
A Long Way from Home

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Nashi stood beneath a canopy of oversized cacti. Sunlight slipped through the mess of short prickles, making crisscrossed shadows appear over his feet. He took a step back, tucking himself farther into the shade. The cacti forest was one of the greenest places on Thunder Junction, but only the hardest wildflowers and desert vegetation survived the dry heat.

It was like that for the people, too.

Nashi's tail flicked behind him, and he uncurled the scroll in his hands, eyes darting over the story he'd memorized by heart. He let every word seep into his mind—then he did his best to hold them there. He imagined the spell latching itself to his very soul as if putting down roots. When the magic began to course through him, it pulsed in his bloodstream like a living, volatile being.

The vibrations made him shudder.

"Steady," his mother's voice sounded beside him. "Story magic cannot be rushed. It is an exchange, and one that requires balance. Give strength to the words, and they will give strength in return."

The familiar tone was enough to make Nashi's throat knot. Soothing, deliberate, and wise; if he closed his eyes, he could imagine the scent of flowers and spice that always lingered on her robes, and the brush of air that tickled his cheeks whenever she'd float past him. Instead, he glanced up to see the shimmering silhouette of his mother's former self.

He still wasn't used to this version of her—not exactly alive, but not truly gone. The Tamiyo that existed now was a mere collection of memories; an animated story scroll that represented everything she once was.

Tamiyo moved like a pixelated aura, and the air around her crackled with light. She took a step closer to Nashi. "Find the balance."

Nashi released a slow breath and let the story flow through him. He recited the words with precision, recounting the tale of a plant sprouting to life from a single particle of sand, each tendril growing to impossible heights, controlled by the will of its creator. A weapon born from the earth.

As Nashi spoke the final word, a sapling burst free of the desert floor, lifting itself slowly toward the sunlight.

"That's it," Tamiyo said patiently. "Now, finish the story. Give it life."

Life. The word hit Nashi like a sucker punch, and in an instant, his mind was transported back to the day the Wanderer killed what had been left of Tamiyo. He wasn't sure if his mother had still been there—if a part of her had managed to survive her transformation—but it didn't matter. The loss that day had been just as powerful as the day he'd learned she'd been compleated.

Nashi faltered, and the sprout gave a weakened shudder before coiling back into the sand.

He tightened his grip around the scroll, whiskers twitching. “I—I can’t do it. I’m not gifted the way you were.”

Tamiyo’s ghost-like form flickered between existence and nothingness, and she reached out to lift Nashi’s chin. He couldn’t feel a thing but tried to imagine it anyway.

“You’re easily distracted by things you cannot control,” she said. “I understand your sorrow, but you cannot allow it to break the flow of your story. You have to maintain focus.”

He lifted his shoulders. “I can focus on you.” He motioned to the memory scroll that never left his side. “When I read your story, you’re here, every time.”

“Yes. And why do you think that is?”

He knew the answer without having to think about it; he just didn’t want to say it out loud.

The only stories that mean anything are the ones that bring me back to you.

Nashi turned away and blinked hard. He stuffed the plant scroll into his rucksack and gave the strap a sharp tug. “It’ll be sundown soon. I should head back.”

Tamiyo watched Nashi with careful curiosity. Finally, she nodded. “Until next time, then.”

Nashi released his hold over Tamiyo’s memory scroll. The glowing version of his mother vanished, but the pain in his chest was unrelenting.

With a tired sigh, he trudged back through the cacti forest, avoiding the rattlesnakes hiding in the surrounding brittlebush as he made his way to the nearest town.

The evening train pulled into the station, and a deep whistle sounded before the wheels screeched to a halt. Moments later, a surge of travelers spilled out onto the platform, and the clamor of footsteps echoed through the night air. A small, metal orb darted in and out of the crowd, weaving around strangers with ease. It hovered for a moment, out of reach, while its blue light scanned the bustling space, logging every detail. After a few minutes, it flew over the train and made a beeline for the three-story saloon across the main road.

The device paused in front of the shuttered doors. The darkness did nothing to hide the wear and tear visible all over the building—chipped paint, splintered window frames, and an abundance of missing roof tiles—but Nashi hadn’t chosen Ironstone for its luster.

Most of the people who passed through were only interested in breaking up their train journeys. It was a roadside town, with little to offer beyond a single card den, an abandoned mine, and a rail station with connections that stretched from Thunder Junction’s biggest cities to the far-reaching outskirts in the wastes. But the influx of new faces every day meant there were always new stories to uncover.

To record and preserve history was Tamiyo’s greatest pursuit. Her *legacy*. Nashi desperately wanted to keep that part of her alive, in the only way he knew how.

The metal orb launched itself skyward and followed the incline of the roof. Nashi waited at the apex where several exposed beams created a smooth surface for sitting. The spy drone slowed in front of him before settling in the curve of his outstretched palm.

Nashi pressed a finger against the microchip at his temple, switching the drone’s feed from “record” to “playback.” The device spun in place, and a hologram formed above the camera’s glass dome. The

glowing image of the train station stretched in front of Nashi, and he watched with interest as the holo-recording began to play.

Most of it was completely ordinary—strangers lugged their bags across the platform, passing anxious looks between their tickets and the overhead clock tower. Two young children stood outside the station café, fighting over a bottle of lemonade. An elderly woman waited on a bench reading a day-old newspaper. And a couple was so busy arguing about whose fault it was they ended up at the wrong station that neither noticed the rogue hand slipping into their coat pockets, relieving them of a silver pocket watch, several gold coins, and a rather important-looking identification card.

Nothing of merit beyond petty theft, Nashi concluded and tapped the chip at his temple several more times, sifting through the shared library of video recordings he'd gathered from across Thunder Junction. There was footage of dueling Hellspurs and Outcasters practicing wild magic, but instead of watching, he paused on a holo-recording he'd seen many times before.

The image flickered across the rooftop. A mother and her two children stood in front of the Omenpath. The children paced, fingers tangling with anticipation. Their eyes locked onto the wide, flickering portal, and their mother took one of their hands and squeezed tight.

Shadows appeared within the blue swirls, and a cluster of figures stepped through the Omenpath. One was tall and broad, but the oversized bags hanging against his shoulders made him appear colossal. His face was weary and travel-worn, but there was hope in it, too.

The man barely stepped away from the portal when he began his search, eyes darting from one stranger to the next. It didn't take him long to spot his family—or for them to spot him.

Joy erupted across his face, and his bags plummeted to the sand. He flung his arms around his family, squeezing them into a desperate embrace, limbs tangled together as his eyes turned glassy. It was a reunion he'd clearly waited a long time for.

The knot in Nashi's throat felt like iron. A part of him knew it was unfair to blame the Wanderer for taking away the reunion he might've had with his mother, but a bigger part of him was too burdened with grief to feel anything but cheated.

Nashi had believed there was still a way to save his mother's life. If Kaito had listened to him ... If the Wanderer hadn't swung her sword ...

His hands curled into fists, thoughts drowning out the sounds of the family's laughter.

Tamiyo had preserved her memories in a magic scroll, but Nashi's memories were in his head. They were fallible at best and at an even greater risk of being forgotten one day. He wished he could rewatch every detail of his life. He wished he could remember the last time his mother hugged him. The last time she'd held him while he cried. The last time she'd tucked him into bed and sang him to sleep.

The corners of his eyes filled with salt-sting, and he cut off the drone's holo-recording abruptly, wiping his cheek with the back of his hand.

You can still make her proud, he told himself, face heating. *You can finish what she started.*

He took a breath, attempting to regain his composure, when a pair of voices in the alley below made his ears perk up.

"I'm telling you—these outskirt jobs are rarely worth the payday. You can make *twice* as much going after high-collar marks in Omenport."

“They’re twice the risk, too. Have you seen the amount of Sterling guards crawling around the city these days? I’ve got no interest in going up against Graywater’s crew. At least these backwater places know how to mind their own business.”

There was a gruff chuckle, and Nashi moved closer to the edge of the roof. Two Slickshots wearing garish velvet coats stood between the buildings, counting whatever money they’d won in the saloon. It was strange to see a Slickshot so far from the city, but even stranger to see them working in pairs. Most knew better than to trust one another.

“No wonder Lilah is getting all the good jobs these days. That magic amplifier is practically making her untouchable!”

“Wonder what a concoction like that would cost on the black market?”

“Doesn’t matter *what* the price is—no one steals from the Slickshots and lives to spend the coin.”

“I don’t want to sell it—I want to *use* it. And it’s not like there’s only one in existence, right? It obviously came from *somewhere*.”

“With the Omenpaths open for business, you’re looking at a thousand and one possibilities. Probably more.”

“Well, I heard it came from a frozen plane full of gods. Rumor is it’s what they drink to stay immortal.”

“I don’t believe that for a second. More likely it’s that Halo stuff from the city-plane.”

“Ravnica?”

“No, the *other* one!”

“Aw, hells. Who can keep track these days. Point is, there’s gotta be more of it out there.”

“Good luck trying to find it. But if you keep talking about stealing from Lilah, I’m going to consider turning you in. Now *that* would be an easy payday.”

The Slickshot laughed in response, but there was an unmissable edge to it. Nashi had a hunch that only one of them would be heading back to the city in the morning.

As they walked back to the hotel across the road, their voices faded in the distance. Nashi didn’t bother following them; he’d heard enough.

There was an amplifier on Thunder Junction. Something that could strengthen his story magic in an instant. And it was currently in the possession of a Slickshot boss called Lilah.

Nashi stood, dusting the sand from his clothes. There wasn’t much he could do tonight. But tomorrow? He had a train to catch.

The Voyager Grande stretched toward the clouds. Jagged, triangular rooftops and wide-reaching windmills loomed from the very top of the entertainment megaplex. Colorful bunting stretched from one balcony to the next, and spherical lights were strung up along the roof gables where blue paint was streaked in neat, uniform lines.

After days of scouring through holo-recordings for information on Lilah, Nashi had what he needed: the amplifier’s location. He straightened his cloak, making sure it hid the equipment he’d attached to his belt, and stepped through the main doors of the megaplex.

Wooden card tables lined the edges of the grand front room. Two wide staircases led to the second floor, where lights flashed around the doorways of each unique establishment. There were restaurants and dance halls and theatre shows—all designed to rid people of as much coin as possible. Nashi made his way to one of the elevators and ducked inside, keeping his head low.

The elevator door curved around him, and the platform began to rise. Nashi studied the control panel at the wall. There were two rows of bronze buttons and a key slot at the top that provided access to the tenth floor. Nashi had done enough research to know that the Slickshot headquarters operated in the basement, but the tenth floor was for the hotel's most-exclusive customers. In other words, anyone—or anything—Lilah wanted to keep out of sight.

Nashi removed one of the devices from his belt and latched it to the control panel. The buttons began to flash wildly, and the key slot lit up a neon blue. When the elevator opened on the tenth floor, he found himself in a wide foyer.

Taking the hallway to the right, Nashi moved for the nearest air vent and reached for one of his drones. The small metal orb gave a shudder before zipping into the dark tunnel. Using the device at his temple, he led the orb through the vent, navigating corners as he followed alongside the corridor. When he stopped in front of one of the rooms, he positioned the drone at the edge of the metal grate, glass dome rotating to get a complete image of the space below. He was prepared for a guard or two and had the smoke bombs on his belt to prove it—but the room was empty, save for an office desk near the window and a wide glass shelving unit along the entire back wall.

Nashi grinned, smug. A thought flickered in his mind of Kaito being impressed by his entry methods—but he pushed the notion away. Things with Kaito were ... complicated.

Focusing on the camera feed, Nashi let the drone circle the room, checking every corner for alarms. A trip light stretched across the floor like a wire, and Nashi nearly laughed when he saw it.

A child could've set a better trap, his mind hummed.

The drone split into two parts: the camera remained floating in the air, but the bottom half took the shape of an origami butterfly. It skittered through the room, racing for the door, and latched itself to the handle. Its metal legs reached into the keyhole, and Nashi heard the *click* from outside. He opened the door, taking care to step over the trip light, and walked toward the back of the room when something made him hesitate.

Sitting on the middle of the desk without any protection at all was a small glass bottle.

The liquid was deep red and unmistakably metallic. There was no writing on the bottle, but Nashi's nostrils flared when he picked up its scent. The magic was abhorrently pungent, and the stench made his eyes water. Maybe *that's* why there were no guards here.

Nashi didn't exactly relish the thought of downing something so putrid, but if it would make him more like his mother ...

I could be what she always wanted me to be, Nashi's heart pinched.

He reached for the potion—but his hand pressed straight through the glass, as if the bottle wasn't there at all. He frowned, trying once more to close his fist around the elixir, but he felt nothing but air.

Nashi pulled his arm back, and the hairs on the back of his neck stood up, alert. Something was wrong.

A *crack* sounded, and when Nashi turned back to the bottle, it had shattered in place. The sounds came in quick succession, glass breaking in time with Nashi's racing heart, when he realized it wasn't just the bottle—the entire *room* was shattering. Lines appeared in his vision, slicing at the world around

him like miniature lightning bolts. Nashi spun, searching for the doorway, but there were cracks there, too. And then—the world exploded.

Nashi threw his hands over his head and crouched low, biting down the cry in the back of his throat. A deep laugh turned his panic to terror.

He looked past his outstretched fingers, and the room was no longer made up of a trillion broken pieces. It was whole, and still—but where the bottle once sat, there was an ogre with blue-gray skin and a ferocious glare. One side of her head was shaved nearly to the skin, while the other boasted wild red waves that seemed to grow in every direction. A pair of fanged animal teeth pierced her pointed ears, and a sleeveless maroon cloak exposed the muscular curves of a well-trained fighter. But it was the hourglass lantern hanging from her waistcoat that made Nashi flinch.



Art by: Ryan Pancoast

“You’re a time mage,” Nashi managed, hoarse. He quickly searched his memories for information on the Slickshot’s hired mercenaries. He hadn’t seen them on any of his drone footage, but he *did* remember a name coming up on more than one occasion. “Obeka.”

The woman flashed her teeth. “You know who I am, and you still tried to steal from me? Either I’m losing my edge, or you have a death wish.”

Nashi stood up slowly. “Look, this is all just a misunderstanding. I thought this room was empty.”

“The second part, I believe. Who do you work for?”

“No one,” Nashi insisted.

Obeka tilted her head to the side before removing the elixir from her coat. “This is what you came for, isn’t it? Who’s after the amplifier? Graywater? The Hellspurs?” She gritted her teeth. “I knew those snakes couldn’t handle competition. I bet they hoped I’d go easy on you because you’re a kid. What a spineless bunch of—”

“I’m not a kid,” Nashi interrupted. “And I don’t know what you’re talking about.” He watched as Obeka rotated the bottle in her fist, studying him. His mind was racing for details about Slickshots and time mages and ogres—anything he could think of to give him an advantage. He tried to keep his voice steady. “I came here alone.”

“Do you know what my employer does to thieves?” Obeka drew out her words carefully, dark eyes searching for the fear in Nashi’s.

He looked at her. He looked at the bottle. He calculated the distance.

Obeka mistook his movements for dread and sneered. “Slickshots like to show each other up, you see. A regular old duel just isn’t enough. It needs something special. Something flashy.”

“If it’s all same to you,” Nashi started, brushing a finger against his temple, “I think I’ll pass.”

The butterfly drone shot down from above, crashing against Obeka’s fist as it snatched the elixir free from her grip. It swooped toward the air vent, barely making it to the grate before shuddering in place—frozen.

Obeka stood, face flushed with rage and her arm outstretched. Magic rippled around her hand before a chain of golden links thrashed forward, tugging at the air as if it were pulling the drone back through time.

The butterfly drone retraced its movements, on course to deliver the elixir back into Obeka’s fist—just the way Nashi had predicted.

With Obeka’s attention fixed on the drone, Nashi removed one of his mother’s scrolls from his bag, eyes scanning hurriedly over the story about a thief disappearing under a veil of invisibility to escape. He mouthed the words, trying not to stumble over his own thoughts, and let the magic move through him. He felt it for a moment—watched his reflection in the mirrored wall as he flickered out of sight—but the spell faltered, just as it had in the cacti forest.

The ripple of magic was enough to draw Obeka’s attention, even as she retrieved the elixir and smashed the drone against the floor.

Her laughter was full of disdain. “Now I understand. You really *were* after the amplifier for your own purposes.” She tucked the bottle into her coat and squared her shoulders. “You should know that the potion would be wasted on a weakling like you. The elixir doesn’t *give* power, it enhances it—and you clearly have nothing worth strengthening.”

Nashi’s anger flushed through him. It didn’t matter if she was right; he needed to move, fast. He reached for a smoke bomb and raised his arm to throw it, when Obeka punched him hard across the jaw.

He felt the pain radiate across his chin, followed by the violent aftershocks that roiled to his very core. But Obeka’s fist was frozen in front of him. Cracks split around it, and once again, the world began to break apart. Glass shards appeared, faster and faster until the explosion shattered his reality.

Something tugged at Nashi’s body, yanking him backward as he tumbled through a tunnel of broken glass. The hotel room morphed into flashes of images that swept past him like shapes in a kaleidoscope.

No, not images, Nashi realized, eyes widening as he soaked in the details around him. *These are memories. My memories.*

When Tamiyo's face blurred past him, he fought at the invisible restraints with every bit of energy he had left, tugging himself free until he lunged for his mother. He was weightless, drifting toward light and color, when the memory surrounded him.

A much younger version of Nashi stood in the doorway of his mother's library, watching her read her scrolls. In his hands was a small gadget. Something he'd made of bolts, spare wires, and a repurposed chip from a surface drone. It chirped like a bird and responded to hand commands. Nashi hoped his mother would like it. She'd always been fond of birds.

But the longer Nashi watched his mother, the more he began to second-guess himself. He wouldn't get her approval with toys he patched together with recycled parts. He needed to study. To practice story magic.

He needed to be just like his mom.

Nashi tucked the small device into his shirt pocket, shoulders sagging with doubt, when Tamiyo turned to face him. She didn't ask any questions; at first, she didn't say anything at all. She just watched Nashi with curious eyes, the way she studied the people whose stories she recorded.

After a moment, she left her scrolls and pulled Nashi into her arms. "Never hide who you are, Nashi. Not from me, and not from the world."

Nashi's voice was timid. "I don't want to be different from you. I want us to be the same."

Tamiyo tilted her head. "We are family. You are my son. The part of my heart that loves you will always be a match to the part of your heart that loves me. In that way, we will always be the same." She cupped his face, brushing her fingers over his cheeks. "But we don't have to be the same for me to be proud of you. You are *Nashi*. That is who I'm proud of. Don't ever forget that. Don't ever forget who *you* are."

The memory dissolved. Nashi blinked, head swirling and jaw aching, and he pushed himself off the carpeted floor. He was back in the hotel room, but Obeka had already vanished with the amplifier. He had no idea how long he'd been unconscious, or how far back into his memories Obeka had sent him. But the warmth of the flashback simmered at the forefront of his mind.

Obeka hadn't meant to, but she'd done him a favor.

When Nashi regained his composure and made his way back through the hotel, he knew exactly what he needed to do next.

A collection of half-built drones was sprawled across Nashi's desk. His brow twitched as he worked, eyes focused on the corner pin of a microchip. He pressed the tip of a soldering iron against it, and the sizzle of heat caused a wave of nostalgia to ripple through him. There was something comforting about the smell of burning metal.

It reminded him of home.

When Nashi finished the modifications, he pulled up every holo-recording from the storage drives. He watched the surveillance feeds he'd gathered from across Thunder Junction, combing through each frame, searching for what he needed.

When he imagined he was back in his mother's study, studying the drones the way she once studied her scrolls, he felt a piece of his heart click into place.

We were never so different after all, he thought, and the relief made his throat tighten.

Nashi worked through the night, singling out a set of holo-recordings and transferring them to their individual drones. When the sun rose over the desert and light flickered through the dusty window-pane, he leaned back in his chair and pressed the device at his temple.

Magic bristled at his fingertips, more naturally than ever before. There was no strain. No fight for control. Power channeled through him like an extension of his own being. For the first time in months, he felt like himself.

It had always been enough for his mother—now, it would be enough for him, too.

Nashi stood outside the Voyager Grande for the second time. Five drones circled around him, taking the shape of small, origami birds. His mother's favorites.

He wore no hat and no cloak. He brought only himself, and the truth in his heart.

Nashi took the elevator to the top floor of the hotel, moved carefully through the halls, and stopped in front of a door he was all too familiar with. When he unlocked the door with one of his devices, he didn't wait for an invitation.

Obeka was sitting in the chair behind the desk, legs up on the table. Behind her, the elixir sat in one of the glass cases.

She frowned at the sight of the open door, but her eyes didn't register on Nashi. Not until he let the invisibility spell drift away.

It only took her a moment to recognize him, and when she did, her mouth curled to one side. "Seriously, kid? I know I let you live, but it was heavily implied I didn't want to see you again."

"It was," Nashi agreed. "But how else was I going to thank you?"

Obeka folded her arms over her chest and snickered. "Not the usual reaction I get after punching people into yesterday."

Nashi took a step forward. "You showed me a memory. It helped me realize what I've been missing all this time."

"Common sense? Survival instincts?"

Nashi cracked a smile. "No. Well, maybe a little bit. But I was so busy trying to be like my mother, that I forgot to embrace who I've always been at my core."

Obeka pressed her fists to the desk, crunching into the wooden surface. "And who might that be?"

Nashi ushered one of his drones ahead, and a hologram appeared from its camera. Video footage from the night Obeka punched him. The audio was distorted and garbled, but the image was seamless. *Accurate.*

Nashi watched the footage alongside Obeka, paying no attention to her reaction as the Nashi in the hologram reached for a potion that wasn't actually there.

Obeka snorted. "So, you're a kid who was tricked by my time illusion. Is that what you're here to tell me?"

Nashi shook his head before vanishing from sight. Obeka startled, blinking furiously as her eyes darted around the room, when she realized the glass case was wide open.

When Nashi's voice sounded once more in the middle of the room, she spun to face him.

He gripped the elixir in his hand and shrugged. "I'm not much of a storyteller—but I know how to work a camera."

Obeka's eyes blazed with rage, and she lunged for Nashi before crashing straight through him and onto the floor. "What did you do?"

From the open window frame, Nashi watched Obeka swing once more at his own time illusion, copied from Obeka's recorded magic. It was a helpful spell to have—and it turned out story magic was a lot easier to control once he traded scrolls for surveillance footage. He smirked before gripping tight to the outer wall and climbing to the rooftop, out of sight.

Nashi stalked across the pitch of the roof and pressed a finger to his temple, summoning his drones back to him. They moved in a slow orbit around him, following as he scaled the next wall and made his way back into the crowd below. He pulled his hood up then, covering his face in shadows.

"You did it," came Tamiyo's voice in a whisper. "Just like I knew you could."

Today, he'd celebrate; tomorrow, he'd make his mother proud. There were new planes to visit, stories to uncover, and magic to record—and Nashi was ready for all of it. So long as she was at his side, nothing could stand in his way.