



Priya Echo's Adventure

BOOK ONE
AWAKENING

DAVID
GOLD

PRIYA ECHO'S ADVENTURE

BOOK 1 - AWAKENING

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AUTHOR'S CAUTION

This is a work of fiction. This book is solely for entertainment. In this entire book, I produced all the plots, characters, settings, etc. I am more than happy to share my imagination with you, hence the fantasy novel. Personally, I will recommend this as an 18+ book. Thank you for your understanding.

DEDICATION

I would like to give my enduring gratitude to my family, who has supported me through the years with kind words and good wisdom. Thank you for persevering through the good and bad. Your generous nature will always be remembered. To beautiful North Carolina, with its bright skies and wide-open spaces. Thank you for nourishing my creativity.

FORWARD

Thank you for reading my first novel. I hope you will have as much fun reading it as I did writing it. In middle school my teacher gave me a composition book and had me start a Free Writing Journal. Several years after that, I wrote a few short stories just for fun. I discovered that writing was a wonderful tool to convey your artistic side. The ideas started coming, and some of them seemed good enough to transfer into written form. I created the concept for this story, and soon discovered that it could be adapted into a book. Enjoy!

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SUMMARY

After Priya Echo's father comes back from the war with the FIRE virus and dies, she is left alone as an orphan. Priya feels abandoned and confused, but decides to dedicate her life to helping people by searching for a cure to the disease. Fast forward, and Priya is a lecturer at university with her own research lab. For the interval she has studied tirelessly, rejecting connections and idle distraction. The researcher invents an anechoic chamber to test as a therapy for FIRE virus. Daring to employ herself as the first test subject, she ventures inside. There, she is reborn as the champion Echo. Eons of dream pass before Priya opens her eyes and escapes the chamber, sliding to the floor as her mind slowly restores. A shy lab girl comes out of her shell and becomes a hero. Now, all she needs is fresh courage.

CHAPTER 1 - AWAKENING

The walls all around were blurry and formless until coming into focus. Depth perception returned. From gray smudges came forms ... convex and concave ... the repeated geometric shapes of an anechoic chamber. Priya pushed herself off the floor and stumbled to the lock, letting in a tide of quiet light. She fought against it, shut it tight and pressed against the outside wall, sliding down until crouched on the tile. A few minutes passed, and her eyes adjusted. Like rifling through an old family album, the setting of the university lab felt so personal. Its tables and chairs were neatly arranged, and there were flasks half filled with solutions from last week's lecture. "That must have been ... a dream. Did I imagine I was a hero?" Priya thought as she looked to her side, and bit her tongue, sucking it until the bitterness thrust more consciousness and uprooted the last of her lethargy. The wide landscape of her memory was mostly undecipherable. Priya giggled for a second and felt like a child that had just spilled a glass of milk, as her memory began to seep back, steadily filling the vessel. Looking down at her hands she could see brown, coffee colored skin, "I'm wearing a white lab coat ... I think I'm probably ... a scientist". Scenes of the past reasserted themselves at normal intervals, chronological appetizers. Farther and farther they went, pulled by an invisible force like gravity back into time, until arriving at childhood. Two wet, salty beads dropped down her face as she recalled. Her father raised her by himself and was everything. Such a good man, maybe too good for the world. But when he returned from the war, she was fourteen, and he was different. His eyes were never the same. A year later it happened, when he took his own life. Watching the rain fall down onto the smooth, black marble of the gravestone, dwarfed by the canopies of umbrellas, she had wished that she could have found a way to save him. But that was just a silly wish. After that day, she dedicated her life to academia, and then to science. Studying day by day, acknowledging and reading the various opinions on the virus that had brought about her father's end, she had worked tirelessly. Priya got to her feet and waddled over to the nearest lab table. On it was a blue folder, and she flipped it open. "Anechoic Isolation and Sensory Deprivation, A Treatment for FIRE virus ... by Priya Echo, PhD. Neuroscience, DGU" she read silently, mouthing the words to herself as the talent of reading found its expression once more. Placing a hand over a throbbing temple, an epiphany cracked

open. No mistake that much of the landscape was undecipherable. “Since then I’ve never really had much of a life. No friends. No boyfriend. My life has been ... closed ... and every urge I’ve dropped like an anchor. Never really known anyone, have I? Didn’t even grasp the meaning. Oh ... I get it now. Then the dream was just a fantasy to fill that emptiness. Lonely Priya. That’s what they call me ... I hear. No ... I’m the Empress Echo, daughter of the Divine Couple, the perfect pair who will be together forever, who’s love is beyond the farthest reaches of philosophy. That’s my mind’s true actress. To find a cure I’ve sacrificed everything. All the great progress I’ve made. I feel pride. But my life is ... I’m so ... pathetic” she reflected.

CHAPTER 2 - PRIYA MEETS THREE GIRLS

Although it was late in the afternoon, the cafeteria was especially noisy that day. Three ladies gossiped at a corner table. Nadine Fenway, a tall, thin Nordic looking blonde was filing her nails. She leaned in close to the other two, Dominique Mellow-Garcia and Felicia Chen, and pointed to the other side of the room. Felicia stuck a leaf of romaine into her mouth and chewed it loudly, then turned to see what it was. “Uh-huh ... look at this bitch” Nadine observed as Priya strode into the cafeteria, seemingly out of place in a ruffled, disheveled lab coat that was paradoxically more attractive than when she wore it correctly. “She is too prim and proper for me” Felicia noted. They stared in fascination as she hesitantly approached different tables with her tray in hand, and then backed away, too cautious to approach. “I heard she’s never had any friends ... ever” Dominique interjected. “I guess there are only a few real academics around here” Nadine quipped, feigning a sigh of regret. “Come on, Nadine. You know how all us hardcore academics don’t have any friends” Dominique argued, whilst stealing a French fry off of her plate and dipping it in blueberry flavored maple syrup. “Oh, and who the fuck are you supposed to be?” Felicia asked sharply, making the other girls snicker. “Looks like she’s lost or something” Nadine whispered, with a sense of the uncanny as she noticed the unfamiliar, somewhat blankness in her features. Meekly Priya inched towards the table. “Do you mind? I could really use some company right now” she asked, politeness in every lyric of her voice. Felicia looked at Nadine as if to say, “Can

we keep it?” with big eyes, and she relented. “I don’t think we’ve met. I’m Nadine from math’s, and this is Dominique from marine biology and Felicia from chemistry” she presented. “I lecture in the north wing but my lab is on the fourth floor, neuroscience. Thanks for letting me sit here. I’m Priya” she explained. “Are you having a stressful day?” Felicia prodded. “You look like burnt toast, hon” Nadine observed. “It’s alright. I’m just having a bad day. My recent project is ending. It’s just a room that removes sound waves, sort of like an isolation tank. I thought it could be put to work for useful therapy, but it’s not fit for human use” Priya related, not quite ready to share the gory details of her journey. “Sorry to hear that. What kind of lab do you have?” Felicia asked excitedly. “A normal one, I guess” Priya shrugged. “Ooh ... do you have brains in there?” Dominique wondered aloud. “Yes. I think you girls would like my lab, it’s very science-y” the researcher assured them. “We will definitely crash that later” Felicia joked. “By that, she means we will take the tour” Dominique corrected. “Yeah, we were born to be nerds” Nadine added in a squeaky voice. Encouraged, Priya set about with a follow-up question, “So ... just out of curiosity, what have you girls done in the last couple ... let’s say three hours. Time can fly on a weekday like this”. A question of profound importance. “I fed a shark” Dominique bragged, taking a big bite of a piece of cornbread. “I just got in from Bayer-Dale, where I do community service for seniors, basically wheeling them around and everything. They like that sort of thing” Felicia related. “Graded papers and took a piss” Nadine said lastly, waving her hands as if it was completely uneventful. “Um ... that sounds really nice” Priya nodded, then looking towards Felicia, “old folks are so sweet”. She considered the blonde for a brief moment. It was obvious she was trying the hardest, and was calm and collected in every jest ... a common element sensed quickly, and something else ... undetectable beneath the surface. “Not like it’s a competition, but what did you do?” Felicia inquired; her voice soft, ready to draw the secret from her like a medieval doctor letting blood. Priya coughed at how subtle the question appeared, and took a swig of water, “To be honest, I was passed out the whole time”.

CHAPTER 3 - PROFESSOR HOOK

Later the following week Priya sat in a waiting area along an empty hallway of south wing when a door creaked open, “The committee is ready for you”. Clarence Hook sat in the middle, white tufts of hair gracing the tops of his ears, like strained, pallid vegetation eking out a meager existence in some cracked, throat-drying, impassable desert. Priya set up a defense and carefully relayed how the chamber did not meet the parameters necessary for human use, and would have to be dismantled, but as she watched them whisper amongst themselves, she realized it was all for naught. “Seeing how your recent activity has not met the markers set in place for the progress of this department, we will be cutting your funding for eighteen months” Hook intoned, meting out the punishment. A brokenhearted neuroscientist waddled out of the room, downcast, counting the square tiles that passed on the way to the far door, as if their census was a profound vocation.

CHAPTER 4 - SIMPLE APARTMENT

That night she was followed back to her apartment. Fiddling with the keys to stall, Priya tried to offer them an alternative, “Maybe we can go see a late viewing of ...”. “Don’t even think about it, newbie, just turn that key” Nadine interrupted, holding her arms against her hips threateningly. “Say ... this dame doesn’t want us to see what’s going on here ... maybe she’s got something to hide” Dominique bellowed, pretending to be a real sherlock. “We got a warrant, mam” Felicia seconded. Biting her lip, Priya turned the key and threw open the door, letting the three of them into perhaps one of the most unadorned, minimalist spaces in the city. They stood there in petrified silence for a moment. Dominique went first, skipping to the center of the room, then threw herself on the ground, and began rolling about, laughing uncontrollably. “Ladies, it looks like we’ve got ourselves a long-term project ahead of us” Nadine said, shutting the door behind them.

CHAPTER 5 - THE LAB TOUR

The following week she provided a tour of the lab to the three of them, but their attention on the minutia of the experiments waned until they locked sights on what intrigued them most of all. “Which one is your favorite, newbie?” Nadine implored, pointing to the workmen crew of summer interns, cobbled together from different departments as they carried away the last of the building blocks of her assembly. “What do you mean? These guys are just here to ...” Priya began, trying to change the subject without avail. “They're here for us to watch them ... obviously” Dominique interrupted. “Interesting ... so it's that one” Nadine observed, watching the movement of Priya's eyeline. She immediately turned away. The next thing she knew, the room where the chamber had been was just another empty space. Trying to think of what use to put it to, she was instead dragged outside and exhorted into unconventional behavior, “If you're going to be part of this crew, you've got to prove yourself” Nadine said, pushing her back as the others giggled. Following him across the grounds from afar during the crew's break, she came into a convenience store. In the candy aisle he stood alone. Priya noticed this was her chance, and inched closer to him as he inspected the rows. “Oh Eric, it's nice to see you” she began, like reading a script. The red shirt was still stained with spots of sweat, “Thanks Priya, I imagine we did a quality job on the lab”. “Yes, it's all back to basics, thank you” she reassured him. “Not a problem. It must have been more work building it though” he speculated. He was puzzled as to why she was acting slightly frantic, but then understood as her body language made things clear. “What sort of candy do you like?” she asked predictably. Eric could see she was becoming more of a nervous wreck and smiled mischievously, “When it comes to candy, I like to be spoiled, only the most expensive stuff is good for me”. Priya blinked and bit her lip, “What about when it comes to girls?”. Looking down at her feet for a moment to think, he ran his hands through his light brown hair, “Hmm ... well I suppose she can be really normal and lame, as long as she has a good heart”. Priya felt a most delightful brew of worldly cunning and blissful naivety at the same time, “Are you sure?”. He stepped towards her, closing the distance. The red of his shirt overpowered the electricity pulsing through her mind, “Definitely ... and she can be a total slob”. Blushing shyly, she turned to the side away from him, “Oh ... um ... that's good”. Eric sighed, wondering whether

it had actually backfired, “Priya, I’m trying really hard here but you’re going to have to work with me”. After the cunning defeated the rest, she turned back towards him and lifted her head to take in his fresh eyes, “how about a slice of pizza?”. After all, she knew what the universe was really all about; the subtlety of human emotions ... and nothing more.

CHAPTER 6 - PRIYA IS HAPPY!

“Slow down ... how would you describe it?” Hook pleaded, trying to reassure her. “A complete lack of existential crisis!” she hyperventilated as a creepy, awkward grin stretched across her face. “I think that’s called happiness Priya” he deduced. The next thing he knew, she was racing down the hall, and turned a corner to the fourth-floor stairwell, “Thank you, sir!” echoing down the corridor. The lab seemed brighter in the bubbly dissociation of her disposition, reinforced by the giddy fizzles of the beakers. Standing in the empty space once more, she closed her eyes, reaching out to feel the consistency of an incorporeal memory. Natural pain and grief washed over her, caught in the rain as reminiscence unfettered itself from the black heaven, the turmoil of a firmament rife with an ancient loss. Time elapsed as she called upon the frenzy to dissipate, and slowly it did, until regaining control. “I’m ready,” Priya said aloud. Down on the floor, she noticed a letter sitting betwixt her feet. “This doesn’t say anything” she thought, looking at its front. Priya opened it and pulled out a greeting card, ready to read its contents. “Just a card, blank” she recognized, scratching her head at the curious placement. Wasting no time, she stocked it in a drawer and left the lab behind, rushing down the stairs into the parking lot. Thrusting forward the stick shift of her car, the scientist propelled down the road towards Sanctum Delacroix Cemetery.

CHAPTER 7 - SANCTUM DELACROIX CEMETERY

Petals detached from their stems swiveled through the whipping wind until they came at a rest on the wet grass, leaving an unmistakable trail. The branches of willows drooped nearby, sloppy from the rain. Bending over, she placed the bouquet at the base of the marble slab. “Dad” Priya mouthed as she looked over the memorial, the words, “Mahandran Echo” etched into the quiet stone. As a teenager, she could remember her father’s hands on her shoulders, his beautiful but weathered face, “Sometimes things are different when you go to sleep and wake up in the morning, but I will always be the one who cares for you. I will care for you forever”. Her chest heaved with deep, uninterrupted breaths, and she closed her eyes and remembered that last day as tears leaped from an interior existence into another, boundless space. Priya Echo smiled in ecstasy as a burst of mirror light swept across Sanctum Delacroix. “Dad, I will try” she thought as the image of his face faded. “Darling, are you going to let this place stay in one piece?” her right eye asked assertively, with a familiar parental tone. “Can you stop crying, it’s really tickling me a lot” her left eye remarked. Priya gasped as soon as she realized Linden and Melina were now her eyes. Exhaustion and a throbbing headache overtook her, and for a fraction she saw a swirling chaos that was unexplainable. “Take it easy, homegirl” Visioness said reassuringly, her voice welling up from within. “My, my, this new place is fabulous!” Pelfe exclaimed lastly. Walking away from the memorial, Priya waved her hand over another gravestone and it lifted off the ground, forming along its smooth surface a mirror so she could see her prior celestial appearance. In moments it was assimilated into her normal, everyday look. Satisfied, she returned the stone back to its place. Strolling back to the car, she looked around, and gradually the willows didn’t seem so doleful ... anymore ... but lively as rays of effervescent light sliced through them, carving slices of verdant nature.

CHAPTER 8 - RISE OF ECHO

Location: Echo Realm

Date: First Age

A man nestled his back against the damp cave wall. It was solid at least, a respite for the fear and unanchored thoughts drifting through his head. From the mouth he could see the rocky earth that stretched out, a pocket of some nocturnal island. Not far from where his memory began it ceased, a cliff surrendering to a medley of ice and dust. Beyond the view of that were stars and nebulae, elfin in the scale of things, huddled within the boundary. How could a speck of dust enclosed in a bubble ever be lost, though it circulates around, a refugee in its own home? Time did not go far, even for a few moments in the agony of immaculate night. He could not even remember if anything came before. Aesthetic dots sharing no answers, only questions. The man looked to his side, down a shy corridor. At least he would be safe for the moment. He craned his head and listened. Pleasing drips from the stalactites followed, abating his worry. Rough hands inquired against the firm stone, searching for another. "I am here!" he called. Words rambled down the dark hall, ushered by the void. Studying its evaporation, his face fell, and he pressed his back once again into the niche. "There must be no one here but me" he thought as his eyes failed, crossing into the decay of sleep. Halfway there. Lower and lower. But then a weird thing happened. It returned back, trembling coherently. "My voice must be hitting off the walls and coming back, that's the only thing that works" the man deliberated. A noteworthy trait, that it could be so kind to an odd traveler. Testing it once more, he felt the rush of his own words, sympathetic like the morning tides. Even the pauses were cordial music. "I must be by myself" he gleaned haplessly, and focused on the entrance, looking back the way of the starlight and its dangers. Some parcels of time went onwards, with loneliness reforming into solitude. He carried on, calling "I am here" to the null passageway, routing the worthless hopes, although in part his thoughts still clung to them. A crumb of uncertainty, that he maintained, just to feel the dreamy degree of the phenomenon, to seek its limits. Slight dizziness came. Then, a glance to the other wall, heavy with furtive shadows. The man took a breath to relax as more starlight joined. Flickering

ideas. If only he could be as eager, with ideas welling up inside. “Hello, my name is Echo” a woman said, emerging from the hall. Rough knees vaulted back into place as the man got to his feet and backed off. She had long black hair and a body freckled with those aesthetic dots, rippling at the edges. Abruptly, a pink layer like his overcame that canvas, keeping only the eyes.

Echo: Hello, my name is Echo.

Sam: Did you come from the cave?

Echo: No, I’m from over there, although this place is not as big as you’d think. I’ve explored most of it.

Sam: You look different, like the outside ... I don’t know where I am.

Echo: Please don’t be afraid. I’m really nice I promise. Did you hear your words repeat?

Sam: Yes, when they hit the walls.

Echo: I know, it’s called an Echo. After you talk, there is a wave in the air. It can touch the wall and return.

Sam: That works well. Then you named yourself after it? I like your name.

Echo: It’s fascinating here. A little scary. Thank you by the way. I’ve spent most of the time flying and fiddling about.

Sam: Are there more people?

Echo: If there are, I haven’t met them yet.

Sam: Echo, you must have looked everywhere. All the way down there. I’m sorry.

Echo: Loneliness is not so nice. Did you feel it, just like I did?

Sam: Yes.

Echo: Can I touch your hand?

Sam: Here.

Echo: To be honest, I was hiding.

Sam: You are too beautiful to do that.

Echo: Hehe ... I knew you would say that. A while ago I woke up drifting in the night, near those dots.

Sam: What are you saying?

Echo: It's strange. I'm the echo of space and time. Since I like to fiddle, I made some mirror light.

Sam: Friend, you must be thinking too much.

Echo: There are so many shapes and details around us. It's so refreshing. Hehehe.

Sam: Friend, I think you have been here too long.

Echo: Even you. I drew you from a shaft of mirror light.

Sam: Please, I am ... am ... call me Sam.

Echo: Wait ... give me a moment to answer.

Sam: Of course, because everything you said works so well. I'm not bad at this.

Echo: Please! Didn't you notice that I became your echo?

Sam: I saw you jump out. Hiding in the shadows, you must have heard my words down the hall. It doesn't mean what you say.

Echo: Sam, don't close your eyes. Let me show you how I can move.

Sam: Incredible!

Echo: Think of how the wave touched the wall and came back.

Sam: Is this true! How can you move like that?

Echo: Alright, handsome.

Sam: Echo, you are ...

Echo: Hehe, there's another way I can move, come closer ...

After more ... reflection ... the goddess flared with mirror light. The first echo generation hit the island like a volley of arrows. Before long, what had been an uncouth stone grew into a village, sprouting huts. People went to work. In those times dust was much easier to manipulate. It could be formed into bricks and laid with easy magic. Subtly, the cave's walls were chiseled out into a market and lined with torches. Less than a hundred milled about, talking all the time. During idle afternoons our lady would play in the flavored emptiness, strolling about and doing loops. Nearby in the flamboyant soup, a blue nebula fanned out. To those who watched, it was more like soaring. A young boy was the only one who cared much. He would prowl to the genuine edge, where chips of rock resigned to the darkness, and skirts of powder lingered, trailing apart. "Echo, why is the nebula blue like that?" the boy Mar questioned once as soon as she set foot on dry ground. Funny geometries of ice bobbed overhead, but they could not compare. The woman thought about its features, squinting hard, but could not arrive at the reason, "I don't know". She stared into the distance as the boy ran off, upset by what he had heard. Dew evaporated from his back like sweat after a long run, useless magic. Even so, he continued, returning back to the place to watch. Then one day Sam took her hand, and she lifted him, bringing him into the ultramarine. Mar had been told to stay home that day. But looking closer, there was dancing, spinning ... young and beautiful ... with a face illiterate to the perils of the outside world, and Sam, who had braved the darkness to find another. A cloud of magnetic blue came between the line of sight, disappearing them. Its composition was fluent, admirable. Mar returned back to the village, powerless to see through the shroud. Later on, in the quiet of their hut, as her husband slept easily by torches and a gentle blanket, Echo gasped vehemently. He was shaken awake, and looked over. Fear catapulted danger from her eyes. "Is everything

fine shyness?” he asked, sitting up as the muscles of her arms began to pulse. “I had a dream. There was a woman drowning in the sea and bubbles were coming from her mouth. A man dived in to save her, but it was hard to see his face” she illustrated as vividness fell from her tongue, translating myths to reality. “We’ve all had dreams before, they’re just feelings and images” he encouraged. Panic seemed to conquer the friend he knew. It was more than he could face. Echo flinched again as the sight returned. The woman sinking in ageless waters, bubbles coming from her throat, “Sam, this was different. Let’s get up. I’ll have to call everyone together to tell them something”. People in the crowd could taste something was amiss. “As you know from my travels we live in the boundary of a sphere, in its basin. I have tried to find a path that leads to another island, and found the edges to be smooth. I thought it natural that there was nothing more. How could anyone argue? But then, I heard the voices of my parents calling out to me. They are in danger, my mother at least, drowning in the sea beyond. Father is doing his best to get there. I have to find and save her. To do so, you must let me leave. Trust me, I know what it’s like to be alone. It is ... of course ... not fun at all. Sam is here to keep you company. If I am not back in ten cycles, please go on without me” she enjoined, needing their assent. Echo had not had time to imagine what course she would take if they declined. Frozen by debate, the woman stood and observed how nervousness ran through her tribe, until at last it died down, supplanted by fragile confidence. “If you get lost, please, try to stay together” she told them, her warm hand gracing Sam’s wet cheek. Language, for all its algebra and beauty, could not arrest the thought of loss. Life was not so simple like the stories they told each other. Knowing what could happen burned the heart. Echo shut her eyes tight, shielding the environment from sadness. That she would have to start again ... all over ... alone. Slipping away through space and time, the woman came to the boundary. Focusing all her attention on a singular point, she reflected a beam of mirror light with intense glow. Palms blazed with magic. “This whole artifact is symmetrical. I will make it not so” Echo resolved until a fracture, an imperfection formed as the shell gave, unable to bear the brunt. Tunneling through, she came to the ocean, and dove downwards, following the trail of bubbles. Linking flashes pounded the skull every so often, sharing memories of the descent, “How could these be ... real. I can hear you mother”. Echo shed the robe of pale skin to swim faster. She had to get even farther down. Her lungs were engines of

oxygen. Keeping close to the curves the tracker moved like a harpoon through the water. The goal must be near, just past the curtain of the deep. At last, the waters up ahead were blurred with a smudge of golden light.

Linden Dream: Are you who I think you are?

Echo: Father ...

Linden Dream: My special ...

Echo: Let me hold you.

Linden Dream: Echo, you are brave and just as graceful as your mother. Melina Dreamer. We have to find her before she perishes. Let's search together.

Echo: Time is against us.

Linden Dream: This way.

Drawing nearer, a horrid creature caught up with them. Linden looked into its fateful glare, and fell back with his daughter. Dark blood woven into a circulatory system of a man. Raw, vulgar energy danced around him like an aura.

Telenon: Is this a conspiracy?

Linden Dream: Who are you? Leave us alone at once.

Telenon: I am Telenon.

Linden Dream: This ... must have formed when we separated.

Telenon: Some problems are their own solution. They don't need an answer.

Linden Dream: Are you looking for something?

Telenon: I see now. The body is down there. The maelstrom is strong.

Linden Dream: Stay right there!

Telenon: The maelstrom allegiance is here ...

Linden Dream: Don't try to go any further. Melina is with us.

Telenon: Trust me, dying will not be fair for you. Let me pass.

Linden Dream: Daughter, help me here.

Equally, as she had brought destruction to the boundary, the soul fought on. Lasers of magical force knifed against the thing. It was stronger than she could have possibly imagined. Pressure shifted in the water as shockwaves formed and collapsed. They seemed to be racing against time. Linden clung to the grueling dance until her daughter finished it with a final blow. He continued to the lost one, before time could return and cycle again, before the tide came. They had spoken about changing the path. Of altering things. The moment of return in their own sphere of time.

CHAPTER 9 - OLD FOLKS HOME

By about the same time the next day, which was a Saturday, a wheelchair came to a screeching halt. The tassels of Esmerelda Delacroix's grandma glasses rattled as she adjusted them, and patted the knee of Rufus Springly, who faced her in his wheelchair. "Not a scratch on you, yah big oaf" she smirked. "Felicia, what are they talking about?" Priya asked while adjusting the direction of the chair. "These old timers are all veterans of the war" Felicia explained, as they wheeled them side by side to their tables so they could get situated before the bingo game commenced. "I used to shoot laser beams" Esmerelda blurted out like a teenager hurtling in their parent's stolen car, carefree down the road. "Wait, what?" Priya winced. Rufus laughed and turned towards her to retort, as if it was a competition, "I blew up a spaceship!". Felicia smiled politely at their repartee and glided them to their spot. They quickly took their seats. Dominique stood at the front, revolving the crank and calling out numbers. "Can you illuminate me kiddo, I'm a little rough on history" Priya asked. "Not a lot of press about it now. About sixty years

ago Earth started getting visitors from an alien race, they were explorers mostly. If you've seen the photographs, they looked a lot like us, but blue and with ribbon strands on their shoulders. After a while, things went south and the Rikiral war began. We didn't stand a chance until out of nowhere a throng of heroes – they say from another dimension – came to our rescue. Their leader was a fellow with the strongest powers. Telenon was his name. According to records, he loaned us some sort of power. Eventually we pushed them back, and he left with everything when the loan had completed. We were told that after the war we would reap the benefits, but the general populace was so bitter and disappointed after the loan expired that most of the record of that time has been lost” Felicia recollected; her knowledge amplified by studying the history of the era. Nadine sat beside Felicia and passed both of them a soda. Priya reclined back on her chair and snapped the lid, lapping up the syrup-flavored carbonated liquid. She closed her eyes as a circus of bubbles danced on her tongue and the world became a much happier place. A moment passed in cordial silence. Priya managed to open her eyes and took another sip. Nadine put her elbow against the table, letting her cheek lean against her fist, and leered at her as a smug look inched across her face, “You should know honey, your half Rikiral”. A spray of soda ejected from her mouth, and she coughed for air ..., “Too soon” she pleaded. “We always thought that’s why you were so introverted and ... frosty” Felicia clarified in a shy, let’s try not to knock her over and break her like a vase in an art exhibit voice. Priya looked at Nadine’s blonde hair brushing the table so perfectly, “You little book psycho. It’s okay, we love you now”. “Bingo!” Springly cried as a seven was called, and Felicia got up to wheel him to the front, where everyone clapped in copious recognition. He grinned ear to ear and threw his hands over his head. Forgetting their prior conversation, Esmerelda leant to the right towards Priya, whispering to her a juicy piece of gossip, “I heard he blew up a spaceship”.

CHAPTER 10 - THE PHARMACY AND DRAMATIC!

Back in the lab she pulled open the drawer with the curious greeting card and looked it over once more. Where it was once blank, the front had a word that was cursive like a signature, “Dramatic”. Opening it up, she held her eye close and read each line carefully, “It must be quiet in there. That is what I have thought since the first day I saw you. Maybe one day that will be different. Priya, there are things that are special about you that are even beyond your wildest dreams. I have selected you for the task at hand, not only for your unique qualities and aptitudes, but because of your exquisite, inexhaustible creativity. If you care to respond to this summons, come to Albatross Convenience Pharmacy on Sixteenth St and place this card in the aisle of greeting cards where there is an empty space”. Visualizing the route and all the stop lights, Priya realized it was not more than twenty minutes away. “Hey, are you ready for the night screening?” Eric asked as he walked in through the door, stretching out his hand to offer her one of two tickets. “Ah ... I’m so sorry. Not tonight. I’ve got to go on a solo mission”. Priya could see how the letdown weighed on him, “Oh, I thought you really wanted to see this. That’s okay. We can do something tomorrow”. “Can I take your jacket, I feel like changing my look today”, and she threw it on since the night would be cold and kissed his cheek before locking the lab behind her. Rumbling down the road, she could feel a palpitating dread of the mysteries that would soon be laid bare. Then, in her heart she felt a weak, incidental spark of audacity, with the knowledge truth would set her free. By now, only a few random cars eked down the twilight encrusted roads. Looking at the clock, she could see midnight had passed without her notice. After rolling into a space and shifting the stick into park, the driver got out and peered into the brightly lit building. “Guess I’m the only one,” Priya noted, throwing open the door. Pleasant shopping music wafted through the store like a lullaby as she turned the corner into the greeting card aisle. “Not a lot of people appreciate you, do they?” Priya thought as the different colors and patterns dazzled her eyes. Hesitating for a moment, she placed the card into the single empty space in the middle of the aisle, and as she did the music ceased, and a voice came over the intercom. “Stand back” it ordered in a deep resonating voice. Flames crept across the assortment, until, enhanced by the flavoring of the colors,

they swelled. Translated into fuel, the cards bent into limp and blackened forms until the aisle disintegrated itself and the flame abated. Wiping away the smoke from her face, she found a stairwell and walked down, then through a long hallway that had at its end a door, the kind that you would see for a maintenance room. "Here we go " Priya said and pulled the coat around her for warmth before twisting the handle. Inside was a little room, not much larger than a lounge, with a box of an old timey television with antennae sitting on a stand across from an easy chair and a coffee table. Priya picked up the VCR tape that sat on the table and pushed it into its slot, then plopped into the seat, musing on how its comfortableness would be the takeaway from this whole experience. Fuzzy static lingered on the screen until the face of a gray bearded man became apparent, "Hello Priya, you are the most beautiful part of my conspiracy. If you're watching this now, I'm already gone. My name is Dramatic, one of the Voices of Reason that were conceived in the primordial time. We are Gazers who witness the focal element ... the ultimate reality of this place. By now, you should have seen it as well, as your genetic potential has allowed you to achieve the phenomenon. I have explored outside, and seen how our place is separate among many, a Bacteriae slithering on a nugget of shiny silver. The ultimate reality of ours is Imagination, disembodied and chaotic. It is turbulent. To renew itself it fills vessels with its essence, separating it for a time until the boundary is broken and it returns to the ocean of its source. This is the RODI which is the "Re-manifestation-Of-The-Divine-Imperfection " which brings about the Matryoshka Realms. Realms within realms, the process is continuous. We live in the Bacteriae Elementum that is a construct of that focal element. From grand studies our race instructed the cosmic tree to help oversee the RODI, and we noticed that the breeze through the foliage brought about life through the many realms, including your own. Eons passed and countless realities faded until I knew with certainty the labor of the Maelstrom Allegiance, must end, for the chaos must be given order. It is that which our people gather magic to accelerate the RODI beyond its limits. . To that end I spoke with Telenon, the alpha and leader among us, but by that suggestion he cast me out as an exile. By that time our Bacteriae was visited by new friends, with technology the likes of which we had never seen that rivaled our powers. The Rikiral were friendly explorers, but Telenon and the followers who are my brothers and sisters of the Voices of Reason could not abide any further interruption, and descended to earth, loaning them with our

incalculable magic to fight against them. A small faction of your people joined the Rikiral in their struggle, your father among them after gaining the abilities granted by them. Priya, it is true that your mother was a Rikiral woman. Her true name was Cala Amnilow, her human imposter name being Claire Aphrodite, but that guise faded quickly, and the extent of her family is unknown to me. Do not think that is the sole and pivotal reason I chose you. The reason is clear and I will not restate what you already know. There is no alternative to our present dilemma. An individual must become the MIND of the Imagination, that disembodied essence which has no vessel, and bring order to that which is uninhibited. Telenon will be the final obstacle, so do not underestimate him. Well acquainted you are already with the cancer of his shadow, for I could not stop it from seeping into the phenomenon. Time can cause problems sometimes, and cruel fate has made it so the instructions here in this tape are the most help I can provide to you. From the primordial soup we came like virtual particles. Me and the other Voices of Reason by nature pass into hibernation within void for a cycle and return. At first, they only lasted for a day or so, but as time passed, they extended to a week, and then years, and then ages. Telenon was the first to discover that reincarnating within another can stave off a hibernation cycle. But the others have elected to do so in honor of the Maelstrom Allegiance so that their strength will be undiluted when they return. Roughly sixty years ago, it was my time as well, but I came here, and was reborn into the body of a convenience store employee who just happened to be walking down the greeting card aisle. I saw their shapes and colors, and it was as if they called to me. I accidentally fell upon the aisle of greeting cards, and the sharp tips of the cards pierced me like falling upon a bed of spikes, and my blood spilled over the assortment. From the Intercom came a voice, “Hey Chris, stop being so dramatic and get back to work”, and I found myself inside it, until I reverberated outwards, escaping, and the sound of the intercom materialized into my new body. Since then I have preserved this spot. This quiet age has one guardian. I am sorry for this, but it is just you and him. As a Voice of Reason, I have complete confidence in you. Either way, when I return, I will see someone different than what I did that day when you stood under the canopy of umbrellas. Take the lessons you have learned and apply them. Good luck”. Later that night a car came screeching to a halt at about half past one. Wiping the sand out of his eyes, Eric stumbled to his apartment door and looked down. Priya leaned against the

passenger's door and waved at him with one hand. "Just thought I would test out the new guy" she yelled. "Ohh ... okay" he reacted. A devious smile crept across her face, then jumped back into the car. "Later" she called and drove off into the night as Eric stood there, slightly confused. Closing the door behind himself, he laughed at what he had gotten himself into. And so Priya took the comfy chair back to her apartment and placed it in the center for her to get the best view of the TV.

CHAPTER 11 - THE GIRLS WONDER ABOUT PRIYA

"Have you ever had the feeling you're being watched?" Felicia whispered to Nadine. Her legs were tired from over an hour of unbridled bicycling. Nadine turned to spy the creeper at the back of the spin class, but he had already gotten up and was headed towards them. "Oh shit, he's coming this way" Dominique gasped with circumspect vigilance. Nadine braced herself for whatever brilliant adjectives he had for her ass, which was inevitable, and to jettison him forthwith from the spin class. In sweet reversal, the lecturer breathed a sigh of relief, jumped off and pecked him on the cheek, "Eric, Sweetie! How are you doing?". Alighting beside him, Felicia and Dominique saluted him with a smile. "I didn't know you liked to cycle," the former teased. "Actually, I came to see you girls because I need your help" Eric confessed as Nadine rhetorically glanced at the other two. "With Priya ..." she acknowledged being indeed the authority on the matter. "She is very low maintenance!" Felicia chimed in, severing the natural affinity betwixt the two. "Felicia, can't you see Eric over here is in desperate need of our advice? Eric, of course we're here for you" she admonished, her last word coinciding as the wheels slowly clicked to a halt. Dominique snickered discreetly as Felicia crossed her arms. Arriving at consensus on their mutual plight, they changed, then embarked to the café across the street from the university gym to discuss. "It's just that she's too ... timid" he relented, finishing off a plastic container filled with savory quiche. "You mean shy" Nadine corrected; her fingers arched in concentration. "Yes, of course. It's just that she's too shy and doesn't communicate the way other people do. Like she has her own language. I'm having issues understanding her" the boyfriend despaired, voicing their own inner monologues with witty masculine charm. "Good

thing you came to us” Dominique bolstered, whilst looking nervously at the other two across the table. “Can you tell me about the real Priya?” Eric appealed, looking squarely in the palatial eyes of the proud Nordic blonde. Nadine felt the heat of the silence around her, the great dynamic mystery of the timid researcher who bumped into them one day in the cafeteria was suddenly all that could occupy her academic mind, “Absolutely, I’ve got this down to a science”. For about thirty minutes they talked and argued. Felicia gripped a crumpled soda can, the rough edges not even angering her as every detail they added was like an answer that only raised more questions. Spoken aloud it seemed very ... funny. “She picked out one piece of furniture and everything else you three chose, what does that mean?” he asked, tossing back the anecdote across the table. Nadine thought about the lab girl, how the two had spent the most time with each other, and how she had taken it completely for granted. The story was starting to become clearer, with every witness of her personality. “Most likely comes from modest beginnings” she settled, taking the pitch. Eric’s eyes widened in surprise. He regarded the three of them, who had gone to considerable lengths to distract the public from their academic pursuit. Nadine had on a spiffy blue getup. Felicia’s blouse had a peach base and yellow polka-dots. Dominique wore a black tank top with a green alien on it, a band that he had liked in high school. But Priya almost always wore her white lab coat. “Wait a second ... Is Priya not materialistic?” Eric pondered. The thought had occurred to him before, yet never so blaringly bright. Circulating around the table, each of them offered an opinion as to whether the subject was indeed materialistic or shallow. In math, the easiest solution is often correct, the disciple recalled, briefly cupping her mouth. Nadine leaned over the table at the guy, who with their effort would surpass their own understanding of the silly lab girl, “Hey, have you ever seen her look in the mirror?”. “Come to think of it, she doesn’t” Eric realized. Felicia snapped her fingers as an idea blossomed, “Do you know Yellow Summer at the court? Flip yes, that place is really expensive. Try buying her a dress and see how she reacts, you know ... as an experiment”. Dominique leapt up, feigning protest, “Are we sure that’s ethical ...”. The fellow across the table ignored the play at theatre. He was already mapping it on his phone.

CHAPTER 12 - ERIC TALKS TO A FRIEND

Behind the glass of a hockey game, a conversation more intriguing than the war dance on the other side was afoot. Eric leaned over to his brother's roommate Maurice, who had asked a rather frank question, "Um, yeah, going well", then slurped a bit of root beer for good measure. "Really, what's her deal?" he shot back, focused, perceptive, without questioning the interference from the other team. Eric coyly shrugged his shoulders, smiling in that dumb way when you are rewarded by your parents but they won't tell you the reason, "It's been a rough start, but I like her a lot". Maurice burst out laughing and craned over to grip both of his shoulders at once for a good pinch, "Stop trying to figure them out, bro". Eric recovered, throwing a handful of popcorn at the screen for good measure as the rivals scored a goal. For a second, he thought about just letting it go. It would probably be useless to talk about someone his friend had never even met. And really, how could that someone understand ... but it was just something he needed to get off his chest. Eric compared the options before making his decision, "Tell me about it. We went out to Jacksons ... you know the place". "That high class joint?", Maurice whistled at the price, then smirked in the knowing way a man does to recognize another's plight. "Have you seen Nadine, you know, the hot one? She convinced me to buy her a dress from Yellow Summer, but she didn't react the way I thought she would. I don't know, maybe she's been in that lab too long or something. Try buying a dress for a girl that isn't materialistic" he chronicled, rambling emotionally. That evening had certainly been an interesting test. Impulsively he glanced down at the gift bag by his chair again, sizing it up. Fashionably literate people milled about a classical interior with a modern open-air twist. Yuppies and wannabes dotted the bar, many relegating their attention to the virgin classical emanating from the stage. A waiter that actually cared daintily illustrated the appetizers to a beefy woman draped somewhat in fur. Lights limping on thin strings were timed to dim and brighten at just the right times for the eye to adjust to feel out the shapes of humanity. He took a look at the bag once more, gauging a reaction, not noticing her arrival. Priya's presence leaped into his awareness. She was wearing a lab coat, one with a few stains from their date from last week. Taking into consideration their conference she had straightened her hair, knowing that was the preference of boys. Eric followed the girl's plan to the letter,

waiting till after desert to subject the real world to hypothesis. “Geez, that was a really good flan” Priya noted, quietly patting her lips with a white napkin. His heart beat blood into effervescence. Reacting with swiftness, he picked up the bag and laid it on the table, “So I found this at a shop near the university, I thought you would like it”. Conscious of his effort, she spurned the desire to play with the curious handfuls of tissue paper as she pulled the contents from the bag. Like the lab coat it was white, but a thousand times more beautiful. Priya’s eyes tinted with interest, observing the scope of it like a spectacular powerpoint slide, “Where did you find me?”. “I found you at the pharmacy, don’t you remember?” he immediately reacted, not expecting the modification or his voice to carry that particular sentence. The girl smiled as she looked away from the gift and back towards his keen, handsome face. “Eric, don’t be silly. I found you” she replied. The memory washed over him as the blur of the game endured. What she had meant from that still didn’t make sense, but she was happy, which was all that mattered. “Damn, you’ve got it made” Maurice grunted as he stole a buttery first full of popcorn. Eric took the comment in stride, folding the past back into the past, because that’s where it belongs ... like origami, “Uh huh, so what’s the deal with your cousin’s new gig”.

CHAPTER 13 - HANCOCK RICHARDS

“Do you know if there are any details?” Priya asked Felicia the next day whilst slurping from a juice box in the cafeteria. “I have to admit the record is silent on that point. That’s pretty much everything I know” her friend articulated contritely. Nearby, the maintenance man Hancock Richards was mopping the floor, and stood to listen. “Talking about that are you ... hehe ... you’re much too young to remember those times”. “If you’re from that generation, you must have lived through it. Did you see him?” Priya enquired. Resting his hands on the tip of the pole, he furrowed his brow as if to remember, “Yup ... I sure did. Saw him on the telly. He looks like a guy that just walked out of a bowling alley in full uniform, you know, the kind of douchebag that thinks he would look good dressed up as a pirate, only he’s the most powerful guy in the universe”. “Blimey. ... are you pulling our leg?” Felicia blurted out. “Excuse my friend ... Do you remember anything about that time before the loan was returned?” Priya

asked, and under the table she stepped on Felicia's foot to quiet her down. "The only thing would be I remember sitting on a bench with my daddy. He was reading the newspaper in the park and ignoring everything as usual. He loved to read the newspaper in the morning. Nearby there were chickens pecking on breadcrumbs. Then a chicken flew onto his lap with a tortilla in its beak and rolled up into it. Then it became a chicken enchilada and he ate it. After that I noticed that around the four corners of the park were walls with the background painted on them that I thought was just the background a moment ago, and we walked out one of the doors, and he told me that was one of his favorite restaurants, but I didn't really understand what he meant till much later". "Priya ... I think this guy is trying to butter you up" Felicia whispered. "Must have been one of the virtual reality rooms back then. I've heard of that as well, how silly" Priya said, vindicating the storyteller, and he walked away, mopping the other end of the cafeteria.

CHAPTER 14 - PROFESSOR HOOK'S BIRTHDAY PARTY

It seemed like a prudent use of time, and so Hook cleaned his apartment three times over until it was entirely spotless. Earlier that day he completed his official duties. Neat stacks of paper lay on his desk. Satisfied, he reclined back onto the couch and adjusted his glasses when all of the sudden the doorbell rang. He wasn't expecting company. A summer sweater was all he had on to entertain. Luckily, as he opened the door it was no other than Priya and the girls. Nadine, Felicia and Dominique to be specific. A delightful cake ringed with candles. "Happy Birthday!" Priya bellowed. They all walked in and ... it was clean as fuck. Almost like her apartment, but better, and with a vague smell of vanilla. Priya gave him her best happy-to-see-you smile and please-reinstate-my-funding eye blinks. Felicia came with a green Chinese dress borrowed from her aunt. Dominique was in a long bodied gray coat with big buttons with a sliver of a white dress shirt. And Nadine had accidentally put on something too red and sexy for the occasion with long dangling earrings. With four versus one, they easily put him in his place, which just happened to be in a chair at the table in front of a birthday cake. Hook was confuddled at the tradition, as he normally went to the library for a good rental on his birthday. Priya leaned in close and he smelled like a warm bran muffin freshly drawn

from the oven at a shelf of some café that is slowly going out of business. The remainder of the quarters had remarkable upkeep. From the windows slipped nice ambient light whose consolation could not be ignored. Priya turned her cheek, knowing the moment needed no entourage. “Well old buddy ... what do you wish for?” she prodded. Hook stared deep into the nostalgia of the candle light. The question lingered on his tongue for some minutes. From audacious youth his temperament had smoothed. Academia worked him to the bone but restored him every day with fertile thoughts. Coffees every day of such assortment of flavors. And the perennial meetings with faculty that marked the passage of time. He had no complaints. Lightheartedly, Hook turned and brushed the inquiry aside, “Actually, I have everything I want. By that I mean ... I have you wonderful girls to make my day”. Priya stepped back at the assertion. Its vigorous thrust assailed her usual apathy. Clinging to the emotion, she cupped her mouth and turned back at the others. Restraint was no longer an option. The onslaught of it made them dewy eyed. A partial faint moved the ladies to embrace one another in fast motions. Concessions of friendship. A long overdue exchange. Nadine looked on, weak for a second. There he was. The cake and its phosphorescence brushing his face like a hearth. Felicia held her arm, as new sensations came, enough to engulf her humanity. Dominique felt the beat of a song but it was akin to emotion. Through the window cars rolled past, ready to move students from home to university. Soon they would don shirts without holes and jeer at each other in the cafeteria. Homebound, their parents would yawn more than usual. They would pick up a hobby, like painting. But the rush continued. Cars cast in primary colors since that was the acceptable thing to do. The winds that day made them aerodynamic. But in the apartment the cross examination was not complete. Priya ran around the table and sat on the other chair facing her beautiful bureaucrat. She slammed both palms onto the maple wood, “Come on Hook, are you going to sit there and not ask for anything? Try to think”. Hook began the long process of decision making. Sundry thoughts flocked deep within the hollows of his soul. Gears twisted. Steam rose. Men in chains slammed hammers against railroad tracks. Priya looked to the others who were dumbfounded. She got up and leaned over the table gracefully. Her back arched, she stuck one elbow on the maple and let the other push against her cheek. Now she was locked with him. A starting contest unlike the world had ever seen. It was not for sport. It was the maternal thing to do. But as the time dwindled

on the clock, and the educator, normally insatiate for knowledge fiddled on, quietly she could not help herself. Hook would think for hours. Preoccupied. Confined in a riddle that was meant to be an easy chore. Ironie pleasure slowly marched across Priya's face. Sly humor. It would be redundant to articulate. A delinquent smile fanned across her face as the pressure mounted. Dominique tried not to laugh. Felicia considered breaking the stalemate. Power hungry Nadine leaned in, wanting an answer. Irregardless, his mind labored on. In Priya's chest she could feel the weight as ideas for very funny and very bad things that were possible to say. Like thuds. Hook sat there; his inability goofy in the furthest extent. Waves of it bashed against the lab-girl. But in the contest Priya knew she had to claim ascendancy. Her eyes narrowed. Her posture strong like a statue. "A cucumber sandwich, " Hook replied. Without missing a beat Priya raised her other arm and snapped her fingers, directed to the girls, "cucumber sandwich". Felicia went to the refrigerator. Inside was a serendipitous vegetable tray. Around it, pungent smells of a sheep's milk cheese. The second in command closed the door. Nadine went and got the bread and took down a cutting board. Dominique just sort of waited and helped with the project management, such as the organizing and making certain that its deliverables were on time and within scope. And she chose the white cream cheese. With a clack the plate hit the maple and slid towards its person. Nadine backed up three feet. An auspicious participant no longer. She noticed that he did not have the usual gray in his tufts. As he munched, Priya waited for the inevitable critique of cucumber sandwich. Enigma to the others, she had echoed Hook with the name of the refreshment. In unity they felt his appetite. Those tufts wagged with joy. "Do you want anything else?" Priya submitted as he wiped thick cream cheese from his mustache with the back of his hand. Hook would tend to his business, flailing his arms with the delight of bread and cucumber. Still, she stood firm. It was victory or nothing. Finally, he stopped and was trapped helplessly in her gaze, "Hummus". Not missing a beat, the lab-girl answered in kind. Its repetition pure and kind. It's copying a thing of envy. Its iteration a thing of seamless song. Priya lifted her head just so. The words departing in good sequence, "Hummus".

CHAPTER 15 - THE ECHO GAME

The girls were not so accustomed to a hard push in the small of their back. Priya weaved them through the square, past secluded buildings. Leading them to their destination. Her fingers thrust in deep. “It’s like a knife!” Felicia squealed. But Priya didn’t budge. Her countenance beamed in harmony with the thought. The day had a special design. And so, she poked them mercilessly, ushering them forward. At a higher elevation, the clouds were delightful and plump. A day meant for picnics. Their eyes tied in blindfolds; the girls witnessed none of it. They were busy dealing with Priya’s antics. Lonely, unsung university buildings lined their path. The windows were smeared gray from weathering. Within those walls stood empty rooms with forgotten pamphlets. But Priya redirected them from that effigy of academia. Along its width a creek caked with mud met a rather anticlimactic end on dry ground. Still, the humble clouds queued in the air. Boundless like spring cotton. From the night before the last raindrop descended onto the handsome earth. Priya had gathered them all regardless of fleeting time. Nadine gasped as her hair and nails were an unmitigated disaster. Dominique stuck out her arms sideways, pretending to be an airplane until the scientist was forced to nudge her away from that misadventure. Still, she led them onward. Pieces of brick tumbled down an incline of a dilapidated building like kids riding down a slide. Another had windows in excess. Its neighbor was wider than usual and drafted in a circular architecture. This was it. Priya quickly untied the three of them. Dominique spun around to face her. “Are you kidding me?” she ridiculed. The auditorium rose above them like a monument to obscurity. It’s dark portals begging for light. “This place is old news ... is this like, funny or something?” Dominique tossed up her hands, exaggerating her displeasure in graphic detail. Felicia looked Priya up and down, wondering if she actually was a robot and whether there was a glitch in the system. Yet all systems were operating smoothly and the aforementioned android booped Dominique in her nose with an outstretched finger to shut her loudmouth up. Priya had worn a new lab coat just for the occasion, and she wasn’t going to give this up. “It’s the perfect place for a game. I made it up. It’s called the echo game” the lab girl revealed, profuse with inexplicable joy. Nadine pivoted on her heels, “You mean like your name?”, she gathered. “Exactly!”, Now Priya’s cheeks were rounded and filled with wonderful things to share

with all of them. But the game was afoot and so she ran inside and waited for their company. As the girls wandered in, they couldn't help but notice the columns at great intervals, arrayed in vague garments of dust. Felicia paused with charming meekness at the scary stuff. Arms close to her chest. Nadine looked up. There was a second floor sporting a balcony. Up ahead was Priya, with a gallant expression on her face. In her presence, the surrounding darkness attained new life. Beautiful like the silence at dawn. Nadine was simultaneously enraptured and at wits end trying to figure her out. "Alright friends, here's the game. This whole auditorium is so big that its walls will let the sound reverberate off of them, making echo's. That's why it's the perfect place for a game of tag" she began. "I think you mean hide and seek," Felicia offered. Priya nodded her head in affirmation and hid the suspicious smile from her face. "It's so funky in here that the game will last an hour" Nadine tended. "Oh, I've got something else up my sleeve," their friend boasted. Sharp reflexes awoke, and the lab girl ran towards the wall, and bounced off of it onto the second floor. "Wow, that was amazing!" hollered Felicia, thinking that it was simply an athletic jump from the wall to the balcony. And with that the game was set in motion. Dominique spent much of the ensuing time daintily prancing over curling shadows and unkempt floorboards from the shipwreck of a floor after Felicia. "Ah!" she whimpered, unforgiving of the former friend who had bested her at tag. In the distance, Nadine's voice trailed behind as she weaved around the columns sowing fine reverberations like bait. It was irresistible. Despite exhaustion, Dominique fed her heart with courage. Her feet barely brushed the ground, except to pursue what had to be acquired. A swift deer, darting behind immemorial columns. The Latina snarled as she neared the heels of her prey. A wily plunge behind a tall column was not enough. Dominique tapped the shoulder. Nadine wept from the sting of injustice. The Latina giggled in her face, knowing she had become her teacher, if only for a second. By that time Priya had arrived on the scene. Dominique grit her teeth. Now there was one. Likewise, the game renewed, invigorated with the lifeblood of the chase. Priya was not so fast as Nadine, the girl thought. Her white lab coat flapped like a sail sprayed with saltwater, its craft advancing towards dancing waves. Then, through some fault of the dimness, she lost her. Behind, Nadine and Felicia huddled for warmth. Draped in black, the auditorium's precedence gripped them. Hushed memories of academia and its endless appraisals swirled around. It's austerity. It's cruel discipline.

Nadine looked hazily at the scene. In her dream-state, the bones of academics shook in the foundation of the auditorium, knowing they had studied to their heart's content. But then with furtive glance the Latina spied her. That pleasantly nerdy voice. Dominique leapt into action, seeking her across the breadth of the room. The auditorium was inaugurated long ago, but its dust made shifting what was plain to the eye. Like a plucky runaway Priya zigzagged through the place, escaping her pursuer. The game was going well. The lab-girl began to smile partially when a fit of laughter descended, slowing her down. "Newbie!" Dominique called. Priya ringed around a certain column, and her pursuer knew just what she would do. "Can you hear me!" rung out, multiplying, obscuring the source. "I'm too good for that to work" Dominique insisted under her breath. Greedily she crept forward, the prey within grasp. Undeterred, longing for the body. She ringed the column like the sun in its unearthly station and ... NOTHING. Where was she? Another clone of the scientist's words navigated her away, across the stretches of the room to another place. Yet it likewise ended empty handed. The process continued, sending her in vain around columns, dizzying her senses. It would continue like that for an hour. The two others would join in, and they would do their best. They would split and reunite, searching the recesses. They would find only shadow. A smiling Priya alighted on the grass outside, her form materializing. "Not bad for a first round" she surmised, rubbing her hands together in glee. She took a moment to stare at the other derelicts. Squirrels casually skipped along the tops of buildings, like knights of the realm guarding turrets. It was going to be a fun day.

CHAPTER 16 - PRIYA AND NADINE AT THE BANK

"What do you mean there's nothing to be concerned about!" Nadine slapped the counter as the bank teller tried to lessen the tension. "There has to be a good explanation for this, mam. Please stay calm" the teller promised half-heartedly. "Can you even see what's going on! Those aren't my withdrawals, and they're happening every hour on the hour. I don't make electronic withdrawals for those amounts" she gesticulated wildly as Priya looked at the ledger, seeing the palpable regularity of the debits. One hundred units every hour, to the second. "There's a hacker taking all of my junk! Make it stop

right now before I lose my shit!” Nadine ejaculated. The teller tried several things to no avail, and then retreated in terror as she witnessed the intervals shorten to every ten minutes. “Um, let me go grab the manager, be right back” the teller offered, skulking away. Sweat began to glisten on her forehead, and she pushed her hand to her temple as the account continued its descent, “... Oh no, everything is spinning!” Nadine whimpered. Priya grabbed her by the shoulders and took her to the center of the room, where the desks were. “Don’t worry, I’ve got your back” she said and raised a hand to snap her fingers, then led her friend back to the counter when they both had returned. The teller looked at the screen, squinting and moderately confused, “The last digit of the account number, which was a 1 changed to a 2, how could that have happened? It looks like a random glitch, but it’s closed out the hacker’s ability”. “We’ll take good care of this mam and file claims on your behalf” the manager assured her, and they both left the branch, cutting across the area where the ATM’s stood. About ten steps out, Nadine realized what had occurred, and stopped dead in her tracks, “Newbie ... your magic!”. “You must be famished”, Priya said as she touched the ATM machine, and it turned into a food dispenser and opened up, providing a fish taco. “How is that even mathematically possible?” she gasped, then bit into the delicious tortilla. A digital smiley face played across the screen and winked as she took the first bite. “Shhhh” the scientist replied, pressing her finger to Nadine’s lips, “I’ll let you know on the ride home, and while we’re at it, I’ll tell you a little bit about Euclidean Husbandry as well”.

CHAPTER 17 - TELENON’S ARRIVAL

Not far from the engineering hall in Remington-Welsh Park the lecturer sat on a bench and checked her watch. Eric finally waved from a distance and strode over, carrying a tote bag. “What’s going on in there?” Priya asked, seeing him stretch his hand inside. “I thought you’d like this. Now ... I’ve thought it over really well. You can take him on the weekends, and I can do the weekdays” he promised, pulling out a cuddly, orange and white hamster. “So, we’ll be like ... parents?” Priya asked, raising a suspicious eyebrow, “Then I guess my experiment the other day was a success”. Eric sat down and offered the fluffball for her to pet, “Don’t get ahead of yourself, I just thought

this guy was a rock-star”, then winked back at her. Priya leant in to kiss him, but as it happened the hamster squirmed out of his hands and jumped down onto the bench, then again to the ground, scurrying away into the bushes. “Flip! Where do you think he could have gone?” Eric wondered as he parted a bush. Priya leant back on the bench, watching the spectacle with considerable girlfriend glee.

Nearby, others were bantering pleasantly when from out of the azure, cloud speckled sky a building descended and landed on the green of Remington-Welsh Park. It stood there silently as a massive crowd from all across the university and the surrounding area converged on its landing site. A furor of flawless wonder jolted them. Pushing through, Priya and Eric came to the front, directly facing the gateway. Eventually Felicia, Nadine and Dominique chiseled their way as well through the crowd. Etched across the top, above white pillars was written its name, “Temple of the Voices of Reason”. The front line of the crowd stepped back in fright as the gates creaked open ominously. Frenzied whispers circulated amongst the crowd until from within came a voice. Priya could hear her name being called. “Time flies,” she lamented, breaking from the crowd and pacing towards the gateway. Even the white noise had escalated, answering to the aesthetic of the unknown. Eric raced quickly to her and grabbed an arm, “Don’t go in there, it’s too weird!” he cajoled in alarm. Looking straight ahead, she yanked the white sleeve of her lab coat away from his grip, “It’s my job”, and continued past the threshold until the gates closed behind her. Delving through the rooms, Priya came to a long hallway embellished with tall pillars on either side. The carpet underneath was lush and seemed to crackle with static electricity. As she continued down the hallway the pillars transfigured gradually into tall kangaroos of marble. Drawing closer, she could hear a thumping like that of a war drum grow loud. A mahogany double doorway opened welcoming her into a wide circular chamber. Around its length at intervals, where there would be pillars ... stood instead kangaroos at butter-churns, hard at work, making the drumming sound. Directly ahead, Telenon sat at his throne and lifted a hand for them to cease their activity. “Dear, what is with the manspreading?” Priya exclaimed, thinking out loud, shielding her sight with a hand. Telenon corrected his posture and coughed, signaling for her to lower it. Priya could see him scratching his five o’clock shadow, and he wore a bowling uniform and the ring finger on his right hand was missing. “Ah ... a nerd. Excuse me if this comes out the

wrong way, but what the fuck do you think you're doing with magic in my city?" Telenon inquired, leaning forward in his chair. "I didn't have a choice. I had to help a friend," Priya justified. "Oh ... and you think I wouldn't notice that? They will witness magic when I show it to them. Just who do you think you are crashing my party?" he blustered like a spoiled teenager. "They deserve to have some of the power also, don't you think? Life's a little dry without it" she answered modestly. At that he jumped down onto the floor and waltzed towards her, taking the nerd in with a good, long look, "So this is who Dramatic sent to run his errand ... pathetic. Aren't you a lab scientist in real life?". "You can give honor to the Maelstrom Allegiance but they will not succumb to it, eventually they will fight back" she shot defiantly. At that he raised his hands, and the kangaroos began to thump their churns, making a racket, and in the midst of it he leant his head back and laughed maniacally. A few moments later the noise stopped, and he snapped back towards her, "Why are you trying to make this universe boring and take away all the fun?". "I'm just trying to understand it," she explained. "By taming the sea of imagination? That's a dumb idea" he spurned, stamping a foot. "It's more hospitable to life, not everyone can live on the extremes like us" Priya replied. The bowler drew closer to her and lowered his voice, "Priya, allow me to let you in on a little secret. A child doesn't really care why the sky is blue. He only says that when he is astounded by what's all around. Maybe you were once a child as well that cared why the sky is blue, but you have grown up now, and should have realized that it doesn't matter". "Dramatic was wise enough to see the truth. He wasn't as blind as you are" she countered. "Really, and where is he now? That old fool won't be back for a thousand cycles. He just decided to fill your head with his personal justice before bowing out" he expressed rhetorically. The fact of the matter struck a nerve. "Alright then. I'm willing to negotiate if you can be sensible" Priya sighed. Telenon sat back on his throne for a moment and summoned a fax machine which printed off a memo containing the history of the realm, and he read it quickly before tossing it aside, "Okay ... okay. Here's what we'll do. You will become one of my Voices of Reason and swear fealty to me and the Maelstrom Allegiance". "I'm listening ...", Priya relented, "but only if you would agree to let them use magic in everyday life. Don't deprive them". "Not going to happen, nerd" he repudiated, "but I will let you reign over your realm". "They're not an experiment. My people are real and I will bring them sooner or later regardless of what you do" she promised stubbornly. At

this he hopped off of his chair once again and strode over to her, “Then forget about all of them. What do you think of me?”. Reviewing his slovenly appearance, his short hair and casual attempt at a beard Priya couldn’t help but think to herself, “He’s kind of hot in a gross kind of way”, but then suppressed it immediately. “Oh ... is this your strategy now? Sorry, I have a reputation to uphold” Priya said, declining his offer. “Here is an even better offer and try to follow me this time” he began and swooned onto the floor. Around him grew a coffin of glass, and he lay inside, stiff and pallid emulating the deceased. Then the coffin altered its shape until it was that of a butter dish. Priya blinked and the body had become a stick of butter. As if an invisible hand stretched above, the lid of the dish was removed, and the stick of butter lifted itself, becoming vertical, reforming into a sculptural resemblance of its occupant. Telenon restored himself, “Resurrection is a simple recipe. All we would have to do is go back to where he is. Let’s go together and dig him up. Then, with your assent I would lay my hand on your stomach, and the realm inside you would progress into its final form ... that of Honfot-Gid, a star-skinned organ ... more than glamorous to behold and seductive with anatomical beauty. For you I will implant it into him, and he will come back as before, all it would take is that one concession”. “That is ... I don’t know what to say” Priya dithered, feeling the gravity of his words. “If you want, I can melt you into mirror light and you and he can be reborn together, and all this confusion can be over. There doesn’t need to be sadness or disconnection. These were things of the past” he petitioned. Waiting in suspense, they both parted until strength returned to her and she lifted her head from bottomless thoughts, “First of all, you should know not to play with a girl’s emotions. Secondly, I may have daddy issues ... but no”. Telenon turned away from her, and let his voice grow deeper, “I don’t understand it, you’re proficient enough to make reality whatever you want it to be, and you still let it dictate you. People like us are different. Eventually you will do the same as me. It’s unavoidable to do so ... since often the truth is unpleasant”. “What are you trying to say?” she questioned. Telenon spun around to face her once again, “Priya, your father was a traitor, and you are the daughter of a traitor. He was so until I captured him and made him fight for us for the remainder. You should desire nothing more than to use your skill for its genuine purpose”. “The man did what he did for his family, and there can be no shame in that ... but come on, Telenon. Did you really think we needed to be separated? They were only

visitors” she asked in an interrogatory tone. “How do you think you were able to dream like you did? Tell me how many years you spent in introspection carrying the burden of the past” he solicited. “So, anything that stands in the path of imagination is a threat? I don’t accept that argument. Just look out there and spy on any person on a regular day, and you will see it as an aspect of a greater whole” Priya prescribed. The kangaroos began their drumming once again until he raised a hand. “Priya, let me ask you a question. Do you get what imagination really is?” he dared coyly. She swerved physically from the generous offer to be precise in words and deed, “Imagination is a type of thinking that lets you explore. It helps paint new things and solve problems. Most importantly, it’s for fun”. “Almost ... after all this time you should know. That’s only the beginning, the part where you try to understand it. Let it be a place in and of itself ... picture yourself walking in the park out there. Let it move you a great distance. Do you feel farther away? Are you lost? I would beg to differ. Keep going, and you’ll find the heart of the Maelstrom, where all the zest the universe is amassed. All the stars forged of fiction and dreams. For years we have only gotten traces of it. Priya, imagination is the focal element ... which means ... everything is fun!” he conveyed, freeing himself from the morality of life. The scientist went by instinct, razing the lies, “No, it doesn’t work that way. Everyone can’t hide from the truth. It has to be controlled, or it is useless. You’ve turned it to randomness ... incoherence”. “The truth is butter!” he ended. “You are crazy!” she cried. Telenon smirked with vile delight, “I’ve got a much better idea. How’s about I increase the turbulence of the focal element by a factor of ten ... and when you are driven completely mad, I will come to your rescue”. “Dream on, douchebag” she spat. “I can and I will,” he called back. Priya crossed her arms and cocked her head so he knew what a jerk he was being, “Oh yeah ... that sounds reasonable. After all, we’re standing right here, in the Temple of Reason, and why are you sitting alone in a room full of kangaroos? Do you not have any friends?”. The debate quickly grew more personal as they bantered back and forth. “I don’t need friends. I am the coolest guy there is” he declared, casting off her insult. Tired from all the illusion, the scientist stamped her foot down, “You just want to corner all the magic to yourself, and not share it, which is probably why you don’t have any friends”. He threw his arms wide, “I guess that makes two of us”, and waited for the coldness of his acknowledgement to sink in. Frustrated and embittered, mostly by being

called a nerd at the outset, the scientist tried to make a correction, “Wrong again. Don’t assume you know me, we just met”. “Really?” Telenon replied and raised an eyebrow sarcastically. From his pocket he took out a tape recorder and pushed a button. “He’s kind of hot in a gross kind of way”, it rang, seconding her personal thoughts. Not wanting to endure any more of the awkwardness, Priya turned around towards the entrance and walked out. As she reached the door and walked past the threshold, kangaroos held them open in courtesy. “A man has a right to spread in his own house!” he shouted, and the mahogany doors closed behind her.

“Babe! you’re alive,” Dominique shouted, jumping into her arms, “now are you going to tell us what’s going on in there?”. The crowd was eager to hear her story until the temple itself separated into architectural segments that floated up into the air where it reassembled. Telenon was left standing on the green and walked over to them. They grew jubilant and a couple at the front called out to him saying, “Telenon! We are so grateful for your help during the war. You are always welcome here” and sent their son to hand him a flower that they had picked. The bowler took it and held it high, “A toast! To all of you! Thank you for defending our world with your unwavering strength”. The crowd cheered vociferously as Priya rolled her eyes and crossed her arms. Another local stepped forward, “Have you come back to tell us about the other dimension, or is there another danger on the horizon?”. “Yes, there is, and I have come to warn you all about it,” he began, and pointed straight over to Priya, “this woman has betrayed me, and in doing so has worsened things for all of you”. “What do you mean?” the locals asked as a pall swept across the crowd. Telenon continued, “During wartime I granted a loan. Maybe you thought that it was regular power, for a lack of ability to describe it, but in truth it was much more. It was my magic that I offered, and this thief is the one that wants to steal it away. It is by my foresight and wisdom that I have sanctioned its use amongst yourselves”. Priya turned to the crowd and raised her voice, “Ha! He just wants to hog all the magic for himself, but I say ... and who is with me ... that we should all have the right to use magic!”. At this they went silly in uproarious agreement to her suggestion. Telenon could see the crowd grow feral, and stray from his grasp. Their desire for magic was innate and unrelenting. “Trust my judgment. I am your champion!” he urged, but they would not listen. “Don’t believe him!” Priya exhorted. Random cries of “Let us have the magic!” erupted from the crowd. Dominique was loudest of all. She

belted out at the top of her lungs, “You holding out on us!” and the mob jeered. Annoyed, he took the flower, and taking a deep breath sent the pollen scattering into the air. “Since you all are so adamant, I’ll let you have some” he grinned. The crowd gasped as the pollen continued to grow in magnitude until giant grains of various colors disseminated, and crashed into the buildings of the city, like wrecking balls. Even the university was not spared. “What is going on?” Felicia gasped, seeing the spheres smash through towers. Panic struck the crowd as a massive grain hurtled towards them, threatening to smush anyone it landed on. “Not so fast!” Priya cried and casted out a bolt of mirror lightning, detonating the ball and pulverizing it into dust. When things had cleared, she could see Telenon was standing at a park vending machine, and put a quarter in. “Hey, he stole that quarter from me!” the little boy that gave him the flower earlier complained, pointing. Telenon opened a bag of potato chips and munched on them one by one as he drew closer. Reaching his hand in, he took out a chip and held it up in front, “Priya, there are so many who honestly deserve revenge on you. They can no longer be heard, as they are drowned in the light of the echo seal. Let this be the beginning of what is to come” and tossed it towards her. Perception heightened. Priya felt time abate and watched in slow motion as the potato chip spun towards her, and when it was near it phased to become immaterial like a ghost and entered her head. Gripping her temples with both hands like a vice, she could feel the agonizing pain as salt multiplied and spread throughout her mind, permeating it all, layering onto the ridges and furrows of the cerebrum. She could feel the sharp edges of the crystals embed themselves. With a seizure from the shock Priya fell to the ground and blacked out. Pleased with himself, Telenon retreated back into the temple that drifted above, and moments later it vanished through the clouds.

CHAPTER 18 - THE PANCAKE EMPORIUM

Location: Echo Realm, SOTA

Date: Present Time

Not far from the train station in portion Valco there sits a squat, rectangular building, the District Pancake Emporium where a handful of new arrivals were invited to

have lunch. By the end of a long table Yon Aboveyou looked down and saw many of her friends who had decided to let bygones be bygones. Phantomess rummaged through her purse until she found a piece of paper and slid it over to the other end of the table. Teddy sighed unenthusiastically as he accepted the peace treaty. And with that the Ascension War was complete. Cumin-James sat at the other end, and down the line there was Gram, Topsy, Brine-Buy, Laura, Obsidian, Haven, Mush, Gremlin-Nose and Lilly Llamas. Obsidian had spent that morning choosing a new appearance and putting on makeup so as not to frighten the guests. Along the other side there was Phantomess, Catcher, Meza Buyer, Koransha Inree, Lance Corporal Synchronized Strudel and Petty Officer Parfait Plurality, Fraudulent Platypus, Leon Turpin, Elliot Traces, and Oasis 2. “Are we ever going to eat?” Yon mumbled, elbowing Lilly. As if hearing their plea, a waitress arrived and laid a platter with a tall stack of fluffy pancakes on the end of the table. To celebrate the treaty, the sides decided to pair off and each get the same entrée. Phantomess and Teddy had a coconut nougat flavored pancake with spun ladyfinger sauce. Yon Aboveyou and Fraudulent Platypus had a pancake topped with dill and powdered sugar. Meza Buyer and Lilly Llamas had a caramelized pear flavored pancake on a bed of raisin bread crumbs. Cumin-James and Catcher had a pancake with cranberry muffin and lemon curd filling topped with ginger candy. Topsy and Oasis 2 had a pancake encased in turmeric glaze. Laura and Leon Turpin had a pancake with its middle cut out and a dollop of beets and cream put in there. Gremlin-Nose and Elliot Traces had a wedding cake made of pancakes with celery cream cheese filling and frosting. A few could not decide on the same entrée and so went unpaired. Lance Corporal Synchronized Strudel and Petty Officer Parfait Plurality, who were an inseparable team, had a grandma-made butternut squash pie crepe split between the two of them. Gram had a buttered scone but the butter was bigger than the scone. Obsidian daintily cut a glazed carrot into circular pieces on her plate. Her real face was visible just for the occasion. Brine-Guy had a waffle with a blueberry in each square in which you have to eat them one at a time and each of them is infused with a different flavor. Haven had a waffle buried in almond and peach gelato. Mush had a big bowl with sticky rice and crushed macaroons. And Koransha Inree had a glass of water. She had an early lunch on the battleship. A chef wheeled over another cart and began dishing out plain pancakes which were rich and even fluffier. Yon reached for the bottle of maple syrup

and began pouring it, but the waitress stopped what she was doing and ran over, “Hey! that’s not the right one!” “Huh? what are you talking about?” she wondered, and glanced down, seeing where her pancakes had vanished. “That was the anti-matter maple syrup” the waitress pointed, seeing that it had annihilated her pancakes which were made of normal matter. “Gracious, where did they go?” Yon exclaimed as the others chuckled. “Here, try out the regular syrup. Later on, we can all go downstairs and I can give you a tour of the accelerator” she promised. “Don’t even think about getting full” Lilly bubbled, pointing to the manager as he approached the table. Much to the diner’s considerable muted delight, it looked like he was wearing a rather intricate belt over his apron. Yon couldn’t figure out what it was, but they looked back down the table, where most of their expressions traced gradually from confusion to giggles. “The speciality of the house is ready, so we can take three people at a time to the belt-line, if you want to split into groups” he announced. Yon, Lilly and Fraudulent broke off from the rest and were escorted into another room with a crowd of people. Instead of waiting, they were brought through a different line to the front, where people waited at an airport baggage claim. “It’s your turn” the manager insisted, and they climbed aboard the conveyor belt, crouching down, so they would fit underneath the flaps as they crossed over. “Ahh!” Lily screamed as she fell off the end of the belt. At last they had a soft landing on a comfy platform. Down there were even more pancakes. Coming in from the freezer, one of the snow-men that operated the colder parts of the particle accelerator grabbed a piece of cake, patted the waitress on the shoulder to encourage her, and went back. “This has been a long day” she thought, bringing another plate to the guest. Phantomess was discussing the nearby river, where baby dolphins leapt through the waters that were once someone’s grandmother’s left-over button collection. From the other room came the manager again, brandishing that same sort of belt contraption. Yon noticed him, until she built up the courage to ask what it was. At first, he pulled on his collar. His cheeks flared red like a red maple tree. Yon could see he was a bit self-conscious, so shot a glance back down the table, to where the Lady Phantomess held him in her gaze, with an iron stare. “Oh ... there is something that you should keep in mind when you leave the Emporium. Most people try to go straight for downtown. Be sure to take the main road, and never walk through the shortcut after dark. There’s a werewolf that lives in the woods out there, and anyone he finds he pounces on, even at dusk, and places them in a

chastity belt. The cultic officers have chased him through the sewers as well, but couldn't catch him". "That must be a lot to deal with," Yon said, quickly putting her hand over her mouth. "Yeah ... I've got this one. Haven't been able to get it off for a week. Expert spells don't work" he sighed. Hearing the conversation, Phantomess stood up and weaved some signs in the air, performing a spell, and snapped her fingers. The sound of metal puzzles unlocking could be heard throughout the restaurant. "Consider that our tip for the night" she said, winking at him. Across the room a loud smack could be heard as someone slammed their fist against the table. The waitress, Delk Northway, almost fell down. She was laughing so hard, and thought to herself how this was probably the best day of her life.

As they left the restaurant, the evening was saturated only with a fine, attenuated sheath of darkness. It dipped in intensity ... lower ... to almost nothing. "This just in ... it's really dark everywhere!" Tracy Garland reported on a telepathic channel, hugging a pillow for comfort. "Who is over there?" Meza pointed, and they could make out across the street two unfamiliar forms approached from the darkness holding a lantern. "Mr. Wire ... Elder Amos, do you know the cause of this disturbance?" Phantomess asked. "There is not much time, ... Yon Aboveyou, must come with us. Come to Coffee Island " he directed. "Phantomess, who are these bozos?" Yon shuddered, shaking her arm. "There's disciples of Echo, and I think we should take a detour tonight, if it suits the rest of you" the patron tried to reassure them. "No ... there's no way. I knew it was a bad idea to trust all of you" she shouted, and the other Framers began to dissent. The split continued until a hiccup of light issued from Yon and through her Echo's voice saying, "Trust them, Yon. I have fainted and I need your help". After the transmission had ceased, they relented, and Mr. Wire weaved some seals and formed a circular portal, "This is meant for those of the Rite, and it can harm outsiders, so to protect you all, come hide in my fanny-pack", and he unzipped it. They all became smaller and entered, except for Phantomess, as they crossed over to the island. For a time, they all watched as Mr. Wire and Elder Amos prepared the ritual, and when they were done came to Yon to speak to her, "It is no longer a secret to us of your true identity ... you are the Salt-Mind, and as such only you can assist us, for the mind of the dreamer has been overcome with virulent salt which must be dispelled". "We're counting on you" Catcher whispered, nodding in agreement. Elder Amos directed her to walk to the center of a seal which

they had lain upon the ground, where she brightened and rose above even the hills of the island, becoming a chandelier of crystal as before her lover had drunkenly imagined she was otherwise. “Arrange yourself into a lattice of ions around her” Mr. Wire said to Brine-Guy, and he did so. As the group added their vitality to the ritual, he called out to Obsidian, “We need you, connect the threads between them, as a constellation, and integrate the chandelier’s light”. “More!” Elder Amos roared, ordering them to put all their strength into the task. They gathered around the circular inscription. So much energy was effused that drops of liquid began to fall from the chandelier lattice like sweat, and some made their way to a nearby pond forming white swans. Spent, the chandelier began to float down from the lattice. Weary, it fell headlong towards the ground. Phantomess was the first to nearly faint, as so much had been given that the rest wavered in kind. Closer to the ground it fell, reverting back into the form of Yon Aboveyou, and at the instant it was to shatter on the seal below, one of them caught her. Obsidian looked out and saw a season of light return to the SOTA. Panting, Fraudulent turned to Yon Aboveyou who he held in his arms, “Good thing you didn’t break ”, and she smiled and couldn’t stop from staring. Lilly thought of her husband, and whispered to Laura, “He isn’t going to like that ...”, then turned to witness the final departure of the darkness as it fled through the corona.

CHAPTER 19 - THE FALL

Priya lay for a while, watching the swaying blemishes move playfully in front of her eyes. A fickle breeze rattled the blades of grass between her fingers one way, and then another, enticing them. Clarity soon collapsed the blur, and she could see the faces of a few people that may have been strange masks in the crowd not so long ago. “Do you remember what happened?” Eric asked, running his hand through threads of raven hair, intermixed with verdant earth. “Eric is that you? How long have I been here?” she asked, seeing in her peripheral vision the three other companions, and the wrinkled, spectacled mug of Hook staring down. “My dear, you’ve been out for almost half an hour” Hook noted, as the other boy moved his hand underneath her neck for support. His hands were warm to the touch. Priya got to her feet and saw that where once there was a

crowd there was now an abandoned landscape. Remembering the light of the chandelier, she made her hand immaterial and reached in, removing the potato chip, and placed it in a pocket for safekeeping. Eric was pale with anxiety, and said to her in particular, as if the others were not even there, “You were really amazing out there, standing up to him, but now we should find a hiding spot where we can all be together and ride it out, like a bunker or something. Priya, you wouldn’t believe what’s been going on since you blacked out”. Rubbing his cheek, she smiled to comfort him, “You know I can’t do that. I have a job to do”. “That’s the Priya I know!” Hook exclaimed. “That’s our newbie!” Nadine added. Noticing more of the landscape as the blurriness seeped away, the park was strewn with acorns, some of them plump, others tiny. Her eyes felt like sponges, soaking up the indistinctness and turning it into clarity. “We’re calling it the acorn fever” Eric began, “if you watch the news channels, it’s spread through most of the world, depopulating major urban areas, morphing people into acorns, and just on the whim of a madman”. Hook dabbed a cheek with a hanky, and explained further, “He was able to summon the word “NUTS” at different cities simultaneously throughout the world, it hovered over them, giving off infectious light that radiated the contagion of the acorn fever”. Drove of squirrels began to sneakily caper across the park, inspecting the fresh trove of oak-fruit. “Is there a way we can fight back?” Felicia pondered, shooing away a squirrel that became too curious. Priya swiped off the dirt still caking her shoulder, “There’s always a way”. She looked intently at the cavities in the structure of the university, the brick that had been excavated so effortlessly. “First let’s get to the stadium, everyone is hunkering down there” Hook sighed, leading them back. As they filed into the basketball court Priya gazed over the stands, where people were passing out bottles of water, and then to the space near the far goal, with sleeping bags set along the floor. “Can we have a minute to talk?” Priya asked the other’s, and they separated, climbing up to the stands to get themselves refreshments. “Things are about to get really weird around here fast ... like level ten weird, which is why I need you to do something for me” uttered Priya, her words coming out steadfast and true, then wiped the dust out of his hair so he would focus. “If you feel it’s important, let me know ...” Eric answered. “I just really need you to be safe” she interjected, acknowledging the sudden role reversal. He looked around to the stands and to the loitering crowd, some passing out plastic containers of staples and chocolate bars, the big kind, “This place is about as

safe as it gets, but what did you have in mind?”. Lifting up her hand to his cheek, she looked at him and drank in the sweet, mild, priceless ignorance in his eyes, “I need you inside of me”. Eric took a few steps back and spun around, looking to see if anyone nearby had heard, “Priya, are you kidding? Right here in front of all of these people”. “No, that’s not what I meant” she blushed, “I have a realm inside of me I literally have another dimension, and I need you to hide there for now”. “Is that how you were able to scarf down four slices of pizza?” he wondered, fading into a flashback of their first date. Priya squinted hard and immediately crossed her arms, “Don’t push it, fella ... just get in there”. “Um ... okay. Can I have something to remember you by?” he asked blatantly, drawing in for a kiss. Waving it away, she reached a hand into a pocket, “Survive in there, and you can have one when you get back ... but I did have something you can remember me by”, passing a little card into his hand. “What is this for?” he said, turning it over. “It’s what I do sometimes once a week ... but I’m not very good at it” she whispered defensively. The card read, “Amethyst Rink” and had a little picture of a snowflake on it. Eric’s eyes lit up at the discovery, “This is for the rink downtown. Priya, you can ice-skate?”. “Just as a stress-reliever, I’m not any good”. Beaming mischievously, he play-punched her shoulder, “That’s nice to know, you’re getting less mysterious every day”. “Don’t count on that” Priya said, putting her hand on his, and curling it up over the card. His tone dropped, realizing the significance of what she had decided to share with him, and the truth of their parting. “Now I know two things about you” he thought. Close again, their faces only divided by fat, obnoxious molecules of air, “I’ll keep this for when I come back” he promised. And so, she took his arm and pulled him through. He felt the rush of phasing the barrier. Eric looked down, howling as galaxies flew past expeditiously. Just like a first-timer. A sky-diver that is. It certainly was a long way down.

CHAPTER 20 - TELENON’S MINIONS ATTACK

Reunion hall was the main gateway of the university. Freshmen scurried through the hall, towards sociable classrooms. Backpacks stuffed with lecture notes. It was a place the higher ups were definitely proud of. Trophies lined the display cases. Pictures

hung on the wall with photos of alumni from years past. Along one narrow hallway was a rather oversized mirror, polished to perfection. It was a place highschoolers traded their doodles for business degrees. An upstanding place. Priya walked alone as if heading somewhere important. Her fingers stretched out to the wall for balance, instinctively. Hard silence was not enough to cope with the gravity of the moment. She needed a place, a natural place where people went on with their own private affairs. The blank slate at the center of a crowd. Ahead of her the corridor tightened. Through filmy spectacles she could see a rectangle of light. A buzz of humanity. "Are you kidding me? That was freaking awesome!" Felicia yelled, catching up to her. At the girl's heels were two others of similar standing. They huffed and puffed as the hallway had been a marathon. The look of anticipation was palpable in her manner. "I thought you were a nerd," Dominique added furiously, hands on her hips in condemnation. "Girls, I was going to let you know, but it just wasn't the right time," Priya answered, guarding her face with two palms. Nadine rolled her eyes and bit on a piece of granola bar, "I knew everything". A conversation dawdled until something loud crashed into the other room. Together they ran to see what it was. A giant bowling ball from Telenon sat amid rubble on the ground. From its three hollows came python sized snakes that bit the first student they could sink their teeth into. "Ah, they got him!" Felicia gasped. Green light flared from his eyes as scales overtook his person. Soon he had a pinball club and was headed right towards them. Priya stood for a moment to study the environs. Subtle afternoon air leaked into the room. The place was spacious and fraught with activity. The figure approaching her was certainly menacing. To her left a good polished mirror glistened. A diagonal rectangle flew across its surface. Priya lifted up her arm and outstretched her hand for the request. In reply, the mirror shattered, and its shards leapt to her hand, forming the mirror sword with angular precision. Now the snake faced man bore his fangs and lifted his arm for the decisive blow. "Not quite," Priya mouthed. The mirror sword met its counterpart, halting its progress. Vibrations phased through the woman's body as she sensed the weight of it. "Don't move" she implored them; her face hidden behind a barrier of jet-black hair. Inescapably the blade proceeded through the figure, bringing the bearer of that armament to the other side. It certainly was just the beginning. Walls caved as more bowling balls intruded, sending their serpents to fetch the innocent pedestrians in razor sharp jaws. A small band emerged, circling around.

They hissed chaotically, and some had grown spikes from their pinball clubs. Priya smiled at the compliment Telenon had sent her and began in earnest. Lightning quick motions dispatched them, amputating arms, sending them flying. The soldier's motion was feather light as she drew a gory chasm into the stomach of an enemy. Nadine looked on in disbelief. They could not touch the ever-shifting form. In pleasure the woman jumped up and kicked one of the giant bowling balls, sending it careening back from whence it came. Another was nearby, but the hydras met their end at the flick of a wrist. Shockingly, more reinforcements charged in from the adjacent halls. A snakehead soldier made its path towards her with his implement ready. Priya felt the time was right, and so altered into echoes and phased through the body to the other side. Dominique's eyes went red as she witnessed the hapless creature explode, fire spurting from its eyes and throat in one tumultuous burst. Following the agile theory of martial arts, the soldier pierced one of them through the chest, throwing up a shower curtain full of blood into the air. Still another lacked an abyss in their body which she promptly assisted with. Felicia gasped as about five at once thought to sneak attack her from behind. Yet in wonderous counter the lithe, ivory lab coat upon her back transformed into that of a cloud, into which they were engulfed, and quick snaps of lightning sent them back, plummeting onto the ground stiff as boards. The lab coat returned to its original substance. As that occurred another army appeared and was sent to their fate. Priya felt more precocious now, sculpting the flesh of her enemies with the mirror blade. Forming a crimson mist. Making autonomous what was once union. The train fell in empty gestures. Another serpent could not shut its mouth and attacked. But the motion of a glimmering wave was too quick, and its head fell, hammering the floorboards. In a circle of the reptilian filth she stood, a noble visage in all that disgracefulness. Priya's hair came loose, freeing individual threads from their bounds. Their movements were alluring. A youthful dance that gave clemency to the air. Felicia experienced the magnetism of her friend as that pristine statue lingered. But the day was not yet won. In the remaining spheres the soldier heard rustling. Bends along its outermost layer. Something was inside. Priya gripped her sword again as the shell broke apart like an egg and a behemoth of matching skin strut out. His arms were like thick trunks. Reunion shook as it stomped towards her. Priya looked around for something helpful. It was one of those occasions. Seeing little of worth in the room, she looked skyward, craning her

neck. In semicircles of shining metal an ornament was nestled. Its crystals dangling handsomely in air. Priya reached her hand up and forced the chandelier to come careening down. As it was about to land, she took the article and turned it into a shield embedded with crystal just as the behemoth struck his mighty fist against it. From sheer force it pushed the soldier back a yard. The combat resumed, with enough acrobatics until the big lug dropped. Not wanting to retain the article, she tossed it like a coin at an attacking goon. When the next one broke free from its shell, it struck the ground with such strength as to form it into a basin. Priya turned to echoes to evade the attack, materializing a foot away as the wreckage fell like rain. Outraged, the fingers on its right hand became five snakes which Priya had to behead one by one. Nadine watched as her newbie sent out a stream of lightning that latched onto the beast, and pulled onto that chain, swinging him around to the other side of the room and through the barrier of the brick wall. In dry sarcasm she merely leant her back against the wall, considering the proceedings dispassionately. A third behemoth had many holes in its body from which it gathered snakes and forged a bowling ball of pure snakes to send at Priya. It hissed as it careened across the floor. Quick witted, Priya merely jumped onto the adjacent wall as it passed, slicing it vertically with her blade. It would ignite a moment later. Felicia couldn't believe it as the soldier lifted the behemoth with nothing but punches and kicks, climbing slowly towards the ceiling. She alighted back onto the ground alone, inside a column of sunlight. Both cheeks rotated as she searched the room. A single sphere remained. Its contents burst out into the open. The behemoth was taller and stronger than all the rest. Its eyes saw the nemesis, standing idle in the glow of reflective beauty. For a second Priya's mirror sword shined like an insubstantial ethereal diamond. The creature made its approach. It would finish everything in one bash. There was nothing to stop him. Knowing what to do, the woman stuck out the blade. Its shard detached, and panels of wood from the wall ripped off to form the border of a mirror. Close enough, the behemoth stood before its own reflection, growling at the sight of such a barrier. It lifted its mighty fist, cocking it back slowly into the air. As it did, the reflection arose, and struck first with a brutal fist, collapsing the great fortified body onto the ground. Excellent. Priya reassembled the blade and returned to them. In euphoria she dispatched the shards back to the polished surface. Dominique was giddy from the novelty of it all, cheering and clapping. Nadine leaned there, bored a little after what had transpired. She

knew what would happen after the lightning rope thing. Felicia kind of stood there panting. Thankfully, Dominique was able to save her before she touched the ground.

CHAPTER 21 - HOOK TAKES PRIYA AND CREW TO RIKIRAL COMPUTER

Not long afterwards the dry, languid, anything-but-eccentric Mr. Hook returned with a clique of university staff and academics. “Come with us, I have something to show you” he enjoined, and they hastened down a series of corridors into the depths of the main building, until it terminated in a boiler room, the type where only bad things happen to good people. Removing a key-card from his suit-pocket, the geriatric scooted over to a little door encroached upon by thick pipes and swiped it on a dusty pad. “Here is something you’ll see which is our best kept secret” Hook promised, gesturing for them to follow. Nadine, Felicia and Dominique shrugged their shoulders. Apparently, she was not the only one. A few at a time to squeeze through, they came to an elevator big enough to fit a horse. Lurching, the box creaked its way into the hidden underbelly of the earth. “Unbelievable” Priya gasped as they were all released into wider space, ogling like drunken peasants at a laboratory large enough to contain an auditorium. But it was not that which made her devolve into a giggling dunderhead. “Here is where we kept after liberating it in the war. Ladies and gentlemen ... what you have before you is a Rikiral computer used to oversee an entire Forward-Marker, the most fearsome class of warship the navy faced. After the ship was dissected, it was left here by the military authority for safekeeping. They had myriad futile attempts at probing its design ... and all were met with disappointment” Hook explained, replaying history in their minds. He led her up to one of its segments containing rows of compartments, “Priya, perhaps with your ... skills, you can bring it out of dormancy”. She leaned against the bulky thing, itself like a boiler room folded into origami, and looked to the right across a series of glass vessels, some of them containing hovering exclamation marks, others question marks, “Yes, but I may need some additional financing for this project, if you could inform the panel, and have them pardon my recent shortcoming”.

Refurbishing the machine over the next few days, Priya finally restored it by repurposing some energetic components. “This will be your base of operations” she told them, “the system will help you research a cure for the acorn fever, and I have programmed it to provide lessons in basic manipulations, or magic as you put it”. “Where will you be going?” Nadine thundered, breaking out in alarm at the implication. “As far away from here as I possibly can. I have to draw his attention, and that will give you enough time to disseminate my knowledge and begin to organize” she admitted, seeing the color leave her friend’s face. “That’s bullshit, we’re coming with you” she demanded, almost threateningly. After a cold minute the scientist was able to pacify her. “Nadine, leave the bad ideas to me. I have to go alone” she stated, forceful enough to cut through the bastion of outrage. The companion dropped a box of computer chips that she had requested, and the scientist took them over to a table where there was a processor and filled it up and set it to maximum until it was a thick green liquid, and poured it into a chip-press, building a comb patterned chip to integrate into the delta level circuit. That task completed, the two of them had a quick conversation in the corner where no one else could hear, then bid the rest of them adieu.

CHAPTER 22 - PRIYA DRIVES AWAY

Fields of wheat danced to the melody of the wind along the side of the road as a beaten-up truck whizzed by. “Am I the only one here who is going to say it?” Visioness blurted out. “Say what?” Priya replied, turning down the music. The memory of leaving for the parking lot was still fresh in her mind. Sitting on a step she had found Richard, drinking a bottle of scotch, and saw him wearing a hat, but it was not a hat. It was the cap of an acorn, and the beginnings of a slow transformation. “Don’t let any of them damn squirrels get me girl” he had begged, and so they had gathered up some of the ruined brick wall. He sat in a little corner near the steps, and she began to lay them, interring him. For mortar they used paper mache. On the other end he helped as well, until all that was left was a single space, through which they both peered, their eyes meeting. “They won’t get you in there, I promise” she said, before sliding in the final brick, but with the way things were going to change, what was the use of promises

anymore? “Roadtrip!” Visioness roared, heady from the fragrance of the country air. Visioness controlled her arm to take the last sip of the bottle of scotch that Richards had given her. “Eww! That’s so gross!” Pelfe protested as Priya wiped her mouth with her sleeve. Both Priya and Visioness couldn’t keep themselves from laughing for a solid minute. At least they had one thing in common. The rustling of the field began to still, transfixed, perhaps by a single lonesome traveler. Noticing the ominous difference, the truck came to a rumbling halt. Priya slammed the door behind her and headed out into the stalks, and those that were in her way bent, crunching easily. Through the columns a poetic face glanced back at her. “Teddy ... is that you?” she declared upon seeing the Senator motionless, stalwart, camouflaged by grain. “Not an easy journey at all, dreamer. It was rough, but I’m the first to get across” he answered, gliding over. Kneeling down on one knee, he bowed his head, “consider me your loyal knight”. “You don’t need to be so humble, Teddy, once I re-manifest the realm, I will be just like the rest of you, and everyone will forget where they came from after just a few years” Priya smiled, dismissing the flattery. “Highly doubtful Empress” Teddy countered, despite how with the cremation of the avatar chain, its logic spilled out into the barren wastes of space-time, their ties were now less than definite. “Listen, Teddy. It will take some time until our abilities return. We have to work together to wrest control of this level from the grip of Telenon, its magnate. He’s a madman that will stop at nothing to foment chaos and drain our magic. The phenomenon will not be safe in his grip” she explained. But as she spoke, he looked over her shoulder, and was intent on another subject entirely, “Echo ... don’t tell me that hunk of junk is our ride”. With its peeling paint and puckered exterior, it looked like something that could be gambled off at a poker game. Climbing into the passenger’s seat, Teddy put on his seat-belt, and they continued down the road until the welcome sign of a small town swung by, “Panorama Precinct”. He had her stop by a local bakery, where he paid the baker to bring a loaf of bread on a wooden peel out into the parking lot, and set it on the ground. “This will be called the bakery bus,” Teddy noted. With more bio-dimensional yeast, the loaf of bread continued to rise until it had become a city bus, wobbling as a crowd of the patrons and familiar faces disembarked. Seeing the first person, Snow ran up to Priya, suitcase in hand, “Do you know where my mom is!”.

CHAPTER 23 - PANORAMA PRECINCT

The local hotel owner was not about to argue with the sudden influx of curiosities, as long as they paid double. Even so, there were not enough rooms, forcing some of them to part ways and find a local bed and breakfast, all except for Snow, who occupied a house that the tenants had fled from when they witnessed the newcomers. For most of dinner they watched the news coverage of the acorn fever, which continued to ravage the world, depopulating even major cities. Slush Noodles went down the buffet-line, slapping a thick slice of honey-ham onto his plate and smiled smugly knowing that both he and his fiancé would be useless for whatever nonsense the patrons had in mind. They would probably settle down in the town for the duration, taking in the sights and browsing local shops for knick-knacks. Peering over his shoulder, he could see his fiancé was still moody. She had a two for one coupon that had expired, and it wasn't even applicable in the new reality. Afterwards Priya gathered them all outside for an announcement none of them were ready for, "This family has made a lot of progress, and I recognize each of you for that. As time continues, the abstract becomes clear. I have observed the actuality that underlies this world, the focal element. There is a rogue imagination, disembodied and untamed. Telenon seeks to abandon all reason to the chaos of its perpetual motion. I fear his designs, for with reason gone humanity will soon follow. The epidemic of the acorn fever is only the first phase. To fight against that, I ask you, Linden, and you Melina to come out of my eyes, and take the form that can collect the acorns, and store them for safekeeping". Priya looked directly at an oak-tree, and the light from her eyes came out as a beautiful stream that illuminated it for a moment. From a hole in the tree came scampering out two squirrels that made their way over to them. "This is much more convenient, if I do say so myself" the Linden-Squirrel remarked. Crawling up her legs, each of them sat upon her shoulders. They were cute but with golden armor. As Linden chattered, Melina-Squirrel addressed them, "As we do the hard work of securing the nutritious bodies, you all will go in teams to destroy the word-signs that still hover over the cities, invading them with infectious light". Exhausted, Echo closed her eyes as Linden continued uninterrupted for some time, naming off the teams that would travel to each destination. Priya looked at her family. It was but a brief antebellum, and just below the skin, the scars of the Ascension still lingered. But soon she could retire to the comfort of her hotel-room, where the air

conditioning was just right, and the sheets were layered just the way that she liked them.

Everyone had a rude awakening the following morning as the pillow cases were filled with squirming tadpoles instead of fluff. Everyone except Echo. Veles went outside and unzipped hers, letting them plop onto the ground. “Huh ... what is that?” she thought. The patroness darted outside to soak up some of the ample sunlight. Around her, the camomile from the bed and breakfast wafted out. She strutted out to the end of the walkway where the quaint cobblestones poked into one another. Above the somewhat mild tempered roofs of the village, a blue sky fanned out. The trees around her seemed to have good dexterity with their limbs. Their leaves drooped down in bountiful heaps. Veles took a deep sigh. But that simple start was not to last. Across stretches of Panorama Precinct it was raining sawdust whenever houses passed by overhead. Most of them had uprooted from the neighborhood just east of the hotel. Veles flew up to one of them and walked through the door. She found them empty and took one of the couch cushions for herself. Valco had gotten up early that morning as well to hike through the surrounding area. Most of the townspeople had already fled but there were still some stragglers. He saw them travel north but did not intervene. After a short nap uninterrupted by the tadpoles and their tomfoolery, Veles found a spa with a hot spring. She went inside to find a pool boy in the lobby. “My, and who do we have here?” the amorous suitor flirted. He was made to order, so to speak, and handsome for the uninitiated. “Ah ... thank you. Are you the pool boy around here? Is there a spa?” Veles asked abruptly, changing the subject in the most drastic way imaginable. “Indeed mam. I can be your host and you my guest” he replied, attempting the feat of charm. Veles felt little in the way of romance. The day had not gone according to plan and she needed a retreat. The smile left his face, and accepting the inevitable, the unlucky pool boy guided her through the door to the other side. “Are you flipping kidding me?” the patron blurted out. Instead of a normal spa there was a pool of olive oil, and in it was a party of praying mantises bathing and having fun. Trying to decide what to do, she watched as a green mantis arose on its own, green olive oil sliding down its thorax. The pool boy was speechless as his handsome jaw fell. “Um ... thanks, but no thanks. this really isn’t my scene” she said, excusing herself and returning outside. Echo woke up and ambled down the stairs to the hotel lobby and fell back into a big easy-chair near the fireplace. A hotel

maid was brushing the dust off of the fireplace. Falling asleep from the warmth of the fire, she was out for a minute. “Get off!” she cried, bursting into awareness again. The dust from the hearth that had been brushed off had transformed into a tan, affable Siberian Dusty that would not stop licking her face. “Smooth sailing so far!” she called out, and pressed her head back into the pillow and closed her eyes.

CHAPTER 24 - DRAKE TEMPO AND THE LIGHTBULB OF QUINTESSENCE

Location: Echo Realm

Date: Second Age

The Neoscience of DI or deliberate improvement, devised by Drake Tempo, a lantern-class cultic master of the patron Emzeser was utilized by that gentleman aboard the mausoleum ship Actual Folk to draw back the dimensional curtain concealing the Faril system in Pole sector. That system contains three worlds. The first is Sycamore Detour, and over various continents there are individual bubble-like atmospheres, the Quasicrystal Aura. Despite Tempo’s warnings the first settlers on Detour were transformed into a race of quasicrystal people, and had to be hunted down and destroyed. Tempo was mostly successful, but the remnant of that population went underground and lived in caverns. After the initial terraforming procedure, the Formative Tear-Basin of the main continent Kromoman-Drape became the site of the colony city. During one night in the home of the colonist family Daniels-Rule, the father was replacing a light-bulb. He left the room. The daughter, Sarah Daniels-Rule climbed up into the opening and vanished. The quasicrystal aura over Kromoman-Drape lifted and formed into the entity Lightbulb of Quintessence that left the Faril system. Thereafter the colonists had no issues. As for the habitat, the planet hosts almost perfect sycamore trees. It hosts four hundred Earth-Detour hybrid varieties of garlic. From this, a new generation of artists took inspiration and became garlic artists. The space platform above Detour contains Institution Sativum, a grand garlic art museum that beckons visitors from across the galaxy. Tourism from the museum is a large part of Detour’s economy. The scope of the territory of Sycamore Detour is much greater than a simple

analysis of its physical dimensions would suggest. There is a process called Turquoise Parallel Defragmentation that greatly increases the spatial regions of the world. This process is mainly caused by the Wobble-Bumkins, purple deer like beasts with legs three times the length of normal deer. They can fold these legs up underneath themselves when they fly. The Wobble-Bumkins travel around Detour and place holes with their antlers in the ground and holes within the sides of the rock and surfaces of the floating sky-islands. During a full moon lunar light will fill the holes, and from them are cast poles of turquoise light known as the Turquoise Parallels. Forests of the parallels emerge, and if one watches, they can see the parallels stretch space, creating new environments. The Wobble-Bumkins are named so because they do so when they walk.

The second world of the Faril system is named Decadent Thesis, and was originally a prison planet of Sycamore Detour, the main center being the prison-city of Banish-People until a prison riot. Banish-People is now the capital. When the prisoner Mei Zoe Ulomara was freed, she became a historian and the author of the historical book “The Unquenchable Annals of History”. The book was used by Ulomara to summon a sequence of energies from Timecurrent to Ruin to Valco and formed them together. Through the power of the book, Thesis became an extension of the Sublime Landscape, with Ulomara as its master. She evolved into the noble Zoe Thesis, and scattered the paper pages of the book. The pages planted themselves into the ground, and became great tall and thick walls that contained in certain regions the essence of the sublime landscape on Thesis. Outside of Zoe’s main city of Banish-People, the settlements of mortals on the world are contained within floating stone cylinders, the Rajarayatran. Within the oceans of the sublime landscape on Thesis, there is a layer of oil over the water, and within it is a dimension in which mortals live as well. That world is called Wioa-Emeva, and its capital is named Iota-Trace. The most significant danger to the colonists living on Thesis are the Tosso. These small hamster-like animals, when they approach a person, carry a tiny hammer which will drift through the air, and continue to grow until it is of great size and will trail a person, and smash them. The Tosso will then eat about a quarter pound of meat, and rip off the hair, leaving the lifeless body hairless, but only if it is considerably smashed.

The third world is Nauseous Gaia. It is mostly a desert world. There are geysers that spill forth seltzer onto the surface. Living within the seltzer geysers are colonies of naked, semi porous people that are released whenever there is a spurt. They congregate together and lick the seltzer off of themselves with their tongues, purifying themselves. The semi porous people can hover as well. When the cleaning is complete they hover away into the wastelands of the desert. If a semi porous person is completely pure, it blossoms into a giant orchid that casts a light projection onto the ground, a projection of an oasis. As far as the human body and psyche is concerned, the waters, vegetation, animals and fruits of these projected oases are equivalent to the real thing. If a semi porous person is incompletely pure, it will blossom into a palm tree, and around it more vegetation will arise. If the semi porous person is still very messy and covered in seltzer, it will bury itself under the sands. They eventually return to the geysers, although some of them explode while they are buried, sending up bursts of sand. Besides that, they are almost completely simpleminded. The planet Nauseous Gaia is infested with Umpereo snakes, as the deserts of the Extreme were. There is a third native variety of Umpereo snake that is a female that gives birth to litters of Dall, reptilian, almost alligator-like bats. The Dall are vicious carnivores and predators of the desert, attacking any humans they encounter. During the first colonization of Gaia a wealthy hedonist by the name of Plymouth Chrome had a pleasure mansion built in the desert. The interior walls of Chrome Mansion were all painted. During an invasion by Umpereo snakes, the humans under their will broke free but became the Removers, a race of humanoids. As the mansion was defended, they were chased back into a mine, from which the colonists discovered a trove of cylindrical rocks called Bayarma that followed them back en-mass. They roll along the walls of the mansion, removing the paint. The Umpereo were also eventually repelled, and due to this new nuisance Plymouth hired countless workers to constantly repaint his mansion. More Bayarma arrived from the mine, and their rotations are endless. The mansion could never truly be entirely repainted, and Plymouth eventually returned to the SOTA. The denizens of Gaia continue to tend to the rocks, as they produce a type of paint, Omech-paint, which the workers will collect in bowls. The Omech-paint is placed as lines on the sand and protects the settlements from incursions by many of the beasts of Gaia, most notably the Amebet, which is like a moray eel with

spikes that spin as fast as drills, and a mouth that fires a replica of an exploding head of whoever it is fighting.

CHAPTER 25 - RECLUSIVE WATERCOLORS

Petty Officer Parfait Plurality and Lance Corporal Synchronized Strudel ran down the corridor to help the poor girl who had fallen. Lusi gasped as they pulled her up to her feet, and the officer placed her hand upon the girl's back so that she would not faint a second time. "Lusi, are you all right?" she enquired. A second or so after finally catching her breath, Lusi looked to the officer. "Make the correction!" she pleaded. Plurality looked over to the corporal and nodded. He examined the corridor, finding that some bumbling fool ... most likely a lecturer ... had placed a chair on one side of the hallway by itself, rather than across from another. The difference of course had caused Lusi to fall into a panic attack as soon as she ascended the stairs. The lance corporal strode over and hid the chair within one of the hallway classrooms and returned to the girl, who had by this time regained her composure. "That gave me quite a start, what would I do without you two?" she smiled and picked up her backpack, continuing down the corridor to the afternoon period's lecture hall. "He won't notice if I am a minute late" she thought to herself, veering to the right before bolting into professor Graham Ramshackle's English class. Seldom did she consciously admit to herself the truth, that Ramshackle himself was not only the principal of the school, but her specialist as well. Indeed, Lusi and the others were all patients of the Asymmetrical Institute, a facility for Asymmetrites, those who shun the outside world and cannot function in a land of differing symmetry. To be more specific, the Children's Asymmetrical Institute, itself a satellite facility of the main Institute is located in the peaceful woodlands of portion Veles. It was built for minors up to the age of eighteen. After they become adults, they are transferred to the main Institute in Salamantra District of portion Veles. Graham Ramshackle is the warden of both facilities, but keeps an almost constant presence at the Children's Institute where the possibility of treating the condition is most promising, relegating the responsibility of the main institute to his protégé Cressida Diligent. He raised an eyebrow as Lusi flew into the classroom. Mentally he counted the seconds it

took for her from exposure to the asymmetry to recovery, and realized her event-time for a minor event was down by twenty seconds. Both Petty Officer Parfait Plurality and Lance Corporal Synchronized Strudel had originally been the imaginary friends, able to make corrections throughout the room when she was distant or unable to reach such locations. They were her guardians, soldiers against the army of phantoms that haunted her. Since last summer the warden had given doctors Insignia Triennium and Piers Gnomon the task of impersonating both characters, which they could easily affect with a spell. It had really had clinical value, although deceitful, and had opened up a new window into her world. “You know what I think about tardiness, don’t you, Lusi?” the professor chastised as she fit into her seat. “I timed it that way, professor. If I had come in at the exact moment, it wouldn’t be chaotic” she explained, smiling behind strands of almondy-albino hair. Chaotic was the term Lusi used for situations that were asymmetric. “Very well. I hope you are ready for the pop quiz then” he countered. “What, wha, www ...” Lusi stammered, and the pencil she had just placed onto her ear tipped off and fell onto the floor, making a click-clack sound. Realizing that Lusi had not studied one drop, the class snickered and looked at her all at once. “Here is a solution, Lusi. If you pass today’s pop quiz, I will take the whole class to Wayward Café afterwards, that is if you get higher than eighty percent”, he promised while dusting off his sleeves. “You’ve got yourself a deal, professor” she winked and rifled through her stack of notebooks for about a minute as he handed out the papers. “Hmmm, what is the meaning of the adjective precocious?” she mused and finally guessed on that one after eliminating “to be brave” and “being unlucky”. The pencil on the floor had a spell that could mimic the movements of another student, but she didn’t want to risk it for Wayward Café. “That’s enough students. Pass up your tests. Moshe, put Lusi’s at the top” he implored indifferently. For the next three minutes Lusi stared at the teacher’s bald spot as she waited in anticipation. She had, of course, failed the English test, but that was not the test that mattered that day. With a gentle sigh he placed his pencil on the desk and looked up at the class, “Well, I suppose we’re all going to have a late supper”. Papers flew into the air. Lusi put a notebook onto her head like a hat and danced around as Connie drummed on the desk. They all congregated in the courtyard where there was a giant ball of yarn. Threads loosened themselves like tentacles from the ball and wrapped themselves around all the members of the party. A strange enchanted electricity

vibrated down the length of the threads. They were pulled in. Lusi could feel dimensions twist around her, and soon she was absorbed, as the others were into the inner dimension. There was, of course, another classroom inside so Ramshackle could continue to bore them during the journey. He showed them a projection of historical images, such as a picture of a big statue holding a torch, several people in ugly hats, and some woman at a typewriter, ... as if that mattered. They were going to Wayward, after all. The ball of yarn completely rolled through the forested roads, chirping with electricity. When it reached its destination, it halted. As Lusi sat at her desk she could feel something curl around her arm. It was the thread, and soon they were all thrown out into the patio of the café. “What tomfoolery!” the matron, Elector Arabella Who Sings in the Vault of Damselflies lamented. “This time won’t be like the last, matron,” the warden assured her. The Elector pointed them to the gate in the fence, “I have your favorite waiting in the backyard. Each of you take a plate and stand in line please”. Near them, a cycloptic falcon tore strips off wood off of the fence. She led the children into the backyard, retrieved her slice and directed them to the table where the plates were stacked up. Elector mumbled to herself as she noticed the girl Lusi, who was chosen by the others to stand impeccably centered as the line progressed. From her vantage point, she didn’t have a clear view of the glistening meal of the non-euclidian pizza. When Lusi got to the front Arabella leaned over the girl, “If you want me to give you a slice, you had better get in the right place”. Lusi twitched her eyes, realizing that she would have to, through force of will, step into the chaotic. A step to the right was sudden and the entire class gasped all at once. Her best friend, Connie Portfolio was having none of it, and stepped to the left to break the line, taking the burden of the other’s responsibility. Arabella turned to the glistening pizza, cut it and laid a portion onto the plate. Lusi looked gleefully at the pepperoni that were spinning like little carousels. An hour later, as the class messily indulged, the warden sauntered over to the matron, who was leaning against the brick wall of the café, her features darkened by the shadow of the overhanging roof. “Well, I would just lock them all up in there and throw away the key. That solves it, doesn’t it?”. The warden smiled and then pointed past a scene of children playing soccer with an acorn, to Lusi as she gobbled up her third helping, “What do you think of that one, Arabella”. “That one? Even if you throw away the key, it wouldn’t do any good. That one’s getting out” she jested. Another perfect line had

formed in front of the wavy, geometrically designed pizza. “Duty calls” Arabella sighed and pushed her back from the wall. That night, back at the Institute, Lusi ran down a circular staircase to the basement. There, a group of classmates were watching the classic film “When Your Shower Curtain Becomes The Sea”. Moshe and Connie sat in the front, eating a sundae together, so she went up and took the seat next to them. As they fell asleep during the opening act, Lusi snatched and finished it while watching the actress Gail Hummingbird move her fingers through her hair, and lather her shoulders as the inundation of the shower thrust itself upon her. Tropical music began to play, and a fresh mist obscured half of her body as she turned the faucet off and reached out for the robe. The actress tied a belt and examined the rippling curtain surrounding her on all sides. Ripples became waves, and the curtain became the sea. Soon, Gail was rowing through the sea on a canoe. As she reached the coastline of the first island of three islands that she would be visiting on her journey, Lusi stopped and looked behind her. The rest of the class was watching the film for the eleventh time. Standing up, she hustled to the back of the room and stood there, watching the entire class at once as they peered upon the screen. “Am I going to be here, as an old woman, watching this movie with the rest of them for the thousandth time?” she thought. Then came a realization. Gail Hummingbird had used magic ... although unintentionally to travel to a different world. That was the whole point of it, after all. What was the point in learning magic, if she was too afraid to see the rest of the world? Lusi retrieved the sundae bowl and threw it in the garbage, then went upstairs to bed. At the apex of the Institute in a chamber relegated to the warden’s private studies, Graham Ramshackle listened to the creaking of the floorboards as he paced over them. Slumbering below were all the students of the school. Although they were just a handful of children, Ramshackle thought of them as an entire generation, and felt their fate. He knew what meager conditions awaited at the true Institute, and what ridicule society placed upon them, a branding that they would have to endure. In his mind, he traveled below the floor down through the levels, and witnessed them. By this time the games and films would be wrapping up, and they did not have the fortitude, like he did, to fight the summons of dreams. If he had to count all of them, there was Pippa Sparkling Aphelion, Duncan Baker’s Dozen, Progenitor Charles, Yummy Pretzel-Sandwich, Ethereal Exoplanet, Iona Classic Analog, Prune Magnificent, Jessamine Colored Pencils, Hannah Humidity-65-Percent, Ashley X-

Coordinate, Molly Night Vision Goggles, Fiscal Year Lewis Anderson, Polly Genealogy, Archie Instantaneous, Alaska Galaxy, Nekota Exponent, Tom Hot-Plate, Taffy Air-Conditioner, Retrieving A Can Opener From The Petulant Pink Sunset, Clover Surrender-Specialist, Aquinnah Import, Zabelle Forecast, Jocasta Climber Of The Modular Mountain, Delegate Giraud Proficient, Moshe Dyson-Sphere, Bronwyn Who Hears The Answering-Machine, Pelipa Easel, Blume Ethnolinguistic, Mink Secret-Sauce Marinade, Cassiopeia Wishing-Well, Zeki O'Connor, Elizabeth Tweezers, Martin Human-Migration, Viscount Felix the Sedate, Tarquin Geometry-Harvest, Mary Cookie-Cutter Hopkins, A Gelatin Hyperventilates, Antonio Diet, Radian of Curiosity, Viscount Lachlan Cross-Examination, Charlie Who Is Born Of The Hypnotic Egnog, Connie Portfolio, I Own An Entire Oak Tree, Silk Timeline, Ian Evasive, Lysander Anniversary, Fergus Na, Hope Abbas, Picture Of Clockwise Motion Williams, Elliot Traces and of course Reclusive Watercolors who goes by Lusi. Silk Timeline is the daughter of Spider's Silk Timeline, a notable figure in the community and a major source of their funding, as well as the parents of the two young Viscounts. Archie Instantaneous was in solitary, and only let out in specified periods. The son of another wealthy donor who had murdered his teacher, after complaining that he was too asymmetrical, and then went on a killing spree, the Red Instantaneous as they had named it in the press. And although he had proven beyond a shadow that violence did not correlate with the condition, it had meant little to them. Graham rolled up the carpet and placed it at the foot of the table. Opening his desk drawer, he retrieved a wooden box, ornate with unique beauty. Kneeling on the floor, he placed the box in front of him, and began to unbutton his shirt. It was folded, and placed directly behind him. Upon the bare chest, torso and arms of the man were signs and seals. Several circular ones were appropriately placed in specific locations. With both hands he threw back the lid of the Em-box and held his hands open. The leeches climbed up the wooden edge and out onto his hands. Slowly and silently, he placed each leech in its proper place within each circular seal. It had taken him several reincarnations to be where he is now, a lantern cultic master of Emzeser. "Patron who broke free from the ocean. Patron who is generous. Patron who is the germ of waterfalls. Let me flow through space and time, realms and realities" he chanted. The seals lighted up, and the leeches detached their mouths from his body, floating back into the box which closed its lid shut tight with a thud. In his mind Ramshackle could see the most

pleasing image of Emzeser, and the form devolved into Emhan, and that form devolved into Em. He reached magical escape velocity. In an instant the lantern became a being, an entity of soul blood. The lantern shifted from the common reality of the Echo Realm, flowing into the Ocean of Zeser. Now he could hear, through the waters, the snoring of the Metacoma as it issued from the Sublime Landscape, vibrating the waters there. From the bedrock of that realm, he ventured out, following the different channels of the ocean. A most disturbing discovery, something only a lantern would notice, soon dawned upon him. In various locales, space itself had generated what could only be described as asymmetric fields of energy. He sensed the bruises stretching out towards the ends of the ocean. Something had to be done. Ramshackle returned to Zeser and called out to his patron, the Peasant, “Awaken, Father Freshwater. I must report to you”. A vast butterfly swan through the waters and transformed into the luminous peasant. “I cannot be subtle about this.. There are wounds being erected throughout the SOTA and beyond.. I would recognize their structure anywhere. They are asymmetric fields, and they will soon encroach upon us”. “Thank you for awakening me, I will be your messenger” Father Freshwater answered, and Ramshackle drifted back through the glistening surface of the barrier to his chamber, and coalesced back into organic form. Thereafter, Father Freshwater went to Emzeser and reported to him, and Emzeser went to Echo and reported to her. Echo considered the asymmetric fields, and thought them remnants of the base reality, fighting back against her mirror light. On the following morning, in her “independent class” with the professor in which he normally questioned her relentlessly on pointless subjects, she had a question for him, “can you teach me magic?”. Ramshackle said nothing, but stood up and brought her to the bookshelf. Where there appeared to be a gap between two books, he placed his hand and revealed an invisible book. “What is this, professor?” she speculated, tracing her hand across the pages. “This is more than a normal book of spells, child, it was originally an illuminated manuscript, and later the script of the spell-book was integrated within it”. “What do you mean by illuminated manuscript?” Lusi queried. “It was a book, in the old times, that was made with elaborate images and decorated with precious metals. Due to this, they carried magical potential” the warden expounded. “Does that mean there was magic before the beginning?” the student asked while coughing in response to the donation of dust. “Even in the age before the phenomenon, there are rumors of events that occurred as a result of

different varieties of books. The illuminated manuscripts were the subject of several such rumors" the warden replied, and carried the tome over to the desk. "What is that thing, professor?" Lusi asked, pointing to a certain page with the depiction of a medieval knight. "That, my child is a horse. People used to ride these big four-legged animals. They were used for riding, and to pull vehicles, and to go into battle on. That bond died shortly before what we call the modern age" he answered. "They look really cool, I wish we had one here" the girl remarked. The professor smiled and stepped to the side of the desk to make space for the pupil, "Lusi, I want you to place your hand upon the book. Concentrate. Feel the image beneath your palm. Then bring it out". Lusi did as he asked. "How am I going to do this?" she thought at first. Gradually she could feel, in exact detail, the different textures – metal, and parchment. The page began to glow. Like a caster, she directed her other hand to the mirror on the wall. It came off and folded, becoming a horse with a mirror hide. Ramshackle looked at his pupil's work. It shattered a moment later into a hundred pieces, but that was enough for him to apprehend her skill. "Mrs. Watercolors, from this day forward you will be my pupil, and I will teach you the fundamentals' ". "Grand!," Lusi thought, "now I'm the teacher's pet". A year later Lusi graduated from the Asymmetrical Institute, and was given her liberty. Her uncle, Nathaniel Watercolors, brought her back to New York. As she stepped out of the parahalf car onto the grassy yard of her new dwelling, Lusi thought to herself, "My heart is clear now". For the next three years she attended Proper Emphasis Academy, then graduated and in the two years afterward worked for Stratagem And Porous Opal Industries inventing new spells. Five years after stepping out of the car, Watercolors died in an unfortunate traffic accident. As per her request at her funeral, she was burned on a pyre of illuminated manuscripts. The flame danced and was polychromatic. The smoke meandered ceremoniously to the sky. At her arrival at the crest of the anechoic plateau, she realized, from a funny warmth between her palms, the presence of a lightbulb. Its light was softer than a normal lamp. It was enough to draw the attention of some familiar company. Standing below a willow in a courtyard was Petty Officer Parfait Plurality and Lance Corporal Synchronized Strudel. They noticed it right away. Reclusive revived again, and strode over to meet her friends, across a floor of the wind-swept grass on that fine day.

CHAPTER 26 - ECHO'S VACATION

Dreamess (who is Echo after defeating Visioness and securing the Dust-Throne) and Sam drop down to the interstellar space below the plane of the SOTA to be alone together. Dreamess, turns to her husband Sam, who is known as Dazin and is realm-king of the echo realm beside her. "There are aspects of our phenomenon which have become detached from their logic. Whether their logic has been lost or absorbed or stolen, I do not know. It is a mystery if the ascension itself is responsible" she says. Sam reaches out to his wife to hold her hand and asks, "What do you mean? What aspect do you speak of?". Dreamess sighs and replies, "I speak of the fabric of which the realm is woven. There is the chain of ascension, which links all of those from bards to mortals. That quilt appears to be whole for now. I mean to speak of the avatar chain, those two threads that form the foundation of the quilt and whose ends dangle from the body of the quilt. We should all simply be personalities of Dreamer and Dream, such that would collapse as the personalities of the echo seal bloodline generation did, but we have grown to be separate individuals. The avatar chain is now only a Link which connects us all. In this way, the logic of the avatar chain has become lost, stolen, or perhaps absorbed by the ascension itself. That is the mysterious truth that we should be all mere creations of the scilysts". Sam thinks on the matter and returns with his conclusion, "Perhaps this is the legacy of the unraveling of black rainbow, who you re-absorbed. Do you sense the presence of such a leftover contagion?". "I do not" she admits, "However, let us depart from this talk of work during our time alone together". The two embrace and Sam, who is the map unravels and the folds of the cosmic map wrap around Dreamess. After some time drifting through the void Sam notices a far-off aberration. "What is that entity? " he wonders and the couple travel closer to investigate. "It appears as a derelict Earth vessel, let us reduce our size and walk through its corridors, and see what answers it holds" Dreamess says. The two patrons reduce and conceal themselves and pass through the steel barrier as if it were tissue paper. "Let us step lightly" Sam says, "this tomb is fragile". As they walk through the corridors the skeletons of fallen sailors drift by. The face of one of the skulls points toward the wall, where there is emblazoned "Men-At-Arms", the name of the vessel. The hatch of the command chamber opens and ushers them within, where there is a large monitor. "Allow me" Sam says and waves his hand over the controls. A relic footage plays upon the screen. The hazy figure of an old man

in a white robe appears, covered in cracks that cover his shoulders and face that crackle with green light and give off emissions of green mist. “This is Commissioner Thonis of Alpha-E calling out to Men-At-Arms. Captain Frankus ... son ... Can you hear me? Four months and five days. We have been waiting for your arrival and the salvation of the cure. In the wake of the epidemic the colony has almost completely collapsed. Now, only a few remain. Even the aid of Earth may be a little too late. Son, if you are hearing this, if you can see this, the disease has taken me as well. Your mother and I have always loved you. When she passed, I thought the world had ended. Now those few that remain call out to the stars, please, do not abandon them”. A wave of horror and realization pass over Dreamess and Sam as they take in the message. “What a fate for the first colony of mother Earth” Dreamess replied, “Let us go there and see if it remains intact”. Sam absorbed the coordinates from the computer and the image of Alpha-E appeared on his body directly below the SOTA and its plane. Before the patrons stepped back into the darkness Dreamess hesitated and said, “Wait”. Her power washed through the ship until she felt something. “Come this way” she said and the two entered an area that had previously been a laboratory. She reached into the structure of the lab table and pulled out a plastic case. “What is that?” Sam asked. “This disk drive is encoded” she replied in echoes, “We will be unable to decipher it until we arrive at the colony”. Sam nods and the two trans-manifest through the hull back into the void. It is a fleeting moment before the swift patrons arrive upon the lively grassy plains of Alpha-E, and alight in the midst of the ruin of a great city. “We are too late my love” Sam laments. In the crowded center of the city there rests a tall building surrounded by a citadel. “Let us walk” she urges, and they do, walking through the grave that once was a city. “Each blade of grass here rotates and twists around slowly as if it were a screw. The effect is wonderful and mesmerizing” Sam observes. The patroness points to the crumbled shells all around them, overrun as they were with lush green vegetation like the cracks that covered Thonis, “I perceive the heritage of the culture of Earth, but with hope and the breath of new life. This is the loss of Earth’s only child”. Eventually the two make their way to the central tower. The entire building had been converted to a hive of labs, each of which ran into the next. The charred green coal-like remains of men and women rested on each lab table. The patroness approached a pile of research papers and blew until her breath had removed all but one, which she took into her hand. “Do you not see

it husband, look closely at this dust”. As he does she reveals the image on the page, a blue woman with strange ornamental ribbons from her shoulders, a cuticle from her forehead and a title at the top of the page – ‘Rikiral Female – Specimen 8891’. The Map takes the paper and holds it in his hand, “The explorers arrived on Alpha-E to find the Rikiral. They married and interbred, but by that time it was too late. First contact had become the last as the contagion, an inter-species sexually transmitted disease wiped them out and turned them into green ash”. They trans-manifest and appear before a theater sized monitor in the heart of the control room. After ordering the computer to repair itself with a brief look, Dreamess placed the disk inside and the computer there decoded the message, sending up static that metamorphosed into an image upon the screen. A security tape of the Men-At-Arms is shown and Frankus is in the command chamber surrounded by half of his lieutenants, the other half facing them. A group of crewmembers confront the captain and his lieutenants. They say Alpha-E is lost and want to return to Earth. To prove the worth of the mission, the captain is forced to make a speech. He fails, and the next scene is within the barricaded laboratory, where Frankus speaks to the camera. “Home Base, if you can hear me, then you will know the truth. They ... have gotten the better of us. I have only just awoken from an attack. My lieutenants saved me, but they are too few now. The Men-At-Arms will not be the salvation of Alpha. My home and family are lost forever. There is only one choice now. If we cannot take her back in a final engagement, then it is over. Farewell”. “According to Earth time, that was one hundred years ago” the patroness states. She extended out her arms and called out to every scrap of data hidden in the citadel to return to the epicenter, the monitor before them. Veiled in static, the image of two figures appears. The father and mother of Frankus, Thonis and his Rikiral mother when they were still young, sitting on the twisting grass of Alpha-E during a picnic. In the sky, the clouds of Alpha-E, which are like fat balloons lazily bump into one another and are sent in opposite directions. A warm smile appears on the face of the mother as she turns toward Thonis. She is wearing orange jewelry that hangs from her extensions and that appear through the distortion of the monitor as the color of sunset. Thonis wears a white uniform of an officer and his beard is still black, with only a hint of gray. Their knees rested on a checkered blanket, and there sat a woven picnic basket between them. Static lingered around them, intertwining their images and then separating them once again. As

the two laughed and spoke of some reminiscence the colors of the picture seemed to levitate and then settle again, and the two could neither discern the words between them. Thonis took the Rikiral woman's hand into his and kissed it, and the two looked away from the patrons out toward the distance. "My love" Dreamess said, "Will you join me in a picnic?". "Yes," Sam nodded. Dreamess and Sam transform into light and enter the monitor, travel through time and possess the couple. They could sense that all was braided together, the past, the future, and the world of the video. Dreamess looked through the eyes of the Rikiral mother, and turned her head left to witness her husband Sam who had inhabited the handsome body of Thonis. The woman opened the picnic basket, and somewhere in the far reaches of space and time a drifting escape pod opened, and the frozen, long dead body of the son emerged, rising into the starry landscape. The skull of the son is cloaked by the light of stars and scatters into dust. "Now you are free," the woman says. The couple dig into the picnic basket and take from it all manner of foods and treats, which they eat together. When they finished the meal, they joined their shoulders together, and relaxed as the wind blew across the grassy plain, which had melted into an endless viridescent horizontal plane. "This is a truly remarkable echelon, but now let us return," she said. The static enshrouded them and spun into a vortex. The two within the echelon materialized at the location of the picnic in the present day. The static dissipates, leaving only small traces on the surrounding environment. The two mortals part and the static bodies of the father and mother dissipate to reveal the spirits beneath. Their picnic finished, Dreamess and Sam return to the SOTA.

CHAPTER 27 - ICE CUBES

It was just one of those days when you really needed a few cubes of ice in your glass of water. Echo strode over to her refrigerator in the kitchen and took out the ice-tray, bringing it over to the circular table in the living room where a whisky-glass full of boring old water awaited on a coaster. Fidgeting with the plastic and bending it in just the right way, one of the cubes plopped out and onto the wood. After picking it up she was on the verge of dropping it into the glass when it grew just a little bit bigger. "Hmm,

it's segmenting into smaller ice-cubes" Echo thought, observing the geometric replication. Then a broad smile swept across her face as she realized the simple, unassuming thing had become a puzzle cube. "Woah ... this thing looks interesting" the player thought, twisting the faces to match the particular shades of opaqueness inscribed within the squares. Biting her tongue, she eventually cracked the code, and the mechanisms within unlocked, and the individual ice-cubes glided into the whisky glass. Then the other ice cubes skipped out from the tray, changed different colors and slid across the table, over the top and underside and over the chairs. Managing to catch the red one as it bolted across the smooth oak, she felt a tap on her shoulder. "Hey, what was that!" she exclaimed, looking over and seeing no one. Turning back around the same thing occurred again, until she realized upon examining the ice-tray that one of the cubes remained, and that whenever she turned her head the cube had grown into a rectangular solid of a few feet in height, then branched off in ninety degrees, tapping her on the shoulder, and retreating quickly to evade discovery. "Give me a break, buster, do you think I'm that easy?" Echo grinned, removing the last cube. Taking its place, the refrigerator came from the kitchen and turned into a block of ice and slid into the depression. Then a white cube turned into white vapor when she touched it, billowing out until congealing into another on the seat of a nearby chair. She ignored it, instead turning to the pink cube that had inside of its interior another plastic ice-cube tray which she retrieved, flipping it over onto the table, letting the different varieties of cubes slip out, but it was really difficult to concentrate with the blue cube running up and down and tickling her left arm. "Oh, wise guy eh" she censured, flicking it off. As all of this was happening ... halfway across the city ... Sam sat by himself in a rather put-together dining hall of the Dalmatian Dynasty Café. Having been bored for the last hour he leaned with a palm flat against his cheek, the other hand gripping a thick water-glass. Sauntering over to him from across the room a rather lovely waitress dipped over, her shadow the only respite in the dreary opulence. "Sir, would you like some ice cubes in your water?" she asked. Nodding he assented, and with a blissful smile she poured the pitcher into the glass, letting the dumb geometries clunk into that empty vessel. It was the third date she had missed that week.

CHAPTER 28 - HAIRCUT COUPON

“Looks like someone forgot to clean the table off last night” Echo grumbled, adjusting a wet lock away from her face. Sifting through the melodramatic adverts, she came upon a conspicuous coupon buried in the mess. “Free haircut? That sounds pretty good” the early bird jibed, quickly clearing the breakfast table with a sweep of an arm. Between her feet the wooden floor devoured the refuse, transferring the useful ingredients to the portion’s industrial system. Already bickering with an overcoat, Dazin came from the bedroom and marched straight to the other side of the room where the window-door hung. “Going before breakfast? I thought you liked to dine and dash” Echo observed dispassionately. Dazin turned around to see himself chastised with a head tilt. Must everything be studied with mockery? “I’m sorry, there’s a protest in Idea’s portion over logic rations and I’ve got to be there to settle the crowd” he explained, seeking reassurance. Echo’s primary scoffing reflex was the farthest thing from concord. It was one of her day’s off for goodness sake ... a rare occurrence. Shifting mood she waved a hand, condoning the breach of breakfast, “Beats me why they ration logic like that in the first place, it doesn’t make any sense”. Unfortunately, the explanation for that was also rationed. “Wish me luck” Dazin encouraged, then left tout de suite. The early bird walked to the refrigerator to procure melba toast and raspberry jam. “Hmmm ... I wonder if I used this coupon, what the result would be. I mean it sounds awfully good ... but what would be the moral implications?” she speculated, crunching down on the first course. Peacefully the ventilation turned on in the background, automatically brushing theories of air through its filter. Insignificant motes of dust, trailing like strays. Sticks of chalk rolled across the blackboard on the eastern wall, then leaped off, creating paths of residue through space. Snatching one of them she dragged herself over to the blackboard, preparing its sable face with a wet sponge. With a line drawn across the middle, on the left, she wrote, “Normal Haircut” and on the right, “Free Haircut”. It continued like that for some time as the day spread thin. With a labor across a prodigious length of the inner circumference, the Atmo became obscured until the mimicry of true night lulled those below to sleep in their miniature cities. Dazin came home from the long social escapade, shutting the door loud enough for an ordinary person to hear and be provoked. Making his way across the room, he found a full

blackboard sprawling with arrows and cursive script. Such was hardly enough to outline the ethical boundaries of each proposal. Echo clawed a head of frizzy hair, shivering with the weight of the incompatibility. “Did you even go outside today, darling?” he sought, bequeathing a handkerchief for her to clean her dusty hands. The researcher shook her head to denote the opposite. “Naturally, the key to deduce the greater moral outcome is close, I just need a few more weeks to work out the precise details” the manic scribbler envisioned. “Let me take a look at that,” he intruded, stealing the paper cut-out from the chalk-ledge, “darling, this one expired over a year ago, down here at the fine print”. Gripping both sides of her frizzy fluffball of a head, the researcher stood dumbfounded, mouth agape, “Huh? Wa? But I ...”. Seizing the moment, he drew close, pressing his chest against hers. “You know what this means right? I’ll just have to pay for a haircut” Echo whispered, voice overwrought with the grievous truth of the words. Her iris flickered with the gleam of esoteric wrath, then dwindled. Mute calmness disentangled the stress riveting every nerve and fiber of her being. The soft warmth of the Star-Map turned those aggressors to putty. “Really, I shouldn’t have gone so far this time” Dazin thought privately to himself as he ushered her back to the bedroom. Things certainly had gotten out of hand.

CHAPTER 29 - ROOFTOP ROMANCE

Dazin (who is Sam after becoming patron) scrutinized the hapless creature whose eyes were glazed over in boredom, leaning on a desk with one hand moving independently. Slow progress ceased as the writer noticed a note pop from thin air at the edge of the table. “Are you really using stationary for hand-written letters? That’s so arbitrary, we can send telegrams telepathically all the time that print our thoughts on the paper” it read, prompting Echo to lift her focus to the newcomer. Around him, the commonplace pillars were sparse, and as such the environment prolonged itself in this vacant wing of the Residence Erudite, where normally students would linger, focusing on given coursework in their own safe harbors. Dotted in the wet grass were cans openers that worked on their counterparts until the metal lids segregated, floating into the air where the metal discus extended vertically forming metallic pillars. In time, the

natural element would be subsumed. "Is there something wrong?" Dazin asked Echo, who looked forlorn enough to rattle about in grim realities as students do, then throw porridge against a wall for the purpose of self-mollification, as if the spillage was an apologist for such an injustice. "Not really, do you think people will like handwritten letters? They're very down to earth, and a real chore" Echo submitted for his approval. Of course, a bland endeavor such as this was way out of character for her, as if she were vainly striving to be swathed in crestfallen blue. "Fine, if you want to be alone, keep it to yourself" Dazin rejoined conversationally, standing firm, looking stoically into her face to acknowledge that he would stay. If one can take a dream with a grain of salt, one can also take reality with a grain of salt. There is one grain. "No, Star-Map ... wait. About last night, I just felt like we weren't really connecting" she replied. Their talk broke a moment as the patron watched the novice ways in which the nature of the room flunked in its quest to fashion itself. From the dresser beside the stream a group of polyester socks leapt out, swimming upstream like salmon until reaching the top. Crossing over to land, the socks returned down the hill and dipped their ends into the river until bloated with water. From there they separated out, finding their own places in the grass where threads unwoven collected twigs and leaves, sewing them together into clumsy branches. Echo looked ironically at the scene from the desk. Happy and fat, the socks lifted up the branches to form a mockery of a tree, until eventually a tiny hole would form on the body, and the water gushed out in one motion, deflating them again. The whole sequence of events was quite dissatisfying. "It's the same as what we normally do," Dazin admitted, blushing coyly. Echo was beginning to lose patience, even with her other half and his dashing loyalty. This was not a hard to grasp concept, after all. "I know ... did you want to try something different?" she suggested. "What did you want to do? Anything but that ..." he gulped, reminiscing back to the era of the Trail War, when he had against the Couple's wishes sought to be the compass guiding all lost souls, and their final confrontation where she had destroyed his aspirations with brazen tactics in one fell swoop. Fortunately, his lover shook her head. Nearby the desk a mailbox grew out of the juvenile grass, propped up by its wooden post. Rotating, it molded its body and blossomed into a black flower. Both of them turned to witness its development as it expelled a plume of white letter dust, obscuring the desk. Getting up, she walked over to him, waving away paper cloudiness with one hand. Dazin put a hand on her hip

as the girl laid one arm over his shoulder. Once more, they were interrupted as the stones below the waterfall towards the northern wall rolled onto ground, each tugging a strip of water in alternate directions causing them to snap as they continued their revolutions. “This room is dumb at everything” Dazin observed, until his partner with a tap on the cheek moved it back to its rightful position. “Have you read of that time when someone fell asleep on the rooftop at night?” Echo enquired, smirking in a way that was more confounding than calming. He shook his head to indicate that ... no ... he had not in fact heard of that. Letting go of his cheek, she raised her hand, tearing a hole in the ceiling with a strike of mirror lightning. Flying through the gap, they alighted on the roof of the Residence Erudite. With inscription lined circles she impregnated the clouds above with color, releasing it to fresh yawning pandemonium. Dazin tore away his human guise, resuming his original form, first with a layer of ordinary maps, then to another type. Echo zigzagged her eyes across the breadth of his body, stopping at every vertex, envisioning the true constellations of the Star-Map. “Don’t think about the color. Here ... I will lay on the roof and you on top of me” she instructed. As he began kissing her neck, she ran her fingers through his hair. Dazin looked down, seeing with pleasure filled eyes how the flunking of nature continued unabated below. Pathetic ... but beautiful. Going further, she felt the texture of the roof rough against her back. He could not help but look through the gap below, at the black flower that had just been a mailbox. They caught a breath after a hard kiss and with the clarity of dreamlike absoluteness, the empress pictured her game plan. “Do you know how swiftly a real night goes? I do. And I have a good trick up my sleeve. Let me approach your back” she whispered in his ear. Securing his consent, she passed a hand over his back along the skin and over the full length of the spine. Motioning with her hand his torso descended. Dazin groaned as the tool tightened. “This is the most important part, so don’t look at anything else but me” she trained. Dispersing, the sky let loose the first of the secondary colors. Echo felt his muscles tense atop her, constricting in pleasure. With each succeeding thrust his energy surged, growing quicker. Damp droplets fell in intervals around them, heightening their senses. Assumptions like time melted as heat fled from their bodies, mild insubstantial wisps. Their passions extinct, she flicked her wrist, untying her arms from his, and nails from his side. Vision slowly returned from addled obscurity, after four or so blinks, and watched the colors engulfed by darkness again.

Luckily none of the students saw them on the roof that evening. “Almost ... as good as I thought it would be” Echo considered, biting her tongue.

CHAPTER 30 - VELES ARRIVES AT THE CLONE PARTY

Location: Echo Realm

Date: First Age

The moment someone dropped a plate on the floor the shards congealed and became toy cars that drove off into different directions. Little white ceramic ones. Echo laughed from the absurdity of it all as they wound about people’s legs. Those sorts of practical jokes built into the magic of items were not uncommon, but at big parties like this they took on a whole new meaning. Linden Dream and Melina Dreamer had consulted with Phantomess and Idea about their son Catcher. The boy spent most days inside the realm of his glass jar of fireflies, and so they decided to relocate it to the highland cloud where glassblowers restructured it into Jar Castle. A project worthy of a year’s diligence. Echo looked around the room. Everybody was there and the music was hot. Suspended from the roof from lines of string were very large orange slices, which people wafted with folding fans until the citrus turned the appropriate color by the flavor of the wind as they cooled. For the majority of parties such as these, she liked most of all to be an objective observer, spotting the little details. “Have I ever told you that you can be somewhat of a wallflower, sister?” Em reprimanded, quaffing a goblet of seltzer. “Well, I like this party but it’s too pretentious for me” she answered subtly in the hopes of evolving a beautiful tangent of conversation. “Everyone is having a good time. To be honest ... remember what that means ... I’ve seen you listen to music in your room” her brother aimed once more, striking a blow. Echo sighed with the swell of the flashback. Not everyone had seen her at her worst, dancing to clear melodies, propelled by the whims of nature. To her, it had been like silk violins woven from magic. A resonance from the caverns of time, a voice from deep below. “This is what happens when you leave the door open” she sighed tellingly. “Is it just me or have you always been the same? I know you like to think a lot ... but come on. Echo, they’re just people, what are

you so afraid of?” Em preached as a camouflage of bodies shifted through the foreground. Echo smiled at the good roasting. “Alright, brother. Don’t forget I had to step up and help them. Locals really can’t understand what we have to deal with” the guest said, refreshing his memory. Echo motioned to Linden in the corner adjusting his spectacles to see an inscription on a local’s hand. By that time a lumbering drunkard had snuck up from behind. Echo bent as a thick arm lay over her shoulders. “Hahaha! What trouble are you planning now!” the ogre belted. Em coughed as hard sweat overcame their senses. “Valco, how much have you been drinking?” she quizzed, knowing he probably hadn’t kept count. By virtue of an interlude most of the bunch parted. Some dozed in lumps of fluffy caterpillars until the music would resume. Yet others chatted about his or her outfit. “Did I ever say I love you? Sis, I’m so big ... you’re like a little toy. I could hug you into ... juice” Valco gushed, his cheeks flushed with an obvious hue. Echo closed both eyes as formulae rambled through her mind, “Decisions, decisions”. Fresh ink hiding behind her lids. “Good notes brother, and you as well. I suppose it’s more reasonable to party” she avowed. Fortunately, there was one trick in particular that she had been honing for quite some while. “Does anyone want to see something that will make your eyeballs glow? Gather around” the spokeswoman promised, ushering them from clusters of gossip to the oval of an expectant crowd. People were worn enough from dancing that they couldn’t resist. Giddy whispers traced in cycles around her, “First of all, I’ll need a regular number 2 pencil. Can you spare one sir?” she asked, plucking it from his pocket. They were too enamored to notice the injustice, “Ask yourselves this, would you say this is just an ordinary pencil? Maybe a second ago, before I hollowed it out into a tiny dimension and filled it with light while you weren’t looking”. Ousting the eraser with a flick of her thumb, a feeble cone of light appeared from the end. A precursor to set the mood. Slowly, deliberately, another object pushed through, laboring like an octopus. “Is it a blob?” the crowd demanded as they watched the anomaly hover, a silvery globe covered in scales like a fish. Echo grinned as the disco ball eclipsed the room with color. Surely that was something that they had never seen before. Roars erupted in mild contagion. Yet soon enough hands and bodies resumed their rhythmic work. The showman stood there, adamant amongst the dancers, an axis in all their cycles. Looking out past the rest, straight through the kaleidoscope and its counterfeit atmosphere of reds and purples, she saw her sister, against the wall in

the back, running her hands through Zenith's blue hair. Fresh lips governed the drift of his body ... every movement. "Onsuru, do you think you should ... in public?" the showman thought mercilessly. Echo felt her shoulders shake and chest hesitate. Down her arms a moisture trickled, most likely sweat borne from the prick of desire. The showman began to pant repeatedly. Marveling lasted a few moments until she couldn't stand it anymore, and moved away, back to the corridor where more paths awaited. It was then that the conscious welled in full with a certain thought. Inclinations of a kind she had not felt since departing from the bubble. "Am I this lonely for real?" Echo asked, studying her own thoughts. In regions of obscurity, she could feel Sam's aspect imprinted, his warm sounds channeling through the emptiness. A kind of physical awareness salvaged all the pieces of his story. The cave, the look in his eyes when he saw her. Echo felt her health's compass oscillate, and fled into a private room owning a balcony as a rolling ache thumbed against her heart. Wrenching a chalice and bottle of seltzer from the cabinet, she angled it just right and poured the liquid to the surface. "If anyone knew what I'm really like, they wouldn't listen" Echo whispered, shielding her loneliness even from her own grasp. His beautiful name tunneled through the past into reality. Sam! How could anything be that gentle? Before the drink could touch her mouth, a notion struck. "Not a bad idea" the wallflower certified, then began at once, sketching inscriptions more toilsome with fine intricate detail. Plumes of mist broadened. The woman looked at the summoning. Indelibly feminine. Meddlesome eyes. Her avatar's face. For the moment she would have to do. Awaiting the right moment, the right second after the cloud's evaporation, the lonely girl took hold of the other. In the nearby room the party did not flag in strength. It had vanished with forgetfulness. Both continued, deep in the throes of need. Formulae wept from her body with each kiss, each erasing evidence of what came before. Far flung sighs. Heightened emotions. Echo took a reprieve from her consort to look around. Most certainly, their only voyeur was the balcony, "Let me give you some of this seltzer. I know you like me. We can drink from both sides while I hold the chalice like this". Steps traced down the corridor. Hinges swerved fast as two people came in through the open entrance. "Oh!" Onsuru screamed. Bashfully, the avatar faded. Leaning over the rail, Echo spat her mouthful out to the highland cloud. "Is it alright if I can get a little privacy here? Where are you going anyway, you two scared the willies out of me. Of course ... you're looking

for a room too, right?” the runaway guessed. She had defected from the party in good order. Followers were not greatly anticipated. “Echo, that was kinda ... weird what you were doing right there” Onsuru pointed, a bit whitened by nature’s abuse. Her sister clumsily took a few steps backwards and tossed the chalice as well, “Well, it was only ...”. “Are you okay?” Zenith delved. Hands waved to dispel the antiquated truth “Yes of course I’m okay! I just had too much seltzer and got carried away”. She guaranteed it with a dumb smile as her heart larked intrinsically. “Don’t you think it would be better if I could explain this ...” Onsuru began in familial unease. Ideally, even magic had its limits. But that was not the case today. “Please don’t say anything,” she begged. Zenith turned to his wife to gauge the reply. As he did, the patron closed the distance, enlisting them into confidence. Back at the main hall glass spinners flaunted their art, blowing replicas for dancing partners in the midst of calm music. For an hour the enjoyments ebbed predictably. Feast tables lost their wealth by degrees as people meandered about. The last leaves were dipped in butter for the mirthful revelers. Even Valco didn’t seem to have much inspiration. Aimlessly, rumors began to flow about some well outside depressing the cloud. A few had seen it through windows facing the manor. Echo felt more at ease to be back with the others. Things would finish up briefly, along with the memories. Recklessness can always be forgiven. Then it happened. Loud thuds hammered down the gates. Sopping wet, a wild creature passed by the threshold. Echo held her breath with the rest. Looking closer, she could see it was a woman, face masked by long hair drenched in well-water, black as night. Vestments of the chalice curled around her body like a helix, metallic pieces. Quickly, before anyone could move a muscle the floor below transmuted into a whirlpool and absconded the revelers to the lower floor, leaving only her and the newcomer. Echo forced her back against the wall, appalled with sudden fear. It paced over the expanse methodically, “I swam to freedom from the whirlpool. Elder, do you know who littered this cup?”. Veles arrived that day, the patron of the whirlpool. And of course, no one had truly understood the anachronisms.

CHAPTER 31 - MOTIF PORCELAIN PILLOW AND THE PUMPKIN PIE REALM

Location: Echo Realm

Date: Second Age

Meanwhile, in portion Leffel a trial was underway for a draft dodger who was conscripted for maintenance service aboard the mausoleum ship Appropriate Management. Mr. and Mrs. Porcelain-Pillow asked for leniency for their son, Motif Porcelain-Pillow, who slouched casually against the defendant's chair. Mrs. Subsidized Porcelain-Pillow stood up and implored the panel, "he's really a responsible son, I promise you. It's just that he didn't realize what was asked of him, and he didn't know what would happen if he declined ... isn't that right dear". "Thought of his family first" Mr. Measurement Porcelain-Pillow called from his chair. He sighed as he looked over to the boy, who was not a boy, but a grown man of thirty that still resided at their house, unable to find work and worthless in the magical ability. The panel was not swayed and called forth the defendant. "The letter that was sent is not a meager invitation. Can you say that there is a suitable reason you declined that letter?" a panelist asked. Motif shrugged carelessly, "I just didn't want to do any of it, I'd rather do something else". At that, the panel sent him back home, on temporary house arrest. At dinner, an argument ensued. The man pointed to a pumpkin pie that rested in the middle of the table to illustrate his point. "I would rather put my foot in that pumpkin pie!", and grabbed the pie, throwing it down on the ground. He let down his foot, placing a footprint into the substance of the pie. Exiled to his room, he hid the leftover pie with the footprint underneath the bed so they would not see it when they checked in on him. Two weeks later, as the family slept calmly in the quietude of confinement, a visitor forced open the lock on the front door and made his way up the stairs to the man's bedroom that had always been his bedroom. Rugged face with a two o'clock shadow, neck wrapped in a red scarf, wearing a black cloak. "No sign of life ... good" he observed as the man's chest rose and fell. Crawling underneath the bed, he found what had beckoned him and stared into the print. (If you haven't figured it out already, it became a realm). With minimal effort the visitor fell into the world of the print, and found himself in a clearing of a forest, whose soil had the characteristic tint of orange. Hiking through the

surrounding landscape, he came upon a conclave of pumpkin-pie brick homes making up a rural village tucked between a high hill and a lake that also resembled a footprint. Introducing himself to the locals, he soon gathered they did not know of an outside world, nor where they came from. It dawned on him that they may be born of the realm, but his advanced vision allowing observation of their spirit bodies quickly dismissed that option. As the locals toiled on a new homestead, the man climbed to the top of the hill, where there was solitude to think. “Why was I drawn here? This may be the most humble and dreary realm I have ever set foot in” the visitor said to himself as he looked down on the villagers with slight disdain. Then, the air began to vibrate, and a mist erupted in front of him, dancing like a dervish. Ebbing and collecting into a more recognizable form, the mist began to speak. “You are not who I asked for, who are you?” it queried, still holding back its true form. “Then it was you whose call I heard. I am Negash Groy, priest of the cult of Eleven Twelfths-Month, who is known as Leffel”. “Your patron is the grandson of Echo” the mist replied, prompting Groy to nod in agreement. When the mist saw that acknowledgment, it began to ebb even less, until the formless aura molded itself into a recognizable shape. “Have you no shame?” Negash rebuked, seeing that the mist had fashioned itself into a likeness of echo, “What you see is what you get. But you are not the man that I called for. I am indeed echo, or that which is the residue of an avatar once dispelled. I once loved my other half, in the short time that I was called into existence. She was so beautiful, her lips so perfectly shimmering with mirror light. Through the eons I drifted. Now I am briefly to wither away into nothing”. Upon hearing this, Negash tore off his red scarf and threw it onto the ground, “Disgraceful! There is much I need to know before I can verify that”. As the mist spoke, it took on more and more of the appearance of echo, but an ancient, more primitive form, “time is slipping away. But this realm called to me. Even though there is no substitute for love, we are compelled to find one when we are without. My craving began long ago, as I consumed the soul ghosts that I came across and digested their memories. They are the folk of that village. Now my craving is of something more solid”. “What do you require to find rest, spirit?” Negash, gritting his teeth behind his mouth as he tried to come to a decision on the abrupt and overwhelming discovery, asked. “I will call to him that will be guardian of the print. A man who didn’t want the madness of the other world. A man who just didn’t want to do any of it, who’d rather do

something else” the mist answered. “Truth be told, I am glad you did not wish me to be king” Negash quipped, but then, swallowed hard in awe as he saw her lips, shimmering with mirror light. With that, he was lifted up by a vortex of mist, back to the underside of the bed. Crawling out, he looked to the alarm clock. It was about one thirty in the outside world. Standing over the man, he whispered in his ear as he slept, and told him of the maiden of mist who awaited his arrival. The visitor walked down the stairs and departed through the door whose lock he picked with a spell. Shortly after, Motif stumbled into a new realm that he believed at first was a dream. Climbing to the heights of a hill, he saw the maiden of mist. “Young man, scoop up a handful of the soil and feed it to me” she ordered. Like a weak bed-stricken hospital patient lifting a head up for a meal, the maiden of mist partook of the handful of pumpkin pie until his palm was clean. “Without love, I will wither away, but this pumpkin pie tastes good” the avatar exhaled. Then as she vanished the man saw the village resting below the hill, tucked away besides the lake.

CHAPTER 32 - UFFHILL AND UMLAVE - UMLAVE RETURNS TO THE OLD QUEENDOM

“Oh, I love red velvet cake, it’s so gory it makes me feel like a gladiator when I eat it” Echo said to him at last night’s party as they lounged in the corner, presumably for the sole purpose of making him laugh as she stole a slice. Now he was thankful that there were leftovers in the refrigerator, so he took out a plate and sat at the end of the dinner table to finish it off. “Apparently, I’m going to have to finish this myself” Uffhill smiled, thinking of how Umlave had left days previous, down through the chamber on some personal journey to Recapture for a stop, then to the ruins of her old queendom to see the trail gate once more. Since she had forgotten to turn off the television, the static had fallen off and collected into a ball that bounced around in the living room. It didn’t make any noise so it wasn’t really a problem. He looked back at the plate. Eventually the piece was reduced in size to such a degree that he scoured the surface for a final bite. “Hey darling, did you save me a piece?” Umlave asked, plopping camping bags onto the floor. “I’ll trade you for souvenirs” he offered, leaning over for a kiss as she sat down at

the table besides him. There's something very attractive about a plate that's been scraped clean, almost peaceful, like the mind's resting state. Uffhill's eyes glanced up, then, kicking the floor the chair scooched back almost a foot. Every so often patrons evolve and take on new forms. That was common knowledge, until it happens to someone you know. "Do you like my new look?" Umlave asked, sliding her hand across the top of her chest over a body of paper skin tattooed with intricate mandalas of brash calligraphy. "How did you ... is that paper?" he gaped, studying the overt difference. There is something about the peristalsis of red velvet cake that is more soothing than an ordinary swallow, and it turned his mind to the calm of the remainder of his body. Umlave watched him stare as the ball of tv static arced over the position of his head from farther away in the living room. "Good read darling, it is a little less smooth than normal and more fragile, but a good fit" she replied. "I would think so, it's just a little ... different" the patron countered. Imperceptibly shifting back in the chair, she redirected her line of sight to the tarnished plate of smeared crimson, "do you like different?". Abandoning his fear, he interlocked his fingers into hers, pressing them tight, "I've always loved different". Paraphernalia from the camping trip crumbled out of the condensed mass of the suitcase between the oval shaped mouth of the zipper. It fell onto the floor diverting his attention, allowing her to return hers to its previous station. Applying the other hand, he polished it with the inquisitive cheek of his palm. Umlave felt a compelling draft of affirmation pass through her, the blurry aspects of his features became definite. But she should have known better. "This looks like wallpaper, all these patterns ..." he witnessed, until the object was retrieved in a quick singular motion. "oh, so it's like wallpaper is it? You just like it because it reminds you of that girl you dated when you were a local on the trail ... what was her name again? Va?" she charged. "That one was too fierce for her own good, but that's long gone, don't look at me like that" he relented, parrying off guilt drenched stares in quick succession. "Alright, if you can tell the difference then ... that's a start" she said, sensing his keen juvenile anticipation in the unwrapping of a flimsy garment. Heeding an unspoken request Umlave, without moving a finger tore back the paper layer covering both her hands, wrists and the portion of her head to her shoulders. "How did this happen?" Uffhill cried. The harmless ball of static had hit the back of his chair at just the exact moment that the remainder of his wife was exposed to room temperature. "So first I meandered

through Recapture. There is barely anything there except for a few dough farmers, and some surviving dreamstuff golems. Eventually I got to my old queendom. Happily, those oaks that I loved so much survived, whole acres of them. That fact made me feel pretentious, but in a good way. Then I went further, past the estate of verdant simplicity which a local is preserving. It was pretty boring until I found the highway and went down that way through Desensitize, to the main square where the ruins of the old trail gate are piled up. Looking them over I realized something fascinating. The Couple and Echo have shed so many secrets, I doubt they can remember even one out of ten of them". "Keeper, the realm was a lot simpler back then, what were your first thoughts when you saw those undisturbed ruins?" the patron requested, his solicitation tinged with the gold of nostalgia. Pouring through the medium of the fiefdom, the divisions of the apartment were substituted by walls of memory. Both listened, hearing birdsong through the dense aether laden wind. "I was gatekeeper" she whispered to herself, remembering the days that she would permit those who sacrificed a dream for the Couple to float through mandalas which she had crafted. Examining the signature of the ruins, a less than obvious thought occurred, "the gate is a scar? A disembodied scar from the moment that Echo's ghost escaped and returned to her body? Normally a ghost exists a body incorporeally without creating a scar". So much made little sense. There was the Cezit Order, who were dreamstuff replicants that unknown to her dwelt within the trail gate. "That is why whispers flowed into the gate" she said, "and the order would call to collect the whispers and usher them unto the gate, and they would themselves hide by tucking themselves within a whisper and leading the others". This had all been told to her by Valco. "Wait just a minute!" he shouted, halting the perceptual retelling. "Yes, I thought that hint to be rather confounding as well, but it's true" the patroness guaranteed, batting back neural ripples of incredulity. In Uffhill's mind, the previous night flashed before his eyes, the way Echo was reclining on the chair, happy as a lark from the synthesis of overeating, good company and four cans of cherry omelet soda. Because of everything, he had not given a second thought of when she thieved a slice of red velvet cake from off plate. Ideas quickly reshaped themselves, conclusions snapped into place like ruthless architecture. "Are you telling me that she ... we all knew she was different ... that she is less perfect in a certain way than an average local? If the ghost tore through and made a scar, it can only mean she was ... let me rephrase that. Echo is

delicate. Is that what you are saying?” he questioned, a mask of epiphany causing her to witness the boldness in the features of his face, something that had many a time belonged to her in full. “Obviously when you take into consideration the past eons, she has grown a lot stronger with every strife that we have faced” Umlave answered, comfortable in her ability to lecture on the prose of history. Drawing him back into the fiefdom, he saw Umlave retrace her steps to the Pyramid of Darkness where the dust of the book of whispers had become the southern desert. Near the periphery some clusters of rocks were hollowed out by the wind into elongated flutes. Along the length of one of them was a caveat scratched into the stone, but of course it was meant for mortal men. An elderly hermit crab crouched by the end of one of them, sitting in the hollow and stroking a long white beard with its claw, regarding her. “Anyway, before I was so politely interrupted, I found an oasis at the center of that territory with a crisp pool ...” she visualized, returning to the story, “Floating to the bottom I was distracted by the motions of life and without realizing it became embedded into the rock beneath a bed of coral. Colorful entities that lived in that stratum pulsated around me. Then cracking open, the rock gave way, and my body had become this white sponge coral. I thought, ‘I am like that sponge within the center of the skull’. I let the little fish and other things swim between the tiny spaces, tickling me. Have you ever been tickled under water? It is really great. Then propped my hands over the edge, lifting myself back up onto the sand. Before I knew it, a portion of sand which had been called by the wind rushed up to meet me and washed over my body until igniting in flame. Dust became pulp and molded itself as paper, draping over my figure. I looked over at the paper of my torso and saw mandalas imprinted by the ink, alternating white and black” the patroness visualized in words for his consideration. It was the ink of the book of whispers. “Did you hear the secret of the book of whispers?” he pleaded, needing the atoms of veracity hidden in the kernels of magic, wreathed in formulae and hypothetical gossip. Looking across the table, he examined the white sponge coral, porous and in the shape of human beauty. “Just as the Couple performed the RODI, ushering dream from their minds to the base reality, I am that semipermeable barrier of the skull from which it can flow through numerous pores” she pontificated, then stuck out a pink tongue which now had the character of the cerebrum. When tempers soar, a good principal to rely on is restraint, but that was not the emotion that prevented her from telling him the rest. That was

shame. For as the patroness returned to normality from hyperventilating at the strain of quick evolution, she could feel a burning sensation, and stuck out her tongue. Resting on it was a drop of coffee like a perfect pearl that one would find within a clam. It lifted off of her tongue and hovered in the air before her, then vanished. It had happened so quickly that she could not in hindsight genuinely tell whether it was of importance. One cannot lose face when in the pursuit of a listener, flighty as they are. The events afterwards were of little import, so she briefly summarized the trek backwards. How at the outskirts of the oasis was a tribe that instead of living and dying transitioned through states of visibility and invisibility, how they enjoyed her constellation salamander form and the way the nodes of grain-stars emit light which diluted and draped the body of the amphibian. Satisfied, they let her gobble them up in her mouth and waddle back up to district, where calling upon the skulls embedded in the fabric of the wreckage of Recapture they flocked to her and under her command destroyed the trail gate, it's substance being communicated to her body by the action of their destruction. Miserably, a shockwave from the Reverse Incarnation, Visioness's final attack against Echo in their battle struck her, and the tribe were forced to nurse her back to health over a day, feeding her bowls of soup and wafting the aroma into her face with fans. "I brought them back with me to the porton. They all work now in an underpants factory, but it is much better than living in the desert" she finished. "Darling, that's enough, your new look is great. I love it" Uffhill relented, his mind weary from heeding such a enterprising memory. She smiled back, then noticed how a smear of the red velvet cake remained at the corner of his mouth, so she tore off a piece of her paper-skin and used it as a napkin to dab the mess away. Maybe one day ... practice for when they had a baby. In the other room the ball of static rebounded until it became stuck between the space of the couch and the wall ... that place that's really hard to get out, and where no one would find it until much later. Uffhill sighed with exhaustion and leaned back in his chair. Thoughts of the transformation revolved in his mind. A wife made of paper and coral. He was not amused. And that old flame that wasn't flammable was starting to sound pretty good.

CHAPTER 33 - PHANTOMESS AND THE PARENTS

Phantomess reclined against the driver's seat, attuned to the whisper of the falling rain as it tapped against the windshield. A dense sheet rolled overhead as the portion's skies wrung water from its roiling heights. In all directions huddled a traffic jam of cars, the casual rude horn peeling before its consequence faded away, as some eagerly squeezed through narrow spaces. Joining the ranks of others in anonymity never failed to be an unsung enticement. And every so often a patron could foster their idleness with a good ride, rather than exerting themselves through phenomenological motion. Tiny paths of droplet water weaved their way to the bottom. Not much could be seen without effort. The pitter pat worked its way through, constant, softening the memory of discontinuous labors that had come before. Cilia from another vehicle brushed against her driver's side door, but before long she had descended through the architectural pillars of the inner city to where a parking lot beckoned to wet, lonesome portioners. Near the entrance an attendant in a rubber smock offered her a mint from a bowl, which she took to shield the skin from stray raindrops. Besides him a woolly partner wrapped in the comfort of his own beard procured a flashlight, directing a blue cone of light to the floor. Throwing a handful of sand, a fraction of it stayed in the grip of the beam rather than falling. He wiggled his fingers, causing the sand to fashion itself into the frame of an umbrella. Phantomess made haste across five blocks and an intersection to the building that would host the local chapter of Concerned Parents, a group of ladies dedicated to sharing their own narratives in the art of childrearing. As they all were dueling with a common obstacle. Greeting her, a circle of empty chairs occupied the center of the room. Around the periphery, loose confederations of society clumped. "Okay everyone, it's eight o'clock, get to your chairs and we'll begin," the moderator squawked. By now the mint's effects began to wane, and so steering her nervousness the patron took a seat among the other ladies. For some unknown reason, none of them recognized her. "Before we begin, I just want to welcome a new entry. Phan, can you stand up and introduce yourself?" she mentioned. "First of all, I'm just looking to ace the test in motherhood, and be bold and agile like a hawk. A hawk-mother if you will". One of them on the other side of the circle shot up and flapped her arms like a bird, earning her a second round. For the first half of the evening the talk proceeded at an

even pace with the recruits trading anecdotes, sharing strong and certain wisdom. The moderator certainly had moxie, the patron thought. Her questions were riveting, multifaceted. But then things took a hasty turn. “Can anyone give us some highlights on discipline?” the moderator inquired, pointing to one of the more reticent mothers that had not been eager enough to contribute. “Um ... I guess I take his phone away when he doesn’t do what I ask” she shared politely. Phantomess couldn’t for the life of her understand why people used phones so often instead of just sending thoughts through the fiefdom, but that wasn’t on the docket today. Most treated that aspect as if it was old fashioned etiquette. And to be honest, the patrons did as well, as such intimacy is rarely needed in the daily frolic of social cares. “Ha! If you want results honey you have to take their spells away. “Hmm ... I’m not sure that is such a good idea” Phantomess thought quietly to herself. Then the lady beside the speaker, her green shawl still dripping, let go of all her bottled-up angst in one quick pass, “Have you heard of Tame Yonder Frisbee? You know how they do that spell, turning frisbees into big platforms that hover above the ground and spin around. Whole groups of them ride the platform. They try to hold on instead of spinning off, and if one gets to the middle they transform into a strange geometric object with a bunch of vertices. Every week they keep thinking up other games. Of course, I had to take that one away from Danny when he crashed a frisbee into grandad’s house. We had to completely remodel the kitchen”. Phatnomess was starting to become concerned with how much magic these parents were willing to take away, but couldn’t help but keep from listening. The lady on the third chair to the left had one to even top that, “So, I’ll tell you what I did for my Jenny when she wasted her whole allowance. If you’d ever visit my house, you’d see those nature posters in her room, all these fields of beautiful sunflowers ... tall and yellow and bright and she is a vegetarian. So, one day I told her we were going on a road trip. You should have seen her bouncing when she saw out the window where I was taking her. First time myself, but I couldn’t get distracted. In the middle there’s this little picnic area where the trail leads to. When she was done spinning around, looking at all the happy faces she came over to me and said, ‘Mom, what are we having for lunch?’. Oh ladies, that was my que. I took out the chart of all the onsurus she wasted that month so she knew I had pinned her down good. Then I took out of my purse a bag of sunflower seeds. Not only is she a vegetarian, my daughter loves sunflowers so much she won’t even eat the seeds. ‘Except

for today' I said, 'you have to eat this whole bag or I'll never give you an allowance again'. Jenny stood a few feet away. I sat on the picnic table and watched her, slowly filling her mouth with the seeds, handful after handful, crying like a puppy. At the end, I couldn't help myself!" and she started laughing with the rest of them, manically like an evil mastermind. "Wait a second, that is really cruel!" Phan protested, leaping from her chair. Directly across the moderator turned to face the woman who had the nerve to cripple the progress of the proceedings, "Phan, you had your turn a minute ago. Maybe you should grow up and be a real mother, rather than standing there whining". "I thought you were being impartial but I guess eventually the truth comes out. My son would never get that hard discipline. We have an understanding, and he's too good for that" Phantomess lashed back, tired of their simple-minded remedies. "He's probably a grown child!" the moderator hurled back, smiled audaciously. Phantomess shook, red-faced with countless eons of quiet restraint boiling to the surface. "I'll give you one that's so good you'll never forget it. Try doing this for one week, Phan, and I'll let you join our spell society without dues for a year. From the look of you it's clear you're a real outsider. Maybe you came to the portion recently, but you don't have to be alone, so listen. Ladies, this is real talk. My son Hobby didn't bring back what I told him to from the store, so guess what I did next. All of his magic. Gone! That's right honey, if you want to punish him good, you have to take all the spells away. Drain them dry" the moderator declared, keen beyond words. At that Phantomess had enough of the common rhetoric, and stood to leave. "I thought I would get something useful here, but I suppose I was wrong" and shunned the alpha as she swept to the doorway. Down the corridor there was a lunch area with snack counters where she stopped to rest, taking a deep breath. "Perhaps if I had just disciplined Catcher by taking away all his magic ... then maybe he would have grown as normal and I would not have waited endlessly through all those long ages. Perhaps if I had done things differently. But would that have worked? Any other remedy may have been effective for a child patron in his condition. Every day in perpetual youth ... Never! No, I would not have hurt him like that. It goes too far. My pain was the price for that, so how dare she say otherwise! I'm going to have a word to that so-called moderator's face" she proscribed, catching her breath with both hands gripping the head-cushion of a booth table. Phantomess headed back into the room where the other had continued onto another topic. "Look who it is ... come back to

apologize mam?" the moderator offered generously. "When I said it was cruel to take away your kid's magic, I was giving my honest opinion, so actually I think it's you who needs to apologize to me" the newcomer countered, feeling sure of herself. The chair screeched slightly as the moderator rose, walked through the circle to the outside where the other woman stood patiently. For some reason the moderator thought it right to stick her nose quite close to her own, "You wanna rumble lady?". Along the circle of chairs, the concerned mothers glanced at each other, expectantly. "What do you mean ..." Phan began, except her sentence was cut short by a hard strike with the palm of a hand, reddening her cheek like a beet. "Nothing can happen, so I have to extinguish all my magic" the patron thought before returning the gift. By the way she had not taken her spectacles off, the moderator was clearly not expecting that. They crashed to the floor, shattering the glass. Zestfully the circle of concerned mothers cheered them on as they brawled across the room. The patron shouted back at the other person in her way, as every brush of hands endowed pain to her face and chest. More people from the other floors began to flock in to witness the scene, crowding the room, until a cultic officer barged through. "Enough of this, mam!" he cried, locking her arms behind and walking her back. "Don't get me, she is full of hopscotch!" Phan hollered as the crowd of people huddled in the room belted out in reply. Most of the people on the left side, to where her back faced were rooting her on, while those on the right favored the moderator. Escorted from the room to the hallway, the newcomer was calmed and sent back to the parking deck. It was just a little better on the road, with much less spoiling traffic. Despite that, the rain had not ceased an undying flow of monotony, drumming against the windshield. Thoughts of Catcher and making breakfast day after day flashed in her mind like a spotlight. Cereal and bowls and spoons and pouring. Phantomess grumbled, awaiting the turn that would veer away to the west. It was something else, however, that could not melt away from all the sights and sounds. It stuck in her brain, an impenetrable tack, "Very annoying! If I had taken his magic away, this never would have happened".

CHAPTER 34 - CRILLI AND DELK IN THE ATTIC

In the middle of the afternoon there came a very annoying tap on the door. “My sweater is so warm, I don’t even want to get up,” thought the girl on the couch. She had stuffed herself into the cushions at just the right angle, that it was now almost inconceivable to get out. But then the tapping came again. “Uhhh” groaned Crilli Feranorme, sliding out of the indentation. At the door was Delk Northway, her best friend from academy, in a muted yellow, her hair tied into a long braid. Looking down, Delk could see her friend was grasping onto a pint of Major General Tim’s Smushy Cream Ice Cream and watched with sorrow as she lodged a spoonful into her mouth. “Did you come here to tell me it’s going to be okay, because it’s not” Crilli mumbled and returned to the couch, laying on it like a life-raft. Earlier that day, they had the quarterly assessments. Delk passed with flying colors. Crilli did not. “Girl, I know how hard you worked for this. I’m just ... really sorry” Delk offered whilst trying to separate her friend from the pint unsuccessfully. “He didn’t even give me a chance to look over the answers” she moaned, tossing a pillow onto the floor. “Well ... just don’t think about it for a minute. Did I tell you about what me and my cousin did at her house last weekend? You’ll like it, I promise” she redirected. “Isn’t her name Lessy or something” Crilli recalled, trying to picture them together. “That’s my father’s side of the family. She’s Mell Lessy” Delk explained while watching her friend wiggle her sock-covered toes as she rested her feet on her lap. “Ohhh” Crilli answered, authorizing her to continue with the story for the sake of killing time. Consciously, the friend tried to wipe the traces of solace from her voice and returned to her tale, “Anyway ... We were both going to my grandmother’s house to clean out her attic, and dad was going to pay us both twenty onsurus. He dropped us off and gave us the key and the whole place was abandoned, since she was away with mom in London. So, we went upstairs to the attic, and it was filled with cardboard boxes, all dim and musty and gross”. “Wow, this is so freezing exciting” Crill whined dramatically, and then winked at her friend with one eye to keep going. “Let’s see ... we had been working for about an hour and a half when we started to get really bored. About a third of the room was still left, when we noticed that sitting on a cardboard box was an old dusty desk lamp, the type with a lampshade, and sitting across from it about two feet away was a tiny side-table with another lamp on it”

Delk related, half lost in the story, half present. Her chin resting on the pint, Crilli thought to herself as she stared blankly at her friend, “Darn, is this like ... reverse therapy?” then blurted out, “... so, how much did you get for them?”. Delk pushed her feet off of her lap mercilessly and gave her friend a look that made her slap the lid back on the pint and pay attention, “Mell and I didn’t take it, and don’t interrupt when I just got to the good part. Anyways, before I could pick up the lamp Mell threw her arm out and stopped me in my tracks, then kneeled down between the two of them, looking into like, thin air or something”. “What did she see, was it a ghost of some kid that was haunting the attic?” Crilli anticipated, finally leaning up from the indentation. “No, it wasn’t that. Mell kneeled down and saw that there was a thin thread, like a thread of dust or a spider’s web or something connecting the two lightbulbs. The lampshades were missing, long gone probably” Northway described, while picking up the pace of the story with a new swagger. As the visual sank in Crilli could see the line connecting the two nondescript lamps in the decaying attic, and felt a thrill pop up as she realized that the boredom of the beginning was merely a setup, a ploy for the fancy part, “That means! Yes! You and Mell used that spell, didn’t you!”. Delk began again, saying, “Better believe it. Just the one we learned in homeroom. So, Mell and I used it as we jumped up onto the one on the right, and we were as tiny as little ants, but still people. The glass was like a hill, and looking across to the other side, it was like a mile. At first, I was really getting vertigo until Mell was all, ‘This is easy, Delk. Just blink and I’ll be on the other side’. She went first, and she had really good form, with her arms stretched out for balance. Mell’s the best tightrope walker”. “Then what happened! Did she fall?” gasped the couch potato. “I was cheering her on the entire time, but it was like a breeze to her. Step by step by step. And I was all ‘Oh my flipping flop!’ and she was on the other side and threw up both hands and gave the thumbs up with both” Delk said, laughing and then grinning as her friend slapped her leg with surprise. “Then, it was my turn. First, I tried looking down and I was really scared and ran back up to the top. I was laying on my side, just like you for like five minutes. Mell shouted over across. I heard her say, “don’t be scared, Delk! You can get over”. The glass was really opaque and it was hard to see through but I could. For a second, I had forgotten that I was tiny and that it was a lightbulb, but then I got my grip. The first step was really the hardest. The thread bent under my weight and I tried not to look down. Instead I looked over across

the expanse to the other side, where Mell was waving at me to go faster. When I finally got to the other side, and stepped onto the other hill, it lit up, and then we looked across and the other hill had lit up too” she bragged a bit as she recalled the feat. “That sounds so fun, Delk. That’s so mega-flamboyant. And I bet you were really brave, just like a tightrope walker. But did I tell you what happened to me and my brother last Monday?” Crilli asked, springing back to life. “No, you didn’t tell me” Delk admitted, grabbing her braid and twisting out the loose trickster mist before throwing it back over her shoulder and slouching back herself. “Greg and I found the old trampoline in the closet, hidden away in some chest so we couldn’t find it. We put it back together, then my brother ran down to the shed and came back up with a chainsaw and went around the edges cutting off the fabric until the circle dropped down. Then we climbed on and started jumping up and down onto the empty air that was really bouncy, and it was a lot of fun. Then Greg got to jump higher than me during the game, so later I told him that the door in the third-floor walkway had coins in it. I stood back. That’s the closet that mom stores all her presents in, and when he opened it, they all came tumbling down over him, burying him in like a hill of those big ugly gift-wrapped presents, and I laughed as he looked up at me with those dorky glasses” Crilli chuckled to herself, remembering the con. “You mean glasses like mine?” Delk exclaimed, playfully taking it as an insult. Getting up, Crilli grabbed her friend’s glasses and put them on, then leaned over her intensely, “girl, can you tutor me, so I can be smart and freezing good like you?”. Knowing her work was almost done, Delk slid a pillow over the pint, hiding it from sight, “alright ... if it means that much to you”. Crilli smiled and offered back the glasses, “thank you, girl”. Breathing a sigh of relief, Delk put them back on, seeing the smudge materialize. It was her friend.

CHAPTER 35 - DGU BRAIN MOUNTAIN

Around the study hall of David Gold University, the usual crowd were tending to their studies. Some strode along the bookshelves, picking up tomes of their liking. Others bent over their papers at the many oaken tables clustered together in the middle of the hall itself. Here and there, students were distracted by various happenings on their

laptops, abandoning their papers for the time being. Near the right-hand side, Silvana Newcomb grazed over the titles of volumes pertaining to Euclidian Husbandry. Near her were her friends Jefferson India Lane and Vibonee Roe, who spoke about what a tiresome old hack their law professor was. Fields Felicity kneeled to tie her shoes, but it was a feint to hide from a boy who just walked into the hall. By the café Algebra Crepe-Batter and Flammable Plants discussed their plans for the weekend, and traded calculus secrets. Far off in the corner of the south-east end two medical students flirted, Lilly Waterfall-Climber and Noah Invoice. Long ago, her grandfather had climbed a waterfall as if it were a ladder and became a lantern. Still others were scattered about, tending to their own various tasks. But what they didn't realize, was the north-west end of the study hall, where an unexpected visitor was tending to a more urgent investigation. Unnoticed by the locals, the empress Echo slid her fingers around the smooth insides of a student's cranial chamber, lifted the organ of the mind, the brain itself, and threw it over her shoulder at the mounting pile of brains behind her. It landed on the top but slowly rolled down to the bottom, as the gelatinous hill undulated with its slow rolling descent. "Looks like this one's empty also" Echo said to herself. The university students were completely unaware, as she had emit a spell of concealment into the light of echoes, so that they would not notice her or any of her doings but go about their normal routine. Echo walked to another of the oak tables, lifted off the top of the scalp of another student and felt her hands over the brain, taking in its memories and knowledge, but finding nothing, then walked away as the covering restored itself. "This is impossible" the investigator protested as she made a lap around the study hall, "There are but glimpses of them and mundane conversation. It's as though no one knows who they are or where they came from". Although the patroness had searched for years for the remotest rumor of the past of her parents, the enlightened ones Melina Dreamer and Linden Dream, the search had come to naught. Even though time acted differently around the university that housed the chamber in portion Valco, there was not one trace of their history. There were some that seemed to go about their studies as if the phenomenon had never occurred, and different times blended into one around here. Even at the coffee shop, there was no-one of significant note, but mere faces in the crowd that may have been there yesterday or the day before. Not wanting to stay in a room where no answers had been found, Echo strode out of the room, and walked through the

corridors to the principal's office. As she opened the door, Put-Another-Quarter-In-The-Machine Anderson was sitting at his desk, going over the semester's budget proposal. Even with her appearance concealed to a humble melody, the patron's features were almost immediately distinguishable. Anderson: "Grand Empress! What gives me the honor of your visit today?". Echo: "It's good to see you Anderson, you don't have to be formal with me today". Anderson: "I see, is there something about the university that doesn't suit your ideals?". Echo: "The university is doing admirable, its welfare from its patrons is everlasting". Anderson scratched his beard, not knowing what the empress intended to discuss, and why she was being so un-straightforward, as the opposite was the prime feature of her personality, "What brings you to our neck of the woods then?" Echo: "I'm just having a difficult time lately. I've been trying to investigate the origins of my parents, the enlightened ones, who attended this very university before the phenomenon, but it's almost as if they had no past at all, and their history is like a ghost that never existed. My parents may have done everything to erase their past after their return, and they won't admit to anything although I've asked and asked". Anderson: "Parents can be like that empress". Echo: "More than you realize, Anderson. And I don't really understand my relationship with my father. To make things worse, there isn't a shred of record about their studies or how they received their grant to build the chamber in the first place. I really don't know what's going on". Anderson: "My recollection of my life before the event does have me signing the grant for the chamber, but it was a routine meeting to say the least ". Echo: "Do you remember anything else about them or the chamber itself?". Anderson: "It was a normal time; the two researchers Linden Dream and Melina Dreamer did not stand out as anything other than ordinary. That is all I can remember". Echo: "Think again, Anderson, there has to be something. They are the enlightened ones after all". Anderson: "The world had only a whisper of magic back then, empress". Echo: "I have been looking through the university for clues all day. It's emotionally exhausting. I've extracted every student's brain and searched through their memories but couldn't find anything. There are piles of brains in most of the rooms. Don't worry, I will put all of them back, and no one will be hurt or remember anything in the least. To make things worse the universe is going to change for about the five hundredth time, but we've been through so many of those calamities that it's starting to get boring. And the Alliance is at war with us to stop it, and the patrons will probably be

forced to fight their Reflectants, and I can't blame them. I just wish I knew what was actually going on". Anderson: "So, you're not a wiseguy. Good to know". Echo: "Very funny ... if you knew the things that Falzar told me the other day. Did you know that there are five alien races that we didn't even know about? There is even an alien race that is made of brown sugar. I don't say this regularly, but brown sugar is making a comeback. And did you know about the white picket fences in the park outside the university? There are creatures sleeping just underground that leave the fingers of their hands above ground to absorb sunlight. These things have been listening to us argue since the American Revolution, and they have ten fence posts for fingers. There's one named Glug, and another named Blibber". Anderson: "It sounds like you need a drink" he said, and turned around to his cabinet, and took out a glass whisky bottle. Echo: "No thank you, not in the mood". Anderson: "Ah ... not a drinker. There's your problem". Echo: "I'm just under a lot of stress and pressure. Why can't we all just see reality as it really is?". Anderson: "Then it wouldn't be a mystery, I presume". Echo: "You know what ... I think I will have a glass, but just this one time" she said, and he poured her a glass of whisky, which was downed slowly. Anderson: "Feel better?". Echo: "Taste goods ... is it okay if I inspect your brain, don't worry about it at all, I'll be very gentle and put it back afterwards and you won't feel a thing and I'll erase your memory". Anderson: "Go right ahead, although you don't really have to do that last part, I trust your judgement". Echo: "Anderson, either you or the whisky have really helped me out today. Thank you". The dream-girl snapped her fingers to push him into insensitivity, and gently took off the top of his head. At first, she pushed her fingers into the substance itself, as if it was a bowl of oatmeal. After wiggling her fingers about for some time, she kneaded the brain-stuff until it was very small and threw it into her mouth. Echo sat back down on the chair and blew bubbles with the brain like chewing gum, letting the memories slowly sink into her consciousness. "What a disappointment" she sighed, and spat out the little piece of chewing gum, throwing it back into the hollow skull-case of the principal, where it expanded again into the proper organ. As she closed the door behind her the man's head regenerated and he went back to work. Echo continued down the corridor back to the study hall, when her vision was abruptly halted. "Did I forget that one?" she thought as she saw Reclusive Watercolors, or Lusi as she was known in a furry blue sweater. Time began to slow as the girl opened a greeting card. Echo peered

at the student, and as she did time almost ceased until it lumbered along like thick magma at the bottom of a volcano. Lusi smiled at first as she opened the greeting card, but then started to giggle. The patron watched as her fingers curled slowly around the side in amusement. Echo returned time to normal and revealed herself to the girl. Astonished, she ran off down the corridor, leaving the card laying open on the side table. Picking it up the investigator read the inside, “It must be quiet in there” and below was the signature “-Dramatic”. “Thank you, Mr. Dramatic. I am being very dramatic, or rather Mrs. Dramatic” Echo thought to herself, and threw the card back on the table, cursed the futility of the hunt and made her way back to the dream-castle of Valco where the patrons were discussing tactics. It was after all, a certainty that her stress had manifested the card as a message to herself.

CHAPTER 36 - MELINA’S OCEAN

“What does that one do?” thought Echo passively as she pressed the bright red square. Releasing a flash, it lowered itself to the level of the other console keys in one unerring motion. Yet this time the ship only fired one of those tiny thrusters, burning with the glitz and glamor of flame. The empress was not one sufficiently adept at minding her own business. Her mother was off exploring some planet below for forever it seemed. It had been hours and hours, recognizable only by the steady arrival of shooting stars, one after the other. And they were the boring kind. The thin ones that are super far away. “It’s too long!” Echo bellowed. In a tantrum of dexterous finger work she pushed a bunch of buttons. A minute ensued of childlike glee, expectant of a missile or a laser or something to fire off the front of the ship into the vastness of the amoral, insensible space ... but nothing. Echo swiveled in the chair and laid her head sideways, trying to find some purpose in the bright colors of the keys. It was going to be a long day. Melina Dreamer alighted on the damp soil below. She looked around, surveying the cardinal directions. Ahead was a trembling ocean, bounding with anima. Behind was the grasslands, made clear by patches of sunlight brought through the divisions of cloud like sand pouring through fingers. A warm loop-de-loop of wind brought scents from flora that donned new aromas. Melina stretched her muscles for a moment. Phenomenological

energy heated her golden armor. With intrepid force she lunged into the ocean and sank down into it, searching for what was promised that day. A pearl necklace to be exact. Traders had reported clams on this planet. After that, it would be claimed in a bloodless coup for the glory of the SOTA. Having an energy of such degree, Melina only flew through the water. Lesser luminaries would take to swimming in such a circumstance. Not a drop touched her skin. It was hydrophobic. Soon enough tidal forces revealed the bounty of the deep. Strange butterflies with gills followed a path to their feeding ground. A turquoise rhino bobbed by, verdant like a one-man olive orchard. Underwater, jet streams followed and metallic dolphins clinked off of each other at intervals. After a good five minutes Melina found herself in the domain of the fish. They were big and ugly. They seemed to be like people. One was wearing a trench-coat. Another smoked a cigar. A mechanic with a greasy uniform hobbled off into the distance. It was starting to get shady. Melina could hear another big-mouth fish talking to his buddy about a pool game in the ocean. Before a trace of suspiciousness could instill itself in her mind, her mouth blurted out, “Do you know the way to the clams?”, and she knew she had screwed up. “Ah, look what we got here, little lady,” the cigar smoking fish said. The whole gang soon came out of the watery woodwork, forming a circle around her. There was Big Joe Fish from Fat Turtle Street. The one with the bust lip and the broken promises. There was Can’t Get No Fins Fish who was just there to start something if the situation presented itself. The one with the trench coat still had the tag on it and it was half price but with the rest of the information scratched off in pencil. “Easy boys, I’m just trying to get myself a pearl,” Melina offered. “Say, for a dame with golden clothes, you’re pretty damn ugly” the cigar smoking one blurted out. Shots fired. “I’ve been told otherwise by many people” the woman returned, amending their words. “Oh really,” another one tended, “I bet you’re so ugly, you can’t walk down the street without someone throwing trash at you like you-se some kind of trash can” the trench coat one said in a very fishy accent. Melina’s cheeks felt hot. The nerve in her temple began to do a little vaudeville number that was unseen by the others because it was under the skin. “I don’t know, Greg, she’s got a pretty good tush for a gal who’s not a fish,” the one behind her said. “On my world, I am a queen!” she shouted. Earth flashed through her mind. High up in the Aether, and its mountain of unblemished golden thrones that know not a day without substance. Realms blossomed at her feet. Dreams within clouds within

dreams. Sublime Landscapes. Sky castles. The metropolis. The omnipotence of stars. Melina was not in sync to the profanity of the commons. And the only gambling she did was with armies. The cigar smoking one spat out his cigar, "Oh I get it. Here we got her boys. The queen of ugly planet!". The tremor sent arrows straight to her heart. Not once had such humiliation ever befallen a graceful conqueror. A primal urge for obliteration flared in the iris of her eyes. Melina lifted a fist at him. "This dame is tough!" the trench coat wearing fish stated. He had been to school. He knew his stuff. Long Division. Geometry and all that. But this was serious. He went in close, right up the woman's face for good measure. "Sock em!" came a bunch of fish voices from the crowd. "Nah, I wouldn't want to hit you in the face. It would just make you more ugly" he tended, his maw wide with a grin. Melina couldn't stand it anymore. Too many cheap shots. She clamored away into the downward streams to lick her wounds. All of them circled around like that, taunting. The shame. "Those arrogant bastards!" Melina fumed while clusters of bubbles formed, transcended in smoothness by their counterpart. The pot of her soul boiled. The heat made its way from her chest to her temples and was sacrificed. "Not even Echo is that unruly!" she admitted reluctantly. The empress would one day don the golden armor, when her mirror blade had downed enough counterfeit tyrants. But not today. Melina's dark hair unfurled and found some small joy in the divergence of the waters. The weight of the insult faded. For a ruler so unscarred it was a nuisance. For a philosopher so restive, save for the amorousness of society ... she lost the train of thought. But no matter. "I will teach them a lesson, but how?" she pondered. A turtle in a shell of peanut brittle drifted past, its heart intent on vast numbers of pecan-fish, "What do fish love the most?". Melina craned her neck upwards and peered beyond the ceiling of the ocean up into the still sunlit sky. It was late afternoon but the innocuous blimp of the moon was right there, floating in the way magical things do. "Aha! They love the ocean!" the woman realized. A most devious smile alighted on that dame's face. Good thing she had muscles. Like a quick sprite the woman lunged to the ocean floor, and stood a moment, observing the water and the earth. The way they touched. The partition only known to those who can witness the scale of things. "Here we go," Melina beamed. The blue sheath of the world. The well betwixt continents. A trillion gallons and so forth. It didn't matter. Melina pulled up her sleeves and knelt down, lifting the entire ocean up and flying up into the air. It was made solid by the gargantuan magic of

the dreamer. The power of the wielder was beyond immaculate. The planet had no idea. As it rose above them, its mountains were helpless to bring back the body. Hundreds of birds were caught unaware. A lucky one was far away, and saw the platform rise. It cawed but the song was unheard. Clouds drowned. Melina raised both arms to the fullest extent. The revolutionary bounds of power surged through her. It was of great dimension but IT COULD NOT RESIST. Melina flew higher and lifted the platform. She threw the ocean to the planet's moon, gifting it. Below, the fish were much aggrieved. They all sat on the mud and the bottom and grumbled at the injustice. Such inexcusable behavior. That dame was hot and they knew it. But this was about attitude, and big things like car rims and credibility. Each of them grew short stubby legs with curly que hairs. They talked amongst themselves to find the biggest meanest one. When they found Linder he swam up into the air and found his enemy applauding herself along the shore. He grew his toe nails into long sharp toe nail spikes and charged. The golden muse reacted, summoning a sword and fending off the attack. In a few short gestures she slashed through the toe-nail spikes scattering them and sent the avenger back to his mud hole from whence he came. Melina put a hand over her eyes to survey the limits of the valley. Beyond the sand the stretches had a cluster of rocks with just the right thing to set one's eyes on. Under her breath she gasped faintly, "Now for that pearl necklace". It was set in between two jagged boulders. It took a season to get there, and once there she approached on foot for sheer pleasure. It had that wavy kinda mouth that looked like it was confused or something. Its row of beady little eyes in navy blue would have been intriguing to an oceanologist. It sat there and did nothing because it was just a stupid clam. Easily the lid unlatched to expose the bounty of pearls within. They were firm to the touch. A quality not uncommon on a Paris thoroughfare at half past noon. She commended the angelic colors. A few had a nice tint of ivory wreathed in smokey gray. Melina picked up an especially white one when the delicate exterior gave way to her fingers, cracking them naturally like an egg-shell. Of course, the realm inside had some pearl people ambling about an orange leafed tree. The woman knew in moments that the others could be nothing less than nascent realms. Appropriate action was simple enough. Melina took them to the other ocean on the moon that she had not named yet and returned forthwith to ascertain the character of the grasslands. Despite what she had done the land still burgeoned. The ruler tossed a single pearl up and down in her hand

like a baseball while she dawdled. At length the grasses fanned out, finding the boundary of their province at the hills. "This could be a good homeland for a colony," Melina mused. The clouds that had survived had elementals who were archers that shot down arrows at the ground which made it fertile with new flowers. Four snow capped mountains hugged the horizon. To her left the trees threw their fruit from one to another until it was ripe. There were hornets living in red raspberries, covered in red pollen, singing rhapsodies to her as she passed. Handsome rabbits with green noses from too much grass. Yawns were given and she kneeled down amongst fresh shoots of perennials for a time. Once content, Melina continued. The shadow of a tree vanquished a swath of once young greenery, but soon it too was dispelled by sunlight. A cactus retracted its spines for a hornet who just wanted to rest its head against the soft pillow. Cucumbers grew in abundance in zigzags below her feet, already covered layered in olive oil which hardened into a candy coating. Lemon shrubs moseyed about, spritzing everything to make it more delectable. The entire place really didn't seem that bad. Melina jumped back in surprise. All at once marble acropolis-like pillars burst from the ground in the distance, ascending to the heights of space. "What is going on!" she thought aloud, awakening from a mild temperament. At the base a vine began to grow and coil around one pillar. It circled, climbing the edifice. Peering closer the woman could see the vine contained within it a plant-human hybrid whose name was Unique Vine. The vine reached the top in space and changed back into human form. Quickly it became a patron and changed its name to Salloris Zegamon. He had a green human body with a vine around himself. Happy to see the transformation, Melina called up to him from the ground. The pillar descended and they met. In his honor she named the planet Plentiful Vine of Healthy Fruit and told him that her people will colonize the world. Salloris related that the planet would cease to be good now that it had no ocean. Suddenly the pearl started to grow huge and it birthed a powerful pearl giant. It towered above the woman, a bodybuilder with gleaming pearl muscles. Amped for a new fight, Melina did hand to hand combat with the giant. He was a virtuoso in his strength. Melina sensed that in a years' time, he could topple mountains. She blocked his fists with hers until an opening appeared and she cracked the shell with a single blow. The giant fell over dead. His pearl blood streamed back into the ditch, creating a new ocean. Salloris thanked Melina and agreed to the location of the new colony. Melina was happy

with the minor scuffle. As she returned the clouds parted and a personal spaceship landed on the ground. The ramp descended and Echo rushed out, demanding something with angry swaying arms, “Mom! Can we go back home now! I’ve been bored all day!”.

CHAPTER 37 - ELEVEN TWELFTHS MONTH

From the new condition of Sol came environmental changes within the SOTA. Before the phenomenon the Earth had orbited outside of the sun. After the phenomenon the Earth orbited within the hollow sun. As a consequence, a process of Environmental Inversion was initiated. Before, there had been twelve months in a year. Now, within the corona the Earth experienced only a fraction, the “One-Twelfth Month”. It is sometimes referred to as $1/12^{\text{th}}$ month or OTM for short. Colloquially it is known as Oat-um or Oats-month, a mispronunciation of OTM. So, there is one month in twelve years, which is termed the total-year. The different expressions of seasonality occur simultaneously in different regions side by side. Strain on local fauna and flora resulted in new adaptations, while others found shelters from the difficulty to remain unchanged. Moreover, the energy field produced by the fiefdom of the SOTA, channeled through the corona threatened to produce disturbances on the other planets within the system, halting diplomatic efforts.

During a tour of one of the autumnal regions of his portion, Leffel came upon a park whose trees were shedding their leaves. He was alone, and so decided to disrobe his cloud vestments, which he placed on a park bench. The patron was now only water in human shape. Sensing a coming breath of wind that would throw the stubborn leaves from their branches, he extended out his arms and rotated around to obtain a total view of the park. Like a disco they danced to the rush of the wind. As they fell upon him the leaves stuck to the surface of his water body, as leaves do when they fall upon a pond. As if a game, Leffel raced back and forth through the park towards the areas of the greatest density of leaves until his body was covered. He evolved and became ETM, Eleven-Twelfths-Month to become the vessel of the remaining segment, the fraction $11/12^{\text{th}}$ month of the total-year. “My water” he thought, looking down at his body as it shifted to orange, and then continued to pass through the the range of autumn, from

orange to red to brown to yellow, as well as the other intermediates. Shaking off several leaves, the remaining ones continued to drift along the surface of his body as if on a pond. Some of them underwent an elemental transformation while others remained pure and simple. The fraction $11/12$ ths appears in his vicinity. In the ensuing period, he would use his newfound ability, sent as an ambassador to placate the disturbances, and to the newfound colonies.

CHAPTER 38 - CACTUS LEMUR GARDEN ASTEROID

By this time Swordcarrier Alexa had experienced the transformation of her patron, being a cultess of he that was now Eleven-Twelfths Month. Alexa lived in the portion atop the anechoic plateau, and was an avid collector of historical items, her home being a cabinet of curiosities. Every two weeks she would return to meet up and socialize. As Alexa searched through the sublime landscape, she came upon ETM as he was walking along a beach of glass sand, moving about for an amenable place to regard the artificial fabric of that space. The delightful vitality of the waters tended to the sweltering ego of the collective dream, giving them pause. Indeed, an entire landscape had been overtaken by the beach overnight without the initiation of any agency within the cult. After a brief inspection of the variance, the woman took out of her satchel her newest acquisition, “Take a look at this will you, these chalices have been dated but the measurements put it even past the eighth age, and it’s still in working condition”. Handing him both the chalices, the patron felt the weight of their age. “Alexa, these must be from the seventh age, how did you get these?” he asked. “Well, I bought them at a yard sale off Pausica street in Grass-Loaf quarter a few years back, and I’ve taken them to one specialist after another, but with no luck” she said, placing the chalices back into her satchel. Telepathically Dreamer reached out to ETM and relayed to him that the chalices were those same vessels that Veles drank from and which the divine couple shared, sending the water through to Echo who cried, forming the sacred pond of Castle Rieuvi from which Leffel was manifested as the personification of a circular ripple. At his prompting Alexa retrieved the chalices again and the patron melted and formed them into a robe for himself. “You are full of surprises, Alexa. These were the very chalices

from which my mother Veles brought me into this world. Today is certainly a day to talk of old times. Tell me, what else do you have hidden away? I'm beginning to think that we don't spend enough time ...” the patron began when a wave from the beach ambushed the historian and dragged her in. Instructing the waters to release her became futile, as all trace of the woman had disappeared. ETM ran into the water waist deep, searching for oceanic currents of the sublime landscape that could have possibly transported the historian, but to no avail. In a distant region of the Zino sector Alexa found herself drifting through space. For some uncertain reason the water that had drenched her face had granted protection from the airlessness and cold. An immense asteroid lumbered past, and Alexa landed on its rocky surface. Searching for shelter the woman found a tunnel and came upon a cavern below with a forest of towering cacti as one would find in a lifegiving desert. Slowly, deliberately Alexa walked through the forest evading the spines that were feet in length. Craning her head to the heights of the garden she could see families of lemurs dancing with precision from one cactus to another. Farther into the heart of the garden there was greater diversity, from succulents to cultivars of various colors and shapes. She passed from a patch with rotten and half rotten cactus fruit lining the ground to another where broken succulents bled aloe down onto her from the heights. “The spaces between the cactus are getting much larger” the woman noted, as a giant lemur landed directly in front of her, hindering the path for a moment before rebounding up into the canopy again. The cacti in the heart of the garden were of much greater circumference, and their spines could actually be climbed quite easily. Families of giant lemurs stared down at Alexa with their yellow eyes, their tails hanging down like pendulums. “That is clearly the center” Alexa thought as she stared at the large green dome that was to her conception a building. A doorway ringed with desert flowers beckoned her within. “In this chamber there are thorns that point inward as well” she noticed, and walked towards the center of the dome. Resting in the body of the woman was the mirror sword used to strike down Githin during the battle of Rot. It arose from her body and reformed, then stretched and became a circular mirror that levitated in front. Curious, she joined hands with her reflection on the smooth surface. Then it was as if her point of view was channeled across a distance, a swift journey between walls of mirror. Insubstantial, her vision moved like a breeze through the maze. The walls were tall and cast no reflection of her presence. When it returned, Alexa

noticed that she was looking simultaneously through four eyes, that of her own person and that of her reflection, each out at the other through the barrier. Blindness came, and then the assault of happiness as it rushed back into the chambers of her body, a seltzer heaving with the return of youthful emotion. Then there was darkness as the inner realm within her was reborn. Alexa opened her eyes from her original perspective and the barrier turned into a mirror sword yet again that vanished into her inner realm. Around the dome of the cactus chamber the thorns that lined the interior became mirror thorns that detached, transforming into new mirror swords which pointed towards her. The multitude of mirror swords shot towards her all at once, and at the moment that they were to pierce her they entered her inner realm. The thorns continued to grow, and they continued to transform into swords and fly towards her, entering her in a continuous stream. After five minutes the barrage ended, and the dome of the chamber rotted away, the buzzing of flies became swirls of motion as the time lapse chewed away at the cactus. In lieu of the garden, the landscape was instead replaced by the walls of the mirror maze. Above, wreathed in indescribable potent eccentricity where Four Eyes from which issued the shifting spatial landscape of the world of the mirror maze. The two sets of Eyes stared at one another. Alexa looked up and each set of Eyes combined into one eye. With vague understanding of what the object in question was, the woman only observed as one observes a strange happening in nature. The two Eyes of Linden Dream combined and became one Eye, and the two Eyes of Melina Dreamer combined and became one Eye. Fainting, the neophyte fell to sleep and came to lay upon a warm bed of sand. "What manner of desert is this? " thought Alexa, thinking that the asteroid of the cactus garden may have returned to whatever delirium it had been conjured from. Scrambling to her feet, the castaway made tracks across the sands. Before her a green cactus sprang from the ground, and atop it grew a cactus flower. As the cactus flower emerged a gray bearded man sitting upon it was revealed. The man spoke to her saying, "That which you gave is now part of the seed of the Jellyfish Flower". "What does that mean?" replied the woman. The man looked down at her with his aged eyes, and shifted its position within the chair of the flower, "The Honfot-Gid that was your own, that you donated to the moon". Alexa was left speechless. She had known like everyone else that the moon had become the seed of the Jellyfish Flower, but she had never once considered her contribution, the organ transplant that was given to Leffel, and had

returned in time to thinking only of simpler matters. Alexa now was filled with questions, and began accumulating them in her head. As she did the cactus grew high and the gray-bearded man atop it vanished from her sight from the level it had reached. Yearning for answers, the woman climbed atop the thorns of the cactus, like climbing a tree, to the top of the cactus. When she arrived at the top the man was gone, leaving only the wide and conspicuous petals. But suddenly she tumbled on through the flowerhead, onto another patch of desert, where she found herself walking along, dizzy for a while. The currents of the wind would at times disclose the night sky that lay underneath the soft terrain. Strange that she could feel her own footprints, even when her feet were far apart from the depressions. Inquisitive, she circled around an odd silvery cactus to examine it. Dut ... dut ... dut. The woman felt a tap on her back. "My name is Chaz Waterpasture" said a normal green cactus standing in a brown flower pot. From its body extended two long vegetative extensions with flower buds like arms at the tips. "Did you tap my back just now?" Alexa asked. "Yes, I just needed to get your attention for a moment, it's good to meet you then" the succulent mentioned. "Can you tell me what this place is, and what is going on?" the woman pleaded. Chaz waved his arms defensively and said, "Seems normal to me. You're not from around here, are you? Jump onto the edge of my pot and I'll show you around". Plopping her behind onto the rim, it glided across the sands that at the corners of her eyes proceeded like free-flowing liquid. Several of the other cactus lifted up and became ovals and then mirror droplets that vanished into the sky. The tearing of roots disturbed the soil. "That's something special to you, isn't it?" Chaz kidded as they watched one of the droplets disappear. "Can I shake your hand" Chaz asked, and Alexa took one of the bud hands into her own and shook it. The bud-hand bloomed into a cactus flower. She took the other bud-hand and shook it as well, and it flowered as well. "Let's go this way" Chaz suggested, and she jumped onto his pot once again until they came upon a charismatic mirror cactus deep in the desert. When she jumped down onto the ground again and approached it, the plant opened and unfurled its skin, revealing the red flesh of a prickly pear within. "I think this is where we part ways," Alexa said, and bid farewell to Chaz as she walked forward, and entered the flesh of the prickly pear fruit, and the flesh of the cactus retracted until the plant was whole again. Swordcarrier was back at the location where the Dome had been before the rotting in the heart of the garden, and evolved into War

Alexa. “My flesh is cactus fruit” she thought. Upon her body formed a green metallic armor. Both hands became heavy as a mirror sword appeared in each. In truth, she could now summon at will mirror swords from her sword carrying inner realm. With both she ventured back into the thicket and came upon a red-eyed giant lemur. “Don’t be shy” Alexa said, and returned the swords back into her inner realm, and stretched out her hand to rub the brown and white fur of its forehead. After befriending it, she rode upon its back as it leapt through the canopy and it took her back to its home in a hollow chamber where a family dined, and she joined them in their feast. When her belly was full Alexa left the asteroid, and returned through the void back towards the SOTA. Without the prominent occupant, the asteroid continued on its lonely journey through space, its ice-trail like a mark of chalk across a blackboard. In the world of the mirror maze a woman in a tan janitor’s uniform whistled as she mopped a spot on the floor, where there was a puddle of cactus fruit juice.

CHAPTER 39 - LEFFEL AND PRIYA AT THE PARK

“What is this big contraption?” Echo wondered. It seemed to have all sorts of bells and whistles, different components operating sequentially. Larry Territorial-Matrix, the youth academy teacher who had brought his class to the park that day, smiled at the incidence of such a clear question. Or perhaps, giving her the benefit of the doubt, and to be rightly impartial, it could have been that it was just his own disposition, wearing two sweaters on a warm day. Simultaneously, each of the students, who had reasonably only worn one sweater gawked as well at the moving parts of the varied framework, although they had built it from scratch themselves in teams of four. “It’s called a Rube Goldberg machine, really it just does one simple job, but the way it does so is complicated,” Larry explained, motioning to the see-saw which had just been lowered. “This is bonkers. You’re just fiddling with things. Why does there have to be such a long string of events?” Echo reacted to the novel, innovative titillation of her intellect. “I’m teaching them about machines so they’ll learn to build them as well. As you know most spell-engines today have their basis in pre-realm machines” Larry countered, drawing a nod of acknowledgment from the eavesdropping patron. “Ah, I get

it now” she multitasked, as her eyes followed the course of dominos falling effortlessly along a track. Bantering further about the current semester of the school year, the time flew. And for the record, conversation has no effect on the rate of it, however precarious the topic. From the jogging path came a new arrival, striding closer by tapping a long walking stick along the ground. Preoccupied, they barely recognized the approach. “Grandmother, I received your telegram. I can show you around on our walk. it’s a circle so we will loop around” Leffel submitted, reluctantly pleased to see her in a jovial mood. For the children he waved his hand, stripping a plump apple tree of its contents, and covered them in rock candy. Thanking Larry, she made for the jogging path, curious as to the purpose of the walking stick, which she deduced was most likely brought simply for show. Echo stayed silent on the matter, feigning disinterest, as other avenues of repartee unfolded. An ember of guilt remained at the back of her throat until dissolving completely. Being taxed by official duties, she had little spare time for each portion’s attractions, even that which Leffel had designed and executed himself. Treading the loop would bring them around the Park Concentric, through the surrounding One Twelfth Month Park but not touch the Ordinary Month Park at the heart of it, a place lined with benches where Leffel awoke as the Eleven-Twelfths Month. “Did you want to show me around?” she began, joining arms as they pushed into the sprawling common, a place where quirks of nature outnumbered people “Yes, you’ll really get to witness the inversion and see how animals have adapted. Jeobeu Bouit loves it, she jogs along this path every morning before returning to metacoma” Leffel offered, sharing a personal tidbit discreetly whilst people hurried by on their afternoon exercise. “The system colonies are scrambling with us for territory, you wouldn’t imagine what dirty tricks they have done to gain land grants on the worlds we founded” Echo bemoaned, watching a line of ants wait patiently in line for a plastic slide, then climb up the ladder, rushing down. “Eventually we are going to need a better way to deal with them. Right now, I have my personal mausoleum, “The Burden of Propagation” that can be put into profit to extend terraforming services to the system colonies. Dylan Arch is a fine captain, so he can usher Hioane Wep and Ramb Unba to perform the duty” Leffel advocated. “He is doing this in part to lord it over Honeycomb Man, but I will accept it” Echo thought, nodding her head, “I was going to ask you earlier, thank you”. “Be careful of the pace at which you do so, grandmother.

Terraforming of our colonies by Chamberification has variable effects. Did you read the report by the office of home hopping? That whole thing was cooked. Most of the environments of the colonies have fought terraforming efforts to a greater extent than you realize. As a result, energy constructs have invaded the sublime landscape, causing the partition of sky-islands. The faster we push this, the more it will weaken the metacoma, just remember that " he suggested, burrowing his way into the political mechanics that ran her continual perception. "Having both of them is gratuitous, you can send a Caterpillar of Ramb Unba in his stead" Echo agreed. Leffel had to thrust out his walking stick in front of his grandmother's feet so they could step around an innocuous circle of frisbee poop that an abridomiah morin carela had deployed along the path. On a nearby patch of grass it pursed its lips disappointedly, then wobbled its hippo-like girth and fat stubby legs. Concerning the poop, It was visually identical to a frisbee in every respect except consistency. Whereas ordinarily the distinction between seasons is abrasive, especially in the pre-realm years, that of the park where not blended ... but sprinkled together in different proportions in different locales. In retrospect the past may have been a simpler time. But those that cling to it cannot appreciate the precious fraction of one-twelfth month. Echo looked to the south where there was a lengthy structure enveloped by bonsai trees, a steam-house from which locals emerged, bath-robes hugging their bodies. They sat on the ends of the square pots of the big bonsai trees and drank from mugs of hot-cocoa, in mid-conversation until ultimately their robes dispersed as snow again, returning to a cloud that showered them on the other end for the newcomers. Nilon, one of the chubbier cases of rat-people stirred his mug with his tail, then continued on about how he had settled out of court for a case involving slander claims of who in fact carried the black plague. The jury had been so confused as to whether humans or his people were to blame. The whole thing, of course, had been a farce. There were also robes from fresh snow on the ground. Bath robes white like fleece hidden like gems in the parkland. Habits of the local flora and fauna were unmistakable in their complementary grace, in a way that spelled déjà vu to those of old, yet in different guises. Along a stretch of trail that had fallen leaves a grouplet of trunks slowly ambled with dumb roots like babies learning to walk. Then up ahead, where the ripeness of the grass was more coherent there wobbled along giddy tinker toy robots that would grab with its little claw one of the cracked nuts on the ground. Five weeks later after

snacking on so many, they could reconfigure into metal birds with beaks like toucans. Every so often the insects, hardier than their antecedents came in groups to the elm, the former of which had grown much taller with less foliage, where cicada shells still cling, offering bunches of flowers that conformed to grow in the recess. Happily, they slurped up nectar, thereafter rubbing their abdomen against certain parts of the tree in appreciation. Larval flowers are also prized by many for amulet class spells. "Grandma, take a look at the woody area over here. After the seasons changed, a lineage of the white oaks, which was used to make barrels for wine-making, adapted. Since then they have been renamed Three Barrel Trees, due to a lifecycle that relies on the container" Leffel directed, aiming his hand at a full-grown oak, "this one isn't doing anything, let's keep moving". Further down the road a cluster of trees shrunk themselves down so they could fit into wooden barrels, flipping themselves head-first so their canopy was at the bottom. Over the mouth the massy dome of roots and dirt sealed up the container. Acting like flippers the staves paddled, bearing it aloft, and the two of them watched the barrels fly about, dropping tubers at various locations for the critters below. "Now see where they go " Leffel said, excitedly squeezing her shoulder. Fighting the winds, one of the more well-rounded barrels swam upwards to a family of low-hanging clouds. In a rather quick dramatic motion the closed end of the barrel unsealed itself, sucking up a portion of the mist, expelling the tree. Halfway to the ground the oak flipped over and formed a makeshift parachute with its root system, softly returning to a humble patch of grass. "Pretty good acrobats' " Echo admired, clapping. Learning of a nearby barrel, the oak shook itself from the brief reprieve, crawling inside. Roused, the spot became damp. Moss and grass spread across the wood of the barrel, forming a mantle. Entirely clad, it sank into the earth. "I can sense where it's burrowing, follow me, " Leffel tugged, leaving the path behind. It surfaced in a clearing, enticing the animals to pluck off the green shrouded staves, collecting them and revealing it to be empty, for at a certain point during the burrow the tree decided to stay underground. Echo watched a teal jackal sloth carry one of the pieces on its shoulder to a suitable spot. Tucking it into a shallow plot, the article blossomed, producing flowers and vegetables and fruits which other scampering onlookers came to benefit from. Hares seemed to be especially fond of a certain petal from a creamy peach colored flower. Thereafter the wood became supple from so much blossoming and the jackal sprinkled bits of dirt into the cavities for it to

continue its production. From earlier, the barrel that was stuffed with clouds drifted to the ground. White feathery rhizome creeping rootstocks located it, tapping the base. "Don't blink, this is my favorite" Leffel promised, then just as before when a singular motion had ejected the tree, the burrowing oak returned to the vessel, pushing out a puff of cloud from the top, sculpted into the perfect shape of a barrel that shot out, bobbing to the sky and engulfed by the underbelly of a more faint-hearted sibling. Closing her eyes, Echo could sense the barrel dissipate in the body of its brother. Gradually the tree incorporated the circle of staves, growing to its original height. "Seeds pooped out by the animals from the stave fruit will grow into replacement barrels" Leffel assured her. "What happens next? I thought you said there were three?" the elder inquired curiously. He turned around to make way back to the park trail spontaneously flashing the autumnal waters of his body, disregarding what had captivated them with instinctive novelty, "At this point the oak is sexually mature and grows a barrel with a leaf inside that will detach and find a suitable location, but we can't stand here and wait another two weeks". Crossing the length of a pond, they watched di-maples detach from the periphery and hover of the surface, growing reflections that they uplifted from the reflective sheath, then turned horizontal, segregating as cells do in mitosis. Octopi squirming within the root ball pushed with their tentacles, helping to separate the two. The patroness kept up with her grandson as the trail curved around in the opposite direction, bringing them to an area more sprinkled with summer. Arrows of light from a particular sharp angle over the horizon fell onto patient locks hidden in their beds of grass, triggering them to complete their combinations, twisting to exact numbers. As the metal bar unhooked and swung to the opposite side, the bulk of the lock, its metallic sheen diminished, until the activity instigated by the light finalized, becoming a thing of transparent glass into which a tiny blue armadillo waddled to make its burrow. To signal the possession, it rolled into a ball, inspiring rivals to disperse as the glass bar locked into place. Here the grass shared subtle symmetries with one another, more so than ordinary. Lapping up the mist, woolly red grazers lumbered past, a species of Wohan habituated to ambient magic. Half-way around the bend Leffel flinched then craned his neck. "Oh! They cannot do that here!" he bawled, seeing a duo of cars flying over the park, broken away from the periphery of the city. Shamelessly they veered around and landed adjacent to a rest area. Chasing off a family at a mahjong table, the youths filed

out of the cars and sprawled out to their own content. Echo couldn't help but notice how ultra-normal some of them looked, except for the one wearing a bathrobe. A brunette girl with a cream blazer and a spiked neck collar kicked the side of the car for the guy inside to start playing loud music, then threw the mahjong tiles up into the air so the others could dance as they came down. Leffel shuddered at how plainly ultra-normal they were dressed, enhanced magically by some store in the mall to be even more normal. "Excuse me ... fellas. The Concentric guidelines clearly read that there is to be no parking or flying overhead. We have to be stewards of this fragile environment and protect the animals that call it home. The park is built on that promise. I'm afraid you will have to return to the portion at once". The girl raised an eyebrow at the lackluster attempt at moral eloquence, "Do you kiss your mother with that mouth?". "Listen here young lady, this is a public place, you can't just make it ..." he began until being cut short. "Actually good?" the girl answered, striding over to him. A finger tapped against his chest, "We can go wherever we say, and I don't see you with wheels, so why don't you shut your mouth and go count your fancy animals over there". "I like these kids" Visioness remarked in her head from the realm of silence. "Absolutely not," Leffel countered, his voice starting to get angry, and with a spell silenced the music, "obviously, if you had been aware of your surroundings you would have known that this place is a reserve for a lot of special creatures. Reading the guidelines lets everyone know what the expectations are. How would you feel if one of these fellows found its way into your room?". Even as an onlooker, the scene was starting to become intolerable. Straightening her posture, the girl glared into his eyes, "And who do you think you are, Echo?". Realizing that the youth could probably take her grandson in a fight, she intervened, slapping them a handful of onsuru coins so they would abscond back to the portion. "Cmon, these park rangers are total losers" she growled, climbing into the passenger's seat. "Empress, those kids needed to be taught some ethics, I really wish you would have let me deal with them in my fashion" he protested, turning away from the departure. Laughing, she summoned a replacement mahjong board, "Maybe on another occasion, but we don't get time like this often". "My word, that was quick" she sighed, seeing the academy children fuss about the contraption in the distance. By then Larry was well exhausted, and with a quick cheerio to them shepherded the children back to the classroom bus and packed up the Rube Goldberg Machine onto the back of a

truck. "Patron, this has been really nice, we should try it again sometime" Echo mused. "By all means, and I have a present for you" he furnished, holding up the walking stick in his right hand. "Did you think that I brought this simply for show? It's actually not what you think. I picked it up at the store earlier on the way here and thought you might like it. It's a nose scratcher" Leffel indicated, causing the staff to retract to manageable hand-held proportions. "I love you grandson", she replied, then for effect thrust the stick into her nose, itching it back and forth with gusto, displaying a wide beaming goofy smile. Heartily both of them laughed so loudly so as to fluster Larry as he drove past, spinning the wheel to see what was amiss. Like a quick chain reaction, the vehicle swerved down the incline, hitting a tree. "I'm all right, it's just a dent, " Larry swore as they pulled him from the driver's seat, taking one shaky step on the ground then righting his stance. Larry wiped the creases off his shirt then turned to see the condition. "Huh?" he gasped. "The Rube Goldberg Machine fell off of the back of the truck into the pond when you crashed" Echo relayed tentatively as the three of them directed their attention to the shore. Pacing to the edge, a ripple spread across the length of the waters. Leffel blinked and looked down at his hands. Unmistakable phenomenological vibrations dashed over her body from the patron, thrusting her into clearer consciousness, tracing her back through the long ages. Tan walls of the Castle Rieuvi, and of the well of silence, and of the circular ripple that brought about Leffel to console her when divided from her true parents in the Moment flashed into existence. "Do you recall how I came about as a circular ripple?" she could hear him think through the fiefdom. Images and concepts whirled in her mind like the gears of the machine, culminating to a precise action, a sentence that she could feel as it left her own lips, "Now we know ".

CHAPTER 40 - TIMECURRENT SAVES THE COLONISTS

After the first one hit, Timecurrent ran from the epicenter of the city, her chest pumping like something hammered by a blacksmith. Behind her the conflagration grew, its crown red with billowing ruffles. Yet another followed, its crimson overlapping with the first. The horrible vagueness of it swallowing a building. Ahead of her, in the newly assembled city, the colonists were reeling. Baby blue hair outrun the worst of it as she

made her way to the council chamber. There, in the space age interior, families huddled together for sympathy. “I didn’t hear anything about the asteroids” a colonist spat, scolding those who had overstepped their bounds. It was the captain of the neo-frigate, cooling off after a lost poker game. Incensed, the other man got in his face and rolled up his sleeves. Time put him in slow motion before a fight ensued. “Are you just standing there? I need to get these people to safety. The port is four blocks away. We can make it if we leave now” the patron urged in a gasp of exigency. “Is it that bad, mam?” the captain asked. Time nodded her head to oust his disbelief. “The whole place is coming down. Get your gear and let’s go”. Forming into a train behind their leader, the patron led them out the door. Above their heads, the sky was overwhelmed with streaks of fire, ripping the thin fabric of the stratosphere. A cluster of bombs mangled the city around them. Leaving fresh chaos in their wake. The sight of a dancing fireball engrossed her senses. Filling her every thought with adrenaline. “Step it up” Time hollered, across the inharmonious blistering din. Favorably, they made it past two and a quarter blocks. At once the patron looked up to the sky to see the full scope of nature’s ultimatum. “Hey ... those aren’t asteroids!” she belted. Time stopped short in astonishment. They were freaking T-Rex Heads blazing through the atmosphere in halos of flame. Toothy grins pointed to the ground. Razor sharp. “Did they gobble up a galaxy?” Time wondered. At that moment, her heart felt like a guy who had just been punched in the face by another guy on a roller coaster who had just been headbutt by another guy on a better rollercoaster. And it fucking hurt. The T-Rex head landed in front of them, burgeoning with a marvel of a flame. The people behind her threw their hands on each other’s shoulders. They tucked down as a ripple made its way across the pavement. Time could not look away from the ball of heat, and saw it twist in weird circular motions. RAAA!!! The T-Rex thundered. A head with a body of pure, elemental flame. The dinosaur was complete. It stomped mercilessly towards them. Time could hardly believe her luck. Flecks of inferno spun and escaped from the backside of the beast. It lowered its head and approached them with ease. A primitive with untamed excitement across its face. Time took a step back as a bit of fire spilled from its mouth like drool. She lifted her hands and manifested a time lapse of prodigious strength. Invisible to the others, pristine wrinkles made their way through another dimension. Undulating as her fingers did. Caught unawares, the beast was sent backwards in time, walking back to the swell of its

arrival, and reabsorbed the halo. It rocketed up through the canopy of the sky, across leagues of black abyss. Towards another world. Time led the flustered colonists across the remainder of the city. Happily, the port was still intact. With the help of the captain, they all boarded the neo-frigate and glided it out of there. Time relaxed her weary back against a plush seat cushion. A viewing window was to their left. Little zigzags of light across a canvas of black painted their escape. The refugees made it to their seats in one piece, unpacking what little belongings they had. The chair was unnaturally warm for a space-seat. Heating pads melted away the pain. Time fell unconscious and had the best Zzzz of her life.

CHAPTER 41 - CLIVE NUT-PASTE

“What are you doing out here, grandpa?” Clive exclaimed as he discovered the old man rocking on his chair out on the porch. With slender fingers he turned the pages of a photo album. The grandson tipped his head to see the images, each a rosy old photo of people in quaint, old-fashioned clothing on a summer’s day outing. “Sit, Sit. C’mon and look at these pictures. Do you notice anything funny?” Beryu Nemzi Nut-paste asked his grandson with raised eyebrows. Handing him the album, he poked his nose into the page until the goings-on of that transient picnic day became clear. “Why are you all holding wooden hammers?” wondered the boy, then returned the raised eyebrow back at his grandad. “Look over here, and over here. See those balls in the grass, and those little metal half-rings stuck in the ground? It’s a game where you have to hit the balls through the rings ... and you win, you see ... but people must have forgotten all about it already” the old man joyfully lamented. A sweet memory popped into his head as he gazed down at the picture. That of picnics, and sandwiches made in haste, and a bowl of strawberries that someone would always spill over while they were talking, and not notice until later. “Do you remember that day, grandpa?” Clive asked, instinctively saying anything to break him from his reverie, without the prudence to know he had done just the opposite. “How could I ever forget ... There I was. Standing there in that cream blazer. It was just my turn. The ladies were milling about. But I only had eyes for one ... hehehe. Waving her arms in front of the ring before I took my shot. I hadn’t done very good up until then. But when I saw my Zanzibar, that blue dress dancing in the wind, what could I have done but make the perfect shot” the elder reminisced as he

gripped his knee, squeezing it. “So, you won the game, didn’t you?” Clive asked, already knowing the answer from the anecdotalist would be, and patted him on the shoulder. “Made the perfect shot. Hit it right through the ring I did. They all saw that I won, and I can tell you it wasn’t even close that time. And that’s how your dad was born” he vainly recalled. “How was he born again?” Clive asked very confusedly as he returned the album sliding it into his slender fingers. Beryu leant over once again, looked at his grandson, straight in the eyes, and said, “Croquet, my dear boy. Croquet”.

CHAPTER 42 - THE HONEYSUCKLE

The fussy rains gradually abated and the metropolis was fast asleep. At twelve o’clock midnight the bell tower struck, deafening a patter across the tops of the city buildings. It was the rascal, who made her way along a circuitous route. In all black, she mimicked the night. Narrow channels marked the passage between platforms. They too would be navigated by a body that glided almost perfectly upon them. A glance below confirmed the last nonchalant tourists in their departure from the central park. They didn’t notice the woman, whose wardrobe that day was more risqué than usual. With her right hand she revised an artless scarf that covered her more discernible features. Like stairs she furtively climbed the high rises. Above the thick glassy Atmo, the sparks glowed white in homage to their ancestor. Their presence like uncommon eggshells, caring and fond of all that slept below. Predictable taps from the leftover raindrops fell in disconnected circles around her. They could no longer hold the secrets of the sky. Unoriginal caws came from wet birds huddled on the lonesome brick. A squat ancillary wall. They nuzzled one another with geriatric beaks for comfort. But that was no hindrance to her travels. The rascal made it to the top. A thought of eyes peering out into the dark made her heart skip. But the chill wind gave no answer. It was half past twelve and the guards would be halfway to dreamland. Tiny threads hung out the sides of her fingerless gloves, tailored hastily. She reached for and uncoiled the rope. Between her legs stood a rectangle easy enough to peer through. Etheria’s mausoleum. Its admirable bowels stocked with the personal trinkets of the patron herself. A slender rope danced a little jig as it dropped to the floor. The rascal relinquished her grip of it and hovered

there, gazing passively at the glass case. It was like the chamber of a fertile rose. Those that are enshrouded by winter and made like crystals. Yet this was not that. Legendary rays sprouted from their source. The darkness became a conduit for their essence, a roman aqueduct. An exemplar between her fingertips. “And what do you think you’re doing?” Etheria politely quipped as she ripped the scarf from its bearer. A rascally smile swept across Snow’s face, “I just think it’s pretty”. Etheria cocked her head ever so slightly, “You want to steal my soul-point power because you think they’re pretty?”. Snow nodded in agreement. In relation to her sister’s eyesight, her butt was slightly higher than her head. The rascal waved her arms like a human powered flying contraption. “I want them. They look like stars”. The big sister crossed her arms, “Oh yeah, like you’re going to make marshmallow smores and be back in five minutes. You’re not even wearing your nightgown”. The girl timidly mouthed something in reply. At that moment Etheria was finished. Her long black hair grew to prodigious lengths and she grabbed the intruder, throwing her out the window and several miles across the city. Below her chest, the soul-point hummed with ambient energy. The richness of exploration leapt from its surface, filling the room. Etheria stood there, her chest pumping. Her eyes following the path of undeviating light. A sailor surveying the room and its regions.

In the early afternoon of the following day, Etheria and her son Honeycomb Man rode on a mat of burning roses through the sky. The air was kind that day and the clouds were supple. Etheria pointed below and they picked up Snow for the excursion. Etheria sighed as her sister laughed playfully. The wind granting her hair sentience, its ivory heft subdividing into filaments. Looking at her sister, she sparkled with the power of the dissolving snowflake. Honeycomb Man scooped a cloud ball and threw it at her for sport. At the end of their journey the mat descended onto a fertile grassland. A depression emerged among the grass as they alighted. The three of them were kindled in rousing emotion for what awaited. It was the very spot where the void eye moon seed planted itself. “This will make her more accountable,” Etheria thought, considering the progress her sister had made. Those refugees she sheltered in her inner realm. The battles with the eclipse beings. Dissolving Dazin’s army. It had all made her stronger. The man went on ahead, forging a path through ankle-deep verdancy. Ferns drifted from mountains over the hills in captivity to the air. The fun-loving sun had warmed the earth,

and made the countryside all aflush with herbal fragrances. Inflorescence sheltered a hill from the simmering heat. Hope seemed to guide the wind as lines made cursive through the grass. They stretched into the distance, to the bounds of land. A flock of doves tore apart and messily ate a rindless honeydew. The light made their feathers vaguely green. Among the wild horses, a stallion got to its knees to bathe in a pile of lunar dust, throwing its head to and fro. Its neck was ideally muscular. Honeycomb Man admired this sight. His back was ahead and clear to his mother. It was implausibly orange. The sister relished a joke from her whispering nephew. Etheria sighed as her chest became flighty. It must have been the sultry waves. They made her sweat. Beads that would share the glamor of the afternoon. Still the multiplicity of grass fanned out. Its purpose unaccounted for. Its reaches unclear. A wealth of many quivering things. In her heart, nothing could postpone a beat. “Let’s stop right here. Take a look. It’s the Jellyfish Flower” Honeycomb Man exclaimed, throwing his arms out as bars against their progress. Etheria stood with coherent understanding. It was his job as the protector to keep them at bay. Higher than them, the translucent petals drooped. Organs jostled inside, and its blossom was like an apparition. Quickly Snow fell on her butt. Her son smiled, knowing they had all failed to witness the jellyfish bees. Like the flower, they were see-through. Jaws chittered as they saw the uninvited guests. Some had bioluminescence like the relatives of the deep. “Don’t go near either of them,” Honeycomb Man warned. “And why are we here exactly? I thought you said you were going to give me your power” Snow whined. Matryoshka inner realms vibrated with annoyance. The elder paced around the stubborn mademoiselle, “You might think that our empire is strong, but its power is only as good as its people. Rather, it is more like this delicate flower. It gives the bees sustenance. For what it lacks, it relies on defenders. It needs them”. “And what do you mean?” Snow insisted. Her face was now cool to the touch. The elder stared down and waited calmly, “Right now, Snow. I need you to swear to uphold your part of that exchange. Use your abilities to protect the realm. It will be the fight of a lifetime. You will have to face enemies. Grapple against darkness. It will be restless and unkind”. For what her sister lacked in authority, she made up for in energy. Scrunched up in that tight little package. Layers of rippling atmosphere. The soft veneer covering fathomless halls of power. A vital frame blinking with light. And above all, Echo’s eyes. A hint of velvet. More piercing than the iris that they trod upon. “I will

protect it,” Snow answered. Hearing it, the elder reunited with motion. She looked to Honeycomb Man and gave a knowing nod. The latter did his thing, causing the jellyfish bee to buzz down and sting the fertile earth. For miles the hilly grassland gave way to honeysuckle. Snow got to her knees and whirled around for the thrill of it all. Picking them up with a wicker basket made of ice. It would last until sunset. Etheria stood there in plain shadow, her arms by her side. A memory unfolding. Smoke and flame. The untamed void eye and its vines. Cities demolished by the crackle of velvet lightning. Those ropes tearing through structures. It was better to be subjugated than wild. It braced her for a second, then faded away.

CHAPTER 43 - SORTJIM AND CARMEL

Echo walked into the empty room, where two patients awaited, lying asleep on their adjacent platforms. The walls of the chamber were specially designed to subdue phenomenological energy, and it warped her appearance into something that looked ... pedestrian. Echo strode over to them, donned in a gray lab-cat and laid her bare cheek against the forehead of the man on the right. As he awoke, she could sense the dream within him fade, its substance dissolve. He opened his eyes and leaned forward, “doctor, that was a good rest, but I am still feeling a little weak”. “Don’t underestimate yourself, you’re making a lot of progress” she assured him, and playfully hit his cheek with her knuckles. The patient retrieved his clothing from underneath the platform and retreated to the outer chamber, where a hot meal was waiting for him. The empress sat down onto the platform and stared into an absent portion of the room beyond the resting woman. Before long, the two aspects of her personality that had stayed hidden for quite some time, blinked into reality. “Certain ideas are starting to appear reasonable, aren’t they? ” Visioness suggested as she made her way towards the patient, and placed her hand onto the woman’s forehead. “It’s not reasonable to act on instinct alone, as you most certainly discovered” she returned. “How can you be so shortsighted after everything that has happened? Half of the Fiefdom is already obsolete. Think on your daughter Phantomess, the patron of the trail. But where is the trail? It may as well be a figment of history’s imagination. When this new process is complete, and all that remains are the

islands of the realms, what will you become? Nothing more than something insubstantial, looking out into a white canvas that is the annulment of being, and reminiscing about a horizon that doesn't exist" Visioness counseled with her merciless, provoking rhetoric. At this Echo faded back in her memory to a conversation she had with her mother Melina a mere four days ago. "That would be quite unnecessary" her mother replied, in response to her suggestion. "But mother, if I were to enter you, and be reborn into the flesh, I would become more than I am now. And we could have the others follow suit". Melina stopped short of her work of fixing the aetheric mechanisms within a cloud and looked to her daughter "despite everything you have learned, how can you be so undiscerning? You are not going to die, my daughter, if we were to awaken from the dream, or if we were to perish. You and the rest would not flicker away out of existence. This reaction has been allowed by nature. You would become our legacy". "We are more than an aspect" Pelfe conceded, appearing at the feet of the resting patient, across from the other. "Then why do you suppose that we do not have the power to alter the finality of the switch. That is what we are calling it, aren't we? Like a light switch. As soon as this patient awakes, it will dissolve like salt into water" Visioness attested. Echo looked back and forth between the two aspects for a moment, and covered her mouth with her hand for a moment to think, "Pelfe, although you are my aspect now, you were once my sister. Visioness was born as an aspect of my grief. Did you split off an aspect yourself, Pelfe? Perhaps an aspect of hope? Such may cure this asymmetry within me". Visioness jumped backward and twirled around in glee, laughing, "look at this! We have an asymmetrite in our midst!". "I think you're missing the whole point" Pelfe groaned, disheveling her hair, "this ... polarity switch, if that is a proper term for it, must simply be itself a default property". "Then the reaction has altered the logic of the polarity switch" Visioness proposed, "It would only be the latter if the Scilysts were asleep, but they are a state that is a mixture of both". "The ultimate trial, perhaps," Visioness said with a sadistic grin as she brushed the throat of the patient, "would be to kill one of them, and have the dream persist afterwards". "My darling shadow, you are a genius" Echo announced, inciting an animated response from Pelfe that was somewhat like interpretive dance. "How can you be so base!" she sobbed. "Not that, what you said earlier, Visioness. That it will dissolve like salt into water. The self-awareness surely does dissolve like salt into water in the liquid of the dream, but

there is a way to counteract that. Tell me ladies, have either of you ever had a lucid dream?" Echo queried. "I had lucid dreams of Henry," Visioness answered quickly. "The golden land is rife with lucidity," Pelfe added. Echo calmed Pelfe, took a deep breath and began her explanation, "Perhaps there is a route, in the absence of phenomenological energy, to do this. In a normal process, the sleeper is oblivious.. In a lucid dream, the dreamer knows the dream, and uses that knowledge to use it as a sort of canvas. This agreement activates the lucid dream state. Now consider this, that there might be a reflection of these two steps. The third step shall then be called omnidichotomy, and the fourth step shall be called counterfeit oblivion. After the four steps of the dream reflection are completed, the individual may then perform the fifth step of lucid awakening. Then, through natural means we are moving into the expanded territory of the overarching logic, or are circumventing the logic of the polarity switch. As with a great burdensome task, the phenomenological route is perhaps a shortcut, whereas the natural route is the long tread, requiring sweat and toil and hard labor. The logic of dependence and the polarity switch is given new organization, as geometries with new dimensions may find new ways to connect". "What a cheap tactic! This dream reflection you propose is just a common inversion" Pelfe admonished. "Maybe it is, but I want to know one thing, sister. Why is it that when we fused, my consciousness was the one that became prominent?". "This was doubtless a result of the power differential between you two" Visioness remarked. "answer me then, Visioness, what do you think was the consequence of your absorption?" Echo asked. "Perhaps ensuring that when the time is right, there may be a substantial, non-dream child born of you and Sam," she conjectured. "I have experienced an ever-increasing degree of parenthood. First there was Mar and the generation. Then there was the avatar. Then there was she that came from my body. Then there was she that was born when I set eyes on another. Then there was she that was born of me and a mortal" Echo mused. "Exactly!" Visioness proclaimed. After a long silence, Echo looked back at her and asked, in a gentle voice, "What would you say was the result of the fusion of our halos? Your iris halo and my cave halo? The substance would be combined, and that, without doubt helped in the rituals of the transition". "That is perhaps an interesting view of my current state ... aspect-mother. Was it coincidence that I was drawn to the power of the void eye, and took it for myself? It is of the dust bloodline, and you did inherit the dust-throne.

Perhaps there is something you still seek to inherit from the originators, if not their flesh” she said, and almost began to raise an eyebrow with vile pleasure. Echo repressed a degree of her eccentricity, and then replied, “Within my cave then, I can call into being lucid echoes. Then that would serve as a way to phenomenologically accelerate the dream reflection”. “The two of you are getting ahead of yourself,” Pelfe interjected, “there are still unanswered questions ...”. “The reflection will equate those perspectives” Echo answered. “What are the risks?” whined her sister. But Echo was in the midst of speaking out loud to herself and the other aspects, “This would go much faster with the spectrum mind wave, but I doubt rider’s reflectant would willingly allow us to exploit it, given the current climate”. Visioness gave a loud cough to gain her attention, “I think our sister was asking, quite politely, what the risks might be”. She stared back blankly at the other two, until Pelfe finally broke through, “Then we will need some better test subjects!”. The very pedestrian, gray coated doctor instructed Pelfe to play the harp, and waves of noise coursed into the well of the Iris Halo, its damp interior dripping with sensory activity. Lucid echoes swathed the patient, making her breathing rise and fall. “Did you get enough sleep, Sortjim?” the doctor asked. She rubbed her eyes and adjusted her wristwatch, “never been this refreshed before”. During the afternoon session, the doctor told both of them about a type of rare grass, florensereya, that only grows within broken egg shells. Such would be the best possibility of curing their hypo-nostalgia-ignorance. By the end of the week, in a joint session, and after instructing them numerous times about the steps, she was ready. Scientific curiosity burned intensely in her chest, so much so that she could only feel the slightest hint of natural emotion. Looking down, the two patients had quickly fallen fast asleep, but by random chance their faces had each fallen to a side of the platform, such that they were facing each other. Echo could feel the edge of her mouth curl into an invisible smile, a small unevenness against the hard mask of her face, then crawled into the moist interior of the Iris Halo, finding within a circle of stalagmites a bed of broken eggshells, and the florensereya growing within one of them. When they came to, the doctor provided the ingredient to both of them, then brought them into her office, printing and presenting both Sortjim and Caramel certificates for their bravery during the long therapy and for overcoming the illness.

CHAPTER 44 - THE LUCIDITY

At the same time, Dreamess summoned both Snow and Etab to a twin planetary system near the Cliva sector, “Like the system you see, the realm too has twins, if I am not mistaken”. The two patrons looked at each other, knowing the speaker meant their relationship as bearers of the matryoshka inner realm. “We are glad that you had such gardening skills, as to grow the onions that brought us forth from below” Snow remarked. “Then you will be glad at our task today, as it is like gardening. We shall call it omni-gardening perhaps?” Echo said in jest, and laughed at her own joke. “Can you be straightforward for once, empress?” Etab proposed. “I will, as we are here to do has never been done before, even once in the ten ages” she replied, and turned her back towards them, and with each hand pointed at one of the twin planets, “Snow, you will take the one to the left, and Etab, you will take the one to the right”. The dissolving goddess realized with certainty what Echo was suggesting, “then I am to manifest my matryoshka inner realm on this world, like laying a blanket across a bed, and found a new colony for our people?”. Etab, who was almost always dour in appearance, disclosed a rare smile. The two began to fly towards the planet until Echo called out to them to return, “do not proceed so soon!”. “This will require a good percentage of my daily power,” Snow professed. Echo halted them and introduced the requirements of the dream reflection to them, “It will not be easy. The foundation of these colonies must be strong. For that reason, a simple manifestation will not do. I have invented a new technique, although somewhat archaic, that I want you both to apply”. And so, over the course of ten hours Echo taught them the dream reflection, and the exertion of it made them perspire. As Snow and Etab achieved lucid awakening, the matryoshka inner realms were manifested on each their respective worlds. Snow named her world New Allium, after the scientific name for onion. Etab named his world Crown Bulb. “This is my time to sway them” Echo thought as both of her disciples rested, wet and perspiring upon a fertile grassy plain of New Allium. She stood over them and said, “brother, vision-daughter, you both know as well as I do our plight. Despite everything, we are incomplete, as we are partly figments of the mind of our great parents. Although a day may come when the realm must continue without the dreamers, there most certainly should be a way to guarantee that we are solid, and not subject to the polarity switch of the original base-reality dream procedure. The way to build that foundation, and

guarantee our safety is the reason I formulated the dream reflection, and with it I entrust you with this next endeavor. For I have chosen both of you to enter our great parents, and enact the dream reflection, such that an avalanche of lucidity will wash over the realm, granting it density". "They will most certainly recognize our explorations" ' Etab panted, and placed his hand on the vision-sister's shoulder. Snow stood on her feet and glowered intensely, "This is most mischievous mother! Even more so than the dark past you tried to bury from all of us for so long. I will not be a part of this, although I will not declare it to our great parents". The schemer pinched the bridge of her nose in irritation. As Snow left through the skies of New Allium, Etab looked to Echo and smiled once more, "I am glad to see her finally standing up to you, at least partly". When they returned, their parents were resting from refashioning the golden aetheric gears and mechanisms within a cloud. Echo watched as her father Linden's chest rose and swelled. Melina was beside him, and so the time was right. They performed the spell, imbued with all the necessary mechanisms. Like dawn brushing across her face, Echo felt the wave of lucidity, and it was of such low frequency only she could. Moments later, couriers burst through the door, and her parents arose. Echo brimmed with anger to learn the childish Alliance cared not for her magnificent parents. Things had gone amiss on Brine-Bath. And they were on the attack.

CHAPTER 45 - SNOW'S CAFE

"This must be it," the first woman said to the other two, as they looked at the skinny, neglected space between the lumbering office buildings. Besides the glass, which had sparsely cracked at all over the years, the remainder of the building was weathered and grayish white. A lonesome storefront sign in spaced letters across the top spelled "December's Delicious Cafe". From the south a paltry wind blew, causing the door to creak in its frame. "Not much to look at, isn't it?" the friend on the left said. Made ever so hesitant by the worrying, almost premeditated lack of character behind the glass the other friend took a step back. It was an empty space without merit. But the woman only stood sentinel, feeling the smooth caress of wind in its feeble senility, and then pressed forward, saying "That's our invitation I guess". Beckoned, the friends

followed. Once inside, she began to rub her temples, and look around. The patron was speechless as she paced about the room in sporadic motions. “Patroness, are you alright?” April Frosting asked of Snow. “Calm down, we need to find whatever is here” Alluring Philosophy reassured her. “Exactly! Exactly! That table was here ... and that chair was there ... and that picture was there!” she declared pointing at vacant spots all around the room. In flashes her counterpart's life began to return. “Little does it matter where we came from, even in our past lives” Alluring Philosophy interrupted, trying to cure the woman’s distress. “I was over there, behind the counter, minding my shop, watching people come and leave,” Snow answered, gliding over to where the partition for the kitchen was. Both of the friends sighed with lack of enthusiasm as they watched her stand behind the counter, as if to offer them a snack. Then they noticed that she was not looking at them, but beyond, glaring out the window with a blank expression. April Frosting waved her hand to get Snow’s attention ... and break her from her reverie. “What did you see?” the metacoma questioned, seeing how the shop-owner had a hand over her mouth, as if to subdue what was trying to escape. “This was my cafe. Now I remember the minute it happened. I was standing here and cutting an onion for a sandwich. The shop was empty, as it was early morning. Looking up, I peered out the window, out there. At first there was nothing, but then one at a time the snowflakes came. Before long, winter danced outside the glass. It came, unspeakable sheets of white. In awe of the beauty, I cried, and tears streamed down my face. It may have been from the onion, or from what I saw, or both. And I may have fallen asleep for a minute. That was when I split, and below, when Echo saw Sam as Dazin, I was brought into being” Snow recognized. “Interesting,” Alluring Philosophy remarked, dispassionate like a proper sleuth, “who did you sell it to?”, in reference to the sandwich. Kneeling down, clearing away cobwebs to a locked cabinet, she unsealed a metal box, “I kept all my receipts down here”. Thumbing through the receipts by date, she finally came to the right article. “Eugene Traveler” the signature on the receipt indicated. “I know this one, he is within the portion” she said, and rushed out of the shop. They continued through downtown Vancouver. As they did, April became more concerned with the ambiguous weather. For when the temperature is just so, it cannot be felt at all, and it is as if ... nature is absent. Sensation ceases and curiosity remains. “The patron’s mood will liven when we find what we are looking for” she reassured herself. Traveler could be found in

the commercial district, tending to a trade fair booth for civil pharmaceutical telecommunication. Nearby, rattle cuttlefish had found their way in through a window. They had at the ends of their tentacle's chimes like that of a rattlesnake which, when vibrated, resonated like a windchime incessantly. A security guard was dispatched to shoo the strays away. "Mr. Eugene, would you be able to answer a few questions?" Snow asked. "I would be happy to answer any questions you have about our products. Ever since the architect pharmacist Bates Origami founded our company, we have had the goal of serving the public with the highest quality" Traveler answered, thinking he could capture their interest. "I'm not here for a sale. What I am looking for is more specific, and personal" the patron replied, then took the receipt out of her pocket, handing it over to him. "You want to know about a sandwich I bought more than ten years ago?" Traveler, raising an eyebrow, replied ... not quite sensing the deviation in time. "I know it's a lot to ask" the woman admitted. "This place hasn't even been open since the old days. It's in the forgotten part of town" he recalled, passing his eyes over the small type with care, a glint in his eye. "We are conservators paid for by the committee. Any history of the old city, we would definitely like to be acquainted with, if it could be preserved" fabricated the detective, hoping for more. "But this was just a quaint little shop" Eugene countered, taken somewhat aback by the rare request. "After a complete record is made, locations important for Vancouver's cultural history will be selected. This is important as a step in our process" Snow elaborated and saw that she had finally won his trust. "I see. December's Delicious Cafe... yes, I can almost picture it now ...lunched there from time to time. They had sandwiches and charming cups of lemon tea. That was before the phenomenon, before lemon tea was augmented by crystals and interpretive dance. My favorite was the swiss. I would have a slice of banana bread on the side. Kind and inviting, filled with light gossip. The owner was pleasant and ran the place herself. Now that I think of it ... that was the one place everyone always looked forward to going. You're making me nostalgic for the old days" Eugene divulged to the guests. As the words entered her, she shivered subtly with nervousness, preparing to ask the next question, "Can you tell us about the sandwich?". Traveler rubbed his chin, thinking, "Lucky for you, that was a day I could never forget. I was on my way back to work when the bag was stolen by some runaway scamps. Never got a good look at them ... even so, that was so long ago". As he extended an arm to

return the receipt, she placed her hand on his wrist saying, "Thank you for your assistance, friend. Keep this, it's a piece of the past", and walked away with the other two. Back at the shop, April formed a table and chairs from cake frosting for them to rest. "Well, at least we know it went to good use" Alluring Philosophy remarked, in order to cheer up the rest. "Should we continue to look for clues?" April wondered aloud. Snow looked at them both, "I wouldn't think so. Duchesses, since our harmony is strong, I will relate to you what is now becoming clear. If you will recall, I came into being the moment that Echo saw Dazin at that party. Likewise, I witnessed the snow with tears streaming down my face as I cut the onion. I was in awe. Just as I am a personification of awe at first sight, I am love at first sight, an entity called forth by that experience of Echo. For this reason ... my identity has been contingent upon their continued bond. Had history found a different course, separating the two, I would not have survived, but faded away, dissolving like a snowflake upon the tongue, just as a dream". "Fascinating!" April exclaimed as Alluring Philosophy gasped from the swift surprise. "Perhaps I was being naïve when I shouted at mother before. Now that I am face to face with a similar dilemma, I feel her struggle" Snow thought to herself. "However, I was broken from this requirement recently by a spell. The dream reflection. At the time I did not recognize the consequences. Now I ... we ... are free to claim our own identity. But I am at a loss as to what path I may wish for. Where there was purpose ... now there is possibility. Duchess ... I feel so afraid" the patron confided. Overwhelmed, they all embraced each other. Separating, she led them out of the shop and towards the street, listening to the clack off the door as it closed behind. Yet before the return, the woman turned again to examine the shop. "A runaway scamp you say ..." she whispered to herself. They went back into the interior, walking through the back kitchen until the door to the cellar revealed itself. "Let's go this way and see if it leads somewhere" Snow proposed, gratified by her friend's fortitude and the new lead. Below, in the musty cellar, there was a chasm in the wall that led for a mile underneath the city, to a society of subterranean misfits. Tattered red and white flags, some of them strips, hung from the ceiling of a communal gathering where bartering tradesmen of the underworld thronged. "A proper freshening of the portion is in order" April began. Alluring smiled back at the humor. Then, powerful waves of drowsiness overtook both of the duchesses, and they fainted onto the dirty ground. Snow felt it, but shook it off,

kneeling down to place a hand upon April's shoulder to rouse her ... but then realized, in a true awakening of horror, what had occurred. "Etab" she thought, realizing the enterprise of the empress and the dark patron had been successful in sending lucidity across space and time. Then this would be a natural backlash, like a shockwave passing through the fiefdom. The metacoma, most of them would be plunged deeper into that precious state and be unable to aid them in a battle that was on the horizon. They would be defenseless. Rambling up to them from the crowd, an old black-bearded vagrant in a thick hood noticed the disturbance. "My April ... and Maude, " he stuttered. The expression on his face gave it away. "Then the scamps were these two" the patron surmised as she rose to talk to him, "They fainted when they saw you. It was too much for them ... after all these years. They will be like this for a good time, maybe weeks if not years. Will you look after them? I have a spell so they do not hunger". With tears making paths upon his face, clean lines, the ragged man embraced her, and lifted up one of them while Snow lifted the other to where he had his quarters behind a shower curtain and placed them down upon a bed. When it was done, the cafe owner returned back through the tunnel to the cellar, up the staircase and out into the still air of Vancouver. Snow looked down at her hand, realizing that she had perhaps dropped the ring somewhere in the dark. "I didn't lose it. I feel ... interesting" she realized. For the solid ring had become mirror light that entered her and became blood. Whispers melded as an alloy. Somewhat unburdened by the new angst that had presented itself so suddenly, the woman smiled with fierce courage and continued back towards the heart of the portion.

CHAPTER 46 - TADPOLES

Location: Earth

Date: Present Time

Unbeknownst to all, deep below the sea there was a dolphin pillow fight. Smacking each other in the dolphin face with pillows. Making it red. That was the life.

Veles was having an eminently unpleasant morning. She marched downstairs and opened the door to let loose some silly tadpoles onto the ground. An odd magic caper of some sort. She went downstairs to the bed and breakfast area with the love seats and had a waffle baked in a strawberry with syrup and dainty cups of milk. The fork was sterling silver edged with copper. Belts of the more salient daylight lay upon the table. An unprovoked and wanton intrusion. From her perspective in the woozy hours of morning, the strawberry looked bigger. Diplomatically she poked at it. A second later it dawned. At once her arms waved into the air in protest, "What the flip is going on?"

But further out onto the lawn the band of tadpoles had already begun their adventure. They swam through the individual blades of grass. They vocalized like cute squeaky squish toys with the sound, "Wa wa wa " into the world. Together they clamored over the ticklish grass to find a place to grow. A sea. A blue oasis where plants germinate beneath safe waters. Far from wretched dangers. The tint of the grass heightened and they dived down into the green sea. Little tadpole tails fluttered, bringing them deeper. Waves the color of unripe apple. "WA !!!" one of them cried. It was too much. So, they surfaced onto the grass to pursue a different route.

Tiny helicopters turned upside down so that their blades cut the grass like a lawnmower. Each chased a tadpole of the band away. An intrepid one jumped onto a helicopter passenger seat just as it righted itself and tried to communicate with the human pilot, yelping "Wa wa wa" but to no avail. It was booted out.

After that matter was good and done with, the band regrouped onto a big flat stone. It was decided that to become frogs, they had to fan out and find a normal sea of water. The youngest tadpole went his own way, and hopped through a window into a birthday party where he was given a party hat and offered cake until a man burst through the window and undid his parachute. He of course wanted the cake as well, but then another man with a jetpack walked into the room and made off with it into the sky, leaving the poor tadpole without a slice. So that endeavor came to naught.

The eldest tadpole had more luck. He knew the game. He came upon the first little dude he could to give him advice. And that little dude was an ant on an ant hill. Those big buggy eyes. Razor sharp jaws clicking back and forth. A few too many legs so the

tadpole lost count. “Wa wa” he demanded. The ant raised its head, “Ah, good to meet you. A sea you say? I haven’t seen anything like that. To be honest it’s been quite a long day. I was working on this tunnel. I moved a pebble from one side to the other. It was hard to get it in the wall. You have to move your head back and forth. But it wouldn’t fit! So, I took that pebble to this other tunnel and put it there. Nice and strong. Then this guy comes and tries to take my pebble. Not going to happen. Whew, what a chore. After that I went into this other chamber and took three pebbles and moved them over to the other side. Then I went to this other tunnel and dragged a big pebble. Hard work. Tell me about it”. “WA !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!” the tadpole whined, making it so loud as to bring the ant out of his memories. “The sea again. Very well. You can probably get there by talking to the dolphin. He is past the parking lot but that’s not the best way. Jump up there and take one of the flying houses. That will get you there my friend”, the ant offered, bidding his adieu. He loved the queen.

Up above in the nascent clouds of the afternoon, a few hamsters roamed. They leapt from one mound to another. If anyone looked up, they could see them bridge the gap. The clouds that they landed on bent and spun, becoming hamster wheels. From them hailed zephyrs that swept across the land.

The tadpole with the big head went in search of fire to pacify the helicopters. He easily sneaked into the bed and breakfast. Priya and the others were long gone, and the lobby was calmly uninhabited. A figure appeared, towering above him. The tadpole was startled. With light meekness he raised his handsome tadpole face. A goofy smile stood there, panting evenly. Along with it, a big tongue slapped him up and down. By that time the Siberian Husky that was born of the hearth was renamed Siberian Dusty. Being a good boy, it knelt down and let the tadpole ride atop its back. Together they ventured past the brick gateway, to a corridor that seemed to know no end. The fireball was jumping on a trampoline, hoping with all its heart to jump high enough to become smoke through the chimney. “Wa!!!” the tadpole insisted to no avail. It didn’t want to join their party. It just wanted to jump. But the clever tadpole drove the doggie to a stick which it grabbed in its mouth and captured the fireball. And although the following bout with tiny helicopters was to no avail, he had made quite a good friend in the process.

Meanwhile, another group of tadpoles led by the one with the freckle did indeed find a pond. Botanicals unfolded across the length of it, making turquoise what once was blue and green. Hummingbirds stuck their long faces into nectar-soaked pits. Petals rubbing their underbellies. Stems weaved amongst themselves into twists with dangling buds and little spaces between. Little beetles scaled those towers. A soul of a lagoon flew past but no one noticed. More slowpoke tadpoles made it to the shore. They went “Wa Wa Wa”, right and left to their bedfellows until a wall of heat descended, revealing a track of lily pads. Big flat ones. Plantlike. Animated. Shimmering their buoyant fringes. The tadpoles bounded in glee across the river until coming upon their destination. But it was already too late. A picnic of lazy citizens had already taken their place. Upon being interrupted they opened their picnic baskets and threw slices of cake at the intruders until they fled. The picnickers were left to their own devices. And a vegetarian crocodile nibbled on parsley in the depths.

The emergence of ripples on a panorama pond was a long-awaited release of natural stamina, unfettered finally from the plane of bright water to the plurality of circles. An ensemble of delicate hues, approaching abstraction. The fondness of the ripples was for the shore, and as it did the pond revealed its wrinkles. In moments it surpassed a babbling brook in its liveliness. Reminiscent of endearment. The colors trespassed into further shores. A disclosure of unbound fervor, animated by light. Minutia of wobbles continued unsupervised for a time. Then circles met each other, forging divine Venn-diagrams. Those that evaporated would know humility once more, passing into the invisibility of air. In reply the leaves of a tree on the shore were sent to another tree. The panoramas felt their emotions sent from one to another, and a young man resting on a bed of grass upon the shore awoke. On the inferno of the sun, the flame formed ripples. Its corona was made pleasant by the circles. Giant fireball heads bobbed out of the depths to see what it was. Espresso cup submarines were sent off course. And the young man got to his knees to see such champion colors that would have made his eyes metamorphosize had they not disappeared a second later. And the geometry stopped, and in time the turbulence would be finished. In the hills and forests would begin the slow, seasonal change to susceptibility.

Undeterred by a few mishaps, the tadpoles ventured on, climbing the hovering wooden planks to the flying house. The place seemed perfectly normal except for the pillow monster in the corner. It just sort of sat there until they were forced to return the way they came, bounding from the doorway back to solid ground.

Farther into the hills, the stone embankment of a river was neat in its construction. It waved into parts farther than one could see. Yet there was a little road leading up to it where mineral specimens of halcyon beauty lined the walkway. A bird flew over and its feathers came off and tickled it until it had to land. Another bird flew over some boaters on another pond and its feathers also came off and tickled them. Later they drove into town and went into a big glass-covered office building where they talked to a tickle insurance salesman but the prices were too high.

Back to the neighbor of the bed and breakfast, a one-story building in unremarkable brick. A shortage of windows and eggshell white drapes. A tadpole escaped forthwith, pursued by the olive oil praying mantis. It unlatched those fearsome jaws and screeched like a monster. The tadpole was caught quite easily. The mantis twiddled its antennae. Preparing for a bite, it raised the tadpole to its buggy head. But as luck would have it magic was in the air, and the two fused to become the praying mantis tadpole. A tadpole with mantis claws and a hunger for blood. It swerved back into the building to look for a snack ... but the pool boy had already gone. He was a smart one. Before long he had found a tadpole to ride outta there.

A couple was not ashamed of their hot air balloon, although it was fat with air. They ascended cool zephyrs until reaching the heights of that staircase. The man edged over the cabin to witness the usual latticework of cities and lush pastures. She heaved deep draughts into a chest shrouded with linen. Glow from the pyre fell over their faces. It was a good day to fly, they presumed, as the clouds parted. Enamored for a moment, they lost navigation and ventured into a vast gateway. Earlier in Panorama, the jewelry store had detached from the ground and floated skyward. Imbued by clouds, it had burgeoned to insurmountable scales. His shoulders shrunk. They were dwarfed with respect to everything. In the cabin, a man and a woman hugged each other in fear, as just a single prick of a diamond could send them on their way. Multifaceted reflections of

hot air balloons slid over hard surfaces. Even the glint of a beam could send sparks. Fearsome sparks.

Pearls became mist in the eyes of the pilot as he cascaded through emotionless empty space. A stewardess paced down the main hall, passing out peanuts that were too salty in the opinion of one guest. Nevertheless, he made a gambit to the cart to steal more peanuts, but his hand was slapped. The skies continued, making a play at being space without essence. The pilot couldn't see Panorama below. There was too much ... interference. He dipped down at a reasonable angle. Without the landing strip he would have to improvise. To his relief a butterfly had alighted on a flower and extended its wings out, making way for the plane to land. As so they did. Gorgeous incendiary colors matted the wings. The group sauntered out to find a pond and with lily pads bathed in the substance of butterfly. One of those circles was a respite for some time for the pilot. He yawned, knowing his day would coincide with the honor of high spirits. Around him slushed a rainbow whose cloth felt the wind even in its most irate passions. "This is a good spot" he mumbled. Such an enticement did not go unnoticed. A beautiful white snail made its way to the surface, putting its slug foot on the lily pad. The man did not know what to say. Very long slimy eyestalks stretched out and looked him up and down to get a good look. He was taken aback until realizing that human impatience meant nothing to a snail. Behind the eyestalks, the shell was almost transparent and reminded him of dreams. A pause in the loft above gave clearance to a beam of light that impacted the wing at just the right time. The man with the peanuts was surprised to see all the invisible mermaids. He had stolen a new bag before they departed. He reached his hand out to pull one up onto the lily pad. She spasmed for a second on dry land, but soon regained her composure. From then on, the mermaid related to him how strange he looked in a shy, dopey kind of way. He grumbled and thought about why it was always him that got such a passenger during flights? And they always took the window seat. The conversation continued unabated until that dopey face almost won him over. Nearly. On the precipice. When earthbound diamonds headed in their direction and the very fabric was torn asunder, unloosing them all to wild plummets to the ground. An unopened bag of salted peanuts.

In the northernmost hamlet of Panorama, a mail boy rode his bike and tossed a newspaper against a door. Ignorantly he ushered the vehicle up the street. But the house was not amused. It got to its feet and ambled down the street, picking the boy up with a chimney smoke turned hand and gave him a stern talking to.

Regrouped, the tadpoles sauntered with newfound gaiety. The day had excelled only in misadventure. Even so, a simple day is what they longed for in their tiny tadpole heart of hearts. Brothers standing tall in the grass. Soon they could pursue the dolphin and gain its trust. Rowdily the crowd shouted “WA!” as loud as they could. Headlong into the parking lot. Inside that most human place, the cars were arranged in stacks on top of Greek pillars. It would take one of them to scale that height to survey the area, and find the dolphin relaxing in the bubbling cauldron of soup, the carrot bumping its happy belly. Young tadpole took the lead, and approached one of the columns. Above him, the trunk slowly creaked open. A handsome paw reached out into the balmy air. It was trunk wolves!!! Grizzled mugs blared with evil ivory teeth. Cruelly they wanted the car stack all to themselves, and they would tear anyone to shreds to keep it that way. Tyrannized, the explorers fell back to the safety of their peers. But the wolves stayed. They wouldn’t depart from the comfort of their trunks. Younger tadpole continued to search around the parking lot until he found a single car atop a single column. Forthwith he bounced into the driver’s seat and smacked the horn. Loud and dominant. Now the tables had turned. He returned and climbed his way to the top. At that altitude, some trees wandered by, growing grass on their roots. Some glistening sports cars were filled with bags of potato chips. But the air was weightless. The horizon seemed clear. Light currents of wind skimmed his body in a relatively new way. An electricity of youth raced across his skin. His entirety. And situated amongst some buildings near a hill was a nose that was too big for anyone’s good.

Feathery sawdust matted the leafy ground. Disheveled clutter littered the remainder. Chunks of wood sullied the natural order, making it cubist at best. Carpenters’ tools laid nearby on a table. Beyond the circumference of that locale spread a ubiquity of flowers. Some pure violet. Others tones of violet. Deep blue like photocopies of the sky. The man hobbled out of the shed; his clothes yellow like durable parchment. Much to his chagrin he then turned into a flower. Self-absorbed and a retiree

of sorts, he took the saw and continued its division of a certain rafter. Fulsome scents lapped around the hut like tides. But he had quite enough to deal with, his face being an ovary and all that. The grain of the wood was quite fussy that day. Hourglass dust sprang from its cracks. The orientalism of the blue lands had gone unnoticed. The rude metal of the saw set in motion new furrows. Its angle perfect. As that happened a loud moaning from above irritated his not giving a damn about society sensibilities. It was one of those passenger planes with a long tubular cabin. The flower man grew hot with rage. He was a brute with a temper who chose solitude. In anger he grabbed the hammer and jumped up into the air and grew to a size much larger than a cloud and smashed the airplane with the hammer exploding it in a magnificent fireball. When he returned to earth there were some pesky tadpoles so he chased them away, and smashed whatever brick houses they hid behind. Debris hung weightless in the air, seemingly trapped in time. But the little ones had teamwork and he did not. They circled around him skillfully and made their way to the other end of Panorama.

Farther away from the town, a circus had arrived in search of riches. The clowns were on their daily break when a cloud stunned them into sleep. Falling over each other, like a bed of colored toothpicks onto the grass. From that silence the curtain of the circus rose, and out hopped a giant frog from the zoo onto the scene. Bloated and fat, it stood on a platform for some time to review the surroundings. A trail of clowns fanned out into the direction of town. Not wanting to get its feet dirty, it hopped on one after the other. At each turn, the frog's butt hit them and their nose honked. The path of honks led to freedom.

Safe for the time being, the pool boy dismounted from his steed. "Wa!" the tadpole added approvingly. The sights and sounds had largely become a hush. The purpose was unknown to him, as such a thing followed only the dreamer. A few residents had made their appearance and milled with pleasant banter. He craned his neck to see the hamsters still spinning in their hamster wheel clouds. A particular one drifted to the center of the sky. Its revolutions quickened, ushering the powerless winds into circles of unfeasible beauty. Diminutive black eyes tightened for the endeavor. Whiskers shivered. Suspended in immediacy, the wheel's physical form ceased to be discernable. Pulled by barbarous force, the clouds become a whirlwind of insatiable strength.

Channeled through such a labyrinth, the light formed into an eloquence of such dapper pinks. Sinews of clouds burst in unexpected directions and reformed. Light radiated in sheathes bending to the will of the whirlwind. The pool boy saw things pass through each sheath. Unable to escape the velocity, the hamster was spun inside the wheel. The winds slowed their campaign. Eventually its center was done. And the cherry blossom pink was sprinkled like powder on the undersides of the clouds as they molded in shape. The pool boy looked down again and heard the others pick up where they left off. More people milled about and it was starting to look like a regular afternoon.

A soup bubbled and a carrot continued to bounce against his belly. The dolphin clapped his flippers together in glee. With such hot pleasures, he was sure to have a joyous day. Around the bowl something ruffled in the grass. He leaned to look and saw himself encircled by funny tadpoles. “Wa!” they pleaded in dulcet choruses. Knowing his time was up, the dolphin dived into the soup and slurped it all up. His mother had told him not to play with food. His belly swelled and a gratified look alighted on the marine mammals’ face. “Yes, I know the way to the sea, but you don’t need to go,” he answered. The solution to their predicament was obvious. The fact that they were so thick began to humor him. “Wa, Wa, Wa” they protested continuously. At last, the dolphin jumped out and gave them a serious look. He explained how they were residents transformed into tadpoles. It wasn’t that big a deal honestly. They all turned back into humans and talked about the weekend and their plans. All except a single soul who needed to be alone. Still burdened by the weight of memories, she clamored through the bush. In the world of the fluff, they had played endlessly. Did anyone guess that it was a pillow? And that of Veles, a personage who no one knew. Dreams filled the chambers of her heart. She was immersed in them and their gravity. The cedars and their branches faded from view. From her vantage she witnessed a castle, its boundary cast of glass. It had a portal and a balcony. And a woman whose presence was dazzling and whose figure graced the night. Unforgettable feelings broke the dam of her spirit and flooded in. Light assailed the inner recesses of her being. And she buckled as the dream became birdsong and soared to infinity. In the daylight she would witness the descent of leaves from the canopy, and see the columns of cedar spring from the very base of the world. And she would be released from that dream, as its contents were not made for the vessel.

Later on, Teddy found the Siberian Dusty and adopted him. Having been accepted by great grandmother Echo, he was most pleased with himself.

The dolphin pillow fight continued until one had won a medal for most smacks in one day. The faces of its enemies were cherry red, resting against coral to regain their breath. Now he was king of the slumber party. They gave him a splendid crown.

CHAPTER 47 - TELENON'S PLAN

In the Temple of the Voices of Reason, Telenon awoke from mere idleness and reveries. Alone in the room, and at the whims of darkness. The man brushed a hairy, hyena-like chest and got to his feet. He spied the window and its thin rectangle of light. Raising his hand, the shade retracted, granting him a macroscale view of the town below, “The best way to destroy Priya is to turn her world upside down. Her daughter Snow will be the first. She is an impulsive one. I can trap her in the turbulence. It will drive her mad and then I can watch as Priya fights her daughter. Inevitably, she will vanquish her in thoughtlessness, and that will break the champion’s will. Overcome by grief. That is the fastest way to do this”. Yet that was not enough. Knowing what battle truly was, he forced himself to plan for all contingencies. Securing a private channel, he spoke to the most fiendish adversaries of the SOTA. Orchidia Everglow, Visioness of the Infinite Black Rainbow, Kyloptos Rama, and the Giftbearer. “Telenon, is that you?” Orchidia murmured. She was tall and lithe, with mesmerizingly long hair, blonde to the extreme. An intricate armor clicked repeatedly upon her person. The second was trapped within the champion. Dark ... like a shadow twin. The third was resting in a sarcophagus. Towered over by an elegant triangle. He was an old man, frail of body, but seething with magic. And the fourth was just a fragment of her former self. In some remote place. Covered in glitter. Naturally, Telenon related the design to them. Kyloptos Rama would have none of it. He was a sore loser, and left of his own accord. The SOTA had done him in. Giftbearer was in no condition to assist ... and so she slinked away. With Visioness, only a few words could be traded before that one faded into the spirit of its captor. And then Orchidia remained. Telenon nodded to her and revealed the expanse

of the prairie below. The place for an evil enterprise. “Do you see that, the honeysuckle upon the house” she noticed. “What do you consider about it then?” he wondered, intrigued by the hint of rebellion. “It means Snow has a portion of Honeycomb Man’s power, which means she must have a portion of Etheria’s power. It will be a barrier”. “No matter, let’s get this underway and you will see me do my justice” he concluded, stepping into the diagonal of light cast onto the ground by the window. Below, the challenger approached her phenomenal destiny. It was now a waiting game.

A rabble of birds larked through the air on a journey to a certain roof. The house sat on top of the hill, wreathed in vines of honeysuckle, bright yellow. Across the walls of the shelter, lines overlapped with one another. Resourceful beetles made their way along the thoroughfares. Further down the hill, the grass met its match through cycles of endless wind. Cleaving semicircles through the prairie. Sweetness filled the air from the interiors of the honeysuckle. It swept across miles, piquing the interest of anything that it came across. But beyond that was the vast ever-present green of the prairie. Flecked with sturdy trees. A copious nursery to arrest the spinning world. To make it blink. Because there, even loneliness was an ecstasy. Later on, more winds were arriving. Forthcoming from the east. Adding mountain air to the fragrance. Making the tone of it elusive. It was the kind of place that journeys led to. Ambling about, getting lost even in the shortest, insubstantial grass. A century to pass the wide sweep of that plane. The sun sent a torrent of light below. It made an obstruction perpendicular to someone’s face. The clouds drifted because that was in vogue these days. And the grass continued its juvenile dance. As if the shell of a person had entered the pure layer of the earth. Through the layer of space. Or being a shell and walking along the prairie with the wind that flows. Or awakening within the cardinal directions of a compass dropped upon the ground. Willing the needle to its rightful place. Despite all of that, the afternoon lurched forward. The trees bent as only they could, stretching their backs, as they had seniority. The house on the hill looked sequestered. The yellow of the honeysuckle welcomed travelers.

The mouth of the hyena smiled with toothy delight. Soon enough, there would be that righteous warrior coming up the hill, who was most definitely still a nerd and not hot. Maybe if you looked at her sideways ... there were some bodacious curves. But that

didn't matter! She was just a student, like all the rest. A simple scholar that likes books and falling asleep in lectures. Just a regular, commonplace girl. With echo powers and a sword and a heroic look on her face and all that - let me save everyone - nonsense.

CHAPTER 48 - COMPANIONS - PRIYA AND SNOW - HONEYSUCKLE HOUSE

Almost tripping over a garden gnome, Priya continued up the driveway until seeing the cottage, its white exterior peeking out from underneath the vines of honeysuckle that had enveloped it like a floral spiderweb. "Snow must still be asleep" she thought, creaking open the front door. Unwanted articles of clothing lay abandoned on the staircase. The family that dwelt there had certainly left in haste. "Hey!" Priya called out, but her daughter refused to answer. More of the vine weaved circuitously through the dwelling, over family portraits and across wallpaper, overpowering the patterns that hid beneath. Supple honeysuckle clusters offered themselves like maidens shackled to their vines. "Doesn't look like she's in the television room, better check the upstairs" Priya thought. Each of the bedrooms, however, were thoroughly empty. "If you just want to stay inside today, that's fine, but I need to know where you are!" Priya shouted. From the corridor she heard the pattering of feet and quiet laughter. Peeking back out of the room into the hall, it was bare save for fresh imprints on the carpet that traced down the stairwell. "Ah, so that's how it's going to be," Priya sighed, following them to wherever they might lead. Snickers emanated from inside the closet, and she opened it, seeing the woman inside speaking to shadows, her hair disheveled, her clothes unkempt. "Darling ... are you hiding?" Priya asked. "It's got to be somewhere in here ..." Snow said, moving her arms diligently. Squinting, her mother looked closer and saw how she was picking the clusters for their nectar. "Everyone's probably having lunch by now, Snowflake, did you want to come outside?". Snow twisted around and looked at her through strands of hair that fell over her face. Her eyes were wild, credulous, childlike, "Not until I find the answer". Hearing this, the mother dragged her by the arm out into the living room, and fixed her hair, "What are you talking about, hon? Let's just go outside already, come on". Snow began picking some of the flowers that were growing on the couch, slurping up the nectar, "No! I can't leave. The answer is hiding in

the nectar of one of these honeysuckles. I have to go throughout the entire house to find it. This is my system. I'm doing it by vine". "I don't get it, what are you looking for?" Priya demanded gruffly, exasperated at how the day was going nowhere. At this the daughter swiveled her neck, opened her mouth, and stuck out her tongue so she could see the undissolving jewel of the Ice-Multiplex resting upon it, glittering with six-fold symmetry, "My purpose". Priya put her hands on her hips, like an instructor insulted by a thoughtless answer, "Snow, you have to invent a purpose, that's what life is about". "It's hiding in the honeysuckle. It's in one of these little drops" Snow assured her, continuing her quest at one of the vines that slithered across the wall. Funny that they would not touch the windows, but traced around, allowing a most pleasant, light-soaked view of the world outside. It was undiluted, where even the feral green spread its limitless body towards town. "That's easy for you to say, mother. You aren't the manifestation of a chemical reaction. Who are you to say the purpose isn't in a little drop of nectar?" she huffed, tossing a family portrait onto the floor after finishing its cluster. The glass cracked like a snail shell stepped upon by a fat shoe. "Snowflake ... if I help you find the mystery, will you come outside and be with us?" her mother asked, humoring her childishness for the sake of time, and she nodded in agreement. "You can start with the vine over there" the patron directed.

"I suppose life has been cruelest to you" Priya thought as she picked one of the honeysuckles and dabbed a drop onto her tongue. Snow came uncomfortably close, grinning eagerly at her first effort. "So, each of these leads to somewhere" she deduced as the walls of the house began to fade. Her daughter took it as well, and before they knew it, they were in a new city, in a parking-lot full of wannabe luxury vehicles. From the building came trotting out another Snow, this one in suspenders and dorky glasses. "Hi, I'm Snowie" she announced, shaking each of their hands rather hard. "Are you a used car salesman?" Snow asked shyly, to which Snowie slapped her shoulder, "You betcha!". The newcomers were ushered into a model which she assured them was fresh off the factory floor, and took it for a test drive down a long road that ran parallel to the city. "This is the next-gen Nordic class air conditioning system, probably one of the best features" Snowie told them, fiddling on the dashboard. "Watch out for that lion on the road!" Priya yelled, and the car screeched to the left. It bore sharp fangs as they veered. "Mom, relax. This is mostly just a hallucination" Snow said as she lowered the window

and laid her elbow out of it, twisting the steering wheel with just one hand. Ignoring Priya, Snowie turned to the driver, studying her, “Did I mention that you have very white teeth, that’s a good judge of character in a person”. “Oh, you know ... I brush at least twice a day,” Snow bragged. They stopped briefly at a light for a group of people wearing pajamas to cross. More lions sleeping in bubbles hovered nearby. By the passenger’s window a hermit crab carrying a string of sausages offered to sell her one, and she traded an onsuru coin. It tasted of pork fed with freshwater scallops and a hint of basil licorice. Seeing the seat to her right had a picnic basket, Priya opened it and saw that inside was the engine of the vehicle ... then quickly closed it and put it back where she found it. “Now I think we’re ready for a shortcut” Snow said as they passed a local park, and spun the car around, barreling through and shredding the green. People playing tennis gasped as they wove through, and more lions appeared that sped away to safety. A grandmother in a nightgown ran out into the fray and hit one of the lions in the head with a wooden rolling pin because it was late for supper. “That’s enough, stop the car right here!” Priya demanded, and they came to a screeching halt near a wide flight of stairs that led to another level. Slamming the door behind her, she got out and paced away to where the railing was, walking onto the first step. “Ah, don’t be like that” Snow beseeched as the salesman trailed behind. From the top flight an old timer shuffled down, eagerly plucking a tennis ball from a white beard. He must have been eager to play, since he ignored their plight completely. A primal mote of consequence. Whilst the two of them were bickering Snowie tapped her shoulder, “Excuse me mam, is this your thermos?”, handing it over gracefully. As soon as Priya opened it, streamers and glitter flew out, spattering over her shoulders. Reveling at the prank, Snowie slapped her knee and burst with laughter, “Haha ... thought you just needed a little something to relax there, mam”. The daughter shirked away, seeing her mother was glaring at her with those unforgiving eyes. “I’m done here” Priya said, and as she walked away, the place that was the realm lost focus and was replaced by the room. “Well, I guess my purpose wasn’t in there, let’s try another” Snow implored. She pulled her mother by the arm from the couch where she had collapsed in agony of the dumbness of the day. “You know what, maybe life hasn’t been cruel enough to you” Priya said as she was forced onto her feet.

For the time being they decided to have tea. As Snow sipped her herbal, she saw that more precocious squirrels, although they were not invited, had decided to romp about the room. “Their population has skyrocketed since the epidemic,” Priya noted. “They would make excellent friends, mom. I think I’ll call this one George” Snow considered, patting the head of one sitting on the napkin. When they were done, they retired back to the wall where another vine awaited them, sharing in another droplet and waited for the walls to disintegrate, shepherding them into the hallucination. Incrementally, the faces of a crowd appeared as snippets latched together, but not in the ordinary fashion. Desiring disunion, quadrants of space segmented off from one another. “Darling, would you say that your vision is different here?” Priya asked, turning towards her. A hairy tarantula looked back, its compound eyes delicate like a lady’s, its legs slender, adolescent. “Ahh!” shouted the other spider in fright, dancing for a bit before coming to terms with her own evolution. “If we are going to be like this, promise me you won’t tell anyone” she pleaded while waving her front legs to-and-fro. “Darling, believe me, when we get back, my fangs are sealed,” she assured her. Gradually, the air around them became fertile with sound – cordial, cyclical, resonating to the rafters. “Mom, this is classical,” the delicate one discerned excitedly. Posh night-on-the-townners had disguised themselves as aristocrats, and they were really posh-ing it up to the furthest posh-able extent. Behind them the oblivious conductor swung his baton, unfettered by the constraints of typical life and the cold-blooded science that underlies it. “Let’s crawl down to the ground really quick and make our way out of here” the younger counseled. Slowly they made their way down the music-sheet. For a moment the air was still, and they looked around thinking, “What is this shadow?” until the conductor, seeing their sneaky endeavors leant back his hand, and with a merciless blow snapped his baton against the paper. Folded into a surface, the two of them plopped onto the ground. Priya stretched herself and blinked profusely, as blinking had become much more of a labor with eight eyes. Around them, the ground was made of overlapping music sheets. Noticing the landscape, patterns of ink and absence made blinking a calming, hushing thing. Doves escaped en masse from the canopies of the surrounding trees and made their way into a tin of sour cream. Turning onto its side, it rolled towards them, and inside was solid sour cream solidified from the doves, and it molded itself into the porcelain face of a woman. “How are you getting in so often? Ah ... this town is

becoming a tourist trap” she complained. Nearby a roman statue of a woman moved to the whimper of the music. For a minute Priya was distracted by the hypnotic effect of her ornaments. Annoyed, the delicate youngster cried, “That art is disrespectful!” and scuttled over to the statue, pushing it over. Fragments of marble scattered across the black and white polka-dot ground. “Snow! What has gotten into you?” Priya protested.

Sliding out of its container the porcelain head examined the jumbled wreckage, “Don’t worry, it’s not like a priceless antique or anything”. Priya rolled all eight of her eyes. “What precisely is your name, if you don’t mind me asking?” Snow inquired. “Hank-Helga. I suppose you all came here to see the Violin Club ... it’s at the center of town” the tin, bobbing appropriately added. “Hmm ... why did your parents give you both a boy and a girl name” she pried. “They didn’t know what I would be, so they thought to cover both bases. Are you done with the personal questions?” Hank-Helga retorted. “Oh, there is more where that came from” Snow teased as they angled towards a path that would bring them to town. Picked up by a passing breeze, the music sheets fluttered by, accenting a sign beaming its tonic in neon light. By the way, Hank-Helga insisted that they stop at an outlet liquor store. A friendly sculptor by the entrance spoke to the porcelain head, and by her request tapped her nose with his hammer and chisel, sending cracks across its surface for it to break apart, eggshells of porcelain littering the ground. Hank-Helga appeared as the dust settled to the ground and shrouded the prose below their feet. She had short gray hair and tattoos of doves and sour cream and porcelain heads. Inside security cameras swiveled along the sides of the walls. “Don’t look their way,” she warned. A wine sampler told them as he poured them a glass of how he escaped from an island of connoisseurs, and of how their wine was made of holograms ... so it didn’t really matter. “I didn’t know bugs had a taste for wine” he noted as he poured Priya’s glass to the very top. “Humid Delay was his name, if I recall” Hank-Helga mentioned as they browsed another aisle. “I’ve seen a lot of tourists in my day, but I have to admit to you that I had an ulterior motive, my friends,” their guide broke to them gently, “this is probably the most fortified store in the city, and only the best escape”. She pointed up above them, to a wine bottle, and saw it floating towards the cupola, evading the security cameras. Extending a telescope, Hank-Helga peered through and tracked the progress of the bottle until it found a very loose section in the ceiling for its escape, “Getting into the club will be easy if you nab me some of those ”.

Priya and Snow made their way up a wall to the ceiling, past the visages of classical art, weaving a web to catch the most cunning varieties, trapping them like flies, and wrapped them in silk for safekeeping. "By the way, my real name is Helga-Hank" she revealed halfheartedly, before loading a bundle into a backpack and zipping it up. When they left the front door, the delicate spider turned to the larger, hairier one, "It's really a bummer today, I'm tired of being a spider". Behind them the door gave off its signature clack. The three of them turned around as the connoisseur stood in the threshold, boldly intruding on their conversation, "Sometimes you can just swish it around". In his hand he held a glass of wine, its cherry hue not staining it, but leaving it glossy and savagely opaque. "Swish around what?" Snow asked, a little flummoxed by the tangent. Humid Delay smiled in a way that would make trapeze artists lose their balance and slurped a meager portion of wine, "The day". Moving the glass in a tight circle, the liquid within became a vortex, and the world around them did the same, the particles of the hallucination tumbling all over the place. Priya opened her eyes to see that they were in the midst of the heart of the city. "My body!" her daughter exclaimed, seeing that they had both resumed their former evolutionary shapes. And so they roved the streets, where crowds frothed about, passing locals who wore oven mittens on their heads. Each had an oval cut out for their faces. "Don't even think about pulling off those mittens," Priya warned her daughter. By the curb a man bought a piece of pink chewing gum from a newspaper salesman and tossed it into his mouth, blowing a bubble that became a pink car, and ushered his family inside. It rode away down the endless street and did not pop. Noticing an approaching danger, Helga-Hank pushed them under an overhang as a big oven mitten filled with a hydra of snakes passed by. It was really just snake mitten ambassador traveling downtown on his official duties, but they didn't know that. As the scary thing passed, they revealed themselves from the safety of the overhang. "Whew, talk about a guy that needs a makeover" Echo whispered, as the safety of the moment returned. Following their guide, a procession brought them to a district gilded with purposeful bronze. Lines of the crowd were roped off around a Violin the size of a stage that must have been shined that very morning. Escorted, they came to the front of the line. From within they could hear the pounding of dance music. Swaggering over to the Violin, Snow peered into the F-Holes and turned back towards her. "If there's anyone that deserves to let off a little steam, it's me," she boasted. Convinced by the sentiment,

Priya let her reservations subside and likewise looked down into the party, seeing it full of dancers, all of them in cool leather getups. Nobody wore mitten hats, and all of their faces were quite clear. Looking back one last time, she could see in the tired evening sky the hopelessness of fool's gold. The distant roar of applause could be heard emanating from even far away as yoyos glided through the clouds. Their tricks were totally sick and they could do "walk-the-dog". Grabbing her arm, Snow led her into the Violin Club and they danced, letting the club-hoppers bounce off of them. "Watch me swish!" Snow exclaimed, and the others circled around as she unleashed some frosty dance moves ... until time whirled and the moment melted and they were back in the room just seconds before their arrival.

The light from outside the window cast itself languidly onto the furniture. Their minute patterns became decipherable, tiny indentations of cushioning. Frays of threads that would linger, unnoticed. Speckles of crumbs of dust. A moth hunted for enigmatic loci of light and shadow in the hills of a couch seat. "For the sake of time, I think it's best if we split up to cover more ground" Priya submitted, until her daughter relented. In the next honeysuckle room, she came upon a box containing an entomology collection, long pins spearing long-dead butterflies. Moving closer, the pins became towers, and the nearer towards it, the more of a city it became. Light generated by the beating of the butterfly wings ignited the windows of the towers. Rising in an elevator to the ball-like crown of the pin, she came upon a distinguished sixty-something in his estate, and they had a long talk, although he didn't believe much of what she reminisced of. Afterwards the traveler attended an auction in the neighboring pin-tower, winning a volume of a much-rumored book.

When she returned, the room was empty, save for a few scampering squirrels exploring the contents of kitchen cabinets. "Do you really want to play hide and seek again!" Priya called fretfully, her voice bouncing off the tapestried walls to no avail. Certainly, her youngling must be occupied in another room where she had not cared to look before. Priya headed up the stairs and to the left, checking the rooms for signs of the runaway. Thoughts whispered from days of the past, appearing out of thin air. Sam had been very spiffy in his brown blazer, and at the time the sight of him was like a subtle virus infecting her dreams. She would have devoured fate to be with him. "Oh,

goodness!” Priya blurted. With all that had happened so recently, the detail of finding a way to free him from his tomb had fallen out of favor. “Mom, are you spying on me!” Snow called, throwing the accusation out into the hall. The scientist turned the corner and pushed the door open into the bathroom. Snow laughed brazenly as she was hard at work giving George a bubble-bath. The little guy looked so content with his gray fur covered in bubbles. “There you are. I was worried about you” Priya huffed. “I decided to take a break to help my squirrel with his bath-time. He’s my new best friend” she said, scrubbing his coat with glee. “Where have I seen this before?” Priya thought as the implication washed over her. “No!” she cried, but it was too late ... as a pulse of energy cascaded through the room. Moments later the little guy’s head bobbed down, as if fainted. Frantically the runaway shook him in her hands, drawing her head near to listen, but even in his eyes she could see nothing but false color, and he reclined across her palm, limp like a ragdoll. “Do you even realize what you did!” her mother scolded. Panic stricken, Snow lay the squirrel on the counter and wiped the clusters of bubbles from her hands onto the ledge of the bathtub, “What just happened?”. Priya took a long deep breath before relating to her the mistake, and its awesome consequences, “Be careful. This new turbulence is unlike anything we’ve encountered before. With such a small coincidence ... my dear ... there’s no way you could have seen it ... unless you were me. I’m sorry. From now on, you have to think about the consequences. Look at George, he enjoyed the bubble bath so much his mind astral projected out of his body. It will descend through time, going back into the past until finding a home in Kyloptos Rama. That’s how he was driven mad and started his reign of terror”. Snow began to cry, until the scientist wrapped her arms around. “I didn’t know it would be like this, ” she wailed. “Snow, hide him right here and we’ll come back later. Kyloptos ... this was just an accident, but now I’m responsible. I promise that one day I’ll return and find you in that pyramid, and grant you a second chance” she swore.

“Mom... I want to take another shot at that used car” the giddy patron confessed. Her mom wiped sweat off her forehead at the suggestion, but agreed just to humor the request. Tasting nectar from the same cluster, they returned back to the first stop on their journey. Snowie was eager to greet them again. Showing off a phony wristwatch, she led them into the same model as before. “Like lambs to the slaughter” Priya heard her think telepathically. For a time, they continued down the same road that ran parallel to the

city. The driver began to grow restless and turned to the salesman, “Where does this road lead?” she wondered. “Pretty soon we’ll have to turn back. This one dead ends at the bridge. It was supposed to stretch over Bishop’s river, but the city wasted so much of the budget, the project was never completed” Snowie cautioned them. “I can see it coming up” the driver exclaimed as tiny lion bubbles smacked into the front glass. The salesman activated the window wipers to push them off. “Darling, I think it would be a good idea to turn around now” Priya advised, instinctively touching her seat belt to ensure it was fastened. Roaring into life, the car jerked forward. “We’ll just turn around once we get to the end,” Snow replied. Stretches of concrete became vague as the car accelerated to its breaking point. The gaping mouth of the bridge grew closer as they were thrust back against their seats. Priya jerked the driver’s seat from behind as Snowie smacked her shoulder. “We’re at the end now!” she yelled. In the rear-view mirror, the scientist could see a droll grin spread across her daughter’s face, and at that moment knew it was too late. Crossing the mouth, the vehicle shot up the incline and towards the severed end of the bridge. Looking out the window, Priya could see the river below, rippling with fear. Then the hunk of metal arced down, and by some stroke of rich, unfathomable luck landed on the concrete of the other side. Snowie didn’t talk for a minute. Inhaling and exhaling laboriously, she eventually realized that yes, she was still alive, and yanked the keys out of the ignition. Needless to say, they were both left at the curb as the sale careened away.

“What on earth has gotten into you!” Priya admonished as soon as they were back in the room. “Didn’t you like that? I think we should go a second time” Snow insisted, climbing onto the couch. Her mother stood there speechless, remembering how only recently her parents had walked into her room and witnessed a similar scene. “Get down from there” she demanded. With a seal the patron summoned in her hands a car tire, and shrunk its size, placing it on her head, turning it into a hat with magic. From the background a screeching sound could be heard, “Do you think they’ll have more fun with three wheels?”. “That’s enough. Get off” her mother reiterated. Disregarding that statement, the runaway tore a honeysuckle vine off the wall and began waving it like a whip, “You’re overreacting!”. For the first time in her life, Priya felt like a beast facing a lion tamer. The scientist felt a bitter taste in her mouth, and turned around, stamping out

of the room. When she got to the door of the house, she slammed the door behind her, walking down the driveway and onto the grass. Anger muffled her like an itchy sweater and only got hotter and hotter. “What is wrong with that kid? I’m going back in there and setting things straight” she thought. But on the way back she glanced down, seeing the gnome that lay in the grass, staring up at her with its doe-ish lifeless eyes. “No ... she’s not a kid anymore. I have to give her space” the patron realized ... although it contradicted all of her instincts, even the primal ones. Inside the house the girl continued to run her hands over the vines that covered the walls, until peering one that caught her eye, glinting curiously. “Here you are ” Snow whispered, and plucked the blossom. A little orb of nectar dangled from that slender thread. Waiting patiently, she let it drop onto her tongue. When it was over, Snow returned to the room and saw the living room mirror, her every feature in disarray, her hair frizzy and torn. Searching through memory, she could see the young cityscape of New Allium, and was drawn to it. “What is that now?” Priya yelped, pressing a hand to her chest. Crossing the boundary of the corona the body of the patron was downloaded, and she came upon the planet in the digital. Looming above it was its moon, but it had shrunk to such a degree that it was no bigger than a small city. Landing on the surface, the patron implanted herself in the grainy, pixelated chalk of the easy soil. Ripening, it became layered like an onion, and as those below in New Allium saw it, and craned their necks, their faces became red and wet, and from each of their eyes came tear-drops that flocked upwards through the atmosphere. From within the innermost concentric circle Snow emerged and was reborn, “I am a good synthesis”. Above New Allium the layers of the moon separated into their constituent parts, as the multitude of lunar rings found new orbits around the world. Pulled into the outer place, she landed on the front lawn. “What am I supposed to call you now?” Priya asked, seeing her lay there and stare up with the eyes of that vessel, where there was once so many worlds in so many layers. But they were beautiful eyes, with life still stirring inside ... not anything like the other ones. “I’ll tell you when I think of it” she smiled wickedly. Extending her hand, Priya pulled her daughter to her feet, and they both traced a path down the driveway, back to where their friends must have been waiting all that morning near the hotel.

CHAPTER 49 - TICKET TORNADO

Across the fence, where normally the pool and the hot-tub would be, instead there was a dolphin relaxing in a simmering crock pot full of stew. It chirped in delight as a soft carrot bumped into its belly.

Back at the hotel, everyone was loitering by the entrance. A movie ticket booth had appeared and out of it came a long ribbon of tickets which Timecurrent had wound around herself as she spun in place. A milkman approached the hotel but was kidnapped by a passing helicopter's special forces team before anyone could react. Then another milkman was callously gunned down by another passing helicopter before anyone could react. His blood mingled with the spilt milk and from it was born raptors that tried to terrorize the crowd until they dispatched them. Pushing the others aside, Valco beat down the majority of them. The last one of them bit his fist and broke its teeth. He body-slammed it back into a puddle of bloody milk. "There you are, finally, " Valco said, seeing them both with a sigh of relief. He knew they would be fashionably late.

Linden-Squirrel and Melina-Squirrel sat on a park bench, making what was modest formidable. "We have to move quickly to stop this. The longer it takes, the more the survivors will be in danger from the turbulence". Priya called to them, and they both scurried onto each of her shoulders. Everyone paid attention to Linden, "Don't worry, friends. The first charge will be to remove the word-lights, and our targets are clear. I am relaying to you all the coordinates for the teams I have selected". The only one that wasn't paying attention was Timecurrent. She continued to spin in place, letting the ribbon wrap around in new layers. "Help, I can't stop!" she protested. Faster now ... quicker ... the tickets continued to stream out, unrelentingly, as if the booth itself was a factory, propelling her into ceaseless revolutions. Accumulations of tickets on Timecurrent's person lashed out, becoming a tornado, and the patrons were swallowed by the eye of the storm. As they were lifted, Valco reached out and quickly held onto Priya's arm. "Ahh! What the hop!" she screamed. Priya felt herself being drawn into his body, his bulky arms enclosing her as the wind scoured them. "Just close your eyes and hold on!" he yelled.

CHAPTER 50 - TIMECURRENT AND TELENON

Timecurrent came too, spitting out a few movie tickets that had gotten stuck between her teeth. Sweeping a hand over her shirt she found it tattered and hole-pocketed from the storm. Once vertical, it became apparent that the booth had not left her side, having landed at the same place. A booth attendant jumped up from underneath, looking out through the glass, and smoothed his disheveled brown hair. “How do you guess that happened?” he said, opening the door and hobbling over to her. “It must just have a mind of its own. You just have to train it better” she suggested, thinking of a good zinger for the occasion. “I’m going to go back in there and see what’s up” he chuckled, and went back into the booth, and began looking through some panels to find where all the supply was coming from. Focusing on his endeavors, Timecurrent barely noticed when the ribbon extended out once again, weaving itself across the ground to her ankle, and began winding its way around and up her leg. Lifted up off the ground by the strength of the strand, it wound its way around her chest and arms. “That’s really tight” she exhaled, tearing part of the ribbon from her shoulder. It left a red mark. Flexible ribbons alternated along her body, squeezing hard. She watched as one of them found its way into a hole of her shirt to the skin beneath, “wait, what are you doing?” she pleaded. Timecurrent’s hair dropped down as the ribbon shifted her in mid-air, laying her horizontal, staring up at the clouds. The patron labored to breathe as the unruly bands continued, the blue sky looking on helplessly. Each breath ferocious as she inhaled and exhaled. More of the tatters drifted to the ground, removed. “I’m locked in!” she could hear the attendant shout, and looked down, seeing him pound on the front glass. Without letting go, the ribbon returned her to the ground, as if obeying her will. “Get down!” Timecurrent cried, and tossed out her yo-yo on its string, breaking the glass. Quickly crawling out, the man dusted off the front of his employee uniform that she recognized did not truly match the dignity of his features. “Let’s get you out of there”, he proposed, moving forward, trying in vain to tear away all of the ribbons that ensnared her. A thread of drool fell from the patron’s lips, and instead of helping the cause let him resume the endeavor as she stared with purpose at soft brown hair. Timecurrent felt a twinge of shame as he looked at the red marks criss-crossing her body, then reached out both arms, bringing him closer, planting both lips on his. It

continued in that fashion for some while. He ran his hands through every inch of her hair. “There must be a refuge from this ecstasy” she thought, scanning the blueness with her eyes. Looking back, she blinked once or twice. “Your face is ... different” the patron noticed “Do you like the real me? I’m not normally a lover” he replied. Words became empty of meaning, like gateways into the wide spaces of nature. Easily, summoning a portal Telenon carried her into the inner chamber of the Temple of the Voices of Reason.

CHAPTER 51 - BOXING MATCH

Telenon rested against his throne and nursed his wounded ego. The Temple was vacant except for the pitiful thing clinging to his leg and murmuring something about feeling dirty. “Intolerable, absolutely intolerable” he protested, restlessly scratching the stubble upon his face. Timecurrent looked up with doe eyes and a look of implacable love, “I know Priya will destroy you ... my turtledove”. The tyrant shifted his position to find an ounce of bodily solace. Limber wood formed its contours around his back ... yet it was still stiff. “I don’t think so my love” he retorted, the dry embers of his eyes burning at the thought of it. Temporal powers from the hostage emanated from her person to him, oscillating like desert heat. “And she’ll be here in a while to save me. It will be easy for her to beat you. Echo is the best! Just wait and see” she beamed. “You may know her, Time, but you don’t know me. She can’t stand against me. I will break her eventually” he answered, with a delicate suggestion as to the course of history. As the incline continued, her baby blue hair parted down the middle, and the lines that made her look like a curious android flared with the same hue, “Ha! You’re joking!”. Telenon anchored his grip and braced for the conversation’s first salvo. “My darling, you have a soft cheek. However, I don’t think you know what will become of this. When she faces me ... with all that glorious vanity ... she will bow her head. I could destroy her to set an example”. The thought of it zapped Timecurrent right in the head, the big thinking part. “Hopscotch! I’ve seen her use the strongest spells in the world!”. “I can counter them with my spells, Time. It won’t take more than three spells to finish this” he gave, throwing wisdom like bread to the masses. His words hollowed out the lonesomeness of

the room, its broad chambers awaiting more of their melody. The conversation would be long and drawn out. It would require the pain of disclosure. "That's like so stupid! She can turn into Echo's and fly through anything and destroy it! I've seen her blow up whole space ships!" Time ejaculated, her eyes gleaming, carriers of the wonderful sight. Telenon leaned over his chair and looked down at the woman with her misguided resiliency "But I'm invincible. That won't hurt me". It would be a hopeless gesture. The armies that had fallen at his feet. Their worthless weapons of last resort. Time knew none of it. But there was something she wanted to ask. "Humph ... I doubt it. I'm sorry darling. Can you bring me to that place in Etheria portion, the restaurant that I like?" The magic of their encounter quickly kicked in again. There was something ridiculously hot about him, but she didn't know what. Adrenaline went up and down her spine like a kid playing on an elevator. "Of course, but not until this is over " he sanctioned, biting his lip. "And feed me the pudding with the spoon?" Time pleaded. "If it will shut that endless mouth" he bantered, knowing the night would result in the antithesis of that. Time was unapologetic, considering the foray and its epicurean intrigues. A clever smile spread across her face, "Yes ... I'll even pay the bill. Why am I drooling?". The conversation had strayed from its original aim. In the pause, the anger welled up in his belly again. It's flame like a blackened beast emerging from a forest fire. "Even so, this is absurd. Priya is overpowered. Even you have to admit that ". "And what do you mean by that?" she joined, with a head twist. Telenon released a bitter sigh, "Think about it Time. A modest student from a university. Carrying stacks of books around every day. Those glasses. Does that sound like a mighty warrior to you? I know there's got to be something wrong here. Her powers are a cheat in every way". The ignominy. The slander. "No way! She got her powers without cheating" the girl exclaimed, furious for once in the course of events. From that she could not relent. "I'm saying her powers are too great for a simple person like her. It's impossible that personality is the reason why" he unfolded dryly. The thought of Priya was coming to light. The strange defiance she had in all manner of times. By now the situation was developing. It was clear that something was amiss. It made him cogent. A willing actor in the disclosure of the invisible. "I don't believe it. Her magic makes sense" the woman countered. Blue lighting forked from her body like some Victorian instrument. It cackled and dispersed as the intrigue faded. How could such a man know Echo? A movie booth man with

gentle hands. Who engineered a tornado of tickets to woo her. And now ... the cruel barbarian. Bent on her guardian's demise. How had such a rapture ceased its exertions? In wordless reply, the man summoned a viewing portal through which they saw countless blades of grass. Its swirling magnificence subsided and became uniform. "Then take a look through this portal, and let it be the judge," Telenon announced.

Priya marched with impunity against the slush of green. The wind seemed elderly in its fond embrace. It's warmth a counterbalance to the dangers ahead. The woman hustled across a curvaceous agrarian landscape. Cabins with boards positioned just so that the darkness could escape amidst immaculate daylight. Meek animals grazed in foolish ignorance to what had become of their world. A private concern endowed her with courage. Its bastion against the travesty of the fleeting moment. Even so, the land continued its pastoral semblance, swirling with the wind and air. Recollections of absent farmers that tilled the land. Afterthoughts. Priya awakened her mapping senses, gathering the world around her. Towards the east, the light continued to frolic in strange ways. It was about that time, when she saw another orphaned shed, that an enemy pounced. It was a flower the size of a man with a hammer in its hand. Priya threw up her hands for a karate chop. For some reason she wasn't using her powers. A tussle ensued, and she kicked the implement out of its leafy hand. Now that the tables had turned, she gave it the old smackaroo in the flowerhead blossom. "Ha! Look at that. She beat the flower guy" Timecurrent exclaimed, joyous with her newfound prestige. Telenon got to his feet and pointed, "Did you not see that? Her powers went away. It was the same as a sidewalk fight between regulars". "So what? It's been a day or so since we emerged from the realm. That always happens when we transition. It takes a week for the powers to return to normal" the baby blue one elaborated, tossing every thread into disarray with a shake of the head. "No, you're wrong. You're not seeing it. Take a closer look" he commanded. After reviewing the encounter, the clock-master shrugged her shoulders, "It's Echo. I don't see anything". Telenon was fraught with impatience. His arms orchestrating the downfall of his enemy, "She had powers. Then when she stood in front of the flower guy, her powers almost went away. After that, she regained them like before". Time considered how, given all that was going on, she was still enamored by his masculine charms. A pouty face looked up at a man whose ambition ruled his heart, "Well duh. It was a rough fight. The flower had a hammer". In that instance, Telenon

forgot her presence. He felt such exoneration at his good fortune, “It’s an ability unlike any I have seen before. Her powers lock on and match whatever enemy she is facing, no matter their power level. Every fight is a perfect tie, so that when she claims victory, her anatomy is strengthened to the core”. It was done. In moments, the mechanisms of his mind revealed themselves to the patron, and he continued on with her. Time was unswayed. She saw the punches and the kicks, “If that’s true then it’s only a fraction of her power. That flower guy was a pushover”. Telenon stamped his foot, “You’re really not getting this. It’s overpowered”. And that was enough. Who was this guy anyways? He had never lived a day in the realm. Its genteel expanse was unknown to him. The subtle transformations. Every day swathed in mint condition blue. It was starting to get under her skin, “It doesn’t matter!”. Grabbing his leg, she pounded it for effect. Yet as she looked back at the portal, the empress was replaced with ripples. “Alright Time. Here ... let me give you another example. I found this from the past” the man offered. This one would be good. He had her cornered. With a smug grin he fell back onto the throne to watch.

In the realm, sometime in the second age. Echo swam through a cornucopia of stars. They draped the outer places in leagues upon leagues. She rushed along that happy abyss. It was through the Protostar Nebula that her destination lay. Little stars popping out of blackness with envelopes of ether. A tunic of light enrobing her. They amassed in one spectacle that made a wall of obvious globes. It brushed across the skin. The rush of solar wind. Making severe what was once cool. Echo felt their maturation. Lessons for the heart. And in the course of things, she let that feeling fade, and made her way towards a rather bulbous star.

Elladora Magnifique was for years the home of a sprawling summer home for the Gaia of that star. It had many emissaries and attendants who loved her affable nature. Not wanting to return home, they decided to stay and took up residence. Adjoining rooms were built. Butlers were hired. They came with trays of buttered scones for the revelers. The stairs were made so that one could lay on them without a back being bent out of shape. At first a sizable event, it grew as more people came. It encircled the economies of outlying regions. The frenzy continued, and as villagers were having breakfast in their homes, their walls would be dismantled around them. Several years

passed until a humble, drab attired man named Jason Axia came to them. He was fed up with the current state of affairs. When he laid eyes upon the Gaia, he refused to give her an acknowledgment. With that one strike, the brokenhearted Gaia wept, and that night she went out like a candle. The flames upon her back could not even char the bed. Jason was taken at once in handcuffs. They threw him in the dungeon. After that, a delegation met to resolve his fate. They gave him no trial. Instead, a ship was constructed with a particular fireproof design. It sailed to the very center of that star. From the decks of the ship the wizards did their incantations, and the rays of light became material, and thick like spears. Now the center of the star was an iron maiden of light. They threw him in, and he was impaled on the hot rays. The wizards were enraged when he did not die. Through the insult he had absorbed the essence of their benefactor. So they departed, and he remained, suffering for the simple deed. The civilization dwindled, and they no longer cared for what came before.

By the time the empress passed the star, an outpouring of his golden blood coated the minor moon. It advanced along the continents, painting the entire surface. The gold moon left its orbit and went to fight the intruder. Echo saw what was going down, and turned her mirror light into two boxing gloves. A constellation transformed into a referee and got between them, "Alright you two, I want a good clean fight". Echo nodded, agreeing to the rules. At that, the fight commenced, and the gold moon with its heft tried to crash into Echo. But she threw a few good punches and sent some continual crust flying away. "Below the waist!" the referee shouted. Yet his pleas could not be heard. They were already too far away. A swing and an uppercut, but it wouldn't go down. The next time she threw a blow, it was too fast and she missed. Echo looked down and the gold moon was below her and it flew up and rammed her in the chest. It hurt a bunch, but then she got serious. Boom. Pow. Wallop. More golden layers off of that bad ball. The gold moon came in from the right and smacked her in the cheek. Echo returned with the old knuckle sandwich. By then, it looked like it just came out of an asteroid belt. Gorgeous cracks fanned out upon its surface. It tried to hide behind the planet, and when Echo went to look for it, the moon came in from the back and bumped her towards the star. "Ah, this is not cool!" she bellowed. With a good effort she halted her downfall. In sudden realization, Echo knew that it was no longer a gentleman's fight. She found the referee and disintegrated him into stars again with one hit, as that had all been a trick of

Jason Axia. “Shelter from the darkness” she said, and the illumination entered her. Echo roared in determination to the gold moon, and they went to town. Fending off an attack and giving one in kind. She flew all over its surface to find the weak spots. With one titanic blow, the lunar surface revealed itself. The gold moon fell back and covered the spot with fresh metal. It flung an asteroid of gold dust at her, but she split it in half with mirror lighting upon her person. In tangents the mirror lightning sprouted from her agile figure. At last Echo realized a way to complete the dance. Inspired by the speed of her enemy, she ramped up. “I’ll orbit around it” she exclaimed, circling the body. The force of it spun the gold moon like a toy globe. Parts of her arms transfigured into energy, yet she sustained the effort. In moments it was apparent the moon had met its match. The dust upon its surface erupted in all directions. Its alabaster came next. With a hand she tossed sweat from her brow, and settled the exercise. Echo continued on her journey unopposed. She left that gung-ho galaxy behind. Unseen by her, the wretched form of Jason Axia drifted from the corona, out into the frigid wasteland of space. It had seen better days.

“Did you see that, it proves everything!” Telenon belted out, rich with eager conviction. Time rolled her eyes sarcastically, “Oh please, that gold moon was weak”. Incensed, he threw out both arms, “She’s fighting a moon with boxing gloves!”. “That’s the smallest moon I’ve ever seen. Have you been past Jupiter? I could probably beat that moon” the girl continued, like an unrelenting gossip. Telenon could not believe how uneducated his hostage was. He looked down at her artless attempt at ridicule, “It’s a moon fighting a person. What part of this are you not getting?”. Time grabbed his leg again, and brought her chin up to the knee she had grasped so unyieldingly. At a certain point a tongue shot out, “Give me a break. That’s probably as weak as a silver moon or a copper moon”. Telenon shook with revulsion, “It’s bigger than a city. It could crush a city”. Time bounded to her feet and made a show of fighting like the boxer. “Nah fella ... It went down easy. I could probably take that out in one hit. Once I roll up my sleeves”. With a ludicrous smile she balled up her fists and repeated the scene. She could timelapse emotions within herself to feel them on a profound level. Back on his throne, the man pinched the bridge of his nose, “Uhhh. It’s not right! It gives her a classic fight with every opponent, so that she has to force herself to get stronger every time! It’s a farce!”. This stopped the girl in her tracks. Time spun around, “But it’s only

a fraction of her power, and she almost never uses that”. The combat being done, the girl fell to her knees once more. All the excitement took a toll on her wakefulness and her eyelids. Telenon sat there and felt an unbridled resolve. He watched the gold moon crumble into ice and fire. The tactics of the nemesis were becoming clearer. A riddle being deciphered. It was a good thing, “Despite that, I’m still going to get her”. “Just ... yawn ... apologize and we can all go to the restaurant” Time implored, making an impression on his leg with her cheek. “Priya ... I’ll destroy you and your entire world” he considered heartily. In the center of the star, the spike rays retracted, their tips covered in golden blood. Time looked up at the man with a smirk in order for him to reconsider his silly plan. It was youthful optimism but it just might work, “Don’t ... I want to see my friends again ...”. As soon as the hostage was asleep, he released the spell that formed the portal. He studied the proceedings again in thought. All the moves that destroyed the golden orb. Until a spark came. A painful epiphany, “She probably doesn’t even remember this. I can sense that”.

CHAPTER 52 - ALEXA’S SWORD

Swordcarrier Alexa rested against a hardy pine until her head was right. The pounding dizziness of the tornado soon passed. The soldier made her way across a now ticket strewn meadow, following a raggedy path. Encased in her green armor, adorned with steel spikes like a cactus. The patron had a more toned body than the others. A countenance that was more butch than most of her generation. But when did looks matter when you had class. A passing wind desperately tried to push her backwards, but she thwarted it by putting one foot in front of the other. Around her, clusters of trees displayed priceless treasures of the fruity variety. Enveloping a hill, the grass was in a haze of constant motions. She did not feel out of place in that jade filled world. “Ah, there you are, Alexa, take us over there will you” Linden bid, an uncommon sliver of a smile upon his face. Buoyancy born from a trivial matter. The Divine Couple were the most fascinating creatures. And they bore enough light to animate the most crestfallen soul. “I’d be happy to accompany you sir” she replied, thankful for her new employment. Melina touched her elbow and chimed in, “I’m glad to have you by our

side again, dear.” “Likewise,” Alexa nodded solemnly, “the fiefdom is in another crunch to be sure”. The odyssey of animals through the forest was audible from far away. Interwoven between their feet were the commonplace imprints of tracks. And it gave Alexa memories from days before. Déjà vu from the forest. More concessions from nature would follow, with blue surprises between flower littered branches. “The patrons are scattered and they are in the depths of a hundred battles” Linden continued, kindling the fires of war in his eyes. “I must go and help them now!” the soldier reasoned. Melina brought her hand to the other’s chin for guidance, “Not now. I want something important up here.” The smolder of her golden armor appeased the confident patron. Alexa had rarely stood down from a fight. She was always making herself useful. And the thought of an enemy escaping her blade almost brought a tear to her eye. “So what could that be?” she wondered aloud. Linden let his feet sink in the earth. He pointed a finger towards the distant meadow. Ahead of her she spotted an enemy base, hopping with squirrels. “I want those people trapped in acorns. The enemy is keeping them in a stockpile. The university will restore them later” he explained intently. Melina laughed at the thought of their forthcoming excursion. The land between them was dotted with the cores of scavenged fruit. Revealing specks of color amongst the backdrop of the grass. A southerly wind made a brief sweep against her face. Its kindness would be remembered. The spikes on her green armor extended an inch. Upon the ground, a summoning circle of inscription brought forth what Echo had entrusted her with. The scalpel-like, shimmering mirror sword. Alexa knew that the Couple would simply walk ahead and not sully their hands. She looked around them and mentally indicated a circle of five feet around them. Now the shape of the storage facility was thoroughly clear. Checking them out, a battalion of squirrels assembled. Alexa saw the first wave charge. A squirrel with brass knuckles and a smug attitude. She elbowed him in the face and relocated herself in front of the dreamers. The second one thought he could swing an ax but got shattered instead by the mirror sword, shifting like a flicker of light. Ninja squirrels soon followed, with weapons that melted at the touch of her blade. One had snuck up behind them, looking like a damn pirate with a scimitar. To reach him, she did a backflip to the other side of her associates. The Couple placidly walked towards the storage facility. The fray then resumed at a glorious pace. She went along with it, weaving in and out. Defending every inch with martial madness. As a wave of ten

squirrels surrounded them, they found themselves impaled by swords shot out through the invisible barrier of her inner realm. She was Swordcarrier Alexa. There were a thousand swords in there for just this very occasion. A knight in shining armor with a bushy tail charged right into them, because apparently chivalry was dead. Alexa beat him with a right hook and moved on. By the gate, a second wave collected itself. A less historical one with plenty of spiffy gadgets. Around them, the blue sky lingered with fresh delight. But it was not meant to be. Lasers careened towards them like blistering torpedoes. Red in the extreme. The mirror sword did what it was made to do, splintering them before they made contact. And soon the enemy discovered that they were worthless. Linden walked besides his wife to the gateway entrance. A quick witted squirrel tried to jump them with nunchucks, but was soon dispatched by their protector. Inside, a third wave amassed itself. Alexa used a spell she had learned and grew a cactus with fierce spikes to down an opponent. All the same, they continued to encircle them. The woman retracted her spikes before grabbing onto Melina and did some sort of gymnastics around her body to fend off two attackers. The insatiable mirror sword discharged the rest, blinking fairly. A tool of flawless reflection. Now everyone was in their proper place ... in a big pile that is. "That will be enough, patron," Linden said, breathing heavily from the exertion of his stroll through the meadow. "That door over there should let us into the acorn room" Melina observed, excited to see the payment for their labors. She put her hand on the cool doorknob and thrust it open. Alexa spiritedly leapt onto one of the acorns. Rows of them filled the volume of the chamber. "I think this is what you're looking for" she joked, knocking the wood with a good click of her heel. "Excellent work patron. The civilians should all be right here" Linden acknowledged. The Couple nodded between themselves and shared a few quiet words. As they drew near, the light from their gleaming armor was exchanged, from one surface to the other. "Alright, everything looks good. I'm going back to the front" the soldier willed. Dreams of perilous battle filled her head, and made her heart swell. The enemy army was a whetstone and she had to sharpen her knife on it. Melina crossed her arms to signal she was bothered by her no holds bar attitude, "Not so fast. We don't want you there, Alexa. Here is a special task for you. Go to the University and train the new regiments. Look over the primary depot where we will store the first acorns. It's a mission best suited to your abilities." Alexa's jaw dropped. She didn't know what to say,

“Best suited?. I should be out there, in the action!”. Around them, the acorns rustled as there was life stirring within. Steel walls enclosed their candidness and its rumblings. The air was filled with lukewarm impotence. The meadow and its dalliances were far behind. Linden adjusted his circular glasses, “The other patrons can take care of themselves. We need you to cover the home base”. A deep sigh welled up in the jade figurine standing atop an acorn, “Very well”. After all, Priya was still out there somewhere, fighting to save the day.

CHAPTER 53 - RECLUSIVE WATERCOLORS FIGHTS A CYBORG KANGAROO

Like a thousand yawns, the sky stretched out to eternity. Somewhere in its wide-ranging breadth, a lightbulb flicked on. It was no ordinary one to be sure. Reclusive Watercolors found herself among many floatation devices, using only the wind for their propulsion. The world had fostered her and given her a firm intellect. In the last few days, she had learned to cover a distance in a shorter time by focusing the energy behind her like a jet. Both hands ahead of her, feeling the remedy of wind on her face. These white, billowing masses were evocative in their movements. She dived down into the gaseous heart of a cloud, and out the other side. She continued through that aerial obstacle course, seeking any hint of blue. Looking down, the world below was brimming with campfires that she dared not speak of. The smoke rose ceremoniously to the sky. Escaping, as it would if the world was a hand and it passed through its fingers. Yet still the landscapes transpired one after the other. A knobby, overly detailed thing. Making her dispassionate to the plight of its citizens. An untethered wind adjusted the course of her flight. She let the sky mentor her. Being its student was not so bad. She was among the breath of eagles. But no! The war was not over. That time she alighted. The thing that the soldier had whispered in her ear. The university was up ahead, following the cardinal north. Parapets like a chivalrous stronghold. And so, she hastened her pace. Reclusive Watercolors came to earth amid a rush of students. They crossed the intimate paths of the university courtyard, deep in various gossip. Their backpacks were heavy, and they had to endure the weight of them. At every angle, the buildings looked like oversized chess pieces, donned with the most appropriate bricks. The air was warm and

its touch soothed her senses. Working through hesitation, she moved her legs so as to quietly shift her body into a forward motion. The faces around her seemed affable enough. They talked of things that were considerably tame when compared to the indulgences of the realm. A student jumped over and tried to flick her on and off as a joke. Reclusive pointed back in jest as it was the proper thing to do. But out there, far away from the tranquil halls of the university, there was someone else. And he did not have a sense of humor. That building she had been admiring was vaporized in a burst of hot red laser light. Telenon's forces made their way into the courtyard, as yet another brazen assault was underway. Reclusive felt the pulse of war beat in her chest. As the veil of dust settled, a form arose behind a hill of bricks. A tall, misshapen fellow. The cyborg kangaroo charged up its right laser eye. Now that the last barricade was all but pulverized, he had a new target in his sights. Reclusive understood his intentions and caught the beam with her own. He had a chiseled, unforgiving face. The luminous pole surged constantly towards her. At the impact there were crescents and coils of escaping light. The girl gave back in equal measure with a column of polychromatic force. Its regularity did not waver. She did the work and pushed it through to the kangaroo, who promptly was enveloped in a fit of flame. Now his enhanced body was weakened from the twofold attack. And she spared no time. Reclusive propelled herself forward, amped up a first full of quintessence and rammed him in the chest. As a foregone conclusion, the frazzled thing leaned back into the mound of bricks, never to mess with innocents again. Even though their commander had fallen, the main throng of the enemy barreled over the rubble towards the university. The academic population fled in exasperation at yet another assault. Among the reckless invaders there were lions with arms wrapped in long chains, feline lynxes with turrets atop their backs, hedgehogs with shovels, snow wolves in snowmobiles, one bowling ball triple serpent, mimes doing somersaults, flamingos with war hammers that they had to awkwardly hold with their necks giving people more time to dodge them, and some guy named Fred with big colored pencils. As the underground of the university was now as sizable as a city, the university regiments charged out of every hall. It took but an hour to shrink their numbers until they were convinced to fall back. In the aftermath, the student was made an honorary regiment commander and sent out with the University 33rd Student Regiment to clear the hills of Little Finnegan's-ville. The skin upon her neck and shoulders began to look like an

illuminated manuscript, but vanished just as quick. The student was relieved at how the rest of the regiment effortlessly followed behind her. The high-flier smiled to know she was now a tinker toy amongst those knobby, overly detailed things. The fully grown trees that gave structure to the hills. Tall grasses brushing the passersby with their springy stems. Their faded, honey colored inflorescence. A log falling apart at the seams as if it had enough of the season's nonsense. The continuous hills like an endless erosion of green. Doted on by virgin clouds. Reclusive looked to her left and saw a ram looking longingly behind a farmer's fence. It was soon thrust upon their senses that the hills were clear. An advisor uncurled a map, and they proceeded up to the next major city, a society nestled in the shadow of a plateau. And the sight of it reminded her of the one in the realm, although the former did not have a trio of skyscrapers. The attendant beside her was curious as to why Lusi had suddenly dropped down onto her knees. Spectral flames began to pour from her eyes. Inside, the student could feel a thrust on her psyche. An affliction rushed in, and down her legs, pulling at her sinews. Although her chest was still, she could feel the convulsions propagate. Heat frolicked in her head like a bonfire. The inferno spun threads that were woven around the student's from the inside. "What ... is this?" she mouthed to the gathering circle of helpless onlookers. THE PUPPET SPELL. A vision welled up in her memory, that of a dome the size of the sky, its petulant surface burning bright yellow. The charlatan solar Gaia arising delicately from formless swirls. Yet it was not one of them. Absurdly long blond hair, with individual motions down to the very fiber. An ornamental armor tainted with blotches of paint as if a child adorned it. Thick silver divided at strange intervals. Long, sharp fingernails. A suave, polished face with intellect concealed beneath aesthetics. "Damn you Linden, you were her child all along? But you taught her well" the hallucinated gaia mustered. "I can't feel anything. It's you again!" the student noticed, her heart fluttering like so many butterflies turning to ash. "Yes indeed, my child. You were smart to get this far. The lightbulb of quintessence shines so well with your personality" the interloper uttered, a thin smile between both ears. "The battle is over. Let me go!" the student roared. But she could not move, the threads of the inferno kept her bound. "But you are so very close to someone who I'm interested in. The one who holds the key" the woman clarified, as the ephemeral flames drifted off her back. At their feet, the titan broiled with arcs of orange plasm.. "Priya hasn't done anything to you! There's nothing to

revenge!” she cried, writhing to escape the grasp. “But she has insulted me. I was the only one at the very center of her being. Millenia passed but I found the truth. So yes, you can call me another avatar if you like” she related, harkening back to earlier times. Her fingertips went onto the student’s forehead, imprinting it with an eerie glow. “It’s our fate, not an insult!” Reclusive shouted back. Ochidia Everglow was not swayed. She had aspirations that the little one could not conceive of. And a strategy that had started long ago. Across her palm, Reclusive could feel an eager magic like wind taking shape. An anarchy of fire erupted from her eyes. “Take the whisper dagger. Be my avenger!” the false gaia roared. The soldiers could not believe it. Their commander lifted off the ground, straight towards the waiting sky. A trail of chaos left in her wake. They were now abandoned.

CHAPTER 54 - ERIC IN THE ECHO REALM

Location: Echo Realm

Date: Present Time

The man got to his feet and dusted himself off. A moment ago he was laying flat on the ground. It was a rude awakening, and it certainly was a long way down. The shirt as well had to be removed of litter and leaves. He turned around to get a good sight of the environs. “So this is what she’s been up to,” Eric observed. The earth stretched out, sculpted into the unmistakable shape of an anechoic chamber. It was a placid day and a few stragglers from the afternoon’s labors happened by. He took a few steps to find the balance that would keep him from falling back onto the ground. The trees around him were ripe with autumn. They felt a certain governance from the wind, and there was a velvety note to their bark. “Leave it to Priya to make a park look so excellent” he noted as the grass brushed against the trunks of the trees. The memory of her soft kiss shivered throughout his body, and it took a minute to regain full composure. Eric continued along a path, dodging a frisbee that a youth had flung with abandon. The stairs hugged the edge of the plateau, and they led down into the city. It was good concrete that stiffened the boot so to speak. The newcomer expertly located a sidewalk from which to observe

things. He would study Priya from the inside out, and finally figure her out. The perfect girlfriend was just around the corner. It would be a cinch. As that thought congealed, he skipped down the sidewalk, navigating through locals, a self-righteous expression on his face. It was all going well when he caught sight of a bicycle rolling on down the street. “Hmm, that bicycle doesn’t have anyone on top” he pondered. The bicycle continued towards the wall of a three story building, and climbed up its wall until it crashed through a window on the second floor. It was then surprising to see the building itself bend from a rectangular form into that of a wheel and spin away. “How did that happen! The building just changed and went away!” he clamored. At the outcry a friendly local slowly explained to him that since the bicycle runs on wheels, it simply entered the building and converted it into a wheel as well. The explanation didn’t seem to touch the enormity of the situation. However, the crowd was incessant, and so he broke away again. The heart of the city would be towards the bustle, and so he turned north. A woman crossed his path with a certain blue dress that had a scene on it of water and a man being chased by an alligator. “Of course, that must be just a screen or something” he presumed. The mouth of the alligator desperately wanted to chomp his butt. The woman paid no mind, folding a purse and setting foot in a department store for a leisurely tour. “Whew” he sighed, tossing some sweat from his brow. Now that he thought of it, the Priya he knew from the start was a little different from all that confronting Telenon business. Over their heads, a toucan started flying with a cluster of grapes, and offered one each to the people walking along the sidewalk. In a generous reply, they tossed a coin to it. Eric kindly declined as he was in deep thought about Priya, but as soon as the toucan was gone realized what had transpired. The cocky student swiveled around on his heels to watch the toucan conduct his business. Everyone likes a good grape it seems. “What the flip is going on!” he hollered. Now the culture shock was starting to do a little dance number on his noggin. Eric rubbed his eyes profusely. Maybe he had woken up on the funny side of the bed. But no. At a sidewalk stand there was a couple on massage beds getting a backrub. They were grunting in the usual way that was completely devoid of the good old-fashioned shame their parents should have instilled in them. And above them were two elephants, pounding their backsides with their trunks. Kneading it real good. With a dexterous limb he flipped the man over like a pancake. That trunk did things that got rid of all the pain points. Eric

took a step back onto the sidewalk squares, getting brushed from both sides but only weakly. The sounds of the crowd made waves down the thoroughfare, but it wasn't anything out of the ordinary. The corridors led to places of denser life. As far as cities went, this one was mildly noisy. The road was where most of the action took place. He witnessed the jam until one car honked their horn. It was a family that passed up a slowpoke. A dad and mom with three kids. The car they drove wasn't made of all that standard metal. Just a car made of toucans, even the steering wheel. Heat from the road was like a desert mirage. It cleared, and at the other side of the road, there was a line of stores. Eric went over them with his eyes to see if he could catch anything of importance. There was a store where people went up to the cashier and gave him money, and the cashier shook his hands at them. It didn't seem to make any sense until Eric looked up and saw the title above, which read "Jazz Hands". The patrons continued to wait in line, only to be showered with the performance of the jazz hands. Eric bolted into an alleyway to recover from the amazement. To be honest he was expecting some lighthearted girl stuff. The boyfriend didn't know what to say. He scratched his four o'clock shadow which was kind of cute and not in a gross kind of way. "I didn't know that she was so ... flamboyant" he articulated. Going deeper, the alleyway led to a larger square area enclosed by brick tenements. Besides the road, there was one other path doubling the arrangement. An ordinary looking guy strolled past and pressed himself up against the brick wall. The inevitable sound of an unzip followed. Eric looked up to the sky as thunder commenced. Past the tenement roofs, the clouds were white, and the sky was blue. There wasn't a rumpus in sight. He moved around the square trying to get a look to see if there was a storm coming in the distance, but nothing. After the local had found relief, he zipped his pants back up and moseyed on over. The guy put a hand on Eric's shoulder, and looked him straight in the eye, "Dick's a cloud bro", and walked straight off back to the street. Woozy from the comment, the boyfriend fell back against the wall. A second later, he realized that Priya had indeed founded the magical human-weather hybrids in her echo realm. It was starting to become clear how exuberant she had become. "What ever happened to the low maintenance Priya who liked to hang out with her three friends" he wondered aloud. It was getting all psychological up in this joint. A memory of the girl delicately brushing his face made his heart waltz and pacified him, "All right. I get it now. Priya, one point. Eric, zero points. Now I'm going

to go back to that city and get to the bottom of this”. Finding no barrier, he easily walked over to the neighboring alleyway square. “Shit” he thought, biting his lip. Ten street toughs, one uglier than the next. The guy in the middle had a falcon tattooed on his chest and he had apparently forgotten to button up his shirt. A messy game of jacks was strewn out across their feet. “Um, please be careful with that thing” he politely asked. A bead of sweat formed on his temple as he raised his hands to both sides. The tuff had his fingers in the holes of a partly chipped brick that would have been more aesthetically pleasing on the wall. “You ain’t from around here, are you?” he managed to utter. For Eric, It seemed the tuff was a little more curious of him than would suit his liking. “Not really, I’m from there” he admitted, pointing to the place beyond the clouds where you couldn’t get your hands on them diamonds even if you tried. “Get this fellas. This one’s from out of town. The big one”, the main guy called. Now he had really piqued his interest, and those of his friends. “Tell me, they got anyone as bad as me up there?” he questioned, poking the innocent boyfriend’s chest with the dull side of the brick. “Probably a lot of goody two shoes up there” one of them shouted. “I know one girl who is” he blurted out clumsily, redeemed with a soothing smile. The ones in back chuckled. “Already know that one, fella” his questioner said, a note of displeasure in his tone. As that situation was developing, another local just happened to wander into the alley. A noble looking man wearing a bathrobe with a long belt dangling down. “Are we done here gentlemen?” he inquired eagerly. The tuffs circled around their new plaything as one of the followers pulled a crowbar out of his backpack. Eric was staggered by what happened next. The man used his bathrobe belt and flung it against the main tuff. He shot backwards against the tenement wall as if he was made of feathers. Seeing their leader humbled, the others fell in. Some sort of martial arts with the bathrobe followed. The belt could curl around people’s limbs and sweep them off the ground. They turned upside down a few times as they were sent in all directions. Soon enough the floor was covered in sprained ankles and Eric slipped out of there back to the safety of the crowd. “Priya can be as weird as she likes as long as I can keep my lunch money” he vowed. A woman in a tan dress glided down the street. Her right hand gripped a dog leash and as he made his eyes down the length of it, he could see the canine was hollow and made of puzzle pieces. “Let me guess, this is the normal part of town” he parried. Touché. Eric was now intent on cataloging all the idiosyncrasies of his so-called girlfriend. Down the

way, there was a man watering his plants in a glass terrarium on mechanical legs. Then there was a women's shoe store, but all the shoes are glass and filled to the brim with jewels and diamonds. "Are you kidding me? This shoe is only half filled with diamonds!" a gutsy woman roared. Eric's eyebrow twitched as she turned it upside down and poured all the stones on the carpet. "How are they supposed to wear them anyway?" he wondered. The lady was in furs, but they were man made. A surviving street tuff passed by the store like it was nothing and gave him a chin up before departing. The next block had some kids playing with spinning tops which grew in size magically, allowing one of them to jump on top and when they did they were spun so fast that they flew up into the air as if it was some kind of child launching pad. "THIS IS SO FLIPPING STUPID!!!" Eric hollered to the four corners of the world. "Do you need a guide my dear boy?" a handsomely dressed wizard with a conically shaped dunce-style cap and a blondie beard offered. "You know what ... Mr. Wizard ... take me wherever you're going" he replied, grinding his teeth without showing it. Priya could do her worst. Did he not take her to that restaurant? Did he not buy her that dress? This was just another checkbox for the standard boyfriend bureaucracy. Hanging onto his shoulder with one hand, they weaved through the city until coming to a sidewalk next to an inclined hill, where he summoned a waterslide from pure magic and slid down. Eric followed him down, the water splashing against his sides like a waterpark on a summer's day. Fencing contained a widespread ledge of walkable stone beyond which was a landscape that resembled a national park. The wizard was happy to spot the various landforms for him, as it would give the newcomer a breath of fresh air from the daunting city life. Eric felt a bit of relief and bantered with him. The conical hat was starting to look good on him. It was a wise fashion choice. The sky was so clear and only a few loitering clouds could be discerned among an aquamarine layer spanning the remainder of the world. "And that down there is the lake" the wizard mentioned, and it was dawning on him that he had not gotten his name. Eric turned to him to ask ... but then something stopped him. "What was that above the lake?" he thought. After looking across the vistas of nature, he had turned quickly back to his guide. Instead of returning to that conversation, he swiveled back for a second look. The upside-down mountain hovered up and down, glancing the lake with its peak. From the exchange, gorgeous circular ripples fanned out across the rippling surface. Its motion made Eric drowsy.

“She is very low maintenance!”. Felicia’s cheery, high-pitched voice. It resonated in his memory. That day at the spin class. It raced through his body, filling it with all the aquamarine purity of the sky. How had they been so naïve? In his mind he saw Priya again, pulling a strand of his hair down from his ear. She must have seen how brown it was and admired it. The moderately popular college guy felt the ambush of love enter his heart. He sat on a bench for consolation, “Alright, so my girlfriend is weird That’s the truth”. Bidding adieu to the wizard who was now captured by the freshness of nature, he made his way up a stairway that ran parallel to the waterslide. For some reason he had perfect navigational skills and effortlessly made his way back to the sidewalk where he first met the guide. The traffic felt like a time lapse as it blurred across his vision. Eric put his hands in his pockets until the melancholy subsided. The blues as they call it, and not even the jazz hands could help him now. “Hey buddy, is that you ” came a voice from the first lane. There was a big car whose wheels were hamster wheels, with a familiar face in the driver’s seat. That day in the park ... the one that got away. No, not Priya. The other one. The little furry one. A big hamster face popped out of the window and motioned for him to come near. “Haven’t seen you in a while. I thought you were going to live under that bush” Eric replied cautiously. “Well buddy, life had other plans for me. Jump in the passenger’s seat and we can talk it over” the hamster advised, wiggling his petal shaped ears. He departed back to the road once his passenger was strapped in and comfortable. The invitation was of good merit and Eric gave a sigh of relief. Then things got personal. “So what’s the deal with the Indian babe?” the chubby hamster wondered. Eric rolled his eyes at the very mention of it, “She has magic powers and this whole world is her dream realm”. “Gotcha, a real tough customer huh” the animal said as he changed lanes. They drove through the city, trading pleasantries until the college guy opened up. It was about that time that a cultic officer noticed the interloper and blared his alarm. The hamster screeched the wheels to a standstill, and hand cranked the window until it was down.

OFFICER - Can I see license and registration?

HAMSTER - No prob officer, here you go.

OFFICER - Is that your friend over there? Looks like he’s not from around here.

HAMSTER - He’s an old friend officer, we met on the way here.

OFFICER - Is that so? The both of you, get your tails out of the vehicle.

ERIC - I don't have a tail.

OFFICER - No tail huh? Good to know.

HAMSTER - Uhh ... should have kept that to yourself bro.

OFFICER - In fact, I haven't seen your face around here.

ERIC - I'm new to town officer.

OFFICER - And what planet are you from?

ERIC - Earth obviously.

OFFICER - Don't get smart with me, new guy.

HAMSTER - Wait a second officer. I told you he was an old friend.

OFFICER - Can you vouch for him?

HAMSTER - Yes, certainly. He is a good guy.

OFFICER - And what makes him so decent?.

HAMSTER - Trust me. He has a girlfriend. He's a real good guy.

OFFICER - You're a real lucky guy.

ERIC - I do my best officer.

OFFICER - But that doesn't mean you're good. I don't have a girlfriend and I'm good.

HAMSTER - Wait a second officer. This guy is a real good boyfriend. Trust me.

OFFICER - And that makes him good? I don't think so.

HAMSTER - Yes it does! He's super good. I've seen him being lovey dovey and all.

OFFICER - Oh really, is that true sir?

ERIC - Yes it is!

OFFICER - Hurts a-lot to hear this. I've got no girlfriend and I'm not good but you're good?

ERIC - I'm a good boyfriend officer! I bought her this hamster.

OFFICER - Now you're just making things up.

ERIC - I swear. I took her on a date and everything!

OFFICER - Oh I bet you did. I'm placing you under arrest sir, get in the car.

HAMSTER - He's just a tourist!

OFFICER - Get out of here hamster ... I don't want to see your furry face again. You're on notice.

After some security checkpoints, they took him to the sitting regent in the heart of the SOTA. Like toy soldiers, a column of cultic officers marched through the halls, and

tossed open a mahogany door. They dragged him by his arms and savagely threw the prisoner at her feet. "Is this for me?" Etheria asked. "Yes mam", one said. They nodded politely and made for the door. Eric got to his feet and composed himself again, hopefully for the last time. The regent was sideways with her knees draped over one of the legs of the throne. Eric was just a touch disappointed. She looked like your typical yuppie businesswoman, tall and attractive with medium length black hair. The kind of person who could be seen carrying a briefcase down a financial district. In fact she did keep some soul points in her briefcase for safekeeping. "Are you the big shot of this place?" he tentatively inquired. Etheria looked at him with piercing eyes. It was apparently an honor to be at her mercy. "Yes, I oversee this whole domain. My name is Etheria, what's yours?" She revealed, alighting from the most comfortable position onto the veritable ground. "Eric" he reciprocated. Being in the presence of someone less regal, the man felt a little less distraught. He adjusted his posture. Etheria approached him and sensed the difference in his aura immediately. "You are from upstairs," she remarked. Eric smiled, knowing the jig is up, "I am. I was sent down here". Etheria circled around him like a shark who was already full but could stuff in one last morsel, "Did they? Who exactly sent you down here?". As the long day was mostly at a close, he was more sociable than usual. Eric rubbed his chin and realized he would have to give her some insight into his purpose. "Her name is Priya Echo " he intoned. "For what reason? Are you a hero?" Etheria guessed eagerly. Eric shifted a little in his posture. This was going to be a little difficult to explain, "Well actually ... a war started and she wanted me to be safe ... I'm her boyfriend". The regent could not believe her ears. Euphoria flooded her body. The tips of her fingers tingled. A wry sliver of a smirk uplifted her face. "Oh, is that so?" she beamed, looking him up and down. Inspecting even the fabric of his pant pockets. "But I don't know if we're right for each other" he mumbled, looking with dismay at his feet. "That's boyfriend talk. They all say that!" one of the female bodyguards shouted. Etheria put a finger to her forehead and thought to herself. Through the eons Sam-Henry-Claudius-Dazin was a regular member of the family. Even from the very start. The years began to flow like some insubstantial element back to their source. Ahh ... those were the days. So many reincarnations and so little time. And now it was confirmed. All counterparts of this earthborn fellow. The regent put a hand on his shoulder just to steady him, "Well then Eric ... this may come

as a bit of shock but ... you have a dream counterpart here in the echo realm ... so you should go and discover what that is all about. I'm going to send you to the planet Cyalola. The ruler there, whose name is TAP, will be able to help you". "Thanks, but I'm sort of a one planet man, " Eric avowed. A serious look on his face transformed as he realized what had happened. It turned out celestial monogamy was his thing. Etheria threw back her head, "Very funny. I'm starting to like you". The business settled, the newcomer paced all the way to the door. As he put a hand on the side of the door, he decided to give the regent some advice as it was his nature to be helpful, "Oh, and your domain is full of weird stuff. try to do something about that please". Ferried by the cultic officers, he was sent expeditiously to the resident spaceport. A modern, silvery number that flattered the surrounding architecture. Eric nudged his head through the window to perceive the cumbersome ship. It must have been able to house a small city. The driver gave him a water bottle for the way and he climbed the ramp with the other families and buttoned down military officers. He got snug in his seat before the lumbering giant left the solid ground behind, and sailed unimpeded to the outer belt. There, the pilot pressed his finger to a view screen and the mausoleum ship activated its mirror light drive. The stars became a wall of pearly white, like the supple curled up inside of a conch. A waitress tried to convince him to try a fuzzy new soda but he declined. She got bonuses on the number of drinks. When he departed they crossed by a hallway with a viewing hall. The glass had a handprint from a kid who must have been on the last ride. And above those fingers he saw it. The vibrant green tapestry of Cyalola, wrapped up in a ball for safekeeping. It was as if a barren world was seeded with a field of clovers. Eric was so impressed by the islands that he did not register the ocean. He took a step back and saw it. The type of thing you would throw a bottle in if you wanted to be rescued. An officer who had been assigned to his duty grabbed him by the collar. A private shuttle was waiting for him. Sleek and sporty like someone had maxed out their credit card. It positioned itself outside the glass, atop the dark bottomless canvas, so you knew you were getting a good fall. Inside, two specialists of Etheria told him that they would personally introduce him to TAP, the ruler of the world below, "We will do the talking. Be cool. After that, I will let you meet her". The pilot was likewise handpicked and she turned around to get the go-ahead from the rest of the crew. Royal purple flames exploded in the nothingness of space, and propelled the

convertible down to the surface. As dignitaries, they made their rounds before coming to the final, awesomely adorned chamber. Like they said, the ambassadors did the talking first, while he stood patient, then abandoned him to the safety of the outside room. After seeing what he saw, Eric was expecting a real luminary. But instead ... the woman had her hands over her face and was shivering audibly. "Are you crying ... please stop" he begged. With that, she revealed her face but continued the waterworks, "I'm told your name is Eric. A pleasure to meet you". "Good to be here. I didn't have a choice but you have a beautiful planet" he offered, trying to reassure her with niceness. She nodded in approval, yet without an ounce of sadness. Then something remarkable happened. Those parcels of salt as that fell from her damp cheek took flight. They circled in wide spirals around the room, flickering with nascent light. They broadened and formed into watery figures of birds with long tails. Each of them landed square on the ground, erupting with unimaginable color. And they were peacocks. "Thank you. That is kind. I am Tears Are Peacocks, or TAP for short" the empress acknowledged. Eric blinked a few times instead of falling flat on his face, which would have been a sensible option, "I can definitely see that ". The woman was never sad, she was simply using her power. TAP noticed his reaction with amusement and quickly changed the subject, "Alright then, from what they said you are here meet your counterpart. Dazin, the star-map". She gave him a wet hand shake that he wiped off on the side of his pants when she wasn't looking. "Yes, that is what Etheria said," he remembered. The empress smiled with delight, "Very well. He is on the maiden island of Jabecera. A boat can take you there". "Things were going smoothly this time, he supposed ", It's that easy? Alright, I will go. Eric felt gratitude for the way this was being handled. At his knee, a peacock was rubbing its head and purring in amorous fixation. His host was remarkably calm, "I will have someone escort you to the shore. I expect you will enjoy the island. good tidings" TAP elected. It was all coming together. That matter from the Battle of Cyalola would soon be resolved. She smiled even grander than before. "Thank you. I hope you get relief for whatever you are crying about. bye!" Eric answered. They saluted each other again and then he was sent out, past those big mahogany doors, towards a maiden island and the promise of the future. He just hoped that he could capture it.

CHAPTER 55 - PHANTOMESS SKIPS ON CLOUDS

Location: Earth

Date: Present Time

Phantomess jumped across the simple clouds looking for anything that would satisfy the soles of her feet. Below was a rather inspiring sweep of land. A benevolent place to witness the trials of humanity. Phantomess felt her heart linger on a certain cloud. The breadth of it was enticing. It incensed the very nature of her being. The patron drew near to it. She knew what had to be done and with a great jump pressed her heels deep into the supine mass of it. The touch of it invigorated her feet, even within her high heels. Now the sapphire sky was shining clear. The space above was more like home than it ever was. And the bitterness of it swept in. Through the stiffness of cold she ran. The wind made her shoulders hard. In her world youth was but the starting point and it grew greater every year. More bravery. More perplexing joy. In great surrender two clouds crashed into each other but she was expecting that. Like a dancer she leapt up and arched over the whole event. A vortex of air almost threw her off course and when she came down her feet were surprised with a thud on a rather hard cloud. Compared to her shorter sisters, Phantomess was the elevated one. They had always complained about her height. Slender and lithe. And the very very long legs. That one got to them alot. She had a white skin tone. Short, tomboyish red hair, with freckles stippling her face. Often, she wore an aqua-marine blue dress, the type with a long skirt. Sometimes replaced with a vest but not today. Aside from the gear, she had a string of small rocks levitating around her person, like toys. Using magic, she could increase their size for skipping purposes. Courageously, she leaped from one cloud to the next, feeling the spring in her leg, the impact on her feet. Her blue dress looked like a souvenir from a dream. At the impact, a gush of dust tried to capture her. Yet she leapt again, outpacing it. The dust around her dwindled until it was a memory. The sky was like a safari that day, filled with ivories. The sun flung its light over heaps of yellow drenched clouds in the most devil-may-care fashion. The girl arced among them, wearing a jaunty smile on her face. It stirred something inside of her. Her chest felt spacious and cheerful. A grotesque happiness beyond words tantalizing her being. Fresh wispy clouds with the

blemish of tangerine light. White and ossified to the core. A cloud spasmed as it received a gust from the north. As she descended, the clashing force of the wind against her figure instilled its icy lash. This way and that, the wind decked her cheeks with its frozen blows. The patron traveled for miles.

An hour passed. An auspicious sky welcomed her into its empire. The uncluttered thing was more than enough to explore. The far reaching blue invigorated her, knowing it would stretch across the entirety of the world. Again, Phantomess felt the onslaught of the wind on her face. It twisted with an inhuman strength. Manifold evergreens carpeted the landscape. She had no quarrel with the beauty of earth. From her viewpoint, she could see a dozen metropolitan areas. From this distance they looked like baby cities. Miniature rectangular prisms in ordered rows. Below, she could see the enemy in the field. Bellicose armies marched on one another. Fires dotted in their wake. Multiplying their hostilities across land and city. Fighting with bulldog determination. A word light tipped upward to catch her in its magical targeting system. It screeched with intensity, and blasted a focused beam of light towards her. Phantomess fell through the air, high heels first against the enemy. She had one leg pointed towards it, and the other bent at the knee. As the beam hit, in all its gleaming potency, it was deflected as she spun like a top, the very tip of her high heel making contact. Phantomess alighted on the word light and leapt back upward as hard as she could, shattering the whole of it. As she rose up, she could hear the cheering roars of the men who had witnessed it.

Tucked in between the folds of the cloud was a greeting card. Delicately, she bent over and plucked it out. "I do not ask you to fight. The most important thing is to keep the memory of the echo realm. Do not let it fade - 'Dramatic' " it read. An ally of Echo's of course, but as the war raged below, it was a curious petition, and its full intent was unclear. Phantomess broke off her advance as she noticed something out of place. At the outskirts of a final cloud, she discovered a blue figure crinkled up like a dried leaf. She drew near and at once it was apparent how the ice upon its person enfolded. In her thoughts, she realized how the lone soldier had fallen from orbit. The battles there would have been intense, blazing with lasers from spaceships of unprecedented design. It would have gifted the earth this casualty. Draped over a cloud, layered with cold ice, like an animal trapped in winter. Phantomess chose a finger and touched the bulk of it. A

blue body with ribbons stretching from the shoulders to the back. One strange horn protruding from the forehead like a satyr, and the other a stump. Soon cracks formed on the surface, releasing all the agony of the past ... and its injustice. The casualty was so frail, it simply transformed into a heap of blue and purple dust. Unlike the others that came before, Phantomess stood silently, and let this one capture her. The blue and purple swiveled in constant motions. She lifted a hand and molded it into a fist, "We will win the day ... this time".

CHAPTER 56 - SNOW STANDS UP FOR HERSELF

Halfway between sunrise and sunset, afternoon unleashed its handsome greenery. Grass and fields. Trees who were never apart in the myriad crowd. Confessing earth's secrets in the form of leaves. As if humanity was entrusted with its beauty. Atop that roof of green, the blue sky ambled on. Vapors returned to the heights where they would be recycled. As a cloud lifted, a more elegant light was inflicted upon the sensibilities. Its path would continue unabated through a channel below, where a city stood as evidence of an adult society. An architect had worked long hours to draft the buildings to a shape of halfhearted semi-perfection. They were astute in their modernness. Designed for good measure against the antics of time.

Even so, the squirrels were holding the local population hostage. They installed a puppet mayor, and the real one was being smacked in the face with a bushy tail. To meet the challenge, the University 115th Student Regiment marched up the hill. They wore beaming smiles and sharp military uniforms. Earlier that day, there was a graduation from training with honors and confetti and goodbyes. A few proud families held back tears to dignify the solemn occasion. All the battles they had between them melted away. It was the start of something new, and everyone knew it. Except of course for the imposter in the ranks. She marched along with keen movements, patting her leader on the shoulder to keep him pacified. Shouting some fighting words. Everyone was fooled and didn't question the waterfall of pure white falling over her shoulders. Snow blushed at the thought of trespass. Being of regular proportions she could easily huddle with the

academic crowd. As the regiment crested the hill she made a break for it, towards a lesser inhabited space on the fringe of the city. Her slippers made quiet hints of her presence through the wood, as she canvassed right and left. Around her the trees stood firm in the delirium of green. An interlude in that tapestry gave way to an open area. Snow smiled with delight at how wily she had been. Ahead of her were metallic buildings and bordered up doors. A bolt could not curb her desires, and so she reached for the sugar packet resting on her back, and sliced open the edifice in a crosswise motion. It was thicker than a sword and did much greater damage. "This is it" Snow thought, relishing the darkness that awaited her. The very touch of it brought out the sparkle on her arms that proliferated to every inch of her body. An abandoned place with inconspicuous shapes in the dark. The sort that would stop a lesser patron in her tracks. A muffled sound came from the woods behind her, but she knew it was only the day escaping. "Ow " thought Snow as she easily bumped her head on a sleek steel door. Some fidgeting about in the dark led her finger to a button that flashed red. As the elevator plummeted down ... Snow took another moment and considered how sneakily sneaky she had been. Those poor soldiers did not even notice a thing.

Further away, a soldier was caught unawares and had to flee from the field. He made his way through a thicket. Above the ground were geysers erupting from the swollen body of the earth. Their outpourings in long, effortless motions. A gargoyle of fear trembled in his throat. The sight of it harpooned the heart. Thrusting too and fro. Shimmering walls with privacy behind them. The university soldier spied the frantic arms of conversation, drenched in a silhouette of the geyser's invention. It could have been anyone who found themselves in the center of a conference on a warm summer day. Unprofessional winds lingered in the open air, waiting for any sort of direction to plunge them forward. A less absolute feeling of surprise made his hands quiver with the force of it. He took a step back until the field was in stricter proportions. Now the multitudes were clear. Silhouettes in every room in every geyser. It was a good day. Fine enough to see the ascent of angels. Harrowing enough to see the dissolution of clouds ... and the theories that compose them. Thereafter, it would be a murky night that pulls the entrails of the clouds to the horizon. And the horizon would become the angels and they would be reborn as spirits that haunt the geysers below. Agape in conversation, like people in the park when they are not alone with their thoughts. And the angels were

really fragments of spoiled clouds. The blue intensity of the sky almost split his head in razor sharp pieces. The gargoyle came out of his mouth as a voice but it was numb. He went to the wall and an insubstantial arm popped out and held onto his arm. They pulled him inside. While the other soldiers were playing with squirrels.

A cordial ding from the elevator announced the end of her journey. The doors slid open and she was ushered from that good natured confinement. Feeling no resistance, the doors closed behind her. Across the woman's body she could sense the dry enfeebled air. Snow suddenly hovered as the floor was unremarkably absent. It was a more open space. That feeling of the drop down heightened in her chest. Inside, its effect magnified and lauded her torso. Now the room and its contents were bare to see. Extra sized acorns stocked up in neat rows. A path between for leisurely walking. At the foot of any subject was the name tag of the hapless inhabitant who had been transformed. "Sarah Cox" bit brightly into her mind. "Darryl Finnegan", "James Harland". The names would not end. To think that deep below the crust they would be stirring. Adults hugging the woody shell of that egg. "Are you going to help us already?" came a beautiful voice, tinged with solace. A layer of short brown hair. Linden Dream rose from the ground alongside his partner, his motions unimpeded, his presence like a flash of insight. Snow looked down into his circular glasses. The subtlety of his golden armor paled in comparison. "Not today. I wanted to talk to you about something important" she declared, wiping the frost from her palms. Linden stood still, unchanged by the intent of it. "And what is on your mind?" he answered. "I will tell you what I think, and I need you to do something about it" she demanded, as if the forces of nature were at her behest. Behind the woman, her hair swayed like a white picket fence in a storm. The body produced momentary stars in earnest, as if time was no obstacle. "Are you looking this way for a reason? Tell me what it is. I will do my utmost", Linden offered, saying the words that would ultimately lead her to a decision he had already made and planned for. An ardor flared in the woman's eye. It could not be expunged so easily. "Have you not seen what is going on? The war is blazing outside. Towers are falling. The soldiers are doing their best" Snow protested, rich with the insanity of anger. She thrust her arms outwards, so that a cool draft iced the walls of the room. Still, Linden was firm. A blank expression that could not be lifted. Upon his person a light of unspecified type flourished like an enigma. "The patrons will be victorious against this assault. You know they have

witnessed many before” he implored, forcefully to satisfy the matter. Ahead of him, was the charismatic beauty of a crystal life form, and it would not subside. “It’s not enough! The dreamer is out there fighting alone. The patrons are scattered. We even propped up some kids with magic for the fight” Snow railed, the weight of it falling from her shoulders. With fierce contagion the ice made its way to her iris. The look of disgust was palpable, clamoring from her lips. “Yes, this is a great confrontation to be sure. It will take all their strength”, he explained again, making the sound as crisp as it would go. The memory of endless wars hummed in his psyche. They had been unlikely, their enemies relentless. Like sands on a ravaged beach. His people sent them all to the light of the echo seal. “The fight is out there! Why are you here instead of helping. I get that the acorns have to be gathered, but that’s a job that you can give to anyone” She pleaded. This could not be permitted. Her heart dissented from its ordinary bounds. The winning features of her face screamed out in anguish. In an unusual moment, her skin stopped dissolving like the snowflakes that fall from the sky. Linden sighed and knew he had met his match. The visage before him was full of clandestine light, tinged with the embrace of ice. Beacons of that sort could never lead a man astray, “Alright, do you want to know the reason”. Snow descended a bit to hear the words. Magic swelled in her breast. A feeling of wet soggiess slipped through her fingers, “I do! Tell me everything”. Linden closed his eyes for a second. In restful awakening he thought of the dreamer. The many perils she had faced. Visioness of the Infinite Black Rainbow. Hogarth the Beheader. Armies of the Alliance. Each had brought her one step closer, “Priya does not need our help. This one is personal. This is her fight”. The insult made its way in circuitous motions about her person, carving away the final locks that held back her impulse. “Are you serious? You should be out there alongside her, turning the enemy to dust. You have the powers. You’re avoiding us!” Snow shouted, loud enough to tremble the room. The fires that had brought them here. In this room, on this day. She looked back at him. An unenviable gaze that would not yield. “I meant it Snow. This is for the future of the realm. Priya must do this alone. Any force from us would only interfere” Linden continued. He could sustain this argument forever. A glimmer swept down the length of his armor, like a waterfall, beyond the thick of clouds. The sinew in his muscle tightened. A modest face with the knowledge of destiny. This was a man of caliber. “You meant to be our leaders! Now you’re turning your back on us!” Snow

cried, in quick motion pointing to the man she thought she knew. Copious with tears. Pining for release from the struggle. Melina looked to her husband, as they were not accustomed to such defiance. “It’s for her own good” Liden uttered, putting down what had been sought for. Now the patron was fraught with merciless grief. Her white hair fell by her waist side. It would give no courtesy to the wind. “I will give you something good!” she promised, lifting both hands to their possible heights. Around them, frost crept meticulously across the walls. The air heaved with an unwelcome bitterness. Linden could see the plasticity of the magic around her, unfurling. Snow invented a blizzard before their eyes. Wild masses of soft homogeny. Sharp like the coldest day. Eddies of alabaster flowing like waves. She tossed it upon them and the Couple was encased in ice. In the aftermath of that, a rising feeling itched the inside of her throat. Hovering in midair, she came to her knees. Tears filled with units of salt, equal in measure. In undulating movements down her cheek. A burst of power, then a thought that racked the body. Emancipating all that came before. Snow dropped down towards the arms of the ice sculptures and continued the progress, releasing all she had. A hand sheltered in that sleek material broke through, and placed it upon her shoulder. The crust of it fell from their figures onto the waiting ground. Linden and Melina placed their arms around the back of their granddaughter. “I’m so sorry Snow. It just had to be this way” Melina whispered. “This isn’t right, It goes against everything we’ve fought for” the cold one offered. Melina felt a cheek that was colder than space. She craned her neck up to the other’s eyes, “But you know it’s necessary. Priya must get stronger”. Salt reached the tips of her fingers, “Are you going to leave us? After all the ages?”. Linden put his forehead to hers, “Come here”.

CHAPTER 57 - THE ARMADA

“Priya would kick your butt one million times over !!!” Timecurrent championed at the top of her lungs while slapping his knee. Telenon was starting to get amused at the constant impotence of his opponents. He leant his head back and gave out a half-hearted snicker, “That’s a laugh, Time. I could destroy her in any way I wanted. It wouldn’t last a day”. Time gasped at the thought of it. The world conquered by this beast ... she

would have to change her wardrobe, get new photo ID's and smile for the camera when they say cheese and everything. "You wouldn't dare!" she challenged, hands collapsed together in frantic petition. "It's absolutely hopeless Time. I'm the leader of the Voices of Reason. I have powers even beyond your belief" he sighed, his mind beaming with the thought of their acquiescence. The day after. The things he could do. And their boundless optimism crushed to dust. Time sat there for a moment, thinking intently until she came up with a productive idea. From her kneeling position on the ground, she sprung up and landed on his lap. "Well buddy ... How about this? You spare my friends and let Priya go, and I will do something for you" she began, piercing him with sharp, academic eyes. "And what is that?" Telenon sought, feeling the weight of the patron upon him. For a diligent whisper, she leant in close to his ear, "I can use my time lapse powers to make things go really slow if you know what i mean". Those cyborg lips and baby blue hair. They were coming in fast. His heart beat quickly like a jet pilot spiraling down and about to eject. Telenon gawked at the wall for a moment since the pedestrian stone was becoming increasingly more interesting. A bit of drool fell from his lip. Time sat in patient silence, waiting for an answer. But just as that was about to happen, a new portal revealed itself in front of them. "Why now? At the very hour of my triumph" Telenon wondered aloud. It was a novel planet somewhere in the galaxy. Attired with fertile intercontinental bridges. Dense with aquatic globules. A speciality of the planet. Cities shrouded in individual hills of wispy cloudstuff. And revolutions that wouldn't cease. Time looked up from the placid surface. A group of vessels were assembled in orbit. Their hulls were savage and blustery with turrets. There was a synergy amongst them. All together for the action against Telenon. Myriad forces. Enough to face their Nemesis. "Who are these guys?" she thought aloud, while sliding back to the hard custody of the floor. "Another world that finds fault with my rule. Just a distraction to be sure. The Haiphians won't steal this moment from me" Telenon vowed. He leant forward over Time in his chair. Now salivating with barbarian pleasure. The raw hedonism of violence flared in his eyes. Awakened by the sound of an instrument, the tails of the assembly flicked on with ruby red cones. They headed to the edge of their solar system. "I will give you what you seek. Pure destruction!" Telenon screeched mockingly. He hurled his right arm towards the portal and its view. To match the glory of that fleet, another sent by the Temple drew near. The escaping fleet could not leave

the confines of its sandbox. They had been caught. Big bowling balls zoomed forward, each of which with three big holes. From them thick serpents emerged, hissing wrathfully. Time watched as the ships were bitten into, their hulls gored with a predatory strike. Riveting cascades of flame leapt from the wounds. The vessels exploded in kind. Lasers tried as they could to pierce the black spheres and their energy shields. Soon enough, the snake pit from galactic hell had cleared the floor. The beasts approached the planet. As they reached formation, their eyes lit up with a stunning blue flame. “What?” Time gasped. Telenon leaned down and pressed a hand tightly against her shoulder. Pristine wrinkles accelerated through another dimension, jolting everything at once. A blue transparent flame like the most subtle star ignited upon her body. Telenon felt the heat of it as it flickered. “Aaaaah!!!” she screamed. Carefully, the world below began to spin. The time-lapse upon its surface quickened. With insurmountable force the channel was established. Telenon pumped more energy into it. Time felt her spirit refracted like white light through a prism. Years of social movement passed before her eyes. The populace slowly aging and degrading into the finest atoms. The days rushing by like a horizontal waterfall. As the ball spun a hundred times a second, Time observed the gradual emptiness. The shrill hiss of the serpents in orbit, looking down with ocular excitement. Blue infernos in their eyes. And then they were alone. The portal shrunk to nil, and it was over. Telenon and Time regained their composure in unison. With poignant convulsions. An army march of sweat glided down her neck onto her chest. In reply, she leant her back onto the throne and its rough comfort. Few words were needed to describe what had occurred. Guttural grunts did the trick. Atop the chair, the man was inspired. “From now on ... no more interruptions” he breathed, happy with the aftermath of things.

CHAPTER 58 - HOPE

Location: Wonderstruck Synthesis and Earth Matryoshka

Date: Before The Rikiral War

Participants filed listlessly into a basic council chamber for a routine matter. Awaiting them was a long oval table of dark blue, and stout chairs carved of the same stone core. In the heart of Wonderstruck Synthesis, they were safe from prying eyes. Among the cohort were the designated ministers of the Voices of Reason and their leader Telenon. How the most purposeful of them became head was a twist of fate. An astute yet ill-tempered man, he sat at the front of the table. The others bowed to him, knowing with full awareness the scope of his abilities. Its transformations flawless, its essence precious. Below the gates of Wonderstruck the outer space of various matryoshka rumbled with potent, newborn stars. A crisp energy hovered about him, ready for the day's work. "Are we ready to decide on the trials?" he questioned. The others nodded in agreement. For the majority of them it was a pleasant start. Yet all of a sudden, a sullied renegade trod in. He was voiceless as he stood and took a stance at the other end of the table. Telenon grit his teeth. He should be in a dungeon. A dungeon with a million dragons. "Do we have the honor of hearing from Dramatic?" he offered delicately. The old gray beard stepped closer. A breeze ruffled his robe, "Indeed we do ... brothers and sisters. Just recently I have returned from an interesting survey of the earth matryoshka. The world turns and the people are in good spirits. I walked the cities. I felt the air on my face. But as I did the future fell into my sight. They are coming my friends, the citizens of another Elementum. The Rikiral. Fast through space in their tireless ships. Soldiers of a planet one hundred times the scale of earth. And they will find our people. Astounded by each other, the meeting will be harmonious. Due to this, human and rikiral will interbreed and their imagination will become more powerful. A salience beyond anything. Free, pure thought. The focal element in its true realization". "Enough Dramatic!" Telenon barked, "The masses know I am the greatest warrior of imagination. My fist is the hardest. It turns everything to embers". Dramatic did not flinch. He scanned the audience and cleared his throat for rhetoric, "Voices of Reason, hear me, even as we speak an ordinary human born today has an innate ability greater

than all of us, and as time passes our children will surpass us". A buoyant laughter circled around the room. Ministers looked to their neighbors in mirth. "Clever sport old man. Did you come here to challenge me?" Telenon dared, rising from his seat. He scowled, thinking the others' speech was null and void. From there they all arose and went to the adjacent room, where an arena jutted from the ground. There, Voices clash by manifesting a display of imagination in turn, each stronger than the other, until one is of greatest energy. Ministers spread out, greedy for the sparring to begin. They had their favorite, and in thoughtless passion they had already guessed the winner. Telenon gracefully lifted his arms and sailed his hands through the air. Along his fingertips trailed a fine delicate powder of pulverized magic. Effortlessly he brought into the foreground a vision of fire and of blazing monsters firing cannonballs from their backs. Raptured, the crowd patted each other on the back. But Dramatic was not impressed. He had seen his friend's work before. He had seen him fashion the Spheres of Zest. He had seen him cause the Machiavellian Eagle to burrow into the sands of Loyasa. He had seen him halt the Vessel of a Thousand Leagues from its transit through Multi Proxima, although its thrusters were the size of mountains and the turrets were plasma cannons. This was a meager display and he wouldn't recoil in the way a lesser man would. Dramatic took a deep breath. Now it was his turn. Rhetoric had failed so he would need to deliver something else. Something that would open their eyes. Telenon crossed his arms in contempt. What an ill-mannered brat. So, the old man channeled all his enigmatic force into a single hand. A glint in his eye alighted. The robes upon his person danced with ripples. And he reached into the future, where there was the first man to find love with a rikiral woman, and reached into his spirit. Mahandran Echo gasped. "This is it " Dramatic knew. The ministers waited for the display, and they were not expecting such a push all the way back to the wall from light itself. Mahandran felt his hope for the future fly into the air, departing his body. The quickness of time arrowed through the room. Atop the platform a world appeared, the future as the couple sought. It was earth, lit with bright cities of human and rikiral alike. "THIS IS THE FUTURE !!!" Dramatic burst, his voice deep like the ancient voids of space. Energy left the minister's clothes in shreds. The brightness of the hope-earth paralyzed Telenon for the first time ever. He had never felt this way. The trembling fear. In seconds the thing dispersed and they were alone. For the room, what had been witnessed could never be unwitnessed. A

defiance against those that had whispered into the cosmic trees. And him who was their chieftain. Not a single domain had ventured to oppose them and lived. Telenon regained his senses once the image was gone, “You were once my best warrior, my best friend” he cried, “You want to help the humans ... then become one!!!”. The chieftain rushed to Dramatic and grabbed him by the robe on his chest, thrusting him forward. Crashing through stone, they plummeted onwards through Wonderstruck back to the land of stars. Dramatic peered behind him. Like a downed spaceship, they were headed for a crash landing on some lush forgotten world. Telenon roared as fierce rage shriveled his countenance. As that happened the mighty wizard bashed the other through the world like a wall, and onto the second world in the solar system, and the third. The triplets exploded in kind. They had been barriers. Meaningless. Dramatics’ eyes flared like newly minted silver coins. He punched his aggressor back. The chieftain craned his neck. The old man had grown to fifty times his size, his robe billowing with the chill of space. He stared down with silver that had become flame, its tail flicking into the unknown. Yet Telenon knew he dwarfed the other. He stood still, waiting for instinct to dawn and make him a warrior ... then silence. Dramatic was surprised. He kept his eyes on the man to see what it was. Magnificent continents whirled past into the depths of space, their tips glowing like toy infernos. Planes of gravity shifted out of their regular order. Its effect swept through neighboring systems, sending strange orbs to new quarters. Without fellowship, the star became a relic. Then it happened. Swiftly, unexpectedly. Wet tears made a mad descent down the man’s face. It was a quirk the old man did not anticipate. Telenon pointed with his right, outstretched arm, “I will give you one mercy, go to the humans, never return”. The sorrow pounded deep in his chest. Rich like drum beats. As Dramatic saw the chieftain his eyes returned to normal. His size decreased, “I will go, but I will find a champion, and they will reclaim the stars”. In gusto he turned, his robe flapping in kind. In moments he would escape in faultless acceleration through the aether. His feet would be on earth. His bare soles on mild grass. No ... he stopped. That was not enough. With eyes no longer engulfed in metallic flame he looked back at the man who was his friend, who was his comrade, who was his leader, “I enjoyed that day in the park”. And they would part ways. Days later everything was set in motion.

Location: Planet of the Voices of Reason

Date: Present Time

It was an awful memory and Telenon descended his throne. Like his compatriot, he had feet with bare soles. It was a long flat, featureless place. In that manner he approached the chamber of the Maelstrom Allegiance. It crackled with energy. A tornado of enterprising wind, its funnel swirling up into ecstasy. At intervals along its length were rings with ghosts of the ministers chanting their endless assertions, giving it strength. His toes pardoned from walking. His soles relieved of painful labors. Letting go he let the draft uplift him. Passage through the heights filled the man's body with beautiful calm. Alleviation in the realest sense. A kindness wrought in the focus of his being. He scaled upwards. Unceasing, as the rings of ministers chanted. Their hibernations would continue for many cycles, beyond the current strife. Priya Echo. Why did she have to be such a know it all? That long jet-black hair ... When the man found the right distance he activated the spell, and the cyclone reacted, forging a space blueprinted of imagination. Telenon found himself on warm meadows. A fine planet. Strong, effeminate trees. Clouds that would make a geisha blush. Telenon continued on his way. There were trees at intervals. Their hapless leaves discarded at the rush of a northern breeze. Fickle animals reclined on grass to doze away the endless days. Telenon stopped and admired a charming horizon that stretched for miles. From the fountainhead of one cloud a rainbow poured. It drifted to the ground, making a full arc. Telenon closed his eyes, picturing the adversary and her tactics. The way she shattered that mirror and forged the mirror sword. The swing of the blade. Its glimmering action. "Priya Echo, do you think you're the only one with mirror powers" he called. With the wave of his hand the ground split and from it a gigantic mirror rose, climbing to the sky. Now the portion of the landscape was doubled, including the rainbow. Like a narcissist studying his looks, his eyes considered the handsome bridge. "Let me envisage my very own Priya Echo and put her in shackles!" he laughed. Telenon tried as hard as he could. Sweat from the endeavor lapped down his resilient body. Drawing substance from the world, an eddy of a portal formed ahead of him. Expectations rose. Beyond it, the complexion of the forest shifted. Adorning the portal, a shameless blue of rippling force twirled. Then the model stepped through to greet him. Its foot with high heels snapping the first blades of grass. "Bonjour. Would you prefer a gelato" offered a woman. A beret tilted on her head. Any hooligan with a decent globe knew that France was several

nautical miles from India, “Is that like Priya?” he thought. Telenon was dumbfounded and just stood there for a moment, wondering why he couldn’t get it right. To add to his disdain, the model started swinging around in some kind of skirt. It got in close and looked him up and down, smirking with a dry smile. Telenon dispatched the first one and tried again. He tried a few more times but with no luck sent them back from whence they came. It was all useless. “I can envisage anything, why can’t I envisage her completely” he lamented.

So, he fled the scene, pivoting up to a corridor fraught with chaos. Dashing, his flight followed a coiled path. Along walls whose motion was a blur. And stealthy, predatory winds that cycled about him. “All hail the maelstrom allegiance” rising from the depths. From his head adrenaline kicked in and a new world presented itself. Its skies angry. Its clouds brimming with lightning. All at once from every angle the world was destroyed by strikes on its surface, turning to rubble. Telenon soared through the disarray to find a temple the proportions of a space station. It had very long columns. But the chase was on, as the clouds that had assailed the planet pursued him, lasering their lightning strikes at his heels. The chieftain swerved and missed them every time, their bolts crashing into pillars, snapping them. “Persistent are we” he confessed, gritting his teeth. Although they could not get him, their maneuverability was unimpeachable, trailing him through various rooms. Blue stings of their lightning crashing into anything that moved. The words “Not good enough!”, like a true emotion expelled from Telenon’s throat. He escaped the threshold, skyward to a new earth, and seeing a chasm on its surface become a key to unlock it. Telenon turned, unlocking geological locking mechanisms that drifted away, higher than the mountains. In the vault a light emerged so painful as to warrant both hands outstretched for shelter. Rays like spears with a vendetta. Then it was subsided and incorporated into three objects – a tiny sun, earth and moon. His body shuddered from the sight of it. A moment lingered as he waited for its answer. After the rampage of the clouds ... this vault and its treasures. The three bounced carelessly, until the selfish earth absorbed the sun and moon. Fire truck red ignited on its continents, along with white lunar seas. Alarming fires sprouted from its geometry. “So, this is it,” thought Telenon. The solar system earth turned to meet its aggressor. It fired a column of flame right at him. Telenon knew he could not give. He made his chest stiff for the blow. At once the column came, its four corners lapping

around him like so much insubstantial crimson. Defiance welled in him, "I WILL HAVE YOU!!!". He stood resolute and the planet took its chance. The column of flame became a waterfall. The orb expanded in all directions, embellished itself with grandiose size. Now the climb became more punishing, enfolding him in abstract flame. The heat intensified, fresh with landforms hotter than the sun. Even so, the man was already thinking one step ahead. "I must become ice to combat the solar earth, " he whispered. Still, the column extended. The waterfall dropped more of its lifeblood onto him. Yet the arc of his passage was unconsumed, shining through the veil. It was the only move. There would be no negotiation with the inferno. As he reached the limits of the continent his body turned to sculpture. Solid Ice. A flash voyaged from his eyes, blinding everything it came across, extinguishing what was red. He closed his eyes. The insult of the spell was agonizing pain. His chest heaved, invalidating the pressure as it softened. Telenon looked out onto the terrain. An aura thick like tar rose up from the earth. Smoke meandered ceremoniously to the sky. Through his fingers. Around him armies of the inferno with their key swords fell to the ground. They had been ready to fight till the ends of time. Now they would find the ground and sleep in beds of ash. Still his eyes shined, and his body of ice glistened. Mechanisms of many locks unlatched in strange motions inside his spirit body. Tingling and twisting. Adorable rhapsodies. He eagerly smiled.

CHAPTER 59 - COMPANIONS - PRIYA AND VALCO - NEO-INKTOPIA

Location: Earth

Date: Present Time

Minutes of cycles ensued, until they were mercifully dropped to the ground. When they opened their eyes, the surroundings were marginally damaged by the tornado, where most had taken flight. Priya turned to Valco, "What do you think, big guy?". He pointed to the hills, "Do you see black towers in the distance? The turbulence will continue to spread like cancer. We will have to focus on one malignancy at a time. I think we should search for a source" Valco suggested, and she agreed to the cunning

plan. The black towers of Neo-Inktopia inched higher as they walked its woeful streets. Every so often a printer cartridge would float creepily from the window of one skyscraper to another. “They must be hiding inside the buildings,” Valco conjectured. Cupping her hands around her mouth, Priya called “Can anyone hear us!”, a force against deadly silence that perched all around. Replying to her summons, a group of ten people emerged from the shadows of an alleyway. “It’s not safe to be out in the open. We ride in here whenever we have to go outside” they whispered pitifully. In the shadows was a stealthy moped. “Why can’t you just leave and go back to Panorama Precinct?” Valco asked. To answer him a siren sounded out from the silence, and swiftly they were pulled into the alleyway. “It’s useless, they’re cracking down on everyone” one of them pleaded. Far beyond the towers, a siren was ringing. Ditching them to the wolves, the locals retreated into their moped and rode off down the alleyway.

“Let’s check everything out” the scientist said, and lifted off the ground, gliding across the ruthlessly somber cityscape. Valco followed behind her. People started to appear in meager bunches. Those that couldn’t hide dashed in headlong urgency through the streets. True to form, a troupe of seemingly decent cop-cars approached on their heels. The leader had more signal beacons blaring red than a nerdy teenager with pimples, and fired them off one by one. Priya grabbed Valco close and evaded a beacon missile that detonated on the side of a building. More formed a blockade ahead. Down below, a police department had a sign splayed across its entrance, “Anti-Priya Police”. “The people deserve a break. I think we should keep them busy” she stated diligently, and maneuvered so they had to chase. As they turned right, the homing missiles swerved around the bend. Priya turned a hard left and saw them careen away, exploding on the side of a tower. “This isn’t your average everyday ink” she observed. “Can you give me a hint before we get there?” Valco demanded, with the heavy knowledge that she had failed to do so before, and it had led to many surprises. “The towers are all made of ink, but it’s not man made. It’s a natural ink. I think an octopus is hiding in here somewhere” the scientist inferred. “Haha ... you must be kidding me. A whole city made of it?” Valco bellowed. Priya hurried as the cars gave no quarter in their hunt. She turned to her companion, who was brisk and full of unrelenting vigor, “The pure chaos of the maelstrom allegiance is all around us. You can see it for yourself”. At last they came to

the boundary of Neo-Inktopia, where the woods surrounded the clandestine emblem of madness. The purity of nature beckoned to them. Letting their forms drop to earth, they came upon a harmless stream, coursing with unforgettable splendor. A big granite rock trembled as the waters encircled its foundation. Priya put her hand to Valco's chest to still his approach, and looked up at his face. She was beaming with the most handsome smile.

"Come, we know you're here" Valco bellowed. He could see the tip of a tentacle stuck to the side. From underneath the octopus emerged and wiggled over to them. "If you knew how hard it was to hide, you wouldn't be so brash about it ... it's really been strange today" it whined. "In case it does turn out that way for good, I promise I will personally find the best hiding spot for you" Priya promised, gaining its trust. "Oh, I get it. You're sweet and he's salty" it joked, slapping a tentacle across his head. "You could say that. I think you'll like it better once we clean up this mess" she added. Shimming over to them, it put a tentacle on each of their shoulders, "New friends, since I feel so comfortable now, will you help me get out of this wrapper?". "Anything for a new friend" Valco replied, "see ... I can be sweet too", and elbowed Priya. Turning around, they saw a zipper and underneath the top of its neck the slider. Priya grabbed it and began unzipping him, as her compatriot grabbed the tips of two tentacles. "Let me help you with that, " she said, grabbing the tips of two others as soon as the zipper had gone as far as it could go. In the opening, she could see underneath a sparkle. Methodically they removed the wrapping, until the octopus was free enough that it wriggled out of the rest. "Goodness!" Priya bellowed, seeing an octopus of pure crystal sparkling in front of them. It lifted off of the ground and hovered before them. "I feel something inside of me ... almost like it wants to come out, " he related, and expelled a cloud of indescribable crystal ink that enveloped the surrounding area. "Fall back, Valco!" Echo ordered, and they did to evade the shimmer. When it dissipated, they looked down at their feet. "Githin?" Valco uttered, seeing the naked man crouched down by their feet, his neck covered by a crystal band of the Waitu Cult. "My child, you must be so frightened. Do not be. I am here for you" Visioness said, stepping out of her host's body, and leaning over him. "Do you think this is a good idea?" she asked Visioness. "Please ... give him a second chance" she begged, turning around to both Priya and Valco. "Empress, this is not a good course of action ..." he advised. "Enough" she said, holding up a hand, and

stared straight into her counterpart's eyes. "Him? I'm giving you a test ... of your loyalty". Holding Githin's hand, she led him back, stepping into her host's body and disappearing from sight. "You have a habit of trusting anyone who will betray you" Valco spat, furious at her decision. "Do not worry. This will be good to know if she is truly a part of me" she artfully replied. Her attention pivoted back to their new acquaintance, "Then that means you're the ninth iteration". Around her finger she wove a ring from mirror light, and held it up. The octopus retracted, and was sucked onto the band, becoming the jewel of an engagement ring. "Stand back" she said, lifting her arm up with the ring. Spell symbols and cryptograms danced about, "Delicate Infinity!". A light burst from the ring, casting them away. And in the world of a prism, an audience of skulls were formed, and with the arrows of light they crumbled away and the reality of that mathematical void-space melted away, and they found themselves among the green hills where the city had once stood.

As the buildings melted into black puddles of ink, the sky around them became clear. "Hmm, Is that what it looks like?" Valco mouthed cautiously. The realm was but a façade for the ghost city ahead of them, the stagnant architectural wonderland of Neo-Panorama. "They must have frittered away all their money" Priya considered, as they graced the streets with their evanescent crystal aura. Indeed they had. Its proponents did not gather enough steam. As a result, the construction did not extend very far past the hills. Its hollow rectangular skeletons were like gateways to the four horizons of the world. "Did you think you could get this far without facing me?" Telenon pried, a frail clone of him hanging overhead. "I thought we were doing kangaroos, Telenon. I knew you were a sucker but ... an octopus? Really?" Priya teased, knowing that his antipathy could never stand between her and justice. The man's cheek was red with anger. From his elevation, he drifted closer, enough to meet her gaze, "It's only the first strike, so get your gloves on". Atop his fingers she could see the fine threads of a subtle orange energy. At the twist of a wrist, he could will them in any direction he pleased. It was a clever strategy. Priya narrowed her eyes just as the sight of it materialized. But by that time, it was too late. "Sister, I can't feel my chest," Valco groaned. Looking to the side, the patron saw that her companion had been seized. "A minor battle to test your strength" Telenon answered, stretching the threads to move his new puppet. The realization dawned on her that indeed she would have to face her brother. The big lug

himself. After a second of pulling the puppet about like a drunkard, Telenon finally got his bearings. Priya fell back, witnessing in full detail the rippling muscles of his bodybuilder physique. Valco's bald head beamed with newfound reflective light. "Oh shit, this is really going down" Priya thought, biting her lip. The first punch tore a crater into the ground, which she abruptly dodged. With impeccable speed, the beast lunged and was already at her chest. The patron used some fast reflexes, and walked her way back, moving away from each thrust. Around them, the metal framework of the construction site was turned to silverlike powder. "Enough of this, let me use an inter-trans-manifestation on him" the woman thought, and when he was in an open area, charged him. She altered to echoes and went straight through. Priya spun around to see the result. An explosion rushed out of his body, detonating with pristine glory. The flames lapped his greek body, shrouded in smoke. Then ... nothing. "Uh, he's too heavy," she complained. Below the clouds, Telenon's laugh could be heard with singular clarity. In the moment after, Valco punched her in the gut, sending her skyward. Priya winced. The man's fist felt like a blunt instrument. Due to the nature of the situation, the patron let her instincts come forth. She parried with her own physical strikes, and the ensuing fight led them on an all-around tour of the once promising city. Now the veins were starting to bulge from his hide, strengthening him, and it was hard to do a lot of damage. "Why so much endurance" Priya thought, sending him to a grave of earth below. Valco did not even budge a second before he tore out of the hole. The girl alighted on the periphery, but then the brute struck fast and sent her careening into a thick, half-finished wall. "I'm glad he's on my side" Priya groaned as she brushed off some brick from her lab coat covered arms. The progress of their struggle sent them from sky to ground, and then back again. As she watched him dance, there was something Priya tried to remember. Something on the tip of her tongue. "Ah yes" she recalled. Unfortunately, the thing about Valco is ... he can transform into a spinning ax. The realization came just in time and she moved her head to the left as the weapon rammed into the wall beside her. Priya unsheathed her mirror sword from a summoned mirror and went to work. The two blades met in swift motions, and the woman had to deal with the successive pattern of human and ax. They alighted on a rooftop where her shifting, seraph-like blade met his. The patron brought him to all four corners, then decided to return to the rubble below where there was more surface area. Telenon was

incensed. He flung his arm out, causing the behemoth to strike her location with the ax, and induced a growth spurt to the article. Priya was like an ice skater on the ground. It was practically impossible to catch her, even as the giant ax threw up a prodigious circle of damage. They returned to the sky where the patron reformed her mirror sword into that of a battle mace and got a clear shot, sending him pummeling through a trio of buildings. Never a subtle man, Valco returned a second time with the same attack, yet she metamorphosed into echoes to evade its fury. “If you can’t kick ass, how are you going to take names?” Telenon shouted behind her. Priya frowned at his unending tenacity. The beast was getting faster despite the blows that she had inflicted. He barreled close and came but an inch to her face with his fist. “Not so fast,” she declared. As the larger foe was maneuvering, he had failed to see the two cottony clouds trailing behind him. Each of them shot out a sizzling bolt of mirror lighting, taking hold of each arm. “If the first attack won’t do the trick, then lightning probably won’t either, but I can use it for this” she reflected. A series of fast punches. She departed inches from the ground and cocked her knee into a vice-like position. Releasing it, a forceful kick sent him backwards. Lawlessly, the beast was sent faster than a blink of an eye to a distant hill at the boundary. The ground formed a cave on his arrival. She stood there for a minute while the boulders atop the pile shifted in their position. A roar freed itself from his lungs as the behemoth shot forward, out of the fragmented ground. Priya could see what she had wrought as a reddish bruise spread across his chest. Priya watched as his barefoot feet touched the grass. The endurance of her brother would continue. Muscles pulsed like their combat had been a workout, and the blemish faded. Thick veins glowed red in his bicep. Sweating like a lion. “Your long-range attacks are not operational yet, what are you going to do?” Telenon bantered laughingly. “Will you shut up!” she countered. Valco heaved into the air and spun around with that slick bald head of his. He transformed into a miniature volcano and shot a burst of lava that sculpted itself into that of an arm with a fist, and it careened into the ground, creating a fiery impact crater. More of them were to come. Priya was starting to get tired of the fireworks. It wasn’t new years and she wasn’t celebrating. Boiling hot lava splattered off the side of the impact crater and almost touched her lab coat as she circled around it. “Get her!” Telenon shouted with abandon. Priya sent a vertical burst of mirror lightning up to shatter the volcano, and it liberated the occupant. At that, the encounter continued with

the prior arrangement of sword and ax, until the beast at last mustered a spell of his own. Priya craned her neck as four portals appeared in the sky. Then there were giant hammers that spun in the delicate air. Priya assumed that it would be an easy endeavor to miss them as they fell to the ground. But she was wrong. At the ends of each of the hammers, the technology within began to activate. Inside the hollow tubes, thin tendrils of electricity flickered. Hot red flames erupted from the ends, and rocket engines awoke. The spinning became seamless, and they were flowing like a single geometric form. Priya was forced to become a string of mirror lightning to evade the attack, and it cracked half the landform along with the city. “Hahaha. Right on the ... what!” Telenon grunted as he realized what happened. The pale, cheerful orange of the puppet threads appeared in her vision. They dangled from the puppet, who could not move a muscle without permission. Priya retreated a yard as her feet slid across the grass. A few resonant breaths from deep below quieted her mind. The lab coat upon her back waved as the carefree air uplifted it. She felt a glint in her eye as the zeal returned. The rules of the game were becoming clear. “I need to take care of those strings,” she murmured to herself. Ahead, Valco was preparing for his final attack. He wiped bloody sweat from his face with one arm. The magnitude of his strength was becoming clear. “Sister, don’t let him win” he pleaded, telepathically as the spell weakened. In one daring jump, he altered again to the giant ax, but set himself alight, becoming a wheel of blade and flame. Priya knew Telenon was dreading a mighty spell in kind. But she gave him what he wanted, and merely lifted her sword before her face. The whole universe seemed to teem with crimson as the weight of it touched down. Through endless revolutions, the wheel sharpened her instrument. Feet pressed into the ground. Like a true grinding, sparks flew off in their myriad directions. With one eye the patron looked past the flawless diagonal shaft of her sword. A red flame diabolical wheel. “This is it. I’ll just adjust the angle a little” she thought. As it happened, the orientation of the ax went from vertical to horizontal, and in one motion the threads were cut clean through. Valco, a helpless brother, fell into her waiting arms. “That was not nice, Telenon!” she exclaimed, the bald head resting against her bosom. Priya transferred some energy and healing to Telenon, and in time he came around.

“Do you like having your head up in the clouds, my friend?” Priya taunted as soon as she reached his level. “Far better than your thoughtlessness” he answered,

“That’s too bad. If we weren’t fighting over destiny, we really could have had a good talk” she stated smirking, and pointed to the cloud behind him. It rang out with thunder and lightning, then dropped away from its peers, and shrunk, forming into something like a white casket. Valco looked up and saw it open its door, and inside it was lined with white spikes. “A cloud iron maiden” he gasped. Stealthily it slid up to the clone from behind, slamming its door to a scream of gruesome pain. Priya sighed with relief, watching rivulets of blood drain from the cracks in the cloud iron maiden, then returned back down to the ground where her friend stood.

CHAPTER 60 - BRAIN PUNCH

The survivors roamed, dazed and confused among the pines. “Let’s get back to the hotel,” Valco insisted. Returning to Panorama Precinct, they came upon the outskirts of the town just as one of the sailing houses rained down a fragile, harmless shower of saw-dust onto their shoulders. Behind them the crowd cheered as the absurdity withdrew, like a tide, leaving the locals in a town that still had some parts remaining and was not totally a lost cause. The following day the two of them were speaking on the roof of the hotel, overthinking their next purposeful move, when around them the scenery traded itself for another. Gunfire and powerful noise cut through the air. Symmetries of black architecture interwove itself around them. What looked like a band of spell-infantry fell as the ray of a trajectory cutter sliced through. Priya looked out and saw its source, the armored Rikiral warrior firing on their position, blue-skinned, the shoulders adorned with ornamental ribbons. A man in a brown coat stepped over the bodies, holding a shotgun in each hand. Atmosphere escaped as the docking bay doors unfurled themselves. Bodies subtly inched away from his feet. In the background, she could see soldiers curving through the spaces between the stars - Rikiral and human alike. From the back of the man emerged his skull attached at the top to his entire spinal column, as if the full piece had decided to become immaterial. It rested behind his back for a moment, until the individual vertebra broke off and curled around to the front. The man took each piece and loaded them into the shotguns as shells, then fired a shot. It rung out and hit the Rikiral attacker dead center, killing him instantly. “Echo ... do you

recognize me? I fought by your side ... you promised to help us” the fallen enemy murmured as he bled. Turning his face, Priya could see a dark cheek, his eyes weary and wet, “I didn’t have a choice”. Priya fell to her knees as the memory decayed. Soon enough, they found themselves back on the roof again. “Valco ... are there any good choices in life, or do they just look different from the other side?” she sobbed. Pulling the scientist to her feet, he embraced her while the trembling ceased. “Tell that to them, ” he said, pointing over the ledge to the people milling about below. “Thank you” she accepted, surveying their motions for a time, “the disorder itself ... FIRE virus must be evolving as a result of the turbulence of the focal element. It’s manifesting flashbacks like this one. We have to stop its growth before it traps someone in a memory”.

They continued to discuss when Priya received a coded message, interrupting them. “This is coming from the SOTA. Etheria’s scientific team was apparently able to revive a satellite dish on a moon in the Alpha-E sector. It’s Rikiral” she reported. “If we can capture a stock of weapons, we could use them against the magnate” Valco perceived. “Agreed, that could give us the upper hand ... but it sounds like they have something else in mind” she paused. Echo transferred her telepathic sight by placing a hand onto his shoulder. Valco closed his eyes and saw the beacon drifting, tendrils of electricity lashing and arching back into a framework from every side. “We could capture that, and harness it” she heard him say. “A dying probe ... it’s probably relaying an old distress signal” Echo considered. “Empress ... Etheria, if our people are able to study this in time, they could use it as an energy source to build a machine that counters the maelstrom”, he thought aloud, grave in his admiration of the profound. “That’s a long-term program brother, we’re at war” she jostled immediately. Etheria came between their newborn rift to broadcast their other discovery ... by first glance a loftier one, “Our dish is getting a signal from the lunar surface. Take a look at this, friends. Here was the capitol White Jade before the war. According to records it fell in a single hour, in a bombardment by the Rikiral. The population abandoned the entire colony for Earth as a result. Now follow the path to the periphery, where you’ll sense three signatures hidden below the surface ... on either end some kind of facility”. “Leftovers from the time they resided with us. They were first turned to shelters, then stations to coordinate the attack” Valco realized briskly, his words returning home,

through a chronicle of the past. “Don’t blink, you’re not going to believe this” Etheria chuckled. Their perspective was sprayed with a lather of black and white. Priya reacted accordingly, the motions of her thoughts conspiring on one obvious verdict. “Are we witnessing the Static Ocean ... Uffhill would love this” Valco conceded. “The object you’re seeing is about a hundredth the size of the moon, spherical and composed of pure static. It was invented by Rikiral ... It was programmed” Etheria explained, narrating the exhilaration of their senses. Echo tempered the delirium of her disbelief. A head researcher of the team spoke up in the midst of silence, “According to historical records the attack on White Jade was brazen, occupying a massive proportion of their armada for little gain”. “We were just told the lunar inhabitants retreated after the attack” Echo argued. “Indeed, but that was in the works already. The visitors were centuries ahead of their counterparts when they arrived. A young, defenseless people. By granting us sorcery, the Voices of Reason used us as foot-soldiers to repel their exploration. It was obvious who their true enemies were. It should come as no surprise that the attack on the lunar capitol was simply a ruse, one to lure the Voices and Telenon into the open, to capture him in a fabricated orb where even he couldn’t escape” the scientist related eagerly. The researchers laughed at their reaction. Echo was happy to have such an answer fall into her lap. It was like every atom in her body was dancing all at once. “This is amazing, we can finish what they started ” she thought aloud, applauding through the telepathic link.

“Let’s think about this for just a moment. Do you really know you have a perfect trap? He outsmarted it once before, and if you’re considering doing that ... it would have to be all or nothing. What if he seals you instead? The beacon’s energy can help us in the long run” Valco argued, as his words were tinged with wonder. “That’s easy for you to say brother, you don’t have to face him” she countered. “You are really trying me right now! Instead of listening to my advice before, you just lectured me” he lamented, turning his back. Feeling the weight of her self-absorption, she tiptoed up to him and pressed her face into his back, “Valco ... I don’t know what our connection is, but it is strong, like you. That’s why you tried everything to save me once, even though it didn’t turn out that way ... alright. I believe you when you say it’s not worth it”. Sighing heavily, he turned back around, “That’s admirable sister” he intoned. Now his eyes

opened back up, “Then here is what I suggest. We obtain the satellite and its energy. However, with our abilities still returning, it would be difficult to cross that distance”. “I think you underestimate your own strength” she began, “and there is a new technique that could aid us in getting an object over a stellar distance. It’s called empty recurrence, an invention of the rite of the true naive”. “What do you need?” he asked, seeing that she was curiously looking up and down his body. “Something to absorb the electricity ... give me your brain” Priya concluded, and placed both of her hands on his temples, causing the organ to become immaterial, and like a trained surgeon retrieved it and placed it about three feet off the ground in the center of the roof. Valco looked over reluctantly. “But if we’re going to do this, put it at the corner over there so I can make a running start at it” he asked. Priya held the brain perfectly still at the corner of the roof, and synced the signal from the satellite dish telepathically with him so that he could visualize the full trajectory. Like a sprinter he charged forward and directed all of his strength into his fist, knocking the brain through the atmosphere where it sailed towards its course across freckles of light, through numberless simplicity.

Revolving like a piece of a shipwreck, the satellite appeared in the view of the brain, who felt itself overtaken by numbness as it neared the end of its voyage. Metallic components loosely tethered together rattled with the escape of lawless static. As the brain came upon it all of the electricity was charged with strange, unearthly prowess. Drawn into the outflow, it became tangled in currents, and soaked them up like a sponge. Back on earth a cloud of hot steam freed itself from his mouth, “It’s back in my skull, sis, and I can feel the heat”. “Segregate it into parcels and diffuse it through the link to the research group” she instructed. Just in time. As voices faltered, it became evident that even a brief connection could not withstand the turbulence. The task complete, they headed downstairs once more.

Priya walked across the hotel lobby and sauntered out to the entrance. In the distance the foliage of a vineyard stretched out across a neighborhood that had once been quite unremarkable. “That’s Mar’s vineyard” Valco started, “which means the realm is emerging gradually”. “Without the RODI it will be a trickle. A feat like that is impossible in the eye of the storm” Priya lamented. But seeing an old thing in a new place, her heart turning to curiosity as it was drawn to the vineyard.

THE END

THANK YOU FOR READING MY BOOK.

I HOPE YOU ENJOYED READING IT AS MUCH AS I ENJOYED WRITING IT

DID YOU LIKE, “ECHO’S QUEST, BOOK 1 - AWAKENING?”

HERE IS A PREVIEW OF THE SEQUEL

“PRIYA ECHO’S ADVENTURE - BOOK 2 - ASCENSION WAR”

COMING SOON - BOOK 2 BONUS CHAPTER - CRYSTALLIZED APRICOT

Location: Echo Realm, Cyalola

Date: Second Age

“Please be careful. The living quarters still have a few traps which have not been removed as of yet” Crystallized Apricot informed the debonair couple touring the copious corridors of the maiden palace. They continued onwards, nodding silently in assent at her words, regarding the blithe wallpaper and furnishings that seemed as if placed somewhat out of time. At the close of the decade, the rising population in the Sky-Nest cities, most notably Omeinn forced the hard settlement of the archipelagos, where quaint farming villages had previously stood undisturbed. Threats from the hunters over time slowly diminished until they were a thing of the past. It dawned on the Actress that the palaces were obsolete. Apricot remembered the day they were gathered all together to hear the news. Filling the vacuum, yuppies with enough riches and prestige flocked for the new real estate. Passing a dining table, inconspicuous coasters laid haphazardly across a placemat. Flinching, saw-blades retracted from them, ready to leap into the air. Extending an arm out, the guide prevented the couple from closing their proximity to the table, pacifying the coasters. Luxury overspread the second quarter salon, which they wandered into for an intermission, and their guide stopped, crippled by its foreignness, feeling the phantoms of the maiden’s twirl about the room in fresh youthful abandon. “Oh man, she is really selling this, you had better step in before we get shafted” the wife whispered in her husband’s ear. “Yes, yes, this is all very well and good, but what real benefits does this property offer besides extensive living quarters? ” he asked, striving to bring her back on course. “It’s just ... there's a lot of history here. Just over by these couches there was a long oval where me and my sisters would play cards. For that reason, you’ll never feel alone. To be honest it’s got more than you could possibly need, like the amenities here in the salon. If you pull this crank here, the chandelier will descend and give you a massage and back-scratch, and let’s say for example the wallpaper doesn’t suit your taste, you can simply walk over here to the corner and take hold of it” Apricot demonstrated, pulling the sheet from the wall like a magician pulling a tablecloth, leaving the paintings and other furnishings untouched.

Felicitously, after pulling a dresser drawer and tucking the article in she was given a trinket by the furnishing in gratitude from a wooden compartment. “Most of the furnishings here will reciprocate” she added, upping the ante. To seal the deal, she took them to the second quarter walking balcony, where they parted to have a word alone. Remembrances of the other girls filled the recess of her mind ... Nicoletta the Ornate One, Audrey Meadowsweet, Galatea of the Ten Velvet Roses, Finality Dulcie, Sybil Eater of Mint Jam ... the company pouring glasses of lemonade on the porch, whittling clumps of lemon sculpture with caramel knives. Like a mirage she could see Galatea again, lifting aesthetic hand-weights to strengthen her appreciation of nature’s beauty. “We’ll take it!” the husband announced, breaking her concentration. The price was not unreasonable for the square footage and worth its weight in status. Apricot let the couple sign, so that Perennial Shed passed hands simply. He dashed a cursive mark so quick as to refute an opportunity for her to formulate an inner expression about it. But time was short, so she headed out to the village of Taken Ground on the island to prepare for the housewarming bash that would, without a doubt, draw a sprawling crowd of socialites. On the drum of her ear she felt the birdsong of the tide, the unmuted swell of the aviary ocean. It drew attention to the trees and grass by paralipsis, the sum of a wholesome green milieu flanking the village. Received by the caterers, she met with them a bit. They took her inside, where she scrutinized a vanilla cake in the shape of a house. For the middle course they prepared stuffed lungs. Chef Wellow named off the various creatures harvested from the laughing clouds overhanging the island. They had been testy enough to bite one of his assistants in the arm, but he was doing just fine. Escorting her to the next table, he introduced plates of wheat crackers dolloped with curd, a gilled meat-berry to garnish the top. Biting into one would deliver a pop of sweetened cranberry. Then she was shown soup bowls that would, upon receiving a helping of fruit peels heat up, forming a chowder. “This is fantastic! I think I’m ready for the sky-nesters to rush us” Apricot exclaimed. With the basic errand complete she departed to Swooshing Wind, their twin island’s bunker to grab a few odds and ends. Resolute movement through the halls declined until her crystalline hands began to sweat. Apricot felt herself shouldering the burden of history. This place too would soon face an equal solemn denouement. Phantoms troubled the visitor with nostalgia anent how easily and unthinkingly her sisters moved onto their counterparts in the adult order of things.

Proliferation of Bliss slid down the railing of the stairs. Now she oversees the Railway Alliance as its baron, guiding the leisure industry. Every summer the cabin-ball trials are held aboard the train of the syndicate's choosing. The maiden saw the girls chase each other with volumes pilfered from the library balanced on their heads, and on the bottom step was Galatea, older by only a year, glancing lazily through a picture book. If anyone got out of line, she would step in, and form a circle from the growth of ten velvet roses to calm their strife. Later she organized the purge against the hunters, granting rank to anyone who served in that capacity until the Free Audience was formed as the replacement governing body of Cyalola. Audrey Meadowsweet founded The Bureau of Harnessing Fools for Useful Purposes. Jade Versatility invented the machinery to harness the color of peacock feathers for energy in the bowels of the sky-nests, and the inventions that measure the transformative properties of peacocks for the Department of Metamorphic Census. Almond Memory runs the University Olivia. Even Sybil chaired the Office of Jam. "But I have nothing" Apricot thought, feeling the taste of uncomfortable fact. Residue in the form of mist stained the carpet as the phantoms toppled over. Mercifully, that would not affect the value. "Bread is only bread for a short time, until it moves through time, and by that, I mean the anus" he said, giving a paltry excuse for his actions. NEE Phycia robbed the plate of its contents, a slice of the rich vanilla cake that Apricot earmarked for herself. As he wiped the frosting off his lip all semblance of composure fell from her face. A thirty something yuppie from Doka sky-nest, he was more than willing to bait another for simple pleasure. The anxious host drew a step closer to the red blazer in retaliation, "Nee, I'm very happy that you're enjoying yourself, but why don't you go take a lap?". "Did you want me to circulate? actually, I had the liberty of doing that already. I spoke briefly to nearly every one of the sisters" he articulated, assuming a more serious posture. "They are more talkative than me" she hinted brusquely. The buyers were ensconced on the corner sofa looking drained from so many mochi macaroons. "For instance, Dulcie let me know how you gave an equal percentage to each of them for the sale of the house, 1200 stripes is what she said. The others told me the same" the gossipier tallied, pointing to her sister. "Of ... course. It belonged to all of us" the maiden echoed in a way that marked verbally how self-evident the remark truly was. Nee would not give up the flow of banter. He buttoned the blazer in defense before continuing onwards, "then I ran into the couple

who told me rather plainly about the selling price. I did the math ... Apricot, that leaves a surplus of twenty percent. What did you do with those stripes? Are you keeping them for yourself?”. “Sir, if you must know I’m giving everything to charity” she stated heartily, snapping back with care by the precision in his words. “And what is their name?” he followed. Apricot suddenly felt a prick of solitude, taking in by contrast the salon and its daedalian opulence with her eyes. Then the blur of the socialite was exchanged once again with the wall and its subtle weavings, the unspoken quid pro quo of consciousness. The maiden took a step back, breaking the bond, “It’s not important. Maybe I should go see how someone else is faring”. “Apricot, stop. I want to know the name” he doubled, the boyishness of his face resolving into a hateful stare. Grabbing him by the arm, they passed by a ravel of fuddled red-cheeked partiers into a quiet corridor. “Nee, what do you want?” she whispered. Smiling, he took her candidness as a favorable result, “I just want what everyone wants, the truth”. The maiden sensed no deviation in his stare, the distracted way in which other men would glimpse the soft rise and fall of her bosom, the way crystalized sugar over the orange pinkness of apricot flesh dilated to the pumping of air. “Alright, if you have to know, I was going to use it to start my own real estate business. Perennial Shed is good practice, after all” she said, making obvious where the surplus was destined for. “That’s enough mam. I just wanted to make sure. Most people will go to the grave before admitting their fault, but that’s just human nature. As a matter of fact, since you shared with me just now, I will share with you. If you recall, I was one of the first to arrive before eight just as the party started. There was time to burn and no supervision, so I decided to tour the rooms on the ground floor. Of course, I wasn’t trying to cause any trouble, but I found a cabinet in the fifth study on the left. A middle drawer was slightly ajar, so I went to close it, and found this” he illustrated, cunningly flaunting a stack of paper clipped together from his blazer. “What is this?” Apricot mused as he handed it over. Her eyes briefly scanned the pages. Dead silence. “Phycia ... this is ...” she stumbled. “Yes, it is the script. Take a gander at the first page ... and you’ll find this very funny” he giggled, pausing for her reaction. Apricot scanned the names of the company until coming upon the most eccentric character of the lot, “I am ... I was the director?”. “That’s right mam. Flip twenty pages over and you’ll see Olivia’s scene. The part where she had stage fright and the realm began, guess what? That was her part! She was supposed to have stage fright. What a

method actor!” he declared, pride swelling in his youthful body. “Nee ... the way you dealt with this matter was very sharp. If you’re not doing anything ... would you prefer to join my company as lead salesman for Apricot Realty Team. I could use your talents” she offered, drinking in the warmth of his laugh. Agreeing, he left allowing her a second to inspect her own annotations in red ink, “She tried again to replicate stage fright. This will be more than fifteen times to no avail. With opening night tomorrow, it’s just going to have to happen on stage. Olivia, it’s all up to you”. Worry dissipated and she glanced out through the lonely balcony. Rainbows darting across the aviary ocean folded into peacock feathers, and drifted to the waters below, tinging them with clusters of light. Making a detour to the ground floor, she tossed the script back in the dresser and returned to the party, where bowls of soup from boiled fruit peel and plenty of cheer awaited.

AUTHOR BIO



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