

"The angels teased me; many times gathered around they asked: 'What is pain?'"
—Odysseus Elytis "Maria Nephele"

"Yellow can help us settle this, then. Yellow, come hither," beckoned the Imperial Princess, Opalescent Apatite, Proxy-Empress of the Chorus of Boundless Progression. "Gypsum is not water-soluble. Mayflower, the dolt, thinks it is, but it's only the carbon acid made by the water, not the water itself."

"It's not carbon acid!" said Mayflower. She had sat herself across from the other teenager at the chess table with her chair tilted away from her friend diagonally, as if to avoid making eye contact. She reached forward and moved her queen, an elaborate, gilded piece of black rock, and put it in a timid, unnecessary place in front of her pawns.

The other teen jumped on the blunder and doubled Mayflower's pawns, clearing the path for her last pawn to reach the 8th rank.

"They're vulnerable to pure water," Mayflower pulled out a small vial. "I saw it when the Baudrifell Bishop dissolved that gypsum dissident," she said.

"Lemme see that." The other teenager took the vial and held her eyes up to the soft-skinned pearl of gypsum floating inside.

"Daddy said pure water will keep him from reconstituting," said Mayflower. "As long as he stays in the vial."

"No blasted way. It's a carbonic solution. I can tell by looking. But Yellow will surely know," said the Princess, as she put the vial down and picked up her fruit drink. "So, Yellow? Which is it?"

The jester, a human woman with short black hair and a yellow outfit who had appeared silently beside the princess the moment her name was spoken, said, "Her Imperial Highness is correct. Pure water won't dissolve gypsum. The vial must contain some other mixture."

"I thought jesters were supposed to be funny," said Mayflower.

The Princess moved her pawn to the end of the board.

"Yellow, you can go," said Mayflower, waving her hand.

Yellow nodded, and quietly retreated into one of the servants' halls.

"Why do you fancy that human jester so much, Apatite?" Mayflower said when Yellow had gone. "She's such a bore. All she knows is science and human

history, which is a useless history, and she never tells any jokes. And what's more she always sides with you, even when I'm sure I'm right." Mayflower's king retreated idly further and further into the corner.

"Maybe that's why I fancy her," said the Imperial Princess. "And maybe you should be taking notes, because I *am* always right. That's checkmate."

Mayflower failed to point out that, since she wasn't in check, it wasn't technically checkmate.

In a small maintenance room in another part of the castle, a door opened and Yellow scrambled in, running over to hush the frantic pounding coming from the maintenance hatch.

She knocked out five beats on the galvanized steel and listened carefully for the response—two beats—at which she grabbed the large copper wheel and wrestled it open. With some effort, it popped off, and a human girl of fifteen or sixteen peaked her head out.

She was breathing heavily and covered in soot. There was a black expanse of air below her, about a thousand feet, then a meadow, and a lake, dim in the half light from the castle.

The girl was similar in build and color to the jester, but was much shorter, as younger humans are generally shorter than older ones.

She had black hair in a ponytail that touched her shoulders, and light brown skin, streaked with ash on every surface except the lines where sweat had trickled down over her face from her hairline. Likewise, every object on her person was coated with the same grey-black, such that the true color of any of her clothing or armaments was a mystery. The one thing that shone despite the soot was a silver-bladed spear, which was tied to an empty red satchel worn on her back, a squarish bag with many toothy metal-edged pockets.

The girl grasped Yellow's hand and she hoisted her out of the well.

"Thanks, Linh," the soot-covered girl said in English. "I was starting to lose my grip."

"It's so good to see you again," said Yellow, also in English.

"No, don't hug me! You'll get dust on you!"

"It's okay," Yellow said, hugging her. "That doesn't matter anymore. Let's just get everyone and get out of here. The Empress will be asking for my head within the week anyway, I'm surprised I even lasted a month."

"You look really different with short hair," said the girl.

"I know..." said Yellow, running a hand through the bristling pikes. "I hardly recognize myself. They call me a different name, too."

"Oh, tell."

"I told them my family name was 'Huang' when I was picked out from the others, and they asked what it meant, so. How are you? What news from the front?"

"It ain't pretty, boss." The girl wiped soot from her face with her soot-covered sleeve, changing the density of it. "Weekly raids now. That cell of oolites you mentioned in your letter are being made examples of. People are saying we should call off the rebellion."

"We might be able to do something about that," Yellow said. "Get some people back, I mean. They keep the elemental pearls in the library, on display."

"Every fucking one? Holy shit."

"Their only weakness is arrogance," Yellow said. "Or maybe one of those hammers you use to break crabshells." She took out Mayflower's vial of pure water and showed it to the girl. "This was Satin Spar Oration. I don't know why the Lord Herald's daughter had him, but I nabbed it just now."

Yellow turned to go, tucking the vial into her pocket.

"Wait—I feel bad leaving him like that."

"We should wait until we can give everyone a proper introduction to life."

"Can't we just reincarnate him real quick? He can stand guard."

"You know he's not going to be the same Satin Spar we lost."

"I know. But what if we're captured? At least someone will get out if we revive him now."

"I suppose," the older human relented, and handed off the vial to the younger one, who immediately smashed it on the floor. She reached down and picked up the pearl-shaped stone and dried it off with her shirt.

When the stone was fully dry, it began to shudder, twisting in itself like a miniature gas giant. She set it on the floor, and took a step back as the stone burst

outward, growing into a humanoid form—a bulky mass of long, thin crystals, mostly white and grey, with an orange oxide cleft running diagonally up the left arm and through the head.

The elemental looked around the room like something that had just been born.

"Satin Spar!" It announced.

"Hi, Satin Spar," said the soot-girl.

"Satin Spar," said Satin Spar.

"I'm Maybe," she said, "and this is my sister, Linh. We're in the celestial palace, but we're going to leave soon. We're on a rescue mission. Can you guard the door here? If we're not back in ten minutes, jump through this hatch. It's a long way down but you'll be fine."

"Satin Spar Guard-the-Door," said Satin Spar.

"We'll talk about the name later, okay?" said Maybe.

"Satin Spar Talk-Later," said Satin Spar.

"Follow me," said the jester, and she led her sister out of the room and down the hall.

When they came to a set of wide double doors, Linh cracked one open and looked inside. "It's empty," she said. "I'll stand here. If someone makes as though they're coming in, I'll knock or make some kind of noise. Tenth floor, you'll see it."

"Got it," the girl nodded, taking her satchel and running in.

Still sneezing soot, Maybe Huang stood still for a moment in the center of the floor, a solid block of glass, in awe at the library, which sprang out of the floor as a single hollow rectangular column that unfolded above itself until reaching a ceiling some twenty-four celestial wingspans above her, and looked down, twenty times as far, into the dark, empty space above the Cinder-Stall Reservoir, a long, black lake beside the indelible Factory of Saint Saint-Arches, which was producing a pleasing green-ish smog.

The library smoothed a golding light onto the shelves, which were decorated half with books—personal genealogies, war-histories, and manuals for the instruction of magic and alchemy—and half with other treasures of the Empire—mythical weapons, historical artifacts, some heads, horns, legs, scales, and

teeth of impossible creatures, and—along the top two floors—with dedicated explanatory tablets marking their chemistry, morphology, history, crimes against the State, and manner of execution—nearly two hundred and twenty elemental pearls (the basest form of the basest form of life), kept from reforming by their indefinite conservation in small vials of uniquely deleterious liquids (or gases).

Without even reading the plaques, the human girl ran up the stairs and began stuffing them in her bag.

Outside, Linh stiffened and tapped her foot against the door.

"Yellow! Yellow, my favorite jester," said the approaching Imperial Princess, Apatite.

Linh stood straight. "Your Highness—is something troubling you?"

"I'm out of sorts. Will you walk with me?"

"Of course, m'Lady."

"Yellow. I like you," the future Proxy-Empress said when they began walking. "Can I tell you something?"

"Anything," Linh said. "I'm honored to be your confidant."

"Do you ever have visions of your ancestry, jester?"

"I can't say that I have, m'Lady."

"Right, I shouldn't have assumed humans track their genealogy," said the Princess. "Well, I've been having visions. They're... I know them all by name. They show themselves to me."

"Do they speak to you?" asked Linh.

"They speak, but they say nothing." Apatite's hand balled into a righteous fist, but her eyes were wide and focused. "They laugh at me."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

The jester and the Imperial Princess continued walking in silence, further and further from the library, until they came to a room with a wide bay window from which an observer could at once see all the great landmarks of the Subterranean Empire scattered in the dim gold light below: the Halite Burrows, the Great Stump, etc., which had been given function and direction by the First Celestial Division eleven years prior.

"I'm sure you humans have your own history of where angels come from," said the Emperor's daughter. "But you're probably wrong. In the golden age, angels were concepts. We were perfect accretions of information."

"I didn't know that," Linh acquiesced.

"What a *blow* struck by providence to have us now cased in mutable bodies and mutable minds. What a bitter evolution. It haunts me daily. My ancestors are laughing in their immortal forms. Laughing at all of us." She stopped to cough. "The idea of sunlight dappled by leaves. That was an angel. The path of aeolian sediments, the breakdown of glucose, the determination of the fractal. And here I am, a body with brittle-boned wings and a dull carapace, filled with blood, bile, and mucus. They can't have wanted this."

They looked out on the underworld, and the Princess watched the balloons stem from the balloon factory. They followed the same paths they had been following for ten years up through the ten thousand natural crevices in the cavern ceilings, where they jumbled. "Let's play chess," said Apatite. "In the library."

"...Don't you usually prefer the game room?" Linh asked.

"I want a change of pace," she said.

"The floor gives me ... a great sense of vertigo," said Linh, using the English word for the sensation of being high up.

"Vertigo," the Princess tried to shape her tongue around the rough shape of the word. "Another example of ancestral supremacy. Your ape ancestors needed a word for falling-dizziness to get them out of the tree. Angels have no vestiges."

"Yes, m'lady."

Linh and the Imperial Princess entered the library and sat across from each other at the chess table. Apatite didn't notice the second human, who had frozen in place behind a pillar on the seventh floor. Linh didn't look up at her either, and sat down to play black.

"In any case, that's what my father has been working so hard for, with his grand machine. And personally, there's no sacrifice I'd be unwilling to make to help him complete it."

"You really think it can be done?" asked Linh. "Stop things from changing?"

"Misery, Yellow! You've let me Ruy Lopez you again. You really ought to work on your openings."

Linh moved her queen out. "Can I be candid with you?" Linh asked. And when her opponent nodded, frowning, she said, "I was also searching for Heaven until recently. But I was wrong about where to look and what to do in order to get there. I hurt a lot of people trying to find it. In fact, I almost killed my own sister because I thought she was the last thing in the way between me and heaven. But I was forced to realize that heaven is not a place you can find by yourself."

Apatite's queen went out to defend the knight, leaving the pawn hanging. "Yellow, what under God's green Earth are you talking about?"

"There goes the extra pawn."

"Stop talking in riddles. You sound like a thousand-year-old commander-general waxing philosophical in his winter years."

"I'm just saying life isn't a war game. You shouldn't think of it as a chess match," Linh said. "Chess is a game with two opponents who start on equal ground. It can be measured very precisely. A single mistake against a good opponent will be a hindrance from the outset. Life is nothing like a chess game. People are not locked in conflict forever, failure is not fatal, and no one starts on equal ground."

"What are you driving at, jester?"

"Just...the tail of a thought experiment."

"...Then proceed," said Apatite, retreating her queen further into a corner.

"Let's take you as an example. You are the celestial Princess, heir of all that is beneath the earth. You were born with certain advantages, compared to, say, a goblin who works mining sunstone and dies of silica inhalation at thirty or forty. Do you think if you were born as a goblin you would dream of what it would be like to be a celestial princess?"

"Of course not. I'd serve my lot in life. But I wasn't born a goblin, and a goblin wasn't born as me, so it doesn't much matter."

"I don't want to overstep my bounds," said Linh, finally forcing a queen trade, doubling Apatite's pawns, and taking her knight. "I don't want to speak ill of your ancestors, I mean." Linh tried not to glance over at her sister, who was slowly creeping down the stairs to the exit.

"No. Speak. For ill or aye."

"In order for Heaven to exist, everyone has to be there. If there are goblins forced to mine the sun and dive for moonstone shards, there are ways in which the golden throne can come to meet the ground. The wheel turns ceaselessly, and it brings endless change to everyone regardless of status."

Apatite blinked at her. "Mayflower was right, you really are frightfully boring and you don't make a lot of sense. All you know how to do is play the viol, make fruit drink, and monologue."

Linh rubbed her forehead. "Sorry. Um. Do you want to hear a joke?"

Apatite nodded, staring furiously at the chess board. "Yes."

"Uh. Why... Are physics classes taught at the edges of cliffs?"

"Why?"

"Because it's where physics students have the most potential," said Linh.

"Ha!" said Apatite.

Having no queen to brandish, the princess developed her second knight. "The format of your human jokes is so very strange."

"I'm not sure that one translates quite," said the jester.

A stair creaked midway between the second and first floors, sending Linh into a coughing fit.

"So, what does any of that have to do with my ancestors? Goblins die every day. So what? Their lives are short anyhow, and I shouldn't mind digging so much were I a goblin, being naturally suited to it."

"I'll just ... phrase it as a question of logic," Linh said, and in a few moves, took the center and the open file. "An immutable concept, like the idea of light on leaves, by its very nature cannot interact with the world. To interact is to be changed. If your ancestors were immutable concepts, how did they begat you? Could it be possible that you evolved biologically? And, if that's the case, is it possible that in another version of history the Empire is run by, say, calcite elementals? And then, would it instead be you dying young in a factory accident? And should you then, in this world, now—since it very well could be you and other celestials living in poverty and dying in tenement fires in the Great Stump—use your power as Proxy-Empress to make this world one where less people suffer and die needlessly in factory fires? To me, that sounds like a solid first step to

bringing Heaven underground. For the good of anyone who can suffer is necessarily your own good."

"Wow. You actually make me sick."

Linh made to stand up. "I'm sorry, m'lady. I overstepped."

"You sit down," Apatite said in the ancient language, and Linh found her body pulled back down, as if a giant hand had bent her knees and pushed her.

"The game's not done." Apatite said in Celestial. "You. You talk so much about the good of others—what of my good, Yellow? And where were you after my game with Mayflower?"

"I was in my quarters, your Highness," she said, softly.

Apatite's carapace grew white hot. "Your Highness this! Your Highness that! You really are a piece of work, plaisante! You lied! You lied about gypsum's solubility. I looked it up. And now you come back covered in soot ash from the filters! You think I wouldn't notice! What are you up to!"

"A servant bumped into me on the way down the hall—"

There was a slight clatter of glass from the second level, and Linh's eyes flicked away from Apatite to the stairs.

"What was that!"

"I—I've no idea."

"Liar!" The angel lunged across the table, crashing into Linh and pinning her by the neck, bruising her spine as it slammed the chair to the floor.

"Maybe my ancestors weren't immutable—maybe they were little monkey men like yours or stupid red things that ran around on the sand, but it doesn't change shit!"

Linh struggled to make a sound through Apatite's grip.

"God, you're so stupid," she said.

With a single beat of her wings she ripped into the air and slammed Linh against the nearest bookshelf.

She pressed herself against Linh, still warm from using magic. "You'll tell me who you've been consorting with on the outside," she whispered, her neck pressed up against Linh's. "Or I can do terrible things to you. You decide."

Linh struggled, unable to make a noise, as Apatite raised her hand to trace along Linh's ear, running her fingers over her shaved-short head, the

bristling-quick feeling of her hair. Apatite's hands came away from the choke hold and slid down Linh's arms, clasping her hands and raising them above her head.

"Still don't have anything to say?" she asked.

"Eat chair, bitch!" said Maybe, smashing the celestial Princess over the head with a chair.

Apatite stumbled sideways in the air, startled to flight, tripping over a table.

"Come on!" Maybe said, and grabbed her dazed sister by the hand.

But Apatite quickly righted herself and shouted again in the ancient tongue, "These two doors lock!" and glowed bright white as her body responded to the exertion. "Yellow, you fucking infidel. I can't decide whether to kill you now or. Is she barking at me?"

"We don't want to fight you!" Linh called, putting her hand on Maybe, who was barking like an English Mastiff.

"Tell her we're gonna kick her fucking ass," said Maybe, leveling her spear.

"No—" Linh said, "Apatite, we don't want to fight."

"Good," said the Princess. "It won't be much of one."

Before Apatite could form another spell, Maybe launched herself with a yell off Linh, while Linh drew a long dagger from Maybe's satchel. Maybe jabbed down at the princess, who side-stepped, only to be caught between the shoulder plates by Linh's knife.

Swearing and spitting, Apatite grabbed Maybe's spear and slammed her into the chess table, scattering the pieces over the glass floor. She took to the air, but was caught hold of by Linh, digging her heels into the ground as the angel struggled to take off.

"You release your grip!" the Princess yelled.

Linh's hands involuntarily unclenched, and Apatite shot into the air, turning and landing on the third level parapet.

"Ha! Not so clever now are you, plaisante?" said the Princess, steadying herself on the perch. "For all your books, you're still just a soft little monkey."

Linh was silent for a moment, then shook her arms like she was preparing to do a front handspring. Then she pointed at the Princess and said, "Your lips produce no sound."

Apatite opened her mouth, but no utterance was made. She shouted, and her face turned red, but there was no noise.

Linh swayed dizzy from the sudden caloric expenditure. "You utter dipshit," Linh said. "Just because your bodies are tempered to process the reaction..." she stumbled forward and caught herself on the wooden chair, "doesn't mean you're the only ones who can use magic. If you hadn't kept knowledge of the Golden City tablets systematically inaccessible—"

Apatite seemed to realize something, and sprang off the balustrade to a shelf on the adjacent wall. The indelible library, being the largest one in the Empire at the time, was, of course, the home of the legendary quill of the Cordial Princept Anoiloleoveavidian and the sister manuscript that had won it its eternal fame following the third Second Schism conference, which should not be discussed in this account lest it be profaned by association.

"Ah fuck," Linh said, and started running up the stairs.

Apatite shattered the display glass and snatched the quill, scrawling a set of symbols on the marble floor. The ink turned red and burned away as the language took effect.

Maybe came at her with the spear, but Apatite swept it aside with her forearm, leaving a long white scratch on her carapace.

"You two, freeze," Apatite said, and both of the sisters froze in place.

"I honestly thought. You understood how I felt," said Apatite, pacing around the two of them. "I thought you knew what I lost. That you'd lost it too. That we were kindred."

"Apatite, I know how it feels, but you can't—" Linh said.

Apatite suddenly turned to her, cutting her off, and Linh noticed she had tears in her eyes. "Do you? My halls are empty. Mayflower is afraid of me! Do you really know how that feels? The palace has gone cold and shrunk! The rooms are blue and foreign," she wept. "I want it to go back to how it was, and I never want it to change."

"Apatite, change isn't a thing you can prevent," Linh said "Not with your body or your mind," she paused looking to her sister who was twisting against the invisible force like she was an ice cube trying to pop out of the ice tray, "Or even with that ridiculous machine your father is building."

Apatite was crying freely now, and glowing brightly in exertion, straining visibly against Maybe's efforts with her every pull and twist.

"Look," Linh said, compassionately. "I don't know how to help you. But I *do* know that you will always be stuck grieving and yearning unless you can bring yourself to let go. Of all of it. Please."

Apatite was silent, shaking. Then, she answered Linh's advice with a heartbreaking and wretched scream, and dropped the spell. Maybe shot forward like a spring, and before either Linh or the Princess could process what was happening, had swung the backpack around and put it between her chest and Apatite's.

They collided, Apatite falling on her back, and a stiff cracking, crunching sound was heard from the backpack, followed by the sizzling of various liquids interacting as they soaked into the dirty red fabric. Maybe jumped backward, grabbed her sister's hand, and ran.

As conditions became suddenly right for their existence, an explosive torrent of elemental beings erupted upon Apatite, a wave of humanoid creatures piling up and tumbling over the balcony.

"Micrite," said Micrite.

"Squamulose," said Squamulose.

"Cirrostratus," said Cirrostratus.

"Rhotochrosite," said Rhotochrosite.

"Everyone, follow me!" Maybe waved from the stairs. "We need to get out of the castle as fast as we can!"

There was a general mass movement as elementals began to find their footing.

"Micrite Get-out-of-the-Castle," said Micrite.

"Squamulose Follow-Me," said Squamulose.

"Cirrostratus One-of-Everyone," said Cirrostratus.

"Rhotochrosite In-the-Castle," said Rhotochrosite.

"Get off!" Apatite managed to scream from under the mass. Despite her strength, there was no noticeable movement at the surface.

"Get! Off!" she screamed again, this time in the ancient language.

Linh laughed, quietly, involuntarily.

There was a massive pressure shift in the room as elementals were forced off Apatite's body from the bottom up by the magic, scattering about the room and picking themselves up. The air molecules above Apatite were shunted away as well, creating a vacuum as they were continually forced off her body by the spell, bouncing back to fill the vacuum and exploding outward.

Apatite stood, swaying, pointing at Linh.

"You ph—" she said.

She passed out.

"That's one way to do it," said Maybe.

"It really pays to be specific," said Linh.

Maybe picked up her bag and Linh motioned for the elementals to follow her out into the hall.

When they reached the service hatch, Maybe paused and listened at the door.

"Something's not right," she said.

"What is it?" Linh asked.

"I don't hear Satin Spar anymore," she whispered, "I hear someone else." She pressed her ear to the door.

Linh drew her knife. With a nod, Maybe opened the door.

Inside, standing over the howling wind from the open maintenance hatch, was Mayflower, the Viceroy's daughter. She stiffened, like a wild dog in an alley. A small, cold pearl of satin spar lay in a pool of water at her feet.

"Drop your weapon," Mayflower said, reflexively.

Linh bent down and laid her knife on the tile floor.

"Figures she would send you to stop me," Mayflower said. "But you can't change my mind."

Linh raised an eyebrow.

"I know you're watching me, Apatite!" Mayflower looked around at the empty spaces in the room, her grey wings shivering in the draft from the hatch. "And I don't care what you threaten, I'm sick of your games. Sending the jester to try to fight me is fucked up, not gonna lie."

"We're not here to fight," Linh said.

Mayflower made no reaction.

"And Apatite isn't watching you."

"She can't even be bothered to try to stop me from leaving herself, so she sends a pawn—"

"I beat her in chess."

Mayflower straightened up a little, and her eyes flicked to the soot and scuffs on Linh's outfit and the smaller human, fresh from a fight and brandishing a pole arm behind her, and the line of quietly shuffling, mumbling newborn elementals behind them both. "Then..." she smiled. "Then don't ask me where I'm going, and I won't ask you."

And she slipped through the hole and into the empty dark.

"Who the fuck was that?" Maybe asked.

"Work acquaintance," Linh said.

Maybe nodded. "Some job."

And one by one, they followed Mayflower into the howling dark, and there was water in the ground like a sponge. Gypsum, halite, aragonite, and water, water, water like a sponge.