading through water. The weight of them settled deep into their bones.

The Keeper staggered backward, their boots slipping against the silver sand. The shell fell from their grasp, landing soundlessly.

They tore their gaze away, heart pounding, dragging their goggles back down over their eyes. The world shifted back into something comprehensible. The Umbra returned to its familiar, endless tide.

But the voice still rang inside their skull, curling at the edges of their thoughts.

"You have seen. Will you remember?"

The Keeper stood, their hands trembling slightly as they dusted off their coat. Without looking back, they resumed their walk.

The shore stretched ahead. The Umbra whispered behind them.

"Go deeper."

They did not answer.

Frame 9 - Liquid Memory - Ra'ala Dusbane

Ra'ala sat on the edge of the cargo bay's loading ramp, staring at the unmarked crate before them, arms crossed. The weight of the moment pressed down on her like the hull of a sinking ship.

"We need to get rid of it," Saren said flatly, arms crossed. "Before the inspectors come. Dump it. Toss it into the Sphere's recycling vats. Hell, eject it into the Below for all I care."

"Absolutely not." Veylan shook his head, already leaning against the crate as if it was a prized possession. "This stuff is valuable. If the Gardeners won't take our credits, they might take this. We keep some. Trade it quietly."

Elara scoffed, a smirk creeping onto her face. "Why are we talking about getting rid of it when we could just... enjoy it?" She glanced at Ra'ala. "We earned a little downtime, Captain. We're at port. And last I checked, part of stopping at port is not being out there journeying." She gestured toward the loading doors, beyond which the Umbra loomed.

Ra'ala was not amused. "Elara—"

"No, listen!" Elara pressed on, hands on her hips. "You are tense as hell about all this. If we're going to be stuck here, why not unwind? We stash most of it somewhere safe before the inspection, but we take a few vials for ourselves. What's the worst that could happen?"

"We get caught and lose our licenses," Ra'ala muttered.

"They only check cargo," Elara countered. "Not crew storage."

Saren groaned, running a hand down her face. "This is a terrible idea."

Veylan folded his arms, considering. "Actually... it might not be. Stormbrew isn't just for pleasure. It enhances perception. Heightens the senses. Might help us see the bigger picture."

Ra'ala exhaled, weighing the options. The Gardeners would be here soon, and they had to move fast.

"Fine," she said, rubbing her temples. "Move the crate to the upper engine bay—they never check there. We'll keep a few vials." She looked down at the crate. "How many are in here?"

"Forty-eight," Veylan answered.

Ra'ala sighed. "Alright. Take what you need for trade. Take what you need for... 'insight.'" She leveled a stare at Elara. "And fine. I'll admit it—I am wound tight. So screw it. I'll take one too."

Elara's eyes gleamed. "That's the spirit."

Ra'ala grabbed a vial, flicking the glass between her fingers before popping the cap. "Hope this works." She lifted it, tilting it in a mock toast before downing it like a Shot.

Elara, laughing, followed suit.

Veylan watched them both with a bemused smile. "This is either going to be brilliant or a disaster."

Saren groaned again. "It's going to be a disaster."

They didn't have time to reconsider. The inspectors would be arriving any moment. Ra'ala swallowed, feeling the burn of the Stormbrew slide down her throat. It wasn't like any alcohol she'd ever had. It was sharper. Colder. Like swallowing liquid memory, each drop unfolding into sensation before she could grasp it.

The world tilted—just slightly. The ambient hum of the ship felt louder. The subtle flicker of Caelux lanterns traced patterns she'd never noticed before. She turned her head, and the motion left a faint afterimage in her vision, as though time itself had hesitated before moving forward again.

"Ra'ala?" Elara's voice seemed distant, layered.

She blinked, focusing, but her mind felt stretched thin—like she was standing at the edge of a great tide, about to be pulled in. The sound of the ship's engine wasn't just mechanical anymore.

It was breathing.

The ship itself, the Sphere, the Umbra—it was all connected.

It always had been.

Something stirred at the edge of her thoughts, a whisper just beyond the reach of Sound.

Elara clapped her on the shoulder. "Whoa. You good?"

Ra'ala swallowed, nodding slowly. She wasn't sure if she was good, but something inside her was shifting. Deepening.

What had they gotten themselves into?

Frame 10 - Insight - Ra'ala Duskbane

The world around Ra'ala shimmered.

Shapes moved just a fraction slower than they should, lines bending where they ought to be straight. But her mind—her mind was clearer than ever.

Elara nudged her shoulder, grinning.

"This stuff is wild. I feel like I can hear colors."

Ra'ala chuckled, watching the air shimmer around Elara's words like heat rising from metal.

"Yeah? I can see our words floating in the air."

They were both tripping hard, but paradoxically, they were also operating at peak clarity. Their bodies felt loose, but their minds felt dangerously sharp. They weren't just aware—they were hyper-aware.

A sudden alert blared through the ship's comms, a sound that stretched too long before snapping back to normal. a sound that stretched too long before snapping back to normal.

"Edeyan Inspectors requesting access. Prepare for boarding."

Ra'ala straightened, instincts kicking in. "Veylan! Go stall them. Buy us time."

Veylan, ever the smooth talker, flashed a half-smile and nodded. "On it." He hit the control panel, activating the external communication.

"Edeyan Control, this is Journey Vessel Wayfarer... we... read you—just finishing a cargo check, minor discrepancies in the... manifest. Might take a moment to Reconcile."

Elara clapped her hands. "Captain, we gotta move! Fast! Before our brains fully untether from reality!"

The two of them stumbled into the storage bay, but stumbled was the wrong word. It felt like walking was happening in both slow motion and high speed at the same Time.

"Okay," Ra'ala said, shoving open the storage hatch. "We—"

"Did you just hear time?" Elara interrupted, blinking rapidly.

Ra'ala narrowed her eyes at her. "I'm going to pretend you didn't just say that."

They shoved the vials into hidden compartments, every movement leaving trails of afterimages behind them. Elara laughed.

"This is the stupidest way to smuggle contraband."

"And yet..." Ra'ala slid a panel shut. "Here we are."

The ship shuddered as the inspectors docked.

DEEP BREATH. LOOK NORMAL. BE PROFESSIONALS.

The bay doors hissed open. Three Edeyan inspectors stepped aboard, their uniforms crisp, their expressions skeptical. The lead officer, a middle-aged woman with piercing blue eyes, paused just a moment too long before speaking.

"You seem... lively."

Ra'ala grinned, her mind firing at hyper-speed. "Captain's prerogative. Long journey, rough cargo manifests, but we keep it together."

The inspector narrowed her eyes but said nothing. The scan drones whirred through the cargo Bay.

TOO LOUD. TOO LOUD!
WAIT. WERE THEY ALWAYS THIS LOUD? WAIT.

"You ever flown out past the Caelux Rings? Real nasty currents there— Real nasty currents there—makes you appreciate a good dock, y'know?"

Elara was definitely about to break. Ra'ala elbowed her lightly. Hold it together.

The lead inspector turned back to Ra'ala. "Routine inspection. No issues with your Shipment?"

Ra'ala gave the most outrageously confident nod she could muster. "None that aren't already being sorted. Our alchemist's handling the manifest right now."

The inspectors moved through the ship, scanning, questioning—but Ra’ala deflected with surgical precision.

Every inquiry? She had an answer. Every suspicion? She turned into a joke. She could see it in their faces—they wanted to find something wrong, but she kept pulling them into exactly the version of reality she wanted them to believe.

She winked at Elara. "See? Nothing to worry about." ;)

Finally, the lead inspector sighed. "Journers. Always a strange lot. Everything checks out. You're cleared to unload."

Ra’ala gave a mock salute. "Pleasure doing business, officer. Hope your shift's smoother than ours."

The inspectors filed out. As soon as the doors sealed shut, Elara collapsed against a crate, bursting into laughter. "Ra’ala, what the hell was that?!"

Ra’ala exhaled. "That, my dear Elara, was what we call Stormbrew diplomacy."

She tipped her head back against the wall, the world still just a little too bright, a little too strange.

The ship was safe. The cargo was hidden. And the night was still young.

What now?

Frame 11 - The Zealian - Saren Holt

While Ra’ala and Elara were dealing with the Edeyan inspectors, Saren made her way to the engine room, the steady thrum of the ship’s core humming through the reinforced metal beneath her boots. The chamber was dimly lit, the glow of the Zeal Pressure Diffusal Engine casting flickering golden light across the walls. She moved with careful steps, her breath steady, but her chest tight.

She already knew what she would find.

Inside the containment field, cradled within the intricate framework of conduits and pressure seals, was Way—the ship’s Zealian.

It was small, fragile. Its form, once a proud birdlike wisp of pink and violet living flame, flickered weakly. Its delicate, skeletal frame of pale bone-like structures

barely held together the swirling energy that made up its being. The fire that once burned bright now trembled, dim and unsteady, the occasional spark failing to catch before fading into nothing.

Way blinked at her, its ember-like eyes soft and tired. It shifted slightly, the motion sluggish, as though even the act of moving was a burden.

Saren swallowed hard. "Hey there, little one."

The Zealian tilted its head, a faint shimmer running through its failing body. No words passed between them, but there was a feeling—a quiet understanding, deeper than speech.

She crouched beside the containment barrier, placing a gloved hand against the smooth, glass-like surface. The heat was faint now, a shadow of what it once was. "I know. I know it hurts. We're gonna fix this."

Way let out a small pulse of light, a flicker of movement in its fading form.

It was like watching a candle try to stay alight in a rising storm.

Saren inhaled sharply, pushing down the ache in her throat. Zealians were more than just power sources. They were companions, part of the ship, part of the crew. No Journer with a heart saw them as mere engines.

And now, Way was dying.

She pressed her palm firmly against the barrier, feeling the faint warmth that still radiated from within. "You're strong, Way. Stronger than most. I remember when we first got you—how you flared up so bright we thought you were gonna burn the whole core out." She let out a small chuckle, the memory bittersweet. "You were so full of life. Still are. You just need a little help, that's all."

Way pulsed again, a little stronger this time, as if trying to reassure her instead of the other way around. Its ember-like eyes blinked slow and knowing, filled with Trust.

Saren could feel her heart tightening. She had seen other ships let their Zealians flicker out, treated like nothing more than tools when they reached their limits. But that wasn't how it would end for Way. Not here. Not on her ship.

She exhaled and leaned closer, her voice low and certain. "I promise you this, Way—you won't spend your last days trapped in here. You'll be free before the end." For a moment, the containment field shimmered, responding to Way's soft, pulsing

glow. Its form, still fragile, still weakening, seemed to rise just a little, the flames curling outward with something like hope.

"We're gonna figure this out," Saren murmured, keeping her hand on the glass. "Just hold on a little longer, okay?"

The engine room's hum carried on, steady and rhythmic. But beneath it, she could hear the faintest crackling sound—the whisper of a fire still fighting to burn.

But how long would it last?

Frame 12 - Drifting - Ra'ala Duskbane

Ra'ala slumped back into the lounge's worn cushions, exhaling as if it took more effort than usual. The world had mostly settled, but a soft haze still clung to the edges of her vision, stretching the lantern glow just a little too far, making everything feel a fraction of a second out of sync. Not bad, not overwhelming—just... Strange.

Across from her, Elara sprawled sideways in her seat, head resting against the armrest, blinking slow like she was trying to calculate the distance between her thoughts and the words leaving her mouth. "I think we did great. No notes."

Ra'ala gave a solemn nod. "Flawless execution."

From the corner of the room, Veylan groaned, rubbing his temples. "You both almost blew our cover at least five times."

Elara waved a lazy hand. "The point is, we didn't."

Ra'ala grinned, sinking deeper into the cushions. "We are legends."

Veylan sighed, crossing his arms. "You're something, alright."

A long pause stretched between them, filled only with the low hum of the station's ambient systems. The ship's Zeal engine might've been dying, but for now, they were still here, still intact. That was enough.

Elara shifted, looking up at the ceiling. "Remember our first journey together?"

Ra'ala let out a short chuckle. "Which one?"

"The real one. Not the little runs. The big one."

Ra'ala closed her eyes for a moment, letting the memory surface. It was there, just beneath the surface, like something sunken deep in the Below. The details blurred, shifting, tempting her to reach further. She let the thought hover instead.

"Yeah. I remember."

"By the Old Gods, we were idiots," Elara muttered.

"Still are," Ra'ala corrected.

Veylan made a sound between a sigh and a laugh. "And this is why I don't drink."

"Lies," Elara said, turning her head toward him. "I saw you sip wine once. I saw it, Veylan."

Veylan deadpanned. "And I still regret it."

Ra'ala chuckled but felt something heavier settling behind the laughter. "We were different back then."

Elara hummed in agreement. "Fewer scars. Fewer ghosts."

Ra'ala opened her eyes, staring at the ceiling, the weight of unseen names pressing against her chest. She could still hear the echoes of those voices, the ones left behind, but she didn't name them. Didn't dare pull the thread.

"You ever think about them?" she asked, voice quieter now.

Elara didn't answer immediately. She didn't have to. The silence was answer enough.

Veylan shifted, looking between them. "Way's still here."

Ra'ala turned her head. "For now."

Veylan didn't correct her. He didn't offer false assurances. He just nodded, slow, measured. "We'll figure it out."

Another long silence. The hum of the ship, the distant sounds of the station outside, the whisper of things left unsaid.

Elara exhaled, eyes half-lidded, a lazy grin spreading across her face. "Hey,

remember that time we—”

Ra’ala smirked, but the question never came. Elara’s grin faded just slightly, as if she had almost let something slip—something deeper, something painful. For a fraction of a second, Ra’ala thought she might say it anyway. Instead, she reached for her glass and took a slow sip, shaking her head.

“Never mind,” Elara muttered. “Doesn’t matter.”

Ra’ala’s chest tightened, and for once, she didn’t push. “Yeah,” she said, barely above a whisper. “Doesn’t matter.”

The silence between them stretched, but this time, it wasn’t comfortable.

Veylan shook his head, but there was a faint smile there too. “You two are Impossible.”

Ra’ala stretched, exhaling as the last of the Stormbrew’s haze began to fade. “Wouldn’t have it any other way.”

She let her gaze drift, watching the lights flicker, feeling the weight of everything settle in her bones.

The past was always close. The future, uncertain.

And yet, in this moment, they were still here. Still together.

For now.

Ra’ala closed her eyes, the question forming on the edges of her thoughts, quiet but Insistent:

How much longer could they keep pretending the past wasn’t catching up to Them?

Frame 12.5 – The Eclipse – Elara Voss

The lounge was quiet, adrift. The lights buzzed too softly, the walls too warm. The Stormbrew was fading now—no longer a tidal wave of perception, but a trailing mist.

Elara Voss sat curled on the corner bench, half-listening as Ra’ala and Veylan exchanged low words across the galley. Her body felt like sea glass: worn down to softness, edges smoothed by memory. Time had gone thin. The room flickered, then stretched.

And then— Daka’ash.

A Cold Sphere, blue and dim, where the snow whispered sideways and the air felt dense with Zeal. Three minor Zeal orbs orbited the sky, so close they sometimes eclipsed the central Caelux like glowing knives. The people there moved with purposeful slowness, as if aware that even heat had a cost.

She had been there between jobs. Just off a long run with a mining vessel that stank of brine and blood-algae. She wasn’t guild-ranked yet. Just a utility hire—bulk lifting, hold organizing, line maintenance. Cheap labor. No prestige.

It was early Glow. Too early for most. Elara had wandered to the common hall of the Guildhouse just to feel her toes again. No one else was awake.

Then, the door creaked. The kind of sound that shouldn’t echo—but did. She turned her head.

An eclipse struck.

And through the framed glow stepped a woman, snow-drenched and wildly underdressed for the sphere. Her coat hung off one shoulder. Her boots looked like they’d survived a knife fight. Her hair was damp with frost. Her eyes—

Gods.

Elara blinked, and somehow forgot to breathe. The woman looked around like she expected the building to rearrange itself to suit her.

“Lodging?” the stranger asked, voice hoarse with travel.

Elara scrambled to sound competent. “You, uh—have to be a guild member to claim a room. If you are, there’s terminals. But they’re locked till—well, not now.”

The woman raised a brow. “Didn’t realize lodging required credentials. I’m new. First time on Daka’ash.”

“You don’t say.”

Elara said it without malice. Just... observation. The way the stranger’s boots weren’t heat-rated. The fact her gloves didn’t match. That she carried her ship’s registry clipped to her collar like a name tag. Elara squinted.

“You’re a Pilot,” she said slowly.

The woman hesitated. Then nodded.

"New Journer registration, yeah?"

A second nod.

"You inherited the ship," Elara guessed, grinning now. "And you haven't figured out how to transfer the guild docking codes yet, have you?"

That got a smile. Tired. Amused.

"You're sharp."

"I'm bored."

The woman chuckled.

"I'm Elara," she said, sticking her hand out. "I've been bouncing between routes for too long. Looking for something that doesn't suck."

"Ra'ala," the woman replied, taking her hand. "I'm looking for..."

There it was.

Elara felt it—like puzzle pieces shifting into place. Like she'd met her before in a different cycle, on a different shore. She didn't believe in fate, but the room narrowed anyway. There was only the two of them, and the sound of breathing in the eclipse-light.

Elara narrowed her eyes at Ra'ala who had trailed off and dropped the handshake, "Well, I'm not looking for anything... Maybe just chasing the Horizon."

Elara took a leap.

"There's a job posted," she said, nodding toward the board. "Can't take it. Guild rules. Only employees can claim contracts on behalf of new vessels."

Ra'ala tilted her head. "And?"

"Hire me. For like... ten minutes. Then I can take the job. You get a jump-start. I get paid. Win-win."

"That's bold," Ra'ala said.

"I know," Elara grinned widely. "But look at me and tell me I'm wrong."

They stared at each other then—an unspoken certainty blooming between them. The quiet kind. The kind that felt older than words.

And right then—

The door burst open. A figure stumbled in, trailing snow and curses.

"Storm on the western ridge's blown out two shuttles," Veylan Asra declared, completely drenched. "I told them not to run fuel lines until—"

He froze mid-step.

Ra'ala and Elara both turned.

The moment shattered.

Elara's mouth twisted. Ra'ala, for the first time, looked vaguely embarrassed.

"Did I interrupt something?" Veylan asked, entirely too smug.

And just like that—

Back in the present.

Veylan abruptly stood up.

"Well, I'm off to do your job for you, Elara," Veylan called over his shoulder. "You can thank me later."

Elara tried to react but was too dazed to speak a word, and soon he was gone.

Ra'ala lay with her eyes closed nearby.

The Wayfarer's lounge hummed again, the Stormbrew haze finally thinning from Elara's veins.

She smiled thinking about the Eclipse on Dak'ash.

She wondered, would she ever see anything like that again?

Frame 13 - The Path Forward - Kaena Datha

The Keeper walked with careful steps, their boots sinking slightly into the silver sand, the shifting grains whispering beneath them.

The village of Kara Null was close now—its port and buildings rising in the distance, silhouetted against the dim glow of the horizon. A collection of lights flickered faintly along the docks, lanterns swaying in the wind, the signs of life subtle but Present.

The architecture of Kara Null had always struck the Keeper as strange—quaint, but with an uncanny symmetry that made the town feel as though it had grown from the land rather than been built upon it.

The rooftops sloped in uneven angles, yet never seemed haphazard. Narrow towers spiraled from clustered homes, their tops adorned with small spires or hollow rings that caught the wind, creating an eerie, melodic hum that drifted through the village at night.

The buildings themselves were of dark stone and alchemically treated wood, their surfaces smoothed by the salt-heavy air of the Umbra's edge. Every structure leaned slightly inward, as if huddled together against the unknown beyond the port's Safety.

They had been walking for what felt like hours, but the passage of time was slippery, elusive. The Beach of Silver Sand stretched long behind them, but the echoes of the Umbra still clung to the edges of their mind, like the receding pull of a tide not entirely willing to let them go.

"Go Deeper..."

Their fingers drifted toward the small object tucked inside their coat—a shell-like fragment, cool and smooth beneath their touch. They had found it on the beach earlier, half-buried in the shifting sand, and though they knew it was important, they couldn't grasp why. The shape, the texture—something about it stirred an unease deep in their chest, a knowing without understanding. It was familiar in a way that made their mind ache.

The wind picked up, and the Keeper tightened their grip on the fragment, as if the breeze might steal it from them before they could decipher its meaning. The Umbra's voice had not spoken since they left the shore, but it still lingered beneath the surface of thought, waiting. Inviting.

"And deeper still..."

They fought the urge to listen. They fought because they remembered something Donde had once said to them—words spoken long ago, in another time, when their mind was clearer and their purpose less fractured.

"You hold too tightly to the past, like a closed hand gripping sand. Open it, and you may still have something left."

The memory clung to them like the shell in their palm, solid but distant. Was it still True?

Had it ever been?

And if it was not, what did that mean for the path ahead?

Frame 14 - The Fountain - Kaena Datha

The Keeper's steps slowed as they approached the outskirts of Kara Null. The village stretched out before them, its uneven rooftops silhouetted against the ever-present glow of the Canvas. This place was neither grand nor imposing—it was a haphazard collection of structures built out of necessity, shaped by those who had carved out a life here beyond the Syndicate's reach.

The Reaches. A network of free colonies and exile settlements, scattered like wayward stars beyond the dominion of the Syndicate of Alchemical Enlightenment. Here, the laws of the Syndicate held no power, and neither did their rigid doctrines. It was a sanctuary for those who sought freedom—or those who had been cast Away.

The Keeper fell into both categories.

Donde Beklo had managed to spare them from execution, convincing the Syndicate to exile them here instead. The charge was heresy—not for simple defiance, but for what the Keeper believed about the Umbra. That it was more than darkness. That it was more than an unknowable, consuming void. That it was speaking. That it had meaning.

The Syndicate had no tolerance for those who sought meaning beyond their carefully controlled scriptures.

Donde, in what could have been seen as an act of mercy—or perhaps simply pity—had argued that death was unnecessary. Instead, they would be given a purpose, a station that suited their perceived 'condition.'

And so the Keeper had been exiled to Kara Null and named its Lighthouse Keeper, a role meant to keep them useful while ensuring they remained far from the Syndicate's concerns.

They remembered that day—the sterile cold of the Syndicate's chambers, the way the inquisitors had spoken of them as if they were already dead, and Donde's measured words cutting through the suffocating finality of it all. They had expected execution. Instead, they had been cast out, placed on the edge of the world, bound to a duty they had never chosen.

Near the heart of the village, a fountain of pure Brya glowed faintly, its alchemically treated waters flowing in an endless cycle, reflecting the lantern light in ghostly ripples. Brya—the essential, drinkable form of water—untainted, unlike the Umbra that stretched beyond the village's limits. It was a rare luxury in the Reaches, a symbol of life preserved in defiance of the Syndicate's control.

A familiar figure leaned against a crumbling stone wall nearby, exhaling a thin stream of smoke into the cool air. Tessa Vaal.

She was draped in a patchwork coat, her goggles pulled snug over her eyes—an acknowledgment of her own brush with Umbra Sickness. Unlike the Keeper, she still fought to keep herself tethered.

"Didn't think I'd see you back so soon," Tessa muttered, flicking her cigarette's ash to the ground. Her voice carried a roughness, the product of too many years breathing in the alchemic dust of the colonies.

The Keeper reached into their coat and pulled out a small bundle wrapped in dark cloth, pressing it into Tessa's hand. A gift—dried medicinal herbs, alchemically treated to help with the lingering effects of Umbra exposure.

Tessa raised an eyebrow, then gave a lopsided grin. "Generous. You doing alright?" The Keeper hesitated, their fingers brushing against the shell-like fragment still tucked away in their pocket. "I am here."

Tessa snorted. "That's an answer without actually answering." She took another slow drag of her cigarette, exhaling through her nose. "The Umbra still whispering?" The Keeper nodded. "It always does."

Tessa studied them for a moment, eyes shadowed behind her goggles. "So? What's it saying this time?"

The Keeper shifted their stance, glancing past Tessa to the flickering lanterns of the

village. "It asked why I listen. It asked what I want from myself."

Tessa let out a slow whistle, shaking her head. "That's... a new one."

She rolled the cigarette between her fingers, thinking. "Some folks would kill to hear the Umbra like you do. Alchemists, Seekers. But you? You treat it like a burden."

The Keeper's jaw tensed. "It is."

Tessa shook her head. "You ever think that maybe they were wrong? The Syndicate, I mean. They call it sickness, but you and I both know sickness doesn't make you understand things. You don't get clarity from illness. Maybe you're not sick. Maybe you're just... in tune."

The Keeper exhaled, their fingers tightening around the shell in their pocket. "Donde didn't see it that way."

Tessa arched an eyebrow. "No? What'd he say?"

The Keeper hesitated, then recited the words, distant but sharp in their memory: "Kaena sees too much and understands too little. That is the danger."

Tessa scoffed. "Figures. He thought you were dangerous, so he made you a lighthouse keeper?"

The Keeper let out a breath. "To watch the edge of the world. To light the path. To stay away."

Tessa flicked the cigarette away, crossing her arms. "Yeah, well. Maybe he was scared you'd see something he couldn't."

She watched the Keeper for a long moment, then sighed. "Come on. Let's sit by the fountain for a bit. You look like you need a break."

The Keeper hesitated but nodded, following her to the worn stone bench by the fountain's edge. The cool glow of the Brya reflected in Tessa's goggles as she leaned back, watching the village with an unreadable expression.

After a time, Tessa finally spoke. "It's okay. I know where you're going."

The Keeper didn't pretend otherwise. "He's dying."

Tessa stared into the water, unreadable. "The whole town's been buzzing about it. His son is set to take over."

They sat in silence, until Tessa took off her goggles, looking at them directly. The Keeper hesitated, then did the same.

For a long moment, they simply gazed at one another, as if seeing each other clearly for the first time.

Then, as though sensing the moment had passed, they returned their goggles to their rightful place.

Tessa stood, stretching. "See you, Kaena."

And with that, she walked off, leaving the Keeper standing by the fountain.

A question lingered in Kaena's mind...

What would they say to Donde, now that he was dying?

Frame 15 - The Lie - Kaena Datha

The Keeper walked through the winding paths of Kara Null, the uneven streets softened by years of salt and wind. The port hummed with its quiet life—lanterns swayed in the breeze, their dim glow casting elongated shadows against the darkened stone, while the distant sounds of dockworkers and quiet conversation filled the space between footsteps. This place was not for the lost, nor for the found—it was for those who had chosen to remain.

The conversation with Tessa still lingered in their mind, her words sharp yet strangely grounding. But the shell in their pocket felt heavier now, its ridged surface pressing against their palm as if reminding them of the weight of their own silence. Donde Beklo was waiting.

The home was as they remembered—a structure of alchemically treated wood and dark stone, leaning into itself like an old man against the wind. A single lantern burned low outside, the flame within flickering erratically, barely clinging to life. The Keeper stared at it for a moment before stepping inside.

The first thing they noticed was the stillness. Not the kind that spoke of peace, but the kind that came when time had settled in its last moments, waiting for permission to move forward.

Donde lay upon a bed of thick blankets, his once-broad shoulders now sunken, his breath rattling in slow, deliberate intervals. The room smelled of aged wood,

alchemical medicine, and something faintly metallic—like the last remnants of a fire long since burned out.

The Keeper stepped forward. “Donde.”

The old man’s eyelids fluttered, and for a moment, it was uncertain if he had heard. But then, his breath hitched, and slowly, his eyes opened.

“...Kaena.” His voice was barely more than a breath, but it still carried the weight it always had. His gaze, though clouded with the dimness of the fading, sharpened slightly as he focused. “You came.”

The Keeper nodded. “I did.”

A slow exhale. A pause. The old man’s fingers twitched against the blanket, as if trying to grasp something that was no longer there. “I don’t have long.”

“I know.”

A silence settled between them. The Keeper, for all their preparations, found themselves uncertain of what to say. There were questions, yes—so many questions—but beneath them all was something deeper, something unspoken that clawed at the edges of understanding.

Donde shifted slightly, the effort barely visible but enough to strain his breath. His voice, though faint, did not waver. “You... want to know if I regret it.”

The Keeper inhaled sharply. “Do you?”

A slow blink. “No.”

And yet, there was something else there—something beneath the certainty. The Keeper could see it, buried in the lines of his face, in the way his breath hesitated before each word.

Donde’s eyes searched theirs, and for the first time, there was something almost pleading in his gaze. “But I do regret what it did to you.”

The words struck deep, unraveling something that the Keeper had not realized was wound so tightly within them.

They swallowed. “You said I saw too much and understood too little.”

Donde began to cough. It lasted for several long moments before he answered.

"It's the other way around, Kaena... I lied to save your life."

The Keeper startled at this revelation, their mind racing. "Why keep me here then?"

Donde's lips parted, and for a moment, it seemed he might answer.

But then, his breath caught—

A sharp inhalation.

A slow exhale.

Then stillness.

The Keeper did not move. The world around them did not move. Only the distant wind, the faint flicker of the lantern outside.

Donde Beklo was gone.

The silence stretched, heavy and unrelenting. The Keeper's fingers tightened around the shell in their pocket, the ridged surface pressing deeper into their skin. Their mind echoed with the weight of something unspoken, something left unfinished. Slowly, they turned the shell over in their hand, running their thumb along its surface. The ridges shimmered faintly in the lantern light, their pattern more deliberate than natural.

A language. A message. A question left behind.

Their breath was steady, but within them, something trembled.

And from the depths of thought, the Umbra whispered.

"And deeper still..."

The Keeper exhaled slowly, walked to Donde's bedside, and closed his eyelids for Him.

They took the shell from their pocket and placed it on Donde's chest.

Then Kaena turned, stepping through the threshold and into the night air.

They did not look back.

Without Donde, what truly tied them to this place?

Frame 16 - The Garden's Market - Veylan Asra

Veylan stepped onto the docking platform, inhaling deeply as the shift in air composition hit him—cool, crisp, saturated with the scent of flora both familiar and strange.

The Wayfarer's hull gleamed in the filtered glow of the Garden Sphere's sky, beads of moisture collecting along its weathered plating. Unlike many of the blocky transport vessels or the towering, angular Syndicate crafts, the Wayfarer was something else entirely.

A Whisper Unit, a Journer class designed for navigating the Below with near-silent Precision.

Sleek as a hunting blade, its reinforced hull was a combination of alchemically-treated alloys and pressure-resistant plating, its surface adorned with etched runes that pulsed faintly in the Sphere's light.

The large, multifaceted lenses along its forward section gave it the unsettling gaze of some deep-sea predator, scanning the world with an otherworldly glint. Unlike the heavy cargo ships or bulky military cruisers docked nearby, the Wayfarer looked coiled, ready to vanish into the depths of the Umbra at any moment.

Around it, vessels of all makes and sizes jostled for space—some vast, lumbering creatures designed for deep transport, others nimble skimmers outfitted for short-haul trade. A handful of independent vessels bore the distinct markings of rogue Journeyers, their hulls scarred by countless expeditions into the Below. Some whispered of forbidden discoveries; others carried the unmistakable scent of recent battle.

The port itself was a hive of movement—Returning Journeyers staggered off their ships, faces lined with exhaustion and eyes full of the weight of distant travels. Some spoke in hushed tones, gripping vials of alchemical salts like lifelines, warding off the lingering effects of the Umbra.

Tourists and civilians mingled among them, their presence marked by the awe in their eyes, pointing toward the great vessels with the wide-eyed wonder of those who had never known the peril of the Below.

Guards, clad in woven armor of organic filaments, moved silently through the crowd—present, but never imposing, their presence a quiet reminder that the Gardeners controlled all within their domain.

Vendors called out in hushed voices, their wares displayed beneath woven awnings of shimmering, alchemical cloth.

Veylan adjusted his robes, straightened his posture, and strode toward the Market. Ra'ala and Elara would join him later, once the last traces of Stormbrew had burned off. For now, the task was his.

The Market was a symphony of life.

Towering canopy walkways suspended above tiered gardens, each one bursting with vibrant, alchemically enhanced plant life. Water flowed in thin, gravity-defying arcs between platforms, forming shimmering curtains of liquid light.

The stalls were arranged in spirals, their woven structures blending seamlessly with the landscape. Sellers hawked their wares in murmured negotiations rather than shouts—exotic minerals, preserved spores, tinctures with labels that shifted depending on who looked at them.

The air pulsed with the scent of something sweet and deeply earthen, a warmth that settled into the lungs like a secret.

Veylan moved through it all like an artisan at work. His eyes swept the crowd, his ears tuned to half-heard whispers of illicit dealings. Not everything was traded openly here—beneath the official exchanges of legal alchemical goods, there was always another layer, an economy of quiet words and careful trust.

But today, the market yielded no results.

He wandered longer than he wanted to, slipping through narrow walkways draped in glowing vines, following murmurs of whispered transactions only to find them dead ends. A merchant dealing in rare inks sneered at him, another vendor laughed outright when he hinted at his wares.

Then, unexpectedly, he spotted a familiar face—a member of his own crew, casually perusing a stall laden with intricate glassware and preserved herbs. Saren Holt, their chief engineer.

She hadn't noticed him yet, her focus locked on a delicate vial, rolling it between her fingers. He hesitated. Saren wasn't one for idle shopping—so why was she here?

"Didn't think I'd run into you here," he said smoothly as he approached.

Saren flicked a glance toward him, her expression unreadable. "Didn't think you'd

be so desperate to sell poison."

Veylan smirked, but there was an edge to it. "Desperate is an ugly word. I'd prefer Resourceful."

She exhaled through her nose, clearly unimpressed. "You're wasting time, Vey. The Gardeners aren't going to touch that stuff, and you know it."

"Maybe," he admitted, glancing upward at the sky. The Sphere's ambient glow lacked the telltale richness of Zeal currents—this world was balanced, beautiful, but not Zeal-rich. "Not exactly the best place to free Way."

Saren followed his gaze and nodded grimly. "Is there something else we can do?" Veylan sighed, lowering his voice. "A new containment field might buy time. Some Zeal-rich nutrients could help keep the creature alive—if we can find them. But we would still need to find a replacement Zealian."

"Not to mention attune it to the ship," Saren murmured. "I doubt Way has that long in its current state."

She frowned, rolling the vial in her palm. "Not likely here."

"No," he agreed. "But we've never been to this world. Who knows?"

She scoffed, but he could tell she wasn't entirely dismissing him. "Just don't drag us into something we can't walk away from."

With that, she turned back to her selection, leaving Veylan to mull over her words. She wasn't wrong. Stormbrew wasn't going to move in the open market. He needed a different approach.

Spying a tavern at the edge of the market, Veylan made his way down the pier and left Saren behind.

The bar nestled itself into the roots of a vast, gnarled tree, its entrance framed by cascading vines that swayed with the movements of those who passed through. Veylan lingered a moment at the entrance to take it all in before feeling the weight of the vials in his pocket, then crossed through the threshold.

Inside, the ceiling was lost in a latticework of glowing branches, their soft luminescence casting the patrons in a shifting dance of shadows and light. The scent of distilled fruits and burning resin filled the space, accompanied by the quiet murmur of conversation.

The bartender, a broad-shouldered man with weathered copper-toned skin and deep-set eyes, worked with slow, deliberate efficiency. His arms bore intricate alchemical tattoos, their shifting ink moving like flowing script beneath his sleeves. He studied Veylan as he approached, taking a moment to assess before offering a Nod.

Veylan slid onto a seat at the counter, tapping a coin against the smooth, living wood. “Looking for something specific?” the bartender asked, his voice like distant Thunder.

Veylan offered a practiced smile. “Not yet. But I imagine I’ll find it here.”

The bartender chuckled, setting down a glass. “That’s what they all say.”

Veylan took a sip, letting the taste settle before lowering his voice. “I’m looking to move something with... delicate value. Know anyone with an appetite for the Unusual?”

The bartender considered him for a long moment. Then, with the barest tilt of his head, he gestured toward a table at the far end of the bar.

Veylan followed his gaze.

There, cloaked in the shifting half-light, sat a figure watching him with quiet interest.

Would this be the one?

Frame 17- The Cost of Journey - Beren Da’antla

Beren sat near the back of the transport, his fingers tracing the worn seams of his coat as the vehicle rumbled over uneven terrain. The low hum of the engine barely registered in his ears—his focus was elsewhere, on the world beyond the reinforced glass of the viewing panel.

Far below, the Garden Sphere gleamed in the distance, its organic spires stretching toward the sky, blending with the unnatural glow of the Below. From up here, the port was nothing more than a cluster of lights, but Beren could still see the shadows of the vessels that had docked. He traced the familiar shape of one in particular—The Wayfarer—his stomach twisting at the sight.

He exhaled sharply and turned away, pressing his fingers against his temples as if that would erase the gnawing sense of finality settling over him. He was never going

back. He had made his choice. There was no undoing it now.

"You're looking at it like a man staring at his own grave," a voice interrupted.

Beren glanced sideways. The man seated across from him was older, his face lined with the wear of countless journeys, his eyes sharp despite the exhaustion that clung to him. He had the look of a Journer, or at least someone who had spent too many cycles pretending to be one.

Beren huffed a quiet laugh, leaning back against his seat. "Might as well be."

The man tilted his head, studying him. "You've been down there. Into the Below."

Beren hesitated, his fingers tightening. Then, he nodded. "Yeah. Too many times."

The man let out a slow breath. "And yet, here you are. Above ground. Running."

Beren didn't answer at first. His eyes flicked toward the mountains ahead, where the Seeker village lay hidden among the ridges. He had paid well to get passage here, and once he arrived, he would disappear. That was the plan.

But plans meant nothing to the Below. He should have known that.
"What made you leave?" the man asked.

Beren hesitated before answering. "I just... I couldn't do it anymore. The pressure, the losses, the feeling that every journey could be my last. I've lost too many people. The Below takes and takes, and it never gives anything back."

The man's gaze sharpened. "And your crew? You set them up."

Beren's jaw tensed. "They wouldn't have let me go. Ra'ala... she doesn't stop. She always needs to go deeper, to push past the horizon, no matter the cost. If I stayed, I'd just be another ghost in the dark, another name lost to the Below. I want out. I want the sky."

The man studied him for a long moment, then exhaled. "You want to be a Seeker." Beren nodded. "Yeah. No more darkness. No more drowning in the unknown. Just light, sky, something real beneath my feet."

The man chuckled bitterly, shaking his head. "That's a rare thing, wanting the Above more than the Below. But tell me, do you really think you can just leave it behind?" Beren didn't answer immediately. He let the silence stretch, staring down at his palms, as if the answer might be etched into his skin.

Could he?

The transport rumbled on, climbing higher toward the ridgeline.

The man shifted slightly, glancing toward the horizon before speaking again. "The Syndicate's closing the walls, kid. Journeying's dying. Soon, only the ones with deep pockets, deep ties, or deep loyalty to the Syndicate are gonna have access to the Below. No more rogue captains. No more free Journeys. You think you got out? You think you're free?"

He shook his head. "They'll find you. Or they'll find the ones you left behind. Either way... the Below's grip doesn't loosen. It just waits."

Beren's fingers curled into fists. He wanted to argue. To tell the man he was wrong.

But the words never came.

Because deep down, he knew.

The Below never lets go.

The transport crested a ridge, and for just a moment, Beren caught sight of the horizon stretching endlessly before them.

The sky was vast, streaked in shades of gold and violet as the Caelux Core met the distant peaks.

It should have felt freeing.

So why didn't it?

Frame 18 -Too Good To Be True - Ra'ala Duskbane

Ra'ala sat with her back against the cool metal of the Wayfarer's hull, her breath slow and steady. Her body ached—not from battle or exhaustion, but from something heavier. Her head throbbed, a dull ache behind her eyes, and the aftertaste of the Stormbrew lingered like burnt copper at the back of her throat.

She exhaled through her nose, staring at the floor as if it held some kind of answer. Across from her, Elara sprawled sideways against a storage crate, her usual sharpness dulled. She looked just as wrung-out as Ra'ala felt. A rare sight.

"Well," Elara muttered, rubbing her temples, "that was an experience."

Ra'ala let out a dry chuckle. "That's one word for it." She tilted her head back against the ship, shutting her eyes for a moment. "Might not have been the best decision." Elara scoffed. "No. It was the right one." She stretched out her legs, eyes half-lidded.

"We needed to think faster, move faster. And we did. You got us through that inspection, didn't you?"

Ra'ala didn't answer immediately. She turned her gaze to the dim lights overhead, watching their faint flicker. "Yeah. We did."

But her mind wasn't on the inspectors. It wasn't on the Stormbrew, either. She hesitated, then exhaled slowly, choosing her words carefully. "I'm almost glad we're stuck here."

Elara frowned. "That doesn't sound like you."

Ra'ala tapped her fingers idly against the metal floor. "Last time we were Journeying, I heard something."

Elara sat up slightly. "Something?"

Ra'ala's jaw tightened. "The Below. The Umbra. It whispered."

Elara's expression shifted from exhaustion to something closer to concern. "Ra'ala, That's—"

"I know what it sounds like," Ra'ala cut in, a sharpness in her voice. "Old wives' tales. Symptoms of stress. Hallucinations from too many cycles in the dark."

Elara studied her. "And?"

Ra'ala clenched her fists, feeling the familiar weight of truth settle in her chest. "And it wasn't any of those things."

Silence stretched between them, thick with unspoken thoughts. Elara leaned forward, resting her arms on her knees. "So what did it say?"

Ra'ala swallowed as she lied to Elara, "I don't know. I couldn't understand the words. But it felt... like something waiting."

A moment of silence separated them, and the echoes of what the Umbra actually said reverberated in Ra'ala's mind.

"Go Deeper..."

Elara exhaled sharply. "Umbra Sickness isn't real. Not like that. If people started hearing things, they'd keep it to themselves. You don't tell your crew you think the Below is talking to you. You just drink more saltwater and push through."

Ra'ala smirked bitterly. "Yeah. That's what I told myself, too."

Elara was quiet for a long moment. Then, her voice softened. "And now?"

Ra'ala rubbed her temples, exhaustion pressing in again. "Now, I need to fix this. The ship. The engine. Everything. Because Journeying is all I know. It's what I was built for. And if I can't do that..."

Elara didn't answer. She didn't need to.

A sharp crackle over the comms cut through the silence.

"Captain?"

Ra'ala's head snapped up. "Veylan?"

His voice came through, light, almost amused. "Where are you? I've got some good News."

Ra'ala closed her eyes for a brief second, grounding herself before responding. "Tell me you didn't do anything reckless."

"Oh, not at all," Veylan said smoothly. "I just sold the shipment."

Elara sat up straight. "The whole thing?"

"Every last vial. Made us a tidy profit, too."

Ra'ala exhaled slowly, but there was no relief in it. Something about his voice—too casual, too pleased. Her instincts prickled.

She straightened. "Who did you sell it to, Veylan?"

Frame 19 -The Deal - Ra'ala Dusbane

The air inside the bar was thick with the scent of old wood, damp stone, and something sharp beneath it all—alchemical fumes clinging to the rafters. It was

quieter than Ra'ala expected. No rowdy crews, no drunken brawls, just the low murmur of Journer voices trading secrets and deals over shared drinks. A place for those who knew how to keep their mouths shut.

She spotted Veylan first. He was lounging in the back, his usual relaxed confidence on display, two fingers lazily tapping against a drink he hadn't touched. Across from him sat three figures—mercenaries, that much was clear. The kind of crew that lived by the currency of risk.

Ra'ala didn't like this.

Elara felt it too. She was just half a step behind Ra'ala, her usual smirk absent, eyes scanning the table. Saren was with them, her arms folded across her chest, tension tightening her jaw. If there was anyone in the crew who understood the value of resources and hard bargains, it was Saren.

Veylan caught sight of them and leaned back, spreading his arms wide as if to welcome them into some grand opportunity. "Captain," he said smoothly, "I was beginning to think you wouldn't show."

Ra'ala slid into the open seat across from him, fixing him with a look. "You said you had good news."

One of the mercenaries chuckled. Their captain, by the look of them. Tall, lean, eyes dark as the Below, a scar carving its way down their jaw. "That depends on how you feel about making money," they said.

Ra'ala leaned back slightly, folding her arms. "I feel fine about it. What's the catch?" The merc captain tilted their head slightly, watching her with something between amusement and calculation. "No catch. Just opportunity."

Veylan exhaled through his nose, as if he could feel Ra'ala's patience thinning. "We offloaded the Stormbrew. A clean sale. But these fine people," he gestured toward the mercs, "are offering something bigger. A trade."

Ra'ala arched a brow. "Go on."

The captain leaned in slightly, their voice lowering. "We need a crew to handle a transport. A quiet one. No Syndicate attention."

Elara tensed slightly beside Ra'ala. "A person?"

The captain nodded. "A scholar. They need to get off the Seeker village and to a Zealrich Sphere. No questions asked."

Ra'ala felt the weight of the words settle in her chest. The Seekers were independent, fiercely so. If someone wanted out, it meant something had already gone wrong. And the Syndicate—if they found out, it wouldn't just be the scholar in danger.

She exhaled slowly. "Why us?"

The merc grinned. "Because we hear you know how to keep quiet."

Elara crossed her arms, glancing at Ra'ala. "And the payment?"

"More than fair. A fresh Zealian. A proper containment unit. Supplies to keep your current one alive long enough to reach a Zeal-rich Sphere." The merc leaned back. "Plus, a decent chunk of credits. More than enough to keep your ship running for a long time."

Saren leaned forward. "That Zealian is worth more than half the damn market deals we've tried to get. And the containment unit? We don't get another shot at that. If we don't take this, we're flying blind."

Ra'ala's mind turned, gears shifting, weighing risk against reward. They needed the containment. They needed the Zealian. They needed to fix the ship. But this? This was something else.

Elara shifted beside her. "Captain..."

Ra'ala exhaled. "I don't like walking into something blind."

The merc captain shrugged. "You're a Journer. Walking blind is part of the trade."

Saren leaned in, her voice edged with frustration. "Ra'ala, if we don't take this, Way won't last another cycle. You know that. You know we don't have another option."

Ra'ala tapped her fingers against the table. This wasn't just a job. It was a line being crossed. The Below had its dangers, but knowledge?

Knowledge was the kind of thing that got people killed.

She closed her eyes for a moment. She could still hear the whisper, curling in the back of her mind.

"Go Deeper..."

She opened them again, meeting the merc's gaze.

"All right," she said, voice steady. "We'll do it. Who's the scholar?"

The mercenary captain's smirk widened, but there was something unreadable behind it. They took their time answering, reaching for their drink, swirling the liquid idly before setting the glass back down.

"Elara," Ra'ala murmured, "this feels off."

Elara, ever the pragmatist, shrugged. "It's a high-stakes deal. When do they ever feel Clean?"

The merc captain finally answered. "The scholar's name is Orlan Vey. He's a researcher from the Above, been living with the Seekers for a few years now. He's got something the Syndicate wouldn't approve of—something about Zeal energy and its connection to the Above."

Ra'ala frowned. "And you're sure he wants to leave?"

The mercs exchanged glances. "He reached out to us. He's scared. And he's got every reason to be."

Veylan leaned in, his tone lower, more serious. "Ra'ala, this isn't just some cargo run. If we do this, we're making enemies. We need to be sure."

Saren scoffed. "We're already making enemies by staying afloat. If we're gonna survive, we need to take the trades that count."

Ra'ala inhaled sharply. The deal was too good, the risk too high. But if Orlan was onto something real—if the Syndicate would silence him over it—then they were already involved the second they heard his name.

She looked at Elara, then Veylan, then Saren, searching their faces. They were waiting for her call.

She exhaled, feeling the weight settle over her shoulders.

"We're in," she said. "But we do it our way. No surprises."

The merc captain grinned, raising their glass. "No surprises."

Ra'ala didn't believe that for a second.

She leaned forward, eyes narrowing slightly. "And if the Syndicate catches wind of

this? What happens then?"

Frame 20 - No Turning Back - Ryn Darksong

The mercenary captain, Ryn Darksong gave a smirk and looked Captain Ra'ala dead in the eyes.

"Why would you let that happen?"

Frame 21 - The Call of the Umbra - Kaena Datha

Kaena walked without direction, yet every step pulled them toward a single, inescapable conclusion.

They needed to leave.

Not as a want, not as a quiet dream buried beneath duty and expectation—no. This was not some passing impulse. This was a need, a force pushing from within their ribs, coiling around their breath, threading through every muscle and bone. It burned in them, deeper than thought, deeper than reason. It was as if something in the Below had decided, had whispered, had stretched out unseen fingers and gripped them from across the tides.

"Go Deeper..."

Their pulse thrummed in time with the memory of it, the echo of the whispers that had followed them since the Beach of Silver Sand. The Umbra had spoken. The Umbra had shown. And now, it waited.

Kaena's boots pressed into the dampened earth of Kara Null's winding paths, weaving through dim alleyways where the lanterns burned low. The streets were quieter than usual, as if the village itself had settled into some unspoken mourning, its inhabitants waiting for the next piece of their world to shift. But even in this quiet, Kaena's mind churned. Their body ached to move, to run, to plunge into the Below before their tether to this place snapped tight around them once more. But it would not be so simple.

Donde Beklo's son, Barek, was in charge now.

He would never allow it.

Kaena could already see the confrontation in their mind—the sharp words, the unyielding stare. Barek was not a cruel man, but he was a pragmatic one, and he had spent too many years under his father's rule to abandon it the moment the old man's breath stilled. If anything, he would double down, solidifying Kara Null's traditions, locking its foundations into place so that no one—not even its wandering Keeper—could disrupt the balance Donde had worked so hard to maintain. Barek would tell them exactly what Donde had before him: The lighthouse must remain lit. The Keeper must remain.

Because the village depended on it.

Kaena's jaw tightened. Did they not understand?

The light was not for them.

They had spent uncountable cycles tending it, feeding it, keeping it steady through storm and shadow, yet the people of Kara Null barely looked beyond their own borders. They did not stand at the cliffs, watching the Below churn with secrets. They did not feel the pull beneath their ribs, the silent gravity that whispered "And Deeper Still...". To them, the lighthouse was a comfort, a ward against the Unknown.

To Kaena, it was a shackle.

But even if they convinced Barek, even if the village could go on without them, how would they leave?

Kaena had no vessel of their own. The lighthouse was their home, but it was not a Journey. They had no means of navigating the Umbra, no hull reinforced with Zeal to withstand the pressure, no engines to push them forward through the tides. They had studied the currents, the alchemical forces that carved paths through the Below, yet they had never steered a ship of their own.

They had always watched. Waited.

And a ship alone would not be enough.

They would need a crew.

Their fingers curled into a fist at the thought. Kara Null was a small village. The people respected them, but they did not follow them. They were tolerated, necessary, but also apart. An exile, taken in not out of kindness, but utility. Would any of them follow if Kaena called? Would any of them even listen?

The weight of it pressed on their shoulders as they reached the outskirts of the village, where the land sloped upward toward the lighthouse. The sky above had begun its slow shift toward deeper hues, the dimming glow of Caelux casting everything in strange relief. The air was heavier now, and Kaena knew what was coming before they heard it.

The bells.

A distant, mournful chime rang out across the village. Then another. And another.

They froze.

The sound carried over the hills, through the winding streets, across the empty port where Journer vessels sat idle.

It was not a bell meant for warning, nor for celebration.

It was the sound of passage, of a weight shifting from one set of shoulders to another.

It was the sound of finality.

Kaena exhaled slowly. The last anchor of their exile had been cut.

And yet, they remained.

The lighthouse stood ahead, its glow steady, its purpose unchanged. For years, it had been the center of their world. Would they leave it behind?

Or would it drag them under once more?

The bells tolled again, and Kaena lifted their gaze toward the endless, shifting tide of the Below.

How does one escape the inescapable pull?

Frame 21.5 – The Bells – Jareth Kyn

The cards whispered as they slid from callused fingers to the tabletop. A low, satisfying friction. Jareth Kyn didn't play to win—he played to sort the noise in his head into something smaller. The seven colors shimmered faintly in the amber glow of afternoon, their glyphs catching light from the hearth-flame and dancing like lazy sparks.

Each suit bore a different symbol—knot, flame, spiral, seed, eye, gate, thread—and Jareth moved them between their stacks with the deliberation of someone who'd already lived a dozen lifetimes. It was a game of balance and rhythm, half-skill, half-listening. He told himself he played to rest.

Outside, the shallow Umbra swayed in engineered channels: a looping spiral of dug-out streams encircling their modest home like ink drawn on the land. The golden reeds—bristal stalks, some called them—shimmered and hummed, their roots steeped in soft pressure and whispering current. Strange harvesting arms hung idle nearby, half-folded like sleeping insects. In the tiered barn beyond, pale animal shapes slumbered in the dappled shade—umbraeweavers, bred for their silk-like fur and low melodic purring.

Jareth paused, fingertip hovering over the knot of the fifth suit.

A low, distant gong rolled over the shore like thunder.

He turned his head slightly, as if not to spook the sound. There it was again—three more tolls, slow and deliberate.

Funeral bells. Kara Null's way of letting the living know someone had passed.

Jareth stood from the game without touching the card. The move could wait.

He walked to the small, warped window carved into the hull of the original Journer frame they'd built the house around. From here, he could see the shoreline glittering violet-blue, the port half-obscured by reeds and tide-light. No vessel stirred, but the bells meant someone had already arrived—or been laid to rest.

He felt it settle then. Donde Beklo was truly gone.

Not the man he once argued with. Not the man who'd exiled Kaena. Just a shape now—emptied, honored, and folded back into the currents.

Jareth exhaled slowly and let his fingers tap against the sill. A ripple passed through the bristal reeds. Some current had shifted—maybe the Keeper was already on their way back.

The bells tolled once more.

Behind him, soft footsteps on wood. Then the unmistakable weight of small arms draping over his side.

"Papa?" came a drowsy voice. "Why are the bells singing?"

He looked down at her—Azaza, still wrapped in her night-wrap, hair like tangled threadlight, eyes still wet from sleep.

“They’re not singing, little reed,” Jareth said, voice quiet. “They’re remembering.”

Azaza blinked up at him. “Who?”

He reached behind her to pull the blanket snug around her shoulder.

“Someone who once made hard choices.”

She didn’t understand—but she nodded like she did. Then looked out the window with him, toward the port, where the water swirled gold and blue.

Behind them, the card game remained—unfinished.

Frame 22 - Echoes of the Past - Kaena Datha

The lighthouse loomed ahead, bathed in the dim glow of Caelux’s retreating light. The wind had died down, leaving the world eerily still. No distant voices from the village, no sound but the rhythmic lap of the Umbra against the cliffs below. Kaena stepped inside, shutting the door behind them with a quiet finality. The silence pressed in.

They had time now. Too much time.

The Keeper ran a hand along the stone wall, feeling the cool, rough surface beneath their fingertips. The beacon still burned overhead, but its light felt distant, removed from them in some fundamental way. The weight of Donde’s passing, the village’s expectations, Barek’s inevitable resistance—it all lingered at the edge of their mind. And yet, something deeper gnawed at them.

The Umbra called. The Below waited.

They sank onto their cot, exhaustion seeping into their limbs. But sleep did not come Easy.

They dreamed.

Or remembered.

Or both.

The Temple of the Syndicate rose around them, immense and monolithic, its halls stretching upward into unknowable heights. The air was thick with the scent of old parchment and alchemical salts, the flickering glow of lanterns reflecting off polished stone. Towering statues loomed over the central atrium—Alchemists Who Had Lit the Way Before. Their robes, carved from the rock itself, cascaded like frozen waterfalls, their visages shrouded in timeworn mystery. Yet their eyes gleamed with something beyond stone, something alive.

Kaena walked with purpose, their steps ringing out in the vast space. A renowned Alchemist in their own right, they had carved their name into the annals of history. Years of study, of experiment, of pushing beyond the boundaries of what was known—it had all led to this.

They reached the grand chamber, the heart of the Syndicate's knowledge. The High Council sat in perfect stillness, their dark robes flowing as if moved by unseen currents. Their faces were obscured, only their eyes visible—glowing like distant stars, flickering like embers in a void. The weight of their presence was suffocating, a tidal force pressing inward.

Kaena stood before them, presenting their findings.

They had discovered something. Something buried within the Umbra itself.

The currents that flowed through its depths were more than just ephemeral tides. They contained something deeper—Strong Flux Ephemeral Currents. The very forces responsible for entangling matter across vast distances, binding elements together in ways beyond alchemical convention. The implications were profound. If the Umbra was more than just shadow—if it was connection, if it was foundation—then everything they had believed about its nature would have to be rewritten.

A figure stepped forward, placing a weight in Kaena's hand. A medal? A mark of honor? It shimmered unnaturally, refracting hues that should not exist. It felt heavier than it should.

The statues whispered.

The voices of the Council overlapped, their words bending and folding into something warped. Kaena tried to focus, but their voices became the whispers of the Umbra, bleeding into the temple's silence.

"Go deeper."

The room trembled. A crack ran along the marble beneath their feet.

Kaena looked up—the statues had moved. Their heads had turned, their once-stoic expressions now subtly... watching. Their stone lips parted.

They whispered. Not words. Not language. Something else.

The figures of the Council began to blur at the edges, dissolving into the same shifting mist Kaena had seen in the Below. Their glowing eyes burned brighter, but their forms unraveled, unspooling into something weightless.

The statues collapsed into dust.

The grand chamber buckled. The walls turned to sand, slipping away beneath their fingertips as they reached for something—anything—to hold onto. The temple's endless heights cracked, shards of reality itself crumbling into the void. Kaena tried to speak, to scream, to hold the memory together. But it was already Breaking.

They felt themselves falling.

Kaena awoke with a start.

Their breath came in short, uneven gasps, sweat clinging to their skin. The room was cold, the quiet absolute.

What had they just seen?

They pressed a hand to their forehead. It had felt real—too real. But how much of it was real?

The whispers, the accolades, the discovery.

Had they truly changed the understanding of the Umbra? Or was it just a dream, a memory distorted by time and exile?

And if it had been true...

What had they done to be cast out?

Frame 23 - Silence - Kaena Datha

As Kaena jolted awake, breath ragged, heart pounding. The dream clung to them like the damp air in the lighthouse—formless yet suffocating. Shadows had consumed the grand halls of the Syndicate, voices overlapping, twisting into something incomprehensible. The temple had crumbled beneath them, leaving only the void. The Below. And the whisper that never came.

They sat up, rubbing their face with trembling fingers. The room was cold, and outside, the wind howled low and mournful. The lighthouse lantern burned steady, but its glow felt distant, its warmth unable to reach them. They swallowed hard, the weight in their chest pressing deeper.

This had happened before—visions bleeding into wakefulness, reality slipping like sand through their fingers. But this time, there was nothing.

They needed to see.

They needed to know.

Kaena rose, moving on instinct, their body guiding them through the motions of a decision already made. The wooden steps creaked beneath their boots as they ascended the winding staircase, spiraling toward the highest point of the lighthouse. The climb felt longer tonight. The shadows stretched in the corners of their vision, shifting with each breath.

At the top, the wind hit them in full force, curling around the lighthouse balcony, tugging at their coat. The Below stretched endlessly before them. The waves pulsed, slow and steady, the shifting mass of the Umbra glistening under the dim glow of Caelux's retreating light.

Kaena gripped the railing, staring down at the abyss. Their breath was steady, measured. Their goggles were still on. The protective glass shielded their eyes, separating them from the raw truth of the Below.

They hesitated.

With a deliberate slowness, they removed their goggles.

The cold air stung their eyes, and for a moment, the entire world sharpened. Every ripple, every shifting current, every flicker of iridescent movement became painfully clear.

They waited.

Their breath came shallow, heart pounding. This was always how it began. The whispers, the voices—soft at first, rising in layers, washing over them like the tide, dragging them into depths unseen.

But this time...

Nothing.

Kaena's fingers curled around the railing. Their pulse quickened. The Umbra stretched before them, indifferent, vast, but utterly, impossibly silent.

No visions. No murmurs at the edges of thought. No answers.

They blinked, straining to hear, to feel anything—but the Below did not stir. The realization settled in slow, suffocating waves.

The Umbra was not listening.

A shuddering breath left their lips. "No," they whispered, their voice lost to the wind. Their grip tightened. "No," they said again, louder, forcing the word into the empty Sky.

Still, nothing.

Their throat tightened. "What should I do?"

Their voice cracked, raw with uncertainty. "Answer me!"

The Umbra remained still.

Kaena clenched their fists. Their breath came faster now, uneven.

"Why do you forsake me when I need you now more than ever!?"

Their voice carried over the waves, swallowed by the empty vastness.

Nothing.

Their teeth ground together. Had they ever truly been hearing the Umbra at all? Had it all been them—their mind, their desperation, spinning meaning from shadows? Their fingers fumbled blindly, shaking, as they gripped the goggles still clutched in their other hand.

For years, these lenses had shielded them. Protected them. Separated them. A slow inhale. A slow exhale.

Then, with a final breath, they threw the goggles over the balcony's edge. The wind caught them, spinning them end over end, until they vanished into the depths below.

Kaena remained where they stood, staring at the empty space where the goggles had been. They did not move. The waves crashed far below, rhythmic and endless. The sky stretched overhead, vast and uncaring. The Umbra rolled beneath them, silent and still.

Time stretched thin. Seconds, minutes—an eternity.

They had committed themselves fully. No barriers. No shields. No turning back.

The wind howled. The Below churned.

And then—

A whisper.

No. Not a whisper.

A voice.

The Umbra spoke.

"You wish to Journey?"

Kaena's breath caught.

Frame 24 - Leviathan - Kaena Datha

The air trembled around them, the edges of the world suddenly too sharp, too real. A surge of motion beneath the waves. A shape rising.

Something vast.

A Leviathan.

The creature erupted from the Umbra, its massive, chitinous form breaking the surface, black eyes gleaming like Abyssal stars. The wind screamed, the lighthouse shook, Kaena stumbled back—

And then it was gone.

The Below was still once more.

Had it ever been there at all?

The answer did not matter.

A final breath of silence.

The Below shifted. Something unseen rippled beneath the waves. The lighthouse's glow flickered, dimming for just a moment—as if acknowledging what had transpired.

Then, clear as the tide, the voice came once more.

"I will show you the way."

Frame 25 - The Seeker Village - Beren Da'antla

The village unfolded before Beren as a study in contrast—a quiet settlement woven seamlessly into the land, yet crowned by the skyport above. The mountain loomed behind it, its stone face carved with terraces and platforms where sleek Seeker vessels rested, waiting to ascend into the blinding light of the Above. Below, the village clung to the earth, its buildings grown rather than built, shaped by alchemical arts that encouraged the wood and stone to merge with the landscape. Trees arched their limbs over rooftops, vines curled around window frames, and glass-paneled structures reflected the shifting hues of the sky.

Beren pulled his rugged leather bomber jacket tighter against the wind that funneled down from the heights. The air carried a crisp bite, tinged with the faint scent of burning resin from alchemical lanterns and the rich loam of damp earth. His jeans were worn from travel, dust clinging to the fabric, and the boots on his feet carried the weight of long journeys and longer regrets. The short cut of his hair revealed the sharp angles of his face, a jawline set in grim determination.

A tattoo lay hidden beneath his sleeve, a simple mark on his wrist that meant far more than ink alone. He was careful to keep it covered; a man fresh from a Syndicate Prison World would find no easy welcome, even here.

He strode forward, drawing little attention at first, until an older villager in a woven vest and loose trousers stepped into his path. The man squinted at him, then gave a nod of recognition—not of familiarity, but of instinct. A traveler, a man looking for Something.

"New arrival?" the villager asked, his voice even, but questioning.

Beren gave a small nod. "Looking for boarding. Got a man to see about a job." The villager studied him, his eyes flickering over the well-worn jacket, the tension in his stance. "You an airman?" he asked, tilting his chin toward the skyport. "Or do

you come from the Below?"

Beren hesitated a fraction too long before answering. "Spent my time on a Journey," he admitted. "Gunner."

The villager's expression flickered, subtle but telling. Gunners were necessary, but not revered. It was a job taken out of obligation, not passion. A role no one wanted, except when it was needed. And when it was needed, it was always ugly.

"Dangerous work," the villager commented.

Beren nodded, his jaw tightening as a memory clawed at the edges of his mind. The Wayfarer's cannons thrummed beneath his fingertips, their alchemical cores pulsing with barely contained energy.

The impact was never seen directly—not with the naked eye. Instead, the specialized viewing screens flickered, revealing the moment the enemy vessel or Umbriotic creature imploded under the pressure of the Below. A silent rupture, a brief, violent vacuum that swallowed the wreckage whole.

But the sound still came.

It reverberated through the hull, a deep, muffled bell tolling through steel and bone. No matter how thick the walls, how far away the explosion, the vibration always found a way inside. A slow, shuddering resonance that settled into the marrow, a reminder that something had ceased to be.

Ra'ala's voice had been steady when she gave the order. No hesitation. No uncertainty. And he had fired. Because that was his job.

Mid-sentence, he fell silent, his words trailing off like smoke in the cold air. The villager waited, then frowned. "You alright?"

Beren blinked, pulling himself back to the present. "Yeah," he muttered, shaking off the moment. "Just tired. Where can I find boarding?"

The villager gestured toward a row of buildings at the far end of the village, near the rise that led up to the port. "Try the Skylark House. They take in travelers. And if you're looking for work on a Seeker, ask for a man named Vossin. He handles the crew manifests."

Beren gave a curt nod of thanks and adjusted his jacket, setting off in the direction he was given. His boots struck the stone path with steady, deliberate steps, but his mind was anything but steady.

How long could a man run from the weight of his own past before it caught up to him?

Frame 26 - Skylark House - Beren Da'antla

Beren stood at the threshold of the Skylark House, lingering just beyond its great arching doorway. The building towered before him, its wooden structure merging seamlessly into the vast tree that housed it, its roots anchored deep into the earth while its highest branches stretched toward the Above.

Flags adorned its exterior, sigils of the sky woven in fine cloth, fluttering gently in the high-altitude breeze. The air carried a warmth, scented with aged timber and faint traces of incense, a place steeped in peace.

From inside, the murmur of voices filtered out, a rolling tide of conversation, laughter, and the occasional burst of song.

Steeling himself, Beren stepped through the entrance. The common hall sprawled before him, a vast open space where polished wooden beams curved overhead, their patterns reminiscent of an ancient canopy. A grand fireplace crackled at its heart, its glow casting flickering light across cushioned chairs, low tables, and benches where travelers and locals alike rested. The space exuded a warmth beyond the heat of the fire—something welcoming, lived-in, almost sacred in its simplicity.

As Beren took it all in, a voice—deep, warm, and laced with mischief—broke through the ambient chatter.

"Well, well! What's this? A Journer skulking about my door, trying to look Inconspicuous?"

Beren turned, finding himself face to face with an elderly man draped in simple robes, sandals scuffing lightly against the wooden floor. His hair was silver-streaked, his face lined with age, but his dark eyes gleamed with unrestrained amusement. "Baas Nerith," the man declared, bowing with an exaggerated flourish. "Innkeeper, trickster, and one-time seeker of secrets—though now, I mostly seek a warm drink and good company." He clapped his hands together. "And you are?"

"Beren," he answered warily, eyeing the man's broad grin with suspicion.

"A fine name! Sounds like a man who takes himself very seriously," Baas mused. "No need for that here, my friend. Skylark House doesn't stand for burdens unless they are dropped at the door."

Beren wasn't sure what to make of him. The man was too... light. People who had seen the Below, who had spent time in the dark, didn't carry themselves like this—not unless they were mad or hiding something.

Still, Baas was already leading him toward the hearth. "Now then! You'll need a place to rest your feet, and lucky for you, I happen to own such a place." His grin widened. "A tragic fate, truly, to be trapped in such generosity."

Beren folded his arms. "And the cost?"

"Ah," Baas sighed, shaking his head. "Always so suspicious, you lot from the Below. No coin, no barter. Just a promise that you don't sneak out before breakfast, because I do a fine morning meal." He wagged a finger. "And believe me, it's better to stay fed. I once let a guest leave without breakfast, and they nearly floated right off into the sky! Absolute tragedy."

Beren exhaled sharply. He wasn't sure if it was a sigh or the start of a laugh. Baas clapped his shoulder as if they were old friends. "And as for employment—" he leaned in, eyes twinkling, "you're not ready to be a Seeker yet. First? You will be my assistant here."

Beren blinked. "What?"

Baas spread his arms. "What better way to learn about the Above than by serving those who come and go from it?" He turned, already walking toward the counter at the far end of the hall, waving a hand dismissively. "Besides, I practically run this place. You'll meet every Seeker worth knowing and more."

"I didn't come here to work an inn," Beren said, though the protest was weak even to his own ears.

Baas didn't stop. "And yet, here you are. You'll find, my friend, that the best paths never begin where we expect."

Beren let out another breath, glancing around at the warmth of the hall, the easy laughter of strangers. Maybe this wasn't what he had expected—but was that such a bad thing?

"So," Baas called back, mischief in his tone. "Will you take my offer? Or are you afraid of a little honest work?"

Beren ran a hand through his short-cropped hair, exhaling slowly.

Hadn't he been running long enough?

Frame 27 - The Sash of Sky - Beren Da'antla

Beren woke to the sound of wind rustling through wooden beams, a gentle creaking that gave the impression that Skylark House itself was stretching in the morning light. The scents of crisp mountain air, burning cedar, and something sweet drifted through his small room, carried by the lazy warmth of dawn.

For the first time in what felt like years, he had slept without the distant hum of a Zeal engine beneath his bones.

He sat up slowly, rubbing the exhaustion from his eyes. The bed was too soft. The air too still. The silence too deep. There were no whispered shift changes, no boots clanking on steel, no storm alarms warning of a volatile current ahead. He felt weightless in a way that unsettled him.

And yet, he hadn't dreamt of gunfire. That, at least, was something.

A knock at his door shattered the moment. Before he could answer, Baas Nerith strolled in, carrying a wooden tray stacked with honeyed flatbread and a steaming clay cup.

"Ah! Good, you live," Baas said cheerfully, setting the tray down with practiced ease. "For a moment, I thought perhaps the Below had claimed you in your sleep. Though if that were the case, I suppose it would've been quite rude of me to barge in."

Beren blinked. "Do you always break into your guests' rooms?"

"Only the interesting ones." Baas took a seat on the edge of a worn chest near the door, folding his hands in his lap. "And since you are officially employed here—" "I didn't agree to that."

Baas waved a hand, dismissing the protest. "—you will need to start your first day on the right foot. And I, being a generous employer, have taken the liberty of preparing a task to ease you into your new role."

Beren sighed, reaching for the cup. The scent of the brew was warm and spiced, a deep, herbal bitterness layered with something floral. He took a slow sip. "Right," he said, bracing himself. "What's the catch?"

Baas beamed. "Ah! You are already learning." He stood, stretching his arms over his head. "Your task is simple. Go to the common hall, find the man wearing the blue sash, and deliver this message: 'The sky is heavier than it looks.'"

Beren frowned. "That's it?"

"That's it," Baas confirmed.

Beren studied him for a long moment, then, muttering under his breath, pulled on his bomber jacket. He had expected cleaning, heavy lifting, even fetching supplies.

But cryptic errands?

The common hall was already alive with morning chatter, the scent of roasting grains and spiced tea thick in the air. Beren scanned the room until he spotted the man Baas had described—a broad-shouldered figure seated near the far window, his blue sash marking him as someone of importance. His expression was unreadable as he sipped his drink, gaze fixed on the world beyond the glass. Steeling himself, Beren made his way over. "Message for you," he said, voice measured. "The sky is heavier than it looks."

The man paused mid-sip, setting his drink down with slow deliberation. He looked up at Beren, eyes sharp, and for a long moment, he said nothing.

Then, he sighed. "Ah. That old truth."

Before Beren could ask what that meant, the man stood, removing his sash and draping it over Beren's shoulders. "If you understand why, you may keep this," he said simply, before turning and walking away, leaving his unfinished meal behind. Beren stiffened. The entire room had gone silent. The weight of the fabric across his shoulders was deceptively light, yet it sat there like an anvil.

Before he could dwell on it, Baas appeared at his side. "Wonderful! Now, since you're wearing the sash, you'll have to continue with your chores. No special treatment, of course."

Beren exhaled sharply and got to work, moving through the Skylark House with the heavy cloth still resting on his shoulders. It was subtle at first, but soon, he noticed it—people looking at him differently. Some greeted him with quiet nods, others whispered when they thought he wasn't listening. A few of the younger Seekers straightened their backs in his presence, as if his mere existence demanded a higher Standard.

Then the absurdity began.

A cook tried to give him the best cut of meat, despite him being an assistant. A group of Seekers nearly tripped over themselves to let him pass through a doorway first. A younger apprentice suddenly started asking him for advice on skyship maintenance, despite Beren having no idea how Seekers actually ran their vessels. One man even

bowed slightly before handing him a broom, as if Beren's mere presence had sanctified the act of sweeping.

By midday, the weight of their attention had become unbearable.

Frustrated, Beren pulled off the sash and tossed it onto a nearby table. The change was instant.

Conversations resumed, postures relaxed, and no one gave him a second glance. He stood there for a long moment, staring down at the simple strip of fabric. Then, slowly, he turned to Baas, who was watching him with an expression that was equal parts amusement and satisfaction.

"Ah," Baas said, tapping his fingers together. "So you see."

Beren frowned. "See what?"

Baas plucked the sash from the table and held it up. "This little piece of cloth carries an expectation. The Sash Bearer is an old tradition in Skylark House—one who wears it is seen as someone worth learning from, someone whose words carry weight. That's why they treated you the way they did."

Beren scoffed. "But I didn't do anything."

Baas' grin widened. "Precisely."

Beren narrowed his eyes. "What's the point, then?"

Baas rested a hand on his shoulder. "You carried a burden without earning it, and people treated you as something you weren't. You enjoyed the perks, but the responsibility? It was crushing, wasn't it?"

Beren said nothing.

Baas chuckled. "Tell me, how different is that from the life you left behind?"

Beren opened his mouth, but no words came.

Baas patted him on the back. "Good! That means you're thinking. And that, my friend, is the first step."

Beren ran a hand through his short-cropped hair, exhaling slowly.

Hadn't he spent his whole life carrying burdens he never chose?

Frame 28 - The Handoff - Ra'ala Duskbane

Ra'ala stood near the docking ramp of the Wayfarer, arms crossed as she watched the mercenaries haul away the last of the Stormbrew. The trade had gone smoothly—perhaps too smoothly—but for now, she wasn't going to argue with success. The lead merc, a wiry woman with a scarred lip, counted out a few final vials before giving Ra'ala a satisfied nod.

"All accounted for," she said. "Pleasure doing business."

Ra'ala grunted. "Just make sure it doesn't come back to bite us."

The mercenary grinned. "That's your problem now, Captain." With that, she gestured to her crew, and they disappeared down the dock.

Veylan was already insufferable. "I'd like to take a moment," he declared, arms spread wide, "to acknowledge my brilliance. Not only did we get rid of a very illegal shipment with no Syndicate attention, but we are now the proud owners of more credits than this creditless Sphere knows what to do with. I expect all complaints about my methods to cease immediately."

Elara scoffed, watching the mercenaries vanish into the crowd. "I don't like it." Veylan raised an eyebrow. "You never like it."

She ignored him. "It's too good to be true. We didn't even have to argue for a better deal. Either they got more out of it than we know, or we just walked into a setup." Veylan waved her off. "Or maybe—just maybe—I'm actually as good as I say I am." Ra'ala exhaled, massaging her temple. "Knock it off. We've still got work to do. Saren, where are we on the Zealian transfer?"

Saren approached, arms covered in streaks of some alchemical residue, her usual expression of annoyance amplified by the task at hand.

"Way's stable. We got them out of the ship's core and into containment. They'll hold up for a while, but they're too weak to be a permanent engine anymore. The new Zealian's here—grumpy, but alive. I'll need time to attune it to the ship, but we might actually be able to fly without breaking apart."

Ra'ala nodded. "Good. Do it. I'll help get it tuned, but once it's stable, you can take the rest of the night off."

Saren eyed her. "Really?"

"You need it."

Saren huffed but didn't argue. Instead, she nodded and walked off toward the ship. Ra'ala turned to Elara. "You and Veylan are with me. We're heading to the Seeker Village."

Elara frowned. "What's in the Seeker village?"

Ra'ala met her gaze. "Orlan Vey."

That was enough to make Elara's frown deepen. "You're serious? The mercs' mystery passenger?"

"Serious enough to make sure we do it ourselves," Ra'ala said. "You were right. This whole deal feels too easy. We need to see this through with our own eyes."

Veylan clapped his hands together. "Well then, this should be interesting."

Ra'ala exhaled, adjusting her jacket. "Let's move."

A question surfaced in Ra'ala's mind before departing... Would this go smoothly?

Frame 29 - Edeyan Cuisine - Ra'ala Duskbane

The attempt to secure transport had gone about as well as Ra'ala expected—which was to say, it hadn't gone well at all.

By the time they reached the main port, Shade had begun. Overhead, the great celestial marker eclipsed the Caelux orb, casting the Sphere in a muted, golden twilight. The warmth of the day faded into crisp evening air, and the marketplace dimmed as lanterns ignited one by one. Most of the transport pilots they approached simply shook their heads.

"No one goes up the mountain at night," one had told them. "Not even the Seekers. Too many stories of travelers never making it."

The few who were willing to take them were Syndicate-affiliated, and that was a risk Ra'ala wasn't going to take. Tired and without options, she made the call.
"We wait till morning. No sense in pressing our luck."

Which was how they found themselves at an Edeyan eatery tucked between two towering trees, its seating arranged in a courtyard illuminated by soft, bioluminescent flora woven into the wooden lattice above. The scent of charred herbs and fragrant oils filled the space, mingling with the soft hum of conversation and the occasional clink of ceramic cups.

Ra'ala, Elara, and Veylan sat at a low wooden table, their plates filled with an assortment of locally sourced, vibrantly spiced dishes. The food was almost ceremonial in presentation—bowls of steaming roots simmered in rich, fire-hued broths, platters of thinly-sliced cured meats wrapped in fragrant leaves, and stone-baked flatbread dusted with charred seeds. Everything was organic, freshly harvested, and prepared in accordance with Edeyan traditions of balance and Nature.

A server—a young woman with braids interwoven with gold-threaded leaves—set down a set of small lacquered cups. “For first-time guests,” she said with a smile. “A customary toast.”

Ra'ala raised a brow, but Veylan was already grinning. “Now this I can get behind.” The drink inside was deep amber, its scent sharp and citrusy. The server motioned for them to lift their cups, waiting expectantly.

“First drink, first words,” she prompted. “You share something from your last journey, and then we drink together.”

Ra'ala exhaled, glancing at Elara and Veylan. This whole night had the surreal air of being on vacation when there’s a looming work deadline, but she wasn’t going to be the one to ruin the moment. “Fine,” she said, lifting her cup. “I’ll start.”

She thought for a moment, then smirked. “Last journey, I made a deal with some mercs, offloaded a questionable shipment, and somehow didn’t get arrested.”

Veylan grinned. “Somehow?”

“Somehow,” she repeated.

Elara rolled her eyes but lifted her cup next. “Last journey, I had to listen to him talk about how brilliant he was for hours.”

Veylan put a hand to his chest. “Elara, please. Days.”

Ra'ala chuckled. “And you, Veylan?”

Veylan swirled the liquid in his cup dramatically. “Last journey, I saved the crew from utter ruin by securing an excellent deal, securing a fortune in credits, and being, frankly, a delight the entire time.”

Elara made a sound of disgust, and Ra'ala just sighed. “You could have just said, ‘I stole something, sold something, and made a profit.’”

"Where's the fun in that?" Veylan said, grinning. "Now, let's drink before Elara stabs Me."

The three of them clinked their cups together and drank. The liquor burned—spicy, citrus-laced fire that lingered on the tongue and sent warmth unfurling through their chests. Ra'ala coughed slightly. Veylan loved it. Elara looked personally Offended.

As the food arrived, the conversation shifted. The spices were intense, designed to awaken the senses, with layered heat that crept up gradually. The Edeyans believed in eating with patience, in letting the flavors tell a story, rather than overwhelming Oneself.

Veylan, predictably, ignored all of that and went straight for the spiciest thing on the Table.

"I don't think you're supposed to do that," Ra'ala said, watching him shovel in a mouthful of red-streaked stew.

Veylan gave a thumbs-up. "Fantastic. No regrets."

Then his eyes widened, and he immediately reached for his drink.

Elara smirked. "That was a mistake, wasn't it?"

He fanned his face. "My soul is on fire."

Ra'ala took another sip of her tea, leaning back. "At least you'll be too busy melting to brag for a few minutes."

Veylan coughed but still managed to shoot her a grin. "Not a chance."

At the far side of the courtyard, a Syndicate officer sat at a table with a few locals, talking quietly over drinks. They didn't seem to pay Ra'ala and her crew any mind. Not yet, anyway.

Elara watched them, her expression unreadable. "This is nice," she admitted. "Sitting here, eating, pretending we don't have an impossible job ahead of us."

Ra'ala hummed. "A little calm before the next storm."

Veylan smirked, finally recovering. "Is it really calm if we know what's coming?" Ra'ala let that linger, the warmth of the food settling in her stomach like a false

sense of security.

What were the odds that by this time tomorrow, they'd still be sitting somewhere this peaceful?

Frame 30 - The Syndicate Crew - Silva Cyaveil

At a table near the far end of the courtyard, a Syndicate officer dined with his crew, unaware of the proximity of his rivals. Lead Operative Aldren Vale sat with a posture of relaxed confidence, his expression unreadable as he swirled a glass of deep amber liquor in his hand. To him, this was just another operation—one of countless before it.

Frey, the analyst, sat opposite him, scrolling through a compact slate, frowning at something only she could see. Kurtis, their muscle, ate with mechanical precision, chewing through his meal with no apparent enjoyment, as if it were just fuel. Silva, the rookie, kept darting glances between her companions, clearly aware of her status as the least experienced person at the table.

The conversation was light, casual, but pointed. To them, this was just another job. "Orlan Vey knows too much. That's a problem," Aldren said calmly, tilting his glass slightly.

Frey glanced up. "We solve problems."

Aldren took a slow sip of his drink and nodded approvingly. "Exactly. Simple equations. Inputs and outputs. He is an input we do not require."

"We could be done with this in under an hour. I don't know why we're still talking," Kurtis grunted, cutting his steak with deliberate, practiced movements.

Frey leaned back, fingers drumming against the table. "Because some of us like to think ahead. What if the Syndicate isn't the only one after him?"

Aldren raised an eyebrow. "If there were another faction involved, we'd already know about it. We don't make mistakes, Frey."

Frey smirked. "That's what the last team said before they went dark on an operation like this."

Kurtis exhaled heavily. "You're paranoid."

"I'm thorough," Frey corrected. "There's a difference."

Silva shifted in her seat. She had been quiet for most of the dinner, absorbing, listening. But now, curiosity edged into her voice. "So, we kill him, and then what? Just move on like it never happened?"

Kurtis scoffed but didn't look up. "That's the job."

Aldren finally turned his gaze toward her, a small, unreadable smirk forming at the corner of his lips. "You think too much, Silva. A liability neutralized is not a moral quandary. It is logistics."

Silva hesitated, then set her drink down. "But what if he's not a liability? What if he's Just—"

"A problem that needs solving," Aldren finished for her, his voice unwavering. "And that's what we do."

Frey exhaled sharply, setting down her slate. "I still don't like unknowns. If someone else is moving against Orlan, we need to know who."

Kurtis set his knife down with a clack. "I'll tell you who. Some fool who doesn't know when to stay out of Syndicate business."

"And fools make for complications," Frey added, her eyes sharp.

Aldren gave a nonchalant shrug. "Then let's find out."

Silva opened her mouth as if to protest, then closed it again. She wasn't sure what she had wanted to say—but deep down, something felt off about all of this. She leaned in slightly. "And if Orlan Vey isn't as easy to find as we think?"

Aldren set his glass down with slow precision. "Then we adapt. We're not amateurs. We have our methods."

"You mean interrogation," Silva murmured, barely above a whisper.

Frey clicked her tongue. "Don't look so uncomfortable. If we weren't meant to clean up messes, the Syndicate wouldn't have put us on this assignment."

Kurtis took another slow bite of his meal, chewing as if bored with the conversation. "Don't waste your breath, Frey. Either she gets used to it, or she doesn't."

Aldren glanced between them, amused. "Enough. We aren't here to debate morality, we're here to ensure efficiency."

Silva bit her lip, staring down at her drink. "Efficiency. Right."

Kurtis sighed, running a hand through his short-cropped hair. "You knew what this was when you signed up, Silva. No one's got clean hands in this business."

Frey smirked. "Well, except me. I wear gloves."

Aldren chuckled, but Silva remained silent.

The conversation shifted to lighter topics—logistics, travel routes, minor grievances about their last station posting—but the weight of their mission remained, unspoken but ever-present.

Across the room, Ra'ala and her crew continued their meal, laughing at something Veylan said, completely unaware of the parallel conversation taking place just meters away.

The SkyTide Tavern carried on, two crews dining in peace, blind to the inevitable collision awaiting them.

How long before they realized they weren't the only ones hunting Orlan Vey?

Frame 31 - The Barrier - Ryn Darksong

The Mercenary Captain gripped the control levers as the final docking clamps hissed and disengaged. The Whisper unit trembled, its Zeal Engine growling low as it rebalanced the pressure fields around the hull. The ship pulled free from the Garden Sphere's gravity lattice with a jolt, slipping into the first currents of the Umbra. In the Canvas, captains didn't lead from behind. They flew. Any fool could give orders. It took nerve to steer a vessel through the Umbra and stare into the unknown with your own eyes.

Behind them, Edeya dwindled. Caelux light spilled through the last atmospheric buffer, casting fractured halos across the hull. The outer shell of the Garden Sphere—veined with bioluminescent ridges, pulsing plant life, and glistening coral membranes—receded into the black. Then it was gone, swallowed by the ever-thickening tides of the Below.

"Venn, bring up the overlays," Ryn said without looking up. His hands stayed firm on the control levers—he wasn't letting go now.

Venn, the deckhand, tapped a sequence into the control panel. The viewport dimmed, shimmered, then flared to life in a cascade of refracted overlays. Sonar-mapped layers of Umbra unfolded across the screen, etched in pale silver and heat-

glow. Echoes. Pressure waves. Movement.

"Reading coral structures up ahead," lyra murmured from the sensory console, her voice low and focused. "Massive root formations. Dense. We're threading into a canopy trench. Multiple layers. And... yeah. Cancerites. Lots of them."

The Captain didn't flinch. "Upper ridgeline... keep it tight," Ryn muttered, guiding the Whisper between the coral folds with minute corrections.

The coral forests of Edeya's exterior weren't static terrain—they were alive. Tangled vines of alchemical root and luminescent fungal reefs twined through the water like skeletal fingers, pulsing in gentle, rhythmic intervals. Chunks of metallic silt drifted lazily in the currents, clinging to bone-like growths and polyhedral lattice formations. Organic bloom-lanterns blinked in and out of phase, like slow signals passed between unseen minds.

A slow, sharp buzz cracked through the sonar as something massive scraped along the edge of the trench wall.

"I've got something blinking violet on the left flank," Jax called from engineering. "Ten meters and closing."

lyra's voice dropped to a murmur. "That's not blinking. That's breathing."

One of the Cancerites detached from the coral, its bulbous shell cycling through deep hues of violet, amber, and cobalt. Bioluminescent ridges shimmered like moving veins. It hovered just beyond the dispersal field, claws twitching in slow, patient Motions.

"Don't like that," Venn said, shifting in his seat. "They're not usually this close." "Maybe they heard us talking shit," lyra muttered.

The Captain said nothing. He adjusted the guidance thrusters manually, easing the vessel through the crevice like threading a needle. His eyes didn't leave the approaching Cancerite.

Another ripple. Another glint of moving color. A second creature drifted along the opposite side of the trench wall. Then a third. Like sentries, or watchers.

The Cancerite nearest them stopped moving entirely. Its body tensed. Lights flared.

Then it lunged.

The impact echoed through the hull as the beast slammed against them. A heavy

claw hooked the outer rim and dragged hard along the plating. The ship groaned under the pressure. A second claw tapped gently against the viewport—not attacking, just... testing.

A long, horrible scraping followed—ScreeeeeCHHKkk.

“Void take us,” Jax hissed.

“I’ve got it,” Ryn said, adjusting thrusters with a steady grip. “Just let it pass.” “It’s just measuring us.”

The lights along the creature’s back pulsed again. Indigo. Amber. Indigo. Amber. Then it unhooked, drifting back without resistance.

Lyra leaned closer to her console. “Captain Ryn, you’re sure we’re not giving off a Zeal pulse that might be attracting them?”

“I recalibrated the dispersal harmonics myself,” Ryn said. “This is just curiosity. Curiosity with claws.”

Venn let out a breath. “I swear they’re getting smarter every run.”

“Or we’re getting slower,” Jax muttered.

The coral thicket stretched wider here, the ridge falling into a spiraling dropoff littered with jagged ruins—old scaffolds, broken mining rigs, and the long-sunken ribs of a collapsed Journeyer vessel. Glowing growths had overtaken the wreckage, turning it into a reef of history.

As the Whisper unit passed overhead, one of the old ship’s viewports flickered faintly—residual Caelux still trapped within.

Ryn’s gaze lingered on it.

“That was a Mark IV skimmer,” he said quietly. “Didn’t even last one run through the Fold.”

Jax frowned. “Captain, we gonna keep talking about other people’s ghosts, or are we gonna stay focused?”

Ryn grinned slightly. “You’re free to walk back to the Sphere if you’d rather not hear it.”

“No Sphere. No Syndicate. Just the job,” Venn added. “That’s the deal, right?”

"It was," Ryn said, his tone cooling. "We hand over the containment unit, the Zealian, and the credits. In return, we keep the Stormbrew and skip the Orlan Vey job. She gets what she needs. We get to not die for a cause we don't believe in."

"And she's probably knee-deep in Movement mess by now," lyra said, tapping her console. "Not our problem."

"Exactly." Ryn pulled a Stormbrew vial from his belt. The liquid curled inside like a serpent of color, shimmering violet and gold.

"We get this. Thirty-seven of them."

Venn chuckled. "Thirty-seven chances to see the Canvas blink back."

"Thirty-seven chances to go blind," Jax replied. "Or worse. You heard about that guy on Duskwake Station?"

"I heard he tried to navigate through a Caelux Storm with his eyes closed after drinking three."

"Still made it," lyra said. "Didn't say he made it intact."

The sonar pulsed. Ahead, something responded—a beacon. Not visible to just anyone, but pulsing back along a coded channel.

"Iv Station," lyra confirmed. "Signal's good."

Ryn leaned forward, adjusting the thrusters himself with a series of subtle, precise motions. His fingers never left the controls.

"Staying low," he muttered, more to himself than to the others. "Let's not wake anything up that doesn't already know we're here."

The Whisper unit banked slowly, the last coral formations falling away as low-pressure Umbra opened ahead.

Silence returned.

Just them, the Umbra, and the things it hadn't decided to show them yet.

What if this time, it decided to show something new?

Frame 32 - Go Deeper – Ryn Darksong

Ryn sat alone in the cockpit, the soft luminescence of the Whisper unit's instruments casting subtle reflections across the canopy. The ship drifted now, coasting quietly between beacons, the low-pressure Umbra around them vast and still. No coral. No Cancerites. Just dark water, endless and slow.

The others were resting. Venn had drifted into a half-sleep in the comms alcove, Jax was back in engineering recalibrating pressure diffusers, and lyra had taken to muttering notes into her logbook. None of them were watching.

Ryn uncapped a Stormbrew vial.

The liquid inside swirled, colors curling like smoke in a sealed bottle. Violet. Gold. A shimmer of something that defied physical law. He didn't raise it in ceremony, didn't toast to health or luck. He simply drank.

It hit hard. Sharp, cold, cutting straight into the space behind his eyes. The hum of the Whisper unit deepened, the lights around him pulsing with rhythm that didn't belong to any known function.

The Umbra shifted.

Just outside the canopy, the darkness breathed. And in its breath, it spoke.

"You drink. You see. We open."

The overlays flickered. The sonar stuttered, then realigned. Nothing had changed.

And yet, something had.

Ryn leaned forward, adjusting the lenses manually. A shimmer passed along the Umbra—a fold in the current, a shape too smooth, too unnatural.

"There."

It wasn't on the sensors. Not yet. But the Stormbrew settled into his blood like a compass pointing to something just out of reach.

"lyra," he said, voice low, "adjust scan range. Try a phase sweep tuned off-center by three degrees. There's something near that second beacon."

A pause.

"Nothing on primary," she said. Another pause. "...Hold on. You're not wrong. I'm picking up scatter."

Ryn pushed the Whisper unit into a gradual turn, trusting the pull behind his ribs more than the overlays.

As the angle shifted, the lenses resolved the shape.

A ship. Long. Scarred. Freshly ruined.

It had drifted behind the beacon's field. Torn in two. Shards of hull floated like bones in stasis, light flickering from fractured Caelux panels. As they approached, Ryn maneuvered around a jagged support beam that spun past the viewport—he tilted the Whisper just enough to avoid it, almost casually.

Jax blinked from his station. "Didn't even see that," he muttered.

Ryn said nothing.

The wreck came into focus.

They drifted closer, slow, deliberate. Ryn stared through the canopy, and the lenses shifted—not just rendering data, but warping. Light bent along the jagged hull, distortions blooming like oil on water. Colors bled. Textures rippled.

Ryn blinked hard.

And then, he saw it. Before the scanners did.

Movement. A ripple.

Something peeled away from the underside of the wreck.

Long. Finned. Too symmetrical.

Inkbloom.

A shimmer of camouflage fell away like a cloak as it surged forward. The lenses didn't register it yet. But Ryn saw it.

"Venn," he snapped, "lenses on high contrast. Combat overlay. Jax, brace core Stabilizers."

Iyra looked up. "What are you—"

The Inkblom ignited.

A spark. Bright violet, almost crystalline, burst from a gland beneath its mantle. It streaked forward and struck the Whisper's flank with a magnetic jolt that set the cabin shaking.

Alarms chimed.

"Impact on starboard midframe! Core buffer intact," Jax barked.

"It's fast!" Venn shouted. "And it's not leaving."

The Inkblom surged again, tentacles unfurling, two of them tipped with sharpened spurs that glinted like bone.

Ryn yanked the Whisper into a dive, spiraling around the debris, hull scraping close enough to scatter paint. A hull panel ripped loose from the wreck behind them as the Inkblom struck again.

The Umbra was not silent.

The blow echoed through the water like a gong, a pressure-pulse that vibrated in their chests. The creature hissed, a sound carried through fluid more felt than Heard.

"Lyra, flare!"

She fired a burst-pulse flare from the underbay. The light rippled and blinded the Inkblom momentarily, but it launched another violet spark in blind rage. It exploded against the wreckage, shattering a viewport into silvery shards.

"You want loud?" Venn snarled. "Try this."

He triggered the forward piercing round. It fired with a thud, no fanfare—just force. The projectile struck true, tearing through the Inkblom's mantle and embedding in its core.

A bloom of deep black blood clouded the water, curling into itself like steam. The creature convulsed.

Its camouflage stuttered, then died. Its lights flickered out. One last pulse ran along its body—bright violet, like a dying nerve—and then it went still.

The Umbra swallowed it.

Silence returned.

Only their hull alarms remained, slowly fading.

Jax exhaled. "Hull integrity holding. We'll need to patch some pitting. Nothing Major."

But Ryn didn't move.

He was staring again.

The lenses refracted something else now. Not movement. Not a threat.

A door. A mirrored void. A shape.

And the Umbra whispered, gentle and terrible:

"I see you."

The canopy darkened. Shapes pulled inward. The lenses rippled, and for a heartbeat, the Umbra stopped pretending to be a sea.

It became an eye.

Vast. Pitch black. Watching.

Its gaze opened within the currents, iris forming from liquid shadow, pupil stretching endlessly inward.

Ryn froze. The whisper now had weight, not just sound.

"Go deeper."

Frame 32.5 - Edge of Edeya - One of Strong Hope, Kin of Guardians

That-which-must-not-be had passed overhead the Canopy. One of Strong Hope, Kin of Guardians' shell quivered with a light pattern of indigo, scarlet and crimson, yellow and orange, a pattern of erratic strobing that illuminated the shadow water.... It was random yet undeniably

carried the idea of “Alarm”, of “Fear” and of “Anger” and of “Panic” and of “Hatred”.

Strong Hope trembled and tried to quell their lights. They did not wish to be seen this way, they had ventured off from safety out of compulsion to defend their siblings, their elders, their community. Long have that-which-must-not-be tore through their homes, harvested their resources and killed their kin. Strong Hope wanted to kill all of them.

Strong Hope also wanted for their action to not be known and thus began to attempt to compose themselves. They willed Indigo. They willed amber... It came through after a couple attempts, but occasional irresistible instinct would show through their facade – They couldn’t hide their lights. No Cancerite could.

Strong Hope brought a claw to its eyes and flexed it, snapping the claw once... twice... thrice, forming bubbles from the umbra in a pattern the Elders taught, who were in turn taught by their elders – The bubbles formed a symbol, the symbol that meant everything. They watched as the bubbles coalesced together for a moment before bursting. And upon that bursting, a knowledge of impermanence reawakened in Strong Hope. It was soothing. A Lesson from the Elders Past, Now Forgotten But Always Near.

Their lights settled... then dimmed. Returning to a cautious cyan glow, Strong Hope turned their head and examined themselves. Satisfied, they climbed down from the canopy and began to scuttle home.

Frame 33 - The Echo - Kaena Datha

“Go deeper.”

The words rippled through the Keeper’s skull like a wave breaking inside their mind. They weren’t just heard—they bloomed. A psychic pressure that arrived with the soft weight of breath against glass.

They stood on the balcony of the Lighthouse, unmoving, hands curled tight around the railing. The Umbra stretched out before them in its infinite, oil-slick expanse. The afterimage of the Leviathan still pulsed at the edge of their perception—a ghost carved into the dark.

They hadn’t blinked in minutes.

Time had become something sideways. Their mouth was dry. Their eyes burned. Their body had gone still the way a glass of water goes still after a quake. The Umbra had never spoken so clearly before...

“How?” the Keeper whispered. Their voice cracked against the silence. “What do you want me to do?”

The currents answered with a flicker. Light bending through water. But not the Umbra's voice.

A man.

"Lyra, run an internal diagnostic. Venn, start processing the hull telemetry—I want a readout in five."

The Keeper inhaled sharply. It was like a memory that didn't belong to them. "See if anything's recoverable from the primary wreck. That Caelux panel looked intact. Might be worth pulling."

The voice was clipped. Tired, but focused. It faded in and out like a distant transmission in a storm.

They saw nothing but the Umbra.

"We'll hold here until—"

Static. Then silence.

Then the Eye opened again.

Not like before. Not symbolic. Not a metaphor. It opened through the Umbra, as if the currents themselves parted around a gaze that stretched beyond time. The pupil dilated, and with it came his breath, his pressure, his fear—as if the Keeper had stepped inside the cockpit of a ship they had never seen.

"Hold us steady. Don't let it drift."

Their hand twitched. Their eyes flicked from left to right, tracking shapes that weren't present. They weren't in their body. Or maybe they were in someone else's. They saw the glint of warning lights. The faint blue glow of a Zeal Engine. Hands they didn't recognize gripping levers.

They felt him.

Felt him struggling to stay grounded. Fighting the instinct to fall further inward. He was trying to see.

The Umbra wrapped around them like silk soaked in blood.

The Keeper blinked, and for the briefest moment, the Umbra blinked too.

And then his voice again, clear, close:

“Who the hell is that?”

And for a second, they were sure—he had seen them back.

Then... Silence.

They staggered back from the railing, blinking hard, throat raw.

The Eye was gone.

But the presence remained, like static caught in the folds of their awareness.

The Keeper turned away from the balcony and headed back inside.

Were they losing their mind?