Esther was going to die. She was sure of it.

She writhed against her handcuffed wrists and ankles as she kneeled in the mud. A shake of her left leg sent a fierce jolt of electricity through her body, sending her screaming to the sodden ground. A steady rain fell from above, caressing her back and offering a temporary escape from her current hell. With her face half submerged in the mud, Esther saw the rain trickle across her laboratory’s rooftop. It was the same course she had seen it run while whimsically gazing at it from her bedroom across the street yesterday.

Esther tried focusing on her shuddered breathing as other screams of agony echoed around her. She lifted her face from the mud and glanced through the dirty curtains of white hair that hung over her eyes. Several others of her kind were shackled and either kneeled or lay face-down in the mud. Standing over all of them was a bull with a human body. It held a long staff with a blood-soaked axe over its shoulder. Suddenly, it brought it down and decapitated her colleague kneeling a few meters away from Esther. A retributive spurt of blood shot onto the bull-man’s suit, which was made of black, sleek armor. Esther recognized it as toconium, a lustrous material specially designed for space travel. The bull-man looked upon the remaining prone creatures with absent eyes, as if it was commuting to a mundane job for the thousandth time.

For as long as she could remember, Esther’s species, the Dawn Elves, had been hated by all other forms of life in the universe. When she turned nine, she was told why. Fifty years before she was born, planets, solar systems, and sometimes entire galaxies, had started to completely disappear. When no one claimed responsibility, the Dawn Elves sought out to discover the truth behind the issue. They devoted an entire region of their home planet, Ianescu, to the research of these missing systems. Esther began working in the laboratories there as an apprentice when she was twelve. However, the Dawn Elves’ research met a wall of skepticism from its neighbors. They claimed the Dawn Elves were performing their research not out of a desire to discover the unknown, but rather to cover their own tracks, attempting to dissuade any suspicion that they in fact were the ones causing the disappearances. The Dawn Elves attempted to persuade their accusers otherwise, but the seed had already been planted. In the following decades, the neighboring star systems sent waves of warriors to exterminate Esther and her kin. Her entire life, Esther had only been met by fear, hate, and oppression from outsiders. Before her mother was killed, she had asked her why the Dawn Elves stood idly by and watched their species go extinct. She answered that retaliation made the Dawn Elves no better than those that persecuted them.

It was those conversations with her mother that flashed through Esther’s mind as she saw the bull-man turn towards her. *What was so wrong with retaliation? If we had stood bravely, then maybe we would have had another chance to tell our side of the story*. *We could have shown that science always gets closer to the truth. It requires time. We just needed more -----*

The bull-man now loomed over her, his fur wet with blood and water. Esther squirmed and tried to crawl away, but another electric shock rendered all her muscles useless.

“If you move too much, I may hurt you,” the bull-man said in a strangely calming tone.

Esther did not heed his warning, as she continued to writhe with fury.

The bull-man sighed. “There is an afterlife. One where you’re conscious and happy. Wouldn’t you rather be there?”

This completely froze Esther. She did not detect any deception or mockery in his tone. In fact, he almost sounded *sympathetic*.

Not allowing his gambit to go to waste, the bull-man grunted and severed Esther’s final thoughts with his axe blade.

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Esther came to her senses. She was once again in the middle of the massacre. The bull-man now stood with his back to her, rain dancing down his glossy armor. He was holding his axe head up towards the sky, letting the downpour wash the blood-misted blade. Yet Esther no longer felt afraid. She no longer felt oppressed. All the pain was gone. She looked down at her slender body, her severed head lying in the mud. *Her severed head lying in the mud*.

An indescribable feeling overtook Esther. She tried moving her fingers. Her eyes. Her legs. Her pallid corpse did not respond. As soon as she tried to move in closer, Esther felt herself being pulled upwards, as if a puppet master was hiding above the cloud cover, retrieving her at the curtain call. Her dismembered body slowly shrunk into a nondescript heap in the mud among several others. As she continued her unwilling ascent, Esther found that she was able to look in all directions. Nothing in the grey patchwork of clouds above her looked out of place. Behind her, she saw the barren deserts of Sarrakia, which divided the laboratories from the spiraling towers of Midalya, the stronghold capital of the Dawn Elves.

Esther drifted above the cloud cover. None of the thin phantoms was disturbed as she shot through the atmosphere. It was before long until she was gazing at her home planet in its entirety, ironically amused by how strange it looked compared to pictures in school books. And soon the pinkish-white surface of her planet became a twinkling afterthought in the cosmos as she hurtled through the empty vacuum of space.

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Time became impossible to track once Esther left her planet behind. She pondered whether her supernatural odyssey had a destination. Something innate made her feel that she was being pulled towards something, almost in the same way gravity had kept her grounded for her entire life. Another part of her desperately longed for any sort of sensation.There was no longer a need to inhale, exhale, speak, or touch. She felt as if she was being dragged to the darkest depths of the ocean, then finding out that she was able to breathe.

After mulling over her new corporeal state for some time, Esther gazed longingly at the other star systems around her. Nebulas flaunted their colors in bright girandoles. A supernova marked its final moments with a miraculous display of cosmic destruction and creation. Suddenly, these peripheral phenomena began to blur at the edges. Esther figured she must be accelerating.

Ahead of her, a verdant planet began growing in size. As Esther entered its atmosphere, a sensation overcame her, telling her that she was welcome. She relaxed and let the invisible force drag her down to the surface.

Esther shot through the cloud cover and saw a vast field with a single, gargantuan tree. The force finally released her from its clutches as Esther coasted across the field. Her Elvish instincts immediately started to survey her surroundings, but could only do so much without a body. She took advantage of her new physical circumstances and started moving forward. The tree loomed before her, hundreds of roots sprawling above ground before disappearing below. Ladybugs and beetles jived to a cadenced orchestra of cricket and cicada chirps. A soft breeze announced its arrival with a cordial caress of the tulips and daffodils nestled beside the tree’s roots. Brigades of ants pittered across shade-flecked cushions of moss.

Esther’s home planet was incapable of having such tranquility. The trees on her cloudy, gaseous home world were jagged, chalk-white ghouls that served no real purpose. She recalled a schoolbook passage telling of entire civilizations that functioned on trees alone. Curious to validate her prior knowledge, she hovered over one of the above-ground roots, noting how similar in size it was to the omnipresent gas pipelines she grew up alongside. If only she was able to return to her body and feel the root’s texture.

“Welcome, Esther,” a voice boomed in the back of her head. “Welcome to Wynn.”

Esther scanned her surroundings. She hadn’t noticed anyone appear since her arrival.

“The one speaking is I. What your species calls a ‘tree’.” A single leaf drifted towards Esther and landed at her feet. The words “Welcome” were etched into its fibers in her native language.

“I am Diziero, the one responsible for bringing you here. I apologize for the long period of travel, but I imagine you gleaned some perspective by sailing through the cosmos.”

Esther tried to reply, but had no vocal chords to assist her.

“Ah, yes. Let’s fix that for you,” Diziero said.

Esther felt a warm presence envelop her, starting at her heart and spreading through her limbs. Her body had materialized once again. She ran her pale hands up and down her alabaster forearms, clenched her teeth together, and blinked repeatedly.

“I hope that’s better,” Diziero echoed. “Although, it’s not exactly necessary.” Their voice did not enter through her ears. It was as if it was a set of distinct thoughts within her head.

Noticing Esther was too disoriented to participate in any sort of conversation, Diziero continued. “You are indeed dead. There is no return to your past life on your home planet. The body I just provided you is actually a part of me, so you will only be able to use all your senses when you are in my presence. For all purposes, spiritual and physical, you are simply a soul.”

Diziero paused, allowing Esther to process this new data. They saw her face flash hues of excitement, fear, surprise, and awe, all of which were too familiar to them. After a few moments, sensing that Esther was beginning to let her new reality sink in, Diziero continued.

“I am a species called Deep-Buried. There are thousands of us spread across this planet we call Wynn. What you are able to see on the surface is about one percent of my total body. The rest of me extends deep into the planet. At the center, all of our roots meet at something called the Repository. There, we are able to tap into a central consciousness, where we can access any thought from anyone that was, is, or will be. Some of us choose to live more independent of the Repository, myself included. I feel that a life filled with external characters is more exciting, and too much time in the Repository can become overwhelming.”

Esther had started to acclimate to her new surroundings and body. She cleared her throat, tasting the new air with her tongue. “...You’re a *Myth*, aren’t you?”

Diziero let out a low hum that rattled its canopy. A pair of night-winged sparrows darted out, showcased a fleeting pirouette in tandem, and disappeared back into the leaves just as quickly. “The Deep-Buried have been called many names: God, Great Spirit, World Tree, *Myth*. To you, I may appear supernatural, but I can assure you I was once of your same mindset. The only difference between us is how much we know. We Deep-Buried prioritized extending our lifespans first, then we made sure to build an extensive knowledge base that we could reference for all time. As we learned from our mistakes, we became more efficient as a species and were able to invent technology to reinforce that. The Repository not only allows us to access generations of thoughts and information, but also to simulate entire species and worlds. The rest followed.”

Esther had always felt the need to explain *why* things were the way they were. Why did everyone doubt the Dawn Elves’ research instead of trust them? Why immediately resort to mass execution and not diplomacy? Diziero had to have the answers.

Esther should not have been surprised at what Diziero was going to say next.

“I’m sure there are a plethora of questions you have for me about the behavior of the universe. Unfortunately, the answers are not straightforward, as you might expect. Provide one answer, and two more questions will appear in its place. We can spend eons discussing everything, but there is a particular reason why I brought you all the way here. Despite me being a Deep-Buried, there is one thing I am unable to do.”

Esther searched her brain for a possible suggestion, but relented as she realized Diziero would answer for her.

“Very good,” Diziero said, reading Esther’s thoughts. “However, do not become used to the sensation of me providing intellectual salvation. Assuming that you want to improve your understanding of the world, you will have to reason through these types of questions on your own.”

Diziero let out another low hum. “I apologize. I can adopt quite a...parental tone at times. Allow me to subvert that by explaining your task.”

Esther timidly twirled a blade of grass between her big and index toes while staring up at Diziero.

“The universe is constantly expanding. This phenomena is constantly pushing the boundaries between the known and the unknown, meaning that us Deep-Buried always have new things to research and explore. At the edge of the universe, we have installed several spacecraft called Outposts. These move with the tide of the expanding universe, like buoys in the vast ocean of the cosmos. As the universe moves outward, the Outposts follow, always staying right on the edge. The Outposts exist partially in the known universe, and partially in the unknown universe.”

Esther nodded, recalling a time when she and her sister had floated out deep into the Saltar Sea on a small boat. A fierce storm disoriented them entirely, but when it had passed, they arrived back at the exact point on the shore they had started from.

“The condition for sending someone to an Outpost is that they must be in a sort of existential limbo. In your case, you no longer have a body, only a soul. Us Deep-Buried are unable to detach our souls from our bodies at will, unless of course we were killed or passed on, but that has not happened for some hundred thousand eons. Thus, given our aversion to death, we constantly monitor the universe for souls we believe deserve a second chance. We have brought several Dawn Elves to Wynn already. The discrimination your kind has faced can be attributed to fear in the face of the unknown. Unwilling to listen to your science and reason, neighboring worlds regressed to their tribal ancestors’ ways. It is quite appalling, especially considering how advanced some of these civilizations are.”

For the first time in her entire existence, Esther began to cry. It was not something she had ever seen a Dawn Elf do. In the face of discrimination, her friends and family wore complexions of steel. But Diziero’s words struck a nerve. It was the feeling that, for her entire life, she had lived for a cause worth dying for. Over time, she began to truly question if she really was on the right side. If the Dawn Elves’ research was truly worth defending. Knowing that her species’ perseverance was not in vain invigorated Esther in an entirely new way.

“However, monitoring an Outpost is no simple task. You must be unshakeable. Are you prepared to hear what is in store for you?”

Fueled by her newfound ambition, Esther replied with a firm yes.

“Because each Outpost is at the edge of the known universe, there is a naturally occurring balance between the Present and the Absent. The boundary between existent and non-existent is constantly being tested, hence why only your soul is able to travel there. You will encounter Absence in its truest form. A void without light or sound. Understanding the composition of Absence is the final frontier for us Deep-Buried. We are indeed limited by our inability to interact with it closely, which is why we are asking for your help.”

Esther was struggling to comprehend exactly what this “Absence” was.

“Does Absence pose a threat to the Deep-Buried’s existence?” she asked.

“Not as far as we know,” Diziero replied. “Absence does not necessarily imply evil. It can inspire irrational fear. There is nothing inherently evil about something not existing. However, give someone the ability to control whether something exists or not, and they become immensely powerful. Of course, this is happening all the time inside your head - whether a certain thought or opinion exists or not has a direct impact on your behavior.”

Each word Diziero spoke was a salve to the emotional wounds Esther had carried her entire life. She wanted to talk more with this Deep-Buried about morality, but her eventual departure to this so-called Outpost began to loom large in the back of her mind.

“Will I be able to come back here once I leave for the Outpost?” Esther inquired.

“Yes, of course,” Diziero answered. “We have found that the best ratio of time between Wynn and the Outpost is five weeks here, and five years out there.”

“Five years. Hm.” Dismay began to cement in Esther’s mind.

“You are now immortal,” Diziero said, attempting to counteract Esther’s emotions. “Your body does not limit you anymore, as you are simply a soul. With the five weeks we have together here, we can discuss anything you’d like. Then let the five years at the Outpost serve as a sort of meditative retreat. Some, after the first five weeks, decide that immortality is not for them. Others after five decades. The only scenario we would eliminate your soul entirely is if we discovered you were withholding information from us about the Absence, for that is your purpose for going to the Outpost in the first place.”

Esther deduced that while Diziero is able to read her thoughts on Wynn, there must be something about the Outpost that doesn’t allow them complete control. Her mind raced. Had some of the repurposed souls at the Outpost found something out and never returned to Wynn?

“Yes, that has happened,” Diziero said, unashamed by their thought-reading. “Some have decided to stay at the Outpost and never come back. Of course, they cannot simply travel anywhere in the cosmos, as we have complete control over the known portion. As soon as they step back into the known cosmos, we are able to bring them back to Wynn. So defectors either remain trapped in the Outpost, or have ventured into the Absence.”

“Why tell me this now?”

“We’ve run thousands of simulations of this exact scenario, and we were able to stay in contact with more spirits if we disclosed that information beforehand.”

“Do you run simulations to choose which of us...spirits...to bring to Wynn?”

“That’s correct.”

“And what happens to those who aren’t brought here?”

Diziero paused. “That’s a conversation for another time.”

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Five weeks passed. Esther did not leave Diziero’s side. It was not that she was uninterested in the rest of Wynn, but she enjoyed being back in her body after her disorienting trip through the cosmos. On the eve of her departure, Esther gazed up into Diziero’s magnificent canopy. Where the leaves thinned, she was able to see the magenta-tinged sky before the sun disappeared. Moments after, three fluorescent moons appeared and defended Diziero and Esther from the darkness. A tiny, distant moon nestled between two closer ones like a newborn child.

Morning’s arrival was announced by a majestic large-winged bird with a white head that Esther had never seen. Its talons dug into a nearby root, and it tilted its head up with a grapevine in its beak. The bird gently placed its gift on Esther’s chest, then soared away with a mighty caw. Awakened by the bird’s departure, Esther sat up and started nibbling on the purple fruit. Its tart and juicy flavor was something Esther had never had experienced. She was reminded of a fact Diziero had mentioned a few days ago: Wynn was home to each and every type of species in the universe.

Seeing that Esther was awake, Diziero offered their final instructions. “When you are ready, walk as far as you possibly can in the direction you first came. Your body will start to slip and fade away. Do not let this discourage you, rather let it be a reminder of the pleasantry of Wynn that you will return to. Your sense of time will be distorted at the Outpost, but I will notify you at the end of every day via the Outpost’s interface.”

“I understand,” Esther said, fully focused. The last five weeks with Diziero had left her feeling incredibly nourished, both physically and intellectually. Having someone to answer each and every question, no matter how outlandish, had spurred her to seek more knowledge. She completely understood why the Deep-Buried were determined on finding the true nature of the Absence.

With that, Esther stood up and began striding away from Diziero. She turned around and gave a sweeping wave to her dear friend.

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After a life on an arid, desiccated homeworld, Esther still caught herself sighing in awe from Wynn’s lush environment. As she strolled through an edgeless field, she reached down for a porcelain-petaled daffodil, a friendly smile in full bloom. Her hand passed right through the stem, and then her arm as she stumbled forward. She glanced down at her palms and saw their translucent outlines. Oh, how easy it would be to go back the way she came, she thought. Alas, Esther reasoned that if she abandoned her mission, she wouldn’t be having whimsical contemplations for much longer. Diziero was a kind being, but she had come to know how devoted they were to their species’ mission. Weeks of starlit conversation had helped Esther overcome her lifelong frustration that one person cannot create massive change. She had internalized that being a cog in the great cosmic machine was more worthwhile than simply accepting her eternal fate. For now at least.

Soon after her body had slowly dissipated into nothing, Esther started to feel all sensory perception slip away. Once again, only her sight remained. She found a massive tree stump Diziero had mentioned as the launch point back into the cosmos. As soon as Esther hovered over it, Wynn’s majestic plains of green started to blur at the edges as she was spun into the cosmos at light speed.

Diziero had noted that her voyage to the Outpost would take considerably longer than her exodus from her home planet. With that in mind, Esther closed her invisible eyes as she hurtled through space and time.

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After an unknown amount of time, a sudden jolt released Esther from her meditative state. Her eyes parted. Before her, a massive black and white cube stood suspended in space. Its edges were jagged and unnatural, as if the cube had been pieced together with small fragments of marble and granite. In the center of one of the cube’s faces, Esther was able to discern the outline of a door. Eager to finally explore what awaited her, Esther launched herself forward towards the entrance. As she approached, the door started rotating away from her. Esther then realized that the cube was slowly spinning, as if an invisible hand had rolled a giant cosmic die.

She accelerated towards the door, darting up the face of the giant cube. As she floated closer, a familiar chill stopped her entirely. This was the same daunting sensation Esther had felt right before the man-bull had sent his axe through her nape. It was the feeling of certain termination.

Now staring at the door, Esther no longer wanted to be at the Outpost. Diziero would surely take her back under their placid canopy. This was a simple test. Just for Esther to get a sense of what true Absence felt like. What Esther sensed coming from the other side of the door was not malicious. She did not fear any sort of pain or torture. But she could sense finality. After being fulfilled with such rich conversations with Diziero, Esther felt she had a real place in the universe. She did not want those to end.

But Diziero’s voice echoed in the rear of her consciousness. *She* was chosen for this mission because that was her new purpose. And if she did not fulfill her duties, there would be no conversations to look forward to. Seemingly aware of Esther’s change in mindset, the door opened and invited her inside.

Esther entered the room, and the door shut quietly behind her. The interior of the cube was similar to the exterior, sporadic sprinkles of black and white marble. A single chiseled chair sat in front of a long mirror-like piece of free-floating glass. Esther drifted towards the seat, hope welling inside her that she could be returned to her body if she visualized herself sitting in it. For whom else could the seat be for?

But as she hovered over the chair, nothing materialized. Defeated, she stared at her reflection in the floating glass pane. *Her reflection!* Esther saw herself gasp, then reacquainted herself with her pale face, white hair, pointed ears, and hollow cheeks. Her irises burned a bright bronze, a sobering reminder of her species’ namesake. She made a sweeping motion with her right hand to see if it would show up in the pane. Sure enough, her arm came up from below the pane, passed through the frame, then disappeared above. And yet, Esther’s body had still not materialized in the chair.

Esther moved her hand towards her face to brush a wayward lock out of her face. But her expression had suddenly frozen. Confused, she once again tried to simulate a sweeping motion with her right hand. Nothing happened. Then, instead of brushing her hair out of her face, her right hand started waving. It was not a friendly, wrist-shaking wave. Esther saw her fingers give a petty flitter as a coy expression appeared on her face.

“You really thought you were looking at yourself? Ha! How naive. We’re smarter than that, Esther,” she heard her reflection say.

The ominous feeling overtook Esther once again, an icy waterfall of goosebumps cascading down her spine. This couldn’t be any sort of recording. She was certain she’d never talked like that.

“You’re quite right,” her reflection said, a sly intonation at the end of every word. “By the way, I’ll just take the liberty of reading your thoughts, as you can’t talk in the state you’re in.”

Esther’s reflection continued unabated, a wily grin transfixed on her face. “Together, I, the body, and you, the soul, make up Esther. After that gruesome-looking bull-man killed us, I was sent to the Absence, and you to the Presence.”

As odd as it seemed to her, Esther’s first instinct was complete skepticism. But something nagged at her. If she was her soul, and only her soul, then her body shouldn’t be able to generate thoughts. It should still be a lifeless corpse.

“Precisely,” her reflection responded. The reflective pane pivoted slightly down to reveal a sickly, bloody gouge through her reflection’s nape. “A pretty clean cut!” her reflection exclaimed amidst sporadic psychotic giggles.

“Poor girl! You must be so confused! Let me help,” her reflection taunted. “The Outpost is a unique piece of technology. Whoever enters one is able to have a conversation with a reflection of themselves, but the reflection is a representation of everything the individual is missing. I am simply the sum of all the emotions you’ve ever discarded, all the impulses you never acted on, and, of course, your physical body that you no longer have. You’re probably inclined to call me an ‘evil’ version of yourself, but that misses the point entirely. I may be, in fact, quite happy, given the miserable marginalized hell of a life we lived.”

Esther reasoned her Absent self had a point, but she was simultaneously skeptical. Diziero had told her that the Absence was a void of light and sound, not a representation of everything she was missing. Conflict arose within her. Should she trust herself, who she had known her entire life, or a superintelligent tree-like being who she had just become acquainted with? Everything Diziero had taught her underscored that the universe was so much more vast than she could ever grasp. Her private contemplations and struggles were infinitesimally minute compared to the combined experience of everything that ever was, is, or will be. And yet, a feeling of trepidation tugged violently at Esther’s heart strings. For all she knew, Diziero and the Deep-Buried had sent her to the Outpost for all eternity to be simply another data point in one of their simulations.

However, Esther knew she had a card left to play. This sensation of overwhelming fear was an old friend to her, for it defined most of her entire life. Esther remembered how excited she was when her mother first taught her the word “fear”. She was finally able to explain how she felt when seeing meteors being shot at her town and the charred Dawn Elven corpses they left behind.

“Wonderful! You’ve figured it out! I am completely fearless. I couldn’t even understand fear if you explained it in the same way Mother did. Because that’s you! The scared one! Sorry you have to live with that, but not really,” her reflection chided.

At that moment, Esther felt a strange sense of relief. Her reflection truly was everything that she was not. Together, they made a flawless individual.

Esther then noticed her reflection’s expression contort into a petrified portrait, as if now the bull-man was standing over *her*.

“What is this? WHAT IS THIS?!” she saw herself scream.

It seemed the Presence and the Absence were still linked, even after Esther’s death. The offloading of fear onto her reflection made Esther feel physically lighter, despite having no body.

But the Absence sent something back.

Images started rushing through her mind. She was older, performing experiments in a state-of-the-art facility alongside the very colleagues that had been slain in front of her eyes. Another image effortlessly popped in her head, as if she was daydreaming under Diziero’s canopy. She was signing a piece of paper that read: “Intergalactic Dawn Elves Ceasefire Order”. A staccato of breath escaped her missing lips.

“All you ever wanted, but never got to achieve. Happiness is a cruel form of torture when it is inches from your fingertips.” Esther’s reflection shook as it erupted into another round of sadistic cackling.

“But that’s not even the best part,” her reflection said. It vanished, and the pane was blotted an ichorous obsidian.

Unable to unleash her anger, Esther felt herself shrivel within the confines of her soul. Dreams of an ameliorated future still swirled in her mind. She wanted to head back to her home planet and start anew, letting nothing get between her and her research. Tens of thousands of ideas competed for what she would do first, but none was the clear favorite. Instead, Esther stared numbly at the pitch-black pane in front of her.

As if to dispel her from her inner monologue, black waves began rippling across the pane at calculated intervals. When a wave reached the center of the pane, it split around a void in the middle, then continued on as two separate currents. Esther watched this happen an uncountable number of times. A sixth sense was telling her she had seen this before. It slightly reminded her of one concept she and her colleagues had researched in later stages of her career: sporadic dispersals of matter. For whatever reason, there were some areas of the universe where matter was repelled, like water pushing around an island. It was the composition of the island that Esther and her colleagues had never discerned.

Suddenly, the face of her reflection appeared where the void in the pane was. “You haven’t figured it out yet?! It’s right in front of you, woman!”

The final tether of Esther’s patience snapped. Regardless of the consequences, she was ready to confront the Absence. Without hesitation, she floated forward towards the pane and passed through the center. Her vision went temporarily dark, but she came out the other side looking at the back wall of the black-and-white marble room.

Quickly, Esther turned around to view the pane from the other side. The waves still rippled gently across the dark surface, but the void at the center was no longer empty. In its place was a bright spark, jettisoning blue and purple streaks from its shining white core. This time, her reflection did not have to explain to her what she was looking at. Esther knew she was looking at her soul.

Instantly, Esther felt all the energy in her soul start to fade away. The ominous feeling she had before entering the Outpost began to overtake her once again.

Familiar sadistic laughter echoed from above her. “Oh, Esther. Soon you’ll join me here! Our entire self will be Absent. But before you go. I’ll make the transition easier by relaying the truth to you.”

Esther was instantly overloaded by a montage of images, equations, and sequences of events. Never in her entire life had she felt so powerful and powerless at the same time.

*How was I supposed to know?*

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In short, what Esther learned from the montage in her final moments:

Unbeknownst to them, the Dawn Elves are one of the most unique species in the entire universe, due to the fact that each one of their souls contains an entire planet’s worth of cosmic matter. When they die, their souls are released as a sort of comet that is sent off into the universe. The Deep-Buried, being the most intelligent species in the universe, had created the Dawn Elves as a way to give names and faces to the cosmic building blocks of all life. This is why they are able to pull all Dawn Elves’ souls onto their home planet, Wynn, without any interruptions.

Conservation law states that if a planet is destroyed, another must be created in its place. This requires the Deep-Buried to instruct a low-intelligence life form (for example, a man-bull or human) to kill a Dawn Elf. Often, massacres are orchestrated so a stockpile of souls can live on Wynn before they are sent to the Outpost.

The Outpost is an apparatus designed by both the Deep-Buried and the Absence to collect souls of Dawn Elves. Only when a Dawn Elf truly surrenders himself to the Absence is his soul captured. The Outpost was designed to show Dawn Elves a scenario that would most likely lead them to give themselves up to the Absence. Some Dawn Elves see a reflection of themselves in a mirror-like object, others walk up and down an infinitely repeating staircase. The Outpost has never failed.

To bring everything full circle, once a Dawn Elf is pulled into the Absence at an Outpost, her soul is held there until the Deep-Buried need to create a new planet. Indeed, this is a vicious cycle. But if the Dawn Elves’ souls are not collected and redistributed, then the fundamental balance of Existence and Absence will be offset for the entire universe.