

PHANTASIA

BOOK ONE: INTO THE RAIN



M. U. Riyadad



Celestial Books
New York

PHANTASIA
Book One: Into the Rain

All text, maps, logos, and images copyright © 2015 by M. U. Riyadad
All rights reserved.

Maps and logo by Maria Gandolfo
Book Cover licensed from Shutterstock Images, LLC / agsandrew

Phantasia is a work of fiction. Names, places, characters, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.
Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the author.

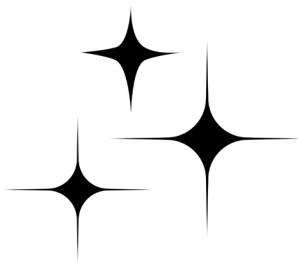
Published by Celestial Books
54 W 40th Street
New York, NY 10018
Printed in the United States of America

ISBN (e-book): 978-0-9964206-0-0
ISBN (hardcover): 978-0-9964206-1-7
ISBN (Trade): 978-0-9964206-2-4

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

www.phantasiabooks.com

*For Sumaya Ullah Restagno for helping me find my voice,
Shima Begum for helping me find myself,
and Joshua Speight for helping me find Phantasia*



CONTENTS

Prologue.....	1
Red.....	3
Beyond The Colored Veil	17
The Evil Eye.....	31
The Twilight Caverns	45
Gnashars and Nightmares	63
A Memory of Hope	75
The Truth Sayer.....	89
The City in The Sky.....	109
The Strange Doctor.....	121
The Priori of Light.....	135
Dark Reflections.....	147

M. U. Riyadad

Lost.....	163
The Reaper of Light.....	179
The Ascension.....	185
The Shepard of Oblivion	207
Bloodsport	219
The Tempest.....	231
Master	245
The Eyes in The Dark.....	255
Rogue Spirits	273
The Sound of Fury.....	283
Suleyk.....	293
Broken Sword, Hidden Blades	305
Sanguine City	319
The Master of Blood.....	335
The Scented Road.....	355
The Myrmecoleon Library.....	367
The Candle in The Void.....	381

Phantasia

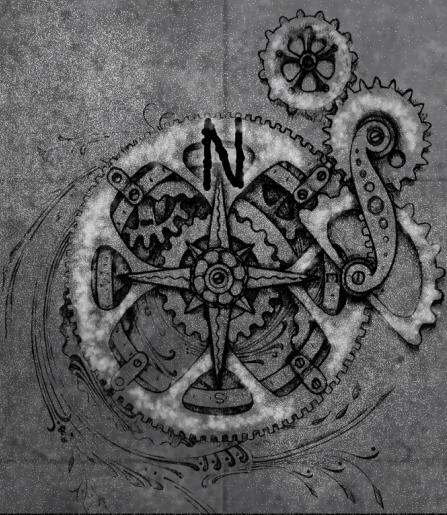
Revelations	397
Into The Fire	425
Afterword	435

The Ellay

Mercenary Camp



Echidn



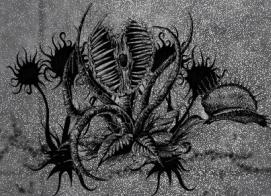
Ellay Desert
Extraction Plan

y Desert

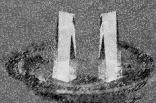


The Gila
Crater

a City



Atlas Cliffs



The Misty Shores

Nimbus

Taic Swamps

Celestial mountains

Alto

Azure Storm

Gallet's
Cave

Baast



Areopa



the
Alcazar

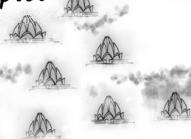


Forest
of Dreams



Central
Gardens

the High
Temples



Katadel

Sanguine
City



Vault Sea



Claret
Sea



Pit of
the Baron

Myrmecoleon
Library



EASTERN

the Ivy Forest

Crystal Forest

the Divine Jungle

Forest of Illusions

Lair of Titanamedus

Dreamer's La

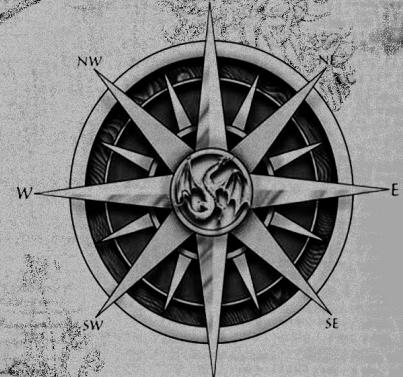
NAGYA

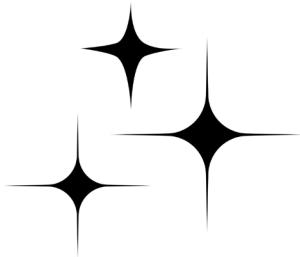
Titan's
Crater

*the Burning
Bushes*

Titan's Cleft

Cinnamon Jungle



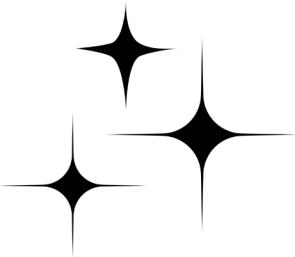


PROLOGUE

They say that the true purpose of The Leviathan is to guard against the terrors that lay hidden beneath the unfathomable depths of Eaut, that beneath the ruined palaces of the Black Sea, where even the mnes do not make their habitation, there, oppressed for innumerable millennia, lay loathsome creatures that drown themselves in worship of their sleeping god. My companion has spoken of rising from these depths, of his torturous wait underneath the billows of infinite oceans, of a day when a war-exhausted world would finally succumb to pandemonium, when the void would ascend to our world and extinguish its life. I would hear that maleficent whisper in my sleep, in those terrible phantasms that I could not distinguish from dream or prescience. “The void comes for you,” it would say, that terrible voice, that terrible voice, that terrible voice in the darkness.

The Evil Eye feeds on flesh and soul to maintain its strength. We hide under the sands in wait of solstice; the light weakens my companion. He seeks a prophet here, The Mouth of The Void, the one who may awaken what lingers in the abyss. I have touched his memories, seen him annihilate entire armies. I am familiar with the strange ambitions birthed by vast power. What weird tales would I have at the end of our voyage together? He watches as I write. His gaze is always upon me. His vision can see past this world.

— From the journals of Dr. Lurch



RED

The violet rain that splattered across the stretched glass left streaks of such a powerful hue that the whole classroom seemed to glow from the inside. A drop would hit, crawl down the panoramic frame to the outside tip of the window, and then begin its long descent to the ground, several tezras below. The phenomenon, a byproduct of Cron pollution, was uncommon, although not unheard of. The protocol followed by citizens of Echidna City was simple — stay in, and stay dry. The problem for students at Crest Academy, however, wasn't avoiding the rain, it was paying attention in class while being drowned in lavender fireworks.

The session today was particularly dry, a lecture on the anatomy of silicon crustaceans in the southern regions of Iris. Red's already considerable deficit in attention could hardly suffer more. He couldn't imagine how such obscure knowledge would ever help him in combat. The only thing keeping him awake, besides staring at the glowing window, was the anticipation of his field test tomorrow, which his team had been awaiting eagerly for weeks. Ranked first in their senior class, they were the only ones confident about how they were going to perform.

Breaking his trance from the caustic rain, he looked towards the other side of the classroom, where Magnus was equally zoned out. Almost as if on cue, Magnus broke out of his own trance, and caught Red's eye. Lifting up his wrist, he pointed to his giant obsidian watch and mouthed '*Fifteen more minutes,*' to signal the end of the painful lecture.

The rest of the class was faring no better in paying attention. Two of the other seniors sitting right behind Magnus were admiring his mallet, an ash-colored weapon with steel teeth, slightly curved to give it an alien look. He had undoubtedly heard the chatter, quickly fixing his posture to give them a better view. *An imposing weapon*, thought Red, *appropriate for someone*

of noble birth. The mallet's sleek form was more a reflection of its high cost than its effectiveness.

He had met Magnus when they first arrived at Crest, and they had been inseparable since. In their initial encounter, they were pitted to spar against each other, a contest that quickly revealed their chemistry. Fighting, like all intense experiences, seemed to allow people to connect on a much deeper level, perhaps because the exercise brought out a more feral side of them. Whatever the reason, he was glad to have found someone with whom he could relate.

Magnus Basil was tall, broad, and built like a king. He was older looking for someone who had just passed into adulthood. Even his beard had a distinguished quality to it, shaping around his face the way a mane would. Above all, he was a good friend and fanatically loyal, traits that served well for both friendship and combat. He was a natural leader, but always preferred a secondary role. Red always thought that it was this exact reluctance to take authority that, in fact, made him the perfect leader.

The professor paused for a moment and gazed out of the window for a few seconds himself, then bent over to reach for something underneath his desk. Without warning, he took out a large tinted container which looked heavily armored with metal bands all around it. He placed it gently upon the table. Red casually glanced at the box, not bothering to identify the creature inside. *Not another critter demonstration,* he thought dully. He wouldn't have minded, if every demonstration wasn't almost identical to the one previous to it. It was only once in a while that they would get to see something unique, or a creature of a more powerful variety.

The professor seemed unusually anxious as he stepped back from the container and looked at the class, waiting for their reaction. Suddenly, a few students in the front row gasped, and rushed out of their seats towards the container. "Is that a real Xenosite?" one of them asked. With a sharp jolt, Red snapped to attention and jumped out of his seat. His mental fatigue vanished in an instant. He rushed down the steps to get to the front of the lecture room along with everyone else, diverting towards the left to meet Magnus halfway there.

He had never seen a real one up close before, despite the fact that they were the sole reason why academies like Crest existed. Specimens were nearly impossible to collect, as they could only be captured if they were found outside of their primary hive clusters. Their invasion had started

more than a century ago, but little was known about the enigmatic parasites. Their limits constantly explored new territories, their origin was a mystery, and their nature remained largely undiscovered.

"It is a real one, alive and all," Professor Kep replied. "I thought that would catch everyone's attention," he added with a smug look of satisfaction. "It is nearly impossible to get a hold of a live one, but luckily I had a friend of mine from within MegaCORP's own research facilities who no longer had use for this one. Consider it a graduation gift. I must add, I was thoroughly surprised when I came to possess it. It is a beautiful specimen, and I should be shocked that one was so willing to part with it." Red always thought that Professor Kep's tone of admiration was a bit off, just a tad too reverent in its pitch when it came to Xenosites. He shared a guilty fascination with the creatures himself — everyone did — but the professor almost seemed fond of them.

Red pushed his head between the huddled shoulders of his classmates to get a better look. The lecture hall was wide enough to accommodate a more liberal setup, but everyone clamored around the center in hopes of getting the best view possible. The Xenosite looked like an overgrown armored worm, with grooved spikes that surrounded its clammy wet body. The spikes were immaculately engineered — so sharp that their edges disappeared into their ends. The slippery body that lurked underneath looked serpentine in shape, though no definite form could be traced. Noticeably, its armor was not fashioned like normal critters, whose exoskeletons were usually plain shells that wrapped around a more vulnerable body. Here, it grew pervasively from the organism itself, as if it were intentionally evolved to be undetachable, despite what nature may have preordained.

The creature stood so still that it appeared to be dead or paralyzed. Red recalled why they reserved themselves to this state. Magnus had explained it to him once. It was a form of deep hibernation that allowed them to live without oxygen or other vital resources for an indefinite period of time. Even in such a vulnerable state, the creature still looked fiendish. A daring volunteer from the class reached out his arm to touch the outside of the container, but took it back when the professor gave him a disapproving nod.

Red knew that he was lucky enough to see one alive at all, a luxury most students at Crest did not enjoy. Nevertheless, he wished he'd gotten to see one a bit larger or more powerful. Recent accounts reported

Xenosites that weighed several tons and enjoyed unadulterated capacities for destruction. Just before this class, he and Magnus had watched a hologram that was spreading like wildfire across academies. A perfectly angled camera had captured an enormous and unidentified breed cleaving straight into a bunker to gain access to the people inside. It wasn't the initial cleave that made the instance unique. It was that the creature then slipped two tentacle shaped claws into the hole that formed and stretched it open with sheer muscle, a shelter that was triple reinforced with bio-iron. The camera had been fixed on the outside — giving a visual of an endless stream of Xenosites flooding into the shelter. It never turned to capture the massacre that ensued, leaving the latter to the viewer's imagination.

Professor Kep lifted another box from below his table as he spoke, this time much more casually than before. Inside was a bright sapphire-colored spider, about twice the length of the palm of a hand. It had sharp legs that looked like icicles from afar, and eight deep blue eyes that were too large for its body. Its bulbous abdomen was lined with pearl white bristles that vacillated up and down with the creature's breath, making it seem as though the spider was constantly shifting between a state of fear and calm. Its legs left a sheet of frost wherever they touched the container, a tiny prison that looked specially built to handle extremely cold temperatures.

"The Crystal Sleet Spider is a highly intelligent, amphibious critter that prefers unnaturally cold climates and possesses several incredible talents including a bite that induces psychedelisis. Of course, the spider can harm only creatures near its own size and power, so it poses no threat to humans in its current stage 2 form. In further evolved forms, however, it can become far more intimidating in size and much more dangerous in scope. Its blue-stained web, for instance, eventually becomes capable of draining heat from anything it captures. Can someone guess where they are native to?"

"Eaut," said Magnus out loud. "The oceanic planet." Magnus had once told Red that he was especially fond of this class, and not just when it covered overly powerful specimens. Red always thought that Magnus was a closet nerd, noticing that his friend found an inherent joy in discovering new creatures, no matter how minute or insignificant they were. In their earlier years, Magnus would often joke that if Red ever failed out of academy, he would drop out himself, and retire to a life of research with Red as his assistant. He once even confided that he sometimes regretted his decision to attend Crest — reminiscing about his home city, Areopa, and the

benefits of a more tranquil life. Being high-born, opting to attend academy had a higher opportunity cost for him than most.

“Correct.” The professor replied. “Now, has anyone seen the process of infection live?” As the class shook their heads quietly, everyone looked around to see if there was an exception. Unsurprisingly, no one raised their hand. The front of the crowd stepped forward eagerly and broke out in whispers, finding it difficult to contain their excitement. Red glanced at Magnus and saw that he had no problem looking over the heads of other students. Magnus towered almost a foot above everyone else. A few of the shorter onlookers finally decided to move to the sides for an uninterrupted view, easing the breadth of the crowd.

Red leaned in as much as he could without pushing someone over. It was his first opportunity to see infection up front. The process had captured his imagination since the day he had first heard of it. He was only a child when the third invasion occurred, the first of his lifetime. He was too young back then to appropriately understand the scope of the disaster, but he read the preliminary reports during his second year at Crest. Age had matured his grasp over things, and he realized then that it was impossible to gather an accurate understanding of these events without being there when they happened.

It was said they rained down from the sky like fire — sacks filled with creatures that crashed all over Takis, the third outermost planet in their system, and introduced its inhabitants to a new form of terror. Colonies vanished overnight, cities were left in snakes of twisted metal, and kingdoms vibrated with carnage until they collapsed. A day before the invasion, everyone in Takis had led a peaceful and prosaic life. A day after, they had disappeared into ecstasies of violence. The invasion spread like an epidemic, bringing mass extinction wherever it went. Entire continents were terraformed into vast breeding grounds, hive clusters collected around regions saturated with resources, and oceans dissolved into pools of miasma and evolution. The losses were never tallied.

There was only one more planet beyond the Metroid Belt besides Takis, and it was mostly evacuated by now. The current hope was to meet the Xenosite after that, to fight them up front if they ever tried to invade the inner planets. Avalonia was far from the outer orbit. In its major cities like Echidna, the danger of Xenosites loomed like an abstract threat, a thought to be delayed as much as possible. Most of its current civilian population

secretly hoped they would be gone long before such an encounter ever occurred. They had more pressing concerns anyway, from Cron pollution to increasingly erratic climates.

“Brace yourself then,” Professor Kep continued. “I’ve seen it almost a hundred times, studied it carefully throughout my life, and I still find it jarring every time.” He attached the connector end of the spider’s container to that of the Xenosite’s and began to twist them together. The spider crawled around frantically, as if it sensed what was on the other side. A light electric current ran between Professor Kep’s fingers and up his forearm. He chuckled softly when he noticed it. “Sorry about that. Happens when I get tense sometimes.”

“Kep used to be on the field. He was an elementalist that specialized in electricity, I heard, before he retired into research,” Magnus whispered to Red.

“Never would’ve guessed,” Red whispered back. The statement made him resent his own classification even more. Fire was his specialty, but he hated being called an elementalist. He didn’t conform to the general characteristics of the class, besides the fact that he happened to be proficient in controlling an element. Most elementalists were overly intellectual and acted as human artillery on the field, rarely engaging anything head-on, a habit that happened to be Red’s favorite.

When the two connectors were securely coupled together, Professor Kep began turning a lever to open a hole between the containers. As the gap grew larger, the spider hunted more violently for an escape. Eventually, perhaps when it realized it had nowhere to go, it withdrew itself to a corner on the far right side of its container, where it quivered intensely. The Xenosite, on the other hand, reacted far more lazily. As if it had been aware of what was happening all along, its body began to uncoil exactly when the gap finished opening. Its movements seemed calculated and eerily unnatural.

Red watched with an anxious curiosity as the Xenosite lumbered across the container like a wicked slug. Despite his intrigue, he wished that it moved faster, that the whole process would be over quickly. The creature’s painfully slow crawl gave the classroom a nightmarish ambiance. Every second in between made it a tiny bit more unbearable, but the anticipation of what was to come, no matter how horrible, or perhaps *because* it was so horrible, made it impossible for anyone to look away.

He exchanged a few glances with Magnus to share his increasing angst. The Xenosite had no eyes, using some sort of extrinsic sense to make out its environment. Despite his earlier thoughts about wishing the creature was of a larger variety, he imagined a size like this invited a new type of horror — the possibility that a tiny miscreation of this sort could be anywhere — in between the space of a crevice you could not see, underneath your seat, or crawling high above on the ceiling of your sleep-room, giving no notice of its existence or intentions.

The spider seemed to have conceded to the inevitable, now stretching out across its corner, anticipating a time soon enough when it would need to defend itself. The end of its legs turned a pale blue as the temperature of its tips rapidly approached zero. It crawled left and right in a combative dance, practicing its dexterity. Red couldn't help but sympathize with the creature, imagining what it would be like to be in its place. A thought suddenly twitched in his subconscious — that he *would* be in its place, maybe in just a few short years.

Professor Kep took a step back when the Xenosite finally reached the hole between the containers. The creature let out a hideous scream, one far louder than its body should have permitted. But it was the style of the scream, not its volume, that made it so oppressive. Red had never heard anything like it. It was an awful noise that no creature should have been capable of making — paralyzing in its intensity, and malicious in its tone. Then, as though it were suddenly revitalized with energy, it launched itself towards the spider with a lightning velocity. For a split second, it became invisible to the naked eye.

The classroom immediately withdrew by several feet. A few wondered if the container was really as secure as its designers had originally thought. The Xenosite latched onto the spider, covering the entirety of its body in an instant. The legs of the spider hung out awkwardly through the sides of the struggle, flailing wildly and attempting to jab its foe with their cold edges. While the body of the spider writhed in rebellion as it was being constricted, its head engaged the Xenosite more directly. It was being forced to consume the insides of its invader. The spider's body swelled and contracted in rhythm with the Xenosite's, as they both exchanged fluids and parts. Some of its pores expanded and popped, polluting the bottom of the container with a blanket of black pus.

Eventually, the spider ceased to move at all. Its legs poked out lifelessly

underneath the mesh of the two bodies. After its main torso seemed to have reached a certain capacity, its legs began to pulse with the fluids. The process looked thoroughly bizarre as the carcass was being filled up to the brim with whatever the Xenosite was injecting into it. Magnus tilted his head slightly towards Red and whispered “And here... we... go...” in a curious but jittery tone. Red looked back at him and nodded apprehensively.

For a few minutes, there was no activity as everyone waited patiently. A slow smile crept over Professor Kep’s face. Then, the spider’s legs began to twitch again, sparking back to life. Tiny hairs grew out of its legs, growing longer and longer, eventually wrapping themselves around the spider’s bristles and thickening into shapes similar to the Xenosite’s original armor. The same happened to its frame, which began to lose the brittleness normally associated with insects, as it turned jagged around the top.

The two bodies continued to mesh together, throbbing violently in some stages. Although everyone had expected it, they could not be ready for what came next. In one hideous movement, the spider lifted its head and rotated it in a full circle. It now had more eyes than before, and looked like a mixture of its old self and the Xenosite. It lifted its body slowly and wiggled its legs. It continued to morph right in front of them, changing its palette of color from ice blue to a darker midnight blue and black, with a newly gifted exoskeleton wrapped in a peculiar type of organic carapace that resembled the Xenosite’s, but was half made of ice, a unique characteristic present in neither of its creators. As it finally lifted its entire body, its new size also became evident. It was almost twice as large as any of its former selves. Its legs continued to grow disproportionately longer, lifting its body to new heights.

“And what we have now, of course, is no longer an Arachnid. The proper term, is...?”

“Xenoarachnid,” replied a few students simultaneously. Professor Kep had been particularly persistent in having all of them memorize the proper names and taxonomy of all the creatures they studied. Red regretted that the answer did not come to him as easily as it had for the others, but memorizing facts was never his forte.

“An infected creature grows in size, strength, intelligence, and can potentially gain new abilities — although it loses its capacity to evolve into further stages. Although it was thought for decades that an infected creature was purely Xenosite in brain function, new research suggests that some

form of its host's consciousness still remains. Regardless, you can trust that all infected creatures are, for the most part, Xenosite in nature," Kep added.

He walked around the front of the room to let his words sink in, welcoming the long pause that followed as everyone stared at the new Xenoarachnid that was now intent on studying its container. Unlike the Crystal Sleet Spider, which hunted for an escape animalistically, this new creature studied its surroundings patiently. Its mannerisms seemed far more shrewd and bold. Red had the odd feeling that it knew it was being watched. Not in the way that a critter can tell if you're staring at it, but in the way that a person would understand the entire context of this situation — that it was being examined in a classroom of humans at a school dedicated to training people how to fight its kind.

"You're finally beginning to understand what you're up against," the professor said as he looked around at all the horrified faces. "I feel guilty for having to crush your naiveté, but you have to know what's out there. You have to be prepared. The Xenosites are beautiful vehicles of destruction. Their invasions have turned extermination into a science. I was there when Carnaega was invaded, right there on the field. At first, electric elementalists were celebrated for their efficiency in combat. There was no greater pleasure than watching a squad of us incinerate thousands of Xenosites in organized attacks. Then a month into the invasion, they began consuming every critter on the planet that was resistant to electricity. They began learning. They began growing. Two months into the invasion, we began seeing legions of new strains that could walk right through a thunderstorm without being phased."

"Can humans be infected?" Magnus asked, interrupting Kep's speech.

"No sentient creature has ever been successfully infected. Not humans, not elves, not dragons. Killed, yes, but never infected. Experiments have been done on humans... umm... death row prisoners of course," the professor added with a sheepish look, "where the process of infection, even by a Xenosite that should be powerful enough to infect a human host, has always resulted in the death of either both subjects, or of only the human. This is all anecdotal of course. It has not yet happened, but we do not know for certain if it is or isn't possible. Either sentience creates neurological complications that make it impossible for sentient creatures to be infected, or it is simply a matter of time before its difficulties are eliminated. We are seeing more powerful, and more intelligent Xenosites every year."

“Can this spider now infect another creature?” someone else asked.

“I’m glad you asked that,” the professor responded. “It depends on the gender of the host. If it’s female, then yes. Essentially, any type of Xenosite requires eggs to infect a host. Note, that it cannot reproduce, it can only infect a new creature. Of course, this has certain restrictions. After acquiring a host, it must wait weeks before it can re-engage the process of infection. Longer, depending on the size and power of its host, and of its target. A Xenosite cannot infect a host significantly above its own strength, it will die in the process, and thus, it will never try to. Instead, it will either kill its target, or bring it back to its hive, alive. But essentially, this does mean that Xenosites can continue the process of infection to more and more powerful creatures, indefinitely. This Xenoarachnid, much more powerful than the original Xenosite, can now infect hosts that its previous form could not, and combine the talents of its previous host with its new one.”

Everyone gave a terrified shiver at the thought. An overhead tune signaled the end of class. Rather than rushing out as everyone normally did, the class took its time, ready to absorb any more information. Professor Kep, in turn, was thrilled at the unusual level of attentiveness. Although the class was fond of him, they were generally bored enough to stampede out of the room at the end of every lecture. “Good luck on your field test, everyone!” he yelled over the shuffle.

“Thanks, professor. Will you be there?” Red asked.

“Indeed, I will be with all the other professors, helping to monitor the desert as you all continue,” Kep replied. “Remember, everyone!” he continued, now addressing the class, “to review everything we discussed regarding creatures of the desert! Chapter 122 of our compendium.”

“Professor,” someone else inquired from the door.

“Yes, Dor?”

“What if the host is male?” The class immediately fell silent. Everyone was listening intently once again.

“Then we have a much, much more problematic situation. If the host is male, the creature cannot infect another one. Instead, its immediate priority becomes to return to a queen, the only confirmed sentient species of Xenosites. Queens are able to mate with any infected creature, and, given the proper nutrients and resources, give birth to hundreds, thousands, if not tens of thousands of similar ones,” the professor said. “It is crucial that you understand that this is the primary and sole imperative of the hive

mind. To consume, to grow, to evolve towards perfection.”

Red shuddered as he walked out of class. The hallways were empty, making their enormous width much more noticeable. Most of the students besides seniors had already returned home. Those who had not were still out of class and spent their time in their quads or exploring Echidna. Academy sessions were separated by a break that started at the solstice. Avalonia enjoyed a perpetual daytime for most of the year because of its two stars. The planet only had seven nights, all of which occurred consecutively during the period known as solstice. It was the only time when both stars set, engulfing the planet in total darkness for a week. For seniors, it was a time of dread. Their field test spanned all seven nights of solstice. The one-time performance evaluation occurred immediately prior to graduation, and determined a student’s placement after academy.

Magnus soon caught up to him, and they walked in the type of silence unique to close friends, a quiet that did not beg to be filled. Red took to staring at his feet as they went, studying the tiny wings on his shoes that were designed to enhance speed. They were functional, but tattered like the rest of his gear, scraped together using manuals and secondary materials. As he mulled over everything Professor Kep had said, it occurred to him that he was walking aimlessly.

“We’re going to the library,” Magnus interjected, as if he had read his mind. “West Library, so we have a long walk ahead of us. Everything else is going to be too crowded.”

“Is everyone going to be there?” Red asked, referring to the other three members of their team. He hadn’t seen them since their last training session three days ago, and suddenly realized how much he would miss them after his training at Crest Academy was over. He had grown accustomed to their presence through the years. It was something to always look forward to. *We may still end up in each other’s presence,* he thought hopefully.

“Yup, a thorough review of our plan for tomorrow. We have to go over creatures we might hit, everything peculiar about desert terrain, and a painful number of field test details that are probably going to bore you to death.”

Red nodded with a smile. He returned to staring at the floor and after a long moment, thought of the professor’s last statement. The idea of coming face to face with a Xenosite had never felt so real to him until then. “Hey, what do you think about communicating with a Xenosite? Do you

think it's possible? Queens are supposed to be sentient. Do you think we could share our thoughts with them?"

"I don't," Magnus laughed. "I try my hardest not to think about any of that. Anyway, best not to busy your mind with these things before tomorrow. You want a clear head. Remember, you're aiming higher than the rest of us."

"Well, you want to get in too," Red replied. Magnus didn't bother responding and instead took out his microAI to check something, leaving Red to drift back into thinking about the lecture. The existence of sentient Xenosites was already confirmed. He tried to imagine them, the queens, how they would think, how they would act, whether it would be possible to communicate with them. They would be entirely alien to him. He couldn't fathom how differently their minds would work. *Would they dream and will as humans do?*

And then there was the possibility of human infection. If such a thing ever occurred, it would result in a more powerful and smarter version of themselves — an objectively superior, more evolved form. Judging by how humans treated their own unequals, the invasion suddenly made an absurd sort of sense to him. The idea of such creatures was still disturbing. He imagined them, humanoid and sentient, wielding weapons and powers just as people do. They would control the elements, bend physics and nature, engineer tools of destruction, and systematically colonize the universe under their singular hive mentality.

He shuddered at the thought. Remembering what Magnus had said, he shut down his train of thinking, but not before glimpsing at how that path would end for humans — that imaginary omnicide that lurked underneath the outcome of the invasion, and not just for humans, but for all sentient things. He imagined how the gemini must feel about it, but gathered that they would probably just project their sorrows away, and that would be that. But elves, they were even more in tune with nature than humans were. They had to be aware of what was happening. Still, besides very few and poorly coordinated joint efforts, it was every species for itself.

"Yes, but I'm not as obsessed about it as you are," Magnus finally said, replying to Red's previous statement after finishing a message on his microAI. He snapped it shut and slipped it around his wrist, but took it out an instant later after another message came in. "I'm okay with just graduating academy. To be honest, I'm not even sure if I want to fight afterwards —

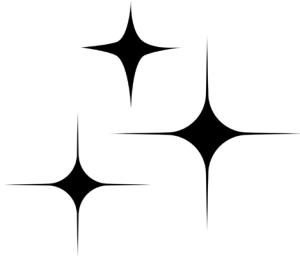
not after seeing *that*,” he added, referring to the demonstration they had just witnessed in class. “Can’t say I’d mind living my life out quietly in Areopa. You could too, you know, as my guest. It wouldn’t be so bad.”

“Yup, wouldn’t that be the life, fiddling with rich foods on a cloud all day,” Red laughed. For a moment, he agreed. It wouldn’t be so bad, living his life out in a city floating in the skies of Avalonia, but he knew that he would feel unfulfilled for the rest of his life. He had come to Crest for a reason, and he had to make sure not to forget it.

“We would have an unlimited supply of food,” Magnus sighed, thumping his stomach as if he was imagining being there right now. Red laughed at the gesture and nodded sarcastically. “But anyway, I think you know what you want. It’s not going to be easy, you know. You’re going to have to work harder than you ever have before, and it won’t end at just qualifying either. You have to go to Areopa to actually compete in the qualifiers. I’ve seen the talent there, and it’s mind blowing. Can’t say I’d mind going though. I haven’t been back home in forever.”

“You’re right,” Red nodded as he clenched his fists. He had to qualify. He had to perform the best he could in his field test. No, even better than that. It was the reason he had worked so hard to come to Crest in the first place, what he had been working for all his life. The thought of failing never occurred to him, but maybe that was a good thing. “WEAPON,” Red whispered.

“WEAPON,” Magnus nodded.



BEYOND THE COLORED VEIL

Red and Magnus waited for the rest of their team in front of the West Library, passing time by admiring the dome architecture of the entire section and the unending rows of books, materials, and items that clung to glass shelves high above them. The edges of the shelves were lined with rails, used by lifts that carried people around the various collections. From afar, the lifts looked as though they were suspended in midair, floating around ceremoniously to take people to their destinations. The quantity of materials to read or study in the West Library alone was staggering, but only represented a fifth of the academy's total collection. The real attraction here were the terminals — massive training rooms equipped with imaging devices that allowed teams to simulate arenas, terrains, and even engagements with different hostiles to prepare for various scenarios.

The outside benches were littered with clusters of seniors who were cramming in as much information as they could about the Alloy Desert, the barren and metallic sahara that surrounded Echidna City and that would host their field test. The peculiarities of the desert stretched from magnetic tornadoes that shred apart objects caught inside their radius, to plants that grew large enough to resemble entire oases and survived the desert by digesting creatures that fell asleep amidst their hypnotic aromas. Not everyone made it out of their field test alive. At least three to five students were reported missing or killed in action every year. While aptitude in combat and high physical endurance granted a team a good degree of flexibility, meticulous preparation was the true key to surviving.

“What are you staring at?” Red asked, noticing how fixed Magnus’s eyes were on the roof as they paced back and forth. But the question wasn’t un-

answered for long. Soon enough, he too noticed the rainbow on the round arch. The rain had stopped momentarily. Its leftovers now collected around the middle to form a brilliant prism of colors that melted back and forth through each other as they walked up and down, creating a mesmerizing illusion. The effect gave the glass dome a dreamlike quality, as if another world existed beyond the ceiling of the one they inhabited.

“Wish I had time to come here more often,” Red lamented. “Hate reading school stuff, but to be able to learn anything you wish...” He stretched his hands upwards and gestured towards the thousands of books above them, imagining what it would be like to spend a lifetime freely exploring all of their contents. He never enjoyed research the way it was presented at Crest Academy, but learning by free will was an entirely different experience to him.

“You should see the elvish library in Areopa. It stretches out to infinity. Makes this place look dainty, if you can imagine that,” Magnus replied. “They say it’s bigger than the city itself,” he added wondrously.

“I thought you’re not allowed in?” Red asked. He’d never been to Areopa but had heard enough about its treasures and customs from Magnus. It was considered the capital of their planet, Avalonia. Areopa was a colossal kingdom composed of five teracities — two human, two elvish, and one felion — that were all built high above the clouds. On a clear enough day, their entire star system was visible from any point in the kingdom. Red’s real interest in Areopa lay in the fact that it hosted the qualifiers for WEAPON. Not much was known about MegaCORP’s secretive project, beyond that it was an elite and experimental army, equally feared and praised throughout all seventeen planets. It was a group that all young combatants obsessed to be in. It was one of the few interspecies collectives, consisting of humans, elves, gemini, narzoas, and factions from several other races.

“You’re not, but you can get a close enough look from the outside,” Magnus replied. “I know of a *few* people that have been permitted to enter. They make exceptions. But not even the elves are allowed to go too deep. There’s a myth about a demon that haunts the aisles. I don’t think anyone’s been far enough to confirm that for centuries. Elf superstition says if you —” his sentence was cut off by the scene ahead of them. Butz was approaching, trying to get his familiar, Linx, off his head. The Aeyz Cat was balanced perfectly on top, jumping to avoid Butz’s attempts at taking him down, and then landing back without the slightest hint of effort. Red and

Magnus couldn't manage to hold in their amusement and burst out laughing.

Butz Silo was a short and scrawny falconer with subpar combat skills, but a talented strategist whose sarcasm and presence were always loved. Butz was originally classified as a techie, a class that specializes in using weaponized mech suits for combat, but like Red, resented his classification and opted instead to train a familiar, a creature taken on as a companion to assist in combat. It was the path to becoming a falconer. He had made a reputation for himself early on at Crest Academy by offering to do written assignments in exchange for coin, an endeavor that paid handsomely and afforded him the opportunity to pursue a pricey classification. Training a familiar required a tiny fortune, with expenditures ranging from food and medical care to armor and combat provisions.

Butz barely made the cut each year at Crest, working twice as hard as everyone else to pass the rigors of physical endurance. Just earlier this year, he had passed out in the middle of a training simulation far above his own level, a challenge he unnecessarily took on. Where Magnus was physically gifted but an intellectual deep down, Butz was mentally gifted but a soldier deep down. The two often bemoaned each other for wasting their natural talents. Prior to academy, he had been recruited aggressively by universities, but had decided early on in his life that he would become a soldier.

Butz's familiar, Linx, was a stage 2 Aeyz Cat — a difficult breed to tame, but powerful and impressive in combat with an extreme penchant for agility. Aeyz Cats bent circumambient light while they stalked prey to become nearly invisible, had a strange habit of howling like wolves to alert others of danger, and enjoyed pentachromatic vision, extending their ocular perception to ultraviolet and infrared. Butz often wondered what it would be like to perceive the world through Linx's eyes — seeing everything in ten times more color and depth than humans ever could. If Aeyz Cats were able to grow into their later stages, their silvery fur acquired a spectral aesthetic. It was an attribute that often attracted an artistic set of owners who believed, sometimes wrongly, that they had the determination necessary to nurture such a powerful familiar to its later stages. But for this very reason, prolific hunting of Aeyz Cats had driven the most mature members of their breed to extinction.

"It's not funny, guys," Butz whined. "He never listens to me, and he won't get off my head now." Butz swiped again at the space above him,

but the cat maneuvered effortlessly around it, and then looked down disapprovingly at its owner.

“Maybe you shouldn’t have gotten such a hard to tame familiar,” Red remarked. He always thought there was something alluring about familiars in the cat family. Their manners were mysterious and aloof. Just watching them was entertaining. He once read that to properly tame them, you needed not only a powerful and dominant owner, but also one who was appropriately balanced and foremost a master of themselves. As they grew into powerful beasts, their feral instincts required a nirvana-like discipline to properly control.

“Yeah, and at the rate he’s growing, he’ll be stage 3 in just a few months. If he’s not tamed well enough by then, you’re gonna end up as his dinner one day,” Magnus laughed. Linx licked the top of Butz’s head more hungrily than lovingly right after the comment. Butz sighed in desperation, giving up any hope of freeing his head. “Well I guess I have a hat now,” he said optimistically as the other two howled with laughter again.

“Oh, they’re already inside, by the way,” Butz said, motioning Red and Magnus to follow him through the entrance. The height and design of the library’s doorway added an aura of grandeur to its foyer. The heads of various critters lined the top of a long mantle that hung high above, representing the most powerful creatures students had championed at Crest. Two of their own were among the decorations — the heads of a boorish looking Danube, a four-legged hairy beast that had nothing on its body besides an enormous mouth, and a much more prominent looking River Harpie, a creature that Red and Magnus had spent a week deep-diving into a freezing lake to find. River Harpies were scaly humanoid creatures that looked like a cross between a Landshark and an elf, and were capable of hiding themselves in complete camouflage while underwater. It was rumored that once, long ago, before hunting dragons was a breach of Imperial Code and a highly ostracized practice, the head of a Crimson Reaper lined the mantle as well, and overshadowed everything below it. There were twenty-six types of dragons, each one identifiable by their distinct shade of color. Crimson Reapers, whose hides always glowed a blood red, were notable for their infinite resistance to heat and their radioactive vision.

They made their way inside, preparing for all the laughs Butz would get, but instead found almost everyone huddled around the main screens in the lobby, their attention glued to a news report. From afar, Red could make

out images of the desert, and what looked like footage of a search. They walked over hurriedly, attempting to piece together what the report was about from whatever they could gather.

They scanned the area and found Raven and S near the edge of the group. S was watching nervously while Raven had her usual look of disinterest, only occasionally glancing at the screen to follow what was going on.

Red had grown up with Raven Maestro, the captain of their team, and the highest individually ranked student at Crest. Raven had jet-black hair with strands of dark blue, lilac eyes, and an athletic build. She was the only student classified as Prometheus, a rare category reserved for people who were proficient in enough distinctions to avoid a single classification. She was generally a loner, save for a strong attachment to Red — with her sword being her second-best friend. While her gear was mostly second- and third-grade like Red's, her blade was a remarkable work of art, an enormous weapon she had won from a dueling tournament that entertained contestants from all over Avalonia. Red had met her when they were both only seven, more than twelve years ago. Prior to that, she had grown up in a colony on an outer planet, but rarely spoke of that time. She had a line of admirers including most of the boys in their senior class, but always seemed completely uninterested in getting to know anyone. Her fighting style was precise and clean, but Red always noticed it had a touch of excessive brutality, an immaculate form corrupted with the slightest hint of a sadistic undertone.

Their fifth and last member, S Nova, was an upbeat and sociable healer who loved fighting for a good cause. S took combat seriously, had a taste for sarcasm, which she exercised on Butz regularly, and like Magnus, was extremely loyal. She came from a wealthier family outside of Avalonia, but had a natural talent for fitting in wherever she went. She was blue-eyed, slightly taller than Butz, and regularly changed her hair color. Currently, she was sporting a distinct shade of green. She was the most recent addition to their team, joining a little less than two years ago, but since then, the five of them had stuck together like family.

“What did we miss?” Magnus whispered.

“Caravan went missing yesterday at 29:30,” S replied. “MegaCORP transport, whole crew disappeared. They were found later... but... umm... not in the same state.”

“Someone tried to steal Cron?” Red asked, in an incredulous tone that

reflected how difficult the task was. The caravans that transported Cron were taller than buildings, manned by a highly trained crew, and nearly impossible to penetrate. Once they were locked for transport, not even the crew responsible for moving them could reopen the seals. There was a time long ago when MegaCORP was regularly threatened by radical groups who opposed the use of Cron or wanted to protest MegaCORP's extensive web of influence, but more recent security measures and generous buy-outs reduced the company's enemies to all but a few extremists. There were a few locations in Avalonia that were rich with Cron, among them, a place in the Alloy Desert several hundred tezras south of Echidna City. The extraction plant there was the size of a small polis, the second largest in Avalonia by output.

"That's what makes it so bizarre. Someone *could've* stolen Cron, but didn't. They only went for the crew," S replied. "Seems like they were disinterested in the Cron itself. They were just looking for people, and the ones they found happened to be transporting Cron."

"What happened to the crew?" Butz asked anxiously.

"Attacked?" Magnus guessed. "Maybe it was a political thing. You know how riled some people can get over MegaCORP?"

S gulped nervously before beginning her response. "Well it looks like... it looks like they were eaten..."

"No!" Butz whispered loudly. "What?!"

"Maybe it was a creature or something in the desert. Who knows what could be out there? It has to be," Red replied.

"Couldn't have been," S answered. "All the vehicles were left perfectly intact. There would've been collateral damage or at least displacement in the sand if it was something that could take a MegaCORP crew out. It was done too precisely. Crew was taken out and their... leftovers... were found fifteen tezras away approximately a day later by the Echidna Guard, after an auto distress signal was sent out from the stationary caravan."

"How many?" Butz asked.

"Seven in total," S replied. "Trained crew and everything too, so whatever did it..."

"Is still out there," Raven remarked bluntly — finishing S's sentence and snapping the rest of them out of their awe. "We have a lot of work to do. We still have a field test," she added curtly, before making her way towards the terminal lifts. Red, Magnus, S, and Butz shared an uneasy look with each

other before following her, unable to shake off their foreboding feelings. Red glanced back at the screens one last time before stepping onto the lift, catching an image of what looked like a gruesome collection of limbs and bones in a net. *Must've been what they found*, he thought.

At the edge of the lift, Butz decided to have a go at Linx one more time, attempting to catch the cat off-guard, but fell prey to the cat's reflexes once more.

"You clearly just don't know anything about cats, do you?" S remarked matter-of-factly. "You just have to offer them food." She took an elk pop from her pocket and held it towards Linx, offering the treat in a pampering voice. The cat looked at her in the eye as she pleaded with it, showing no interest. After a while, she blushed and withdrew her hand, trying to pretend the exchange never happened.

"Marvelous!" Butz screamed, as Magnus and Red laughed along. The exchange helped lighten the mood as they made their way to a terminal on the top floor. They trained with another team of five, going over a northeastern route that would avoid the area where the caravan was found, to everyone's relief. The route would pass through zones of powerful enough critters to score them points, but still remained relatively close to "safe areas." Their microAIs would act as their primary grading mechanism, recording everything around them to be re-imaged, including their encounters and where they went. A control room at Crest mapped everyone's progress this way. More points were earned for fighting more powerful creatures or going deeper into the desert. They could go underground, through cavern entrances, or outwards, in any direction away from Echidna City.

The dread from the news downstairs eventually dissipated as everyone settled into a rhythm while drilling. They wanted to end early to conserve their energy, but Raven insisted that they have a comprehensive session. The team they partnered with had gone back to their quads long before their own session ended. At the end of it, Red and Magnus walked back to their shared room half-asleep. Magnus could barely stand and collapsed almost instantly, while Red more gradually ebbed into his dreams. He had nearly forgotten about the news clip from the library, but the thought surfaced in his mind as he tried to sleep. There was something eerie about the occurrence; he would've felt better if it was a Xenosite attack or something recognizable. It was always the inexplicable, no matter how much less disturbing the substance of the event was, that really bothered him. *I guess that's*

normal. Everyone feels that way, he thought, as he drifted to sleep.

A few short hours later, he awoke with a jolt, electrified from a nightmare. His palms were covered in cold sweat. He looked down to see his entire body shaking. Everything ached, and for a moment, he thought the pain was only in his head, a phase of his nightmare, until he remembered their training from earlier. *Brilliant idea, Raven, have us all burned out before the field test.* He rested his head on his palms, trying to shake off the exhaustion, imagining he would be fine after a hot shower, a stretch, and a long period of meditation. His dream had left him feeling nervous and edgy, not a good state to be in prior to an exam that would determine the course of his life.

He stared out of his corner window, recognizing the familiar duskiness that began as their two stars, one red, and one green, set for the only time during the year. Crest was housed in the top forty-two floors of one of Echidna's smaller super-structures, but the building was still tall enough to grant its upper inhabitants a magnificent view of the city. Out of his window, the giant metropolis looked like an urban jungle. Hover pods floated freely through the air above most of the city at speeds that forced them to swerve dangerously around super-structures, cars formed rivers of traffic around the network of streets and bridges that webbed around the city, and all the different hues from advertisements and signs melted into a dazzling tapestry of neon colors. Despite the fact that he had only spent the last four years of his life here, Echidna was the only place he felt he could call home. Even with its erratic weather and less than ideal location in the middle of a desert, he felt comfortable and at ease here.

Magnus was still sound asleep, occasionally snoring loudly. Red snapped his microAI from his wrist and sent out a mass message to his closest friends to see if anyone was still awake. Because Avalonia enjoyed endless daylight, students slept as they pleased around their thirty-three-hour days, but teams usually conformed to the same sleep schedule. After he sent his message, he remembered glumly that most people had either left or were resting before the field test. But a minute later, his microAI lit up with a response. It was Raven, whom he realized never seemed to sleep at all. She was eating downstairs just two floors below their quads.

Realizing how hungry he was after her message, he decided to skip his shower and opted for a quick face-wash. As he splashed water on his cheeks to wake himself up, he looked towards the mirror in front of him, and

then leapt to his feet, snapping around to attention behind him. There was nothing there, but he could've sworn he had seen a silhouette of something in the mirror. His reflection looked more gaunt than normal. His skin, normally white but with a brown tint, looked as pale as a ghost. He was of average height, with short black hair and a face that Magnus said looked like an elf-human hybrid. He wiped his face with his eyes open, feeling more anxious than ever, and impatient to meet someone else who was awake. Company always settled his nerves. He sat by Magnus for a minute to gather himself, and then quietly put on his combat suit. While the armor was comfortably thin, it was still padded in certain areas to absorb shock and incoming energy waves. The vest was particularly heavy, providing maximum protection for his torso without sacrificing flexibility. The suit was dark grey with strokes of light green, the colors of Crest Academy. After taking a long look at his room to make sure he had not forgotten anything, he quietly headed out.

He felt a wave of relief as he entered the halls, noticing that there were still a few other people walking around. As he made his way to the elevator platforms, it occurred to him that he may never see this place again. He had mixed feelings about leaving — excitement about moving on, but a nostalgic type of bleakness for losing everything he had here. He brushed off the thoughts, imagining that there would be enough time to lament his loss after his field test was over. *If I fail, it may very well not be the last time I'm here*, he laughed to himself.

He found Raven sitting by herself at a long table, eating a brownish fruit covered with seedy ridges that he'd never seen before. The variety of foods at the eatery was constantly changing, one of the benefits of a tier one academy. There was no one there besides two other students in pajamas at the far opposite side. The floor-to-ceiling windows that usually flooded the place with light now faded into a grim shade of dusk. Besides the library, the eatery was his other favorite place at Crest Academy. It was always alive with noise and laughter during the year, and he had many of his best memories hanging out with his team here. Combat training was its own type of fun, but nothing could match the pure joy of companionship.

“Can’t sleep?” she asked when he got to her. She hacked away at her fruit, whose skin seemed unusually sturdy. He noticed that she was using a cutlass, a combat weapon, and not a fruit knife like normal people.

“Mmhmm,” he replied. He grabbed the fruit from her and took a bite,

instantly regretting it as his taste buds recoiled in agony from the bitterness. “Ew... what is that?” he asked.

“Marrow egg,” she smiled, referring to the scaly birds that flocked around the rooftops of Echidna. Red looked disgusted after hearing he had eaten one of their premature kin, which made Raven laugh.

“Don’t laugh too hard. People might hear you,” he teased. “I think the food’s gotten worse since we first came here. I remember tasting much finer things during our early years.”

“I think it’s gotten better — much healthier — but that never seemed to be your style of appetite,” she replied sarcastically. It was true. Both he and Magnus had a penchant for eating unholy amounts of junk food, but they figured they worked hard enough to burn it off. They both had made a resolution long ago that after they graduated, they would retire to much healthier lifestyles. Now that that time had finally come, he was unsure if he would follow through.

“Remember when we first got here, and we’d never seen that much food just given out for free?” Red asked.

“Mmhmm. I remember spending the first three days here just eating,” she smiled, her voice peppered with just the slightest hint of nostalgia.

“Do you feel bad... I mean... about leaving?” Red asked.

She paused for a moment before answering, glancing around at the eatery as if she were recalling all the times they had eaten here. Red felt as though it were just yesterday that they had their first meal here. He even remembered which table they sat at. “It’s a useless emotion,” she finally replied. “Missing things. This is how life is. What’s the point?” She seemed to zone back to her usual aloof attitude after the question, as if her response reminded her that this was how she felt.

“Well that’s kind of a cynical way to see things.”

“Want some more egg?” she asked, extending the brown thing towards him. He waved his hands, and she noticed that they were shakier than usual. “You’re a bit jittery.”

“Nervous for the exam... and... I woke up from a nightmare.”

“Same one as always?”

“Mmhmm. And... I dunno... I always feel like I see things after them. Like, things that are there... but not there.”

“My mother used to tell me that dreams were memories of past lives, that children could remember their past lives and were much more in tune

with them. That's why they're more prone to having nightmares. It's like how people never truly forget traumatic events. They just bury them, but the memories always come back for you."

He grunted in silence, noting that she had mentioned her parents, a rare occurrence. He never asked her about them. They had a silent agreement between them prohibiting discussions about their past before they met.

"What do you think?" he asked, after a long while.

"I think dreams are just dreams. Like consciousness, an accident in a universe where the improbable is always what happens." Her reply was so mechanical, he wondered if this was how she truly felt or if it was how she had trained herself to feel. *What's the difference?* he thought.

"Hmph," was his only response. He was somewhat accustomed to her nihilistic outlook on life, but never bothered to argue against it, even if he disagreed. He always thought that it was impossible to assess someone's outlook justly. You could know every detail of every experience in someone's life, but still fail to understand how he or she related to each one.

"Oh yeah, I have something for you," she said, "since you don't use a weapon to fight with." She handed over a clear pouch that felt as though it were filled with liquid, but looked dry on the inside. Upon closer inspection, Red saw that it was filled with a fine red dust that floated freely inside of its container, somehow defying gravity. He was taken aback when he realized what it was.

"Flashdust?"

"Mmhmm. Use it during the field test if you need it. It's every fire user's dream, isn't it?" He noted that she didn't use the term "elementalist," on purpose.

"How'd you get it?" he asked.

"Beat up a second year and took his coin."

He looked at her in horror, unable to tell whether she was joking or not. Unlike Butz, she was fully capable of doing some of the things she sarcastically mentioned.

"Relax, I'm kidding," she smiled after a minute.

"Well... it sounds like something you'd do..." Red replied.

"You'll love the qualifiers, you know, when we go. They let me go last year to attend as an observer. They split the races up into groups, and it's not just regular sparring. You have to pass different obstacles, and the arenas themselves, well, let's just say they're massive, and completely different

from the plain ones we've been fighting at in academy. And you get to see all the different races fight. Some of them are magnificently unique. The gemini factions especially, they're a cut above the rest," Raven marveled.

"I wanted to tell you something, by the way," Red began awkwardly, after Raven had finished. "Well... this field test, to be honest I'm not a hundred percent sure about how I'll perform, and if I don't make it to WEAPON, I still won't give up. I'll find my own way, but I think we all know how you're going to do, and how your overall profile looks anyway... and..."

"No, Red —"

"I haven't finished yet."

"I already gave you my answer. If you go to WEAPON, I'll go to WEAPON. If you join the Echidna Guard, I'll join the Echidna Guard. I'm going wherever you're going."

"Raven, we can't stick around each other forever."

"You fight recklessly, you're not as experienced as you think, and your optimism will change the moment you see a Xenosite up front. Without me, you're as good as dead, and I'm not letting you die, at least not by yourself." She slowly got up to leave, refusing to argue any further. "If you dig yourself an early grave, I'll dig myself an early grave. You need 475 points to qualify. I already checked. Let's go downstairs and fuel the bikes. We should have as smooth a start as possible. Solstice is in four hours," she added, after checking her microAI.

Red sighed in exasperation, unsure of what else to say. They'd had this conversation before, and he was always frustrated at the thought of holding her back. But unlike him, she seemed to have no true ambition for combat, or getting into something like WEAPON, for that matter. It was just something in which she was gifted. "We're grown up, you know," he yelled after her. "We're not poor little orphans anymore, Raven."

The comment caught her by surprise. She turned to look back at him, and then looked down hesitantly, contemplating something. She stepped forward, as if she wanted to walk back to him, then changed her mind and began to walk away again. The paradox in gestures made Red feel as though a lifetime's worth of debate had just occurred in her head.

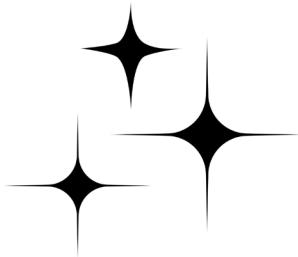
"Look at your gear, Red, and look at mine. We're still poor, and we'll always be orphans. We're just not little anymore."

Her response left him with an odd feeling of longing for the past, but not one he could remember happily. He thought maybe it wasn't even the

past that he longed for, but the vague impression he once had of a limitless future. There was no doubt that he liked where he was more than where he had been — but time had robbed his imagination of its wonder.

He got up to follow her to their bikes. They were stationed on the ground floor. The elevator ride alone took several minutes. They made a list of last-minute preparations to be done, which he gladly took his time finishing. The routine acts of cleaning, refueling, and checking their equipment cooled him to a steady excitement. His favorite part of preparation was always getting the hover bikes ready. Their curved shapes made them look like glowing bullets from afar — human projectiles capable of relentless velocities with their elliptical, friction-resistant designs. He always imagined that speed was a symbol of humanity's conquest over time, a way for people to breach the limits that nature had set for accomplishing things in space. In a few hours, they would be blasting across the desert with a mix of Cron and adrenaline. All his worries would become subordinate to the instinctual need to survive during combat, to the rush of energy that overcame his senses when he cast fire, and to the discipline he would have to exercise to outlive seven nights in a punishing environment.

By the time Magnus, S, and Butz were on the ground floor to meet them, Red and Raven were both asleep on top of their bikes. Magnus shook him gently until he awoke, but he was startled nonetheless. Looking around, he saw the determined looks on Butz's and Magnus's faces, the disillusioned look on Raven's as she awoke, the serious look on S's, and the apprehensive look on everyone else around them. Without a word to each other, they placed their palms on the sensory grips of each of their bikes until they came alive, and then shot away in silence toward the incoming darkness.



THE EVIL EYE

They rode towards Eio, Avalonia's largest moon, which hung above the clouds like a rising planet in the distant star-lit concave. The moon was so close, and so enormous, it seemed as though if they continued at this pace, in a day's time they would be close enough to touch it. Bodies of Lumazoas swam in the air high above them — wide umbrella-shaped creatures that were light enough to float and had gelatinous bodies with hundreds of trailing tentacles. Solstice was their single mating season. The jelly-like critters would attract mates by lighting up their bodies in the darkness, a process that caused their tentacles to glow like viscous coils of heated plasma and flicker aurorally scented lights of every color across the barren desert.

Solstice separated Avalonia's two seasons, Hale and Torrid. The seven nights in between were characterized by nearly perfect weather. Neither the scorching heat of Torrid nor the sub-zero gas storms of Hale would bother the desert now, but the rain from earlier had saturated the air with wisp, a vaporous substance that looked like fog but carried a heavier weight. There wasn't enough to blur their vision, but it added an ominous tone to the grey desert. Noticing the strange coloring of the wisp that must have resulted from the Cron pollution in the rain, Red briefly wondered if the substance was safe to breathe.

From the corner of his eye, he noticed a single green flare several tezras to their left shoot up high above the sky, and then another one far ahead of them a few minutes later. Flares were how teams signaled to each other across the desert. Because field tests were standardized, the event took on a more cooperative than competitive nature. Green flares signaled that someone had just seen a stage 1 critter. Likewise, multiple green flares indicated a group of stage 1 critters. (Desert creatures tended not to form packs, but there were exceptions.) A yellow flare indicated that someone had found a supply of food or a place where shelter could be made. They were the most

important ones to note and record, as they could be circled back to in the future to make camp among larger groups.

“Ignore it,” came Raven’s voice over the intercom. The cut-off for qualifying for WEAPON was so high that recording contact with stage 1 critters would be nearly pointless. For Red, the second- and third-highest achievements would be to qualify for the corps that fought Xenosites directly in the outer planets or the ones getting ready to fight them if an invasion past Iris ever took place. These required 150 and 125 points, respectively — a stretch from WEAPON’s incredible 475-point cut-off. Very few teams were aiming that high, which meant they would find less and less help the farther they forayed into the desert.

It had been hours since they crossed the boundary between Echidna and the Alloy Desert. They were heading full-speed down their route without interruption, save for an eating break sometime an hour ago. Green and yellow flares were starting to appear less frequently. Red glanced at his microAI and flipped to its compass to see how far they were from the nearest team, locating one about ten tezras north of their current position, and another about fourteen tezras to the west. They had to be sure never to stray *too* far. A single tezra could be walked in twenty minutes. The rule of thumb was to stay walking distance of at least two other teams.

“Someone just pinked,” Butz interjected. Red glanced at him and saw Linx laying comfortably behind him on the bike, the cat’s head welcoming the surge of wind with an open tongue. It seemed to be enjoying the breeze and the dewy feeling of the wisp more than anyone else was. Its eyes sparkled like tiny stars. They looked attentive but tired.

“I see it,” Raven’s voice followed. “Let’s go.”

Red looked around and then saw it on their left side. *It must’ve been the team to the west*, he thought. Three pink flares shot up towards the sky. Hungry for some action, they all banked towards the flares in unison, slightly slowing down as they went. Pinks indicated stronger critters; three meant there must’ve been a pack of them. Likely, whoever had signaled them needed help taking them on.

A lone figure flagged them down once they approached the area. Red recognized her as a girl from Professor Kep’s class. The rest of her team lay behind an artificial trench they had dug. He couldn’t remember her name but recalled her classification: a stalker — a category that specialized in killing from long distances. They were known for their vast knowledge

of weapons and skill in tracking prey. Magnus nodded to her as they approached.

“What did you find?” Raven asked, skipping the greeting process. The girl seemed to light up to attention when she realized who Raven was. She pointed over the trench they had dug and ushered them over. Climbing to the top, Red saw a cluster of Ignot Gilas a short distance ahead of them, all of them clawing and biting at a carcass they couldn’t seem to penetrate. The reptilian creatures had a tough, energy-resistant hide and a bite powerful enough to shatter protective shields like glass. Their chins drooped far below their mouths, bulging with glands that produced a potent mix of bacteria. When they stood on their forelegs, they were about twice the size of an adult human. Their long snouts curved around a sinister set of jaws that were lined with oversized teeth. In the darkness, the moonlight glinted off their scales like slashes of radiant ivory.

“We were waiting for more people to show up,” the girl began. “They’re mostly stage 2, but there are two stage 3.” Red noticed them immediately. They looked like giants among their cousins — big enough to swallow a person whole. “I think we still need another team or two,” the girl added. The Gilas were still panting around the hull of the creature they had found. The scavengers couldn’t seem to penetrate through the hide of their dead prey. Red couldn’t see what it was, but judging by how spread out the Gilas were, he guessed that the creature must have been enormous. It was buried under the sand, but patches of an ethereal green shone through. Raven walked over to the top of the trench and took out her bow and arrow. The other team watched in wonder.

“S,” Raven said quietly.

“Already ready,” S replied. She was sitting in a meditative position that Red recognized as her healing stance. He had tried healing for himself once, but the position was too stressful. Healers were required to be so in tune with the rest of their team that they shared their pain — a way for them to efficiently recognize how their energy, or flou as it was appropriately called, should be spent. Very few people took on the position, and having a healer on their own team was one of the major reasons behind their success.

Raven stuck an arrow between her nocking point and pulled back stiffly, exhaling calmly as she stretched the weapon back. Red noticed the head of the arrow slightly bulging as it sparked with electricity. Her cast imbued the weapon with a voltaic property. He was familiar with this cast. She had used

it many times before. It required almost no energy on her part, but made the weapon much more effective. Everyone kept still as she concentrated. Any disturbance to a person's focus as they fulfilled a cast could cause their effectiveness to decline sharply and their flow to spiral out of control. The stillness was more out of habit in this case. It was only for more major casts that impeccable concentration was an absolute necessity. For someone like Raven, turning an arrow into a paralyzing shot was an effortless task.

The other team seemed to be getting more and more nervous as Raven continued aiming at the Ignot Gilas. They seemed to be unsure if this was a good idea, and exchanged anxious glances with each other. Red understood why; Raven was relying on her ability to shoot all of the Gilas down before they made it to them. If she missed even one or two, especially one of the larger stage 3 Gilas, she would be putting all of them in danger. The reptilian critters had a soft spot near the bottom of their bellies, a vulnerable patch of skin that covered access to several vital organs, and a place they adamantly guarded if they sensed danger.

Finally, a boy on the other team sitting at the edge of the trench spoke up. He seemed to be equipped like the girl who had flagged them down, with a long rod strapped to his back that Red recognized as a beam rifle. He was also a stalker, Red guessed. "If I were you, I wouldn't do that," the boy commented.

"And if I were *you*, I wouldn't do it either," Raven replied politely. Her fingers eased as she released the first arrow. It pierced through the air with surgical precision, looking like it was going to miss, but then curving masterfully through the air, flowing with the gradient of the wind, just as its owner had calculated, to finally find its mark on the soft tissue that composed the underbelly of an unsuspecting Gila. A reptilian screech split open the quiet of the desert, as thirteen of its comrades tried to make sense of what was happening. Their instinct, like that of any other desert creature, was to assess the situation and decide as quickly as possible whether to defend themselves or to run. While they weren't the sharpest of creatures, they were still close to being apex predators within the desert. Still, they were well aware that the dark sands hid beasts that far eclipsed them in both size and hunger.

With rapid succession, she let out thirteen more shots, reaching over to her quiver and reloading her bow with a blurring speed every time. The rest of her body remained perfectly still as her arms did all the moving. Her

near perfect form did not go unnoticed by the other team, who weren't as accustomed to seeing her perform. The arrows all found a Gila as a target, but not all of them hit the correct area. She continued to fire past the necessary fourteen shots, but her accuracy diminished as the pressure mounted and the pack ran towards her in full tilt. Red got up and flexed his fingers, planting them into the ground softly. He heard the whistle of Magnus's mallet swinging through the air as he charged its momentum. *Here it comes*, he thought excitedly.

Raven continued to remain perfectly still, not flinching despite the dwindling space between herself and the Gilas. Eleven dropped, twelve dropped, thirteen dropped, but Red knew she wasn't going to get the last one. It was one of the stage 3 Gilas. It had already taken one shot to the underbelly but failed to slow down. Raven dropped her bow and arrow next to her and silently placed her hand on the hilt of the sword strapped behind her. The boy that had spoken earlier choked back a scream, imagining that Raven was either suicidal or too paralyzed to move, as he was. The enormous creature in front of them, now in position to strike, launched forward with an open mouth, ready to grip its prey with the force of its hunger.

An instant before the jaws closed around her in an atomizing bite, Butz and Red both rushed in front, bridging their arms out to hold the mouth open with their hands. The force of the impact was so charged, it pushed them a foot deeper into the sand and sent out waves of energy that visibly rippled across the air and sand around them. Screaming with effort as they wrestled to stretch the mouth open, they swung their head to the side to make space for Magnus's mallet, which came down a second after they had shifted their weight away. A deafening thud filled the air as the weapon collided with the Gila's skull.

"Courtesy of Butz," the falconer said cheerfully. He dropped two teeth in front of Raven, which he had ripped out from the Gila during the exchange.

"I had it," Raven replied calmly.

"Sure you did," Butz sneered. "Just remember you owe me for this, and I won't tell anyone I had to save the invincible Raven from the cold hand of death itself," he laughed. Linx let out a soft howl as he continued to stare at the Gila cautiously. "It's dead, boy. It's okay," Butz said reassuringly. He began walking towards the carcass in the sand, curious to know what the Gilas were trying to eat.

Just as Red was about to follow, the Gila they had thought dead sprung back to life and hurtled towards Butz at breakneck speed, its back legs granting it a final surge of strength. Butz was caught off-guard, with no time to position himself appropriately, and numbed by the sight of a purple tongue whipping wildly through the air. He shuddered and rolled his shoulders instinctively while raising his hands — seeing only the moist texture of an enormous, gaping mouth before closing his eyes.

Red lifted his hands to cast anything that came to mind but was sure he was going to be too late. The scene seemed to unfold in front of him at a heightened speed, one his quickness could not catch up to. Yet at the same time, the moment seemed frozen in place, letting him contemplate forever the precarious ending of his teammate. He thought of all of his experiences with Butz, running through every memory of him in a fraction of a second.

He turned to look at Raven, who was next to him just an instant ago, to see if she had been able to do anything, but she was no longer there. Feeling like he was moving underwater, he twisted his head back around to the lunging Gila and saw Raven on the other side of it, as if she had somehow traveled back in time to change her initial location. An instant later, delayed in the same way his perception was, he heard the penetrating sound of celestial steel slicing through air and organ, in a clean yet forceful manner. A minute had passed before anyone dared to speak.

“Am... am I dead?” Butz peeped.

“I told you. I had it,” Raven said calmly. She was on one knee and out of breath, resting on the handle of her sword, but still maintaining her poise. “Anyway, consider us even,” she added. “We should pay attention to Linx more carefully from now on. He can sense if things are actually dead or not.”

“That was amazing! You moved faster than sound.... What was that?” the girl on the other team asked. The five of them seemed more dazed than even Butz after what had happened. They took a few steps back to digest the series of events. Raven gave the girl an unrevealing wink and said nothing more.

“You blew all your energy,” S said. “Literally, I think all of it. I would’ve just let him get eaten to be honest,” she added with a sarcastic grin. Raven breathed deeply, still on one knee, relaxing her muscles and trying to recuperate. Red walked up to her to share his water.

"That really was incredible," he said. "Faster than sound... that's why I saw what happened... and *then* heard it."

"Mmhmm," she nodded.

"I'm guessing you can only do it once, because of all the energy it takes?" Red asked.

"For now," she said. "My output isn't like yours. I don't have as much energy."

"You're fine," Red laughed. Output, or the total amount of raw energy someone could put out, was the only thing that Red ever felt stood out about him. Still, he could never focus cleanly enough as some other people to channel it appropriately, save for when he cast anything fire related. When he would get down on himself for his inability to focus, Raven reminded him of his potential, a gesture that he always appreciated.

"Guys... you won't believe this," S yelled from ahead of them. She had walked to the carcass buried in the sand, and started uncovering it. Red ran over with everyone else, paying extra attention to Linx in case any of the other Gilas were still alive. He did a double take when he finally arrived at the creature.

"It's a..." Red began, but couldn't find the words to finish.

"A dragon," Butz whispered reverently. He seemed to have regained his color after his near-death experience. Linx purred softly next to him, examining the dead creature with equal regard.

"It's an Emerald Thornback," Magnus interjected. Even while it lay dead and half-buried in the sand, the dragon exuded a look of majesty. Its green hide shimmered beautifully under the bed of wisp and sand that accumulated around it. Its body was enormous, one of the largest creatures Red had ever seen. Spread around its skin were tiny bristles that looked like hair but were far too acuminous. Red stretched out his hand and reached over to gently touch the creature. Blood leaked out almost instantly upon contact as one of the bristles smoothly vivisected the glove of his suit and cut the skin underneath. He yelped in pain and jumped back, surprised at how sharp the bristles were. *I don't think I even touched it*, he thought scornfully.

S reacted almost immediately, taking his hand and beginning to heal the cut. Tiny pink waves travelled from the tip of her hands to inside the wound, wrapping around the blood and soothing the lesion. It was a cool and tingly sensation, but was quickly overcome by a burning feeling after Magnus began rubbing a small tube of gel over it.

“Some of the bristles were covered in Gila saliva — can’t risk an infection,” Magnus said as Red breathed deeply to absorb the sting of the gel. The idea of an infection hadn’t even occurred to him. He was suddenly greatly appreciative that Magnus had paid attention in class while he dozed off.

“Mmhmm,” Red replied. He inhaled sharply as the gel seemed to have activated. The burning sensation increased to a peak around the tip of the cut.

“We should pick off some of these bristles and collect the saliva. If we coat them and stick them to arrow heads, we’d have a pretty lethal weapon,” Butz suggested.

“Good idea,” S said as she continued to nurse the cut.

“Look at its eyes,” someone on the other team yelled. They walked over to the head of the dragon just as Raven had finally joined them.

“All black...” Red whispered.

“No way... It was meta-conditioned?” Butz asked.

“Impossible,” Magnus replied. “You hear about it a lot in the political world, or at least I do, but it rarely happens. It’s too difficult of a technique to pull off. You’d be surprised how hard it would be for us to meta-condition something even as simple as an insect. A dragon would be impossible.”

“But look, its eyes,” Butz protested. They were empty vessels, cloudy and black. Unmistakable signs of meta-conditioning as they had been taught — the binding control of one will over another. Red had learned about meta-conditioning in a class on psykinesthetics, or mental warfare. At the end of the class, all the students were required to try it on each other. Meta-conditioning someone was akin to running through their thoughts over and over again, while fighting every little impulse the other person’s mind and body produced. It felt impossible for Red. He could barely control his own impulses, let alone someone else’s. Because psykinesthetics were ineffective against Xenosites, the subject was not heavily taught. There was no classification for people adept in it, although healers picked it up quickly, as their training already required them to be comfortable establishing connections with other people’s minds. Besides meta-conditioning, skills related to psykinesthetics included ocular manipulation, or the ability to read and control someone’s dreams, id-speech, or the ability to verbally mimic the sound of someone’s conscience by recognizing their voice patterns to give them commands they believe they gave themselves, and myodistortion, or

altering someone's perception of reality by inducing visual or auditory hallucinations. Most techniques under psykinesthetics were rarely executed, more so because they always left telltale signs of their practice than because they were exceptionally difficult to perform.

"Magnus is right," Raven replied. "It has to be something else. Dragons are among the most powerful creatures in existence. They're fully sentient, and arguably more intelligent and shrewd than humans are. It would be impossible to meta-condition one," she added firmly.

"There's a saddle here," someone screamed from the other side of the body. They walked over again and saw a strange black saddle strapped to the dragon. It was stitched from a thick and unfamiliar hide. Red wondered briefly if it was the skin of another dragon, the only thing he could imagine that could safely wrap around the bristles without being shredded to pieces.

"This is just bizarre," Magnus said. "Well, Emerald Thornbacks are one of the few creatures that can travel through space, a rare ability even among dragons," he added. "I guess... something could've ridden it... to Avalonia... but that's impossible. Dragons don't carry people." At the thought, they all quickly looked upwards and around, as if to find someone else within their company, but saw no sign of movement besides a few Luma zoas far above them. The desert remained quiet and empty.

"Send out yellow flares," Raven directed. "The Ignot Gilas will provide more than enough food for at least five teams. Maybe we can get more people here to study this. We should also send a message to the control room about it. It could have something to do with the caravan attack." They nodded while taking out their flare guns. Within the hour, two other teams showed up, increasing their number to twenty. They all camped around the dragon. Yellow flares went up in two other directions near them, making everyone more relaxed. If there were other teams in the vicinity, it was unlikely they would be bothered as they slept.

Magnus was busy at work for the next few hours, directing everyone as to which parts of the Ignot Gilas were edible and which were poisonous. They had cut off all the chins of the Gilas to pack their bacteria and emptied out the meat from the inside through their underbellies. During the process, they had a laugh about eating dragon meat, which Butz suggested was a once in a lifetime experience. Magnus replied that he wouldn't be able to manage. There was something off about the idea of eating another sentient creature, something too close to cannibalism. Either way,

they wouldn't be able to penetrate dragon hide.

Red and Raven helped set up everyone's TPs as S and Butz scouted the area for signs of other critters. They put up their mock shelters just in time. A few hours into their setup, it began to rain again. Everyone packed as much of the Ignot Gila meat as possible inside the TPs, unsure if it would be edible once soaked in rain. The light drizzle quickly picked up into a rain-storm, an unusual hiccup in solstice's usually calm weather. As soon as signs of the storm came about, everyone skinned the Gilas as fast as they were able to and placed them underneath where they sat. Lightning in a metallic desert could charge an indefinite amount of space. The outer skin of most creatures that adapted to this environment was already insulated against such threats. The five of them huddled inside S's TP, listening to the storm as it continued to rage outside. Red stole a glance through the entrance whenever he could, marveling at the rivers of violet rain that cascaded brilliantly off the peaks of metallic dunes — a scene only marginally lit by the fires they had created inside their TPs and Eio's pale luminescence.

Teams took turns keeping watch. By the time it was their turn to sleep, Red's exhaustion from the night before had caught up to him. Laying on top of the Gila skin was an unusual feeling. It was a tough hide that resembled organic armor, but felt oddly comfortable, like a hard bed. There wasn't enough Gila skin to cover all of the TPs, so everyone decided to sleep together in S's TP. As Red shifted around to get into a comfortable position, he noticed that the rain had gotten slightly quieter.

"Are you really going to sleep like that?" Butz asked. Red turned around to see what Butz was referring to and burst out laughing when he saw Raven hunched over with a dagger in each hand.

"Yes, and I'd stop laughing if you'd like to wake up," Raven replied.

"A lunatic, that one," Butz remarked with a grin as he went back to trying to figure out a comfortable position to lay in, like Red. They recounted the events of the day as they tried to sleep, remarking that they had covered a more than adequate amount of ground for one day. They had gotten lucky running into the Ignot Gilas, and hopefully their fortune would carry over to the next few days.

As Red drifted to sleep, he hoped that he wouldn't have another nightmare. Consecutive sleepless nights would be too draining at a time when he had to keep his energy up. Raven was unlikely to recover fully by tomorrow after bursting all of her energy out to save Butz. Everyone would have to

put in extra effort to keep them on pace. He went to sleep counting his good fortunes. Above them all, he realized, was probably that they had Raven on their team.

When he started hearing screams in his sleep, he imagined unconsciously that his hope for a pleasant dream was dashed. But then, as he became slightly more aware, he realized the shouting was coming from outside. A hand shoved him hard, and he finally awoke with sudden alarm.

“What?” he screamed. Magnus had shoved him awake and was now doing the same to Butz and S. He heard shouting outside. Several people were yelling his name. “Are they calling me?” he asked curiously.

“No,” Magnus said quickly. “I don’t think so, but we need to wake up. Something’s going on.” S and Butz soon snapped awake as well. Raven, who Red realized had left the TP, poked her head in through the entrance. She was spot dry, which meant the rain must’ve stopped.

“We need to move. Now.” She said it with such sternness, everyone followed suit without a word. After Red packed as fast as he could, he stepped outside, and saw what everyone was yelling about. It wasn’t his name. It was a single red flare that was shooting up into the sky. Red flares were different. They didn’t fire up and explode like the other colors. They were slow to go up, extremely visible, and sparked up into a radius that covered twice as much breadth as anything else. They signaled danger — extreme danger. Not the type of danger that a team might want to face to score points, which was signaled by an orange flare, but the type of danger that indicated a team might have just been wiped out. Everyone who saw the flare needed to evacuate the zone immediately. Red flares were rarely seen, even during field tests, and usually indicated either a natural disaster like a moving whirlpool or an extremely advanced-stage critter.

Everyone scrambled chaotically to disassemble their TPs. They would have left everything there, but the threat of another rainstorm still lingered. Red suddenly wished they had made camp in a more mobile and organized way. The scene was hectic as everyone tried to gather their things among the frenzied shuffling. A second flare rocketed towards the sky, this one even closer to them. Judging by the angle between the two flares, whatever it was, it was heading straight towards their camp.

“Stop staring, go, go, go!” Raven screamed. Everyone had frozen momentarily to look at the flares, but quickly returned to packing. When he was done, Red ran over to his bike, which was parked right next to Butz’s.

Linx was right behind them, howling wildly at the sky. Together, Butz and Red placed their palms down to activate their bikes, gripping tightly as if the pressure would speed up the process. Both of their bikes turned on simultaneously and lit up the space ahead of them. The next moment though, they both choked with a combination of fright and bewilderment.

There was someone there, standing boldly in the darkness. It was a man, but no ordinary man. He was a gaunt figure with no eyes, just skin where there should've been eyes, and a lifeless smile composed of sharp yellow teeth. He had a thin, sickly body with patches of bone sticking out. But his most shocking feature was his right hand, or what *should've been* his right hand. In its place was an enormous blade, larger than his own body. It throbbed with veins and looked like it had a life of its own. At the center of the massive weapon was a single eye, an unsettling organ that darted around with a maddening gaze. Oddly, Red felt a strange sense of familiarity, like *deja vu*, upon seeing the blade — as if he knew this moment was coming all along, but had forgotten about it.

Both Butz and Red continued to stand perfectly still. Red could hear the sound of rustling behind him, and then a sudden quietness, as everyone seemed to notice the man. The gaunt figure lifted his giant arm in a cumbersome manner, and brought it down in a devastating blow. Red reflexively stepped back from the danger, but failed to avoid it entirely.

He felt only the violent sensation of being shocked, like lightning had just struck him and his body was imploding to avoid the danger. There was no pain, but he knew he had been hit somewhere. Everything around him seemed to recede to a distance, contract inwards, and then recede back to a distance, in a continuous cycle every second. Barely aware of what was going on, he noted that fighting had started, that he was thrown on someone's bike, and that someone else had covered his hand with a kapcha, a thick white net made out of an adhesive substance used to stop bleeding from heavy injuries. After that, he felt only the sensation of rushing down the desert, a maddening ringing noise in his ears, and the sound of voices screaming all over his intercom.

He closed his eyes to try and regain consciousness and piece together what happened. *My hand, my hand is gone*, he thought. Fighting to open his eyes, he saw the stump of white. He heard vague expressions, someone trying to yell at him, but couldn't make out the words. He wanted to tell the person he couldn't understand them, but his voice came out as an inaudible scream. He turned around and squinted into the distance. *Focus*, he thought.

He needed to become aware of what was going on. He was in danger. There were bikes behind them, and something like a black meteor hurtling down the desert.

“Red, can you hear me?” He heard Raven’s calm voice, and finally understood that he was right behind her, on her bike. The voices on the intercom were Butz, Magnus, and S — but he couldn’t understand them through their simultaneous talking.

“Yeah,” he replied. The word came out as a faint noise, despite the fact that he intended to scream it.

“You need to stay conscious, Red. Don’t faint. We’re being chased. *You’re* being chased. We’re in danger. You need to think clearly. What is that thing, Red? Why is it chasing you? It’s ignoring everyone else.” He began to understand what was going on, and nodded. His senses crawled back to him, and he suddenly felt swept by an acute depression.

“My hand... he cut off my right hand. He’s chasing us,” he mumbled, looking back at the dark figure rushing towards them. *He’s moving as fast as our bike.*

“Yes Red, you need to focus. Do you have the flashdust?”

“Flashdust,” he whispered to himself. With a sudden hurried urgency, he took out the pouch of crimson dust from his pockets with his left hand and grabbed onto it.

“Light it, Red. You can light the entire bag. Throw it and then light it. Don’t miss.” He nodded. *My right hand is gone though*, he thought despondently.

“My right hand is gone.... It’s the one I cast with,” he said to Raven. He knew he could use his left, but the thought stuck to his consciousness like an overwhelming tragedy. He couldn’t seem to get over it.

“Use your left, Red,” Raven replied.

“Okay,” he answered robotically. He was still dazed from a feeling of shock. His voice sounded alien through his ears.

“Flashdust inbound, flank left,” Raven said into the intercom. Butz, Magnus, and S hushed immediately and confirmed. He turned around and saw that strange and ghastly figure torpedoing down the desert right behind them. He remembered the eye, and the terrible feeling that he somehow knew it from before.

“Make sure you don’t miss, Red. Don’t use it if you’re not fully conscious.”

“No, I’m okay,” he lied. “Just drive straight.” His body wanted to drift into a paralysis of its own. It was a struggle just to stay conscious. Bits of darkness continuously ate away at the corner of his eyes, urging him to give in to the sensation of fainting. But he felt he could hang on, and knew that he had to if they were going to survive this. Paying attention to his body, he realized he was trembling with adrenaline.

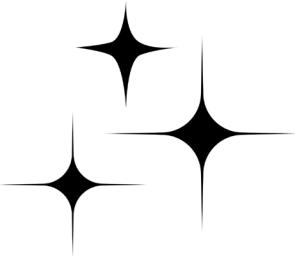
When the bladed man was directly behind them and aligned perfectly with the direction the bike was heading, he threw the flashdust up, thrust his left hand forward, and let out a river of flames that connected with the dust. Flashdust was a highly flammable substance that amplified fire casts, but still had to be triggered properly or its effect would be marginal. Red’s initial blast covered a wide radius, but more importantly, the rush of the energy ebbing away from his hand and flowing into the air launched him back to consciousness. *This is what I live for*, he thought.

When the flashdust blew, an explosion sounded and the flames turned green — bursting out in all directions and ricocheting violently off the sands in streaks of ember. The long lines of fire then came together and formed the signature shape of flashdust, an enormous snake shaped out of green flames. The scorching serpent continued to stretch out as they rode forward, now covering more than a tezra’s length. It saw the bladed man first, and shot forward at him, swallowing his body whole and then exploding in a storm of green embers.

“He’s still behind us,” Red said. The man had been burnt, and looked like a charcoaled body now, black as death, but continued through the desert as if unfazed by the flames.

“I thought he would be,” Raven replied. “Red, I want you to hang on as tight as you can to me. I don’t want us to get separated.”

“Separated by what?” Red asked. But when he turned to the front to look at her, he knew what she meant. She was driving them straight into a whirlpool. It would tunnel them into different locations far underground, possibly across the entire desert, if they were separated. She let go of the bike and gripped his arms, letting the bike drive on its own over the cliff of the whirlpool. She held on so tightly, he could’ve sworn her nails dug in through his skin. The bike leaped through the air as it crossed the edge of the whirlpool and then fell straight into its center. The last thing Red remembered seeing before everything went black, was that maddening eye, jumping into the whirlpool right after them.



THE TWILIGHT CAVERNS

Red landed headfirst into a foamy undergrowth — unable to sense the stillness of the moment after rushing through the polarizing currents of a whirlpool. With his vision still distorted from reeling wildly at an uncontrollable speed, he gripped the soft floor underneath him and nervously scanned the area for any danger. He was alone, for the time being. There was no sign of the lidless eye, nor of Raven. He was surprised that the whirlpool had been able to separate them after their rigid grip on each other. Abruptly, his attention was drawn to the bright glow of the cavern he had fallen into, and the calm rhythm of a waterfall flowing freely somewhere nearby. He sat up and hunched over, counting to ten forwards and backwards with his eyes closed to let his delirium fade away, just as he was taught to do in academy.

My hand is gone. The ringing sensation in his ears came back. He tried telling himself that it would be okay, that he would get a syntechdage, an artificial limb, installed once he got back to Crest, but the thought clung to his mind like a leech. It was more than just a hand to him. Had it been anything else, his right foot, his left hand, it would have been just a limb, but what he lost was his way of controlling the world around him. *My right hand.* Dots of black crept up against the fringes of his vision, inviting him once more to give in to the serenity of fainting. He focused on the light around him, desperate to anchor his attention to something. If he fainted, there was no telling how long he would be out.

The glow of the cavern seemed to permeate everything around him, an organic gleam that betrayed the presence of boundless energy. “Cron,” he whispered to himself. Everything here must have been saturated with an extraordinary amount of it. The renowned energy source could be found inside any substance — its primary attribute was a bio-phosphorescent ef-

fect that it imbued to its container. The more Cron, the brighter the glow. After Cron was extracted, distilled, and purified into a more usable form through a cryptic process patented by MegaCORP called hyperproxification, it could be used to power anything from fleets of vehicles and entire cities to dimensional portals for space travel. He heard that a gemini mothership could use as much Cron in a single day as all of Echidna City could use in an entire year. Every technologically advanced culture he ever heard of in their star system was fueled by Cron. He learned that Xenosites showed a special affinity for the substance as well, suggesting that they used it for biological functions that appropriated extraordinary amounts of energy. But how they naturally synthesized the substance into a form of usable energy was still unknown.

The floor of the cavern was composed of a thick, spongy foam with a fungal quality. The soft lather was colored a deep shade of coral and frothed about spontaneously as if it were actively fermenting. Some parts of the foam were as hard as rock, whereas others were so light and viscous, they felt like the stretched remnants of a gaseous gel. Wherever the natural interior of the cavern could be seen underneath the foam, a glowing metal cut through like fragments of a lunar crescent. As he gathered his senses, he came to realize the enormity of the cavern. The sound of a waterfall came not from a singular fall, but from many of them, hundreds of cataracts that gushed turbulently from holes spread generously all throughout the sides of the giant cavern. He couldn't imagine how deep underground the whirlpool had taken him. The ceiling of the place stretched out into an immeasurable blackness, and in no direction was there a visible end. Even on the floor on which he landed, wide cavities threatened to take him deeper underground should he fall.

He stood up and limped over to the closest waterfall with the intent of washing his face, but paused when he realized it wasn't flowing with water at all. The liquid was of a rich, seal color and flowed with an unusual heaviness. *Umbriel*, he thought. He remembered studying the liquid, specifically, an entire ocean of it, in Karth, the eighth planet in their star system. Like water, it gave birth to its own set of life forms, strange and intelligent species of bacteria that were so large they were visible to the naked eye. He took a step back from the falls after recalling that fact, and decided he could do without washing his face after all. He couldn't remember reading anything about umbriel in Avalonia. *I thought Karth was the only planet with*

umbriel, he mused.

He reached for his microAI but then gasped when he saw that stump again — a plain white block covered in a kapcha. “I lost my hand,” he said to himself over and over again until the reality of it settled in. It seemed ages, not a few hours, since he lost it. An urge to react hysterically, to maybe cry or scream still drifted somewhere in his consciousness, but he fought it whenever it pried into his mind. “This is combat,” he told himself. He didn’t join Crest Academy expecting a safe trip to the end. *Even a single moment spent focusing on an injury is a waste of time.* This wasn’t his first calamity in combat, even if it was his worst, and it surely wouldn’t be his last. He closed his eyes again, repeating the counting procedure over and over until the realization that he had lost his casting hand washed over him like a cool bath rather than an icy shock. Briefly, he wondered if this was how all of life’s tragedies were overcome — not with the audacious courage he imagined in members of WEAPON, but with a patient sort of complacency that refused to accept reality for less than what it was. Raven suddenly came to mind, and he imagined how indifferently she would react if the same thing had happened to her. *Always cool and in control. “Focus, Red,”* she would tell him now. He struggled to snap off his microAI with only his left hand to open its compass and check if she landed somewhere nearby.

He tinkered with the settings of the compass so that it displayed altitude as well, and then saw that all three of his other team members must have followed him and Raven into the whirlpool. Butz was at the same altitude as he was, and only a few tezras away. S and Magnus landed near each other, but far enough to be a day’s worth of traveling away from him and Butz. It was Raven who was the furthest from him. She seemed to have landed on a much deeper level, but judging by the speed of her dot — she was moving towards him as fast as she could. *Or running away from something,* he thought uneasily. He shuddered lightly, remembering that eyeless face and the crooked yellow smile twisted with sharp teeth, but knew that she wasn’t being chased by the bladed man. The eye was far away now, he could *feel* it, but something else told him that it was getting closer with every passing moment. *You’re just being paranoid,* he quickly told himself, and then forced the thought out of his mind.

Checking his compass again, he saw that Butz was heading towards him, and that Magnus and S were moving towards each other. He began hiking towards Butz, picking up the pace as much as he could to match the

falconer. His loss of blood had left him delirious, and the emptiness at the end of his right arm continuously threw off his balance. He tested the floor before every step as he went. Some of the holes were covered with blankets of the coral foam, making it easy for a misstep to send him hurtling down to another level of the caverns. Twice, he still took a step too quickly, nearly falling through one of the many gaps on the floor. On the way to Butz, he passed through a tunnel so narrow it gave him the feeling the walls were closing in on him. The tunnel opened up to another chamber, but one with a low ceiling. Sharp grey stalactites hung from above like metallic scythes, forcing him to carefully weave between their points. He noticed a light a long distance ahead of him, and the movement of a pair of shadows. His heart leaped for a moment, before he realized that it must have been Butz using a cast to create extra light. The thought of illuminating the cavern hadn't occurred to him, the glow of the Cron seemed enough — but he quickly copied the idea and created a ball of light himself, feeling more relaxed as the practice of extolling his energy calmed him. Casting with his left felt awkward at first, like he was forcing his body to misappropriate its energy, but he became used to it as he held his focus. Still, the motion lacked a sense of fluidity.

"Butz?" he called out softly. The sound echoed through the chamber, and he suddenly worried that he might attract unwanted attention. He had forgotten that there was a good chance there were other creatures here. From what he understood about the desert, the deeper one went, the more likely one was to run into an advanced-stage critter.

"Red? Is that you?" Butz asked.

"Yeah, hold on, I'm coming," Red whispered back loudly. He heard the soft purr of Linx as well, and a surge of relief suddenly washed over him. The feeling was short lived when he finally came face to face with Butz. The falconer looked far more disturbed than usual, like he had just awakened from a nightmare.

"There's something here, Red..."

"Huh? Something like what?"

"I don't know what it is, but I spotted something moving underneath the foam when I first landed, and I could've sworn it was following me."

Red clenched his left hand into a fist and let a wisp of fire surround his knuckles. He vaguely recalled an image of one of the dangers bred inside umbriel — a body of collected microbes that moved as a single organ-

ism and hunted calculatingly. The specimens in the image were tiny, and incapable of higher levels of thinking, like problem solving, on their own, but they were able to come together to rapidly create larger collections of themselves with centers of thinking that functioned similar to brains. The more of the microbe that came together, the smarter the super organism they created. He let the wisp of fire grow into a ball of flame, and then looked around sharply for any movement but found none.

“Seems to be nothing here,” he remarked calmly, but didn’t let his guard down.

“Yeah I guess... or at least nothing that wants to be seen...” Butz replied uncertainly.

“Have you tried sending out a message to the control room from your microAI?” Red asked as he began to do just that.

“Yeah, it won’t work. Maybe we’re too deep? I don’t know. Something’s jamming the rays.” They moved towards the center of the chamber, where there seemed to be no foam, only a vast pit with jagged stalagmites that stuck out from the floor at queer angles. Red took a step into it, intending to climb down and away from the foam for a while, but then pulled his foot back quickly when ripples broke out at the top of the pit. A second later, he realized that there was no pit at all. There was a lake of water at the center of this chamber. It had stood unmoved for so long that it perfectly reflected the stalactites on the ceiling. The ripples he sent out broke the illusion, and he suddenly felt a pang of guilt for having disturbed something that must have been sleeping for millennia.

Butz seemed to be equally surprised but caught on quickly and resumed eyeing the foam suspiciously. Linx seemed relaxed, which gave Red a feeling of assurance. The Aeyz Cat had far better senses than they did, and if there was anything dangerous here, it would sense it first. “Red... what was that thing? That half-man — or whatever it was — with an arm that looked like a blade? And that eye... I’ve never seen or heard of anything like that. It looked like it had a life of its own. Was it a critter?”

“I don’t know,” Red sighed. “I’ve never seen it either.”

“It was after you, or at least it looked like it was after you.”

“Specifically me?” It was a rhetorical question. He knew it was after him, but he didn’t want Butz to think he was hiding something. He wasn’t, after all, at least not intentionally.

“Well, when everyone broke out, it seemed to ignore everything and go

straight for you. And when Raven took you on her bike, it wasted no time in chasing you guys.”

“Hmm...” was all Red could say, as he tried to piece together everything that had happened. “You guys shouldn’t have followed us into the whirlpool. That probably puts you in danger too.”

“As if I’d ever *not* follow my team into danger,” Butz grinned. He leaned against a stalactite and closed his eyes briefly. “This foam thing, it makes me want to fall asleep.”

“I know what you mean,” Red smiled. “It’s like a giant breathing blanket. Inviting, in a strange way.” He felt a tickling sensation at the end of his arm, but tried not to look down. The image of the stump never failed to bring back a sense of shock, despite his awareness of his injury.

“Hah — exactly.”

“But we should find everyone else before we think about sleeping.” Butz nodded before taking out his microAI to map a path to their closest team members — Magnus and S. The two of them were already traveling towards Red and Butz. Raven was still a few days of travel away, not accounting for any terrain blocks they would run into inside the caverns, which meant they would likely have to make camp at least once before getting to her.

“Well that’s odd,” Butz quipped after studying his compass.

“What?” Red asked quickly as he stepped closer to Butz to study the compass along with him.

“Raven — she seems to have been standing still for the last twenty minutes. Her location just froze. And her vitals are... abnormal. Look at her heart rate.”

“That can’t be right,” Red replied. He shuffled out his own microAI to check his compass but saw the same thing. The green dot that signaled Raven’s position was now frozen in a single location at an altitude far lower than theirs. Her heart rate was half of what it should have been, and her microAI indicated that her energy was in flux, constantly dropping below average and then returning to an unusual peak.

“She’s probably resting while practicing energy trance techniques, or something,” Red offered, although he knew how unlikely that was. Butz gave him a doubtful look.

“Well, her vitals don’t indicate that she’s in danger or anything,” Butz added hopefully.

“Yeah, I guess not,” Red agreed. He still had a bad feeling about her sud-

den inactivity. It occurred to him that he had never felt this way before. He could not remember ever having to worry about Raven. There was never a doubt that she could take care of herself, but now things were different. They were out in the wild, and far deeper underground in the Alloy Desert than he imagined anyone had ever been. It was his fault that she ended up here, and she was the only one on their team that was still alone.

“I’m sure she’s ok. There doesn’t seem to be anything dangerous here, besides whatever I saw before, but I don’t even know what that was. I haven’t seen a single real critter,” Butz said reassuringly.

“That could be a very good thing or a very bad thing. What if everything alive that comes here —” A flicker of movement in the foam cut Red’s sentence off and made him jump. He saw it from the corner of his eyes. Something leaped out of the foam and then fell back in one swift movement.

“Did you see that?!” Butz asked.

“Yeah… it just looked like… a moving stream of liquid or something? Was it just the foam?”

“No, definitely not,” Butz replied firmly. “It was a different color.”

“Well, Linx still seems relaxed,” Red said. The Aeyz Cat was grooming itself in the foam and seemed disinterested in their surroundings.

“You’re right. I guess it was nothing,” Butz said uneasily. “Either that or Linx has been plotting my death for years and doesn’t want to jeopardize this opportunity,” he added.

“Think we can we drink this?” Red asked as he scooped up some of the water from the lake with his left hand.

“I don’t see why not,” Butz replied. “I’m sorry, by the way,” he added sympathetically after a moment while gesturing at Red’s other hand.

“Yeah, it’s fine. I’m okay. Sorry for dragging you into this.”

“It’s okay. I always imagined a heroic death for myself. When you jumped into the whirlpool, I figured it was a good way to go out. Couldn’t let you guys have all the glory, right?”

“Hah!” Red laughed. “How’d you get Linx to follow you?”

“Follow me? I dragged that sucker in. Held him as tightly as I could. I already spent too much coin feeding and raising this fat cat. If I’m going down, I’m taking him with me.” Red laughed again, and then followed Butz as he led the way towards Magnus and S. Linx dragged on behind them. The Aeyz Cat seemed to be in love with the foam and its texture, constantly rolling around in it or submerging himself fully underneath it. Red

wondered if it was safe to do so, but then decided it was unwise to try and remove the cat from its glee. *He probably knows better than I do, anyway.* They climbed over a wall and then through a narrow chute into a larger chamber like the one in which Red had first landed. There were several lakes there, all of them bigger than the first one they saw. At the far end of one of the sides was an enormous umbrielfall, hundreds of times larger than any of the ones he had seen so far. The umbriel flowed so powerfully from this one that it crashed into the ground below with the sound of a planet being torn apart. The oversized cataract seemed perfectly structured, as if it was carved into place by the hands of a titan. Red couldn't help but wonder if all of this was truly natural, or if someone had built it from the ground up.

It took them nearly an entire day to walk halfway across the chamber, but when they got there, Red could make out two tiny figures walking towards them from the other end. He felt inclined to run, but his legs could barely move. The exhaustion from two sleepless nights was adding up. Adrenaline could only carry him so far. They were closer to the giant umbrielfall now, and the deafening white noise made him that much more sleepy. *I have to keep going*, he thought, while glancing at his microAI to see if Raven had shown any movement. Her location marker remained exactly in place since the last time he checked.

When he was finally close enough to recognize Magnus and S, he saw that they were laughing as they walked along. The image lifted his spirits, and Butz seemed to walk with a lighter step as well. Linx ran ahead of them to greet S. The cat seemed much more loving than usual. After getting closer, Red saw that despite their enthusiasm, both of them seemed just as exhausted as he and Butz. Their eyes looked too heavy for their sockets and drooped unhealthily below their brows.

"Well you guys seem to be in a soaring mood," Butz said cheerfully when they finally met.

"Yup, it's the flazb," S replied.

"The what? Is that this foam thing?" Red asked.

"Yeah, Karth is filled with it in its subterranean environments. Makes me feel like I'm back at home. I've never heard of it growing in Avalonia though," S answered.

"Oh right, I forgot you're from Karth," Butz remarked. "That's where umbriel is from as well, right?"

"Yup —" This time it was Magnus who replied. "Flazb and umbriel go

hand in hand. In dark places wet with umbriel, flazb begins to grow, like fungus in dark places moist with water. Umbriel has never been discovered in Avalonia though, or anywhere outside of Karth, for that matter. Who would've thought that there was an entire world of it hidden somewhere in the Twilight Caverns?"

"Ah right — I was trying to remember what this place was called," Butz sighed. "The caverns underneath the Alloy Desert."

"Yeah, but we may not even be in the Twilight Caverns, technically," Magus replied. "I think we might be far deeper underground. This place is brimming with Cron. We're probably somewhere near the South end of the desert where the MegaCORP extraction plant is. And I haven't seen any machinery or signs of a settlement, which means we're far beneath the desert's deepest extraction point."

"In Karth, flazb is a luxury. The substance heals and nourishes you when you sleep in it. It restores your energy," S said, changing the subject back to the foam and stretching a handful of the material carefully with her fingers. "It can take decades to grow, and dies out from the slightest touch of starlight. It's incredible that there's this much of it underground right here in Avalonia, and that it's gone undiscovered for who knows how long." Red bent over and took a handful of the foam himself and studied it intently. It was almost too much to believe, although he'd heard of stranger things. It was more because running into a substance that could restore his energy seemed to be too big of a stroke of luck, especially after all the misfortune the field test had brought them thus far.

"Well, we still have to find something here to kill and eat, even if this foam can *somewhat* restore our energy," Butz replied skeptically. The thought of eating hadn't occurred to Red. Every passing moment, he felt more eager to find Raven. He opened his compass again to check her status. *As still as ever. Maybe she just fell asleep from exhaustion. But the energy flux?* His stomach grumbled as he felt the sharp pain of being hungry for too long, but he tried ignoring it. He wished Butz hadn't reminded him they needed food. His stomach had not pained him thus far. It seemed to have forgotten as well, until now.

"All of her vitals are reading fine, even if they're abnormal," S chimed in, looking at the compass along with Red. "I don't know why she's standing still. We noticed that too. I think it started about eight hours ago. She just suddenly froze in place."

“Can you feel her?” Red asked.

“No, we’re too far. I have to be closer.”

“We have to keep moving,” Red replied. “We can’t make camp until we find her.”

“You look tired enough to pass out at any moment. You have to get some sleep. All of us do. We can’t go farther until we’ve rested. If we run into anything dangerous, we’ll be much worse off if we’re delirious from exhaustion,” Magnus said. The three of them looked at him reluctantly but knew he was right.

“I know, but Red has a point. Any moment we waste could make us a moment too late,” S broke in.

Butz began to lie down exactly where they were and wasted no time getting comfortable. He seemed to agree with Magnus’s suggestion, or more likely, was too exhausted to disagree with anything else. “Am I the only one who realizes it’s *Raven Maestro*? She’s fine. We have less of a chance of survival with the four of us here together, *with* supplies and a source of fresh water, than she does even if she were blind and stuck somewhere deep below, tied to a Xenosite hive cluster.” Red couldn’t help but smile at the comment, and thought hopefully that Butz was right. “Are you *absolutely* sure this stuff is safe, by the way?” Butz asked S while poking the flazb skeptically as if it might attack him at any moment.

“Positive,” S laughed. “In Karth, people spend months sleeping in artificial chambers that grow flazb to cure themselves of ailments.” Butz hummed questioningly at her response but decided he would take her word for it.

“I’ll keep first watch,” Magnus said. “We’ll head out as soon as we’re all at least *somewhat* rested.”

“Okay, fine. Wake us if we’re asleep for too long, though,” Red said as he closed his eyes. His body felt like shutting down but his mind continued to race frantically.

“So what about food?” Butz asked as they lay down. “We haven’t solved that yet, and I’m starving.”

“Oh right — you won’t need any,” S laughed. “The flazb will take care of that, trust me. Now go to sleep, fast.”

“What do you mean? You want us to eat it?” Butz asked with a revolted look on his face.

“No, just go to sleep,” S said impatiently. Butz looked like he wanted

to press her for an explanation but instead turned around and dozed off without another word. Red felt the marshy substance seep in through his suit as he lay there next to them, and then into his body through the pores of his skin. He imagined the process to be some strange form of osmosis. He hoped that S was right about the flazb being safe, but then suddenly remembered what they had seen earlier. The thought of something hiding underneath the foam and entering his body through his pores made his skin crawl.

“We saw something here earlier by the way,” he mumbled with his eyes closed. S and Butz were fast asleep and didn’t hear.

“Like a critter?” Magnus asked.

“No, like a moving blob of liquid or something. Have you heard of the things that grow in umbriel?”

“Yeah, of course. They’re called supragens. The ocean in Karth has been explored for only a fraction of its depth, and they’ve already found life forms that challenge our understanding of the firm distinction between sentient and non-sentient lifeforms. The microbes aren’t like critters that evolve from one stage to another, nor like sentient beings. They seem to be able to combine into super organisms that *are* sentient, but by themselves, they resemble bacteria or viruses as we know them. Some of them have exhibited bizarre qualities. Like when they touch other organisms, they turn them into clones of themselves.”

“And that’s only what’s been discovered...” Red whispered. “Imagine what could be even deeper down there. You think any of those things can be growing in the umbriel *here*? ”

“I don’t know, to be honest, but I suppose it’s a possibility,” Magnus replied. “I’ll scout the area while you guys sleep. Linx is awake as well. He can help me keep guard and spot anything dangerous.”

“You always seem to know exactly where we are or what we’re facing. I don’t really know what we’d do without you. How *do you* know so much about the world?” Red asked. “Even for someone who studies so much, you retain an awful lot.”

“Never thought I knew *that* much. I always thought it was just common knowledge to be honest,” Magnus chuckled.

“Definitely not common knowledge,” Red laughed. “After we find Raven, how do you think we can get out of here? Will we have to scale the walls?”

“Yeah, or we can find a geyser. S and I saw one back where we first landed. They’re pockets of pressurized air. The currents are usually powerful enough to lift heavy objects. They’re sort of like reverse whirlpools. I doubt there are any that will take us directly to the surface from our current depth, but we may be able to get to a much higher level of the caverns.”

“All right then,” Red mumbled, but was halfway asleep between the words. He realized that over the last few minutes, the flazb had created a sturdy concave underneath him. The foam seemed to know his body intimately, creating a bed of hard mesh that perfectly catered to the curve of his back. It was the most comfortable thing he had ever tried sleeping on. His mind soon felt relaxed — at least as relaxed as he imagined it could be under their circumstances — and he drifted to sleep while listening to the thundering crash of the umbrielfalls all around them.

By the time Red awoke, he felt like days had passed, and was worried that he might have overslept. To his relief, he saw that S and Butz were still asleep, which meant that he was the first one up. He looked around and saw Magnus nearby, playing with Linx and his mallet. The cat seemed to be paying close attention to all of the human’s movements. If Red didn’t know any better, he would say that Magnus was teaching Linx how to use a mallet.

“How long was I out for?” Red asked, as he walked over with a yawn and stretched his arms out.

“About three hours or so,” Magnus replied.

“No way! That’s incredible. I feel like I’ve been asleep for more than a day. S was right. This stuff is amazing.”

“Yup, it costs a fortune to stay in a flazb chamber in Karth. I heard they want to build one right in Areopa.”

“Good call by the way, on resting. I felt like I was going to pass out before.”

“Thanks, I figured we couldn’t go on otherwise.”

“Raven would’ve forced us to go on,” Red smiled. “I wish she hadn’t overworked us the night before the field test. I feel like things may have gone differently... if I was up to par with my senses.” He looked at his right hand regretfully but tried not to think about what *could’ve been*. It was always terrible to let one’s mind wander down that path. But it was true, if he had dodged that swipe just a second earlier, things might have turned out differently.

“She can be a tough leader,” was all Magnus replied. “Are you okay, after

all that?”

“Yeah, I guess. How come you never offered to be captain?” Red asked curiously. The question seemed to come out of nowhere, catching Magnus off-guard, but Red had wanted to ask it for a while now. “I remember you were captain of your team during our first year at Crest,” he added. “When Professor Kep kept making us spar against each other for some reason.”

Magnus nodded distractedly. “Never wanted to do it, to be honest. Plus, I’m classified as a warrior. We typically don’t make good strategists.”

“But it comes naturally to you, doesn’t it? I mean, the Basilis rule each of the two human cities in Areopa, don’t they?”

“Sure, but that doesn’t mean I want to do it. If we go to Raven now and find that... well... that something’s happened to her that we could’ve prevented if we had gotten there earlier, suddenly it won’t be so smart that I made us all take a rest.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Red agreed. He tried to block any negative thoughts about her circumstances. He glanced at his microAI — *still no movement at all. She definitely couldn’t have been asleep for this long.*

“People think that it’s a great privilege to be a leader, but I always found it to be a burden,” Magnus continued.

“Maybe that’s what’ll make you a good leader one day.”

“What do you mean?”

“I always thought that only bad leaders would think of it as a privilege. It’s more of a duty. You’re a servant to those that serve you, not the other way around. Maybe it’s not a privilege that someone’s lucky to have, but a duty that someone’s unlucky enough to have to take on. And something you shouldn’t turn your back on if you have a gift for it. You’d be doing a great disservice to those around you.”

“Never thought of it like that,” Magnus smiled. His face beamed and Red had the sudden feeling that something had just clicked in his friend’s head. “For some reason, seeing it as a duty makes me feel better about it than seeing it as a privilege.”

“Makes sense, doesn’t it? Anyway, go to sleep. I’ll take next watch,” Red replied.

“Yeah, thanks,” Magnus said as he walked over to S and Butz and settled down right next to them. The four of them rotated guard duty so that by the time everyone was ready, Red had two more chances to sleep. He found it impossible both times around — partially because his three hour

nap in the flazb had left him so well rested, and partially because he felt too guilty about wasting any more time. Instead, he meditated while Butz kept watch, and then took over S's turn to let her sleep longer. It wasn't until they were all awake and preparing to head out that Red realized his hunger had gone. He wasn't full, but his body felt restored, as if all of its resources had secretly been replenished. He mentioned it to S, who smiled in return, and began a lecture on the rejuvenating properties of flazb.

When they finally returned on their quest towards Raven, they found out that taking a break was a much better idea than they expected. They still had a while to go, but now that they were well rested, they were able to travel at a much faster pace. They went on for an entire day, traveling between chambers of different sizes, running through dark caves that seemed to have no end, and crawling through tunnels that were nearly too narrow for Magnus to pass through. When they arrived at a chamber that the compass indicated was directly above Raven, they split into four directions to search for a chute wide enough to climb down. When they found one, they descended to the lower level as quickly as possible. Linx seemed to have no trouble at all, flitting from rock to rock down the vertical tunnel as if the danger of falling was no more than an afterthought.

"Ow, sorry!" Red whispered when he accidentally stepped on a hand.

"It's okay," S replied.

"What happened?" Butz asked both of them from above. "Why are we stopping?"

"There's something down there," Magnus called back from way below. "Hold on, follow my lead."

As Red went farther down, he noticed what had caught Magnus's attention. Down below at the end of the passageway was a bright blue light, too radiant to be the glow of Cron. When they got to the end of the chute, they each gripped the ceiling of the cavern the pathway opened up into, and then swung their bodies over to hang from the ceiling of the chamber below, like human spiders.

At first, Red was sure that his eyes were deceiving him. If he thought any of the chambers they had crossed before were enormous, he wouldn't know what word to use to describe this one. The place was big enough to house a city. Down below, as best he could make out, were hundreds of thousands of creatures, or plants — he wasn't sure — that looked like giant toadstools and swam around the gulf of the cavern like busy colonies

of fungi. Their movement was neither a walk nor a glide as he may have expected, but an abrasive way of swimming through the flazb that soaked up the foam as they went. Floating eerily around the space of the cavern were lone brown clouds of umbriel, an effect that Red associated with the unique conditions of the chamber. *An internal atmosphere.* On the far opposite side of where they hung, he noticed a cluster of the clouds, raining down umbriel below like an isolated storm.

Spread around the cavern were wide spires so tall he was sure some of them could match the super-structures of Echidna in height. He gasped sharply when he took a closer look at them, and after hearing everyone else do the same, he was sure that his eyes weren't fooling him. The spires were littered with thousands of bodies, mostly critters of various sorts, but a few of them were human. They were all securely wrapped up in a mixture of flazb and other fungal substances. Some of the bodies were old, and had already lost their flesh, leaving only the skeleton of a corpse behind. Others looked fresh, recent even. He could feel the fear begin to pound in his chest — *Raven's stuck somewhere here.* A few of the bodies even had academy uniforms on, and Red imagined that this was where most people ended up if they fell through one of the whirlpools on the surface as they had. *What is this place?* At the center of the canyon was a single blue crystal that hung weightlessly like the clouds around it. Its radiance was blinding, but magnetic — a dazzling light that pulled Red's attention away from the rest of the room. Just as he was about to stare into it, to get lost in its radiance for only a moment or two, he heard S shout a warning,

“DON’T STARE AT THE CRYSTAL!”

“What? Why not?” He was surprised at how disappointed his voice sounded. He didn’t realize how much he was tempted to do exactly that.

“I know what this is. I know what this place is supposed to be,” S replied hurriedly.

“That’s an ainmosni crystal.” Magnus said while gesturing to the center of the room.

“Yeah. That blue crystal in the middle, if you stare at it, it puts you into a trance-like deep sleep. Those things — the mushroom things, I’ve heard of them, in a story about blood elves once. In their homeland in Karth, to ascend to their highest caste, certain members meditate in these caves with creatures that are supposed to make your nightmares come true. This must be a cave similar to the ones in the stories. Those toadstool things, they’re

like parasites of your dreamscape. They feed on your imagination by circling you through your nightmares.”

Red stared at her, wide-eyed, imagining that he knew exactly which nightmare he’d be stuck in if he gazed into the crystal. The thought made it easy for him to avoid its light, no matter how tempting the aura. S fixed her microAI over her eyes, and then shifted the device to its vizor mode. Red heard a click as the gadget strapped around her head, and then watched as she scanned the entire room, zooming in and out of different regions. Eventually, she motioned towards the second spire on their left. It took them several hours to climb across the ceiling, careful as they were not to accidentally pull a rock loose and drop to the bottom of the chamber. When they were directly above their target spire, they let go of the ceiling and used an air resistance cast to land softly at the cusp of the tower. Red calculated that he’d make it halfway to the floor of the chamber, if he dropped straight down from the top of the spire, before he ran out of energy (a bearing that can cause death on its own). Every second of an air resistance cast drained exponentially more energy to match the increasing velocity of a fall. A few minutes after climbing down from the top, S motioned towards a fresh looking gap in the spire, one that looked like it had recently been disturbed. Red held his breath as she clawed out its inhabitant.

Raven had her eyes marginally open, with a passive but slightly disturbed expression glued to her face. Her pupils looked cloudy and lost, like she had accidentally wandered too far into a daydream. Red immediately shook her, intending to pull her out of her sleep, but she remained unconscious. “You can’t wake somebody out of the sleep of an ainmosni crystal. The only way out is if they escape their own nightmares,” S said bleakly.

“What does that mean?” Butz asked.

“I’m not sure. I think it depends on the nightmare, and the person having it,” S replied. “There’s a story about a blood elf that feared the stars, and to overcome his nightmare, he had to fly into the center of our galaxy with his eyes open. He awoke only after an entire month, and they say the experience left him mad — always ranting about a place called star world,” she added grimly. “The crystal works by keeping you trapped within cycles of your own negative energy. If you can stop the flow of the energy, find another way to channel it, or eliminate the fear all together, you can free yourself from the nightmare.”

“What now then?” Red asked despondently. “Can we pull her out and

bring her back to the surface? There must be a cure for this type of thing. I can carry her myself.”

“From what I know, there’s no way out — besides getting over the induced nightmare. It’s an eternal sleep,” Magnus answered thickly. “Moreover, someone can *only* wake up while they’re exposed to the glow of the same ainmosni crystal that put them to sleep. We have to wait for her. There’s nothing else we can do.” Red looked back and forth between Raven and his team, hoping that someone would come up with a solution. *The eye comes*, a voice in his head said. The sound of umbriel dripping rhythmically onto the floor below suddenly reminded him of a ticking clock.

“I have an idea,” S began, as the other three jumped in unison with an excited “What?!”

“The mental connection healers share with their team members or those they’re close to, I’ve heard it being used to enter someone’s dreams as well. It’s a method of curing people of deeper mental complexes that manifest themselves as physical ailments. I’ve done something like it before... with Raven, nonetheless —”

“Raven has nightmares?” Butz asked.

“She’s never mentioned anything about them to me,” Red added skeptically. He wondered briefly if they were something she wanted to hide.

“You can connect to her dreamscape? You can help pull her out then!” Magnus exclaimed after the two of them.

“Exactly. Not just me, a healer’s connection can span multiple people. I think I can get all of us there. We can use the crystal to enter into the same deep sleep she’s in so that we won’t accidentally wake up and leave someone behind.”

“That’s risky,” Magnus replied. “We’d be bringing in our own fears as well.”

“It’s worth a shot,” Butz replied. “We can’t just leave her here, and she’d do the same for us.”

“Butz is right,” S answered. “We have to give it a shot. Plus, it will still primarily be *her* dreamscape. I’m sure our influences will be negligible.”

“What do we do then?” Red asked, looking directly at Magnus. Magnus looked surprised to be suddenly given charge over the decision, but hesitated for only a second before replying.

“We’ll give it a shot,” he said.

“How will it work?” Butz asked.

“It’ll be just like any of the connections I’ve made before. It’ll just feel more powerful. Don’t begin staring at the crystal until I tell you to,” S replied. The healer planted herself right next to Raven and dug deeply into the flazb until she was securely strapped inside. The other three did the same right after her.

“Okay, sure,” Red said. “What if these toadstool things notice us?”

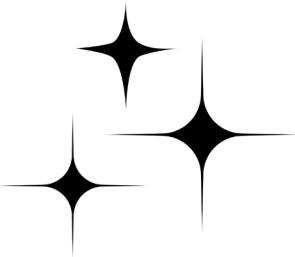
“They won’t feel our presence until we’re asleep. They can only sense you in the astral plane. Raven must’ve stared into the crystal before realizing what it was,” S replied. “And anyway, all they’d do is stick us into these spires, and we’ve already done that for them.”

In the next few minutes, Red felt the familiar sensation of his own conscience meshing with S’s, recalling emotions and memories that he knew weren’t his. He was somewhat used to this, having gone through the connection several times before, but soon felt Butz, Magnus, and Raven as well — an overwhelming wave of emotions he wasn’t expecting. His vision blurred, and he felt as though he were sharing their physical senses as well. *I guess she wasn’t exaggerating about this one being more powerful*, he thought, as he struggled to distinguish between his own sensations and those of his team.

“Go!” S shouted softly, catching everyone by surprise. As he stared into the crystal, Red felt the thrill of his consciousness slipping away for the second time during the field test.

“Does anyone have any idea what her nightmare is going to be about?” Butz asked in a dazed voice. “It occurred to me, we have no idea what we’re getting ourselves into.”

“I do,” S replied. “Brace yourselves, and pray that it doesn’t feel too real.”



GNASHARS AND NIGHTMARES

The rocky interior of the cavern had vanished behind a thicket of ghost white pillars with skeletal branches that extended from the ground like frozen claws. It took a moment before Red realized that the pillars were trees, albeit gaunt and desolate ones that resembled nothing he had ever studied. Each of their branches was finger-thin and shaped into elaborate spirals like the braids of a miniature galaxy. He looked down and saw that his body was waist deep in a pool of slush. There was no solid ground anywhere in sight, only a vast marsh steeped with carpets of black algae and estranged bits of floating ice. The land stretched on like this for as far as he could see — a frozen everglade that conquered its horizon with a collection of eccentric flora. He looked to his right, where he saw Butz, Magnus, and S, all of whom looked equally bewildered, and then up, towards the sky, where something seemed to be off. It took a moment for the question to register in his head.

“Why are Avalonia’s stars so far away?” he asked out loud. From where he stood, both stars were mere specks in the sky, shrunk against a backdrop of misplaced constellations. Their unusual distance created a dimmer daytime atmosphere than what Red was used to. The red star, Aleph, seemed disproportionately closer than its green sister, Gama, drowning the hue of Avalonia’s usual starlight into an ultra-blue tone and rooting the sky into a perpetual state of twilight.

“Because we’re not in Avalonia anymore,” Magnus answered in a dazed tone. “We’re in the glacial swamps of Takis,” he added, while intently observing their surroundings.

“Takis? We’re in Takis? How did we get here?” Red asked curiously.

“We’re in Raven’s dreamscape, Red. You can’t forget that — this isn’t real,” S answered while pinching him. It seemed obvious now that he thought about it, and he wondered how he had forgotten.

“None of this is real,” he repeated to himself. He looked down at his hands. He had both of them. *Takis. Takis.* Suddenly, he realized what Raven’s nightmare was going to be about. The glacial swamps of Takis loosely referred to a collection of arctic wetlands encircling the planet’s equator. The subzero temperatures of the forested region spawned a diverse set of ecosystems with creatures that exhibited an extreme tolerance for cold and acidic environments. Takis itself was the first planet to be colonized beyond the Metroid belt, even before Iris, despite being farther away from the center of their star system. Roughly about twice the size of Avalonia, Takis was too cold to be habitable anywhere beyond its equatorial regions, where hundreds of major cities had formed around major Cron deposits. Some speculated that underneath Takis’s beds of frozen ice, warm oceans could have given birth to underwater civilizations like the mnes of Eaut, but nothing of the sort had ever been confirmed. Like the three other outer planets, Takis’s sources of Cron led to a rapid pace of colonization, and after only a few centuries, its population exceeded that of Avalonia.

“We’re supposed to find Raven in *this?*” Butz groaned. “At least I don’t feel the cold.”

“Don’t be so sure,” Magnus replied quaintly.

“What do you mean? I feel fine, and I’m sitting in half-frozen water. My body’s not using its flou to warm up the area around me either. Isn’t that what happens if you’re in an uninhabitable environment?”

“Your body *is* releasing energy — in the *real world*, because it thinks that all of this is real,” S answered. “Luckily, we’re wrapped in flazb. That explains how people are preserved in this state for so long within their nightmares, and also why Raven’s energy level was in flux. She must be using up her energy in her dreamscape, and then having it restored by the flazb.”

“What happens if we die here?” Red asked. *Should’ve known the answer to that before I jumped in here*, he mused.

“It cycles you into a deeper state of the nightmare,” S replied. “And if you die there, even deeper. Each level a more raw state of Raven’s subconscious, where her fears and thoughts take on more abstract forms.”

“But we’re all connected to a single dreamscape —”

“So you’d get stuck in a combination of Raven’s mind, and bits of ours,

inside the composite folds of all of our thoughts. And if you didn't understand what the fears were because they'd be more abstract, you would have no way out," S added darkly. "And if she wakes up before you can get out, to be honest, I have no idea what plane you'd be stuck in. It would be a broken dreamscape made up of fragments of our minds." Butz gave a long whistle after her reply and then began wading through the mire. The algae clung to his waist as he treaded along, like shards of thin molasses floating on water. Although his sense of smell was off, Red could tell this place had a sickly sweet aroma that combined with the sting of the cold to electrify your nostrils. It was a memory that he had — or that Raven had — that he now shared with her. Beyond that, he could feel a mix of other emotions, a familiar combination of fear and wonder, terror and fascination, dread and curiosity. "Wait! Do you know where you're going?" S shouted after Butz.

"Yes, of course," Butz replied with a pep as he continued. "Haven't you all studied the maps of Raven's subconscious?"

"There should be a city somewhere nearby. Takis is where Raven grew up before Avalonia. This must be close to where she lived," S remarked. Red knew that Raven grew up in one of the outer planets, but not that it was Takis.

"Fantastic, let's just find someone to ask for directions then, shall we?" Butz replied sarcastically. Deciding that moving in any direction was better than standing still, Red, Magnus, and S eventually followed behind him. Moving through the algae proved to be particularly difficult. The substance was much heavier than it seemed. It had been concentrated into thicker and more efficient colonies over the course of many years. Linx treaded through the swamp right next to Butz, but it took a while for Red to notice how peculiar the cat's presence was. He realized, then, how difficult it was to recognize the irrational in his current state of mind.

"Butz... why is Linx here?" he asked curiously.

"And why is he so big?" Magnus followed up. Red looked at Butz for a moment and thought it was odd that he was wearing a white crown on his head, but could not remember if he had it on back in the caverns. He decided not to ask.

"I don't know..." Butz sighed. "Linx, why are you so big? And why are you here?"

"*Obviously* because this is how you see me in your mind," the Aeyz Cat replied matter-of-factly. His fur now flashed a spectral jade green, reflect-

ing the light around him like the body of a phantom. Red thought he had a funny voice, like that of a highly intellectual scholar, but held back from laughing for the sake of being polite. The cat glared at him angrily, as if it had read his mind. *Why didn't he ever talk before?* Red thought, as they all kept trekking across the swamp. *Must've been difficult to have been hiding it for so long.* The cat had a broad and nasal accent. It reminded Red of what elves sounded like, but with a far more deliberate tone. "There is something watching us, I should add, since the lot of you are too dim-witted to notice," Linx added rudely.

"What?" Magnus choked. "Where?" They looked around haphazardly until they saw it — a pair of beady eyes half submerged in the shallow mire, watching them patiently from afar. Linx laughed softly to himself as he watched the four of them freeze in place, unsure of what to do about the hidden creature. Its eyes were small and yellow, but Red was unwilling to bet that the creature was of a similar proportion. Nearby, a wide, curving trail in the water snaked its way to them, betraying the approach of another of its kind.

"Ahh and look at that, he's calling his friends," Linx chuckled. "It looks like this is the end for the lot of you. Good riddance." Red noted that Linx sounded an awful lot like his owner, and wondered briefly if familiars were the ones that ended up being like their owners — or if it was the other way around. *Probably the other way around*, he mused. A third pair of beady eyes approached in between the two that were watching them. As Red and his team quietly turned around to walk away from them, two more pairs swam around from behind.

"Would you mind explaining the dying part again?" Butz asked tactfully.

"Shhh... don't make any noise or sudden movements," Magnus replied.

"Ahh yes, let's pretend we aren't here," Butz sneered.

"Butz, shut up!" S whispered back loudly as the many pairs of eyes continued to hover around them. They waited there, in perfect stillness, for the longest five minutes Red ever experienced. One of the eyes that came from behind soon broke out into a movement, circling around them and coming closer. Red felt his flou seeping into his hands as he prepared to draw for a cast, but hesitated from summoning any fire in case it provoked the creatures. In a slow and heavy pace, the one that kept circling them began to rise from the water, letting its long snake-like body tower above the four of them as it demonstrated its full height. The critter was an immense orange

worm with a thick body and an oversized mouth that constituted most of its head, one lined from end to end with saber-like teeth that resembled skewers. It carried a large, colorful shrub in its mouth, which it cautiously let down across the four of them. Red kept glancing behind himself to check for sudden movements in any of the other creatures, but they remained submerged in the water, watching the four of them with their beady eyes. After several moments of an idle standoff, the creature that dropped the shrub in front of them picked it up and swallowed it in one gulp, then drew another shrub from nearby and placed it in front of them again. Following another long pause, the critter continued to stare them down, then let out a deafening roar that reverberated across the swamp.

“I think it’s calling more of its kind,” Magnus whispered worriedly.

“They won’t hurt you,” a voice came from above them. For a split second, Red thought it might have been Raven, but it was a small boy, no more than thirteen years of age, whose pearl white clothing let him blend in with the trees. He had high cheekbones, a magnetic smile, and a youthful frame. He sat at the neck of one of the spiral branches, balanced perfectly on the thin strip of bark as though he had practiced the position a thousand times over. The only thing that made him noticeable against the pale white tree was his hair — a mop of messy dark strands. He carried a sling around his shoulders, and a gem-encrusted cutlass against his waist.

“Are you sure? Because they look like things that were created to hurt other things,” Butz said wearily. The worm-like creature stretched its mouth out hungrily and exhaled a cloud of steam. Its teeth were so long that each of them occupied their own vertical row.

“I’m positive,” the boy laughed. He jumped from the tree onto the head of the worm and planted himself right above its mouth. He was quick on his feet and the distance he leapt from the branch to the worm suggested he was much more able-bodied than he looked. Red was sure that the boy had just jumped farther than any of them could.

“Are you *mad?*” S screamed. “Get down from there!” The boy nearly slipped inside the worm’s mouth, but planted his feet on its lip and grabbed onto its teeth for support. The worm suddenly stood perfectly still, as if it too was worried that the boy would fall off.

“They’re peaceful critters. They’re called Gnashars. This one gave you a shrub to eat. It roared because it was worried you were dumb and didn’t know how to eat. It was showing you how.” *Gnashars*. Red had done a pro-

file of the creatures before, but he had not seen images of them past their stage 2 forms. The ones in front of them, he guessed, were at least stage 4. Next to him, Magnus nodded vigorously as if he had just heard something interesting in class.

“You can understand them?” Red asked the boy.

“Sort of.... I can sometimes feel what they’re thinking. It’s like an intuition. Can’t say it’s too difficult though, pretty obvious to read what they’re doing. You just have to learn to listen without your ears.”

“What’s your name?” Magnus asked. “Are you from around here?”

“My name’s Wren. And yup, I’m from Rockmire. It’s a settlement a bit far down from here, right at the heart of our swamp. Are you guys lost? You don’t look like you’re from around here.” They all looked at each other hopefully, and Red imagined they were all thinking the same thing — that Rockmire might have been Raven’s home.

“Yes, we’re looking for someone actually,” Red replied, feeling somewhat awkward after realizing he was talking to a figment of someone’s imagination. “A girl... our age, she should be dressed in something like this,” Red said, gesturing to his green and grey combat suit. The Crest emblem shone brightly, and it seemed to have caught Wren’s eyes.

“Can’t say I’ve seen anyone like that recently. I can take you to Rockmire if you’d like, and you can ask around there. It’s a small slum compared to some of the other settlements around here. If you have no luck there, I can point you to Nyle. It’s the closest city to Rockmire.” The four of them looked at each other and shrugged. Considering this was their best option thus far, they could not see the harm in exploring Rockmire. *But don’t forget, the clock is ticking*, Red reminded himself. “We can take Slink,” Wren said, pointing to the worm. “Your cat can come too.” Linx growled softly after the remark, detesting the label “your cat.”

“You can ride that thing?” Magnus asked, bewildered.

“And you even named it...” Butz mumbled.

“Sure I did. This one’s Slink. The two you first saw that are still submerged, are Wriggle and Vesper. The one right there, I just met a few days ago. He’s new to this area. I call him Kraal. There’s another one around here I named Tiny. He’s *enormous!* I think he must be the largest one in all of Takis, but he’s... umm... less friendly. Most people can’t ride Gnashars. They’re difficult to steer because of how quickly they move. They say your reflexes need to be as fast as the wings of a harpie. Mine are faster,” Wren

grinned. Red smiled and walked carefully towards the giant worm, as the other three followed behind him. Wren reminded him of a younger version of himself, and he felt surprisingly comfortable around him. Linx didn't hesitate, casually climbing on to the back of the Gnashar and settling comfortably near the top of its head. The worm lay itself down on the shallow water, somehow knowing what they had all intended, and waited for them to climb the scales on its sides. It had several long tentacles along its back-side, all of which were perfect to grip onto for support.

"They don't mind it... when people just ride them like that? They don't seem domesticated much," Magnus asked. The unusual friendliness of the Gnashars caught his curiosity.

"Not at all — I think they rather like feeling useful and important. Doesn't everybody?" Wren replied heartily. When Slink began to move, Red noticed that Wren was using a cluster of the tentacles closer to the Gnashar's head to send signals to the worm. As they picked up speed, he understood what the boy meant by quick reflexes. The world had turned into a blur of colors as they rushed across the swamp, and steering required a constant changing of directions to avoid hitting trees or other brush while maintaining the same route. More than once, they had made several consecutive turns so quickly that Red had completely lost track of their original direction. He ducked his head low to avoid the creatures that constantly leapt out of the waters, some of whom came dangerously close to the worm's body. He had a good feeling that they were trying to catch one of the humans off-guard.

In the middle of their journey, a creature whose head was nearly twice the size of Slink's jumped out of the water and towards the Gnashar. Wren reacted with a force cast that sent the weight of the creature back into the water. Red was stunned, both by how quickly Wren had reacted, and by the amount of energy he must have expelled to complete the cast. The creature had to have weighed more than a ton. He exchanged a glance with Magnus immediately after, who seemed equally awed by how powerful Wren was, especially for his age. When Slink finally slowed down, Red figured it was safe to look up. Nauseous from their earlier pace, he wondered if it was possible to throw up in a dream. They were in a clearing now, where the water was much deeper than where they had first discovered the swamps. They followed a path that led into a forest of trees and glaciers that looked far more ancient than the space around it.

“You lot are from an academy aren’t you? Are you from Polyneux?” Wren asked. Red recognized the name immediately. Polyneux was a renowned academy on Takis, famous for being the last stronghold for the planet’s resistance against the Xenosites. The hologram he and Magnus had watched of a Xenosite tearing into a bunker was made from footage taken outside of Polyneux. No outer academies existed any longer, besides the ones in Iris, and those were currently being shaped into fortresses for their respective cities. Iris had been preparing for an invasion ever since Takis was first hit. Eaut was the seventeenth and last planet in their star system, and the first to be invaded, more than a hundred years ago. Carnaega, one planet ahead of Eaut, was invaded thirty years ago. The shortening gaps between each invasion suggested that it wouldn’t be long before Iris had their defenses tested.

“No... we’re from Crest —”

“In Avalonia?! I’ve read all about it. It used to be one of my top choices. One of the best, I’ve heard,” Wren replied excitedly.

“You want to go to an academy?” Red asked, feeling like he could suddenly relate perfectly to how Wren felt when he was his age.

“I wanted to... before. And join the Imperial Guard of Takis — to defend my home planet. They say the Xenosites are coming here any day now. I wanted to help fight them.”

“You look rather talented,” S replied. “You’re not having any trouble getting in, are you?”

“Hah — I shouldn’t. I’ve been ranked first in all of Takis for the APT since I was nine,” Wren replied, referring to the combat aptitude test given to children between the ages of five and thirteen. The scores were adjusted for age, allowing for a single relative measure for everyone in the age group. It was used as a way for academies to scout for new prospects. The four of them studied Wren much closer after he mentioned he placed first for several years in a row, a nearly impossible feat. Usually, those in the top ten were so talented they were able to skip academy altogether and receive apprenticeships in whatever corps they wanted to join. Rarely had anyone ever placed in the top ten consistently year after year. To be first for more than four years in a row meant Wren must’ve been a prospect of extraordinary caliber — someone that WEAPON would consider recruiting directly, Red imagined.

“That’s amazing!” S replied. “Why do you not want to join anymore,

then?” Wren looked down wearily as though he would have preferred that S had not asked him that.

“I have polystigmata,” he replied in a bland tone that could not hide his misery. S drew a sharp breath in, and Red could tell that she wished that she had not asked. Polystigmata was a fatal disorder, a result of overexposure to Cron pollution at a young age. While cases were rare in the inner planets (although increasing at an alarming rate) due to tighter environmental controls, it ran rampant across the youth of the outer planets. The symptoms began to settle in at puberty and develop from then on. The degenerative mutation led to a slow decay of energy and vitality, culminating in excessive fatigue, a weakened immune system, and a gradual loss of all faculties including sight, smell, and hearing. In less than five years, Wren would no longer be capable of a cast. In less than ten, he would lose one of his five major senses. There was no cure and no treatment. It was an inevitable and slow-burning death. Red wanted to say “It’s okay,” or something to console him, but knew it was pointless. They followed Wren wordlessly through the clearing, where they saw the word “Rockmire” etched into a glacier that floated near the front of it.

Rockmire was a village of fewer than ten thousand, a small settlement of people who lived in homes carved into the glaciers or built among the tops of trees. Wren explained that the trees — called white coils after their spiral branches — were stronger than they looked and each could support more than a single home. The village was self-sustaining and most people here were either hunters or gatherers, with those of higher ambitions going to work for Cron extraction plants or trying their luck at getting into an academy or a research institution. There were hundreds of villages similar to this one spread around Takis’s equator, each one referred to as a “slum.” The term was attributed to any settlement that was not a major city.

There were no signs of wealth or incredible technology here. The place looked drab and run-down. Red had a feeling that the dreary vibe of the village had something to do with the kids here constantly being diagnosed with polystigmata. Far behind the village lay a mountain range that stretched from one end of the horizon to the other, with peaks that disappeared into Takis’s atmosphere. Wren told them that several MegaCORP extraction plants were located there, and were often the point of debate for many of the villages in the area. His father, he told them proudly, was the leader of a radical group of rebels who were responsible for several attacks on extrac-

tion plants around Takis. They were wiped out while on a mission less than a year ago. Rumor had it that the group had become so powerful, and his father such an icon, that MegaCORP had to deploy a WEAPON to deal with them. The story left Red with an uneasy feeling, especially regarding his own dream of becoming a WEAPON. “I get my strength from my father,” Wren told them at the end of the story. “He was known across Takis. He only became a rebel after my family was told I had polystigmata.”

“Would the four of you be willing to come over for breakfast? I’d like to hear everything about Crest Academy, if you wouldn’t mind. I’ll never have a chance to go. I just want to know what it’s like.” Red was about to answer with a yes, but then remembered that they still had to find Raven, and that no matter how real all of this felt, it was all in their heads.

“Of course!” S shouted next to him. He exchanged a glance with her, wondering if she had forgotten this was a dream. Magnus and Butz seemed unsure as well, but Red imagined they all felt the same way about saying no to Wren’s wish — imaginary or not. They were the only ones that travelled the way through the village by Gnashar. Everyone else floated across in platforms of ice or ships made from the white bark of snow coils. There were no roads or solid ground. Everything was connected by the water of the swamp. Eventually, they reached a small cutout in a glacier that Wren pointed to as his home, and stepped off of Slink and through a path of ice to Wren’s house. There was no door, and the entrance was covered by a giant blanket of fur. Magnus mumbled something to himself as he walked through it. Red was sure that he was trying to identify the creature.

“This is my little sister, Raven,” Wren said, pointing to a fully-grown Raven Maestro who looked to be twice his age. In one fell swoop, everything clicked in Red’s mind. “She’s only seven. She ranked fourth in all of Takis in the APT. She’s quite talented as well, although not nearly as much as I am,” he grinned. “I have to take care of both her and my mother, you know, with hunting for food and other chores.”

“Raven!” S screamed when she saw her. Wren did not seem to think that it was odd that S knew his sister, nor that Raven was actually twelve years older than she was supposed to be. Red imagined it had something to do with the mechanics of how someone’s dreamscape worked.

“This isn’t real!” Red shouted as the four of them began to explain everything to her. She seemed disenchanted by all of it, and before they finished, she replied with a calm, “I know.”

“Well... can’t you wake up then?” Butz pleaded. “We have to get out of the caverns!”

“No, I already would have if I knew how. I’ve been through this nightmare already, in my own head. I feel... over it. I don’t know why I’m trapped in here, or how to get out.”

“Get out of what?” Wren asked. Raven looked at him curiously, with an expression that Red had never seen on her face. It was her usual look of detachment mixed with the impression of a strong but hidden yearning. It was what someone looked like when they were lost in a memory.

“Wren, would you mind making dinner for us?” Raven asked casually.

“Mmhmm,” her brother replied.

They sat on the floor as they ate, discussing a mix of things between life at the academy with Wren and all the details of the dreamscape they were stuck in with Raven. Raven told them that the Gnashars were creatures that both frightened and amazed her as a child. There weren’t too many advanced-stage critters around their village, and the worms were the largest things she had ever seen before leaving Takis. They briefly pitched the idea that the Gnashars were the point of her fears, but dismissed it as too inconsequential. Every now and then, Red caught glimpses of an older woman in the room next to them, someone who looked no older than Raven currently was and strikingly similar to her.

“Yes, that’s her,” Raven said quietly to him.

“Your mother?”

“Mmhmm.”

“She looks a lot like you.”

“These were hard times for her. We had just lost my father, and Wren was just rejected by the Bentham.”

“The what?”

“It’s a test given to the people of Takis. We had already known for months now that the invasion was coming soon. The Imperial Guard had limited resources and to determine whom they could evacuate in case it was necessary, they used a test called the Bentham. It would take a small sample of your blood, analyze it for things like intelligence, longevity, and vitality, and then give a score that measured your overall benefit to your species. If you passed a certain cut-off, they’d assign you to a ship that would take you out of Takis. No one with polystigmata ever passed. My mother was infuriated, I remember. Wren was a powerful kid, far more than anyone else

on Takis was. Even I didn't come close to his level of talent. She said it was unfair that he'd be left behind when he could do more in the next five years than ten other kids would do throughout their entire lifetimes. But there was no changing the outcome of the Bentham. The Imperial Guard said it was the only objective way to measure who would get to leave and who would get left behind."

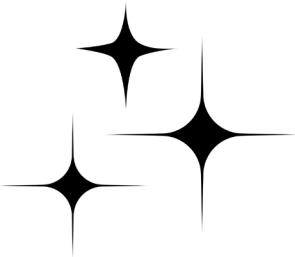
"Did you pass?"

"Both my mother and I passed, but my mother refused to get on the ship. She couldn't leave Wren. I don't think it was a matter of choosing between me and him — I think it was more that she couldn't bear the thought of just leaving one of her children to a worse fate than herself."

Red was about to comment on how brave he thought her mother must have been, but the sound of a deafening horn filled the room. Judging by the direction, Red imagined that it must have come from the mountains.

"What is that?!" Butz groaned.

"The warning bells from the extraction plants," Raven replied. "This is when the invasion starts."



A MEMORY OF HOPE

The village had gathered atop the highest glacier on Rockmire, a plateau made of thick rock and ice where the view extended into the mountains beyond the swamps. The slopes of the mountains reached so high up into the atmosphere that when he saw the army of Xenosites descending from their peaks, they looked as though they were raining down from the skies. Thousands, millions, no, an *infinite* amount, Red thought, fell from the cover of the clouds like an avalanche. The sides of the mountains were filled with other villages, from which Red saw flashes of energy and the fiery collateral of artillery. But the sounds and flashes of resistance lasted only a few moments, seamlessly devoured by the black maw of the swarm as the avalanche descended towards the base of the mountain in relentless pursuit of oblivion.

The rumbling of the ground as the avalanche approached was suddenly drowned out by the same oppressive noise that Red once heard in Professor Kep's class, but this time a hundred-fold louder — a piercing requiem that boded extermination. It sounded as though the mountains themselves had begun screaming. More flashes of energy burned, casts that filled the sky with thunder colored the planet, and the sound of heavy weaponry cut into the screaming of the mountains. But the avalanche never ceased for more than a few moments, continuing its tour de force straight through any points of resistance with sudden spasms of carnage that were so one-sided they reminded Red of the violence in an abattoir.

Then came the rain. They looked like meteorites from afar — pod-shaped vessels of various sizes that flew through the sky in trails of fire and cosmic dust, crashing into the glacial swamps of Takis with deafening explosions that sent tidal waves in every direction. The creatures inside were the largest Xenosites Red had ever seen. *Their most powerful breeds*, he

guessed. They looked to be purposely bred for extravagant combinations of power and brutality. They roamed the swamps as soon as they landed with such ferocity that Red was sure they must have been tortured before they were sent down. Some had strange combinations of limbs: wings which allowed them to fly, fins to swim, and burrowing claws to traverse underground.

The screeching and howling of critters filled the swamps as the Xenosites infected every living organism in sight. Red could not help but think of Avalonia in place of Takis. He imagined what it would be like if every living thing he had come to love and appreciate were suddenly converted into an unfamiliar strain of existence with its own purpose. Everywhere he looked, the writhing of creatures signaled a mass decay in the planet's biosphere. Different species were infected, one after the other, with female hosts blending with each other to expand the limits of evolution while male hosts returned to their hive clusters to begin a rampant process of reproduction.

It was then that Red felt it, the ominous presence of another self-aware consciousness. It was alien, certainly not human, nor elf, nor anything he was familiar with, and sentient in a way that expanded how he understood the term. A vividly perceptive and intensely deep mind inside the dim sanctuary of a cold intelligence, a rational being with a capacity for thought, reason, and acumen that far exceeded any human standard. It felt endless in its depth. If he touched it, even grazed the surface of its thoughts the way one does when recalling the bare details of a forgotten dream that felt like another lifetime, it would overwhelm the contents of his mind.

“It’s the queen,” Raven said as she stood next to him. He realized that for all the intensity of this other mind, for all the pressure he felt on his own mind from experiencing this consciousness that threatened his understanding of reality, he was seeing a mere shadow of a shadow. He was feeling everything through Raven’s memory, displaced from the actual event like the observer of an observer.

“The queen?”

“Over a thousand queens landed on Takis during the invasion. One was right here, nestled just beyond the mountains. They communicate like the gemini, not through words but through thoughts and perceptions. I felt her, only for a moment, before blocking off my mind.” Knowing it was a Xenosite mind, he expected to feel some absurd level of hatred, or an ani-

malistic desire for destruction, but there was nothing there except a clear and concise obsession with evolution and an elegant distaste for imperfection. “*Embrace the purity of annihilation,*” he could hear it say, not to any one person but to the planet as a whole — a single thought broadcasted to all of Takis over and over again. Only a few people heard it, he knew, and even fewer understood where it was coming from. “They say there are over ten thousand now, all preparing for the invasion of Iris,” Raven added.

“There’s something else...” Red began, but was cut off by a sharp look from her.

“Don’t go there,” she said, referring to that spot of black in the mind of the queen, that eternal consciousness that he would never dare look at directly. But there was indeed something else there, and he knew by her reaction that she felt it too. It was the answer to a simple question: the queens may control the swarm, but what controls the queens?

“I understand now...” Magnus whispered. He stood a few steps behind all of them, with the same astonished expression as Red. They all felt the brush of contact with this other conscience, the queen, an experience that felt like a brief intersection with a higher being. “I once took this class on ontology and knowledge. It mentioned something about different levels of sentience.” For once, Red was listening intently to one of Magnus’s explanations, desperate to understand how to grasp what he had just felt.

“Sentience begins at its first order, or simply non-sentience, exhibited by inanimate bodies like rocks and clouds. Second order sentience begins with the ability to replicate and store knowledge in any form. Things like most plants, robots, and creatures display second order sentience. While these bodies may “desire” certain objective goals, the way a program might desire to execute a command, they aren’t cognizant of their desires. They have deterministic wills and aren’t capable of acting beyond their designs. Third order sentience is the highest order discovered among intelligent life in our observable universe, and considered to be the maximum potential for organic life. This is where free will begins. It is sentience that has developed the ability to be aware of its own desires — to be capable of imagining things that are not real and deciding to pursue them, or to be able to observe its own desires and to decide *not* to pursue them.

“And it goes beyond that...” Butz whispered, sounding like he already grasped what was coming next.

“Fourth order sentience has been observed, but not in organic life. It is

sentience that is not only aware of its own sentience, *but in control* of it. Able to manipulate, improve, and alter the core of its structure. While humans are aware of their own desires and have some degree of control in terms of pursuing them, it's a very primitive and imperfect control. We all experience this imperfection. It can be as simple as loving something and not being able to stop desiring it, even if you want to. Similarly, our intelligence is naturally limited by how much knowledge we can retain and the extent to which we can correlate that knowledge. In fourth order sentience, you can change your desires, your perceptions, your cognizance as you choose — altering your consciousness to achieve higher levels of perception and intelligence. This is why it's a breach of Imperial Code to build any form of self-aware artificial intelligence that's unregulated. Because of technology's capacity to improve itself, self-aware artificial intelligence always extends into fourth order sentience, which, because of its unpredictable potential, poses a threat to anything with which it interacts. I've heard that the Imperial Guard, and even MegaCORP itself, use fourth order sentient machines to manage their infrastructure.

And then you have fifth order sentience, a term that's been deemed *super fictional*. We can say that something is fictional if it's limited to our imagination, or something that doesn't exist in reality, only in our minds. Something super fictional, not only doesn't exist, but isn't imaginable. They say fifth order sentience is beyond the ability of third order sentient creatures to fathom, understand, or imagine, and thus, is impossible to exist even in fiction. It is *perfect sentience*, something that possesses perfect knowledge and an infinite will, including objective knowledge over its purpose and place in the universe. A level beyond free will that's impossible to describe or understand for anything that's limited by free will. We can imagine that it exists, but not how it would perceive the universe."

"What we just felt—" Red began, "—was fifth order sentience. The mind of the queen. Or no — a spot in the mind of the queen. I'm not sure what to make of it." Red wanted to ask him more about what fifth order sentience meant, but was interrupted by a single black pod that hurled through the sky and drove straight into the glacier they were standing on. Someone from the crowd had screamed "Look out!" moments before, but the warning had come too late and a small group of villagers absorbed the impact head-on. Everyone atop the glacier scattered and rushed back towards the village, screaming in a frenzy of different commands. "Where

are they going?” Red asked as he turned to Raven, imagining these people must know that they wouldn’t be safe in their homes anyway. A tiny fissure in the glacier began forming, and he worried that the iceberg would crack into pieces before they had a chance to get off. They began climbing down quickly, ready to leap off in case the plateau broke apart.

“They’re going to shelters built deep underground in the village. Everyone who failed the Bentham or were a part of the active resistance settled in subterranean shelters. There are shelters in the cities as well, and all of them form a network of underground roads to allow for travel and transportation between each other. The system had been built over the last two decades, ever since Carnaega had been invaded.”

“You went there, too?”

“No, I go to the rafts,” she said while pointing to a number of flatboats that were rushing down the village and picking up most of the children. “Their engines run on Cron. They’re fast enough to take people to Nyle in less than an hour. It’s the nearest city, and where the ships are docked. I’m supposed to board the SH-4, headed for Avalonia,” she smiled faintly.

“Wren... and your mother,” S chimed in, pointing to the two of them who had walked down and were now speaking at the base of the glacier. Amidst the chaos, Raven’s mother seemed to be talking calmly to Wren, although at an extremely rapid pace.

“What’s she saying?” Red asked.

“She’s giving me and Wren directions on how to survive. She said no matter what, we *have to live*.”

“She doesn’t seem to be crying.”

“She didn’t. I know she did after we were both gone, but not when we were talking now.”

“Did *you* cry?”

“For the last time ever.”

“Are you going to go to her now?”

“I already know what she says. There’s no point.”

“I know but... don’t you want to go anyway?”

“No.”

“I think you should,” S remarked. Raven said nothing but walked over coolly to Wren and her mother. Red noticed that her mother spoke to the two of them with the same distinct manner as Raven — giving sharp and concise commands despite their circumstances. She hugged them at the

end of it, a scene that left a thick lump in Red's throat, and then she and Wren walked over to where the rafts were taking off. *This must be the last time she gets to see her*, he thought.

Magnus, Butz, and surprisingly, even Linx, were helping villagers evacuate their homes and enter the tunnels that led to the shelters, or board the rafts headed to Nyle. Linx had his own way of encouraging people to move faster — by describing what infection must feel like to anyone who lagged behind. Despite being a dream, their reaction to their surroundings was genuine. It was a refreshing reminder of their devotion to duty and what they would do if this ever happened in Avalonia — or *when* this happens in Avalonia, Red thought grimly.

"What's her name?" Red asked when Raven walked back to him and S. Wren and their mother had now walked over to where the rafts were being sent out and seemed overly attentive to a single one that was preparing to take off.

"Heron."

"Did you know this was going to be the last time you would get to see them?"

"Yeah, but I knew what had to be done. My mother raised us to be strong, always strong. Wren comes with us for a while longer anyway. You'll see," she said. "It should come out any second now."

"What?" Red asked, but saw the answer to the question as soon he had asked it. It was an infected creature that looked like a mix between an arthropod and a giant cat. It had claws pinching through its back that seemed like they could snap a man in two, a tail that ended in the shape of a double-sided axe, two heads, and a muscular body that pulsed with energy. Its skin looked spectral in nature, but the light that it gave off was corrosive. It jumped out of the water onto a platform near the rafts. *It must have come from the pod that landed in the glacier*, Red thought as he berated himself for not realizing that the vessel would carry a Xenosite.

"That's not what I saw originally," Raven whispered, confused. The creature's spine had a mane that began to light up from its tail. When the light reached the top of its body, both heads began shooting out beams of energy from their mouths that incinerated anything they touched. Butz and Linx were the fastest ones to react, running towards the creature at full speed while leaping around the village to dodge its beams. Linx, despite being half the size of the creature, tackled it to the floor and then rolled

over to distract it while Butz grabbed onto one of the necks and snapped it into a quick paralysis. The other head reacted violently and lunged for a bite as Butz dodged it by a hair's width. Wren, who was the second one there, dashed underneath the creature from behind it and slid out from its forelegs, a moment before it had a second chance to bite down on Butz, and unloaded as much pure energy as he could give off in a single burst, straight into the creature's mouth. Energy, when not focused into a specific element or force, came out in a form called plasma. It was a rare method of manipulating flou, as the purity of its form made it more unstable and difficult to control. As a tradeoff, it was more efficient and one could generally do more damage using less flou. Red and Raven both ran towards the fight, but it was over by the time they got there.

"That's an infected Aeyz Cat," Butz breathed as he lay on the floor. "How could that be in Takis? Aeyz Cats aren't even from the outer planets. There's no way one could have been caught for infection."

"It's not supposed to be. That's not what I originally saw," Raven replied.

"It's quite obvious what's happening..." Linx said absentmindedly, while pacing around them. They looked at the cat for an explanation, but Linx seemed disinterested in elaborating further.

"Please enlighten us, oh great one," Butz said while rolling his eyes.

"Your dreams are beginning to mesh."

"He's right," S replied instantly. "Of course... Butz, you've had nightmares about Linx being infected, haven't you?" Butz didn't reply, but his look of understanding was answer enough.

"What do we do from here on, then?" Red asked just as Wren got up and began running towards the village. It seemed like an awkward burst of movement, but then Red realized that it must have been in sequence with Raven's original memory. By the time Wren ran back to them, most of the village had left, through either the tunnels or the rafts.

"Raven, I'm coming with you for now. I'm riding next to your raft, to make sure you get to Nyle safely. I'll come back here and enter the tunnels myself. Are your friends going with you, or are they going into the shelters?"

Magnus was the first one to reply after a brief moment of contemplation. "We may as well leave on the ship. It was the way out for this nightmare when it really happened, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, I guess," Raven replied.

"I think it's our best shot, too. You think it might end the nightmare?" Butz asked, turning to S.

"I don't know..." S replied uneasily. "It could be... but if it's not, and we just missed something entirely, we'll get cycled through this whole thing again."

"We have to risk it. Just staying here as the invasion progresses will only put us in more danger," Magnus said.

"He's right," Raven replied. "Follow me. I know which raft to board." The flatboat they boarded was shared by three hundred other villagers. Wren rode next to them on Slink, and three other Gnashars followed behind the two of them. From the raft, Red could see the length of Slink's entire body, an enormous serpentine frame that split the water apart as it gushed through the swamp. Everyone was quiet on board, except for a crazed preacher who managed to amass a small group of loyal listeners and a few small groups of older people that were discussing the fate of the planet.

"He's a shaman," Raven remarked when she noticed Red staring at him in annoyance.

"He's clearly lost his mind. Why is he on the rafts? He couldn't have passed the Bentham. Look how old he is."

"It's not a perfect test, even if it's *the* perfect test. And anyway, he's a Maurak Shaman. They're considered important to certain groups of people on Takis. Most of them *are* mad, or at least half-mad. They've lost most of their senses suffering from too much psychedelisis. But they have a devout set of followers, people who believe psychedelisis is a form of enlightenment. He has, or *had*, this weird igloo home at Rockmire where he collected artifacts. Everyone who wasn't a follower, including me, still visited to hear his stories. They were entertaining."

"Well, sounds better than history class."

"Yeah, and you couldn't separate the historical accounts from the fictional ones. It made things more exciting."

From afar, Red could see a Xenosite that looked to be the size of a small island. He had to take out his microAI and zoom in to confirm that it was a single organism. The beast was of a strange breed. It did not seem to be violent. It peacefully treaded along the top of the swamp as several other Xenosites clumped around its body. Its shell formed an enormous dome against the sky. When its head was submerged, it looked more like a bulging

landmass. Everyone on the raft broke out into nervous whispers as soon as they noticed it. It made a noise like a deep bellow, similar to the screech of its cousins, but far lower in tone and louder.

“They’re nicknamed ‘*planet rippers*’ — that breed,” Magnus broke in. “The invasion of Takis was the first time they were discovered. They’re a strain of Xenosite that specializes in terraforming different environments to make them more habitable for their hive clusters. They use a host of different methods, from releasing noxious chemicals into waters to fertilizing grounds with strange plants that nourish Xenosites. The plants are currently being studied in Avalonia. Some say they’re just seeds of regular flora that have been infected, but everyone’s hoping otherwise. The idea of plants being infected opens up a whole new set of dangers. It would allow the Xenosites to take over planets in so many more ways. They could permanently alter landscapes and atmospheres to make them habitable only by their own kind.” A few other passengers on the raft listened in as Magnus continued to explain how Xenosites changed their environments.

“I thought the Xenosite could adapt to any environment,” Butz cut in at one point. “Why do they need to terraform planets?”

“They can survive in almost any environment, even ones with extremely limited resources or harsh conditions, but the ones they’re creating are more ideal for evolution.” *Of course*, Red thought. He had felt it, in that brief meeting with the queen. *Stagnation is the enemy. Imperfection must be purged. Must evolve. Always evolve.* He shook his head in a puzzled expression as he realized the previous thought wasn’t his own. An announcement overhead said that the raft was going to take a detour to avoid a possible intersection with Xenosites, and that their arrival at Nyle would be delayed. Red tried to listen to the details of the announcement, but the shouting of the shaman had become louder. He resisted the urge to swear at the man.

“THE KYRONS HAVE COME. THEIR RETURN BRINGS DESTRUCTION!” he shouted restlessly.

“Is he confused about the Xenosite?” Butz asked, turning to Raven. “Is he calling them ‘kyrons’?”

“No, he’s in his own world. He’s talking about a story called ‘The Sign of Ikb’Sept.’ He thinks that the Xenosites are actually the return of an ancient race called the kyrongs, a species so devoted to achieving a perfect form in mind and matter that they became cursed by their own ambition.”

“Cursed?”

“They were visited by a deity named Drah’Kar — *The False One*, a cosmic entity from the void that promised them their perfect form if only they were willing to use dark flou, the energy that permeates the void. I don’t know the rest, to be honest, but the kyrons ended up being cursed.”

“You don’t think it’s real?”

“I didn’t say the story wasn’t real, but that doesn’t mean that the kyrons are the Xenosites. The kyrons are supposed to be an advanced civilization. They probably had cities, architecture, inventions. They weren’t... hives,” she replied, unable to find the right word.

“What did Drah’Kar want? In the story?” Red asked.

“Drah’Kar is an entity that tricks people, or sometimes entire races, as in the story of the kyrons, into using the void to achieve their goals, but no one can touch the void without being tainted.”

“But what did he *want*? What was his goal? And what did being tainted mean?” Red asked. His question was interrupted as the shaman stood up and bellowed above the crowd.

“BEWARE THE EVIL EYE!” he shouted. All five of them exchanged a stunned expression with each other as the same thought crossed their minds.

“What did you say?” Red shouted back instantly. He walked over eagerly as everyone followed behind him. *Can’t be a coincidence*, he thought. The shaman had a peculiar outfit, a cloak that looked to be made from the scales of sea creatures and a headdress carved out of ice and bird feathers. He held a staff made from the bark of the spiral trees they had seen in the swamps, and stood on the raft barefoot with the stems of several plants wrapped around his ankles. He had the face of an incredibly old man, and a hunched body, bent and twisted like a tree.

“Worlds will be torn apart, galaxies will burn...” the man whispered softly while waving an ominous finger as they approached. The crowd that was listening to him seemed to be annoyed that Red had the audacity to interrupt him.

“Galaxies *do* burn...” Butz remarked matter-of-factly, barely loud enough to be heard. The crowd suddenly focused on him and the sudden surge of attention made the falconer’s eyes dart nervously around the raft as if he were looking for an escape. “Well I mean... you know... they’re stars, aren’t they? They *do* burn...” he said while awkwardly clearing his throat.

“Please ignore him,” S said to the shaman as he studied the five of them curiously. “Could you go on about The Evil Eye?” she added politely. “Or whatever it was that you were talking about.”

“The Evil Eye... beware The Evil Eye...” the shaman continued cryptically. Just as Red was about to badger the inebriated man for more details, the raft shook violently to steer away from an enormous sea creature that emerged from behind them. It looked like a whale, with a long horn that stretched out from its snout. Judging from its slowly morphing body, it had just recently gone through infection. The creature was big enough to swallow the raft whole, and all three hundred people on board.

“Well there’s no fighting *that* thing,” Magnus said as they all kneeled down to grab onto the floor of the raft as it swerved across the swamp. “I don’t even know what it is.” Slink leapt out of the water from the side of the raft and attacked the creature. The Gnashar’s sharp teeth dug into the side of the creature’s head as its tail whipped around its neck. As Slink dove back into the water to avoid the creature’s retaliatory bite, Wren jumped off from her and onto another Gnashar that came out of the water. He used a pair of hooks to latch onto the other Gnashar’s tentacles, and repeated the same maneuver four more times, using his own flou in blasts of plasma each time he switched Gnashars.

“Shouldn’t we help him?” Red asked.

“None of this is real. No point in risking your actual life. He wins anyway. He always wins. He’s my brother.” Red continued to watch the Gnashars fight the giant Xenosite, but kept his hands ready for a cast in case it was needed, although he was unsure of what he could do against a creature this large. As the whale creature began to retreat and victory looked to be within reach for them, a second Xenosite that resembled a Gnashar, but was smaller in size, jumped out of the water and latched onto Slink, instantly covering the Gnashar’s mouth with its own before submerging it underwater. *Infected*. Wren looked like he had just seen a family member killed. His face was frozen in a look of shock and disbelief. Toward where the raft was heading, Red could see a barricade in the water and a fleet of carriers floating behind it. *Nyle must be close*, he thought. *We made it*. Wren stopped following behind them and kept circling the area where Slink was taken down.

“I wish this wasn’t the way I last saw him,” Raven said as Wren’s figure slowly shrunk into the horizon. Right before disappearing into a blur, he

lifted his right hand in a sign that Raven returned symmetrically. Red recognized it as the farewell sign in Takis. Raven had taught it to him many years ago — extending your palm forward, towards the sky, like a stiff salute, and then letting out a tiny puff of plasma.

“Was Slink his familiar or something?” Butz asked as they crossed the barricade.

“I guess. Wren never went to academy, so he was never officially classified as a falconer, but I think he would’ve taken up Slink as a familiar if he had. He grew up with the Gnashars, all of them, but he was especially close to her. He’s known her since she was a stage 1. She was a gentle creature. Even I didn’t mind her much, despite how much I was afraid of Gnashars in general.”

“Hmm,” Butz sighed as he slowly nodded and looked at Linx. Despite his odd relationship with his cat, Red could guess what he was thinking. The raft docked on a pier that extended from the side of a ship that had hundreds of shuttles lined on its main deck, each one labeled with two letters and then a number. Before Red knew what was going on, they were being rushed out of the raft into lines for a sorting process. A tiny machine at the end of the line pinched your hand to identify you, confirm that you passed the Bentham, and assign you to a shuttle.

“We’re not passing this test, are we? We’re not even from Takis. If the machine uses a universal database, it should technically identify us as seven-year-olds,” Magnus started. “How is this going to work in your dream?” Raven scanned the ship as if she were looking for a solution to appear. The main deck was filled with troops from the Takis Imperial Guard. Most were techies, Red noticed, with mech suits that had huge cannons strapped to their sides. The weaponry on mech suits usually fired plasma in concentrated bursts, and were powered either by a person’s own energy, or crystallized Cron, a form that could store huge amounts of energy with minimal leakage.

“Wait, I need to find the shaman!” Red yelled as he took a few steps back from the line of people.

“What? Red I know what you’re thinking, but it’s very unlikely that ‘The Evil Eye’ he mentioned had anything to do with... with *that* eye,” Raven replied.

“I don’t know...” Butz chimed in. “The one we saw looked pretty evil. I’d want to know what he was talking about too. Has he mentioned it be-

fore?"

"Yes, I don't remember the details, but I recognize the term."

"I want to at least *ask him* then," Red protested. An announcement on board called off the ships as they departed. They were up to SH-2.

"Red, we don't have much time. We can't look for him. We'll miss the ship. You can ask someone else about The Evil Eye, someone outside of my dreamscape. We need to get back to the real world."

"SH-3, departing in sixty seconds," a voice overhead announced, interrupting their debate. They saw a sign for SH-4 at the corner of the main deck.

"Can we run for it, right before it departs?" Magnus asked. Red looked around desperately for the shaman, hoping to catch him before they had to decide on their next move.

"Exactly what I was thinking," Raven replied.

"Before we get on, there's something I don't understand," S began.

"About what?" Raven asked in a hurried tone.

"What are you afraid of? I mean, I understand that this is a *nightmare*, but there seems to be nothing to overcome. Your body *has to* be releasing negative energy in some form or another for you to be trapped here, but you haven't really shown a fear of anything. It doesn't make any sense."

"I don't know. You don't think we'll get out if we leave on the ship?"

"No... I mean... I don't know. Do you know if Wren and your mother are alive or not?"

"My mother passed away a year after I left. I don't know from what, but I saw her name in a casualty list from the Takis Imperial Guard. I don't know about Wren, but he has polystigmata. He would be blind by now, or maybe deaf, and it wouldn't be long before he lost his other senses. He wouldn't be able to survive on Takis. It doesn't make a difference, anyway, does it?"

"I guess not," S replied.

"STOP RIGHT THERE!" a voice screamed. A single techie marched up to them, his hand cannon fully cocked and pointed at Red. Raven reactively stepped forward and placed her hand gently on the hilt of her sword. More techies followed right behind the one that approached them. "What's going on? Are you infected or something?" he asked in a hostile tone.

"What?" Red asked, puzzled.

"Why is your hand a blade? Why does it look like that?" Red looked

down at his right hand, *a giant blade*. It was black and shadowy, not organic and veiny like the one he had seen on the bladed man. Everyone else looked at him with sudden surprise, as if they too had just noticed it.

“When did *that* happen? Red, is this *your* nightmare?” S asked.

“What? No. I don’t think so,” Red replied. If it was, this was a bad way for his to mix with Raven’s, he thought, as he stared down the barrel of the cannon pointed at him. He could see the light of the crystal inside it, an ominous blue like the ainmosni crystal. His hand still felt like a hand. He felt like he could open and close it, even grip something, but it shaped out as a blade. He suddenly felt an odd prickly sensation and the urge to laugh. He tried fighting it, but a smile slowly crept over his face as he couldn’t resist.

“I have orders to shoot anything on sight that’s suspected to be hostile,” the techie replied anxiously. Red’s smile seemed to make the techie more nervous, and he grabbed his hand cannon with his free hand, preparing for the recoil of firing. “I’m giving you until five to explain.” A crowd had now formed around them, watching the whole debacle unfold. S and Magnus both began yelling at the soldier, telling him to calm down, but he continued to count down from five. The need to explain anything had long vanished in Red, and he couldn’t think of anything but his newfound sensation to laugh. His smile broke out into choked spurts of glee, and then all out laughter. *Where is this coming from?* he wondered.

“Four.”

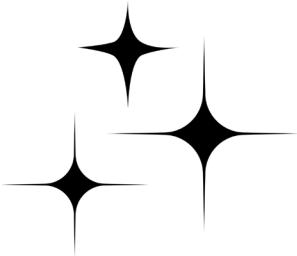
“Red, answer him,” Raven said.

“Three.”

“RED! Why is your hand a blade?!” Butz yelled.

“Two.”

“RED!” Raven yelled. It was one of the few times he had ever heard her not calm. The techie didn’t bother counting off one. Red heard the sound of his trigger click as the world disappeared around him.



THE TRUTH SAYER

Unlike the first time he had entered Raven's dreamscape, when the world around him simply melted into Takis, almost unnoticeably, this time, as Red fell into a deeper layer of her nightmare, he felt the jarring sensation of diving into a pool of freezing water and then sinking below its surface. The first instant he splashed into the water, he felt as though he had finally awakened for the first time in his life — like he had been asleep for all these years and just now opened his eyes to see the world for the very first time. *I'm submerged underneath the glacial swamps*, he thought blithely. *Everyone is right there above the surface. I can go and return whenever I want to.* But he had no intention of swimming up to the surface, at least not yet. The first level of Raven's dreamscape only felt like another rendition of reality, but the world he now entered felt like a level above reality, *true reality*, if there was such a thing. He heard someone calling his name, "Red," and thought of the color. Suddenly, he could *hear* the color red, the actual color itself. Its burning and lively rhythm, its melody of endless energy. When he blinked to reset his vision, he could *see* the sound "red," right there in the ocean, swimming next to him, swimming *through* him. Everything around him felt transcendental, as if the world had finally revealed its true form. He had the urge not to swim to the surface and save himself, but to sink deeper, to peer further into this dream. *No, not this dream, into reality. I'll see it for the first time.* And so he went, deeper and deeper.

Time had shed itself of its linear illusion and he could see the lives of his team, including himself, all unfold from start to finish. Not the details or contents of their experiences, *no, those were irrelevant*, but the way they would shape the universe ahead of them and behind them. He saw each one for who they truly were: the king, the prophet, the key, the betrayer, and the phoenix. Then there were ones that he would soon meet whose lives were

inextricably connected to all of theirs. He could see them as well now: the light, the dragon, the wolf, the conqueror, and the dark one. The dark one he could not see. Red only knew that he was not from this world. There were more but their images were blurrier, and he assumed that they were too far into the future for his present self to grasp. He could only make out a few of them: the defiler, the people's champion, the genie, and the executioner.

He looked up again towards the surface. It was much farther above now, but still reachable. He thought of having to return to his world one day, the one he knew as "the real world," and felt a pang of regret. He knew he wouldn't remember any of this. The experience would float at the edge of his memory like a vague sense of enlightenment. He looked deeper into the waters. There was more there, so much more to be discovered. He didn't have to go back, at least not yet. And so he swam deeper.

Any thought that came into his mind he could explore within these waters. He looked into the last memory they had in Raven's dreamscape, boarding the shuttle headed for Avalonia. The machine that sorted seven-year-old Raven into SH-4 had done so in error. She belonged in SH-3, headed for Karth. He could see the two alternate realities side by side, and their profound differences. If she hadn't come to Avalonia, they never would have met in the orphanage, she never would have come to Crest, she would not have been with him during the field test, and he would not have escaped The Evil Eye. A single error, a result of a shuttle planner incorrectly documenting SH-3's capacity as less than what it actually was, changed the course of the entire universe. That's all life was, he realized in that instant. An enormous web of what-ifs, a giant network of errors and consequences, a collection of paths that connected and branched out into an infinite number of different universes — and a single temporary blip of consciousness that allowed someone to grasp one of those branches from beginning to end.

He could see everyone's fears in these waters, the energy released by their fears, and the parasites that fed hungrily on their minds as they slept. He felt his imagination, his mind, being chewed up and devoured. He could even feel its digestion. But what he hadn't realized before, that he could finally see in these waters, was that the mushroom creatures were only tributary symbionts, that the true parasites were the fears themselves — the terrors that hid underneath the skin of his consciousness, exposing his mind

to obliteration over and over again. They were tiny leeches that infected his spirit with an imitable amnesia, a sickness that crawled into his thoughts and made him forget all there was to live for.

He could see it there — when he was thirteen and so paralyzed right before his entrance exam for Crest Academy that he did not perform at his peak. He could see it here — when he was ten and so contorted with terror after a nightmare that he needed Raven to sleep next to him for the rest of the month. Curious to know how far back that incredible narcosis went, he swam to the first memory he had of being gripped by fear. Something told him that he had to. He was four years old and a strange man clad in dark attire entered the orphanage asking for him. *The bladed man*, this is where he had seen him before. The man did not have a blade for an arm, not here, *not yet*. He looked normal, if abnormally gaunt and queer in manner. He had a deep voice that resonated with the room, dark eyes that extended into a cruel darkness, and a tall, slim frame.

The man asked him several questions about where he was from, what he liked to do for fun, and if he liked the orphanage, and then told him a story that frightened him. It was the first time the feeling had ever touched him — the first time its toxicity ever planted itself in his head like a nest of poisonous thoughts. The story was about an evil eye that possessed people, giving them sight of a terrible, loathsome world beyond this one and then slowly dragged them there. *This is where I first heard of it*, he thought, a memory so early that he could not consciously recall it. The man then asked Red if the eye sounded familiar, and curiously, Red replied yes, and that he found it frightening because he had seen the eye before, in a nightmare. He had seen himself use it before. *Odd*, Red thought. He could not remember this now, yet his younger version seemed sure of it. His response stunned the man, as if he had just heard something too good to be true, something he had been waiting to hear all his life, and then he began asking Red a series of questions related to his nightmares.

“Could you be the one?” the man whispered before getting up to leave. “The eye is locked away,” he said as he passed the entrance of Red’s room. “But it will not be for long. Soon, it will come for you, if you are the one.” He could tell that his younger version was not fond of this man. Before he left through the door, he turned around and asked Red, “What is your name, your true name?” A glint in his eye betrayed how much hung on the thread of this single question.

“Red,” his younger self replied, a lie. He had just recently been taught the colors at the orphanage and what each one represented. He had fallen in love with the color red almost immediately and the word came to him easily.

“That is your true name?” the man asked, raising an eyebrow. He could not hide the disappointment in his tone.

“Yes,” his younger version lied again, somehow knowing that he had to lie to protect himself. *A child’s intuition*, Red thought in his current state, wishing that he hadn’t lost his. He almost wished that he had told the truth, just so he could now hear what his *true name* was. How did he forget it? He always thought that Red *was* his name. But no, the orphanage did not assign names to children who came there too early. It gave them identification codes, and then let them choose their own names when they became older. But he *did* have a name, his *true name* as this man referred to it. A name from a life that he could no longer remember. He knew the name as a child. He could see it on the face of his younger self.

Red suddenly knew what he had to do next. It seemed so obvious that he was shocked he had not thought of it before. He had to swim to his nightmare, the one that had been haunting him for as far back as he could remember, and travel through the entirety of it in these waters. He had never gone through the entire nightmare. He always woke up midway, overwhelmed with terror, and unable to grasp most of what he saw. The nightmare followed no litany of events. It was simply a collection of seemingly random visions that he saw one by one. Visions of the past? Visions of the future? He did not know. He had never seen them clearly. But here in these waters, he could travel through his dreams as he pleased. He could swim through the entire span of his consciousness if he wanted to. But the end of the nightmare was so deep below, and hid something so terrifying, that he knew there was a risk he may not be able to make it back up to the surface. *Would it be worth it?* he asked himself. For a single glimpse, would it be worth the risk of being trapped in here forever?

“No,” a voice said above him, Raven’s voice. He wasn’t sure if it was actually Raven or if it was just her presence in his own mind. But then again, the two could be the same thing in these waters. “It wouldn’t be worth it,” she said.

“You discovered something,” Red replied. He could *feel it*. Something had changed about her. She had let go of something, of a piece of her that

had always been there since Takis.

“I spent days swimming through here to find you. I finally saw it, why I was trapped in here, in this dream.”

“But you’re not going to tell me until a time long into the future,” he said. He knew it already. They shared the thought together.

“You’re going to see it for yourself one day. You’re going to have to let go of it, too, and then I will tell you,” she smiled back.

“I have to go,” Red said, looking back down at the depths of the water. “I have to go and see what’s down there. It’s always been calling to me.”

“Let *me* go,” she replied. He looked at her curiously, not understanding what she was proposing. “You’re not supposed to go — you’re not supposed to see it, Red.”

“You can’t see the nightmare without the eye anyway,” he replied. *How do I know this?* he thought ruefully. “At least not the entire thing. I can only see the parts I’ve already seen, the visions. I only want to be able to see them clearly.”

“You won’t be able to come back up if you go that far in.”

“How will you come back up then?”

“I already overcame the reason I’m here. Hold my hand,” she said. She reached out some part of her conscience, the part of a person’s mind that you felt whenever you held their hand in the physical world, and when Red grabbed it, he suddenly felt lighter than air, like he had been wrapped in a bubble that could carry him to the surface of these waters without any effort. “See? I’m not trapped here any longer. I can leave no matter how deep I go.”

“Will you tell me what you see afterwards? How will you remember it?”

“You’re not incapable of remembering what you see in your nightmares, Red. You just choose to forget them. These aren’t my nightmares. I can look in without needing to forget them.”

“When will you tell me what you see? I won’t even remember to ask you.”

“I will tell you. You have to trust me.”

“What should I do?”

“I’ll count down from three and then plunge in and come back out as fast as I can. Keep your eyes closed. Don’t look. And hold onto me as tight as you can. We can’t be separated or I don’t know if you’ll be with me when I leave.”

“This didn’t work out last time...” he replied, referring to the whirlpool.

“True,” she laughed. “But if it doesn’t this time, I’ll come back for you, as many times as I need to.”

“Where’s everyone else?”

“They’ve already awoken, and so will you. We just need to get to the surface.”

“Okay, fine. Whenever you’re ready,” he said, trying to calm himself. He knew he’d have the urge to open his eyes as they plunged into his nightmare, and he knew he’d have to control it.

“Three.”

He shut his eyes as hard as he could. He had no physical eyes. He was closing his openness to the world, his perception of the universe around him. He had to make sure he saw nothing.

“Two.”

He had to keep them closed, no matter how much he wanted to open them. “You know, the last time someone counted down like this, I got shot in the face.”

“One!” she half shouted and laughed. *She’d hear it. When she went deep enough, she would hear that voice. Someone else would finally hear it,* he thought. *Someone else would finally hear that terrible voice, that terrible voice, that terrible voice in the darkness.*

The crisp impression of the physical world around him told him that he had come back to the world as he knew it. The marine scent of the flazb, the squishiness of the substance pressing against his body, and the sound of something clawing against a wall nearby — all of it flooded his senses, telling him that it was safe to open his eyes. The scenery had turned back into the dim outlay of the caverns. The flazb had now grown all over his body, housing him in a protective shell. Someone was right outside, clawing him out with a vicious impatience. His first thought was that it must have been one of his team members, desperate to finally escape from here, but the long outline of a blade and the shadow of a narrow body told him differently.

Stay calm. Think clearly. At times like these, when he talked to himself, it would be through Raven’s voice, giving him clear and concise directions on what to do. When he hit a wall, it would be Butz’s voice that he heard, cracking a sadistic joke about how he would die soon. His intention was

to grip his right hand into a fist to summon a cast, but in trying to do so, a sudden emptiness at the edge of his sleeve reminded him that his hand was gone — cut off by the thing in front of him. He felt a sudden surge of anger, of hatred, *the perfect emotion to get me ready to fight*, he thought. Without missing a beat, he switched channeling his cast to his left hand. This was going to be powerful. He could feel it. The flazb had not only revitalized his energy, but the dream sequence he had gone through had somehow improved his mental landscape, made him more familiar with his mind, more lethal in the art of utilizing it.

There was much from the dream that he had forgotten, much that he knew he would have to try and remember later, but now was not the time to think about all of that. Now he had to fight. Now he had to struggle in combat. He loved this, he remembered. Had he forgotten how much he loved it? Fighting, summoning casts, drowning things in flames — these were the desires that he breathed for when he was younger. Somehow, he had forgotten how much he loved them as he had trained through academy. Controlled sparring and reading from books had pacified him, dimmed the ambition that once drove him. Winning practice match after practice match by having Raven on his team had satisfied his desire to win. Victory had defeated him, elevated him beyond the primal senses that he needed to survive in combat. But the dreamscape let him reach down and remember the hunger he once had as a child. It let him touch that fire, let it burn him. *What was there to be scared of?* he thought. Why had he stood there in the desert petrified in fear when he knew that he was in danger? Why had he let himself lose part of his arm? His left hand began to glow red as adrenaline coursed through his body. His hand trembled from the amount of energy he focused into it. The flames would fill the entire caverns. He would burn everything from the mushrooms, to their spires, to the chambers that connected both above and below. He would douse their entire city in rings of fire.

The bladed man cut an outline through the flazb and began peeling the shell away from the top. *I dare him to*, Red thought, feeling like the moment couldn't come any sooner. A feline figure shot out from the top of his view and tackled the man. Both of them fell off the spire. *Linx*. He heard a popping noise from above him, someone jumping out of their shell — and then another one soon after. He punched his own shell from the inside as hard as he could, ripping right through the center of the flazb

as he pushed himself out. A moment later, he saw Butz running vertically down the spire, towards Linx, who was hanging on to a ledge several levels below them while swinging his body left and right to dodge swipes from the enormous blade. He saw S run past him, following a few feet behind Butz.

He knew what he wanted to do, although he had never practiced the technique before. He had seen a fire elementalist do it once, a cast that wrapped its user in flames and launched him towards a target like a meteor. The energy from the flames protected the caster upon impact, and focused his energy onto the target when the two bodies collided. The cast could be used both to damage an entire area, or just a single target. Even if he hadn't practiced it before, he knew he could do it now, simply because of how large his pool of flou was. His body felt like an endless source of energy. It would be sloppy and wasteful, but that would be a good thing. He wanted to let out as much energy as he could. He wanted to see everything here burn.

He aimed towards the bladed man, who now noticed Butz and S running towards him and took a defensive posture, covering the front of his body with the giant sword. *Pointless*, Red thought. *You can't block this*. He heard two more popping noises right before he launched himself from the spire. The flames were so concentrated around him that they had turned blue. There were three levels of flames that elementalists could summon. Starting from orange, flames turned blue, and then white, depending on how densely concentrated the energy was. Flames of other colors, like green or purple, resulted from enchanted substances like flashdust and banefire.

The air around him scorched in heat as he shot towards his target. He zoomed past S and Butz, almost coming close enough to set them on fire as well. He didn't realize how much control he would lose over his trajectory after launching, and hoped that his initial aim was enough to rely on. He hit the bladed man with a silent thud, and then plunged with him towards the floor of the cavern in a cone of flames. Halfway to the floor, he was swept with a nervous thought, that he may have miscalculated the amount of energy he needed to survive the impact, but the rush of the drop wiped his senses clean, and all he could feel was the velocity of the moment as his thoughts blended into nothingness. The impact felt like an explosion of energy — it *was* an explosion of energy — and he nearly missed the entire scene by having his eyes closed. Forcing them open a few seconds after he landed on the floor, he saw the depth of the crater he created and a wave of

flames moving outwards towards the sides of the caverns. They died down before reaching the ends, but he was sure he did more than enough damage. He transformed the place into an inferno, but as the smoke cleared, he saw him again. The lidless eye peered back at him through the haze as the bladed man slowly struggled to get back on his feet at the bottom of the crater. *Impossible*, thought Red.

He had burned away most of the mushrooms, but thousands still remained. They began converging towards Red and the bladed man at the center of the impact, swimming through the mounds of cauterized flazb and fungus as fast as they could. Their movement stopped abruptly as the floor of the cavern began to quake, and they turned around to swim in the opposite direction just as fast as they had converged. From above, Red could see his team racing towards him in vertical strides.

“Go back, go back!” he screamed towards Butz, who was almost at the bottom of the spire. A cleft began to emerge at the pit of the crater, quickly developing into a fissure that sliced the floor of the cavern from one end to the other. The hint of a tremor followed, but instead of the roar of a seism, an invasive slithering began crawling up from deep below the surface — an unhinging noise mixed with the sound of slime skidding across a rocky surface. The toadstool creatures had by now, vanished into the walls of their city, squeezing themselves through the cracks of various rocks to disappear behind a bed of flazb. *Wish we could do that*, Red thought sullenly.

“Hurry up! The floor is breaking!” Butz screamed back at him. The fissure had now grown from a single crack to a web of broken terrain. Steam-ing umbriel poured in through the gaps to pad the air with a brown mist, heating the bottom of the cavern with a searing humidity. When Red finally got to the spire, he had to leap over a growing gap to grab on to its base. He looked to see if the bladed man was chasing him, but saw that he was still at the center of the crater, recovering from the collision. *At least I did enough damage to slow him down*, thought Red. He began climbing as fast as he could, skipping every other step by throwing himself upwards with only his left hand. He looked back down — the bladed man was running towards the spire. Something else caught Red’s attention from the corner of his eyes. A thin, sickly green ooze began seeping in through the gaps on the floor. *Now what?* he thought unwelcomingly.

“Don’t stop climbing!” Butz screamed as Red became too distracted by the ooze. The amount of the substance was increasing rapidly and soon it

flooded the entire crater, beginning to leak across the floor of the cavern. The bladed man ran from its touch and grabbed onto the spire they were on, climbing behind Red in staggering leaps by using his sword to anchor his momentum. Both Red and Butz gave a short yelp as they doubled their paces. The goo continued to rise, quicker and quicker every second. Its capacity soon filled the entire bottom of the cavern.

From his peripheral, Red saw the sea of muck beginning to take form like a liquid filling an invisible container. “It’s alive!” he heard Magnus scream from far above them. “It’s alive!” The ooze splattered against the spire as it climbed the cavern with a hideous speed, spreading bits of itself all over the air. “Go! Go! Go!” he could hear Magnus scream. *I’m already climbing as fast as I can*, Red thought, but somehow managed to speed up his pace anyway. Once all five of them had gotten to the top, they began taking turns jumping to latch onto the ceiling.

“Do you have energy?” Raven asked. She seemed delirious, and not her usual self. Something about her was off, as if she had been deeply disturbed. It reminded Red of what he looked like after a nightmare. For a second, he felt like there was something he needed to ask her, but couldn’t remember what it was. “A regular jump won’t cut it. We’ll need to combine it with a propulsion cast.”

“Yeah, I feel fine,” Red answered, surprised that he actually *did* feel fine, and not exhausted. Somehow, he still had a good amount of energy leftover after his cast. She returned a curious look before pointing upwards. *What is it that I need to ask you?* The thought wouldn’t leave Red’s mind despite the blitz of the moment.

“Okay, I’m jumping last,” she replied. Butz, Magnus, and S went ahead of Red, each spacing their jump only a second apart from one another. Butz carried Linx on his back and went first. Red followed behind S, but nearly missed reaching the ceiling. Butz extended a hand that he grabbed onto, saving him from having to jump a second time. Raven had no problem closing the gap with her leap, and they began climbing towards the hole they had entered through as soon as she came up.

“No, follow me,” Raven replied, as she went in a different direction. When they reached an alternate gap in the ceiling, they rushed through it as fast as they could. A moment before Red went in, he glanced back down at the caverns and saw the ooze spiraling around the bladed man like a tornado and then collapsing onto him in a violent splash of slime. *Finally*, he

thought. *Please let that be the end of him.* The chute they climbed through led to a horizontal tunnel where mini toadstools scuttled back and forth as the five of them crawled across. Despite being far and away from the chambers down below, no one seemed inclined to take any chances by slowing down. Eventually, they reached a tiny room where Red saw several fast-moving currents at the center, twisting the air around them like channels of energy. *Geyser.* “This is near where I first landed,” Raven began. “I had to climb back down through that other chamber to get through to you guys — that’s when I got caught staring at the crystal. How far up do you think this goes?” she asked, turning to Magnus.

“I don’t know, but the wider the geyser, the farther towards the surface it’ll take us,” Magnus replied. They spent a few minutes comparing the width of each of the geysers until a soft rumbling interrupted their calm.

“It can’t be...” Butz whispered. The floor exploded in green as the ooze popped up from underneath them, gushing into the tiny chamber as though it were being pumped from below. Raven used a cast that eviscerated the floor with plasma, while Red poured as much of his energy as he could into a cast of flames. He had never seen Raven use plasma before, at least not in a fight, and suspected it had something to do with watching Wren use it in her dreamscape. Magnus and Butz, who relied primarily on physical combat, were useless against the slime. They helplessly skittered across the floor with S, attempting to dodge the goo whenever it seeped to their feet. The two of them shoveled the ground around her to keep the goo from getting to her, and for a second, Red thought they were simply being instinctively protective until he realized they were trying to fix their positioning. At Crest, it was drilled into their heads over and over again that positioning in a fight was always the key to victory — where your healers, warriors, casters, and everyone else was in relation to each other and the enemy. Because the slime was flooding the floor haphazardly, S had nowhere to remain calm and focused. If your healer was neutralized in a fight, the position was called curative-atrophy — the kiss of death for any squadron.

“GO!” Raven shouted furiously at the four of them. “What are you doing? Don’t bother fighting it. Just go through one of the geysers, any of them. Go before the slime takes shape.” Just as she finished her sentence, the goo began stacking on top of itself in loud plopping noises to create a totem-like creature that continued to burgeon as it collected more slime. Without hesitating, Magnus jumped into a geyser and Red saw him cannon

upwards with the draft. Butz and Linx followed behind him, then S, and then Red. The sensation was almost the same as falling, except he could feel two forces sandwiching his body — the air propelling him upwards and gravity pushing him downwards. In a few seconds, he traveled to a higher level of the caverns, where the geyser threw him on top of his team. Butz, Magnus, and Red were all piled on top of S, who somehow ended up at the bottom.

“You’re crushing me,” she squealed as they rushed to get off.

“Just makin’ sure the healer’s safe,” Butz replied. When Raven came through, she was able to maintain her tact and landed gently next to them on her feet. The chamber they landed in was large, but nothing like the one with the ainmosni crystal. A single geyser protruded from the floor of this one, and hundreds of rocks, perfectly weathered into elliptical shapes, were collected among large pools of umbriel. They took their time catching their breath while Magnus and Butz hopped over to study the rocks. Red was about to join them when a rumbling noise interrupted them just like before.

“No... no... no...” Red whispered. “I thought we *left* the nightmare.”

“How? It’s impossible. We must be a tezra or two higher than the first chamber,” Magnus replied. “It can’t be chasing us this far.” But just as it had done twice already, the floor began to crack and a green ooze leaked into the room. S swore at the thing before jumping into the geyser. They all followed right behind her, jumping in pairs of two this time.

“We can’t stop,” Raven said, as soon as they landed in the next chamber. “Don’t stop going until you’re at the surface. Following her directions, they climbed through four consecutive chambers without stopping, always on the lookout for the slightest hint of a rumble. The last room they ascended led to a vast chamber with waterfalls — not made of umbriel — and from the holes on the ceiling in this one, Red could see the faint trace of starlight.

“We made it...” S breathed. “There’s daylight. Solstice is over?”

“There’s a geyser there,” Magnus pointed. “We don’t even have to climb the walls.” They ran for the channel of air and took it straight up to the surface, where the sudden surge of light made Red feel as if he had cleansed himself of a deeper evil from down below in the caverns. They landed atop a shallow dune, and Red noticed that behind him, the sliver of space they popped up from had disappeared underneath the sand. *Odd*, thought Red. It looked as though the space was timed to close right after they exited through it. The five of them panted breathlessly while stretching their com-

bat suits over their mouths to protect themselves from the wind. Solstice had given way to Torrid, and already, the season's notorious sandstorms had begun tearing across the desert. "We must have been asleep for longer than we thought," Magnus finally shouted, breaking the silence between them. The howling of the sandstorm made his voice barely audible.

"Time distortion in the dreamscape," S shouted back. Butz let himself fall and rolled down the hill of sand they were sitting atop, either laughing or crying as he went. Red couldn't tell. Linx jumped along behind Butz, letting the slope of the dune carry him to the bottom.

"I can't believe we made it," Red beamed as he finally caught his breath.

"Let's save that for when we're back in our beds," S said. "I'm sending a message to the control room right now for an exfil. We can't walk back to Echidna from where we are."

"At least we'll have an interesting debrief after all this is over," Magnus laughed.

Red looked at Raven to ask her if she was okay but saw that she had walked over to the same spot they had emerged from, seemingly dumfounded by the disappearance of the hole just as he was. "Is everything okay?" he shouted.

"Fine. We should head over to the extraction plant. We'll be safer around there until we get picked up," she replied, pointing over to the purple beam of light in the distance. Cron extraction plants looked like gated microcities, and were indistinguishable from normal settlements except for their Cron prisms, beams of purple light that extended from their centers. The beams were a result of the excess energy given off from hyperproxification. While it was unknown exactly how much energy was wasted in this way, Mega-CORP made a point to make sure that none of it was redirected towards a free pool of energy. All five of their microAIs lit up simultaneously to confirm their exfil in twelve hours — which Red noted was an abnormally long time. The notification suddenly reminded him that he hadn't checked his progress for the field test since their first night on the desert.

"Our scores!" Red yelled. The pace of everything that happened nearly made him forget why he was here in the first place. Taking out his microAI, he quickly opened up his field test progress to see how he had done.

"No way... 560!" he exclaimed.

"What!" Magnus choked as he ran over to see it for himself. Not believing that it could be accurate, he checked his own score, which ended up

being only ten points lower. Butz and S scored 530 each, and Raven had a 600, which they suspected was a result of initially landing at a much lower level through the whirlpool.

“What does this mean?” Butz asked.

“It means we’re going to Areopa,” Red sighed as he collapsed once more on top of the sand, suddenly feeling like everything had been worth it. He could see the backdrop of the Cron extraction plant as he lay down, the silhouette of a tiny city, and imagined how pleasant it would be to finally return to his own bed at Echidna. After resting for a few more minutes, they took to finding a spot near the extraction plant to make camp until their exfil.

“Do you think he’s gone?” S asked, looking back towards the direction they had come from.

“It looked like it,” Magnus replied. “I’m surprised your cast didn’t kill him. I’ve never seen you do that,” he added, turning to Red. “Didn’t know you could.”

“*I’ve* never seen myself do that, and I didn’t know I could either,” Red laughed. He caught Raven’s eyes glaring at him from their peripherals, but pretended not to notice. There was something about everyone that had changed now, although he couldn’t put his finger on it. Not on the surface, but something inside had changed in Butz, Magnus, S, and Raven. In everyone, except for Raven, it seemed to be a change for the better. In Raven, he sensed something more complicated. Even her energy flow felt different — more powerful, but more raw. *I’ll ask her about it later*, he thought, *in private*. He wanted to ask her about The Evil Eye as well, the term used by the shaman, and something else that had slipped his mind, but that he hoped would come back to him.

“The bikes are gone...” S said as they trekked through the desert. “Ugh, we’re going to have to pay a fortune for losing them.”

“Well, maybe we’re in luck. Let’s see how much we could sell this for,” Butz replied, taking out a giant shard of blue crystal he hid underneath a piece of cloth so no one could look at it clearly.

“What? How? When’d you get that?” S asked.

“Linx must have swiped it while we were asleep. I saw it in his mouth when we were climbing up,” Butz smiled proudly.

“Wow. Like owner... like familiar...” S replied. The five of them shared a laugh, thinking back to the dream. Red wondered what Linx would sound

like if he really *could* talk.

“Good thing we made it out alive,” Butz sighed.

“Did you ever have a doubt?” S asked.

“At one point, when the steaming umbriel came out.”

“The umbriel?”

“Yeah, umbriel is highly explosive if mixed with methane. I thought someone might pass gas and kill us all.”

They made camp at the mouth of a cave a few tezras away from the extraction plant. It took them hours to find shelter, but without their TPs, they had no choice but to seek an enclosure to protect themselves from the sandstorm. It was Raven’s turn to keep watch. The winds had died down from earlier, and Red struggled to keep himself awake amidst the quiet of the desert. He was waiting for a chance to discuss everything that happened in the dreamscape with Raven. The longer he waited, the more of the dream slipped his mind, vexing him with a growing impatience. Butz and Magnus were sound asleep. Only S was still awake. He suspected that the snoring of the other two was what was bothering her. It occurred to him that he didn’t know exactly why he was trying so hard to keep the other three from overhearing — but he had a strong feeling that it was the right thing to do.

“She’s asleep,” Raven said. “She’s just shifting in her sleep.”

“Oh. You knew —”

“I always know what you’re thinking or when you’re talking to yourself.”

“You’re not reading my mind are you?” Red asked suspiciously.

“No,” she smiled. “I can just tell.”

He debated how to go about the conversation, and then decided to jump right in. He wasn’t fully sure what he intended to ask or find out, but he had a feeling she did. “Do you remember what the shaman mentioned? The Evil Eye?”

“Yes, but I don’t remember anything about it. From my childhood, I mean. I remember him mentioning it before, but none of the context.”

“It’s a part of that story you mentioned —”

“The Sign of Ikb’Sept. Yeah, but I already told you everything I knew about the story, just the part about the kyrons.”

“Is that the entire story? But what’s Ikb’Sept then?”

“It’s a who — and I don’t know,” she sighed. It sounded genuine, but

Red had a feeling she was lying, or at least omitting a small detail. Oddly enough, he also had a feeling that she knew that he could *tell* she was lying.

“Well is there *anything* you could tell me about the dreamscape? I remember falling into a second dream and... swimming through my own mind. I can’t describe it, and I forgot most of what I went through, but I know it’s something I want to remember. I don’t know if I forgot what happened, or if my mind just can’t make sense of it now. I feel like... it was the happenings of my subconscious and somehow... I was able to go down there myself.”

“Want to see something cool?” she asked casually, getting up to walk out of the cave.

“Are we leaving them here?”

“I left a shield cast above the area a few hours ago. It should still hold strong. Either way, I’ll sense it if it breaks.”

“I still want to talk about the dreamscape. There’s something about it at the tip of my mind that I keep trying to remember, but I can’t,” Red protested, suspicious that she was trying to change the subject. “And, somehow everything feels different. *Everyone* feels different I mean. Butz, Magnus, S, even you. I feel it. *Especially you*, actually.”

“I didn’t say we weren’t going to,” Raven replied. It irked him how calm her tone was, not for any particular reason, but because of its disparity with his own sense of urgency. He realized it was nothing new. He felt this way often — it was the same when he tried to tell her she belonged in WEAPON even if he didn’t make it, and when she stubbornly insisted that they have a punishing practice session only a day before their field test. Outside of the cave, he could hear the distant whir of the extraction plant skirling against the quiet of the wind. They attached their microAIs over their heads as vizors to keep the sand from getting into their eyes. The storm had calmed enough to limit the need to stretch their combat suits, but its breeze still carried bits of metal sand with it. The fabric of combat suits was made out of noirtex, an elastic dark grey material that could be stretched into new shapes. If they ever needed to, they could stretch the hem of their necks over their entire heads to create a makeshift hood or a facemask.

“Where are we going?” Red asked. Raven didn’t respond. “We can’t go too far from the cave,” he relented after a few more minutes.

“Right there,” she said, pointing to a dune nearby. When he got to the

top of it, he could see the expanse of barren land surrounding the extraction plant. A single Ignot Gila roamed the desert a few tezras away from them, stranded from its drove. “Have you ever tried looking at the sky with your vizor in its fermi mode?”

“No. The sky is irrelevant. It doesn’t affect my life,” he replied, hoping the irony of his response would catch on to her.

“Do it,” she replied. He reluctantly followed, wondering what she could possibly want to show him. The sky was empty, just like the desert, except for the glimmer of its stars. *And there's no Ignot Gila*, he mused. *That's something Butz would say.* “Put it on magnitude nine, and then look this way,” she said, gesturing towards a familiar constellation. He did; the cover of black disappeared into what looked like a rainbow cloud. He zoomed in further, magnitude ten. The cloud turned into a splash of colors, an assortment of every dye painted against a canvas of stellar constellations.

“What do you feel, looking at it?” Raven asked.

“I don’t know.... Awe?” Red replied.

“Just awe?”

“Yeah, I guess. What else am I supposed to feel? What am I looking at?”

“It’s the birth of a supernova.”

“Is it happening now?”

“What you’re looking at happened thousands and thousands of years ago. The light just takes that long to reach us.” It *was* amazing, he thought, but his mind was too occupied to fully appreciate it. “I first saw it when I went to Areopa last year. I had nothing to do during the qualifiers, and stargazing is a famous hobby in their city,” she added.

“It’s beautiful. Like a rainbow bursting in the sky.” It really was, he thought, but he wasn’t in a mood to marvel at nature’s miracles.

“It’s from your dreams — your nightmares,” Raven said, after a long pause.

“What?” The words threw him off.

“I went down there. You asked me to, in the second level of the dreamscape. I went down to your nightmares. You wanted to go there yourself, but it was too dangerous for you. You made me promise to tell you what I saw. That’s what’s been bothering you. Red, it’s like a collection of visions. I couldn’t make sense of any of them. There were hundreds. It felt like an eternity going through each one, but when I woke up, the whole dream had collapsed into one quick moment. I still remember some of them, maybe

clearer than you do, but I don't know what they mean. I know you were expecting more, but that's all I have."

"You saw a supernova?"

"No, more than that. I saw... I saw the star. I saw it dying, being *killed*, if that makes any sense, and then I saw it turning into a supernova."

"What else did you see?"

"I don't know.... I saw... a lot. But I can't describe any of it. You told me you wanted to go down there to see for yourself, and I insisted you let me go instead because there was a chance you wouldn't be able to come back up if you went. I thought it would be like my own dreamscape, and that I'd recall it all as a memory, but it wasn't. I think I was in another world. I don't mean like a dream, just... another world entirely. Does that make sense?"

"It does," Red sighed. "That's how I feel, too, when I'm in the nightmare. You can't remember anything else?"

"There was a place. It was important to you. I don't know if it was from your childhood or from something else. I don't know where your dreams are coming from, or why you're dreaming about these things, but I think it's more significant than you think. I think they have something to do with why that bladed man is chasing you. And the eye on the blade... I don't know what The Evil Eye is, and why it's mentioned in so many of the stories I've heard as a child, but Red, I have a feeling that *was* The Evil Eye. It's more than a feeling actually. I just know. I just know from your dreams. The same way *you* do."

"Did you see it in my dreams? The eye?"

"I did, but it wasn't an eye. It was a part of you. In this other world, things aren't... *things*." Red took a sharp breath in, uncertain of what to make of all of it, but at the same time feeling like he had at least made some progress in decoding his nightmares. "There's something else, Red."

"The *voice*."

"The voice." He wasn't sure what to ask her about it, if anything at all. Hearing it was enough. It was like a whisper from the deepest recess of his mind, but one without any meaning or sense. He gazed up at the sky again, looking at the supernova, seeing if it brought anything out of him. There *was* a sense of *déjà vu* there. He had felt the same way when he first saw the eye on the bladed man, but there was nothing more. "Did you see yourself there?" Red asked.

“Myself?”

“Sometimes, I see you. Or I think I see you. Not in the way that I’ll see someone in a dream, but in my nightmares, as something else from that other world.” She turned to face another direction, as if to intentionally let him know that she was going to lie.

“No,” she said, blandly. The sound of the wind filled the long pause between them. She was leaving something out; he knew.

“What do you feel?” he finally asked. He felt slightly bad for being rude to her earlier. She had only been contemplating everything in the dreamscape to figure out how to explain it to him. “When you look at the supernova, what do you feel?”

“Insignificant,” she said after a moment of staring at the nova.

“Insignificant?”

“Since the Xenosite invasion a hundred and thirty years ago, imagine how much activity there’s been across our star system. From training in academies to all-out war in the outer planets. It’ll all continue for who knows how many more centuries, probably for long after we’re gone. Inflection, evolution, survival, so much is happening now, so much that we don’t understand. If we use energy as a measure of how much is happening out there, it would be at an all-time peak for all sentient life, I bet. Our own lives, the total amount of energy we breathe into the world, are just specks of nothing compared to everything happening out there. But what you’re looking at now, the birth of this supernova, releases about six trillion times *per second* all the energy consumed and produced in our star system since the beginning of life.”

“Imagine if we were a bit closer. It’d probably be much hotter there.”

“Yeah, imagine,” she laughed. “Let’s get back to the cave. You need rest. Our debrief is going to be painful. Our exfil shouldn’t be taking this long. That means a lot of people were stranded after their field tests, or there were a lot of injuries.”

They walked back to the cave where Red had difficulty sleeping, pondering everything she said. When he finally got to sleep, he entered his own dreamscape, which he welcomed because it was absent of the angst he felt during his usual nightmares. The dream was clear and lucid. It felt more like his mind had simply travelled to another place in the astral plane. He was on top of a cloud, and an enormous figure made out of light slowly approached him.

“I have the answers you seek,” it told Red. It was a woman’s voice, powerful and illuminating.

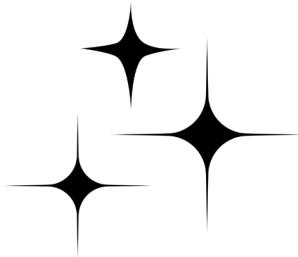
“Who are you?” Red asked. “What answers? How did you find me?”

“I have been looking for you all my life,” the figure replied. “A life that spans millennia. I found you when you finally revealed yourself in your dreamscape. I am The Truth Sayer. Come to me, and I will tell you everything you want to know. Everything about who you are, and your purpose. How you can end the Xenosite invasion, why you have your nightmares, and why The Evil Eye seeks you.”

“Where are you? How can I find you?”

“I am where you are going next. The city in the sky. You do not have to find me. I will find *you*.” From a far distance, another figure approached. It looked like a black cloud with crystals of different colors swirling all around it.

“*You must wake up now! Leave this place!*” The Truth Sayer said, her voice suddenly turning into an urgent whisper. “*Something wicked comes this way.*”



THE CITY IN THE SKY

“Is it awake?” Red asked while staring out of the wyvern. The transport ship’s viewing deck was crowded with passengers who had been keeping themselves up for more than a day to avoid missing their chance to see Titanamedusae. The ship’s AI had announced the possibility of spotting the creature since they had entered Nagya, the land of the tree elves.

“It’s rare to find it awake. Don’t get your hopes up,” Magnus replied. They had been afloat for nearly three days now, flying above cities, oceans, canyons, and mountains that mystified Red’s imagination and expanded his take on how vast the world was. There were ships that could take them to Areopa faster, in a matter of hours even, but both Red and S had insisted that they take a slower route. Neither of them had seen much of Avalonia. Red felt particularly adamant about it, feeling that he had an obligation to see as much of his home planet as possible.

“Arghhh,” Red groaned. “I wish we could do something to wake it.”

“Titanamedusae is not something you *want* to wake, at least not while you’re near it,” Magnus replied. “Anyway, relax, we’ve already seen a ton of amazing things. So what if we miss out on one or two of Avalonia’s wonders?” Red gave him a look of shock and disgust, as if suggesting they miss out on anything were a heinous crime.

“Look, it says here that many sects of tree elves devote their entire lives to studying and worshipping Titanamedusae,” S said as she read off of a panel on the side of the ship. “Its elvish name roughly translates to ‘Guardian of Avalonia.’ Roughly, because the elves have six different words for ‘guardian,’ each one denoting an entirely different meaning in their language. Isn’t that amazing? It really shows how much deeper they relate to the concept.”

“Blah blah blah... I just wanna see this thing in action — tearing apart a

city or something. I think Red is right. Somebody should find a way to wake it. They could let it loose in a major city like Echidna and record the whole thing,” Butz muttered with a hungry gleam in his eyes. “Can you imagine how popular that hologram would be? It would get a trillion views in a matter of minutes, I bet.”

“Well... I don’t know about letting it lose in Echidna...” Red began, unsure if Butz was being sarcastic or not. “But I *was* really looking forward to seeing it.”

S rolled her eyes at them as she continued to read from the panel. “Titanamedusae is infamous for starting tsunamis whenever it takes flight. Its wingspan is so enormous that the tree elves have their own word for eclipses caused by the creature’s presence in the sky. It has not been seen flying, or outside of Nagya, for more than a hundred years. Its last known departure from its natural habitat occurred in 243527 A.G., when it flew to Indapia in a seemingly random episode of aggression and leveled the city with a windstorm. The mystic elves insisted that something must have been happening in Indapia that was threatening the well-being of Avalonia, although no such hypothesis has ever been confirmed.”

There was a sudden stir in the crowd as Red saw everyone rush to the other side of the viewing deck. “What’s going on?” he mumbled, imagining that what he was hoping for was too good to be true.

“No way...” Magnus whispered right next to him.

“Is that it?” S asked. Far and away from the top of the viewing deck, in line with the horizon, Red could see seven long heads stretching out from the ocean next to Nagya and disappearing into the clouds. Each head was so long, they could individually classify as the largest creature Red had ever seen. Despite their impassable lengths, they were broad in diameter as well, replacing the usual fragility apparent in serpentine shapes with a bulky and colossal semblance. The size of the creature, without seeing its submerged body, was so godly and imposing in naked view that Red could no longer feel his own energy level in its presence.

“Can you feel it?” he asked, turning to Magnus.

“I feel like I’m sensing the power of a mountain or an ocean. It’s impossible to make sense of, and we’re still so far. I can’t feel anyone in the viewing deck anymore. It’s as if we’ve all just become specks of light next to a star. Titanamedusae, The Lizard Queen Hydra, Guardian of Avalonia. The most powerful creature discovered on our planet is in front us...”

Red paused for a moment, admiring the creature in a dazed wonder before replying. “Isn’t it strange that we struggle all of our lives to break our limits, to realize higher and higher ranks of power — when there’s this creature here that sleeps all day and idly grazes the forests of Nagya that’s capable of things we could never dream of? Who wields a power that can terrorize planets, and will forever only treat us like insects — little annoyances that need to be exterminated here and there to keep its own habitat in check? If I lived my life out in Nagya, I *would* think that this was a deity. Who could imagine that there was anything more powerful than it? Just *look* at it. Imagine seeing it close up.”

“But there *are*,” Raven broke in as she walked up next to them. “There are things that would make even Titanamedusae look like a speck of water in an ocean. Maybe we’ll get to see one of them — if we ever go to Eaut.”

“*The Leviathan...*” Magnus whispered, saying the word as if it were forbidden to do so. The thought made Red’s head spin. The mere shadow of such creatures crowned his race with an epithet of insignificance. They were tyrants of creation, forces of entity and matter that could bury entire worlds in deluges of destruction. He had heard that when The Leviathan takes breath, the whole of Eaut gasps from the sudden shortage of air. That when one even *attempts* to sense the creature’s power, they are instantly driven mad by its touch. That it may sleep for decades at a time, waking only to gorge in feasts that translate into cycles of mass extinction. That the mind of the creature retains an intelligence so frightening, it would make humans question themselves as thinking creatures, a hunger so vast, it could be compared to those irrevocable blackbodies that consume space-time beyond their horizons of gravity, and a life so ancient, the stars could not remember seeing it as a child.

After a short announcement by the wyvern’s AI on Titanamedusae’s sudden visibility through the ship’s eastern viewing deck, they began steering upwards, covering the dialite windows of the ship in a stratus of clouds. The drum of the wind against the glass compound was so loud, Red was amazed it didn’t shatter, although he knew better than imagining it would. Dialite, like bio-iron, was a durable compound made out of bacteria capable of re-growing itself to fix cracks and fissures. The screen of their microAIs was made out of the same material. “Oh, we’re almost there,” Magnus remarked.

“What? Areopa is this close to Nagya?” Red squirmed, unable to hide

his discomfort. The change in movement as the ship steered upward was so fast that his stomach tumbled into itself in a wave of nausea. The absence of his hand made it harder for him to balance his body, an effect of having a slightly heavier left side. He was noticing more and more of these nuances since adjusting to life after his injury. Thankfully, he wouldn't have to suffer through them for much longer. He planned to get a syntechdage installed during their first week in Areopa to give himself enough time to become comfortable with it before their qualifiers. S had suggested that he get it installed back at Echidna, but he was too impatient about getting to Areopa. *About finding The Truth Sayer*, he reminded himself.

"Areopa is *on top* of Nagya. It's just really, really high up," Magnus replied. Red went back to staring out of the viewing deck, hoping to get a clear glance at the heads of Titanamedusae somewhere through the clouds, but the density of the overcast only intensified as they went higher. Most of the passengers were now shuffling aboard the main deck — gathering their belongings or readying themselves to land. As the ship continued to rise higher and higher, Red noticed that the clouds had become so thick that it looked as though they could be grabbed and twisted into different shapes.

"Is Areopa naturally made, or is it an artificial city?" he asked Magnus.

"What do you mean? Cities aren't natural."

"No, I know. I mean, the clouds and the terrain. Is that part natural, or was it created by one of the races in Areopa? Someone had to have imbued the clouds with a cast or something to turn them into solid structures."

"I don't know actually. Could be the felions or the elves who created it. Good question. I'll ask someone in Areopa," Magnus replied. "All right, so I need to fill you guys in on a couple of things before we land, and S wanted to hear a bit about my family history and Areopa in general," Magnus continued, now turning to everyone and waving his hands as though he were beginning an important presentation. S silently clapped along with eager eyes as Magnus opened up a hologram of a bulleted list on his microAI.

"So, first, a bit about Areopa's governing system. The two human cities are ruled by my family, the Basils, but under two different lines. My grandfather is the current king of Nimbus. My own line rules the other human city. My mother is the queen of Alto."

"What about your father? Isn't he the king of Alto?" S interrupted.

"No. Under Areopa's customs, only someone directly related to the royal family can rule. You can't marry into it. Your offspring are of royal birth-

right, but your own status doesn't change. People married to someone in the royal family are referred to as sky consorts. The same idea applies to last names in the royal family. If you have a royal last name, it's an eternal bond. My mother takes my grandfather's name, and I take my mother's name."

"Interesting..." S mumbled, her eyes dazzling as if she were imagining what it would be like to be a princess of eminence. She was from a wealthy family in Karth, but Red could understand her veneration for true royalty. The perishability of plain material wealth always seemed to highlight itself in the presence of power leavened with a divine quality.

"The palace at Alto is currently being rebuilt, so we're staying at The Empyrean Alcazar in Nimbus. All you need to know is that it's much, much bigger than it looks — so do try and not get lost. Oh, and we're going to be staying with a lot of guests. The place is big enough that you probably won't run into many of them. Right now there are going to be people from MegaCORP, a group called The Priori of Light, and several other royal families and guests who have come to see the qualifiers."

"I didn't know the qualifiers were that big," Red confessed. "What's The Priori of Light?"

"The qualifiers are huge. Each inner planet has its own yearly qualifiers, but the one for Avalonia is especially large, and one of the most entertaining. The Priori of Light... I'm not really sure how to explain what they are. I'm surprised you haven't heard of them. They're somewhat of an infamous group. They're here to present something about the Xenosites, but I don't know the details. The order is dedicated to fighting the presence of the void in our world, a pretty vague goal that can give them a wide reach over our star system. They tend to meddle in affairs that don't have anything to do with them. My uncle tells me that their real goal is to gain influence over Areopa, and that he's skeptical about their true objectives and their overly zealous beliefs. The Priori itself is very old. No one knows how long they've been around for, and the majority of their group exists beyond our star system. They're very secretive about their goals and customs, a practice that makes them rather unpopular among the places they visit."

"You don't know anything at all about what they're going to be presenting? If it's about the Xenosites, is it something we can come watch too?" Red asked.

"Of course. I was going to drag you guys there anyway. The presentation will be at an ociramma. It's a social event that's long been a custom of

Nimbus. They're always boring from what I can remember from childhood. There will be a lot of guests in attendance though, and you'll get to meet people from MegaCORP and other places of interest," Magnus replied. "Now, second, while the Empyrean Alcazar has thousands of rooms, ours ended up right next to my uncle's, or the heir to the throne of Areopa. Can't be a coincidence. I have a feeling he did it on purpose. He probably wants to try and convince me to take his place again."

"To take his place? As King of Nimbus?!" S laughed.

"Yup, my uncle hates the idea of ruling. He's always trying to convince *me* specifically to take his spot, not even any of my older brothers," Magnus replied proudly. "Not sure why, but probably because I've always been his favorite relative. We share many of the same interests. Since we're right next to him, we'll be running into him fairly often during our stay there. Be warned... my uncle is a... peculiar figure. He's young, and rather eccentric."

"In what way?" S asked worriedly.

"Probably in the regular way. He's not very many years old," Butz replied, in the most sincere tone he could manage.

"No... not in what way is he young, *genius*. I mean in what way is he eccentric?"

"Oh, no, he's not going to trouble us or anything. At least, I'm pretty sure he won't," Magnus laughed. "He's just very... odd. You have to see for yourself. My family has always said that it was a result of his mind. He has an extremely overactive brain, and is rather brilliant in many ways. He's an expert on many random subjects, although ignorant of many of the more popular ones. He's only about a decade older than us."

"What does he do?" Raven asked suspiciously.

"He has many of his own projects. They usually have something to do with creatures, drugs, or one of the sciences. He's written books on topics ranging from combat to the anatomy of marine critters. You guys may find some of his works interesting, especially the ones about combat. They'll be at the Alcazar if you want to take a look," Magnus replied. "Now third, a quick timeline of our schedule. The ociramma is tomorrow, so the Alcazar will be bustling with activity until then. After that, we have a good enough amount of time to look around Areopa and train. We can go anywhere, except for the blood elf city. Humans are... not too welcome there."

"We have a feud with them?" Red asked.

"No, we're just their food," Magnus replied.

“They eat humans?!”

“Technically they don’t *eat* humans. They drink them,” Butz replied.

“Why do you think they call them blood elves? They drain the blood of other creatures for energy.”

“Well yeah, but I thought they ate critters or something,” Red gasped.

“They *do*, most of the time, but anyone that ends up in blood elf territory is game for them. That includes me,” Magnus said. “It would be best to avoid that city entirely. Sometimes blood elves will sneak into Nimbus or Alto during the night and try and feed there, or steal people back to their dens in Sanguine City. You always have to be careful if you’re roaming the less guarded parts of Areopa. You’ll be safe in the Alcazar though.”

“What do you mean they come at night? They only come during solstice? Or is there night and day in Areopa?” Butz asked.

“Technically there’s only day in Areopa, just like any other part of Avalon, but the city has an artificial lighting and weather system that creates a regular day and nighttime in the human cities. Nighttime is exactly what solstice is like, pitch black except for scattered lights,” Magnus replied.

“Okay, got it,” S replied sharply. Red shared a curious glance with Butz, imagining that the both of them were thinking the same exact thing. *Let’s go see Sanguine City.* He caught Raven’s eye right afterwards and her fixed stare seemed to be saying, “*I know what you’re thinking, and it’s not happening.*”

“We can get Red’s hand fixed the day after the ociramma. There are some really good places in Areopa that work with loss of limb injuries. The Alcazar has their own medical staff as well. They might be able to help. Fourth —” Before Magnus was able to finish his next point, the ship had lurched forward and jumped out of the thicket of clouds they were rising against, suddenly granting view of a magnificent city unlike any Red had ever seen. The buildings were not tall like Echidna’s super-structures, but richly made and expanded out into weird shapes — their architecture uninhibited by the vertical restrictions of land and gravity. Attractions like fountains and gardens were not planted into firm structures, but floated about serendipitously like birds. Everything here seemed to be connected by sets of long rails that twisted and curved through the sky. The building the ship made port in looked like a floating tent half made of cloud. It had no definite shape, nor any hint of an organized structure.

“Are people just walking on invisible floors?” Red asked Magnus.

“They’re not floors,” Raven replied. “Force fields.”

“Never heard of that before.”

“Yep — the guy who realized that force fields could be used to construct buildings was considered a prodigy of sorts. But it’s such an obvious application, right? They’re nanotubes of different elements combined into lattices to hold an almost indefinite amount of weight. It also means that structures in Areopa can be built almost instantaneously. Of course, not everything is made out of force fields. The majority of buildings, especially the older ones, use various forms of rock and cloud to make their shapes. There’s no metal in Areopa.” Once the ship had officially docked and opened its gates, they followed Magnus to an opening in the port where all the rails were lined up haphazardly above them. A sign made of clouds read “Welcome to Areopa,” while another next to it read, “Sky Rail Lobby.” Red turned to Magnus to ask him what the sky rail was, but then saw that Magnus had been flanked by a number of guards he was greeting with enthusiasm.

“He must know them from before,” Raven remarked. The next instant, as if everyone in the lobby suddenly realized who Magnus was, a crowd rushed around him, covering him in a glut of shouts and questions. The surge of attention was so sudden, Red thought for a second that they were under attack.

“Is he also a musician of some sort that we don’t know about?” Butz asked.

“No, this is how royalty is treated,” Raven replied. “I saw it last year when I came to Areopa. Everyone here is crazed about their governing families. Magnus, being the younger brother of the next king of Alto, is especially famous.”

“Didn’t realize... it was like this...” Red admitted, suddenly bewildered by how modest and humble Magnus had been all throughout their years at Crest.

“I hope our entire stay isn’t like this,” S griped. The crowd continued to swell with more people, making it unlikely that Magnus was going to escape any time soon.

“It will be, at least if we leave the Alcazar with him,” Raven replied. “Luckily, we won’t be touring much. It’ll be only the training rooms for us.” S gave a nod of agreement, but Red could see the disappointment in her eyes.

“Do we just wait here until the mob disperses?” Butz asked. Linx hopped

onto his head for a better view of the crowd. Red noticed that with every passing day, the Aeyz Cat was getting bigger and bigger. In another month or two, he would no longer fit on Butz's head. Magnus suddenly broke out of the mass of people and rushed to them as his guards tried to follow behind. He gestured to Red for everyone to follow as he weaved through the crowd toward the other end of the lobby. Butz and S ran to catch up while Raven dragged on behind. Red could feel her resentment through the air — the last thing she wanted in life was to be a cohort of royalty. He ushered for her to move faster, and she reluctantly followed after he insisted several times. Luckily, the crowd seemed to have lost track of where Magnus was. Their center of attention was now focused on two of the guards who hung back. Red had a feeling that this was a well-practiced maneuver.

“Well, I didn’t really expect *this*,” Red laughed.

“Wait till we get to the city, if we ever go with Magnus. It’ll be a disaster,” Raven chided. They crossed through a set of double doors at the other side of the lobby into a room with only three walls and a single rail running through it. Unlike the other rails, which looked like thick silvery strings, this one was of a shining blue-green color. Four more guards were stationed in this room, watching them with unmoving eyes.

“Okay, so this will take us straight to the Empyrean Alcazar. It’ll only take us a few minutes to get through security there, and then we’re good to go,” Magnus said.

“What? We’re supposed to use *this* thing to get there?” Butz asked. “I’ve never been to Areopa. I don’t know how to work this.”

“It’s simple. You just grab onto the hook, and it’ll take you straight there,” Magnus answered.

“How would it even know where I want to go?” Butz asked skeptically.

“The sky rail is telepathically controlled. It’ll work even if you’re not adept at using your mind. It will always take you exactly where you want to go. It even reads your thoughts to see where you want to go *more* if you’re deciding between two places. Anyway, this one *only* goes to the Alcazar,” Magnus replied. Red glanced outwards and saw how easily people grabbed onto the hooks and flew through the sky rail — as if riding on a rail that cut through the middle of the sky while holding onto nothing but a hook were a perfectly sane thing to do. Some jumped from one rail to the other, and he wondered how no one accidentally fell off.

“It feels natural once you’re on it. The rails make you jump from one to

another to get you to where you want to go,” Raven replied, as if she had read his mind.

“You just let go and fly onto the other one?”

“No one falls off the sky rail, if that’s what you’re thinking. It’s not possible. The hook will make sure you land on another rail safely,” Magnus replied.

“Isn’t there another way to get there?” Red asked.

“There is. Most of the royal family rides on Ozes, but those are boring. This is much more fun. I’ll go first so you can watch,” Magnus answered. In a single leap, he grabbed onto the hook on the rail and shot away through the sky. At one point, the path curved upwards and he saw Magnus let go of the rail he was currently flying on to swing through the air and land safely onto another. The impact was so harsh, Red wondered how it didn’t break Magnus’s arm.

“Ugh... and I have to do this with my left hand.”

“It doesn’t look *that* bad,” S replied. “I saw you leap from the top of a spire about the height of a super-structure, and land straight into the ground in a cone of flames. Now you’re afraid of doing something that even the old people here do?”

“That was... *in the moment*,” Red relented.

“I’ll see you at the palace,” S winked before leaping forward and grabbing onto the hook.

“Well, if she can do it, it can’t be *that* difficult,” Butz snorted before directing Linx to hold onto him and following behind S. Red heard him wail in terror a few seconds after he got on.

“I’ll go behind you. You won’t fall,” Raven said.

“I hate flying. I don’t even like it much on ships. If I at least had my right hand.”

“I know. I’ll figure something else out for us when we’re at the Alcazar.”

“I should’ve just had a syntechdage installed in Echidna. Impatience always gets the better of me,” Red grumbled as he approached the hook at the edge of the room. Figuring there was no point in delaying the inevitable, he jumped forward as if he were leaping for his life. Surprisingly, he reached the hook with little effort, and it suddenly occurred to him that the gravity in Areopa was obviously being manipulated. His movement through the rail started off as a slow glide, but rapidly progressed into an uncomfortable dash. He tried to compare the feeling to something else in

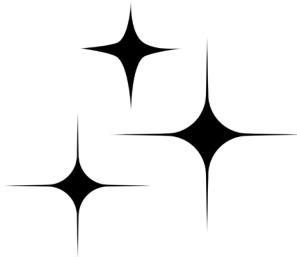
his head, but ended up imagining it was exactly what it sounded like, *flying through the sky by way of a rail that ran through the clouds — secured by nothing but your grip on a hook.* As he went faster and faster, however, the sky rail felt more and more natural.

The hook put no pressure on his arm. It felt like a natural extension of his body. The strain that should have resulted from soaring through the rails at his speed just wasn't there. It was replaced by a feeling of comfort, like something was holding onto his hand rather than the other way around. He finally understood what Magnus meant by the sky rail being intuitive. He felt like he was being carried to where he wanted to go by an invisible force, as if it just wasn't possible to fall off the rails. Daring himself to test it, he tried to let go of the hook, but couldn't. An odd sensation, like someone else was controlling his left arm, had taken over. It reminded him of the feeling he had before bursting out laughing in Raven's dreamscape. *Another thing to ask The Truth Sayer. Something else was controlling me. I know it.*

At one point, the rail curved upwards and the line abruptly ended. Before Red could try and stop himself, he flew off the end in a leap he was sure was going to be his last. Soaring freely through the air felt surreal, similar to the rush of being carried by the geysers in the Twilight Caverns, but more liberating. There was no pressure lifting him here, only the momentum of his speed. If the dreamscape had freed his mind of the inhibitions of reality, this freed his body. He felt a mix of fear, adrenaline, and excitement, before gathering awareness of his surroundings. He was falling towards another rail now, but the line was so thin, he imagined it would be impossible not to miss catching it. He took a moment to breathe in the city around him. Now more than ever, the world seemed to be bursting with life. Not just the people, but also the clouds, buildings, decorations, even the air. He could see other people flying through the clouds on their rail lines. Ironically, despite their incredible speeds, everyone here seemed to be far more relaxed than the stiff figures he remembered at Echidna. Everyone here seemed free, as if the rush of traveling through the rails wasn't a rush at all, but a slow voyage where the journey itself was what they craved.

He crashed into the other rail before he realized he was close enough to grab onto it. Somehow, the hook he held onto knew to perfectly align itself with the sky rail. As he continued racing with the wind, he secretly wished that the rail would break off again, letting him get lost in the rush of flying once more. Landing back down had somehow reminded him of the qualifi-

ers, grounding him back to the reality he had left just a moment ago. Areopa was a series of one wonder after another. The city was not incredible in the way that most advanced cities were; there were no buildings larger than life nor unseen technologies besides the force fields — which Red realized was nothing technologically advanced, but simply a creative way of applying a very basic form of technology — instead, the city was simply rich with culture, a vibrant sense of energy, and the strangest feats of engineering he had ever seen. One building resembled a long, floating shoe. Another was constructed purely of cloud and shaped out like a dragon. As he marveled at one building after another, he was suddenly overwhelmed by a sense of nostalgia. Even the people riding Ozes looked familiar to him. And then, in a flash of recollection, he realized that he *had* seen this place before. He had seen it all in one of his dreams. He had seen it all in a nightmare. The memory rushed back to him the way the contents of a forgotten dream could strike out from the lethe without warning. He had seen the entire city doused in black flames, people on Ozes running from the tendrils of a breathing fire, and him, at the helm of a burning anarchy. Another break in the railway came, and this time, he soared straight through a populated city center, consumed by a sense of vertigo but with only one question on his mind. *What makes black fire?*



THE STRANGE DOCTOR

The principal features of the raeth wing of the Empyrean Alcazar, the only section of the royal home that Red had seen so far, were long winding passageways replete with hundreds of portraits of previous Basilis, a rustic architecture which Magnus explained was a result of the section's age (the raeth wing was one of the first parts of the Alcazar to be built), and strange critters that hung around freely in various parts of the palace as if it were home to them too. A palace keeper that noticed Red's curious glances commented that the presence of the critters was a result of Prince Arkan Basil's fascination with rare and unusual creatures. *So this is where Magnus gets it from,* Red laughed to himself. There was never an empty hallway. The entire Alcazar seemed to be thriving with activity. Everyone was eagerly anticipating tomorrow's presentation. For Red, the multitude of other royal families that lived in the Alcazar shed light on the scale of Nimbus's governing body, and how far the city stretched.

From the outside, the Alcazar looked like a collection of palaces built on top of a bed of clouds with a vast and peculiar vacuum of space situated in the center. S had asked Magnus what the space was designated for, to which he cryptically replied, "No idea, one of Arkan's projects," leaving them all with the thrill of a mystery. Red noticed that the architecture of the Alcazar looked even more archaic than the rest of Areopa, instilling its inhabitants with a sense of tradition and heritage. Stone walls and time-worn bastions replaced the sleek and innovative designs he came to expect in modern cities.

Flying within the vicinity of the Alcazar, but especially around the courtyard ponds that were built inside of clouds, were dozens of Ozone Raptors, or Ozes, as everyone in Areopa referred to them. Ozes were tall, bird-like critters with rudimentary wings, chubby frames, and arms that were so

tiny Red could not imagine for what they were used. Despite their bulky shapes, the agile creatures were capable of flying at near supersonic speeds if they were free of weight, and were both extremely intelligent and very playful. Ozes were the designated carriers for the nobility of Areopa and were trained never to break a leisurely speed limit — a restriction that resulted in a drawling commute whenever one was mounted.

As the five of them walked to their room in the raeth wing, a critter that looked like an oversized skull with tentacles dropped from the ceiling above them with a loud plop and began crawling behind Linx. The Aeyz Cat eyed its new admirer suspiciously while circling around Butz to hide himself. “I’d hate to see what this thing would look like at a higher stage,” Red gulped. After a soft squeal that sounded like a cry, the creature slugged its body away from them, seemingly deterred by Linx’s eschewal.

“At least none of the creatures here are that big,” S commented, just as a heart-wrenching roar came from somewhere deep within the palace.

“Yeah... I’m not so sure about that,” Butz gasped.

“We’re almost there,” Magnus chuckled as they passed by a room that looked to be a mix between a kitchen and a makeshift office. Red peeked inside to see six solemn figures, clad in silver robes, discussing something vigorously. He heard the words “Xenosite,” and “Cron,” but couldn’t pick up on anything else despite straining to hear more. When they saw him, one of the figures quickly got up to close the door of the room. A second before the door slammed shut in front of him, he caught the face of the figure. She was a girl about his age, and quite beautiful, he thought, in a very bare and naked way.

“Priori of Light. They don’t like others hearing about their business,” Magnus conferred.

“Probably not a good idea to eavesdrop on people anyway,” S replied.

“Well, speaking behind closed doors doesn’t sound like a good way of gaining popularity in the Alcazar, if that’s what they’re aiming for,” Raven chided.

“They’re not very popular here anyway. Known to be fanatics about their beliefs. Areopa is a freedom-loving place, not a city to be steered by dogma. We’ll have to see at tomorrow’s presentation what they’re here for,” Magnus replied. “I reckon something about uniting different kingdoms and people in the fight against the Xenosites, which wouldn’t be so bad, I guess. But if it was under their own banner, I’m sure they’d abuse their influence.

They've been known to do it before."

A stench that Red imagined must have been the putrid flavor of an evaporated corpse suddenly filled the air as they were walking towards their room. Its onset was so unusually sudden and powerful that he thought, if he had pinched his nose a second later, it may have been too late and he would have passed out. "It's coming from there," Butz choked as he held in his breath. He pointed to a room with an oversized red door that was neatly lined with columns of belted spikes, akin to the entrance of a castle dungeon as Red would imagine. The door stood slightly ajar as green fumes poured out of its opening — slowly drifting into the open air of the palace like a noxious cloud.

"Ugh... what is that?" Magnus groaned as he looked around for help. There was no one in this hallway. It was an unusual occurrence, Red realized. Almost every other palace corridor he had passed was manned by at least a single guard or keeper. He assumed it must have been the smell, although whoever was responsible might have sent away the keeper *before* beginning their assault on the hallway's air. Magnus walked up to the open door and studied its columns of spikes with a curious glance before knocking quietly on an empty patch. "Oh... I think I know who's responsible for this," he croaked while cautiously opening the door. There was no response from the inside after his knocking, although the sound of a muffled voice could be heard, and the soft rustle of activity. The room was pitch black as the five of them slipped in. They tiptoed inside as if the entrance may have been laced with traps. S used a tiny light cast to illuminate the space around them. A heavy grunt marked the presence of another creature. Turning to his right, Red saw a giant hairy monster that looked like a beast-born man. From the body of the critter he could see green fumes evaporating into the air. Inexplicably, after he stepped inside of the room, the deathly smell was gone, and replaced by a sweet, nectar-like aroma. He let go of his pinched nose to take a waft of the air, but a voice came from the darkness that stopped him.

"One sniff, certain death," it said. It was the voice of a young man, speaking in an astute tone, the way Red imagined proverbs were always told. It sounded sharp and intelligent, but with a hint of madness — the voice of a mind blighted with narcotic realism.

"Uncle?"

"The Muskurasque is a simian critter extremely sensitive about its body

odor. The sweet aroma is an illusion. To the human nose, the smell is consistently different, depending on the space between your nose and the Muskurasque. An enticing mystery of the natural world that has yet to be solved. It does not understand why you are pinching your nose, but sniff it, and it shall recognize your gesture as an affront to its aroma, and react with extreme aggression. The stage 4 you see in front of you can pound its arms into the floor with the force of a hundred tons, squashing the fire elementalist who thinks he is not a fire elementalist next to you in a single display of force.”

“You know of us?” Red asked in wonder.

“Know? I merely observed. You’re wearing imperial-grade heat-absorbing wrist bands to protect the rest of your gear, which happens to be over-used, and *not* heat resistant, but rather, suited for melee combat. It’s a rather profound effort in pretending *not* to be a fire elementalist for someone who takes the precaution of enabling themselves for such a high level of fire casts, *don’t you think?*” Red looked down at his wristbands, uncertain of how to reply. The observation was correct, but he found it too hard to believe that someone had made the deduction so quickly and so easily. The Muskurasque let out another grunt and stared at the five of them, as if daring them to take a sniff of his body. Red stepped back from the creature, carefully breathing through his mouth to make sure it didn’t think he was sniffing it.

“Uncle, these are my friends from Crest Academy.”

“Ahh yes, yes, you’ve mentioned them before, I believe. I’ve heard much about Crest Academy since you’ve enrolled. I made a good decision by recommending it for you. I see it’s good enough to attract people from Takis and Karth as well,” the voice replied. Raven seemed a bit taken aback, uncomfortable at the idea of being carefully observed. “Come now, Mongo. I must see you in the light. It has been a full year, no? I am familiar with many of your professors at Crest. They have told me good things.” A number of candles a short distance ahead of them lit up, illuminating the presence of a shirtless man with blue insects crawling all over his upper body.

“Crystal Sleet Spiders!” Magnus nearly shouted.

“Shhhhhh. I must advise you not to increase your volume beyond that of a whisper. If provoked, these spiders may bite me all at once, leading to severe paralysis of the brain.”

“But uncle... they may bite you anyway.”

“They already have, in fact. They’ve bitten me *eighteen times* to be precise. But do not worry. I have been spacing out the bites evenly.”

“Eighteen?!” Butz gasped. “But you must be... drugged out of your mind!”

“Dear man, are you a detective of sorts?” the voice asked. Butz stood speechless. Red imagined he was too shocked from being on the other side of a sarcastic remark. He heard S snort with laughter from behind him. “I prefer the term ‘of an alternate state of mind,’” the voice continued. “But yes, I see what you are saying. I suppose I *am* seeing reality slightly differently than the way all of you are. Mongo, you’ve grown in a year. Stronger, I see. And more scarred — the way the body of a king *should* look. Your mallet has served you well in your victories. The bite on your neck — River Harpie? And by the tiny cut on your friend’s fingertip — you’ve come across an Emerald Thornback?”

“Mmhmm,” Magnus smiled. “All correct as always uncle,” he added, in a tone that suggested a deep fondness. Red was impressed by how observant Magnus’s uncle was, imagining the quality must have been supernatural in some way. He couldn’t, however, understand why he kept calling Magnus “Mongo,” or why a nickname would be given that sounded so similar.

“Are you Prince Arkan?” Butz asked sheepishly.

“I am indeed. However, I must request that you keep my identity a secret. I have many enemies, you know,” Prince Arkan replied fastidiously. “One can never be too careful nowadays, even around family.” *But everyone in the palace must know who you are*, Red thought. Butz nodded uncertainly at Prince Arkan’s bizarre request, while glancing at Magnus, who raised his eyebrows as if to say “*I told you so.*”

“What are all of your names?” the prince asked. They each introduced themselves, one by one, and gave a short, curt bow, unsure of how royalty was to be approached in Areopa. A loud growl came from within the darkness of the room, revealing the presence of other creatures besides the Muskurasque. “Do not be alarmed. They are only Wyrms,” Prince Arkan replied, referring to the winged beasts that were similar to dragons. It was theorized that dragons had evolved their sentient forms from Wyrms, who were far more aggressive and undomesticated creatures. Red’s experience in the Alcazar was getting stranger with every passing moment. If the room was big enough to fit a Wyrm, or several of them, as Prince Arkan suggested, they must have just entered an enormous chamber — its size hid-

den by the darkness. *How in the world does he have trained Wyrmis in here? Is it even possible to train them?* Red wondered. Linx approached Arkan with stuttering steps, eventually deciding to settle down next to him as the prince stroked the back of the Aeyz Cat. The motion was so natural, it seemed as though the two had known each other for years.

"I've never seen him so comfortable around a stranger before," Butz admitted. "You must have raised an Aeyz Cat before?"

"Never raised one, although I've seen my fair share of them," Prince Arkan replied. "Your room is down the hall, I believe. Allow me a few minutes to relieve myself of these spiders, and I shall meet you there. I would like to hear your tale of the Emerald Thornback, and more about all of your friends. Especially from this one — by your age I'd say you must have come to Avalonia *after* the invasion?" Raven nodded hesitantly, caught off-guard at being addressed directly. "Yes, you have the look of lost hope, the one so common in everyone who has been through an invasion. An excellent topic for conversation, the subject of the Xenosites has been on my mind recently. I would be thrilled to hear more about them. You will find food ready at your room. I have already directed the keeper to stock your favorites, Mongo. Ahh, and I believe congratulations are in order? It almost slipped my mind — you must have performed extraordinarily on your field test to have made it to the qualifiers for WEAPON. Dare I admit I had my doubts?"

"Thank you, uncle," Magnus smiled. "Don't worry. I had my doubts as well." As they left the room with Linx in tow, the Muskurasque grunted one last time and clapped its hands in a celebratory fashion. Despite how strange Prince Arkan seemed, Red liked Magnus's uncle. In just a few short moments, he was convinced that he had just met the most interesting man in Avalonia. The chamber that was designated as their quarters was a luxurious suite of three rooms filled with lavish provisions. The kitchen was stocked with what Red imagined was a year's supply of the unhealthiest foods in Avalonia — a dream come true for him and Magnus, although he knew Raven would force them to refrain from eating unhealthily before the qualifiers. The main room was opulently furnished with Laicon chairs and tables of an alabaster-type material that felt smooth to the touch and had sawtooth patterns that shifted in the light. The bathrooms were made out of a rocky material that glowed in the dark, had beds inside, for no purpose that Red could imagine, and were packed with elastic towels that were so

soft they reminded Red of flazb, although they fell short of the fungal substance's intimate feel. In the process of deciding how to split up the rooms — Red, Magnus, and Butz all ended up together in the smallest sleep-room, and S and Raven each took one of the larger two rooms for themselves.

Magnus explained that since knowing they were all coming to Areopa for the qualifiers, he requested that one of the keepers set aside a room perfect for the stay of five people, allowing them to remain together as they prepared for their trials. The raeth wing, named after a renowned Basil from hundreds of years ago, was hardly occupied by anyone besides Prince Arkan. The lack of permanent occupants, however, made it an excellent workspace, and the wing always buzzed with activity throughout the day-time. After sneaking in as much food as they could from the kitchen, Red, Magnus, and Butz settled down in the suite's study den, which was almost exclusively filled with books authored by Basils. Most of them, Red noticed, were written by Arkan. The prince was a prolific writer as well as an eccentric figure. Red browsed through a few choices before committing to one titled "The Mathematics of Combat." The cover, a rendition of a battlefield, but on a three-dimensional graph, had caught his attention. Flipping through the pages, he was immediately surprised at how technical the material was. A certain diagram, a graphical interpretation of a force cast, caught his interest, but he understood none of the equations written on the page and had to ask Magnus to explain them to him. He always found arithmetic to be an overly dry subject and hardly ever paid attention to his math classes at Crest.

"What's the point of studying math in relation to combat? You're never actually going to *use* anything you learn, will you?" Red lamented.

"As a matter of fact, you'll use it every moment you're in a fight," a familiar voice replied from the entrance of the study den. Prince Arkan had entered their room so quietly that Red had not noticed his presence until he spoke. He was about to stand up to greet him properly, but Arkan gestured for him to stay seated. "Please, Blue, I absolutely detest all forms of courtesy. Superfluous expressions of respect invented for one intelligent being to assuage the ego of another. An absolute waste of time and energy. Now then, what you were saying about mathematics?" Red exchanged a questioning glance with Magnus, who seemed to be hiding a laugh behind a blank stare. *Did he just call me Blue?* He was uncertain whether he had heard correctly.

“Well, it’s just that I can’t see the utility of it. I mean, I won’t be making calculations on a battlefield will I? Look at all these formulas in this book. Of what use are they when you’re dodging the swipe of a blade?” The prince stole a glance at Red’s missing right hand.

“How long did it take you to register that an enormous blade was a threat?”

“Hmm?”

“How long, in seconds? Seeing as how you have not had your hand fixed yet, and that your field test was not more than two weeks ago, I assume you must have incurred the injury during your field test. But the Alloy Desert contains no beast that brandishes a blade. I assume then, that you were under attack by another *human*? Or something sentient? It must have presented itself, with its blade, in front of you, for the injury to have happened in the angle at which your hand is cut. And you were given a few seconds to register the threat in your head. *Exactly* how many seconds did it take?”

“A few, I guess. *Too long*, if that’s an answer.”

“Precisely — *too long*. Studying these formulas, or mathematics in general, has nothing to do with applying them on the battlefield, but everything to do with applying your mind at the task of exercising its own acumen. A mind needs problems as a muscle needs weights. Do you doubt the utility of your mind, the sharpness of its intellect, the breadth of its perception, on your effectiveness in combat?”

“No... I guess not,” Red replied. “But there must be other ways to exercise your mind for combat.”

“Bahhh!” Arkan shouted. “Nature gives you a science so rational on which to whet your mind, and you would throw it away, for what? The banality of memorization in critter biology? The stale work of reflex manipulation in hand-eye coordination tests? There is no purer a science than that of arithmetic, and no better way to exercise your mind than to embellish it in all of its problems. You need not know the equations in the book you hold. You may forget them even a day after you learn them. But the *process* of simplifying a concept to be understood by your conscious mind — that, your brain will never forget, and it will apply that skill over and over again in all the challenges you will face throughout life. You want your mind to react faster in combat? Study arithmetic. You want to solve problems in maneuverability more quickly during an engagement? Study arithmetic.” Butz’s attention was glued to Arkan. The prince’s words seemed to have a

profound effect on him. His eyes lit up as if he had just seen the light of the world. Butz had long been naturally gifted in mathematics, but renounced the subject as Red did in favor of studying more combat-oriented topics.

“The injury you sustained on your hand is nothing. A single injury will never decide the fate of a war, and it will certainly not decide the fate of humanity. At the upper echelons of our battle for survival against the Xenosites, battles will be fought out on a planetary scale. Strategy will trump tactics, planning will trump practice, and our ability to utilize our mind *while it is still an advantage over the Xenosites* will trump our ability to utilize our physical prowess — which, might I add, is obviously far behind. You’d better hope that your commanders are astute mathematicians. Intuition and experience often lie on the battlefield, but numbers never do. Come now, we have more important matters to attend to,” Arkan added, pointing to Red’s hand. “We *must* get that repaired.”

“I was going to get it fixed after the ociramma.”

“Don’t be silly. A social event is a dangerous thing. You’ll need the protection of both hands to make sure you do not lose the other one. I have the best doctor in Avalonia right here at the palace. He shall fix your injury in less than a moment.” Red looked at Magnus and Butz, both of whom shrugged and got up to follow Arkan as he left the room. *I guess better now than later*, Red thought, following behind the three of them.

“Parrot and Z, the both of you should come as well. Best to give your teammate all the moral support he can get,” Arkan advised, while ushering to Raven and S, who were sitting in the kitchen preparing food for themselves. Raven stared at Arkan in disbelief, and then looked at Magnus, who gave her the same look he had given to Butz earlier — the one that said *“I told you so.”* S followed behind with a disappointed groan, upset that her meal would have to wait.

“Uncle, I did not know that the Xenosites interested you so much. I’ve never heard you speak of them before.”

“A new hobby, if you will. They are currently the only thing on my mind. Areopa has been bombarded with requests to share our resources more generously in the struggle against them. The Priori have contacted father several times already about attempting to create a unified front. Since we were once a unified kingdom of several races, they believe that Areopa can serve as the foundation for a cross-species effort. I agree with their stated intentions, but the last thing I’d want would be for Areopa to be ruled by

the Light.”

The doctor Arkan had spoken of was located only a few minutes away from the suite. His laboratory occupied a space at the eastern edge of the raeth wing. Red suspected that it couldn’t have been a coincidence — Arkan likely stationed him there and worked alongside the doctor on various projects. The prince’s writings spanned such a wide breadth of topics, Red imagined he must have taken great measures to surround himself with people he could consult with on all the subjects that interested him. On the way there, he also spotted a sickbay for critters, and a workshop with several people engineering weapons of various sorts. Upon entering the laboratory, Red understood why anyone would want to work under Prince Arkan in the first place. The lab held nothing back when it came to furnishing itself with equipment and necessary facilities. The place was manned by at least fifty people. Some were young researchers simply observing the goings-on of the lab, others were of an older age, running in between different sections of the workspace while shouting orders, statistics, and ideas. It occurred to Red that every room he entered thus far in the palace seemed deceptively small from the outside, and then opened up into its own world. Magnus was unsurprised by the size of the lab, but smiled at the wonder it held for his team, satisfied that they were impressed by all of the Alcazar’s marvels.

“This place must have cost a fortune!” Butz exclaimed.

“Science does not believe in fortunes. It believes in building the future as it pleases,” A hoarse voice replied from behind them. Red turned around to see a gaunt figure in a blue lab coat, holding in his right hand the segmented limb of a critter, and in his left, a pair of enormous scissors. Arkan nodded his head in greeting, and took the limb of the critter from the old man to study it himself.

“Excellent. Excellent work. Doctor Lurch, my nephew’s friend here requires a syntechdage. His hand was cut off in an accident during an academy field test. Will you take a look?”

“Of course,” replied the doctor, holding out his hand towards Red, who hesitated for a moment before resting the stump of his right hand on the doctor’s palm. Doctor Lurch’s hands were long, thin, and mottled. He grabbed Red’s wrist so suddenly that Red almost jumped at the touch. The doctor’s face had a strange resemblance to someone else he had recently seen, but Red hoped it was just a memory bias on his part. *Wrinkles make all elderly people look similar. That must be it*, he thought. Doctor Lurch was at

least a hundred and fifty.

“Lurch. I’ve heard the name before,” Magnus replied.

“Likely you have. A family of several prominent scientists will do that.”

“You invented crystalized Cron.”

“Afraid that was a cousin.”

“Weren’t you one of the first to discover the Xenosites on Eaut?”

“A brother.”

“Oh,” Magnus replied bashfully. Stepping closer to the man’s face, Red realized that the similarities between Doctor Lurch and the bladed man were too striking to be a coincidence. The doctor had the same cruel, penetrating eyes — the ones Red had seen in his memories.

“Come, this shall take only a few minutes,” the doctor said while ushering their group to a section of the lab filled with different human parts. Some were mechanical and others were identical to real limbs. A large machine resembling a giant microscope stood in the middle of the space. Doctor Lurch ordered Red to sit in the center of it, where several green lights scanned his body back and forth. Raven, S, Magnus, and Arkan stood by him while Butz went off to find Linx. The cat had wandered somewhere into the lab.

“Have you ever had a syntechdage installed before?” the doctor asked.

“No,” Red replied. “Does it hurt?”

“Pain is only an illusion of the mind,” the doctor replied brusquely. “Do you wish to keep your memory of the incident?”

“My memory?”

“Once a syntechdage is installed, it shall operate with your nerves just as your original hand did. This machine, an orgoprinter, is scanning your body to replicate an identical version of your hand. Once it is installed, however, no matter how accurately the hand was replicated and how precisely the augmentation was done, your mind shall remember the hand as a prosthetic one, inhibiting your ability to function at full capacity. To fix that, I can delete a segment of your memory, the part that involves the loss of your hand. Your brain shall make up another event in its place. There are rarely any side effects, although some *do* come up from time to time.”

“Like what?” Raven quickly asked. Her reaction seemed to have caught Arkan’s attention, but only for a moment.

“There are patients who, for instance, replace the lost memory with that of losing another limb, one that they *do* have, leading to a psychosomatic

inability to use parts of their bodies that are healthy. While we can delete the new memory as well, deleting *made up* memories creates further complications. Too much memory slicing can lead to complex side effects. There is always a price to pay when it comes to science.”

“I’ll do it,” Red said. “If it’ll help me cast like I did before, I’ll take the small risk it comes with.”

“Excellent, then,” the doctor replied.

“Are you sure?” Raven asked. “Your casting ability seemed fine with just your left hand.”

“How exactly *did* you lose your hand?” the doctor asked. “Out of curiosity.”

Starting from the Ignot Gilas, Magnus quickly recounted their adventure in the Alloy Desert, continuing briskly even after Raven shot him a cautionary glance when he mentioned the appearance of the bladed man. Red studied Doctor Lurch’s face carefully as Magnus told the story, but the doctor remained impassive throughout. He shrugged off the doctor’s resemblance to the bladed man as a coincidence. Prince Arkan cut Magnus’s story off just then, interrupting him with a wondrous look.

“Did you say... *a blade with an eye?*”

“Mmhmm. A blade with an eye that looked like it had a life of its own.”

“Describe it for me, every detail you can muster up,” the prince requested. Magnus began depicting the blade — and the man that wielded it — as best as he could. Red added in a few details here and there, but nothing seemed to be able to satisfy Arkan’s need for specifics. The prince continued on for ten minutes, asking about the length of the blade, the width, the color of the eye, and a number of other trivial details.

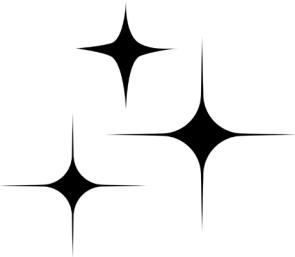
“The hand itself throbbed lightly, and the eye had no lashes,” Red said.

“Hopefully, your new hand won’t throb,” Doctor Lurch replied. Red hoped he was kidding, but his sincere tone said otherwise. The orgoprinter whirred for a minute. Inside of a glass cube next to him, Red could see a hand beginning to take shape, modeled by the lasers strapped to the roof of the laboratory. “The machine will take care of everything from here on, but I shall have two attendees oversee the process till the end,” the doctor said while gesturing over to two younger technicians from an upper level. “This is where I must say goodbye, Prince Arkan. The polymerization machine requires my full attention,” the doctor added, while pointing to the segmented limb of the critter he was holding onto earlier. “I trust you will

be at the ociramma tomorrow?"

"Of course. I would not want to miss what the Priori are presenting," Arkan replied.

"You would be wise not to. I have seen what they are going to reveal. I daresay it will change the face of our struggle against the Xenosites permanently, and maybe much more than that." The doctor turned around to leave, but slipped a tiny note into Red's left hand before he went. Assuming it was a private matter, Red opened the note in his palm and read it as subtly as he could. All it said was: *You must meet me in private at the ociramma tomorrow. The Evil Eye comes for you.*



THE PRIORI OF LIGHT

Red woke up the next morning with an ear-splitting headache, feeling as though someone had drilled a hole into his skull overnight. Magnus and Prince Arkan were standing idly by his bedside, quietly watching him as he struggled to sit up. Magnus had on a light blue tunic with plain lateral designs, while Prince Arkan, in a much stranger fashion, sported a fake beard, an odd pair of goggles with pitch-black spectacles, and rubber gloves that were locked onto his wrists. “Ociramma...” Red mumbled, barely able to drag the word out of his mouth. “What time is the ociramma?”

“It has already started. Bless the stars, we’ll be arriving a few hours late on my count,” Arkan replied heartily while checking his pocket watch — an obsidian timepiece with crystal green knobs and a dialite face. Red had never seen someone with a traditional watch on their person before. The broad capabilities of microAIs had made such tools unnecessary, but he imagined it was more out of taste than necessity for the prince. The device matched Areopa’s palate for antiquity. *Magnus has one too*, he remembered, although it was not as ornate as Arkan’s.

“What!” Red yelped. “I’m so sorry. Was I asleep *the entire day*? What happened? I remember going to Doctor Lurch to fix my broken hand, but everything’s a blur after that. I don’t even remember coming back to this room.” His last clear memory was of Doctor Lurch slipping the note into his palm. Magnus, whose face was suddenly swept by a look of relief, was about to speak, but Arkan cut him off with a cautionary glance. The interruption made Red wonder what Magnus was about to say, but he thought nothing significant of the exchange.

“The machine that fixed your broken hand used a bit too much anesthesia, I suspect. Are you feeling all right now? Doctor Lurch told us to report any feelings of strangeness,” Arkan said.

“Yeah, I guess I feel okay,” Red replied. His right hand itched severely, as though it had been bitten by insect critters all over, but otherwise it felt normal. He summoned a wisp of fire on his palm, which was easy enough, but he had to overcome a numbing sensation to do so, one that made his hand feel like it was being pricked all over by needles too sharp to hurt. The paralyzing feeling subsided after a while, but he had to keep flexing his hand to prevent it from cramping. It was no longer limp — he was sure it wasn’t broken anymore. The doctor had done his job, but the feeling of controlling his hand now felt awkward, as though it were somehow resisting his impulses. *It’s probably just a side effect of the anesthesia*, he thought sullenly.

“Ahh, magnificent!” Prince Arkan shouted unexpectedly. “To be perfectly honest, the procedure we used to fix your hand was still in its experimental stage. We were waiting for a second test subject for quite a while now. Luckily, your injury was spot on. Terrible things could have happened if Doctor Lurch had made a miscalculation.” Both Magnus’s and Red’s eyes darted from Arkan to each other in horror.

“What happened to the first test subject?” Red asked nervously, unsure if he wanted to hear the answer.

“Ahh yes, that one. It was nothing *too* significant. We accidentally shot his memory away. *All of it*. But his body was perfectly all right of course, well, most of it at least. *Your* memory seems to be functioning correctly though, eh? You remember who both of us are?” the prince asked nonchalantly, as if that was all it took to be sure that Red was fine.

“Yes, I do. My memory feels fine... I think. Besides last night. I guess I wouldn’t know what I forgot anyway, right?” Red replied while making a mental note never to take Arkan’s assistance on a matter of health. He could not imagine why his memory would be affected by a device geared to fix his *hand*, but decided he should still ask Doctor Lurch about it, just in case. Truthfully, he was looking for a reason to speak to the doctor again. *No... he can’t be The Truth Sayer. Can he? Would The Truth Sayer even be a human? Or someone who took a human form?*

“What do you remember of your hand?” Magnus asked, interrupting Red’s train of thought.

“Just breaking it when I fell into the twilight caverns through the whirlpool, and not being able to use it until now.” He flexed his right hand again. It seemed perfectly functional but still felt awkward to control.

“All is well then!” the prince cheered while grabbing Red’s hand and

shaking it vigorously in observation. “Let us be off soon. I believe the Light has a surprise for us.”

“Were both of you waiting for me this entire time? I’m sorry again. I didn’t mean to wake up so late.”

“Don’t apologize. It was the best thing that could have happened,” Arkan replied blissfully. “The presentation is not till the end of the ociramma. I could not have asked for a better reason to miss all of the beginning hospitalities than to observe the results of a test subject. Far too many civilities are demanded at such ostentatious events. Handshakes, and hugs, and laughs — terrifying business, all of it.”

“Yeah, I wasn’t looking forward to the beginning either, just a bunch of boring introductions,” Magnus replied. “But let’s not miss the presentation. It should be starting soon,” he added hastily.

“Mmhmm,” Red replied before trying to shake his head free of its migraine. He pulled himself to the bathroom, where a quick shower somewhat relieved his headache. He stuffed his face with food as fast as he could, and then came back to his room to put on his Crest Academy combat suit, when Magnus handed over an outfit identical to the one he was wearing, but smaller.

“Wear this,” Magnus pointed, handing over the tunic and a pair of beige pants. “It’s Areopa’s traditional outfit, what all the male Basils wear. We have simple tastes here.”

“But I’m not a part of your family,” Red replied.

“Meh, I’d say you are,” Magnus laughed, unaware of how much his comment had meant to Red. “Gave one to Butz, too, but I ended up picking the wrong sizes for him. I told him it was traditional for the clothes to look too large, but I’m sure he realized by now, it’s not.”

“What’s it made out of?” Red asked while carefully kneading the material with his fingertips. It was sleek and cold to the touch. *Exactly what a cloud would feel like if it were tailored*, he thought, half certain that he had just answered his own question.

“A plutostratus cloud. The material is called kerebricrite after it’s sewn into clothing. It’s stronger than the noirtex our combat suits are made of, and as light as air, *literally*. You’d be hard pressed to find anything stronger or of better quality in Areopa. It’s heat resistant, too. It should be able to handle orange and blue level casts with ease. So it’ll be good for you for another month or so,” Magnus winked. Red thanked Magnus several times

over before rushing to put it on.

“May I ask why you are... in disguise, Prince Arkan?” Red asked as they stepped out of the suite.

“So that no one will recognize me, naturally. I thought the purpose of a disguise was self-explanatory?” Not trusting himself to inquire further, Red quickly finished getting ready and then followed Magnus and Arkan out of the suite. The three of them leisurely strolled to the spectra courtyard, a massive field on the eastern side of the Alcazar where the ociramma was being held. Prince Arkan seemed to be inclined to take as long as possible to get to the event, stopping at various points to brief Red and Magnus about everything he could deduce from any guest that walked by.

“Are the three of them at the event already?” Red asked, feeling slightly disappointed that Raven had not waited for him. He knew it was unusual to expect such a thing, but the feeling stubbornly lingered in his mind.

“Yup, they’ve been there from the start.”

“Well, thanks for waiting. Sorry again. Have you seen your family yet?”

“Yup, did the rounds through all of them while you were asleep. My younger siblings have returned from their universities. And don’t be sorry. I’ve already been to a hundred of these. Nothing I haven’t seen already. I’m not too keen on meeting people from ‘The Priori of Light’ anyway,” Magnus replied as they crossed a pair of double doors into a vast field that Red assumed must have been the spectra courtyard. Hundreds of gold and blue tables were lined in a circular fashion around an Okrimar, a giant critter that occupied the center of the room, and whom the event was named after. Okrimars reminded Red of the gemini. They were tall, centurion-shaped creatures with beetle heads and squishy bodies. Their primary feature, and what an ociramma was essentially based upon, were their cralanches, long tubes that extended from their torso and excreted a smoky liquid, called cral, that had an intoxicating and euphoric effect on other creatures. While being farmed for their bodily fluids seemed like a torturous existence, Magnus explained to Red that the creatures were treated like royalty. Okrimar farmers were paid fortunes to rent their broods for ocirammas, and the creatures themselves produced better quality cral in higher stages if they were well taken care of.

Silently ushering for both of them to follow him, Prince Arkan went straight for the Okrimar without an introductory word to anyone at the event. There was music and dancing around the tall creature, and an im-

mense black box stationed behind it, which Red assumed was the object of the presentation. At the far opposite side of the entrance was the table arrangement for the royal family, easily identifiable by its extravagant decorations and the Talakrash, felion soldiers that served as that king's personal bodyguards. There were five next to the king, three chimeras, and two sphinxes. There was one other breed of felions, called lycans, but Red did not spot any of the wolfish, humanoid creatures around.

"What's the name of their city?" Red asked Magnus while pointing over to the felions and tiptoeing for a better look at the king of Nimbus. Artemis Basil, despite his age — a hundred and two, according to Arkan — looked like a man no older than fifty. He had a tall and expansive frame, like Magnus, a cheerful expression, and spoke in animated gestures as he entertained those that beckoned for his attention. Red was going to ask Magnus to introduce him, but there seemed to be a line, and thought it better if he waited till later. The king's broad build and striking similarities to Magnus suddenly brought to Red's attention how *different* Arkan looked from the two of them. The prince was only of average height and had a thin, spindly frame.

"Baast," Arkan replied before Magnus had a chance to. "Try this," he added, shoving a cralanx into Red's hands while exhaling a pink cloud. The Okrimar's appendage felt like a pulpy sponge, leaking with a pink liquid that escaped into the air as a blush vapor. "It's good for your soul."

"I'm okay for now," Red replied, passing the cralanx back as Magnus chuckled. "Have you ever done it?"

"I have, a few times. It makes me nauseous. You might like it, though. It's a matter of personal taste, I think," Magnus answered.

"All tastes can be acquired, even personal ones," Arkan replied. "Some may require years of dedication and consistent consumption, but certainly they can all be acquired."

"Speaking from experience, Prince Arkan?" Red laughed.

"Shh, shhh, shhh, you mustn't use that name here," Arkan chided. "We are in grave danger under our current circumstances. You never know who may be listening in on us."

"In danger from what? Are there people *here* that are looking to do you harm?" Red asked. "But we're around a hundred guards."

"They are looking for far worse than that, I'm afraid. *Conversation*," Arkan whispered in a deadly tone.

“Look, there’s everyone else with my brothers,” Magnus pointed. Butz, S, and Raven were huddled together in a small crowd with members of the Priori and several natives of Areopa. Nearly everyone at the ociramma was identifiable by garb. Members of the Priori wore silver cloaks, the nobility of Areopa wore light blue tunics, MegaCORP’s acolytes donned their black and gold uniforms, and most of everyone else wore the combat suits of their respective guard or clothing emblazoned with their city emblems. One of Magnus’s brothers seemed to have taken a liking to Raven, and despite her impassive response to his approach, the scene imparted Red with an unfamiliar jealousy that he tried to ignore.

“I’ll try it just once,” Red said, whilst grabbing the cralanx from Arkan.

“Excellent. Let us mark this moment as the beginning of your corruption, eh?”

“Sure,” Red replied with a laugh. He glanced up at the Okrimar before using the cralanx, instinctively looking for a sign of approval before inhaling the creature’s bodily produce. The critter continued staring all around the ociramma with its long head, ignoring all of the people down below who were using its cralanxes.

“Okrimars are meant to have their cral consumed by other creatures. The substance is poisonous to them in large amounts,” Arkan replied. “You didn’t think we were barbarians here in Areopa, did you?” he added with a wink.

“Oh... I didn’t know that,” Red replied, suddenly feeling better about the whole process. Critters were classified into distinct categories based on qualities that ranged from aggressiveness and intelligence to empathy and diet. Certain categories were barred from hunting or domestication. When it came to the Okrimar, Red could not help but feel empathy for the peaceful creature. At Crest, he had once had a discussion with Magnus that ran through the night about how morally complex the practice of hunting critters was. Only a few centuries ago, hunting dragons, creatures that are fully sentient, was not considered a breach of Imperial Code.

“Are you waiting for it to die of old age first?” Arkan asked.

“No, sorry,” Red replied while inhaling the cral. The substance tasted deliciously sweet and swirled around in his mouth in a mix of liquid and gas before he exhaled it in a cloud of pink. Its effect was immediate. His body felt lighter for a few moments, the music pounded in his ears, he could feel the energy of everyone dancing around the Okrimar, and the world sud-

denly brimmed with an oversaturation of color.

“Wow... that’s intense,” Red marveled, bracing himself against the body of the Okrimar.

“Tragically, it only lasts for only a few minutes,” Arkan replied. “Now... *psychedelisis*, on the other hand... if you’re into Crystal Sleet Spiders —”

“Uncle, please, will you refrain from influencing my friends too much?”

“A silver cloak approaches. She is in search of the prince, and someone has indicated that Magnus is the one to ask,” Arkan replied.

Red was confused by his response until he turned to Magnus and saw a tall, elderly woman of the Priori approaching them from afar. The cral made it seem as though her stroll were a glide, and that her coming was going to herald an epic event. Luckily, the effect of the substance had faded by the time she got to them.

“Are you... Magnus Basil, son of Elysia Basil?”

“I am,” Magnus replied with a curt bow. The woman’s eyes glanced over Red and Arkan, but lingered on the prince’s strange attire.

“I am told you are the one to ask about the whereabouts of your uncle, heir to the throne of Nimbus? We have been trying to find him all evening. It seems difficult to find an audience with him. Is he not at the royal table?”

“Probably somewhere around the food,” Magnus replied. His eyes darted to Arkan for no more than a second, but the woman’s eyes quickly followed and she seemed to have caught on. *She’s sharp*, Red thought.

“We would be delighted to have you at our table. Your two friends are welcome too,” the woman replied, gesturing to Arkan and Red. “Zenae Chloe, Soul of Light,” she replied with a short nod.

“I’m Red,” Red replied with the same bow and gesture Magnus had, but going a bit lower. He felt as though he should have added a title after his name but could think of nothing. “Student at Crest Academy,” did not have the same ring to it as “Soul of Light.” The woman then looked at Arkan, who bowed but remained silent.

“Please, do follow me,” Zenae replied. She turned around without waiting for their response and ushered for them to follow behind her.

“How rude...” Arkan mumbled under his breath.

“We were actually going to go meet our friends,” Magnus said, pointing over to the group where their team was.

“Ahh, they are with members of the Priori already,” the woman replied. “I shall bring them all over to our table as well. Will that work for you?” she

asked, in a polite, yet overly artificial tone. There was something off about her voice. Red decided that it was her monotone accent. Magnus slowly nodded before continuing to follow her.

“Is that the best you could do to get us out of this?” Prince Arkan angrily whispered in his ear. “*“Going to our friends.”* Have you not learned *anything* from me after all these years?”

“Sorry, sorry,” Magnus whispered back. Zenae led them over to a long table at the end of the room seated with several other Priori members. Among them, Red noticed the girl he saw earlier, the one that shut the door in his face. Zenae gestured for Magnus to sit next to the girl, and for Arkan and Red to sit on Magnus’s other side. A moment before they were at the table, Prince Arkan put a hand on Magnus’s shoulder and leaned over to speak between both of their ears.

“Observe: the monotonous tone, the stiff movements, the empty eyes of the woman before us.”

“Id-speech?” Magnus asked incredulously. He exchanged a confused look with Red, who was equally bewildered.

“The girl next to you, she does not want to be here. The Light has demanded of her a very specific task. They are a cunning people. Do not underestimate them,” Arkan added pointedly. He quickly switched to a casual stance before anyone in the table noticed they were speaking to each other.

“Lux Euclid, Acolyte of Light,” the girl said, with the hint of a bow. Her voice was soft, but stern and sharp with a trained and refined rhythm. Red and Magnus introduced themselves, and then the three of them shared an awkward pause as they waited for Prince Arkan to do the same. Instead of saying anything, Arkan took to picking at the plate of fruits at the center of the table. A few of the other Priori members around them were in a passive discussion, but Red had a feeling they were all intently focused on the conversation between the four of them.

“The Light shines upon Areopa,” Lux said. “I heard you were quite the warrior.”

“You must’ve heard wrong. I’ve never even been in a real battle — let alone done anything to take the mantle of a warrior,” Magnus replied graciously.

“He’s just being modest,” Arkan quipped. “Mongo here is going to be competing in the qualifiers. We’ll see him in action soon enough, I daresay.” Magnus glared at his uncle, who happily continued discussing Magnus’s gift

for combat.

“You want to join that *abomination* of a group?” Lux replied after letting Arkan finish. Red noticed the eyes of a couple of the other members dart between each other. One in particular flashed a look of warning to Lux. Red suspected that they had all intended the conversation to take a very specific and different route. He looked at Arkan. The prince continued picking at the fruits in front of him.

“Only chance we’ve got of fighting against the Xenosites, I reckon,” Magnus answered calmly. “Saw in the news that the Priori has been trying to unite different factions against them the way WEAPON did. Not too much luck, eh?”

“Let me ask you *this*: Have you ever actually *seen* a WEAPON?” someone asked from across the table — a boy only a few years older than Red. His silver cloak was more decorative than the ones Red had seen so far. The hem of the robe was adorned with perfectly clear pearls and several other transparent jewels.

“No, I thought not,” the boy added after a moment of silence. “Ever read a report on how these larger-than-life soldiers saved a city from an invasion, eliminated a swarm of Xenosites, or even bothered to help any of the other guards in their fights?” Another pause. “I imagined not. These qualifiers that everyone is so obsessed with — it is my understanding that most of the participants *die* in the process, except for a small minority who ‘qualify.’ Does no one outside of the Light see the absurdity of the situation? The best soldiers of every race are dying, killed off in these *purges*, and no one bothers to speak out against it? And the select few who *do* make it... disappear within MegaCORP itself. Quite inconvenient, *don’t you think?*”

“Who stopped Mej’Lith?” Arkan broke in. “A creation of the Light itself, I hear?”

“MegaCORP, yes, but there was no evidence of a WEAPON ever seen. And Mej’Lith was no follower of the Light.”

“And you imagine some other force could have stopped him, instead of a WEAPON?” Arkan asked.

“Who *is* Mej’Lith?” Magnus asked politely. “The name sounds familiar, but I can’t recall its significance.”

Lux was about to speak, but Arkan got to it first. “Toft Lumo was a gemini, and one of the highest ranking members of the Priori of Light, Elder of Light I believe.” As the prince began to speak, all of the silver cloaks

around him exchanged surprised glances, caught off-guard by his knowledge over their own group. “The Light fancies itself as an organization that fights against the void, an alternate dimension infamous for being poorly understood by nearly everyone. Only two things about the void are known, and one of those things is only understood through tale, myth, and legend. One, that the void is home to fantastic beings that seek destruction upon our own world, and two, that the void itself can be utilized as a source of energy — a pool of infinite dark flou with unlimited potential. Toft Lumo found out that a sect of elves, a small sect, relatively unknown among their race, had been drawing energy from the void and using dark flou for their own practices. Being a fanatic for ‘peace and life,’ naturally, Lumo waged war and declared death upon the entire sect. Eventually, his ambitions grew, and he labeled *all* elves as tainted by the void, leading to one of the largest exterminations of a single race in the history of our star system. To this day, relations between the Light, the gemini, and the elves, have never been repaired. But the crowning irony of the entire situation is that at the end of his life, Toft Lumo himself began dabbling with the powers of the void. He soon perceived himself a prophet of sorts, took the name Mej’Lith, and began an all-out conquest of the world, attempting to unite our star system under his control. After a century of his antics, MegaCORP intervened and decimated his empire, the entire northeastern hemisphere of planet Ultra.”

“His actions were not condoned by the Priori,” Lux replied briskly. “He was a monster.”

“Ahh yes, I believe the Light has a rather convenient process for disowning its own members for exactly these kinds of awkward misunderstandings, eh? Every once in a while, someone forgets that light can be just as blinding as darkness.”

“Granted, your account may be accurate, if biased, that still says nothing about WEAPON,” the boy replied.

“I didn’t know WEAPON was that old,” Red interrupted. “I thought it was a relatively new invention, created for the Xenosites.”

“That it is called WEAPON now and labeled an experimental army does not hide the fact that since its inception, MegaCORP has been using soldiers of immense powers to advance their interests across our star system for its three-thousand-year existence. The mystic elves that live right next to us report that when Titanamedusae had gone to the Cron extraction plant in Indapia, seemingly to level the entire construction, the creature

was *stopped* by something, and returned three days later, sustaining such heavy injuries that it had to rest for an entire year afterwards to recover. No one seemed to question the obvious stunning revelation, that MegaCORP controls a force that can subdue *Titanamedusae*. The rebellion force in Takis — for an entire decade they ravaged the planet's extraction plants. At its peak, the group had grown to a force of millions. They were millions of *excellently* trained soldiers, I might add, with combat abilities renowned across the planet. And then — overnight — the entire rebel force vanishes? Only a single account of the battle remains, and it recalls the emergence of several beings of godlike power that came and eradicated the rebellion, vaporizing its members. Believe what you want about the qualifiers, but do not doubt that there *is* certainly a fist underneath *that glove*.” The silver cloaks shifted uncomfortably in their seats, murmuring inaudible expressions to each other. Despite their good intentions, Red was satisfied that Prince Arkan had shut them down.

“Well whatever the case with WEAPON, such things are irrelevant to the bigger picture. After our presentation today, I am sure Areopa will finally understand our cause and the scope of what we are up against. At least Prince Arkan will. I heard he is a genius,” Lux replied.

“Oh?” Arkan replied with the hint of a smile. “I heard he’s a madman.”

“That’s what I think,” the boy across the table laughed. “Heard some of the stories about his experiments with critters. Trying to talk to them and whatnot?”

“That’s my uncle, you know,” Magnus replied. The boy ignored his response, a reaction that slightly irked Red.

“Lance Ursaw, Stallion of Light.” The boy put a slight emphasis on his title, but Red did not know enough about the Priori to know if it was significant or not. Lance extended his hand to shake the three of theirs, which Red took reluctantly.

“Butz Silo, Minister of Death,” a familiar voice replied, behind Red. Arkan snorted back a laugh as a fourth hand extended from behind Red to shake Lance’s hand.

“Apologies, my friend here has a rude sense of humor,” S added from right behind Butz.

“I think it’s rather brilliant,” Arkan commented.

“The titles of the Light are nothing to joke about,” Lance replied briskly.

“Is there no room here?” Raven interrupted.

“You can go sit at the royal table, with Magnus’s brothers,” Red replied as politely as possible. “They’re calling you.” He pointed to the boy who had been talking to Raven earlier, who was gesturing to her from afar. Ignoring Red, Raven grabbed a seat from the end of the table and shoved it in between him and Magnus.

“What are we all discussing?” S asked in a friendly tone.

“Prince Arkan, as a matter of fact,” Arkan replied, looking carefully at S, Raven, and Butz, to make sure they had caught on. “Lux here was saying he is a genius. We were just correcting her about how he is in fact, a madman.”

“A madman cannot author thirty-seven books on completely unrelated subjects in less than a year,” Lux replied. “And I’ve read his treatises on the fight against the Xenosites. The Priori has been seeking someone of such sense to join our cause.”

“Ahh, so that is what you are here for? I have not known the Light to be so blunt in their goals.”

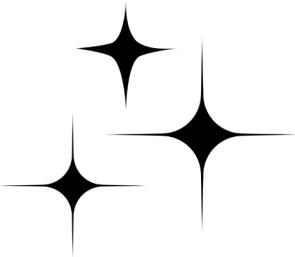
“Well, it’s time that we were,” Lux replied. “Stupidity has hindered the people of every planet from coordinating a unified attack on the Xenosites — which is exactly what we need. The Priori has been waiting a long time for a leader like Arkan.”

“Stupidity, you say? Are you quite sure that you would prefer genius over stupidity?”

“What? Of course. Stupidity is a scary thing in leaders. Do you know how many wars are being fought around our star system over small skirmishes while the Xenosite invasion threatens every race with extinction?”

“Stupidity *is* a scary thing among leaders, but genius, is *far, far* scarier. The Light must have seen that in Mej’Lith. Stupidity creates conflicts, but genius creates massacres.” Arkan looked as though he wanted to continue, but a woman in the center of the room with a flowing silver coat began speaking into a microphone.

“Ladies and gentleman, I would now like to present the object of discussion for tonight,” she began. “Let me introduce myself first. I am Gelda Lightheart, Soul of Light, and The Truth Sayer.” Red’s heart stopped as she introduced herself. For a brief second, their eyes met. “The Light has traveled far to be here tonight, and I’d like to unveil the object of our presentation straight away before beginning our discussion.” She gestured towards the black box in the center of the room. It was slowly being lifted up. Underneath it, in a tank of what looked like umbriel, was a Xenosite queen.



DARK REFLECTIONS

The reaction from the crowd reminded Red of the moment Professor Kep first revealed a Xenosite in front of the class at Crest Academy. There was no applause, no cry of awe, no outburst of questions — only a faint silence as everyone slowly overcame their own disbelief. He could imagine what they were all thinking, “Is it a real one?” “Is it alive?” “Is this safe?” “Can it escape?” Several members of the Priori were possessed by similar expressions of shock, and it occurred to Red that not everyone among the Light’s own circles must have been informed about what was going to be revealed. He could sense the tension in the air and the polarized thoughts of everyone in the crowd. The room was on the verge of tilting over to an outburst of either hysteria or applause. Either opinion only needed a single nudge in its direction. The crowd began exchanging nervous glances with each other. Everyone was looking around to find someone who would take the lead in determining a proper group response. *Someone say something good*, Red hoped, unable to find the courage to break the silence himself.

“You fools! Do you know the danger you’ve exposed us to?” he heard someone scream from one corner of the room. It was a husky woman of middle age, a MegaCORP acolyte with a portly, muscular figure. She was surrounded by a ring of guards who were far smaller than her. *Would she know anything about WEAPON?* Red wondered. In front of him was a queen, a sentient breed of Xenosite whose mind held the answer to every question he’d ever had about the enigmatic parasites. To his far left was a high-ranking member of MegaCORP, someone who might know all the secrets of WEAPON. The keys to the mysteries of the universe were abound, only a few feet away from him in either direction. As he watched some of the other people in the crowd getting up to stand on their chairs,

his eyes darted from the woman to the Xenosite in the center of the room with a sense of urgency.

“Get it out! Kill it while we can!” an Areopa native cried. Red felt his stomach drop.

“We’re all in danger!” someone else warned. A larger portion of the crowd began following suit, cautioning each other to keep their distance while shouting accusations towards the Light. Gelda held her composure in the center of the room but the company of silver cloaks around her tightened their circle. Lux and Lance got up to race towards the center of the room while Magnus followed behind, telling his own kin to seat themselves as he went.

“Should we help him?” Red asked.

“Not our fight,” Raven replied. Both she and Arkan were studying the room with a cool intensity, wearing taciturn expressions that hid their focus. Raven looked like she was surveying a battlefield. *But we’re in an event with royalty; how bad can this get?* Red wondered. He looked around at the guards, who were reluctantly starting to get more involved in the fray. As the shouting gradually escalated and mobs of people began swarming the center of the room, he noticed that the audience was much bigger than he had initially estimated. He knew that the courtyard was larger than it seemed, like all rooms in the Alcazar, but the throngs of Areopa natives that were now collecting around the center of the ociramma seemed to have come out of nowhere.

“Are there more people coming in from the back of the room?” Red asked, tip-toeing for a better view. He considered standing on his chair, but no one around him was doing it.

“I think so,” S replied. “I can’t see that far. Must be people who were already here.” Red looked at Arkan for a reply, but the prince remained silent. Red was sure he was eyeing the entrances as well. As the space around the ends of the room thinned, he caught a brief glance at a small group of elves who were making their way out. They were mystic elves — absent of the gentle crimson tint that delineated the skin of blood elves. They looked similar to humans, nearly identical, in fact, if more svelte in form and dignified in appearance. The burly woman from MegaCORP looked content with the way things were playing out, and her group had now moved to the far corner of the room, positioning itself away from the collateral of any casts that might break out. The crowd had surrounded all of the silver

cloaks in the center of the room, forcing the Priori to squish around the brim of the canister holding the queen. The Areopa natives were unwilling to get any closer. Red suspected that they were afraid the canister would tip over, despite being bolted to the stage.

Would it awaken? he wondered, imagining that even in its hibernation, it must be aware of the commotion outside. He recalled how the tiny specimen in Professor Kep's class was able to sense the presence of the spider even while it slept. Despite its large size, the queen was small compared to others he had seen. It was perhaps only two or three decades old, young for a Xenosite. Its head stretched out in a long, curved, almost saucer-like shape — protected by an elliptical shako that wrapped around its skull like a black crown. Its neck and body were one and the same, with more than a dozen tentacles sticking out in irregular angles. The tentacles — lecher siphons, they were called — were their primary mating organs. They could stretch out of the body of the queen for fantastic lengths and had hundreds of curled tips lined along their sides. The tips could morph into anything from suction cups to organic blades for slicing into flesh. Magnus had once shown him a hologram of a grand queen, a queen more than a hundred years old, stretching out its tentacles to more than a tezra's length to grip a Wyrm that was attempting to fly away from it.

King Artemis remained seated, showing almost no interest in the sudden turn of events. Red thought he looked more annoyed than worried. His tranquil method of studying the chaos around him was different from Raven's or Arkan's. Whereas the latter two seemed calm, yet paranoid and sternly focused, King Artemis was not taking the outburst seriously at all. He kept on a bland, expressionless face, a drastic change from the loud and warm spirit that he used to entertain his guests. The felion guards who surrounded him looked for a command. They were calm as well, but positioned tensely around the king. The three chimeras looked particularly lethal, trading their passive sitting stances for an aggressive posture that carried their weight on their hind legs, making them look as though they were going to lunge forward at any moment with all of their wild heads. *Which head does the talking?* Red wondered. All three of them seemed untamed. King Artemis signaled to the human guards around the ociramma. The guards began escorting everyone out of the courtyard, starting with the guests who were watching peacefully. A sudden sense of desperation filled Red.

“They can’t! I can’t believe we’re giving this up! A chance to know eve-

rything!” Red cried.

“I agree, Red, but father’s orders. This can get much messier, anyway, so it’s best to end this quickly for now,” Arkan replied. Red saw the members of MegaCORP filing out with another group of elves. The hostilities seemed to have calmed a bit, but he was sure there was going to be no presentation for today. He could no longer spot Gelda in the crowd and hoped that she wouldn’t forget about meeting him later. Lance was shoving people out of his way as he elbowed through, while Lux crept along his side. He felt a pang of sympathy for them, imagining that the Priori only meant well, despite their questionable decision to bring in a live Xenosite specimen.

“Does no one else want to hear what they have to say?! This could be a breakthrough!” Red exclaimed. “Everything I ever wondered about the Xenosite — everything *anyone* has ever wondered — is about to be laid bare before the world. Your people are about to throw it all away! Can’t they see that?”

“Doesn’t look like they’re thinking straight, to be honest,” Butz replied. “Think I would have done the same if this was *my* city.”

“He’s right, Red. These people are reacting instinctively. But do not fear, we will still get our chance, I hope,” Arkan answered. Red looked at him curiously. “The Priori seeks my audience, remember? Perhaps I *will* entertain them in private. If this was the bearing of their presentation, I would be most interested to know what they have to say.”

“Can I —”

“I don’t see why you can’t,” Arkan replied before Red finished. A single silver cloak flew up from the center of the room and landed several feet away in the middle of the crowd, crashing into a table and throwing food into the air. Someone hidden in the crowd had used a force cast. Other casts followed, as if the first one had muted an unspoken rule about restraint. A fire spread across the center of the room but was quickly put out by one of the guards. Everyone who was spectating from afar now began exiting the courtyard in droves. Red felt Raven grasp his shoulder firmly from behind as he and S both got up to look for Magnus.

“Come on, we have to leave. You heard what Arkan said. You’ll get your chance later. Maybe I’ll come too,” Raven said.

“But Magnus is still there,” S protested.

“Every man for himself, if you ask me,” Butz said while shaking his head.

“Magnus will be fine. The guards will watch him carefully. I’m afraid I can’t say the same about you lot. Raven is right. It would be wise to leave now,” Arkan replied. “If you are *that* eager to hear what the Light has to say, I will be sure to call you when I meet with them.”

“Please do,” Red nodded. As they made their way out, he stole one final glance at the queen. He remembered how one had touched his mind in Raven’s dreamscape, and he guiltily acknowledged that he craved that contact again. While the magnitude of its depth had been overwhelming, paralyzing even, the experience was an intense rush of awareness — a shot of adrenaline, but for his mind and ego rather than his body. The cold intelligence, the manic obsession with growth and evolution, had all been embracing as well, attempting to absorb his own conscience within the savage purview of the hive mind. Running closer and closer to the spot of black at the seed of the swarm was like swimming deeper and deeper towards the voice in the dark in his nightmares. *It’s because it IS the same thing*, he thought as he shuddered with the same sense of excitement he’d often get from casting fire.

The crowd broke up into smaller groups in the hallway, carrying on the argument from inside. The conflict no longer seemed as one-sided; several Areopa natives were now interested in hearing what the Priori had to say, although they were voicing their opinions far more subtly than needed. Red tried to listen in on anything the Light had to say about the queen. Questions about her and the Xenosite still occupied most of his mind as he wandered down the hallway. *What would the impact with its mind be like firsthand?* It was impossible to imagine. *What does she eat? How do they feed her? How long have they had her?* He relented that the queen was in hibernation, but knew that had it been conscious, the presence of its mind would have driven everyone far more frantic than they already were.

He felt another consciousness touch his mind. For an abrupt second, he thought it was the queen, and relished again in his guilty fascination. But soon enough, he realized that this one was far too simplistic to be the mind of the queen. It was another human. Her mind was heavy and burdened with old age. “*Come find me*,” was all she said. Her voice was soothing. Its calm tone contrasted heavily with the disarray of the Alcazar. He had practiced telepathy before, but the process was usually sloppy, with either person’s message being blurred by the collective consciousness of those around them or by their very own minds. Both S and Raven were good at it. If they ever wanted to send him a message, and if they were no more

than an arm's length way, he could usually make out their missive, even if not in the exact words that they intended. But this voice, Gelda's voice, he could hear sharply in his mind, as if it were his own consciousness saying the words. It immediately struck him that she must have been well practiced in psykinesthetics, and remembered how Arkan had pointed out that Zenae was being controlled by id-speech.

"Where are we going?" Butz asked. The same thought had just crossed Red's mind. He didn't want to stray too far from the courtyard. He intended to catch Gelda on her way out, or at least someone from the Light, to ask how he could find her. *Although she won't be on her own*, he thought, recalling how many guards were stationed around her during the presentation. The last thing he wanted was to somehow raise the suspicion of the Light. *But she's probably already shared what she knows — whatever it is that she knows — with other members of the Priori.* The thought led him to wonder if it was Prince Arkan and Magnus that they were after this entire time, or if it was actually him. More questions came as he walked alongside Butz, making him more eager than ever to speak to Gelda, *The Truth Sayer*, and to finally get his answers.

"Follow the crowd for now," Arkan said. "I've learned from experience that it's always best to stay right on the fringes of a conflict. Watch everything unfold from afar, but always avoid being pulled in yourself."

"Are you going back in to speak to King Artemis?" S asked.

"Soon, after everyone here clears out. Father will be seeking my opinion on the Light."

"Have you formed one already?" Red asked, eager to hear Arkan's take on the Priori. He imagined that the prince's opinion alone could change whether they would learn more about the queen.

"Not yet. I intend to see what they have to say about the Xenosite first, and what they plan to do with their specimen. Who knows how long they've had her? What things they might have learned? They also haven't told us *exactly* what they want, although my guess would be to establish Areopa as a base for the Priori's operations, and as a model for a multi-race effort against the Xenosite."

"So *you're* Prince Arkan," Lux said from behind them. She seemed to have appeared out of nowhere. Arkan rolled his eyes dismissively. "*I thought* Zenae was giving me a weird look when she seated you. Why are you in disguise? That was quite rude, you know. There were several people in there

looking for you. One would expect better from the royalty of Areopa,” she chided. Red was surprised by her tone, and the lack of respect it had for the prince. She sounded stout and genuinely offended.

“Where’s Magnus?” S asked. “Is he still inside? Is he okay?”

“He’s fine. He was back at the royal table the last time I saw him. The crowd was already simmering down. Everything should be fine in a few minutes. Hopefully, everyone here will come to their senses and see what we have to offer.” She gave Arkan a stern look as she spoke, but he seemed to be ignoring her. “You would think that a city as sophisticated as Areopa would be above fear mongering.”

“I suppose the Priori told you to come after us, and that’s why you left the courtyard?” Arkan asked.

“Yup,” Lux answered in her unapologetic way. Red couldn’t decide whether to laugh or be offended.

“And I suppose they told you earlier to speak to Magnus to find me, eh?” Arkan added. “Are we going to be followed back to our rooms as well?”

“The Basilis are in demand,” Lux replied matter-of-factly. “Perhaps if you made yourself more available, we wouldn’t be so desperate for an audience. The Priori has been looking for you since we arrived at the Alcazar, you know. It’s been weeks.”

Raven had been suspiciously eyeing everyone in the hallway for a few minutes now and Red finally understood why. Here and there were a few members of the Priori watching them carefully from afar. They were disengaged from their own groups and quietly kept to themselves as they followed behind Arkan. *Are they actually following Arkan? Or are they following me? Maybe both of us.* He thought about letting Arkan know, maybe slipping him a note like Doctor Lurch had, but then realized that the prince was likely already aware that they were being watched, perhaps long before he and Raven were aware of it. The hallways were now beginning to fill up as more people left the courtyard, but through the inarticulate mass of blue tunics and silver cloaks, he could clearly make out the few individuals who were watching them.

He had a feeling that ever since they sat down at the table with Lux, they had not left the eyes of the Light. He caught Arkan’s glance from his peripheral, and the prince gave him the slightest hint of a nod, as if to acknowledge their circumstances. Butz and S were oblivious to what was going on, while Raven’s eyes constantly darted left and right, keeping

track of everyone who was watching them. Her lips moved silently as she counted the number of people around them and described each one to herself. *No wonder no one likes the Light*, Red thought. The crudeness of being blatantly spied on left him with a strange paranoia, and he began having doubts about seeing Gelda. *Or maybe that's how serious this is*, he reconciled. *Maybe I do need to be watched*. He debated going up to Lux and asking her to take him straight to Gelda, but thought better of it. He was unsure if The Truth Sayer intended for him to keep their communication a secret just between them.

Lance was marching down the hallway now while arguing with someone from MegaCORP and one of Magnus's older brothers, the one who had been talking to Raven before. Red felt something tug at the ends of his cuffs. The skull creature that had bothered Linx before — Scalp-o-Lanterns, they were called, according to his microAI — was now prodding him with one of its arms. He ignored it and walked as inconspicuously as he could behind Lux and Arkan, who were now in the middle of an argument about the history of the Light. Arkan was listing the Priori's many transgressions while Lux vehemently defended the group's overall intentions. Red thought she sounded earnest, but from what Arkan was saying, was stubbornly convinced of the purity of the Light's motives.

"There was a time once when Areopa itself was an enemy of the Light. One of your Oracles had a vision that a child of a royal family in Areopa was a changeling, a deity from the void that masked itself as a child," Arkan said. "They believed it was someone from a blood elf family, no?"

"*That* suspicion is still there..." Lux replied. "That's why we didn't invite them to the ociramma. And the blood elves aren't the friendliest of races you know. It's not a surprise that they don't get along with the Light. Some of their sects have close ties to the dark elves."

"Yes, but most of them *are* fighting the Xenosite. That's why they're in the qualifiers for WEAPON. It would be ideal if the Light were more open to people who shared their goals. Then maybe MegaCORP would work with you as well. But I suppose the Priori never cared for making enemies out of the elves, nor for making allies with those they could not control," Arkan replied.

"We have nothing against the elves. There are elves who are a part of the Priori as well, you know. But a vision from an Oracle of Light is not to be taken casually. The void is among us, everywhere, our Elders say; in this

star system, it is even more pervasive than the Light. Some of the Priori can even sense its presence in the Alcazar.”

“I see it every time I turn off the lights... close my eyes... darkness...” Butz said in a grave voice while rolling his eyes upwards in an ominous way. Lux looked like she was restraining herself from hitting him.

The Scalp-o-Lantern tugged on his cuffs again, but this time, its arm began gently hovering towards another direction. It was pointing at something. Linx was watching the creature with a leery fascination from afar. It suddenly dawned on Red that this skull creature must be trained. He looked around and saw that they were still being watched by the Priori. *But if they're watching Arkan... maybe they won't follow me, or notice that I'm gone.* Raven had settled herself on one of the ledges in the corridor, flipping her cutlass around her thumb with a speed that made Red's stomach turn. For the first time, he noticed the gems on the cutlass, and recognized it as the same one Wren used to carry. He quickly typed a message on his microAI, asking her to follow behind him if he took off. She read it and then continued flipping her cutlass without a reply. She would need no explanation, he knew.

“Butz, I need you to create a distraction,” Red whispered.

“Yeah I know. This is getting too boring, isn’t it?”

“No, no, it’s because I need to get away from here. Just trust me. I’ll explain later.”

“Mmm, okay,” Butz replied. Less than a minute after Red had walked away, he heard a loud explosion coming from where Lance was standing. *Well that was overkill*, he thought. Butz’s cast had floored half the people standing in the passageway. A veil of gray smoke emerged from the center of the blast as people struggled to recover. He noticed that no one from MegaCORP had even flinched; they had force fields around them that were calibrated to absorb shock, sound, and light if it reached a certain degree. Arkan retained his composure, as well, although he had no shield. Likely, he had known what was coming. Red was sure that the prince would notice him following the Scalp-o-Lantern, but there was nothing to prevent that. He only hoped that it wouldn’t raise any suspicions. He took one more look around the hallway to make sure no one was watching him and then dashed in the direction the Scalp-o-Lantern had pointed. He felt a hard arm grab him from behind. Its fingers were so cold he could feel the heat drain from his elbow as though it had been stabbed by an ice pick.

“Be careful as you go. You are being watched,” Arkan whispered.

"I know. I noticed them too. The Light, right?" Red asked.

"No Red, you misunderstand. *You* are being watched. I do not know why, but I intend to find out." Not trusting himself to speak another word in the presence of Arkan's scrutiny, Red simply nodded and then headed down the corridor. The Scalp-o-Lantern put on a surprising burst of speed, cartwheeling its body down the Alcazar to lead the way ahead of him. He wondered how bizarre the scene would appear to an onlooker. Luckily, they crossed paths with no one as they went. Raven followed behind, but left a comfortable distance between them. He had not told her anything about their circumstances, and so she defaulted to remaining inconspicuous. She kept her distance just perfectly beyond the view of the curving corridor, invisible to anyone that might suddenly come face to face with Red, but close enough to help if there was any sign of danger.

The route they took sloped downwards, and after a few minutes, they had exited the spectra wing entirely. He could tell from how different the interior of the Alcazar looked here that they had descended far below the main level. The walls were no longer made out of stone. They were composed of a silky black cinder that pulsed with waves as he ran along their sides, as if his movement had a gravitational pull on the substance itself. He broke out into a run just to see its effect on the material. The black cinder gushed out as if to swallow him into its composition. If he ran fast enough, it pulsed as though it were a liquid. By now, Raven had disappeared from his view entirely, and he only knew by the faint traces of her energy that she was somewhere nearby. Still, her sudden absence made him uncomfortable, and he instinctively kept looking back to catch sight of her. There were no portraits of Basilis here, only barren black walls, mirrors stationed haphazardly as decorations here and there, and suits of empty armor that he kept mistaking for guards. The Scalp-o-Lantern finally began to slow its pace. It turned left and entered a room up ahead. Red tiptoed behind it.

The room they entered was made of stone. It was smaller than the other rooms he had seen in the Alcazar, and resembled a dungeon more than a meeting room at a palace. Doctor Lurch stood at its center with his back turned to Red. The chamber was dimly lit by tiny green flames in the shape of snakes that slithered across the ceiling. *Light casts mixed with flashdust. Interesting*, Red thought. There were more Scalp-o-Lanterns here. He imagined that all of them in the Alcazar must have made their home here. There were no fewer than twenty. In the corner was a similar creature but with three

skulls for a body instead of one. Its arms were longer, and it had a single leg, something that looked like a short, white tree stump. *So that's what they would look like if they evolved*, Red thought, answering his question from the day before.

"I once had a brother — or I *have* a brother, perhaps. I'm not sure which anymore. He was older, and he was far more brilliant than most of our family. With a heritage of renowned scientists, that's saying a lot," Doctor Lurch began, in his clear but raspy voice. He enunciated his words as though he were speaking to an AI. The doctor looked more disheveled now, out of rhythm. His hair was a mess, and his lab coat lay crumpled at the corner of the room. There was writing all over the walls, which Red had not noticed when he had entered. They looked like dates and events. He caught only one, "243492 A.G. — discovery of Xenosite." The year Red was born was written on the wall too, with a circle around it, but there was no writing next to it. The ink the doctor used was only visible under the green light of the flashdust snakes on the ceiling. When the snakes disappeared, the letters melted into the texture of the wall.

"He must have been twenty-five at the time, and me only twenty, both of us with broad ambitions in our fields. Over the last two years, he had become increasingly obsessed with the study of another dimension. By this time, metacosmology was already the most popular subject among the brightest minds in science. Humans were far behind in the field compared to the gemini, but progress was being made in leaps and bounds. Several alternate realities and parallel universes had been studied thoroughly — some even visited. But there was a single one, a single dimension that he had become obsessed with over the past two years. Let us say, a more elusive one, with a different structure and nature than the ones we were already familiar with. Even its very definition was in debate; some said it was an alternate dimension, others said it was a dimension between all the other dimensions, a kind of space that occupied the distance between alternate universes. A hundred years later, and the answer is still not clear, although much more about this other dimension *has* been learned. Do you know what I speak of?"

"The void?"

"The void, the netherworld, the world between worlds — every race has their own term for it. What had interested him most was that unlike other dimensions and alternate universes, which no one had heard of *until* science

had proven their existence, the void had been in stories since the inception of sentience as we know it. Stories of a dark world beyond this one, with deities that visited our universe and sometimes lived among us, were in the folklore of every race. By now, of course, not only has the existence of the void been proven as factual, but we have even documented contact with several of these deities. The locations where they are often seen are recorded, and you'd be able to seek them out if you wanted to.”

“I didn't know that...” Red muttered.

“Ahh, they're closer than you think. But anyhow, many of them are rather irrelevant. It is understood that they visit many universes outside of the void, and that they have little impact on them. It was thus not them that my brother was interested in.”

“Arkan said that the void could be an endless source of energy as well. An ocean of dark flou, he called it,” Red cut in.

“Ahh yes, don't worry, I am getting to that part. But you'll appreciate the details, and perhaps they'll... *pertain to you*,” Doctor Lurch replied, finally turning to look at Red. He tilted his head down to stare at Red above his glasses. He looked like he was searching a patient for symptoms, or a specific reaction to his words. Red stood as still as he could, feigning a sudden interest in the writing on the walls. He noticed that the doctor had listed the cycles for solstice on planet Eaut as well as the hibernation cycles of The Leviathan.

“Previous to metacosmology, my brother had been studying the habits of mythical creatures, namely, The Gozmalog of planet Ultra. There is a device, called an arcmeter, which can detect high levels of concentrated energy. If the device is calibrated to detect less than most stars, but still a high enough level of energy to qualify as an extraordinary amount, it can be used to detect mythical creatures across the universe that have not been discovered yet. There is another device, called a galeoreactor, engineered only a few centuries ago, which can be used to open dimensional rifts. My brother combined these two devices, with his partner, a man who has long since disappeared, into an unnamed invention and pointed the device towards the void. They found something remarkable. Can you guess what they found?”

“*Red, you are in danger.*” Gelda said, her voice clear and crisp in his head as though she were right next to him. He wanted to ask her “*what kind of danger?*” but knew that his message would come out as an unreadable blur

of thought. He took an instinctive step back, towards the door, and then remembered that Raven was right outside. *I'll be okay. Just a few more minutes and then I'll go back to my suite. I'll be around my team. They'll want to hear this.*

"He found something... powerful?" Red replied awkwardly. He didn't want to reply so blandly, but he knew he couldn't say what he was thinking. *The voice in the darkness — that's what they had found.*

"Power. More power. Power ad nausum, power ad infinitum. More power than if all the stars in our galaxy were combined into a single point, and then multiplied a hundredfold. And more surprisingly, the source was not static. This source of power was releasing its energy in bursts of flou, but a different sort of flou than the one we recognize in this world. As you mentioned earlier, we refer to it now as dark flou. My brother and his partner did not know what to make of this, but they were excited by their discovery. With no scientific precedent for it, they had no choice but to turn to cultural lore. They knew that there was a sect of elves, dark elves, whose religion centered around the void."

Red received a message in his microAI. He looked down towards his wrist as subtly as he could. It was Raven, asking if he was okay. He couldn't type out a response now without interrupting Doctor Lurch. *Hopefully, she won't burst in here if I don't reply.* A Scalp-o-Lantern began climbing through the shelves that lined the top of the room. The ledges were filled with jars and pots that had been collecting dust for years. It was the first time he had seen dust in the Alcazar.

"The dark elves told him that the source he referred to was an entity in the void, a godlike being that their religion was centered around, a being whose energy was nearly infinite, fed by the galaxies that it had consumed throughout its lifetime. My brother asked him why its source of energy was being expelled, and they replied that the deity was asleep, and had been asleep since the beginning of our universe. It is always either releasing energy or consuming more of it. Probing further, he asked if this god of theirs would ever awaken. They replied that there was a prophet that existed in our universe. They called him '*The Mouth of The Void*', a being reincarnated every thousand years as a random life form that held the key to awakening their god. He asked how he could find this prophet. They replied that he was nothing without his sight and his powers, and that it would be pointless to search for the latter without acquiring the former. The powers of their prophet are locked in his weapon, and his sight within his third eye, or as is

referred to in fable, ‘The Evil Eye.’ Both, they said, were hidden somewhere in the universe, *within the depths of an oceanic planet guarded by a great beast.*”

“His sight?”

“Ahh, not his vision, his sight into the void. They claimed that the prophet would awaken their god by peering into the abyss, an action only possible by using The Evil Eye, a unique type of prescience referred to as... *Phantasia.*”

“And... an oceanic planet guarded by a great beast...”

“Ahh, it gets interesting from there. There are over six hundred such planets within our galaxy, but my brother knew it was Eaut. Call it intuition if you may, but he felt it was no coincidence, that his path had been determined by fate.”

“Your brother is the Lurch who discovered the Xenosite?” *The bladed man.*

“I am not sure *discovered* is the word I would use, Red. I find it difficult to believe that only a decade after my brother set out on his path, he had *discovered* the Xenosite, who, at the time, had just begun their invasion of Eaut. The invasion began exactly when The Leviathan had begun one of its longest periods of hibernation. It was not my brother who created the Xenosite, I am sure, but all of it was by design. Perhaps not by the design of a being from this world, but still by the design of *someone’s* hand. Tell me, now, this bladed man you spoke of before, has he ever visited you before? Perhaps while you were a child? In the orphanage you grew up in?” *He knows,* Red thought. A pot crashed from the top of the room and shattered into pieces. Its contents, flashdust, poured onto the floor. Strangely, the skull creature that was climbing through the shelves was on the other side of the pot that had fallen over. *Maybe its hands stretched out and tipped it over,* Red thought.

“*Red, what we saw in your dream — he is there with the other human. He is in the room with you! Leave wherever you are. Run!*” It was Gelda’s voice again. The telepathy carried over her sense of urgency, and he felt it as though it were his own emotion. His adrenaline shot up, and he almost stumbled back as he stepped away towards the door. Doctor Lurch began looking nervously from the pots to Red, his eyes darting back and forth as though he were waiting for a command from someone. More of the jars in the room began to rattle. Without another word, Red bolted from the room, running as fast he could up the hallway. Raven was standing outside, just beyond the curve of the hallway, which calmed him a little.

“What happened?” she asked, drawing her sword. She was about to walk back towards the room, but Red pulled her away. She flinched at his touch. His hands were blazing hot. He was instinctively prepared for a fire cast.

“Nothing, it’s nothing, just come,” Red replied. He stopped running but still walked as fast as he could back up the Alcazar. He turned around to see if Doctor Lurch was following them, but the corridor remained empty. The walls seemed to pop out even more now, belching out of the hallway in tides of black ink. Once more he had the urge to run fast enough to make the walls spill into each other, but Gelda had spooked him enough to keep him from experimenting. The adrenaline of the moment dampened his composure, giving the hallway a far more surreal effect than the first time around. He walked straight along its center, as far as possible from the ebb and flow of either side.

“I wonder what these walls are made out of,” he muttered.

“We can ask Magnus later,” Raven replied. “Why did you run out? And why are we walking so fast? Did he try to hurt you? I always thought he was a bit creepy. I can fight him, you know.”

“No, I don’t want you to fight someone who’s a hundred and fifty. Did you hear what he was saying?”

“I heard most of it. I was walking up and down the hallway. I didn’t hear anything that would make you want to bolt out like that. Sounded like he was giving you the answers you were looking for. The bladed man was his brother. Did he tell you to meet him there?”

“Mmhmm, he slipped me a note when I was getting my hand mended.”

“Oh, I didn’t see,” Raven replied, sounding like she was disappointed with herself.

“He told me he needed to see me, and then the Scalp-o-Lantern led me to that room from outside the courtyard. Did you see anything in the room? The writings, or how messy he looked?”

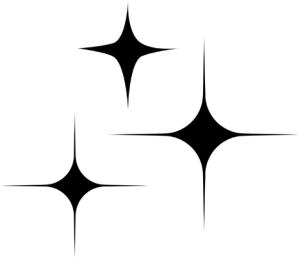
“No. I sensed your emotions and heard him, but I didn’t see anything.”

“Okay, I’ll tell you why I ran out when we get back to our suite. I want to tell everyone now, Magnus, S, and Butz.” He passed by a few of the mirrors in the hallway without noticing anything strange, but the fourth mirror down made him stop short. His own reflection looked smaller in this mirror, not scaled down, but as though he had receded into a distance or the hallway itself was actually a far-reaching chamber. In the background, he could clearly make out what he had been seeing all these years in mirrors,

the image that always vanished if he turned around. This time, he didn't turn around, and continued to stare at the mirror, capturing what he was seeing as vividly as he could into his memory: a black cloud that stretched into the blurry silhouette of a giant torso. He could not see the head, but knew it was there, staring at him through the surface of the mirror. The crystals that orbited the body spun around it in rapid speeds; they were colorful and large, jewels the size of miniature boulders. He blinked, and the next instant, the image was gone. His reflection went back to normal.

"Are you okay?" Raven asked. *She can't see it.*

"Yeah. I'm fine. I think. Come on, let's get back to everyone else."



LOST

They rushed back to the hallway by the courtyard. Most of the crowd from the ociramma had dispersed, but a good number of people still remained. Lance was now in an argument with the bulky woman from MegaCORP. Everyone else had dropped their own debates to listen to the two of them speak. There was more tension in the air now, but less noise, making it easier to hear out both sides. From up close, the distinguished quality of the MegaCORP uniforms was unmistakable. The black color was from a coat of liquid obsidian, and the gold patterns from aurica, a rare compound between celestial steel and gold. Unlike the Areopa uniforms, which looked like casual garb but could function as combat gear due to their kerebricrite compositions, the MegaCORP uniforms were made to clearly resemble combat suits. Their look of eminence had militaristic undertones.

Red took a moment to scan the crowd as he approached it. Arkan and Gelda were nowhere to be seen, which left him disappointed. He realized that he not only enjoyed Arkan's presence, but felt much safer around him. He could trust the prince to be aware of everything that was happening around them. Butz, S, and Lux were standing near Lance. Linx was sitting on top of Lux's head for a better view of the crowd. Butz seemed not to mind, happily embracing Linx's choice to sit on someone other than him. *Maybe he trained him to start sitting on other people's heads,* Red laughed to himself. Lux kept glancing above her head nervously while Butz kept warning her about the cat's unusual habit of defecating without warning. Red suspected that she had already tried to remove the cat, but failed to match his reflexes. Once in a while she would jump up to try and throw Linx off, which had Butz rolling with laughter and some of the bystanders glaring at them angrily.

"Will you tell him to get off of me?" Red heard her whisper as he came

up next to them.

“He does what he wants,” Butz replied while throwing both of his hands up as though he were intimidated by Linx. “You have to tell him. Sometimes, if his victims explain the situation to him really sincerely, he listens,” Butz added. Lux rolled her eyes in exasperation and tried jumping up again. Linx looked down curiously, as if to ask her if something was wrong. When Lux tried bending over sideways, the cat tilted over towards her neck, as though he didn’t notice the change in her position. The white of his fur now had a marine tint to it, especially near the back of his head. Day by day, it was slowly turning into the spectral exterior Aeyz critters were acclaimed for. His eyes were changing in color and shape as well, adopting a ghost-like appearance with their faint glow and sharp contours. Soon enough, the edges of Linx’s eyes would taper out to resemble curved triangles, taking away the natural charm he once had as a kitten. His glowing pupils would dilate enough to cover the entirety of his eyes, granting him even better vision than what he already had.

“Do you know what kind of danger you’ve exposed this entire city to?” the woman from MegaCORP asked. She wasn’t yelling, nor speaking as though she were worried. Instead, her tone was condescending, as if she were reprimanding children for making a troublesome mistake. The Areopa natives around her murmured in agreement, but none of them spoke up. There were no Nimbus guards present in the hallway, but the crowd was too small to burst out into a chaotic fight as they had in the ociramma. *Plus, no one wants to get into a fight with people from MegaCORP so close,* Red thought. Both the wide breadth of space and the cautionary glances everyone gave the MegaCORP guards were noticeable. Red realized that they were not armed any more than the regular city guards. They simply held themselves in a way that made them look more threatening.

“I’m afraid you’ve got it all wrong. We *are* in far more danger than anyone could have imagined, but not from this queen. If the people here would listen to us,” Lance said, gesturing at the audience, “if they knew what we found from studying the mind of this creature —”

“You think MegaCORP *hasn’t* already studied the mind of such creatures?” The woman asked. “You think the Light has contributed to *any* advancement in this field that we haven’t already made on our own?”

“Well, you haven’t shared it with anyone, if you have,” Lance replied sheepishly.

“You *don’t* know what kind danger you’ve exposed the people of Areopa to, do you? Do you know what the mind of this creature would do to everyone else’s minds if it were awake? Did you warn the people here that this creature instinctively creates telepathic connections with all other creatures around it, placing them in a near catatonic state that is sometimes impossible to come back from? Were you aware that soldiers who have stayed for extended durations around the proximity of a hive cluster containing a queen all report an altered perception of the world and of reality, and of traumatic nightmares and waking states of harrowing daydreams even decades after their experiences?” The Areopa natives glared angrily at Lance, awaiting an explanation. Even some of the Light looked on with startled expressions, muttering to each other in frightened tones under their breaths.

“Well, that’s why we’re leaving it in hibernation,” Lance replied. He looked at Lux and some of the other silver cloaks around him for support, but they remained silent.

“Leaving it, or simply hoping that it stays in hibernation as you found it? You *don’t* know what makes them stay in their hibernating phases, do you? Nor are you aware of how to keep them there. Did you care to find out *anything* about this creature or the danger that it poses before bringing it to a *planetary capital*? ”

“What we found from the queen —”

“What you found from the queen is irrelevant, something we could have told everyone from our own studies. What you are trying to dodge is the immediacy of the situation at hand, and the danger of your negligence.”

“Lance, maybe we should hear her out,” Lux said. “I want everyone to hear out what we have to say too, but I don’t think we intend to put anyone in danger, do we?”

Lance dismissed her with a wave of his hand before continuing. “We have found something within the mind of the queen that confirms a long-held suspicion by the Elders in the Priori. Something that puts this entire star system, and perhaps beyond, in danger. We did not come here seeking to place the people of Areopa in danger, but if that’s the case, then so be it. We *must* be heard. What we found might explain why the Xenosite feed on nothing but Cron.” For the first time, Red could see the woman become slightly uncomfortable.

“Ahh, and what is it you seek from the people of Areopa?” the woman

asked. “To unite them under your dogma? To have people worship the stars and the Nebulae as you do? Those ancient beings that exist in a realm above ours, that we have nothing to do with, would you have everyone shape their lives after them? And what would you have them practice here in Areopa? Would you have them gather everyone who has polystigmata and shoot them into the center of stars, as your kind do?” Red, Butz, and S, exchanged curious glances with each other. All three of them avoided looking at Raven. “Would you have them make contact with those so-called ‘sentient lights’ that have made more than half of your ruling class taut with paranoia about the coming invasion of the void? Listen to the meaningless dribble of your ‘Elders,’ who say they can speak with the stars?”

“*That* invasion has already started. *That’s* what the Light has come to stop in this star system.” It was Lux who spoke, and for the first time, Red could see some interest brewing in the people of Areopa. “What you spoke of before — shooting people into stars — yes, that *is* what we do, but it’s not as deranged of a practice as you’re making it out to be. People who suffer from polystigmata lose all of their senses and degenerate into a vegetative state. But if they don’t die within two or three decades upon being exposed to the corruption of Cron, then polystigmata turns into something else. Would you like to enlighten the people of Areopa as to what happens to them?”

“The subject at hand is not Cron pollution, but rather, the danger that the queen you’ve brought in poses to these people,” the woman said. “The ideologues of the Priori have been so obsessed with getting their message across that they’re willing to put anyone at risk of a *Xenosite invasion* for it. I, for one, vote that we should close our ears to your dogma until the Light has proven *not* to be such a corrosive organization. Who would save Areopa if anything like that *did* happen? You, with that tiny army the Light has been creating on planet Ultra? I think not. It would be MegaCORP, and it would not be the first time we had to clean up after your kind. I also doubt it will be the last.” At the term “Xenosite invasion,” several people broke out in nervous whispers again.

“How could there be a Xenosite invasion here? We’re an inner planet,” Butz mumbled.

“Try explaining that to everyone here,” S replied.

“Thought it was common sense...” Butz sighed.

“I, for one, *do* want to hear what the Light has to say,” Arkan’s voice in-

terrupted. The prince seemed to have appeared out of thin air. He was out of his disguise. For the first time since Red had met him, he looked like a person of importance, a prince. Now that he had Areopa's native garb on, Red imagined that this was how "the world" knew Arkan. His appearance lacked the regal quality apparent in Magnus and King Artemis, but he still had an imposing aura, albeit one in a different style of authority. Arkan's was cold, confident, and piercing. The first sound of his voice revealed an overly analytical mind. It was a sharp contrast to his usual playfulness, although Red had already seen how quickly the prince could switch between those two personas. He imagined that Arkan's mind was always so active that it had to adopt an unusually playful mask to balance its own tension.

Some of the Areopa natives bowed low upon Arkan's arrival, flashing a sign with their hands and expelling a ring of white light from their fingertips. The salute was done too quickly for Red to discern the exact motion. It was the first time he had seen anyone do a traditional greeting here. Arkan replied with a slight nod of his head, looking down and holding up his right hand to expel an identical ring of light, while hiding his cringe. The lower and more respectfully someone bowed, the more the prince cringed. Some of the people of the Light, including Lux, knew the motion as well. No one from MegaCORP reacted at all upon Arkan's arrival, although the bulky woman held her posture more firmly now, cocking her head slightly higher than should have been comfortable. Red recalled that everyone he had seen in the Alcazar who was part of a noble or a royal family kept the Nimbus Guard close by. Arkan, however, never travelled with company.

"Oh, look at that. He looks just like Magnus's bearded friend..." Butz whispered. Lux leered at him from the side. Lance greeted Arkan with a solemn bow, not recognizing the prince from his old guise. The woman from MegaCORP held out her arm to clasp hands with the prince. It was an awkward and stiff gesture, Red thought, since she didn't lean her body over at all. She raised her hand like a lever, keeping it rigidly perpendicular to her shoulders. She let it hang there, uncomfortably close to her own body, while waiting for Arkan to lean over and clasp it. Arkan looked at the hand for a moment, tapped it meekly with his own fingertips as though he were petting a dangerous critter, and then went back to greeting some of the other natives. Everyone who was watching, including Raven, tried their hardest to stifle a laugh. The woman, however bizarre she must have found Arkan's reaction, did not seem flustered at all. Red imagined that someone

must have already warned her about Arkan's persona. It did not seem to bother the prince that everyone found his habits to be exceedingly quirky. Red thought that Arkan rather enjoyed everyone's opinion of him.

"Ahh, Odra Mytap, Gigladon Slayer. We meet, finally," Arkan said, coming back to the woman. *The Gigladon*. Red had heard of the creature before, and of its death. It was a legendary sea creature on planet Ultra, a shark big enough to swallow entire ocean cruisers. When legendary creatures were bested, their slayers would champion their names as a sign of their achievement. The same would occur if someone slayed a mythical creature, but the latter achievement had never been earned. Half the crowd stared at Odra in disbelief, as if expecting her to correct Arkan, but she only stood more firmly, as though someone were finally giving her the respect she deserved. The other half was unaware of what the accomplishment meant, or like Raven, chose to remain impassive.

"I bet if someone said they killed The Leviathan by beating it with a wooden staff, she still wouldn't be impressed," Butz whispered while pointing to Raven.

"You know my name, and my title?" she asked, raising a brow. "I was not aware that I gave any formal notice of my arrival."

"You were the seven-hundred-and-thirty-fourth name on the guest list, and being the only Envion General from MegaCORP to attend the ociramma, I assumed that since you had guards, you were indeed who I thought you were," Arkan replied politely. The woman grunted in reply, acknowledging that she was impressed, if unsatisfied with his response. Someone else from MegaCORP whispered something into her ear, and she nodded with an expression of understanding. From somewhere in the crowd, the glare of a gem blinded Red for a split second, too quickly for him to notice where it came from.

"It must have been tedious, memorizing all those names," the woman mocked.

"Ahh, I only risked a quick glance of course," Arkan replied. "Now then, I believe I must have already missed the better part of this argument. What is it exactly that the Light wanted to share about the queen and the Xenosite? I understand that there will be no presentation today, but suppose we can divulge a bit more information, at least? Something that may help me convince King Artemis to give the Priori its due attention?"

"Finally, someone with sense," Lance sighed.

“Too many madmen among the common folks, eh?” Arkan replied.

“Prince Arkan, your attention should be focused on the safety of the people of Areopa from immediate threats, not on whatever vague dangers the Light wishes to hint towards with their dogma. This is how their creed spreads, by instilling the people of different lands with talk of dark beings that must be stopped, *with their intervention*,” Odra said. This time, the Areopa natives did not support her with their nods or hushed whispers of agreement. They simply looked to Arkan for direction.

“Yes, of course, but I suppose if I were to let them speak for only a minute or two, right here, that queen in the canister of umbriel wouldn’t run down the hall to murder us all for it, eh?” Odra did not reply but did not let down her look of defiance either. She glared at Lance as everyone waited for someone from the Priori to begin speaking. Ironically, now that they had their chance to speak openly, no one from the Light seemed to know what to say. Lux finally stepped forward to break the silence.

“We’ve found that the mind of the queen is controlled by another entity, or a figment of another entity. Our Elders believe that it is proof of the taint. A deity lurks in the void whose consciousness seeps over to this world, controlling the mind of other beings by instilling them with an overriding imperative to set this world up for its own consumption. Those who are affected by the taint are subconsciously driven toward this being, whether that means being more inclined to use dark flou, or enveloping themselves in the telepathic connection you mentioned earlier.”

“If there *is* another *entity* that poses a threat to this star system, you can rest assured that MegaCORP will destroy it, just as we will the Xenosite, so long as no one interferes with our plans,” Odra broke in.

“It is *not* a creature to be bested like a Wyrm or a Hydra. It is the eternal enemy of the Light, a nameless entity whose power stretches from one end of space to another, across time and through multiple dimensions. It has been asleep since the creation of this universe, unable to die and unable to truly live. Yet even as it sleeps in the void, its power is so immense, creatures in our universe, both sentient and non-sentient, still suffer from its control, from its taint, and they are taking steps every day to ready this world for the awakening of their god, for the ascension of the void.” There was an abrupt silence as she finished. It was not just her words, but her delivery, that Red found eloquent. She had a calm way of speaking that mixed a sense of urgency with genuine terror to enrapture her audience.

“You know, if you didn’t have a cat on your head, you would have sounded much more persuasive,” Lance hissed underneath his breath. Lux glared at Butz, who was covering his mouth to keep himself from laughing. Linx stood proudly on Lux’s head, as though he thought he should have been given credit for the speech as well. He eventually hopped off and began circling Butz. From down the corridor, Red could see Magnus approaching them. He had a grin on his face, and was reading something off of his microAI. He sped up his pace when he saw Red and everyone else. S and Butz waved their hands to let him know they were there.

“If the Xenosite had any type of organized initiative, we would have known about it before now,” Odra finally replied. “Believe it or not, MegaCORP knows far more about these creatures than the Light does. I don’t recall anything about the Light helping out in the outer planets during the invasions as we did. Couldn’t your Elders ask the stars for help? Perhaps tell Aleph to come closer to Eaut and burn the largest hive clusters?” she asked snidely.

“Oh, but they *do* have an organized initiative,” Lux replied. “Our Elders believe that the invasion of Eaut was not a coincidence, and the Xenosite are a race of beings that have come from far, far away to invade Eaut specifically. They intend to set off a sequence of events beginning with the revival of an ancient weapon and an old enemy of the Light. You’ve heard of The Evil Eye, and its possessor, Ikb’Sept, The Mouth of The Void?” There were more whispers. Her use of the terms had violated an unspoken taboo. *It’s dead. It’s gone. We destroyed it with the slime,* Red assured himself. *And we don’t even know if she’s talking about the same thing.* He tried to sense if the eye was nearby but felt nothing. Still, something told him that it wasn’t over. He would see it again, maybe sooner than he hoped. Odra tensed up before speaking this time. Even Raven was listening intently now.

“This is what I mean about the Light manipulating people with their own dogma to justify their intervention on the matters of others. Thus far, you’ve only spoken of invisible ‘deities,’ and bad omens to warrant the presence of the queen — a creature that currently threatens the entire population of Areopa. And if you *are* worried about the invasion of the Xenosite, why aren’t you doing anything about it? You think that tiny army of yours will accomplish anything compared to what MegaCORP can do? Compared to what we are making with WEAPON?” *She said it,* Red thought. Just her use of the term made his heart race. She was acknowledg-

ing the existence of a legend he yearned to be a part of.

“We’re doing the best we can,” Lance cut in, “but the Priori needs more resources. We are fighting multiple wars. That’s why we have come to Areopa.”

“He should just let Lux do the talking,” Butz whispered. Red nodded. Lance had a crude way of speaking and seemed to lose the audience every time he tried to make an argument.

“Ahh, yes, and I suppose the Priori is using every bit of its *own* resources for this conflict then? I suppose *you* are going to fight against the Xenosite hands on, just as WEAPON will, and just as you are asking other people to?” Odra asked. Lance remained silent. Lux’s leverage over the crowd was slowly disappearing.

“She has a point, you know,” Butz whispered to Lux.

When Magnus arrived, he quickly walked passed them and ushered for the four of them to follow behind him. Red hesitated, wanting to hear more from the Priori, but Magnus insisted that it was urgent. The five of them broke away from the crowd as silently as they could. Red saw Arkan watching them from the corner of his eyes with a look of disappointment. He also noticed the members of the Light who were watching him. They stood at the edge of the crowd, disinterested in the argument that was going on behind them. Some of them looked as though they intended to follow behind Red and the others, but they stayed behind and only watched from the crowd until they disappeared behind the turn of the corridor. Red considered mentioning them to his team right away, but thought it would be best to save it for until they were back in the suite. He tried to shake off the paranoia that had been bothering him since leaving the courtyard, but he had the distinct feeling that they were either being watched, or that everything they were saying was being listened to.

“Something about the qualifiers?” Raven asked.

“Yup. MegaCORP just released the layout of the first round. I’ll tell you guys when we get back to our suite, or better yet, show you the hologram,” Magnus replied. Judging by his tone, it was good news. The rounds in the qualifiers could be set up in a multitude of different ways. It was never straightforward combat with another team. Depending on the design of the challenge and how the objectives were oriented, it could be a huge advantage for certain races or styles of combat.

“Did they reveal the terrain?” Red asked. While he knew it would be an

advantage if they were able to fight on familiar grounds, part of him hoped for an exotic location, perhaps even outside of their star system. Half of the past rounds he had studied all used terrain found on Avalonia, but the other half had no pattern to the way they were chosen. MegaCORP combined a selection of exotic and native landscapes to test their participants. His only fear was that they would be placed at a distinct disadvantage, for example, if the arena used was a space station and they were up against the gemini, a race that had no need for oxygen.

“No, not the terrain. Just some general information, but still enough to start planning,” Magnus replied. As they entered the raeth wing, they almost bumped into a group of Priori members who were passing by. Red was sure that they had been sent to find them. He was going to say something to interrupt them as they were walking by, but he felt Gelda enter his mind before he could speak. He thought Raven could detect the connection as well because her eyes were suddenly transfixed on him.

Red, I have sent the Priori to watch you. They will be around your sleep-room as well. I have not told them anything about you, only that they must keep a close watch on you and protect you from harm’s way. You are in more danger than you think. I am speaking to King Artemis, and I will not be able to meet you until tomorrow. Then, all will be clear. Stay safe and don’t wander on your own. If you notice anything strange, or if you feel strange at all, go to someone of the Light and tell them to bring you straight to me.

“You okay?” S asked.

“Huh? What? Yeah, I’m fine,” Red replied. He still wasn’t used to telepathy and didn’t realize how abruptly he had stopped to receive the message. He wiped the cold sweat from his forehead. The sound of someone else’s voice in his head made him feel as though he wasn’t completely in control of his own mind. He made a note to tell Gelda to avoid speaking directly into his mind unless it was absolutely necessary. He would have preferred a message on his microAI or even a messenger from the Light. He resolved to learn more about psykinesthetics, as well, imagining that even if it was not a skill he could use against the Xenosite, it would be important in his dealings with other sentient beings.

“You stopped walking out of nowhere,” Butz said.

“Oh, sorry, yeah,” Red replied. “I’ll tell you back in the room.” It occurred to him after her voice was gone that he had no reason to trust her, beyond her affiliation with the Light, and even then, he was now aware that the Priori itself could have dubious pretenses. Her request left him in

a conundrum. What if being under the watch of the Light *was* what was putting him in danger? He decided he would speak to his team later today about it. He intended to tell them everything he had come to know up until now. They already knew bits and pieces, but not all of it, and certainly not what he had pieced together.

When they got back to their room, Magnus insisted that they make dinner first, before watching the hologram that MegaCORP sent out. Having not eaten since morning, Red didn't argue. Everyone except for Raven helped with cooking. Raven went straight to watching the hologram anyway. They cooked a Bulwark Mackerel, a sea critter born with a natural force field stronger than most mature critters could summon on their own. Their diet, ever since their field test, consisted almost exclusively of creatures that specialized in defensive traits. While Red snuck in star leaves whenever he could, a vegetable that enhanced fire-casting abilities, he mostly stuck to the list of foods Raven created for them. It was one of the rare exceptions he made for giving up junk food. Besides his first day at the Alcazar, he had stuck strictly to the diet. He was going to go the distance for WEAPON. Even the way they prepared the critter, with salts and minerals that increased muscle endurance and recovery speeds, was designed with a purpose in mind.

The hologram was short. By the time they sat down with their food to watch it, Raven had already finished it. S cooked Raven's Bulwark Mackerel. Both of theirs, and Magnus's as well, came out fine. Butz's Mackerel looked half raw, which he found odd because he'd left it on top of the fire for the same amount of time as everyone else. Red had the opposite problem. His portion was so burned on the inside, the critter looked like it was stuffed with black debris underneath its skin. Butz gave most of his to Linx, who hopped on the table and ate right off of Butz's plate. Red thought it was hard to tell which of them had poorer etiquette. Raven gave half of hers to Red, and Red tried giving his portion to Linx, but even the cat refused to eat his leftovers and glared at Red afterwards, as though he took the offer as an insult.

The hologram began by thanking everyone for competing. The voice sounded slightly familiar to Red, but it was heavily tuned and resembled an AI more than anything. It segued into explaining all of the rules for the competition, or lack thereof. Eliminating another contestant (Red noticed that the video never used the word *kill*, as though not explicitly stating that

word hid the violent nature of the qualifiers) was always allowed unless specifically stated otherwise. There were no limits on casts or the quality of gear participants could use, although MegaCORP would provide its own gear as well. The last statement made Red wonder why MegaCORP didn't think that superior gear worn by inferior contestants compromised the goal of the qualifiers. Like the choice of terrain, it was one of the many variables that could tilt the fairness of a match. Magnus had already told them that the royal families of both Nimbus and Alto were strictly forbidden from using coin for personal endeavors, unless they earned it themselves, and that buying his team gear would qualify as an infraction. Butz suggested that they sell the shard of ainmosni crystal that Linx had broken off, but Magnus told him that wasn't possible in Nimbus either. Trade of certain items, including ainmosni crystals, was a breach of Imperial Code. Imperial Code was developed by the Druiaclite Trade Coalition, a governing body in their star system that created regulatory guidelines for cities, kingdoms, and empires. Because they left enforcement of the code to local bodies of government, and held no sway over their adherence to Imperial Code beyond economic sanctions, certain states followed their guidelines much more adamantly than others. Centers of commerce, like Nimbus and Alto, tended to enforce Imperial Code with harsh penalties for transgressors.

The task for the first round of the qualifiers was left ambiguous. There was only one line in the entire hologram that described the goal: "The first team to eliminate the other team's infected wins the round." Regarding the terrain, the hologram stated that participants needed to prepare for high altitudes, and that hostile critters would not be much of a bother. At first, Red was relieved, but then the hologram went on to state that the removal of critters was a conscious decision to promote "interaction between opposing teams." Finally, it stated that participants would be grouped first by their race, and then by their initial scores. Their subgroup included the twenty other highest scoring humans, and for their task, they would be competing against the blood elves.

"We have to protect our infected? What does that even mean? They're going to have someone infected by the Xenosite?" Butz asked.

"Sentient creatures can't be infected by Xenosites," both Magnus and Red answered at the same time.

"It could mean infected by something else," Raven replied. "What I'm worried about is that we're up against the blood elves, not the task. They're

known to be more brutal in the qualifiers than the other races. Gemini generally win almost all of their tasks, but they force other teams to surrender. The last time I watched a blood elf match, they ignored the task entirely and just went straight to killing all the other teams. And they don't kill in pleasant ways, either."

"And from what the hologram stated, directly fighting other teams is going to be encouraged by the design of the terrain," S added. *We could die*, Red thought. The closer they came to the qualifiers, the more real the idea became. *WEAPON, just think about WEAPON. Think about what it would mean to make it.* If he tunnel-visioned enough onto his goal, he could bury the fear away. He realized that ever since the field test, thinking about death occupied more and more of his time. He hoped that the trend wouldn't continue as he got older. He thought it was strange that the more experience he had with death, and the more he saw it around him, the more afraid he became of it. It was the opposite with everything else in his life.

"So the gemini are going to be the strongest team in the entire qualifiers?" Magnus asked.

"I think so," Raven replied. "But the highest scorer in the entire competition is a blood elf, a girl who scored 1,325 on her field test."

"What?!" Butz exclaimed. "That's more than double than what we had!"

"It's not just more than double. She likely did it in the standard way, by killing critters or trekking straight through terrain. We took a *shortcut*," Raven replied.

"Well, in our defense, we were asleep in your dreamscape for a good amount of time as well. Who knows what we would have scored if we were awake the entire time," S reasoned.

Magnus grabbed a Mackerel tail from a plate in the middle of the table. "No one brought a knife?" he asked. Raven began rummaging through her pocket but then stopped with a confused look on her face.

"My cutlass is gone," she said.

"Your cutlass? Did you leave it in the hallway?" Red asked.

"Maybe," Raven replied, immediately getting up from dinner and heading out of the room.

"We can go after dinner —" Butz said, but she was already gone by the time he finished his sentence. Red knew she wouldn't stop and got up to follow her. They traced their steps back through the spectra wing. The hallways were empty now, aside from a few members of the Priori who were

idly walking through the Alcazar and the guards stationed on every corner.

“They’re watching you,” Raven remarked as they walked past some of the silver cloaks.

“I know,” Red said. “I’ll explain when we get back to the room. Gelda told me I needed to be watched, for my own safety.”

“Gelda?” Raven asked. Red forgot that he had not told Raven about her.

“Never mind. I’ll tell you everything when we get back.”

“It can’t be in the courtyard,” Raven said as they arrived at the entrance of where the ociramma was held. The place was sealed off with warning signs placed all over. Guards were posted along the sides of the hallway, and Raven asked them if they had seen a cutlass lying around. Some of them looked at her suspiciously, but they all replied no.

“I saw you flipping it in the hallway last, where Lance was arguing with Odra. Did you drop it while we were running to the room in the lower levels?” Red asked, hoping that her answer was no so that they wouldn’t have to go back down there.

“Maybe,” Raven replied. “I can go by myself to check,” she added, sensing his tone.

“No, I’ll come with you.”

“I don’t think I dropped it. I’ve had it for years, and I’ve never dropped it. If I was running, I would have attached it to my belt. It wouldn’t fall off.”

“Maybe you forgot to attach it this time?” Red suggested, although he knew her answer was going to be no. “You don’t think someone could have swiped it, do you?”

“I don’t know,” Raven replied. A silver cloak walked by at the end of the corridor. He had a weapon strapped to his back. It was the first time Red had seen an armed member of the Priori. He thought he felt a bit more comfortable with them now, at least after being around Lux and Lance. While it was still a bizarre experience, he thought it also helped that Gelda had told him that they were there to protect him. *She may not be telling the truth, but it’s better than if she told me she was sending people to murder me*, Red thought.

The Light of the Alcazar began to dim as Areopa’s simulation of nighttime began. They headed down to the lower levels at a leisurely pace, careful to scan every area of the floor as they walked, but found nothing. Red was almost too afraid to look into any of the mirrors this time, but saw nothing as they passed them. He thought it would have been a better idea if they

brought Linx with them. The cat would have easily spotted the item with its vision.

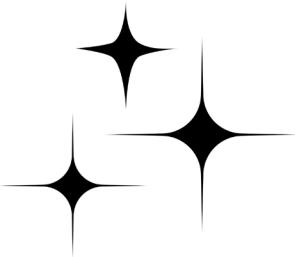
“You can ask around,” Red said. “Someone might have seen it and taken it. Maybe it was Arkan. He might have spotted it and knew it was yours. He could be holding it for you.”

Raven said nothing in reply. They did several more rounds around the spectra courtyard before heading back to the room. Red could tell how upset Raven was, but she didn’t voice it. It was dark by the time they got back. Magnus and Butz had already gone to sleep.

“I’ll help you search for it tomorrow,” S said, as they settled into the living area. She was still up, doing research upon previous qualifiers that used high altitude terrains.

“No, it’s okay, I already wasted enough time today. We have to get back to training tomorrow,” Raven replied. She went straight to her room without another word.

“Well, I guess that’s that,” Red said to S as the two of them sat by themselves in the dining table. Before heading to bed himself, he helped her clean the eating area and everything they used to cook. They discussed the blood elves and their differences with humans, a subject that Red was particularly unfamiliar with. Because he followed Magnus’s lead in choosing classes at Crest, most of his knowledge centered around critters rather than other sentient species. Despite the events of the day, he felt calm once he got to bed. He did not get a chance to tell everyone about the Light, Doctor Lurch, and Gelda, but decided it could wait until tomorrow. He began dreaming shortly after he fell asleep. It felt as though he was entering another world just as he did in the caverns. It was peaceful, lucid, and exhilarating.



THE REAPER OF LIGHT

His dream began as a journey through a far off region of the universe. He was flying through space, watching from a distance, the gods that the Priori worshipped. Nebulae, they called them, clouds of ionized gases that stretched for hundreds of light years across the gulf of space, exploding internally in a blast furnace of cosmic dust and hydrogen to establish themselves as the pillars of creation. Every ten thousand years their dust would collect into a nucleus of heated plasma, giving birth to a luminous body that emanated the energy necessary to create and sustain life in a nine-billion-tezra radius around it. These stars, bodies of light and energy, burned through their cores of hydrogen in a spellbinding pageant of thermonuclear fusion, struggling each second against the fury of their own gravity, struggling for a lifespan that could outlast fifteen billion years, struggling for a chance to give birth to life, to continue the cycle of creation brought on by the collapse of their originators. In the Nebula that Red was looking at, the top left curved outwards in a plume of orange smoke that was glowing from the inside. He thought it looked like a fist, holding in its fingers the power of light and life, celebrating its triumph over non-existence in a spectacle of victory blown across the proportion of a galaxy for all the universe to see.

Outside of the Priori, they would say that these bodies of atomized matter were not alive, that sentience could only exist at an organic level. But in his dream, he knew they were alive — they were more alive than he would ever be. The roar of atoms colliding into each other screamed over a theatre of scorching gases, a space opera that could vaporize a planet clean out of its orbit. From a distance, maybe a hundred light years away, he could hear the Nebula breathing. He could still make out the clash of each hydrogen atom against another. It would not matter if he was a human, The

Leviathan, or even a planet. It would not matter if he was any creature or object he may have considered significant. The light was so bright, so alive, that if he got too close, even in his dream, the Nebula would burn off the face of his soul like ether.

Suddenly, his world began zooming in and he was at a semi-translucent planet in the Nebula, one with oceans of diamond and umbriel, and continents of iron and obsidian. There was an insectoid species here, obsessed with evolving into the perfect organism. A storm arrived at their planet, a black cloud filled with the ominous glint of gems from another world. It stretched across their oceans, causing it to rain with a purple liquid that they could consume to fulfill their instinct to evolve. But upon using the energy source, another mind had seeded itself into their own collective consciousness. The creatures became more violent and single-minded. In past generations they were focused on experimenting with evolution, discovering the possibilities of life. Now, they approached their goal of creating the perfect organism with a razor sharp obsession, eliminating the inferior creatures they occasionally produced. The creatures had once exhibited empathy, the remnants of a morally conscious mind, but they slowly diverted away from that path, losing themselves in the depths of their own mind, in the spot of black at the root of their senses.

Their strongest instinct, the one to live, became replaced with a need to awaken the mind that had tainted their own. There was a planet in the far reaches of their galaxy, made of oceans of water and inhabited by a great beast. They would have to go there while the beast was asleep and traverse to the deepest part of the planet, where there lay an eye that could see into the other world, the world where the taint had come from. The eye would be used by their messiah, a reincarnation of a being that was born when the universe first formed, to awaken what stirred in the dark. They would assimilate this creature, the messiah, and with the eye, he would attain the perfection of form and mind that their species sought after for generations. The first kyron queens began breeding an army for the invasion of the oceanic planet at the distant reaches of their galaxy. By the time they would arrive there, another ten thousand years would pass, and they would be known by a different name. More queens would come to exist. Of these, Red could now feel the presence of one. The one in Areopa. It was calling out to him, beckoning him to finish that last step, *Phantasia*.

He awoke with only a vague memory of the dream. He was sweating,

panting in the darkness of the room. The queen was calling him. She was awake, out of her state of hibernation. Perhaps she had been waiting for this, waiting for nightfall to come when she knew she could have him come by himself. Magnus was still snoring, as was Butz. No one else could feel her presence. She was calling out to him specifically. He hopped out from his bed but fell back into it almost immediately. He had double vision and could barely maintain enough balance to walk. Again, he stumbled out of bed and this time crawled to the entrance of the room, where he used the doorknob to pull himself up.

The experience was just as he expected. It was similar to what he felt in Raven's dreamscape, but multiplied in intensity. The spot of black in the mind of the queen was no longer something to marvel at. It was something he was falling into. He felt as though his mind was drowning in its depth, diving deeper and deeper every moment. He knew the queen felt the same way. Her own consciousness, the entire hive mind, had lost itself in this spot of black. It was not the same as being controlled by another being. It felt more as though your own consciousness was expanded to think all of the thoughts in the universe at once. Like his mind was racing, but not with one, or two, or even a hundred thoughts, but with all of them. With all the thoughts that could exist in this dimension, in the next dimension, in every dimension, all at once.

He stumbled all the way to the entrance of the room. The living area smelled like flashdust, an herbal odor mixed with a burning, ashy smell. Raven's door was open, but she was not in her room. He glanced at his microAI, thinking it would be a good idea to message her, but could not see clearly enough to write anything out. *I could use voice command*, he thought, but when he made the effort to speak, nothing but mindless words came out. *I'm speaking in another language*. He opened the door of the main room. Perhaps someone from the Light would be there to help him. Gelda said that he was being watched. He flung the door open. Raven was standing outside, leaning on the side of the door frame.

“Red?”

He hunched over, holding in a sudden urge to throw up. He tried to say words, but again, nothing came out.

“The queen?” she asked. He nodded. He pointed down the hallway, hoping she would understand.

“You can feel her?” He nodded again. “Is she calling to you?” He did

not nod this time, but began wobbling down the hallway in the direction of the spectra courtyard. He realized that at this rate, he would pass out before he would get there. He felt a searing pain, his mind flashed all black, he heard that voice in the darkness speak out to him from the spot of black in the queen's mind, and then, her presence disappeared. As though he had woken up from another dream, everything suddenly went back to normal. *That can only mean one thing.* He broke out into a run towards the spectra courtyard. Raven followed behind.

"Red, stop! We have to go back to the room," she yelled after him. It did not occur to him until later that it was an odd thing for her to say. She had no reason to presume they were in danger.

"She was calling me. She wanted to tell me something," Red shouted back as he continued running. He felt Gelda's presence in his mind. She sent a message to him but it was being blocked. He wondered if it was his own mind that blocked it. His own consciousness felt alien to him now. *No, I'm not tainted,* he thought. *Not yet.* He hoped they would not run across a mirror. He knew what he would see, just as he knew that it was there with him now, watching him. But if he did not see it, his mind could ignore that it was there.

"Red! Stop!" she called out after him again. They crossed over to the spectra courtyard. There was smoke in the hallway. He breathed it in, letting it flow through his lungs as though it were his own cast. He was almost there. He could see a fire somewhere up ahead. He turned into the corridor that led to the spectra courtyard. The doors were broken down. There was a line of guards, all of them on the floor. There was no sign of a struggle. They were simply asleep as though they had all simultaneously fainted. He knew what he was going to see when he ran into the courtyard. He knew it the moment he had felt the queen disappear from his mind. An alarm went off overhead and the Alcazar suddenly changed color. Its simulation of nighttime ended instantly, and it was daytime again. The alarm rang in his ears. The noise was so deafening he could hear faint traces of its ringing at the back of his head, like his brain itself was generating the noise. He felt the shuffling of feet and the presence of other people gathering in the Alcazar but could hear nothing over the sound of the alarm. People were running into the hallway. He rushed into the courtyard before anyone arrived at the corridor.

The entire courtyard was set ablaze with green flames. The floor was

charred with a trail of black that led to the canister. The glass was still holding, even against the flashdust, but even the umbriel inside was burning. Someone had used a fire cast powerful enough to enchant its flames with the ability to burn through umbriel. Raven tried to pull him out of the room, but he insisted on staying. He couldn't hear what she was saying, he only wanted to watch the room burn. He could feel the tense vibe of the entire alcazar in the air. *It's not just the queen.*

"THE KING HAS BEEN MURDERED!" someone screamed. He heard mindless yelling outside of the courtyard. He finally left with Raven. The hallways were crowded with people now, but the alarms had been turned off. From far away, he could see Magnus, S, and Butz arriving.

"THE KING IS DEAD!" someone else screamed. Members of the Priori began entering the hallway now. People were eyeing them suspiciously. They were eyeing anyone suspiciously who was not an Areopa native.

"GELDA HAS BEEN KILLED!" someone from the Light screamed. A fit of hysteria broke out across all the silver cloaks. Guards spilled into the hallway, baring their weapons. The atmosphere of the Alcazar turned surreal. A bolt of panic spread from one person to the next in a frenzy of shouting. Magnus turned to Red when he arrived, looking as though he wanted to speak, but said nothing. He was paralyzed by the same confusion and shock that gripped Red. Arkan appeared from the same direction that they had come from.

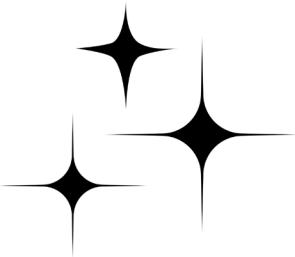
"The king is dead!" a guard shouted. "The murderer left their weapon in his chamber as well. We will catch them tonight!" the guard screamed. More panic spread across the hallway. Arkan arrived and stood a few feet away from them. Everyone was giving him a fair amount of room, as though getting too close to him was the most dangerous thing they could do now. "This is the weapon! Someone tell me who this belongs to! Can anyone identify this?!" the guard screamed. It was a gem-encrusted cutlass.

Magnus reacted first, almost immediately, as though he was expecting it to be a cutlass all along and had prepared a defense for it. He ran up to Arkan. Red followed behind to listen. He began spewing a string of words. Next to Red, Raven watched with an unemotional expression. He had the urge to yell at her, to tell her that she needed to panic. That now was the time to break down in hysteria. An impassive face would not favor her chances of convincing people that she had done nothing.

"Uncle... that cutlass... it's not... it is... I mean," he could hear Magnus

muttering, out of breath, in shock.

"I know," was all Arkan replied. He was looking coldly at the room around them, analytically, processing everything he was watching. He gripped Magnus by the head and made him turn around to the crowd. "I want you to look closely, very closely. What has happened here, Mongo? Where is the enemy? *Who is the enemy?*"



THE ASCENSION

It was the morning of the first round of the qualifiers. They spent the week leading up to this day in between training sessions, interrogations by the Areopa guard, and discussions about the Light that lasted from night to dawn. Their training sessions were held in terminals that simulated high altitude terrains in mountainous regions. While Areopa itself was at the top of Avalonia's atmosphere, most of the kingdom was a controlled environment. Its gravity was equal to the planet's gravity at sea level and there was no difference in the amount of oxygen in its air. They were short on time to prepare thoroughly, and so on their very first day in the terminal, Raven simulated a peak altitude environment. All five of them spent most of the session throwing up and trying to walk straight. The lower concentration of oxygen also weakened Red's fire casts. He noticed that he was using his left hand for casts much more often now. It began to feel more natural to him, as though after breaking his right hand in the Twilight Caverns, it became permanently unstructured against his flou. By their fifth session, they were comfortable with the simulated terrains, and by their tenth, they were training as though they were on Avalonia's surface.

Raven noted that although they were preparing for as many different high altitude terrains as they could, there was still a chance that they would be placed in an environment they were not ready for. MegaCORP had a habit of using half-truths in describing their tasks and environments. For instance, she indicated that last year, the environment was described as "oceanic." All the contestants prepared for battles under water at high pressure depths. Ultimately, the terrain used was the surface of an ocean, one coated with vestixil, a material that gave any liquid a solid-like membrane on which people could walk. Red always considered adaptability as one of the core strengths of their team, and imagined that no matter where they

ended up, they would be able to calibrate quick enough to become effective in a short amount of time.

Throughout their training sessions, Red noticed how much more fluid everyone had become with their movements and casts since before their field test. They had trained non-stop for three months before the test, and the entire month before coming to Areopa. S could use her healing casts without touching someone, although she still had to be close to them. Magnus was much stronger now, and used his mallet with better technique and stability, rather than swinging it around with all his strength as he had when he first got the weapon. Butz could hold his own in physical combat now, which meant having a familiar put him far ahead of both Red and Magnus. Falconers had a steep learning curve, but once they passed their initial plateaus and learned how to control their familiars, they excelled at an exponential rate. Linx was too big to sit comfortably on anyone's head now, and began to look more like a panther than a cat. He was a stage 3 now. His ability to bend circumambient light had advanced enough to let him become completely invisible when he stood still in dimly lit areas. Once he became a stage 5 or 6, he would be able to do it while running in plain starlight. While Red felt no different, he knew that his casts were more powerful than they ever were. His focus had gotten better, and he was able to channel his energy much more efficiently than before. Despite all of their developments, the four of them still came nowhere close to Raven's rate of improvement. In past years, it seemed as though she never tried, and simply excelled naturally. Now, something in her was different, and Red could see that during training sessions, she would put in all of her effort. Even in just the past week, she seemed to have broken another plateau. Red was confident that at this point, she could fight the four of them on her own, Linx included.

The aftermath of the deaths of Gelda and King Artemis was not as Red expected. There was no mass mourning, no series of riots, no hysteria of any sort across Nimbus. Instead, the city fell into the dark and hushed tone of a conspiracy. He and Raven had taken a walk out of the Alcazar twice to explore the city, and both times, he noticed that everyone in Nimbus now had the same lifeless expression of a person who did not trust their surroundings. They looked down as they walked, only taking a second to look up at each other when they crossed paths to share a quick nod, acknowledging in that split second what had happened — that dark times had fallen on their kingdom, and that if they consciously spoke about it or acknowledged

it, something bad would happen to them as well. The city looked entirely different than when Red first flew across the sky rail. The death of their king dispirited the citizens of Nimbus. The strength with which the Areopa natives reacted to defend their city when the Light first revealed the Xenosite queen had vanished without a trace, as though it had been only an act in the first place.

The Priori had taken on the same vibe as Nimbus since Gelda's death. They could always be seen huddling in small groups by their own wing, whispering to each other but coming to an abrupt silence when anyone walked by. Red suspected that they wanted to leave the Alcazar, but Prince Arkan insisted that they remain. There was no consensus as to who was responsible, only a universal understanding that it was an orchestrated event that must have required vast resources and meticulous planning, which was what had everyone in a state of unease. The Priori had lost their own leader, and so barely anyone pointed a finger at them, although several claimed that bringing a queen to Nimbus was what started the whole chain of events that led to Gelda's and Artemis's deaths. The Light pointed out that it was the Areopa natives who wanted the queen gone, and thus that it was one of their own who could have killed Gelda and burned the queen, and perhaps even killed King Artemis for wanting to side with the Priori. Red wondered why no one pointed a finger at MegaCORP, although he imagined it had something to do with their own clout. If it *had* been MegaCORP, no one could do anything about it, and it was to avoid this realization that Areopa natives continued to bicker with the Light. Still, he doubted it was MegaCORP. The supra organization had a strict policy against directly interfering with the affairs of sovereign kingdoms and empires. If it was ever discovered that they assisted in the murder of a monarch, it was likely that multiple dominions across the star system would unite to put a stop to their growing influence.

Without any links to a single group, the question of who committed the three crimes still remained. The Nimbus Guard struggled to maintain its reputation despite growing concerns that the events occurred due to their negligence. They could not explain how both King Artemis and Gelda were murdered nearly simultaneously, nor was their investigation making any progress. Raven was the first one to be questioned and thoroughly interrogated. Arkan insisted on staying in the room with her throughout all of her questioning, and defended her whenever he could. Most importantly,

he pointed out that she was incapable of what had happened. When he said this in the interrogation, Raven replied “I wouldn’t say I was *incapable*. I just wasn’t in possession of the necessary equipment at the time.” No one argued that she could have taken out the twelve guards standing outside of the spectra courtyard, or passed through the felions that guarded the king’s chamber. The felions claimed that they saw no one enter the chamber while the king was asleep, but they did claim they recognized Raven’s scent. Raven replied that she was walking around the Alcazar at the time because she could not sleep, and that she may have passed near the king’s chambers without knowing it.

There were recording devices all over the Alcazar, but all of them failed to capture what had occurred. Red saw the holograms that the Nimbus Guard had. Around 31:00, when the murders were suspected to have happened, a black smoke had filled the hallways and covered all of the recording devices. Red did not want to add anything to their hypothesis, let alone have to explain what he meant, but he was sure that the smoke resembled a black *cloud* in its thickness and movement rather than smoke from a fire or a cast. Just the presence of the cloud alone would not have bothered him, but that it followed these events now unnerved him. It was always *there*, Red thought, but it had never done anything to affect the world around him. At least, not that he was aware of. No one who was awake or patrolling the hallways at the time had seen any of the black smoke. The guards outside of the ociramma said that their memory blacked out at the time, and that they only remember a sudden urge to fall asleep before passing out in the hallway. Their superiors raged at them for a while, but Arkan agreed that it was not their fault, that they were dealing with something they were unprepared for.

Every night, back in their suite and after training was over, they would spend hours discussing the matter of who could have done it. It was generally understood that the motive revolved around the queen, and getting rid of her presence in the Alcazar. Her remains were never found and some suggested that they could have been stolen rather than destroyed. Gelda’s death could be explained in the context of getting rid of the queen, but not King Artemis’s. Magnus pointed out that if MegaCORP wanted to stop Areopa from doing something like working with the Light, they could have done it in a much less invasive and risky way. Red suggested that the felions themselves might have been part of it, but Magnus told him that

was impossible. Except for lycans, all felions are bound since birth to their duties. They are unable to lie to those they serve. The Basils were not the only family that employed them as their personal guard. It was common practice across their star system.

Lance was the most devoted to finding who the killer was. He questioned all five of them himself, and Red thought that he had an obsessive quality about him. Despite all of the reasons why Raven could *not* have committed the crime, the evidence still pointed to her, and Lance did not give up on trying to get a confession out of her. He reasoned that she was working with other people, although Arkan pointed out that she knew no one else in the Alcazar besides her team, and that the four of them had been asleep when the crimes took place. Raven's cutlass was not only found in the king's chamber, but her energy trace was detected on it. By the time the cutlass was scanned, her trace was still warm, indicating that she must have held the cutlass sometime not too long before. Arkan pointed out that they were clearly dealing with someone or a group with the capacity to frame her, but Lance said that the simplest explanation was that she had done it. He asked her where she was at the time of the crimes, and she stuck to her story of walking around in the Alcazar because she could not sleep. Lance asked Red why he was originally going outside. Red decided it was best to answer honestly, and replied that he had sensed the queen. No one seemed to argue against this, as it was well documented that Xenosite queens had powerful mental presences, but Lance pointed out that it still begged the question of why the queen would reach out to Red. It was also still a mystery how Gelda was killed. She passed away in her sleep. It was assumed that she must have been poisoned sometime earlier, perhaps during the ociramma.

The day after the murders, Red told his team everything that had happened up until then, and the connections he had made thus far between his dreams and what Lux had said about the taint. He told them about the queen calling out to him specifically and trying to tell him something before it died. He told them about Gelda, the black cloud that he always saw, and the voice in the darkness that always haunted him. He told them about Doctor Lurch, Phantasia, and how Gelda had warned him telepathically that he was in danger, and that he saw the black cloud moments after. Butz said that whatever killed King Artemis and Gelda must have waited until it had to, or until it felt necessary. With its capabilities, it could have done it at any time, but it waited until it was sure that the two of them were working

together. More importantly, because it killed King Artemis, it was not worried about the well-being of Areopa, and thus, it must have destroyed the queen for some other purpose. Red recalled that he had seen jars of flashdust in the room at the basement of the Alcazar, and that flashdust was what the killer used, along with the cutlass. But when they went back to the room, following Magnus's lead this time, they found nothing there except for the Scalp-o-Lanterns. Even the shelves on top had been disassembled. S said that although Gelda was dead, Red should still try reaching out to someone in the Light for his answers. Butz suggested Lux, but Red replied that he wasn't so sure if that was a good idea. Gelda had already told him that she did not tell anyone else specifics about him, and at this point, he was not sure whom he could trust. Magnus suggested that they tell Prince Arkan when they had the chance, and this Red agreed with.

Despite the events that had occurred, MegaCORP declared that their qualifiers would continue as planned without a delay. There were far too many people already occupying Areopa who had come to watch. Delaying the first round would cost a fortune. On the night before the qualifiers, their discussion ran well into the morning, and no one was able to sleep even by then. Raven meditated in the living area while Butz, Magnus, and S continued researching as much as they could about past qualifiers and the different challenges that contestants had faced. Magnus seemed particularly stressed, believing that it was his responsibility to be as knowledgeable as possible about their arena. Red decided to take a long walk around the Alcazar. Besides the sudden change from night to day when the alarms of the palace had gone off, he had never seen the break of dawn at the Alcazar. It was hard for him to believe that the process would look natural within the interior of a building.

He stayed around the raeth wing, always within visible distance of a guard or two. He was still occasionally being watched by the Light, but they seemed less adamant about following him around now. As time passed, he spotted fewer and fewer of them around their suite. The Alcazar had no ceiling. Everything was open and the sky could be seen as though you were standing in an open field, although much closer. During night, the entire spectrum of their star system could be seen, including the moons of different planets, and Aleph and Gama. Areopa was so high up that both of the stars had to be artificially dimmed to keep their light from blinding citizens of the kingdom. During the night, both of the stars would vanish, and it

was this change that Red was most curious to witness. The temperature seemed cooler as well, and he wondered if that was another simulated effect or if it was just in his mind.

Besides this last solstice, he had witnessed every starset and starrise in Avalonia since he could remember. In a planet that bore no daily cycle of dawn and dark, they were ritualistic events that everyone watched, not just for aesthetic pleasure, but to participate in — to fall when Aleph fell, and to rise when Aleph rose. Aleph was always the first to come up. There would be a moment of silence before he appeared, of worry and wonder, as though everyone were convinced that despite all odds, this solstice would be the one where Aleph did not rise, that the darkness would be perpetual this time, and their endless days would come to an abrupt end. Then Aleph's light would break out into the black of solstice, appearing first as an eruption of scarlet before mixing with the green of Gama's rays, to assure them that the world they knew would continue as planned. Gama would rise slower, as though she were struggling to claim her spot in the sky against the presence of her older and larger brother, but by the time she succeeded, her light appeared even brighter, as though the struggle of coming up had somehow brightened her even more than her natural size would allow.

Starrise in Nimbus was different, because Aleph and Gama did not rise. They were already in the sky. At the break of dawn, it would look as though someone were painting over the view of distant stars with the mural of a brand new day. There would be long strokes of white, agile lines of a pallid tone that would leap over the canvas like an Ozone Raptor. They would not resemble clouds at first, only the faint outline of a mist. As the lines swelled into their wrinkled shapes, the black of outer space would tone itself with a red hue. It was not obvious that the red was from Aleph's rays until the clouds took their full shapes, and by then, Gama's rays would have already mixed with Aleph's to turn the sky into its signature amber color. The specks of white from the nighttime stars would disappear behind the sky by 11:00, but if you looked hard enough, you could still see them. The stars were always there, and they would appear again when the cover of day was peeled away at 27:00 to reveal them.

Magnus told him that Sanguine City had a different setup. It had a perpetual nighttime, exactly the opposite of the rest of Avalonia. Although blood elves had no problem functioning normally in light, they preferred

the dark, and their vision was better in it. Katadel, the mystic elf city, opted to keep their cycle the same as Avalonia. It had a perpetual daytime and even exempted itself from the dark of solstice. There were more people awake this morning, watching the transition to daytime with Red. He unlocked his microAI from his wrist and wrapped it around his eyes to observe the sky in different levels of its zoom feature. At magnitude nine, he could see the supernova that Raven had pointed out. At magnitude three, the painted sky of Areopa disappeared, and he could see straight into the emptiness of space. While at this level, he saw a flicker of orange. Something was burning in a space not far above Areopa, and it was moving quickly across the sky. It took him a minute to realize that it was a Phoenix, one of the few creatures like Emerald Thornbacks that could travel through space. He had never seen one before, not even in a picture or a hologram. It was rare to see one in their star system, as no planet contained ambrosia, their only food.

The first round was not until the evening. The qualifiers consisted of three rounds in total, each one with a different objective and terrain. He was walking back to the suite now, to get some sleep before they had to make last minute preparations. As he headed down the entrance of the raeth wing, he suddenly heard the sound of a liquid dripping onto the floor. It was louder than it should have been, as though it was happening right next to his ears. He looked around but saw nothing and wondered if it was coming from somewhere inside the walls. He continued to the suite and then paused a minute later when the sound came back even louder, and this time with an echo. He looked around again. There were four guards in this hallway, and several groups of people who were walking by. Many of them looked like researchers from Doctor Lurch's lab. A few of them noticed the sound and looked around as Red did, but saw nothing, and continued on their way without a second thought. He ignored it as well, until he heard it a third time when he was closer to their suite. Deciding it had something to do with the Alcazar that Magnus would explain later, he ignored it again but picked up his pace after a feeling of foreboding crept up on him. When he was almost at their room, a green puddle at the corner of a clearing in the raeth wing made his stomach drop. He knew what it was going to be before he got a chance to study it. He approached it slowly, as though the substance was explosive. It was a puddle of green ooze. He was sure it was the same substance they had seen in the Twilight Caverns.

“Don’t worry, I’m cleaning that up,” said a keeper who was walking by. Red had the urge to tell him not to, to tell him that it was dangerous, but knew that he would sound crazy. He only looked at the keeper and nodded clumsily. There was nothing on the walls nearby or on the pillars that ran above them. There was no other ooze anywhere around the clearing. The puddle did not move, though it did have the texture of something that had been a part of a living organism, a thick and organic quality. The keeper watched him with a worried expression as he broke out into a run. He almost swung the door into his face as he rushed into their room. He half expected a giant creature made of slime to be there when he entered. There was no ooze, although they did have unexpected guests over.

Both Lux and Arkan were in the suite. Arkan was pacing around the room while Lux was sitting at the eating table with everyone else. Raven had gotten her cutlass back and was cracking open a giant legume of sorts with the hilt of the blade. They came to a quick silence when Red entered, the type that told him he was the subject of their conversation.

“The Light has been watching you,” Lux said, almost in an accusatory tone.

“I know.... I thought we all knew,” Red replied while looking around the room. “Aren’t they watching everyone around Prince Arkan? And Raven?”

“No, they don’t care about Prince Arkan. Apparently Gelda gave certain people in the Priori the order to watch *you*. The people that she was closest to. Not even I knew about it, not until Lance told me when he found out today after questioning all of our members. They weren’t told why they were supposed to watch you, only that they *should* watch you. Some of the members are now suspicious that you have something to do with her death. And given that you and Raven are on the same team...”

“I know. I mean, Gelda told me I was going to be watched,” Red replied. Lux gave him a questioning look. “It’s a long story, but I had nothing to do with her death.”

“Well, Raven’s cutlass was found in the king’s chamber, and you’re the person that Gelda told us to watch... and why didn’t you tell me you were being watched by her?”

“Tell you? I don’t *know* you, or anyone in the Priori for that matter. I never even met Gelda personally. She contacted me back when I was in Echidna City through a dream. And here she spoke to me telepathically.”

“She contacted you in a dream?!” Lux asked. “I’ve never heard of some-

one from the Light doing such a thing, especially not to an outsider. And especially not someone like her, not a Soul of Light. What did she say? She must have taken a great interest in you if she went that far to speak to you. Lance is going to want to know about this.”

“I don’t know,” Red shrugged while looking away. “And why do I care what Lance wants to know?”

“Red didn’t have anything to do with my grandfather’s death. That’s absurd,” Magnus replied. “Nor did Raven. And they certainly had nothing to do with Gelda’s death. Not everyone is interested in the goings-on of the Light, you know. The Priori makes an enemy out of everyone, but in truth, no one really cares about all of your missions and duties, protecting the universe from invisible entities, half of which you can’t even prove exist,” Magnus added, exasperated. Red felt a chord of sympathy for Lux, who suddenly looked despondent after Magnus’s last statement.

“I’ll have to agree with Magnus on this one,” Arkan replied. “Even if they *did* have a reason to do it, I’m sure no one in the Light *truly* believes that two kids who just graduated academy did this. Perhaps if they were *already* in WEAPON, I’d consider it,” Arkan replied with the hint of a smile. “Red, you said something about the queen contacting you telepathically on the night of the murders. Did Gelda reach out to you that night as well?” His team looked at him with blank expressions. He knew what they were thinking. They were all wondering if it was safe to tell Arkan and Lux. Arkan he felt comfortable with, but Lux, he wasn’t so sure about. A long pause filled the room as they waited for his answer.

“She did, but, I felt another presence as well. Blocking her. And it wasn’t the queen either,” Red sighed. He took a seat next to Raven and began telling the story, all the way from when they first crossed the bladed man in the desert. He decided he couldn’t trust Lux, and he did not know what the Light’s intentions were, but told her anyway to see what she would say in response. His curiosity had burned a hole in him, and he was desperate to put the pieces together. *I do know what I am*, Red thought. He was more sure of it every day, but he did not know what the implications were. He wondered how to go about explaining it to Lux and Arkan, wishing he could just shout to them, “*I am him, that dark prophet the Light speaks about, the one that Doctor Lurch’s brother was in search for. I am him. What does that mean?*”

Magnus and S helped him fill in the details of the story. He left out the portion about Raven diving into his nightmares in his dreamscape. He was

unsure if she wanted to speak about what she had seen, and figured that if she did, she would say something. When he got to the ooze, he remembered the puddle, and told everyone the reason he slammed through the door was because he just saw the liquid it was made out of outside. They took a few minutes to walk to the clearing together, but the puddle had already been cleaned up by the keeper. When he told them that Doctor Lurch had taken him aside in the Alcazar earlier on the day of the murders, and everything that the doctor had said, Arkan kept mumbling the word “*interesting*.”

“Could the doctor be responsible? Or have anything to do with this?” Magnus asked. “I haven’t seen him in the Alcazar since the day of the ociramma.”

“The doctor is gone,” Arkan replied briskly. “And I am afraid that your suspicions are correct. But neither he nor anyone I know would be capable of the feat that has occurred. I’m afraid the lot of you, and I think actually the Nimbus Guard themselves, are not aware of the scope of the crime. The king’s chamber is guarded by sphinxes, chimeras, and human guards. It would be nearly impossible to force your way in. Felions are notorious for their ability to sense energy signatures, even from great lengths and amidst crowds of other creatures. The room where the king resides is impenetrable by anything besides air. I’ll admit, Gelda’s room is a bit easier,” he said, looking at Lux apologetically, “but still nearly impenetrable. And I believe she was murdered with several *others* present in the room simultaneously, all of whom claim to notice nothing suspicious at the time, hence the theory that she must have been poisoned earlier — although even *that* is yet to be proven. Perhaps the Light ought to look into its own circles a bit more carefully?”

“No one from the Priori is responsible for this,” Lux replied, taking offense to the question.

“What about the black cloud that Red keeps talking about? You said you saw it back at Crest Academy as well?” S asked. Red nodded.

“I’m not sure what to think about that,” Arkan replied while looking at Lux for input. Lux remained silent while contemplating something on her own. “And I can’t quite ask the Nimbus Guard to investigate something that... may or may not be there.”

“I know. Don’t worry. I don’t expect you to,” Red replied. “I don’t even know if I saw it, or exactly what I saw at all. I mean, I *did* see it... but... it wasn’t there when I turned back. It’s never there. I never see it... in the *real*

world, if that makes any sense.”

“Hmm, interesting. I’m going to ask the keeper who cleaned up the puddle you saw if I can obtain a sample of the substance he found,” Arkan said. “Lux, this *cloud being* that Red keeps mentioning, that he sees in the Alcazar, do you think it could be a —”

“I do,” Lux replied, without waiting for him to finish. “I absolutely do. It is something from the void.” She began getting up hastily. “I have to go speak to the Light about all of this. There is still someone else who is a Soul of Light at the Alcazar. I must speak with her. Red... you have to come with me.”

“That’s not happening,” Raven replied. “He’s not going with you anywhere.”

“We have our qualifiers today,” Butz replied. “There’s no way we’re going to miss that to speak to your crazy light enthusiasts. What will it take to keep the lot of you off of our backs? I swear by The Leviathan, I’ll always sleep with the lights on from now on.”

“Even if we *didn’t* have the qualifiers today, he still wouldn’t go with you,” Raven added.

“You don’t understand —” Lux began.

“I *do* understand,” Red replied. “Trust me, I do. But Butz is right. I’m not missing the qualifiers for anything. Who can I speak to from the Light? Gelda is dead, and she told me she said nothing about me to anyone else before she was killed.”

“There are others in the Light who will have answers. Zenae took over after Gelda’s death. She will know something. We can speak to her.”

“Ahh, everything is beginning to make sense now,” Arkan replied. Lux looked at him questioningly. “Has the Light not noticed that Zenae Chloe is under the effect of id-speech?”

“That’s impossible!” Lux exclaimed, waving her hands wildly in a dismissive motion. “Everyone who is a Soul of Light has a pure heart, they would be impossible to corrupt, let alone control. And their minds are far more collected, calm, and together than all of ours. If you saw the number of hours they spent in meditation alone —”

“You will go to Zenae today. You will look for all of the signs of someone under the control of id-speech, and you will come back to me and tell me what you have found. Do not speak anything of what Red has told you until then. Do you understand?” Lux looked a little taken aback from hav-

ing been given a direct command from Arkan, but nodded sheepishly. *There it is again*, Red thought. Arkan's tone and persona would change drastically when he wanted to be serious. He could see now why the prince *would* make a good king. He had an intimidating presence when he wanted one.

"Do you know how to put someone under the control of id-speech?" Arkan asked.

"No, why would I?" Lux answered, as though Arkan was accusing her of it.

"To know when your own people are being subjected to it," Arkan said while rolling his eyes. "You must search out the people she speaks to most, and see if they are speaking differently when they are talking to her. See if anyone speaking to her is trying to mimic her voice patterns. Then look at the places she stays. Search for writing on the walls with invisible ink. Have someone use different revealing casts to check the rooms that are occupied by the Light. Check her sleep-room for anything that looks suspicious. Unlike meta-conditioning, id-speech does not require much use of direct psykinesthetics, only long-term exposure to stimuli that reinforces certain ideas, then an eventual prodding of her mind by an external consciousness. It will not control her entirely, only make her think that certain ideas, which are actually someone else's, are her own. It is a much more subtle method of manipulation."

"I'm sure we already check for those things," Lux replied. "We're not incompetent, you know."

"I'm sure you *don't* check. The Light is far too arrogant to be that careful. And it's not the incompetence of the Light that concerns me. It is the competence of who we are facing," Arkan replied. Lux looked down and nodded, as though it just struck her that the situation was more severe than she had thought.

"There is one more thing you must do," Arkan added.

"What?"

"There is a book that we require, or a tome, I should say, to identify what Red has been talking about. I trust that you have heard of it before — 'The Draconion Index'?"

"*That* book is not with us. The Light does not remove it from Phorress, our home planet. How do you know about it? It is a well kept secret, even among our people," Lux replied — not accusingly, but wondrously, as though she had finally accepted that it was natural for Arkan to possess

knowledge beyond his own capacity. “I have heard that the book contains more than just the index, and some of its contents would be dangerous if possessed by the enemies of the Light. We keep it hidden from even our own people so as not to incite fear or curiosity. Gelda used to say that our knowledge of dark things is ironically what causes us to seek them out, to awaken them. Knowledge is always earned in the Light, never given out freely, a principle that many of our members disagree with.”

“What’s the index?” S asked.

“What Arkan is looking for, I think, is the introduction of the book, which contains an archive of every entity from the void that the Light knows about,” Lux replied. “There are only two copies of the Draconion Index in existence, and both are protected with high level casts. They are impossible to replicate. Or nearly impossible I should say.”

“The other copy, is *here*, no?” Arkan asked.

“The Library?” Lux gasped. “Yes, but the Priori forbids us to go there, and their aisles are guarded by the void. And we are not allowed in there by the elves.”

“Guarded by the void?” Red repeated curiously. Lux replied with a grave stare. “Even if that *is* true — didn’t you say that the book is dangerous if it falls into the hands of your enemies? That doesn’t make much sense, does it?”

“I thought that was just elf superstition,” Magnus replied. “There’s something really there?”

“Yes, he is called Aku’Dragoon, The Monster with Eleven Faces. Long ago when the book was first written, only one copy existed. A second was created by Mej’Lith — whose story you’ve already heard of from Arkan — but was locked away in the Great Library with a cast that would keep it there unless it was removed by someone from the Light. Aku’Dragoon is a servant of the void who followed the book’s whereabouts, but was locked within the library by the Priori as well. Our Elders believed it was the wisest thing to do, rather than destroy the copy entirely, because it would preserve the knowledge in case the original *was* ever destroyed, and because the library itself is not allowed to be entered by the Light under normal conditions, keeping most of the Priori out anyway. For a copy to be made, an even more powerful cast than the one used to seal the book had to be used. Only Mej’Lith was capable of such a thing. The elves do not know that what haunts their aisles is an entity from the void locked in there by the

Light. They believe it is simply a mysterious and dangerous creature that lurks deep within. Aku'Dragoon has been there since Mej'Lith's reign. It has been thousands of years now. They say he has spent the time summoning something else from the void, a great power from the abyss that he now spends his time guarding."

"Well if it's something like that cloud thing that's in the Alcazar, I suppose an umbrella wouldn't protect us, hmm?" Butz asked. No one laughed except for Arkan, and Linx looked at Butz sternly, as though he were ashamed of his owner.

"This isn't a laughing matter, you know," Lux chided. "If you think it's such a joke why don't you go in for yourself? I'll tell you where the book is. It will be in one of the deeper levels of the library, and we can all wish you luck and give you plenty of umbrellas. If the Alcazar is possessed by a demon from the netherworld, no one is safe here, not even the Light. Despite what Prince Arkan has insisted, the Light is still making preparations to leave this place and settle somewhere else."

"I have heard that you are sending for more people," Arkan said. "Can one of them bring the book?"

"More people are coming, but they will not bring the book. More people are coming because the events, as they have unfolded, seem to have confirmed what the Light feared all along. Starting with the Xenosite to other signs that they have seen, our Elders believe that the ascension of the void is near. And I think," she said, pointing at Red, "I think you may play an important part in it."

"What does that mean?" Raven asked. "And earlier, you were telling that woman from MegaCORP something about people living through polystigmata. How is that possible?"

"It is rare, but we *have* seen people live through it, but they come back *altered*. It is difficult to explain unless you have gone through the studies and training of the Light. But in short, they are no longer a creature born of starlight. Creatures born from starlight cannot be tainted. They simply die in the process. Their minds cannot be lost in the abyss without being disconnected from their living bodies. But those that are corrupted — they *can* be tainted, just like the Xenosite."

"What does 'The Evil Eye,' have to do with all this?" Red asked. "Does it come up in the way the Priori details the ascension?"

"I can't be sure whether the eye you spoke of is the same thing, but

something tells me it is. If Gelda reached out to you, then I think it would make sense.”

“But what does that mean?” Red asked.

“It means you could be a reincarnation of Ikb’Sept, or as the Light refers to him, The Shepard of Oblivion.” There was a sharp silence in the room as Lux finished. “There is no way to be sure yet.”

“I’ve known him since he was six. Red is a normal human,” Raven replied.

“Yes, I know,” Lux said. “That’s why you have to come with me to see other people from the Light, Red. They will know better. You must tell them that Gelda has spoken to you. You must tell them about the eye that has been chasing you, the black cloud, the nightmares you have — everything.”

“It doesn’t sound like the Light can be trusted either,” S broke in.

“Yeah, and especially not if one of your kind is under the control of id-speech,” Butz added.

“I don’t know about all that,” Lux said, “but I can find out. I just need some time. I need all of you to make sure nothing happens to Red. The Light is not watching him as carefully as we should be if everything you say is true.”

“That means, don’t die in the qualifiers,” Arkan added with a smirk, “or we’ll never find out if you’re the messiah of the void.” He said it casually, but Red noticed how serious Lux’s expression had turned as she looked down, avoiding eye contact with him. A feeling of heaviness lifted from his chest. Although the revelation was something he had come to expect, he felt better now that his team knew about it as well.

“Shouldn’t this, umm, prophet thing, be big and dark and powerful or something?” Butz asked. “Not that you’re not powerful Red, but...”

“The Mouth of The Void can be reincarnated as any being, and he is nothing without the memories of his past lives, his weapon, and the eye that lets him peer into the abyss,” Lux replied. She began getting up to leave again. “I’m going to find out, Red. Don’t worry for now. Just stay safe. There are others, like Mej’Lith, who have had signs that they were the reincarnation of Ikb’Sept, but they were not. Just because you suffer from these nightmares and the eye seeks you, those things do not mean anything definite. And that ooze — if you see it again, you must come to the Light immediately. Find me, or Lance.”

“He won’t die in the qualifiers,” Raven said. “None of us will.”

“Lance will be competing,” Lux replied.

“What?” they all asked simultaneously.

“Well, after the death of Gelda he seemed to have taken MegaCORP’s insult seriously. The one about the Light not fighting its own battles. He decided he would take arms with MegaCORP to set a precedent. He told the Light that it *was* the best way to go, and that if MegaCORP is going to be fighting the Xenosite anyway, and that’s what the Light wants to do, we may as well figure out a way to work with each other. For a long time we have been fighting this war separately. It has hindered our efforts greatly. Even the blood elves have joined in the struggle against the Xenosite, but they still refuse to work with the Light. We will be taking steps to change all of that, to build allies.”

“Didn’t look like you guys were getting along well,” Arkan commented. “I am surprised that you are suddenly working with MegaCORP.”

“That’s true, we’ve always had a contentious relationship, but Lance is right. We *should* figure out a way to work together. The Light has never trusted MegaCORP before. There is something overly mysterious about their operations. And even pertaining to Cron itself, your star system seems to be unaware that it is a *new* energy source. Just a few thousand years ago, no one had even heard of it, and then it comes out of nowhere and MegaCORP soon has a monopoly over it. It is hard to believe their theory, that it has been deep underground in all of the planets all along. One would think it would have been discovered earlier.”

“It’s in every planet, isn’t it?” S asked. “Deep inside, where it’s extracted and processed through — what’s it called? Hyperproxification?”

“Well, it’s not as though people haven’t gone underground before, right?” Lux replied. “And thus far it hasn’t been found in any other planet outside of this star system. Anyway, the Light does not use Cron. MegaCORP’s presence is banned from our home planet, and no one of the Light is allowed to use any Cron-powered device. We rely on starlight for our energy, and will always do so. It is the purest of all energy sources, even more than flou.”

“I agree with Cron pollution being a negative side effect, but all energy sources result in some sort of pollution of the environment,” Magnus replied. “Why all the animosity against Cron specifically?”

“Not *all* energy sources, not starlight,” Lux said with a hint of smugness.

“And it’s not animosity, and it’s not just what happens after Cron pollution, although that’s a big factor. The Light has been studying MegaCORP since their inception, and their usage of Cron. There is something that just doesn’t fit. Polystigmata is also not a casual side effect of environmental pollution. It is a decay of people’s lifeforce, and it can effect both critters and plants as well. But there’s more. Have you ever seen those beams of light that are shot up from Cron reactors?”

“Yeah, we saw one during our field test,” S replied. “In the Alloy Desert there’s a Cron extraction plant. We had to make camp there at the end of our field test.”

“Well it’s supposedly some type of residue from hyperproxification, but if you look at the energy output, it’s enormous. As though all the Cron being produced in the reactor is actually just being shot up into the sky. Anyway, I should go now. There is much to be done. Take care during your qualifiers.” She walked to the door and turned back to Red one last time before leaving. “Like I said, there have been others who have had visions of the void. I would not be too worried yet.”

“What happened to the others?” Red asked.

“Well, when Mej’Lith had them, he thought the same thing as you, that he was The Mouth of The Void reincarnated, and so he began trying to draw dark flou from the void. It was a bizarre change in his ideals. He had been one of the most adamant followers of the Light. Some say the revelation that he was the dark prophet turned him mad, and that’s why he turned on his own kin so drastically.”

“He didn’t die from it?” Butz asked.

“His lifeforce decayed as it would with any creature of the Light. And like Arkan said before, MegaCORP intervened to stop his empire, but no one knows what actually happened to him. He was *not* the prophet he thought he was, and his usage of dark flou eventually corrupted him. He became weak and blind as he grew older. He was already near death by the time MegaCORP came in to break apart his empire. It is rare that we see anyone use dark flou directly from the void, but from the few cases that we’ve seen, the symptoms are almost identical to someone exposed to Cron pollution. That is why the Light does not trust it as an energy source.”

“Lux, before you go —” Arkan began. “One last thing, could you find out as much as you can about The Evil Eye for me? Everything the Light has to say about it, every story. If possible, I’d like to speak to some of the

Elders directly.” Lux nodded.

After she left, Arkan walked over to the door to leave as well. “I will leave the lot of you alone for now. It would be best to focus on your qualifiers. I trust you are as prepared as you can be?”

“Yeah, I think so,” Magnus nodded.

“I will see to the substance that Red spotted in the Alcazar. I must admit, more than anything, I am simply excited to study a creature of that sort,” Arkan said. “Have you prepared for combat against the blood elves?” They all nodded, looking at each other in assurance. “Don’t be *too* confident. Stay cautious. They may be feral, but they are just as intelligent as humans. Our only real advantage comes from our natural mastery over external casts, like elemental ones, but they are *far* better fighters. The blood elves are similar to us in physiology as well, besides a few key differences. It is better that you are going up against them than the gemini, though. That race is much more different than anything you could imagine. Just merely studying them on paper does not do justice to experiencing anything from combat to even a conversation with them firsthand. Oh, and around a fifth of the participants in every round die every year. Make sure you’re at the top eighty percent, eh? Even if you don’t make it as a WEAPON, I’d like my nephew to come back alive,” he smiled. He left the door open as he exited. Red got up to close it.

“I’m going to bed,” Raven said. “You guys should go too. We need as much rest as we can get, even if it’s only for a few hours. The first task is supposed to last for more than three days. I doubt we’ll sleep at all in between.” Everyone happily followed her advice, but no one was able to sleep once they were back in their rooms. Instead, Butz, Magnus, and Red lay awake in their beds, occasionally reminding each other different facts about the rules of the qualifiers, the blood elves, and what types of critters they might face in a terrain with a high altitude. Red could hear S furiously clicking away on her microAI from the room next to them. After thirty minutes, the three of them quieted down and agreed to rest even if they could not fall asleep. Red lay in his bed with his hands folded behind his head, like someone who expects not to sleep for the entirety of a night.

“You guys ever wish you hadn’t enrolled in academy?” Butz asked. Red was surprised that an answer did not come to him. “Not for an extended period of time or anything, but just for a moment or two, maybe a minute, after something bad happened or when you saw that Xenosite in Professor

Kep's classroom?" Red knew his answer was yes, but was afraid to say it, as though if he said it out loud, it would make it more true. He thought Magnus must have felt the same way, because he remained silent as well. "What if we lived out our lives in a different way? Didn't take a path so difficult, worked in research in one of the inner planets? We would never have to think of the Xenosites. Not in our lifetime, at least. We could leave that for later generations," he added in a mocking tone.

"Having second thoughts about the qualifiers?" Magnus asked. Red noted that there was no hint of sarcasm in the question. It made him uncomfortable how sincere both of them sounded.

"I didn't really think we were going to die, or even get injured during the field test. And then *when* the field test happened, all these things just started piling up one by one, and I had to keep reminding myself that we weren't in a training simulation anymore, that everything was real, and that we wouldn't just go back to our room at the end of the day and forget about what happened or joke about it later. We even came close to dying a few times, and I don't know, I don't wanna die." He let out a nervous laugh in between his words. "I never really worried about it before, but now it's different, especially for the qualifiers. The field test I knew we were prepared for. I'm not so sure about the qualifiers. We're going to be up against elves of our own caliber — some of them might be just as strong as Raven. We were always against critters, or things that I knew would never harm us so long as we were smart about it. But now, it's not just about avoiding obvious mistakes, we actually need a *strategy* to avoid death. For the first time, we're both prey *and* predator in a hunt. Isn't that strange?"

"Well, technically speaking, against blood elves, we're just prey," Magnus laughed.

"Only twenty percent get eliminated by death every year. That's not bad," Red said. "If we're careful..."

"You think the twenty percent who died weren't careful?" Butz asked. "I'm sure no one goes into the qualifiers with a casual attitude. Everyone knows what they're up against. During the field test, the time when that Ignot Gila shot up towards me, the one that we thought was dead..."

"You thought you wouldn't make it?" Red asked.

"I'm not sure what I was thinking. It's hard to explain, but the idea of dying never became so real to me before that. Sounds funny, I know, since we're soldiers and all that, but nope, never. Maybe that's just it, right? People

in academy are taught to never think about it because unlike other people, it's always so close to us. It's *right* there, just beyond the corner of a single mistake. So we ignore it, pretend it's not there, and convince ourselves that we're invincible. I mean, if we didn't, we'd probably all go mad."

"That time the River Harpie grabbed me from behind and started pulling me down into the river, I wasn't sure Red would get to me in time..." Magnus said.

"What were you thinking?" Red asked. "Were you scared?"

"I was thinking '*I wish Raven came for me instead of Red,*'" Magnus laughed.

"If she hadn't pulled that move in the desert, I wouldn't be here right now," Butz said. "I'd be... somewhere else?"

"Where do you think people go after?" Red asked.

"Another dimension?" Magnus suggested.

"Maybe we just disappear," Butz replied.

"I can't imagine either," Red replied. "What do you think other dimensions are like?"

"Maybe you should tell us. You're the one having dreams of the void," Magnus laughed.

"That time we were in Raven's dreamscape, you guys remember the second level?" Butz asked. Magnus and Red hummed a loud "yes." "Well, remember how it was like when your consciousness was just floating? Without a body? And it felt like you were no longer... limited by your body? It occurred to me, whenever people *do* talk about passing on from this world, they always describe it as though we'd still retain our human condition. As though we'd still have a body and feel everything as we would if we had a body. When people talk about going to another dimension, they describe seeing things and feeling things, but that's not how it would be right? I mean it could be, but it also could be something else entirely. What if we wouldn't even have bodies? What if other dimensions are more like the way it is in dreams? Remember how it felt in there, when time didn't seem like it existed? You could go from past to future without any trouble. Anything you thought was suddenly alive and in front of you. Anywhere you wanted to be, you were just there instantly, as though the thought itself made it into a reality. It was like we transcended this world. I bet dreams are on the border of other dimensions, and when you're dreaming, maybe your mind is just wired to get signals from those other worlds better. Maybe it's seeing things that *do* exist, or *are* happening, but just not in this world. We think

about our bodies as our only way to experience life, but it could also be the only thing limiting us from it, giving us only five senses and hiding an entire other universe from our awareness.” There was a long pause after Butz had finished as Red and Magnus thought over what he said.

“We’re not going to die,” Red finally replied, determined, confident, assured. “No matter what, we have to stick together. We’ll protect each other. The blood elves are known to be brutal, I know, but worst case scenario, we can always run from a fight.”

“You think Raven would ever be willing to run from a fight if it came down to it?” Magnus asked.

“To save Red, I think so,” Butz laughed.

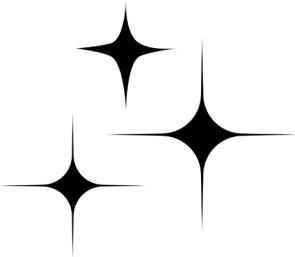
“If it was her alone, then no. I think she would fight,” Red replied. “I think she always prefers to fight, no matter what the scenario is. But if we were there, I don’t think she would risk fighting when the odds were against us. About certain things — she’s more sensitive than you guys think. I remember how she looked at Wren when she saw him in her dreamscape. I’ll never forget that. My stomach sinks thinking about it.”

“Sometimes her idea of the odds being in our favor are a bit... *distorted*,” Butz said. “She’ll think she can take on three or four blood elves at once.”

“That’s because she *can* take on three or four blood elves at once,” Red retorted.

“What about that girl who scored 1300?” Magnus replied. “What if she’s stronger than Raven?”

“Yeah, you’re right. I guess we’re as good as dead,” Red replied after a moment of silence. The other two laughed quietly, and then they slept for three hours. Red had no dreams, but his sleep was filled with thoughts. When they awoke, it was time to move out. Raven and S were sitting in the living area, ready and waiting for the rest of them. As Red geared up, he dropped all of his items off in their room besides his gloves. He decided he would use all of the gear provided by MegaCORP. After the five of them were ready, they ate a light meal and then head out to the amphidome, the enormous theatre where the qualifiers would be held.



THE SHEPARD OF OBLIVION

The five of them were sitting in the vestibule for the loading room as the other twenty participants arrived. Despite being nothing more than a waiting room, the vestibule was about the size of a terminal, large enough to hold at least a hundred people. It was empty, apart from the many benches along the sides. The loading room itself would not open until everyone was there. They had come early to scope out their teammates before the competition. Suiting up would not take them long. They already had a plan for what they would grab. Raven said they should pack lightly, to remain agile in skirmishes when they broke out. Magnus's mallet was not approved by MegaCORP to be used in the qualifiers, with a note saying that it was too ornamental and that it would fall short in quality compared to the weapons provided in the loading room. It left Magnus a bit dejected to not have the weapon he was comfortable with, but at the same time, he was excited to see what weapons would be provided and assumed they would be far more powerful than his mallet.

As the participants arrived, Magnus and Red made an effort to introduce themselves to all of them. Some of the participants recognized Raven, either from global competitions or by word of mouth. There were three other falconers, each with a rare familiar. Linx seemed to realize that he had competition now and perched himself more firmly next to Butz, showing off his confidence. He paid no mind to the other critters that entered the room. The other familiars were all of a higher stage, and far larger than Linx. The Aeyz Cat seemed to realize this as well, and maintained a stately expression as a result, to show them that he wasn't intimidated. Butz seemed to feel differently, and Red could tell that the falconer was already

beginning to get nervous. *He'll be fine*, Red thought. *He's a soldier at heart. When we're in battle, that side of him will take over.*

The first familiar that entered was a Night Warg. His owner was a girl who was equipped with far too many daggers than Red thought was necessary. They weren't inconspicuous at all, either. They stuck out from various parts of her combat suit in haphazard angles. If she fell to the floor or bumped against a wall, Red was sure that one of them would press into her body. She had an eccentric vibe, and he imagined that it was how she wanted to come off. Night Wargs were large, wolfish creatures with dark blue fur and long manes that ran down their spines. They were exceptionally beautiful creatures, Red thought, with piercing eyes and curved claws that extended out of the top of their paws at will. They were from a family of canine critters referred to as "bounty hunter dogs" for their extraordinary sense of smell and their ability to trace energy signatures through long distances. They could track prey across an entire continent by following the slightest trails of flou and odor. They were native to a group of islands in the southern regions of Avalonia, known as the Azure Pits. The islands had craters filled with blue mercury, a phosphorescent liquid that enhanced the senses of creatures that swam in it, but was poisonous if ingested. Raising familiars that were native to the region was exceptionally costly and overbearing because they would need to be taken back to the Azure Pits at least once every three months or their senses would diminish.

The second familiar was a Gatrax Cnidaria, a large jellyfish-type critter that changed color depending on its emotional state and had a very unique way of killing other critters and sensing the world around it. Its tentacles would grab hold of another creature and transfer energy through electrical impulses to bacteria inside of its prey to culture them into larger, more powerful strains, and allow them to multiply uncontrollably. The death of the prey looked like a rapid process of degeneration. It occurred so fast at times, especially if the Gatrax Cnidaria was of a higher stage, that the skin of its prey would bubble in toxicity as its body dissolved into the ground. Gatrax Cnidarias would store strains of bacteria they were unfamiliar with inside of their bulbous heads. The familiar here was a stage 5. Red had seen a demonstration at Crest Academy of a stage 8 version. Its head carried over seven million different strains of bacteria and viruses. Gatrax Cnidarias were from the Fifth Sea, a floating body of xeth on planet Ultra. Xeth was a clear liquid that resembled water, but innately carried an electrical

charge inside of it. Gatrax Cnidarias had no extrinsic senses and perceived the world around them by reading electrical impulses. This stage 5 would be able to detect a drop of water that hit the surface of the floor within a tentzera radius around it. As a result of their method of perception, however, they were nearly blind in thunderstorms or when a high amount of electric casts were used around them.

The last familiar was too big to enter the vestibule and would have to use a different entrance to come into the loading room. It was a Rune Mammoth, an enormous woolly creature that stood as tall as a Gnashar in its stage 4 form, but was far heavier. As early as its stage 7 form, the creature could be as large as a building. Its roar sounded like an instrument being played underwater, almost musical, and could be deafening in magnitude. Rune Mammoths had no specific region they were native to, and could be found all over the tundras of Avalonia. They were defensive critters, and could stomp on the ground around them to generate shockwaves that acted as force fields. Their skin was resistant to most elements, casts, and weapons. It was similar to dragon hide, but less powerful. Raven's blade would have a hard time going through the hide of a Rune Mammoth. Against the carapace of a dragon, however, celestial steel would simply break before making a scratch.

Red was surprisingly glad to see Lance, more because he was a familiar face than because he liked him. The Stallion of Light was dressed in a silver and gold combat suit that resembled MegaCORP's uniform. He had a scepter, a rare weapon that helped humans manipulate light, time, and matter, the way gemini did. Some of the other people in the room, who recognized him as someone from the Priori of Light, looked surprised to see him as well.

“So you changed your mind about whether WEAPON was useful after all?” Magnus asked.

“Not quite. It’s still an inane process. I’ve simply come to prove a point.” He spoke in the same arrogant tone he had at the ociramma and during their interrogation. It did not bother Red this time. He was still glad to see a familiar face. Lance looked equally pleased at the sight of the five of them, although Red suspected it also was not because he was particularly fond of any of them.

“Inane?” asked someone else, who was sitting near them. It was the girl with the Warg. Her familiar bared his teeth hungrily. Linx jumped atop a

chair, as though to demonstrate that he was above such gestures. Red tried his hardest not to show that he was intimidated by the creature. Its teeth were dirty and unpolished, giving it a crude and lethal look.

“You don’t think the best soldiers of every race killing each other when we’re at war with a far greater enemy is inane?” Lance asked, raising a brow. The girl looked at him with an incredulous expression, as though she were checking if he was being sarcastic or not. Her familiar took a step towards Lance, still baring its teeth. It looked eager to bite something. Every time it looked at its owner, Red was sure it was hoping for an attack command. He thought that while the other familiars may be stronger than Linx, the Aeyz Cat was far better socialized. *At least they’ve got something going for them*, Red laughed to himself.

“It’s not,” a boy replied, someone from the other side of the room. It occurred to Red that his sense of hearing must have been extraordinarily acute to have caught the conversation from that far, and above the chatter of other people. “From what I understand about WEAPON, they augment soldiers with new genes, and very few of their experiments go the right way. But every successful WEAPON is worth ten thousand ordinary soldiers, maybe even more as they get stronger. MegaCORP allows its participants to kill each other because to them, single ordinary soldiers are irrelevant, no matter how powerful we think we are. The only time they make exceptions is when they think a participant is strong enough from the start.”

“That happens?” Red asked.

“Sure, happened to someone six years ago from my academy. He was a Prometheus, just like her,” he pointed to Raven. “On the very first skirmish that broke out, it was already obvious that he was more powerful than anyone else on the field. And the next day, he vanished. Just like that, in the middle of the round. We asked later what happened to him, and they told us he was already admitted into WEAPON. I guess they don’t want to risk losing people like that.”

“Interesting,” Lance mumbled. “Have you heard from him again, since then?”

“No, it’s well known that the program is still experimental. I don’t think they’re going to use any of the WEAPONS until the Xenosite invade the inner planets. Either way, their own guard are already doing far more than anyone else in the outer planets. I’m Roland, by the way. I’m a stalker from Kaldin Academy.”

“The other kids should have sacked him earlier,” Butz replied. “Especially if he was making them look bad. That’s what I woulda done. If anybody excels among the humans — ” he made a beheading gesture with his neck and a cleaving noise.

“Yeah Butz, you let Raven know,” S said.

“It’s not just about WEAPON either, for everyone who competes,” the girl with the Warg added. “For the different races, it’s about proving their own superiority. No matter what kind of extinction we’re threatened with, that drive will always exist. The gemini, most of all I’m sure, don’t want to give up their legacy. They’ve dominated the qualifiers almost every year. Their race actually *is* more powerful if you ask me. I don’t see how it’s too fair that they’re allowed to compete with humans on equal terms. And on a personal level, it’s more than just about getting into WEAPON, isn’t it? No one wants to admit it, but it’s about glory, and that rush of fame and acknowledgement of your power. To finally get the recognition you always daydream about, what you always thought you deserved.” She looked away as she spoke, as though she expected the others to deny what she said or to assume that it was a rhetorical statement.

A switch flicked green near one of the doors in the room, which opened shortly after. Behind it, a long chute led into a larger room.

“Loading room’s open,” the girl said. “My name’s Grecko, by the way,” she added before heading down the chute with her Warg. As the room emptied out, Lance made a gesture for the five of them to stay behind. They waited, curious to see what he had to say. Something bellowed from the end of the hallway. *The Rune Mammoth*, Red thought. He could hear it stomping on the floor as it moved around in the loading room. He wondered how its falconer kept a creature like that around her for most of the day. *You would need your entire life to revolve around just taking care of it*, he mused. Lance pulled up a chair to sit next to them. Some of the last participants to walk into the loading room looked at them suspiciously. Red realized that they were the only team that had entered the qualifiers together. Everyone else qualified individually, either by performing better than their team, or because their academies conducted maverick field tests. He could not imagine being here without all four of his teammates.

“Red, Lux told me everything that happened,” Lance said, “and one of Gelda’s closest advisors told me that she had told the Light to keep a close watch on you.” Red nodded silently and hesitantly. He was not comfortable

speaking to Lance about this and regretted that Lux told him anything, but saw no way to deny what he was saying. “You are not alone Red, in having visions of the void and showing signs of being Ikb’Sept, The Mouth of The Void. There are others just like you that the Light also watches carefully.” *The name*, Red thought. *There is my true name*. Raven was listening intently next to him. “But, and I want to make sure of this, you said that there was a man with an *arm for a blade, and an eye on the blade*, that came after you during your field test?” Red looked at his teammates before nodding slowly.

“Not just any eye — you should have seen this one. It was *alive*,” Butz exclaimed, “and the way it was looking around, maddening. It looked at me for only a moment and I felt like it could see something far deeper than just the surface of my body, like it was able to look into my thoughts.” S shoved him lightly with her elbow before he stopped talking.

“I believe you,” Lance said. He said it candidly, and Red had the feeling that it took a lot for him to say it.

“Lux said that I may have been linked to the enemy of the Light, the one she spoke of earlier,” Red replied.

“And you have been seeing a... black cloud in the Alcazar? In... mirrors? Following you?” Lance asked.

“Yeah, and it doesn’t just look like a plain cloud. It has crystals around it, and near the top of it I can vaguely make out a body, almost humanoid in form. Sometimes the body is there, and sometimes it’s just a cloud.”

“I believe you,” Lance repeated. “And I think it explains why someone would want Raven to seem like the person who committed the crimes — perhaps to convince the Light that you were already against us.”

“What does it mean to be *linked* to something related to the void?” Raven asked.

“I don’t think Red is just connected to the war between the Light and the dark. I think there is more,” Lance said. “I think what Lux said was a conservative way of putting it. The Light cannot identify The Shepard of Oblivion. We can only read signs that point to how he was reincarnated. We knew it would be in human form this time, and we had several guesses already. All of the Souls of Light are tasked with finding out who it is. Gelda seemed to think it might have been you. But the eye... the eye would never chase a false prophet. And Red, if you are saying that you’ve been chased by an eye, The Evil Eye by the sound of it, and by a black cloud that I’m afraid sounds as though it too is an entity from the world between worlds,

then you are him, Red. There is no doubt then. You are the reincarnation of Ikb'Sept, The Mouth of The Void, The Shepard of Oblivion.” There was a long silence that followed after Lance finished.

“What are you going to do with him?” Raven asked. Lance looked at them for a long while, contemplating something in his head, before clearing his throat to speak. Red felt surprisingly calm now that Lance had finally relieved him of any doubt.

“I have sent a message to the Elders of the Light already. When they find out...” He donned a serious expression while looking for the words to complete his thought. “The army that Odra had spoken of in planet Ultra, the army of the Light, is nothing. The Priori of Light has existed since before life had even formed in this star system. We exist even beyond this galaxy, and our armies are vast, beyond anything MegaCORP could imagine. They will bring *everything* here to protect Red, and perhaps, prepare for a war.”

“A war?” Butz asked.

“This might be the beginning of a far greater war than the one we are fighting against the Xenosite. It *is* the beginning of a greater war, one that the Light has been fighting since the beginning of this universe. We will fight it here, in this star system, and I’m afraid it will all revolve around Red.”

“Around me?”

“The less people that know about *what* you are, the better. Even among the Light, we only share knowledge on a need-to-know basis. Gelda was wise not to tell anyone in her circle about your presence, and about her suspicions.”

“Is not everyone in the Light trustworthy?” S asked.

“No,” Lance said in a surprisingly blunt way. “You already know about Zenae?” Both Red and Magnus nodded. “We do not know who was controlling her through id-speech, or for what purpose, but we’re wiping her mind right now, and I assure you, we will find out soon. She will be denounced and stripped of her title and rank. The curious thing is how someone could have gotten close enough to a Soul of Light to execute something like id-speech without being noticed. It would have to be someone with a masterful command over psykinesthetics. We checked all of our rooms for hidden writing, questioned everyone we know, nothing suspicious seems to be going on. But that makes us all the more worried. I will speak to Prince Arkan

about it more closely. I am disturbed that he was able to tell so quickly when no one in the Light had ever noticed.”

“Guess he’s not such a madman after all, eh?” Magus laughed.

“No, he was right about her, for one thing. Anyway, Red, you must stay focused on the task at hand now. I joined MegaCORP to show everyone that the Light is serious about our goals, and that we’re willing to work with anyone who will cooperate with us in our fight against the Xenosite. Creating a unified front is the most important thing for the Light right now. But as a secondary goal, I’ve also come to protect you. You must stay close to the Light from now on.”

“How do we know we can trust you?” Raven asked. “You said yourself, even the Light don’t trust each other. And how did you get into the qualifiers? You’re not from an academy, nor did you perform a field test.”

“I *am* from an academy, or at least the equivalent of one. The Light has its own ways of preparing its members for combat. MegaCORP has a very good understanding of our methods. They are well versed in the training methods of many different races and groups. They like to pride themselves in the diversity of participants in WEAPON and how many new races join every year. And it’s not that the Light do not trust each other, but recently there have been... infiltrations. Our enemy is not from this world, which makes it all the more troublesome that the people who are working against us are humans, elves, gemini, beings just like us. It is something we have been trying to explain for a long time.”

“You mean there are humans on the side of the void?” S asked.

“Exactly, and it doesn’t make any sense at all if you think about it. Why would humans, or anyone of this universe, be helping with their own destruction? But that’s what all of our evidence is pointing to. The best explanation is that they suffer from the taint, but no creature born of starlight can be tainted and survive, at least not without their lifeforce being altered first. And while we’ve seen some examples of this through polystigmata, those exceptions occur far too rarely to make a difference. In the war that the Light is fighting right now, our enemies are not obvious. We are losing tiny, invisible battles — like the death of Gelda. But I’m afraid these battles are far more important than they seem, and our Elders are just beginning to realize that.” He stood up and began walking over to the door that led to the loading room. “We’ll discuss this after the first round is over.”

“Arkan mentioned something about a book that he wanted Lux to get,”

Butz said.

“Ahh yes, the Draconion Index? Arkan is on the right track, but I’m afraid the book will be impossible to retrieve. The index is the Light’s way of keeping track of all deities of the void that we know to exist. This black cloud that Red speaks of, I think he is trying to figure out what it is. Arkan is no doubt bothered by its presence in the Alcazar. Has he spoken of how it could be related to the murders of Gelda and the king?”

“He has,” Magnus replied. “Sort of. I mean, it’s all still inexplicable.”

An announcement overhead indicated that the round would commence shortly, and that everyone should be ready soon.

“We will speak later,” Lance said, getting up and walking across the chute.

“Wait guys,” Raven said, just as everyone was about to follow behind Lance. “I want to go over a couple of last minute things.”

“Last minute?” Butz asked nervously.

“Nothing like that, we’re as prepared as we can be. But listen carefully. I want you guys to stay close to me at all times, no matter what. Do you understand?” She stressed every syllable of her last sentence. “Don’t go out of my sight, and don’t fight in any skirmishes unless I’m there. Avoid fighting directly as much as you can and conserve your energy as much as possible.”

“We’ll be fine,” Butz assured her.

“No, you won’t,” Raven said. “The four of you are in the bottom half of the group here. Everyone’s energy level is pretty high. I don’t know if you’ve been reading them.” Red shook his head guiltily. “The people who die during the qualifiers are not random. It’s always either the weakest, whom the group decides to send on risky skirmishes or missions, or the most careless. We’re up against the blood elves, a group known to be excessively brutal. It’s not going to be a fifth of us that die here. It’s going to be nearly half. So don’t go far from me. This isn’t a sparring session or a field test anymore. Don’t treat it carelessly.” They all nodded in agreement. Red felt his excitement die down. Raven turned to S. “S, you’re the only healer here. Don’t use your energy to heal anyone else except for our own team, even if they ask. The only exception is if it’s a critical emergency, none of us need any healing, and it’s not too taxing on you.” S nodded.

“If someone else is about to die, let them die,” Raven said. “Don’t put yourself at risk trying to save them.” They sat there in silence for a while,

before following suit behind Raven as she got up to enter the loading room. “Alright, let’s do this.”

He expected the loading room to be an empty hallway stacked with items, but instead, it was filled with apprentices who were aiding participants in getting ready. There was an entire section for fire elementalists, but as he found out when he got there, he wasn’t strong enough to use most of the gear there. Most higher level combat weaponry and armor drained high amounts of energy from their users to sustain their quality. He remembered watching Magnus try on an armor set made entirely of obsidian last year, and almost pass out after less than twenty minutes. One of the combat suits was housed in a case of dialite and caught his attention immediately. It was red and gold, with a glowing maroon aura around it that made it look as though it were giving off energy. It wasn’t lavishly designed, but its simplicity gave it a unique look compared to the other armor sets. He asked one of the apprentices to give him more details and he found that the set was called “Rebirth” and that it was forged entirely from the body of a phoenix that was found dead in Avalonia over a century ago. The maker of the set was a famous blacksmith who was able to retain enough of the phoenix to keep the creature’s signature ability — upon receiving a fatal wound and nearing death, the wearer of the armor would be reborn almost instantaneously and the armor itself would burn away. The armor set used so much energy from its user, however, he would be able to wear it for less than a minute before dying, anyway. He wondered if this was how strong Mega-CORP expected its participants to be, or if it showcased armor like this just to flaunt its own wealth.

Everything in the loading room was of imperial-grade or better — the grade of armor and weaponry used by the guard of most kingdoms, cities, and empires. He immediately changed out of his Crest Academy uniform for a new grey and red combat suit with a high degree of fire resistance. Still, there were combat suits of far higher grades. He was glad that none of the other humans were fire elementalists. He had no one to compare himself with directly. The other falconers suited their familiars with armor. Butz tried twice, but Linx would have none of it. Magnus chose to keep wearing his combat suit from Crest Academy. The one he had originally bought was of imperial-grade, and he decided it was better to stay comfortable than to swap it out for a different one. For a weapon, he chose the biggest mallet he could carry without tiring himself out. They stocked a

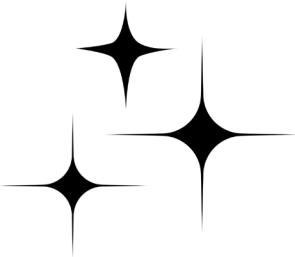
variety of items from psilicadust to gravity grenades, packing as much as they could into the slots of their gear. No one mentioned anything about food, nor was there anything available in the loading room, and Red wondered if the round would have critters for them to kill and eat, or a source of water somewhere. Likely, the terrain would make it challenging for them to find either.

He was taken aback when he saw Raven. Her combat gear was designed for her. It was the only one that was designed for a specific person, and it gave away that MegaCORP was already watching her. The armor set was named “Prometheus 4.” The “4” marked her as the fourth promethean to ever compete in the qualifiers, and the only one out of all the races in this year’s competition. The armor set was jet black with an alien and angular helmet, as though it were crafted with the design of a stealth ship in mind. It had no aura, and instead, hid her own natural energy signal so that it was undetectable even if she was only an arm’s length away. The black color had a certain sheen to it and looked out of place when she stood under a bright light. Her sword no longer had to be strapped to her back. The armor had its own slot for it, tailored to the size of the blade. He was so used to only seeing her use her sword that he had forgotten she was well practiced in other weapons as well. She had a number of daggers hidden in her boots, her bow and arrow strapped to the side of her back, and a belt stacked with items. She also carried a keratana, a weapon that was difficult to use, consisting of two large ring-shaped blades with a string attached to them. Both rings were controlled by pulling from the center of the string and could reach long distances with the right amount of control. He had seen a hologram of someone using one and slicing their own foot off by pulling back on the weapon too hard and at an angle too low. Despite her heavy load, she looked more flexible and agile than anyone else in the room. He thought she looked beautiful.

She caught the eyes of other people as well, for more reason than one, Red imagined. For all his life he had seen her in drab, under-grade gear like himself, and her talent and power remained hidden behind it. Her change of gear was a subtle metamorphosis, and it lifted an unspoken guilt from Red’s mind. He finally felt relieved of holding her back all these years. She was now free to express her talent to the entire world, he thought. Of all the people that took sudden notice of her, there was no envy at all, as though it were implicitly understood that she was a different type of crea-

ture entirely, not to be compared to the standards they held for themselves.

Once everyone was ready, they stood on the platform tubes that would elevate them to the arena. After all twenty-five of the participants were boarded, they rose simultaneously. Red thought his heart might jump out of his chest. He was exploding with so much energy that he dug his hands into his pockets and let out fire casts to be absorbed into his combat suit. The first sound he heard was of the crowd. There must have been millions of people watching in the stands, he thought. The arena was enormous and he could not make out the end of it. The crowd was beyond the horizon, but he could still hear them. At first, it was a plain flat arena with a solid floor and it did not change for a few minutes. Before the arena itself started morphing, the sound of the crowd died out and there was complete silence. The sky changed first. He was watching it change just as he watched Areopa change from night to day, but the modification was more rapid and distorted. The sky looked like it was melting, until it turned into the black, emptiness of space. The floor shot up rapidly and half the group fell on top of themselves as they were lifted into the air. He wondered what would have happened if he had been standing on the portion of the floor that was left behind. The floor did not stop rising until they were at least fifty tezras up. Its color changed into a chalky blue terrain. Although the arena was a simulation, it was meant to resemble a natural terrain that existed somewhere else in the universe. A ringing sound indicated the commencement of the round. The qualifiers had begun.



BLOODSPORT

They were standing atop a mountain. The floor was the same chalky blue that Red had noticed earlier. He bent down to swipe it with his fingertips. It was uncomfortable to touch. He felt the moisture drain away from his skin and then the naked roughness of the floor. It felt like rock, but at the same time, somewhat metallic. He noticed that there were no rock fragments, boulders, or smaller pieces, not even dust. The mountain was a singular piece of rock that was perfectly carved out into its craggy shape. He could not see the terrain below the mountain. Everything was covered by a blanket of yellow mist. In the distance, he could see a mountain that looked identical to the one they were on. He could not identify the terrain or the constellations above them, which were usually a giveaway. From the curious look on all of his teammates' faces, he guessed they could not either. On the middle of the summit was a stand, and on top of it, a chalice with what looked like a single drop of a silver substance. It was metal, he guessed.

"Where do you think we are?" Red asked, but Magnus just shrugged. He swiped the floor just as Red did, and then curled his hands into a fist to get back some of its moisture. The gravity was much stronger here than on Avalonia, but it had been calibrated to feel more natural. It was unusual for MegaCORP to make such an adjustment, but he understood why after reading the level of force being exerted on the atmosphere through his microAI — more than a thousand times the pressure on Avalonia. His body was using a tiny amount of its flou to retain equilibrium, to make him feel as though the gravity here was the same as what he was always used to. It was a subconscious process that he had no control over. He would not notice the difference until the end of the day. By then, he would be far more exhausted than he normally would have been. He summoned a tiny fire cast

at the palm of his left hand. It was noticeably more powerful than what he intended. There was either more oxygen in the air here, or something else that made it easier for him to generate fire casts. He took a deep breath, and then smiled at the thought.

“No idea. Doesn’t look like anything we’ve studied,” Magnus said. Red could hear the guilt in his voice. Most of the other participants around them looked just as puzzled. “I guess the blood elves will have an advantage if they’re familiar with this place. I don’t even know what planet this is supposed to be, nor do I recognize any of the stars. I wouldn’t even know if we were in our galaxy.”

“It’s not a planet,” Lance said. He inspected the chalky floor as though it were sacred ground. He bent over to look very closely at the material and then swiped it just as Red and Magnus had. He studied his finger carefully before repeating the motion with his other hand. “We’re on the surface of a dead star. You wouldn’t recognize this place. It’s not meant to be known by anyone outside of the Light.”

“A dead star?” S repeated. “Like, one that’s collapsed on itself?”

Lance nodded. “It is in our galaxy, but not near the star system you are from. It is far from any inhabited star system. I have been here before, once, when I was much younger. These mountains are made out of a material called nephril. If the substance touches liquid metal, a reaction occurs, similar to something burning. But instead of fire, the visible part of the process is called sphyrix. Instead of ashes, the end result of a material ‘catonizing,’ as the reaction is called, is a liquid form of nephril, unattainable otherwise. If this mountain catonized, you would get an ocean of nephril.”

“Unattainable as in, this substance can’t melt otherwise?” Magnus asked. A few people took a step back from the chalice holding the drop of metal on top of the stand.

“Exactly.”

“Well, I guess we know what MegaCORP had in mind for us,” the girl with the Warg said. “If that drop of metal touches the floor, how much of this mountain will catonize?” She hesitated on the word, and Red was glad to know they weren’t the only people who were unfamiliar with it.

“The entire mountain,” Lance replied. “It is a chain reaction. If you light up a corner of something flammable, eventually, the entire thing will burn, no matter how big it is.”

“What does it look like?” Red asked.

“Hard to say, imagine describing the process of something burning to someone, or what fire looks like. When something is catonizing, it looks like all the bits and atoms of the material suddenly start shifting places, spiraling, breaking down. Sphyrix itself looks kind of like a gas that always collapses into cyclones. Its colors change depending on the intensity of the process and the concentration of the material that’s catonizing.”

“Is it dangerous?” Red asked.

“Yes. Unlike fire, sphyrix doesn’t release heat energy. It releases flou, or the same energy you channel to create casts.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?” Red asked.

“Aren’t heat and warmth technically good things too?” Lance replied. “After a certain amount, it becomes toxic to the body. It’s a terrible way to die, a quick but painful meltdown. It’ll feel like your own flou is imploding in your body as you lose control of your energy channels.” Raven sat hunched over near the edge of the summit. Red guessed that she was studying the mountain at the other side of the arena, but she was bent over as though she were sick.

“What about the gas?” Roland asked. “It looks like wisp. Is it even a gas? It’s wavy, kind of like a liquid.”

“It *is* wisp,” Lance replied. “A form of it, at least. It’s a heavy substance that often appears on dead stars. It’s a gas, but you can swim through it. You’ll feel weightless at first, but it builds pressure if you go deeper, just like if you go underwater. It makes it even more dangerous because sometimes you won’t be aware of the pressure on your body until it’s too late. You can breathe through it as well, but it’ll be harder. The wisp will flow into your lungs more quickly than regular air, and if you’re not careful, you’ll quickly get sick from too much of it. You have to control your breath and not take big gulps of air in, even if you feel like you’re out of breath. Hey, is she okay?” Lance asked, pointing to Raven while walking over to her. “Hey, are you all right?”

An instant before he was there, Red suddenly noticed that something was terribly wrong. Raven wasn’t studying the terrain at all, she was hunching over while holding onto her stomach. He heard her moan softly, as though she was about to throw up. Instinctually, he felt a need to warn Lance to move back. He screamed something, inaudible, not making any sense, and Lance gave him a curious look in turn. The next second, Raven was on her feet. She stood up so fast, Red couldn’t follow her motions. She

continued to move faster than his eyes could follow. The sound of steel cutting through flesh filled the air. It wasn't a meat packing noise as it had been with the Ignot Gila when he first saw Raven use this technique. It was a clean, short sound, the effect of celestial steel slicing through a thin amount of bone, flesh, and skin with a practiced expertise. Red took a step back in shock. Lance was no longer standing next to Raven in one piece. His body was on the floor, lifeless, and his head had fallen off the top of the summit. Red's first thought was that from somewhere in the stands, the Priori was watching the prime suspect of Gelda's death kill their Stallion of Light.

No one besides Red's own team reacted with any surprise. Everyone moved with a clean and precise efficiency. Grecko hopped on her Warg and charged at Raven, trying to get her familiar to tackle her down. Red wanted to tell them to stop fighting, but he couldn't find the words. He continued to stare at Lance's body. Its decapitated form left him speechless, as though his mind was still trying to comprehend what had happened, trying to catch up with his eyes. Raven dodged the tackle from the Warg and without saying anything, jumped from the top of the mountain onto the wisp below. She turned back to take one last look at all of them before she jumped. Red barely recognized her face. It had marks like black spikes that came out from the sides, and her face itself looked pale and lifeless. Her eyes only glanced over him, as though she no longer recognized who he was. S screamed after her, tried to tell her to stop, but it was too late. By the time everyone was at the side of the summit, Raven was already gone, swimming across the bed of wisp and disappearing underneath the yellow fog.

"What... what just happened?" S sobbed. She was trembling, and collapsed on her knees while staring at Lance's body. Everyone received a notification simultaneously on their microAIs. Magnus played his out loud. *Infections will last for approximately twenty-two hours at a time, and are done by the Velvet Worm, a genetically modified mind parasite created by MegaCORP. There will be a special map in your microAI to track the infected. The other team will have access to this as well. Infected participants will be hostile to even their own team with very minimal control over their actions. Only one participant at a time will be affected. The opposing team will not have an infected member at the same time as you. The first team to eliminate the other team's infected will win the round.* The message came in just a minute late. He wondered why they couldn't have been warned of that before the round commenced, perhaps in the loading room. It seemed like a cruel joke not to warn anyone to be careful, and too much of a coincidence

that Raven was the first one to be infected. He had to force himself to look away from Lance.

"I guess we shouldn't follow her advice about staying near her," Butz said darkly.

"I can track her," the girl with the Warg said. "If we want to go after her, that is." She took a passing glance at S, finding it odd how emotional the healer had become from Lance's death. In turn, Red was surprised by how little everyone else seemed affected by it. Roland was on his microAI, reading a passage about Velvet Worms without taking a second glance at Lance's body. Linx stood at the edge of the summit, looking out for Raven. Red suspected that the cat must be the most confused as to what happened to their team leader. Magnus, S, Red, and Butz all gathered around Lance's body. Red could tell S was trying to hold back tears, not out of despair, but out of shock. It was not that she had never seen anything like this before — he suspected it was the pressure of the qualifiers combined with Raven being the first infected, and everything happening so quickly. The first round had only just begun, and their team was already broken.

"Was that Raven Maestro? The first infected?" asked someone who Red did not recognize. "And was the other one the one from The Priori of Light?" The boy walked over to Lance and picked up his scepter, juggling it between both hands while studying it.

"Yeah," Roland replied. "And why would we track her? She's hostile right now. I'm not even sure if she's going to be on the run or if she's going to come back to pick us off. What do they mean by infected?"

"Not to harm her, to *protect her*," the girl replied. "Obviously, the blood elves are going to be tracking her. That's the whole point of this round. I know she's hostile, but I'm here to win. You scared of her?" They went back and forth like this, with a few people in favor of keeping tabs on Raven, while everyone else was too afraid to go near her, let alone follow a trail. While they were told that the infected would act hostile, they were not told if it would actively seek out other contestants and kill them. Red, Magnus, S, and Butz remained quiet the entire time, feeling that it was partially their fault for what happened, although no one pointed a finger at them. Eventually, they left Lance's body and walked over to the center of the summit to join the discussion. Red wondered if it was possible for Raven to kill one of her own team members, and how much of her own personality she retained. If she was still herself while infected, he could at least predict

what she would do as the round progressed.

“We shouldn’t follow her,” Magnus finally said, cutting off their argument.

“Oh yeah, you guys are on the same team as her, right?” Roland asked. It sounded like an accusation.

“Yeah, and we shouldn’t follow her,” Magnus repeated, more confidently this time. “Judging by how slow I saw her move in the wisp, it’ll take more than two-third’s of a day’s time to get from one mountain to the other, right?” A few of them nodded. “Well, remember what our message said? Infections will only last for twenty-two hours. By the time the blood elves are here, her infection will have ended, and instead, it’ll be a blood elf who gets infected.” No one verbally agreed, although a few people nodded while they thought it over. It sounded logical to Red, and he suspected that the others only found it skeptical because the idea had not occurred to them first. “And even if they aren’t here by then, at least we’ll be on the offensive. Anyway, I’d rather wait for a different human to be infected than go after Raven.” More of the participants agreed with Magnus now. Even Roland reluctantly nodded. Red looked over toward the peak of the other mountain. Against the backdrop of the wisp, it looked like a jagged tooth sticking out of a yellow mouth. *The blood elves are on their way here*, he thought. He shuddered at the idea of being cornered against a group of them and unconsciously stepped closer towards the other humans.

Despite their initial speedy reaction, everyone was lost about what to do while they waited for Raven’s twenty-two hours to elapse. Red had the feeling that the participants were used to working on their own, without leadership or a sense of group direction. Whenever anyone would suggest a course of action, someone else would always argue. He also noticed that the people here generally only listened to the ideas of those more powerful than them, regardless of the merit of the idea itself. Most of them took to staring out of the summit when they weren’t arguing, watching for any signs of the blood elves. Roland said he would be able to spot them from several tezras away and that they need not worry about the blood elves arriving without him noticing. Stalkers were trained to augment their sense of sight and hearing with casts to put them at a heightened state of awareness at all times.

They set up camp at the other side of the summit from where Lance’s body lay, all the way at the edge, where they had a clear view of anything that

might arrive from the other mountain. Everyone besides his own team had forgotten about the early casualty. Now and then he would catch S or Butz glancing at the body. He thought back to what Butz had said back in the suite and was sure that the falconer was thinking about how it could have been him if he had been the one to step towards Raven instead of Lance. *It could have even been me*, Red sighed. He looked at his microAI to check where Raven was. She was a good distance below them on the mountain and was sitting still. He hoped that whatever the infection did to her, she would still be capable of finding food and water on her own and avoiding danger.

Red took the liberty of using a fire cast to create a bubble of warmth where most people were sitting down. He could find no source of heat nearby and assumed that the simulation must have altered the temperature to make it more bearable — but it was still below freezing. S noted that they should stand as far as possible from the chalice, so as not to knock it over accidentally. Red imagined that if MegaCORP had left the drop of metal there, then whatever reaction Lance had spoken of couldn't be too dangerous. Otherwise, they were all at risk of dying if someone accidentally tipped over the cup. Butz suggested throwing it away entirely, but then Magnus pointed out that the drop of metal would float unpredictably through the wisp, and could still come into contact with the mountain. Luckily, there was no wind here, but that, combined with the lack of critters and the absence of an atmosphere, gave the mountain a stale and lifeless feeling. They were placed in a location where nothing was meant to survive or flourish. He had to remind himself that he had come here to win, although more than once, he found himself simply wishing to go back to their room in the Alcazar with no one hurt.

As they waited out the twenty-two hours that Raven would be infected, they filled the area around their own summit with protective casts. While it was unlikely they would see any blood elves soon, they took every precaution possible. Red caught S fiddling around with the psilicadust throughout the day. The item gave her the rare opportunity to be useful in a combat role. When healing casts were used on psilicadust, each speck of the powder would turn into a flesh-eating insect immune to most elemental casts. After the first several hours had gone by, Red, Magnus, S, and Butz checked the area around the summit to see if they could spot Raven. They saw signs of her presence, but never her. If the worm allowed her to retain her usual resourcefulness, Red doubted anyone could track her, except for the Warg

and perhaps Roland.

Everyone badgered Roland about keeping watch in case the blood elves arrived, but the stalker said he saw no sign of movement, not even on the other mountain. While Red knew that stalkers had acute senses, he worried that the blood elves had somehow passed by without being detected. They would likely expect the human team to have a stalker, and plan accordingly. Roland said there was no chance they would get past him without giving at least a few signs away, but not everyone was convinced. Human senses could often be duped by casts that worked to conceal energy traces and scents, and despite the amplifications on his own senses, he was still no match for the Night Warg. Red kept an eye on the familiar to watch for any sudden changes in behavior. *I wish someone would invent a machine to let critters talk*, Red thought as he watched both the Warg and Linx. He made a note to mention it to Arkan when he got back. *If I get back.*

As the twelfth hour began to wind down, both Linx and the Warg took a sudden interest in looking out the southwest corner of the summit. It was the side where Lance's body was, and where Raven was currently camped. Roland said there was nothing there, but when Linx began howling, they were all sure that he must have spotted something. The Warg kept running up to its owner, and calling her to the edge of the summit by running back and forth between her and the spot he wanted her to stand. If Red had at least seen the blood elves, and how far they were from arriving, he would have been less anxious, but nothing was visible besides the wisp. The substance seemed to be transparent, but he did not trust his vision when he looked through it, nor Roland's. He began checking his radar more frequently to keep track of Raven. She was always close to them, but far below, halfway to the base of the mountain. Eventually they all decided to split up into hunting parties, both to search for Raven and to find sources of food and water. It was unclear how many days this could last. If both teams took to a waiting strategy, the entire round could be delayed indefinitely. They agreed never to engage if they spotted any elves, only to send out flares. A few of them, including the girl with the Rune Mammoth, decided to remain on the summit. Red felt safer around the creature and regretted having to leave its company.

The radar that kept track of Raven pointed to her general area, but was prone to inaccuracy. Now and then she would disappear and then reappear a good distance away from her original location. There was also always a

delay in determining her position. Red was sure that the round was intentionally designed to give a late reading in their microAIs, causing them to always be an hour behind from her actual spot. He only hoped that the blood elves suffered from the same dilemma. Roland indicated that there were no critters around, which made them worry that it would be impossible to find a food source. But when they found the area where Raven had first setup camp, they found the remains of two Straggler Melts, star-shaped critters with multiple heads that were often found in lifeless planets. Straggler Melts had no real source of food. They spent most of their lifetimes hibernating in the center of planets, dead stars, or moons, absorbing energy from the core of their host satellites. When they found a single Straggler Melt themselves, using the help of the Warg to search through crevices in the mountain, it was obvious to everyone that Roland's tracking skills were more rudimentary than he admitted. The stalker indicated that the new environment was throwing off his senses and that he would be fine once he became more comfortable in it.

They only found a few Straggler Melts hiding in the mountain, which was unusual because the creatures generally lived in schools of thousands or more. They could be spotted in small gaps with a tail or head poking out inconspicuously. They were the same chalky blue color as the nephril, which made them difficult to spot. They had to remember that the mountain was perfectly carved, so anything that stuck out was likely a camouflaged critter. At fourteen hours, Roland indicated that he could smell the blood elves. The Warg seemed to, as well, because he began acting more alert and on edge. Blood elves had a unique body odor that attracted humans and other prey to them, the way certain plants attracted insects. At a close enough distance, the odor was said to have mind-altering effects, making humans more placid and fearless, and thus, more accepting of pain and death.

The third time they all split up into groups to keep track of Raven, they took more defensive measures. S placed as much psilicadust as she could all around the summit while Red setup casts that would ignite anything that came near. They were called flame traps, a technique he had learned while training for their field test. They eventually decided that staying on top of the summit was too risky. It would be the first area the blood elves checked when they arrived. The mountain had several caves in it, and they made camp inside of one. According to the radar, Raven was half a tezra below them. Roland indicated that the smell of blood elves was stronger now, and

that they could be at the mountains in less than a few hours. The falconer with the Rune Mammoth insisted on staying at the summit because her familiar wouldn't fit in a cave. No one argued with her, but nor did they offer to change their plan. They left her at the summit to fend for herself and casually told her to warn them through her microAI if she sensed any danger.

Red was sitting in a cave next to Butz inside of the new bubble he had created, when Roland's party came running into the cave. They were breathless, gasping, shouting about the girl and her Warg and how they found her and her group. No one had to ask what they meant by "found."

They moved out as one large group this time. Red spotted the Warg first as they swerved over the curve of the mountain. They had to climb down to see it, almost within arm's length of the wisp. The Warg hung lifelessly by the rope its owner used to mount onto the cliff. Grecko was next to it, and so were the two other girls who had grouped with her to search for Raven and food. A single Straggler Melt was also there. Everything was knotted around the rope that was choking the Warg. Red only glanced at the scene for a second, looking away the next instant and trying his hardest to think of something different. *Raven had done this.* But it wasn't her, he justified — it was the worm. One of the older participants swung over and cut off the Straggler Melt and carried it back with him. By the time they returned to the caverns, not everyone was in a dark mood. A couple of people, including Roland, were more active than ever now. They were discussing strategies to attack the blood elves and neutralize infected members. It was the right thing to do, Red thought. He knew he couldn't let casualties stop him in the middle of a round, but he found it hard to get his mind to think about anything else. Judging by how quiet Magnus, S, and Butz were, they were all thinking the same thing.

They decided that it would be too dangerous to move out at all, in case they were confronted by the blood elves. They were short four teammates now, and their strongest member was the one who was infected. They would have to wait it out until Raven was back to herself and a blood elf was infected, giving them the chance to go on the offensive. Red mentioned that it was dangerous to rely on Raven to fend for herself, but everyone agreed that they had no choice but to risk it. Even Magnus said it would be foolish for them to move out. *Don't be emotional,* Red told himself, realizing how much harder it was to do than say even after all those years in Crest

Academy. He laughed at the thought of himself as a ruthless fighter. It had been how he imagined himself when he was younger.

He sat in the bubble, counting the minutes as they went by with a nail-biting angst. There had been no real action that involved him yet, but that made it worse. He had no outlet for his energy. He felt like he was in bed, drifting to sleep while *knowing* he was going to have a nightmare. He would not be able to blink an eye and wake from it in an instant, though. Reality would stretch this nightmare out at its own torturous pace. By the sixteenth hour some people decided to take short naps, as this was likely going to be their only chance to sleep. Roland indicated that he had to taper his sense of smell because the aroma from the blood elves was too strong now. They prepared their defilterizers, small pads they attached to their noses that could block certain smells while not affecting their pace of breath. Red couldn't smell anything at all. He put his defilterizer on anyway, as a precaution. They passed the time telling stories about past combat experiences, any encounters they had with Xenosites, and why each of them chose to enter the qualifiers. Some of the participants had fought against Xenosites in the outer planets before coming to the qualifiers. Red suddenly felt that his story of seeing one in Professor Kep's class was meek by comparison. For wanting to join WEAPON, everyone had the same vague answer, that they felt it was their calling. Magnus and S said that they felt it was the right thing to do because Red and Butz were so adamant about it. Red realized that there was nothing practical about any of their ambitions. It was more like their lifeforces had pulled them down this path, or would make them restless if they chose anything else.

"Was she always this strong?" Roland asked, referring to Raven. Butz, Magnus, and S shrugged while looking at Red.

"I guess so," Butz replied. "I've only known her since we entered Crest Academy, and she always stood out. I don't know about before that. She's gotten exponentially stronger now, or at least it feels like it. Especially recently, I think. Did you guys sense it too? Felt like her power just spiked since we went into her dreamscape."

"Her dreamscape?" Roland asked, leading to a ten-minute debrief of their entire field test. Several people asked for more details about the caverns, wondering just like their team had, how there could be so much flazb and umbriel in Avalonia that went undiscovered.

"I met her when I was seven," Red said. "At an orphanage in Avalonia.

We grew up together there.” No one seemed to be surprised that they grew up in an orphanage, and Red learned that more than half the participants were also parentless. He was sure the trend was not a coincidence, and that if they went to the groups in the lower levels of the qualifiers, it would be less prevalent. “I didn’t really know she could fight until we were ten.”

“What happened then?” someone asked.

“Well, it’s not even that I saw her fight. It was just the first time I saw her do anything... violent. I guess you can say it was the first time I saw she had it in her. It’s a long story,” Red replied, expecting that no one wanted to hear it, but a couple of other people egged him on.

“Well, it’s also a *strange* story. Are you *sure* you want to hear it?” Red asked.

“We have nothing else to do while we wait,” Roland said. “Best to act when Raven is back in our group anyway.”

“Okay,” Red replied. “It’s a story from back in our orphanage, in the Temple Gulf. And just as a warning, there’s still some debate about its... err... authenticity.”

“Authenticity?” Roland asked.

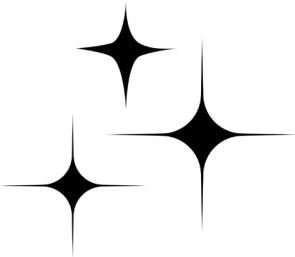
“Yeah. Raven was ten at the time, and she claims she doesn’t remember any of it. I remember it clear as day, and I still have a hard time believing that she’s not just denying it. I mean, she was young, but we were both pretty smart, and I think we understood most of what we were seeing,” Red replied. A couple of the onlookers seemed even more interested now. He zoned out, staring into the fire before beginning the story. Recalling the gist of the memory was easy, but its details had become a blur. He wished he was back in the dreamscape so that he could simply relive it or show them the exact visual of what happened. Magnus helped him get started, seeing that Red was having difficulty knowing where to begin.

“Start with the fairies, when you first saw them.” Magnus said. Red had told him the story many times before.

“I can’t remember when I *first* saw them,” Red replied. “They were just always... there. Like ghosts. The children knew about them, but they would only come to get us during the storm.”

“Okay, just start with the time they came on *that* day.”

“Okay, I can do that,” Red replied.



THE TEMPEST

The Temple Gulf lay directly between the Azure Pits and the Barren Mountains in the southern regions of Avalonia. The gulf is the largest arm of the Crystal Ocean and the only one with a staggering population, mostly children. Floating within the gulf are hundreds of monarch tree trunks, segments of a giant breed of forest that are native to the woodlands that cover Avalonia's north pole. How the tree trunks got there, and their way of organizing into symmetrical patterns at regular intervals throughout the year, remains a mystery, but the trunks serve a practical purpose. At the start of the century, with the massive influx of homeless children from the outer planets, the insides of these trunks were carved into makeshift shelters that could serve as orphanages. The tree houses were massive enough to host hundreds of children and their natural insulation from extreme heat and cold kept the weather at bay during the extreme parts of Hale and Torrid.

Red's tenth birthday had just passed. He was staring out of the window of his room, admiring the frozen waves of the Temple Gulf while pondering how he would pass his next two years at the Vine. Time seemed to move slower in the orphanage, and slowest for the kids who had little chance of leaving. It was an irony he had come to appreciate when the times were good. In two years, he would be eligible to apply to an academy. Until then, he would spend his days preparing for Avalonia's APT. He was waiting for Raven. She had told him she would be upstairs within the hour. She was already late and the impatience was getting to him. They had nothing urgent to do, but the act of waiting was still unbearable. He never understood how adults did it so passively. He tapped furiously on the ledge of his window as he waited. Occasionally, the paint on the ledge would peel away, revealing the decaying wood underneath. Outside of the Vine, a frozen wave was

breaking apart and crashing into the waters below. He wished he could send Raven a message, but his overseer had taken away his microAI for fighting with one of the other kids in his hallway.

The sky hung low in the Temple Gulf during the stormiest portion of Hale, about two months into the season. If you stepped out of the Vine, you could jump up and catch the clouds with your hands on days when they drifted low enough. During a gas storm, bursts of halocen would freeze parts of the gulf in place, sometimes mid-tide, creating colossal ice sculptures that mirrored the shape of an upsurge. These frozen waves would either slowly break down, or bursts of halocen would stack on top of them, freezing newer waves above them and creating seashell-like structures of ice and debris. Red was looking out to spot the Tempest, a three-day annual storm, exponentially more violent than anything else in the gulf, which always signaled its arrival with the formation of a strangely shaped cloud that resembled a centipede-like fish with hundreds of legs. The children of the Vine all strictly observed the Tempest, not only because of the theatre it commanded in the gulf, but because of what always happened inside of the orphanage during the storm. The adults all seemed to be unaware of it, or they at least ignored it. Red wondered if any of the children ever mentioned it to one of the overseers. It was the reason Raven was coming over. They had decided they would go through it together if they had to.

It would always begin immediately prior to the start of the Tempest. All the children would lose their voices and the adults would disappear from the Vine for the duration of the storm. If you screamed during the Tempest, you would have the odd sensation of feeling your throat vibrate without producing any noise. The children locked their doors and stayed in their rooms, counting down every hour of each day until everything went back to normal. No one dared to step out into the hallway during the Tempest. It was customary to stock your room with all the essentials. If you ran out of food, you would starve yourself until the storm was over. At the end of the three days, everyone, including the overseers, would act as though nothing strange had ever happened, although the children sometimes spoke of it amongst themselves. They spoke in hushed whispers, as though it were a taboo subject and if you said anything too loudly, you would be one of the ones who were taken in the years following. Spider fairies would come by during the Tempest, “grabbers,” the children nicknamed them, and pick people out of their rooms. The children they picked would disappear with-

out a trace. Some would reappear by the end of the Tempest, and you could hear them re-enter their rooms, signaling that it was now safe to enter the hallways. Others would disappear entirely. At the end of the storm, their rooms would be empty and clean, and no one acknowledged that they were ever there to begin with. If you asked one of the overseers about the missing children, they would say that they were adopted on short notice, but all the kids knew that was never the case. The spider fairies that came by to take the children had no facial features, only blank white heads, like unfinished statues. They would look into the rooms of children through the glass windows near the top, windows that stood ten feet above the floor of the vine. Red noticed that the windows were always left open right before the beginning of the Tempest, and they were too high up for the children to reach up and close.

The children had their own theories about the spider fairies. Some said that the overseers brought them in to take children that were never going to be adopted. Others claimed they took human children to turn into fairies. Red didn't believe they existed at all until he saw one for himself two years before, passing by his room and glancing inside for only a moment. He was tempted to open his door and check to see if it was really there, but decided not to test his luck.

He decided that this year, if one came by, he would step out and meet it. Raven would be here, and so would his courage. The fairies did not come every year, nor did they always take children. Red imagined that a cast must have been used to render all of the children temporarily mute. Casts that controlled sound were typical of fairies and gemini. The only sounds that could be heard during the Tempest were those of doors creaking open and then closing, and sometimes the noise of children struggling against a grabber. You could hear it as they slammed their fists and feet against the floor and walls, trying to fight against a spider fairy. After a few minutes of this, there was always a sudden eerie calm. If he was ever picked, Red decided that he would go quietly without fighting. Although he always spoke of it as though he were afraid of being taken, he wasn't exactly sure how he would feel. It would be a way to escape the world he knew thus far, but there was also a chance of stumbling upon something worse. The way the fairies looked did not scare him as it scared the other children.

He heard a knock at his door and jumped off the ledge. It was only Raven that ever came in, but the sound still startled him as his thoughts

lingered on the Tempest. He had met Raven three years before and had formed a deep attachment to her since. She was the only person that he felt also knew that there was a world outside of the Vine, one calling them to explore it. He went over to the door and cracked it open to make sure it was her. *Not that I'd be able to stop a grabber anyway*, he thought as he turned the knob. He had never seen anything besides the head of a spider fairy, but judging by their name, he imagined they were gruesome looking. She came in silently and sat at the chair by his table. He liked this about her — that she was like him, and still wasn't old enough to speak without saying anything, and thus preferred to stay quiet most of the time. He decided against badgering her for being late and hopped onto the windowsill again to continue watching the waves break down over the ocean. He hoped that she would notice that his microAI was missing and hung his left hand out to make it more obvious. She would berate him for hours on end for getting into fights, but he secretly enjoyed the attention.

"Did you spot it yet?" Raven asked. "You've been staring outside for hours."

"No. Maybe there's going to be no storm this time. And how'd you know I've been looking for it?"

"By the way you're looking for it now. And there's always a storm. What's this?" she asked, pointing to a book on fire casts. Red had borrowed it from someone older who lived two rooms down from him. Most of the children here had relatives who sponsored them, allowing them to afford the cost of studying for entrance to an academy or an institution. The overseers at the Vine insisted that Red quit trying to study combat and pursue a simpler profession, but he didn't let up. Unable to afford the cost of early training programs, he would borrow books from the kids around him, and take the final exam for every class on its last day. He didn't pass with flying colors, but he did well enough to get by, and often placed second behind Raven. Raven, having scored high on a previous APT from an outer planet, was eligible for free training. She was not too interested in it at first, but when Red told her he was going to leave the Vine to join an academy in two years, she began taking training more seriously.

He rolled up his sleeves and extended his palm out, concentrating for a few seconds on his cast before a small ember appeared at the ball of his palms. He sustained it for almost half a minute before it went out. Raven stared at it with intrigue, envy even, he thought, and it reminded him why

he was pursuing a life in combat in the first place.

“Did you start learning it after you saw the exhibition?” Raven asked. Red nodded. Academies would always recruit from the orphanages in the Temple Gulf. One of them had sent a group of fire elementalists for an exhibition. The performance had intrigued Red like none other. It wasn’t their level of expertise in the subject that amazed him, but how the element itself captured the attention of the audience. It was the purest form of channeling energy, he thought, with someone’s power clearly demonstrated by their level of output. Every time the crowd applauded, he would feel a longing that felt too primal to be anything he could put into words.

“Can you do it with your other hand?”

“No,” he replied disappointedly. “I’m much stronger with my right. It just feels more natural.”

She began flipping through the pages of the book, pausing only to look at the images that would pop up into holograms. “I thought you hated studying? This looks pretty hard.”

“I don’t *hate* it. It’s just boring. But you have to do it, right? To get out of here, at least.”

“I guess. Why do you want to leave anyway? It’s not so bad. Things could be worse. There are people who don’t even have this.” She stared off into the walls.

“They *can’t* be any worse,” Red sighed.

“The outer planets have it worse,” she replied. He knew about the Xenosites, but the invasions were happening too far away to feel real to him. Even if he enrolled in an academy, he wouldn’t have to think about them for another ten years. If the next ten years went by as slowly as the last ten years, he thought he would have all the time in the world to prepare himself.

“Are you hungry?” she asked, taking out a few wrapped squares of gert from her pocket. It was the only food that was given out for free in the Vine, and the only one they had an abundant supply of. Red thought it tasted like the walls, woody and inedible. Half of the gert that was given out last week was nearly expired, and had to be chewed on like plastic before they could be swallowed safely. Still, it never made him sick, and he was glad for it. One of the other boys in his hallway became fatally ill earlier in the year from eating too many squares in a single day.

“No,” he lied. She seemed to know because she threw one at him any-

way. He didn't bother catching it. He let the packet hit his chest and then fall into his hands before reluctantly grabbing it. He took the square tart and unwrapped it slowly, staring at it as though it were a person he hated. Gert captured everything he disliked about the Vine. The tart was a plain brown color. He was sure it was made out of the tree bark they lived in. It didn't change texture if it expired, and it was wrapped in a material that felt cheap to the touch. There was nothing outwardly terrible about it, but that was exactly why he hated it so much. It was *supposed* to be good. It was a boring, plain food that was revered for being free for people who could afford nothing better.

He had been taught all his life that he was lucky to live in an orphanage rather than in the wild of Avalonia, to be taken care of, even under the harsh lifestyle of the Vine and the authoritative attitude of the overseers, and he resented it. He resented every moment of it, and found purpose only in trying to leave. At the Vine, it was the hope of a new life, the constant exposure of children who somehow made it out to academy or to a family that wanted them, that always made living there so unbearable. He promised himself that joining an academy would be his exit. The overseers would often say that they wished the best for their kids, but he always sensed an underlying malice towards those who made it out to a better life. Most of the overseers at the Vine were kids who grew up there and ended up staying for lack of a better alternative. Sometimes, he thought there was no way to blame them — that if he let his resentment build up for as many years as they had, without ever having an outlet for it, that he too would be just as bad as them.

“Are they going to clean your room? You have growth. It needs to be sealed. You should clean some of it yourself if you can.” He looked over and she pointed at the top right of the ceiling. The wood was overflowing with a fungal material. He never noticed it before. It was brown and blended in with the walls.

“No critters are there,” Red replied. “Doesn’t bother me.”

“You should still get it cleaned,” Raven replied. “You might get sick, and it could be dangerous.” She was right. He had gotten sick from a growth in his last room. The fungus that grew back there looked like a ball of flat rope and moved around as though it were a creature. It took a week before someone came in to clean it out, and by then, he had already had a severe reaction to the material. Fungal infestations were common in the Vine. The

orphanage was made out of one of the older tree trunks in the Temple Gulf. They were rarely dangerous, although sometimes, they could become breeding grounds for poisonous insect critters. If there was ever growth on the floor rather than the ceiling, it would be cleaned out immediately because it posed a more severe threat. If you lay down on growth for too long, it would begin seeping into your body, growing into your bones and vessels. Two years ago a group of kids in the Vine trapped someone younger in a pit with a growth infestation. The overseers did not realize the child was missing until three days later, and by then, it was too late. When they opened the lid of the pit, they could make out no part of the child's body besides his head, and even that could not move freely out of the fungus. The child's mouth was covered by growth and so he could not speak. He could only move his eyes and watch with dread as the overseers covered the pit and sealed it shut. They wrote it off as an accident and declared the child had gone missing. Removing someone attached to growth after too long would lead to their death, unless the extraction was done by a professional, and that was an expensive process.

“Maybe I’ll burn it,” Red smiled while concentrating on creating another ember in his palms. It wouldn’t come out this time.

“You have to relax. If you’re frustrated, you can’t channel your energy,” Raven replied.

“I am relaxed.”

“No you’re not. You always get frustrated if you can’t do something quickly. That’s when you lose your focus.” He rolled his eyes and turned back to the window. He rested his elbows on the ledge and looked for signs of the Tempest. Like everyone at the Vine, he was wearing long sleeves and long pants, covering almost every part of his body. Almost every inch of the orphanage was teeming with splinters. Falling or leaning on anything with open skin was a sure way to cut yourself. With fungal and Botchworm infestations running amuck, the chance of an infection was also high.

The Vine was not split into floors, although certain rooms were built higher than others. Everything was carved into the inner sides of the log. To get to a room higher up, ropes and vines were strapped to the roof. The center was a large, open area that served as a place for meals, lessons, and presentations. Despite its size, it was not large enough to comfortably host even half of the kids that occupied the orphanage, driving up the price for lessons in every field over the past few decades. Red heard that the place

was once much better, with smoothed out walls and clean rooms, but the influx of orphans after the invasions in the outer planets led to a lower quality of living and overpopulated quarters. He wondered if the overseers had treated the children better back then.

He had travelled very little outside of the Temple Gulf, although he explored much of the world through the one macroAI here. Every orphanage had one, but it had to be shared amongst all of the children there. He was able to use it for only a few hours every week, but he got as much out of it as he could. He would scroll through everything that was happening in the world, look at holograms of powerful critters and exotic terrains, and research combat maneuvers that weren't taught at the Vine. It was in those few hours that he felt like he really lived, seeing the world as it was, despite being confined to only a chair that simulated all of it for him. It was real enough to capture his imagination, which was all he wanted.

It was at the macroAI that he had first heard of the Xenosite. At the time, little was known about them. They were seen as an invasive species of critters that absorbed other critters into their own bodies to create hybrid breeds. Often, he would play back holograms of infections, although he would never watch them. He would close his eyes as the images unfolded in front of him, and sometimes even covered his ears. Still, he played them over and over again. He was addicted to the feeling of fear they instilled in him, despite rarely ever looking at them. He asked Raven about the Xenosite a few times, but noticed that she had a habit of dozing off whenever the subject was brought up. *She must find it boring*, he thought, wondering how anyone could find the incredible parasites to be dull.

Red's travels outside of the Vine consisted mainly of field trips sponsored by academy recruiters. His most recent one was to a Xenosite museum, and the trip was funded by MegaCORP. Besides just Xenosite, the museum also held an exhibition for soldiers that fought against them. The better the soldier, the more elaborate his memorial. Some were plated with rare minerals and had guards stationed near them. It was a good way to live, Red thought, protecting one's race and then being enshrined for it. Some of the soldiers were given creative nicknames, which were mentioned in the excerpts below their exhibitions. Their vehicles were on display, along with the gear they used and several holograms of them in action.

"Oh you have the older edition," Raven said, turning to the back of the book. "Have you seen this?" She placed the book flat on its back where a

full page hologram popped up. It was an advertisement from MegaCORP titled “Recruiting Now!” The audio of the hologram was damaged. He regretted not taking better care of the book.

“What is that?” Red asked, rushing forward to take a closer look.

“Read or listen to it,” Raven replied.

“This is the older version?” Red asked.

“Yeah, the newer ones don’t have this image, and they’re taking back all of the books with it. Some type of mass recall.” He looked at the hologram. It was a 360 view of what looked like a half-critter and half-human hybrid. The creature’s left arm was the head of another reptilian critter.

“Looks kind of like a human Xenosite,” Red said.

“It doesn’t look like a Xenosite at all,” Raven replied. “Look carefully. Not everything that looks weird is a Xenosite.”

“Yeah, I guess not.” He stared at the word on top. It had a more powerful presence because it was not written in a special language or in an elaborate design, nor was it animated or colored the way everything else in the hologram was. The word just stood there, floating far above the rest of the hologram, as though it were placed there by accident. *WEAPON*.

“You have to be from an academy to get into *WEAPON*,” Raven said, “and even then, they don’t take everyone.”

“What is it?” Red asked. “And I *am* going to academy.”

Raven didn’t bother replying. She turned the book over and then got up to look out of the window herself. She scanned the horizon up and down a few times before pointing east.

“It’s here,” she said.

“I didn’t see anything,” Red replied, glancing at the book one last time before setting it aside and walking over to the window. She was right. The centipede-shaped cloud was there, hiding behind several layers of wisp. It was barely visible in the dim starlight that came through the fog. The sky was disproportionately green. Gama’s rays were far more dominant than Aleph’s.

“Are you scared?” Raven asked, not in a way that poked fun at him.

“No,” Red lied. “What’s there to be scared of?”

“You said you saw them for yourself, the grabbers.”

“I’m not scared of *them*,” Red said defiantly. “I want to know where they take the kids.”

Raven walked over to the door and locked it.

“*You’re* scared,” Red laughed, although he knew she wasn’t.

“Well it’s not like we can stop them anyway, if they want to take us,” Raven said.

“Where do you think the overseers go?” Red asked. Outside the window, he could see the sea level slowly lowering. The tide would recede for a full hour before the Tempest began, and then surge up again, more violently than ever.

“I don’t know, maybe they’re in their rooms.”

“But then wouldn’t they see the grabbers come? I mean, shouldn’t they do something about them?”

“I asked them about it once.”

“You did?”

“Yeah, I asked Vough about it.”

“What did she say?”

“That it was a myth amongst the children, and there were no such things as grabbers. That spider fairies exist deep in the ocean, and never come up far enough to interact with humans.”

“Did you tell her how the children see them? How the kids always go missing?”

“No, I didn’t. Maybe they can’t see them, themselves.” He heard doors slamming in the hallway. All the children were going back to their rooms. He curled up into his bed, lying on his left side while exercising his right hand in the same motion he used to cast the embers. He wanted to master the technique.

“Maybe the spider fairies *are* the overseers. Maybe they dress up as spider fairies to scare the children, or to get rid of the ones they don’t like. You’ve been getting into fights recently — maybe they’ll come for you,” Raven said. Red shrugged in bed.

“Are you already going to sleep? It’s early.” Raven walked back over to the book and began browsing through it again.

“No, just lying down. Are you trying to learn how to cast fire yourself?” Red asked as he watched her studying the book and practicing the casting motions with her hands. Her palms started to glow and Red’s face flushed with envy. *Everything comes so easy to her*, he thought. “The first part’s always the easiest,” he quickly said. “It’s when you start doing it that it gets more difficult.” She looked at him for a long moment, and then snapped the book shut and stopped practicing her cast. He had a feeling she wouldn’t

be summoning fire casts in front of him any time soon. The Vine began rocking steadily across the gulf. Most of the shock against the tide and waves was absorbed by the interior lining of the tree. It was only during the Tempest that the water movement in the gulf became strong enough to move the Vine. Everything in people's rooms from shelves to furniture were either carved straight into the walls or attached in a way to preempt the motion of the Vine. It was rare that the tree trunk would move enough for things to start falling in a room. The log itself was too large and too heavy to ever be fully overturned, even by the Tempest and the waves it created. He had heard of that happening only once, and it was to an orphanage much smaller than the Vine.

Red spent the next few hours dozing in and out of sleep, occasionally watching Raven as she paced the room, going through his various books. He thought it was unfair that she could learn how to cast like this. For him, going through books was a struggle, a heroic task he had to undertake to find his way in life, to escape the Vine. For her, it was a way to pass time. The kids who were just as talented as him had a different advantage, the support they received for training lessons. He knew life could have been worse, he was never starving nor destitute, but it could have been better as well. He could have been more talented or born somewhere different. He realized that it wasn't the unfairness that bothered him so much — he could fight through that. It was more that someone had dictated such a large portion of his life without his own input. Raven looked at him as he was half awake and waved to say "hello." He laughed quietly underneath the covers, and for a single moment, thought it wouldn't be so bad if they were stuck in the Vine forever, but only if it stayed like this, and if they grew old without anyone else knowing. The sound of footsteps alerted them both to someone's presence in the hallway. Red quickly tiptoed to the door. He put his ear right next to the knob. He forgot that the Tempest had already started.

"What are you doing?" Raven whispered.

"Just listening," Red replied, putting his ear to the door. "It's silent," he said.

She lifted a brow. "The overseers should be gone by now."

"Well there's *someone* in the hallway," Red replied.

"Maybe it's one of the kids. I didn't hear Mehl go back to his room."

"I can hear creaking. It's soft, but it's there. It's too quiet to be any of the kids. I think someone is tip toeing across the hallway. If it was a kid, they'd

be running back to their room by now,” Red whispered.

She nodded. Two years ago when he had seen a grabber, he hadn’t heard them coming either. He was lying in his bed, staring out the window at the top of his room, when the featureless white face of a spider fairy passed by. It happened so quickly that he wasn’t even sure it really happened. He thought he might have woken up from a nightmare too quickly to know the difference between reality and his dream. He dared to ask one of the boys in the hallway about it later, and the boy said that he had seen one too. There were no doors that opened and closed that day so he assumed that no children would be missing. He was right, but he heard the next day that two kids with rooms below them were missing. The overseers told them that the kids were adopted together, but adoption never happened so quickly, and children never disappeared so fast.

“What do we do?” Red asked.

“I thought you said you wanted to know where they take the kids.”

“I do, but that doesn’t mean I *want* to be taken,” Red said, rolling his eyes. The footsteps were louder now. He heard something shaking in the hallway. Someone was testing a doorknob or locking their room with a trembling hand. He heard more creaks in the hallway. It sounded like *many* people were walking down the corridor now. Each creak was too heavy and too long for the steps to be made by anyone who weighed less than an adult. The pacing of the steps was also awkward. It sounded like a group of people were scuttling around the corridor, pausing in front of different rooms before continuing on their way. He still did not hear the opening of a door. He had spent enough days lying on his bed and listening to people passing by in the hallways to know exactly how far a person was from his door. *Halfway here from the end of the hallway*, Red thought. The creaking seemed to get disproportionately louder as it approached his room, but he was sure he was imagining it. Whenever he was nervous, sounds would always seem louder in his head than they really were. The slightest of noises could send his heart racing.

He saw what looked like several thin feet appear underneath his doorway. They stopped in front of his room. He could not see the actual legs of any person, only the shadows they imparted into his room through the light of the doorway. He looked at Raven. She stared back at him emptily and then looked up towards the ceiling. She didn’t look back down at him; she continued to stare up. He was afraid to follow her eyes, which were locked

on the window above.

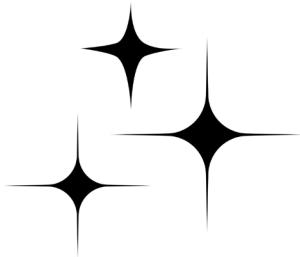
He began tilting his head up little by little. He squinted his eyes, as one would moments before looking at something they know will frighten them. Unconsciously, he grabbed onto Raven's hand to brace himself. A head was peering in through the window at the top of the doorway. It tilted left and right, looking carefully at both Raven and Red. He thought it looked confused, although the head itself was featureless, expressionless, and white, just like the one he had seen before. The place where its mouth should have been moved in and out, as though it were talking, but no sounds came out. The area started pushing itself back like a suction cup, as though it were absorbing something into its face. The crater in its head grew larger and larger until it covered the creature's entire face, and then it expanded back to normal. It had a mop of long, silvery white hairs on top of its head. Each strand reflected light the way a metal would. Red could not see its entire neck, but it looked absurdly long and thin. This was no overseer in a costume. They were looking at the head of a spider fairy.

"Raven," he tried uttering, but nothing would come out. He tried saying a different word, but still, nothing came out. He could feel his throat shaking, even the words leaving his mouth, but no sound would come out. Raven finally stared back at him, still expressionless. She put a finger over her lips. *Not like I have a choice to make a sound*, Red thought. He tapped his hands against the wooden floor and heard them. *I only lost my voice*, he thought. He looked up again. The grabber was looking down at him, turning its head from side to side as it continued to study him and Raven. It was bending down to look through the window, which meant it was even taller than the other one he had seen, at least by a foot, he thought. He heard a door down the hallway open and close. There were no sounds of a struggle. His own doorknob began turning and he instinctively put his hands on it to stop the door from opening. *I'm not scared*, he said to himself. *I would just rather it not open, and it's locked anyway*. The grabber's head disappeared behind the window, and for a moment, Red hoped it was over, and the spider fairy had given up and decided to let him and Raven pass.

Something wet touched his knuckles. He pulled his hand back from the doorknob with a silent scream. He fell to the floor and knocked over Raven in the process. Hundreds of silver strings were coming through the side of the door. He realized it was the fairy's hair. They curled around the doorknob and began turning it. Water gushed out as though they were be-

ing rinsed. He thought about kicking the door shut again with his legs, but something told him it would be pointless. Raven crawled away from the door and was trying to pull him back with one arm. He sat there on the floor, paralyzed, with his palms sweating profusely through the wooden floor as he waited to see what the spider fairy would look like. Raven was trying to usher him to hide underneath the bed, but he was too afraid to move. He waved his hands to try and tell her to go on her own, but she stayed there with him. His eyes were fixed on the door as it opened.

Its torso was white and long, just as Red imagined, but the bottom half of its body was not humanoid at all. It occurred to him that he never thought about why they were called spider fairies, nor had he ever seen an image of one, but it was obvious now. The creature had no less than sixteen legs, all of them black and bristly. He heard more scuttling and then another spider fairy appeared. This one was escorting Mehl. The boy looked at Red and Raven with a horrified expression before continuing to follow the fairy. He had tears rolling down his cheeks. The spider fairy that entered Red's room waited for a few minutes before turning sideways and gesturing to the both of them. Her hair began moving again, swaying back and forth threateningly around the two of them. She wanted them to follow her.



MASTER

As soon as they stepped outside of his room, Red's first thought was to run for it with Raven. The fairy seemed to know what he was thinking because it placed its hands firmly on his neck. Its grip was not constricting, but its long, bushy fingers were able to wrap all the way around his throat, leashing him to the space between its legs. Another fairy arrived from down the hallway.

Well, looks like we each get our own escort, Red thought. *One of the rare luxuries of the Vine.* He wanted to laugh at his own humor, more out of nervousness than amusement, but he held his breath and remained expressive. Raven immediately stepped next to the second grabber, indicating that she was going to follow behind it. It did not bother placing its hands around her. If she was afraid, she did not show it. He decided that no matter what happened, he would not let any of the other kids see him cry. Raven's grabber started to crawl down the corridor and she obediently followed behind it. She glanced back at Red before she went to make sure his grabber was not leaving in a different direction. He realized that she was more afraid of them being separated than of where the fairies were taking them. *Don't worry. Some of the kids come back safely,* Red told himself. *But some don't.* He gave an encouraging nod to Raven to show her that he wasn't afraid.

He tried to avoid brushing against the legs of the fairy as they walked alongside each other. Now that he was closer, he could see that the lower half of its body and its hair were teeming with thousands of tiny, flat-headed insect critters. At first, they looked like beads of black sweat that were gushing out of its pores. Upon closer inspection, he realized that the fairy's legs had pockets of skin all over that formed a system of tunnels through the interior of its body. All of the insect critters were moving in and out of its abdomen and occasionally trailed down its legs to catch other insects

caught in its bristles. The fairy's body was soaking wet. It had tiny webbed wings on its back that could only be seen when its hair swayed over to its sides. While it intended to move in a single direction, it always scuttled on a tilt, and constantly had to shift its weight to maintain balance. When Red tried to turn around to see if any more kids from his hallway were going to be summoned, the grabber used a single finger to turn his head back. He could feel the strength of the fairy from the gesture. It could snap his neck in a moment if it wanted to.

At the end of the hallway, a hundred or so other kids were being led down to the center of the Vine by other fairies. They were climbing down the ropes and forming a line that led to the main entrance. The grabbers did not have to use the ropes. They crawled down the side of the walls next to the children they were escorting. Their legs dug into the wood like drills as they went down. Some of them left behind holes so deep they revealed the growth underneath the walls. Red's own grabber stuck closer to his side than Raven's. He was almost sure that spider fairies could read minds, or somehow knew who was more inclined to run away, or who was more afraid. Some of the children were still silently struggling. Their grabbers held onto them with their hairs and kept them tightly wrapped around their bodies as they crawled down. The insect critters from the grabber's body would crawl around these children, sometimes entering their nostrils or ears, mistaking them for the holes in the grabber. He looked at his own fairy, hoping that it wouldn't choose to grab and carry him. "I won't run," he said. No sound came out, but the grabber looked at him and nodded. *It can understand me.*

It was obvious which of the kids had been taken before. They were far calmer as they made their way to the entrance. Red wondered why they never spoke of what happened, why they chose to keep this a secret. They had the expressions of children who were neither afraid nor hopeful — only blissfully accepting of their fates. When they reached the floor, they took their places at the end of the line. Raven was two spots ahead of him and constantly glanced back to make sure he was still behind her. He realized that she might have been chosen in the years before but never mentioned it to him. The boy that he had gotten into a fight with earlier, Mehl, stood in front of him. He turned back to give Red an empty smile. Red knew what he was trying to say, that their fight was meaningless, and that they were now in this together. Raven glanced back again as they ap-

proached the entrance. *Where else would I go?* Red thought. He imagined that he was the reason why she was always so brave, which suddenly made him feel braver himself, although he could feel his own fear and nervousness beginning to creep up. He was familiar with this feeling. He always had it moments before a nightmare. It was a badly mixed adrenaline rush. All the symptoms of a flood of energy and excitement would present themselves, but the confidence needed for action would be missing.

“Where are you taking us?” Red asked. The fairy did not respond. Red made a motion with his hands to get its attention. “Where are you taking us?” he asked again. The grabber pointed up ahead, towards the entrance. *She can see my speech, but she can't hear it,* Red thought. He also realized that he was not the only one to have figured this out. Some of the other children were also silently mouthing things to their grabber, mostly the ones who were calm and had likely been taken before. “Are you taking us outside?” Red asked. The fairy nodded. “There's a storm outside.” He thought he sounded silly saying it. They were surely aware of the Tempest — it was the only time they came — but knowing the fairy could understand him made him feel less nervous. He tried to think of something to say that would catch its attention, perhaps impress it, or make it feel sympathetic towards him. As they came closer to the entrance, he saw that the overseers had *not* disappeared. They were all standing right outside of the Vine, watching the children with vacant eyes as they passed through. They had the same expressions as some of the children — purposeless, blank, as though their minds had already left this world and their bodies were aware they were abandoned to dry sensations. *They may as well be spider fairies,* Red thought. Their features were plastered onto their faces like sculptures of flesh.

The cold almost knocked him out when he stepped through the entrance. The wind was so strong that he had to bend his knees and pivot against its crushing pressure to keep himself from being swept up and thrown into the waters. He could barely make out what was happening up ahead. At the end of the plank, the kids were jumping into the water one at a time with their grabbers. No one was resisting. “I can't breathe under-water,” Red said. He was beginning to panic. The line was moving faster. It would be his turn to dive into the gulf in less than a minute. *Some of the kids always make it back, he told himself over and over again. But some don't.* He hated water, having drowned almost three times in the gulf during swimming lessons. Drowning reminded him of his nightmare, the sensation of

falling deeper and deeper into darkness while suffocating. “Did you hear me? I can’t breathe underwater, and I’m not a good swimmer,” he said, while tapping on the fairy’s legs. It turned to look at him as he repeated himself, but it did not react.

The Tempest raged on in the gulf. The sky was covered with sheet lightning that only travelled horizontally and in between clouds. They were taught never to look directly into the skies during a storm. Sheets of lightning could continue for so long they were no longer single flashes of illumination, but long, blinding periods of fluorescence. The large centipede-shaped cloud was closer now. It was at the center of the storm, crawling through the wisp and fog around the eye of The Tempest. For a split second, when the wind had died down and he could clearly look at it, he thought it moved in a freakishly lifelike way. The storm quickly picked up before he could take a second look.

It was Raven’s turn to jump now. She turned around to look at him. *Don’t worry*, she mouthed. *Hold your breath*. He turned to his own grabber. “I’m scared,” he said. Again, the fairy did not react, but tightened its grip around his neck. He was glad no one could hear him say it. Being able to admit it freely, even if no one heard it, allowed him to release the tension that was bubbling inside. He could not help but admire Raven as she jumped in. She was not like the other kids, who jumped with clenched fists or with their bodies curled into balls, hoping to sink into the water without being noticed. She dove in perfect form, unafraid of the cold, the spider fairies, the storm, and the critters that lurked underneath the surface. His heart jumped when she did, and the splash that told him she was underneath the waters suddenly made him feel alone.

It was his turn to jump. *Why did I wish to know where they took the kids?* he thought. He could not help but blame himself for their luck. He glanced behind him. None of the kids seemed any braver than him. He looked at his grabber. “I don’t want to go,” he said, more out of instinct than an expectation that he wouldn’t have to. He looked down into the gulf and looked for Raven, but could not see her underneath the dark waters. He turned to his grabber again. “Can you tell me what I’m supposed to do? I’ll die in the water if I stay for too long. It’s too cold.” The grabber placed its hand over his head. He was sure it would crush his skull right then and there, but instead, he began seeing images in his mind — first of an ocean floor, and then of something below it. *They’re telepathic*, he realized. “Is there

another way to go? The water is cold,” he said. He saw the image of the ocean floor again, but this time, he was in the image as well. His body was on the ocean floor, lifelessly buried underneath the debris of the gulf. The grabber moved its head closer to Red, as though to ask him if he understood the message. Red nodded. He bent his knees, took a deep breath, and then jumped.

The water was so cold it stung against his skin like fire and made the air above feel like a breeze. He was not familiar enough with his flou to understand how it worked beyond his conscious control, but he could feel himself rapidly tiring as his body depleted its energy reserves to warm him up. Right below the surface, Raven was afloat, waiting for him. He regretted taking so long, realizing that she would be forced to hold her breath for longer now. She grabbed his hand and quickly began swimming towards the bottom of the ocean. Their grabbers followed behind. He heard the splash of someone else diving in from behind them. All the spider fairies and the children were swimming to the ocean floor in single file. He was always fascinated by the diversity of sea critters in the gulf, but he had no time to appreciate them here. He hurried along as his breath ran out. *There has to be a source of air where they're taking the children*, he thought.

A small part of the ocean floor shimmered strangely against the dark landscape around it. As they swam deeper and deeper, Red's breath slowly began to give way. He was already getting dizzy from a lack of air and from the pressure of their depth. *Almost there*, he thought as he watched the children disappearing beyond the bottom of the gulf. *There has to be air there. There has to be*. He thought Raven could feel his nervousness because she quickened her pace until they were almost touching the person ahead of them. He wondered if they could cut in line, thinking back to how often kids would fight in the Vine because of people who went ahead of them in lines for food or the macroAI. *No one would fight for their place in line here*, he mused. His lungs began to feel heavy, close to collapsing. *If I pass out, she'll drag me there. I won't die*. The image of his own body in the ocean floor flashed in his mind again and he resolutely made himself focus. Only a few kids were ahead of them now. Their grabbers were at their sides, swimming by bending all of their legs in and out for sudden bursts of speed. Their wings, Red realized, were actually fins. He began to feel faint as they approached the ocean floor. The way the floor glimmered made it feel as though treasure were hidden underneath. He suddenly imagined him and

Raven spending a lifetime exploring and hunting for jewels all around Avalonia. She squeezed his hand, temporarily relieving his stupor.

He passed through the ocean floor. Just as he expected, they entered a hidden part of the Temple Gulf. There were no critters here. The waters were barren, but warm and refreshing. Instinctively, he was about to try and take a gulp of air in, but Raven put her hands over his mouth. He panicked, suddenly struggling against her grip, and wondered how there could be no air here. The other kids seemed to be doing fine. Raven pointed to a large air bubble that was floating nearby. It took him a second to understand in his panicked state. He rushed over to the bubble, stuck his head in, and took a deep breath. The air inside of the bubble was hot and humid. He felt like he was breathing in a pocket of air that was saving the atmosphere and temperature of Torrid. Raven stuck her head in with him. He couldn't help but laugh while they were both in there. He still could not hear his speech, but he thought that made it funnier. She laughed with him, but only for a moment before leaving the bubble and swimming down towards the bottom. He took the deepest breath he could, and then followed behind her. There were hundreds of more bubbles floating nearby. He always kept an eye out for the closest one.

As he approached the second ocean floor, he saw the source of the air bubbles. The floor was covered in Welkin Mums. The oxygen producing plants were often farmed on space ships on extended trips. Individual plants looked like tiny spores, but they clumped together in giant balls to produce the large air bubbles that Red was breathing. The air bubbles, he knew, carried their seeds. They were meant for sea creatures that normally had to travel to the surface to take in air. The seeds would be exhaled as a creature travelled to new locations, allowing them to germinate in different parts of the ocean. *They're colonizers*, Red realized, as he breathed in his third air bubble. *Just like us*. At first he thought that the spider fairies were taking them to a mountain at the bottom of the ocean, but then he realized as he got closer that he was looking at the roof of a stone temple. Surrounding it were bas-relief statues of various sizes that looked like the centipede-shaped cloud that signaled the arrival of the Tempest. The sound of being underwater gave the structure a desolate, ruined impression, as though the place were intentionally abandoned by Avalonia itself, hidden underneath a rising sea level and the facade of an impassable floor. He thought the temple was haphazardly made, or suffered from great deterioration under

the pressure of the gulf, but then remembered that he was not looking at a human construction and could not fathom how the temple was intended to look.

The grabbers were making the children form circles. Each child held the hands of the children next to them. He and Raven swam over to a circle that was not complete yet. There were twenty or so kids there when they joined, and thirty by the time the circle was complete. Raven stood between Red and Mehl. The spider fairies began circling above them. Red was about to plant his feet in the ground, but it was scalding hot when he stepped on it. *Should've remembered*, he thought. *Welkin Mums need extreme temperatures to thrive*. He gave Raven a curious look, wondering if she knew anything about what was going to happen. As he stood there, jumping off the floor with his toes every second to avoid burning himself, the grabbers began dispersing amongst the circle, studying each of the kids closely. When one approached Red, he began to see a vision of his own body and a clock, not a physical clock, but one inside of him. The grabbers were able to tell when each of them would die. Down to the last second, they knew exactly how much time each child had left to live.

A grabber came very close to Red's face, almost touching it. "Master needs a heart," it said. Its voice sounded like Red's own voice, but hollow and impaired, like he was speaking through a pipe. Another came to Raven to tell her the same thing, and this one, sounded like Raven.

"We will take a heart from the one who will die first," a fairy said to Mehl.

"We do not waste life," another said to Red. This one sounded like it was laughing. "Master must be fed well, kept healthy for the ascension. When the dark awakens, Master will be born."

"Who is Master?" Red mouthed to the one speaking to him.

"The temple calls. Master is hungry," the grabber replied. It placed its hands on Red's head, caressed his hair, and then gave him a vision of a tiny larvae crawling around human children that were dropped inside of its oversized cocoon. "Master is hungry," the fairy repeated. It pointed to the temple. There were children being carried inside by the fairies, one from each circle. The doors of the temple were open, but he could not see beyond the shadow of its opening. He could hear something squirming in the inside, the sound of a sickly creature growing, maturing.

"Speak of what happened here, and we feed you to Master next year," a

fairy said, addressing all of them simultaneously. Red heard his own voice, but he imagined it was different for everyone. Some of the kids nodded, the ones that were here before. The other ones looked far more panic stricken. Red squeezed Raven's hand. She stepped closer to him in the circle. "Wake up in your beds after today, and remember everything only as a dream," the grabber whispered. "If chosen three times, Master will always take you." The fairies began swimming around them, studying each of them closely. After a few minutes, Red was sure that they were each beginning to look at him more often, more closely. He noticed some of the kids, including Raven, were looking at him as well now.

"It's going to be me?" he mouthed. He could feel a lump in his throat. "Is it going to be me?" he asked again, more defiantly this time, shouting the words despite his muteness. Raven was mouthing something too, but he could not read her lips. She seemed to be asking a question. One of the other grabbers placed their hands on her head, and he knew she was receiving a vision. Judging by how long the spider fairy stayed with her, he imagined it must have been much more than the split second images he received.

Some of the circles of children were beginning to break apart and swim back to the top. He wished he could join them. He heard another squirm from the temple, this one louder. *Master hungers*, he said to himself. The deep water ambiance made him feel like he was under a spell. *Master hungers*. He imagined swimming to the temple himself, just to explore the insides and see *Master*. One of the fairies swam behind him, making a slurping noise as it brushed against his body.

"This one!" the grabber hissed, swimming over Red's head and then floating above him. Her hair covered his entire face for a second. Its texture was so rough that he thought it cut him all over his cheeks and ears. "This one!" it repeated. He shook his head to escape its hair. Its voice slithered out of its mouthless face like it was summoning the words with a cast. All the kids and the grabbers were now looking at him. He wondered if they expected him to surrender peacefully. He thought about swimming up to the surface, but there would be no way to outrun the fairies. They had to take someone else from the circle if it wasn't him, and he was sure that the other kids would drag him down themselves if it came down to it. The circle of children began to shape into an ellipse as everyone moved away from Red. The grabbers began to swim closer and closer in circles around him. The child to his right let go of his hand. He looked at Red not with

an expression of sympathy, but of loathing, as though he knew he were damned and was afraid Red was trying to take him with him. Raven pulled him closer to her. Mehl looked horrified and let go of Raven's hand. It was only the two of them now.

Raven let go of Red's hand and rushed over to Mehl. He thought that she had left him too. She swam behind Mehl, and before the boy knew what was happening, placed him in a chokehold. He struggled against her grip, but his movements were too slow in the water to hit her with any force. By the time he stopped trying to hit her head or her body and tried instead to peel away her arm, his face was already blue from a lack of oxygen. He tried to lean in to breathe in a passing air bubble, but Raven kept his head firmly locked while holding her own breath in. He eventually gave up trying to force her away, and began to flail his arms, looking right and left for help from the other kids. Everyone moved away from him. He looked at Red, who was too stunned to move. Mehl pointed at him, mouthing something savagely as the last bit of air left his body.

"What are you doing?!" Red tried to scream. Raven mouthed something and one of the grabbers looked at her, and placed its hands on her head.

"Give us a heart! Change his fate!" another one screamed so that all of them could hear.

"This one will kill!" a fairy shrieked. "This one is strong!" They seemed to be energized by the spectacle of Raven choking the boy, suddenly swimming faster and faster above them. They began chanting in rhythm like a wild orchestra.

"Give us a child! Give us a child!" they screamed in ecstasy. "Violence! Agony! Give him to us!" They chanted louder and louder. The words were deafening and Red could barely make out what they were saying.

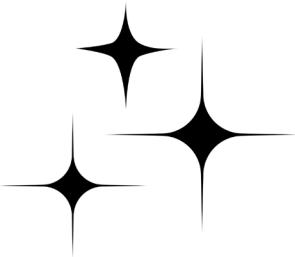
"Kill him, and you are free to go!" they chanted. "Kill him, and everyone is free to go! Master loves violence! The ones killed by another human make Master much stronger!" they screamed. "Kill him, and you are free to go!" They were swimming so fast they created a whirlpool at the center of the children now. More spider fairies nearby swam to them, enticed by what was happening. All of them were looking at Raven now. It looked as though they were feeding off of her energy, becoming frenzied more and more as the boy came closer to death and as Raven strengthened her grip around Mehl's neck.

"Let go of him! Let go of him!" Red silently screamed. He tried to

swim to her, but there were too many spider fairies blocking his way. They surrounded her, spiraling around and around at dizzying speed. He could only catch glimpses of her between their bodies. A large, bald spider fairy, a male, Red realized, wrapped its legs around Raven and Mehl and grabbed her with his arms. Its head began cratering like the grabber that first looked into their room. Everything in the ocean fell silent. Red could hear nothing, not even the sound of the water.

“Cut his heart out and give it to us,” the grabber whispered. This one’s voice sounded different. It was unique. It did not mimic someone else’s voice. It was deathly and thunderous. Its tone was different too, not ecstatic, but loving. “Cut his heart out, and give it to us. Give it to Master. Master will be pleased,” it said. “You have the gift of Master, the gift of violence.” It held Raven the way a lover would, placing its hands over her face and body in a generous, passionate way. It looked like it was the closest thing to affection she had ever felt. Red had never seen her like this. The sound of the world had not come back yet. The other fairies were swimming too fast to even be seen as bodies now. They were all blurs in the madness. They looked euphoric, and Raven looked like she was sharing in their euphoria, in their ritual. She reached down into her boots and pulled out a cutlass. He had never seen a weapon so beautiful. It was encrusted with brilliant gems all across its handle. They were not allowed to keep personal weapons in the Vine. Mehl, despite being nearly passed out, saw the blade and donned a wild expression, recouping his efforts to escape from Raven’s grip. She held on even tighter.

“Give us his heart,” the grabber whispered to her again. Raven looked at Red as she lifted the blade over her head. He had never seen her like this. She was trembling with energy and euphoria — she looked more alive than ever. He was going to swim over and try and stop her from bringing the knife down, but when he looked at her, he knew it would be pointless. She looked determined, poised, obsessive. Raven had prometheus eyes.



THE EYES IN THE DARK

“And then she took his heart out? With the cutlass?” Butz asked. A few of the other people who were listening leaned in over the fire at the center of the heat bubble Red created. He had not realized how much time had passed since he began the story. Everyone was so enthralled by it, he lost himself in the memory as he was recounting it. Butz’s question broke his concentration. It took him a moment to snap back to reality and process what Butz had asked. His memory was blurry after seeing Raven taking out Wren’s cutlass. He remembered somehow escaping the bottom of the gulf, but not swimming to the surface nor going back to the Vine. His last clear image from the memory was of the spider fairy holding Raven. Beyond that, it was like recalling a dream he knew he had, but could not remember.

“Well?” Roland asked. “Did she take out the kid’s heart?”

Red looked at him for a long time, wondering why this was the point he was so interested in. Everyone in the bubble was listening intently, feverishly, with the obsessive expressions of people lost in another time — like they too longed to be down there with him and Raven at the bottom of the gulf, surrounded by spider fairies, deciding whether or not they should carve out someone else’s heart to save their own. Their undivided attention, the intensity with which they stared, made his stomach turn, not with nervousness or excitement, but with guilt.

“It was the only way we could have gotten out. The only way *I* could have gotten out.”

“And she doesn’t believe any of this happened? Or she doesn’t remember is what you’re saying?” someone else asked.

Red shrugged. “Either she does and she doesn’t want to say, or she really doesn’t remember any of it. She told me she remembers the Tempest, but that the grabbers were only a myth of the Vine. I don’t know. I remember

everything that happened pretty accurately.”

“I can’t believe I’ve never heard this story,” Butz said, sounding as though he had been betrayed. Red laughed and shook his head. “You told the both of them already?” Butz asked.

Red nodded. Magnus and S were both asleep, leaning against each other and the wall of the cave. The walls were so smooth that they looked like the corridors of a building set inside of a mountain rather than a natural landscape. Red swiped against the floor where he was sitting. His fingers felt dirty after, as though they had collected dust from the floor, but they were spotless when he looked at them.

“I’ve heard that before about fairies, by the way,” Butz added. “That they can tell when humans are going to die. It’s a funny thought, isn’t it? If we all knew when we were going to die, age would be measured as a percentage. You would watch everyone you’re close to fly by, or fall behind. But what I don’t understand is — how did Raven kill that kid then? I mean, isn’t that kind of a paradox? They saw you as the first one to die.” He said the last sentence with a reluctance that made Red writhe inside himself.

“No, there’s a metaphor that the gemini use to explain that,” Red replied. “I looked it up before, when I had free time at Crest. The fairies, I remember them all chanting and telling Raven to ‘*change his fate*.’ The gemini describe the universe as a web of possibilities, and life, sentience, and consciousness, as spiders on the web. They can create new possibilities, break lines that exist, or twist and combine lines that were separated. It’s kind of like how we think we can objectively observe time and space but both are distorted by gravity — consciousness distorts fate, even if the latter can be observed by beings with prescience.”

“The creature they all worshipped, the one they called *Master* — do you know what it was?” someone asked. “Was it just a powerful critter?”

“No,” Red replied. “I can’t imagine what it would have been.” He shuddered as he thought of the squirming sound that came from the temple and the image of a tiny larvae inside of a cocoon filled with human bodies. *It’s still there*, he thought. *Master is still there, at the bottom of the Temple Gulf.*

“Spider fairies are worshippers of the void,” Roland said. “I have heard of similar fairies from where I come from in Avalonia. They often form cults around strange, mythic creatures, many of them believed to be extinct or purely made up. They live in the bottom of seas and oceans, deep underground, or in remote locations. I only know of them because in the

academy I trained at, Kaldin, deep sea exploration and combat were emphasized. It specialized in creating soldiers that would be prepared for missions on Eaut.”

“They worship the void?” Red asked.

“Mmhmm. Like the dark elves, their religion centers around the place between worlds. They believe it is a sort of salvation to be lost there,” Roland said. Red looked at Butz, who shrugged cluelessly. “The creatures they worship tend to possess supernatural powers, beyond the normal casting potential of regular critters. Many are sentient as well, and possess intellects greater than most humanoid races. These creatures and the ones who worship them, The Priori of Light often goes to great lengths to hunt them down.”

S’s microAI began beeping. Red leaned over to put it on silent. It was a timer set to periodically count down the end of Raven’s infection.

“Only a few more hours, right?” Butz asked.

“Yeah, she should be back to normal soon,” Red said. “I don’t understand how that whole infection thing works.”

“It’s from a worm that MegaCORP reverse engineered from the Xenosite,” Roland said. “I looked it up on my microAI.”

“From the Xenosite?!” someone exclaimed.

“Yup, quite brilliant. But it’s naturally averse to the lifeforce in people, and it slowly dies out inside of them. I heard of it earlier this year, but I didn’t remember anything about it until I looked it up a few hours ago. It was only in an experimental stage when I read about it. They were calling it the biggest breakthrough in MegaCORP technology. I mean, think about it. It’s like meta-conditioning but without the difficulty of exercising the process. You drop it in a population, and once they tweak them to last long enough — maybe even permanently, they can control entire regions.”

“Funny, sounds like what the Xenosite would do themselves,” Butz sighed.

“It’s a line of defense. The idea is that if humans ever *did* become infected, this would be a way to regain control over them. Maybe the worms could be used against infected critters,” Roland replied.

“Sounds like human infection finally *is* possible,” said a girl on the other side of the fire.

“Yeah, that’s what I was thinking,” someone else added.

“Well, it’s not permanent,” Roland said. “I think they’re having the same

problems the Xenosite are, and it doesn't augment any of your DNA or grant you any capabilities beyond what you already have. It might make you lose control of yourself, but it doesn't make you any stronger like infection would."

"Looks like they're using the qualifiers as a way to test out their new project, more than anything," Butz said. Red thought back to Wren and the story of the rebels in Takis. The idea of joining WEAPON had never bothered him more than it did now, when it was finally only a few rounds away.

"Should we go outside and check for the blood elves?" Red asked. He glanced at his microAI. Raven had settled down to make camp farther away from them than he would have preferred. She would be most vulnerable for the next few hours when the arrival of the blood elves coincided with her infection. He wondered how pervasive the control of the worm would be and if it would allow her to retain her carefulness.

"She'll be fine. It's us you have to worry about. Let's just hope she doesn't fall asleep at the wrong time, or that she doesn't decide to come hunt us down. You realize that we can't even harm her, right? If she comes to kill us, we just have to run and hide," Butz laughed. "If anything happens to her, we could lose the round."

"Don't worry. I should be able to sense the blood elves before they're close to our mountain anyway. Not just their energy signatures, but their odor alone," Roland said. "You guys ever smelled it?"

"No," Red and Butz replied simultaneously.

"Have you?" Butz asked. "Ow!" he yelped. Linx was pulling the hair out of his scalp. Red thought the cat must have been getting anxious because Raven was missing. He felt a similar nervousness. They had never operated without their leader, although he was not worried that they couldn't.

"Yeah, I trained with them a few times," Roland said. "Brutal creatures. You'd think they weren't even sentient sometimes. They're different from the other elves, even more removed than humans are. While other elves are generally more peaceful than we are, blood elves fall in the extreme opposite of the spectrum."

"You've gotten bit?" Red asked.

"No, never that. I've sparred with them, but I was always careful never to get bit. They have a toxin in their body that creates either an intense feeling of euphoria as they drain their prey, or causes your pain receptors to overload. It can go either way, depending on what they want to induce. You

ever had the smoke of an Okrimar?” Red nodded. “The euphoria is like that, but times ten, and lasts all the way until... until they drain you dry.”

Butz shuddered and gave a disgusted look. “Do they drink each other’s blood?”

“They do, but it’s in these weird ceremonies where they all exchange each other’s blood. It’s not practiced amongst their higher castes.”

“They have castes?” Red asked.

“Yeah, all elves do, but theirs are practiced a bit differently. Blood elves get stronger if they drink the blood of certain victims, ones with more powerful flou or heritages. They retain that blood as their own and pass it on to their children. Their royalty takes the idea of royal blood quite literally. Their strongest are the strongest because they’ve been preying on more powerful creatures and people for centuries on end.”

“Do stronger creatures always have better blood?” Red asked.

“No, not always. I’m not sure how it works. I’ve heard they have a special affinity for royal blood,” Roland smiled while pointing over to Magnus. “Best tell him to watch out if he’s ever around them.”

“Hey, I have a story similar to the one he just said, about the spider fairies,” a girl next to Red interjected. “It’s also from where I grew up, an orphanage near Bellathos.” A few people looked at her excitedly. Red watched Linx as the cat took a few steps deeper into the cave and his ears began twitching. He tapped Butz’s shoulder, who began watching Linx carefully as well. Red wished that the Warg was still alive. While Linx and Roland had superior senses to the rest of them, the Warg’s were unparalleled and would have been harder to fool with casts.

“There’s nothing there,” Roland said, looking into the cave himself. He put his ears to the floor and listened carefully for a few minutes, gesturing to the rest of them to remain silent. A few other people grabbed their microAIs and strapped it over their eyes, using its infrared mode to see through the dark.

“He’s right, there’s nothing there,” someone else said. “At least nothing nearby.” Linx let out a howl, not loud, but not soft either. He then ran over to Butz and began scratching the falconer’s legs.

“Okay, okay, I get it,” Butz replied. “There’s something there,” he said, turning to Roland and the others. “Maybe not close, but there’s definitely something inside of this cave. Linx has never been wrong before.”

“Okay, I’ll go check it out,” Roland said. Two others offered to go with

him. “I’ll be able to sense any danger from afar. I don’t think it’s the blood elves. They wouldn’t come from the inside of the mountains. At least, I don’t think so. It’s probably a critter or something. We’ll bring back food if we can. Keep an eye out outside.”

“You seem to be unsure of a lot of things, or plain wrong,” Butz said. “Maybe not your day as a stalker?” Red was surprised by how blunt he sounded. It was unlike Butz to call someone out.

Roland replied with a nervous laugh and a shrug. “Not used to this place yet, but I wouldn’t miss it if there were blood elves nearby.”

“We’ll stay here with everyone else,” Red said. “Raven has about three hours left. When she’s back, we’ll have time to rethink what we want to do.”

Roland moved towards the cave. “We’ll be back soon. Stay alert.” Butz and Red silently began skinning a Straggler Melt. It took them more than twenty minutes to strip the crust off of its membrane, but Red was happy to pass the time with something that took his mind off of the round. They used a cleansing cast that S had taught them to clean out its toxins. They kept an eye on Linx, who took to staring into the cave with a skittish alertness. They trusted the cat’s instincts much more than Roland’s. He was surprised that Magnus and S were still sleeping. Everyone else was too anxious to sleep for more than an hour. Red created a second fire in front of the two of them. Maintaining the heat bubble and the increased gravity of the area began to make him feel tired despite the stress of the moment. He decided he would sleep for an hour if he could manage it. Magnus and S slept calmly, which made him feel safer. As he and Butz began cooking the Straggler Melt, Linx started howling into the cave again and wouldn’t stop until Butz held his mouth shut.

“You’re going to let the blood elves know exactly where we are, aren’t you boy?” Butz whispered. Linx seemed to have understood because he remained silent after that, but acted as though he had a nervous tick. He clawed Butz’s legs, jumped on top of the falconer when he sat down, or ran around in circles around the heat bubble. The Aeyz Cat was not in his usual playful mood. Red could tell he was either afraid or nervous. Once in a while, he would run over to Magnus and S and pretend to be asleep next to them, which made his behavior seem even more erratic to everyone else.

“We could have been at an elaborate banquet right now,” Butz said as he stared off into the cave. His mouth was full of the Straggler Melt. From the way he was chewing it, Red could tell it was not the best tasting of crit-

ters. He eyed his own piece with distaste. “We could have been surrounded by desserts and foods from all over the star system, an unlimited supply of them. Meeting top officials from around Avalonia, wearing the best gear, all for free. We could have gotten paid coin to do literally *nothing* but wait.”

“What?” Red asked. “Are you okay?” He looked at the Straggler Melt Butz was eating, hoping it didn’t have any hallucinogens in it. They didn’t bother asking Magnus about the properties of the creature.

“I’m fine,” Butz sighed. “Everyone who chose to join an Imperial Guard — they have no qualifiers past the field test. They’re at some paradise destination right now, eating all kinds of foods, enjoying music and dancing....” He looked off into space with a cynical expression. “They’re probably never going to be called into a mission, you know that right? Our new strategy is to surrender the outer planets entirely, which means until an inner planet is invaded, they’re just going to be living lavish lives for free. That could have been us. But no, we chose *this*.” He held his arms out, speaking louder so that everyone could hear. “We chose to be entrapped inside of a simulation of some far-off sacred destination of the Priori, entrapped with a trained Prometheus possessed by a worm that wants to kill us, and a small horde of blood elves on their way to drain us dry. I bet they won’t even bother using that toxin thing that makes us euphoric before we die. I bet you they’re talking about it right now, laughing and joking about how they’ll make us agonize and bend in pain as they drain our blood.”

“Are you regretting coming here?” Red laughed.

Butz glared at him. “If a blood elf catches you and begins to drain your blood, I hope they ask you that same question while you’re writhing in pain.”

“So you *do* regret coming here?” Red grinned.

“Hah. No. I don’t *regret* coming here. That’s not the word I would use. But I don’t know, I’m just imagining other possibilities,” Butz replied. “You never do that?”

“I do,” Red said, “but then I think back to WEAPON, and I can’t imagine my life any differently. I mean, even when I sometimes regret joining, when the road suddenly gets tough —” He lowered his voice to a whisper. “— When I’m not sure about MegaCORP’s intentions... I still can’t imagine my life as anything but a pursuit of joining WEAPON. I guess you can say it gives me direction. Maybe even more than that, maybe it gives me *purpose*.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean. It’s like destiny calls and no matter how much you don’t like yours, you’ve got to follow it. Anything below that and you’d just wonder what it would have been like to take that path for the rest of your life, right?”

“Is that why we joined WEAPON?”

“Are you asking me why *you* joined WEAPON?” Butz laughed.

“No, I know why I joined.”

“Why?”

Red looked at him for a long moment before replying. “Okay, I guess I don’t know.” Butz laughed. “Well, it’s not that I don’t know. I just can’t put it into words. Like you said, it was a calling.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in destiny? I thought people could change their fates as they pleased?” Butz asked.

“Hmm… It’s not that I don’t believe in *fate*, nor do I think people can escape *all* of their destiny. I just don’t think fate works the way people think it does.”

“Hmm?”

“I think fate brings us through a lot of doors throughout life, but it’s always our choice whether we want to pursue them or not.”

“And you think it brought you to the door for WEAPON?”

“The door *to* the door to WEAPON, in this case,” Red laughed.

“Yeah, right.”

“It’s not to fight the Xenosite.”

“It’s not? I can’t imagine anything else to justify going through *this*…”

“Think about it, Butz. If all we wanted to do was fight the Xenosite, we could have just joined the Imperial Guard, and we could have asked for a mission in the outer planets if we were *that* desperate. We knew what we were getting ourselves into when we signed up for this. Everyone here did.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Maybe the glory of it all?”

“Now *there’s* something to put our lives on the line for,” Red replied sarcastically.

“Me, you, and Raven are all orphans,” Butz said while pointing over to Magnus and S. “You think it’s a coincidence who’s able to sleep through this, and who’s not?”

“Heh, definitely not,” Red sighed. “I have a gentle rage in me. A competition, a drive, a race. I want no one else to win it. Maybe it’s just resentment or depression, but I need to let it out. I need to express it, and fighting lets

me do that. Training, fighting, pursuing WEAPON. The way people look at you if they find out you're in the qualifiers, the way an opponent looks at you the *moment* that they realize they stand no chance, watching someone's ego break down when you're sparring with them. I love it all. I live for it. You ever get jealous of Raven?"

"Always. I mean, not in a way where I wish bad on her. I just get angry at myself for not being as good, as talented, as strong. It makes me work twice as hard though. Sometimes, I think I'm not even *actually* funny, or sarcastic, that it's all just a way for me to cope with my drive to fight, to be great, to be the most powerful soldier I know. One day, I want to be the most powerful WEAPON out there. Sometimes, I think my mind just makes me funny because it doesn't like its own drive. It feels guilty about it, or embarrassed — like my inner self thinks that if I was just a serious kid, and told everyone that one day I was going to be stronger than Raven and everyone else we knew, that they would just laugh me off, or think I was crazy. So it makes me sarcastic, lets me try hard under the radar. Does that make sense?"

"Yeah, it makes a lot of sense. You're absolutely crazy," Red laughed. "Sometimes, I feel like they just don't get it," he added, pointing over to Magnus and S again. "If you ask anyone in the Imperial Guard why they want to join, they'll tell you it's to serve their planet, or to save humanity from the Xenosite. Something positive, an ideal. Even Wren. He wanted to join Takis's Imperial Guard, not WEAPON. He wanted to join to help save his planet."

"But if you ask us —"

"I get the most obsessed about joining WEAPON when I'm in a rage, or jealous, or upset, or casting fire, or fighting someone. When I'm like that, I don't want to see the world saved; I don't want to see it flourish. I want to see it burn."

"We *are* pretty crazy aren't we?" Butz laughed.

"Look around, Butz. We're not alone." Red got up to grab Linx, who was straying too deep into the cave. When he walked back, he handed his microAI over to Butz. "Look, Raven is awake. She's on the move."

"Is she coming towards us?" Butz asked, trying to trace her movement through the compass.

"Seems like she's just moving erratically. I guess the general trend is towards this cave."

"Everyone's here. We'll be fine."

“This time, it’s her I’m worried about,” Red said. “Blood elves should be close. Hopefully her infection ends soon enough. I hope she’s not moving like that because she’s trying to avoid them.”

After Red put Linx down, the cat walked over to the tip of the heat bubble and began howling at the cave, this time as loud as he could.

“Linx, hush!” Butz yelled. From inside the cave, another howl came back. Everyone around the fire was suddenly alert and looked inside the cave in confusion.

“It’s a critter. It has to be a critter,” someone said. A couple of people grabbed their weapons.

“Maybe Roland’s found something. Should we yell for him?” Butz asked.

“No, that would give away where we are. If there’s... anyone nearby,” Red said. He glanced at his microAI instinctively, although he knew it wouldn’t let him track the blood elves.

“It’s probably nothing,” someone said. “Just a critter. Nothing to be worried about. I mean there *will* be other critters here you know.” Red glanced at Linx, hoping for another clue.

“Linx wouldn’t howl then. He only howls when there’s danger,” Butz said. “He can usually even tell the difference between a dangerous critter and a passive one.”

“He does look pretty on edge,” Red said. Linx took a few steps back and circled around Butz’s leg.

“If only he could talk,” Butz grunted.

Everyone’s microAI lit up simultaneously with a message from Roland. The stalker had found a critter and needed help from two more people to carry it back. Red sighed in relief.

“Let’s go,” Red said, gesturing to Butz. “We can use light casts to leave a trail if we think we’ll get lost.”

“We shouldn’t keep splitting up,” someone warned. “Roland left with those two others. We’re already down a couple of members. These two are asleep. This is sloppy. We’re not safe here.”

“We’ll be back fast. Don’t worry,” Red said. “He said he just needs help carrying it back. Judging by the howl, he’s probably not too far inside. We won’t engage anything. If we see any signs of danger, we’ll run back. Raven should be done with her infection soon anyway. Why would the blood elves continue to stay after that?”

Butz led the way into the cave using a light cast. Linx tiptoed behind

them and was smart enough not to make any more sounds. “Let’s not use any light casts that are too big,” Red said, as he left a trail of glowing specks behind him. “I don’t want to draw any attention to ourselves, in case there is something in here, blood elf or critter.” Butz nodded.

They used their microAIs to keep track of Roland as they headed in his direction. The cave forked into several different paths at various intersections, and they had to do the best they could using their compass to find Roland. Butz had to occasionally put out his light cast as they walked deeper into the mountain. Certain parts of the walls were designed to reflect light in calculated angles towards other reflective surfaces, creating long chains of illumination if they were touched with light. Red could feel the coolness of a breeze coming from different directions, which worried him because it meant there were multiple entrances to the mountain. He tried his hardest to keep to Roland’s trail, but it became harder the deeper they went into the cave. The stalker was moving fast for someone carrying a load. The three of them hadn’t left any physical trail beyond their footsteps and energy signatures. Linx constantly skipped ahead of them before running back. While Red knew he was scouting ahead, an instinctive trait of Aeyz Cats that they could not help, he was worried that the cat would find itself in danger too quickly, and they would not be able to save him.

“Hey, look at this,” Butz said as he used a cast to illuminate carvings on the wall.

“An old writing system?” Red whispered. The symbols were not etched into the walls. Rather, parts of the nephril popped out to create designs, figures, and images. Certain parts popped out more than others, and Red assumed this was a method for highlighting symbols that were more important than others.

“Aloglyphs,” Butz said. “It’s the first written language used by The Priori of Light.”

“How did you know?”

“Did some research for the past few days, especially after talking to Lux about them. They have an interesting history and culture.”

“Remember how Lance sounded when he recognized the terrain? This must be one of their first settlements.”

“Yeah, dead stars are like natural temples for them. I think their religion was founded on a dead star. It’s where they discovered the Light.”

“Discovered the Light?”

“That’s what they call their umm... enlightenment. When they first found their path, you can say, and the void as well.” Red cringed at the word.

“You have a thing for Lux,” Red laughed.

“No,” Butz said, as though he were offended.

“Sure. I think I know how they made this,” Red said while scanning the wall for a place without any glyphs. Butz hesitated before walking over, relenting that Red had changed the subject so quickly on a sarcastic remark. Red began heating a small portion of the wall with a fire cast. He used only a finger and focused the cast on a tiny circumference. After a few minutes, the fire went from orange to blue. Linx looked on curiously.

“What are you doing?” Butz asked. Red lifted his finger tip. As the wall cooled down, it began protruding out until it created a solitary ledge. Butz carefully touched the protrusion with his fingers. “Incredible, it’s already as cold as everything around it. None of the heat is leftover at all.”

“Yup, and look at that,” Red replied. “This is how they made these Alo-glyphs. The images must have been crafted by heating up different portions of the wall to different degrees. But there’s no way fire could be used to create designs so detailed. They probably used light. That’s how they got everything to be so exact.” He took out a knife and tried to scratch the walls. “See, this material, nephril, you can’t carve anything into it. It’s too hard. That’s why they chose this method instead.”

“So?”

“I just found it interesting, that’s all. Usually you’d expect people to carve their writing into walls, not for things to pop out.”

“Oh, okay. It sounded like you were working your way up to some kind of cultural epiphany,” Butz laughed. “You just ruined ancient art by the way.”

“It’s just a simulation,” Red replied. “How are these things made, anyway? I mean, just look at this place. It has such incredible detail. Nothing like training simulations in terminals. I’m almost tempted to say that they’ve actually cut out a piece of the dead star and brought it with them,” Red said.

“Close enough. Most of it is simulated. Some of it is printed,” Butz replied.

“Printed?”

“Yeah, they use these machines called terrain architects. They analyze different landscapes or parts of a planet, and then you input all the mate-

rial you need to replicate the landscapes perfectly. They make everything from trees identical to the real ones they're simulating to the correct design of snowflakes. The atmosphere and gravity are simulated. Our microAIs tell us what the temperature and gravity of the original location are, and if there were any further adjustments made through the simulation."

"They must have some incredible simulations to train people in WEAPON."

"Yeah, probably. Anyway, look at this image," Butz pointed. They had to stand back to look at the entire picture.

"Well, that's obviously a sea creature," Red said. He paced back and forth from one end of the image to the other. It was more detailed than the rest of the images. There were protrusions within protrusions. Everything was intricately polished to perfection. He was sure that many people must have worked on it together.

"You don't know if that's water," Butz said.

"I guess not. It could be umbriel or something, but it's definitely an ocean."

"Or a lake or something."

"Okay, okay, it's liquid, happy?" Red relented.

"Yes. Thanks."

"And the creature is large. Relatively."

"Well technically, it could be a speck of bacteria in a cup of water or something," Butz said. Red looked at him smugly. "I'm just saying — you never know for sure. There's no scale here, right?"

"Look at that," Red said. He pointed to the top of the image. It looked like a rendition of a man, using a cast on the creature below.

"He's summoning the creature," Butz said.

"It looks more like its struggling. Maybe he's drowning the creature. But look at the size of the man against the size of the creature. The creature's obviously big."

"I guess," Butz replied. "I don't think that's a human. Look closely. It has three eyes."

Behind them, Linx let out a soft howl that made the both of them jump. Red shuffled with his microAI as he strapped it over his eyes to look into the dark.

"Looks like there's still nothing here," Red said, taking it off. He opened his compass. "Roland is close. I think he's in this direction." He pointed

northeast.

“Okay,” Butz said. “They already made it halfway back from where they were. I don’t think they even needed us. Judging by how fast he’s moving, it doesn’t look like he’s having much trouble carrying whatever he found.”

“Yeah, I think he just wanted to feel important,” Red replied. “He reminds me of that *type* of person. Know what I mean?” Butz nodded.

“Magnus is awake. He just sent us a message.”

“We should utilize our intercom with everyone,” Red said.

“Too many people for everyone to use it at once. But I agree, we should have been more organized about this. Maybe split everyone up in smaller teams. We’re a mess. This whole thing has been a mess so far. We haven’t even met the blood elves yet, and we already have casualties.”

“Because there was no clear leader,” Red said. “Wish they just assigned us one.”

“Wish Raven just took up the mantle. She would have, if she wasn’t infected.”

“Magnus could have too,” Red replied. “Hey, look at these,” he added, pointing to more aloglyphs.

“They look like cities, sort of.”

“The buildings, they’re like orbs of light.”

“Yeah, it’s like a city of stars, right?” Butz asked.

“Mmhmm. You should tell Lux about this when we get back. It’ll give you a reason to talk to her,” Red said, stifling a laugh.

“Hey, look. I think its Aleph,” Butz said, pretending not to hear. “This star, it’s sort of colored. It’s red.”

“Yeah, you’re right, and this must be Gama,” Red added, pointing to another image on the other side of the wall. “There are a bunch of other stars too. Each has a long paragraph of writing next to it.”

“What do you think it says?” Butz asked.

“Probably a description of the star or something. The Priori worships them as living beings, don’t they?”

“They *are* living beings, according to them.”

“More from your research?” Red chuckled.

“It’s interesting stuff. But yeah, more from my research. It’s not that crazy, you know.”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you know the nine properties of life?” Butz asked.

“Sure, the things that are necessary for anything to be classified as a fully living being. There’s stuff in between, too.”

“Did you know that fire has seven out of nine of those properties?” Butz asked. Red looked surprised for a moment and then gazed off as he wondered about what Butz said.

“Yeah, wow, I guess you’re right.”

“Makes you wonder, right?” Butz asked.

“Well, I don’t know about fire being alive, but it makes *me* feel like I’m alive,” Red said as he summoned a ball of flames in his hand. Linx let out a soft howl again.

“Just playing with fire,” Red said as he put it out. Another howl came, from deeper into the cave. Red and Butz exchanged nervous glances.

“The critter they’re carrying has to be dead by now,” Butz said. “The three of them aren’t even carrying it together. They’re in different locations. Look at the compass.”

“We should just go back to camp,” Red said as he started walking in the direction they had come from. “This cave is a labyrinth. We wouldn’t be able to find them anyway.” A second howl came, this time from closer to them. Linx let out a soft roar this time, taking a few steps from the way they had come, warning Red and Butz to stay behind him.

“Linx, this is the way we came from,” Red said, as though the cat would understand. “We have to follow the trail I left behind.”

“Another message from Magnus,” Butz said. “S is up too. She’s furious that we left.”

“Tell them to meet us halfway or something with everyone else, and to stick together. I have a bad feeling about Roland. I sent him a message. He hasn’t responded.”

“His vitals are reading fine, and they’re moving,” Butz said. They continued following the trail Red left behind, stopping only occasionally if they thought they heard something, or on Linx’s warnings. After a while, Red bent down to look at the trail of light he had created.

“Butz, this is a different color from my own trail,” Red said.

“We should be close to Roland,” Butz said. “Wait, what do you mean it’s a different color?” He tripped over something and crashed onto the floor a few steps ahead of Red. The moment he tripped, Red knew what they had found before even looking at it. He pushed his light cast to where Butz was and closed his mouth with his hand to keep himself from making a

sound. They had originally missed it because Butz was holding his light cast horizontal to his face, unable to see the floor beneath him. There, where his foot had tripped over, lay Roland's body. It was shriveled up, drained of all of its blood. The skin lumped on top of the bones underneath like a sheet of cloth, meshed in with his clothing to create a strange, twisted image. They both ran for it, leaving the trail of light behind them as they used their compass to make their way back to camp. It was more difficult without a trail, because a fork in the cave that seemed to go in the right direction would often loop around, but they didn't stop running.

Red glanced at his microAI whenever he could. Raven was moving towards the human camp as well. *She's going the wrong way*, he thought, wondering how the humans would react if she attacked them. *Unless the blood elves found her, then she's going the right way*. He clenched his fists. He would have to get to her even if she was infected.

"We have to get back. There's no time to look at the glyphs Butz," Red said. Butz had stopped a few steps behind him.

"No... it's not that..." Butz gaped.

"Butz now isn't the time to be in shock, we need to act fast. They could be anywhere. They might be heading towards Raven. We have to protect her." He took out his defilterizer to check if he could smell anything in the cave, wishing he had thought of this earlier. It would be the easiest way to know if there were blood elves near them, according to Roland. He smelled it the moment he removed the defilterizer and nearly stumbled back as he struggled to put it back on. The aroma was so intense that he thought it must have travelled straight to his brain to create the instinct to seek out its source that now possessed him. He froze in place, trying to breathe through his mouth to keep the smell from getting to his head. His eyes swept the area around him, desperately trying to find where the smell was coming from. Every muscle in his body enticed him to find the smell, despite his conscious mind knowing that it was a sign of danger. He finally got his defilterizer back on, but the effect on his mind still lingered.

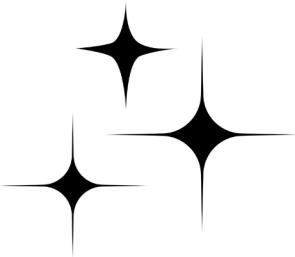
"Red..."

"I know... they're close."

"No, Red, they're... they're right here." Red looked over to where Butz was facing. Several pairs of red eyes were peering through the dark at them. They looked like specks of fire in the darkness. Butz made his light cast a bit stronger to penetrate the darkness of the cave. The blood elves stood

there, motionless, as the light swept over their faces. Red had never seen the crimson tint of their skin before. One of the elves looked far more flushed than the rest of them. His eyes and the veins around his neck were glowing red. *Must be one of the ones that just fed,* Red thought. He made his own light cast stronger and pointed it in the opposite direction. There were more elves on the other side. *All twenty-five of them.* He took a step back but the smell had made him so lightheaded that his knees buckled, and he fell to the floor with Butz. A single elf stepped out of the darkness and approached them. She had Roland's microAI strapped to her wrist.

"The red moon blesses us," she said. She licked her lips hungrily. "We have found more food."



ROGUE SPIRITS

The elf that approached them was more ornately dressed than everyone else. She wore no armor, only a black and red suit with decorative elements weaved to its sides. There was no detectable force field around her body. Red realized how extraordinarily arrogant she had to be to rely only on her reflexes in an event like the qualifiers — even Raven wore protective gear. She had silver hair like a spider fairy, but of a smooth, groomed texture. Her only weapons were two pairs of short blades. Each pair extended from the pulse bracers on her forearms like steel claws. The bracers, Red noticed when she bent over to study him and Butz, went all the way up to her shoulders and then wrapped around her back. The entire weapon was a single piece, built that way to allow her to channel her flou more easily to her weapons. The bracers were not resistant to casts of a specific element, but to physical force. Pulse bracers were worn by people who relied on hand-to-hand combat and needed to protect themselves from the recoil of their own movements.

“Butz... how is she using Roland’s microAI?” Red whispered. “That’s why we thought he was on the move.”

“I think if she drinks someone’s blood, she can channel their flou,” Butz whispered back. “Our microAI, it identifies us by using our energy signatures.”

While the female elves looked like average sized humans, the males were larger and had brutish-looking bodies. Some of them, the largest ones, wore no armor on their upper bodies, but unlike the girl in front of them, had visible shields. Their arms looked like they could crush a human skull in a single blow. They carried very few weapons, although several wore gauntlets on their hands. He did not see a single elf carrying a weapon like a sword or a mace. No one had anything larger than a dagger. The girl was

now face to face with Red. He thought of using a cast to try and burn her quickly, but was sure there would be no way to escape the rest of them. *I could grab her and then threaten to kill her*, he thought, wondering if blood elves felt empathy for each other or if they would let her die. *I've never killed anyone before.*

“Try it,” she said, glancing at his hands. He looked up at her and then pulled his head back, stunned by how beautiful she was, despite not being human. The edges of her ears looked sharp enough to cut through flesh. Even with his defilterizer on, he could faintly smell her blood elf scent. She looked similar to S, but with a more angular and radiant face that was flushed red with blood. Her complexion changed every other second from a deep red to an orange, human color, depending on her pulse and the flow of her energy. Her teeth were all pointed like a canine’s and glinted brightly when it reflected Red’s light cast, giving her a deranged, vicious expression when she spoke.

“Try what?” he mumbled, sounding less confident than he intended. His forehead was doused with cold sweat. He could feel it dripping down his ears. His head throbbed uncontrollably, along with his heart rate. He had been in tense situations before, but this was different. His body was intuitively aware that it was surrounded by its natural predators. He imagined this was how insects felt around humans. It was a rare feeling for sentient beings and apex predators. He felt no inclination to fight like he normally did when he was in danger. He only wanted to run, to get away from these creatures. His flou wanted to repress itself rather than escape his body as a cast.

At the same time, his mind drifted towards her scent, and how peaceful it seemed. *Maybe it wouldn't be so bad*, he thought, imagining what it would be like to be bit. He suddenly felt tired, tired of the qualifiers, tired of WEAPON, tired of fighting. The scent was a temporary escape from it all. He even pondered taking off his defilterizer, breathing it all in at once. *Blood elves...WEAPON...smell...blood elves...WEAPON...smell...* he repeated the words in his mind over and over again like a mantra. Butz recognized that he was dozing off and shoved him hard with his shoulders, snapping him out of the trance.

“You’re thinking of using a cast on me. Try it,” she said, smiling. Some of the other elves laughed quietly from the darkness. His hand twitched as he thought about it. He began channeling his flou as best as he could,

expecting her to move back or flinch, but she remained perfectly still, right in front of his face, testing him. He knew Butz was thinking about it too now. He imagined the falconer's hands slowly drifting to his boots, grabbing the dagger out of his heels. He wanted to tell him, "*don't hurt her.*" Linx was perched right next to them, bent over on all fours, ready to pounce. Red desperately hoped that the Aeyz Cat would not attack. If any of them had a chance to survive, it was Linx. He was sure one of the blood elves would kill him if he made any sudden movements. He glanced at his microAI. The humans were approaching them from their camp, but it was unlikely they would make it in time. The blood elves had left multiple fake trails over his original one, and the compass would not help them navigate through the forks in the cave.

They won't even be able to save us, Red thought, remembering how outnumbered they were. It would be a feast for the blood elves. He thought back to what Lance said. *This is crazy. He was right. Our best soldiers are all about to die in this stupid competition. It doesn't matter how powerful a WEAPON is. There should be rules protecting participants.*

A human body fell from the ceiling of the cave. One of the elves was hanging there, and let it drop after he finished draining it. It was one of the boys that Roland had left with. Red watched the elf's veins and muscles expand, rejuvenated with new blood and energy. He suddenly looked alive, crazed, hungrier than the rest of them. Red could barely make out his face in the shadows, but it looked contorted in a strange way. The girl came closer to him and flared her nostrils as she smelled him and Butz. Linx took a step forward and growled wildly. The girl returned the growl several times louder, sounding more feral than any critter he'd ever heard. Her face changed shape as she made the noise, twisting with wrinkles and scars, suddenly turning her into a beast-like creature. Red turned to look away, terrified by her alternate form. She bared her fangs, which had grown in this form and stuck out like crooked sabers. He could feel her flow rocket out of control. It disappeared without a trace when she changed back to normal. Linx crawled silently behind Butz.

"The other humans are nearby," the elf on the ceiling said. He let himself fall to the floor and kicked aside the human body he had drained. He had a large scar across his face, the mark of a sword. He retained his feral form, not bothering to switch out of it after he was done feeding. He looked at Red and Butz hungrily. Red hoped that if he *was* going to be

drained, it would be by the girl and not him. He laughed at the thought in his mind, and wondered if all people thought this casually when they were this close to death. Butz's hands were clenched by his feet, hidden from sight. He was still holding his dagger.

"Should we think about setting up a trap?" another elf asked.

I have to warn them somehow, Red thought, glancing again at his microAI. The girl caught his eyes. *They have to know by now that the blood elves are here,* he thought, hoping that someone else had tried taking out their defilterizer and smelling the air. *They're moving together. At least they won't get picked off.*

"What's there to think about? They're *humans*, food for thought," she replied. She looked at Roland's microAI and opened up its compass to track the other humans. "There's a little more than half of them left, and they're missing their strongest ones. The infected one is heading in our direction as well. This will be over quickly. Perhaps too quickly. I was hoping this was going to be more fun."

This has to be her, Red thought, remembering that Raven said the highest reported score on a field test was a blood elf.

"Are you scared of fighting humans?" she asked her team. Some of the elves snarled in the background. The one with the scar pounded his fists together in anger. If she had offended her team, she did not seem to mind. "Do you fear death, human?" she asked Red. She scraped the floor with her claws. *So nephil can be scratched,* Red thought, looking at the marks she left on the cave. She brought her blades up to his neck and held them an inch away from the bottom of his throat. They were made out of a crystalline material he could not identify. He could detect the girl's energy signature continuously moving through the blades, as though they were part of her body and not external weapons. They also had a distinct smell, which his defilterizer did not block. It was similar to metal, but rustic. *Like blood,* Red thought.

"No," Red replied. Butz cleared his throat next to him and then made a quaint groaning noise. The girl laughed again. Despite the intensity of the moment, her face kept catching his eyes. He wondered if the attraction he felt for her was another of their natural qualities used to draw in prey. While her general features were humanoid, the effects of her skin and the shapes of her ears and hands were so different it made him feel like he was only appreciating her in an aesthetic sense, the way one would a magnificent creature. "No, I'm not afraid of death," Red said, strengthening his tone to sound bolder.

She pulled her head and away, and for a moment, he thought he had somehow talked himself out of death. She lunged towards his face the next second, changing to her animalistic form while barking madly. Red screamed and leaped back, falling on top of Butz as he went. Linx jumped back to avoid being crushed underneath the both of them. Several of the elves in the darkness laughed again, louder this time. The girl looked pleased with herself.

“I thought you weren’t scared?” she asked.

“He said we’re not afraid of death, but that face of yours...” Butz replied. The girl’s expression turned serious before breaking into another smile.

“You have heard of the toxins we have in our saliva?” she asked. Red looked up silently at her but did not reply. “One of the toxins, the one that causes pleasure, I have heard it was like experiencing all of the joys in life in a single moment. And the other, the pain it causes, I have heard it is comparable to being tortured in every possible way simultaneously, an explosion of agony and torment.” Red continued staring at her, making sure never to break eye contact. He regretted jumping back before and did his best to show he wasn’t afraid. He had heard that blood elves had a culture that greatly revered strength and courage, and that many of their trials and rituals revolved around celebrating and testing both. “I have always wondered,” the girl began, in a tone of genuine curiosity, “what it would feel like if one were injected with both.”

“At the same time?” Butz asked.

“That’s right,” the girl said, speaking in an excited whisper. “Both toxins, simultaneously. Both extremes of life, experienced at the same time. It would be like nothing you’ve ever felt before, no?”

“Why don’t you try it on each other?” Butz asked. Red was sure that at one point, the falconer would cross the line and offend her more harshly than he intended.

“Sadly, we are immune to our own poisons, or I would have already tried it on all those I have already killed,” the elf replied. “But you, you are but a human, so fragile, so vulnerable, *so weak*. Will you speak to me as I feed on the both of you? Will you tell me what it feels like? Let us imagine it is an experiment between us three.” She donned a raving expression as she spoke and came uncomfortably close to the both of their faces while waiting for a response. Red found it hard to tell if she really wanted an answer or if she

was simply getting a perverse pleasure out of trying to make them more afraid of her. “Did you know that the smell of a blood elf, if taken in too closely by a human, can turn them mad for the rest of their lives? It would make you yearn for the scent all your life. You would not know any form of pleasure beyond it. And the toxin that induces pain — it contains a mental time dilator. While the process of draining you will only take a few minutes, to you, it will feel like days are going by. The pain will be so intense, you will forget what it means to exist. You will beg for death to take you quickly.”

“Did you take this long to kill the others as well?” Red asked.

“I don’t mind the time, to be quite honest,” Butz quickly interrupted.

“Even longer, we played a game with *them*. We howled in the caverns, pretending to be creatures that lurked in the shadows as we hunted them down. We wanted to see who could find them the fastest, without using any devices. That is the true glory of the hunt. To be alone with only one’s senses and their body. To practice your own capacity for tracking prey. Humans have yet to evolve to enjoy such pleasures.”

Red looked at Roland’s body, suddenly feeling terrible that he had let the stalker go on his own. *We should never have split up at all*, he thought, remembering that the girl with the Rune Mammoth was still at the top of the summit. *We’re even missing our strongest familiar*.

“Enough of this. Kill them already. I hunger!” the scarred elf said. His voice boomed loudly when he raised it. It sounded as though it was being amplified by a speaker. He slammed his knuckles against each other a few more times and let out an emphatic roar that rang in Red’s ears. He was sure that its echo must have gone all the way to the end of the cave. Some of the elves around the scarred one took a few steps back from him. Others stood their ground, but Red could tell they were intimidated and were trying their hardest not to show it. Linx curled up behind Butz, trying to hide himself. The girl only seemed annoyed.

“Are you going to come between me and my prey?” she asked, barely turning to the other elf as she spoke. “Do you challenge me to faadh?” She turned another inch towards him. “Me, are you challenging *me* to faadh?” She was almost facing him, but looked off in another direction as though she were thinking about something else. The scarred elf backed away while grunting but did not make another noise. *How can he be afraid of her?* Red wondered. The scarred elf was almost triple her size, both in height and width. She turned back to Red and Butz. Despite her calm exterior, Red

could tell she was raging inside from the exchange. He prepared himself to dodge if she swung her claws at him. Her hands shook with anger as she clasped them into fists. She created a set of deep grooves on the nephril with her claws, slowly etching the lines as though she were slicing flesh open. She took a deep breath to regain control of herself.

“What is the point in killing us?” Butz asked. She looked at him as though he had just asked a foolish question. “We are doing this for the same reason, you know, to fight the Xenosite. To save our star system. Why kill us? You can win the round without doing so. Maybe we can surrender. Or you can just focus on the objective at hand. What was the point of draining the three you found alone?”

“Where I come from, a warrior would be beheaded and then stuck on top of a pike for such cowardice. A person who is meant to dedicate their life to combat, to victory, to glory, asks for their life to be spared? This is why humans are such a weak race. So subordinate to their fears and anxieties. Blood elves, we are controlled by our thirst, passions, and strengths, not by the things we are afraid of. They would be *cruel* to you where I come from. They would not even give you the honor of being drunk by another warrior.” She spit on the floor. Her saliva was a thick globule of blood mixed with a black substance. “Not even exile is a worthy punishment. Only death can liberate someone from the fear of their own fate.”

“Is that meant to be an honor? Being drained by another warrior?” Butz asked. “To be honest, I would much rather *not* be drained by someone like that,” he pointed to the scarred elf. Red elbowed him lightly, hoping the falconer would stop making comments. According to their microAI, the humans were still far, and judging by their pace, they were having no luck navigating through the cave. *They won't make it in time, unless she lets us keep stalling*, Red thought. *Butz you're only going to get us killed in the most painful way possible.*

He began trying to think of ways to buy them more time. *Maybe if I use a fire cast to create an explosion, it would distract them for a bit.* He tried to study their surroundings as subtly as possible. *Or maybe this really is the end.* He decided he would not admit it later on if they made it out of this, but he knew that Butz was right. At the moment, he regretted trying to join WEAPON and would have preferred to keep his life over competing in the qualifiers. His mind drifted away as he thought about Raven and their childhood together. He forced himself to focus on the situation at hand but images of him and

her at the Vine or at Crest kept flashing through his mind. *There has to be a way out. What would Magnus think of? What would Raven do?*

“Do not be afraid of dying here, human. It is I who will drink you.” She emphasized herself as she spoke. “You will soon be part of another being, one far more powerful than you could ever hope to be. You will be part of a legacy that will continue on for generations, a bloodline that consists of kings, warriors, and beasts of unimaginable strengths. A lineage of conquerors, explorers, journeymen, all that you could imagine. I will grant you this gift. You need not even ask for it.”

Red knew what Butz was thinking of saying next and pinched the falconer before his sense of humor got the better of him. Raven disappeared from his compass. *She couldn't have been captured. All the blood elves are right here.* He feared that she might have run into a critter that she could not fend off or that the worm caused her to do something erratic. The girl began moving Red’s head around, looking over his neck like a hungry predator. Unsure if he should resist or not, he decided he would not fight back until she went to bite or slash him. Butz looked on with a horrified expression. She placed her finger nails right below his chin. “This is the vein that pumps the most of your blood. It is the one I drink from. Most humans have it on the other side. I have been feeding on your kind since I was born. I prefer it over the other creatures we feed on.”

She took his defilterizer off and threw it on the floor. He was expecting it, and a moment before, he drew the deepest breath in that he could. Even while blocking his breath, he could make out the blood elf scent. His nostrils flared, sensing its presence in the air. His urge to breathe came more from wanting to take in the scent than from a need of oxygen. Butz immediately started a cleansing cast next to him to clear out the air. Red felt a surge of appreciation for the falconer and his competence.

“Do you wish to fight me or no?” the girl asked impatiently. Red looked at her, confused by the question. “Use your cast. You have been *dying* to try it, no?” She held out her hands as though she were defenseless. “Use your fire cast, elementalist. Do the best you can. Use all of your flou. Summon your strength. Fight me. Allow me to earn my kill, and allow yourself to earn a good death. I give you this one chance. If you win, no one will harm you. We will let you go without a struggle. If you kill me, you kill me.” He could hear more laughs. *Is this a trap? he wondered. Or is she actually this crazy?* He thought of how angry she had been when the larger elf challenged her,

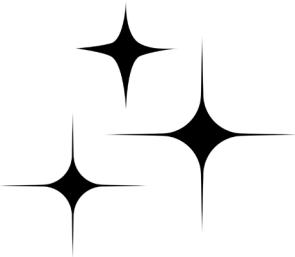
realizing this was likely another quirk of their culture.

“Do it,” Butz whispered under his breath. Red thought he heard him make a whirring noise as well, but the sound lingered after the falconer stopped speaking. It was so faint he could attribute it to his imagination.

“Do it!” Butz said again. “Red, do it. It’s our only chance.” Linx stood up and perked his ears, recognizing that something was about to happen. Red looked up at the girl, wondering if she could read his energy level and if she was truly prepared for any cast he could think of. *You can’t dodge fire*, he thought, *no matter how fast you are. I would cast in every direction. I would burn everyone here.* The other elves could protect themselves with their shields, but the girl was defenseless. The whirring noise got louder. He was sure it wasn’t in his head now. Some of the other elves noticed it as well, looking around to identify its source. It seemed to be coming from the walls of the cave. It sounded like a mechanical squeaking.

“Do you hear that?” he whispered to Butz. The girl took a stepped toward him, changing to her feral form. She bared her teeth and claws and bent low towards the ground, as Linx would before dashing towards an enemy. Red stood up, pivoted on his back foot, and began channeling his flou to prepare a cast. She growled loudly, letting blood drip from the corners of her mouth and her fangs. She sounded nothing like a sentient creature. Her cries were tameless, savage, expressions of a boorish hunger. She continued to lean lower towards the floor as his hands began to glow. He could not help but regret the idea of hurting her. He knew any fire that he summoned would lack the energy he normally put into his casts. His body still felt weaker. He found it harder to find his flou, all of it seemed fragmented and only loosely connected to his will.

“Are you sure about this?” he asked the girl. She did not reply, but clawed the floor madly with her hands. *She’s going to be fast.* He bent low on his knees to prepare to leap in either direction if she lunged at him. *This is it. I could be dead before this cast finishes.* He thought of Raven and the Vine as the fire began coming up in his hands. He thought of Magnus and Arkan and Areopa as it reached his fingertips. He turned back to look at Butz and Linx. The whirring noise got even louder. Linx was aware of it now, facing the direction where he thought it was coming from. It was loud enough to catch the girl’s attention. He thought that if ever there was a moment to attack, now was it, while she was distracted. *This is it. This is it.* The thought sent chills down his spine. He summoned his cast.



THE SOUND OF FURY

“**P**SILICA SWARM!” an elf screamed.

He recognized the sound as soon as the elf mentioned it. The familiar squeaking noises, like greased metal being squeezed together too quickly, signaled a swarm of the flesh-eating metallic crustaceans. By how loud the whirring was, he guessed that S must have used at least a third of the psilicadust she had brought from the loading room. Half the elves ran for it immediately, dispersing in different directions as they sped off into the cave. The other half stayed there, waiting for the girl that was still staring down Red.

“Come on, you can feed on them later!” an elf cried. She relented, howling one last time at Red before changing back to her passive form. She went from looking terrifying to the most beautiful creature he had ever seen in almost an instant. He wouldn’t have believed such a transformation were possible unless he had seen it for himself. Even her posture changed to resemble a well groomed warrior as opposed to an untamed beast. As she left, the rest of the elves followed.

“Well, we can’t go in the direction they’re going,” Butz said.

“Where are they coming from?!” Red shouted. “The Psilica Beetles, where are they coming from?”

“From there, I think,” Butz said, pointing in the direction of Red’s trail. “I can feel S’s energy signature. She’s the one casting it.”

“Of course she is. She’s the only healer. What can we do? Does fire burn them? Can I cast something?”

“No, there’s nothing we can do. They are resistant to most elements, even under extreme conditions. That’s why the elves ran. You can’t survive if you’re in the path of a Psilica swarm. You just get... eaten alive. Bit by bit.”

“Can’t we use an air cast to make them go in a different direction?” Red asked. He swerved his head left and right, looking for a direction to reroute the swarm. He was not trained in using air casts, but he thought he knew enough to control the cave’s currents. *Maybe I can leverage the breeze here.* Butz shook his head slowly, quickly deflating his hope.

“No, it’s weird how they work. Their swarm never moves backwards. It’s supposed to be a habit that keeps them from feeding on their own nests. Once you use an air cast to throw the eggs in a certain direction, there’s no stopping them. They seek out anything alive, anything with energy, anything with living tissue, and they devour it. If there were fossils on the floor here, they would eat *even that.*”

“Do they see in the dark? I mean, how are they coming towards us? How do they know where we are? There must be a hundred different paths through this cave,” Red asked, breathless. The squeaking noise was beginning to drown out his voice. *They’re coming. They know exactly where we are.*

“No, they’re blind and deaf. They don’t have any real senses, but they can detect living tissue from several tezras away. They have a lifespan of only a few minutes, not more than ten or fifteen. They need huge amounts of flesh and flou to sustain themselves and mate, to keep their swarm going. They’ll die out here, but I don’t think we’ll make it,” Butz shouted. “Red... I see them....” Through the dark of the cave, Red could see the glistening of metal, tiny specks of silver that were reflecting his light cast. He made it brighter to see the cloud of insects more clearly.

“Can we use a force field?” Red asked. “A barrier or something? You and I can create two. Or one and share our energy. Something powerful. A heat bubble of extreme temperatures?” His voice cracked as he screamed over the sound of the approaching beetles. He wondered if it was better to die this way, or to simply have been eaten by the blood elves. His mind ran through every idea it could imagine. He studied the area around them, looking for anything to take advantage of, a ditch they could jump into, a crack they could seal off. There was nothing in sight. They were in an open area, perfect for the insects.

“It’ll take them seconds to eat through it, and they’ll eat every piece of us as well. They eat hair, nails, everything. It’ll be like we never existed,” Butz replied. He held onto Linx tightly. “It’ll be fast.”

“BUTZ, THERE HAS TO BE SOMETHING WE CAN DO!” Red shouted at the top of his lungs. He looked at the falconer. Butz was calm,

serene. Red thought he could read what his face was saying. *I told you so.* He wanted to hit him as hard as he could. The blood elves were gone. He felt in control of his flou again. He was afraid, but in a way that would let him use more energy. The familiar intensity of combat, of adrenaline, of a need to survive gripped him. He aimed at a circle around the three of them and used as much flou as he could to heat up the area. The fire came out blue. He had never used a cast this powerful before, nor was he aware that he was capable of doing so until now.

“What are you doing?” Butz said, coming closer to Red to avoid the circle of flames.

“You’ll see,” Red said. “Just help me. Use an air cast to keep the flames tightly packed in the circle.” Butz did as he was told. The insects were coming closer. Red closed his eyes, afraid that looking at them would break his focus. *No, nothing can break my focus*, he thought.

“Red, we need more fire! It’s not going to work without more energy!” Butz shouted as he realized what Red was doing. The floor around them quickly started rising like a tiny fort.

Red collapsed on his knees and doubled his output. *I’m burning it too fast*, he thought. *I’m going to run out of energy faster than I should.* Tunnels of flames ran down uncontrollably from his arms to the nephril. The material glowed a bright blue as it rose above them. It was hot enough to be malleable now.

“Butz, make sure you shape it out the right way with air or force casts,” Red said. He was not sure if the falconer could hear him. “If we just raise it straight, it won’t create a roof above us. It won’t do anything at all. You have to make sure you curve it inwards.” In his mind, he began begging his own strength to serve him this one last time, to draw from itself more energy than it was capable of, far more energy than it had in its reserves. The screeching of the beetles was all he could hear now. They were not stealthy predators, nor stalkers, nor patient killers. The noises they made expressed the natural cannibalism of the insect world and their own relentless yearning for sustenance. It was the announcement of a predator that claimed it needed no disguise, no method of luring its prey, no obscure gambit for drawing in its own victims, a warning that all methods of escape would end in vain. It was the sound of an obnoxious, unstoppable carnivore. Each insect was the size of a human finger. They had no teeth, but mouths with rotating saws that could churn through bone without any effort. While they ate, they plucked back their entire heads, allowing their mouths to extend

past their jaws and stretch open to a nearly horizontal shape.

"Red, my gear isn't resistant to fire casts," Butz said. He looked delirious. "Linx, Red, Linx. Keep Linx alive." Red could no longer hear his voice and had to read his lips. While Butz was shaping out the dome over their heads, the fire was getting closer and closer to his feet.

I can't stop casting, Red wanted to shout, but knew there was no point. Butz came as close to Red as possible, but he still could not escape the heat around them. The flames were scorching hot, and unlike the cast he had used in the Twilight Caverns, all of the heat here was concentrated to a small area. He was sure Butz's gear would ignite by the end of it. *Can I do it?* Red asked himself. *Can I let him burn in my own cast to save myself?* He didn't stop the flames. He didn't stop to think what he was doing. His only priority was to survive now.

The fort was nearly finished. The screeching was so loud he was beginning to lose his sense of hearing. The squeaking, the whirring, the sound of the saws rotating in their mouths, all of it was becoming softer and softer as he turned momentarily deaf. Even the ringing in his ears wasn't loud enough to be heard over the screeching of the insects. He could hear the sound of digging — someone digging in his ears — the sound of blood pumping through his temples. He would have to close the walls around them and then use a sound barrier to protect his ears, or he would permanently lose his hearing. Butz looked up at him and gave him an encouraging nod. He knew what the falconer was saying, to save himself, *and Linx*, if he could. He could no longer maintain his cast at its temperature. The flames slowly began to turn orange, but the heat they generated was still overwhelming. Butz used the remaining bit of energy he had all at once in a force cast to try and push the walls closed, and then fainted from the heat. His head hit the floor between Red's knees with a hollow thud.

A second before the fort was completed, a single beetle whirred into the shelter inside. As though it had already planned what it would do, it immediately latched onto Linx's ears, sawing the cat's lobes with its stretched out mouth. Blood splattered all over Red's combat suit. He backed away first, slamming against the shelter while screaming, and then leaned over and grabbed Linx's ear, crushing the insect with all his force. Linx screamed, the sound of raw agony. The insect drilled closer and closer to Linx's head. Red screamed with effort as he tried to break it, but it seemed indestructible.

There's no other way, Red thought. *I'm sorry Linx. If I don't kill it here, it'll get*

Butz too, and then me. He had no time to think of alternatives. He summoned his energy again, focused a fire cast in the space between his hands and burned the critter with blue flames. The insect seemed to weaken, even if it was not dead. Its shell felt softer in Red's hands. He used all his strength to tear it off of Linx, ripping apart the cat's ear in the process. He slammed the beetle against the walls as many times as he could. He slammed it against the nephril until his hand was numb with pain and his own wrist was broken. He heard it crack. It sounded like metal breaking rather than bone. He dropped the dead insect on the floor. Its mouth had broken off but still rotated on its own. He clasped his hands over his ears, unable to stop the stream of tears that were now coming out and the sound of the insects outside.

Linx lay still next to Butz. He twitched unconsciously from pain and shock every few seconds. He was still breathing, but the bleeding from the side of his head would not stop. *Please make it*, Red thought. *Even if we don't, please make it, Linx. Please survive.* He felt more sympathy for the cat than even himself and Butz. Linx had not chosen to be here, to participate in WEAPON, nor to put himself in this kind of danger. *How crazy is it that you followed your falconer here, that you were this loyal, Linx?* Red thought. His tears would not stop, and he could think of nothing but the pain the familiar was bearing, more than his own and Butz's. He placed his palms over the cat's head and tried to use a healing cast. It was too weak to make a difference. He berated himself for not paying more attention in class, or to S when she taught them elementary healing casts. His hand continued to tremble over Linx's body as he struggled to try and think of something to help. He hit Butz on the head, and then shoved him several times, shouting at him to wake up. The falconer lay there, as still as his familiar.

He hunched over both of their bodies and sat inside of the shelter motionlessly with his hands tightly packed around his ears. The shrill noises of the Psilica Beetles slowly ate away at his sonic barrier, and, he thought, his sanity. The sounds continued for so long he could no longer differentiate them as external noises. He thought his own mind was driving itself mad, echoing the screeching in his head long after he had gone deaf. The minutes that he was counting down were the slowest ones he had ever experienced. Every time his microAI indicated that one minute had gone by, he questioned if he would make it to the next one. The only things keeping him sober were the few times when Linx twitched. Every time the Aeyz

Cat moved, something awoke inside of him, a hope, that all three of them would somehow make it alive — that they would be back in Echidna City to talk about the round, win or lose, WEAPON or no WEAPON.

The oxygen inside of their shelter was running out. He took in slow, calculated breaths to try and keep as much of it circulating as possible. He thought the swarm would pass through them, but the beetles decided to settle down and attempt to break through the nephril. They hacked away at the material with their mouths. *There's nothing to do but wait for death*, Red thought, *either mine or theirs*. He checked his microAI. Three minutes had passed.

His mind drifted over and over again to a single memory, when Butz adopted Linx. The keeper of familiars in Crest Academy had gotten Linx as a gift from a friend who knew how passionate she was about rare, powerful, and mysterious critters. Originally, Linx was not up for adoption to anyone. The cat was only showcased to those who were planning to train as falconers. The first time Butz saw him, he ran straight to their training session and told the four of them that he had fallen in love with the cat. Determined to find a way to adopt him, he volunteered to help take care all of the keeper's creatures for free. Butz used the time to learn the ins and outs of training familiars. He bonded with Linx early, more because he would spoil the cat with food he would buy on his own than because of his prowess in training familiars. *If anything, he was way behind in that area*, Red thought, remembering how difficult Butz used to find it to get Linx to obey any command.

After six months had gone by, the keeper indicated that she was going to take Linx with her on a long traveling route through Avalonia. Heartbroken, Butz decided to give up on becoming a falconer entirely. It was S who encouraged him to express his interest to the keeper anyway. Linx was there when Butz showed up at the critter's pen at Crest Academy. She relented after seeing how attached the two of them were to each other, and how determined Butz was to meet all of the familiar's needs.

"Aeyz Cats are powerful, and brilliant critters," Red remembered the keeper saying, "but they require an extraordinary amount of discipline, resources, and patience to train." Red thought he circled through this single memory a hundred times before the sound of the insects finally began dying out. He wondered if they were only silently waiting outside now, or if they were truly dead. *I still have no way to escape this place*, Red thought, grazing the nephril with his fingers. *This material is too hard*. He felt a sudden solace

in being there with Linx and Butz, in possibly having to die with his team around him. The oxygen was growing thinner and thinner. The last of the Psilica Beetles began to fall silent. He was left alone with only the sound of his fury.

Something crashed through the nephril, breaking the entire dome into pieces. The debris fell over his hands and his back. *It's either the blood elves who are here to kill me, or the humans who are here to save me*, Red thought. He remained impassive, not caring which it was. He did not look up to check. There were voices, but his hearing was too impaired to make sense of them. Someone pushed him to face up towards the ceiling. Several people bent around over him, but their faces were unrecognizable blurs. He felt someone touch his face and check his pulse, study his wounds. The hands were familiar, in the shape and energy of a healer. His eyes drifted toward where she was casting. He could see tiny pink and green sparks flying all over his body, closing wounds and granting him a tiny surge of energy. It was enough to keep him alive, to reverse his decline to unconsciousness. His lungs felt rejuvenated. He gasped for air, taking in as much as he could in giant gulps that nearly choked him.

"You... you found us," he began. "Are... are they alive?" He mumbled the words in between breaths.

"I think Butz will be fine," S said. "He has internal burns, but nothing I can't fix. I might have to use up all of my energy." Her voice was calm, but despondent. She began studying Linx. Red was too afraid to ask about the familiar.

"Can you save Linx?" Magnus asked.

"I don't know," S said. She took out a kapcha and wrapped Linx's head with it. The bleeding still didn't stop. The wounds were too large and too deep. Red was surprised by how much blood the Aeyz Cat could lose without dying. He was still breathing, even if faintly. S began using her healing casts on both Linx and Butz. She tried her best to balance her energy between them, giving a bit more to Linx when she could. *Just survive, just survive*, Red thought. While healing casts were exerted by healers onto their targets, the casts themselves heavily relied on manipulating the flou of the targets to complete the healing. It was exponentially harder to heal targets that were severely wounded as opposed to ones with only mild injuries.

Red's vision began to clear up. He was well enough to walk. Even his right hand did not hurt as much as it should have. His left could still cast

appropriately, although he felt almost entirely drained of all his energy. He insisted that S used only the bare minimum amount of energy on him and spent the rest on Linx. He realized he was lucky not to have suffered any serious wounds. He was only exhausted, traumatized from the noise, and delirious. His hearing began to return to normal. Everything still sounded like it was underwater, but he was able to understand people as they spoke.

"I'm going to try something," S said, after failing to see any improvement in Linx's condition. She held onto the cat's toes and began summoning a tiny electric cast.

"You're shocking him?" Magnus asked.

"Yeah, I think it's our only hope," S replied. "I need him to at least be conscious. I have to draw his own flou to heal him. It's impossible the way he is now. He's not getting any better."

"You think it'll work?" Magnus asked.

"I don't know," S replied. Red's heart dropped. He thought of Slink crashing into the waters of Takis and the expression on Wren's face. When Butz woke up, he would be devastated. He could not imagine having to tell the falconer that it was his fault his familiar had died. *If only I could have summoned more energy from myself*, he thought. He resented every moment he did not spend practicing for WEAPON. *I'm responsible for all of this. I made them follow me to the qualifiers without even being prepared for it myself.* Linx was not responding to the charge S created. She amplified her cast.

"This is the highest I can go without actually hurting him further," S said. "I've never even practiced this before. I only know it should work in theory." Magnus kneeled down over Linx, watching with a careful attention for any sign of life. Red rolled over to do the same. *Anything Linx, anything. Just move.* He could see the static spark across Linx's body. The Aeyz Cat's hair immediately stood up. He could hear the cat's heartbeat. The memory of Butz adopting him kept replaying in his head over and over again.

A foot stirred. Linx's foot. He thought first that it was too good to be true, that it was only the electricity causing a muscle spasm. As though they had planned it together, both Linx and Butz lifted their heads nearly simultaneously, looking first at S and then everyone else around them. Red thought he would faint from the surge of joy he felt. *We're going to surrender, he thought. I'm not going to rounds two or three. I will never put my team in this much danger again.*

"You almost killed us," Butz said. He lay his head back down on the

floor. He flexed his hands repeatedly, waiting for feeling to return to them.

“I know,” S replied. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking straight. I knew the blood elves were where you guys were. I panicked, and no one could think of any way to help you guys escape. I didn’t even ask anyone if it was a good idea. I just wanted to get them away from you guys.”

“We’re fine,” Red said. “We’re fine.” He repeated the words in his head over and over again, finding them hard to believe. “It worked out in the end. They’re gone, for now.” He looked down the path the elves had run.

“That was brilliant thinking,” Magnus said. “Using the nephril like that.”

“How did you guys break through it? I thought it was harder than that,” Red asked.

“*We* didn’t. I thought it was indestructible, myself. That was her,” Magnus said, pointing to Raven, who was leaning against the cave away from them. She walked over when Red noticed her.

“Are they going to make it?” she asked, gesturing to Linx and Butz.

S nodded. “I think so, yeah. I think Linx will make it.” She held the cat carefully in her hands, using all of her healing energy on it. Butz pulled himself up and began chugging down water.

“Are you hurt?” Raven asked Red.

He looked away when she asked the question. “No, nothing serious. Just exhausted. And my ears...” He shook his head, trying to relieve the headache from the screeching of the Psilica Beetles.

“Did the blood elves do anything to you?”

“No, I was about to fight one. The girl. She’s powerful.”

“I know,” Raven replied. “I sensed her.”

“You disappeared from our microAI. And... you’re not infected anymore? What was it like?”

“I only vaguely remember what happened. It was like a dream where I was watching myself from the third person, only partially in control of my own thoughts and actions. I killed Lance?” Red nodded. “When I came back to consciousness I got the message in our microAI about the Velvet Worm. It seemed obvious to throw out my microAI. The blood elves won’t realize that our infected was cured yet.”

“You came back to consciousness early,” Magnus replied. “They die from our own lifeforces.”

“I know. Mine is stronger than all of yours. The twenty-two hours is an estimate for the rest of you.” She got up and began walking down the cave.

“If Linx is okay, we need to move. We only have a small window before they realize one of their own is going to be infected soon. By then, they’ll already be on their way back to their own mountain.” Some of the other humans looked at her hesitantly. Others were ready to follow without question.

“They’re still here?” Red asked. “There’s too many of them for us to fight, and they’re too strong.” Several members of their team agreed with him, nodding apprehensively. They looked just as broken as Red and Butz, despite not having suffered any injuries. *Is this the best humans can do?* Red thought, looking at how weak everyone suddenly looked compared to the blood elves. *Maybe they are the superior race.*

“We have no choice,” Raven replied. “We either fight now, or we wait for them to come kill us later.”

“Maybe we should surrender,” one of the participants suggested. Red was surprised that no one immediately shot down the idea.

“We can’t surrender, not after we’ve already come this far,” Magnus replied. He began walking towards Raven. S, Red, and Butz followed behind the two of them along with the rest of the humans.

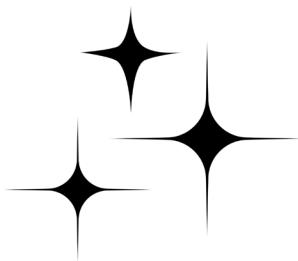
“I’ll watch Linx,” Butz said, taking the Aeyz Cat from S. Linx’s bleeding had stopped. He seemed to be in a much better condition. He was asleep now, but looked calm and peaceful. Over and over again, Red could hear the cat’s screaming when the Psilica Beetle first grabbed onto its ears. That and the sound of the beetles screeching were like background music in his mind now. He could not shake them off. He could feel a draft coming from up ahead. They were approaching another exit out of the mountain. He could already make out the yellow of the wisp outside. This cave entrance was at a lower altitude than the one where they had set up camp.

“Do we have a plan for fighting them?” Magnus asked Raven. The two of them walked ahead of the rest of the group, but Red was close enough to hear them.

“Yes, we hit them harder than they hit us.”

“We’re going to be outnumbered,” Magnus replied. “It would be seventeen of us against twenty-five of them.”

“It was one on forty-nine when I started, and that was easy enough,” Raven replied.



SULEYK

They swam through the wisp to get back up as quickly as possible to the summit. The few Straggler Melts that they had caught on the sides of the mountain before were not acting out of habit. They were closer to their colonies than it seemed. Inside the wisp were thousands of their kind. They grazed through the yellow smoke with the weightless tranquility of sea creatures, often forming patterns as they clumped up into enormous schools. The ones of a higher stage looked like lone isles, floating serendipitously around their younger analogues like towering moons. There were no other creatures besides the Straggler Melts, no predators, no parasites, no symbionts. As Red approached the tip of the yellow blanket, he thought of how heavily their peaceful and solitary existences contrasted with all that he had known himself. Somewhere, far away from where he was, there were millions of these creatures floating on a real dead star, living out their stellar lifespans unaccompanied by the troubles of the universe. He pushed through the wisp and grabbed onto a ridge on the mountain. He began to climb up behind Raven, increasing his pace to be next to her. He heard Butz coughing and spitting right behind him. The falconer had swallowed too much of the wisp.

“Roland was drained,” Red said. “They caught him when he was exploring the cave.”

“I had a feeling he was going to die anyway,” Raven replied. “He was careless.”

“Careless? You knew him for a few minutes.”

“That was enough.”

Butz was gaining on them, climbing quickly despite having Linx perched on his shoulder. The Aeyz Cat was half asleep. He occasionally opened his eyes to check for danger, but the alertness that defined his character was

gone. S and Magnus lagged behind Butz, along with the rest of their team. “You really have no plan for engaging them? Nothing thought out at all?” Butz asked.

“No,” Raven replied. “We’ll catch them off-guard. They won’t know that the infected human has been cured. We’ll have to stall until one of their own is infected.”

“Did you notice that they have no falconers?” Red asked.

“That’s probably because they feed on all of their familiars,” Butz replied. “Savages, those elves. Did you see the way they were looking at us? Like packets of food, not even creatures to be hunted.”

“Well, we were surrounded by twenty-five of them. We *were* like packets of food at the time. You’d think they had a little more respect for other sentient beings though,” Red said.

“It’s a part of who they are,” Raven answered. “They treat each other the same way.”

“I wonder how their class system works. I couldn’t identify what any of them were. They just all looked bred to fight hand to hand. They didn’t strike me as too smart either,” Red replied.

“Don’t let their aggressiveness fool you. They were smart enough to ambush us through the other side of the mountain and use Roland’s microAI to keep track of all the humans,” Raven replied. “Be careful as we cross over the ledge. They might be right there.”

As they approached the top of the mountain, Red could feel the energy signatures of the elves getting stronger. He assumed that they climbed up to the summit to keep sight of the entire mountain, watching for any humans that might try and escape through the wisp. They checked for any nearby elves as they jumped over the top. Raven went first and Red followed behind her. The rest of their team picked up their pace, arriving at the summit only a minute behind Red and Raven. The Rune Mammoth immediately caught Red’s attention. The sight of the creature tied down and drained, along with his falconer, made his head spin with nausea. It was hard for him to imagine that blood elves were anything more than unfeeling predators that happened to resemble sentient beings. The elves were standing in a semicircle at the other side of the summit, patiently waiting for all the humans to arrive. The ones that had just fed on the Rune Mammoth were sitting down. They seemed to be bracing themselves from the feast, overwhelmed by the energy they received from it.

“Well... they don’t look very surprised for being caught off-guard,” Butz said. Raven ignored him. The girl stood closer to them than the other elves, near the center of the summit. She stood right next to the chalice with the drop of metal, waiting for someone to step forward. Raven went, just as the last of the humans arrived. Red could feel his heart dashing from beat to beat as he looked at the elf. Her eyes glanced over him before settling on Raven.

“Be careful,” S whispered. Raven was already too far to hear.

“They will not fight you,” the elf said while waving her hands at the elves around them. “I tried to convince them otherwise, but they still refuse. They are afraid of you. We sensed the presence of a Suleyk when we first arrived at this mountain, but it was too hard to believe. Then we felt all of you climbing up the mountains, chasing after us. At that moment, I knew it had to be true, or that there was a chance it was true. Only a Suleyk would be brave enough to face death as an equal, to bring their own people to ruin without any hesitation. You are the first human to pass the trials of Suleyk for more than two millennia, but there is no record of a human Suleyk in existence. You have gone to Karth on your own? You have travelled to the caves?”

“No,” Raven replied. “I’ve never been to Karth.”

“Tell me, how have you become Suleyk then? Is this some sort of trick for the trials of WEAPON? Have you prepared a way to fool us?” She seemed angered now. “You have somehow forged passing the trials?”

“I don’t even know what that is. I’ve never heard of any of your rituals, and I don’t know anything about your trials or your ways. I only know how you fight, and that’s all I care about.”

“You do not know what a Suleyk is?” The elf sounded confused now. “Have you travelled to your dreams ever, human? To your worst fears, your nightmares? Have you stared into the heart of an ainmosni crystal and gone into the eternal sleep? Have you felt the presence in your mind of dream feasters? Have you fought against the devourers of fears?” Raven did not reply, but silently looked at her in understanding now. “Ahh, so you *do* know what I speak of.” She looked around at the other elves. “They will not fight you. We are forbidden by our blood to kill a Suleyk. The enlightened ones are never to be harmed. The only exception is to challenge one to faadh, a ritual battle, if you would, between two blood elves. You are human, but by being Suleyk, you are able to accept. The fight is to the death. The stakes

are simple. If you win, my people here will concede that you are the victors of the trials of WEAPON. We will hand over our own infected for their killing. If I win, I am to drink from you, and take your weapons and your titles. I challenge you to faadh, Suleyk. Do you accept my challenge?” The elf took her crystal blades and cut the palm of her hand, letting the blood drip onto the summit.

“Why is this different from those two just fighting?” Red whispered to S.

“We can’t interfere in the fight,” S replied. “It’s between those two. I mean, I guess technically we can. We’re not the ones bound by their law. I don’t know what they would do though. Maybe hunt us down later. I’ve seen these in Karth. The ones who participate in faadh are usually the strongest of their kind, and they do so to determine things like control over kingdoms and territories. Sometimes two elves will commit to faadh just out of anger. Other times, it’s done to strengthen their bloodlines. I’ve seen two male elves challenge each other to faadh to decide who would create children with someone else, because a single bloodline that combined both of their strengths would create more powerful children.”

“That’s a bit too much dedication to your own people if you ask me,” Butz whispered “I can’t imagine all blood elves are like this. This has to be just their strongest ones, or their warrior caste or something. From what I’ve heard from Magnus, most of Sanguine City is populated by petty blood elves that are always starving for blood, scouring the streets, and licking the floors for just a few drops.”

“I accept your challenge,” Raven said. She copied the elf, cutting the palm of her hand, and then took out her keratana, gripping both ring blades with the tips of her fingers to keep the edges from touching her. She let the rings drop to the floor and grabbed onto the center of the elastic chain. She slowly tugged and dragged on the chain to test the weight of the rings, trying to get an intuitive grasp over how to control the weapon based on its balance and the increased gravity of the arena.

“Ahh so you are a master of many weapons, Suleyk?” the elf asked. “Come, show me your skill. I wish to see what a human Suleyk is capable of. I wish to taste the strength of humanity.”

Raven did not hesitate. She whipped the chain over her head with all her strength, throwing the first ring blade over the edge of the summit before bringing both of them all the way over towards the elf. When the blades were perfectly horizontal or vertical in the air, they were too thin and too

fast to be seen. Red could only hear them whistling through the air towards the elf. *Duck*, he whispered to himself. He did not want Raven to lose, but he did not want the elf to die.

She dodged the first ring by taking a short step back. It wasn't a fast, nor a sudden reaction. It was a slow, controlled movement, the minimum required to dodge it. The second ring lashed towards her and she ducked to dodge it, and then lifted her own claws to catch the ring between them. The ring spun around the elf's blades until she threw it back towards Raven.

The prometheus did not move to dodge it. She used all her strength to pull on the chain and throw the ring back towards the elves. It spun through the air towards the other side of the summit. Some of the elves dodged it. The last one in the semicircle did not react fast enough and the ring sliced off his head a second before Raven let it land on the floor. Some of the humans stepped closer to the edge of the summit, horrified by the sudden injury. The elves did not flinch. They looked on at the battle with more interest.

"You have power, but no control, Suleyk," the elf said. Raven gripped the keratana more firmly, as though she was going to throw it with more strength, but then dropped it and took out her blade. Her sword looked like it was made out of dots of light rather than metal. When there was no light pollution in the atmosphere, celestial steel perfectly reflected the natural light of distant stars on its surface. The metal part of the blade turned into a barely visible, ethereal shade of grey. From afar, it looked like there was another universe inside of the blade, ready to burst free every time it was swung.

"Power *is* control," Raven replied. She charged, lifting her blade over her shoulder and jumping high into the air. The hilt of the blade glowed a burning blue as she focused her energy into it, charging the entire blade with plasma. She landed with a loud clang as the metal hit the floor of the summit, creating a crater on the mountain and a shockwave of flou that combusted into blue flames. The elf dodged it again, more easily this time, but Raven's movement was so slow that Red suspected she never intended for the blow to land, only intimidate her opponent. The elf looked slightly shaken, but still confident. He wondered if the blow would have been strong enough to kill her had it landed.

"The elf is fast," S said.

"She doesn't move fast," Red replied.

“Not that kind of fast, not quick. She’s *fast*. She can pick up on her opponent’s movements quickly, read a fight. She’s predictive, not reactive.”

“So much fury and rage, suppressed inside, do you think that gives you control over it, Suleyk? To be able to contain it inside of yourself, to never let it out, do you think that is the same as having mastery over it?” the elf asked. “You should have been born a blood elf. You would have fit finely in one of our clans. You would have been bred to be one of the best. We would have unlocked your full potential.” She spoke with a fanatic zeal. “We would have taught you better than these humans have. We would have taught you how to release your anger, not hold it in. How to express your intensity. How to let it run wild in the world the way it does in your mind. You were born in the wrong race, Suleyk. You were not meant to be human, not meant to be imprisoned by the shackles of a timid race. But fear not, I will liberate you from the confines of fate. Your blood will be mine, and I will carry your strength to the destiny it was meant to fulfill. In fact, why not just surrender? You do not wish to see what your blood is capable of? How it can change the world? The powers that are hidden inside of you?”

“Ignorance is bliss,” Raven replied. She straightened her sword, preparing for a second maneuver.

“Knowledge is power,” the elf answered. Raven began laughing. Not in a loud or offensive tone, but in a careless, sarcastic one. He had never seen her laugh in a fight before. The elf pivoted into her combat stance, both confused and intrigued by Raven’s outburst. “Why do you laugh, Suleyk?”

“I am going to kill you.” She began walking towards the elf, dragging her blade carelessly across the floor. “And then I’m going to let your blood drip from the side of the mountain, because it is useless to me. I am already far stronger than you.”

The elf no longer looked cavalier. She held her hands out in fists, sharpening the blades on her wrists against each other. “I will show you strength, human. I will show you control. I will show you what power is.”

She bent over onto her knees, closed her eyes, and sat looking down on the floor. Without waiting to see what the elf was doing, Raven jumped into the air again and brought her blade down with even more force than last time. Red stepped back. Even if her blow did not make contact, he knew the aftershock would throw him off balance.

What is she doing? Red thought, looking at the elf. *Move!* She looked as though she had sat herself down for death, patiently waiting for Raven’s

sword to come down on her. She did not look up as Raven began descending on her. She was less than half a second away from being torn into pieces when Red felt her energy signature climb up to the highest he had ever seen in a sentient being. It lasted for only a fraction of a second. The energy was channeled into her blades as Raven's sword struck down on her. The elf jumped to her feet and pulled her claws up to block the sword, crashing into the celestial steel with the sound of glass exploding in a nova.

At the center of the summit, a human had run up and hugged the chalice and the pillar it was on to keep the drop of metal from spilling over. *Good thinking*, Red sighed, chastising himself for not thinking of it first. *That can be an escape plan*. He was close enough to the chalice to knock it over himself if things went badly here.

The elf and Raven were both out of breath. Raven's blade had broken. Its top half was not only severed, it had shattered into tiny pieces that were scattered all over the summit.

"I didn't even know that celestial steel could break," Red whispered to Magnus.

"Yeah, this isn't good," Butz said.

"It can't, not under normal circumstances," Magnus replied.

"I have to help. I can't let her die. She has no weapon now," S said.

"Not yet," Red replied. "She can still fight."

"Had you been a blood elf, you would have known that the mind is the strongest weapon in the universe," the elf said. "No material can break it, and no material can withstand the strength of its focus."

Raven tossed aside her sword as if it meant nothing to her. She took a few steps back from the elf and then began disarming herself. She took out her daggers, her bracers, a short sword she kept on her legs, her bow and arrow, everything she had on her, and put them aside on the floor.

"Ahh... now you are beginning to see the way, Suleyk. Now you are finally understanding," the elf said. Raven threw her cutlass over to Red. When the last of her weapons were off, she walked over to the elf again and stood in her combat stance. The elf followed suit and began taking off her bracers. The blades on her wrist were unscathed from their contact with celestial steel. When she took them off and unstrapped the shell they were attached to from her back, they hit the floor with a thunderous clap and left a third crater on the summit.

"Impossible..." Magnus whispered.

"That must weigh a ton. She's been fighting with it on her back. No wonder she seemed slow," S gaped.

"Raven hasn't shown her full speed or strength yet either," Red replied. "Just wait."

"If I see the elf taking the upper hand, I'm going to help her," S said. "I don't care what kind of ritual they're fighting under. I'm not a blood elf, and I'm not going to watch her die. Not without me, at least."

Red eyed the chalice as she spoke. The human who had grabbed on to it before had stepped away, but was still guarding it carefully. He thought about going over and telling her to knock it over if they had to, but then thought it would look too suspicious if a blood elf noticed. *If it comes down to it, I'll have to just run and do it myself.*

"Come, elf. Show me the strength of a true predator," Raven said. "I wish for one of us to die by the hands of the other."

The elf smiled wolfishly back at her. "Suleyk, you are the only human I have ever met to be worthy of my own blood." She launched herself at Raven, who disappeared from Red's vision and then reappeared next to the elf a split second later to shoulder her at her waist. The elf flew back and crashed onto the floor next to another blood elf. She was both infuriated and shocked.

Although Raven had landed a good blow, she had burst an incredible amount of energy to perform her technique. Red was not sure who won the exchange. Judging by the elf's reaction, he thought that it was the first time she was hit that hard without being able to counter. The elf changed to her feral form almost immediately and launched herself at Raven again, this time leaping on all fours like a critter. She seemed even more ferocious than when he first saw her. Her throat was throbbing with veins, and her hands had grown disproportionately large and resembled meshed claws.

Something caught Red's attention and his eyes stopped following the fight. At the other side of the summit, he saw a blood elf hunching over the edge of the mountain as though he was throwing up. *It's happening.* None of the other blood elves had noticed yet. *This is my only chance. I need a distraction.*

The elf collided with Raven. Red ran for the other side of the summit, crossing straight through the center where the chalice was. Butz shouted something after him about Linx, but he paid no attention to the words. He was not looking at the fight in the center, but he could hear the blood elf smothering Raven against the floor. Her hands were clawing at her while

Raven was blocking them with her forearms. He saw blood splatter into the air, but he was not sure who it belonged to. He heard the thud of a blow landing on someone's face. The other blood elves looked at him running towards the chalice, but did not react. They seemed not to care so long as he did not interfere with the fight. The human girl guarding the chalice mumbled something to him and tried to stop him from running into the pillar, but he dove headfirst for the chalice anyway. He thought he had it, but she used a force cast to knock him over.

"What are you doing!?" she shouted. "We can't knock this over." Red looked over at the blood elf that was hunched over. One of the other elves now noticed the sick elf and was asking him if he was okay. He saw what Butz was shouting at now — Linx was running towards the center of the summit as well. He leaped first onto the girl, then onto the chalice, grabbing it with his mouth while spilling the drop of metal onto the floor. He walked over to Red with the chalice and a proud look on his face. *Smart cat*, Red thought. He did not know what to expect from the reaction. Nothing was happening at first. The drop of metal touched the nephril and evaporated in a puff of smoke. Raven pushed the elf off of her and rolled over onto her feet.

"Red, watch out!" she screamed. Two blood elves were walking over to him. They weren't charging or walking fast. They were coming to keep him from interfering with the fight.

Where the drop of metal had landed, the floor of the mountain suddenly began moving. It looked like an optical illusion. The flat surface of the nephril slowly began segmenting into different shapes — circles, triangles, and odd geometric figures, and then began switching positions with each other like a puzzle. The figures started out large and then segmented into smaller and smaller pieces as the reaction progressed. The area it covered grew larger and larger, spreading across the center of the summit like someone was carving out the top of the mountain and rearranging the pieces faster and faster.

Although Red could see the floor underneath him changing, it did not feel different at first. The only noticeable change, besides the visual effect of the mountain catonizing, was that he could now feel the mountain's energy. It felt like the entire structure was slowly coming alive, awakening from a dormant state that hid its own organic flow. Red's hands began sinking into the mountain. He pulled them up but then his feet began sinking

and he had to stand up and jump to keep from being swallowed by the floor. Linx hopped on his shoulders when he felt the same happening to him.

“What have you done?” the girl asked. She tried pulling herself up but she had sunk too deep to escape. It felt like they were drowning in quicksand. Where the chalice had fallen, a small whirlpool within the nephril began to develop. It slowly levitated off the ground and looked like a tiny, inverted tornado. Rather than continuing to grow larger, at one point it suddenly collapsed into itself and then exploded into ten more whirlpools, which repeated the process.

When one of the whirlpools was right next to Red, he grazed it with his fingers. He felt all his energy return to him, supercharged as though he had been electrocuted with flou. In an instant, he felt all his exhaustion melt away into a nervous energy that put him at his maximum potential for casting. Adrenaline coursed through his body as he tried to contain the surge of flou. He turned around to look at the blood elf who was going through infection.

I have to get him. He struggled to get up on his feet and then ran towards the elf. His foot touched another whirlpool. He lost his balance from the pang of dizziness that came with the additional energy and struggled again to get up from the dissolving nephril. He knew his flou was at an even higher level now, but he was already past his peak, and felt both nauseous and too exhilarated to channel the extra energy. It was far too much to control. He began sinking faster and faster, too fast to pick himself up from the nephril.

He used a fire cast and a force cast to propel himself forward, unable to escape the nephril with sheer strength. He would never have been able to use both casts simultaneously, but the feeling of having infinite energy from the sphyrix allowed him to commit to both without worrying about running out of energy. He paid no attention to the commotion around him, nor to his own team shouting at him.

He grabbed onto the infected blood elf but almost tumbled off the summit in the process. The elf fell over and dangled at the edge of the summit while holding onto Red’s arm. He sounded as though he was choking. He held onto his own neck with one hand, and Red’s left arm with the other. His face began to change the same way Raven’s had, with tiny black lines forming around its sides like dark veins. Red swung him over to

the summit, but the sphyrix had already reached them. As the whirlpools spread out, drawing closer and closer to him, he could feel their potency and the sudden urge to throw up, a desperate reaction by his body to get rid of its extra flou.

At the center of the summit, the humans and the blood elves had begun fighting. He grabbed onto the infected blood elf from behind, but fell through the mountain before he could decide on what to do. Everyone sank through the summit faster and faster, eventually falling through the nephril as though it were empty air rather than a solid substance. The mountain was caving in towards the floor.

We'll hit the wisp eventually. We'll be okay, Red hoped. He held onto the blood elf as hard as he could. The elf was still not entirely conscious but was struggling against his grip. He saw Raven and the blood elf girl were still grappling with each other. They were so absorbed in their own fight that it seemed like neither of them realized the mountain was breaking apart around them. Raven put the girl in a headlock, but the girl bit into her arm and was draining her blood through it. Raven still held on tight. It was a race to see who could kill the other first. Raven used her other arm to pull on the one wrapped around the girl's neck.

"Red! Kill him! End the simulation!" he heard someone shout at him. It was Magnus. He was falling at the same pace as him, clawing at the nephril around him to try and hold onto something. The whirlpools were all over now, shooting left and right like micro-cyclones.

"Red! There isn't much time! Before we hit the wisp, burn him!" Butz shouted. The falconer was locked in combat with another blood elf.

"He's infected!" the girl blood elf shouted between her choking gasps. "Stop him!" Her mouth was dripping with Raven's blood. Raven's arm seemed to have gone numb from being drained, but she was still pulling it with her other arm to strangle the girl. Red wasn't sure who would last longer.

I have to do this. I have to, he told himself. He did not think about what he would have to do after he caught the infected blood elf. *Don't think about it. Just do it — tunnel vision.*

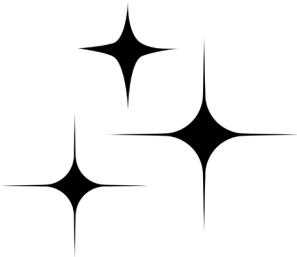
"Do it, Red!" Raven shouted. He summoned all the energy he could muster, even if he could not control it, and wrapped himself in fire. The elf had no heat-resistant gear on. There was nothing to protect him besides a shield that melted in seconds. As Red incinerated the elf's body, fire poured

out of his eyes and mouth like he was bleeding flames. Just as it seemed like the mountain had entirely catonized and they couldn't fall any faster, he dipped into the wisp and began falling all the way through. The substance slowly absorbed his speed until he hit a metal floor with a hollow thud. He looked around, confused at first, by the sudden disappearance of the wisp. The environment had vanished around him. They were no longer on the dead star. He was standing in the arena as it originally was. In the far distance, he could hear the roar of a crowd. The elf that he had burned was now only a pile of dust and ash next to his hands.

"We did it," he whispered, more to himself than anyone else. Some of the blood elves were looking around, confused as well by the sudden disappearance of the environment. Raven and the girl had stopped fighting. There were MegaCORP uniformed soldiers pouring into the arena now, coming through chutes in the floor.

"We did it," he said again, to Butz, who was the closest to him.

"Yeah," Butz replied, gasping for air. "Only two more rounds to go."



BROKEN SWORD, HIDDEN BLADES

A week had passed since the first round of the qualifiers. The second round would not occur for another six weeks. No details about it were released yet. Red and Magnus were sitting in the living area of their suite, discussing the morality of hunting critters while S and Butz were in the kitchen making the next meal for the team. Raven was in meditation in her room after a training session that had spanned most of the morning. The team had returned before mid-day, but she stayed for several extra hours.

Despite her increased training regimens, Red thought that her focus had been awry for the last few days. The injury from the blood elf had healed, but her pride had not. She slept even less than she normally did, and spent her time almost exclusively meditating or training on her own. She no longer insisted that anyone come to training sessions with her. She would leave for a full day's regimen without telling anyone, and never comment on their absences if they did not follow.

Magnus scheduled their training routines now, which Red found less grueling than Raven's old schedule, but still adequate. However, he now felt guilty that he was not training as hard as he could be. The last round had left him regretting that he did not train harder at Crest Academy, but also more appreciative of life outside of combat. He spent more of his days exploring Nimbus and the other human city in Areopa, Alto. Butz would often accompany him while Magnus and S spent more time helping Arkan with his duties in the Alcazar.

Red thought that Raven was pushing herself harder than her body could handle and tried several times, unsuccessfully, to get her to take a long break before the second round neared. Every morning, he could sense that her

flou was weaker than it was the day before. She had a continually dogged expression, the look of someone trying to deny their own exhaustion. S would constantly remind her that if she burned herself out, she might collapse too close to the second round to have time to recover, but Raven did not lighten her regimens and always insisted that she was fine.

The pieces of her sword had been retrieved from the simulation but she had no interest in trying to put them back together. Despite her emotional attachment to it, which Red found akin to Butz's attachment to Linx, she gave the remains of the weapon to a shop that sold used gear. She asked for no money in return, and for her name not to be recorded as a previous owner. Red thought it was her way of distancing herself from the nostalgia inherent in the weapon. Prior to the qualifiers and the combat suit she received from MegaCORP, it was the only piece of gear she had earned on her own, and that did not belong to someone else before. Butz suggested that the only way she would return back to normal was if they somehow setup a rematch with the elf. Red kept an eye on Raven, fearing that she was mad enough to go to Sanguine City on her own and seek out the girl to complete their faadh.

Red had only been able to see Prince Arkan once this week. The raeth wing was now a center of activity as everyone in the Alcazar prepared for Arkan's induction as the new king of Areopa. It kept the prince busier than he liked to be, but Red thought it was a good way to keep his mind off of his father's death. Although Arkan never seemed emotionally invested in the tragedy like the rest of Nimbus, Red suspected he was compartmentalizing the event the way Raven did with her own ordeals.

During their brief meeting, Arkan was quick to indicate that the guards had found the slime Red had mentioned earlier. The substance was frequently spotted throughout the Alcazar, sometimes in bizarre locations like the Oz pen, but there were never more than a few ounces of it on the floor. The guards, unaware of what it could mean, assumed that a child in the Alcazar must have been playing a prank and attempted to track down the culprit, but to no avail. On holograms that captured what was happening, the liquid was always seen dripping from above, but because the Alcazar had no ceiling, the source of the substance remained unknown. Arkan reassured them that nothing sinister was ever seen, and that the slime could very well be different from the one they had seen in the Twilight Caverns. Red remained unconvinced and his paranoia grew worse day by day.

Round one had initially taken his mind off of the darker vibes of the Alcazar, but he was reminded of the city's somber atmosphere soon after returning. Although Arkan made it seem as though nothing had changed, it was obvious to Red that the Alcazar was worse off than before. Another incident had occurred, outside of the palace. Several members of the Light who were staying at lodges in Nimbus were found mutilated deep under the city's main levels. Parts of their bodies were torn, and others were missing entirely. The bodies looked identical to the ones found in the Alloy Desert a day before their field test, decayed and rotten as though they had been sitting there for years.

A crime like that had not been committed in the human cities of Areopa for decades. Most of the Priori who remained in the Alcazar after Gelda's death left soon thereafter. The guards at the Alcazar, who once looked invincible in their stances, now seemed even more scared than the palace's residents. They were startled easily, and could often be seen charging their casts preemptively before any sign of danger. Half the Alcazar had emptied out. Although the raeth wing was still fairly busy, barely anyone could be seen walking around the courtyards or anywhere they didn't have business. Guests who arrived to see the qualifiers opted to stay at Nimbus or outside of Areopa entirely, on an orbiting ship. Word had spread that people were disappearing as well, including most of Doctor Lurch's colleagues and assistants. While most assumed that it was because they were leaving the Alcazar without telling anyone, in the back of Red's mind, he always held the possibility of something more sinister.

The Priori only left a few people behind at the Alcazar. They watched Red and Raven as consistently as they could. They were no longer dressed in their silver cloaks, and followed them less conspicuously than before, making no effort at all to hide their attempts to overhear their team's conversations. They were always nearby when Red toured the Alcazar, and the few times he had left the royal palace to explore Nimbus, he spotted them among the residents of the city. They often donned Nimbus's native garb, but their mannerisms made them easy to spot. Occasionally they followed Butz, S, and Magnus as well. Their team agreed that so long as the Light did not cause them any harm, there was no point in confronting them.

Red also saw Zenae a few times around the raeth wing. He thought it odd that she was one of the few the Light would leave behind. She looked even more robotic than the first time he saw her. He thought that it must

have been obvious to the Light that she was still being controlled by either id-speech or another form of psykinesthetic force.

The five of them learned as much as they could about the Priori's presence in their star system. Butz was more interested in their culture, history, and the deeper aspects of their beliefs. Red was sure it had something to do with his interest in Lux.

Despite what would seem like an obvious reason to confront Raven after the qualifiers, not a single member of the Priori came up to them to investigate Lance's death. Red suspected that it had something to do with Arkan. The prince was overly protective of Magnus and the four of them, and neither the Light nor any of the guards at the Alcazar ever gave them any trouble. He thanked Arkan for this when he saw him.

Since the qualifiers, Red had not spotted any sign of the black cloud that had haunted him since before arriving at Areopa. His dreams were relatively brief, with no visions. It was a good feeling. He could not remember the last time he went to bed without dreading the possibility of a nightmare. He told Raven about this positive turn of events, but she replied that it was only "the calm before the storm." Still, he could not help but hope that he was either getting a break, or something had blown over and that there was actually nothing to worry about.

If everything stayed quiet in the Alcazar, they decided they would tour the felion city the following week. Positive that Raven would not come, Red suggested that they make it a tour with an objective — to go around the weapon shops in the city to find Raven a new sword. Butz offered to barter the shard of ainmosni crystal with someone who was willing to travel outside of Areopa to trade it.

S and Butz had just finished cooking. There was a knock at the door.

"Are we expecting someone?" Butz asked.

"No," Magnus replied, frowning. Butz stood up to get the door. Linx followed behind him. The cat eagerly clawed at the door when they approached it.

"Wait," S whispered. "Check who it is first." A second pair of knocks. "You never know...."

"They probably heard us from the outside," Magnus whispered back. "They know we're in here. We have to open it."

"We don't *have* to open it," S replied.

"Okay will someone just tell me how I can see who it is?" Butz asked,

frustrated. He peered at the door, studying its sides to check for a slit.

“You can’t,” Magnus whispered back. He stood on the couch they were sitting on.

“What do you mean I can’t?” Butz asked.

“You can crack it open first. But there’s no way to see who’s on the other side. Not on this door. It’s just kind of old fashioned, I guess. This isn’t a room people designed for security.”

“Great that you tell us this *now*,” S replied angrily. A third pair of knocks sounded, this time louder. The person was getting impatient.

“If we crack it open, I can always shut it,” Butz whispered back. Linx began circling around the door, looking at Butz angrily for not opening it.

“Well, Linx seems fine with whoever it is, and he can see through this,” Magnus said. Butz nodded in agreement and then turned to open the locks on the door. After taking a minute to understand how the alternating locks worked, he cracked it open, and then shut it closed immediately before anyone got a chance to see who was on the other side.

“Butz who is it?” S asked.

“Oh, hi,” Butz said, opening the door again, wider this time. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to shut it on you as soon as I opened it. I was just... umm...” He scratched his head as he searched for his words.

“Took you guys long enough,” Lux replied, exasperated. She slammed the door open as she walked in. “I want to go to Sanguine City and the elvish library. And I want to get the book that Prince Arkan wanted.”

Both Red and Magnus breathed a sigh of relief. Red was half expecting her to attack them for Lance’s death. Linx immediately hopped onto her shoulders. He was too big to fit on her head now. Lux didn’t resist at all. She enjoyed it, and stroked the cat’s ears by reaching over her head. Linx had gotten so large that he had to wrap around her back. The Aeyz Cat was hitting his growth spurt. In the wild, they grew at a far greater rate than Linx did. Being around competitors brought out an innate instinct to grow larger and faster than everyone around them. Red wondered if Linx’s most recent growth spurt had anything to do with being around the other familiars during the first round.

“What? Sanguine City? I don’t know if that’s the best idea,” Magnus replied. “If you *are* going to go, it should be through Katadel, the mystic elf city. The library is in between the two of them.”

“We just had a run in with blood elves during the qualifiers. Can’t say

I'm excited to see them again this early," S said. "Or maybe not even during this lifetime. In Karth they live on the opposite side of the planet from the human kingdoms and cities. I don't get Areopa, to be honest. I know there's not much travel between the cities, but to have a human city right next to a blood elf city..."

"Are you okay?" Butz asked Lux. Her eyes were swollen. It looked as though she hadn't slept in days. She stepped inside and took a seat on the dining table. "I thought you had left to be honest. I wasn't sure if you stayed behind. If this is about Lance, I hope you know..."

"It's not," Lux replied. She held her voice steady. "A lot has been going on at the Priori. I've never seen our people so troubled. There seems to be no clear direction for us. Everyone is tossing these different theories around."

"So... you were okay with what Raven did to Lance?" Butz asked. S shoved him with her elbow.

"We're not okay with it, and it couldn't have been by accident, even if Raven didn't do it intentionally," Lux said. "I'd like to speak with her as well, if it's possible."

"I don't know if that's such a good idea," Red said. "She's generally not in a good mood nowadays."

"And I don't think she's too fond of the Light. No offense," Butz added. "Also, I'm not saying that Lance's death wasn't tragic, but it's hard to think that it wasn't just a coincidence. I mean, he knew what he was getting himself into during the qualifiers. And he wasn't the only one that didn't make it."

"Why do you want to go to Sanguine city?" S asked. "The Light sent you to get the book *for Arkan*?"

"No. Quite the opposite in fact. They said the book was sacred and should not be shared with people outside of those whom the Light deems appropriate. They berated me for even suggesting that we share it. It is guarded carefully in our home planet, to make sure it never falls into the wrong hands. They were furious when they heard Arkan knew about it and would not listen when I tried to convince them to help him obtain it from the elvish library here. They said I was reaching far above my authority to even request something like that. I'm afraid that I cannot ask them for help. Anything I want to do, I'll have to do on my own. Now is the worst time to raise any doubts about my loyalty to the Priori."

“I thought it was just a book to identify beings from the void?” Butz asked. “Sounds more like something *everyone* should have if you ask me. In fact, seems wrong that the Priori would be hiding such knowledge. What are they afraid of? That people are going to help them?”

“That’s what I thought too. I don’t think there’s any real harm in it. I think they just said that because it’s customary not to share it. But then again, that’s only one part of the book. I don’t know what else is in there.”

“Why do you want to take it from the library then?” Red asked. “And why is it something that Arkan can’t do himself? I mean, he’s the prince of Nimbus. Certainly the elves would make an exception for him if he wanted to go in, right?” He looked at Magnus for an answer.

“The Light is in shambles. Everyone in the Priori is suddenly paralyzed, frozen, unsure of what to do. I told the Elders of Arkan’s suspicion over Zenae. He was right, of course, but we have no idea who could have infiltrated the Light to get close enough to a Soul of Light. We wiped her mind, but we were able to learn nothing from it. We left her behind with a few people to watch over her actions. The Priori wanted to see how much we could learn from her. We hoped that whoever was controlling her would not realize we knew about her state, and maybe let something slip — perhaps meet with her in the Alcazar or somewhere in Areopa. I think it was a mistake for most of us to leave the Alcazar. I’ve never seen the Light like this. I’ve never seen us scared. We’re waiting for our leaders to come to this star system for order. The Elders of Light have called more of the Priori to come here. Losing Gelda was bad enough, but at least we had Lance. He had direction. With him gone as well now, everything here is suddenly chaotic. Nothing will be resolved until our leadership here is clear.” She spoke while holding her temples with her fingers. She was not crying, but strained to find her words. “And I guess Prince Arkan *can* go, but he’s probably just too busy. It’s not exactly like Nimbus is all put together, you know? Have you been outside? There are people who have started rioting now. They’re claiming that they should go to war against the Light. It’s absurd, but they think we’re behind the whole thing. As if we’d kill our own.”

“When Lance saw us... me... at the qualifiers... he told me —” Red started.

“That you are the reincarnation of Ikb’Sept, The Mouth of The Void? There is a chance he is right. The Light is divided now. Some of us think it is impossible for you to be Ikb’Sept. You are too... normal. I think they

are in denial. There have been others who have been plagued by visions like you have, visions of the world between worlds, but never have they been hunted by an eye like the one you described.”

“Well is there anything we can do about it?”

“There is nothing to be done but to keep an eye on you,” Lux replied.

“No pun intended,” Butz laughed. Lux rolled her eyes.

“I didn’t mean it like that. We have to watch you, make sure nothing comes after you. It is no longer a secret. All of the Light knows of what happened between you and Gelda. I told them of your nightmares, and Lance had spoken to them, but there is no consensus to what it all means. Some doubt that the eye truly exists, or that you even saw it. I mean, you don’t have proof of it, do you? They think you may have heard the story elsewhere and made it all up to convince people you are an entity from beyond, like Mej’Lith tried to do.”

“Why would I do that?” Red objected. “I’ve never heard of the Priori before coming to Areopa, or any of your myths and prophecies.”

“We know what we saw,” Butz replied, “and Red’s not making any of it up.”

“I know. I believe you. But my people don’t, or they don’t *want* to believe, I should say,” Lux said. “It is clear to us that we are not welcome at the Alcazar. It is unclear whether the forces that threaten us are human or something else.”

“Human?” Magnus asked. “You don’t think it’s the Areopa natives who harmed Gelda and our own king, do you? We wouldn’t do this. And the crimes outside of the Alcazar, those were beyond anything someone from Nimbus would do. It looked more like the work of a blood elf, if you ask me.”

“We claim to have only one enemy, but there are many that do not like us, that do not agree with our ways and resent our presence,” Lux replied. “It’s not necessarily the work of an Areopa native. There’s also MegaCORP. As far as the bodies go, it’s hard to say. Creatures that suffer from the taint or that come from the abyss require flou to feed on. They usually consume raw flesh, often parts of a body where most of a person’s energy is concentrated, like their hearts.”

“Well, that makes perfect sense. Remember the bodies that were found?” S began.

“Perhaps too perfect,” Lux said. “Again, it did not have to be something

feeding on those bodies. It could have been a regular crime, made that way to imitate something more sinister. We do not know.”

“All of this uncertainty makes me feel... itchy...” Butz mumbled.

“So where does this leave us?” Red asked.

“I told you. We have to get the book,” Lux answered. “I want to see if I can identify the things you have been seeing, both in your dreams and in the Alcazar.”

“The things I’ve been seeing...” Red whispered to himself. “Well, I don’t remember many images from my dreams. I mean, I don’t even know if I’d recognize them if I saw them —”

“It’s worth a try, isn’t it?” Lux asked. Red nodded. “You may not be able to recall them when you wake up, but if you were to see anything that you recognize, or that *seems familiar*, maybe we can work from there.”

“Can’t you send word for your people to look up what you need to from your home planet?”

“No. It would take months for any message to get there and return. I don’t think time is a luxury we can afford. Also, there’s little chance they would look it up for me, anyway. It would have to be an Elder of Light making the request, and I told you, they disagreed to share the contents of the book. Now it would look suspicious if I tried to get information directly myself. There are already circles within circles in the Light, no need for us to be further divided. I’d rather not raise any suspicions about myself at a time like this. I just want to retrieve the book in secret, without anyone knowing.”

“Months? To travel to another planet? How is that possible?” Butz gasped.

“Do you know where our home planet is?” Lux shot a glare at him.

“No...” Butz replied.

“We have to get the book today, if possible.”

“What’s with the urgency? I mean I know we’re short on time in general, but why today?” Butz cut in.

“The rogue Xenosite, we only have three days left. I know everyone is saying that it was the queen, or just a stroke of bad luck, and that it is an insignificant number arriving, but I think it has to be more than that. I *don’t* think it’s a coincidence. I think this is all planned and something is going to happen, and Areopa is going to be at the center of it all,” she said, speaking quickly without taking a breath.

“Wait, wait, no, no, there’s no Xenosite in Areopa,” Butz said with a nervous laugh. “What are you talking about?”

“Rogue Xenosite?” Magnus asked.

“I thought Prince Arkan would have told you,” Lux replied, raising a brow.

“Told us what?” S gaped.

“A group of rogue Xenosites was spotted heading towards Areopa. They must have broken past the Metroid Belt more than a month ago, before any of the things in Areopa had unfolded. Their trajectory points them exactly at Nimbus. Your natives are throwing riots in the city, blaming the Light for this. They say that it was because we brought a queen here, and it somehow reached out to its hive cluster and asked for help. But that’s impossible — the Xenosites had to have left the outer planets long before the queen was harmed to be here now. It has to be either an extraordinary stroke of luck or by design, and not the queen’s. Remember what Red said about Doctor Lurch?”

“No, we didn’t hear about this,” Magnus said quietly. “It’s not likely that Arkan forgot either. He must have chosen not to mention it.”

Rogue Xenosites were a rare occurrence, and unheard of in planets as deep as Avalonia. They were groups of Xenosites that broke apart from their hive clusters, either by accident or on purpose, to travel on a meteorite or a larger breed of Xenosite that could serve as a vessel to get to one of the inner planets. Most of the time, the Xenosites would crash onto something in the Metroid Belt and fail to make it through. If they did manage to land on an inner planet, their numbers were usually small, and they were quickly eliminated by a planet’s Imperial Guard. Red knew of only a few instances when rogue Xenosites had caused major damage to settlements in an inner planet. They occurred if infestations were caught too late, allowing the Xenosites to infect other creatures and grow more powerful.

“They’re landing on *Nimbus*!?” Butz said. “Well, it *has* to be the Light then. Do you know how small *Nimbus* is with respect to Avalonia — and even Areopa? It *has* to be a coordinated landing if they’re going to land exactly in *this* human city. If it was by someone else’s design it would have been all over Areopa, or they would have attacked all the major cities in Avalonia. It had to be the queen that pinpointed this location.”

“According to the reports, it’s a tiny meteorite,” S said. She was reading off of her microAI. “It’s barely anything. It can’t be too much of a threat.”

“I don’t think so,” Lux said. “The Light claims that it’s nothing serious, but I think they’re just trying to appease the people who are blaming them for this. I know what both Lance and Gelda would say. They wouldn’t sugarcoat anything if they thought we were in danger. It’s not a coincidence that all of this is happening following their deaths. I think our first step in figuring this out is getting that book for Arkan.”

“But even if we identify something from Red’s dreams, what then? Has Arkan said anything further about the book?” Magnus asked.

“Yes, I spoke to him earlier this week,” Lux said. “Prince Arkan agrees with me, or at least that’s what I thought. He said it was more urgent than ever that we retrieve the book. He has a sort of cryptic way of not exactly explaining why, but still remaining convincing.”

“Yeah,” Red nodded. “I know what you mean.”

“If we can identify Red’s visions and what’s been haunting the Alcazar, I can get the Priori to act faster.”

“Lance said that it was already a serious matter. He said the Priori were going to bring their entire army over to this star system ever since they heard about Red being chased by The Evil Eye,” Magnus said.

“Yes, that was our original plan. And the Light *is* coming, but not all of them. After Lance died and for the past week in general, things have been different. It’s hard to explain. I don’t think everyone has been themselves. I worry that more people in the Priori than we’d like to admit are under the influence of psykinesthetics. Several of the Elders have left this place entirely. It is not like them to leave a place when it is in need of the Light. People have begun doubting Red’s story. Many of the lower ranking members of the Priori were furious that they were not told about the queen beforehand. It’s a disaster. Those who believe that Red may be Ikb’Sept and that Gelda was onto something are on their way here. The other half of the Light, including most of the ones who were here at the Alcazar, refuse to believe it and have left. Only a week ago, we had a unified front and a clear course of action. It’s bizarre.”

“Even if we wanted to, how could we get the book?” Butz asked. “I thought the library was off-limits for humans.”

“And the elves here don’t exactly get along with the Priori,” Magnus added. “Mystic elves especially. They may be less violent than blood elves, but they’re far more radical in their beliefs. And they *do not* like the Priori.”

“Let’s just say I know of another way to get in, thanks to Arkan,” Lux

said. “And, yes, well, I wasn’t planning on going in through the mystic elf city. The entrance I want to use is only accessible through Sanguine City.”

“This is a bad, bad idea,” S whispered. “There’s no way any of us are going back to see the blood elves.” Red nodded in agreement. While he hadn’t been suffering from his usual nightmares, thinking about his encounter with the blood elves still left him uneasy in the dark. Watching another human getting drained had left him mentally scarred.

“Can’t say I don’t agree,” Magnus said. “Plus, I can’t go even if I wanted to. I was supposed to help Arkan today with organizing renovations in the Alcazar. They have to get the spectra courtyard fixed.”

“Neither can I,” S said. “I’m heading to Karth tomorrow morning. I’m going to stay there for a week before coming back.”

“You’re going to Karth?!” Butz asked. “Now? And you’re only staying for a week? That’s how long it takes to get there!?”

“Yeah, don’t worry. I’ll be back before round two starts of course. Even earlier, actually, so I won’t miss too many training sessions. If there’s anything you guys want me to practice or learn at home or during the trip, I can always do that,” S replied sheepishly.

“Why now?” Magnus asked. “I mean, in the middle of the qualifiers. Why not before it started?”

“That’s exactly why. After round one... I just... I need to see my kingdom. I need to visit home and my family before going to round two,” S replied.

“I get it,” Red sighed. “I wouldn’t mind going back to Echidna City and... maybe even to the Vine, before beginning round two. Good luck.”

“We don’t all have to go,” Lux broke in. “But if one or two of you would come with me to the library —”

She was cut off as Raven entered the room.

“I’m surprised you’re here, after what happened to Lance. Does the Light know that you’re speaking to us?” Raven asked.

“No...” Lux said. “I’ve come on my own. They’ll be furious when they find out I’m here, but I had to. I was just explaining it to them —”

“I heard you,” Raven said. “I was listening from my room. I’ll come with you to the library, if you’re sure you know a way in.”

Lux’s eyes lit up. “Raven, thank you, thank you so much. This is to protect Red. I know the Light hasn’t been the friendliest to you, but I assure you, I have no doubt that you weren’t involved in either Gelda’s death or Lance’s. It’s someone else — the same person who’s been using id-speech

on Zenae,” Lux said.

“What do we need before we go?” Raven asked.

“Are we really going?!” Butz exclaimed. “This is madness.”

“I didn’t say we. I’m not forcing you, am I?” Raven shot back.

“Well if *you* guys go... I’m not staying here by myself,” he mumbled under his breath.

“Is it safe?” Lux asked Magnus. “I mean the city, in general. Can humans ever walk through it?”

“Sure,” Magnus replied. “All kinds of people go through Sanguine City. You’ll need to take a map, and I’ll mark the areas you want to avoid. Everyone there wears a hooded cloak, so you’ll need one for each of you. Just don’t show that you’re human and no one will bother you, and whatever you do, *don’t* go in with an open cut or wound. Pack supplies to clean them, and if you get one, immediately seal it off. If you’re in the better areas, it’s unlikely anyone will follow you. There will be guards on the main roads. They’re blood elves too, but they’ll stop any trouble from brewing. Do you know where you want to go?”

“The Scented Road. Have you ever heard of it?” Lux asked.

“No, you’ll have to ask someone there or check if it’s on a map,” Magnus answered.

Raven headed for the door. “Where are you going?” Butz asked.

“To get the stuff we need and head out. Supplies to clean wounds, a map, and cloaks. Why would we waste any time?”

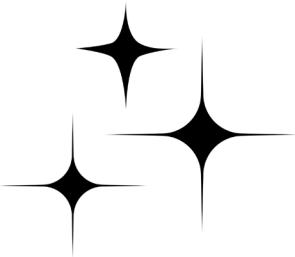
Lux followed her. “Just one more thing,” Raven said to her. “If I find out this is a ploy to get us to see your Elders or anyone from the Light, I’m going to hunt you down and feed you to the Scalp-o-Lanterns. I’ll give you a minute to rethink your plan.” Lux looked down and nodded, taken aback by the statement. She risked an upwards glance, checking to see whether Raven was being sarcastic.

“Well, now that we’ve confirmed Raven would never harm anyone from the Light...” Butz interjected.

“No one in the Light knows that I’m going. But there *are* people from the Light watching all of you. Once we get everything we need, we’ll have to split up and lose them before heading to Sanguine City.”

“Luckily, we have a master of disguises and distractions on our team,” Butz said proudly.

“We do?” Lux asked. “Who?!”



SANGUINE CITY

There were few places more foreboding than the Gates of Thokh, the singular entrance to Sanguine City. The obsidian doors spanned more than three tezras in height and looked impossible to close with physical force. Unlike Alto and Nimbus, Sanguine City had no one guarding its entryway. There were only two massive stone statues of winged blood elves positioned at the sides of the gates. Both were eagerly poised to take flight, making it look as though they were real creatures accidentally frozen in place. The city was composed almost entirely of dark gray storm clouds. It rained perpetually, but there was no wind, giving it a bare and lifeless feeling. The only light in the sky, apart from the occasional flashes of lightning, was from the crimson moon that gleamed over the fog and darkness. A small number of people were moving in and out of the city. From only their gait, Red could tell which ones were blood elves and which were not. The people of other races were walking with the rigid mannerisms of someone entering an area only to take care of business, and leaving with their hoods down and the relieved expressions of people waking up from a bad nightmare.

“Which moon is that?” Red asked. “I’ve never seen a red moon in Avalon.”

“It’s not real,” Lux replied. “It’s a part of Areopa’s simulated weather and sky, but unique to Sanguine City. *That* moon — its name is Lahl, and it’s one of Karth’s moons. You can only see it from Karth a few times every year, and when it’s visible, the blood elves are much stronger. They can feed off of its light just like blood. I suppose they’re going for a placebo effect here. But don’t worry. They’re not any stronger because of it.”

“Well that’s a relief,” Red sighed.

“How did you know all that? Did you research Sanguine City before you came here?” Butz asked.

“Well, obviously. I learned as much as I could before coming. Why would anyone go somewhere dangerous without educating themselves about the place?”

“Yeah... good point. I just realized we never do that...” Butz replied. “Well, I guess the qualifiers and the field test were exceptions —” A long burst of thunder cut him off.

“Did you guys see that?” Raven asked, pointing towards the sky.

“The clouds? Or the lightning?” Red asked.

“No, the eyes.” Raven replied.

“The eyes?” Butz gasped. “There are no eyes there. Are you trying to scare us? Coming to this city is bad enough you know. Guilt tripping me into following you...” He mumbled something about the qualifiers underneath his breath.

“No,” Raven replied. “If I wanted to scare you, I’d start shouting that we were humans and looking to be eaten.” Butz looked horrified.

“Eyes?” Lux asked. “In the sky?”

“Yeah, never mind,” Raven replied. “It’s the second time I’ve seen them, this pair of giant eyes flying across the sky.”

“Maybe it’s something else. It could be another part of their simulation,” Red said, hopefully.

“Yeah, maybe,” Raven replied.

“Can we keep it down a bit,” Butz whispered. “There are blood elves around here, you know. The ones we fought against were only our age. Who knows how much more violent they get when they get older? Maybe they get much stronger too. I already regret coming here.” He shuddered.

“Well they can’t really see us. Just keep your cloak on and your hood up,” Red replied. He unconsciously touched his defilterizer. “And so long as we don’t get caught by their smell, we’ll be fine.”

“Blood elves *sound* different,” Butz replied. “If we don’t whisper, someone will recognize we’re humans.”

“They don’t sound different,” Lux replied. “Where did you get that from?”

“Yes they do,” Butz protested. “They *sound* like they’re always trying to hypnotize you. The first time I heard them talk, I thought they were trying to meta-condition us or something.”

“I guess you’re right,” Red replied. “They *do* sound like that.”

“Elves are worse at psykinesthetics than humans are,” Lux replied. “It’s

a well-known fact. It's one of their biggest handicaps. What do they teach you at academy anyway?"

"Well *we* are handicapped at being bloodsucking killers. And sorry we don't know about all the different cultures and races you must have learned about in 'Priori day school,' *we* were too busy learning about *Xenosites*, and all the different ways they can kill us or possibly take us to their queen to mate with and create thousands of evolved versions of ourselves," Butz shot back.

"Guys! Will you be quiet?" Raven interjected. "They won't need to hear our tone to know we're humans because everybody can hear our full conversations."

"Fine, but I'm not going to stand near her," Butz said as he veered off to the side. Lux made a snorting sound before doing the same towards the other side.

"Guys, this isn't bootcamp for friendship. We're on a mission," Red exclaimed. "Have you forgotten?" He looked at Lux.

"I haven't forgotten!" Lux snapped. "It's not me, it's him."

"Well... he's Butz. Just ignore him," Red replied.

"Hey! What's that supposed to mean?!" Butz asked.

"If you guys make another sound, I'm going to throw the both of you into the next group of blood elves that walks by," Raven said. Butz grunted but said nothing. Red thought that Linx's absence made him more irritable than usual. They chose to leave the Aeyz Cat back in their suite, afraid that the presence of a familiar might attract unwanted attention.

A bolt of lightning hit a tower in the distance, illuminating the city's crystal skyline before it was swallowed back into the night. The highest towers in Sanguine City were made out of shade crystals, pitch black gems that had the smooth texture of a pearl and the dark shade of obsidian. Shade crystals were rare and even more expensive than kerebricrite. Each tower constructed out of the material was worth a fortune. Red wondered what they were used for as they ventured deeper into the city. The intimidating form of The Gates of Thokh and the black towers that were built at seemingly random locations stood in stark contrast to the rest of the city, which looked drab and dull in comparison. Giant stone buildings that looked like square monoliths from afar housed most of their city's population. No one had individual homes here. Blood elves lived together in communes.

Off the main road, the streets of Sanguine City told an entirely dif-

ferent story from epochal doors and prodigious towers. As they walked towards the Scented Road, where it was marked on Lux's map, they passed through streets that were littered with dead carcasses that were drained into discolored lumps of skin, flesh, and bone. Skirmishes would take place between elves fighting for the last few drops of blood in the corpses. The elves that fought on the streets were weaker than Red expected. Many of them were missing limbs and fought with no aptitude for combat at all, gnawing and mauling their opponents like wild beasts. It reminded him that their strength depended largely on the quality of blood they fed on. Apart from the fights, the streets were silent, except for the occasional mutterings of elves who had gone mad from starvation. Like Nimbus, there were no vehicles here. Most people travelled by foot. He passed by only a few carriages, and he assumed that their occupants must have been well-known in the neighborhood not to have their hungering kin come raid their critters for blood. The roads were lit with balloons that carried farms of fluorescent insects inside. The light they emitted was a vermillion red. Combined with the moon and the hematic atmosphere, it added a psychotic twist to the city's grisly ambiance. The red of Sanguine City was not the color he had fallen in love with. It was another side of that same color, a darker, more lurid side.

The only lively elements of the local roads were the taverns located at the corner of every other street. Each one had a list of times for "harvests," or get-togethers where blood was given out to those who could afford it. Some of them held gladiator-like events, where starving elves from the streets were pitted against critters to fight to the death, giving the elves a chance at a meal if they won. Other elves would pay to see the fights, sometimes increasing the ante by adding more challenges. There was a sign on one of the taverns they passed, requesting a blood elf that was willing to do battle against a Marsaki Beetle with his eyes covered. The insect critter grew exponentially in size during its early stages, from the length of a palm to twice the size of a human by stage 4. Its hind limbs, the most dangerous part of its body, made a rattling noise before they lashed out of the critter's shell to strike prey. It was critical to listen to the sounds its body made while fighting it, and conversely, it was possible to best the creature blindly by predicting its movements based on the noises it produced.

During harvests, groups of desperate blood elves would collect around the entryway, begging those who passed by to pay for their admission.

Some of them sounded so despondent, Red was almost inclined to help them, and only retracted because he was afraid of drawing attention to himself. The blood elves were a single race of scavengers and predators, beggars and champions, with only wooden doorways and a few coins to separate one from the other.

A cloaked figure carrying a barrel on his shoulders walked past them. The sound of a liquid slushing inside made Red cringe as he imagined what it must have been filled with. As the figure passed them, a long, green, scaly tail stuck out from underneath its cloak. The backside of his cloak had a slit cut out for the tail to fit comfortably through. Every time its feet hit the pavement, it made a flat crunching noise, like the sound of eggshells being stepped on. It had no shoes on, and no weapon. Red hopped over its tail as it passed his feet, nearly tripping in the process. The shadow of its cowl and the dim light of the roads hid the details of its face. Still, through the fringes of its hood, Red could make out a long snout and pointed teeth. It breathed in a heavy, threatening way, even though its pace was no more than a stroll. It looked over its shoulder to glance at them as it passed by, sniffing the air as it went.

“What was that thing? It looked like a lizard,” Lux whispered. Red had the odd feeling that the creature could hear her despite its distance. It leaned its head towards them as it walked, but did not slow its pace. “There aren’t any gavilis on Avalonia are there? Let alone living in Sanguine City. This isn’t a place for a race like *that*.”

“This isn’t a place for *anyone*, besides a blood elf. I think that’s literally the only race that would feel comfortable living in a city like *this*,” Butz replied. He waved his hands in a grand gesture, as though he were presenting the city to them. “Maybe he’s a tourist. Just looking around, taking in the views. Or maybe he’s lost... oh man... I would *not* want to end up here while I was trying to get to Nimbus. Should we ask him if he’s lost?” Red held his breath to stifle his laugh.

An elf crawled out of an alleyway nearby and slid towards the reptilian visitor. He was bald, had no legs, and only one arm. He moved by slamming his one hand onto the floor ahead of him and then dragging his whole body behind it. The reptile picked up its pace. The four of them did the same. The elf began hauling its body faster than Red thought was possible. It kept up with their pace despite its handicaps. It had no pupils, a side-effect of being emaciated for too long. His body was down to its bones. When it

came under the shadow of a building, it looked like a disjointed skeleton that was chasing them.

“Is it following us? Go faster!” Butz whispered.

“Will you calm down? It’s following the barrel, not us. It probably knows there’s blood in it. Your edginess is making me uncomfortable,” Lux replied.

“My *edginess*?! We’re walking through a city where everyone feeds on human flesh, where there are half-bodied elves with no pupils roaming the streets looking for blood, and what looks to be a giant man-lizard carrying a barrel of our bodily fluids, and it’s my *edginess* that’s getting to you?!”

“Okay, okay, so we’re not in the safest city in Areopa, but you’re just making it worse. Can we just stay focused on the task at hand?” Lux sighed. The elf finally caught up with the reptilian figure. He grasped its ankles, but the figure shook off its grip. Its tail stiffened, ready to swipe at the gaunt elf if it needed to. The elf grunted as it stumbled behind, and then began dragging itself again, more desperately this time.

“Please, sire, please. I haven’t fed in months. Please, sire, just a few drops. Or just let me smell the open container, please. They are vicious here. No one leaves me anything. No one shares. I am starving, please, just a few drops.” His voice was scratchy, gruff, the accent of someone who had not spoken for so long that they nearly forgot how to do so. He tried to grab on to the reptilian figure’s ankles again, but missed. Its body and hand were covered in boils. Its wrinkles were corrugated into a giant knot of hollow flesh that drooped like dangling knots.

“Filthy mongrel, get away!” the figure shouted. It slammed its tail next to the elf, sending out a powerful shockwave when it hit the pavement. “This blood is not for the people. It is for the *Baron*.” It hissed its words out like a snake. Its tongue made a dribbling noise as it spoke, lingering in the air after every word like a stutter.

“Did Magnus mention anything about a baron?” Butz asked.

“Not that I can remember,” Red replied. “Is that a title or something?”

“No,” Lux answered. “They have several royal bloodlines that rule this city, but there is no official government like there is in Nimbus, and no titles. At least none officially conferred for ruling purposes like a duke. Their culture and values count as their laws, just as they do for most elvish races. Their titles have to do with accomplishments, not positions of authority.”

“Sounds a bit chaotic to me,” Red replied.

"Yeah, maybe if they were more organized, their people wouldn't be starving all across the city," Lux said.

"Great idea!" Butz exclaimed. "Why don't you suggest it to them? If they can get some proper leadership in place here, maybe they can organize a nice takeover of Nimbus and Alto so their citizens here have plenty of humans to feed on." Lux rolled her eyes, refusing to comment further.

The reptilian figure turned and disappeared behind a carriage that was fast approaching them from down the road. Red could still hear the elf with one arm begging under his breath.

They passed by a tavern where a group of elves were gathered outside, staring into a well-lit balloon, hypnotized by the light of the insects inside and the patterns they were forming. The sound of the rain pounding against the pavement, the stammering of the critters that were carrying the carriage, and the begging of the half-elf in the background combined to capture the dreadful atmosphere that was pervasive across the city in a single sona. Instinctively, Red glanced behind him to check for danger. The one-handed elf had bitten into his hand to drink his own blood. The image singed itself into Red's mind before he had a chance to look away.

The sound of a girl screaming spilt open the tranquil chords of the rain.

"That was a human scream," Butz said.

"It came from that direction," Lux added, pointing east. "We're not going there are we?"

"No," Raven replied, studying the map on her microAI. "According to the directions *you said* Arkan gave you, the Scented Road is north of here, but we'll be moving farther and farther away from the main road."

"Where is the Scented Road on the map?" Butz asked nervously. He peered over to look at Raven's microAI.

"It's not on here, but Arkan said we couldn't miss it when we were around there," Lux replied. Butz looked at her with the expression of someone who had just been told they had walked into their own death.

"What do you mean it's not on there?!" he shouted.

"It's a hidden path. It's supposed to take us to a secret entrance into the library," Lux replied.

"This idea is just getting worse and worse," Butz gasped.

"There's nothing we can do about the girl," Raven said. "She probably got caught in the wrong part of the city. Just keep walking. Anyway, if the blood elves that are hungry look like the one that we just passed, I don't

think we'll be in much danger. We can fight torsos. Unless you're afraid of those too?" She raised a brow at Butz.

There were no sounds of conversation or laughing coming out of the tavern they were passing. A harvest was going on. All that could be heard were the sloppy sounds of feeding blood elves, a bevy of slurps, gulps, and gags. There was a sign outside of the building that read "Live Meat." There were two elves brooding outside of the tavern's entrance, staring in through the windows like lost children. One had an arm missing, and the other had a chunk of his left side missing. The carriage approached them. Someone inside of it pointed in their direction. Red glanced behind to make sure it wasn't pointing at the four of them. Before he had a chance to turn back around, Raven pulled him towards the tavern. Lux and Butz followed the two of them with confused expressions.

"What happened?" Butz whispered. "Something wrong?" The tavern guard came up to them, a stalky blood elf that looked well fed. He stood almost as high as the ceiling. Raven handed him several triton coins without counting them. The elf clasped the coins, studied them in his hands in disbelief, and then grunted approvingly.

"A private feast then?" the elf asked.

"No, we'll only be here for a minute," Raven replied. The elf looked at her oddly, and then peered closer, trying to look into her hood. "We're trying to avoid someone," she added.

"Ahh," the elf replied with another approving grunt. "Let me know if I can be of help." He counted the coins a second time over and then slipped them into his pocket.

"Who are we trying to avoid?" Butz asked. "And why did you give him so much coin?"

"I didn't give him *that* much. And the girl, she was on the carriage," Raven replied.

"The girl that was screaming?!" Butz asked.

"No... the blood elf girl, the one from the qualifiers," Raven replied.

"What? Are you sure?" Red asked, more eagerly than he intended.

"Yeah," Raven replied. Red turned to look inside of the tavern before she had a chance to study him. The place reminded him of the Vine. It was made entirely out of wood, with sharp splinters sticking out of every inch of the wall. The elves inside were drinking from carcasses placed on standing tabletops, not spilling a drop as they fed. Near the back of the room was

a private entrance, from which Red could vaguely make out the sounds of a struggle. The top of the doorway had a sign like the one outside that said “Live Meat.” The elves feasted in crowded huddles, fighting their way in to bite into their food above each other. Some of the elves came to complain to the tavern guard if they weren’t getting their proper share.

“This place is disgusting,” Butz said.

“It’s not like we’re very different you know. Imagine what a critter might think of a human butcher shop,” Lux replied. “You eat meat, don’t you?”

“Yes... but... well... not like *this*,” he waved his hand towards the tables. “And I *certainly* don’t go into private rooms to eat *live meat*.”

“Semantics. Still not that different,” Lux mumbled underneath her breath.

“I think she’s gone,” Raven replied.

“Are you sure? You don’t think she’s trailing us somehow, do you?” Butz asked. “Maybe the elves we faced in the round can trace our scent.”

“I don’t think so,” Raven replied. “I know they can smell blood but she can’t have sensed our energy signatures, or smelled us in a city with this many people.”

“Raven’s right,” Lux said. “As congested as Sanguine City seems, it’s pretty big here. So you guys fought against that girl? Is she strong?”

“Oh, you have no idea —” Butz began, but was cut off by a pointed look from Raven. “I mean, I think Raven can take her, but still, I’m not in a hurry to come face to face with her.”

I am, Red thought, wishing he were in an alternate dimension where humans got along with blood elves.

“Okay, let’s get going,” Raven said, gesturing to the door. Red took one last look at the tavern before leaving. Everyone was too busy in the middle of their feasts to watch four strangers entering and leaving without any notice. The tavern keeper gave them a quick nod as they headed outside. He stuck his hands in his pockets, grabbing the triton coins in a fist, as though he were afraid that Raven might ask for them back. Red assumed that they had grossly overpaid for the cost of a feast here. The amount of coin that Raven handed over to the elf was the cost of an average meal in Nimbus.

“Ow!” Butz shouted as he was walking out. His cloak was caught in a large splinter in the doorway. A piece of it tore apart as he pulled it back. The splinter penetrated deeper than it seemed. A tiny rivulet of Butz’s blood leaked out. The tavern went silent in an instant. Red could hear his

own heartbeat in the sudden stillness. Everyone stopped eating to look at the entrance. The tavern keeper slowly stretched out his arms, bracing himself for what was to come next.

“Oh no...” Lux whispered as she noticed the cut on Butz’s arm. Butz slapped his other hand over it. He jerked his head around like a lost creature, checking to see if anyone had noticed. They had. Not a single elf was paying attention to the feast or their turn in line. They were all staring at Butz, awestruck by their luck.

“Fresh... fresh human blood...” someone said from one of the tables. Raven’s hand floated to her cutlass. The door of the tavern slammed open. One of the beggars from outside crawled inside, looking at the four of them with a hungry glare. “Please! Please! Just a few drops! I would give my life for just a few drops!”

The elves in the tavern were rising slowly, moving their arms and legs in a sluggish manner, as though they were afraid of scaring the four of them off if they made any sudden movements.

“Run!” Lux screamed. It was the signal everyone was waiting for. The slow movements in the tavern erupted into a stampede as the elves rushed towards the entrance. The four of them bolted through the door. Raven used a force cast to put down the elf that was crawling towards them and another that was approaching the doorway from outside. The elves that were staring at the balloon outside did not move. Raven ran past them as the three of them followed behind. Red turned to glance at the balloon himself as they ran through the streets, wondering what could be inside of them that was forcing the elves into such a deep trance. The tiny creatures inside were dancing through zig-zag patterns, a mating ritual that translated into a visual rapture. He felt someone pulling on his arm but didn’t bother to look who it was. A second pull came, and someone screamed into his ears.

“Red, what are you doing?! Run!” He turned to see Raven dragging him out of the streets. The elves from the tavern had spotted them. Butz and Lux were far ahead of where the two of them were. *I must have been staring at it for a full minute*, Red realized. It had felt like an instant.

They weaved through the inner streets, jumping across the bodies of amputated elves that begged them for blood as they ran along and the dry carcasses of consumed creatures. Every shadow, even their own, looked like someone ready to jump at them from the darkness. They didn’t stop

running for several tezras, not because it was how long it took to lose the elves chasing them, but because their instincts wouldn't let them stop. Finally, they paused at what looked like an abandoned marketplace in the middle of an alleyway. There were carcasses stacked on top of each other on the floor and tabletops with signs for different amounts of coin. The prices were so low, Red could hardly believe that even the drained bodies of the dead creatures weren't worth more. The marketplace seemed to have been raided earlier. All of the carcasses were dry and damaged with puncture wounds all around.

"Will you stand still?" Lux demanded. "I've been trying to get this on you since you ran out. It would make it easier to lose them, you know." She wrapped a kapcha around Butz's arm.

"All of it isn't necessary. Kapchas are used for more serious injuries," Butz said.

"I know, but it's the fastest way to seal off the wound. The faster we close it, the harder it'll be for the elves to smell it," Lux replied. Butz nodded reluctantly. Something fell at the end of the alleyway, a metal bin that was holding slabs of meat inside. It clanged against the pavement as it rolled towards them.

"What was that?" Butz asked.

"Nothing, we probably just put it off balance as we were walking," Lux replied. "Okay, I think you're all set." She squeezed his arms lightly to test the kapcha.

"Ow!"

"Stop whining," Lux said.

"Well, if you knew how to put it on properly..."

"Well, if *you* weren't dumb enough to cut yourself in a place called *Sanguine City*."

"Guys, let's keep walking," Raven said. "I think they're still on our trail."

"Aren't you Suleek or something? Can't you give them commands? Tell them to stop chasing us?" Butz asked.

"It's Suleyk, and I don't think that lets me give them commands."

"Did you look up what it means?" Red asked.

"I tried to, but couldn't find much," Raven replied. "Must be a private custom of theirs."

"Suleyk?" Lux repeated.

"Yeah," Butz said. "Do you know what it means?"

"I know what the word means, but not in what context you guys are referring to."

"Blood elves have their own tongue?" Red asked.

"No, it's the same as ours, but the word Suleyk is from vozruh'dal," Lux replied.

"The dragon language?" Butz asked.

"Yes. And it means to be void of fear. I've never heard it used as a title, though. Why don't you ask S? Isn't she from Karth?"

"We did. She didn't know much about what it entailed either. So it means to be courageous?" Butz asked.

"No, not at all. Being void of fear is something very different from being courageous. We use the terms interchangeably, but in vozruh'dal the words are considered almost opposites," Lux answered. "The elves, they called you this as a title?" Raven nodded.

"It has to do with the dreamscape we went through," Red said.

"Technically we *all* went through it, but they didn't call *us* anything special," Butz added.

"Guys... do we know where we are, by the way?" Red asked. He hadn't realized they were walking on an empty road. All the buildings around them were abandoned. There were only a few carcasses here and there. By their state of decay, Red guessed they had been left there for weeks. He tapped nervously on his defilterizer. "If we didn't have these, we'd probably pass out from the smell of rotten and dead things. I don't think even the blood elf aroma could penetrate *this*. It's a wonder it doesn't bother the elves." A lone figure approached them from an alleyway up ahead. He had his hood on, but Red could see the white glint of fangs underneath them. They looked like twisted pearls in the colored light.

"Good night for a drink... eh?" He asked as he approached them. His hands were hidden underneath his robes. He looked like he was holding something. Raven ignored him as they continued to walk along the empty road. The silhouettes of more elves could be seen coming out of the intersecting roads. They walked slowly, like they were stalking prey. "You left the tavern so quickly," the elf commented politely. "It's not often that we get *human* visitors around these parts of Sanguine City." His voice sent shivers down Red's spine. The more he thought about what Butz had said, the more he realized he was right. Blood elves had a slow, idle way of speaking, like every word was being meticulously crafted before being spoken. The

elf sounded as though he were casting a spell rather than conversing. Raven turned back to him and pulled her hood down.

“We don’t want to trouble you. Leave us be, and we’ll return the favor.” The elf smiled at first, intending to reply right away, but then stuttered and held his breath. He took his own hood off and then studied Raven for several seconds.

“A human Suleyk?” he asked. Raven nodded. The elf raised his brow in doubt, but nodded in return, like someone who was forced to believe the impossible by the sight of their own eyes.

“You are forbidden to hurt my kind, I understand?” Raven replied. The elf stroked his chin. The other elves were getting closer, gathering in a circle around them.

“What trickery is this? How can a human be Suleyk?” the elf asked. “It has not occurred for over two thousand years.”

“Believe your eyes if you won’t believe me,” Raven replied.

“*They* are not Suleyk,” the elf said, pointing at Red, Butz, and Lux. He licked his lips hungrily.

“They are with me,” Raven said. Butz drew his breath to add something but Raven signaled him to remain silent. “We are on business here.”

“What kind of business?” the elf asked. He stepped closer. The group around them tightened their circle. There was no gap for an escape. They were all blood elves and judging by the vacant expressions on their eyes, Red thought this must have been their first chance at a real meal for years. He had seen the look before. People always had it in the Alloy Desert when they were looking at mirages.

“We are here to see the Baron,” Butz blurted out. “Why else would we be on this road?”

The elf looked at them in disbelief again. “How do you know the existence of the Baron, *human*? And what business do you have with the master of blood?”

Butz pulled out his shard of ainmosni crystal. “We are here to give him this. And a message.”

The elf took another step closer to inspect the crystal, checking if it was real or not. “A shard from the caves of terror. Most interesting...” the elf mused. “Very well, we cannot interfere with the business of the Baron.” He lifted a single hand up towards the other elves to tell them to back off.

“But... but...it is fresh blood. We cannot let *that* go to waste,” an elf

from the crowd pleaded. He lifted his hood to reveal his face. He had an eye missing, and several wounds on his face that looked like scratch marks from other elves. The elves around him murmured in agreement.

“It does not take *four* to deliver a message to the Baron,” someone else said. There was a long silence following the statement.

“He is right,” the elf that stopped them said solemnly, as though he were delivering an unbearable amount of bad news to Butz. “What business do the three of you have with the Baron? The Suleyk alone can deliver the crystal and the message.”

“They’re with me,” Raven said, stepping forward this time and placing her hand over her keratana. The elf’s eyes drifted towards her hand.

“You cannot take all of us, Suleyk. We *hunger*. Your travel companions shall come with us, and you will be given safe passage to the master of blood.”

“He’s talking about us like we’re farm stock or something,” Butz whispered angrily underneath his breath.

“I don’t like the way he talks about the Baron. *The master of blood*,” Red replied. “I think we’re getting ourselves into something even worse than the situation we’re in.”

“You know what this weapon is?” Raven asked, taking out her keratana. The ring blades looked like wreathed scythes in the half-light of the nearest balloon. The elf took a step back.

“Yes, Suleyk. We call them ring swords here. Again, we mean *you* no harm.”

“If you mean *them* harm, you mean *me* harm,” Raven replied. “These blades, they can reach to the end of the road if I wanted to throw them that far. I am faster than even the strongest of your kind. If I wanted to, I could take off your head in the blink of an eye, from right here.” The elf took another step back. “Bring us to the Baron first. Decide what you will do with my human companions after hearing what he says. The Baron does not request for humans to come to his lair unless he *means it*, does he? And if you killed my friends here, what would he do to you?” The elf mused over her proposition.

“Fetch my chariot Glendal,” the elf said, snapping his fingers. A blood elf from the crowd ran down the streets. “We are bringing these four to the Baron.” The elves around him murmured angrily. “We will see what the master of blood says about them,” the elf added.

“You will take us there on your chariot?” Raven asked. The elf nodded slowly.

“I imagine we shall have *company* following the chariot,” he said, gesturing to the crowd around them. “I can’t say they’ll be too satisfied though,” he added, now speaking in a whisper. “Those who bear messages for the Baron often do not bring any *return* messages, and the Baron does not leave leftovers.”

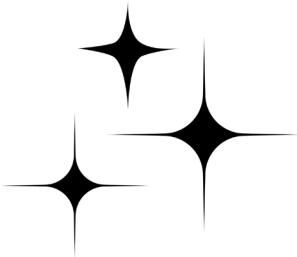
“What is the significance of the Baron?” Butz asked. “Is he just a powerful blood elf?”

“You do not know who the Baron is?” the elf asked. The ends of his lips curled into a smile. His fangs bit into his bottom lips, puncturing them unintentionally. Lux gave Butz a slight elbow from behind Red.

“No,” Butz replied quickly. “I mean, we were not given details. Only to go directly to him.”

“Please sire,” another elf from the crowd said. His voice was broken, and he stuttered like he was cold. “Please, the Baron would not mind if we had a taste.”

“Of course the Baron would mind,” the elf responded angrily. “We do not touch what the master of blood intends to drink.” He turned to Butz, smiling again. “The Baron is not an elf, nor a human. Truthfully, no one knows what exactly he is. He is of an ancient, nearly extinct race. All but a few of his kind remain, scattered throughout the universe as symbols of the powers that once existed long ago. His strength is immeasurable, and he is immortal by our standards. The master of blood is a hemomancer, a numen of the liquid of life.”



THE MASTER OF BLOOD

“How long have we been traveling?” Butz asked. “Can we even trust this guy to take us to the Baron? Who knows where he could be leading us?”

“I don’t think we have a choice. It’s been at least two hours now,” Red replied. He looked outside the carriage. There were no less than a hundred elves following them now. He could hear them whispering about fresh blood and the luck of running into humans off the main road. Every time someone mentioned that they were heading to the Baron, a few of the elves would always leave, shouting something about the Baron eating all of their food as they limped away. The elves that stayed to follow their carriage looked the hungriest.

“A little more than two hours, by my count,” Lux added.

“We’re almost there,” the elf at the front said. “Only a bit down this road now.”

“Say, what’s your name? I didn’t catch it before,” Butz asked.

“Maundrell,” the elf replied.

“Why do so many of the elves here have one or more of their limbs missing? We’ve seen blood elves before, we’ve even fought against them, but they were rather healthy and... *intact*,” Butz asked.

“They are called halflings. You say you’ve fought against blood elves before. They were strong?” the elf asked. Red and Butz both nodded. “They were well fed, trained, probably groomed to fight. Not all of our kind are that lucky. Only the ones with the best blood are allowed those luxuries, allowed to become warriors, the second highest of our castes. The poorest of our kind, they often drink their own blood. You might have seen this already.”

“Yeah, I saw one bite into his hands,” Red replied.

“While we are immune to the explicit effects of our toxins, if they cycle through our blood stream over and over again, they poison our body. The toxin is meant to stay within the glands in our mouths, and to be used scarcely even when we feed. A hungry elf will drink from his own legs first. Those are always the first limbs to go. Soon after it’s the arms, then the torso, and then the poison begins to spread to the brain and heart. The pain and hunger must be endured for years before death finally takes a blood elf. Our bodies are resilient, strong, even under extreme conditions. We are not fragile like humans. But at that point, I think many elves would agree that they would be better off dead. For a stubborn heart, life can quickly become more of a curse than a blessing.”

Raven expanded her map from her microAI. “See that?” she asked.

“This place isn’t charted?” Butz asked.

“No, we’ve either left Areopa entirely, or we’re somewhere that hasn’t been mapped. We’re still in the skies, so I’m guessing it’s the latter. Strangely, we’re still around the places Arkan marked, the places he said to look for the Scented Road.”

“Something tells me that not too many blood elves come here either,” Lux said. Red looked outside again. Besides the troupe of blood elves that were following them, there was no one in this area. There were only a few stone lodges with no activity around them, and several dark towers, like the ones they had seen before, with pools of water and spiked rails around them. The floor was still composed of the same dark clouds of Sanguine City, but they were more pristine here, fresh and unpolluted by the city. The lack of buildings and activity made the rain seem heavier, wilder, and cleaner. There were a few dark blue trees with straight branches that stuck out like icicles. They were the only signs of life in the pitch black tundra. They sent out light casts to survey the area around them every few minutes. The lack of other elves here made it unimportant to keep from drawing attention to themselves. Mentioning the Baron gave them sanction here, but for what price, Red did not know.

“What are the dark towers for?” Red asked. The curiosity had been eating away at him, but at first, he was unsure if it was a good idea to ask about them. Butz’s and Lux’s sudden looks of interest told him that they were holding back on the question too.

“Haven’t you ever wondered how Areopa was created, and why?” the elf began. “Areopa was not a city for humans, blood elves, or mystic elves.

Originally, it was constructed by the dark elves as a place for worship.”

“Worship?” Red repeated. Lux sat up as her interest piqued. “And the dark elves, you say?”

“Mmhmm. Sanguine City was the only place they settled. It was the other races that expanded Areopa. These towers that they constructed, they are heavily concentrated with energy from the void — so much of it, that the entire place is untethered from Avalonia. Gravity pulls the city back, but the energy from the void makes Avalonia’s own lifeforce reject it, keeping it in a floating stasis in the planet’s sky. The kingdom itself is kept balanced by force casts, but as you must have guessed, it would be impossible for us to generate enough energy to keep it floating on its own. Long ago, the dark elves would go to these towers, and they would meditate while absorbing the energy that runs through them. It would put them in a bodiless state where they could freely move in between this world and the world between worlds. Sometimes they would get lost in the void entirely, never make it back to their bodies.”

“That sounds horrible —” Lux gasped.

“Oh no, that was the *goal*. To become lost in the void entirely. There is a name for it. I forgot what it was. Mmm...”

“Phantasia,” Red whispered.

“Yes, that’s it,” the elf said. He turned around and glanced at Red curiously before looking back at the road. “Phantasia. They were obsessed with being able to peer into the abyss, catching sight of the bottom of it. It is impossible, they say. Only The Evil Eye can see that far. The rest simply fall deeper and deeper, for eternity. You’ve heard of this tale?”

“I have,” Lux quickly replied. The elf nodded and glanced back again. Lux pulled her hood tighter over her face, afraid that he would recognize that she was from the Priori.

“Many of them died in the process of trying to get to the void. That type of energy has strange effects on the body. Our own lifeforce rejects it. I’ve heard of only very few making it through. Surviving the effects of the energy for long enough to meditate and becoming lost in the abyss entirely. At that point, it was said that they lost their desire to come back anyway, that they had freed themselves of the shackles that held them to this world. They had successfully entered the void. Of course, none of them have ever come back to say otherwise, so there’s no real way to know, now is there? The towers are now used by blood elves and other creatures for a similar,

but altogether different purpose. Sometimes humans, or other beings, will come there and willingly allow blood elves to farm them,” Maundrell said.

“Farm them?” Butz gulped.

“That’s right. Remember, our toxin causes intense euphoria to humans subjected to it? And the aroma of a blood elf you’re attracted to or afraid of —”

“Attracted to?” Red asked.

“The smell is greatly amplified by certain emotional states. The aroma is more a result of psykinesthetic force than the control of a visceral sense. It works by manipulating everything from your visual perception of an elf to your ability to sense danger around them. If you don’t see an elf, if you don’t feel their presence, you wouldn’t smell them at all. Most humans don’t understand this, and that’s why your kind always comes to our city with those silly defilterizers. When you smell a blood elf around you without seeing one first, it’s because your body can sense they’re around, and is too consumed by its own fear. It’s how the aroma works. The defilterizers are unnecessary. If you can control the pace of your mind, the smell disappears. Although I suppose they still help with the smell of rotten bodies here. People of all races come to the towers for the aroma and the toxin of elves, to experience as much of it as they can before their bodies give way. They allow themselves to be taken care of by a blood elf inside. They live the rest of their lives out as a food source. It’s a symbiotic relationship.”

“*Parasitic*, if you ask me —” Butz mumbled.

“Yes, well, it’s a matter of perspectives,” Maundrell replied. “Remember — the humans come willingly there. As for the blood elves, it’s a good deal for them, but not as good as complete bliss and euphoria until death. We get a lot of elderly people, or people suffering from a deathly illness. Anyway, it’s hard to get pure blood in Sanguine City, so I can’t say the elves are getting a bad deal for having to take care of their human partners. I’ve heard sometimes, they form life-changing bonds.” An image of being trapped with the girl blood elf in a tower flashed through Red’s mind.

“What about the taverns? There were always feasts going on,” Red said. “They’re open to those who can afford it.”

“Ahh, those places have anything *but* pure blood. The creatures they serve, even the *live* ones are heavily injected with fluids to dilute their blood. It makes them produce a much larger amount of bodily fluids, *but*, everything you drink only has a small amount of actual blood in it. It is why the

elves you see in Sanguine City are seldom satisfied. They always thirst. Their bodies are always craving *true* blood.” He turned back at them and shined a smile with his fangs. “We are here. Stay here for another minute or two while I settle the creatures down.”

The four of them peeked outside. The hound-like creatures that were drawing the carriage began barking nervously and stepping away from the lake the elf was trying to bring them closer to. “Come now, it’s not *us* going to the Baron,” Maundrell said to the critters. The blood elves that were following them were in view, but stood far from where they were. Some were carrying torches. It was hard to tell how large the lake was in the dark. There were no waves, nor any wind. The water was perfectly still, as though they were underground.

“I just realized — Cron... it’s dark flou,” Butz suddenly said in the carriage. He looked at Lux eagerly. She nodded, slowly.

“Yes, or at least it has *some* dark flou in it.”

“And polystigmata —” He looked at Raven now.

“Is the reaction our bodies have to dark flou,” Lux said. “It is understood as a disease from environmental pollution, but it is really the result of our bodies being subjected to dark flou. It only affects children because adults are not exposed to enough of it to deteriorate our lifeforce, but it can happen to us too. Eventually, it *will* start happening to us, even in the inner planets.”

“You knew this already?” Red asked. “I mean, shouldn’t the Light be more worried about MegaCORP then?”

“Not exactly,” Lux replied. “Finding dark flou somewhere isn’t the issue. Dark flou exists everywhere in the universe. It is far rarer than other forms of energy, but it certainly exists. Our Elders say this universe came about from several others combining, including remnants of the void itself, hence why so much dark flou remains here. It can also get here through the rifts that often form between dimensions. Either way, it’s not the very presence of dark flou that concerns us. For as long as we can remember, it has always been used as an extremely efficient source of energy by sentient beings who are aware of how to tap into it. The first gemini colonies used dark flou to create the very first prototypes of their motherships. Only an energy source *that* pure was capable of powering those behemoth machines.”

“Then?” Butz asked. “What’s the problem with Cron?”

“The issue is more about how *this much* Cron can exist in this star system.

The gemini colonies that used dark flou — they only had access to a tiny amount that leaked through a rift that existed millions of years before they themselves came to be. You don't understand, but the amount of energy being mined from the planets in this star system is quite literally impossible to correlate with the conditions of your inner planets, and arguably your outer planets as well. If this much dark flou existed in these planets, then there should be no life in this star system. Dark flou is naturally rejected by organisms born of starlight. Only creatures like the Xenosites are able to flourish under these conditions."

"The Xenosite?" Red asked.

"Yes, they're different. Like I said, from what the Light knows about them, they were somehow born of the light of a dark star, or a star that burns with dark flou. The thing is, we've never found one. We either don't understand what a star of that kind would look like, or it is somehow being hidden. We don't know."

"Step into the waters," Maundrell shouted from outside. They climbed out of the carriage slowly.

"The Baron's... erm... home... is in the lake?" Butz asked

"It is hidden underneath the Claret Sea," the elf replied. "If he expects you, the entrance will rise when you enter the sea."

"Sea?" Red gaped. He threw his light cast as far as he could. It was still too dark to tell how far the water stretched.

"And if he doesn't?" Butz asked. Red stepped on the falconer's left foot. "I mean... hypothetically speaking, what would happen if the Baron doesn't expect someone? There must be *some* people who wander here accidentally."

"No," the elf replied firmly. "No one wanders into the lair of the master of blood by accident. To be honest, I don't know what would happen if someone uninvited walks into the lake, but I imagine the Baron does not take kindly to unwanted guests." Raven began walking forward. Red stopped her.

"Let me," he said. "You always go first in these things."

"Red, it won't —"

"Just let me," Red repeated. She gestured for him to go first. He stepped into the sea. It was ice cold. A breeze passed by as soon as his foot touched the water. He stood there for several minutes. Nothing happened. Butz came up next to him, and then Lux.

“Well, I guess this means the Baron wasn’t expecting us,” Butz whispered.

“Surprise, surprise,” Lux shuddered. “This water is freezing.”

“Hey, we’re in a better position now than we were before, right? It’s only Maundrell here now. We can put him down and take his carriage. I mean, if we can figure out how to control those hound things. Listen, Red, can’t you do one of those short burst fire casts on him? Or like a force cast to knock him out? Pretend to go back to ask him a question, and then just give him a good day’s worth of sleep.” Red nodded. Lux turned to them with a horrified expression.

“Yeah, good idea. I hope it won’t draw the attention of the other elves,” Red replied. He glanced back, peering into the distance. The torches were far away. The elves would not hear the sounds of an altercation.

“Is something wrong?” Maundrell shouted.

“No, not at all,” Butz shouted back. “Just waiting for her.” Raven was studying the area around them, looking for another road to avoid the elves that followed them here. She finally stepped into the water with the three of them. She gripped her keratana with her left hand.

“Hey, we don’t have to kill him,” Red whispered when she entered the water. “I can just —” A slight rumble in the sea interrupted him. It grew louder, until the floor began shaking.

“There can’t be any planet quakes in Areopa, can there?” Butz asked.

“Maybe it’s a sky quake?” Red suggested. “Is there even such a thing?” He stepped back on his right foot to balance himself.

“That’s no planet quake,” Lux gasped, pointing ahead of them. The enormous head of a creature began erupting from the sea. As it slowly rose, Red realized it was made out of stone, although it moved like a normal critter would. It emerged with its mouth closed, and then slowly opened it as it came to the surface. A bright white light sparkled from deep inside the mouth of the creature like a diamond.

“How is that... how is that possible?” Butz whispered. “The Baron can’t be expecting us, can he?”

“What do we do now? Do we go in?” Red asked, looking at Raven.

“We can turn back,” she said, staring at the entrance in wonder. “We should turn back.”

“I don’t know. Remember what the guy said about the Baron? I mean... what if it comes after us now that we’ve awakened it?” Red took a step

back. Vines from the floor of the sea shot up and grabbed his ankles. He fell over, splashing headfirst into the water behind him. Butz bent down and tore his foot free of the vines.

“Stand still,” Raven whispered. “There are *things* under our feet. I can feel them. We can’t move back, only forward.”

“Well, I guess that decides it for us,” Butz said.

“I think we can run for it,” Raven replied, “but we have to go all at once, and fast.”

“Lux, are you okay?” Red asked. He didn’t notice before, but she was trembling now.

“Are you cold?” Butz asked.

“No, I’m fine,” Lux replied. “I mean, I’m cold, but I also just have a bad feeling about this place. Let’s just get out of here. I sense something strange in there.”

“Well yeah, I mean, we’re staring into the giant mouth of some demon statue. I doubt anyone would sense something *good* in there,” Butz replied.

“No, more than that,” Lux said. “There is a presence in there. Something... ancient, dark. I can feel its hunger.”

“I don’t feel anything,” Red said. “At least not any energy. Maybe it’s your senses from the Light? Is it something from the void in there?”

“No. Not from the void. But... something just as powerful, just as old as anything from the void.”

“You cannot leave the sea once you have awakened the Baron,” Maundrell shouted, as though he had read their minds. “The sea will drown you if you attempt to escape, or so I’ve heard.”

“I’m going to try it anyway,” Raven whispered to the three of them. “At the count of three, okay?” Red and Butz nodded. Lux seemed too terror-struck to move at all.

“One.”

“What’s wrong?” Butz asked Lux. She shook her head nervously. “We’re going to be fine. Just get ready to run.” She held onto Butz’s hand and nodded.

“Two. I’m going to use my keratana. I won’t kill Maundrell,” Raven said, looking at Red. “I’ll just... stop him from stopping us.”

“Don’t get carried away,” Red whispered under his breath.

“Go!” Raven shouted.

Red ran first. Nothing came out of the waters to stop him. Raven was

right behind him. In the dim light of his cast, he could see that Maundrell was running for his carriage. He heard the ring blades scratching each other as Raven took them out.

“Red! Help!” Butz shouted. Red turned back. Vines as thick as tree trunks shot out of the sea floor and wrapped around Lux like snakes. Butz tried to pull her back, but their grip was too strong. Her hands slipped out of Butz’s in the water, and the vines began dragging her into the mouth of the statue. Butz ran after her. Without thinking, Red did the same. Raven didn’t go until he did. Once Lux was inside of the creature’s mouth, the vines let her go. The four of them came to help her up, but as soon as they did, the mouth of the statue closed around them. It did not move back underwater, but the entrance did not open. The light they saw were torches of white flames that lit a stairwell that spiraled downwards.

“Well, this feels quite familiar,” Red mumbled.

“Are you okay?” Butz asked.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Lux panted. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to get caught. The three of you... you should have just left me.” Her eyes glistened as she choked back tears.

“Don’t be stupid,” Butz replied as he helped her up. “We don’t leave behind teammates.”

“What are you staring at?” Raven asked. Red looked back at her.

“This fire... it’s... white.”

“Yeah. Can you feel it?”

“No... ironically... no. It’s like it’s reached a temperature so hot that it’s not hot anymore.”

“That happens,” Raven replied. “Its energy is more concentrated into only the flames. It won’t release heat around it, but if you touch the flames, you can expect to melt.”

“How can this be?” Red asked. “I mean, white fire? Something *must* be generating it or it wouldn’t last.” An odd, animalistic moan emanated from deep under them. It sounded like an enormous sea creature, but strangely, also something with a voice. The moan came three times with long pauses in between. It echoed through the stairwell with a musical note.

“What... was that?” Butz whimpered.

“Can you sense anything?” Red asked Lux. “Anger? Power?”

“Desire,” Lux replied. “I sense desire. I thought it was hunger before, but it’s not. It’s desire — similar, but distinct.”

“What? Desire for what?” Red asked.

“I don’t know I just... feel it.”

“I really don’t want to go down there,” Butz whispered again.

“Get a hold of yourself, Butz,” Raven replied. “I’ll go on my own if I have to. I’ll kill this thing if it’s the only way out.” She began descending down the spiral staircase. Red shrugged at Butz before following her. Lux came after him, and then Butz.

“This is the worst of all bad ideas,” Butz whispered indignantly. “Personally, I wouldn’t mind a mutiny once in a while.”

“For once I agree,” Lux said. “Well... not the mutiny part, but I don’t think we should be going down here. There has to be another way out.”

“Raven is Suleyk,” Red replied. “I mean, thus far, from what I understand about blood elves, it means *something* important, or worth preserving. Maybe this thing will let us go.”

“You don’t understand what I feel, Red,” Lux replied. “I wish I could somehow show you.”

“Well, I’ll understand soon enough,” Red replied as he picked up his pace to keep up with Raven. The stairwell was silent. He expected to hear gushing water, but there were only the hollow thuds of their footsteps. It sounded more like they were in an isolated chamber than under a sea.

“It’s not regular stone,” Butz said as they walked down. Red grazed the walls with his fingers. “It’s obsidian. Like the Gates of Thokh.”

“Isn’t obsidian usually smoother?” Red asked.

“Yeah, when it’s refined. This structure is much older. Handmade, without any casts or machinery. Feel it. The stone doesn’t have any impurities,” Butz replied.

“Yeah, you’re right,” Red said. He knocked on the walls lightly. At the bottom of the stairs, he jumped back and grabbed Butz when he saw a figure standing before them. It was hunched over, underneath a shawl. Red could not see its face. Its breath turned into vapor in the cold air of the chamber they were in. It was on a wooden boat that was floating on water.

“Are you... the Baron?” Raven asked, disappointedly.

“Oh no,” the woman cackled. “I am the one who will take you to him.”

“Are you a blood elf?” Red asked. Her energy felt different from an elf’s. It felt normal and weak. He tried to see under her hood. It looked like her bones were popping out of her hunched back.

“No, I am like you,” the woman replied. She looked up, barely lifting her

shawl. She had the face of a human who should have passed away long ago. Her wrinkles had settled in so deeply that her face looked deformed, and barely recognizable as a living person. Her pupils were invisible underneath her drooping eyelids. The skin underneath her neck and jaws hung down so low, Red expected a chunk to fall off any second. “Come now, you don’t want to keep him waiting.” Raven stepped inside of the boat.

“What are you doing?” Lux asked.

“She knows what she’s doing,” the woman said. She looked at Raven with a strange stare that Raven returned, as though they both understood something between each other that the rest of them didn’t.

“Come,” Raven said. “There’s no other way out of here. We have to see the Baron.”

“The master of blood is not one to be kept waiting,” the woman warned. Red looked back up the staircase, wishing an escape route would pop out.

“Butz, I really, really don’t feel like this is a good idea,” Lux whispered.

“Do all of us have to go?” Butz asked. The woman looked up at him. “Can she stay back here while we go?”

“I don’t want to stay back here by myself,” Lux said. “I don’t know what’s here.”

“You would be wise not to,” the woman replied. “The guests of the dungeon may get hungry.”

“Guests?” Lux gasped. The woman pointed up. Red extended a light cast to the ceiling of the stone dungeon. There were hundreds of winged creatures on top, hanging upside down with the claws of their feet dug into the obsidian. They screeched when the light was near them. Red immediately brought the cast back down.

“They are sensitive to light,” the woman said. “You don’t want to disturb them.”

“What are they?” Lux asked. “Blood elves? We saw winged ones at the entrance to this city. I thought they were just...”

“Decorations on the elves? Oh no,” the woman coughed. “They are taureks. Blood elves are not a natural race of elves. They developed over centuries as other elves cross bred with taureks in a distant star system.”

“Are they... people? I mean, do they think, or speak? Or are they critters?” Butz asked with a confused expression.

“I do not know. I have never seen one awake,” the woman replied. “Although I’ve heard that they *do* wake from time to time, in search of food.”

She looked at Lux ominously.

“How long have you been here for?” Red asked.

“Two hundred years,” the woman coughed. She began to row the boat.

“Wait!” Lux yelled. She hopped onto the boat along with Butz and Red. “I knew she would come,” the woman cackled.

“The elf that brought us here... he said... that the entrance to this place would only arise if the Baron *expected* us. But... we were never summoned by him,” Lux said. “How can he expect us? We didn’t even know that he existed before we came to Sanguine City.”

“Coincidence is often just your blood summoning you to a place, beckoning you to meet someone, or bringing you in front of a door you thought did not exist,” the woman replied. “The master of blood did not have to ask you to come to him for him to summon you here. Perhaps it was not him that wanted you to see him in the first place.” Red exchanged a baffled glance with the other three. “You are close now,” the woman said as she waded through the water. “Can you feel him?”

“No,” Red replied, looking at everyone else.

“I can,” Lux said.

“Not everyone can,” the woman replied. “He is a different kind of being. Different from us. If you are not used to sensing the energies of older beings, creatures from a time when the universe was still young, you will not be able to feel it.” Red nodded in understanding.

“What’s in those gaps?” Butz asked, pointing to the wide crevices in the lake where water was flowing in.

“Why don’t you take a look?” the woman suggested. Both Red and Butz leaned over to see down the crevices. Butz used a light cast to illuminate the way. Through the hole were thousands of blood elves, all silently feeding on each other in a frenzy of gore and blood. Something shoved Butz, and he almost fell over. Red looked up to see Raven grabbing him by his collar.

“That wasn’t funny,” Butz whispered loudly. “I could have fallen over.” Raven shrugged.

“It was *kind* of funny,” Lux snickered.

“Those are blood elves in there?” Red asked.

“They are servants of the Baron. Go down those steps. He will be waiting,” she said, pointing to a second stairwell at the end of the lake. They followed suit, taking each step slower than the one before it.

“Will you be waiting here?” Red asked as he took his fourth step down.

“I will be where the Baron wants me to be,” the woman replied.

“Well, that doesn’t really help,” Butz mumbled angrily. The steps ended in a pool of dark liquid too viscous to be water.

“We’re in blood...” Butz whispered.

“Butz, get over here,” Lux whispered angrily. “Stay close to me.”

“Okay, okay, relax, I’m here.” The room was dark. Red made his light cast as tiny as possible, illuminating only the immediate space around him. He was afraid the Baron would not appreciate the light. He heard something move above them. It was descending downwards, taking its time to come towards them.

Its body started out as an immense larva with a rotating circle at the end of its tip, reminiscent of a pupil. It came down like a spider, on a single cord of dry, sticky blood. It didn’t look or feel familiar, but Red was struck with a sense of nostalgia when he peered into the eye of the cyclopean creature. He could sense what Lux had mentioned before, a combination of desire and hunger, but only faint traces of it. Trying to sense the creature’s energy or state of mind felt like exercising a motion ingrained in his muscle memory, but that he had lost touch with after many years of non-use. It plopped onto the pool of blood that they were now waist-deep in. Lux and Butz took sharp gasps of air in, squealing underneath their breaths like their mouths were taped shut. Raven took out her keratana. Red had a feeling the weapon was going to be useless. A hand emerged from the blood, opening and closing furiously like the body underneath was drowning. It began growing in size, into a claw-like appendage with pitch-black talons. Another hand came out of the water, but this one did not grow. The creature’s head began emerging. It now had a humanoid body, but neither its face nor its eyes could be seen. Everything was covered in the vines that grabbed them earlier. Its enlarged hand was bigger than half of its body. It reached out towards the four of them. The hand stretched farther and farther like an elastic limb. It stopped only a few feet in front of them, and then clenched its palm, as though it were drawing something out. Lux made a violent choking noise. A thick globule of blood came out of her mouth and floated towards the Baron’s outstretched hand. The master of blood studied it in silence.

“You fear me,” the Baron said. It sounded like multiple people were speaking behind the vine wrapped body simultaneously, the voices of men and women, elves and humans. Red could hear the distinct inflections of

different accents, tones, and eras, all combined into a single channel. Behind him, Lux began trembling.

“What... what are you?” She asked.

“I am blood. I am life,” the Baron replied. It vanished and reappeared somewhere else in its lair almost instantly, as though its first image had only been an illusion. It still had Lux’s blood floating above the palm of its larger hand. It studied the liquid again. “The conflicts of elves and the Light do not concern me. I have existed before either was born, and I will exist after both are dead. I sense fear in you, Acolyte of Light. Fear of me, and fear of the coming darkness. You sense the ascension. It scares you, as it does all creatures of the Light.” Lux shook her head slowly. Red wasn’t sure if she was trying to say no, or if she was simply twitching from fright. “You cannot lie to the master of blood,” the Baron said. “I am not asking you these things. I am only reading to you what your blood says. You fear the ascension, yet you come here with the one who will bring it upon you.” Lux turned her head to Red, and then turned back quickly, as if hoping he wouldn’t notice.

“How did you know we were coming?” Lux asked, shuddering between the words. “The elf that brought us here... he said the Baron had to expect his guests.”

“It is a visit I have been expecting for a long time.” The creature tilted its head towards Red. “But there *are* certain things I did *not* expect,” it added, turning to the other three, studying them deeply, one by one. “There is another coming. A child of mine, who wishes to save you. She is almost here.”

“A child of his?” Butz mumbled underneath his breath. The Baron lifted his hand and made another gripping motion. It was Butz who choked up blood this time. The globule floated towards the Baron just like before.

“I see courage here, but still a creature consumed by fear. Not fear of the outside world, but of the one inside. You are afraid of not being as powerful as you think you are meant to be, human?” The Baron vanished and reappeared several times all around the chamber, flickering in and out of Red’s sight like a broken hologram, until finally settling at a spot right behind Butz. The falconer turned only halfway before stumbling into the blood. He wiped the liquid off his face with congested sobs, unable to hide his revulsion and shock. “Your past has many missteps, ruler of beasts. But your future is yet to be written. One day you will come upon a decision to save either the one you are in love with, or the ones you love. Choose wisely,

for one will destroy you, and the other will make you a king.”

“You can t-t-tell my future?” Butz stuttered.

“The choice is written in your blood, but the decision will be written by *you*.” The Baron descended into the pool of blood, disappearing underneath a knot of bubbles. It slowly emerged again in the form of the giant larva that they had seen earlier. Vines emerged from the pool of blood and shot straight into the walls, forming a network of strings for the Baron to crawl across.

“I preferred its... umm... humanesque form,” Butz whispered. The Baron crawled close to Red and then pointed its eye at him.

“Ahh, and now, to fulfill a pact made thousands of years ago.” Red looked at the other three in confusion, making sure that the Baron was talking to him.

“Between... between me and you?” Red muttered.

“We meet again, Ikb’Sept. You are weaker than your last form.”

Lux looked back and forth between Red and the Baron. She had an expression of anticipated shock, like someone witnessing an ending they had expected, but spent too long waiting for.

“We’ve met before? I mean... me and you?”

“In a past lifetime, Ikb’Sept, we knew each other very well.” The Baron’s voice came not from the larva but from the walls of the pit they were in, like it was being echoed from somewhere else.

“We knew each other well? But... you aren’t from the void, are you?”

“No, Ikb’Sept, I am not, and the world between worlds does not concern me. But, in a past life, you gave me your blood in return for a favor. Even my own kind knows to keep their word with The Shepard of Oblivion.”

“I... I don’t know what I am,” Red replied. “I have no memory of my past life.”

“Have you found the eye, Ikb’Sept? And the Phase Blade? That is what you were so obsessed with in the life I have met you in before. Finding the pieces to make you whole again.”

“No... I mean... I’m not looking for it. It’s looking for me.” The eye lunged at him, peering closely.

“Make sure you know the difference, Ikb’Sept. The eye does not seek its owner unless it is summoned. I can see it in your human eyes right now. What you wish to ask me now, what you are itching to ask me, is, in essence, calling the eye to you.” Lux, Raven, and Butz were staring at him so

intensely Red thought he might explode from the scrutiny. He wished he were alone suddenly, just him and the Baron.

"I want to ask nothing. I want no favors," Red quickly replied.

The Baron dropped to a whisper, and he thought he was the only one who could hear the creature's voice. It sounded like it was speaking in his head through telepathy. "You want to know what powers the eye will bring you, Ikb'Sept. You want to know what the Phase Blade is. You want to know what it means to be The Mouth of The Void. You *hunger* for strength. You feel incomplete without it. You desire to feel whole again."

"No," Red replied. "No, I don't. I came here to *stop* all of those things. To learn how to stop myself."

The Baron laughed, a strange, crude noise, like metal being scratched against metal. "Long ago you lost something in the Vault of Knowledge, Shepard of Oblivion. A powerful force keeps all that is dark trapped within the vault, and all that is outside from entering. You came to me seeking to break the cast to allow yourself to enter, but before we could fulfill the pact, you were defeated in battle. Now, history repeats itself, and perhaps, without knowing it, you are acting by your own designs. A trail of blood outside of my lair will lead you to the hidden entrance to the Vault of Knowledge," the Baron said. "You will need my own blood to enter it. Take some from here, and consider our pact complete, Ikb'Sept."

"The Vault of Knowledge," Lux whispered. "The library. But how did you —"

"You are asking the wrong questions, Acolyte of Light. The next time we meet, you will know the correct ones. Take the blood and go. Time is of the essence for all things that are mortal."

"I've seen another of your kind," Red said. "I think..."

"Perhaps..." the Baron mused.

"Is it also a hemomancer?"

"There is only *one* master of blood. My kind is nearly extinct, but we wield *many* powers. They are spoken of by *your* kind only in myth and legend."

"The ascension... that's what it wanted," Red said. "The ascension of the void. Is that what you want?"

The Baron turned to look at him closely again. "The ascension does not concern me, Ikb'Sept. My kind, we are bound to our own prisons, but I have no intention of escaping mine. The Light and the dark do not bother

me. My children fight on either side, and for many foolish reasons, but should the void ascend, I *too* will roam the universe as I once did, when it was still only an infant.”

“What’s in it?” Red asked. “What’s in the dark that I’m supposed to awaken?” The Baron suddenly began spiraling all around the lair in a frenzy of movement before settling on Red again.

“We do not speak of what lay asleep in the dark, Ikb’Sept. He is The Beginning and The End.” Its voice changed into a harsher, angrier tone.

“When you looked at their blood, you said you saw fear. Wouldn’t you see the same with me? I mean, even if I *am* this... thing. Why are you fulfilling your pact with me? Why don’t you just kill me?” Red asked. Butz looked at him with a horrified expression.

“You suffer from the human condition, Ikb’Sept. When you are whole, you will once again be tainted with perfection. I keep my pact with you not because I am afraid of your human side, but of the darker one. Do not think you are unique, human. I have heard your name across the universe for epochs untold, dying over and over again on both sides of the same war, but The Mouth of The Void is bound to rise again *one day*. There are only so many combinations of the universe that allow for The Great Sleeper to remain asleep.”

The sound of the chamber door opening echoed across the lair. “Come forth, child,” the Baron said. The aroma filled Red’s head with a pang of dizziness. He touched his defilterizer. It was still on. *All in my head*, he thought. The smell disappeared as quickly as it had come.

“Baron, master of blood,” a familiar voice beckoned. “You already know why I am here?” The girl blood elf climbed down the steps and then splashed into the pool next to Red. She seemed comfortable there, unafraid of the area around her.

“The master of blood is aware of all the webs that connect to him,” the Baron replied.

“The ones here — I know them. I have done battle with them. They defeated me. They are strong, and I must beg for their release. Please, master of blood, let them go. The world can use more of their kind. A Suleyk stands among them. We have challenged each other to faadh, but the ritual was interrupted. Let her live even if you must kill the others. Allow me to do battle with her to see if I am worthy of Suleyk.”

“Yes,” the Baron whispered. “A Suleyk. The prize I have been waiting

for.” The larva dropped into the pool and then emerged again as the clawed humanoid creature it was before. It lifted its arm and pulled a globule of blood from Raven. It came out not as a choke, but in the sound of a breath being exhaled heavily. She willingly gave her blood.

“Suleyk, I have waited eons for someone of your strength to come to me,” the Baron marveled. Next to him, Red noticed a look of sudden spite on the blood elf’s face. It disappeared when he blinked. “This world has forgotten true power, Suleyk. Peace has made it complacent. Harmony has made it weak. It has been defeated by victory.” It slid through one of the vines, coming closer to the four of them. It summoned another globule of blood from Raven. “Give me a child, Suleyk. Let me remind them of what true power is. Give me a child, Suleyk, and you and all of your companions are free to go.”

“A what?” Butz muttered. “Did he say child?”

“I think so,” Lux whispered back.

The blood elf looked as though she was trying her hardest to hold her tongue. She took a few steps to the side, away from the Baron, and lightly bumped against Red.

“You think you have strength, Suleyk? You think you have power and wrath?”

“Enough to tear worlds apart,” Raven replied. The Baron made a laughing noise, the sound of pure glee. It plopped into the water and then leaped out wildly. It was much larger this time, and began wrapping its entire body around the lair. Its head slowly made its way towards Raven. Its eye looked at her with the intense stare of someone trying to see past the corporeal.

“Give me a child, Suleyk, and I will show you someone who truly *can* tear worlds apart.”

“Let her come back, Baron,” the blood elf asked. “Please, master of blood, let her come back later and fulfill your request.”

“Master of blood, I *will* come back later. You have my word. I am not ready now,” Raven said.

“You cannot lie to *me*,” the Baron said. He pulled another blotch of blood from her. Raven held her stomach in pain.

“What’s wrong? Did he take too much?” Red asked, leaning over to her.

“No, I’m fine,” Raven whispered. She wiped residual blood from her lips.

“You *will* come back,” the Baron said firmly after studying her blood.

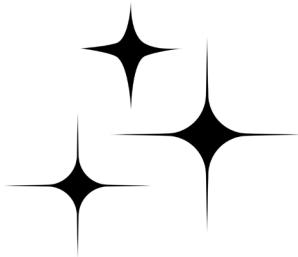
“Go now then, and find the knowledge you seek. Come to me when you have lost your balance, Suleyk, and I will return it to you for a child.” The elf quickly treaded through the pool of blood towards the staircase. Butz and Lux quickly followed behind her. Raven gestured for Red to follow behind them. When they were near the door at the top, Raven turned back one more time and looked over the stair case.

“Baron?” The larva crawled up a vine to the top of the pit to look at Raven. “You said you would mark the way to the Vault of Knowledge, the library. Can you keep the blood elves from disturbing us?”

“You need not fear the blood elves. There is someone far more powerful watching over *you*, Suleyk”

Raven glanced confusedly at both Butz and Red before looking back at the Baron. “Who?”

“Death.”



THE SCENTED ROAD

The old human woman was waiting for them on the boat.

"Thank you," Red said, as soon as they were out of the Baron's lair. "Why did you come and save us? I mean, thank you, but, why? How did you find us?"

"Finding you was easy," the elf said. "Her wound is still not fully healed." She pointed at Raven's arm, at the place she had bitten. "There is no free flowing blood there, but the smell of an old bite lingers within. It makes her scent a hundredfold stronger to me. I knew she was here as soon as you entered Sanguine City. Blood elves bite their prey without killing them to mark them. The scent of an old bite can remain for months, even after the wound has healed over."

"Then why did you save us?" Lux asked. "And are you the blood elf they keep referring to?" The elf looked at Raven and Red with a questioning glance until Red nodded.

"Yeah, she's the one we fought in the qualifiers," Butz said. "The one that almost killed us," he mumbled underneath his breath.

"When you challenge another to faadh and the challenge is not complete, you are bound by honor to protect them until it is finished. I seek a rematch, Suleyk. It is rare for me to find a challenge worth pursuing."

"You came here because you were bound by honor?" Butz asked. "You saved her just to fight her?"

"Yes," the elf replied, raising a brow. The five of them entered the boat as the old woman began rowing back to the staircase that led out of the lair.

"I mean, I'm very thankful too. I just... don't understand it," Butz said.

"What is there not to understand?" the elf asked.

"This must be a serious deal for you, faadh, if you are willing to come down here to save us. I mean, I don't know if the Baron would have harmed

you, but it must have been troublesome to follow us all the way here,” Butz said.

“Not all of you, only her.” She pointed to Raven. “Only the Suleyk. I couldn’t have cared less if the master of blood killed the rest of you. What is strong is sacred to us. You remember the Baron’s proposition to the Suleyk? The master of blood is driven by an insatiable thirst to breed power. Our entire race comes from his blood. We have the same hunger, and the same respect for strength. We cherish it, nurture it, and always allow it to grow. It is forbidden to drink from a creature you needed help to slay, and we are not allowed to kill those who are stronger than us. Quite contrary, we are to give up our own lives protecting them so that *their* blood may live on.”

“Back in Sanguine City, and even outside of this very place, there are all these elves that are halflings, begging for food and scraps and drops of blood. They don’t seem like honorable elves,” Butz said. The elf averted her eyes before replying.

“They are disowned by our kind. They do not deserve the title of blood elf. They are leeches, parasites that feed off the strong. They reek of desperation, fear, and frailty.”

“But aren’t they governed by the same rules you are?” Butz asked. “I mean, they *are* technically blood elves, aren’t they?” Red tried to hint at him to stop asking questions, but the falconer was intent on getting a satisfactory answer.

“What is the single most important quality that defines humans?” the elf asked after a momentary pause. “What is your strongest trait, your race’s most redeeming quality? You are not the strongest, nor the smartest, nor the fastest, nor the most moral. What is it that stands out about your kind? What would make you proud to be human? Unlike the blood elves, where only the weak suffer from the stench of fear, your *strongest*, wealthiest, most powerful are the ones who are most afraid of death. Unlike the mystic elves who are naturally inclined to seek enlightenment in the universe, your race is always moving away from the pattern, as though your most basic instinct urges you to corrupt yourself. Unlike the gemini, who use technology to make themselves stronger — you use it to make yourselves weaker, more apathetic, more neurotic, more dependent. Why would anyone want to be human?”

“Hope?” Lux asked. “There is a saying in the Light, that humans are the universe’s dreamers. It is why the highest number of Elders of Light are

human.”

“Yet, are there not so many of your kind — perhaps *most* of your kind — that betray your most redeeming quality?” the elf asked. “The hopeless, the dejected, the despondent, the ones who always live in vain, do they not far outnumber those who live by your most redeeming virtue?”

“I guess,” Butz shrugged.

“It is the same with the elves, and perhaps with all things that are conscious of their own ideals. To be cursed with a lack of their greatest virtues, and to find it hardest simply to be themselves.”

“So, just to make things clear, you came here *just* to save Raven?” Butz asked incredulously. “You don’t want to feed on us?”

“Yes, Butz, she came just to save Raven. Will you stop badgering her now? Some people have no ulterior motives when they come to help others,” Lux snapped. Butz sat back on the boat with a guilty look. Red breathed a sigh of relief.

“I have no ulterior motive. I just want to be the one to kill her. That is all,” the elf said in an amicable tone, as though it was to be expected. “I do not mean to deceive, Suleyk. I trust you understand? I will only fight you when you are ready.” Raven gave her an appreciative nod after a brief silence where she contemplated what to make of the elf’s intentions.

“What’s your name?” Red asked.

“You would not know how to say it,” the elf replied.

“Is it in some elvish tongue?”

“★👑♣♥॥”

“What? How did you say that? Was that even a word? I only saw images in my mind.”

“Was that telepathy?” Butz asked.

“It’s an older method of expression,” Lux said. “One that no longer exists.”

“My father is from a time before sounds were used to communicate. Back then, they used to speak only through thoughts and ideas, kind of like the way gemini do now, but more freely. The gemini still use symbols, characters, and words to share concepts through telepathy. When my father was young, minds flowed into and out of each other the way words between people do now. I was named in that method of speak, not in the one you hear with your ears. It is my true name. I have never taken any other.”

“But that’s not a blood elf thing, is it?” Red asked. “The elf that brought

us here, his name was Maundrell. That's a normal name.”

“Are you saying my name isn't normal?” the elf asked, glaring at Red.

“No, no, I didn't mean it like that.”

“Thank you, Ellisia,” the elf said as she hopped off the boat. The old woman grunted before waving a short goodbye. The four of them followed behind the elf as she climbed the stairs lit by the torches of white fire. “I told you, my father is from a time long before tongue-speak ever came about. Back then, I doubt the beings that existed even conceived of sound being used as a form of communication. *Sound* itself is newer than you'd imagine.”

“Your father isn't a blood elf then?” Butz asked.

“No, my mother is a blood elf.”

“Your father is the Baron,” Raven said staunchly.

“Yes,” the elf replied proudly. “I was born from the master of blood himself.”

“Didn't your mother think he was strange?” Butz asked.

“What?” the elf asked, addled.

“Our apologies,” Lux said kindly, “our companion here suffers from multiple, severe, debilitating head injuries.” The elf looked at both Lux and Butz with a bewildered expression as the two of them began arguing.

“Wait. Outside, there are blood elves,” Red warned. “At least a hundred of them followed us to the Baron. I think they wanted to see if they could drink from us afterwards or something.”

“Not surprising,” the elf said. “Halflings will feed on anything in sight. They will drink rotting, poisoned blood, or the blood of the strong by ganging up on them. One day, I will purge my home of them.”

“What do we do about them? We can't cross the road with them there,” Red asked.

“What do you mean, what you will you do? You will fight them and kill them. Let the ones who survive fight amongst each other to eat the scraps of those you kill,” the elf replied.

“We were hoping to avoid something like that,” Butz sighed.

“If you want to make it out of Sanguine City alive, you must be ready to fight. This city is a butcher shop for the weak,” the elf said. The stone creature that covered the entrance of the Baron's lair had opened its mouth once again. They walked towards the shore with careful steps, still afraid of the vines that lurked underneath the waters. Maundrell sat atop his carriage,

leaning over to one side as though he were asleep. His hounds lay peacefully at the edge of the shore. The torches of the elves that were waiting had gone out, but Red was sure they were still down the road, perhaps even closer than before. “Why are the four of you here, anyway? You are here to help her?” She nodded towards Lux. “The Light is not welcome here. Even if we *are* both fighting the Xenosite now.”

“Why *are* you fighting the Xenosite?” Red asked. “I mean, why are you joining WEAPON in general? From what the Baron says, it’s not even all the blood elves that are fighting them.”

“No, it is not,” the elf replied. “The dark elves whisper of strange things returning from the void, but that does not concern us. We strive to join WEAPON to become stronger. That is what was promised to us by the Watchers”

“The Watchers?” Red asked.

“That’s what the elves call MegaCORP,” Lux whispered. “It was MegaCORP who stopped Me’Lith from his extermination of elves. They are thought of as guardians, not to mention that they bring energy to the sects of elves that use Cron.”

“We came here to retrieve something from the library here. Do you know the way?” Raven asked.

“I do,” the elf replied.

“Will you help us get there?” Raven asked.

“Suleyk, I have come only to do battle with you. If I help you, you will complete our faadh?”

“I will.”

“Wait, hold on —” Butz interrupted. Lux squeezed his hand to silence him.

“Just be quiet. We’ll figure it out later,” she whispered angrily. “Someone needs to use a silencing cast on you.” She pulled Butz back to speak into his ear. “Raven isn’t bound by their honor code or whatever it is. She doesn’t *need* to fight, but we *need* to get to the library safely.”

“Raven doesn’t use the blood elf code because she has her own. Raven code. And it’s much, *much* worse,” Butz whispered back. “Chock full of revenge, blood, and gore. And anyway, didn’t the Baron say he was going to mark the way for us or something?”

“What do you need from the library?” the elf asked, now turning to Lux.

“It is a book that belongs to the Light.”

“You seek the Draconion Index?” The elf asked.

“Yes, how did you know?”

“There is only one book from the Light in that library, and the book itself is famous in Areopa’s history. It is the reason why the cities here were first formed. I suppose some would argue that it was inevitable Areopa would come to be, but the book triggered the events that created this kingdom.”

“The Draconion Index? What are you talking about?” Lux asked.

“What do you know of the book? And what are you in the Light?”

“I am an Acolyte of Light. The book in the library is a copy made by Mej’Lith, the gemini that betrayed us and caused us to go to war with the elves more than two thousand years ago. He copied the book and stole it away in the library here. When he was caught, the Light locked the book away in the library along with the guardian that Mej’Lith originally sent to guard the book.”

“You know nothing of the library, nor the Draconion Index,” the elf laughed. “The book you seek is not a *copy*. This is why the Light is so ridiculed. So much dogma and tradition keeps you from asking simpler questions. How is a book that was created to be impossible to copy, copied?”

“What are you saying? It’s not in the library?” Butz asked.

“The book in the library *is* the Draconion Index — and the *only* copy of it. It wasn’t *copied* by Mej’Lith. It was stolen by him and brought here to Kalatoph, the dark elf that originally founded this city as a place for worship of the void. It was one of Kalatoph’s servants that convinced Mej’Lith he was a deity from the void, and that he needed the book to reach his full potential. When your Elders of Light found out, they begged the elves to help. Back then, Areopa was still a part of Nagya, and many different sects of elves lived in the forests below together. It was one elf in particular, Myrmecoleon, who agreed to help, because he sensed the danger that was beginning to stir in his homeland. You may know Myrmecoleon for something else —”

“The inventor of the barrier cast,” Raven said.

“Yes, he was the first ever person to learn to channel flou as a shield that could last, even after the caster stopped channeling. Myrmecoleon used a powerful cast, yet to be broken, to bar all things that had touched the void from entering the library, and to keep the ones already in the library trapped there forever. The library was originally referred to as the Vault of

Knowledge. It was built by Kalatoph to collect all the ideas, information, and truths of the universe for his own consumption. He was obsessed with learning everything he could about the world. It was said that he summoned a powerful entity from the void and kept it in the library to guard all of the knowledge that he acquired. His greatest power was hidden there as well, something he could only use if he learned to channel the energy of the world between worlds. Both the demon he summoned and the power he wanted to use are now trapped there, to this day. It is why elves do not venture further than they absolutely need to. Locking out Kalatoph from the Vault of Knowledge is what led to the war between the other elves in Nagya and the dark elves. The dark elves were driven out, but their ruination of the land was already complete. The part of Nagya where their black towers were built was soon tethered from Avalonia's own lifeforce, and broke away into the skies. Many of the elves chose to remove themselves from Nagya entirely after the war, and only the tree elves remained. The blood elves remained in Areopa, creating Sanguine City. The mystic elves soon followed in an attempt to purify the land there, but mainly because they wanted access to Kalatoph's Vault of Knowledge. The felions and humans founded their cities there because they knew no better. Areopa was formed within a century after the end of the war."

"That's not the version I heard," Lux replied glibly.

"Believe what you will, Acolyte of Light. I speak the truth. I have heard it from the master of blood himself. Not many in the Priori know of the truth, too few to try and reclaim the book from the library. The elves would not allow them in. And for them to try and force their way in, they would need to tell all of their people. But they wouldn't tell anyone, would they? In truth, the Priori does not even trust itself, let alone those outside of the Light. Your Elders who know, they feel it better to allow the book to remain, where it stays untouched by both the void and the Light."

"What happened to Myrmecoleon?" Butz asked.

"His cast to lock Kalatoph out of the library was so powerful that his lifeforce could not withstand it. He died even before the war started. The Vault of Knowledge was renamed to the Myrmecoleon Library."

Raven stepped back to speak to the three of them alone. The elf continued walking towards Maundrell's carriage. Her own carriage was sitting a few feet behind it.

"If what the elf says is true, you know who Kalatoph was, right?" Raven

asked. Lux nodded solemnly.

“Who? Do we know him?” Butz asked. “That was two thousand years ago.”

“It was Red,” Raven said.

“Me?” Red asked.

“It was a previous incarnation of Ikb’Sept. A dark elf. He was probably more in touch with the void than most versions. I didn’t know the history behind Areopa. I knew dark elves were settled here before, but not that they *founded* the city,” Lux said. “And I never heard anything about the towers. But there’s one thing I don’t get, and that makes me uncomfortable.”

“The pact,” Raven said.

“Yes, the pact. Red, I don’t mean to accuse you of anything, but according to what the Baron is saying, we’re doing exactly as, umm... *you* planned. Or... I guess some evil version of you,” Lux said. “You were locked out of the library two thousand years ago, and you made a pact with the Baron to find your way back in.”

“Hey, it wasn’t me that wanted to come here,” Red replied defensively. “I didn’t even know the Baron existed. This is just as bizarre to me as it is to you. It was Arkan who sent us here.”

“Prince Arkan...” Lux mumbled. “Do you know where the Scented Road is?” Lux yelled, calling out to the blood elf. She turned around, looking confused.

“You’re on it,” the elf replied.

“What?” Lux asked.

“You’re *on* the scented road. It was the Baron that brought us to Areopa, and the reason why the blood elves remained here. Back when we were still a new race in Nagya, we used to sniff the air and follow the scent of the Baron’s blood to find our way to him. Back then, the blood elves here were deeply connected to the master of blood. We were at our peak, even stronger than the blood elves in Karth. They called the path to the Baron the Scented Road. It was never mapped because we used our ability to smell blood to find the Baron, not a carved road, and we wanted to keep the master of blood hidden from all the other races.” The four of them exchanged surprised glances with each other.

“I don’t understand then. Arkan brought us to the Baron?” Red asked, returning to a whisper.

“Maybe he knew about the pact,” Lux replied.

"I mean, I know he *knows* things, but isn't this something a bit *really* out there for him to know?" Red asked.

"Yeah, it is," Raven said. "We should go back and ask him. Not to mention that he almost had us killed by the Baron. He could have at least warned us if he *did* know where we would end up."

"We have to get the book first," Lux said. "This could be our only chance." She pulled out the vial of the Baron's blood she had collected. "We'll go into the library, grab the book, run back to Arkan, and sort this whole thing out. The Xenosites are supposed to land on Nimbus in less than three days. I want to get the book before they come. I know it's supposed to be a small number of them, but I still have a bad feeling about it. Even if it's only a few Xenosites that land, who knows how strong they'll be?"

"I'm not coming with you to the library," the elf said from up ahead. They were almost at the shore. Red was surprised that Maundrell hadn't awoken yet. "I'll come as far as the entrance, but that's it."

"Why not?" Red asked. He caught Raven looking at him from the side and averted his stare towards the empty sea. The elf stop in her tracks and turned around.

"Aku'Dragoon, The Monster with Eleven Faces, guards the knowledge at the Myrmecoleon Library. I am not foolish enough to venture in there with you. He was summoned by Kalatoph to kill anyone who walked inside besides himself."

"You are afraid?" Raven asked.

"Suleyk, it is not courage to kill oneself. Aku'Dragoon is a demon, not something to be scared off like a critter. It would be like facing the master of blood. He is older than the human race."

"We won't fight him," Red said. "The Baron said we would have safe passage to the library. He said he would mark the way for us, and that we could use his blood to enter. If he didn't stop us from going, I'm sure we can avoid whatever is in there. We don't have to fight anything. We only need to grab the book and then run out."

"The Baron didn't *exactly* say we have safe passage," Butz whispered. Red elbowed him in his chest. "If you guys would just stop with the hints..." Butz muttered to himself.

"The Baron gave you his blood?" the elf asked. Lux lifted up the vial.

"Yeah, before you came," Red said. "He told us we wouldn't have a

problem finding what we needed in the library. Our only threat now is other blood elves and making it back to Nimbus. Come with us, and then you can have your faadh with Raven,” he said, more eagerly than he intended. The elf thought over the suggestion.

“Maundrell is dead,” she said, pointing up ahead.

“What? He can’t be dead. Maybe he’s asleep,” Butz said, beginning to walk faster towards the shore.

“No, he is dead,” the elf said. “Blood elves do not sleep the way humans do.”

Raven was the first to walk over. She pushed Maundrell lightly. The elf tipped over the side of the open carriage. There were no wounds, or signs of resistance around him.

“He’s... dead... just dead...” Butz whispered.

“His hounds are dead too,” the elf said. “So are mine.” She pointed up ahead where her carriage was. When Red cast his own light over them, he saw that they were lying down in awkward positions, as though someone had twisted their bodies after they had already died.

“How?” Lux said. “Was someone else here?”

“It’s just like the Baron said,” Butz said, gaping at Raven. “He said death was following you.”

“He said it was *watching* over me,” Raven replied. “I didn’t think he meant it seriously.”

“What about the elves?” Red asked. “They can’t be all dead.”

“We’ll find out soon enough,” the blood elf said. “We walk from here. The Baron’s path cuts through the towers north of here.”

“The Baron’s path?” Butz asked. “I see no trail.”

“There are drops of blood on the road. One here, and one up ahead. I can smell both. You won’t see them in this light. I guess he forgot you weren’t blood elves, or he expected you to search for them.”

“Does this mean you’ll come with us then?” Red asked.

“I’ll help if I can,” the elf replied. “Come, we need to hurry if you want to make it before we lose the trail.”

“Lose the trail?” Lux asked. “You’ll be able to smell the blood even if it’s dry, won’t you?”

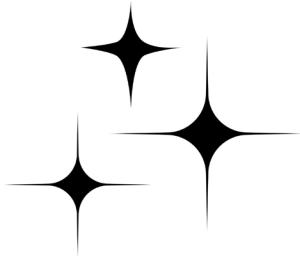
“Yes, but there’s no guarantee that a halfling won’t run into them and lick them straight out of the ground. There are likely some that would not recognize the scent of the Baron’s blood. Perhaps some that don’t even

care.”

“What happens if an elf drinks the Baron’s blood?” Red asked.

“For most, it would kill them. The rush of power would be too much for a starved body. They would not be able to acclimate themselves to it fast enough,” the elf replied. They walked up the road to where they had last seen the blood elves following them. They were lying on the floor peacefully, like the guards at the Alcazar on the night of the king’s murder. There were no signs of a struggle or a fight. Their torches were all put out against the ground. It was the only sign that someone else must have passed by. All the torches were smothered against the floor. They passed by the cluster of bodies silently. Red bent over occasionally to see if there were any traces of a cast on the elves, but there were none to be found. The girl blood elf seemed not only indifferent, but almost glad for the incident. Every time they passed by a halfling, she made a point to stomp over its body with a disgusted expression.

The path to the library the Baron had marked did not cross through the populated centers of Sanguine City. It cut straight through the dark tundra and then turned north, continuing to take them through empty expanses, a few black towers, and several abandoned stone structures that served as the first blood elf settlements. They travelled quietly. While there were many things Red wanted to discuss, he decided to take the time to muse over his thoughts. The only thing on his mind besides the words of the Baron was the scent of the elf. It passed by his mind every time he looked at her, only to fade away when he remembered his defilterizer.



THE MYRMECOLEON LIBRARY

“We’re almost there,” the blood elf said. “You can see the walls of the library from here. There are only two entrances through the back, and the master of blood’s trail does not lead to either. We’re near the northeastern corner.”

“I can’t see anything but the night,” Red replied.

“I forgot you were human,” she sighed.

“I can see it,” Raven said. “It looks like a dead end.”

“You still have the blood of the Baron with you, right?” Butz asked Lux.

“No Butz, I got thirsty and drank it up on the way here,” Lux snapped. The blood elf was the only one who laughed out loud. When they were within a hundred feet of the wall of the library, Red could finally see it. The clouds that created the floor they were walking on and covered the skies hid the height and depth of the structure. Two other figures were walking along the side of the building, towards what he assumed was the nearest entrance. The blood elf waited for them to disappear before continuing to the end of the trail.

“There’s nothing here,” Butz said as he grazed the building with his fingertip. “But this is just regular stone. I think we could break through this.”

“Why don’t you try?” the elf suggested. Butz studied the building and then used a force cast to pressure the wall. It wasn’t enough to break it; he was only trying to test the material. The falconer flew back almost instantly, not just catapulting away, but floating horizontally as though he were being carried by an invisible force. He landed nearly fifty feet away from the wall, clenching his stomach in pain. Both Red and Lux ran up to help him.

“You okay?” Red asked.

“Yeah,” Butz cringed. “Only had the wind knocked out of me.” He took a deep breath to gather himself.

“You idiot, why would you try that?” Lux asked. “You’re lucky you weren’t seriously injured. Did you not hear the elf when she said the wall was protected by a barrier?”

“Honestly, it’s not *that* tough for a giant wall,” Butz replied.

“Yeah, I guess not,” Red laughed as they walked back to Raven and the elf.

“Are you sure this is where the trail ends?” Lux asked.

“Yes, this is where the scent ends. There’s nothing inside of the library. The last drop of the Baron’s blood is here,” the elf replied.

“Where exactly?” Lux asked. The elf walked along the side back and forth for a few times before pointing at the bottom of a spot on the wall. Raven used a light cast to illuminate the area.

“There,” the elf said. A single drop of blood was moving across a stone brick.

“Well, my blood can’t do that,” Butz said. “Put the blood of the Baron on the brick.”

“What? You mean just spill the vial over it?” Lux asked.

“It’s not like he gave us directions, you know,” Butz replied. “And unless you have experience with this sort of thing...” He cast a glance at the elf.

“I think he’s right,” the blood elf said. “Spill the vial over the brick.”

“Are you sure? I mean, this is the only vial I took. Can we collect the blood back if it fails?”

“No,” the blood elf replied. “We can go back to the Baron if it doesn’t work. Assuming he’ll let us into his lair again.”

“I’d rather not,” Butz said. “What if he asks *me* to have children this time?”

“No one in their right mind would ever want *you* to procreate, Butz. Especially not someone who has the sake of the universe on their mind,” Lux replied. She took out the vial and sprayed the blood over the stone brick. The drops scattered to the sides and dripped to the bottom. Each bead of blood went up and down the streak it created like a tear drop, turning the red bands on the stone darker and darker every time. The stone began melting away, not like an ore being heated, but like flesh that was deteriorating away. The grains of the brick liquefied into lines of tissue-like capillaries. Within seconds, a hole had formed in the wall. The marks on its edges resembled a decaying organ rather than broken stone, as though a critter

were hiding inside of it. The elf was the first one to step into the library. Red went next.

“It’s... it’s a forest?” he muttered.

“What did you expect?” the elf asked with a questioning glance. “You’ve never seen images of the inside of the library?”

“No,” Red replied, “I only knew it existed when a friend told me about it a few months ago.”

“The vault was built in the middle of one of Nagya’s forests. There was a tree there called the Oak of Memory. It was said that if anyone learned anything underneath the tree, they would never forget it for the rest of their lives. Kalatoph built the vault around the Oak of Memory, and preserved the forest to retain its powers. The outside of the library has been cleared of its natural terrain to build Sanguine City, but the inside looks exactly as it did two millennia ago, besides the thousands of shelves and books of course.”

The endless shelves that were piled with books were not built from the floor up, but from the treetops, and connected sideways across the many branches that blocked their view of the ceiling. The place was lit entirely by its wildlife and flora. Much of it was fluorescent, but not in the polished style of Cron. They had a temperate light, natural and soothing. There were no insect critters in sight, only lizards and rodents. The creatures made enough noise to make Red quickly forget that he was inside of a building. Some of the shelves that held books had holes that served as makeshift nests and shelters. Thousands of books littered the floor everywhere they walked, some of them in neat stacks, exactly as they were left when the library was first built. There were no aisles or rows, and no discernible sense of organization. The only things that could serve as pathways were the routes carved by the wild growth of bramble. The thorny shrubs, vines, bushes, and plants were thick, sable, broad, and expanded in and out in rhythm like they were all one organism, breathing in sync. The architecture and design of the library reflected someone devoted to both nature and knowledge, but the distant, untouched feel of all the books and forest expressed an obsession that was never fulfilled. It was an asylum for someone who collected knowledge only for the sake of possessing it, as one would a precious jewel. In a frightening realization, Red imagined that it was exactly how he would have built a library himself.

“Do you know where to go?” Raven asked Lux.

“Yeah, I do,” Lux said, while unfolding a large scroll from her bag.

“A map?” Butz asked.

“The library’s too big to create a map, but there’s a method of navigation that they used to organize all of the material here. It may look like a mess, but it’s carefully designed.”

“You sure?” Red asked, pointing to a shelf of books placed inordinately between two other shelves. It was hanging upside down as though it had crashed into one of the trees from the sky. The windows that lined the sides of the library quickly disappeared behind the trees as they walked deeper into the library.

“She’s right,” the elf said. “If you know what you’re looking for, I might be able to help you. I have been here a few times myself. When I was young, learning how to navigate through here was one of my most frustrating challenges.”

“Yeah, probably because it wasn’t one you could punch or bite,” Butz mumbled.

“I already had this figured out. I’m just double checking,” Lux replied. “Okay, it’s this way. I’ll try and walk around the thorns whenever I can, but we may have to jump over a few of them.”

“Fine by me,” Raven said. They traversed through the woodlands, crossing mounds of books as big as hilltops, clearings filled with chests of scrolls, and pools of water with thriving ecosystems inside of them. The library had no clear set of floors, but several upper levels held together with trees that had been carved into pillars. There were never any staircases leading up to them, only trunks and vines they had to climb to reach the books there. It was upon one of these upper levels that Lux finally settled and began browsing carefully to find what she was looking for.

“Need help searching?” Red asked.

“Nope, shouldn’t take too long from here. You guys can browse around, but stay close,” Lux replied. Raven and the elf split up in opposite directions while Butz and Red lingered with Lux before moving one level down to look through the books. Despite what Lux had said, there seemed to be no logical method of organization. Many of the books had no authors listed on them, and the topics they covered ranged from unique environments to the history of obscure races of different galaxies. Retrieving any book would require climbing the trees that held them. Red patiently browsed through the collection, deciding he would only go through the trouble of grabbing one if it caught his attention.

“There’s a book here on fire casting,” Butz said, pointing to a red binding sticking out of the top of a tree arm. There was no shelf for it. The branch of the tree itself had slots for books. Red used a force cast to pull it out. The cast was not accurate enough. He pulled all of the books in there together, causing a huge clamor as they splashed against the stream on the floor.

“Good going,” Butz whispered. “You’ll call over that thing that’s supposed to be here in no time.” A flicker of a lost sensation crossed Red’s mind, like he remembered he had forgotten something.

“The eye...” he whispered.

“No, not the eye,” Butz replied. “That thing that the elf was talking about. That Kalatoph or... you... however that works, put in the library.”

“No, the eye. I feel it,” Red said.

“The eye? Like... the bladed man?” Butz asked.

“No, it’s different now. It feels different, but I can feel it.”

“That’s impossible. I mean, isn’t it?” Red scanned the area around him. There were no sounds besides the white noise of the forest, and no unusual movements.

“I don’t know. Let’s just hope Lux finds what she’s looking for quickly so we can get out of here.” He began flipping through the book in his hands nervously, to take his mind off the eye. “It’s in a different language,” he said, closing the cover.

“Wait, there were images,” Butz replied, grabbing the book from his hand. He flipped through the pages himself while Red paced back and forth along the trees. Nearby, a furry critter with sharp fangs was eating a lizard.

“Will you stop doing that?” Butz asked.

“Doing what?”

“Pacing back and forth so fast, it’s making me nervous. Look at this. It’s like the cast you used in the caverns, but a lot stronger.” Red turned around to look at the image. The drawing was of an elf taking the form of a meteor and launching himself from a planet’s atmosphere towards the floor in a cast similar to the one he used before.

“There’s no way someone could survive that,” Red said.

“Well, it’s right here. Too bad we can’t read it. Maybe there’s a trick to it.”

“Maybe the blood elf can.”

“Or Lux,” Butz said. “She’s studied old languages.” Red grabbed the book again to flip through it himself.

“I’ve done this too, sort of,” Red said, pointing at an image of an elementalist flying. “It’s an air cast combined with a fire cast to act as a propeller, but this stuff has to be theoretical. I mean, I know people use it to glide, but flying across a planet’s atmosphere would take too much flou.”

“Never say never,” Butz chided.

“Yeah... I guess...” Red sighed, putting the book down on the floor. “There are no large critters here. Did you realize that? And no insect critters at all. It seems pretty diverse, but there are only two or three kinds of creatures here.”

“They probably removed all the ones that could damage the books,” Butz replied. “It’s like a tiny forest of little creatures, and no bugs. Oh man, that actually sounds awesome now that I think about it. It’s a good change from what we’re used to. There are no abnormal and ugly creatures, no tiny insects that crawl under your skin.” He shuddered as he spoke.

“Do you think the elf looks abnormally human?”

“Abnormally human? What does that even mean?” Butz asked.

“Well you know, for a race that’s not human, she looks really human.”

“So blood elves look like they’re abnormally human?”

“No, no, she does,” Red replied. “Not all elves look like her.”

“Oh... I know where this is going.”

“What?”

“She’s probably like four hundred years old you know.”

“I’m your age,” a voice came from behind them.” Both of them jumped and turned around.

“She can hear us?” Red whispered.

“Yes, I can hear both of you,” the elf replied. “I’m a blood elf, and will you stop speaking so loud? You’ll draw attention to us.”

“Where are you?” Red asked, scanning the area around him.

“Seems like there’s nothing here...” Butz whispered. He peered into the treetops above to try and find her. “Linx?” he suddenly whispered.

“What?” Red asked. Butz began walking towards a cluster of trees behind them.

“I thought I just saw Linx. Linx, did you follow us here?” Butz called out.

“Butz, don’t venture too far,” Red said. “Lux said to stay close, and I don’t think Linx is here. Maybe it’s something that looks like an Aeyz Cat.”

“Yeah, yeah...” Butz replied. He climbed into a hole between two trees

and disappeared behind the cluster. “Wait one second, I’m coming back,” he shouted back to Red.

“Great...” Red whispered. He turned around and jumped in surprise a second time. The blood elf was standing next to him. “How did you do that?” he gasped.

“Predator... prey...” she said, pointing to herself and then him.

“Did you see where Butz was going? He said he saw his familiar and ran off.”

“So maybe he did?” The elf said. She picked up the books Red had thrown down and began shelving them into the tree.

“That’s impossible. Linx isn’t here,” Red replied.

“I didn’t say his companion was *here*. I said maybe he saw his cat and then ran off chasing him.”

“And how would that work?”

“We are in the Forest of Illusions, the part of Nagya that this library was built upon. You will see and hear many things that aren’t real.”

“Oh,” Red grunted. “That doesn’t sound too good.” He looked for signs of Butz, but the falconer had disappeared entirely behind the trees. A part of him wanted the comfort of a buffer, and another wanted to stay alone with the elf.

“Lux?!” Red called out, walking back towards where they had come from.

“What are you doing? Be quiet!” the elf shouted. “I told you. We can’t make too much noise.”

A nostalgic feeling crossed his mind again, a sense that the eye was nearby. *It’s the forest. It has to be*, Red thought. *It’s an illusion. How could the eye have gotten into the library?*

“Can we find her? We need the book, and then we need to get out of here fast,” Red said.

“First you drag me in here, and now *you’re* the one who’s afraid?” the elf snapped. “We’re staying here until she finds the book.”

“It feels like... something else is here,” Red replied.

“There are *many* things here,” the elf said, pointing to a group of rodent critters chewing on the edges of a shelf. “And anyway, I’m sure the Suleyk will protect you if you’re in danger,” she laughed.

“I can protect myself,” Red retorted. “She’s not the only one who’s strong in our team you know.”

“Oh yeah?”

“I’m a fire elementalist.”

The elf bent over and touched a stream of water flowing through a vine by her foot. Just as Red was about to look at what she was touching, she leaped towards him, changing her face to its feral form and silently clamping onto the air where his throat was a second ago. He jolted back and fell over, tripping onto the stream himself and spraying water over a pile of books that lay nearby.

“That’s twice now,” the elf laughed.

“Do you get some sort of sick pleasure from doing that?”

“To be honest, yes.”

“Figures,” Red sighed. “What does Suleyk mean?”

“You don’t know what Suleyk means?”

“I mean, I understand it means you go through those underground trials that let you overcome your fear, but I don’t understand the significance of it. Why does your kind revere it so much? It’s not even a word in elvish, right?”

“No, and it means much more than just overcoming your fears,” the elf replied. “It is a long blood elf tale. Are you sure you want to hear it?”

“Yeah,” Red replied. “Of course. I’ve been dying to find out since the qualifiers.”

“The qualifiers?”

“Umm... the trials of the Watchers.”

The elf grabbed a lizard stuck on a tree branch and began staring at it hungrily. She let it go with a sarcastic sigh after Red gave her a horrified expression.

“The word Suleyk is vozruh’dal for ‘one who is absent of fear.’ Every emotion that we feel, from happiness to anger and hunger makes it easier for us to channel our flou. Each one, in its own unique way, can be used to release our energy, except for fear. It is the only emotion that manipulates our lifeforce in a negative way, blocking it from being released. When we act out of courage, we’re able to momentarily overcome those blocks, but they always come back. It is only one who is truly *absent* of fear who never faces them. To watch a Suleyk fight is like watching someone defy gravity effortlessly, someone who is simply immune to the greatest plague of consciousness, someone who has broken the chains that you always thought were universal limitations to what could be done both physically and mentally.

Blood elves are one of the oldest races in this star system. We, along with dragons, were the first to inhabit it on planet Tiamat. We fought with them, from planet after planet, for control over different territories and resources, but dragons are far more powerful than blood elves, than all creatures, really. There was only one of our kind that could fight them —”

“Suleyk?”

“Yes, the Suleyk. It was in Karth where the caves were first discovered. Filled with a rare crystal that put you in a deep trance, and dream feasting creatures that could only be overcome by letting go of your fears. To the elves that first discovered the caves, it felt like they were placed there for a reason, perhaps by a more powerful race that wanted to shape our destiny, to challenge us to evolve. When the first blood elves successfully emerged from the caves, it was like their flou had been released from their natural plateaus. There are always limits to what we can do, physical limits to how much energy we could channel or force that we could fight with. But not for the Suleyk. When one emerged from their challenge, *if* they emerged from their challenge, they were suddenly able to defy all the boundaries that were set by the universe. The Suleyk were the only ones the dragons feared, and it was on Karth that we first defeated them. The rarest breed of blood elves was born, and titled by the most powerful race in the star system. Other races discovered the caves, and we opened them freely to anyone who wanted to undertake the challenge, but it is a rare thing to pass. Less than one in ten thousand of those who undertake the challenge — which is already a very small number of people — are able to wake from their nightmares. The rest become trapped in there for eternity. It is said that even if death takes your physical body, your mind still remains trapped in its nightmares. The challenge is taken by very few now, and even fewer pass it. The practice is nearly extinct.”

“So Raven... is going to be even stronger now?”

“You must have sensed it, no? A Suleyk becomes exponentially more powerful after they complete their challenge. They become more than elf, more than human. Her power will grow like it never has before. Soon, she may even be able to fight me,” the elf laughed.

“Hunger is an emotion?” Red asked.

“What?”

“When you listed the emotions that we could channel, you said hunger is one of them?”

“If you’re a blood elf, yes.”

“What is it like?”

“What does it feel like? I guess... anger... and happiness combined.”

“A bit of both?”

“No, not a mix as if you’re feeling each individually. I can’t explain it. There are elements of both.”

“Interesting...” Red mumbled. He looked aimlessly towards the trees above them as he spoke, trying to catch glimpses of the elf whenever she looked away to avoid direct eye contact. He tapped on his defilterizer every few seconds, but its placebo reminder now seemed useless. Her scent was in the air, coming out of the forest itself. “Are blood elves the only things that live in Sanguine City?”

“Mostly. Not only. Why?”

“We saw something on the way here. He was bipedal, but had a tail.”

“He looked like a creature with scales?”

“Yeah! And he was on the way to the Baron, carrying a barrel of something. I think blood.”

“A mnes.”

“Mnes? From Eaut?”

“Mmhmm.”

“But... they live under the sea... and aren’t bipedal.”

“Some are,” the elf replied. “They come seeking the Baron’s blood.”

“They come for the Baron’s blood?”

“It is a powerful item, with many strange properties, some that you wouldn’t even believe.”

“Like what?”

“They say if you drink the Baron’s blood on a full moon — a moon of Karth — you can be immortal until the moon dies out.”

“Immortal? And are you talking about Lahl?”

“You know of our red moon?”

“Yeah, Lux told me.”

“The Acolyte of Light?” the elf asked. Red nodded. “Why do you follow her?”

“To get the book she needed.”

“Yes, but why? It doesn’t seem typical for people outside of the Priori to help them with their tasks.”

“Oh... yeah. It’s a long story.” Red sighed.

“It is a long story, or you do not want to tell me?”

“You’ve heard of the murder of the king of Nimbus?” Red asked.

“Yes, it happened right before the trials of WEAPON. The mystic elves gave word that the Light had brought in a living Xenosite to Nimbus. We thought it had to be related to that.”

“Yes, sort of. Lux and some of the other members of the Priori think it had something to do with the void.”

“What does the world between worlds have to do with human affairs?”

“Like I said, long story,” Red replied.

“That’s why you’re helping her? Their new king sent you? Sounds more like the Light is using their beliefs to interfere with the governing of Nimbus. They are infamous for wrongly thinking that many events of the universe are influenced by otherworldly things.”

“No, we weren’t sent by the king. Well actually, technically, yes. Prince — King Arkan, *did* send us, but a lot of it has to do with me, I guess.”

“With you?”

“The Light thinks I have something to do with the void.”

“You? But you are weak.”

“Will you stop saying that?” Red berated.

“But you are...”

“Okay, what does that have to do with the void?”

“They think you are possessed by a dark spirit?” the elf laughed. “Like Kalatoph, the elf that built this place?”

“Yes! Actually, that’s exactly what they think. By the *same* exact spirit, if that makes sense.”

“Have they proven it to you?” the elf asked, holding back another laugh.

“Yes,” Red replied defensively. “Well, sort of. It’s hard to explain. There’s just... a lot that has happened.” The elf leaned over and sniffed him.

“You don’t smell like anything beyond this world.”

“How would you know what something from the void smelled like?” Red asked.

“Well, they wouldn’t smell human, I’m guessing, and you smell human.”

The sound of liquid trickling above the treetops caught Red’s attention. His stomach formed a familiar knot as the feeling of the eye being nearby crossed his mind.

“Do you hear that? The sound of rain? Something’s trickling down from the treetops, something sticky.”

“It’s the stream,” the elf replied.

“No, it’s coming from above,” Red said.

“Maybe it’s coming from your head,” the elf laughed.

The sound of a scream interrupted their conversation, cutting through the quaint sounds of the forest like a scalpel.

“Lux!” Red shouted.

“That was no illusion. It came from where she was looking for her book. Come.” They both broke out into a run, following the sound as best as possible from their memory. “This way,” the elf shouted, just as Red was about to break away.

“Are you sure? I thought it was coming from here.”

“No, it’s this way,” the elf said. “I am sure.” He ran behind her without protesting. They spotted Butz and Raven running towards them.

“You guys heard her too?” Butz asked. “We shouldn’t have left her alone.”

“Yeah, no sign of her though,” Raven said. “She was right here a few minutes ago. I saw her.”

“This is where the scream came from,” the elf said. She bent over to look for tracks on the floor of the forest.

“Can you pick up a scent?” Raven asked.

“No, there is no blood. I smell something else though... somewhere here... something unusual...” the elf replied.

“We have to find her! We have to do something!” Butz pleaded.

“Let’s split up, but stay within each other’s vision,” Raven said. “She couldn’t have gone far.”

“I don’t know what this is,” the elf said, pointing to a puddle of green ooze on the floor. “But the Acolyte of Light’s footprint is on top of it, and her guide is caught on this tree.” She pulled out the scroll that Lux was using earlier. “I can smell fear in her sweat. I think she was taken by something. If the demon of the vault hunts us, we need to leave, *right now*.”

“Stop crying about your invincible demon over and over again,” Raven snapped. “If it has a head, I’ll cut it off. Everything that walks can be killed.”

“Not everything, Suleyk, not everything,” the elf replied.

“Go, we need to search for her *now*,” Raven said. Butz nodded before heading off east. Raven went north after him.

“I’ll go this way, and you the other?” Red asked.

“I came to complete faadh, and now I’m trapped at the end of the Myrmecoleon Library where people are disappearing.”

“Well, if you came here for the challenge of faadh, that means you came here risking your life anyway, doesn’t it?” Red asked. “Now help us, please. You’ll get your fight with Raven later. We need to find the girl that went missing. It’s important. For Areopa.” The elf nodded reluctantly and headed west.

The eye, feel out the eye, Red thought as he ran through the forest. It felt like it was getting closer, but he was oblivious to the direction. He only felt its presence suffocating his sense of awareness. It was the same feeling as being watched from afar, a paranoid sensation that was growing with intensity every moment. He ran through a circle of lizards, causing them to scatter as he trampled the vines. From the corner of his eyes, he saw movement, someone’s feet.

“Lux?!” he shouted. He ran up ahead and caught sight of her turning into a tunnel-like collection of bramble. “Lux?! Wait!” He shouted again. He ran as fast as he could, careful not to trip over the thorny shrubs on the floor. He crossed the tunnel, using a light cast to illuminate the area inside. It led to a clearing surrounded by the tallest trees he had seen in the library thus far, and a door at the opposite end of where he was standing. At the center of the clearing, Lux stood by herself with a book in her hands. “You found it?” Red asked, walking towards her. “We thought we heard you scream. Lux, remember that slime we were telling you about, the one that we found at the Twilight Caverns?” He panted as he spoke.

“Ikb’Sept kaleesh may’zak, iyrdyl valek?” she asked. He could barely make out the words, but she enunciated very clearly. Her voice did not sound like her own.

“What did you call me?” He realized he did not know the direct translation of what she said, but he could somehow intuit its meaning.

“Ikb’Sept, the one who will bring eternal night, comes to awaken The Great Sleeper?”

“Lux? Are you okay?” Red asked. He felt the eye inching closer and closer to him. He turned around towards the tunnel he had come from, expecting it to come out any moment now. *How are they going to find me?* he wondered. He took out a dagger from his boots, the only one he had, and softly pricked himself across the leg.

When he looked back up, Lux was gone. She had left the book she was

holding at the center of the room. She slipped through the door at the end of the clearing and slammed it shut. The door was built into a stone surface, like the outer walls of the library. “Lux?” he shouted. He ran up to the door and banged on it. He placed his ears on the stone surface. There was no sound coming from the inside. There was no handle; the door opened and closed by revolving around an axis. He stood there for several minutes, debating whether to follow her in. His intuition told him something was off about what he had just seen. *Forest of Illusions, Forest of Illusions*, he kept saying to himself. When he decided to see what was on the other side of the door anyway, Butz’s voice stopped him.

“Red!” Butz shouted from the end of the tunnel. He was with the elf, Raven, and Lux. They grouped together at the center of the clearing.

“Good thinking,” the elf said, pointing to his cut. We were nearby. I found your Acolyte near this tunnel, but we weren’t thinking of crossing it to look for you until I picked up your scent.

“You found it!” Lux shouted, looking down at the floor. “The book I was looking for. How did you even know?”

“I didn’t find it,” Red replied. “But... I just saw you...”

“She said she wasn’t the one who screamed,” Raven said.

“Lux, I just saw you. You dropped this book off here and went through that door,” Red said, pointing to the stone wall behind them.

“Nope, I don’t even know where this place is,” Lux replied, looking around at the clearing. “How did you find this place? And the book?”

“What do you mean?” Red protested.

“Are you sure you saw *her*?” Raven asked. “Maybe it was something else.”

“I’m sure if Red said he saw *Lux*, he at least saw something that looked like Lux. I mean, one of those rats would have to be *huge* to resemble her,” Butz replied. Lux gave him a grimacing expression.

“Wait, Red, you saw *Lux*?” the elf asked.

“Yes, and she spoke to me.”

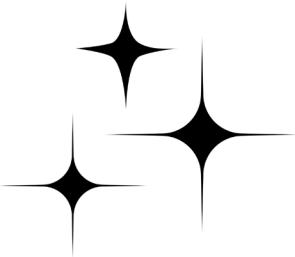
“She spoke to you?”

“Yeah, she sounded different, but she spoke to me.”

“Did she seem like a different person?” the elf asked. Red nodded.

“Yeah, actually, I guess so. It didn’t *feel* like her.” She grabbed his arm with a terrified expression. “What? What is it?”

“Red, they call Aku’Dragoon The Monster with Eleven Faces because he’s a shapeshifter.”



THE CANDLE IN THE VOID

“So you’re saying the thing that haunts the library brought Red here to give him the book?” Butz asked.

“Are you absolutely sure it’s me that you saw?” Lux asked incredulously.

“Yes! For the fourth time, yes! I saw Lux here, or who I thought was Lux,” Red replied.

“Did you see what was through the door?” Butz asked, walking over to observe the stone wall. “How does it open? I can see an outline, but there’s no knob or anything.”

“You just push it, I think,” Red said. “That’s how Lux opened it.” Butz began pushing the door as hard as he could, trying several different angles but finding no success.

“What are you doing?! Don’t open it!” Lux shouted.

“Can’t anyway, it won’t even budge,” Butz replied. “I just wanted to see what’s on the other side.”

“There’s no reason to see what’s in there,” Raven replied. “We got what we came for. Let’s get out of here.”

“Do you guys hear that?” the elf asked. She strained her neck and began walking towards the tunnel.

“Hear what?” Red asked nervously, although he already knew what was coming. The sensation of the eye nearing in on him was so powerful now that he could feel its intent to find him, to possess him. As the feeling rose, like a repressed emotion surging to his conscious mind, it filled him with a sudden anxiety, a feeling of being separated from a part of himself, or from someone he was closely attached to, and an imminent need to feel complete again.

“You’ll hear it in a second,” the elf replied, turning back towards them. “I think it’s coming towards us.” Raven took out her keratana while Lux hid the book behind her cloak. “Suleyk, are we fighting whatever is coming?”

“I don’t think we *can* fight it,” Red said. “At least not with weapons.” He heard a gushing noise at the end of the tunnel.

“It sounds like this place is being flooded,” the elf said, peering closer into the tunnel. “There is a river or a stream... moving wildly across the library, flowing towards us. I can hear all of the water slamming against the trees.”

“It’s not water,” Red replied.

“You know what it is that’s coming?” the elf asked. “How do we fight it?”

“We don’t know how to fight it. Maybe you could help with that. You don’t need to ask what’s coming. It’s here,” Raven said, pointing at the end of the tunnel. The elf gawked into the darkness while taking several steps back. Red summoned a light cast and threw it into the tunnel.

“Impossible,” the elf said, just as the slime came into view. The ooze gathered at the front of the clearing, quickly forming into an enormous mound that broke past the trees containing its height. “A Grand Flourge.”

“A what?” Red asked. “*You* know what that thing is?”

“Yes, they are creatures that live in Karth, underneath the Meko Ocean.”

“What’s a Flourge?” Raven asked.

“The things that cause us to fall ill, destroy our flou, and cause unbalances in our lifeforces. This creature, it is an enormous collection of them that come together to form a single being. It is still unknown how or why they combine. I have never seen one this large, nor heard of one outside of Karth.”

“How do you kill it?” Raven asked. The mound bubbled and frothed as more ooze poured into it from the tunnel. It began moving towards them like a lumbering mountain. “Do they have any weaknesses? Fire? Plasma?”

“There are none that I am aware of. They are immune to the effects of force and flou. They cannot be destroyed. They can be broken into pieces, but they would only rejoin, even stronger. We need to find a way out of here.” She scanned the clearing for another exit. Behind the trees, there was only the stone wall with the door.

“I’m *trying!* Can one of you help me with this?!” Butz yelled. Lux rushed over, but the door wasn’t budging even with both of them trying to push

it. The slime began forming a head at the top of its mound. It was a long, stretched skull with a tiny neck that connected it to the rest of its body. Its lower half took no form. It was only a giant muck of green slime that continued to grow.

Raven threw her keratana at the creature, slicing its head off before swinging it high around the room for a second attack. The creature's head was disembodied but fell upon the floor, where it combined with the mound of slime again. Two heads, even larger than the one Raven had cut off, formed almost immediately. The same thing happened after her second attack, and the creature now had four heads that wobbled as it slowly climbed towards them.

“WILL YOU STOP CUTTING ITS HEAD OFF!?” Butz screamed from the door. Raven dropped her keratana on the floor and went into a hand to hand combat stance. Next to her, the elf changed to her feral form. “UNLESS THE BOTH OF YOU ARE PLANNING TO WRESTLE THAT THING, HELP ME GET THIS DOOR OPEN!”

Raven hesitated for a moment, staring at the approaching mound of slime like she had an idea, then turned and ran to help Butz. The elf followed suit, changing back to her normal form. Red couldn't help but stare at her as she transformed back and forth. There were both subtle and drastic changes in everything from her facial features to her posture, hinting that the two faces were both one creature yet unique identities.

“Push!” Red shouted. “Faster!” *Here it comes*, he thought, knowing that the eye was ready to emerge. The right side of the creature exploded, throwing bits of slime all over the clearing. An enormous sword emerged from the side of the creature like a loose arm. At the center of it, was The Evil Eye.

“It won’t budge!” Butz shouted. “Red, get over here and help too!” Red backpedaled to run towards them, getting a good look at the eye before turning around to help open the door. The door swung open almost instantly when he placed his palms against it.

“Well, that wasn’t too hard,” he said as they crossed over to the other side.

“That had to be because of *you*,” Raven replied.

“Come on! Get inside so I can close it!” Butz screamed. Lux was standing halfway between the open door, staring at the lidless eye as it spun madly in its pocket. She was mumbling something underneath her breath

in a different language. The pupil twitched left and right, sometimes disappearing entirely from view, only to reappear in a different color and size. Butz pulled her in just as the creature began lifting the sword to strike at the doorway. Red swung the door shut as soon as she was safely on the other side. The blade slammed against the wall, shaking the library as it echoed across its stone surface.

“Can it get through this?” the elf asked. “Are there cracks here?”

“I don’t know,” Red replied. “It looks sealed.” He studied the edges of the door. “Are you praying to the stars or something?” he asked Lux, who was still mumbling madly underneath her breath.

“I saw it.... I saw the eye...” Lux whispered. “It’s real....”

“Of course it’s real. Did you think we were lying all along?” Red asked. “This is what we’ve been trying to tell you about.”

“You don’t understand, Red. You don’t understand what this means. I’ve heard tales of it growing up, The Evil Eye. It’s like I just saw my own nightmares come to life.”

The slime creature slammed against the door from the other side, causing the wall to shake.

“Yeah, trust me, I know the feeling,” Red replied.

“Guys, am I the only one who’s looking at what’s in this room?” Butz asked. The four of them turned around simultaneously. They pushed their backs against the door to continue holding it. The room was an exact mirror of the clearing they were just in, except there was no tunnel on the other side, only another stone door, and in the center of the room was a tiny black creature fluttering in the air. There were four stone beams that stretched out from the floor at the sides of the room that emitted an electric current that seemed to be holding the creature in a floating prison. The slime had stopped slamming the door, creating a sudden and eerie silence.

“Is it gone?” Lux whispered.

“I doubt it,” Red replied. He could still feel the eye. It was searching for him, calling to him. “I think it knows it can’t get through the door though. It’s probably looking for another way in. I just realized, what happened in the caverns — it probably made things much worse. I would have much rather faced the bladed man than *that* thing.”

“Yeah, you think?” Butz sighed. “How are we supposed to kill indestructible bacteria? And how big can that thing get? It looked like the stream of ooze was never going to end.”

“They can keep growing forever,” the elf said. “It’s made out of flouge. They reproduce quickly, on their own too, so long as they have a resource to sustain them.”

“What resource are they using, air?” Raven asked. “Can’t we just take it away?”

“The flouge from the Meko Ocean are omnifeeders. They can use anything from air to fire and flou to grow,” the elf replied.

“So they’re indestructible, *and* anything you use against them only makes them stronger?” Butz lamented. “Great. Why haven’t these things taken over the universe yet? We’re all worried about the Xenosite, when it’s something underneath one of the *inner* planets that’s going to do us in.”

“They don’t *leave* the Meko Ocean in Karth. Why is this one chasing you?” the elf asked.

“Remember what I said about being possessed by a spirit from the void?” Red asked.

“Can we discuss the details later?” Lux suggested. “We need to find a way out of here. Maybe we can go through the stone door at the other side? This one opened when Red touched it. Maybe he can open that one, too. If we can’t fight that thing, we need to find a way out of here as soon as we can, and preferably while it’s still searching for another way in and not trying to break this door down.” Red began walking towards the other side of the clearing.

“Wait, this isn’t a creature,” Red said, stepping closer towards the center of the room to look at the fluttering black material. There was a hole underneath it, barely big enough for a single person to fit through. An arrow with an encryption around it pointed to the hole, but was written in a language he did not recognize. He had forgotten how high up Areopa was in the skies of Avalonia until he looked through the gap. The clouds below were twice as far from the library as they were from Avalonia’s surface.

“It’s... fire...” Red said as he studied the flame from every angle. “It’s black fire.” A memory of a nightmare flashed through his mind, a burning city, a scorched jungle, a planet consumed in black flames. It was a single ember that was burning wildly, like the wick of a candle placed in the wind. He felt a spontaneous, deep affection for the flame, as though it reminded him of his own love of fire and seeing it contained in the prison drew his sympathies in the way a living creature that was imprisoned would. The more he looked at it, the more affection he felt for the flame.

“Don’t touch it!” Butz shouted.

“Sorry, I didn’t even realize I was reaching my hand out.”

“I have seen both of Ikb’Sept’s most powerful servants now,” Lux said. She looked back and forth between Red and the black flame. “Red, no matter what happens, you have to stay away from that eye. You can’t let it possess you. You can’t go near it.”

“What, you think the rest of us want to go near it?” Butz asked.

“If *you* need to go near it — if we need to *die* to keep it from Red, we must do it without thinking twice,” Lux replied.

“No one is going to die,” Red said.

“You weren’t lying,” the elf said, looking at him. “You really *are* possessed by a dark spirit.”

“This flame, I’ve seen it in a dream. Is it something used by Ikb’Sept?” he asked Lux.

“This is not just a flame. It’s an entity,” Lux replied.

“A spirit?” the elf asked.

“Yes, one from the void,” Lux said. “Her name is Ragna’Mai, The Devourer.”

“Is she not a peaceful entity then?” Butz asked.

“Ragna’Mai is said to be the one true love of Ikb’Sept,” Lux said, staring intently at Red.

“Love? Like romantic love?” Raven asked.

“Yes. Red, you’re looking at your *actual* first love. The first love of all your lifetimes.”

“Red has existed for more than one lifetime? Like the Baron?” the elf asked.

“It’s complicated,” Butz replied.

“No, I understand. If what you say is true about him being possessed by the same spirit as Kalatoph, you mean this flame is the first love of the spirit itself?” the elf asked.

“Yes actually, exactly,” Lux said. “Except, he’s not exactly possessed by an external spirit. He *is* the spirit, just reincarnated.” The elf nodded, but still retained a confused expression.

A loud bang against the stone wall interrupted their conversation, followed by several more blasts against the stone wall.

“That thing really wants to get in here,” Butz muttered.

“We can’t let it get to Red, we *can’t*,” Lux pleaded. “We *have to* find a way

out of here.”

“I can hear voices from the other side of this door,” Red said when he ran over to the other side of the clearing. “Should I still open it?”

“Voices? What kind of voices?” Lux asked. “Maybe there are other people deep in the library. Maybe someone knows we’ve broken in. We could ask for help, or for someone to take us out of here. We can’t go back out *there*,” she said, pointing to the door they had come from.

“I think it’s locked,” Red said. “I can’t get it to open. Maybe these doors only open from one direction.” He placed his ears against the door to listen to the voices on the other side.

“Where did Lux go, then?” Raven asked. “The shapeshifter, didn’t you say you saw it come into this room?”

“Yeah, I don’t know,” Red said. He scanned the trees around them, but there was no sign of any movement.

“I guess it’s not sealed, guys,” Butz said, pointing to the bottom of the door. Ooze was trickling in, slowly amassing into a puddle.

“Is there *anything* we can do? *Anything*!?” Raven asked.

“You did not listen to me when I warned you, Suleyk. All the strength in the world will not enable you to kill that which cannot die.”

“Guys, I think it’s *us* on the other side,” Red said.

“What do you mean *us*? Like us five?” Butz asked.

“Yeah... I mean... I can hear *our* voices,” Red replied. He gestured for Butz to listen as well. The falconer put his ear against the door. “See, it’s us, but five minutes ago. There’s my voice telling Lux that I just saw her.”

“You’re right...” Butz said in a confused tone.

“What about this hole?” Lux asked, looking at the elf. “Can we go through it?”

“Go through that hole?! Are you insane? We must be a thousand tezras above ground right now,” Butz gasped.

“Probably more than a thousand. But it doesn’t matter because no one can fall off of Areopa. It isn’t possible unless you jump from outside of its boundaries,” Lux replied.

“Well, how do you know we haven’t passed its boundaries?” Butz asked.

“Because we’re in the library, genius,” Lux replied.

“She’s right,” the elf said. “There’s an arrow that points to the hole too. It has to lead *somewhere*.”

Butz came in closer to peer through the hole, and then jumped back

right away after catching a glimpse. The puddle in the clearing was growing, but no more than a few tiny streams of ooze were able to pass through the door at once.

“There’s no way I’m jumping through that,” Butz said.

“Suit yourself, then,” Lux replied. “You can stay here and try and convince The Evil Eye you’re a friend of Ikb’Sept’s, and that he should spare you.”

“Wait, can I do that?” Red asked. “I mean, I am supposed to be what it’s looking for. Can’t I command it or something?”

“I don’t think so. For all we know, it could be more like the way *she* describes it,” Lux replied, pointing at the elf. “If you consider Ikb’Sept a spirit, then it wants to possess you. Once it does, I don’t know if you’ll retain control over yourself, or if you do, how much of it.”

“What does it mean if I become possessed?” Red asked. “I mean, besides having a blade for an arm, do I get back all the memories of my past lifetimes or something?”

“I don’t know,” Lux replied. “I don’t know how it works. Ikb’Sept has only been known to reunite with the blade and the eye twice in the history of this universe, apart from his first incarnation. Most of what happened back then was never recorded, or recorded in languages that are now dead and unknown. There may be a few people in the Light who could tell you, but they would be on our home planet. I could ask them to send as much information as they could, if we can get out of here.”

“Please, that would be helpful,” Red replied.

“We need to act fast,” the elf said, pointing to the puddle. “Are we going through this or no? Suleyk, you decide.”

“Did you try the door?” Raven asked.

“Yeah, this one doesn’t open. I tried pushing as hard as I can,” Red replied. “Maybe it only opens from one side.”

“Doesn’t that mean it’ll open any second now?” Butz asked. “I mean technically, we heard our own voices. We’re going to get up to the point where *we* come in through that door.”

“It could just be an illusion,” the elf said.

“Right...” Red muttered. The puddle of ooze began taking shape into a mound. It was still relatively small, but it began meandering towards the center of the room.

“What about the fire?” Red asked. “Do we just leave it here?” He could

not hide the yearning in his voice.

“Yes, Red, we can’t let something like that out into our world. I would say we should put it somewhere safer, but Ragna’Mai is said to be nearly impossible to contain. In the first war the Light had fought against Ikb’Supt, it was said that Ragna’Mai burned planets, even stars, for her master.”

“Sorry, Butz, but this is for your own good,” Raven said. She grabbed him by the collar and pushed him into the hole as he kicked his feet to resist.

“STOP! WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!” he screamed.

“You’re *sure* we can’t fall off of Areopa?” Raven asked.

“Positive,” the elf replied. “Go, Suleyk. We are not at the lowest level of Areopa anyway. There are parts of Areopa underneath us.” Raven nodded before shoving Butz down the hole. His body immediately swung eastward, carried by a gale.

“I guess there’s a wind tunnel there,” Lux said.

“I’ll go next, in case there’s anything dangerous wherever we land,” Raven said, before jumping through.

“There shouldn’t be anything dangerous. This has to lead to somewhere in Areopa, I think,” the elf replied. “If we are separated, I will find you. Your wound is still fresh,” she said to Red before jumping next.

“You go, and I’ll follow right after,” Red said to Lux.

“Okay. Don’t hesitate when you’re alone here,” Lux replied. Red nodded.

“It’s moving too slowly anyway. You have the book right?”

“Mmhmm.” Lux jumped with her body clenched tightly together and her eyes closed. She gripped the book underneath her cloak as hard as she could. Red bent over to jump in right after her, but looked up to take one last look at the fire. “Ragna’Mai,” he whispered. He thought the flame flickered more powerfully when he spoke to it. He took a step towards the hole, but then jumped back when Butz suddenly appeared at the other side of it.

“You are Aku’Dragoon?” Red asked immediately. Butz nodded.

“The location of the portal is hidden in the book I have given you. Will you start the fire, Shepard of Oblivion?” Butz asked, looking at the black flame. “Cleanse this place, Ikb’Supt — awaken The Eternal Sleeper. We have waited far too long.” Red stood there, frozen in place, thinking of how to respond.

“Not yet,” he finally said, trying to think of something that would ap-

pease the shapeshifter. The slime was inching closer towards him. He held his breath and leaped through the hole.

The wind tunnel carried him east so fast that the barrier he cast to protect his body still wasn't powerful enough to keep the force of his momentum from pulling the skin of his face back. He could barely open his eyes. Using his hands to cover his brows, he managed to squint to check if the slime was following him through the hole. The path from the library remained empty. Far ahead of him, he caught a glimpse of Lux entering a cluster of clouds. When the library disappeared from view, the wind tunnel throttled him straight down towards her, even faster than Avalonia's air resistance would have normally allowed.

You can't fall off Areopa. You can't fall off Areopa, he kept telling himself. The clouds doused his suit in water. There were frozen ones nearby that were shattering from the velocity of his body as he passed through. *I'm either really lucky, or this wind tunnel is really exact*, he thought, imagining that if he hit even a single frozen cloud, the impact would be too powerful for his barrier to withstand. He was moving too fast to be able to slow himself down with a cast without burning through all of his flou instantly.

He broke through the bottom of the clouds. The sudden influx of light was blinding. He had escaped Sanguine City's simulated nighttime, exposing himself to the raw brilliance of Avalonia's daytime sky during Aleph's peak hours. Even with his eyes closed, the starlight was so dazzling he thought it would scorch his retinas through his eyelids. The wind tunnel abruptly ended, throwing him into a free fall. *You can't fall off Areopa. You can't fall off Areopa*. The sound of the wind and the pulse of his eardrums were becoming so loud they began drowning out his thoughts. Panic seized his frame of mind as he struggled to open his eyes against Aleph's light, even if it was only to see how far he was from the ground.

He was staring into an eye that covered the entire horizon. When it blinked, he felt a breeze from its eyelids tilt his direction ever so lightly. A flock of flying critters flashed in and out of his vision, showing him the immense speed at which he was traveling. The eye began moving away from him as the creature it belonged to turned its head. Despite his distance from it, even after straining to use his peripheral vision, he could only see a tiny corner of its face. A single one of its scales resembled a colossal fortress — impenetrable, archaic, divine.

“Titanamedusae!” he screamed at the top of his lungs. “Titanamedu-

sae!” He could not tell why the instinct possessed him, but it would not let him go. He kept screaming the creature’s name, even after he closed his eyes, as though it would save him if it heard him. *Am I falling to my death?* he wondered. *Like the elf that I jumped from the top of the mountain with — this must be how he felt.*

A Woodlands Wyrm, one the size of an adult dragon, began soaring next to him. The creature was innocently curious and moved on after studying Red for several seconds. He could see Nagya. *So you can fall off of Areopa.* He continued screaming “*Titanamedusae,*” over and over again, even waving his arms at the creature as though it would recognize him as a friend. Being in its presence emptied his mind. Even as he thought of his fate, he could feel nothing — not tragedy, not fear, not shock. His own instincts had abandoned him.

He began slowing down. Underneath him, a cloud had formed, slowing his speed as he approached the ground. From above, Nagya’s forests looked like a field of multi-colored clouds. Its trees sported the full brushes of leaves customary of Torrid, although as the season progressed into its drier periods, they would eventually wither into the dry petals that were crucial to the development of Nagya’s unique ecosphere.

He was drifting into the land of tree elves like a feather, swaying side to side as the cloud carried him to the floor. It was a dark grey cloud, similar to the ones that created Sanguine City. It began dissolving into the air as he approached a thicket of branches. He crashed onto Nagya’s floor from the top of a tree. His barrier cast broke, but protected him from the pain of the fall. Even through his defilterizer, he could sense the presence of noxious vapors all over the air of the forest. He landed on the bank of a stream. He lay there, as still as a flower, catching his breath, and counting the minutes as they went by, unable to move even a single muscle.

“Red?!” He heard someone shouting his name. *Butz.* He opened his eyes and stared at his own hands. *I’m alive.* He felt a sudden, intense surge of euphoria. When he stood up, a pang of nausea and dizziness overtook his senses, and he immediately fell back down and struggled to keep from fainting.

“I’m here!” he shouted. His own voice rung in his ears. He wasn’t sure if he actually screamed or if he whispered the words.

“Red?! There you are!” Butz exclaimed. The falconer came up to him and held his head still. The elf and Raven were behind him. Lux was draped

across Raven's shoulders. "How many fingers am I holding?" Butz asked.

"Seventeen?" Red replied after a thorough count.

"Yeah, see? He's fine," Butz said. He began helping Red up to his feet.

"He said seventeen..." the elf said.

"Yeah, close enough. He was never good at math," Butz said. "Red, come on. Lux passed out on the way here. We can't lose you too. It'll be impossible to move out if we have to carry *two* people."

"I'm fine, I'm fine. Where are we? Why does it smell like that?" Red mumbled. He hobbled alongside Butz, leaning on his shoulders for support. "This whole place smells like fuel. And why is it so hot? Even my suit can't keep me cool."

"We are in the Cinamic Jungle of Nagya," the elf said. "The fumes you are breathing are coming from the fire water." She pointed to the stream.

"That's not regular water?" Red asked.

"No, Butz replied. "It's mawth, one of the more popular sources of energy before Cron was adopted. We can't drink or touch it."

"Is the air toxic?" Red asked.

"It will cause humans breathing problems, but it won't kill you," the elf said. "Not unless you're here for months on end. The damage to your breathing can be permanent, then."

"I can walk," Red muttered, getting off of Butz. "Is she okay?"

"Yeah," Raven said. "She's fine. She just passed out from the fall. Not everyone's gone through hundreds of skydiving simulations."

"Hopefully she doesn't throw up all over us. I'm suddenly really glad I went to Crest," Butz said. "Did the slime follow you? The eye?"

"No, I didn't see it leave the library," Red answered.

"We should still leave this area," Raven replied. "It'll land around here if it comes."

"Were you guys carried by a cloud as well?" Red asked.

"It is a rare occurrence. It happens whenever someone breaks through Areopa's borders, or falls through the city. A last ditch safety mechanism to keep anyone from injuring themselves when they fall," the elf replied.

"The cloud got to me kind of late. I was sure I was going to die," Red said.

"That's because we were in a wind tunnel. It must have directed us to this area of Nagya. The land of tree elves contains two jungles and three rain forests."

“I thought it was all a forest?” Butz asked.

“A jungle *is* a forest,” Raven replied, “but there are differences in the types of plants in each.”

“Oh. But yeah, I thought I was going to die falling too. I think this is the fourth time I was sure I was going to die in these past three months alone. That can’t be good for my mental health.”

“Get used to it,” Raven said. “We’re not in school anymore.”

“How are we going to get out of here?” Red asked.

“I already sent a message to Magnus. He said he’ll send a search party for us and to keep our microAIs on,” Butz replied. “That’ll allow them to lock on to our location.”

“Can it take her back to Sanguine City?” Red asked, gesturing to the elf.

“I can find my own way,” she replied. “There are beams that take you up to Sanguine City.”

“Right here in the jungle?” Red asked.

“None in this one. The nearest one I know of is in the Forest of Illusions. It’s a few days’ journey from here.”

“Isn’t it dangerous here?” Butz asked. “You’re going to go on your own?”

“I’ll stay until your ship arrives, to make sure the four of you make it back alive,” the elf said, “and no, it isn’t dangerous for me. Our training requires us to stay alive in the forest for many weeks at a time. I spent much of my childhood fighting for my life in Nagya, learning the way of the tree elves. We do not use simulations.”

“You can’t just come along in our ship?” Red asked. “I’m sure it’s easier to get to Sanguine City from Nimbus than from Nagya.”

“No, I would rather not. I have been meaning to come down here anyway. Since the first trial, I’ve been looking for a way to clear my head.” They continued walking up the stream, botching their tracks as they went along. Red eventually became used to the smell of the mawth, but its pungency still added an extra degree of oppressiveness to the humidity of the jungle. They tried to leave the bank of the stream, which opened more widely into a river as they went along, but the dense vegetation of the area made it impossible to comfortably voyage inside. They would need to use casts to clear the way, and they decided it was best to preserve their energy. Up ahead, Red spotted a squid-like creature that was walking on top of the river. Its body looked exactly like the mawth underneath it, clear like water

but with a glistening sheen. In the blur of the heat, it was impossible to differentiate the creature from the river.

“Wish we had Magnus here so he could identify it,” Butz mumbled.

“They are harmless,” the elf said.

“Do you know what it is?” Red asked.

“They are called River Walkers. I am familiar with them. They do not attack other creatures, and they feed on fire.”

“On fire?” Butz asked.

“They’re mawth-based organisms, not water,” Raven said. “Mawth is highly flammable. Its environments are known to spontaneously combust under extreme pressure or heat. I don’t know the human name for that squid thing, but she’s right.”

“Fires are common in this jungle,” the elf said. “They are an integral part of all life here. Many of the creatures feed off of flames. Those eggs on the trees —” She pointed to the hundreds of cocoons in the canopy above that Red had mistaken for fruits. “They are River Walker eggs, and they only open after they’ve absorbed enough heat, which sometimes requires months of incubation during the season of Torrid, and multiple forest fires. Everything here thrives on fire. Regular water is rare in this jungle. It is composed almost entirely of fire water, a mix of different oils.”

“I just realized... that means we’ll die of thirst...” Red said. His throat suddenly felt raspy as he cleared it.

“I have water,” the elf said, passing him her flask.

“It’s so cold,” Red whispered, jerking the bottle back as he drank from it. He intended to take a more generous gulp, but the water nearly froze his teeth.

“There are ice crystals in it,” the elf replied. “The water should last us until your ship arrives. I can find more if we run out.”

“Look, that’s sort of a path,” Butz said, pointing to an opening in the jungle’s growth. “Let’s go in there.”

They were only able to travel less than a tezra into the jungle before finding it too difficult to go on. The plants had no thorns like the ones in the library, but some were nearly as thick as the tree trunks around them. They used only force casts to clear the area as they went. While plasma or fire would have been more efficient, they were careful not to accidentally ignite the jungle.

“I thought this place would be easier to travel through,” Red said, as they settled down under the cover of several flowers that were twice their own

height. The petals of the flowers alone were longer than Red's arms, from tip to tip. Its fresh smell relieved him of the harsh aroma of the jungle. All the vegetation in the area around them had transparent bodies, just like the squid creature they had seen. From the tree trunks to the stems of the flowers they were sitting under, the entire jungle seemed to be composed of a uniform, clear, gelatinous material, although he knew that each of the plants were unique and had wildly different properties from one another. "The library wasn't like this. I thought you said it was preserved exactly the way Nagya left it? It was so much easier to travel through."

"It is," the elf replied, "but that was the Forest of Illusions. It's known to be easy to walk through, at least in some ways. The Cinamic Jungle is infamous for being nearly impenetrable."

"Shh, do you hear that?" Butz asked.

"It's nothing," the elf replied. "It's the tree elves. They've probably noticed us in their land."

"Would they attack?" Butz asked. "I can't see them."

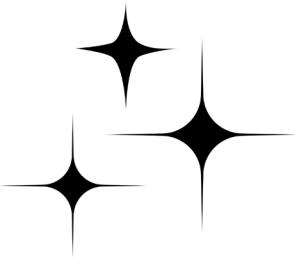
"Of course not. They are tree elves..." the elf replied. "You can't see them because they're hiding above us. Don't pay attention to them, or you'll worry them. If you act scared or paranoid, they'll react in the same way."

"Ok, fine," Butz sighed, turning around and suddenly feigning a great interest in the white soil of the ground.

"They are peaceful," the elf nodded. "How long will your ship take to come?"

"A few hours," Raven replied. "Magnus said they were tight on resources. The city is preparing for the rogue Xenosite. They are landing sooner than expected."

Red lay down on his back, staring up into the trees as he zoned out of their conversation. He had lost count of how many hours he had been awake. The fumes, combined with the fresh scent of the flowers were making him sleepy. He thought of his jump from the library and suddenly craved doing it again. *Never thought I'd think that*, he mused, remembering how different he felt about heights only a few months before. As he focused on the trees above him, the words of Raven, Butz, and the elf melted away into the sounds of the jungle. He could hear everything, from the insect critters around them, to the sound of the squid walking against the stream they came from. The eye was nowhere near them. He drifted into a peaceful nap, thinking only of Titanamedusae as he fell to sleep.



REVELATIONS

The jungle was silent. It was one of the few occasions when he woke up in the outdoors without a sudden need to fend for himself. He kept his eyes closed as he stirred from his sleep, listening for any signs of wildlife that was nearby. He opened one eye to see who was keeping watch. To his surprise, both Butz and Raven were asleep next to him, Raven with one hand on her keratana and Butz with his hands around a giant rock as if it were Linx. Red sat up, slowly, with his eyes closed, as though he were back in his bed at Echidna City and not lost in a jungle composed of fossil fuels. He could barely detect the smell of the mawth now, but the air still felt heavy. He hit his head against a flower petal as he sat up. The leaves were providing shade for all of them. Despite the jungle's thick canopy, starlight was still able to penetrate through the gaps in the branches. Along with the heavily shaded areas, they created a strange combination of spots in the soil that were cool and dark right next to ones that were blazing hot and brightly lit. Fumes were rising from all the plants. Red wiped a coat of sweat off his forehead. The heat was more than his suit could handle. Although it was fire resistant, it was made to endure short bursts of extreme temperatures rather than a long, consistent exposure to a moist and blistering climate. He suspected that the fumes in the environment also helped in allowing the heat to penetrate through to his skin. He noticed Lux on the other side of the flower.

"You're awake?!" he asked.

"I woke up a while ago," Lux replied, without looking up. She was reading through the Draconion Index.

"A while ago? How long have I been out for?"

"About four hours, I think. Can't you tell? Gama's rays are starting to get stronger than Aleph's now. Look at the color of the light."

“Yeah, I guess. I’m just surprised. I thought I’d be asleep for less than an hour.”

“It probably has something to do with the fumes. They make you sleepier than usual, I think. Raven was trying really hard to stay up, and then she just passed out.”

“Yeah, probably. Have you found anything?” Red asked, pointing to the book.

“Not yet, but there’s a lot of stuff to get through. It’ll take me a while. I can’t believe I never learned some of the things in this book. A lot of it really should be made common knowledge among the Light.”

“Like what?”

“Well, it’s written in multiple languages with no real indication of why a single uniform language wasn’t used, so I can’t translate all of it. I think it has something to do with the Light just wanting to get the knowledge together, and since the Priori spans so many different races, each one just wrote in their own language. But there’s this whole section about a portal in a remote part of this galaxy that’s being guarded by a sect of the Priori that I’ve never heard of. It’s a dimensional rift, far larger and older than any discovered thus far, but the strangest thing is that nothing’s ever come out of it.”

“Things come out of dimensional rifts?”

“Of course, beings from other dimensions have visited us before.”

“Right, Doctor Lurch mentioned something about that. Isn’t it a good thing if nothing’s ever come out of it?”

“I don’t know. Why would we be guarding it then?”

“Can you ask an Elder of Light?”

“No Elder of Light that would have knowledge that deep has ever left our home planet. It would take too long for a message to get to one and then back here.”

“Too long? Just to send a message?”

“Messages don’t get from one place to another instantaneously, you know. It feels like that because we use light to send them through, but even light has its boundaries. It would take months, at the very least, to send a message to my home planet and get it back to Avalonia.”

“How did *you* get here. If it takes months to travel between this star system and your home planet, didn’t you spend most of your life traveling back and forth?”

“That’s a tricky question,” Lux smiled.

“Why?”

“How old do you think I am?”

“About my age.”

“I am, but I’m also fifteen years older.”

“Why? I mean, how?”

“The star system I’m from is too far away from Avalonia to use a regular form of transportation to get here. The only viable method is to use a gemini mothership. They travel close to the speed of light, as close as you could probably go without breaking the universe’s natural limits. But when you’re traveling that fast —”

“Time slows down for everyone inside.”

“Exactly. We were put to sleep for most of the trip.”

“What is it like? Traveling at that speed?” Red asked. For the first time, she broke away from the book to look at him. She laughed, looking ecstatic as she tried to find her words.

“It is... *so* impossible to adequately describe using speech. Even pictures or holograms wouldn’t do it justice. It was the single most amazing experience I’ve ever had in my life. Even amazing isn’t the right word to describe it, cerebral maybe, or mentally and physically overwhelming. When you travel that fast, you can tell that such speeds were not meant for any human or elf or gemini to witness or understand, and that they were meant to be the exclusive domains of the gods that we worship, the stars and Nebulae that make up the whole universe. You know how when you’re running towards something, it starts to become bigger and bigger within your field of vision?”

“Mmhmm,” Red nodded, as he cupped his knees in excitement. Her tone had him desperately wishing that he had been on the ship with her. He was trying as hard as he could to visualize her every syllable.

“Well, when you start approaching the speed of light, for a while, the exact opposite happens. You get closer to what you’re moving towards, but your field of vision, or in the case of the ship, what you can see through the panoramic front windows, extends dramatically, so it looks like what you’re moving towards is actually receding into the distance. You can only see things if you’re receiving light from them. As the ship speeds up, it catches up with the light that normally passes from behind it, making those things visible as well. For a while, you see almost the entire galaxy around you,

millions and millions of stars, and you'll think this will continue infinitely — you hope desperately that it will — because then, at one point, you'll be able to see the entire universe, in all its vastness and beauty and glory and grandeur and magnificence.”

“And does it?”

“No, something even *more* amazing happens. The light disappears entirely.”

“It vanishes?”

“Yup, as you begin to move too fast, it slowly fades out. It was an effect of light that the Priori hypothesized long before it was actually observed. Light always has a certain pitch, just like sound, and if it goes too high or too low, you can no longer see it. It passes the range of possible frequencies that your eyes can perceive. When you approach the speed of light, that happens to the starlight around you. Its pitch becomes too low as you catch up to how fast it's going. Even if you expect it, it still scares you, like someone's accidentally erasing the universe, or you yourself are moving so fast that you're leaving this world. It is the moment in which you feel most that this speed was not meant for any human to ever travel, because no matter how much you expect it, no matter how much you *know* that it's going to happen, or even if you've seen it before, your mind can still never truly prepare itself for it. It's like watching yourself vanish into non-existence. But then, after a while, you begin to see light again.”

“From other stars?”

“No, and that's the most incredible part. You're already moving too fast to catch starlight. What you're seeing is something else, something that was once at a pitch too high to be perceived as light by anything in the universe, but that you can now see. It was this second phenomenon that the Priori never expected. It changed the way we saw the universe, not just our universe but all of the universes that exist, and all of the dimensions that exist, forever.”

“Why?”

“Well, our entire religion used to be based on the idea that starlight was the only pure form of light, and that all life, consciousness, mass, everything ever created comes from starlight.”

“But then you found out that there were other forms of light.”

“Exactly. There are other, undiscovered lights in the universe, even purer than starlight itself. Perhaps older, more powerful, perhaps what *created*

starlight in the first place. What you begin to see when you approach the speed of light after everything else vanishes, is this other light. It just comes out of the darkness, and every time, it starts as just an orb, a tiny orb of light at the center of your eyes, no matter what direction you're looking, and then grows and grows until it fills your entire field of vision, until all you can see is light. It's the strangest thing you can experience. All your life you think that the universe is this dark, terrifying place, with only a few, tiny stars within its infinite vastness to light up a small amount of space around themselves, but then, when you're moving at that speed, you realize that it could be just the opposite that's true, that the universe is actually *filled* with light, and darkness is just what you happen to perceive because you can only see one form of light. I mean, what other things can we not perceive because of the few, basic senses that we have, and the limits on even *those* senses? What other lives do we live in dreams that we always forget when we're in this one? It just expands the entire horizon of what you thought the universe was, how you see the world, and what it means to exist, or better yet — what exists out *there*."

"Incredible," Red whispered.

Lux paused for a while. "Yeah..." she sighed. "Anyway, I need to get back to this book. I should focus on what Arkan needs for now. If you want to learn more, I will introduce you to someone who can teach you about the light, the stars, and the universe."

"Yeah, that would be amazing," Red nodded. "Did she leave? The elf?" He could not hide the sudden tone of disappointment in his voice.

"No, she went through there," Lux said, pointing to a trail of broken leaves and plants. "I think she found a well of water."

"Of water?"

"Well yeah, you didn't think the tree elves drank mawth, did you?"

"No, I guess not." He got up to see where the trail led. "Did she say how far it was?"

"No, but it took her about half an hour to go there and come back," Lux said. "She made a couple of trips to fill those up," she pointed to Raven's and Butz's bottles on the floor.

"Oh, that was nice of her."

"Mmhmm," Lux replied, absentmindedly. She was lost in the book again. He got up to follow the trail the elf had left behind, glancing to see if Butz or Raven was awake. His eyes lingered on Raven for an extra

second, unintentionally, before he took off. The elf had used her claws to carve out the jungle as she went. There were deep slashes left behind on stems, branches, shrubs, and the tangles of undergrowth that blocked the way. *They must have required all of her strength to cut through*, he thought, as he tried to break the stem of a flower himself but found it impossible. The trail of hackings she left behind looked more like the aftermath of a battle than a peaceful excursion into a forest.

Although it was much quieter than before, there were still sounds of life emanating from all over. The sounds would always come from his immediate location, as though they were following him to alert the rest of the jungle to his presence. Despite all the calls, trills, chirps, and clicks of the jungle, he could not spot a single creature. Instead, it was the diversity of all the plants that caught his attention. While the forest he had seen in the library was composed mainly of similar looking trees and critters, every flower, tree, and bush in the Cinamic Jungle looked unique. While he was landing from above, the clear leaves of the treetops looked yellow, blue, and purple. From where he was standing now, they were a mix of green and red, shifting from one to the other depending on the angle. Their transparent trunks had a surfeit of other flowers and plants growing out of them, giving each a one-of-a-kind appearance. Not a single plant grew straight upwards. They all curved in various directions, usually tilting their body to expose themselves to as many slits of starlight coming through the canopy as possible. He heard movement around him as he went, sometimes a slithering or rattling noise, but there were no signs of life. He kept looking up to check for any tree elves as he walked along the path. It wasn't long before he heard the sound of splashing water.

"The trees are the apex predators of the jungle," the elf said.

"What?" Red asked.

"You've been looking for creatures in the jungle, right?"

"Yeah..."

"There are barely any. The Cinamic Jungle is made up of mostly plants right now. The creatures will start coming slowly."

"What do you mean?" Red asked. "I heard noises coming here, noises of things moving." She was leaning over, collecting water from a natural well with a long vine that was pumping water to the surface.

"The noises are from the plants, too, although no one knows exactly where they come from or how they're made, and they only make the noises

if there are other creatures nearby. They remain silent otherwise. The plants are alive. They breathe and eat just as we do. They are all meat eaters, even worse than blood elves, if you ask me. They eat *everything*. They don't just drink the blood of their prey, and there is no creature too big in Nagya for a tree to eat, except for Titanamedusae herself." Red turned around, suddenly looking at each plant with a newfound vigilance. "They're not going to eat you *now*," the elf laughed.

"Then?"

"Throughout the year, the plants absorb as much starlight as they can. They fight for it amongst themselves, soaking up everything they can get through the trees above." She pointed at the slits of light all around them. "Although *you* see life all around you, this jungle is full of death and starvation. The soil is composed almost entirely of the corpses of dry, baked plants. The trees, flowers, and shrubs then absorb their nutrients, continuing the cycle of cannibalism that defines plant life. Throughout the year, the jungle starts to get populated with more critters, who are aware of what the plants are like but cannot give up on the chance to freely feast on River Walker eggs, the only creatures that the trees *don't* feed on, for the very reason that they bait other creatures into the forest. When solstice approaches, some of the creatures will be able to sense what is coming. They try and escape the jungle for other parts of Nagya, but they end up getting trapped here by the plants. The jungle slowly becomes a maze, a labyrinth of stems and trunks and vines. Some creatures get stuck in mawth mud, some get pulled up in vines from the tops of trees, and others will simply fall into ditches that appear out of nowhere."

"What happens when solstice comes?" Red gasped.

"*The trees... they come to life,* and they feast on all the creatures in the Cinamic jungle, leaving not a single drop of blood, thread of hair, or piece of bone behind."

"They come to life... like critters?"

"It's much more terrifying than that. You'd have to be there when they're alive to know what I'm talking about. If you're standing in a clearing, you won't even see them moving towards you. It will feel like your memories are disappearing, becoming harder to grasp. One second you're at the bank of the river, where there are no plants nearby, and the next, you're somehow in the middle of the jungle, surrounded by them. You can't see their teeth or faces, but you *know* that they're there. Some other sense warns you

that you're looking into something terrifying, and you get bumps all over your body. Your hair rises, every inch of your body tells you that you're in danger, even if you can't see any danger. You'll stand there, perfectly still, unable to move. And then — you're gone. *Eaten alive.*"

"Coming from a blood elf that must mean they're *really* scary."

"It's not just that they're scary. It's how many of them there are. Think about all the leaves, the flowers, the petals. When solstice approaches, if you're in the forest, you start getting these bouts of panic when you're alone. Ironically, it's always *those* moments that are the worst. Blood elves are often prepared for physical challenges, but not mental ones. Many like to speak about being fearless, but they are even more enslaved to the emotion than humans are. The more in tune you are with the forest, the more you feel the panic. It hits you all of a sudden that everything around you, the plants, the trees, they're all alive, *watching you*, waiting for the stars to fall to come alive, plotting how to keep you here to have you for themselves. They say if you have access to your third eye, if you can see into the world of spirits, that you can see the faces of the trees, and tell which ones are the most evil."

"You've been here right before solstice?"

"Of course. There are five different trials that the Watchers use to determine whether elves from Areopa are worthy of their own WEAPON trials. One of them involves staying in the Cinamic Jungle for the seven days before solstice, and making it out before the darkness falls."

"Wow... and can you make it out after?"

"Never. No creature has ever left the forest alive after solstice starts. We know of what happens because the microAI of participants in the trials of WEAPON simulates everything and records their reactions. Some of them have spoken into their mics moments before they were eaten. We've learned a lot about the forest in the past few decades, but much of it is still a mystery."

Red took a deep breath in. He shifted his feet to keep from stepping on the plants on the ground.

"Thank you for the water bottles," Red said, trying to think of anything but the trees. He felt that they were listening to the both of them intently, perhaps even speaking to each other about the two humans in their presence.

"It's always thirst or hunger that kills people during the trials in this jun-

gle, never the creatures or the plants. Elves will forget to feed on blood or drink water for so long that by the time they realize they are starving, they are out of energy and strength to fight for their resources. They have no choice but to remain until solstice comes and the plants take them.”

“Fight?”

“Of course. We must fight for them with other elves and creatures during the trials.”

“Strange,” Red replied. “It’s the opposite for us. I guess technically it’s competitive too, but we’re against so many hundreds of other academies that no one at Crest thinks of competing with *each other*. We always work together during our field test.”

“Crest?”

“It’s the name of the school where I trained. Do the elves ever die of starvation here? I mean, directly of starvation, not because they were starved and ended up staying until solstice.”

“Of course not, we wouldn’t die in only seven days, only become severely weak. There is little blood and water to find in the jungle, and never enough for everyone competing. The reason our trials are designed this way is to make sure our weak do not make it back alive. It is a purging process.”

“You could just have them come back alive, you know. Not everyone has to *join* WEAPON. They could do something else, couldn’t they? I mean, they may be weaker than your strongest kin, but they’re surely still capable if they’re in the trials in the first place.”

“You wouldn’t understand. It is part of being a blood elf.” She looked like she wanted to continue, but stopped abruptly. He thought it was because she was realizing more and more every moment that he was only human. He looked into the well during their silence. It was a plant that stored its water deep underground, with vines that could be used to pump it to the surface. The plant was a hybrid that used both mawth and water to survive. The elf had dug a hole ten feet deep to gain access to it, although it was obvious that its roots went far deeper. He thought he heard a sound coming from underground, a tune, like a flute combined with the sounds of the jungle to create a melody. He was sure it was in his mind, until he leaned his head into the hole to listen more closely.

“Do you hear that?” He asked.

“Hear what?”

“That tune.”

“A tune? Like a song?”

“Yeah, exactly like a song.”

“You hear it?! Where is it coming from?”

“I don’t know. I think underground.”

“No, it has to be coming from a direction, Red. What direction?”

“I don’t know, why? What is it? The jungle? The tree elves?” He put his hands on the edge of the well, and then leaned his whole head in.

“Be careful,” the elf laughed. “You’re going to fall in and be stuck here until solstice.”

“I hear it — it’s from there.” He pointed west. She jumped up and began slicing the jungle to carve a path westward.

“Where are you going?”

“It’s the spirit of the jungle!” She turned back as she was carving the path. “Are you coming or not?” She made her way to the tallest tree around them and then began climbing. He heard rustling from above, the sound of feet shuffling on branches. “Hurry up if you’re coming. The tree elves hear it too. They’re on the move.”

“Why do we have to follow the tune?” he asked, struggling to climb the tree behind her. He used a cast to help himself up, but did it as subtly as possible so she wouldn’t notice. “Isn’t this a tree elf ritual or something?”

“Why do you ask so many questions? Is that another human trait? To be innately afraid of things you don’t understand or know everything about?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, it is, and it helps us *survive*. So will you tell me where we’re going?”

“To find the spirit of the forest.”

“Are we going far? I don’t want to leave everyone behind. Why do *we* need to find the spirit of the forest?”

“We might be at the other side of Nagya by the time we can get to the source of the melody. We are going because he rarely ever visits the forest in our side of the world. He is always in the spirit world. You may be able to witness something even most elves never get a chance to see. Perhaps you can ask him about the spirit that haunts *you*.”

“The other side of Nagya?! I don’t understand what you mean every time you say a spirit. Are they beings from other dimensions? I think the elves have a different way of interpreting the world than we do. There must be a human equivalent of what you keep calling spirits.”

“I don’t know. And yes, the other side of Nagya, where there may be no

Suleyk to protect you,” the elf grinned.

“I can protect myself,” Red relented.

“Of course,” she laughed. She used the branches that intertwined between trees to climb through the canopy. While they had to avoid the eggs and the sharper ends of some of the trees, it was far simpler than trying to cut through the growth of the jungle. It was easier than he thought to hold his weight up on the branches. He could always find something to plant his feet on to take short breaks. It made him fall behind, but kept him from tiring out. The longer he travelled through the canopy, the faster he could go. He quickly picked up the habit of throwing his body through the gaps of the canopy to maintain his momentum. He would eventually crash into a branch if he tried to go too fast, but he enjoyed the thrill of attempting to catch up to the elf. It was a challenging game he could lose himself to. She was several trees ahead of him.

She turned over one shoulder to speak without slowing down. “The Suleyk is in love with you. I can smell it on her. And the two that always fight, they do not share your bond with the Suleyk, but I can smell them as well.”

“You can smell it?” Red asked with a curious expression. “Like an *odo*?”

“Of course. I can smell you too,” she said, laughing again. He turned red, trying not to imagine what she meant. “Go faster, or we’re going to lose the melody,” she added.

“It’s getting louder,” Red said, happily changing the subject.

“I know. I can hear it too now.” She grabbed onto the trunk of a tree and placed her ear to its side, listening to its interior. “It’s this way,” she said, pointing south. “He’s changing direction.”

“You can tell by listening to a tree?” Red asked.

“The trees resonate with the melody more loudly than the air.” She hacked away at branches that were blocking her way, and then continued galloping through the canopy.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Red asked. He was starting to run out of breath. “I mean with the trees being people-eaters and all that — maybe we should be kinder to them.”

“You’re thinking of the wrong forest,” the elf said, picking up her pace as she soared through the canopy.

“Slow down!” Red shouted. He hoped that she didn’t have an ability to smell him looking at her. She had a graceful but powerful way of moving that his eyes couldn’t stop following. He tried to catch glimpses of her face,

in all its joy from being able to move through the trees so effortlessly like it was a childhood pastime that her muscles refused to forget. Every time he did, he wished ever so slightly that they would get lost here and never find their way back.

“In some forests, the trees are siblings, or connected like a single life form. In those, you must heed the rules of nature and show proper respect to the plants around you, if you want to make it out alive. Such is not the case for the Cinamic Jungle. The trees here are all vicious, savage plants. When you cut off the stem of one plant, all the ones around it will rejoice over being able to absorb its nutrients for themselves. Just because they are fairly quiet, always still, and bask in starlight, does not mean that they are not dark, sadistic things. This is a jungle, not a place where generosity bodes well.” He saw three bodies passing by underneath them, weaving through the gaps in the plants like they had their patterns memorized. They were short and had thin, wiry bodies, which seemed to be made for maneuvering through tight spaces. They moved with a nimble, fluid style, never losing their momentum as they flew through the jungle with precise movements and elegant control.

“Tree elves,” Red said. “I’ve never seen them before.”

“An amazing people, aren’t they? Blood elves might be stronger, but we’ll never have the survival capabilities of tree elves.” One of the elves made a screeching noise followed by a whistle. The other two broke off in separate directions.

“Signs of danger or something?” Red asked nervously.

“No, that’s how they communicate. They have no language, no way of sharing complex ideas, only emotions and simple commands. By the way that one screamed, I’d say he was asking the other two to tell their tribe about the spirit of the forest.”

“They have no language? No way to speak to each other?”

“No, they are like critters. They live in the wilderness. They have no structures or homes or organized method of living. They use no tools beyond their own bodies. Blood elves are known not to use too many weapons or wear a surfeit of armor like humans do, but we always make important exceptions.” She brandished her blades from afar. “Tree elves live in absolute harmony with nature. They believe that language is what alienates sentient creatures from the lifeforces all around them, and that speaking is what causes any single race to be too focused on just themselves and not

the world. They believe that the more a race communicates and the more they bring to the world outside ideas and tools, the more that nature exiles them.”

“That sounds like a harsh way to live. How can they have that idea if they don’t speak? I mean, that sounds like a fairly complex belief system in and of itself. They would have to actively put down methods of communication when they arose. It’s like consciously stopping evolution. Doesn’t it require that they actually *understand* what language is in the first place? They would need to be aware of it to make exceptions for whistles and screams like they do now. They would have to know the difference between the way regular creatures communicate with each other and the way humans or other elves do.”

“Yes, it’s not *technically* what they believe, or what they say they believe anyway. It’s what *other* elves say they believe, from studying their behaviors and habits for years and years. I guess in a way, describing their culture for ourselves to understand tells us more about ourselves than them, right?”

“Yeah,” Red replied. “Exactly.” The entire forest shook from a sudden quake. He almost fell from the branch he was holding onto but the elf turned around and quickly grabbed a hold of him.

“On your feet?” she asked.

“Yeah, you can let go, thanks.” Red said. He dropped down to the floor and looked for another tree to climb.

“Don’t bother. I’m coming down,” the elf said. “We’ll go through the jungle from here. It’s going to start thinning out.”

“What was that?” Red asked.

“*Titanamedusae*. The sound of the spirit probably awoke her.”

“She can hear it too? It’s only a faint tune.”

“It’s not how loud the sound is, it’s how well you’re listening to the forest. She does it better than anyone.”

“I heard it before you.”

“Yes, you did. Maybe you’re more in tune with nature than you think,” the elf smiled.

“Aren’t you tired?” Red asked. “I mean, I slept for a while before running through here.”

“Blood elves don’t sleep, at least not like humans. We sleep for long periods of time at once, sometimes up to months, but then we can stay awake for long periods of time as well. We get it from our ancestors, the taureks.”

“Oh, yeah. I saw them sleeping at the Baron’s pit.”

“A few thousand live there. Do you hear everything around us?”

“Yeah, the jungle is louder now. *A lot* louder than before.”

“Everything is quieter when Titanamedusae is asleep. That’s why you were able to sleep more peacefully. She was sleeping as well.” They tried to follow behind the tree elf as best as they could. It knew exactly which angles and gaps in the growth could be used to get through the forest as fast as possible. There were flower petals that could be used as trampolines, trees that had holes hiding between their flowers that could be used to swing forward, and puddles of slippery, frozen mawth that Red would have slipped on had he not watched the tree elf dodge them from up ahead. The frozen puddles were a result of a rare breed of grass that drained an inordinate amount of heat from its immediate surroundings. If the surface of a puddle was exposed to starlight, despite being frozen, it was still hot to the touch, and perfectly frictionless. Red only recognized them because he studied a similar plant at Crest while going over the flora of Avalonia.

“Do you know anything about that elf that I fought with? During the qualifiers? I mean... the trials of WEAPON.”

“Yes, he was strong. You were stronger.” He thought he detected a hint of admiration in her tone. Despite how trivial it was, he felt electric.

“Was he your friend? Did you know him well?”

“Yes, we trained together for years. I met him first in this very forest. We fought with each other for water.”

“Did you win?”

“Of course.”

“I didn’t mean to kill him. If there was another way to win the round, I would have. I’m sorry for it.”

“Why are you apologizing, and what do you feel bad about? I would have killed your Suleyk had I been given the chance. I still will, when we complete our faadh.”

“You think you can beat Raven?”

“Now? Yes, I think so. But I would have to fight her to find out, no? She is strong, but it is not only strength that determines the victor in a fight.”

“I thought you would be able to tell just from a person’s flou whether you can beat them or not.”

“You could hardly tell anything from that. A person’s true strength only comes *as* they fight, not when they think about it. Sometimes it is beyond

what they knew they possessed, other times, it is far less. Regardless of how strong you are, if you cannot control it, what good will it do? I have seen dark elves fight twice in my life. They have an unusual style of combat. They waste no movements, and they use no extra energy, no weapons, and no casts. They are taught not power, but control, because the ones who reach the peak of their training are supposed to use dark flou for their casts, which is a far more volatile and dangerous form of energy than any other in existence. If you can control dark flou, exerting power is unnecessary. Long ago, I saw two dark elves in a duel. They were each allowed only a *single* strike. With enough control, that's all you ever need. Remember that if you are ever fighting a dark elf. Give them any space to hit you, and death is certain."

"The elf that I killed, I remember him struggling for his life before I used my fire cast. I was trying to think of any way I could end the round without killing him."

"This has been on your mind?"

"Yeah, for a while now. I try not to think about it, but it comes up randomly in my mind sometimes. I thought since you're a blood elf, you might know him. And if you knew him, that if I told you it would make me feel better. Or if I apologized or something."

"And do you feel better?"

"No."

"Why do you feel bad? Is it not something you expected to do when you chose to become a warrior? I was six when I bested my first opponent. A large ceremony is held for when a warrior blood elf first challenges another to faadh. Usually no one does it until they are at least ten. My opponent was four years older than me, and far larger. I drank her blood after I killed her."

Red took a moment to collect his thoughts. They approached a series of giant mushrooms that were blocking their way. They looked like colorful, contorted hills. They were tilted away from them and easy to climb up. Their sides were lined with long, sticky hairs like the back of a Gnashar. The canopy was beginning to disappear as they approached the edge of the Cinamic Jungle. The tree elf they were following had disappeared. Its tracks stopped abruptly in front of the mushrooms. The fungal structures reminded Red of the Twilight Caverns.

He was struck with a brief sense of both nostalgia and wonder, as he thought about how much had changed in his life in only the past two months.

Ikb'Sept, The Shepard of Oblivion — he remembered hearing his name for the first time, his *own* name, his *true* name. He felt no sense of shock or awe, no impression of being greater than any other human who was coming to terms with who they were. He wondered if it was because, subconsciously, he still believed the idea was too absurd to be true, or because he knew it was true long ago and thus felt nothing but bliss when Lance finally told him what he was. It reminded him of a time, many years ago, when a good friend of his and Magnus's was killed by a critter during an outdoor exhibition. He remembered not feeling any grief at all, and wondering deeply why he wasn't more upset than he was. He was close to the friend, but he did not have the same jarred reaction that Magnus had. After killing the elf in the first round of the qualifiers, it was not a shocking sense of remorse that he felt, but a tiny, nagging feeling of regret. It spoke to his conscience from the back of his mind like the voice in the darkness, slowly breaking down his sense of self. The melody of the forest was becoming clearer as they climbed up the mushrooms.

“I think I know how to explain it to you. The same way that blood elves feel bound not to kill someone that they think is stronger than them, unless it is done through a challenge that the person agrees to, humans feel bound not to kill anything that loves life just as much as they do or anything that doesn't pose a threat to them. We feel sympathy for other creatures and compassion when they feel pain, even if they are weaker than us. Actually — *especially* when they are weaker than us.”

“Pain and death are also part of nature. For a blood elf to be ashamed of killing a weaker opponent would be equal to us feeling ashamed of being blood elf, ashamed of our bodies, ashamed of our blood, ashamed of who we are. The world never apologizes for the way it is, why should the people in it apologize for the way they are?”

“Nature is about living, not dying.”

“The dark elf word for coming to life is the same as to die. You may think they are very different things, but don't be so sure that it is not just a human perspective. They are beings of many dimensions, and they understand both concepts far better than any human.” She stopped halfway up the mushroom to look back at him. “You are upset because you fear death, yourself. It scares you, it frightens you, it terrifies you, and you are afraid to think that you have put someone through what you yourself fear so much. If you do not fear death, you will not feel bad about killing him.”

“Well, that’s a very simple way to put it.”

“Why complicate it? If you do not fear death for yourself, then you will not fear it for others. What is it about it that frightens you? The pain? You will feel *that* all your life, from your bones and muscles to your heart and mind. I would rather die *without* fear than live a hundred lives *with* fear.” She began climbing again. “Come, I can hear the melody from over the hill. It’s getting louder. The spirit is near.”

“Yeah it is...” Red replied. “And no, not the pain. I mean I guess that’s part of it, but I don’t know, not existing. Or existing in some way other way afterwards? I don’t know. That’s why I’m afraid — I just don’t know. And it could be forever.”

“So are you afraid that you won’t last at all, or that you’ll last forever?” she laughed.

“You won’t get it. It’s a human thing,” Red grunted. She turned back again.

“Maybe *that’s* why they call humans dreamers. They don’t just dream of good things, do they? Most of the time it’s nightmares that they conjure up, always imagining the worst possible thing that could happen wherever they go. You thought you were going to die when you were falling from the library. That is why death is on your mind, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Red shrugged.

“Did you see Titanamedusae as you were falling from the skies?” She had a different way of enunciating the name. She exaggerated the last three syllables as though the creature were royalty.

“I did.”

“Were you afraid of death then?”

“No, all I could think about was her. I felt so insignificant.”

“See? Fear is the instinct of a body in denial of its own fate. Once you accept the world as it is, you will no longer be afraid of it. Why insignificant? You are in the presence of the most powerful creature on Avalonia, and you feel insignificant?”

“Yeah, of course. That’s exactly *why* I feel so insignificant. I mean, its size alone. Its strength, and its age. What would it think of a man falling to his death nearby? Nothing. It would be like the way we think of dust as it falls to the floor around us.”

“That’s a strange way to think,” the elf replied. “Everything in this world is made up of the dust you speak so lowly about, and the light people

speak so highly about. You should ask your companion from the Priori. She would know best. They believe that the stars themselves are where all life originated from. Their lives and their deaths have shaped the universe around us.”

“I saw a supernova once, in the sky, right from Avalonia.”

“How could you feel insignificant when you witness something like *that*? The energy they are made of, they would have reached us by now through space. You could be made up of the very same flou that was once a part of a supernova. Any single bit of light that you see in the sky had to travel a near impossible journey to get to where it is. It must travel all the way from the heart of a star, across all of space, to get to your eye. When you see it, it’s like you are meeting with another traveler, no?”

“Yeah... I guess,” Red replied. He wished he could feel as energetic as she suddenly was, but his mind was calibrated to echo only the bleakness of the last two months. Something told him that he would slowly find her idea more profound as time passed, rather than in one swift moment of realization. He decided he would write it down somewhere as soon as he was back at the Alcazar. He mused over the idea of keeping a journal of his travels as they approached the top of the mushroom. He knew many soldiers that did.

Beyond the mountainous plant was an enormous chasm filled with hundreds of flower stems that stretched from its bottom, and a colossal, cage-like structure that curved outwards into the sky. The stems of the flowers were twice as thick as the trees he had seen in the forest. They descended down the mushroom slowly, careful not to trip over and accidentally roll into the chasm. It was impossible to make sense of how deep the hole went. He dropped a rock into it, but no sound echoed back. He thought of going around the chasm if they had to cross it, but it stretched all the way to the horizon. On the other side of the pit, the plants looked different. They were more similar to the ones he had seen in the library.

“Are these elf-made?” Red asked, touching the cage-like structure. It had a natural feel to it, like decaying wood, but still retained the luster of a metal. He imagined it was a hybrid material. It extended from the bottom of the pit, and seemed to stretch just as far as the chasm. He knocked on one of the shafts. It was hollow inside, and sent a deep echo across the pit. He could feel the vibration move across the entire structure like the string of a musical instrument.

“Elf-made?”

“Aren’t these the remains of a building or something?”

“These are the bones of the last Titanamedusae,” the elf replied.

“Oh...” Red gasped, quickly taking his hand off the bones. “How big are they, and how deep does this hole go? Can you climb to the bottom?”

“We call this place the Pit of Death. That should give you an idea,” the elf replied. “It divides The Cinamic Jungle with the Forest of Illusions.”

“What’s at the bottom?” Red asked.

“Want me to push you in so you can see?” she grinned.

“No thanks,” Red said, taking a few steps away from the hole. He spotted the tree elf they were following on top of one of the mushrooms. The elf was watching them, and also peering into the hole. Looking closer, Red realized that there were more tree elves there, lying down and hiding their faces behind the mushroom. “The melody is coming from the other side,” he said, turning to the blood elf.

“Yes, we can use the petals to cross.”

“They won’t cross?” Red asked, pointing to the tree elves.

“No, they never cross this pit. It’s hard to know exactly why. We can’t just ask them, but we believe it has something to do with angering the spirit of the last Titanamedusae. She was even bigger than the one that lives now. There is another one, a male one, who lived four generations ago. He is believed to be the largest ever in the history of the planet. We have counted seven thus far. They are Avalonia’s only mythical creatures. Of course, not all of the planet has been explored yet. There is always the possibility of nature surprising us with its powers of creation.”

“Well if they don’t cross... maybe we should think twice. Isn’t there another way to the other side?”

“There is, all the way around the burning bushes, but the melody would be gone by then. Don’t be so much of a human. It’s safe. I’ve done this before. I think.”

“You think?!”

“Yes, I can’t remember if it was a dream or not. Now that I think about it, I think it *was* a dream. I fell in and died and then I woke up,” she added. She jumped to the nearest petal. The leaf made a loud chime, like a musical note.

“Why do they sound like that?” Red asked.

“More questions? Are you coming or not? We’re going to lose the tune.”

She jumped to another leaf. It made a similar sound, but deeper in tone.

“What’s so important about finding this spirit?” Red asked. He leaped forward and landed on the first leaf easily. Every successive one was placed farther from the last, as though someone had designed this place to be increasingly more difficult to cross. The tree elves were watching them from afar with foreboding expressions. “I mean, I know *we’re* just chasing the tune because you have a death wish, but why do *they* want to find the spirit?”

“I don’t know, now that I think about it,” the elf said, turning back to him. “I guess it’s just a thing that people in this forest do as soon as they hear it. Like a festival, if you will. Or maybe there *is* a reason and we just don’t know it.” She jumped onto the cliff on the other side. She nearly missed it, but used her claws to latch onto the ledge and pull herself up. “What are you staring at? Come on!” she shouted.

He was on the second to last leaf, but was suddenly mesmerized by the depth of the chasm. Looking into the darkness, he could tell that there was no bottom to this hole. If he leaned in, he could hear something coming from the darkness. It sounded like the wind at first, and then if he listened more carefully, a murmur, a whisper, and then finally that voice, that voice from his dreams.

“Red?!” the elf shouted. It broke him out of his trance.

“I think I had a dream about this place too,” Red said. “I feel... nostalgic here. Like I’ve been here before and done this. But... just like you... I think I fell *into* the pit in the dream.”

“A dream about *this* pit?” the elf asked. “But you have never been here before.”

“Yeah, I don’t know,” Red replied. “But I’m sure it was this *same exact* one.” He crossed over to the side, using a propulsion cast to launch himself from the last leaf.

“You needed a cast to get across?” the elf asked, raising a brow.

“Let’s just keep going, shall we?” Red replied, glancing back at the pit one last time before moving on. “The tune is so clear on this side. It’s being played — right beyond those trees. What does this spirit look like? What happens when you find it? Does it speak to you?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never heard of anybody actually following the melody all the way through. I suppose the tree elves have found him before. Nagya has a guardian, a spirit, and a phantom.”

“A phantom?”

“A mischievous entity, also a spirit. He lives here, in the forest of illusions, although he travels all over Nagya. A few blood elves I know say they ran into him during their trials here. He is only active when Titanamedusae is asleep.”

They passed into an open area with a lake at its center. The air was fresher, and did not have the noxious aroma of the jungle. The trees were more generously spaced out, and the flowers that grew here were small and gentle. The tune sounded like it was coming from the lake. The forest was filled with a heavy fog that clung to the air like clouds of pollen. It was cooler here, and the fog mellowed out the glaring starlight that hung over Nagya. The light that did make it to the ground was of a pleasant, low intensity, wrapping the forest of illusions in a continuous state of dusk. They walked over to the lake. The fog was becoming so thick that as they neared the center, Red had to use a light cast to illuminate the way ahead of him. The elf sniffed the air to feel out her surroundings. They walked over to the lake. Red half expected to find a group of people playing instruments when he peered into the water.

“There’s nothing here,” Red said. “But the tune...”

“Isn’t that amazing?” the elf asked.

“Isn’t what amazing?

“That there’s nothing there.”

“Well, I was expecting a great spirit or something...”

“Don’t be thick. Look into the water again, and tell me what you don’t see.”

“My reflection, where is it? The melody... it sounds like it’s coming from right here, but not the lake.”

“I don’t think the tune is coming from the waters,” the elf replied. “I think it’s coming from up there.” She pointed at the sky.

“Through the fog?”

“Yes, but we have no way to get up there,” she lamented. “Well, I guess it’s for the fun of the chase that people follow the tune anyway.” The fog made it hard to see beyond a few feet above them. Red threw up his light cast. There was nothing there.

“Are you sure we’re supposed to go up? Are you *absolutely* sure?” Red asked. He tried to tune in to the melody. *It is coming from above*, he realized.

“Yes, I think so.”

“You *think* that you’re absolutely sure?” *How does that even work?* he won-

dered.

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Okay,” Red sighed. “I think I have a way to get up there. I saw it in a book in the library. If there’s nothing there, we’ll probably get seriously injured. Hopefully, we won’t die. Do you know how to use a force cast? Or a propulsion cast?”

“I don’t understand you humans and all of your complicated names and categories. It’s like you think the world will suddenly make more sense if you can name and label everything. What is it that you’re asking me to do?”

“Can you lift us up?”

“Both of us? Yes, but not very far.”

“We’ll go far. I have an idea. I’m going to use a fire cast, and you’re going to use a propulsion cast. We’ll each have enough energy to launch us pretty far up.”

“How are we going to land?” the elf asked.

“You said you’re confident the tune is coming from above right?”

The elf glanced at the sky again. “Yes... but...”

“Are you scared?”

She stepped closer and grabbed tightly onto him. “Okay fine, but if you run out of flou before me, don’t expect me to try and save both of us.”

“You might be faster and stronger than me, but you’re not going to have more flou than me,” Red grinned. “Not even your Suleyk does.” He felt a rush of pride.

“We’ll see,” the elf said, rolling her eyes. “You’re going to set the whole forest ablaze.”

“You said fires are an important part of Nagya didn’t you? Anyway, there’s a lake right here. We’ll tilt towards the water, and I’ll cast from above it.” He held his breath as he began to cast, trying to keep her scent from distracting him. The elf started her air cast a few seconds after. They rose slowly, until they tilted towards the lake and increased their output. The adrenaline, he thought, was more a result of how close he was to her than the fire. As he began to put more energy into his flames, the elf was straining to keep up with his output. He felt a surge of liveliness, until they were a good distance above the ground, and too high up to land without injuring themselves. The elf held on tighter to him. The lake disappeared behind the fog. Her output was beginning to decline as she ran out of energy. He doubled his own. His cast was not making him more tired as he would have

expected. The flames flowed smoothly, like the fire had a life of its own and all it needed was for him to open a path in his body for it to flow through. He tried not to look at her as they climbed higher. He could smell her and feel her presence next to him so severely, he thought it would be too much if he looked at her as well.

“You *do* have a lot of flou,” the elf said, with a hint of worry in her voice. “We are going to fall. I have to save the rest of my energy to protect myself when we land. Unless you’ll have enough for both of us? I feel my flou slipping away.” There was nothing above them, only more fog. The tune was becoming louder and louder, a crescendo of flutes, clicks, and rhythm, until it suddenly stopped, and all he could hear was the air rushing through his ears.

“Don’t stop yet. We can go higher,” Red said, doubling his output again. The flames would have escaped far beyond the lake now. He didn’t want to imagine how much of the forest he must have doused in flames. She stopped her air cast and clung to him as tightly as she could. His own flames carried them a bit further off of the remnants of her current, but they were slowing down. He could feel the weight of their bodies yearning to crash back onto Avalonia. When he stopped his own cast, however, rather than falling towards the forest, they landed lightly on a puddle. He was standing on top of the fog, like there was an invisible, wet floor underneath it. He looked up. There was no fog above them, only open air. The sky was filled with gray storm clouds that stretched from horizon to horizon. Aleph and Gama had disappeared behind the dark sky. It was raining, but the water was coming up from the fog they were standing on and falling into the clouds above them. He had to hold his chin up to keep the water from splashing onto his face. From far away, a long, green, serpentine body began snaking through the clouds towards them, the body of a dragon.

“That must be the size of Titanamedusae,” Red whispered as it approached. Even when it was finally close to them, its green body could still be seen curling over the horizon. “Is this what you were talking about?” Red muttered, trembling. “The spirit of the forest?”

“I’ve never seen him before,” the elf whispered. She grabbed onto his hand as the creature descended from the skies, looking at them with glowing red eyes. “It’s probably going to eat us.”

“What? What do you mean?!”

“I’ve heard of the spirit eating those who disturb him. Now I know why,

because it's a dragon."

"Why didn't you warn me?!"

"Why are you upset? It will be a quick, painless death, and we will be one with a being far greater than either of us," the elf encouraged him.

Red knew that dragons had no limit to how large they could grow, but the one that was coming towards them dwarfed anything he had ever seen in holograms or heard of through first person accounts. The creature studied them closely. Its nostrils were big enough to suck them up from right where they were. He recognized it as an Emerald Thornback. The thorns on its side were not the tiny, threaded needles he had seen in the dragon in the desert, but enormous spikes with smaller knives growing out of them, with needles then growing out of the knives. The creature had no energy signature. If he closed his eyes, he wouldn't know it was there, except for the cold, eerie feeling he had at the bottom of his stomach. He realized he had the same feeling in the pit of the Baron and when he sensed the centipede-like creature underneath the Temple Gulf. When he summoned his courage and looked straight into the creature's eyes, he noticed it did not look solid, but ethereal, as though if he threw something at it, it would go right through its body. Its face was scarred across its right eye, a deep slash.

"I thought I sensed your presence, demon," the dragon said. Its voice boomed across the entire sky. Both Red and the elf shook as it spoke. She looked back and forth between the dragon and Red, confused, and trying to make sure that the spirit was talking to them. "I have summoned the forest to look for you, but it seems that you have come for yourself. Speak. Why have you returned to this place?"

"You know who I am, dragon?" Red asked. Its eyes glowed brighter as it stared at Red.

"You are the incarnation of Ikb'Sept. You have no memories of your past lives, human?"

"No, dragon, I do not. I only know who I am. You have seen me in my past life?"

"Seen you? It is I whom you fought to build your forsaken temples in Nagya. This scar is from you, Harbinger of the Ascension. You still do not have your third eye, nor your weapon."

"No, neither," Red replied. "I do not want them. Dragon — how can I destroy The Evil Eye, and the blade that comes with it?"

"Destroy? You are a creature of light, human, but your heart is not pure.

The eye will taint you. The weapon will take you, and the void will consume you.” The dragon began moving back into the skies. “Do not come into this forest again, human, or I will treat you as if you were the demon that first tore my land apart.”

“Wait, dragon! Please, tell me how I can destroy the eye. Even if I am not pure, tell me how it can be done! I wish to *become* pure. Do I seek out the Light?”

“The Light will not save you, Ikb’Sept. What sleeps in the dark is coming. I can feel its presence growing day by day. The void comes for you. It comes for all of us.”

“Tell me dragon! Please!” Red was shouting now, demanding it. “How can I slow it down then? What can I do to trap the eye?”

The dragon’s head receded behind the clouds. “He who rules the skies seeks to find the map that will reveal where oblivion will come from. There is but one place in the universe where you may summon The Beginning and The End. Keep the map from the rulers of the skies, and you may keep the world from the ascension for another lifetime.”

Before Red could consider the words of the dragon, they fell through the fog underneath them and suddenly found themselves underwater. He could see a faint light several feet ahead of him — they were close to the surface. He swam towards the light. The elf was a few feet behind him. He broke through to the surface and took a deep breath before swimming towards the shore. They were in the lake. It was raining now, heavily. The embers he had created were dying out, leaving a charred forest behind them. The elf came and sat down next to him, shaking the water from herself and her blades. They sat in silence as they caught their breaths. It was the same rain that was coming from underneath him when he was speaking to the dragon; he knew.

“Where did we just come from? I feel like I just woke up from a dream,” Red said. He wiped the water from his face.

“The spirit world,” the elf replied. She stood up and squeezed the water out of her hair. “You better fix that,” she laughed, pointing at his face. He quickly adjusted his defilterizer. Falling into the lake had loosened it. “Do you know your way back?” He turned towards the direction they came from.

“Yeah. You’re not coming?”

“The path back to Sanguine City is this way.” She pointed deeper into

the forest.

“Oh, right.” He got up and wiped more water from his suit. “Aren’t you going to fight Raven?” He was surprised that he asked.

“That is all I could think about for the past seven days. But, no, not anymore. I think seeing the spirit of the forest, and hearing him talk to you, made me realize something. I am not ready yet. I may win in faadh against the Suleyk, but I am still not ready to fight her. There is something else I must do first, somewhere else I must go.”

“You’re going to go to Karth.”

“Yes, to the caves of Suleyk.”

He tapped on his legs, wondering how to go about saying goodbye. It occurred to him that he never had a moment like this. Not when he was leaving everything behind at the Vine, nor at Crest. Everywhere he went, everyone he wanted was always with him or always came with him.

“I guess this is goodbye then?”

“Do you want to come with me?” the elf asked, abruptly.

“Come with you? To Karth?”

“Yes, to Karth.”

“Me? Why?”

“Blood elves do not use casts often. We usually prefer to fight with our hands. But there is a small sect of blood elves that *do* use fire, and they are the best fire casters in the world. The writings you saw in the library were likely made by them. I can take you to where they train. There is much they can teach you. You can learn control.” He looked back towards the Cinamic Jungle.

“No, I can’t. I mean, I can’t leave anything here, and what about WEAP-ON?”

“We will go after the trials are over. Whether we make it or not. And there may be answers you can seek there as well. The dark elves, their largest city is on the blind side of Lahl. Come to Karth with me, Red. This planet is too small for people like us.”

“I can’t. I’m sorry. I’ve never even considered leaving Avalonia. Not unless it was to fight the Xenosites in the outer planets. Why do you want *me* to come with you?”

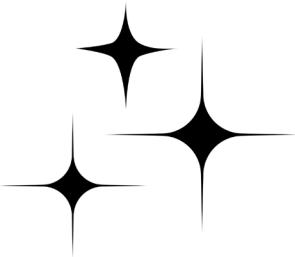
She grabbed his face gently. “Be careful, Red. You are strong, and from what I heard the spirit of the forest say, you are stronger than you know. Stay alive. Be careful with the Light.”

“Be careful?”

“If there is a dark spirit that possesses you, what do you think the Light will do to get rid of it? They may have the best intentions, but they have their own way of doing things. The elves have learned that firsthand. Be wary of them. Until we meet again.” She turned around and began walking away. He watched her walking away, more confused than upset. Crossing paths again during the qualifiers would be unlikely. This was going to be the last time he was going to see her.

“Tell me your name again,” he shouted after her. The images came in distinct pieces this time, and he tried to store each away in his memory.

“★♣♥♦”



INTO THE FIRE

A ship was already waiting for him when he got back to their campsite. It was larger than he expected. He hopped onto the deck where everyone was waiting. Raven was sharpening her keratana, Butz sat in silence with his eyes fixed on the ceiling, lost in a day dream, and Lux was still looking through the book. She had two of her fingers between a page she had already read, marking it for later. There was a single guard there. He looked nervous for a soldier on duty, fidgeting with his weapon as he tried to look anywhere but at the four of them. There was no escape hatch through the ship, and the door was bolted shut as soon as it closed. Red thought nothing of it, imagining that it must have been the only ship available at the time to pick them up. He checked his microAI. *The Xenosite should be arriving soon.*

“Good trip into the forest?” Raven asked, without looking up. Her question carried an invisible weight.

“Yeah, I saw the Forest of Illusions. She left, the elf.”

“You should have asked her to come with us,” Raven replied. He shrugged as indifferently as he could. He tried to grasp how he felt, a mix of guilt and enmity. He could not stop wishing the elf was there with him on the ship. He took off his defilterizer. Her scent filled the air almost instantly. It was all in his head, he knew, but it didn’t make it less real.

“Did you find anything?” he asked Lux, trying to change the subject.

“She did. You won’t believe it,” Butz said excitedly. “Show him.” Red took a seat next to Lux and leaned in as she opened the page she had marked.

“Look at this.” It was an image of a half-man, half-beast, a grim creature whose lower half was only a black cloud with crystals of various colors swirling all around it. Its torso was purple and dark, that of a man, but its head was of a horned creature. It had six arms, each one long and gaunt

like a skeleton's. Its eyes were pitch black. Its nose was flat and snake-like, and its face donned a bitter expression. It looked alive, even in the pages. Red couldn't stare at it for more than a moment. Underneath it, in an ornate style of writing, was the name "Drah'Kar, The False One." He read over the name several times.

"Get this, it can grant anyone a similar form to itself. Remember how Prince — I mean King Arkan said that the king's chamber only had air vents?" Before Red could reply, the door from the cockpit of the ship opened and King Arkan walked in, as though Butz magically summoned him when he said his name. Everyone was caught speechless. The soldier in the corner quickly stood up and bowed, then offered his seat. Arkan politely refused. He was dressed in all black, and looked sharper than usual. It took a moment for his sudden appearance to register in Red's head. *The lord of the skies.*

"Ahh, did someone mention my name?" Arkan asked, kindly.

"King Arkan, I didn't know you were here. You came to pick us up? Magnus didn't tell us anything about *you* coming," Butz quickly replied.

"Ahh, Mongo is a bit preoccupied as of the moment," Arkan replied. Red's heart dropped to the bottom of his stomach. He looked at Raven, Butz, and Lux. *None of them know*, he thought. He tapped his foot three times against each other. It was his and Raven's way of subliminally indicating danger. She noticed, and looked immediately at Arkan. He thought Arkan noticed as well. The king followed Red's movements and then Raven's eyes. "We have made progress with discovering the king's killer. It seems the answer was just as obvious as everyone first thought."

"Oh?" Butz said. "What did they find?" Red's heart rate picked up as he looked around the ship for a weapon. The adrenaline poured from his head down to his toes. *At least Arkan is unarmed*, he thought. The guard in the corner did not look like he could be much of a threat. *But King Arkan isn't human*. He thought of the beast in the book Lux had shown, imagining to what kind of size Arkan's true form could grow. Even in his human form, the king resembled the creature in the book.

"There was flashdust found in a guest suite in the Alcazar, and writing in an ink only visible from the fire of flashdust. The ink is made out of a material called glint lead. You are familiar with this already, Red, correct?" Red stared at him with a blank expression. "When the ink itself is set on fire, it creates a mesmerizing illusion of messages, writing that can be seen

with one's eyes closed, and even while they are asleep. A simple method of reinforcing a message to one's subconscious, preparing it for either meta-conditioning, or, the much more simple process of id-speech. And oh, you should have seen the messages in this guest room Red. Many of them were about *you*." Red put his hands in his pockets, preparing for his cast. Raven gripped her keratana firmly. Next to him, Lux slowly closed the book and tucked it inside of her cloak.

"What? What does he mean by that?" Butz asked, looking back and forth between Raven and Red. From the corner of his eyes, Red could see Lux frozen in place. *She knows. She has to.*

"Ahh, but by the look on all of your faces, you must already know, correct? Three decades ago an Oracle of Light had a vision that a child in a royal family in Areopa was a changeling. You would think that the Light would be more careful around the families in Nimbus. But nope, against the grain of common sense, they still let their prejudices win them over, clinging to the belief that it just *had* to be a blood elf. When did *you* figure it out, Red? Was it when you found out I led you to the Baron's pit myself? Or later?"

"I... I met the spirit of the forest..." Red mumbled.

"Found out what? Red, what's going on?" Butz asked.

"Then my work here is done, or should I say, *your* work here is done. I would like to introduce you all to MegaCORP's second greatest invention to date, a creature that will forever change the course of the universe." He opened the palm of his hands to reveal four dark red worms that curled upwards to study their surroundings. "Behold! The Velvet Worm!" He let them drop to the floor.

Raven swung her keratana at him. Butz screamed as he ducked from the blades. King Arkan burst into a cloud of black vapor before the keratana touched him. Before Red could react, he felt something burrowing into the back of his neck. Something tiny was crawling under his skin. He tried to grab it with his hands but it was too late. The creature was already inside of him. He could feel the bulge it created as it traveled down his spine. He felt a surge of agonizing pain as his stomach cramped up. He crouched over, gagging several times as his body tried to throw up in an effort to eject the worm. Lux, Butz, and Raven, were all doing the same.

"The book! Lux! The book!" He tried mumbling the words, but only inaudible sounds were leaving his mouth. He saw Arkan's hand grab the book

by its spine. He did not faint as he expected to, but passed into a dreamlike state where he could barely interpret what was going on around him and had very little control over his own body.

Hours were passing by, but each felt like a single moment. All he could grab were intermittent images. The ship landed in the Alcazar, on a launch pad behind it. He first traveled to the center of the royal palace, then deep below into its lower levels, farther than he had gone last time. He was put into a chamber for several hours. Inside of the Alcazar and the chamber, he felt the presence of the eye closer than ever, but he could do little to warn anyone around him. Arkan was always near him, watching him as he went. When he regained consciousness, several hours later, he was staring into a glass pod, similar to the ones Crest used to heal people. Inside was Magnus.

“Magnussssss?” he said, slurring his words. His hands were tied behind his back. His knees were in pain. He realized he had been dragged through the floor all along. The sleeves of his suit were ripped. There were marks all over his right arm. He had been injected several times with a syringe. His hands were strapped with gloves that inhibited him from using a cast.

“You are far more resilient to the worm than I thought you would be, Red. You do not give yourself enough credit, but what’s done is done.”

“What... what did you do to him?” Inside of the pod, the left side of Magnus’s face was beginning to change into a black, putrid color. There were Velvet Worms in there with him, swimming around freely. He was sound asleep, but Red could still sense his energy. He was alive. A voice came from several speakers spread across the ceiling. Red looked up when he heard it, suddenly realizing how large the chamber was. There were hundreds of pods similar to the one Magnus was in, each one with its own inhabitant. He noticed that they were all human.

“Good evening Red, you are looking at the greatest invention in the history of the universe, created by the gemini themselves, a small faction that exists within MegaCORP.” Doctor Lurch was speaking.

“What is he? What did you turn him into?” He looked at the bottom of the pod. It read “WEAPON 462: Magnus Basil — The Mandrake Lion.” He recognized the name as a legendary creature from planet Ultra. Magnus’s right hand had been replaced by a miniature version of the creature’s head. Red couldn’t see the back of the pod, but he was sure the Areopan native was growing a tail.

“A remarkable number of discoveries, Red, led to this moment, to the

creation of what you see before you, something that life itself has never been able to contrive. What you are looking at are *perfect* organisms. Behold! WEAPON, the acme of power, flou, and technological achievement. These are the greatest of creations in the universe. The pods they are incubating in are designed to block most of their energy signatures because if they were released, this room would be uninhabitable. It would be too overwhelming for anyone to stand in their presence. Imagine the power of Titanamedusae concentrated into a single human body.”

“Magnus...” Red whispered, grazing the glass with his fingertips. He wondered if he could hear him from inside. Despite his monstrous form, he looked peaceful. “Why Magnus?” he asked, looking at Arkan.

“Only certain life forms are capable of becoming a WEAPON, ones with lifeforces strong enough to survive the alterations made by polystigmata, or as we discovered, ones with royal blood,” Arkan said. “The latter is usually more important. It lets us breed leaders among WEAPON. They will command our legions, the Xenosite.”

“What is he?”

“He is the accumulation of many discoveries, Red,” Doctor Lurch said. “As the Xenosite grew rapidly in power, we realized that it was still impossible for them to ever become as strong as we wanted them to. They would never be able to infect and drain the power of legendary creatures, let alone mythical ones. It became most obvious to us during their invasion of Eaut, during which they were unable to ever challenge The Leviathan, regardless of how prolific their numbers became. The Xenosite were forced to avoid whichever side of the planet the creature swam in. The only way to imitate the power of creatures of that stature was to splice their genes with our own organisms artificially. For this, we created the Velvet Worm. Reverse engineered from the Xenosite, the creature is capable of full control over its hosts for as long as it can resist its lifeforce. More importantly, though, if it infects a host suffering from *the taint*, a host whose lifeforce has already been compromised, then it may make permanent changes to its host’s memories, instincts, tendencies, flou structure, and genes. The process is similar to infection, but Velvet Worms were designed specifically to have the capacity to control creatures that are sentient.”

“But why?” Red asked. “For what end? You’re working with the Xenosite?”

“The Xenosite? Don’t be petty, Red. I work for a far higher power. We

both do. They were merely a tiny part of our plan. A battle comes to control the birthplace of The Eternal Sleeper,” Arkan said. He held out the book Red had retrieved from the library.

“For the portal?” Red asked. Arkan nodded slowly.

“Soon, we will seize control of the eternal rift, and the ascension will come.” Red stared back into the pod. *Why Magnus?*

“Why are they all humans?”

“Ahh, I’m glad you noticed. Did you know that gemini and humans are the only two creatures capable of being bored, Red? It was Doctor Lurch who first recognized what an important discovery this was. Their inability to simply *exist*. It is not just a frivolous detail in their psychological make-ups. It has profound implications on how their consciousness relates to the rest of the universe. In a way, it means that each gemini’s and human’s mind is greater than all the universe itself, because not even the entire world is capable of satisfying it. The mind of either always recedes to a point of boredom where they always seek more. *The taint*, as you understand it, is to be possessed by the greatest consciousness that exists across all universes, all times, and all dimensions. When a human is affected by the taint, their need to still seek *more* than perfect sentience allows them to function as mindful creatures even after they are possessed. The Xenosite were once also a sentient species, but the taint turned them into mindless creatures. It melted their consciousness into near oblivion. Their unified and synchronous minds might have allowed them to act under a hive mind mentality and accomplish incredible feats, but it prevented them from ever achieving their goal of perfection. What you are looking at, Red, is perfection. Creatures capable of retaining full consciousness, while still acting under the influence of the taint. Haven’t you ever noticed why Xenosites are never able to cast, not even with dark flou? They may consume Cron, but they cannot manipulate it as an energy source beyond fueling their organs, but the creatures before you... the absolute terror they will bring to the Light...”

“Where’s Butz? And Lux, and Raven? What did you do with them?”

“The falconer and the Acolyte of Light were taken to a separate location, from which they have escaped.”

“Escaped?” Red asked. Arkan looked amused. “You let them go on purpose?”

“She will bring the Light to save you. It will not occur for a while, so you may as well get comfortable here. It will be at least a month before their

forces arrive to this star system and they feel they are ready to break you free. They would have come anyway, but the sooner the better, hence why we released Lux. We cannot accomplish what we set out to do yet, more pieces must be moved. But the Light is far too arrogant to think ahead of *me*.”

“Where’s Raven? You used her to kill King Artemis?”

“I thought *that* much was obvious from the start. I had met Zenae when the Light first arrived at the Alcazar. Raven, I never intended to control, but it was an opportunity I could not pass up. It is rare to find a human of such talent, let alone one with such an affinity for violence. I cannot give objects my own form, only humans and their bodies. I had taken her cutlass and placed it in King Artemis’s chamber myself. After that, it was a simple matter of making her believe that killing the king was necessary to protect you from Areopa working with the Light to put you down after they found out you were The Mouth of The Void — easily accomplished with id-speech,” Arkan boasted. “And best of all, no one would notice if *Raven Maestro* suddenly sounded monotonous and looked placid. I must add, her cutlass was a crucial piece. The gem encrusted in it is a rare jewel from Takis with untold powers. There is another thing I suspect about her, although there is no way to be sure. All I will say is that you may be, by far, the luckiest incarnation of Ikb’Sept yet. Or perhaps it isn’t luck at all, and the world just has its way of connecting things that are meant to be.”

“And now, Red, you will see how *you* will fulfill your destiny, the greatest one among all of us,” Doctor Lurch shouted over the speakerphone. He spoke in absolute ecstasy. Red would have thought that this was the happiest moment in the doctor’s life. One of the walls of the chamber began opening. Behind it, an enormous brain with wires attached to it sat in a green, tinted glass chamber.

“Who is that?” Red asked. “Who’s mind is that?”

“I did not know that the eye had already found you. I had sent the late Doctor Lurch to retrieve the eye from the depths of Eaut after he found you at the orphanage, but I never knew whether or not he was successful, not until you came to me and told me your story of the bladed man. And of course, even our first meeting was not a coincidence. I suppose nothing in your life was ever a coincidence. The more powerfully you call to the eye, the faster it comes to you. You have done all that I could have asked for as a human form of Ikb’Sept,” Arkan said. “If it were up to me, I would have

done this differently. I would have let *you* fulfill the destiny of Ikb’Sept. But alas, even I do not have that kind of power over MegaCORP. We cannot trust that your own consciousness will not resist once you possess both your weapon and The Evil Eye. The brain you are looking at is that of a gemini, one believed to be dead. He wishes desperately to *become* The Shepard of Oblivion, and he would be much easier for us to command. He is someone who has wished, for centuries, to be the one to awaken The Eternal Sleeper. We cannot deny him that privilege when it is in our power to grant it. The brain, of course, is much larger than it should be. Even our current technology does not allow us to replicate consciousness in an efficient manner, but this mind has been preserved accurately nonetheless, for over two thousand years.”

“Mej’Lith...” Red whispered, looking at the brain and taking a few steps back from it. “What are you going to do with me?”

“Isn’t it obvious, Red? We’re going to switch your body with Mej’Lith’s,” Arkan said. “Do not fear. Like I said, it will not happen immediately. There is still much to be done, and such an operation would require months of preparation. For now, we simply wait until the Light comes to set you free.” Red felt a surge of adrenaline and summoned as much strength as he could to break free from the guards. Arkan waved his hands, and the guards did not fight back. Red took his chance and ran from them, away from Arkan, away from the brain as fast as he could. He heard Doctor Lurch laughing from the speakers above. He did not know where he was going, he did not know where the exit to the place was, but he ran anyway, in any direction he could away from them.

“Red!” Arkan shouted after him. “You are going to miss our greatest and most powerful WEAPON. You don’t want to see it? Perfection amongst the perfect? It is the only lifeforce we have ever captured that was capable of being spliced with *any* creature in existence. I look forward to seeing how the Priori plans to fight against *this*!” Arkan laughed madly.

“No!” he shouted to himself. Tears flowed from his eyes. *It can’t be*, he thought.

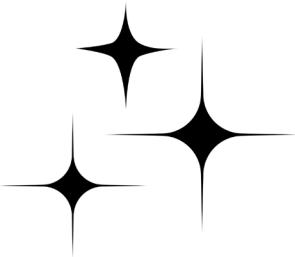
“Run the other way, Red! Run the other way! It is there, in the first glass pod all the way at the corner. There is no exit in this room. You have nothing to lose, Red!”

He ran as fast as he could. The aisles passed by, one by one, each holding twenty different humans spliced with a different legendary or mythical

creature. When he got to the last aisle, he was ready to break down if he saw her, but she was on the floor, not in a glass chamber. He felt a surge of utter, overwhelming joy when he saw her.

“Raven!” Red screamed. From afar, he could see that she was crying as well. He ran towards her, sliding across the floor to come next to her. “Raven we have to get out of here. Did you hear what Arkan just said? I thought... I thought...”

She pointed to the pod she was sitting in front of. This one had no glass window, and looked far more secure than any of the other ones. Its inhabitant could not be seen. Red looked at the label, already knowing what it would read. “WEAPON 1: Wren Maestro — The Leviathan.”



AFTERWORD

Dear Reader,

Thank you for taking the time to read Phantasia, my first attempt at writing fiction. I have never written a story before, not even a short story, and so I imagine it must have taken some amount of dedication to trek your way to the ending of this one. To be honest, I'm not sure if anyone is ever going to read this, and so, in a way, these are just the ramblings of a madman. I created this afterword to explain my inspirations for Phantasia, some of my decisions in the design of the characters and plot, what you can expect next, and why, for heaven's sake, was there a cliffhanger ending? I'll start by saying a bit about myself, and then jump straight into the subjects I wish to discuss. I will preface every subject with a bold heading to allow you to scroll through this easily and read whichever parts interest you. If this is the only paragraph you'll read, I have only one request. Please feel free to e-mail me at riyadad.ullah@gmail.com with all of your thoughts about the book. Good or bad, I'd like to hear them all. I take writing very seriously as a craft and knowing what readers would like to see more of in my future works, or what I can improve on, means a great deal to me. Even if you absolutely hated Phantasia, I want to know every reason why, in case there's anything I can learn from it. If you're interested in knowing where I got the idea for a certain setting, character, or scene, feel free to ask. If there are certain descriptions that you like, I can tell you the exact song I was listening to when I was writing it, what time of day or night it was when I wrote it, and exactly how I built the description, sentence by sentence.

About Me

My name is Mohammed Riyadad Ullah. I am 24 years old. I live in New York City, and I grew up in Queens. Prior to Phantasia I was CEO of a tech/pet-services startup, and before that, I was a crazed math, economics, and philosophy geek in college. I write because I find it fulfilling and enjoyable, and I don't think I could live without it. Writing fantasy, building worlds, and creating characters is more than a passion for me, it's the only thing that gives me purpose.

Why is there a cliffhanger ending? (Note: I wrote this part 2 months after the initial afterword)

Since releasing the book, I've received several death threats for not resolving the plot. First, I want to let you know that I'm currently madly at work writing book two, and that I will resolve the entire plot there, and use a new thread for the third and final book of the Phantasia series, so there is no reason to challenge me to faadh over the ending of book one. I wish I could defend my choice of having a cliffhanger by saying it was an artistic decision, but in reality, it was simply the result of a novice writer afraid of leaving his own world. Put succinctly, I was so drawn and immersed into Phantasia that I felt if I resolved the plot, it would no longer need me. I've struggled with this fear for quite a few months while writing Phantasia, and book two will largely be about overcoming that fear to write a satisfying ending. It was a poor creative choice, and one that I'm working on to fix quickly. Rest assured, book two will give you the conclusion you wanted, and you won't have to wait long before it's out.

Where did the idea for Phantasia come from?

Phantasia had no storyline when I started it. All I had was a single scene in my head of a person staring out of a glass window high in the sky while looking at purple rain coming down, and all I knew was that I wanted to tell an epic story. The first draft of the first chapter was simply a rendition of this scene, and various, random facts about the world around it. One of my friends read it and told me "in fiction, show, don't tell." It was one of the

best pieces of advice I've ever gotten, and it was from that point on that Phantasia started to unfold with a plot. I'm sure it's one of the most obvious things for experienced fiction writers, but for me, it was eye-opening at the time.

What were the biggest inspirations for the characters and settings?

My friends that have read early drafts of Phantasia often ended up drawing correlations between Phantasia and certain books or movies only because they were popular at the time, and so I find it necessary both to state where I did and did *not* receive inspiration from. Some authors that inspired me, and whom I draw heavily from include Frank Herbert (*Dune*), Stephen King, H. P. Lovecraft, Ayn Rand, William Faulkner, Hemingway, George Orwell, H. G. Wells, George R. R. Martin, J. K. Rowling, Robert Jordan, and Michio Kaku. Kaku is a physicist, but his book "Physics of the Impossible," helped me a great deal with world building. I am also an avid gamer, and a fan of anime. Enthusiasts of either will see the influences. In high school and college I used to be obsessed with Nietzsche. The struggle between the Light and the dark in Phantasia came to me when I was trying to imagine a physical struggle between nihilism and existentialism in a fantasy realm. You'll also notice some of the characters reflect this struggle internally. The elf is not afraid of death because she finds so much purpose in life that she finds purpose even in death, and Raven is not afraid of death because she finds no purpose in life at all, beyond Red. Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* was also a huge influence. Films that inspired me include *2001: A Space Odyssey*, all of Christopher Nolan's films, and all of Daniel Day-Lewis's films.

I have never seen *Star Wars* 4, 5, or 6. I have never seen *Star Trek*. I have never read *The Lord of The Rings*. I have never read *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, or *Twilight*. For writing prose, I studied Stephen King, Hemingway, and Faulkner. For writing descriptive passages, H. P. Lovecraft. The first paragraph of "The Call of Cthulhu," which I read when I was 16, was what first inspired me to ever begin writing. I found that single opening paragraph to be so immersive, that it changed the way I understood words. I realized for the first time then, that words on a page could be just as visually stimulating as an IMAX film (if not more). J. K. Rowling was a huge

inspiration for writing and life in general, but stylistically, I am extremely different from her and find it difficult to borrow elements from her stories. I build characters, settings, and plots very differently. I mention this because a lot of my friends have tried to draw comparisons between Phantasia and HP because Harry Potter was the only other fantasy series they ever read. It ends up greatly hindering their ability to understand the characters in Phantasia. For example, outside of not being effusive, Raven's psychological makeup is actually far more similar to Bellatrix Lestrange than Hermione (codependent upon a character with a messiah complex, an affinity for violence, etc). Trying to understand Raven by relating her to common YA heroines dilutes her personality.

Why did you use elves? Why not just invent a different race to fit with a science fiction setting? Why use so many fantasy and science fiction tropes?

The first draft of Phantasia created a world and plot far more unique than the final draft. The problem was, I would create these new “races,” but I felt emotionally distant from them, and the plot felt like something I had to drag out of me. They say in writing you should only “write what you know.” But how is one supposed to write what they’ve experienced if they want to write fantasy? The answer came to me via Faulkner, who once said that what a writer “experiences,” is not necessarily just what they physically experience, but what they experience in their mind — what they relate to so strongly, that it feels real to them. Like many authors, I originally set out to write a story that was 100% unique, but it’s exactly that goal that causes so many writers to fail. Imagining yourself as revolutionizing the science fiction and fantasy genres with a single novel is like trying to take a shortcut to success in life. It’s why I think so many works of fiction have disembodied plots, fail to adhere to their internal systems of logic, and often have to resort to too many deus ex machinas to save themselves. When I started using tropes, I felt like I was writing from my own experiences. A writer should aim to be only 1% or 2% unique in their writing. They should borrow enough from past stories they’ve connected to, to make everything real to them, but still contribute a tiny fraction of originality to it to move the entire genre forward by an inch. As a corollary, you should never be

0% unique. The danger of works that are too repetitive is that the genre as a whole will become stagnant. Like the Xenosite, we must evolve, always evolve.

Why is there no glossary?

I hate fantasies that require glossaries. I believe making your reader scroll to the back of the book to look up a definition makes for a poor experience and disengages them from the world. It's like creating a mobile application that requires a manual — it means it's not intuitive enough for the user to understand naturally. To compensate for this, however, I decided to design the story in a specific way. A reader might learn of a new material called "nephril" in chapter 15, and a related concept, "sphyrix." I will use those words in chapters 15-17, allowing the reader to appreciate the novelty of a fictional reaction similar to burning, but the words will never be used again — not in future books, and not in later chapters. This allows me to take advantage of a reader's short-term memory, without making them frustrated for not being able to retain enough. There are still many, many exceptions to this rule. There are many words you are required to know to understand the plot. For instance, in the paragraph detailing the many methods of psykinesthetics, you *are* required to remember id-speech and meta-conditioning, even if not any of the other ones. There is no guarantee that I was successful in what I intended to do, and you might still feel that there are too many words. If that were the case, rather than adding a glossary to Phantasia 2, I would eliminate a majority of the new terms to make the book easier to read. I still believe in the principle of excluding glossaries in fantasies, it's just a matter of whether I can pull it off.

How do you think of the settings?

Some of the settings come from my own nightmares. The first one I ever thought of, a glacial swamp, came to me in a dream where I was stranded in one. In chapter 13, the entire beginning description is from a similar nightmare that I had, where I was moving farther and farther away from the sun and into a nebula in the Milky Way. I remember feeling terrified because of how fast and far I was going. I woke up at 3:00am from the nightmare

and began writing the beginning of the chapter right then and there. Some of the settings are from things that actual exist in space. Diamond oceans exist in Neptune, and an oceanic planet with warm ice has already been discovered in the Kepler-22 star system. My nightmares are a huge inspiration for my writing, and I don't think I'd be able to write if I didn't have them (at least not fiction with elements of horror or cosmic horror).

Is Phantasia science fiction or fantasy?

I don't know if there is already a term for this, but I consider Phantasia to be a future fantasy novel. It has futuristic elements, but it absolutely does not aspire to justify some of its mechanics the way many science fiction stories do. Originally, I just didn't realize that novels usually followed only one or the other. I built the world as I pleased, with no boundaries beyond the ones set internally. I also think both of these genres have been stagnant for the past two decades. Even at a rate of 1% uniqueness per novel, it should be moving at a much faster rate. Some of the fictional technologies that you'll read about in today's science fiction are already real inventions in Google Labs, or things with prototypes for them. I don't even consider Phantasia to be forward moving enough. It falls into this same group, and I plan on pushing the boundaries to 2% uniqueness in Phantasia 2. And maybe, if I get really crazy, to 3% uniqueness in Phantasia 3.

Does your work have religious connotations?

No. I use a lot of religious symbolism because many of my favorite authors do (Frank Herbert, J. K. Rowling, Lovecraft), but it's nothing more than a tool for world building. I *will* say this though: two of the biggest themes in most works of fantasy are death and evil. On a broader context, they are also possibly the two biggest themes in the human experience, next to life and love. It's a part of reality that every person faces, and that most people are afraid to face. Authors are the same, and oftentimes their work reflects that. Likewise, because religion is usually how they were taught to "relate" to these concepts, or make sense of them, it ends up being the perspective from which they write when they explore the themes in their own work, whether or not they intended to do so.

Why didn't you just get rid of S? Isn't she a completely useless character? And Magnus was pretty boring too.

George R. R. Martin once said something interesting about fantasy authors, that they can be divided into two categories — architects and farmers. Architects have their entire plot mapped out from the beginning, and farmers only plant a seed and have no idea where it'll take them. I am the latter. Beyond purple rain falling onto a glass window, I had *no idea* what Phantasia would be about when I first began to write. In fact, while I was writing it, I had no idea what was going to happen from chapter to chapter. Remember in chapter 6 how the guard shoots Red and he enters the second level of the dreamscape? I had no plan for that. I got up to the end of the chapter and thought “wow... it would be really cool if Red died in the dream right now.” There are exceptions to this rule. There are many things I intentionally placed in book 1 to hint towards ideas I already had in mind for book 2 or 3. There are also certain connections which are made early on that only reveal themselves late in the book if you’re able to recall small details (the relationship between Kep and Arkan, how Arkan guided Red’s life, etc).

The advantage of being a farmer is that you can take your readers through a pretty wild and creative journey. The disadvantage is that you often create characters or sub-plots that have no purpose. The absolute worst is when you write yourself into a corner and need to resort to a deus ex machina to resolve the problem. As a farmer, you have to try your best to think ahead, but this mistake is inevitable. It wasn’t until chapter 10 that I realized S had no purpose in the story, and by then, it was too late to take her out. However — the advantage of being a farmer is that such problems can be resolved later on with new threads. S becomes more important in book 2. Likewise, I originally had no idea what to do after Red lost a hand. It just seemed like a good idea to add in chapter 3. In some of my early drafts, I had literally forgotten and my friends had to point out things like “how is Red grabbing onto the spire with two hands?” So then in chapter 9, I had him get a syntechdage installed to solve the problem. And THEN, I realized at the end of the story, I could do something very interesting and add a whole new plot twist from the seed I had planted long ago (you’ll see in book 2).

Do you have anything interesting to say about the characters that matter? Like Raven?

One of the reasons why I have so much trouble writing about characters like S and Magnus is because they are typical protagonists. This also goes back to why I have so much difficulty borrowing from young adult fantasy authors. I am *much* more drawn to deeply flawed characters, who have a darker or more complex side to them. I don't just mean a character who happens to have a dark past or is related to an evil character — I mean characters who are driven by truly dark instincts and have trouble wrestling with their own demons. An author always imagines his settings and characters much more deeply than he expresses them in a book (the same way people think much darker thoughts than they show in real life). Thus, these elements aren't obvious to you, but I created Raven as a sociopathic character who had a co-dependent relationship with Red, who truly enjoyed violence and showing off her talent for it, and who struggled with finding purpose in life. Butz might be a comedic character, but in one of my favorite monologues, he explains how his humor is just a way for him to balance the tension between his ambitions and fears. Red suffers from a messiah complex (even before he finds out he is The Mouth of The Void) as a result of his upbringing.

In creating all three of them, I was trying to create characters who were real and believable. You'll often hear of protagonists who had extraordinarily tough childhoods, and then as the story goes, they rise up and overcome their pasts and they grow up to be kind and gentle people with extremely discerning morals. But the world is far too cruel to let growing up be that easy. Red doesn't have a destitute or tortured childhood — he has a childhood just below the threshold of "ideal." His childhood isn't so bad that it may cause anger or depression, it's only bad enough to breed resentment. It's like having enough money so that you're never hungry, but always having to order the cheapest dinner when you're out with your friends or family. His childhood isn't void of affection, he always had Raven. But it's absent of enough attention and fulfillment that he seeks to be complete for the rest of his life by excelling in combat, by defeating opponents, by mastering fire, and by relishing in his own strength. Likewise, when he's falling down the mountain with the infected blood elf, there is no external force

Phantasia

that could end the round for him and retain his purity as a character. He may be a good person at heart, but he kills to join WEAPON.

How long did it take to write Phantasia? How many words do you write per day?

It took a full year from beginning to final edited draft to create Phantasia. With that being said, I took several large breaks in between. In terms of consistent writing, I probably spent about six months writing Phantasia, and three months editing it. I’m sure you’ll still find errors and typos, my apologies. On a typical writing day I can write between 2,000 and 5,000 words. When I’m feeling manic, I can write between 10,000 and 20,000 words in one sitting. I say sitting because sometimes a sitting can span multiple days. The most I wrote for Phantasia was 20,000 words at once (from chapter 6 to chapter 10 I think). I wrote for about 36 hours straight and just couldn’t stop. The next day, I had to buy an ergonomic keyboard because my fingers were in so much pain.

Why did you start writing Phantasia?

There’s probably a lot of reasons for this, but the single biggest one is that my instincts just told me to. I quit work in February of 2014 and started writing Phantasia the next day. Honestly, I think I was just having a really crazy moment and I had just read The Alchemist by Paulo Coelho and it said something about following signs in life. The next day, I’m at work, and this random pop-up comes up that said something like “Ever wanted to quit your job and become an author? Publish on the kindle store now!” and I thought to myself — *If ever there was a sign from the universe, this was it.* I had tried to juggle Phantasia and work simultaneously, but just couldn’t. It wasn’t that I had too many things to do (even while writing Phantasia unemployed, I usually only wrote for 2-4 hours a day), the world was just so immersive for me that I found it difficult to settle back into the real world after. I remember this one time I was with a colleague and she said something like “You should really consider getting into Big Data,” and I replied with something about scales and teeth because I was zoned out and thought she said “Big Dragons.”

Any advice for other writers?

Yes, a lot, but I have too much to say to go over here. Maybe I'll create a blog and post something about this. But for now, all I'll say is to take writing seriously, and to be humble about it. When I first started Phantasia, I was very arrogant about the craft. It always came to me easily so I thought I wouldn't need to work for it. Then I started reading Faulkner and all my confidence disappeared. If ever there was a way to humble yourself in writing, it's to read someone's writing that's vastly superior to your own, someone who's writing makes you want to work to better your own to try and surpass them one day. I never felt the same way with, for example, H. P. Lovecraft, because although his purple prose is amazing, his character development and dialogue are below average so I always imagined I could compensate in other areas even if I couldn't write descriptions like him.

You'll never get through writing a novel unless you force yourself to be disciplined. There were times when I felt like procrastinating so much that I thought my body was physically keeping me from trying to write. In those moments, there's nothing but will power that'll make you push through. I quit smoking a year after college. I had been a smoker for 6 years previous. I remember thinking during one my strongest cravings "not smoking right now is going to be the hardest thing I'll ever have to do in my life." About a year later, I once had this bout of writer's block and I remember thinking, "that was the 2nd hardest thing I've ever had to do. Getting up and writing now will be the hardest thing ever."

What were some of the hardest challenges in writing Phantasia?

Keeping the world consistent was extremely difficult. I had to make sure never to use words like magic, sunlight, earthquake, and solar system, among many others. I'm sure I still fibbed several times throughout the novel. I also had my own set of grammar rules which I often violated. I needed to read over my work about 15 times before putting it up on Amazon, and even now, I'm sure there are mistakes. For example: places should not have "the" capitalized (the Twilight Caverns). Titles of creatures and people should (The Leviathan, The Devourer). The only place where I remember always being inconsistent was with the word Xenosite. I use the plural "Xenosite" and "Xenosites" interchangeably. This is because the

word itself just sounds beautiful to me in a variety of different ways. “The Xenosite are coming,” sounds magnificent to me, but so does “There are 4 Xenosites in the room.” In the world of Phantasia, both are permissible in many instances, and it is simply a preference of the speaker.

There is also something to be said about keeping the way different races related to the world via language consistent. The elves for example, will refer to creatures with intuitive and more natural names like “River Walker,” whereas humans will categorize them into specific subclasses because of their need to taxonomize the world around them as much as they can. As a corollary, humans often name things with no reference to how they relate to the object itself (Gatrax Cnidaria), emphasizing the irony of their habit of moving further and further away from nature the more they try to understand and make sense of it. A good example of trapping myself in my own writing comes in chapter 29, when the elf uses the term “microAI.” It felt unnatural as I was writing it, but I felt I had no choice. In an earlier scene the blood elves use Roland’s microAI to trick the humans. Their proficiency with the object wouldn’t make sense unless they knew exactly what it was. The hinting of blood elves as being less technologically advanced, but still superior to humans in terms of the food chain and physical strength, was an effort to question whether intelligence and technological proficiency was a way to measure the advancement of one sentient species against another — or whether other metrics should be used. If we discovered an alien species with better universal morals (no crime, no prejudice against their own sects, etc), but that was less technologically advanced, would we consider them to be more or less evolved than us? Note also that the relationship between language and our perception of the world extends past just how we title things, and into how we speak about them. The elves refer to Titanamedusae as a “her,” whereas the humans will refer to Titanamedusae as an “it.”

Keeping myself consistent in terms of writing also felt nearly impossible. There were days when I felt like I was writing utter rubbish, and I was just shoveling it to get Phantasia done. It was Stephen King who pulled me through that. In his book, “On Writing,” he discusses similar problems and how he always tries to remind himself to just keep moving the plot forward with “subject, verb, subject, verb.” That book is also the reason why Phantasia is almost exactly 180,000 words long. I remember one day, back in the beginning, I was debating how long to make it. I was thinking

I should just write a short story and save writing an epic for when I was older. I also thought writing an epic would be impossible, considering that I had no experience. But then I thought, when has a lack of experience ever stopped me from trying anything in life? And then that very day, I'm in the middle of "On Writing," and Stephen King says "a good novel should be 180,000 words long, which is just enough to get a reader lost in its world." Again, I was sure I was getting a sign. Nowadays, a lot of short novels are just written to be short because they're more profitable that way. But like King would say, "if you're gonna write, *write goddamit!*"

Will there be a Phantasia 2?

Yes, hopefully soon. I'm supposed to start grad school at Georgetown this September, but I'm at the end of my journey with Phantasia and all I can think about is writing the sequel. Although... I'm not sure if writing another novel so soon would be good for my mental health. The first time I read this quote by Faulkner: "A writer is a creature driven by demons," I thought maybe he was just an alcoholic. When I was writing Phantasia, I finally realized what he meant. A majority of writers (except for authors like Dr. Seuss — and maybe even him) are driven primarily by negative emotions like guilt, hopelessness, rage, resentment, depression, ennui, etc. When they set out to write a novel, just the practice of writing consistently forces them to bask in these emotions day after day. I remember sometimes I would stop writing at 10:00pm and then just look out the window straight until sunrise, listening to "in the hall of the mountain king," thinking about nothing but the question of whether consciousness truly existed after death, how vast the universe is, whether the human experience is a tragedy, and how insignificant people are. Bizarre things to think about when you're 24 years old. I should be thinking about cars and girls. Writing also brings out the most obsessive sides of my personality, and eventually forces me into staying locked in a room for weeks on end in complete social isolation, which is not something I look forward to doing again. I don't even know if anyone besides me will read Phantasia, which makes all of this even more absurd. Writing a book is like creating something with a soul, but soul is a limited resource. In writing a novel, you have to break a piece of your own and place it inside of a body of art. It's like... creating a horcrux...

Phantasia

On the other hand, maybe I'll be in school and suddenly drop out and start writing book two 24/7 because something just calls me to it. I have to say, there's truly nothing like creating art. To my fellow writers, singers, painters, dancers, game developers, whatever you are — pursue your project with as much devotion as you would if everyone in the world were going to see it, even if it's actually just you that's going to see it. And even if everyone hates it, create more of it. Unpopular art is not bad art. The only bad art is false art — art that isn't true to itself, art that was created with the highest priority being to please an audience, to make money, or that betrays its original meaning. Whether it's good or bad, creating art is like etching an affirmation of your existence into the world. To imagine something purely made up, to dedicate yourself to creating it, and then to will it to existence by nothing but sheer determination. It's like creating a monument of yourself in space-time that, even after you die, can scream out to the rest of the world "*Yes! I lived! And I loved every moment of it!*"

