

“Battle not with monsters, lest ye become a monster, and if you gaze into the abyss, the abyss gazes also into you.” — Friedrich Nietzsche

It was a distant world. This was a different place, and a different time, far removed from the cars and buildings and computers that are so very familiar to us here. There were no cities. There was only The Forest—one that enjoyed a reign as far as the eye could see. Here, the only skyscrapers were the gargantuan trees rising thousands of feet into the heavens, holding up the sky, keeping it in place with their broad branches.

The trees were all the Overen people knew. Their trunks were so thick, they would hollow out entire sections and make their homes in them. They had branches that could span almost a mile in every direction, intertwining, shaking hands and mingling with the neighboring trees, forming natural pathways for the beings to navigate. The people all lived close to the top, where the light from above would not completely lose their way and dissipate in the leaves.

The Overen lived in harmony with The Forest, preferring subsistence and serenity. They knew it well, able to venture almost anywhere. *Almost*. There were only two places that very few ever dared to go—and for good reason.

One such place was Below. Below, there existed a darkness far blacker than any night. The old ones would tell the children tales of the monsters that lived there, in the bottomless pit of perpetual nothingness. In scary stories, they whispered of hideous creatures that would feast not only on your bodies, but on your very souls. They would rip and tear into you relentlessly and without mercy until there was nothing left, and when they were done with their evil deeds, whatever was left of you would become a part of the darkness too. And, of course, they particularly fancied little children.

At nights in their cots made of bark and leaves, the more curious little ones would listen for the monsters as they wondered if there actually was anything at the bottom of the Below to put your feet on, or if the trees extended inwards, forever. Sometimes a faint growl would be heard clawing its way up from the abyss, and the ones who were so curious before would suddenly find themselves with their questions removed, covering from head to toe, shutting their ears ever so tightly with their hands.

The Edge was the other forbidden place. This was the perimeter of The Forest, and the extent of the Overen's dominion. Beyond The Edge, an everlasting mist blanketed the area, obscuring within it mysteries yet unknown to the people of The Forest.

Here was where Gaige stood. Here, where no one else would come, was where he was perched, looking out at the end of everything that his people knew. He was high atop the trees, standing on the natural flooring of the network of branches and leaves under him. He looked out at the mist, listening. It was always so quiet here...so peaceful. The calm was a charade, of course. There was deception in the tranquility. This was something he could feel in his bones. Nonetheless, he gazed into the mist, allowing himself to be enthralled by it. Suddenly, there came a distant howl from deep within the grey, and he was jolted back into his duty. He turned away and continued his rounds.

Though technically middle-aged, Gaige was among the oldest of the clan. When he was just a small boy, he became one of the original settlers of this part of The Forest, brought here by his now dead father. There was no official societal hierarchy, but when decisions needed to be made, they turned to him like they had once turned to his father. He was wise, for he had seen much with his sharp brown eyes. He was strong, for his muscular arms had wielded an axe and a bow since he was a child. Though he was inherently a pacifist, he was also a sentry, a hunter, and a survivor, and the many scars and calluses on his body were a living map of how he came to be all these things, and they acted as a testament to how well he did them. He was, after all, still alive.

Seeing nothing out of the ordinary, he began to make his way back to his people, bow in hand, looking around for a familiar flutter. He emitted a low, gratifying "Ah", directed to an owl a hundred paces away. Slowly and silently, an arrow slid out of its quiver and was positioned on the bow. Time froze, as if the entirety of the world began holding its collective breath. In a single fleeting moment, it was released, and connected with its target precisely where Gaige had aimed it. The Forest carried on, as if nothing had happened.

With the owl now strapped and dangling from his waist, Gaige made his way down the accustomed branches back to his home. The Edge was quite far from it, and it was already night when he arrived. As he approached, there was a faint buzz in the air. The trees got thicker, and there was a warmth about the place. Branches poked and prodded and grew directly against his path. He climbed above the thickest parts and looked down. Quite abruptly, the hindering, thick branches were gone. In its place was a clearing consisting of almost 20 particularly massive trees quite evenly spaced out. The only branches that existed travelled from one tree to another.

Looking more closely, a quite peculiar scene materialized in the midst of the greenery. Here, hidden to all those not actively seeking it, was the home of the Overen: the Garden. There were several wooden balconies encircling most of the trees. Each tree supported over four of them, sometimes more. At least one balcony of each tree housed several fruits and vegetables, varying in nature from tree to tree. Walkways made of wood and rope helped to connect the trees in areas where there was a deficit of branches.

In the middle of this unusual establishment was the Agora, a construction born from a tree that was once so massive, its apex stretched far beyond the top of The Forest. Its commanding stature eventually became its downfall, when, in a time before the Overen had settled here, a lightning bolt pierced through the sky and down into this king of trees and cut it in half, like the sword of a jealous underling.

The end result was a furious fire and the effective decapitation of the giant, with its "head" of branches resting atop the Forest. That was the event that drew the Overen to this place.

In the aftermath of the treacherous lightning storm, an expedition to the area was led by Alen Mason, Gaige's father, where he immediately observed the potential for realizing his dream of a Garden for the Overen. As they began to carve out their dwellings in the surrounding trees, the head of the old king that lay eerily above them became the source of nearly all the raw materials required to erect their balconies and walkways, while the unusually thick stump that remained was trimmed down into a clean plateau, and extended even further by large balconies of its own. The multitude of walkways were designed to all connect here, creating a central hub for the Overen. This is how the Agora--and the Garden that sprang up around it--came to be.

One of the more peculiar features of the Garden was the intricate network of pipes expertly fashioned from branches that darted in and out of the trees and through the air above the walkways, following them up to a stone construction at the very center of the Agora's plateau. This assembly was in the shape of a multi-leveled cube, with the first level accommodating a large fire. On top of that rested a giant ceramic pot housing boiling water. The pipes fit snugly into holes surrounding the bottom of the pot. It was a plumbing system unlike any other.

However, by far the most outlandish aspect of the decor were the two poles that ran parallel to the Agora and up beyond the ceiling of The Forest. Its purpose (as Gaige often had to explain) was to attract lightning, so that it would spare the trees and prevent a disaster such as the one that had brought them here in the first place. There were two mysteries surrounding the poles. Firstly, it was made of a material that many Overen knew nothing of: metal. The legend was that Alen Mason's generation had acquired it from beyond The Edge, but none of the surviving Overen knew anything further, other than some of their surviving possessions from the Old World were made of it. The second mystery was that these poles travelled straight into the Below, and those sentries positioned closest to it claimed that they were both connected to *something*, and that that *something* gave off a hum every once in a while that made their hair stand on end.

All of the Garden's marvels were designed by Alen. Of all the things that Gaige was, he always felt that his father was so much more.

Gaige made his way to the Agora, alternating between branches and walkways as his preferred path. The Agora was where the Overen gathered every night to sit on the benches surrounding the warm fire to eat, drink, and tell stories to each other. The entire population of the Garden was currently doing just that.

He passed through his empty residence to retire his hunting gear, and continued on. He took a shortcut through the school, starting from the Reading balcony where the books preserved from the Old World were tucked away safely in their shelves in the innards of the tree, up to the Mathematics level littered with pages of trigonometric drawings and algebraic equations.

As he got closer to the Agora, he heard the faint bustle of a few dozen conversations filling the air. He brought his kill to one of the cooks tending the fire. They obliged and began swiftly preparing to add the owl to the communal dinner. He then walked around, looking for the beauty of a wife he knew he would find with the glow of the fire on her cheeks and her hands moving about wildly, telling one of her many fairy tales to their children.

As he passed the other families, he waved as he listened to a hunter talking of the slippery monkey he spent over an hour chasing about the treetops, only to have it snatched away by a cunning falcon. Next to him was a sentry telling his children of his latest encounter with a monster from Below. Gaige stopped, and many others gathered to listen. He described in great detail its grotesque skinless flesh, its wide emotionless eyes, and its eerie crawl through the bushes. Even from high above in his perch, the sentry was engulfed in its stench. It smelled like death, he said. He swore he landed an arrow cleanly onto one of the monster's legs before it limped off, whimpering. As he held on to his children, they held on to his every word.

That was enough for Gaige. He passed through the crowd and made his way to the far end of the Agora, to the benches most often frequented by his family. Then, he saw her--his Luana. Her long black hair was blowing in the wind, its gentle curls enjoying intermittent freedom. Her green eyes were wide with excitement as she recited her story to the children around her:

*"Either the hole was very deep, or she fell very slowly, for she had plenty of time as she went down to look about her and to wonder what was going to happen next. First, she tried to look down and make out what she was coming to, but it was too dark to see anything; then she looked at the sides, and noticed that they were filled with cupboards and book-shelves..."*

He searched their faces, hoping to see both his sons among them. He found only one: Troi.

Troi was only ten seasons old, but he was as curious as ever. He seemed to be interested in anything and everything. He had inherited his mother's curls and eyes, and in many ways, he had inherited her spirit as well. He sat there, fixated on her story. Gaige went over and sat next to him, in a not-so-stealthy manner. Luana was on to him. In her usual sarcastic demeanor, she shouted, "Well children, look who we have here! Gaige Lasteer Mason! How good of you to join us!" The children all giggled, both at the fact that she commanded the authority to jeer at one of the most respected members of the Overen, and also that she called him *Lasteer*, a name he loathed, and one that he had expressly mentioned no one should ever call him.

"Why don't you tell the children a better story? What's the matter, have you forgotten all the good ones in your old age?", Gaige retorted. She glared back at him in mock-offense. "My dear, perhaps your hearing is starting to leave you in *your* old age, for I'm delivering one of your favorites! Indeed, you share so much with the main character...always falling into places and bumping into things. My, I *have* married such a clumsy one!" The children burst out laughing. She was always better at their playful sparring than he was, so he graciously smiled and allowed her this win. She returned the smile in acknowledgement of her victory and continued on with her tale.

He turned to Troi. "Where's your brother?"

Troi barely took his eyes off his mother. "He went off over there to listen to them talk about the monster from today." He pointed to the crowd he had passed. Indeed, hidden amongst the crowd was Troi's equally inquisitive brother, Odis. He was a season younger than Troi, and his curiosity was of a different brand. He was more reserved, often choosing to seek out his own answers to his questions rather than being content to simply ask them. Even now, he stayed towards the edge of the crowd. If Troi was his mother's son, then Odis was Gaige's.

Odis and Troi made quite the team, and were always a handful for Gaige and Luana. They were troublemakers of sorts, always poking (or stumbling) into the affairs of the older ones.

Gaige got up and walked over to Odis. He put his hand on his shoulder. "Father!"

"Hello my little Odis. Why aren't you with your mother and brother?"

"The others...they were talking about this monster that was wandering about today. I just wanted to..."

"My boy, you know what these stories do to you. You'll have nightmares tonight for sure. Now come with me, let's go have dinner together."

"Yes father."

Odis reluctantly followed his father, swaying his arms about in an effort to express his unwillingness to go. After a brief silence, he could contain himself no longer. "Father..."

"Yes?"

"Where did the monsters come from?"

This was a question that his sons had often confronted him with. His reply was not very different from all the times before. "When you're older, then I'll tell you." The disappointment that stifled his son's previous excitement was not very different from all the times before either.

After mingling for a while longer, the Overen all resigned to their respective dwellings. Luana tucked the boys into their cots while Gaige waited outside on a balcony. She came up behind him, took his hand, and whispered into his ear, "Care to watch the stars with me tonight, my Love?"

He smiled. "I can think of nothing better."

Together, they both lay in their hammock hung on the balcony, looking up at the puncture in The Forest's ceiling directly underneath the Agora. The night was clear. The stars twinkled. The wind was gentle. Luana placed her head on her husband's chest and listened to his heart. It beat with a leader's strength, a wise man's composure, and a lover's rhythm. She massaged his tired arms. They were at peace.

Sleep had just began to find them when suddenly, a scream permeated the air. Gaige knew immediately who's it was. "Odis! Damn it, I told that boy that he would have nightmares tonight!" He bolted out of the hammock and ran inside.

Terror soon set in with what he found there: Odis and Troi were gone.