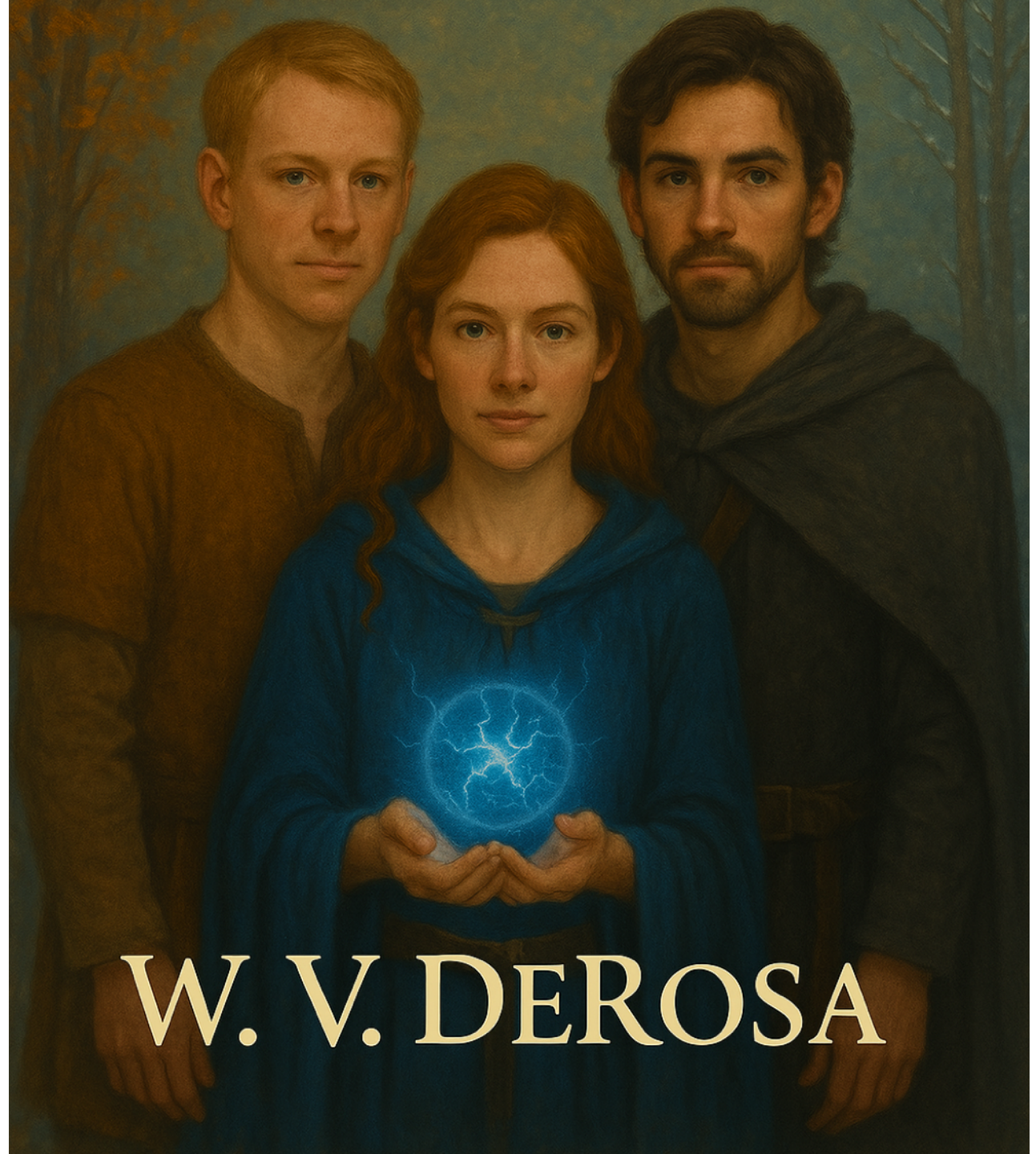


QUANTUM SEASONS



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Note from the author:

“This is only a preview of the final draft copy. Final chapter will differ slightly after developmental editing, proofreading and copyediting. However, for now, enjoy the first look at chapter 27 as it currently stands. Here, the group of travelers are reflecting upon their many adventures so far, and contemplating how they may be able to defeat Chronovare.”

Chapter 27: The Gathering of Threads.

The fire crackled in the center of the camp, casting shifting shadows across the travelers' faces. The scent of burning wood mingled with damp earth and leaves, grounding them in the now, even as their thoughts spiraled through timelines, distortions, and what still lay ahead.

The night was almost too peaceful, like the world was holding its breath. Stars shimmered above in a clear sky, and the faint chirp of crickets filled the spaces between their thoughts. A breeze stirred the trees, not eerie like before, but natural, welcome.

After breaking the loop of the Reversed Realm, passing through the resonance gate, and consulting both the Compass and Stig's knowledge of the Emberlands to steady their course, they realized- much to their quiet astonishment- that they had traveled only a few miles from where they'd entered the tunnel, though it felt like ages ago.

The discovery brought a flood of relief. They hadn't been hurled into some far off world or trapped in a realm that would have taken days or longer to escape. They were still within The Emberlands, the transitional world that bridged the fading fires of Summer and the gathering twilight of Autumn.

The realization settled over them like a soft blanket after a long storm. Here, at least, the ground was steady beneath their feet. They agreed without argument that they needed true rest. A place to nourish their bodies, quiet their minds, and gather strength after the relentless succession of trials they had endured. The road ahead would demand more from them still, and they knew better than to face it worn and unready.

They sat in silence for a while. The flames flickered with the rhythm of their shared weariness. No longer just warmth, but a quiet pulse matching the undercurrent of questions none had yet spoken aloud.

Robert broke the silence. “Do you ever feel like, for everything we've seen... we still have no idea what we're actually walking into?”

Theo nodded, eyes on the fire. “Yeah. We’ve crossed rifts, survived distortions-but the shape of what’s coming? It’s still fog.”

Nyra leaned forward, her hands loosely clasped. “Maybe it’s not meant to be clear. Maybe clarity is a luxury we don’t get. Some paths you don’t follow. You feel your way through them. One moment at a time.”

Stig’s voice, quiet and grounded. “Time and space don’t give answers. They shift, pulse, resist. But you’ve begun to move with them; to listen. That’s rare.”

Nyra glanced toward the shadows beyond their camp. “Whatever Chronovare is doing... it’s not random. These fractures, these distortions, they’re warnings. Pressure building beneath the skin of reality.”

Lisa stirred, her voice soft but steady. “And we’re inside it now. Not outside, not observing. Part of the disruption. Part of the solution, maybe. I don’t know if we’ll find every truth... but I think we’ll find what counts.”

Theo stood and walked to the edge of the camp. Above him, the stars glinted like shattered reflections, impossible and endless.

“We’ve come so far,” he murmured. “But I keep wondering. When we finally reach him- Chronovare- what are we really facing?”

Nyra stepped beside him, her voice barely more than a breath. “Not just power,” she said. “Something ancient. Hollow and hungry. He doesn’t use time, he consumes it. He feeds on imbalance, on dissonance.”

Robert, from behind them, spoke quietly. “So what do we even do when we find him?”

Stig’s eyes were fixed on the fire, the reflection flickering in his steady gaze. “Some say the Supreme Being was never born. That he came into awareness when time itself began. When the first moment sparked into being. He wasn’t created. He emerged. Since then, he has touched everything. It’s said he seeded pain and suffering, lies and misdirection, bending memory and time just enough to shift choices, to turn hearts toward power and greed.

The original design of the universe- of all worlds and realms- was one of balance. But he was not part of that design. Good, or the essence of good, has always held him in check. Good is stronger than evil. And so, for eons, he could only reach so far. He could only disrupt so much. Until Earth began to decay. Until nature and the Seasons faltered. And then... your father’s experiment showed him a way to grow stronger.”

He looked up, the firelight catching the edge of something ancient in his expression.

“And ever since, he’s wanted to put it all back together, but in his image. Not as life intended. Not through harmony or growth, but through *control*. Through stillness. He doesn’t want to destroy time. He wants to *own* it.”

Nyra's voice followed, hushed and reverent. "There are stories that he once walked the edges of the multiverse in silence. That he could look into any realm and see its potential and rewrite it. Not with a sword, but with a thought. He bends Feylock not by force alone, but by understanding its pattern better than anyone else ever could."

"So how do we even fight something like that?" Theo asked. "If he sees all possibilities... how do we win?"

"You don't fight him by playing his game," Stig said. "You change the rules. You bring in what he can't see."

"Like what?" Robert asked.

"Love," Nyra said simply. "Emotion. Free will. Things that don't follow patterns. Things even a god of time can't predict."

A long silence settled around them.

Theo exhaled. "So that's it. We're heading toward something that thinks it already knows how this ends."

"But we haven't decided yet," Lisa said. "And that's *our* power."

Stig nodded. "Chronovare believes he's the center. But he's forgotten one of the most fundamental and important rules: even the center cannot exist alone. It only has meaning because of everything around it."

The words fell into silence again. But this time, the silence didn't feel empty. It was full-weighted with understanding.

Theo looked down at the fire. "We've been given the Tools. The Compass, the Root, the Fragment, the Feylumen Blades... but even they won't be enough. We can't just follow time, we have to feel it. Read it. Shape it."

Nyra nodded. "And make the right choices when the time comes."

Robert cracked a tired grin. "We're not exactly known for perfection."

"No," Nyra said, smiling back. "But we're still here. Together. That's something."

They sat in stillness for a while. Not because they had nothing more to say, but because, for once, there was peace in not needing to say it.

The journey ahead would not wait. But for now, they rested.

Theo stood and brushed off his pants, his voice steady now. "Tomorrow, we find the Autumn Realm. One more season to heal... and then we see where the path takes us. But tonight... we sleep."

One by one, they lay beside the fire, wrapped in cloaks and dreams.
And above them, the stars twinkled-quiet witnesses to the gathering of threads.

The morning came softly, draped in a sky of muted gold. Dew clung to cloaks and leaves alike, and the scent of damp earth rose around them as they broke camp in silence. The embers of last night's fire hissed faintly in the quiet, and above, long winged birds spiraled through the sky-bronze, feathered and flute voiced, their cries echoing like distant memory. They ate a quick breakfast and drank coffee that Theo had forgot was stored in Stig's threadpack.

They decided it was a good time for another quick sword lesson before they moved on. Each took out their blade, falling into motion-practicing strikes, turns, and parries while deepening their connection to the weapon in hand.

They moved through the forms again, blades cutting clean arcs through the air. Stig corrected their stances only once or twice, watching with a measured nod. "The sword is not obeying you," he said. "It is remembering you." Nyra circled them, eyes sharp. "Feylumen doesn't respond to force. It responds to alignment. Let it finish the movement before your mind does." Theo spun with precision. Lisa's blade blurred in a perfect sweep. Robert adjusted mid strike, flowing as if guided by instinct. What had once felt foreign now moved as if it had always belonged to them.

After a time, they felt as though they truly understood their weapons, and slid them back into their sheaths-ready, at last, for whatever battle lay ahead.

As they moved onward, the land subtly changed. Grasses grew rust red underfoot, and trees wore the first touches of copper and rose along their edges. The wind here moved more slowly, as though dragging time behind it. Insects with translucent, glassy wings darted in brief pulses of light-each leaving a flicker, as if reality hesitated in their wake. The scent of aging bark, distant woodsmoke, and overripe fruit settled low in the air.

Ahead, they saw a towering obelisk rising in the distance, fractured near the top, wrapped in ivy and centuries of silence. As they drew closer, they could see its surface was carved with faded runes, etched deep into the stone and glowing faintly where the sunlight touched them. Large black beetles with prism-like shells crawled along its base, their quiet clicks echoing through the clearing. It felt less like a monument and more like a wound-an ancient scar left behind by something the world had tried, and failed, to forget.

"It looks older than the Realms themselves," Lisa murmured.

Stig nodded. "It might be. These are markers from a forgotten time, before what some call the scars of the First Fracture. If you remember, when you found your swords by the stream, Nyra and I spoke of it then. They weren't just lost weapons. They were remnants; threads left behind for those who would come after."

Theo, Lisa, and Robert each rested a hand on the hilts of their swords, a quiet reverence passing between them. For a moment, they could almost feel it-the faint echo of something ancient,

something vast. A connection to a history so old it had slipped beyond memory, yet somehow still lived on through them.

Other remnants soon followed: broken stone bridges suspended above crumbling ravines, stairways that ended abruptly in open air, and leaning gates crusted with moss and lichens. Cracked fountains, long dry, stood in the shadows, their empty basins cradling nests of thorny vines and small, flickering insects.

Dusk colored birds perched along the ridges, singing hollow, metallic chimes that drifted downward like falling ash. In the half light, everything seemed frayed at the edges as though even the air had begun to forget this place.

Beyond the obelisk, the faint outlines of a once grand plaza stretched outward, its flagstones split and shifted by roots and time. Shattered statues, worn faceless, stood watch over streets where no footsteps had fallen in countless ages. Plants grew wild through every crack, reclaiming the bones of the city, while small, unseen animals rustled and whispered among the ruins.

They paused at the edge of the clearing, the stillness heavy with a silence that felt older than memory.

Nyra looked out over the crumbling city, her gaze distant. Her voice was soft, almost a whisper. "Some say places like this are the only true records left. The only witnesses still standing. Perhaps the swords remember more than we ever could."

They stood there for a long moment, each of them quietly absorbing the weight of the place. The way time had unraveled not with violence, but with slow, inevitable erosion. It wasn't just a city they were looking at. It was a warning. A reminder that even the strongest foundations could be undone when the weave of time itself was torn.

Finally, Stig's voice broke the silence, steady and certain. "It is time to move on. The Autumn Realm is not far now."

One by one, they turned from the ruins, their footsteps soft against the broken earth, and continued toward the horizon where Robert's Compass pointed.