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While AI assisted in crafting fitting sketches and refining sentences, the heart of this book remains entirely human.

This book has been translated from its original language.

“Gravity is the silent force that shapes our existence, an ever-present reminder of the inescapable weight of being. In its inexorable embrace, we find ourselves bound to Veridian, tethered to the ceaseless cycle of birth and decay, longing for meaning in a world that offers only the cold embrace of entropy.”

- *From “Gravity’s Lament”*
By Aurelius Valtos

To you, my sister, Seryn, who sought freedom in the abyss of The Iron Cliffs, I dedicate this, a testament to that which devours us all—the inexorable pull of oblivion that lies just beyond the precipice of reason.

- **Jorin Braywick**

VERIDIAN

Written by Jorin Braywick

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“Gravity’s divide is the shackles of oppression, binding the weak to their fate while empowering the elite. It is the false promise of destiny, veiling the true source of inequality and injustice.”

- ***Arius Thalos***

I

Eamon stood at the anvil, his arms knotted with corded muscle, the hammer rising and falling with a grim, unyielding rhythm. The forge spat red light, painting his face in shades of molten fury. Iron sang beneath his blows, each strike sharp and certain, a hard punctuation in the stillness. Kael lingered in the shadows, eyes fixed on the relentless labor, the crude ore surrendering to purpose in fire and force. The hammer rose again. Fell again. And still, Eamon kept hammering.

“You’re not finished, father?”

“The iron isn’t done with me.”

“Don’t you fear that we’ll fall behind if every piece is to be perfect?”

“No piece is perfect, but this craft does demand patience.”

Eamon was a hammer striking the same anvil, over and over again.

“I know, father.”

“Weakness is shaped by circumstance, but strength is forged through resilience.”

“I know, father.”

Kael wiped the sweat from his brow as he gazed at the piece in his father’s hands. Eamon took notice.

“You’ve been hanging around that miner fella too much.”

“Jorin? What does he have to do with anything?”

“Jorin is a dreamer, a boy with his head in the clouds and his body in the ground. This land depends on the work they do down there in the mines. So if he’s off in wonderland and something goes wrong, his crew suffers. We all suffer.”

Kael held back the few words he'd gathered, letting them dissolve like smoke on the wind. His gaze wandered past the open threshold of the hovel, where sullen clouds gathered, heavy and slow. The air tasted of coming rain. Behind him, Eamon's hammer stilled, suspended mid-swing, his eyes narrowing as he caught the drift of Kael's thoughts—something far off, untouchable, pulling him beyond the forge's narrow light.

"My point is that you're slacking, and your work is suffering for it and I'm suffering for it and the Great Families will suffer for it."

Kael returned his focus to the anvil.

"What do you and Jorin usually talk about anyway?"

He searched for an answer that wouldn't betray the trust he shared with his oldest friend.

"We talk about family, mostly. And the stars, the planets. Things like that."

"The stars and the planets. And what else?"

Kael hesitated.

"We sometimes talk about the gravity pockets. How these gravity zones shape our entire lives, our identities. How it's not fair that where we're born determines so much about our lives."

"We make do with what we have, with the cards we're dealt."

His father's words gnawed at him, sharp-edged and stubborn, lodging deep like a thorn that wouldn't work free. They had a way of sticking, barbed with meaning half-said, heavy with expectation. He clenched his jaw, tasting the bitterness they left behind, familiar as old scars.

"There will always be chains that bind us. We accept the ones that fit us best. Those folks in The Meadowlands have their own chains."

Kael nodded, biting back a retort. Eamon's hammer resumed its steady rhythm, filling the silence. "Father, have you ever thought about leaving this place? Seeing what's beyond The Iron Cliffs?" Kael asked, his voice tentative.

Eamon turned to look at Kael, his eyes searching his son's face. "Leaving? Our life is here, lad. The forge, the family... everything we know."

"But what if there's more? What if we're missing something?" Kael persisted.

Eamon sighed, setting the hammer down. “More doesn’t always mean better, Kael. Sometimes, it’s about finding purpose where you are.”

Kael opened his mouth to argue, but the words died on his lips as he noticed the darkening sky outside.

“Father, do you think we could be done for the day? I need to run into town for supplies before the storm hits.”

“If you are done, then you are done.”

“Well, then I am.”

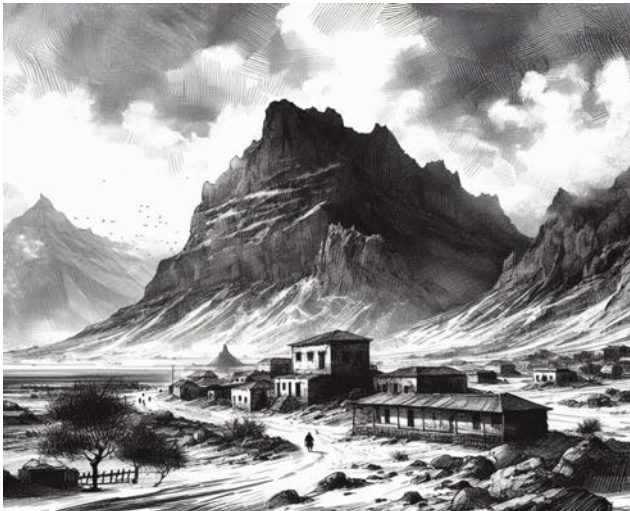
Eamon nodded. He surveyed the darkening clouds.

“Aye, son, but be quick about it. Don’t be caught out in the open when the storm breaks.”

The hammer slipped from his grip, landing with a dull thud against the ground. He surged toward the door. As he passed, his fingertips grazed the weathered sign, its carved letters worn but unyielding.

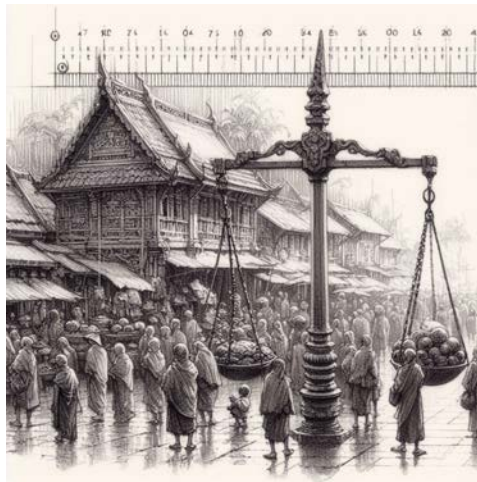
We bear the burden.

The words burned in his mind, a creed etched deeper than the wood. He didn’t look back.



The town of Calvaron sprawled beneath a sky as gray and unyielding as iron, a stark tableau of survival and desolation. The cliffs rose like ancient titans, their faces etched with the scars of eons, bearing witness to the ceaseless struggle below. Amidst this oppressive landscape, the people of Calvaron trudged, their bodies honed by the relentless pull that sought to claim them. Their homes clung to the crags like barnacles, hewn from the unforgiving stone. The dual suns, distant, uncaring orbs, cast long shadows that merged with the dusk.

The town was bustling in anticipation of the storm. Poverty had etched the faces of the townspeople, their eyes hollow as the rusted beams that the whole of the town seemed to be made of. The market of Calvaron was a mosaic of muted colors and sounds. Kael made his way through the throngs of people. The store he sought was nestled between a cobbler's stand and a weaver's loom, known as *The Balanced Scale*.



Orlan, the owner, did not notice Kael walk in, for his hands were busy wrapping a parcel for a young couple and the store was full of customers. Kael's list was simple: iron nails, oil for the lamps, and cloth.

"By The Great Weaver himself, if it isn't the iron-forger in the flesh," a voice called out.

Kael turned around to see Jorin approaching, his hair wild and his eyes bright with mischief.

"Don't you know there's a storm coming? Aren't you supposed to be at work?"

Kael shrugged, adjusting the sack slung over his shoulder. "Father let me out early for supplies. And why are you out so early?"

"The mine shut down for the very same reason."

"Since when have they cared about you?"

"They must think it's going to be a big one."

He wore no hood, no cloak—just a tattered shirt, a knapsack, and that ever-present grin. The impending storm didn't seem to bother him in the slightest.

"You're braver than me, facing this weather without any cover," Kael remarked, glancing out at the darkening sky.

Jorin waved a hand dismissively. "Ah, what's a bit of rain and wind?"

Kael laid his coins on the counter, the clink of metal barely audible over the growing murmur of the market. A gust of wind rustled the goods and banners hanging from the stalls. A collective shiver ran through the crowd. The sky darkened, a tapestry of ominous clouds blotting out the suns. Vendors hurriedly secured their wares, tying down loose items and rolling up delicate fabrics. The smell of impending rain mingled with the scents of fresh produce and baked goods, a prelude to the downpour. Murmurings from the crowd:

"Is it here already?"

"Sooner than it was s'posed to be."

"Praise Weaver, we could use the rain."

"If our homes aren't destroyed, that is."

The first drops of rain tapped a staccato rhythm on the canvas awnings, creating a symphony of soft, irregular beats. Shoppers pulled their cloaks tighter,

some darting for cover, while others continued their transactions with a newfound urgency. A mother clutched her child close. An old man cursed under his breath, his hands fumbling with a bundle of herbs.

"They act like they've never seen a storm before," Jorin said, leaning against the counter.

"Oy, don't go jinxing us now, Jorin," Orlan, the shopkeeper interjected, "Some of us have families to go home to."

"Well that's awfully rude," Jorin scoffed.

"And don't lean on the counter."

"Why are you always harping on me, Orlan?"

"Why are you always leaning on the counter, young lad?"

"Alright, alright, I'm off," Jorin conceded, raising his hands in mock surrender.

Kael observed the exchange with a bemused expression. "You finished here?" he asked Jorin, tilting his head toward the door.

"I suppose I can loiter elsewhere," Jorin replied as they left.

Kael shook his head. "You know, not everyone appreciates your brand of entertainment."

"Then they don't know what they're missing," Jorin said as he flaunted the stolen ale underneath his knapsack.

The sky churned like a restless beast, swollen with dark, tumbling clouds bruised purple and gray. Thunder growled low and sullen in the distance, a warning too old to be ignored. The air hung thick, charged with a sharp, electric stillness, as if the world itself held its breath.

"Ah, yes, isn't it magnificent? The smell of the air, the anticipation of the rain... There's something magical about it," Jorin said as he looked up at the sky. "There's poetry in the way Veridian transforms before a storm. The energy in the air, the rumble of distant thunder... It's invigorating."

As the first heavy drops began to fall, pattering against the cobblestones with increasing urgency, Kael stopped in his tracks. A crash of thunder in the sky.

"I don't think we'll make it back before the downpour," Kael said.

Jorin shrugged his shoulders and they turned around.

Dead in the center at the end of the market stood the looming Brocadian Temple, its tall spire piercing the darkening sky. Reverend Cyrus was at the entrance, ushering the townsfolk hurriedly inside. Jorin and Kael joined the line of people shuffling in, seeking refuge from the storm.

“Ah, maelstroms,” Jorin said with a smirk, “the only time the poor folks’ tithings put this building to good use.”

“There’s something nice about everyone coming together, though.” Kael replied. He already knew what Jorin was going to say.

“Oh sure, it’s wonderful that us denselanders have a spacious spot to gather and feed into the delusions that keep us stuck in the dirt,” Jorin shot back, his tone dripping with sarcasm.

“You don’t miss the communal aspect of it?” Kael asked.

Jorin’s eyes softened slightly, though his sarcastic smile remained. “I miss a lot of things, Kael. But blind faith isn’t one of them.” And he walked on.

The Temple loomed vast and unmoving, its weathered stone walls scarred by time but still defiant against the elements. Its high arches yawned wide, ready to swallow the town if fate demanded. Tonight, it just might. Villagers pressed through the heavy doors, drenched cloaks dripping onto cold flagstones. They cast uneasy looks skyward, where storm clouds twisted and roared like an army mustering for war. The wind clawed at the Temple’s walls, but within, the ancient stones held fast—for now.

The air was filled with murmurs and the occasional cough, the scent of damp clothes and fear mingling in the large hall. Reverend Cyrus moved through the crowd, offering words of comfort and reassurance. Kael looked around at the familiar faces, seeing both neighbors and strangers alike huddled together. Behind them, Jorin and Kael could hear Orlan’s family urging him to seek shelter in the Temple.

“You know I can’t leave The Scale. It’s my livelihood,” Orlan insisted, the shopkeeper’s voice resolute despite the concern evident in his tone.

“What about us, Orlan?” his wife pleaded.

“You go, don’t worry about me. The Scale will hold,” Orlan reassured her, his hands moving deftly to secure the shutters and close the shop door against the

impending storm.

Jorin exchanged a glance with Kael as they watched Orlan's family reluctantly head towards the Temple.

Kael turned to Jorin. "Come on, let's find a spot before it gets too crowded."

As they settled in among the townspeople, the first real gusts of the maelstrom began to batter the Temple walls, the sound like a distant roar promising a long night ahead. Kael stood by the large window, his gaze fixed on the torrential downpour outside. The rain transformed into a deluge, the droplets striking the ground with a relentless drumming that echoed through the village. Despite the chaos of the storm, there was a strange beauty to the rhythm, a melody that seemed to resonate with the heartbeat of the village itself.

"Why do you think The Weaver hates us so?" Jorin's voice cut through the quiet murmurs of the crowd.

"Shh, you'll cause an uproar," Kael said, casting a cautious glance around them.

"Oh, you don't believe in that stuff either," Jorin countered.

"There's no need for us to become pariahs at this time."

"A little healthy discussion never hurt anybody."

"I'm afraid there would be no discussion, Jorin," Kael said, his eyes scanning the crowd nervously.

Jorin nodded, his gaze drifting over the huddled figures. "Does your father know?"

Kael pondered the question for a moment. "I think he's too afraid to ask."

"So he has an inkling."

"More or less." His gaze dropped to the floor.

"What do you think he'd do if he found out?"

"I don't know. What could he do?"

"Disown you?"

"He wouldn't do that. He'd fall too far behind in the forge."

"Is that the only reason he keeps you around?"

"Sometimes I feel that way," Kael admitted quietly, his voice barely audible

over the sound of the storm.

“No, you don’t.”

“No, you’re right. I don’t.”

The quiet murmurs of group prayer filled the air, a collective plea for mercy in the face of nature’s wrath. As the storm raged outside, members of the clergy began their offerings. Some brought forth bundles of herbs and flowers, symbols of life and renewal, which they placed carefully at the feet of The Great Weaver’s statue. Others offered precious jewels and coins, symbols of prosperity and abundance, to be laid upon the altar as tokens of gratitude. In a small chamber in the corner of the Temple, hidden from the view of the congregation, the most devout members of the clergy offered parts of themselves to The Great Weaver, willing to shed their own blood in exchange for divine favor.



The storm raged outside, its fury pressing against the Temple like a living thing, the wind howling and the rain battering the stone. Inside, the murmur of

voices—low and anxious—rose and fell, but it was no match for the tempest’s roar. Yet, amidst the noise, a whispered rumor slithered through the crowd, winding its way like a shadow. It was faint at first, a ripple in the air, but soon it spread, carried by those who dared not speak louder, for fear of being heard.

“There’s an outsider among us.”

“A woman from The Meadowlands.”

“They say she’s been wandering The Iron Cliffs, half-dead.”

“Not even wearing a gravity suit.”

Hours passed, the storm showing no mercy. Lanterns flickered, casting a golden glow on the faces of those within. Jorin was asleep near the window’s edge, exhausted from the day’s work. Reverend Cyrus moved gracefully through the crowded hall. In his hands, he carried a basket of warm bread, offering small comforts to the congregation. When he reached Kael, his eyes held a gentle warmth as he handed him a piece of bread.

“How is your father, Kael?” Reverend Cyrus inquired, his voice soft with concern.

“He’s doing well, thank you,” Kael offered a small smile of appreciation.

“I’m very glad to hear that. I know it’s been some time now, but though time heals all wounds, so does space. Time and space must work together in this process. Has your father given himself the space to grieve?”

“I’m not sure what that means, Reverend,” Kael said, confusion evident in his voice.

“I hate to pry, but I have not seen your father in the Temple for a long while now. As a matter of fact, it’s been a long while since I’ve seen you here, either.”

“I’m sorry, Reverend, it’s just that...” Kael trailed off, his words faltering as he struggled to articulate his feelings.

“He doesn’t need it,” Jorin muttered in the corner.

“I’m sorry, what was that?” Reverend Cyrus asked, turning his attention to the one he thought was sleeping.

“He doesn’t need your beliefs to live in a world that cares nothing of them,” Jorin spoke up, apparently awake.

Reverend Cyrus turned his attention towards Jorin. “It’s good to see you again, Jorin.” Jorin had no answer, so he turned his attention back towards Kael. “You need not make any excuses for me,” Reverend Cyrus interrupted, his voice gentle but firm. “All I’m offering is the space to grieve, to heal. Please let your father know.”

“I will.”

“This applies to you as well, Kael,” Reverend Cyrus added, “And to you, Jorin.”

Jorin sat up now. “You would take advantage of the grieving in order to recruit people to your... your cult?”

“Jorin,” Kael said, his gaze sharp.

Reverend Cyrus paused, a quiet smile tugging at the corner of his lips. He motioned gently toward Kael, a slow, deliberate gesture meant to ease the tension. “It’s all right, Kael,” he said, his voice calm as ever, before turning his attention back to Jorin. “My son, do you think you are free of faith?”

Jorin didn’t answer.

Reverend Cyrus looked around before sitting down beside Jorin, resting his back against the cold stone. “You’ve always struck me as a person who appreciates bluntness. May I be blunt?”

Jorin made a quick sarcastic glance towards Kael before nodding. “By all means.”

Reverend Cyrus leaned in slightly. “You may say love is a chemical reaction, nothing more. Maybe beauty is mere sensory stimuli with no inherent value. Yet you appreciate these moments, don’t you?”

Jorin raised an eyebrow. “I appreciate them, sure. But that doesn’t mean I assign some deeper meaning to them.”

Cyrus continued, ignoring Jorin’s comment. “You find solace in them, even if you deny it. When you gaze at the night sky, do you not wonder about the vastness, the mystery?”

Jorin hesitated, his gaze flickering to the darkening sky outside. “I wonder, but it’s just curiosity, not faith.”

“When tragedy strikes, do you not yearn for comfort, for meaning?” Cyrus

pressed. “That’s faith—the quiet acknowledgment that life holds something beyond the absurd.”

Jorin shook his head. “You’re trying to twist my words. I see no point in denying reality.”

Cyrus smiled gently. “You’re not free of it; you’ve merely rebranded it as cynicism.”

“There’s a big difference between your faith and mine,” Jorin replied, his tone firm. “Yours clings to dogma like a moth to a flame, relying on it for guidance when it only disorients.”

Cyrus looked thoughtful. “And yours?”

“Brand me how you will, but my faith has no rules,” Jorin said, a defiant glint in his eyes.

The Reverend smiled in thought. “You’re very clever, son. But our doctrines merely point the way—it’s our footsteps that matter. And perhaps, Jorin, your skepticism is just another form of dogma, rigidly denying what might lie beyond the veil.” Cyrus paused for a reply, but there was none. He stood up. “I hope you know you’re always welcome here.”

As he walked away, Jorin glared at Kael. “You were awfully quiet.”

“What was I supposed to say?”

“I don’t know, maybe help me out a little.”

“I’m not half as good with words as you are.”

Jorin stared out the window. “You’d be on my side though, right?”

“There are sides?”

“You know there are.”

“Well, I suppose I agree with you, but he did have a point.”

“Yeah, well, whatever happened to a leap of faith?”



As the storm's rage subsided, the village slowly emerged from the shelter of the Brocadian Temple, stepping cautiously into the stillness left in its wake. The skies, once torn and wild, now exhaled a soft, exhausted breath, the dark clouds slowly parting to reveal fleeting glimpses of clear blue, a fragile peace settling over the land. The air was heavy, saturated with the scent of wet soil, as the villagers gazed out at the remnants of nature's fury.

Kael stirred from his makeshift bed on the cold stone floor of the Temple, his body protesting the chill and the stiffening ache of a restless sleep. He pushed himself up, gritting his teeth against the discomfort, and nudged Jorin awake. Jorin blinked, his eyes bleary, a frown pulling at his face as he rubbed sleep from his eyes. He sat up slowly, his mind sluggish, disoriented by the sudden shift in the air.

"Looks like the storm's finally passed."

Jorin nodded as he took in the sight of the tranquil sky outside. "About time," he muttered, stretching his cramped limbs.

As Kael and Jorin emerged from the Temple, they found the crowd dispersing in all directions, their voices hushed in the wake of the storm's passing. The air was still thick with tension, and the gasps and murmurs of the villagers drew their attention.

The Balanced Scale lay in ruins, crushed beneath the weight of a massive boulder that had seemingly tumbled from the cliffs above during the height of the storm. The wooden beams splintered and shattered, the once welcoming doorway now a jumbled mess of debris and destruction.

Orlan's family rushed to the wreckage, their faces stricken with panic as they scrambled through the rubble. Hands trembled, digging frantically, but it was futile—there was no shifting the massive boulder that lay heavy atop the destruction. They worked in desperate silence, their eyes wide with fear, but as the minutes stretched, it became clear: Orlan was not there.

After a long, silent walk, their footsteps heavy on the soil, the path before them finally split. Without a word, they parted ways. Kael and Jorin made their way home, their thoughts as tangled as the broken branches littering the ground. The remnants of the storm whispered softly to the night, the wind brushing through the trees like a fading apology, as if Veridian itself mourned what had been lost.



He found her half-dead, her body soaked, her breaths shallow. Her bones were light. No gravity suit. She was slender and tall. Her clothes clung to her like a second skin, every thread weighed down by the relentless storm. He recognized the exhaustion etched into her features, the hunger that hollowed her cheeks. She had collapsed at the doorstep, her skin pale as moonlight. He didn't know her then, but he saw the desperation in her eyes—the same desperation that haunted every soul in the denser lands. Sewn at the top of her breastbone into her skin was the crest of the Valenwood's. She was a Meadowlander. But one need not see the symbol to know this.

“Help me.”

Without a word, he reached down, his arms steady despite the surprise that tightened his chest. He carried her inside. He laid her on the worn sofa where the fire crackled, its light dancing over her weary face. She shivered. He knew she couldn't stay in those soaked clothes, but the awkwardness of the situation made him hesitate. He would hate for his father to walk in.

Where would he be though?

Finally, he carefully tugged at her drenched clothes, his hands trembling with the urgency of the moment. When they wouldn't budge, he reached for a knife, the cold steel slicing through fabric with practiced ease. As the last of her clothing fell away, she stirred, her body responding to the touch of air on her skin. For a fleeting moment, her eyes fluttered open, and her hand shot out, gripping his with a strength that startled him. Her fingers were cold, but the pressure in her grasp was unmistakable. He froze, unsure of whether it was a sign of life or something else.

“It's okay, I'm here to help,” he assured her. “We've got to get you warm.”

She murmured something incoherent and Kael simply nodded, understanding that some words were too heavy for the exhausted to bear. Her hand released and she slipped away into unconsciousness again. Wrapping her in a heavy wool blanket, he stoked the fire, and her trembling lips were extinguished. He watched her drift into a fitful sleep, her body occasionally wracked by groans as she

battled some unknown, unconscious enemy.

Eamon finally stepped through the front door, his brow furrowed, ready to scold Kael for staying out in the storm, for tempting fate with reckless disregard. But as his eyes fell upon the scene before him, his words caught in his throat.

“What is this?”

“She was lying nearly dead on our doorstep, father.”

“Great Weaver.”

He sat beside her. His hands gently examined the stranger who had appeared from the storm. Eamon caught the shift in Kael’s posture and their gazes met, an unspoken conversation passing between them.

“You got caught in the storm too?”

“We took shelter in the Temple.”

“We?”

“I... Jorin and I,” Kael admitted.

Eamon grunted. “Did you get what you needed?”

“Yes, but... Orlan’s shop was destroyed, father. A boulder from the cliffs. He was killed.”

“Great Weaver.”

“There was nothing we could do,” Kael added.

Eamon looked back up, his expression grave. “Was his family there?”

Kael only nodded.

Eamon sighed heavily, reciting an old dictum; “Gravity is the tool the Great Weaver uses to receive his offerings and calm the storm.”

Kael let the moment pass. “Where did you go, father?” He finally spoke.

“Sampson’s little girl was trapped under a fallen tree. I ran over to help after hearing her screams.”

“Is she okay?”

“She’s a little shook up, but she’ll be fine. I think it hurt Sampson more than her. No one wants to see their child like that.” He saw the tattered clothes of the Meadowlander lying on the floor next to the fireplace and looked up at his son. “You did the right thing here, Kael.”

A surge of pride rose up in him. “What do we do about her, father?”

“What can we do? For now, we must wait.”

“She looks so much like...”

“She’s a Meadowlander,” Eamon interjected, “She’s not used to the dense lands of The Iron Cliffs. Must have been in a hurry, leaving with no gear. Very dangerous to travel without it.”

“Where do you think she was going?”

“Wherever she could escape the pull of gravity,” Eamon replied.

“Why not stay where she came from then?”

“Most Meadowlanders are Damaskians. Their customs are stricter than ours. Breaking a custom can mean exile, or worse. My guess is that she’s been cast out.”

“What for?”

“I don’t know. All I know is that she can’t stay too long here. It’ll wear on her, and on us.”

“On us?”

“If she hasn’t been cast out and is instead fleeing from something—or someone—we might find trouble knocking at our door,” Eamon explained, walking over to the fire and throwing on a log. “You go get some rest, Kael. I’ll watch over her.”

Kael got up, but Eamon was not finished.

“Do not let her beauty blind you, Kael. We know nothing about her. Wherever she is going, you will not help.”

And as if tending to an already raging fire, Eamon concluded:

“It’s what your mother would have wanted.”



The next day passed without mark. The girl slept through it, still as the ground beneath her. Kael and Eamon worked in silence, the fire crackling low, the forge's glow like a dying ember in the dark. They kept watch, their eyes flicking to the shadowed edges of the night. The storm had torn itself apart, its fury spent, and now there was nothing but the weight of the stillness. The land lay barren beneath the sky, a breath held. No sound but the wind turning over the rocks and the occasional drip of water from the trees.

Kael lay in his room, restless, his mind spinning with thoughts of the stranger Meadowlander who now rested under his roof. Something about her, perhaps the way her hair caught the firelight or the soft curve of her face, had unearthed a memory long buried. Not long enough.

He saw his father, finally asleep, slumped in the old rocking chair by the fire, the faint creak of the chair the only sign of his presence. She sat across the room, the bowl of soup cradled in her hands, sipping from it with a care that spoke of hunger long held at bay. He knew it, had seen it in the hollow of her eyes, the thinness of her frame. They had little to offer her, scraps mostly, but it was all they had. On the side table beside her lay *The Nexustratum*, its pages curling at the edges, the candle flickering too close, casting long shadows on the walls.

She looked up, startled, her eyes wide, and for a moment neither of them moved. She jumped a little, as though caught, but it was him who flinched, a jolt of panic running through him. He feared his father might stir, his heavy breath a faint rasp in the silence. But the old man remained still, the firelight dancing on his weathered face. Kael exhaled, not even realizing he'd been holding his breath.

"You scared me," she whispered.

He glanced at his father and then back at her, holding his finger up to his lips. She looked over at the man sleeping on the rocking chair, then motioned for Kael to come over to her. He obeyed. She fixed her gaze upon him. He found himself unable to meet it for more than a fleeting moment.

"Who are you?"

"Kael."

"Just Kael?"

"Kael Wright."

"Kael Wright," she studied the word with her tongue. "You were the one that brought me in here?"

He nodded.

"Why am I naked under this wool?"

Kael's face flushed, a rush of heat flooding his skin. "You were soaking wet and freezing, I--I had to."

She paused, her gaze steady, and after a long moment, she seemed to accept his explanation, though the silence between them hung heavy. Then, her eyes turned to him, studying him now, the kind of scrutiny that made him shift uncomfortably under her gaze. She reached out, her frail arm trembling slightly, and touched his face with fingers as delicate as bird feathers. Her touch was gentle, almost reverent, as if she were tracing the lines of some ancient map. "Veridian has sculpted you as it has me."

"It seems it took more care with its chisel on you," he replied, withdrawing slightly as the blush crept further across his cheeks.

She let her hand fall into her lap, her eyes softening. "Thank you for what you've done for me. I would have surely perished without your intervention, denselander."

“It’s Kael.”

She smiled. “Thank you, Kael. But I must be going in the morning, I have a long way to go.”

“You were headed the wrong way. The Meadowlands are to the west.”

“Yes, I know. That’s where I came from. I’m not going back.”

“You don’t look like a Guild Navigator. You have no equipment.”

“You know not where I’m headed, therefore-”

“It doesn’t matter where you’re headed, you won’t make it.”

“That’s quite forward of you.”

“I just meant that, in the shape you’re in, you won’t get far. Not without help at least.”

“I see. And you are offering?”

“Offering what?”

“Help?”

“No.” He pondered for a moment. “That would depend entirely on how far you are headed and where.”

“So you want to help?”

“I... did not say that.”

“It’s no matter. I should be able to suffice on my own with the proper equipment.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“You didn’t ask a question.”

“I asked you where you were going.”

“No you did not. You said whether or not you aided me depended on the duration and location of the journey.”

“Where are you going?”

She sighed and did not answer.

“All right then. Where do you plan on getting the navigation equipment?”

“Well, I was hoping you’d be kind enough to lend me some supplies.”

Kael found himself bewitched by her ethereal grace yet bemused by her outlandish demeanor. Ezra’s tales of the Meadowlanders had painted a vivid picture, and though Calvaron had hosted a handful of these visitors, it was always

with the barrier of their G-suits. To witness one in the flesh, let alone of such beauty, was an entirely different experience.

"With all due respect, have you had a chance to take a look at the place? This is an iron forge, we have no resources for gravity tech."

Her gaze fell upon Kael, a crestfallen shadow passing over her features. His eyes widened slightly, and he shifted his weight from one foot to the other, his discomfort evident. "I'm sorry. I just mean that I would if I could."

She sighed. "I understand."

He bit his lip, glancing around the room as if searching for a solution. He took a deep breath, running a hand through his hair. "Look, I might be able to get ahold of a G-suit, but it's tricky," he said, his voice lowering as he leaned in, his eyes darting around nervously.

Her face lit up. "Oh please, Kael, it would mean the world to me! I cannot traverse without one."

"Even if I can get you a suit, you won't be able to traverse without help."

"Kael, your offer of aid is generous, but I must decline."

"Did I offer it?"

"The path I tread is fraught with peril, a journey too treacherous and distant for me to allow your company. It is not merely that I cannot impose such a burden upon you; it is that I wish to spare you from it."

"If I were to offer assistance, rest assured, I could take care of myself."

She paused, her thoughtful silence stretching out before she finally broke it with a decisive nod. "Very well."

The silence stretched out between them, heavy and unyielding, until Kael could no longer bear the weight of it. He shifted on his feet, his eyes flicking to the floor, then the door. "I'll leave you to it," he muttered, his voice low, almost swallowed by the stillness. He reached the door, his hand on the rough wood, and paused. Something tugged at him, something unfinished, though he couldn't say what. He turned back, his shadow long and dark in the firelight. "What's your name?" he asked, the words falling flat and simple, like stones dropped into a dry well.

"Lysandra," she touched the crest on her breastbone, "of the

Valenwoods’.”

“Lysandra, why did you fall at our doorstep?”

“Besides the exhaustion and threat of collapsing at any moment, I was told that iron-forgers are trustworthy people. I trusted my instinct.”

“Who told you that?”

She smiled. “Goodbye, Kael.”



The path to the burial grounds was familiar, though the journey felt different tonight as he moved through the shadows cast by the waning moons. Approaching the Necropolis, the sight of the gravestones jutting from the ground like jagged teeth filled him with a somber sense of peace. Kael made his way to a grave marked by a tall, dark stone intricately carved with symbols of his family’s lineage. The iron inlays on the stone glinted faintly in the moonlight, and right in the middle was etched the name, Maria Wright.

He knelt beside the grave, his hand resting on the cold stone. Memories flooded back—her laughter, her gentle touch, the stories she used to tell him about their ancestors. The wind whispered through the stones, carrying with it a sense of her presence. Kael closed his eyes, letting the memories wash over him, grounding himself in the connection he still felt to her.



He sat on the cliff's overhang at the edge of the gravity pocket, looking out at the sea, at the lighthouse nearby, and waited. He watched distant trees that stood gnarled and twisted, their branches reaching for the sky. Kael imagined their roots digging deep into the ground, anchoring them against the pull of gravity. They were survivors, like him. Like his father. The ground itself seemed to protest, its rocky surface groaning under the weight of existence. It's as if the very soil was whispering, *"Here, mortal, you are bound by laws older than memory. Bend, but do not break."*

He closed his eyes, listening. The wind carried whispers—the voices of those who had walked this path before him. Their footsteps echoed in his mind, a chorus of struggle and despair. They were the forgotten, the ones who had slipped through the cracks. Their stories were etched into the very fabric of Veridian—their hopes, their dreams, their pain. If one listened close enough.

"Kael!" Jorin's voice cut through the quiet, dragging Kael from his thoughts like a tether yanked taut.

"Jorin?" Kael turned.

Jorin stepped closer, his bare feet scraping against the rocks. He lingered a few steps from the edge, gaze flicking toward it—just for a moment—before settling on Kael. “What are you doing here so late?”

“Couldn’t sleep,” Kael muttered.

Jorin handed him a flask of ale and dropped down beside him, heaving a great sigh of relief. “Rough one, huh?”

Kael opened the flask and took a swig. “I was thinking of Ezra’s sermon from the other day. You know, the opposing forces and all?”

“And we’re at the brunt end of these forces.”

Kael nodded. “So it would seem.”

“Damn Meadowlanders reap all the benefits of our shitty lives, don’t they?”

Maybe it’s not a good time to mention her, Kael thought. “My father says that Orlan’s death was an offering to make the storm recede.”

Jorin dangled his legs over the abyss, but unlike Kael, he didn’t let them swing. “Nonsense. It’s all nonsense. Brocadians always speak of their offerings as balancing the scales, as if the Great Weaver was an incubus demanding payment to stop its destruction.” He took a swig of ale. “This appeals to those like Reverend Cyrus much more than the cold facts.”

“And what are the facts?”

“That gravity is a result of the chaos of the quantum realm, something that comes from the deeper workings of the universe. That’s why gravity varies so much on Veridian. Not because of a vengeful god.”

The gravity pocket emitted a low, resonant hum that filled the air around them.

“You hear that?” Jorin continued. “Gravisonance. Maybe that’s the sound of fluctuations in the quantum information that underpins the pockets themselves. Gravisonance could be a glimpse into the very fabric of the universe. It’s like the gods of the gravity pockets are singing to us, revealing secrets that have been hidden in plain sight all along.”

“Or maybe you pissed off the Great Weaver.”

Jorin snorted, the sound breaking the fragile thread of mysticism he’d

spun. He took another swig, shaking his head as if to ward off the absurdity of the moment. Then his face shifted, the humor draining away like water through cracked stone. His gaze fixed on the horizon, his brow furrowed, as if he saw something out there in the dark he'd rather not see.

"If gravity comes from how messed up the quantum realm is," he began, his voice quieter now, more distant, "then it makes sense it'd be different in different places. Those weird gravity spots are like signs of how messed up our world is underneath, on a fundamental level. It's like this planet is showing us how the universe itself works, with all its chaos and order mixing together, and us stuck in the middle, the abandoned ones."

Jorin took a swig. "Veridian cares not about balance. Did it care about my sister's loneliness? No. Did it save her from..." His voice hitched for a moment, but he powered through it. "Did it save Orlan from the boulder? No. Do you have any feeling that it's ever going to do anything for the denselanders?" Jorin paused for a reflective moment, then looked over at Kael. "Are you even listening to me?"

Kael turned to him. "Of course."

"Well, and?"

"And what?"

"I just spouted out a bunch of words, what do you think of them?"

Kael, having caught only fragments of the monologue, knew the topic was about balance. "So you don't think there's any balance to the world?"

Jorin sighed. "I dunno. Maybe there's some, but I don't know if it can stay stable. Even the inner ear, which keeps us balanced, gets messed up by changes in gravity. Weaver's Loom, even a high-pitched sound can throw it off." Jorin leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, the weight of his thoughts pressing him down. "So, if even the smallest thing—a sound, a tilt in the ground, a shift in gravity—can throw off something as basic as our balance, how can the world itself hold steady? Weaver's Loom, Kael, maybe it's not supposed to. Maybe balance isn't the point at all. Maybe it's all just motion, chaos pushing against chaos, and we're stuck in the middle trying to make sense of it."

He paused, staring into the abyss as though it might answer him. "And maybe that's why we look for patterns. For gods. For something to blame, or

something to thank. But the world doesn't care. Veridian doesn't care. It just spins and burns and shifts under us. Balance, if it exists, is something we fight for, not something we're given. And even then, it doesn't last." He sat back and took another swig, his expression hardening as if to shield himself from his own words. "I don't think there's balance. There's just us, trying not to fall."

Kael sat in silence for a moment, letting Jorin's words settle over him like ash after a fire. He leaned back, a faint smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. "I think you could have a following of your own if you really applied yourself."

Jorin shook his head as he lifted the flask for another drink. "A following?" he said, his voice thick with disbelief. "What would I do with that? Preach the gospel of chaos and falling rocks?"

Kael shrugged, the smirk lingering. "Might be more honest than most sermons. You've got the passion for it, at least."

"Oh, shut up," Jorin said, throwing a pebble at him.

They both turned their attention to the expanse beyond. The vastness stretched out before them, its edges blurred by the distortion of the gravity pockets. Kael's thoughts drifted, inevitably, to Lysandra and the promise he had made.

Jorin bent to pick up a rock and hurled it off the edge. They watched as its trajectory bent unnaturally, plunging downward in a sharp arc as it reached the boundary of the pocket. "You still miss her a lot, don't you?"

Kael didn't answer right away, his gaze fixed on the horizon. When he did, his voice was quiet. "You still miss Seryn, don't you?"

Jorin hesitated. Then he shook his head and took another drink. "I don't know what I miss," he admitted. "I just know that every time I hear a sermon about balance, I want to break something."

They stared off in wonder, but did not stay there for long. The lighthouse cast its light on a distant but incoming vessel from the sea. "Sometimes I wish I could do something else."

Jorin turned his attention from the horizon back to Kael. "You mean instead of forge?"

Kael nodded. Jorin awaited more, but none came, so he added, "Like what?"

Kael sighed. "I dunno. Something more exciting."

Jorin followed suit with a sigh. "I hear ya."

After a moment, Kael yawned and pushed himself up. "I'd better be getting back before my father wakes up," he said, stifling another yawn.

Jorin smiled. "Still under his thumb?"

Kael smiled as he stood up. "Something like that."

They began their descent down the rugged cliffside, the path narrow and winding. The rocks beneath their feet were worn smooth by years of erosion, but still treacherous in places. Jorin moved with the ease of someone who had traversed this route countless times, his steps sure and confident. Kael, though familiar with the terrain, was more cautious, placing each step deliberately. As they reached the bottom of the cliff, Kael waved Jorin on. "I want to visit my mom's stone real quick, you go on."

Jorin nodded in understanding, giving Kael a pat on the shoulder before heading towards the town. "Whatever you say, bud."

As they parted, instinct compelled Jorin to turn around, and he saw Kael heading not towards the gravesite, but towards the sea.



Kael crouched in the shadows, watching as the vessel's crew worked tirelessly under the dim glow of lanterns. The dock was alive with activity, men shouting orders, and crates being hauled off the ship. Slipping from his hiding place, he moved stealthily towards the stacks of crates labeled with symbols he recognized. He pried open the nearest one with his hand-forged tool, but found only bolts of fabric. He checked another, then another, each time coming up empty-handed. He found a crate marked with the Gravitek logo. His hands trembled slightly as he worked the lid open, revealing the contents within: gravity suits, neatly folded and ready for use. He reached in and grabbed two of the suits. The fabric was surprisingly light.

"Hey! What are you doing there!?"

Kael ducked behind a stack of barrels, trying to make himself as small as possible.

"Come out, now! I know you're back there!"

His mind raced. He spotted a narrow gap between two large crates that led to a darker, less-traveled part of the dock, slipping through the gap just as the dockworker rounded the corner.

"Stop! Thief!"

He sprinted through the maze of cargo, his feet barely touching the ground. He could hear the heavy footsteps behind him, growing closer. Desperation fueled his movements, pushing him to move faster, to find a way out.

He spotted an open warehouse door ahead and darted inside, the darkness swallowing him whole. He pressed himself against the wall, listening intently as the dockworker's footsteps slowed, then stopped. Kael held his breath, willing himself to become invisible.

"Where did you go, you little rat?"

"And the brave hero, with sword in hand, faced the monstrous beast without a single fear!" Jorin's voice rang out, clearly feigning drunkenness as he staggered down the beach, an open book clutched in one hand. "For he knew that destiny favored the bold!"

"Who's out there?" The dockworker, distracted by the commotion,

turned towards the sound.

“Ah, the sea! The stars! And the endless tales of old!” Jorin swayed dramatically, nearly falling over as he waved the book around.

“Hey! What are you doing here?”

Jorin looked up, eyes wide with mock surprise. “Me? Just a humble bard, lost in my stories!” He hiccupped. “Care to hear one?”

Kael slipped out of the warehouse and back into the shadows with the gravity suits still clutched tightly. He cast one last glance over his shoulder, silently thanking Jorin.

Sneaking by the dockyard office, Kael overheard two dockworkers gossiping as they leaned against a stack of crates.

“Word is she’s being hunted. Something about an affair with a man from The Iron Cliffs.”

“Didn’t her husband have him executed already?”

“That’s the word.”

“No wonder she ran away. I wouldn’t have come here though. Not the safest place for a featherweight.”

He moved away from the dockhouse. As he moved, Kael glanced towards the beach and saw the dockworker escorting Jorin off the sand while Jorin read on.

“...The Royal Families were the pillars upon which Veridian’s society stood. The Family Solara ruled over the lands of the Sunlit Plains, the Umbra over the Shadowed Forests, the Tempest commanded The Iron Cliffs, and the Aetherius governed The Meadowlands.”

“Come on, time to sober up somewhere else,” the dockworker said while shoving him forward. Jorin glanced back toward the docks, his eyes scanning the shadows and flickering lamplight, but Kael was nowhere to be seen. He lingered for a moment, as if expecting his friend to reappear, but the emptiness held firm.



The porch sagged under Eamon's weight, the wood groaning like an old man, like himself. He sat there, his eyes like flint, watching Kael approach. "You've been sneaking out again."

Kael froze mid-step, caught off guard. He stopped in his tracks, gripping the strap of his pack where the crowbar and G-suits lay hidden. "Yes, Father," he admitted, his voice steady. "I was with Jorin."

He waited for the reprimand, for the gruff tone and stern words he had grown accustomed to, but none came. Eamon stayed silent, his gaze distant, then dropped his eyes to the warped boards of the porch.

"She's awake?" Kael ventured, shifting on his feet.

"She's eating," Eamon replied, his voice low and heavy with exhaustion. "But she is weak."

Kael frowned, unease crawling up his spine. "What do we do?"

Eamon shook his head, the faintest of motions. "I do not know."

Kael nodded, his jaw tightening. "I'm going to go check on her," he said, stepping toward the door.

He barely reached it before Eamon's voice stopped him cold. "I heard your talk with the meadow girl."

"And what of it?" Kael replied, keeping his tone even as he turned to face his father. The older man's features gradually came into view, softened by the pale moonlight. Kael noticed tears welling up in his father's eyes, a rare and unsettling sight.

"There are things I haven't told you, Kael. Before the forge, before the iron..." Eamon's voice trailed off, laden with unspoken memories.

Kael observed his father, noting the familiar scent of ale. He saw a rare glimpse of sentimentality that had eluded him since his mother's passing. But, like a shadow, it quickly retreated as Eamon's expression hardened. "You cannot go with her. It's too dangerous."

Kael sighed, frustration bubbling to the surface. "Father, I'm eighteen orbital years old. I can make these decisions for myself."

"You don't know what's out there, Kael."

"And you do?" Kael shot back, his eyes narrowing.

Eamon paused, his gaze shifting away as if the night held the answers he sought. "The forge needs you here. I... need you here."

Kael stood silently, pondering his father's words. "I have to know what's out there. Even if it's nothing."

Eamon's posture slumped slightly, the weight of his unspoken fears evident. He couldn't help but sympathize with Kael's need for discovery. "It's not the unknown I fear, Kael, but the dangers I've seen with my own eyes." He took a long pause. "Yet, I know I can't keep you here forever."

Kael felt a pang of sorrow for his father's vulnerability, but his resolve overshadowed this sorrow. "I need to do this. For myself. For Mom."

Eamon nodded slowly. "I don't want this to be the last time I see you."

"It won't be, Father. I promise. I'll come back."

Eamon said nothing more, and stared at his boots for a long moment.



The room lay in disarray, a chaotic tableau of bowls, spoons, and blankets strewn about as if in the aftermath of a silent storm. His eyes swept over the chaos, searching for any sign of her. The blankets were tossed aside, the bowls overturned, their contents long since dried. It was as though she had been there only moments before, the energy of her presence still palpable in the air. But amid the clutter, one thing was conspicuously absent—Lysandra herself had vanished. The room felt colder, emptier without her. Kael's heart sank as he took in the scene, a deep sense of unease settling over him. He approached the small window, hoping for some clue, but the view outside offered no answers, just the silent expanse of the night.

In the days when Veridian was young, The Weaver sat at his loom. His fingers danced across the cosmic fabric, pulling threads from The Meadowlands and The Iron Cliffs. He wove love and longing, hope and despair. And the loom hummed—a song of existence.

- ***From “The Nexustratum”
Weave 1, Strand 3***

II

The dawn broke with a silence that hung over the land like a shroud. Lysandra's form was a mere shadow against the burgeoning light. She stood with a pack on her shoulder at the precipice of the gravity pocket, The Meadowlands behind her a fading memory. She felt a primal unease as the sounds of Veridian's gravitational tension filled the air. The low, continuous hum resonated within her. She tried to steady her breath, to calm the fluttering in her chest, but the sporadic deep thrums unsettled. She could not help but feel small, a lone figure against the vastness of a planet that spoke in tones of pressure and density.

Touching the emblem on her chest, she stepped forward, the boundary invisible yet as palpable. The transition was almost immediate. Gravity seized her, pressing her to the ground with a force that threatened to extinguish the very breath from her lungs. She fought for air, her limbs heavy as if wrought from iron. Suddenly, the ground beneath her, a tapestry of rock and dust, began to stir. Terror seized her.

A sprawling mass of dark, mottled tendrils, each one pulsating with the heavy rhythm of the land, crept toward Lysandra. Its body flat against the ground, almost indistinguishable from the rock and soil it inhabited, save for the occasional glint of its slick, obsidian-like skin. It had no eyes, for it sensed the world through vibrations and minute shifts in gravity. In the presence of prey, the Gravidisk expanded, its tendrils reaching out, seeking to envelop and ultimately assimilate its

quarry into the dense matter of its being.

Lysandra's terror surged, every fiber of her being trembled with fear. Sweat beaded on her brow. Her breaths came in shallow gasps as adrenaline surged through her veins. Her thoughts scattered like leaves in the wind, her mind consumed by a primal instinct to flee, yet her limbs felt heavy, weighed down by an invisible force.

With a sharp blow, the creature recoiled. Its form dissipated into the ground from whence it came. He reached for her, his hands grasping the fabric of her garments, pulling her from the merciless grip of gravity and back to the safety of the lighter pocket.

"A Grivilisk. These things prey on weary wanderers at the edges of pockets. You would have been killed. What were you thinking?!"

"Kael!" A surge of gratitude washed over her. She beheld the contours of his face, the bulk of his body underneath the G-suit he now donned.

"You obviously can't travel alone." He helped her up. The sight of her in his mother's old dress, stolen from his home, stirred a surge of emotions within him. It was the dress his mother used to wear to the Temple. "Why didn't you tell me you were being hunted?"

She looked at him. "I guess word travels fast."

"Yes it does."

"You must understand, Kael, that you are not safe with me."

"Is what they say true?"

"Perhaps."

He stopped. "What do you mean?"

"My husband, Dorian, is a relentless man, Kael. You do not want to meet up with him."

"For Weaver's sake! Dorian Valenwood?"

"And with his tracking and navigation equipment from The Guild, he has every advantage. That's why I have to be cautious."

"You don't trust me?"

As the adrenaline of the moment began to ebb away, Lysandra drew a steadying breath, her trembling hands finding an anchor in the fabric of her

clothing. She willed her racing heart to slow, her mind to clear, and her emotions to retreat into the depths of her being. “Alright then. Come if you will.”

“First you have to tell me where you’re headed, and why you’re being hunted,” he sensed his newfound upper hand.

She pondered for a long moment. The conflict played out in her eyes, a flicker of hesitation. Finally, she exhaled, the resolve leaving her shoulders as she made her decision. “The Nexus.”

“The Nexus?” He couldn’t help but sneer at the notion, but immediately regretted it, seeing her eyes narrow in response.

“All things return to The Nexus,” she retorted sharply, a challenge in her voice.

“So you are Damaskian,” he questioned.

“This is why I did not tell you initially,” she said as she folded her arms.

“I’m sorry but... you think it’s a real place?”

“It is.”

“But I mean beyond your faith? In the tangible world?”

“Since when does tangibility determine reality?”

“Why are you searching for this Nexus?” He ignored her question.

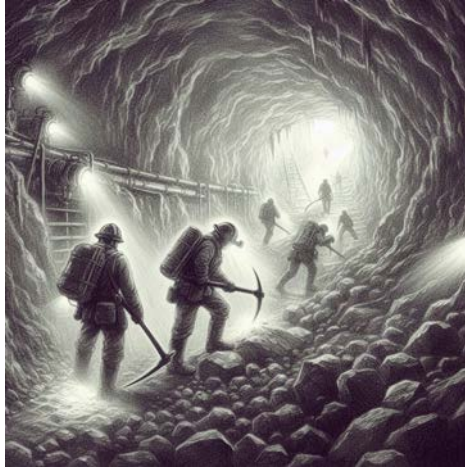
She contemplated for a moment. “I was in a relationship with someone from the dense lands. When we were discovered, Dorian sentenced him to death. I need to find him at The Nexus. That’s all I’m willing to tell you.”

A silence broke out between them.

“I understand if you don’t wish to help. I know it’s not everyone’s journey to undertake. I will not proselytize you.”

He thought for a moment, the slow hum filling the silence. “I can’t let you go alone. You’ll be dead before sunrise. I’ll go.”

A slight smile flickered on her face. His did the same. He quickly shook it off as he took off his pack and procured the stolen suit and offered it to her, who smiled in silent gratitude.



The mines breathed—a slow, laborious rhythm that echoed through the tunnels. The jagged walls closed in like the jaws of some ancient beast, yet the miners burrowed deeper.

“Watch your footing on that ledge. We don’t need any accidents today.”

“Hey, Jorin, think we’ll hit a rich vein today?”

“With any luck,” Jorin said offhandedly, deep in thought.

Dark shadows loomed over the miners, formed by the single lamp which gave light to the crew’s section.

“Keep those drills steady, everyone. We need clean cuts if we want them to be worth anything.”

The mining crew operated like a well-oiled machine. Each member played their part in the intricate dance of extraction. Using pickaxes and pneumatic drills, they chipped away at the rocky terrain.

“Weaver’s Loom, you could use a shower.”

“Yeah, so could you, ya muck.”

The sheer force of gravity could cause instability in the rock formations, making them prone to sudden collapses or shifts. Even the slightest miscalculation

or misstep could have catastrophic consequences.

"These guys aren't from around here."

Several men in G-suits and one in the middle of them, decorated with medals of valor, approached. It was a tall man with eyes like ancient stones, chiseled as the cliffs themselves.

"You're Jorin, the miner."

"Could be."

"You ARE Jorin, the miner."

"What do you want?"

The man's gaze swept the dimly lit tunnel.

"Information. About a woman."

"And who might that be?"

"She left with your friend not long ago."

"Who?" Jorin saw the nametag, *Dorian Valenwood*, and recognized the Damaskian symbol on his suit. He knew of the extremists' methods of torture and knew also that they could make him talk. "He didn't tell me where he was going."

One of the adjutants shifted. "Lies."

Dorian stared at Jorin for a long time. Jorin's mind conjured up an old quote he had read:

I am no hero. I am a man who burrows into the ground, who whispers secrets to ancient stones. What am I to offer?

"No. I believe he speaks the truth," Dorian said, drawing a symbol on the ground—a spiral that vaguely resembled the Damaskian symbol.



Several members of his crew watched from a distance. Jorin's gaze went from his crew mates to an abandoned mine cart—a relic from better days, its wheels rusted and silent.

“You know of this symbol?” Dorian asked.

“It's a cult symbol,” he said, looking down at it.

“Blasphemy,” cried the adjutant.

Dorian shot a disapproving glance at the adjutant before returning his attention to Jorin. “It's the Damaskian symbol. We're the only ones in this patchwork of a world that still strive for equilibrium. Jacquardians and Brocadians claim to seek this balance, yet they were the ones that caused the rift in the first place.”

“I am neither. What does this have to do with me?”

“This has nothing to do with you. You are but an annoying stop on the road. I am merely checking off the boxes necessary for my full report,” he began to walk away.

“What will you do to them?”

Dorian turned around. “Lysandra broke our sacred pact. Chaos must not be the new order. She'll have to repent.”

“And my friend?”

But Dorian did not answer.



The land stretched before them, a tapestry of relentless gravity. The horizon was a heavy line, burdened by the weight of the sky, and the air pressed down like an unseen ocean. The trees stood stoic, their branches drooping under the oppressive force, leaves like hands weighed down by invisible shackles. They moved through a world where every stone, every blade of grass, seemed forged from iron. Fully equipped with gear now, Lysandra moved with newfound ease. In this land, the sound was a stranger. Their voices were hushed and close, as if afraid to be swallowed by the vastness. The only constant was the deep thrum of the planet itself, a heartbeat of heaviness that resonated in their bones. It was a place not meant for the living.

“Just a bit further down this path and we should reach a river. We can rest there.”

Lysandra’s exhaustion weighed heavily upon her, leaving her too weary to protest. Her stomach rumbled. “I should have stolen more food from you. I’m starving.”

“It’s good you didn’t, lest my father be out here tracking you down.”

“Your father seems like a decent man. I doubt he’d go to such lengths.”

“No, he wouldn’t. It was a joke.”

“Oh. Was it, now?”

Above them, the clouds hung low, gravid with the promise of a storm. The light here was a rare commodity, filtered through a veil of density that turned day into dusk.

“Tell me something about The Meadowlands.”

“What do you want to hear?”

“Anything. I’ve heard the stories but never a firsthand account.”

“I’d have to think about it.”

“What did you like most about it?”

Lysandra’s mind drifted back to memories of a distant past. “In the mornings, the dual suns would cast a beautiful light on the veranda. I would wake to that warm glow, and my aunt Venra and I would share tea and biscuits together. Her beautiful red hair would dance in the wind, each strand catching the light just right. I could watch it all morning, utterly mesmerized. That, I suppose, is what I liked most about it.”

“Tea with aunt Venra on the veranda. That sounds nice.”

“Yes. It was.”

“And now you’ll never go back.”

Lysandra’s smile faltered. “Perhaps not.”

“Do you miss them?”

“Not so much my father. I do miss my mother.”

“Why not your father?”

“I’d rather not talk about him.”

“Why not?”

She looked at him in disbelief. “You really don’t keep up with politics, do you?”

“I guess not.”

“Why not?”

“Why should I?”

“Well, why shouldn’t you?”

He let out a great sigh. “The way I see it, there’s the rich lightlanders and the poor denselanders. It’s that simple. Nobody in power will change the system that benefits them.”

“Well, don’t you think if more of you denselanders engaged in politics, you could collectively shape your own destiny,” she said as she trudged after him.

“I don’t think that’s how it works.”

“Well, how do you think it works?”

He let out another sigh. “I believe the lightlanders craft their own reality to suit their interests, with little to no consideration for us denselanders.”

“You know, you don’t have to stay here.”

“Don’t be naive. You couldn’t handle our lands, and we wouldn’t fit in yours.”

Lysandra was silent for a moment. “There is truth in what you say, Kael. I recognize that. But embracing a victim mentality will only hinder your progress. You must strive to rise above it.”

“Your air of superiority is grating,” he said as he walked on ahead.

“Oh, and your pessimism is just so smooth and pleasant to the ear,” Lysandra said, following shortly after him. “Tell me, denselander, where do you expect this mindset to get you?”

“Realistic expectations lead to realistic outcomes.” He found himself spouting Jorin’s words.

“What does that even mean?”

“It means... that if you expect little of the world, it will take little from you.”

“But it still takes?”

“But it still takes.”

“And what do you expect of this journey, Kael?”

He studied a track on the ground and traced its origins. “I expect to come back in one piece. By the way, what is your plan if we get there--”

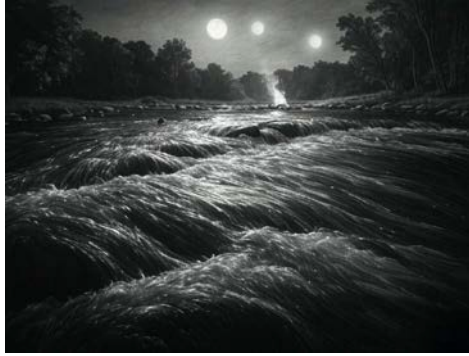
“When we get there,” she interjected.

“...WHEN we get there, anyway? Are you just going to jump in?”

“Kael, I don’t know the specifics of how The Nexus works. All will be

revealed in time. We will go with the flow.”

He stared at her for a long moment, a sigh escaping his lips. Without another word, he turned and resumed walking.



As dusk descended upon the rugged landscape, the gentle murmur of flowing water provided a soothing backdrop to their makeshift campsite, the crackling flames of the fire cast dancing shadows against the surrounding wilderness. Above, three of the moons of Veridian illuminated the night sky, their ethereal glow bathing the land in a soft, silver radiance. Lysandra sat cross-legged, her journal cradled in her lap. Kael studied her.

“What are you writing?”

“I always write.”

“About?”

“About the day. It’s a journal.”

“It was a pretty uneventful day.”

“Was it, now?”

Sparks dance upwards, mingling with the stars above as he added another log to the crackling blaze. The remains of a small creatures’ bones lay beside him, picked clean and gnawed upon. “Why don’t you wish to speak of your father, Lysandra?”

His words, like stones tested before a crossing, caused her to put down her journal. “Must you?”

“I must.”

She looked at him before staring into the flames. “My father is a man who sees faith as a means to an end. The Damaskian creed is his ledger. He finds profit, not piety, in it. Dorian is the same way, but with much more fervor. To them, the forces of nature are divine instruments to segregate, to control.”

The fire’s glow waned, casting long shadows over their faces. He tossed a twig into the fire, watching it succumb to flame. “These days, everything’s up for sale, even people’s beliefs.”

“The Great Weaver is not a commodity,” she replied, “The Weaver’s Tapestry is vast and intricate, connecting all things. It cannot be bought or sold.”

He looked into the fire, his eyes reflecting its dying light. “That’s what makes it the greatest commodity of all. A god that connects everything, that holds the fabric of existence in its hands—that’s something people would pay any price for.”

“Faith is not about transactions. It’s about belief, about finding meaning beyond the material. The Great Weaver doesn’t weave for profit; the tapestry exists for us to find our place within it, to understand our part in the grand design.”

“Everything has a price. Nothing is sacred.”

“Sacredness is not diminished by those who fail to understand its value. The Great Weaver’s Tapestry is not lessened by the greed of men. It is in the moments when we stand in awe of the vastness, when we feel the threads connect us to something greater, that we truly understand its worth.” His mother’s words spouted from Lysandra’s mouth.

“And here I thought you weren’t one to preach?”

Lysandra scoffed at this and was silent for a moment. “You may not believe in The Great Weaver, Kael, but that doesn’t mean his work is not evident all around us—in the stars above, in the ground beneath, in the very air we breathe. He is not a commodity because He is not owned by anyone; He simply is.”

“He may not belong to anyone, but many people claim Him as their own.”

“This is not the way of a true Damaskian, Kael. You must understand that.

My father and Dorian are extremists. They've taken things too far. Don't let their actions cloud your perception of me or my community."

"You're your own person, I wouldn't align you with anyone else." Kael stirred the fire. "Everyone has to find a way to cope, I suppose."

She gazed at his silhouette against the backdrop of the dying fire, the flickering flames casting shadows that danced across his frame. His presence, steady and unwavering, provided a strange comfort in the encroaching darkness. "And how do you cope, Kael?"

The fire's flickering tendrils whipped out at him, threatening to ensnare him in their false light. He turned and looked out into the darkness of the night. "I just do."



In the restless embrace of night, he found himself in the heart of The Iron Cliffs, but it is not the land he knows. The gravity here is a malevolent force, a tyrant that crushes without mercy. The sky roars with a darkness that swallows stars, and the ground beneath him groans, a beast awakened. He tries to move, to

run, but his limbs are leaden, each movement a battle against an unseen foe that grows stronger with his every breath. Around him, the world of Veridian crumbles. The Meadowlands is torn asunder, its inhabitants cast into the abyss. The Nexus is but a void that devours all light, all life.



“Wake up, we have to move.” She shook him awake. Her voice was hushed but firm, her silhouette a dark shape against the cavern’s yawning emptiness.

Kael groaned, shifting on the cold rock floor. His body ached from days of uneven sleep, but Lysandra was already up, already packed, already pressing buttons on the outdated compass built into her G-suit. The dim glow of its interface cast eerie green light across her face.

“This compass is old, but it says there should be a Strand on the other side of this cavern,” she whispered.

Kael ran a hand over his face, trying to shake the weight of sleep. “Lysandra, this suit runs on solar energy. We have to use it sparingly in these caves.” His voice came out harsher than intended, but she only tightened the strap on her

pack in response.

Then—

“Shh.” Lysandra’s hand shot up, her body going rigid. “I heard something.”

Kael exhaled. “It’s just gravity’s whispers. It’s nothing.”

“No,” she murmured. “Listen.”

They fell silent.

At first, it was just the usual hum—the cavern walls adjusting, the slow, imperceptible pull of the planet’s immense gravity shifting the rock around them. But beneath that... something else. A scrape. A dragging sound, like stone sliding against stone. From the direction they had come.

Kael tensed. His fingers found the handle of his axe, running over its familiar grooves.

Then the cavern *exhaled*.

That was the only way to describe it. The air trembled, a pulse that was neither wind nor movement but something deeper, something that stretched the space around them. The cavern’s walls seemed to stretch and warp, as if the stone itself had briefly forgotten how to hold form. Lysandra staggered back, her breath hitching.

“Did you—?”

“Yes.” Kael swallowed, gripping his weapon. His vision felt *off*, as if the edges of reality had been folded for the briefest moment.

Ahead of them, something moved.

Not a figure, not an animal. The *space* itself.

A shimmer passed over the darkness, like heat rising from stone, but colder. Shapes bent in ways they shouldn’t. Lysandra reached out instinctively, but Kael caught her wrist. “Don’t.”

She turned to him, wide-eyed. “I think it’s a gravity rift.”

Rifts like these weren’t unheard of in places where the planet’s pull was strongest, where unseen forces twisted reality into knots. Some were stable enough to pass through unharmed. Others... swallowed things whole.

The scraping sound grew closer.

A gust of air rushed past them, though the cavern should have been still. Kael gritted his teeth, feeling the weight of the axe in his hand shift unnaturally, as if gravity had hiccupped.

Then—a sound, low and deep, like the groan of a distant landslide. But it wasn't distant.

Lysandra's fingers tightened around his sleeve. The space around them had begun to bend, the walls of the cavern shifting ever so slightly, warping at the edges like ripples in water. The sliver of light ahead—the faint promise of an exit—seemed to *move*, stretching and contracting in the dark. "Kael," she breathed, "something's wrong."

The ground beneath them *lurched*. Lysandra staggered, barely catching herself. Kael felt it too—a sudden increase in pressure, his knees buckling under an invisible force. His vision wavered, the cavern flickering between oppressive darkness and something else—a strange, shimmering distortion in the air, as though they were looking at the world through cracked glass.

Then, a pull.

Lysandra gasped as her feet lifted off the ground. For a heartbeat, she hung in the air, arms flailing, her body twisting midair as if caught in an unseen tide. Kael barely had time to react before the force reversed, *slamming* her back down, sending her sprawling onto the rocky floor.

Kael lunged toward her, only to find his movements sluggish, as if the air itself had thickened. He clenched his jaw, pushing forward against the invisible drag, muscles burning. Lysandra groaned, trying to rise, but her limbs felt leaden. The cavern trembled. The shadows deepened, stretching unnaturally long along the walls. Kael forced himself forward, grabbing Lysandra's wrist just as the air around them *cracked*—a deep, soundless rupture in space.

They had seconds.

Gritting his teeth, Kael yanked her forward. The exit was still there, still shifting, *moving*. If they didn't make it now, they never would.

"Run," he gasped.

They pushed forward against the shifting pull, every step a battle against unseen forces. Lysandra gritted her teeth, lungs burning as she forced herself

through the drag, like wading through water that thickened with every step. Kael kept his grip on her wrist, dragging her when she stumbled. The world behind them was warping, the stone twisting inwards as if being devoured. The force screamed in silence, folding the cavern in on itself.

Then—light.

With a final heave, they burst out into the open. The moment their feet hit the ground outside, gravity snapped back to normal. The pressure lifted. The silence rang loud in their ears, as if the world itself had been holding its breath. Kael stumbled forward, sucking in gulps of air. Lysandra bent over, hands on her knees, shaking.

Then they saw it.

A half-mile away, stretching across the horizon, was the Strand, alive with travelers, a microcosm of Agritavian society in motion. There were those ensconced within vehicles, their shapes odd and angular, crafted to withstand the planet's capricious gravitational whims. Beside them, on foot, were the walkers, their strides measured and deliberate. They were a diverse tapestry of life, some clad in the vibrant garb of The Meadowlands, most in the utilitarian attire of The Iron Cliffs. Among these travelers were the beasts of burden and companionship, creatures both familiar and bizarre. There were the lithe Striders, their long legs dancing across the terrain with a grace that belied their size. And the robust Terradrake, whose hulking forms moved with a ponderous dignity, their backs laden with wares and the dreams of their owners.

Lysandra watched with a mix of wonder and wariness. Kael stood beside her, his gaze lingering on the procession of life and commerce. He looked back at the cavern, at the dark maw that had nearly swallowed them whole. The rift was gone. Only the stillness of the cliffs remained, as if nothing had ever been wrong. He looked at Lysandra, who looked back at him.

"That was..." She was shaking. "I've only read about them. I didn't know they were so..."

He grabbed her hand to steady her, to steady himself. "Yeah..."

They stood there for a long while, gazing out at the vast expanse of light

and wonder, trying to recenter themselves.

“We’d better get a move on,” he finally spoke, breaking the silence that only the wind held. She only nodded. “Cover your face, lest you are recognized,” he said.

“Okay.”



“From navigator to forger.” Dorian paced. “You navigated pre-flight restrictions, isn’t that so?”

No response.

“Is it not?”

“We lost many men in those days.”

“No, you lost too many shipments. If it weren’t for that, air travel across zones would still be permitted.”

Eamon lowered his head, knowing this to be true.

Dorian procured an old compass from his pocket. “We found this in your pack. Do you still use this old tech?”

“It serves me well.”

“You know, times have changed. We have new ways of navigating that you wouldn’t believe, new ways of getting information that would astound you.”

Eamon had heard rumors of the new interrogation techniques employed by the Guild, of their advances in gravitational manipulation. “The Guild still struggles with radio communication across the pockets, don’t they?”

Dorian remembered well his course in Gravitational Communication Engineering. “Redshifting will be overcome some day, just like every obstacle set before us before now. We have yet to master this constant flux of spacetime, but we are not far off. But you know that’s not what I meant.”

“That’ll be the day.”

He set down the compass. “The girl, Lysandra. Why did she enlist your son’s help?”

“The winds of Veridian do not whisper their secrets to me.” An old dictum.

“She must have spoken of The Nexus to you.”

“The Nexus?” Eamon’s chuckle was dry as dust. “A myth for children and fools.”

“And I am neither, and you are no storyteller.” He glared at Eamon, who glared back.

“I navigated Veridian when The Guild stood for honor. What do you stand for?”

Dorian’s eyes narrowed. “The Guild has not changed. It is the world that has shifted, revealing what was always there. The darkness has now cleared for all to see.”

“I see decay. I see rust that gnaws at the bones of this planet. I see you.”

“You think I’m part of the problem? I’m trying to rid The Guild of corruption, not add to it. The world’s become so much more complicated since

your time, and you dare to judge me? You're a relic, Eamon. A fossil. The Guild has no place for sentimentality."

"Is that what you call conscience now?"

Dorian couldn't deny a growing sense of respect for Eamon. And this admiration may have been the only thing keeping Eamon alive. But his patience was thinning. "A system does not just become corrupt overnight, Eamon. If it is so, a large part of the blame has to fall on your generation. The pull of our lineage anchors us; through our children, gravity's debts are settled."

Eamon's silence and avoidance of direct answers irked Dorian. "You know, Eamon, I've been patient. Following every detour you suggested, every false lead. But it's clear now," Dorian said, stepping closer, his tone hardening. "You've been leading me astray on purpose, haven't you?"

Eamon's eyes flickered, a momentary break in his stoic facade.

"I knew something was off when we hit the Iron Glaciers," Dorian continued, his voice like steel. "You never intended to lead me to Kael and Lysandra."

Eamon took a deep breath, his defiance returning. "You think you can intimidate me into compliance? I'd rather mislead you a thousand times over than lead you to them."

Dorian's face softened for a moment. "I think I knew even sooner than that. Your path towards The Nexus is too far north for the comfort of a lightlander. But it's no matter. I'm in no rush." He picked up a small trinket hanging on the wall beside him and examined it. "You know, you could be imprisoned for this?"

Eamon met his gaze steadily. "I have done nothing wrong. My son has done nothing wrong."

Dorian chuckled lightly. "It's funny how malleable the law can be, Eamon." He sat down the trinket and looked at him. "As I've said, I'm not one to bend the laws. I'm trying to reinforce them. But I also have no further use for you." He turned to his adjutant. "Let him go."

The door to the station was unhatched as a burst of freezing wind blew in, sending chills down Eamon's spine. The adjutant grabbed him and pulled him towards the door, but Dorian stopped him. Eamon looked at him. "There's a

Strand about nine or ten miles to the southwest of here. Stay with the wind,” Dorian advised, his tone almost casual.

Eamon’s eyes narrowed. “I know,” he retorted, trying to maintain his composure despite the cold.

Dorian patted him on the back, a gesture that felt both dismissive and oddly respectful. “You just might make it, old man.”



The Strand unfurled before them like a relentless river of constancy, a path trodden by countless souls seeking the solace of predictable gravity. Winding like an unnatural vein through the body of the land, it appeared as mere ribbons of iridescence, shimmering in the light like ephemeral threads spun from stardust. Yet, upon closer inspection, its true intricacy revealed itself—a lattice of energy pulsating with the rhythm of the planet.

They had become part of its flow, their steps synchronized with the pulse of life that moved around them. The suns had arched across the sky, casting long shadows that stretched out like dark fingers across the land. Lysandra watched a handful of travelers who had found respite at a Calibration Station. “I think we

should stop here.”

“Why?” Kael asked, glancing around.

“This compass is old and the needle has been wavering a lot. We need to make sure it’s calibrated right.”

Kael hesitated. “I don’t know about that.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know if I trust automation.”

“Why would you not trust automation?” Lysandra’s brow furrowed in confusion.

“A lot of us don’t trust automation.”

“Us?”

“Denselanders.”

“Don’t you really mean lightlanders?”

“No, I mean denselanders.”

“No, I mean, don’t you mean a lot of denselanders don’t trust lightlanders.”

“No, I mean automation.”

Lysandra sighed, her patience wearing thin. “Trust me, Kael, it’ll be fine.”

Stepping inside, they were greeted by a hum of activity. Several technicians were attending to the needs of a few travelers seeking to fine-tune their instruments. They approached the central console. Lysandra placed the worn compass upon the designated platform, initiating the recalibration process. The station’s sensors sprang to life, and as they waited, Kael’s eyes scanned the screen above the console displaying detailed information. It explained how the Graviton Compass operated by detecting the subtle variations in gravitational pull across the planet’s surface. It highlighted the sensitive gravimetric array that mapped the surrounding gravitational fields, allowing for precise navigation through areas of varying gravity.

“I wish we could trade for a Strider,” Lysandra said as they waited.

“What would we trade? We have little of value.”

“I know. I just said I wish.”

Kael noticed additional information about the density altimeter, which measured the relative ‘thickness’ or density of gravity, a feature crucial for avoiding

or seeking out areas of extreme gravitational pull.

“Hey there, pretty lady. Haven’t I seen you somewhere before?” a voice drawled from the corner.

Startled, Lysandra turned her head to see a man with slicked-back hair and a trench coat casually leaning against a vending machine, tossing a piece of fruit up and down. “Sorry, I don’t think so,” she replied coolly, turning back to Kael. “Can’t this machine go any faster?”

Kael glanced at the calibration screen, his impatience mirroring hers. “Just a bit longer,” he muttered, willing the process to speed up.

As the sensors gathered data, the screen updated with real-time readings, showing how gravity sensors measured subtle fluctuations in gravitational pull, magnetometers detected anomalies in the magnetic field, and solar intensity monitors accounted for variations in sunlight. The station’s dynamic calibration algorithms processed this information, adjusting the compass settings accordingly.

“Nah, I swear I’ve seen you in the papers before,” the man continued, no longer tossing the fruit. “You’re from that one ‘royal’ family, right,” he said, using air quotations. “The Valenwoo--”

“Sorry, you must have me confused with someone else,” she nervously interjected, turning back towards the console. “Come on, damned machine.”

The interface displayed the current gravity strength, magnetic field intensity, and calibration status of their compass. Kael watched intensely as the station aligned the needle with true north, calibrated the internal sensors for gravity and magnetism, and compensated for any variations in solar intensity.

From the corner of her eye, Lysandra watched as the strange man crept towards them, trying to get a better look. “He’s coming this way,” she whispered.

“This was a stupid idea,” Kael said, his voice barely a whisper.

Finally, the process concluded with a confirmation message on the screen: Calibration Successful. Lysandra quickly unplugged the compass and they rushed towards the exit.

“Take care,” the man said behind them.

Just as they were about to step outside, an alarm blared, startling both of them. The console screen flashed red with a message: Unauthorized Device

Detected. Please Report to the Nearest Authority.

Lysandra looked down at the compass, then at Kael. "Kael, did you steal--"

"Shh!" Kael's heart raced as he quickly realized the gravity of their situation. Technicians began to glance in their direction, curiosity turning to suspicion. Kael grabbed the compass and led Lysandra outside, trying to remain inconspicuous despite the alarm ringing through the station. He glanced back to see if anyone was following, then turned to Lysandra. "We need to move quickly and stay off the main paths."

"Can they track these?" Lysandra asked.

Kael, not knowing, tossed it on the ground. "I knew we shouldn't have gone in there."

"It wasn't my fault," she whispered in a panic, "if I had known you had stolen the suits then--"

"Oh just shut up. Come on."

They walked quickly as Navigators entered the station and searched the area. Kael turned around briefly and saw the strange man pointing his finger right at them. "They might not bother us in The Barrens. We need to get off the path now."

"We'll stick out like a sore thumb if we veer off."

"We're already doing that."

As they stepped through the luminescent barrier, the weight was immediate, almost nauseating. The terrain shifted beneath them, a mosaic of rocks and soil that told a different tale than the smooth surface of the trail.

A Guild Navigator drew his service weapon, swiftly adjusting the setting to tracker mode. He input a message in shorthand code: "fugitive." He raised the weapon, taking careful aim at Kael's back. His breathing steady, he locked onto his target and pulled the trigger. A small tracker shot out, embedding itself into Kael's backside. Kael winced at the sudden sting, but the pain was fleeting, barely more than a mosquito bite, so Kael continued on.

The Navigator observed, gesturing subtly to catch the attention of another Navigator down the trail with hand signals. The distant Navigator responded in kind, mirroring the gestures to indicate understanding:

How do you propose we proceed?

The first Navigator paused, eyes tracking the distant figures as they receded into the distance.

Let them go for now. Nowhere to go that direction but the train crossing. Once in range, the Navigators stationed there will get the tracking signal and pursue more serious charges.

The distant Navigator nodded. *Agreed.*



They trudged wearily through the desolate expanse of The Fringe Barrens, the oppressive silence of the landscape enveloping them like a heavy shroud. Each step seemed to echo through the vast emptiness, punctuated only by the distant howl of the wind. In the distance, they spotted the silhouette of an abandoned structure rising against the stark backdrop of The Barrens. Its weathered walls bore the scars of time, and ivy tendrils snaked their way around its crumbling facade. Atop the structure, a six-sided star stood sentinel, its intricate design giving way to a

spiral at its center—the unmistakable symbol of the Damaskians.

They approached cautiously, their footsteps echoing hollowly against the barren soil. Pushing open the creaking doors, they stepped into the dim interior of the temple, the musty scent of decay mingling with the stale air. Their eyes adjusted to the dim light, revealing the remnants of a once-vibrant faith scattered throughout the sacred space. Crumbling statues of The Great Weaver and other revered Damaskian figures loomed solemnly from their alcoves, their weathered features bearing silent witness to the passage of time. Despite its dilapidated state, there was a sense of solemn grandeur that permeated the space, as if the echoes of prayers long since forgotten lingered within its hallowed halls.

A strange creature came from the shadows, its shape a thing unspoken, warped and unknowable. It moved with a sudden violence, an alien grace, and shot through the open window, the air shifting in its wake. The two stood rooted, startled and silent, their breath caught like a thing that might not return.

“Who’s there?” A voice weathered by time shattered the stillness of the abandoned Damaskian temple. They turned towards the source of the voice. From the shadows, a frail silhouette emerged, her features obscured by the veil of age. They did not move. The figure’s eyes pierced through the darkness at them.

“We mean no harm.”

“We seek shelter.”

Her gaze lingered on their weary faces. “In these forsaken halls, where faith has long since fled?” The figure stepped further into the dim light, and they could finally discern the features of her weathered face. Lines of wisdom and hardship etched deep furrows across her brow, while her sightless eyes gazed out into the darkness with an unfathomable depth. It was then that they realized the old woman was blind. The hollow sockets a void that seemed to swallow the very essence of her being. “You’ll forgive me, I don’t get many visitors anymore.” There was a hint of sadness in her tone, mingled with a touch of something darker.

“We didn’t mean to bother you. We’ll be on our way.”

“No. Stay.” The old woman’s insistence held them in place. “There are many dangers in these lands, but I am not one of them.” The old woman’s voice carried a note of calm authority. “Why are you all the way out here?”

“We’re looking for the holy land.” Lysandra’s eyes searched the old woman’s face for any sign of recognition or understanding. In the depths of her sightless gaze, there was a flicker of recognition. The sudden snap of an animal trap shattered the eerie silence like a thunderclap, startling the wanderers.

“The Nexus.” She paused for a long time, walking towards the animal trap. “Many have sought The Nexus. But have any succeeded? Has anyone returned to tell the tale?”

They shuffled with uncertainty.

“We were once the stewards of this temple, we Sisters of Damaskus, entrusted with the sacred task of preserving the teachings of our ancestors and seeking enlightenment in the mysteries of the cosmos.” As she spoke, the old woman’s hands deftly removed the dead animal from the trap, practiced and sure despite her blindness. With a solemn reverence, she cradled the creature in her arms.

“But as the years passed and the land began to wither, the Sisters faced a choice. The gravitational shifts, the dying agriculture—the signs of decay were all around us, and the people began to flee from this land in search of greener pastures. The temple fell into disrepair as the faithful dwindled, and the Sisters’ numbers waned. Yet, our faith remained unshakeable. We decided to make a pilgrimage for The Nexus, a quest born of desperation and hope, seeking salvation awaiting us in the heart of the cosmos.”

Her fingers traced the contours of the animal trap with a quiet reverence. In her touch, there was a palpable connection to the past—a tangible link to the memories of a time long gone.

“But when the time came to depart, I chose to stay behind. My duty lay here, with the remnants of our faith and the memories of those who came before.”

Her sightless gaze drifted to the crumbling walls of the temple.

“But the loneliness... It has been a heavy burden to bear. To watch as the world outside faded into oblivion, leaving me behind to tend to the remnants.” A chill swept through the air, causing her to shiver.

“Only a few of us remained behind to tend to the temple. One day, a stranger came to our door. He claimed to have been sent by the Sisters. It was much later that I learned the truth. The Sisters who had gone on the pilgrimage had told this man of our location, before they were all slaughtered or sold as slaves. He was the ultimate test from The Great Weaver. A trial by fire that would push me to the brink of despair.”

She paused for a long moment. Her nails bit into the flesh of her palms. “He took my eyesight along with the remaining Sisters from me, leaving me alone in darkness, with only the light of truth to guide my way.”

She fell silent. The old woman’s hands moved deftly to kindle a fire in the heart of the chamber. Its flickering flames cast a warm glow upon the worn stone walls. “You will not find The Nexus.” She turned to face Kael and Lysandra with a sense of purpose burning bright within her sightless gaze. “But if by some miracle you should, I ask of you a solemn task—a duty that I am unable to fulfill.”

She reached into the folds of her robes, producing a small pouch that she cradled in her trembling hands. “These are the ashes of my sisters. They were taken from me by the cruel hand of fate, their spirits lost to the darkness that now surrounds us.” Tears welled in the old woman’s sightless eyes, tracing silent paths down her weathered cheeks. “I ask of you to take these ashes there, to release them into the heart of the cosmos, and to grant my sisters the peace that has long eluded them.” The old woman placed the pouch of ashes into Lysandra’s outstretched hands. Lysandra nodded solemnly and looked at Kael, who mirrored her tender

expression. A silent understanding flowed between the two of them, as well as a deep-seated fear. Lysandra's grip tightened around the pouch.

"We will not rest until they have found peace."



The room was small and cold, its crumbling walls bathed in the dim silver light of the fractured moons. The air carried a faint musty smell, tinged with the sharpness of old stone. Kael stood near the doorway, arms crossed, his pack slumped at his feet. Lysandra was kneeling by the single cracked window, fiddling with a shard of glass.

"That woman..." Kael began, breaking the silence. "Her story doesn't change anything for you?"

Lysandra glanced over her shoulder, her fingers still on the shard. "No." Her voice was calm, but there was steel beneath it.

Kael frowned. "Even if The Nexus isn't real? Even if it's just—"

“It’s real,” she interrupted, her tone sharp. She set the shard down and stood, brushing dust from her knees. “You don’t have to believe in it, Kael. I’m not asking you to. But you agreed to help me.”

He exhaled through his nose, a hint of frustration flickering across his face. “Yeah, I did.”

“Then why keep questioning it?”

Kael didn’t answer right away. His gaze wandered to the darkened corners of the room, avoiding hers. “Guess I don’t see the point in chasing something that doesn’t—might not exist.”

Lysandra stepped closer, her eyes searching his face. “And I don’t see the point in staying still while everything falls apart around me. I’d rather believe in something than let the world grind me down.”

Kael opened his mouth to respond, but stopped himself. He turned away, running a hand through his hair. “Fine. Believe what you want.”

Lysandra let the silence hang between them for a moment before speaking again, her tone softer this time. “I need to change out of this suit.”

Kael looked back at her, his brow furrowing slightly.

“Can you—” She gestured vaguely.

He blinked, realization dawning, and turned around quickly. “Right. Yeah. I’ll just...” He trailed off, facing the wall with exaggerated focus.

Behind him, he heard the faint sound of clasps being undone, followed by the rustle of fabric. He clenched his jaw, willing himself to focus on the cracks in the stone in front of him, the faint draft against his skin—anything but the small noises behind him.

He turned his head slightly, catching her reflection in a shard of broken glass on the floor. She was down to her bare skin now, her hair loose and tumbling over her shoulders. His gaze lingered for only a moment before he forced it away, heat rising in his cheeks.

“You’re not peeking, are you?” Lysandra’s voice had a teasing edge, but there was an undercurrent of genuine concern.

Kael snorted. “Of course not.”

“Okay,” she said after a moment. “You can turn around now.”

He turned cautiously, his eyes flicking to her. She was in her lighter gear now, her hair loose and falling over her shoulders. She stood near the window, her silhouette framed by the fractured moonlight.

For a moment, neither of them spoke. Then Lysandra broke the silence. “Do you think she was right? About us not finding it?”

He met her gaze, his expression softening slightly. “You’re not going to give up, are you?”

Lysandra tilted her head, studying him. “What about you? What are you hoping to find out here?”

He hesitated. “Just trying to make sure you don’t get yourself killed.”

Her lips quirked into a half-smile, but she didn’t press him further. Instead, she turned back to the window, picking up the shard of glass she’d left there.

Kael watched her for a moment before speaking. “You should get some rest. We’ve got a long way to go tomorrow.”

She nodded, tucking the shard into her pack. “Goodnight, Kael.”

“Goodnight,” he replied, his voice low.

As Lysandra settled against the wall, Kael remained where he was, watching the faint rise and fall of her shoulders in the moonlight. Eventually, he turned away, sinking to the floor with his back to the wall. He closed his eyes, but sleep didn’t come easily.

*“May your equilibrium endure, and may The Nexus cradle your dreams.
Until the next convergence of paths, may gravity guide your steps.”*

- Damaskian farewell

III

For days they trekked through the unforgiving high-density zone, following the old woman's directions. Their bodies, gaunt and hollow, clung to the last vestiges of strength. Their stomachs gnawed at their insides, demanding sustenance that remained elusive. Kael's eyes, once sharp and determined, now held a desperate glimmer. Lysandra's lips were cracked, her skin stretched taut over bone.

They had become shadows in a land of perpetual gravity. And then, as if the universe itself relented, they stepped across an invisible threshold. The transition was neither abrupt nor dramatic. Instead, the air lightened imperceptibly. Lysandra glanced at Kael, her eyes widening. The trees, once stooped and weary, stood a little taller. The ground yielded beneath their feet, as if welcoming them home.

"We've crossed over."

He nodded. The lower-density zone stretched before them, a realm of possibility. Here, gravity was a kinder lover, its embrace gentle rather than suffocating. The air tasted sweeter, and for the first time in days, they felt hunger without despair. As they walked, their steps grew lighter.

They came upon it without fanfare. The water lay still as glass, a sheen of pale light skimming its surface, shifting faintly like breath caught in the lungs of the

ground. The reflections cast back the world in fragments, broken and strange, as if the place itself held no memory of what it had been. Kael's eyes widened as he gazed across its surface. "What is this place?"

"I recognize it from the picture in my family's book. Lake Eclipse. My ancestors settled here."

The flora danced in slow pirouettes. Trees, their trunks elongated, stretched toward the sky, their leaves forming delicate canopies that seemed to defy gravity. Mosses clung to the cliffs, their tendrils floating. Fish, their scales iridescent, swam in languid circles, their movements graceful and deliberate. Kael stepped into the shallows without hesitation, the water lapping at his boots. He knelt, hands plunging into the cold shimmer, the surface breaking around his fingers like something alive and knowing.

"Wait."

"Lysandra, feel it," Kael said, his voice low with wonder. "It's like silk."

"The water is sacred," she said, her tone sharp but quiet. Her eyes didn't leave the surface, watching the way it caught the light. "You're not supposed to touch it. Let alone swim."

Kael knelt deeper, the water creeping up his thighs, ripples spiraling out in perfect circles. "It's so cold," he said, half to himself, his hands trailing through the shimmer. "It's nice."

But as his skin touched its depths, it felt as if a legion of icy needles were piercing him all at once. Waves of excruciating pain electrified his veins, wrenching

a guttural gasp from him. Lysandra bolted towards him but stopped at the edge of the Lake. Invisible jellyfish—their translucent bodies like shards of glass—swarmed around him. And they seemed to dance—tiny phantoms, their tendrils trailing like forgotten dreams. They swirled around him, stinging, and he felt their venom seep into his blood. His legs grew heavy, his breath shallow.

“Kael!”

The pain surged, sharp and unrelenting, tearing through him like a blade turned slow. Lysandra’s voice was a distant hum, her words drowned beneath the roar in his skull. The edges of the world collapsed inward, shadows pooling thick and heavy. The light faltered, and he knew, with the certainty of a falling stone, that he would not rise again.

Dear Weaver, help me...



He awoke to a world softened by pain, the sharp edges of reality blurred into a gentle haze. Above him, his mother's face hovered like a benevolent moon. Her hair cascaded down like a curtain of golden twilight. The stings that had sent him into darkness now throbbed with a dull ache.

"Kael, you're awake!"

His throat felt dry, his words coming slow. "What happened?"

"You were stung. Mourning Veils. But you'll live."

As his vision cleared, he saw that Lysandra spoke to him. Her hands were streaked with the juice of some strange fruit, the color bright and unnatural against her skin. She turned and pointed to a crooked shape rising from the ground in the

distance.

“That tree. Zephyrfruit. It heals the wounds.”

He pushed himself upright, the ache in his limbs sharp but distant now, like a memory of pain. A laugh spilled from him, sudden and unwarranted. Lysandra’s laughter joined his, soft at first, then rising, filling the still air. For a moment, the weight of the world lifted, and they were just two souls beneath an endless sky.

“I thought I was done for,” he said, shaking his head.

“Their stings,” she said, her voice quieter now, “they play tricks on the mind. Makes you feel like you’ve already died.” She handed him the fruit, what little was left, and he took it without a word, biting into its flesh. The taste was strange, bitter and sweet at once, like the memory of something long gone. “We’d best find shelter,” Lysandra said, rising to her feet. Her gaze swept the horizon, sharp and wary. “This place is a liar. It hides its teeth.”



She sat cross-legged, her eyes fixed on *The Nexustratum*, the tome resting heavy in her lap. The flickering light from the fire danced over her face, tracing the contours of her brow, the curve of her mouth, like some unseen hand painting her into the scene. Kael watched her in silence for a time, the steady turn of her eyes over the page mesmerizing. Finally, he broke the quiet.

“Why do you read it?”

Lysandra didn’t answer at first, her gaze lingering on the words before her. When she looked up, her expression was distant, her voice soft. “It’s been my steadfast companion since the days of my youth.”

“Surely you’ve read it all by now.”

“Indeed I have,” she said, a faint smile tugging at her lips. “But like a wellspring of knowledge, its depths are boundless. Each reading unveils new truths—truths I wasn’t ready to see the time before.”

Kael tilted his head, curiosity flickering in his eyes. “Why don’t you read it out loud?”

She raised a brow. “You want to hear it?”

He nodded, his expression earnest. “There’s very little time for us denselanders to read. We know stories, but books... they’re a rare thing.”

For a moment, she said nothing, her fingers brushing the edges of the page as if weighing his request. Then, without another word, she turned the book gently to its genesis. The pages whispered against each other, the sound soft and reverent, like prayer.

And she began to read.

In the beginning, there was matter without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the spirit of The Great Weaver moved upon it. And The Great Weaver said, Let there be a tapestry: and there was a tapestry. And The Great Weaver saw the tapestry, that it was good: and The Great Weaver divided the tapestry from the darkness. And The Great Weaver called the tapestry Veridian.

And from Veridian, The Great Weaver formed the first lifeforms, Aedan

and Evanna. And The Great Weaver blessed them, and The Great Weaver said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish Veridian, and subdue it: and have dominion over every living thing that shall moveth upon Veridian.

And The Great Weaver placed Aedan and Evanna within a garden unlike any other, a sanctuary where the threads of the tapestry wove life in its most radiant form. The air was rich with the scent of blossoms unfurling in eternal bloom, their petals glistening with the morning's first light. Rivers of liquid silver coursed through the land, their shimmering waters feeding roots that delved deep into the heart of Veridian.

And The Great Weaver said, Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed, and every tree, in the which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat. But of the tapestry of The Nexus, where I weaveth the quilt of the cosmos, thou shalt not touch; for in the day that thou touchest thereof thou shalt surely fracture.

And Aedan and Evanna lived in the bliss of ignorance, until the day their curiosity begot disobedience, and they touched the sacred quilt. And the moment they touched the tapestry of The Nexus, their feet no longer found the ground, and they were unbound by gravity, floating amidst the endless

threads of the cosmos. Their eyes were opened, and they saw the tapestry in its fullness, its infinite design stretching beyond their understanding. But shame filled them, for they knew they had fractured the sacred weave.

And they hid themselves, drifting among the shadows of The Nexus, hoping to escape the gaze of The Great Weaver. And they heard the voice of The Great Weaver, who called unto Aedan, and said unto him, Where art thou? And Aedan answered, I heard thy voice, and I was afraid, for I had strayed from the weave; and I hid myself.

And The Great Weaver said, Who told thee that thou hadst strayed? Hast thou touched the tapestry whereof I commanded thee that thou shouldest not touch? And Aedan and Evanna both said, The great whispers beguiled us, and we did touch.

Therefore, The Great Weaver drove out the man and woman, casting them from The Nexus. And The Great Weaver said, Thou shalt no longer float among the threads of my design; thou art bound to Veridian, where gravity shall anchor thee to the ground from whence thou wast formed.

And it came to pass, as they fell from the heights of The Nexus, that the world of Veridian was rent asunder by their transgression. The lands were divided, each unto its own gravity. The Meadowlands, light and airy, were torn from

The Iron Cliffs, heavy and unyielding. And so, Aedan and Evanna were set to wander the fractured world, bound to the dirt, always yearning for the heights of the sacred weave they could never again touch.

As she read aloud, her voice threaded through the stillness of the cave, the cadence of the words blending with the dim light that pooled around them. It was a fragile thing, that quiet, held intact until a faint sound at the edge of their awareness unraveled it. A soft pattering. Lysandra stopped mid-sentence, and Kael turned his head toward the mouth of the cave.

The sky beyond wept, but not like any rain he had known. The droplets fell as if the heavens mourned in slow motion, reluctant to let go. Each drop hung in the air, suspended between descent and return, shimmering like molten silver against the low light. The sound was not the insistent drumming of rain but something softer, a gentle rhythm that seemed to breathe with the world itself.

Kael stumbled as he rose, his injuries pulling at him like unseen weights, but the sight drew him forward. Lysandra followed in silence. Together, they reached the edge of the cave, the curtain of rain just before them.

Kael reached out a hand, rough and scarred, catching a single droplet. It rested there, quivering and weightless, before slipping through his fingers, leaving only the memory of coolness behind.

Lysandra tilted her face skyward, her light hair clinging to her cheeks. A soft smile played across her lips as she extended her tongue, catching one of the

languid drops. It lingered there, a perfect sphere, before breaking and vanishing as if it had never been. “Even in Aetherius,” she said, her voice hushed, “we don’t get much rain.”

They watched the rain in silence, the stillness between them not heavy but whole, like the pause between breaths. The rain fell in a slow and deliberate rhythm, each droplet suspended as if reluctant to touch the ground. It seemed to breathe with them, to stretch time into something elastic and unending.

After a while, Kael spoke, his voice low and uncertain. “Who was he? The one you lost...”

Her eyes, which had been tracing the unhurried descent of the rain, now dropped to the soil darkened by its touch. “Arin,” she said.

“He was from the dense lands?”

She nodded, her fingers tightening around the edge of her cloak. “Yes.”

Kael turned his gaze to her, the quiet vulnerability in her voice stirring something in him. “Tell me about him. How did you meet him?”

She didn’t answer at first, her silence broken only by the soft rhythm of the rain. When she finally spoke, her voice was distant, as though the words were not hers but echoes carried from some far-off place. “It was during the Festival of Damaskus,” she began, her voice quiet, as if the memory itself demanded reverence. “The lanterns were strung everywhere, casting the streets in hues of gold and crimson. I was wandering through the maze of stalls, the air thick with the scent of sweetbread and the hum of old songs, when I saw him.”

Her gaze turned inward, her eyes fixed on something beyond the rain. “He was standing by a strange, intricate stone, his head tilted, studying it as though it might reveal some secret. He looked so out of place, so intent. And then, he saw me. Our eyes met.”

She paused, and Kael saw her hand tremble as she wiped at her face. A tear traced its way down her cheek, distinct even in the rain, as though the grief it carried made it heavier. “By the time the lanterns dimmed,” she said, her voice breaking just slightly, “I knew I had fallen for him. And I knew the danger we were both in.”

Kael’s brow furrowed, the weight of her words settling over him. “What was he doing in the light lands?”

“He was sent as a messenger,” she said, her tone hardening, “to help settle a dispute between the lands. A disagreement about sharing resources and opening trade routes.” Her eyes dropped again to the wet soil. “He did not get his way.”

Kael nodded, the rain between them filling the silence that followed. It was not a silence of questions left unasked, but one of understanding, of the things that words could not reach.

“I know you think I’m not attuned to the problems of denselanders,” Lysandra said, her voice gentle, “and I certainly haven’t the lived experience. But Arin taught me so much—so much of the troubles faced by your people.”

Kael turned his gaze toward her, his jaw tightening. “They’re not my people,” he said. “They’re just people.”

Lysandra nodded slowly, her expression unreadable. “I understand.”

For a while, they sat in silence. The rain was easing now, its cadence softening, the droplets thinning until the sky seemed more mist than storm. Kael’s eyes drifted to where the gray veil began to lift, revealing the contours of the land.

“Kael,” Lysandra said, her voice breaking the quiet. “Why did you come on this journey with me, really?”

Her question lingered between them, unbroken by the fading rhythm of the rain. Kael kept his eyes on the horizon, the mist lifting like a curtain drawn back on memories he had long tried to bury. When he finally spoke, his voice was quieter than Lysandra had ever heard it. “There’s a memory of my mother I hold onto,” he began. “She’d made me a cloak, woven from the feathers of the Meadowlark. It was light as air, shimmering in the lantern glow. She said it was to remind me that no matter how heavy the world felt, there was always a way to find lightness.”

His voice, usually steady and sure, wavered as he continued. “Five years ago, she passed. Gravitational Density Syndrome. A rare disease, cruel and relentless. The weight became too much for her. Eventually, she couldn’t even get up.” He paused, the words catching in his throat. “We couldn’t afford the treatment. The doctors, their medicine... might as well have been on another planet.”

The cave was silent save for the soft hiss of the last droplets hitting the soil. Lysandra’s face was turned toward him, her features softened by his grief. “I’m so sorry, Kael,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

He gazed into her eyes, searching them as if they held some echo of a world he'd lost. For a fleeting moment, she was his mother—the gentle curve of her face, the quiet strength in her gaze, the way her presence softened the edges of the harshest truths. It struck him like a blade, sharp and deep, the ache of what was gone. He wanted to tell her, to say aloud the unbearable weight of it, but the words withered in his throat. How could he burden her with that? How could he tell her that every time she looked at him like that, it made him ache for something he could never have again? That it wasn't just comfort she gave him, but the cruel reminder of what he'd lost?

So he said nothing, only held her gaze for a moment too long, and then looked away, carrying the silence like a wound he'd never let heal. In the tranquil hush, two insects, their bodies intertwined, floated amidst the falling rain. One appeared lifeless, its vibrancy extinguished, while the other clung desperately to it, as if refusing to let go could somehow rewrite the inevitable.



In the waning light, a lone creature ventured forth. The Stalker, its sleek form a silhouette against the vastness of the trees. The rain fell in a slow procession around it, droplets suspended as if in reverence to the creature's passage. It moved with a deliberate grace, each step a calculated dance between the droplets, its scales glistening with the moisture of a world unhurried by time. It emitted a low, haunting hum that reverberated with the rhythm of the rain, each note lingering in the air before gently fading into the quiet. A siren song that was both a lullaby and a dirge.

The Gossamer, drawn by the ethereal melody, ventured forth from their hiding places, mesmerized by the promise of the call. The Stalker, cloaked in the mist, waited with the patience of the eternal. Its prey, spellbound, moved closer,

each flutter a dance orchestrated by the Stalker's song. And then, in a moment as swift as the falling raindrops, the Stalker struck. The hum ceased. The Gossamer, consumed, became one with the land it once fluttered over, and the Stalker's hum rose again, a haunting echo in the gathering dark.



The land around them had unraveled into chaos, a world torn at its seams. At one turn, the jagged teeth of cliffs juttied skyward, at another, an endless sweep of wheat gave way to dunes of shifting sand, then jungle rising like a wall of green. They climbed a ridge, the loose stone crumbling underfoot, and as they reached the crest, the land fell away before them into a strange and trembling void.

They stood at the edge of the only known anti-gravity zone in Agritavia. Here, the ground was a mother unsure of her children, torn between holding them close and casting them into the unrelenting abyss of the heavens. Far off, a railroad track stretched across the emptiness, its iron lines thin as a hair, vanishing into the pale and distant light.

Lysandra stood frozen, her breath shallow, her eyes fixed on the fragile bridge that dared to cross the sky. A cold fear settled deep in her gut, heavy as stone.

“How long until the train comes through?”

“Your guess is as good as mine.”

The ground underfoot was treacherous, a mix of solidity and shadow, where one may walk with leaden steps only to find themselves suddenly unmoored,

footprints left hanging in the air like the last words of a sentence left unfinished. The sky was a deep bruise, colors bleeding into one another—indigo, violet, a sickly yellow at the horizon where the suns’ rays grappled with the strange forces at play. It was a painter’s palette, knocked askew, colors running where they will. The air was thick with the scent of iron and ozone, a metallic tang that filled the lungs and weighed down the tongue. This was no place for the weak-hearted. It was a land that demanded respect.

An hour passed before they heard the whistle. A locomotive, stretching a half-mile long. Twin turbines protruded from its flanks, whirring with a mesmerizing hum as they harnessed the power of Veridian’s elemental forces.

“Once we start after it, we’ll be out in the open. We have to time it so we can jump on the last car without standing out in the open for too long. They’ll try to gun us down if they see us.”

“How do you know this?”

“A friend of mine used to hop trains.”

She nodded, but inside her fear grew.

“Now!”

They jumped to their feet, their bodies protesting the abrupt departure from rest. The train was a living thing, its steel sinews flexing as it navigated the treacherous land between gravities. They ran alongside the tracks as the train slowed way down, each car shuddering and adjusting to the capricious whims of gravity, maintaining their own localized gravitational fields.

They moved low through the tall grass. Though the train had slowed significantly, they were still barely faster than it. As Kael sprinted, he felt a sharp twinge of pain from the sting on his leg. With each stride, the wound throbbed. The scent of the seeping wound carried through the air. The Stalker had caught up to its scent. It moved forward with deadly grace, shimmering in the dim light.

Sensing the weakness in its prey, it lunged forward with lightning speed, its fangs bared and venom dripping.

Lysandra's keen senses caught the movement just in time, her instincts kicking into overdrive. She grabbed Kael's arm, pulling him off course just as the strike narrowly missed its mark.

"Dear Weaver, what was that?!"

"I have no idea!"

They veered away from the creature's reach, their pace quickening as they raced towards the safety of the departing train.

But the Stalker was relentless. It recovered swiftly, its gleaming eyes locking onto Kael with renewed determination. The creature lunged again, its muscles coiling and releasing like a spring, fangs leading the charge. Kael stumbled, the throbbing pain in his leg making his movements sluggish. Lysandra spun around, her eyes wide as she saw the Stalker closing in. Her heart thundered in her chest as her gaze darted across the terrain, desperate for something—anything. Then, as if on instinct, Lysandra's hand drifted to her belt. Without thinking, she pulled the shard of glass free, its jagged edge catching the faint light that lingered in the air. She held it in her palm, its weight solid against her skin. Her fingers wrapped around it, not quite consciously, but as if her body had decided it belonged there, in her hand.

"Hold still!" she shouted, stepping between Kael and the beast.

The Stalker lunged, and Lysandra thrust the shard upward, meeting its charge with a desperate swing. The glass sank into the creature's hide just as it

collided with her, the force of the impact knocking her back. The Stalker screeched, its movements jerky as it twisted and recoiled, dark blood seeping from the wound.

Kael scrambled to his feet, adrenaline surging through him despite the pain in his leg. He grabbed Lysandra's arm, pulling her up as the Stalker writhed in agony.

"That was reckless," he said, his voice low, but there was no bite to it. Only awe. He watched her, his gaze softening as she stood, her chest heaving, the bloodied shard still gripped tightly in her hand.

The creature wasn't finished. Though wounded, it snapped its fangs in a rage, its body coiling for another attack. Breathing heavily, Kael peered around the boulder, spotting the train just ahead. "We have to make it," he gasped.

"Go," Lysandra urged, her voice firm. "I'll distract it."

Before Kael could protest, Lysandra picked up a nearby rock and hurled it at the Stalker, hitting it squarely on the snout. The creature recoiled, hissing in anger. Kael seized the moment, sprinting towards the train with all the strength he could muster. Lysandra followed close behind, the Stalker still in pursuit but momentarily disoriented.

They reached the train just as it began to pick up speed again. Kael reached out, his fingers grazing the cold metal of the last car adorned with the sigils of The Navigation Guild. With a grunt of effort, he hoisted himself up, turning to extend his hand to Lysandra. She leapt, her fingers locking with his. As the train sped away, the Stalker gave one last menacing hiss before disappearing into the tall grass.

As the last car crossed into the anti-gravity zone, a hush fell. The ground released its hold, and for a moment, they were adrift—two souls untethered from the world. Kael’s steel grip tightened around the cold metal, his eyes on Lysandra. Lysandra’s hand is clasped in his, her lifeline in a realm where Veridian’s embrace was but a memory.

The train gained speed. Around them, heavy rocks floated by, a silent but threatening procession. Lysandra’s body was a pendulum, swinging on the hinge that was Kael’s arm with the momentum of the train as it hurtled through the mile-long stretch. Amidst the danger, Kael couldn’t help but gaze in awe at his surroundings.

If this place weren’t so uninhabitable, one might think this was The Nexus.

Lysandra felt the pull of the gravity as her grip loosened. The train whistled a lone cry.

“Don’t you dare let go!”

“I’ve got you!” But he didn’t know for how long.

The pull lessened. The air thinned and they drifted into a gentler current. The ground below them gave way to the cold metal of the train car, and they came

to rest there, their bodies heavy with the weight of what they had escaped. Their chests rose and fell, breaths shallow and quick. The metal beneath them was colder than the air, like the touch of a dead thing through their suits. The hum of the train, low and constant, rattled through their bones.

“We’d better strap on,” Kael muttered, his voice rough. “You can’t trust the pockets out here.”

“At least we weren’t shot at,” Lysandra said, her tone dry but unsteady. Her attention shifted when she noticed something glinting between them, catching the faint light. She frowned, leaning up slightly. The shard of glass, smeared with blood, lay where it had fallen during the chaos.

Kael’s eyes dropped to it too. He tilted his head, his brow furrowing. “You still have that?”

Lysandra picked up the shard gingerly, its jagged edges glinting with menace. She stared at it for a long moment, turning it between her fingers, as if trying to make sense of its presence. “I guess I do.” She looked at him, but Kael’s eyes were now elsewhere. Lysandra followed his gaze to the sky above.

Drifters in driftsuits rode the unseen sky currents. They soared with an elegance born of mastery over the whims of gravity, a dance of freedom and abandon. She watched the drifters with a mix of awe and trepidation. Their graceful forms, silhouetted against the vast canvas of the sky, were like specters from another world. And as they glided effortlessly above, a chill ran down her spine.



The hiss of steam and the groan of metal broke the stillness, the iron beast shuddering to a halt. Kael stirred, the rhythmic clatter of wheels now a memory fading into silence. He turned to Lysandra, still folded into restless sleep, her face pale in the dim light. “Lysandra,” he murmured, shaking her shoulder gently. “I think we’re at the station.”

She blinked awake, disoriented, her eyes searching his face before drifting to the shadowed world beyond. The faint glow of lanterns flickered through the rising steam, shapes moving like ghosts in the murk.

Poised on the edge of the rooftop, they began their descent, their steps slow and deliberate, the iron beneath them slick with dew. The low hum of the engine thrummed in the night, swallowing the sound of their movements as if the great machine itself conspired to keep their passage unseen.

Kael reached the ground first, the weight unfamiliar after so long spent riding its restless steel veins. Lysandra followed, her feet touching down with a hesitance that betrayed the ache of the journey. They stood together on the platform, the lantern-lit mist curling around their boots, the vast silence of the world pressing close.

“Stop right there!”

They had barely taken a few steps when a figure approached them, the insignia of the ACD — Agritavian Control Division — emblazoned on his uniform, with gravitational lines intertwining to form a harmonious whole. He was of medium height and build. Next to his badge on the midnight blue uniform gleamed the engraved nameplate: Officer Thorne. At his side, he carried the standard issue rifle. “You are under arrest for violations of the Transit Integrity and Safety Statute. You will come with me.”

Lysandra’s breath caught in her throat, and her mind raced. “There must be some mistake--”

“Lysandra.” With a glance, Kael urged her not to speak.

“There is no mistake. Please do not resist.”



The cell was a box of stone and shadow, its walls weeping with damp that gathered in slick trails along the seams. The single barred window admitted a gray and withered light, enough only to make the darkness deeper. The air smelled of rust and decay, the ghost of suffering long since passed but not forgotten. Beneath their feet, the floor was rough-hewn and uneven, etched with the scuffs of restless shoes and the faint stains of old despair.

Lysandra sat against the wall, her knees drawn to her chest, her voice low and trembling like a thing trapped. “I can’t bear the thought of it,” she said, her eyes fixed on the narrow slit of sky beyond the bars. “Prison. Do you know what they’ll do to me in there?” She turned to Kael, her face pale in the half-light, her fear as raw and naked as an open wound. “Someone like me. Do you understand what that means?”

“Panic won’t serve us, Lysandra,” Kael said, his voice steady, a stone in the flood of her fear.

She turned on him, her eyes bright with despair, her voice fraying at the edges. “But what will? You just sit there, as if resigned to our fate.” The words came sharp, cutting through the damp air, her desperation spilling over, unable to be contained. It clung to her like the weight of the cell itself, pressing down, suffocating.

“Lysandra,” Kael began, his voice low, measured. “I’ve seen the legal machine grind a man to dust. My friend’s uncle, Aric—he was a merchant in Calvaron. Honest as the day is long. Never dabbled in anything shady, never broke a law worth mentioning. He was the kind to call out injustice, even when it put him at odds with the Great Families. Families like yours.”

Lysandra flinched, her gaze shifting to the damp floor, but Kael went on. “One day, they accused him of smuggling. No proof. No witnesses. Didn’t matter. The authorities pressed, relentless, like wolves around a wounded beast. Aric fought. Tried to clear his name, but the system wasn’t built for that. It was built to devour. They convicted him on evidence so flimsy it might as well have been a shadow. And then they sent him away. The Abyssal Citadel. You know the place. A prison so remote none of us could even visit, let alone save him.”

His eyes found hers, steady and unflinching. “He was swallowed whole, Lysandra. The system doesn’t care if you’re guilty or innocent. You don’t outwit it. You don’t fight it. It’s a force unto itself.”

The weight of Kael’s words hung between them, a pall over Lysandra’s fragile resolve. She sat in silence until a voice, low and hoarse, rose from the adjoining cell.

“There are fates worse than prison.”

Both Kael and Lysandra turned, straining their eyes against the dimness. The speaker’s face remained hidden, shrouded in shadow, his words lingering like a cold draft through the room. Before either could reply, a shrill buzzer tore through the stale air. The heavy clunk of the cell door unlocking followed, and Officer

Thorne stepped into view.

Kael's gaze fell on the small pouch tied to Thorne's belt, its frayed strings barely concealing a faint gray powder within. His stomach churned. "The Sisters' ashes," he murmured, leaning toward Lysandra. "Why does he carry them?"

"Some Damaskians believe it's good luck," she whispered back, her voice tight. "Carrying another's ashes, especially of loved ones, is said to bring protection and blessings from The Great Weaver."

Kael scoffed, shaking his head, but Lysandra's expression darkened. "We have to get those ashes back, Kael," she said, her voice edged with urgency. "Do you understand? We can't leave them with him. It's—it's wrong."

Before Kael could answer, Thorne approached their cell, his boots ringing hollow against the stone floor. His face betrayed nothing but a grim purpose. "You two," he barked. "With me." As the door creaked open, he turned to the adjoining cell, addressing the shadowed figure. "You, too."

Kael exchanged a glance with Lysandra, doubt flickering in his eyes like a candle in the wind. She met his gaze, the fire of her determination igniting his own. "We'll find a way to get them back."



They'd been marched from their cells into a sterile chamber where their names were logged, their chains weighed and measured as if such calculations held meaning. Officers with dead eyes and clipped voices stamped papers and passed them across desks, each act a ritual devoid of soul. Lysandra had tried to catch glimpses of their intent, scanning documents before they disappeared into the maw of the system. Kael stood silent, his jaw set, as if by saying nothing he might somehow remain unseen, unspoken, untouched.

They were loaded into a vehicle without ceremony. Its interior reeked of oil and damp leather, the floor slick beneath their feet. The engine churned with a low growl as the world outside turned to silhouettes—trees stripped of their shape, a horizon swallowed by shadow. No words passed between them, only the rhythmic jolt of the wheels against uneven ground. When the vehicle came to a halt, the doors opened onto the enveloping darkness of the night. They were pushed forward, stumbling on uneven ground before being ushered through a heavy steel door that closed behind them with a hollow finality. The air inside was thick and

stale, carrying with it a faint tang of rust and despair.

They found themselves in a dimly lit corridor, the walls lined with peeling paint and long streaks of grime. The faint echo of voices drifted toward them, distorted and distant, as if filtered through water. Lysandra's steps faltered, her hand brushing the wall as if for balance. "This is no prison," she whispered. Her voice carried a tremor that hadn't been there before, her confidence unraveling thread by thread in the oppressive dark.

The room was a cacophony of voices. The cavernous space smelt of unwashed bodies and the acrid tang of fear, with walls lined with dark, moisture-stained stone dimly lit by flickering torches. The floor was a patchwork of worn stone and dirt, trodden by countless feet, both free and bound. A raised platform stood at the far end, where a man's voice boomed, resonating through the chamber. Around it, a motley crowd of merchants and slavers, eyes like sharks, and the curious, drawn by the spectacle of despair, gathered. Shadows flicker across the faces of the onlookers, casting them in a sinister tableau of greed and anticipation.

In the midst of this, Kael and Lysandra stood, the focus of all eyes. Lysandra's wrists ached within the Graviton Bindings, the metal cold and unyielding. Her eyes darted around, seeking escape. Above them, the auctioneer's gavel rose and fell. As the auctioneer's voice rose, Lysandra made her move. She surged forward, straining against the bindings. But the moment her intent to flee registered, the fail-safe mechanism within the bindings activated. A sudden, crushing weight slammed into Lysandra, dragging her down. The bindings pulled her towards the ground with an invisible force, as if the very planet had reached up and clasped her in its fist. She gasped, her breath stolen by the sudden increase in gravity that pinned her to the floor.

The room fell silent before laughter, all eyes on the pitiful woman. Officer Thorne smirked from the crowd. She was hoisted up and thrown back beside Kael. The impact was a jolt to her already frayed nerves.

“Why did you do that?” Kael spoke quietly.

She turned to Kael, her gaze fierce. “Why did you not help me?”

“And what would you have me do, Lysandra? Challenge the entire room with my bare hands?”

“You could have tried. Anything, really!”

He shook his head. “That would have gotten us killed. Is that what you want?”

Her anger gave way to the fear she had been holding at bay. “I can’t just sit here and wait for... for whatever comes next.”

“We need to be smart, Lysandra. Rash actions won’t save us.”

“We begin,” the auctioneer, a gaunt figure with a voice that cut through the din like a knife, stood elevated on his platform, “Lot number one, a pair of fine specimens from the dense and the light. Who will start the bidding?”

The crowd surged forward, a sea of avarice and hunger.

“Fifty!”

“Seventy-five!”

“One hundred!”

“I heard one hundred in the back!”

Kael and Lysandra stood side by side as the numbers climbed and climbed.

“One fifty!”

“Do I hear one seventy-five?!”

“Five hundred!”

The bid sliced through the air, silencing the room. It came from a man shrouded in darkness, his features obscured, his presence ominous, but his voice familiar to all who frequented.

“I heard five hundred!”

The room was silent.

“Going once, going twice...”

No movement.

“Sold for five hundred Looms to... Marek!”

The auctioneer’s gavel pounded, a dreadful drumbeat. The man stepped forward, his smile a slash of malice. He was a tall figure, his body lean and wiry, with a presence that filled the room despite his slender frame. His skin was pale, almost translucent. His eyes were sharp and calculating, the color of steel, and they seemed to miss nothing. His hair was a slicked-back crown of obsidian. As he approached the pair, his gaze lingered on Lysandra with a predatory interest that belied his stoic demeanor. He stopped just before her, his proximity pressing in, a shadow darkening the space between them. The air around him seemed to grow colder, heavier, as though he were drawing the very warmth from the room. His smile twisted further, something darker behind it, a hunger that had no words, only intent. He let the silence hang, stretching like a thick rope, and in the weight of his gaze, there was no escape.



The vehicle lurched to a halt beneath the relentless glare of the Veridian suns. It sat heavy and worn, a thing of rust and grit, its hull caked in layers of dust and the detritus of a thousand miles on land that had forgotten mercy. The wheels, massive and ironclad, held fast to the broken soil, their edges chewed and scarred from years of toil. Bars crossed the windows like the marks of a prison, twisted and blackened by time. Across its side, scrawled in crude, defiant lettering, the words bled out in the fading light: Reason has robbed us of our gods. The paint cracked, but the message held fast, like a prayer to some forgotten deity, a warning or a curse.

Marek gripped the wheel with a steady hand, the engine's low rumble a constant murmur beneath the taut silence in the vehicle. Kael and Lysandra sat in the back, shackled, their eyes locked on the horizon where the barren expanse gave way to the unknown. Across from them, the shrouded man remained motionless, a shadow given form, his face a void beneath the dim interior light.

As they approached the border checkpoint marking the edge of Agritavia, the landscape seemed to grow heavier, the air thick with unspoken tensions. The post itself was a crumbling testament to bureaucracy, its metal barriers streaked with rust, the guards worn thin by years of duty at the nation's fraying edges. Marek reached beneath the dashboard with deliberate care, retrieving a small pouch that seemed as inconsequential as a stone, though it carried the weight of escape.

A border patrol officer approached, his face drawn and weathered by endless negotiations like this one. Marek leaned out, his smile practiced, his movements smooth as he slid the pouch into the officer's hand. The exchange was barely visible over the hood of the vehicle, drowned out by the engine's growl, but Kael caught the subtle shift in the officer's demeanor.

The barrier creaked upward, and the officer's gaze flicked to Lysandra, his expression unreadable, before his eyes dropped to the ground. Whatever battle had been fought within him, it ended as quickly as it began. He turned back toward his

post, shoulders slumping as if the weight of his duty had hollowed him out. The vehicle rolled forward, leaving Agritavia behind, crossing into a land as uncertain and untethered as their fates.

“You two ever crossed over to Terra Pristina?” The guard sitting beside them asked, his tone casual as a man remarking on the weather. Neither Kael nor Lysandra answered. Their silence, heavy as stone, filled the narrow space. The guard smirked, undeterred. “This is a lawless land. Out here, man makes the rule. No government. Only man.”

Across from him, the other guard snorted. “Man don’t rule out here. This is no-man’s land. Nature’s the only conqueror.”

“Nature doesn’t rule shit.”

“You think a man can beat a storm?”

“No,” the first admitted, with a slow shake of his head. “But we build shelters.”

“So what?”

“What do you mean, so what?” His voice climbed, anger twitching at the corners of his mouth. “We adapt. We survive. That’s how we beat it.”

The second guard let out a dry laugh, his gaze drifting toward the dust-streaked windows. “You think a shelter means anything? Out here, man’s just another beast waiting to be swallowed whole.”

The vehicle groaned to a stop, the argument unfinished. Marek climbed out, his boots grinding against gravel. The rear doors rattled, then slid open with a screech that filled the stale air inside. He stood there, a lean silhouette framed by the twin suns, a six-shooter hanging loose in his hand. He spun the chamber, the click of the cylinder loud as a hammer cocked against the silence.

The first shot rang out like thunder, sharp and final. The guard beside them jerked once before collapsing, the bullet punching through his temple. His blood splattered across the walls and pooled in the grooves of the floor. The second

guard froze, his hands fumbling for his sidearm. Before he could draw it, Marek fired again. The second man slumped forward, his face a ruin, blood and bone mingling in the dirt at his feet.

Kael and Lysandra didn't move. The air inside the vehicle had turned cold, the stench of blood heavy and sharp. Marek's movements were methodical, almost casual. He dragged the bodies out, their limbs flopping like those of broken marionettes. For a man so wiry, he moved them with startling ease, tossing them to the ground as if they were sacks of grain.

Above, the black shapes of vultures circled, their shadows flitting over the barren soil. They descended as Marek turned back toward the vehicle, their wings rustling like dry leaves. The first beak struck flesh before the second bird landed, and soon the two were tearing into the corpses with feral precision.

Marek slammed the doors shut, his face blank, and the vehicle lurched forward again. The groan of its engine barely masked the wet, ripping sounds from behind. Kael turned to Lysandra. Her face was pale, her eyes fixed ahead.

"Are you all right?" he whispered, his voice trembling.

She didn't answer, her silence carved from something deeper than fear.



The chamber was draped in opulence that belied the brutality of its owner, a paradox of grandeur and menace. The walls were adorned with rich tapestries depicting scenes of conquest and power, their vibrant colors contrasting sharply with the cold, hard stone beneath. Gilded candelabras cast a flickering light, illuminating the opulent furnishings—a massive mahogany desk, intricately carved with scenes of battle, and plush velvet chairs that seemed out of place in such a brutal setting. The air was thick with the scent of incense, masking the underlying odor of blood and sweat.

He moved through the chamber with the slow deliberation of a predator, his boots heavy on the stone floor. The light from the single hanging lamp swung faintly, casting his shadow in long, trembling arcs that seemed to recoil from him. His eyes were fixed on Lysandra, cold and devoid of pity, glinting with the unspoken promise of violence.

She stood stiffly as he approached, her chin lifted in a fragile defiance that

wavered under the weight of his gaze. He reached for her with a hand that was pale and sinewy, closing his fingers around her throat in a grip that was neither hurried nor uncertain. She whimpered, a soft, involuntary sound that escaped her lips before she could swallow it. His mouth twitched in a shadow of satisfaction.

His hand moved lower, fingers grazing the edge of her garments. She flinched but did not break, her voice trembling with a desperation she struggled to conceal. "I am from The Meadowlands," she said. "My people will pay dearly for my return. More than you could imagine."

His movements faltered for the barest moment, his head tilting as if her words had struck some hidden chord. His gaze turned distant, his face unreadable, but he said nothing. His hand lingered where it was.

"They will not pay," she continued, her voice gaining a measure of strength. "Not a single coin if I am touched. You know this. Damaskians do not bargain with dishonor."

For a moment, the room held its breath, the silence dense as fog. Then Marek released her, his hand falling away like the blade of a guillotine. He turned sharply, his back to her now, and the tension in the room coiled around them like a living thing. Without warning, his arm swept across the nearby table, scattering its contents to the floor with a crash that echoed through the chamber. Bottles shattered. Papers scattered like ash.

Lysandra stood motionless, the ghost of his grip still burning against her throat. Marek exhaled sharply, his shoulders heaving once, and then stilled.

He didn't look at her again. "Take her," he said to the guard lingering at the door. His voice was flat, distant, as though spoken by someone else. "And bring me the blonde one."



The cage bars stood black against the wavering torchlight, their shadows latticed on the stone floor like the ribs of some vast and dying beast. Kael and the shrouded man were hurled inside, the iron gate slamming shut behind them with a sound that echoed through the cavernous dark. Lysandra was taken elsewhere, her pale face the last thing Kael saw before she disappeared beyond the reach of the light.

The prisoners stirred in their corners, rising like revenants from their nests of rags and filth. Their faces were gaunt and hollow-eyed, their skin gray with the dust of the place, and they moved with the slow reluctance of the long-damned. One of them stepped forward, his figure thin as a shadow, his voice dry as dead leaves. “I’m going to claim my freedom,” he said. “After the next battle, he assured me.”

The others muttered among themselves, voices low and bitter as wind in dead trees. One of them laughed, a sound without mirth. “What makes you think he’ll keep his word?”

The thin man's gaze flickered, but he stood his ground. "He swore it in ink and blood. No man would dare break such an oath, not before The Great Weaver."

A ripple of murmurs passed through the group. The sound was neither belief nor disbelief but something worn smooth by time. Another voice, rough and sharp as a broken blade, cut through. "And what did you give him in return?"

The thin man fell silent, his gaunt face drawn into shadows.

Kael spoke then, his voice low. "Why do they call him The Vulture?"

A woman answered, her voice like stone scraping stone. A scar ran the length of her jaw, pulling one corner of her mouth into a permanent sneer. "You don't know?"

Kael shook his head. Her eyes were cold as flint. A man with hands twisted and knotted like old roots chuckled from the darkness. "What'd you do to cross him? Did he come for you too?"

"He looks the type," someone muttered.

"What type?" Kael asked.

"A fighter," the gnarled man said. "A warrior. Food for the creature."

The words hung in the air, heavy as the shadows around them. Kael's body tightened, his muscles coiling as if braced for some unseen blow. "What does that mean?"

The shrouded man spoke then, his voice calm, measured, like the tolling of a distant bell. "He's going to test us."

"Test us?" Kael repeated, the words slipping from his mouth like stones into water.

The sound of a buzzer broke the stillness, loud and mechanical. The gate groaned open, and a guard stepped in, his shadow looming long over the prisoners. "All right, let's move," he said.

The prisoners stood, their movements slow and deliberate, the shuffle of their feet the only sound as they filed into the corridor. The thin man fell in behind

Kael, leaning close to whisper in his ear. “The Great Weaver has tested me,” he said. “And I passed. You will pass too, so long as you have faith.”

Kael said nothing. Ahead of them, the faint roar of a crowd rumbled through the stone walls, low and ominous, like the growl of some vast and unseen beast.



The arena yawned before them like some great mouth of ruin, its jagged expanse cast in the hellish light of a bruised sky. They were led to its threshold, their chains clinking with a cruel rhythm. The air grew heavier, laden with an unseen charge, alive with the unnatural pull of gravity unraveled. The ground here was a mosaic of shattered stone and bent metal, a terrain borne of chaos and upheaval. The ground shifted beneath them, heaving as if some ancient thing beneath it stirred in restless sleep. Overhead, clouds like blackened scars boiled and churned, slashed through by lightning too quick for thunder to follow.

Kael had never seen a place like this. The very laws that tethered man to the ground were nothing here but the whims of a cruel and capricious god. Gravity played the tyrant, pressing them into the ground with crushing weight one moment and then abandoning them to the void the next. Each step was a wager against forces unseen, and Kael's body coiled with the tension of it, every muscle ready to lock or leap.

The crowd was a distant roar, muffled by the chaos that filled the air. Their hunger seeped through the cracks of the world, a formless, feral thing. Above them, towering walls held back the world's madness, their surfaces etched with a lattice of

intricate gravity wells. These were the only boundaries in this place, where nature had no say, and survival was a wager made with blood.

Kael's first step into the arena was halting. His boots met the ground like a pilgrim's at the edge of the abyss, uncertain if the ground would hold him or send him skyward. Around him, the landscape shifted and writhed, fragments of stone and metal rising and falling in the fickle pull of unseen forces. Beside him, the shrouded man grunted low, a sound of weary acceptance. The thin man whispered his prayers, his hands clasped tight as if holding onto the last fragile thread of some forgotten faith.

The voice of the announcer boomed from above, cutting through the chaos like a blade. "And now," it said, "our fighters will defy the very laws of nature for your entertainment!"

The crowd's fervor rose like a black tide, their bloodlust thick in the air. The shrouded man's eyes were hard, unreadable beneath his cowl. Kael stared into the abyss before him, his fists tightening as the weight of the world—or its absence—pressed down upon him.

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In the suffocating silence of Marek's private box, Lysandra's thoughts ricocheted like trapped birds, desperate for escape. Her eyes darted between the imposing figure of Marek and the chaos erupting below. He watched the arena through binoculars with a predator's focus, his posture taut as a coiled whip, every sinew primed for action. The glass of dark liquid in his hand remained untouched, its rich aroma of Harmonia Wine failing to compete with the savage ballet playing out below. His gaze lingered on Kael, the faint curl of his lips betraying a flicker of amusement at the man's resistance.

Behind him, Marek's entourage huddled like scavengers, their whispers carrying the sharp edge of fear. They cast quick, nervous glances at their leader,



their betting slips clutched tight as if they held more than just numbers—perhaps their very survival. One of them murmured a question, and Marek turned his head slightly, silencing him with a look that could carve stone. The room seemed to shrink under his scrutiny, its air turning as oppressive as the shifting gravity in The Chaos Pocket below.

“Please,” Lysandra ventured, her voice trembling but resolute. “There has to be another way. I can’t—”

Marek’s hand shot out, gripping her wrist with a strength that made her gasp. “Quiet,” he hissed, his voice a low growl that sent a chill down her spine. He released her with a shove that sent her stumbling back into her chair. “It’s starting.” But he didn’t return his gaze to the arena. Instead, his eyes pinned her where she sat, a cruel light flickering behind them. “He hangs by a thread down there. A shame if it were cut too soon.”

The room seemed to tilt, her breath catching as the weight of his words sank in. Below, the crowd roared, their bloodlust a distant rumble against the pounding of her heart. Marek turned back to the arena, the binoculars rising once more.

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The gladiators gathered near the edge of the arena, their forms silhouetted against the shifting glow of The Chaos Pocket. The air hung heavy with a silence that bore the weight of all things unsaid. Kael turned to the others, his voice low but steady. “What are we waiting for?” No one answered. The question drifted out into the void and was swallowed whole.

The iron gates groaned open, their rusted hinges screaming in protest. From the yawning black came the Leviatus, a creature dragged from the marrow of

Veridian's most violent dreams. It moved with a terrible purpose, its scaled hide glinting like forged steel beneath the dim and roiling light. Each step sent tremors rippling outward, the very ground seeming to shrink from its weight. Its eyes burned an unholy blue, cold and luminous, cutting through the gloom like distant stars. The beast stood there a moment, its breath a guttural rasp, its bulk a challenge to all who dared to stand against it.

Then came the horns. Their call shattered the stillness, a raw and ragged sound that ripped through the air and bounded off the jagged walls of the arena. It was not music but violence given voice, each note a war cry hurled into the gathering dark. The sound pulled at the crowd, drawing forth their roars, their howls, their unrelenting hunger.

Kael stood rigid, the others breaking apart around him like driftwood before a tide. He felt the beat of the horns in his chest, an ancient rhythm that quickened his blood. The Leviatus crouched low, its massive head swaying with the promise of carnage. It moved with sudden violence, a force unshackled, barreling forward in a rush of muscle and wrath.

The ground shook with its charge, the arena heaving beneath them like a wounded beast. Kael leapt to the side, his breath caught somewhere in his chest. The others scattered, bodies flung into motion, their paths as desperate and chaotic as the storm that had been unleashed. Behind them, the Leviatus roared, a sound that split the night and left it bleeding.

Kael dove behind a jagged outcrop of stone, the sharp edges biting into his palms as he steadied himself. The air reeked of blood and the cold iron of despair. Ahead of him, a stout warrior, his breath heaving in shallow bursts, was caught in the beast's claws. The Leviatus lifted him as if he weighed nothing, its talons curling around his torso and dragging him into the storm of its hunger. Kael watched, powerless, the man's screams swallowed by the chaos as the beast rended flesh from bone.

Across the sands, a gaunt figure moved like a wraith, his body taut with the frantic rhythm of flight. Kael tracked him, his eyes narrowing against the dust and gore that hung in the air like a pall. The man ran with the desperation of the damned, his feet tearing divots in the red-streaked soil. Behind him, the Leviatus roared, its massive frame lunging forward, closing the distance with an inevitability that was almost leisurely. The crowd roared, their voices a tide of savage glee, rising with each stride of the beast.

The thin man reached a spire of jagged stone, his body folding against it like a suppliant before an altar. His hands came together, trembling, his lips moving in silent prayer. The words were lost in the tumult, but Kael could see their shape, the frantic invocations to a god long absent from this place. And then the man turned, his eyes darting like a cornered animal, and his gaze found another.

A warrior passed too close, his stride steady, his focus set on the Leviatus. The thin man lunged, his hand seizing the warrior's arm in a grip born of pure survival. Kael's breath caught as he watched the betrayal unfold. The thin man wrenched the other into the beast's path, the motion swift and brutal, and the warrior stumbled forward. His cry was sharp and brief, silenced by the Leviatus's jaws as they closed on his neck. The crunch of bone was audible even above the roar of the crowd.

The thin man did not hesitate. He muttered something as he slipped into the shadows, his form merging with the chaos of the arena. Kael read the words on his lips, quiet and calm, as if spoken in a place of peace.

"I'll keep you in my prayers."

Kael's stomach churned. He pressed his back against the stone, his breath shallow and ragged. Around him, the arena churned with blood and screams, but he could not shake the image of the man's face, serene and resolute, as he bartered another's life for his own.

Then, a glimmer caught his eye, faint at first but undeniable, a sharp glint

amidst the murk of chaos. At the heart of the arena, the weapons lay piled in a cruel tableau, a jagged mound of iron and steel forged for one purpose. Blades honed to a gleaming edge, axes with heads broad as shovels, maces studded with spikes that promised only ruin. The weapons shimmered in the erratic light of the arena, rising and falling in time with the pulsing waves of gravity, as if the ground itself breathed beneath them.

The first man broke from the pack, his limbs a blur of desperation as he raced toward the mound. Others followed, a surge of bodies with eyes fixed only on survival, their hunger for steel as palpable as the blood on the sand. Kael watched them collide with the pile, a frantic tangle of limbs and fury, the clash of weapons beginning even before they were wielded. Metal bit metal in savage discord as men tore at each other, the promise of power igniting a frenzy.

Kael hesitated only a moment before he bolted forward, his stride long and sure, his eyes locked on the shifting mound. Around him, gravity surged, pulling at his limbs, then relenting, letting him lurch forward in uneven strides. He reached the heap as others fell back, their hands clutching the spoils of their struggle. A man with a blade already bloodied staggered past, his chest heaving, his face a mask of fear and triumph. Kael ignored him.

His hands fell upon a shield, its surface unmarred. The metal gleamed cold and steady under his fingers. He lifted it, his grip finding the straps bound tightly with leather. They held firm. Around him, the chaos persisted, men armed and bleeding, the Leviatus's roar tearing through the air. But Kael had his shield, and for the first time since stepping into this hell, he felt something like resolve.

The burly man charged the beast, his roar swallowed by the expanse of the arena. He held his weapon aloft, a jagged axe that gleamed like a shard of night, his steps heavy and certain. Then the gravity beneath him surged, a merciless wave, and he was hurled to the ground as if by some unseen hand. The axe wrenched free from his grip, clattering away across the stone. The Leviatus loomed over him, its

shadow long and implacable. One crushing blow, swift and final, and the man was no more, his defiance extinguished like a candle in the wind.

Kael staggered, the gravity's aftershock rippling through him. The air thickened around his lungs, and his vision swam, nausea rising like bile. He stumbled but stayed upright, his fingers brushing the edge of his shield as if it might anchor him to this unsteady world.

To his left, a lithe figure darted between the chaos, her daggers twin flashes of silver in her hands. She bounded from rock to rock, her movements light and deliberate, the low gravity her ally. She climbed the air with ease, each leap carrying her higher, closer to the beast. Then the world turned against her. A sudden shift in gravity seized her mid-flight, hurling her upwards with cruel indifference. Her ascent was uncontrolled, her small frame tossed like a leaf in a storm. The Leviatus, ever watchful, lunged with a predatory precision. It caught her in its jaws mid-air, her cry a brief, piercing note that ended in silence. With a violent twist, it hurled her downward. Her body struck the ground near Kael, a dull thud that echoed louder than the crowd's roar.

She lay crumpled, her form bent at impossible angles, her daggers still clenched in hands that no longer moved. Her chest did not rise, her lips did not part for breath. The energy that had filled her moments before had fled, leaving behind only this stillness, this absence. Kael crouched beside her, his hand trembling as it reached for her cheek. The skin was cool beneath his fingers, but not like the chill of a winter's night. It was a deeper cold, an emptiness that seemed to pull at him, to drag him into the void where she now dwelled.

Kael froze, his breath caught in his throat. The world shrank around him. The cacophony of the arena faded to a distant hum. The beast, the gladiators, the crowd—all dissolved into the periphery. He stared at her lifeless face, her vacant eyes. He was not thinking of her but of himself, of the void that waited for him, too. The fragility of it all gripped him like a vice, and he suddenly realized he might

die.

Suddenly, the gravity peaked. It descended like an unseen colossus, pressing upon the arena with a weight that turned air to stone. The world itself seemed to groan under the strain, the very ground quivering as if to collapse beneath its burden. Kael felt it first as a tremor in his knees, then a roar through his bones. His muscles screamed in protest, sinew stretched to its limit, as he planted his feet deep into the unforgiving soil. His blacksmith's strength, forged in heat and toil, became his salvation. He braced against the crushing force, teeth clenched, veins bulging as the weight of mountains bore down upon him.

The others fared worse. Gladiators crumpled where they stood, their bodies flattened to the ground, their weapons wrenched from their hands and flung aside like chaff. Cries of pain and panic were choked off as lungs collapsed under the invisible vise.

Even the beast, the Leviatus, was not immune to the planet's cruel embrace. It bellowed, a sound of rage and confusion, its once-mighty strides faltering. Its iron-scaled body seemed to sag, knees buckling beneath its monstrous weight. It clawed at the dirt, its head lashing wildly as if seeking an enemy it could not see.

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Lysandra watched helplessly from the private box, her body pinned to the seat as much by the weight of her shackles as by the oppressive tension that filled the arena. Her breath was shallow, each inhale a fight against the growing pressure in the air. The scene before her seemed carved from a nightmare: warriors sprawled like broken marionettes, their weapons scattered and useless, and the Leviatus, a beast of legend, brought low under the same relentless force that gripped them all.

In the stands, the crowd fell silent. The roars of bloodlust that had echoed moments before were choked off, replaced by a hush so profound it felt like the very air had been stolen from the space. Gravity's peak had transformed the spectacle; it was no longer a source of savage entertainment but a grim tableau of human fragility and defiance. Even the most fervent gamblers and jeering spectators sat frozen, their faces pale and drawn, united with the fighters below in a shared ordeal that stripped away the facade of invincibility.

Lysandra's hands clenched involuntarily, the cold bite of the shackles grounding her in the present. Her heart thundered in her chest, a rhythm that matched the pulse of her dread. She tore her gaze from the Leviatus, whose heaving body mirrored the struggle of the men around it, and focused on Kael. She saw the tremor in his legs, the quaking of his shield arm as he stood against the unrelenting weight, and felt a pang of despair pierce her resolve.

Beneath the crushing force of her worry, a thought slithered into her mind, unbidden and relentless: What victory is there if they all perish under the chaos? The arena, the fighters, the Leviatus—none would survive if the gravity refused to relent. Was this Marek's game all along? To let nature claim them so he could watch, detached and unscathed, from his perch above?

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The dense gravity slowly began to release its iron grip, and the arena came alive with the groans of battered bodies. Kael straightened cautiously, his muscles trembling from the exertion. His gaze was drawn to the Leviatus, its massive body swaying unsteadily as it sought to recover from the onslaught of gravitational chaos. The beast's thick limbs dragged through the dirt, its head jerking as if to shake off an invisible weight. Each movement betrayed a vulnerability that had not been present before—a creature built for carnage, now struggling to recalibrate against its own might.

Beside him, the shrouded man rose with surprising fluidity, his eyes fixed

on the Leviatus with an intensity that made the air around him seem sharper. “Its equilibrium,” he murmured, his voice a low vibration that carried an edge of discovery.

Kael followed the man’s gaze, his eyes settling on a sonic lance buried among the debris of the weapon pile. The lance’s sleek, polished surface reflected the flickering light of the arena, its potential radiating like a beacon. Then, as if drawn by the thought, Kael’s last conversation with Jorin surfaced in his mind. *The beast’s weakness lies in its balance. Disrupt that, and you disrupt everything.*

The faint whisper of strategy was broken by the desperate panting of the thin man, who shoved past Kael with a frantic burst of energy. His eyes were wild, his lips moving in a rapid prayer. “Dear Weaver, please not me! I’m so close!” he cried, his words breaking apart with each staggered step.

The shove sent Kael stumbling over a jagged outcropping of rock, the sharp edge biting into his calf. He landed heavily, his injured leg burning as the wound reopened, spilling blood onto the thirsty soil. The metallic tang of it hung in the air, a scent that carried on the lightening gravity.

And the Leviatus smelled it.

The beast halted mid-lurch, its glowing blue eyes snapping to attention as its nostrils flared. With an unnatural precision, it turned, its massive head swiveling toward Kael. The crowd’s collective gasp was like a rush of wind through a chasm, their morbid anticipation palpable. The Leviatus roared, the sound cutting through the thinning gravity like a blade, and Kael felt the weight of its focus settle over him.

Time seemed to slow as the beast lunged, each massive stride closing the distance with terrifying speed. Kael scrambled for his footing, his mind racing through every lesson he’d ever learned, every ounce of strength and strategy he could summon. But the beast was relentless, a harbinger of inevitable death bearing down on its target.

The arena seemed to bend with the violence of the moment. The sudden commotion broke the spell of the Leviatus’s focus, pulling its attention to a pair of twin warriors, each a flash of steel and intent. They moved as one, their bodies flowing with the perfect synchrony of practiced killers. One flanked from the left,

the other from the right, their blades raised high in deadly arcs, cutting through the air with a precision that seemed almost divine.

But the arena had other plans.

The ground shifted beneath one of them. A gravity well activated, a silent, invisible force that yanked him upward with a brutal, unrelenting pull. He was lifted, suspended in the air like prey caught in a snare, his eyes wide with horror as he drifted helplessly above the chaos of the arena floor. His brother, now alone, roared in defiance, charging forward with desperate fury to engage the beast, hoping against all reason that the battle might still be won.

But the Leviatus had already turned its focus back to the grounded twin. The creature's immense bulk shifted, its massive body moving with a deadly purpose. The beast roared again, and with a single, crushing swipe of its talon-like claws, it sent the warrior to the ground in a spray of blood and broken bone. The air was thick with the scent of iron and fear.

The twin who was caught in the gravity well screamed in rage, his body twisting uselessly in the air, but there was no chance for him to aid his brother. The Leviatus, without a second thought, turned away from the fallen warrior and with an indifferent swat sent his brother's body spiraling through the air, his life extinguished in an instant. The crowd erupted, their roars like thunder, but it was a hollow sound, lost in the dissonance of death and destruction unfolding below.

The shrouded man moved like a shadow, a blur of calculated violence. As the beast tore into the twin, its claws sinking deep, the man's blade gleamed in the dim flicker of the arena's light. It was swift, a movement born of years of survival in blood and bone, and it struck true. The steel met the beast's iron-like scales with a hiss of sparks, the air crackling as the weapon found its mark. The creature howled, a sound that cut the air like a dying thing, its form wracked with pain as the blade gouged a deep wound into its flesh. Blood, dark and viscous, spilled from the wound, staining the ground below.

The Leviatus turned, rage and agony clouding its senses. With one swipe of its massive paw, it sent the shrouded man flying through the air, his body a ragdoll, limbs flailing against the air before he crashed into the jagged ground with a sickening thud. There was no mercy in the motion, no pause for hesitation. The

creature was a force of nature, indifferent and brutal in its wrath.

Kael moved. The weight of the moment hung over him, every step a strain, his muscles screaming in protest as he fought against the gravity that sought to crush him. His eyes locked onto the sonic lance, lying within reach, gleaming like a harbinger of death. He lunged, pain flaring through his body as his fingers closed around the hilt. The weapon felt like a promise in his hand, a fleeting chance at survival. With a grunt, he smashed the lance against a chunk of metal, the high-pitched whine slicing through the air, a shriek that set Kael's teeth on edge. The beast reeled, its massive body rocked by the sonic assault, staggering under the force as its equilibrium shattered.

The shrouded man, now on his feet again, moved as if driven by something more than will. He charged with a fury born of desperation, his body propelled forward, a missile of rage and survival. The beast faltered, its senses dulled by the assault. It turned, but not fast enough. The shrouded man struck again, his blade sinking deep into the beast's underbelly, the force of his blow splitting the creature open. The Leviatus's roar turned to a strangled whimper, a sound of death. It collapsed, its massive form crumpling under the weight of its wounds, its life force ebbing away like the final gasp of a dying thing.

The arena fell silent. For a moment, nothing moved. The beast lay still, the echoes of its fury fading into the empty spaces between the jagged rocks and twisted metal. Kael stood, the air heavy with the stench of death and blood, his breath ragged in his chest.

The arena broke into a roar, the sound deafening, the crowd rising as one. They cheered, their voices a storm that filled the hollow air. The shrouded man stood with his chest heaving, his breath shallow and quick. The others, too, relaxed, the tension in their limbs easing as they allowed themselves to breathe again. The beast lay in the dust, its iron flesh still, its final breath lost in the clamor of the spectators. For a moment, there was peace. The Chaos Pocket stilled.

Kael's body was a furnace, sweat soaking his skin as the heat of battle drained away, replaced by the cold grip of exhaustion. He stood over the Leviatus, its massive form sprawled beneath him. The rush of victory flooded his veins, his

heart still pounding in his chest. His body trembled, but it wasn't fear that shook him—it was the force of what had just happened, what he had just survived. His eyes flickered to the shrouded man, meeting his gaze in the dim light of the arena. They said nothing, but the exchange was clear, understood without words. A nod passed between them, a silent promise. They had made it through together.

But it was short-lived. From the edge of his vision, Kael saw them approach. The guards, like wolves on the hunt, moving with the precision of predation. His breath caught in his throat as they reached the shrouded man, forcing him to the ground with brutal efficiency. Kael's fists clenched at his sides, impotent rage seizing him as the cold shackles were snapped into place. He watched helplessly, his heart sinking as the victory they had earned together was stripped away, stolen by the cold, unyielding hand of authority. The shrouded man's shoulders slumped under the weight of the chains, the fight in him dulled but not extinguished. And Kael knew, with a cold clarity, that it would be his turn next.



The dry lands stretched out like a wound, raw and unyielding beneath the twin suns. The prisoners shuffled in the heat, their shadows small and sharp against the cracked soil. The hum of The Chaos Pocket lingered behind them, a low and restless thing, punctuated by deep, resonant thrums that shivered through the ground. “Today, we circled the edge of the abyss,” he began as they walked, “where greatness is stripped to the bone.”

He swept his gaze over them, taking in the haggard faces, the bent backs. His eyes lingered on Kael and the shrouded man, the faintest trace of a smile carving lines into his weathered face. “You do me proud, every one of you.”

Kael stopped walking, his body taut with defiance. “You’ve made your money,” he said. “Now let us go.”

His smile grew, thin and cold as a razor’s edge. “My friend,” he said, “you misunderstand. Freedom was never on the table. There’s more to win. And you’ve earned nothing. Not yet.”

The thin man spoke then, his voice small and wavering, like a reed bending in the wind. “And what of my freedom, sir?”

Marek’s gaze shifted, slow and deliberate, until it rested on the thin man. He moved toward him, his steps measured, his boots stirring pale dust. The thin man stood his ground, trembling but unbroken.

“Your freedom?” Marek said, his tone steeped in mockery, in disbelief. He stopped inches from the man, close enough to feel his breath.

The thin man nodded. “Signed in ink and blood,” he said, the words tumbling out in a rush. “I sacrificed the warrior. Just as you asked.”

Marek tilted his head, considering. A shadow of amusement flickered across his face. “I remember,” he said. “I keep my word.”

He raised a hand, and with a flick of his fingers, the guards stepped forward. The shackles fell from the thin man’s wrists, clattering to the ground.

“Go,” Marek said, his voice soft as a snake’s hiss. “You are free.”

The thin man hesitated, his eyes darting to Marek’s face, searching for something—mercy, perhaps, or a trap. His shoulders sagged with the weight of uncertainty. “Thank you, sir,” he said at last. “I won’t forget your mercy. I’ll keep you in my prayers.”

Marek’s smile deepened, cutting lines into his face like cracks in dry soil.

The thin man walked, his pace faltering, his head turning again and again to glance over his shoulder. His breath came shallow, his shadow dragging long behind him in the twin suns’ light. He feared the thing which might come to stop him in his tracks. A bullet in his back, or something worse. Instead, it was Marek’s voice that halted him as it did for the first time so long ago.

“Before you go...”

He froze. The sound was soft but carried with it a weight that settled like iron on his back. Marek turned, his eyes catching the thin man’s and holding them there like a hooked fish. Slowly, the prisoner turned to face his captor once more, his body trembling, his fear so thick it seemed to ripple the air around him.

Marek smiled, his teeth white as sun-bleached bone. “Let me offer my thanks,” he said.

Kael watched as Marek approached, his steps unhurried, his gait calm. The thin man stood frozen, his hands hanging useless at his sides. When Marek reached him, he opened his arms wide, the gesture incongruous, a predator feigning gentleness.

The thin man hesitated, and then, as if compelled, stepped into the embrace. Marek wrapped his arms around the man, pulling him close. The gesture might have seemed tender to anyone who hadn’t seen Marek’s eyes.

Kael saw them. They were calm and cold, as if he were gazing upon the thin man not as a fellow creature but as something broken that might be made useful. Marek’s hand rested on the man’s shoulder. He leaned in, his voice low.

“How about a farewell kiss?”

The thin man flinched, a shudder passing through his body. Marek smiled again, wider this time, and leaned closer. His lips pressed against the man’s eye, and for a moment, everything seemed to hold still.

Then the hum came, deep and resonant, the Gravisonance shifting its song. A vibration passed through the terrain, through the prisoners, through Kael himself. Marek straightened, his head tilting back slightly, his smile splitting wider as the thin man began to scream.

It was not the scream of a man. It was the scream of something primal, something that knew it was being unmade. Blood seeped from the thin man’s eye, streaking down his face in red rivers. He tried to pull away, his hands scrabbling at Marek’s chest, but Marek’s grip was iron.

Marek did not release the man. He held him as one might hold a child, close and unyielding, his eyes half-closed as if savoring the moment. When he finally let go, the thin man collapsed to the ground, his body shaking, his hands clutching at the empty socket where his eye had been.

Marek stepped back, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, his gaze calm and detached. And then, as if struck by a sudden thought, he reached down and grabbed the thin man again. This time, there was no pretense of tenderness. His hands were rough, his movements swift. The second eye came away with less ceremony.

Kael felt the bile rise in his throat, hot and bitter, but he swallowed it down, his gaze locked on the nightmare before him. He could not look away, even as his mind screamed for retreat. Beside him, Lysandra stood frozen, her face pale and her body trembling. Her eyes, wide and unblinking, tracked the violence with an animalistic terror. When Marek’s work was done and the thin man’s screams ebbed into pitiful whimpers, the weight of the scene crashed over her like a breaking wave.

She staggered back, one hand clutching her stomach, the other covering her mouth. A wrenching sound escaped her lips as she doubled over, her body convulsing with the force of her retching. The dry, acrid air carried the stench of blood and bile, compounding the sickness clawing at her insides.

Kael moved instinctively, a hand reaching out, his voice low and urgent. “Lysandra—”

But the guard stepped in swiftly, his arm an iron bar across Kael’s chest. The gesture was curt and final, a silent warning that needed no words. Kael’s jaw tightened, his fists curling at his sides, but he held his ground, his glare drilling into the guard.

Lysandra wavered, her knees threatening to buckle as she clung to some shred of composure. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, her eyes darting to Kael, then to Marek, who stood nearby like a monument to his own cruelty.

The thin man lay crumpled in the dust, his body shivering like something small and dying. The sound of his whimpering wove through the silence, brittle and thin. Marek stood over him, his shadow long and unwavering in the low light. His voice broke the stillness, calm and smooth, a blade sheathed in velvet.

“You may go now,” Marek said.

The crowd held its breath, faces pale and waxen, their horror held in quiet reverence. Marek turned, the blood on his hands darkening to rust, and his eyes fell upon Lysandra. His steps were measured, deliberate, the air around him bending to his presence.

“I don’t know what you’re so gloomy about,” he said, his voice low, almost tender. “Your freedom is on its way here as we speak.”

A guard stepped forward, rough hands gripping Lysandra’s arms and pulling her to her feet. She didn’t resist; her body felt hollowed out, drained of will or weight. Her eyes flicked to Marek, then away, her mind clawing for purchase

against the tide of revulsion that threatened to drown her. She recalled the old woman, the Damaskian Sister's story of such a man. The guard tugged her forward, and she moved without thought, her feet stumbling over the uneven ground. Behind her, the thin man's cries pierced the heavy air, faint and broken, carried away by the dry wind that swept across the plain.

"Help me!" he called. "Help me!"

Kael turned his head slightly, straining to catch the sound as it faded into nothing. He stood motionless, his eyes fixed on the horizon where the man had disappeared, and then he whispered, so low it seemed the words might be carried back to him on the wind.

"You'll be in my prayers."

“Their souls... Veridian takes a piece of them—their memories, their desires. They become hollow, like echoes in the canyons. Some vanish, swallowed by gravity itself. Others linger, lost between worlds.”

- ***Ezra the Elder***

IV

The suns hung low in the bleeding sky, their light casting long shadows across the dry land. The air was still and heavy with the weight of day's end when the messenger stumbled forth, breathless, his face drawn with the kind of fear that comes from carrying bad news too far.

"Sir," the man said, his voice quaking. "A Marek, they call him The Vulture. He's sent word to one of our Navigators out of Galesend. He's holding her there. Says he'll trade her for a price."

Dorian turned, his eyes cutting through the man like a blade, his face unreadable beneath the dying light. "Who is this Marek?" he said.

"A trader, sir. A buyer. He's with the Crimson Talons."

For a moment, the silence stretched between them, thick as oil. Then Dorian's lips curved, slow and deliberate, into a grin that held no warmth.

"Tell this Vulture I'll come to him," he said. "Tell him I'll bring his ransom."

The messenger hesitated, shuffling like a man too frightened to stay and too fearful to leave. "But sir," he ventured, "Galesend's beyond the border, and we've no word on what his price might be—"

"Go," Dorian said, his voice low, steady as the tide, "I'd like very much for this to all be over before the Obsidian Veil."

The messenger fled, his footsteps fading into the approaching dark. Dorian stood there, his gaze lingering on the fading sky as the light waned, the heavens awash in the hues of fire and blood. He thought of The Weaver, The Great Loom spinning out the threads of their lives, and of the dark veil that would soon cover them all. Then he smiled again, a brief, sharp thing, and turned toward the horizon.



Moonlight spilled through the sky windows, pale beams fractured into broken latticework across the stone floor. The room held its breath in a stillness so deep it felt alive, every shadow listening. She lay curled in the cage, her blanket little more than a threadbare shield against the cold. She stared at the iron bars that encased her, the air heavy with unease, when she heard it—a grunt, low and guttural, followed by the creak of a cot.

Marek was awake.

Her body stiffened as he rose, his movements slow, deliberate. His shadow stretched toward her as he approached, his steps uneven but determined. She pressed herself deeper into the corner of the cage, her pulse hammering in her ears.

“Marek...” she started, her voice cracking.

He didn’t answer. His hand clutched the bars, rattling them once, the metallic sound echoing in the cavernous space. His breath was heavy, hot with liquor and something far darker. She saw his eyes, glassy and animalistic, fixed on her like a predator cornering its prey.

Lysandra scrambled backward, her hand clutching the edge of her blanket as if it could shield her from what was coming. “Don’t,” she whispered, her voice trembling. “The ransom, remember? This isn’t—”

The cage door groaned. He had the key. He always had the key.

Panic surged through her as the door swung open. She lunged for the nearest object—a tin plate left from her meager meal—and hurled it at him. It struck his shoulder, but he barely flinched.

“Stay away!” she cried, her voice high and wild. She crawled backward on her hands and knees, but there was nowhere to go. The cage was too small, and he was already inside.

Marek lunged, his hand grabbing her ankle. She kicked with all the force she could muster, her foot connecting with his jaw. He grunted, his grip loosening for a precious second, and she scrambled to her feet, pressing her back against the bars.

His face twisted in rage. He wiped at his mouth, his hand coming away smeared with blood.

Lysandra’s hands fumbled along the bars, searching desperately for something—anything—to defend herself. Her fingers closed around a shard of stone, jagged and cold, lying forgotten in the corner. She gripped it tightly, her knuckles white.

He lunged again, his bulk filling the cage, and she struck out wildly. The shard scraped against his arm, drawing a thin line of blood. He howled in pain, recoiling just enough for her to duck under his arm and bolt for the cage door.

She didn't make it. His hand closed around her wrist, yanking her back with a force that sent her sprawling to the floor. The shard slipped from her grasp, clattering out of reach.

"No!" she screamed, thrashing wildly, her nails clawing at his hand, his face, anything she could reach. Her struggle only seemed to fuel his frenzy.

And then it came—the sound. A whisper, faint and otherworldly, slicing through the chaos like a blade through flesh. Marek froze, his head snapping toward the sky windows.

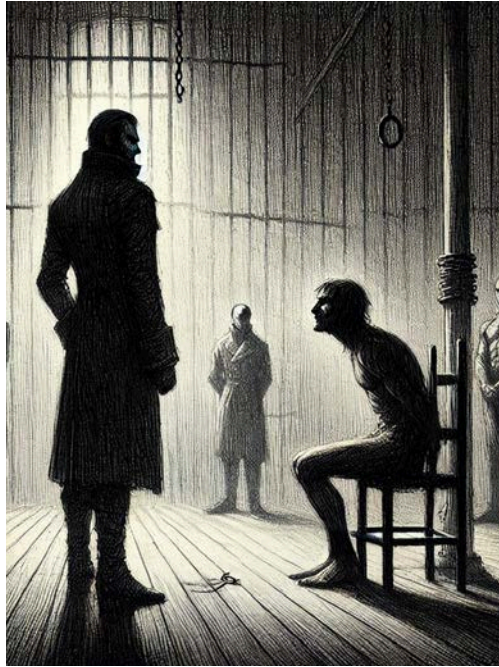
Lysandra didn't hesitate. She tore free of his loosened grip and scrambled out of the cage, her body moving on pure instinct. She didn't look back as the whisper grew louder, a dry rasp like bone against stone. Shadows spilled into the room, fluid and deliberate, descending through the latticework above.

The first figure landed soundlessly, its cloaked form absorbing the moonlight like a void. Then another. And another.

Marek stumbled to his feet, his wild eyes darting between Lysandra and the intruders. He reached for his dagger, but the figures were faster. They moved as one, their motions seamless, and before he could draw his blade, they were upon him.

Lysandra pressed herself against the far wall, her breath coming in short, frantic gasps. She watched as Marek fell, the fight stripped from him with brutal efficiency. The sound of his body hitting the floor was muffled, swallowed by the same silence that had brought them.

The shadows turned toward her, their faces hidden beneath their hoods. She clutched the bars behind her, her heart pounding as they advanced.



He stepped into the dim-lit chamber, the weight of its silence pressing down on him like a stone. The air was thick, stale, tinged with the metallic tang of rust and something older. At the center of the room was the man, gaunt and wiry, his frame little more than a scaffolding of bone. Marek sat under the watch of two hollow-eyed guards who stood as though they'd been carved from the same desolation.

Dorian halted, his steps measured, his gaze sharp and wary. The man lifted his head, a slow and sinuous movement that carried no welcome. Marek's face caught the dim light, and there it was—that smile. A barren thing, as if it had been unearthed rather than formed. His eyes were voids, empty as a drained well, and yet

they held something in their stillness that made Dorian pause.

"I've always wondered," Dorian said, his voice low and deliberate, "what it is that men like you live for." He kept his distance, feet planted just beyond what he reckoned was Marek's reach. He wasn't about to test the limits of those chains.

Marek's gaze held on him, unblinking, that desolate smile unwavering, as though it had been stitched into his face. The silence stretched between them, Marek's stillness more unnerving than movement might have been. It wasn't something practiced. It wasn't something deliberate. It simply was. And yet, it worked. It burrowed into the bones of the moment, set the air to trembling.

"I've read about you," Dorian said. "Enough to know the kind of man you are. Chaos is your gospel, isn't it? No law, no order, just the rule of ruin. Selling men, women, children to fight, to die, all for the weight of a few coins in your pocket. And then—" he gestured with a hand that trembled only slightly—"you take those coins, that blood-stained bounty, and you cast it away."

His words hung in the air, brittle and sharp. Marek didn't speak. Didn't blink. The emptiness in his expression felt like the answer to a question Dorian hadn't meant to ask. The guards shifted slightly, their movements skeletal, like wind-blown reeds. The room waited, its shadows deepening, as if it, too, hungered for what Marek might say.

"I've seen what you've left behind," Dorian began, his voice sharp, cutting through the silence. "Towns emptied. Families sundered. Men turned into beasts for your profit." He took a step closer, though his boots dragged as if the air around Marek weighed heavy. "And for what? What do you build? What do you leave behind, Marek? Nothing. Nothing but ruin."

Marek sat motionless, his head lowered, the faint rattle of his chains the only acknowledgment of Dorian's words. His eyes lifted, catching Dorian in their shadowed depths. There was no malice there, no defense. Only a hollow, bottomless stillness, as if the man before him was not a man at all, but the eye of a

storm, vast and unmeasurable.

“You sit there,” Dorian continued, his voice rising. “You sit there like none of this matters. But it does. It matters to the people you’ve destroyed. It matters to me.” His fists clenched at his sides, and he leaned closer, his voice dropping to a harsh whisper. “I’ve read about men like you. You think you’re above reason, above judgment. But you’re not.”

Marek blinked slowly, his expression unchanging. Dorian’s words fell into the stillness like stones into a void.

“Say something,” Dorian demanded, his voice cracking, as though the silence itself mocked him.

Marek moved at last, the faintest of motions—a tilt of his head, a slow exhale. He rose from his seat, the chains dragging against the floor with a metallic hiss. The guards stiffened but did not intervene, their faces pale with the same unease that rippled through Dorian’s chest.

Marek stepped forward, closing the space between them. Dorian fought the urge to step back, his heart pounding in his ears. The man before him radiated a calm so absolute it was unbearable, like standing at the edge of a great abyss.

Marek raised a hand, slow and deliberate. For a moment, Dorian thought he might strike, and his fingers twitched toward the hilt of his weapon. But Marek did not strike. His hand came to rest on Dorian’s shoulder, light as a breath. The touch sent a jolt through him, not of pain but of something deeper—something unnameable.

Then Marek leaned in, his lips brushing Dorian’s cheek in a gesture so sudden and inexplicable it froze him in place. It was not an act of defiance or affection but something far stranger, as if chaos itself had reached out and touched him.

The kiss lingered for a breath, then Marek stepped back. His chains clinked faintly as he returned to his seat, his gaze drifting downward once more, as

though Dorian had ceased to exist.

The silence stretched, heavy and suffocating. Dorian stumbled back a step, his mind reeling, his skin prickling as if he'd been touched by the infinite. His voice, when it came, was barely a whisper.

"You'll answer for this," he said, though the words felt hollow even as he spoke them.

Marek didn't move. Didn't look.

Dorian turned and walked away, the kiss searing his skin, a mark he would carry without name or reason.



As they brought her forward, Lysandra held her head high, though every step closer to him felt like the ground might give way beneath her. Dorian stood waiting, his posture stiff and officious, hands clasped behind his back, a ledgerkeeper surveying the day's losses. His eyes, sharp and assessing, lingered on

her longer than she cared to tolerate, though his face betrayed no emotion beyond the faintest shadow of bitterness.

She saw it then—tied to his belt, swinging faintly with his breaths. The pouch. The Sisters' ashes. A gift entrusted to her, now dangling like some cheap trinket at his side.

He did not speak immediately, nor did he step closer. When his voice finally came, it was clipped and careful, as if he were walking the edge of something he refused to name. "It seems," he said, "you've found yourself in quite the predicament."

Her lips tightened, her jaw clenched. "You did this," she said. "You and your twisted beliefs. You're a coward. A tyrant."

Something flickered across his face, so faint it might have been imagined—a twitch at the corner of his mouth, a brief tightening of the jaw. He adjusted the hem of his coat, his fingers brushing against the pouch at his side, though whether consciously or not, she couldn't tell.

"I am merely a servant," he said, the words neat and precise, "of the greater good. A guardian of The Great Weaver's order. Whatever betrayal you imagine, it was your actions, not mine, that led you here."

She laughed once, bitter and sharp. "Don't speak to me about righteousness. You've no claim to it. You're a monster, and you know it."

His hands tightened behind his back. He looked away briefly, toward the men standing at the edges of the room, then back to her. When he spoke again, his voice was softer, though no less measured. "Do you know," he asked, "what the law is beyond The Meadowlands?"

She said nothing, her silence heavy with defiance.

"Gravity," he continued, the word hanging in the air. "Men like to think their laws matter. That their scriptures and decrees hold weight. But strip them of their illusions, and what remains? The pull of the world beneath them. The

certainty that, no matter how high they rise, they will always fall.” His voice lowered, barely more than a breath. “Unless they learn to command it.” His eyes gleamed with something dark, something unshaken. “And those who can bend it to their will inherit the power to shape everything else.”

Her stomach twisted, her disgust plain on her face. “You’re insane.”

The words landed hard, and though he barely moved, something shifted in him. Dorian’s voice was low, his gaze lingering on her face as though searching for something long lost. “We could’ve been something special,” he said. His words carried no heat, no grand declaration—just a simple, bitter truth, dropped like a stone into the silence between them. He didn’t wait for her response. The door closed behind him with a soft click, and the room seemed colder for it.



As the Crawler lurched into motion, it emitted a low, resonant hum, a dissonant note in the land of dissonance. When the traction pads gripped the

terrain, there was a series of soft thuds, like the muffled drumbeats of a distant giant walking across the land. Kael felt it resonate within his chest, a symphony of potential that was both exhilarating and intimidating. The interior of Dorian's Crawler was a cocoon of alien technology and unfamiliar luxury. Visions of his father's forge came to him, the heat of the flames, the ring of hammer on anvil. Kael recalled the pride in his father's eyes, the lessons of resilience and strength. He recalled his mother.

Lysandra, confined next to Dorian in the front, was marked by a palpable air of resignation. Her gaze was distant, fixed on a point beyond the Crawler's armored walls, as if she could will herself away from the oppressive proximity to her husband. There was no fear evident on her face, only a detached indifference, a protective veil she had drawn around herself. Each jolt of the Crawler was met with a slight tightening of her jaw, the only sign of discomfort she permitted herself to show. She turned around and looked back through the cold steel bars at Kael and Marek's silhouette, both bound by chains across from each other.

The Crawler groaned and sighed, a great mechanical animal adapting to the capricious whims of gravity's invisible hand. Its hum wavered like a prayer to no god in particular, the fluctuating pitch a hymn to friction and weight, the metal guts of the beast alive with unknowable intent. Marek came to with a start, lurching forward against the restraints that bound his wrists behind his back, the cage around his mouth rattling like the punctuation to a bad joke.

He blinked hard, once, twice, the dim light casting odd shadows across his face, turning him into a half-carved idol abandoned mid-chisel. His eyes, sharp and glassy, roamed the confines of the cabin, cataloging the alien strangeness of his predicament with a dispassion that could only be called professional.

And then they landed on Kael. A moment stretched itself out—too long, too thin, like a rubber band about to snap. The blacksmith squirmed under the gaze, a gaze that did not so much observe as it did insinuate, worming its way into

every fissure of his discomfort.

Lysandra's wrists were raw, her skin worn thin where the chains gnawed like greedy vermin at her bones. She shifted against the metal that enclosed her, the soft rasp of her movement swallowed by the endless, droning hymn of the Crawler. Options? No. There were no options, no doors to kick in, no cunning escape route awaiting discovery—just the slow grind of inevitability.

Dorian leaned against the cabin wall, his posture too casual, his voice an instrument tuned to precision. "Lysandra, what is it, exactly, that you hope to achieve, chasing after The Nexus?"

She turned her head just enough to let him see the fire behind her eyes. "You already know my answer."

"You think you'll find a place on Veridian—this godforsaken rock—where you'll be reunited with your stonefoot?" His tone dripped with condescension, the kind you could bottle and sell to bureaucrats.

"His name is Arin."

"Oh, of course. Arin the noble. Arin the martyr. Arin, who you believe is waiting for you somewhere beyond this heap of scrap and slag. Tell me, do you write him letters? Do you sign them 'Someday, yours'?"

Lysandra's lips barely moved as she replied, her words scalpel-sharp. "I must believe in a place where love isn't shackled by the weight of this world. Where gravity doesn't break the heart."

Dorian chuckled, a dry, low sound that landed somewhere between amusement and spite. "Hopeless romantic," he said.

"And you're just hopeless."

That stung, and she could see it in the slight twitch of his jaw, the shadow of something raw that slipped across his face before he buried it again under the veneer of detached superiority. He shifted closer, his eyes narrowing, his voice dipping into that dangerous register of men who have learned how to win battles

with words alone.

“Your determination, Lysandra,” he said, “is as admirable as it is ridiculous. Let’s entertain, for a moment, the possibility that The Nexus exists. That there’s a gateway somewhere on this ball of dust to another plane of existence. Even if you find it, have you considered the cost? The toll it might demand of you? Traversing it, reuniting with the dead—it’s not like threading a needle. You’ll bleed. You’ll sacrifice. And for what? A pipe dream? A delusion?”

The hum of the Crawler rose in pitch, a mechanical exclamation point to his argument, but Lysandra didn’t flinch. She didn’t even blink. Her gaze was fixed on the horizon beyond the cabin’s narrow window, where the dead skies of Veridian stretched out like the waiting arms of some unknowable god.

One of the graviturgists leaned forward, his voice cutting through the hum of the Crawler’s engine. “Boss, storm clouds gathering. Looks like tornadoes could be forming up ahead.”

Dorian peered through the Crawler’s reinforced viewport. The skies, a tumultuous canvas of darkening swirls, mirrored the chaos of the land below. “Adjust our course. Keep to the edge of the storm’s path, but maintain speed. We can’t afford delays.”

The driver nodded, hands deftly adjusting the controls as the Crawler veered, its traction pads gripping the terrain with renewed urgency. The graviturgist’s voice cut through the cabin’s tension. “We’re heading into a real behemoth of a storm.”

Kael’s eyes darted from the storm-churned windows to the control deck, the quiet tension of survivalists creeping into every corner of his body. Across from him, Marek sat motionless—no, not motionless. Marek was a slow burn, a predator crouching in the guise of a prisoner. The faint shift of his shoulders, the tightening of his jaw: small movements, yet they bristled with the energy of something coiled too tightly.

Dorian's men secured the hatches and double-checked the instruments. The Crawler's interior was bathed in the soft glow of emergency lights, casting long shadows that danced with the vehicle's movements. Kael, strapped tightly in his seat, hands bound, watched what could be seen of the storm's approach with a mixture of fear and fascination. The Crawler's hull groaned under the strain of the intensifying winds.

Suddenly, a bright flash of lightning illuminated the landscape, followed by the deep rumble of thunder. The Crawler shuddered as a powerful gust of wind slammed against it, tilting the vehicle precariously before the traction pads regained their grip on the ground.

"Steady!" the graviturgist barked, his voice sharp as broken glass against the rising gale. His hands gripped the controls with the desperation of a man clutching the edge of a crumbling cliff, knuckles bone-white and trembling. The Crawler groaned beneath them, its traction pads clawing at the treacherous ground as if scrabbling for purchase in a nightmare. "We're not going down without a fight!" he shouted, though the words felt like a plea hurled into the void. Another flash, another thunderous roar, and the world outside turned a blinding white. The graviturgist knew the Crawler was now at the mercy of the storm.

Lysandra's senses were assaulted by its ferocity. The wind howled like a beast in agony, a sound so primal and raw that it seemed to resonate with the core of Veridian itself. She could feel the Crawler shake with each thunderous boom. And then, there it was—the tornado. It loomed vast and grotesque, a monstrous gyre stitching dirt to sky, its broad base grinding the soil to pulp, its apex vanishing into the heavens, a needle threading chaos into the firmament. Trees cracked and hurtled upward, debris orbiting in ecstatic submission, the land itself offered up in fragments to the whirling god of entropy.

Inside the Crawler, commands shattered the air. Dorian's voice, sharp as a lash: "Get them out! Secure the doors!" The storm seemed to mock him, its howl

threading through the cabin, tearing words to tatters before they could settle. The guards obeyed. Marek's buckles were wrenched free with frantic hands, his body hauled forward as though the storm itself had deputized them. The rear doors flung open, and the wind surged in—a predator seizing its chance, a feral, laughing force. The guard at the threshold braced himself, gripping the railing as his boots skidded against the floor.

Marek fell first. No resistance. No struggle. Just the easy grace of surrender. He hit the ground, rolling, vanishing, a speck in the storm. Kael fought. His kicks were wild, defiance flailing against inevitability. The guard ducked, unbuckled, and shoved.

The wind caught him.

He hit the ground.

The storm roared.

Tornado loomed.

It came closer.

Closer.

Close.

Here.



Lysandra's heart twisted sharp in her chest, the kind of pain that leaves no room for breath, as Kael was flung into the maw of the storm.

"No!"

Her voice, lost in the fury of the wind, was nothing but a thread torn from the fabric of the storm. Her hands, trembling, stretched out across the void, fingers clawing at the emptiness where he had been. The storm answered her with its own cruel indifference, scattering her desperation into the dirt and sky.

Dorian sat there, the wind rattling faintly against the reinforced glass, tugging at the edges of his coat as if even the storm longed to unseat him. But he might as well have been carved from the same stone as his heart. "It was necessary," he said, his words rolling slow, heavy, like stones loosed into her chest. "He chose this path the moment he turned his back on order, on The Weaver's design. This was always how it would end for him."

Her breath hitched, her tears welling up until her vision blurred, the wind cold against the wetness on her face. And still, her hands hung in the air, reaching,

grasping for something she could not name but could never forget.

The storm's fury began its' Grivilisk-like envelopment of the Crawler. Its powerful tendrils reached out to claim its prey. The wind buffeted the vehicle with relentless force. Rain violently lashed against its metal hull. Lysandra gripped the edge of her seat. The tornado enveloped them in its dark embrace. Lightning crackled, illuminating the swirling chaos. Thunder rumbled ominously. "Divert all power to the shields and traction pads! Anchor the Crawler!"

His men scrambled to comply. But it was too late. A sickening lurch. The Crawler was caught. Tossed about in the hands of a wrathful god. Lysandra's world spun dizzily. The maelstrom's grip tightened. She prayed. This was all she knew to do.



He found himself wandering through a desolate landscape, where towering monuments of stone rose against the backdrop of a blood-red sky. He walked alone, haunted by whispers of regret and longing, his footsteps echoing

hollowly against the cold, unforgiving soil. Suddenly, he was adrift upon a sea of stars, sailing through the cosmos aboard a vessel of his own creation. The vast expanse stretched out before him, infinite and unknowable, its secrets hidden behind veils of shimmering light. He reached out, yearning to touch the mysteries that lay beyond his grasp, only to find himself pulled inexorably into the depths of the void.

And then, amidst the chaos, he saw her—a figure cloaked in shadows, her features obscured by the mists of time. She reached out to him, her hand outstretched in a gesture of forgiveness and redemption. But as he reached back, he found himself unable to bridge the divide that separated them, his fingers slipping through hers like grains of sand.



Her mind clawed its way back, slow and raw, through the fog of half-dreamt dread, the storm's ruin settling in around her like the weight of a world undone. She lay there, the taste of dust bitter in her mouth, her body pressed into the wreckage's embrace, her wrists still bound, chains biting deep against bone. The sky above churned on, indifferent.

He was there too, a shadow trapped beneath the broken door of the Crawler, the metal buckled and jagged like the teeth of some ancient, dead beast. She pushed herself upright, limbs protesting every movement, and staggered toward him. The storm's dying breath still whispering in her ears. When she reached his side, she stood over him, her shadow falling long across his face. Without hesitation, she drove her heel into his ribs, the blow sharp and full of purpose.

Dorian jolted awake, coughing as the pain pulled him from unconsciousness. His eyes fluttered open, settling on her with the disoriented gaze of a man dragged back to life against his will. "Look where you have brought us," he managed, voice thin and rasping.

She stared down at him, her jaw tight, her hands trembling from exhaustion and rage. "You have done this to yourself," she said, her voice low and steady, punctuating her words with another kick to his side.

His body jerked under the impact, a groan slipping from his lips. He turned his head to cough, the motion drawing blood to the corners of his mouth, bright against the pallor of his skin. "You will never reach The Nexus," he said, the words curling up into a weak, venomous smile. "You will never see Arin again."

The name struck her like a blow, the weight of it catching in her throat, but she refused to let him see the wound it left. Instead, she knelt beside him, her face unreadable, her eyes fixed on his with an intensity that made his smirk falter. For a fleeting moment, his gaze softened, a flicker of something tender, almost pleading, passing between them.

Her hands shot out, closing around his throat, her grip tightening as his breath hitched. His body convulsed, and he clawed weakly at her arms, his lips parting in a futile gasp for air.

For Arin.

The thought burned in her mind, but as her hands trembled with the effort, the resolve began to fray. She had never killed, not with her own hands, not like this. The weight of it pressed down on her, unbearable. Her grip faltered, and she released him. Dorian choked and coughed, his chest heaving as he struggled to fill his lungs, the sound raw and desperate.

Lysandra rose, her legs unsteady beneath her. She turned and began to walk away, each step feeling heavier than the last, the pull of the distance between them like the breaking of some unseen thread.

“Wait,” Dorian gasped behind her, his voice ragged but laced with urgency. “Lysandra, help me. Don’t leave me like this.”

She didn’t stop, her steps crunching against the debris.

“Please,” he said, and there it was, the crack in his voice, the sound of something breaking apart.

Lysandra paused. She turned back toward him, her face unreadable. His expression shifted, relief washing over his features as she approached. She knelt beside him, her hands moving quickly to his belt.

“Thank you, Lysandra,” he whispered, his voice barely audible.

She didn’t answer, didn’t meet his gaze. Her fingers found the blade at his side, pulling it free with a deft motion. In one clean cut, she severed the rope holding the Sisters’ ashes. She cradled the small bundle in her hands, then rose without a word.

Dorian’s face darkened as realization dawned, the relief twisting into fury. “You’ll never survive!” he shouted after her, his voice ragged, desperate, bitter. “The Nexus is a lie! Just like your love for the stonefoot!”

But she didn’t look back. Her steps carried her forward, unyielding, toward whatever lay ahead, the ashes clutched tightly against her chest.

Dorian’s cries grew weaker, fading into the howling winds that swept across the land. Lysandra scoured the desert, her eyes scanning the endless expanse of wreckage and sand. The suns blazed overhead, the merciless heat beating down on her, but she pressed on, searching for any sign of Kael among the twisted remnants of the battle.

She called out his name, her voice growing hoarse and desperate, but the only response was the mournful howl of the desert wind. Kael was nowhere to be found. The weight of this realization settled heavily on her shoulders. The distant line where the sky kissed Veridian beckoned her forth, so she walked. Alone now, without her guide, without Kael, she walked on.

“Chaos and order collide in a dance of cosmic significance.”

- ***Horace Pine***



The suns had forgotten to rise today. This was not unusual. This was a place where the air itself seemed to whisper of forgotten things, a faint trail through a forest where the trees were tall and thick. A chilling mist slithered along the ground, and the air was heavy with an unspoken dread. The memory of Dorian's last moments lingered in her mind. As the day became the night, Veridian's moons were obscured by a rare celestial event known as the Obsidian Veil, casting the world into an unnatural darkness that seemed to swallow all hope. Lysandra trudged forward, her body aching from days of relentless travel. Her stomach twisted with the pangs of starvation, and her throat was parched from the unforgiving heat. The absence of Kael weighed heavily on her spirit. She didn't realize how much she had relied on his company.

The ground seemed to quiver with uncertainty. A sense of foreboding washed over her. She instinctively reached out for something to steady herself. But before she could react, the world gave way beneath her feet with a treacherous crumble, and she was falling, tumbling into an abyss that opened like a monstrous maw. The air rushed past her, damp and heavy with the scent of soil long untouched by the suns' rays. With a bone-jarring impact, she crashed to the ground below, the breath knocked from her lungs as she lay sprawled amidst the rubble. The darkness was absolute, a suffocating cloak that pressed against her eyes, urging them to see what was not there. The smell of moist soil and decay filled her nostrils. But it was the soft, almost imperceptible rustle of movement in the darkness that

ignited the raw edge of terror within her.

I am not alone.

The darkness was alive with sounds that skittered and whispered along the edges of her awareness. She could hear the soft patter of feet, dozens of them. Then there were the whispers, voices that rose and fell like the breath of Veridian itself. The murmurs of creatures who had never seen the suns. Her hands groped blindly, seeking anything to anchor her to reality. The cool, slick surface of the cavern walls offered little comfort. She could taste the fear, metallic and sharp on her tongue, as she whispered a silent prayer for the light of day.

Why do you wander so far from the light, child of the surface?

A voice slithered through the silence, wrapping around her like a shroud. It was a voice that seemed human, yet held a cryptic edge that made her skin crawl. Each word resonated with a strange familiarity. She couldn't tell if this voice was internal or external; that is, whether it existed in the tangible world or only in her mind.

"Who's there?"

She strained her eyes, searching for the source, but the shadows were impenetrable. Her voice betrayed a tremor she couldn't suppress.

We are the forgotten ones, the dwellers in the dark. We see your struggles.

"Show yourself"

She demanded this, though she wasn't sure she wanted to see what it was that spoke to her.

There was a shifting in the darkness as the creature moved closer. Her heart raced, and she backed away, only to find the cavern wall at her back. And there it was, stepping into the half-light, a being of nightmares. It had too many legs, each one articulated in ways that defied nature, and its body was a mass of writhing shadows. Its eyes (if they could be called that) were luminescent orbs that held no warmth, only a chilling intelligence.

Do you fear me, child?

Frozen in fear, she could not answer, but she knew it already knew.

Why do you fear me? I am your reflection.

She felt a cold dread settle in her stomach. The glint of countless eyes flickered like stars in the void around her.

We are but echoes of the same void that calls to you.

Its voice echoed off the walls of her mind.

You have fallen into our domain. Are you familiar with the cost of such intrusion?

The initial shock began to wear off, allowing her a few words. "I'll give you whatever you want."

Whatever we want.

It sounded like a horrible twisted echo of her words. She began to form an offer, but it seemed as if it already knew her thoughts.

You think us fond of materialistic things? Land? Coin? Our toll is not paid in coin or material, but in memories.

"Memories?"

The dearest ones you hold. The very essence of what makes you cling to the light. Memories are our sustenance, as vital as light is to surface dwellers. It is memories or the flesh.

She recoiled, the thought of losing her cherished memories more terrifying than any physical harm.

We find our dealings more than fair.

"My memories are my own. They are all I have left... I cannot pay that price."

You can't? Let's see what we have here.

As one limb reached out, the air seemed to thicken, time bending around the will of the creature. The tip of its appendage was a mere wisp, yet it carried the weight of worlds. It hovered above Lysandra's forehead, a specter of touch that promised both revelation and oblivion.

The moment the limb made contact, a shiver ran through the fabric of the cave. Lysandra's eyes fluttered closed, her mind a canvas upon which her memories were projected. The creature delved into the tapestry of her past, its presence a dark whisper threading through each recollection. It sought the memory that shone

brightest, the one that burned with the fiercest passion and the deepest sorrow.

There it is.

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The suns of Veridian hung low in the sky, casting a golden hue over the landscape. They were there, in the heart of The Meadowlands, surrounded by the tall, swaying grasses that seemed to bow and dance around them.

Arin's face was alight with joy. His hair was tousled by the gentle breeze, and his laughter was a sound that seemed to resonate with the very soul of the world. They ran together, their feet barely touching the ground, each step launching them into the air as if they were part of the meadow's dance. Lysandra remembered the feeling of weightlessness, the exhilaration of moving through the air with such ease, her hand clasped tightly in Arin's.

They came to rest beneath a tree, its leaves a canopy of shimmering green. Arin looked at her with a tenderness she'd never known. He spoke of dreams and futures, of a life unbound by the gravity that sought to keep them apart. His words were a vow made in the sanctity of their secret meeting place.

As they lay there, watching the clouds drift lazily above, Lysandra remembered the warmth of Arin's body next to hers, the softness of his touch, and the strength of his embrace. It was a moment of perfect peace, a memory of unity in a world torn.

The laughter and warmth of Arin's presence grew distant, a sound carried

away by an unforgiving wind. The touch of his hand, once a source of unshakeable comfort, now felt like a ghostly echo against her skin.

The meadows where they had once frolicked were losing their luster, the greens and blues bleeding into a monochrome haze. The sky, which had sheltered their love, seemed to collapse, the stars winking out one by one, as if in mourning for the light that was leaving her world.

As Arin's visage began to blur and fade from Lysandra's memory, it was as if the very essence of him was being drawn back into the ether from whence it came. His face became a fleeting shadow, a wraith caught between realms.

His eyes, which had sparkled with the vibrant hues of Veridian's twin suns, dimmed, their light ebbing away into a dull, lifeless gaze. The contours of his cheeks, once sculpted by laughter and joy, softened into indistinct lines, as if his very features were succumbing to the pull of some unseen tide.

The smile that had so often played upon his lips now seemed a distant memory, a relic of a time and place that was slipping through the cracks of reality.

With each moment that passed, Arin's face became less tangible, more a concept than a physical presence. The warmth of his skin, the texture of his hair, the resonance of his voice—all were being stripped away, leaving behind a hollow echo of the man she had loved.

She reached out, desperate to hold onto the fragments of the memory, but they slipped through her fingers like grains of sand. With each passing second, Arin's image grew blurrier, his voice a fading whisper, until she was left clutching at

the void where he once stood.

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“Please no. Not that one.”

The creature paused its’ undulation.

No? Then there is another I would accept. Your choice.

Once more, she felt the icy tendril wrap around her thoughts, pulling her unwillingly towards the creature’s sinister destination. It stopped upon arriving at a cave in the rain, where Kael and Lysandra sat, reading from *The Nexustratum* and catching slow-falling raindrops on their tongues.

“Not that one.”

You must choose between the two. Quickly, before they both melt.

She felt them slipping away. Slowly but surely. And she knew there was nothing she could do. The creature paused, its essence enveloping the memory. Lysandra’s heart ached within her chest, the pain as real as when she had lost him in the storm. The limb retracted, and as she slipped into unconsciousness, the creature left behind a whisper:

Even under the brightest star, shadows will consume the echoes of your heart, leaving only silence in their wake.



She awoke above ground. The absence of a memory she knew used to be there felt like a gaping void in the fabric of her being. Like reaching for something familiar in the darkness, only to find emptiness staring back at her. There was a sense of disorientation, of being adrift in a sea of uncertainty, as she grappled with the fragments of her past that refused to coalesce into a coherent whole. It was haunting. A nagging feeling that something essential was missing, yet tantalizingly out of reach.

She wandered aimlessly for a long time. The darkness was a blanket, heavy yet intangible, pressing against her eyelids. It was a struggle to even remember how to breathe, each inhalation a laborious chore.

There was a rustling sound, a disturbance in the stillness that surrounded her.

Footsteps? No, too soft, too rhythmic.

It was like the beating of a heart, slow and deliberate, approaching her through the fog that clouded her mind. She wanted to open her eyes, to see who or what was nearing, but her eyelids were stubborn, refusing to obey.

Then, warmth. A touch against her skin, gentle, cautious. Alien, yet

comforting. She felt like she was being lifted, cradled like a child, the sensation so foreign yet so desperately needed. She didn't resist; she couldn't. The effort to move was beyond her now.

She was carried, the motion lulling her into a state of semi-consciousness where reality and dreams blurred. She heard a voice, a whisper that was not in a language she knew, yet its tone was unmistakable. It was kindness, concern, maybe even curiosity. But there was no fear, neither from the owner of the voice nor from her.

Her eyes fluttered open to a world tinged with the soft glow of dawn. The room was small, the walls adorned with tapestries that seemed to dance with images of memories she could no longer claim as her own. She was lying on a bed of woven grass, surprisingly comfortable and fragrant with the scent of the outdoors.

She pushed herself upright, the motion slow, deliberate, her body unsure of itself, the gravity here not what she remembered. It clung to her in unfamiliar ways, heavier than The Meadowlands, lighter than The Iron Cliffs, as if the very air demanded she feel it. Her head swam, and the edges of the room wavered for a moment before sharpening again. Across from her, an old man sat, his form half-lost in the shadows of the small space. His hands worked at something she couldn't name, some device that hummed faintly, its sound so low it was almost not there at all, just a vibration in the air between them. His eyes lifted when she moved, his hands going still. He set the thing aside with the careful precision of someone who had spent a life in its company. He looked at her then, his gaze holding hers like a question that had no answer, like he was waiting to see if she would become something he already knew.

"Where am I?" Her voice fractured the stillness of the room, foreign and faint against the tranquility, as though it didn't belong to her.

"You are in my home, in The Echoing Expanse." The reply came in Agritavian, the common tongue, but the words carried a cadence unfamiliar to her

ears. His voice was a soothing baritone, rich and resonant, as if the walls and air of the room conspired to echo it back to her. "You were in need of aid," he said.

She swallowed hard, the words stirring fragments at the edges of her memory. The creatures. Their hollowed faces, their grasping hands. The theft. "These creatures..." she began, her voice trailing off as the pieces refused to fit together. "They took something from me."

The man rose with the slow deliberation of someone accustomed to patience. He moved to a shelf, his fingers brushing past a row of small, glowing objects, selecting one. A fruit, its surface faintly luminous, pulsing like a distant star. "Eat this," he said, extending it toward her. "It will help clear your mind."

She hesitated, but the soft glow seemed to call to her, an unspoken promise of reprieve. When she took it, the light dimmed beneath her touch, its warmth seeping into her palm. She bit into it, the taste unfamiliar yet oddly comforting, and as she ate, clarity began to unfurl within her like the first light of dawn.

With the clarity came questions. Too many, too quickly. "Who are you? Why did you help me? What is this place?"

He smiled then, the kind of smile that hinted at more than it revealed. "I am Theron," he said, his voice carrying the weight of something ancient and enduring. "An Echokeeper of the Lorath'eeni."

The walls were a tapestry of woven branches, interlaced with a precision that spoke of a craftsman's hand. They curved overhead, meeting at a point that seemed to draw the eye upward, as if pointing to the heavens themselves. There was a single window, more an opening than a pane, that framed the world outside in a rectangle of soft light. It cast a warm, golden hue across the room, illuminating the artifacts that Theron had collected. Each one seemed to hum with a story, a memory that they had been aching to tell. She suddenly realized that her shackles were gone.

“Thalorin eni! Elen voren sylvan!”

Theron's voice cut sharply through the stillness, carrying the resonance of authority, but it softened at the edges like an elder scolding a mischievous pup. A shadow darted from the window, small feet kicking up dust as the boy fled with the speed of someone well-practiced in the art of evasion.

Theron let out a sigh, shaking his head. The severity in his tone melted away, replaced by something warmer, more amused than irritated. “That boy Elan... always up to something,” he said, his gaze lingering on the now-empty window as though expecting the boy to return. “He is harmless, though.”

She could hear the distant trickle of a stream. The unique call of some unknown creature pierced the air—a chorus of cries that were both alien and familiar. The subtle thud of footsteps provided a grounding rhythm to the melody of nature.

The patchwork quilt that adorned the space within Theron's hut was a mosaic of fabrics and hues, some as deep as the night sky of The Meadowlands, others as vibrant as the flora that thrived in The Echoing Expanse. She traced the seams with her eyes, following the threads that bound the pieces together. They ran like rivers across the quilt, connecting each memory, each story, into a single narrative. Some patches were embroidered with symbols that she assumed represented significant events or figures in Lorath'eeni lore. There were intricate patterns that resembled the swirling maelstroms of the dense lands, and lighter, more ethereal motifs that surely spoke of The Meadowlands. The quilt felt alive under the soft light that filtered through the window.

“You were close to death out there. You're a Meadowlander. Tell me, why do you seek The Nexus?”

“How do you know I seek The Nexus?”

“Not many outsiders wander this way otherwise.”

She studied him, his calm demeanor, his eyes that seemed to harbor

centuries of understanding. He seemed harmless, but her mistrust lingered. He answered the silence for her. “You have lost someone.”

Her throat tightened, and she nodded. His gaze, steady and unflinching, conveyed a trustworthiness she had not encountered in many moons.

“I was also entrusted with the ashes of the Sisters of Damaskus to spread across The Nexus, but... I don’t know if I have the strength. I’ve lost my family. I’ve lost my guide. I’ve lost so much in such a short span of time...”

“Some paths, once embarked upon, have no return. The gravity of loss is a labyrinth with no exit, its paths etched deep in the heart.”

There was a gentleness to his voice, a weathered understanding that made her feel as though her burdens had been carried by others before her. She realized in that moment that he had likely helped many wanderers like her, each with their stories of loss and longing.

From outside, a drumbeat began to thrum, faint but insistent. Her attention drifted momentarily, captivated by its rhythm before returning to him. “My story isn’t unique, is it?”

“To be lost in loss is to walk a road that vanishes beneath your feet, leaving you suspended in the gravity of a moment that will never come again.”

He let the words settle in place before continuing, his voice like a gentle current pulling her forward.

“The wanderer’s mistake is not in her mourning, but in her surrender to it.”

As he moved toward the door, her voice stopped him. “Wait. Before you saved me back there, I had fallen into a hole. This creature, it had the most terrifying eyes and limbs—”

“Voren’shala. The Memorivore. You’ve sacrificed a most cherished memory.”

Her stomach churned. “I had to choose between two memories. I’m not

sure if I made the right choice. But of course it doesn't matter now, I don't remember what I've sacrificed. But I feel its absence in my mind."

Theron nodded solemnly, his expression grave. "Voren'shala are cunning. They weave illusions as easily as the truth. They often present a false memory alongside a real one, giving you the semblance of a choice."

A cold shiver ran down her spine. Doubt seeped into her, pooling in the crevices of her thoughts. "Then how do I know which memories are mine?"

"You may never fully know. But trust in the feelings they evoke. The heart often remembers what the mind forgets."



The night spread out like a vast tapestry of stars as the Lorath'eeni formed a circle around her, their faces solemn yet kind. Alone amidst them, she felt the weight of her lost memories pressing down upon her. They began their chant in their native tongue, their voices carrying the weight of centuries. Stepping forward,

his weathered hands cradled a single feather, as light as the air in The Meadowlands, her home now so distant. His voice rumbled gently as he spoke in Agritavian;

“Lysandra of the Valenwoods, Whispering Winds is not just a ritual; it is a passage. With each feather you release, you let go of a burden, and with each whisper, you embrace the winds of change.”

He repeated this in Lorath’eeni. One by one they approached, offering her feathers of varying hues. Some were as blue as the Veridian skies, others as golden as the dawn. Taking each feather, she held it close to her heart and whispered to it. She whispered of Arin, of Kael, of Dorian, of her aunt, of her father and mother. With each whisper, she felt a part of her lift and lighten. Releasing the feathers, they floated upwards, dancing on the winds until they were indistinguishable from the stars above.

“Memories, like feathers, are not meant to be held too tightly. They are meant to be released, to become one with the universe, to become the stars that guide us through our darkest nights.”

As the last whispers were carried away, a gentle revelry began to stir among the Lorath’eeni. The air filled with the soft strumming of stringed instruments, Harmoniwood Flute, and Echo Drums, their melodies rising and falling with the rhythm of the land. Flasks of liquid brewed from the luminescent flora of the land were brought out. Children laughed and ran around, playing *Vor’asha’silva*, or “Chase the Comet,” a game that mimicked the celestial dance of comets across the night sky, a reminder of their connection to something greater.

Lysandra watched them play, but a movement at the edge of the gathering caught her eye. In the flickering light of the fire, a man sat rigidly on a stone, his face pale and slick with sweat. A healer knelt before him, peeling back the fabric of his sleeve to reveal dark, creeping lines spreading across his arm—skin mottled and eaten away by something unseen. The healer’s hands moved quickly, packing the wound with crushed herbs, but the man’s pained expression told her it was not

enough.

“Strange, isn’t it?” Theron mused as he sat down beside her. “A people so in tune with the land, yet even they are not immune to its cruelty.” He glanced toward the wounded man before turning back to her. “The Expanse is unforgiving, but it speaks to those who know how to listen—not just with their ears, but with their heart. Gravity wells can disorient, mislead. You must learn to hear the consonance in their dissonance.” He looked at her. “I will teach you.”

The boy Elian reached for her hand, his eyes alight with a mischief unspoiled by the weight of the world. She let him take it, his small fingers warm against her own, and he tugged her forward with a suddenness that broke the quiet resolve she’d carried like armor. She glanced at Theron, who gave a solemn nod, his face carved in shadow and firelight, as if rendered from the same ancient stone as the circle they stood within. The boy pulled her into the ring, their steps tracing the ground in long arcs, and she became the tail to his comet, the wind lifting her hair as the music rose around them. The Lorath’eeni clapped and laughed, their voices mingling with the echoes of the Expanse, a sound older than time, deeper than memory. She spun, and for a moment, the weight of her loss fell away, and the stars above seemed close enough to touch, their light cutting clean through the vast, endless dark.

As the circle quieted, settling into the warmth of shared stories, Lysandra found herself watching an elderly woman work. Her hands, steady with years of practice, guided a needle through layers of fabric, stitching together something that was more than just a quilt. Theron caught her gaze and nodded toward a section of the patchwork where sharp-edged shapes met in striking contrast.

“This here,” he said, running a finger over the precise angles, “is Brocadian work. They call it ‘precision piecing.’ Every bit of fabric is measured and cut just right, then stitched together to form these clean, geometric patterns. It’s rigid by design—meant to symbolize stability, strength. Their way of saying that some

things, at least, can be made to fit exactly where they belong.”

He shifted his hand to a different section, where colors melted into one another like watercolor on cloth. The fabric curved and flowed, less structured but no less deliberate. “This,” he continued, “is Damaskian ‘blending.’ They work with softer fabrics, ones that move easily under the needle. See how the colors shift so gradually? How the shapes roll instead of snap into place? Meant to mirror The Meadowlands—the way the wind stirs the tall grass, the way the hills rise and fall without a harsh edge in sight. Damaskians also like to quilt with ‘appliqué’—sewing smaller pieces of fabric onto a larger background, layering texture, adding depth. Like how memories sit on top of one another, each one shaping the ones that come after.”

He traced his hand over a different patch, this one dense with woven detail—threads interlacing to form intricate designs, almost like tiny stories stitched straight into the fabric itself. “This is Jacquardian weaving. They don’t just sew pieces together; they build the design right into the cloth itself. It takes time, patience, a careful hand. Their quilts aren’t just about warmth—they’re about history. Every thread placed with intention, every pattern a story waiting to be read.”

He leaned back slightly, taking in the whole quilt. “What we do—our people—we don’t follow just one way. We take the precision of the Brocadians, the fluidity of the Damaskians, the depth of the Jacquardians, and we weave them together. The structure keeps our stories grounded, the movement reminds us that nothing stays the same, and the detail—that’s where we find meaning. Each quilt is a journey. A map of where we’ve been. Proof that we adapt, that we endure.”

The weaver’s hands paused for a moment, her fingers brushing over a particularly bright patch. Lysandra’s breath caught as she recognized it—a scrap of fabric from her own clothing, worn and faded but unmistakably hers. A piece of her, sewn into their story. The realization settled deep in her chest.

She had already become part of something larger than herself.



The suns hung low, a pair of molten discs on the edge of the world, leaking their coppery glow across the field where children, heedless of celestial theatrics, occupied themselves with Driftball—an enterprise that appeared as chaotic as it was, upon closer inspection, bizarrely choreographed. The ball itself, crafted from Kerron Resin, bounced and hovered unpredictably, and the children, with a rhythm borne of instinct and fleeting alliances, leapt and lunged after it, their voices colliding in midair like particles in some noisy cosmic accelerator: “Pass it!” “Elian!” “No, over here!”

Elian, known for plays that bordered on reckless and admired for the way he moved—as if his bones carried some ancient music of the spheres—darted toward the ball. It veered off, teasing, rolling toward the far edge of the field, where the ground grew uncertain and the air, according to old-timers, had a way of

playing tricks. He followed, faster now, his focus narrowing until the world resolved into the ball, himself, and the point of their inevitable union.

But the moment cracked open. His laughter broke, inverted itself into a sharp and rising cry as the unseen forces lurking at the periphery made themselves known. A rogue gravity pocket—anomaly, defect, or simply an indifference to human presence—claimed him. One moment he was running, and the next, he wasn't. His body lifted as if unhooked from its terrestrial bindings, feet scrabbling against nothing, his ascent slow but unrelenting. The ball, traitorous and oblivious, spun to the ground.

The children froze. Their shouts decayed into a stunned silence, save for the occasional half-formed word: “Elian—” “What—” “He’s—” Eyes wide, mouths open, they stared upward as he rose, their friend turned skyward emissary, his arms reaching, flailing, imploring as the copper sky swallowed him. Panic crackled through the group, a wave of raw and disorganized energy, too much and too little all at once. Finally, one voice emerged, a clarion note cutting through the surreal haze of the moment:

“Get Theron!”



The air trembled. Not in the way of wind or storm, but something deeper—an unseen force pulling and pushing, bending reality itself. Lysandra felt it in her bones before she heard it, a pressure beneath her ribs, a whisper behind her thoughts.

Theron stood a few paces ahead, his stance at ease but his presence commanding, as if even the ground beneath him bent in quiet reverence. “You listen too hard,” he said without turning. “You’re trying to hear it with your ears when it’s never been about sound.”

Lysandra exhaled, closing her eyes. The world around her had become second nature in the past week—the way the stones pulsed underfoot, the way the gravity pockets distorted the light, warping the horizon like ripples on a pond. She focused, letting go of her own breath, her own heartbeat, until all that remained was the hum of the land. The deep groan of a heavy gravity well far to the east. The flickering wail of a shifting pocket just ahead. And in between—scattered, fractured notes of dissonance, discordant and unpredictable.

“Don’t chase them,” Theron instructed. “Let them come to you. Find the pattern beneath the chaos.”

Lysandra adjusted her stance, feeling the pull of an unstable well just at the edge of her awareness. It wavered erratically, a shrill, broken tone—dangerous. But beneath it, buried in the noise, was something steady. A thread of resonance. A tone that did not waver. She reached for it—not with her hands, but with something less tangible, an instinct, a recognition.

And then, suddenly, the world aligned.

The pockets didn’t disappear; they remained, erratic and shifting. But their presence no longer felt like a cacophony—she could feel the spaces between them, the places where the distortions balanced each other out. The path revealed itself, not as a line but as a flow, like stepping stones through a river.

Her eyes snapped open. She took a step forward, then another, guided not by sight but by that unspoken harmony. The resonance swelled around her, the pull and push of the land no longer fighting her but moving with her.

Theron smiled. “You hear it now.”

Lysandra nodded. “I do.”

She stepped forward again, and this time, the land did not resist.

“Well done,” Theron said, though his voice carried no triumph, only acknowledgment, as if her success had been inevitable.

She let out a slow breath, the weight of effort fading into something lighter. Her gaze drifted toward the towering trees, their canopies shifting like a living ocean of green and shadow. “This place,” she murmured, “it’s beautiful. It reminds me of home... in a way.”

Theron followed her gaze, silent for a moment. Then, as if reading the question forming in her mind, he said, “And you’re wondering why the Guild hasn’t taken it.”

She hesitated but nodded. “It doesn’t seem like them to leave something

untouched.”

He smiled, a crooked, knowing smile, shaking his head. “The Guild fears what it can’t control. And these lands—” he gestured broadly at the forest, the land that seemed to pulse with its own rhythm—“are something they’ll never master. The storms, the creatures, the gravity pockets... It’s chaos to them, and chaos doesn’t bend to their will.”

Lysandra’s brow knit tightly, the gravity of his words settling over. She thought of The Chaos Pocket, the memory of its distortion tugging at her thoughts.

“But,” he added, his voice quieter now, “chaos has its place, just like everything else. It keeps the order from swallowing the world whole.”

Suddenly, a noise in the distance. Then came the shouts, sharp and urgent, breaking through the hum of the land.

“Theron! Theron!”

A group of children burst into the clearing, their voices tripping over each other, their faces pale with fear.

“Theron! Eliathra! Elian vorosha gravitae!”

Theron turned sharply, his eyes narrowing. “Shorun vela, kinthra. Echolai vistara?”

Lysandra caught only fragments of their words, the unfamiliar cadence of the Lorath’eeni tongue falling fast and heavy, but their urgency was unmistakable.

Theron looked to her, his face grave. “Elian’s caught in gravity’s snare,” he said. “We need to move. Now.”

The children’s hurried feet stilled as they reached the spot, a clearing where the remnants of their game hung suspended in unnatural stillness—the driftball, caught mid-air, swaying faintly as if recalling the chaos that had unfolded. Lysandra’s gaze followed the children’s to the edge of the trees, the space before them heavy with an unspoken dread. She took a breath that felt like it might catch

in her chest, her thoughts spinning through the dark possibilities of what awaited.

And then she saw him.

Emerging from the shadows of the treeline, a figure took shape—a man, short and weathered, his clothes stained with the soil of Veridian, his movements burdened and slow. His face, rugged and lined, bore the exhaustion of a journey that had been as much battle as trek. In his arms, he carried Elian, the boy's small frame limp against his chest, his bright hair dulled by dirt and sweat. The child's stillness struck sharper than any shout or cry might have. His broad shoulders bore more than the boy's weight; the rope, once coiled in hope, hung across him like a relic of failed intent, its loose ends brushing the ground with each step.

And then he saw her.

“If fate dictates the course of our lives, are we not also bound by the same laws that govern it? In the end, we cannot evade accountability; we are architects of our own destinies, sculptors of the paths we tread upon.”

- *From “Whispers of the Nebula”*
By Silas Mercer

VI

The tempest roared around him, a chaotic symphony of wind and debris. He clung desperately to a fragment of a broken tree, his fingers digging into the rough bark as if it were his only lifeline. With each gust, his body strained against the onslaught. Debris flew past him like missiles. The howling wind drowned out all other sounds, leaving only the pounding of his heart echoing in his ears.

Through squinted eyes, he glimpsed the swirling vortex overhead, a monstrous funnel of destruction tearing through everything in its path. Fear clawed at his chest. On the ground at a distance he could see Marek, struggling with his bindings. Another distant sight caught his attention.

A creature? An angel?

He watched in awe as a winged figure swooped down and wrapped its wings around Marek, battered and vulnerable, now cocooned within the wings. A distant sound pierced through the chaos. With a heart pounding in his chest, he turned, his vision blurred by the swirling debris, and there, emerging from the darkness behind him, was another figure, its form shrouded in shadow. Before he could fully comprehend what was happening, he felt himself enveloped in a suffocating darkness, the stranger's wings wrapping around him with an otherworldly embrace. He was overcome by a sense of profound disorientation, his mind reeling with disbelief as the stranger's wings anchored them both to the

ground, staking its talons into the dry soil.

Trapped within the suffocating embrace of the winged stranger's cocoon, his senses were assaulted by a cacophony of torment. Beyond the veil of darkness that enshrouded them, screams of agony pierced the air. With every passing moment, the cries grew louder, more desperate, echoing through the storm like a haunting lament. Then they stopped.

The storm had passed, the air now heavy with its aftermath, a strange and hollow silence settling over the land. The stranger lay crumpled in the dirt, his body torn asunder, the great black wings sundered from his frame, their edges frayed and broken, their purpose spent. Kael stared through a gap in the cocoon at the ruin of him, the ground around stained dark where the stranger's life had seeped into it.

Marek stood some distance off, the new wings stretched behind him, their span vast and unnatural, catching the faint light in strange, muted hues. He did not speak. His eyes found Kael's and in them was a thing Kael did not know, would not know, something emptied of all recognition, all humanity. Marek turned, the wings moving as if of their own volition, lifting him from the ground like some unholy bird, and with a single powerful sweep, he rose into the air.

Kael watched him go, the figure shrinking against the expanse of sky until it was swallowed by the distant horizon. The wind stirred faintly, brushing against his face with the dry taste of dust and ash. He stood alone in the wreckage, the stranger's broken body at his back, and the world stretched out before him, vast and indifferent.

Suddenly, light. The cocoon was released. Kael stood up. "Weaver's Whisper." The words hung in the air like the fading echo of the storm, and Kael turned, his eyes settling on the speaker. A man stepped forward, his wings tucked close to his body, their edges flickering faintly in the waning light. Behind him, more figures emerged, gliding in silently, their movements eerily fluid. The man's

gaze fell to the mangled corpse, his expression unreadable save for a flicker of something deep and old in his eyes.

He knelt beside the remains, his hand resting lightly on what was left of the stranger's forehead, lips moving in a whisper too soft to catch. Whatever ritual passed between the living and the dead was brief, and when he rose, his eyes turned to Kael, lingering on the binds still fastened around his wrists.

"What did they want you for?" the man asked, his voice low and even, as if wary of disturbing the fragile calm.

Kael blinked, his thoughts still scattered, but he managed to speak. "The man who... who did this," he gestured toward the broken body, his voice thick with disbelief, "he made us fight. Then the Navigators came. They took my friend—Lysandra. Put her in a Crawler. They... they threw me out into the storm to die."

The man studied Kael for a moment, his sharp gaze cutting through the haze of Kael's words. Then, with a slight tilt of his head, he gestured to one of the figures behind him. A woman stepped forward, her wings folding tightly against her back as she approached. In her hand, she held a small, intricate tool that gleamed faintly in the dim light. She crouched beside Kael, her expression unreadable, and began to work on the cuffs. The tension around his wrists eased as the mechanism clicked open, and the cold metal fell away. The woman stepped back silently, her dark eyes flicking to the man before retreating into the shadows of the group.

"Damned storm got the Crawler before we could," the man muttered under his breath. His gaze sharpened as Kael stiffened at the words. He sighed, kicking at the dirt as the others gathered closer, a curious mix of silent watchers and wary companions. "You mean you *saw* the storm take them?" He shook his head. "I'm sorry, lad. You don't walk away from a storm like that. Not one this big."

Kael's voice broke through the man's certainty. "I did."

The man's lips curved into a crooked smile, not unkind but carrying the weight of a skeptic. "Not without our divine intervention, mate." He spread his hands as if the very ground owed them gratitude. "You're alive because Aeryn here has a habit of saving fools from the brink."

Kael's gaze shifted to Aeryn, who stood a little apart from the group, his dust goggles pushed high on his forehead, dark hair disheveled, his frame lean and wiry. Kael's voice softened. "Thank you."

Aeryn inclined his head, the faintest of nods, his lips pressed into a thin line. He said nothing, his eyes distant, like he'd already seen too much of what Kael only now began to grasp.

Studying the group now, he saw how remarkably unique each individuals' wings were. Fashioned from the resilient hides of the Voltalynths, boasting wingspans that rivaled the largest birds of prey, each wingsuit was tailored to fit snugly against the body while allowing for freedom of movement. He could not know how carefully they had harvested the supple yet durable hides of the Voltalynths, and how they treated them with a blend of oils and resins to enhance their strength and flexibility. He did not notice the strips of reinforced fabric that ran along the arms and legs, providing structure and support, or the intricate patterns of stitching that crisscrossed the surface, reminiscent of the intricate designs found in the natural world. And while noticed, he could not fully appreciate the thin, yet incredibly strong, membranes stretched between the frame, capable of catching even the slightest breeze and transforming it into lift.

"Come on, lads. The storm carried it off this way," the leader said, his voice low but firm, a steady note against the wind's wild song. They moved as one, boots dragging in the dust, and the man stopped once more, turning to Kael. "You can follow if you wish, but once we catch a drift, we're off. And we won't wait for you."

Kael nodded, his gaze heavy with thought, lingering on the ruined body they left behind. "You don't want to give him a proper service?"

The man shrugged, glancing back but only briefly, as if the dead were already forgotten. “Nature makes its own service,” he said.

Kael hesitated before falling into step with them, his voice cutting through the gap between their strides. “My friend is in that Crawler. With the guildsmen. A tall woman. If we find them, please don’t harm her.”

The man stopped again, turning, his face shadowed but his eyes sharp. He studied Kael for a long moment, the wind tugging at his coat and carrying faint laughter from his men. “A dense lander with a light lander,” he said, as if tasting the words. “Now that’s something rare.” The men behind him chuckled, their voices low and rough, like stones rolled in a dry riverbed.

“And all the way out here, in no man’s land?” He stepped closer, his presence like the weight of the storm itself, pressing down.

Kael stood firm, his voice calm but resolute. “We were tasked to drift the ashes of the Damaskian Sisters into The Nexus. I was sent as her guard.”

The man’s smirk faded, something unreadable crossing his face. He extended a hand, and Kael took it. “Then I wish you the best of luck,” the man said, his grip firm. “Others call us vagabonds, scavengers, fools. We call ourselves the Nomad Drifters. I’m Astraeus.”

“Kael.”

“Just Kael?”

“Kael Wright.”

Astraeus tilted his head, the name stirring something in the depths of his memory. “Wright? Your family’s ironforgers. You’ve still got people working at that trade?”

Kael nodded but hesitated, the weight of the past and present binding his tongue. “I work with my father. We have a forge in Calvaron. Tools, mostly.”

“Tools,” Astraeus repeated, a note of curiosity in his voice, his eyes narrowing slightly. “I thought most of that was done by machines these days.”

“It is,” Kael said, his words clipped, carrying a bitterness that settled into the air between them. “It’s not by choice.”

Astraeus stared at him for a moment, the ghost of a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. “Most things in life aren’t.”



The storm’s wrath had passed, leaving the land strewn with wreckage and ruin. They came upon the broken shell of the Crawler, its metallic carcass half-buried in the dirt, torn asunder like some ancient beast gutted and left to rot. Kael stood among the wreckage, his breath shallow, his eyes darting across the jagged remains as fear coiled tight in his chest. A man protruded from beneath a warped door, lifeless and still. Astraeus and his men moved with grim efficiency, prying the door free and dragging the body from beneath it.

The navigator lay broken and bloodied, his frame twisted and torn like a rag cast aside by a careless hand. Astraeus knelt and slapped him hard across the face, the sound cracking like a rifle shot in the still air. The man stirred, coughing weakly, his lips split and dry. “You there, navigator?” Astraeus barked. “What is your name?”

The navigator’s gaze wandered, unfocused and glassy, his head lolling as if the question itself were too much to bear. Kael, unable to hold his tongue, answered in his stead. “His name is Dorian.”

“Dorian? The Valenwood?” Astraeus’s eyes flicked to Kael, then back to the navigator. “Where were you going?”

Dorian’s eyes fluttered open, his mouth curling into a dry, humorless grin as he caught sight of Kael. “Stronger than you look, my friend,” he rasped, his voice cracked and thin, before breaking into a hollow, hacking laugh.

The laugh ended abruptly as Astraeus struck him again, the blow sharp and unyielding. “Answer me,” Astraeus demanded, his voice low and hard.

The grin faded from Dorian’s face. He shifted his gaze to Astraeus, then back to Kael. “We were headed back,” he said slowly, the words dragged from him like stones from a pit. “Three escaped convicts. Him included.” He coughed, a wet, rattling sound that brought blood to his lips. “Only one other survivor I know of.”

Kael stepped forward, his pulse thundering in his ears. “Lysandra?” he asked, his voice tight with hope and dread.

Dorian’s eyes met Kael’s, and in them was a quiet and brutal sorrow. The answer was written there, in the weight of his silence.

Astraeus’s gaze shifted between them, his patience thinning. “And what did she do?” he asked, his tone edged with disdain.

Dorian’s attention snapped back to Astraeus. “Violation of the Inter-Zonal Relations Prohibition Act,” he said flatly. He gestured weakly toward Kael. “He helped her escape.”

Astraeus snorted, a sound devoid of humor. “A stupid law.”

Dorian blinked, caught off guard. “A necessary one,” he countered, his voice rising with conviction. “Dense and lightlanders—different physiologies. Mixing them—”

“Bullshit excuses,” Astraeus cut him off, his voice a growl. He leaned closer, his shadow falling over Dorian like the weight of the world. “You hear me? Bullshit.”

He struck Dorian again, harder this time, the sound echoing across the desolation. Blood trickled from the corner of Dorian’s mouth as he stared up at Astraeus with defiance and disbelief.

“You’re a navigator,” Astraeus said. “Tell me how to reach The Nexus.”

The navigator laughed, a sound that rattled in his chest and spilled out thin and bitter. “The Nexus?” he said, his voice dry as the ground beneath them.

Astraeus’s finger stabbed at the map handed to him, tapping the unmarked land to the east. “This,” he said. “Why is this unmapped?”

The navigator didn’t answer, his gaze drifting to the horizon as if the answer lay somewhere beyond it. The fist came fast and hard, snapping his head to the side. Blood dripped from his mouth into the dirt. “I don’t have that high of authorization,” the navigator said finally, his voice a whisper laced with exhaustion.

Astraeus leaned in, his shadow long in the fading light. “Authorization from who?” he demanded. “Who tells you where you can and cannot go?”

The navigator coughed, spitting blood into the dust. “Higher-ups. I don’t know their names. No one does. That’s how they keep it.”

Astraeus straightened, his hands curling into fists at his sides. His eyes swept the map again, circling a northern stretch of land with his finger. “This here,” he said, his voice like the edge of a blade. “The Echokeepers’ territory. You’re telling me all this land south of it belongs to the Lorath’eeni?”

“That’s what they say,” the navigator murmured. “It’s what I know.”

“You know more than you’re saying,” Astraeus growled. “Why wouldn’t they want you out there? What’s so goddamn important in this place they’ve wiped off the maps?”

The navigator hesitated, his breath shallow, his eyes flickering with something fragile and fleeting. “It’s not what you think it is,” he said at last.

“Then what is it?” Astraeus said.

The navigator looked up at him, his gaze steady now, the faintest trace of pity in his expression. “It’s a lie,” he said simply. “The Nexus is a lie. A control tactic. To keep us complacent. To keep us afraid.”

Astraeus’s face was unreadable, the muscles in his jaw tightening. “You’re saying it doesn’t exist?”

“It exists,” the navigator said. “It’s a zero-gravity zone. No oxygen. Nothing but a death trap. They feed us stories of paradise so we’ll stop looking for something better. How many people have you heard who’ve been there, seen it with their own eyes?”

Astraeus didn’t answer, the silence pressing in around them like a weight.

The navigator’s laughter broke the stillness, dry and humorless. “You don’t even believe in The Weaver, do you? Yet here you are, clinging to the tales like a man drowning. Did you really think—” He broke off, shaking his head. The words died on his lips.

Astraeus stepped back, his gaze shifting to Kael. His voice was low, a growl in the twilight. “Iron-forger,” he said. “If there’s something you need from this man, ask it now.”

Kael stepped forward, his boots grinding against the grit, and fixed his eyes on Dorian. The Navigator met his gaze, a flicker of something ancient and tired lurking in the bloodshot whites.

“Where is Lysandra?” Kael asked, his voice low, strained.

Dorian's lips twisted into a grimace that might have been a smile if not for the blood staining his teeth. "Where do you think?" he rasped, then lifted a shaking finger, pointing eastward.

Astraeus stood silent for a moment, the wind tugging at his tattered cloak. Then, without ceremony, he pulled a revolver from his belt and held it out to Kael. The metal gleamed dully in the dying light, heavy and purposeful. "You won't keep up with us," Astraeus said, his tone as flat as the land stretching before them. "And you're too heavy for a suit. But follow if you will."

Kael hesitated, his hand closing around the weapon. The weight of it settled into his palm, a cold and unyielding truth.

"You're still going?" he asked.

Astraeus turned, already walking, his men falling in behind him like shadows. "You believe him?" he called over his shoulder. "It's your choice, lad."

Kael stood there, the revolver in his grasp, the fading echoes of their steps dragging him back to the present. He looked down at Dorian, whose face was a canvas of cuts and bruises.

"She'll betray you too, Kael."

He leveled the revolver, his gaze unflinching, his finger tightening on the trigger. Dorian froze, his breath caught in his throat. The metallic click of the hammer sounded like thunder in the silence.

Dorian closed his eyes, bracing for the inevitable.

A heartbeat stretched into eternity.

Another.

Then—nothing.

Dorian's eyes flicked open, his chest heaving. Kael stood still, the revolver now hanging loosely at his side, though his expression remained cold as steel.

"You're not mine to kill," Kael muttered, his voice low and razor-sharp.

Dorian staggered, struggling to steady his breath as Kael took a deliberate step closer.

“But you are going to help me find her, Navigator,” Kael said, his tone as much a threat as a command.

And Dorian couldn’t help but laugh.



Coming across a bout of land in which gravity played games with the body, the Nomads couldn’t help but join in. Here, a chasm cut through a forested area, flanked by steep, rugged cliffs that descended sharply into a narrow valley. At the bottom of the valley, a rocky stream flowed, winding its way through the rough terrain. The area in between the forests provided light gravity, which allowed one to jump from one side of the fissure to the other, provided the proper equipment. The Nomads did this with ease, some even attempting flips and tricks.

Dorian sat apart, arms crossed, his face shadowed and still as stone, carved against the light that broke unevenly through the sparse canopy. His eyes followed Kael's gaze, past the flicker of the Nomads' bodies rising and falling, untethered, ridiculous, against the law that bound all things to the dirt. His lip curled, a scowl deepening like a fissure through worn rock.

"This is absurd," he muttered, low, bitter, like the scrape of a dull blade. "Astraeus beating his drum for urgency and look at them. Like children. Burning daylight while the world twists its knife in us."

Kael turned his head, slow, the movement almost indifferent. "We needed the rest."

Dorian let out a sound like a laugh stripped bare of mirth, a short bark that fell flat between them. "This isn't rest," Dorian said, his voice low, the edges frayed with something raw. "This is folly dressed up as joy, and it'll get us all killed," he spat, his arms tightening across his chest, and he turned his gaze back to the chasm, where the Nomads danced with gravity's careless whim.

Kael said nothing, his silence stretching into something that pulled at the air, the edges of his face unreadable, like the horizon wrapped in mist. He felt every second pass, a sharp, raw thing gnawing its way through his ribs, but he turned his eyes away, away from Dorian, away from the hollow weight of the words that hung between them. He watched the Nomads instead, one of them attempting a bold, reckless flip that spun him high, too high, beyond the balance of Veridian's strange mercy. The Nomad missed the ledge, and for a breath, the world held still, bound by that terrible moment. But the Nomad caught himself, clawing back to the edge with a wild, scraping effort, and the others cheered, a sharp and frantic sound that echoed, foolish and free, into the hollow of the chasm.



The Nomads gathered close in the clearing, their faces lit by the flickering firelight, the only light available during the night of the Obsidian Veil. Astraeus stood tall at its edge, his voice carrying above the crackling flames. “Brothers and sisters, tonight we defy a world built to cage us. They draw their maps and build their walls, but we were born for the open skies, for the uncharted and untamed. They fear us—not because of what we’ve done, but because of what we dream.”

The group murmured in agreement, some nodding, others raising their fists. Astraeus pressed on, his voice rising. “They call us reckless. They call us few. But I tell you this: the few can move mountains. The few can topple empires. And when the many see us soar, they’ll know the truth—freedom cannot be chained!”

A roar of approval rose from the crowd. Astraeus’s hand lingered in the air a moment, then fell. His eyes swept over them, and a faint smile tugged at his lips. “Tonight, we drift for something greater. Not just for ourselves, but for every soul still bound by the chains we’ve cast off. Drift on, brothers and sisters. Drift on!”

The cheers echoed long after Astraeus stepped away. He moved through the crowd to where Kael and Dorian sat apart. The firelight painted their faces in sharp relief—Kael quiet, contemplative; Dorian leaning back, his smirk barely

visible in the flicker of flames. “Quite the show,” Dorian said. “You’d give a Guild speaker a run for their money.”

Astraeus leaned forward, resting his forearms on his knees. “If words can carry a blade, then let them cut deep,” he said quietly, his voice stripped of the bravado it held moments ago.

Dorian’s smirk widened faintly, his eyes sharpening. “Selwyn Tarrow,” he said, the name falling from his lips like a challenge. “A Weaver philosopher exiled for sedition. Strange company for a man like you to keep.”

Astraeus’s gaze flickered with the faintest glimmer of surprise. “And yet, here we are, speaking his words. Seems his exile didn’t bury his ideas.”

“Ideas that were half-formed at best,” Dorian said, leaning forward now, his tone as sharp as the firelight cutting across his face. “Selwyn’s blade of words was just as likely to cut himself. He preached revolt but had no answer for what came after.”

“Maybe he understood that it’s not always about the answer,” Astraeus countered. “Sometimes it’s about asking the right questions. Breaking the silence.”

“And replacing it with what?” Dorian shot back, his voice rising. “Noise? Chaos? You admire him because his words made ripples, but you ignore the drownings that followed. Do you even understand the currents you’re trying to stir?”

Astraeus leaned back slightly, his face shadowed, the flicker of firelight softening his features. “I understand that The Weaver’s perfect design wasn’t so perfect for people like me. Or for those out there,” he said, nodding toward the crowd of Nomads. “You read Selwyn’s words, but you never felt them. You never had to.”

Dorian’s jaw tightened. “You speak of tearing down the Guild’s maps, their plans, but you follow Selwyn’s words like a map of your own. You claim

freedom, yet you chain yourself to his ideals just as tightly as I chain myself to The Weaver's."

"Selwyn never asked for followers, Dorian. His words were a spark, not a leash. You see chains in every direction because you can't imagine life without them. But what if they weren't chains at all?"

Dorian tilted his head, his smirk fading into something sharper, more measured. The firelight caught his eyes as he leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "A spark can light a fire, Astraeus. But fires need fuel, and once they burn hot enough, they don't care what they consume. Your followers—your Nomads—they're not feeding on the ideals you preach. They're feeding on rebellion for rebellion's sake. And when the fire's out of control, what's left? Ashes."

Astraeus's jaw tightened, but he didn't look away. "And what would you have them do, Dorian? Bow their heads? Thank the Guild and the ACD for the scraps they're given? You talk of ashes, but what's left if we do nothing? A world where people like you rule over the rest of us, claiming it's all part of The Weaver's plan?"

Dorian's voice hardened, the smirk returning but colder now. "You misunderstand me, Astraeus. I don't rule. I guide. The Weaver's plan isn't about control; it's about balance. You talk of tearing down maps, but even chaos needs borders to define it. Without them, your Nomads drift into nothingness."

"And yet," Astraeus said, his tone quieter now, cutting through the space between them like a blade, "you call it balance, but it's chains. You call it guidance, but it's submission. You accuse me of building my fight on Selwyn's spark, but at least I admit the fire's my own. How much of your belief is truly yours, Dorian? Or is it just the safest answer to the questions you're too afraid to ask?"

Dorian tilted his head, his smirk sharpening into something more pointed. "Freedom, Astraeus? You speak of it like it's something you can hold, something

real. But freedom's just a mirage—a story we tell ourselves to make the chains easier to bear.”

Astraeus's eyes narrowed. “Is that what you think? That all of this—everything we're doing—is just another chain?”

“Of course it is,” Dorian said, leaning forward, his voice low and deliberate. “You call it rebellion. I call it instinct. You and your Nomads aren't defying anything. You're just following a different path carved by the same forces—fear, ambition, desperation. You think you're free, but you're as bound to your cause as I am to The Weaver's plan. The only difference is I don't lie to myself about it.”

Astraeus's lips pressed into a thin line. “And what would you have us do, Dorian? Accept that our lives are just strings pulled by forces we can't see? Bow to The Weaver and call it fate?”

“I'd have you see the truth,” Dorian said, his voice rising, his words cutting like shards of ice. “The Weaver's plan isn't about chains or submission. It's about recognizing the boundaries of what we are. There's no freedom, Astraeus. Not for you, not for me, not for anyone. We are shaped by forces older than we can imagine—forces you'll never outrun, no matter how high you soar.”

Astraeus leaned back, his jaw tightening. “So that's it? Give up, stop fighting, let the world grind us into dust because ‘freedom’ isn't real?”

“No,” Dorian said quietly, his gaze steady. “You fight because you have to. Because The Weaver wove struggle into the fabric of existence. But don't pretend it's anything more than that. Don't lie to yourself about why you're doing it.”

Astraeus's expression softened, but his eyes burned with defiance. “Even if the chains are real, I'd rather die pulling against them than sit still and call it balance.”

Dorian's smirk returned, faint and cold. "And that's where we differ. You see the fire as a chance to burn brighter. I see it as proof that the chains are unbreakable. And I'll outlive you, Astraeus, because I know when to stop pulling."

"You'll outlive me, huh?" Astraeus said, his voice low and sharp as a blade. His hand moved before the words had fully left Dorian's lips. In one fluid motion, a knife gleamed in the firelight, its edge catching the flicker of flames as he pressed it to Dorian's throat. The crowd beyond them was still caught up in the afterglow of Astraeus's speech, oblivious to the tension now crackling like static between the two men.

Dorian didn't flinch. His eyes locked onto Astraeus's, cold and steady, his smirk gone but his defiance intact. "And here I thought you fancied yourself a leader of freedom. This doesn't feel very free."

"You think I'm afraid to cut you down?" Astraeus's voice was low, trembling not with fear but with fury. "You sit there, spitting your poison, mocking everything these people fight for. You think survival is enough? You think that's life?" He pressed the blade closer, the tip grazing Dorian's skin.

Kael rose to his feet, the tension in the air pulling him forward almost unwillingly. "Astraeus," he said, his voice uncertain, wavering. "Please. I... I need him. You know that. If you kill him, I don't have a way to find her."

Astraeus didn't respond immediately, his grip on the knife unwavering, his focus locked on Dorian.

Kael swallowed hard, stepping closer, his tone turning almost pleading. "I'm asking you. For me. Let him live—for now."

For a long moment, Astraeus didn't move. The firelight caught the hard lines of his face, the tension in his jaw, the storm in his eyes. Slowly, with a sharp exhale, he pulled the knife away, his hand shaking as he sheathed it.

Dorian exhaled, a quiet, sardonic laugh escaping his lips as he rubbed his neck where the blade had rested. “Charming,” he said, his voice dry as ash. “Remind me not to bring up inconvenient truths at your next sermon.”

Astraeus turned away sharply, his hands curling into fists at his sides. Kael watched him for a moment, his gaze steady, before sitting back down beside Dorian.

“Thank you,” Kael said softly, the words more to himself than anyone else.

Dorian chuckled, low and humorless. “Oh, I’m well aware of my place, Kael. Believe me, I know exactly how far I can push—and when to stop.”

Across the firelight, Astraeus stood still for a moment, staring into the flames as though they might burn away the storm raging inside him. Then, without another word, he walked away, his figure dissolving into the shadows beyond the camp.



The blizzard fell hard on the troupe as they traversed the wide canyon, looking for a way down, waiting for their time. This was entirely unexpected weather, thus all were freezing. Kael caught up to Astraeus while dragging Dorian behind him, bound by rope.

“Astraeus, I feel like we’re holding you back. Why don’t you take advantage of this wind and the canyon?”

“Ah Kael, catching a wind drift is an art. When you see a promising current forming, you must be swift yet patient. Timing is everything, lad.”

Kael looked ahead. Nothing was to be seen. Nothing but white snow.

“Trust me, denselander, we wouldn’t let you drag us behind. Our mission is far too important for any single individual to hinder.”

Dorian’s limp had impeded their process significantly. He stumbled and fell, yanking Kael backwards. “Damned clumsy buffoon!” Kael would have kicked him before picking him back up, but he lacked the energy.

“There’s an easier way around this, you know,” Dorian said, “If you’d only let me help--”

“Shut up, Navigator,” one of the Nomads spouted, “you’re of no use without your tools.”

Dorian remained silent.

They stopped on an overhanging rock. One of Astraeus’ men brought him a pair of binoculars. Though the blizzard was heavy, he could catch glimpses of objects moving below.

“Dear Weaver.”

“What is it?”

Astraeus handed the binoculars over for the man to see. “Prepare for flight men. Skimmers down below. A whole group of them.”

Kael, catching his breath, noticed the commotion. “What’s going on?”

Astraeus moved in his direction. “I’m afraid this is where we’re going to have to leave you. If we can get ahold of those Skimmers, our traversal will go a lot quicker, and our journey has been long enough.”

“And what of the men already driving the Skimmers?”

Astraeus shrugged his shoulders. “This world is tough on man.”

The blizzard ceased for a moment. Astraeus walked to the edge of the overhang with the rest of the men as they prepared their suits. His conscience gnawed at him. He shook his head and walked back over to Kael while procuring a length of rope and a series of metal hooks from his pack. “I hope you know this isn’t easy for me to part with.” He handed them over to Kael. “Stay safe out there, lad.” He patted Kael on the shoulder before walking back to the edge.

The Nomads gazed out across the landscape, searching for the signs of an approaching wind current—a shimmering in the air or the distant call of birds catching an updraft. Astraeus raised a weathered hand to signal the group to attention. The Nomads adjusted.

Seconds passed like hours. Then, a shift in the air caught their attention. The Nomads positioned themselves at the edge of the rock, their bodies poised for action. The wind intensified. One by one, as if in silent communion with the air, the Nomads leapt from the rock. They spread their arms wide, their wings catching the updraft, and suddenly they were airborne, one with the elements.

Kael watched them disappear in awe. After the moment subsided, he secured Dorian to a heavy rock by his bindings. “Don’t go anywhere,” he growled.

“And where exactly would I go?” Dorian mustered.

Kael walked to the edge. Below them, the landscape unfurled like a patchwork quilt, revealing the intricate contours of Veridian’s gravity-distorted terrain. He watched the Nomads navigate with skill, riding the currents and eddies, before losing sight of them for good.

The wind swept through the narrow canyon, carrying with it the distant echoes of the Nomads' departure. Kael stood at the edge, eyeing the anchor rappelling gear left behind by Astraeus, while Dorian, hands bound to the boulder by the length of sturdy rope, studied him. "Do you even know how to use this?"

"Shut up, I'm thinking." Kael began to gather the gear and lay it out.

"Here, let me show you how to set it up."

"No chance."

"Kael, you have to let me help. You clearly don't know what you're doing."

"I can't think while you're talking." Kael said as he messed with the instruments.

"I want to find Lysandra as much as you do, Kael. Survival out here is easier with the two of us. I can promise I won't try anything stupid."

"How do I know I can trust you?"

"You don't have a choice. We need to get down from here."

Kael thought for a moment, eyeing the rugged terrain and the gear laid out before him. "Alright, Dorian. Tell me what to do."

"First, find two sturdy anchor points along the edge of the canyon."

Kael's eyes swept the canyon's edge until he spotted two solid anchor points jutting from the rocky terrain.

"Fasten the hook to the rope—tight," Dorian's voice cut through the wind, steady and commanding. "No room for mistakes."

Kael worked quickly, securing the hook with as much precision as he thought possible. The metal groaned faintly as he tested its hold. He anchored the first point, then moved to the second.

"Taut and clean—no knots," Dorian reminded.

Kael stretched the rope between the two points, pulling it tight until it thrummed under tension. Satisfied, he cast a glance at Dorian, who lifted his bindings. "I'll need both of my arms to navigate us safely."

Kael hesitated. He resignedly approached Dorian and began to untie the bindings. As the last of the knots came loose, Dorian flexed his hands.

Kael packed the rope away. "Don't try anything stupid."

"You have my word, on *The Nexustratum*."

"That means shit to me."

"Fine then. You have my word, on my mother's grave."

"That'll have to do."

Dorian positioned himself at the edge, checking the ropes with meticulous scrutiny. "Frankly, I don't have the energy to do anything stupid."

Watching Dorian's progress, Kael's apprehension grew. "Hurry up, we don't have all day."

Dorian's jaw tightened. "I'm doing the best I can with what we've got." And he began his careful descent.

As he went, Kael reluctantly positioned himself at the ropes, preparing for his own descent. He gripped the ropes tightly, his distrust fueling his determination. With hesitant movements, Kael began his descent, his eyes fixed on the canyon wall ahead.

"Don't let your doubts get the better of you," Dorian said, his words a mixture of annoyance and concern.

"I know what I'm doing!"

Then Dorian noticed them, just barely jutting out from the canyon walls. "Kael, whatever you do, do not touch the mushrooms!"

"What mushrooms?" Kael replied as one smashed against his palm while he switched his grip. "Oh dear Weaver." He suddenly found himself unable to remove his hand from the cliff. "Shit." He pulled and pulled to no avail. "Dorian!"

"Kael, what did I just say?"

Kael caught a glimpse of something embedded into the cliff wall a short distance away, unable to discern it.

“Just stay where you are, I’m coming.”

“And where would I go?” he mocked. The blizzard calmed for a moment, and he could see it now, the carcass of a man, frozen stiff to the cliff wall, hands stuck with the gluey mushroom substance. His eyes widened in terror. “Dorian, get me out of here!”

The silence was shattered by a sudden screech echoing through the canyon. They froze, their senses on high alert.

“What was that?”

He scanned the rocky terrain for any signs of danger. Before Dorian could respond, a small movement came from the shadows. A pack of agile creatures with razor-sharp claws and glowing eyes. Kael’s voice was as quiet as it could be. “Dorian, what are those things?”

Dorian, despite his exhaustion and injury, maintained a vigilant watch. He glanced back at Kael, his expression grim. “They’re sensitive to sound and movement. Keep still and quiet.”

The creatures edged forward slowly. They clicked their tongues together. Echolocation. One crept up to the frozen carcass and felt it to assure itself that it was what it seemed. The creature screeched before using its beak like a pickaxe against the frozen body, chipping away at the ice until it came in contact with flesh and bone. The others crept forward and joined in, gnawing at the flesh. Dorian stealthily continued his ascent while they were preoccupied.

As if on cue, another eerie screech echoed through the blizzard. Dorian’s instincts kicked in, his focus sharpening as he prepared to confront them. “Stay close to the wall, Kael.” He grabbed a branch jutting out from the cliff and snapped it, causing a slight twitch from the creatures. They were still preoccupied. He pulled out a knife from his boot and began to shave the end of the branch into a sharp point.

Kael looked down at him. “You had a knife?!”

“Be quiet, you’ll draw them nearer.”

Kael calmed himself, then scanned the area for any potential threats. His free hand slipped. One of the creatures noticed the commotion. It let out a screech.

“They’re coming!”

The first creature lunged towards him, claws gleaming in the dim light. With a swift movement, Dorian intercepted the attack, driving his makeshift spear into the creature’s flank. It let out a chilling cry, momentarily staggered by the unexpected resistance. Seizing the opportunity, Kael hurled a rock at another, aiming to distract and disorient it. The creature faltered briefly, its eyes narrowing with aggression. Another closed in on Dorian, its claws swiping dangerously close. Dorian sidestepped, narrowly avoiding the attack, before retaliating with a well-aimed thrust of his makeshift weapon.

Suddenly, a shadowy figure lunged towards Kael, its glowing eyes fixed on its target. Kael barely had time to react as the creature’s claws grazed his side, knocking him off balance. Time seemed to slow as Kael stumbled, the icy ground unforgiving beneath him. He fought to regain his footing, but the slippery terrain betrayed him as he hung from his stuck hand.

Dorian intercepted the creature’s next strike, deflecting it with his makeshift spear. The creature recoiled, its attention momentarily diverted by Dorian’s counterattack. This brief respite allowed Kael the opportunity to regain his footing. Gasping for breath, Kael glanced up to see Dorian standing between him and the prowling creatures. Slowly, they backed away.

“They’re not done, they’re just biding their time.”

Kael gave him a silent nod of appreciation. Dorian nodded back. He took his knife and chiseled Kael’s hand free. He pointed downward. “See all those?”

Kael noticed a large patch of mushroom not more than a few yards below them.

“We’ll have to traverse to the left, around the mushrooms. The blizzard won’t hold off for long”

“Okay.” Kael’s breaths came in ragged gasps, his exhaustion evident as he leaned against the canyon wall for support. The blizzard continued to whip around them, but the intensity of the storm seemed to lessen as if nature itself had also taken a brief pause. As they began again to descend the cliff, the storm pressed on.



They camped near the base of the cliff, huddled against stone worn ancient by wind and time. A meager fire struggled into being, its frail light trembling in the grip of the dark. The cold pressed in like an old curse, relentless and uncaring, while the flames wavered—fierce but fleeting—against the vast, frozen night.

At dawn, they pressed on into the storm’s white maw, faces hardened against the razor-sharp wind. Snow lashed at them in wild flurries, a ceaseless assault from a sky emptied of mercy. The world was a blind, frozen expanse, endless and

indifferent. Their march became a struggle measured in battered steps, the monotony shattered only by savage gusts that clawed at their footing, as if Veridian itself sought to cast them away.

Dusk bled across the horizon, unveiling a grim tableau carved from winter's merciless grasp. A bird, frozen mid-perch, rested in the outstretched hands of an aged man, his body locked in eternal supplication. His hollow eyes stared blindly into the dying light, frost etching its claim upon his weathered face. Rags clung stiffly to his emaciated frame, brittle as the forgotten remnants of his scattered belongings, all entombed in shimmering ice—silent witnesses to a fate long sealed.

"This storm must have taken everyone by surprise," Kael muttered, his breath curling into the frozen air like a ghost of warmth.

"So it seems," Dorian answered, his voice steady but distant.

"Maybe he has food?" Kael suggested, hesitant but driven by the gnawing hunger that had accompanied them for days.

Their numb fingers clawed through the dead man's frozen possessions, the ice clinging stubbornly to a life long surrendered. Books, letters—fragile relics of a forgotten existence—offered nothing but hollow memories. Then, half-buried in frost, they found it: a lone bottle of booze, amber liquid still intact. A small mercy. With grim relief, they uncorked it, passing it back and forth, its fiery burn chasing the cold from their throats if only for a fleeting moment.

Dorian's gaze settled on the bird, rigid in the man's outstretched hand—a final act, frozen in time. Without a word, he pried it free, ice cracking like brittle bone. Kael watched, silent and knowing. Hunger was merciless, and survival left no room for reverence.

Hours later, they stumbled upon a sparse grove of twisted, weather-beaten trees—an imperfect refuge but enough. Kael coaxed a feeble fire to life, its trembling flames the last defense against the encroaching freeze. Pale light flickered

across their worn faces, shadows stretching long and restless. Dorian sat near the dwindling fire, his leg stiff and aching, his eyes dark and unreadable as he watched Kael work with trembling hands to thaw the frozen bird. The cold gnawed at them both, patient and relentless, a silent predator biding its time.

“Weaver’s Loom,” Dorian muttered, voice rough as broken stone. “Is this the best we could manage?”

“It’ll have to do,” Kael said, not looking up.

Dorian shook his head, grimacing as he shifted his leg. “Did your father teach you nothing about surviving out here?”

“We’re forgers and traders, not hunters.”

Dorian studied him for a long moment, something dawning in his eyes. “Your father never told you, did he?”

Kael frowned, wary. “Told me what?”

Dorian hesitated briefly. “Before your time, he was a Navigator.”

Kael froze, the bird forgotten in his hands. “That’s a lie.”

“We have the records.” Dorian’s tone was flat, final. “Why would I lie? Moreso, why would he lie?”

Kael’s jaw tightened, a sudden realization cutting through the cold. “You talked to him, didn’t you? Did you hurt him?”

Dorian met his gaze, steady and cold. “I didn’t touch a hair on his head.”

Kael studied him, searching for deceit, then exhaled slowly.

“You’re so much like him,” Dorian said. “And you probably don’t even know it.”

“You know nothing about us.” Kael’s voice cut like ice. “About what we’ve been through.”

Dorian watched the fire, shadows moving like restless memories in his eyes. “And what do you know of me?” he asked quietly.

Kael met his gaze, unyielding. “Enough.”

Dorian shook his head. “You think us Meadowlanders don’t have our own problems?”

Kael’s eyes flashed. “I think your problems are higher on the food chain than ours.”

“What do you know of the world, Kael? Only what you’ve read in books. But who writes those books?”

Kael paused, considering the question. “What’s your point?”

“Ah, never mind,” Dorian sighed, his tone weary.

“What?” Kael pressed, sensing there was more.

“You’re not worth the effort. You denselanders are stubborn. You think that makes you invulnerable, but it just makes you easier to manipulate.”

Kael bristled at the comment, but deep down, he saw the truth in Dorian’s words, recalling similar thoughts about his father. “Maybe he never told me because he couldn’t stand what The Guild had turned into—what men like you turned it into.”

Dorian stared into the fire for a long time, its flickering light reflected in his cold, calculating eyes. His hands twitched involuntarily, as if reaching for something long gone—a familiar weight that was no longer there.



At dawn, they stirred, breath rising in thin, ghostly plumes against the brittle morning air. Hunger coiled tight in their bellies, a silent, ever-present ache. They pressed onward, weary but driven. Overhead, the storm's fury waned at last, its icy grip loosening. Patches of mud and grass emerged from beneath the retreating veil of snow, dark and stubborn, like memories that refused to be buried.

Kael, his skepticism mingling with desperation, watched as Dorian knelt down, his fingers sifting through the heavy soil. "Here. The Echokeepers favor paths lined with Ferrothorn. Its spores leave a faint resonance," Dorian explained, his voice steady despite the cold.

Kael furrowed his brow. "Echokeepers?"

Dorian nodded. "They're dispersed all throughout this area. It's more than likely she was picked up by one of them."

Kael's confusion deepened. "I've heard that word before. Echokeeper."

Dorian looked up, a hint of exasperation in his eyes. “Sometimes I forget that you’re dense. They’re just glorified primates that claim to be navigators. Navigators with no equipment whatsoever. Ridiculous, but harmless.”

Kael’s skepticism flared. “And you trust them?”

Dorian shrugged. “I trust their patterns. They have a knack for finding paths others miss. It’s worth a shot, given our options.”

Kael exhaled a long, weary sigh, his eyes lingering on the winding path ahead, uncertainty gnawing at the edges of his thoughts.

Dorian traced the heavy prints in the mud. His lips barely moved as he spoke. “They’re not the ones we should fear, after all.”

Kael’s eyes lingered on the tracks, a weary sigh escaping him as he spoke, the weight of hunger pressing him down. “I’ll ignore that jab about me being dense—for now. Too hungry to argue.”

Dorian rose to his feet. “Don’t worry. The forest ahead should provide.”

Kael frowned. “Don’t we need to be going east?”

“Straight east is a high-density zone. She would instinctively avoid those,” Dorian explained, his gaze fixed on the path ahead.

“Yeah, but we just came from a dense zone,” Kael countered, frustration creeping into his voice.

“It was unavoidable. Her path was erratic through there, seeking light gravity. Once on this side of the zone, she would have avoided another like it. It’s the way we Meadowlanders are taught. It’s become instinctive in us.”

“She came to my doorstep in Calvaron. A dense land. Maybe one doesn’t always seek light gravity.”

Dorian’s expression softened slightly. “Well, sometimes gravity’s pull is inescapable.” He stood up, brushing the dirt from his hands. “You may think me an unromantic shrewd, Kael, but I do not view myself that way. I was trained to read the land and its gravitational nuances, which often tell a more revealing story than

the inhabitants themselves might know. I understand a poetry, an art, a beauty that you will never know. Sometimes it moves me to tears. Ridiculous tears. In many ways, I have more in common with an Echokeeper than I do with a denselander.”

Kael stared at him for a moment, absorbing his words. “I can’t do this right now. I. Am. Hungry.”

Dorian nodded. “The forest should have what we need.”



The trees stood tall and majestic, their branches adorned with glistening icicles that sparkled like diamonds in the sunlight. As they ventured deeper into the forest, a curious creature emerged from the underbrush—a small, innocent-looking creature with fur as white as snow and eyes that shimmered with an otherworldly innocence. Its delicate features and gentle demeanor seemed to belie its wild surroundings. Dorian’s eyes lit up with intrigue as the creature approached them, unafraid. He knelt down. Kael questioned him. “What are you doing?”

“Don’t worry, Snowlarks are harmless. The natives of this land consider them sacred beings, symbols of purity and harmony.”

The Snowlark approached with a quiet trust, its delicate steps unhurried as it neared Dorian. His fingers brushed gently through its soft fur, a rare moment of tenderness in the cold. But before Kael could reach out to touch it, Dorian’s grip tightened. With a swift motion, he snapped its neck, the creature’s warmth fading instantly in his hands.

“Weaver’s Whisper!”

Dorian’s gaze hardened slightly. “Survival demands sacrifices, Kael.”

As the snow fell soft and steady, a quiet mantle over the world, Dorian set to work with methodical hands, preparing the Snowlark over the crackling fire. The scent of roasting meat rose into the cold air, sharp and primal, mingling with the forest’s breath. Kael stood by, the unease still gnawing at him, his gaze distant and troubled from the sight of the creature’s swift end—its innocence lost in the brittle silence of the woods.

As the Snowlark cooked, a faint vapor rose from its flesh, curling into the air with a sweetness that stung Kael’s senses. The scent filled his lungs, a quiet intoxication, and with it came a slow, creeping euphoria—a sensation foreign to him. The world around him sharpened, then softened into something else entirely.

The fire’s flames danced and twisted, forming patterns that beckoned, hypnotic in their flicker. The sharp edges of their camp blurred into a soft, dreamlike fog, and Kael drifted, swept away by visions unbidden. Shapes and figures emerged from the haze, their movements flowing like liquid in the air. Familiar faces blended with strange, fragmented ones, shifting in a kaleidoscope of fleeting memories and half-formed dreams.

Time stretched and twisted, folding in on itself, leaving Kael suspended in awe and disorientation. For what felt like an eternity, he was lost within the fog, every sense overwhelmed by the Snowlark’s strange spell. Slowly, the vivid illusions

began to dim, yet the high lingered—a detached clarity, as though the world had grown distant and strange, and Kael was caught somewhere between it and the void. From that void came flashes of movement—figures that flickered like dying embers, faces he almost recognized but couldn't hold on to. His father's voice echoed faintly, too quiet to understand, lost beneath the hum of the unseen threads.

Beside him, Dorian sat motionless, his gaze locked on the fire, his face pale. He didn't speak or flinch, but his body trembled, like a man standing on the precipice of something vast and terrible. In the flames, a figure had emerged—small, fragile. A boy. His face was familiar in a way that made Dorian's chest ache, though he hadn't seen it in years. The child hadn't spoken or moved, but his wide eyes had met Dorian's, unblinking, filled with something too close to blame. The boy's face lingered in Dorian's mind, vivid and raw. He was too small, too young to carry that kind of sadness, that kind of understanding. Dorian pressed a hand to his temple, willing the memory to fade, but it stayed.

When the visions finally subsided, they left behind a hollow stillness. The world sharpened slowly, yet nothing felt quite real. The fire crackled softly, a fragile tether to reality, though its flames still seemed to shimmer with an otherworldly glow. Kael sat up, pulling his knees to his chest. The air felt heavier now, the cold biting sharper. He glanced at Dorian, who sat transfixed by the fire, his eyes distant and wild. "Did you see that too?" Kael asked, his voice rough, still tinged with the remnants of the hallucination.

Dorian jumped slightly, startled. "Don't do that!" he snapped.

"Sorry," Kael muttered.

"It's alright," Dorian said, though his gaze stayed fixed on the dancing flames. The silence stretched between them, broken only by the fire's occasional crackle.

"None of this makes sense," Kael said finally, his voice quiet.

Dorian glanced at him, his expression guarded. “What doesn’t?”

“All of it.” Kael gestured vaguely to the sky, the fire, the ground beneath them. “The way this planet works—it’s like everything here’s wrong. Like none of it was supposed to fit in the first place.”

Dorian shook his head. “Nothing here fits because we don’t belong here. Whatever brought us to Veridian... left us to rot.”

Kael frowned. “What are you talking about?”

Dorian didn’t answer at first. He stared into the fire, the light carving shadows into the hollows of his face.

“Dorian?”

His jaw tightened, words coiled in his throat like something venomous. Finally, he leaned forward, his voice low. “They’ve... found things.”

Kael waited, the silence hanging between them like a blade. “Who found things? What kind of things?”

“Evidence.” Dorian’s eyes flicked to Kael, then back to the flames. “Fragments of spacecraft. Ancient ruins. Alien technology buried so deep most people don’t even know it’s there. But it’s there.”

Kael’s brow furrowed. The air felt colder, sharper, though the fire still burned. “What kind of ruins?”

Dorian’s lips thinned. “Enough to raise questions no one wants to answer. The kind that don’t fit with the stories we’ve told ourselves.” He hesitated, the firelight shifting in his dark eyes. “Some of us—those who’ve studied what’s been uncovered—we think... no, we know... this planet wasn’t always ours. Whoever brought us here, whoever built those ships or left those ruins—they didn’t stay. They left us behind.”

Kael’s breath stilled, his chest tight. “You’re saying we were abandoned?”

Dorian nodded slowly, his voice like gravel. “This place—these gravity pockets, the way the land twists and turns on itself—it’s not natural. It wasn’t

meant for us. We're not supposed to be here. It's like we were dumped here. Dropped into a world that doesn't care if we live or die."

Kael's voice was barely a whisper. "Why would they do that?"

Dorian's gaze flicked back to the fire, his jaw working. For a long moment, he said nothing. Then he spoke, his voice low, bitter. "Maybe they didn't care enough to think about it," Dorian said darkly. "Maybe we were an experiment, or a mistake, or a problem they couldn't fix." He stared into the distance, his voice softening. "Or maybe our ancestors weren't just abandoned. Maybe they were forgotten—left behind by a civilization that couldn't, or wouldn't, deal with the harsh realities of this place. It might've been a failed colonization attempt. The gravity pockets, the unpredictable environment... too much for them to handle, too much for anyone. Or maybe it was by design. Exiles, abandoned in a world that could break them. A cruel experiment, their survival irrelevant to those who sent them here."

Dorian's gaze hardened. "Or worse—what if it was none of that? What if they were just... lost? Displaced in time or space, stranded in a place so hostile their creators couldn't even find them again? The truth could be anything. All of it, or none of it. And yet here we are—still standing, still searching, still living in the shadow of whatever came before."

Kael felt the words lodge in his chest, a weight he couldn't move. The fire crackled, loud against the silence. "How do you know all this?" he asked.

Dorian's eyes narrowed, his voice turning cold. "Because I've seen it. The ruins. The tech. I've read the records—the ones buried so deep you'd think they were ashamed of them. I didn't believe it at first. But out here..." His words trailed off, his face grim, haunted.

Kael stared at him, his mind racing, the pieces twisting into shapes he didn't want to see. "Why haven't you said anything? If this is true—"

Dorian cut him off, his voice low and sharp. “Would anyone believe it? Do you even believe it? What’s worse: that there’s someone out there watching us, or that there’s no one at all? Both answers are terrifying.” He paused for a long moment. “People believe what they want to believe. Best leave them wondering.”

Kael looked up at the stars. They were faint now, ordinary, but he couldn’t shake the memory of the glowing web he had seen in the visions. “What if they didn’t abandon us? What if they’re still out there, waiting for us to figure it out?”

Dorian’s gaze hardened, his eyes reflecting the dying embers of the fire. He shook his head, a faint, joyless smile tugging at his lips. “If they were out there, they’ve stopped waiting, Kael. People don’t wait forever. They forget. They move on.” His voice dropped, quieter now, edged with something raw. “And the ones left behind learn to stop waiting, too.”

Kael didn’t respond right away. His gaze stayed on the sky, his thoughts heavy. “I think somehow I knew,” he murmured, his voice rough-edged with uncertainty, “that he was keeping something from me.”

Dorian frowned. “Your father?”

Kael didn’t answer. He rolled onto his side, turning away from Dorian and the vast unknown stretching beyond the stars. The wind stirred softly through the trees, carrying with it the faintest whisper of something ancient, something lost.

Dorian sat in silence, staring into the fire. The weight of what he’d done settled in his chest, heavy and unmoving. He had left Kael’s father out there—alone, without mercy—and now the guilt curled in the pit of his stomach, cold and quiet. He should tell him. He should say something. But the words stayed locked behind his teeth. The silence stretched, a heavy thing between them. The land around them seemed to breathe, slow and steady, its secrets buried deep beneath the snow. The stars above, cold and distant, watched silently, as if waiting for something yet to unfold. In the quiet of the night, time stretched, and the world, for a moment, felt still—lost in a dream of its own making.



The days stretched long and lean, folding into one another without end. The land lay silent and unyielding, a vast and vacant thing that gave nothing and took all. Hunger gnawed at their bellies, weariness bent their bones. They moved as specters through the ruin of the world, sifting through the frost-laden ground for what little it might surrender, though it surrendered nothing. The sky hung gray and sullen. The wind spoke in tongues of desolation.

Then a cry. Thin and reedy, swallowed almost at once by the silence. A sound not meant for such a place. They stopped, listening. It came again, a ragged plea borne on the dead air. Kael looked to Dorian, and Dorian looked to Kael. No words passed between them. There was no need.

They followed the sound through the brittle hush. Then they saw him. A boy, no more than twelve cycles old, adrift in a pocket of broken gravity. He turned

slowly in the empty air, his limbs flailing, the fear in his face stark and wordless. The sky had him now. And it would not let him go.

“Wait!” Dorian shouted at Kael as he sprinted towards the boy. “We don’t know exactly where the pull is.”

Kael stopped in his tracks. The boy’s frightened cries echoed through the eerie silence as he drifted higher and higher, beyond their immediate reach. Kael grabbed the anchor rope from his pack and hurled it towards the boy, but it wasn’t heavy enough to reach him.

A sinuous creature, part caterpillar, part serpent, writhed within the shifting gravity, its form undulating with a predatory grace. Its head, crowned with a deadly stinger, arced toward the boy, drawn by instinct, its hunger sharp and unrelenting. The creature circled in the air, as if the very pocket of chaos had conspired to deliver the child into its grasp.

“Dorian, we need to do something!”

Dorian watched the boy, caught in the slow spiral of the gravity pocket, the creature circling like a shadow in the sky. He wrestled with the heavy, gnawing weight in his chest, as something within him twisted—soft, yet insistent. What was it?

With grim resolve, he seized the anchor rope and grabbed Kael by the shoulders, staring him directly in the eye. “I’m sorry.”

Before Kael could speak, Dorian was already moving, a streak of motion against the stillness. He leapt, weightless in the roiling air, the unseen hand of the gravity pocket pulling him in. Kael’s fingers caught the rope, his breath locked in his chest. Dorian twisted midair, reaching the boy just as the thing in the dark unfurled itself, its body sinuous, its stinger poised, waiting.

He pulled the boy close, the rope wrapped tight around him. The boy cried out, but the sound was lost, swallowed by the howling void. The gravity seethed and churned around them. Then the thing struck. A flash of motion, a

sharp arc of inevitability. The stinger buried itself in Dorian's side. He gasped, a sound cut short, and his body shuddered. A moment of silence, then a great convulsion of pain. His grip faltered. The boy slipped free.

Kael braced himself and pulled, the rope burning against his palms, his muscles locked against the weight of the child. Dorian hung in the air, the poison working quick, his skin going pale, his body thinning as if something inside him was being drawn away, unwritten. His face twisted, lips pulling back in some silent agony, before his limbs went slack. The thing withdrew, its hunger sated, and Dorian drifted, his form emptied, his body no longer his own.

Kael held the boy against him, his breath heavy, his gaze fixed on the hollow shell that had been Dorian. He watched it spiral higher, caught in the unseen tide, swallowed inch by inch by the place that had taken him. He did not call out. Did not reach for him. Some things were beyond saving.

Then—footsteps. Urgent, running. He turned. And there she was. Standing there, breathless. Eyes wide. A shadow of who she once was, yet undeniably her. Lysandra.

“In the dance of hearts, there lies both chaos and clarity. Love’s madness may obscure reason, yet within its tumultuous embrace, there flickers a guiding light of understanding.”

- ***Darius Vennor***

VII

They sat in the low glow of the fire, the light crawling over their faces, licking at the dark. The embers crackled, sending up whispers of smoke to vanish in the cold air. The world outside had fallen away. There was only this. The quiet breath between them. The things they could not bring themselves to say.

He told her everything. Of the Nomads who saved him. Of Marek's escape. Of how he had forced Dorian's hand, how he had made him help, how in the end Dorian had given himself over to the void. He did not tell her of Dorian's words, of the claim that The Nexus was a lie. He did not tell her of the visions, of the world unraveling in his mind.

She told him everything. Of Theron pulling her from the edge. Of the ritual, the Whispering Winds, the training. She did not tell him of the Memorivore, of the memory forever lost to her.

She was quiet for a long time. Then—"This is not the Dorian I knew, Kael. How noble his actions were in the end." Her voice was soft, something sorrowful and distant in it.

Kael stared into the fire. Watched the wood crumble, collapse into ash. "It doesn't take away from what he put you through." The words came slow, even. Not just for her. For himself too.

Lysandra's gaze dropped to the fire, as if it might hold the answers she sought. Kael watched her, feeling the weight of their time apart, the words still between them like a wall, fragile and unspoken. "Lysandra, I've been searching for you for so long."

She met his eyes, and for a moment, the fire seemed to pulse with the unspoken things between them. Kael watched her face, the play of emotions across it—joy, doubt, a flicker of pain—and he wondered if it would ever be enough, this reunion, this moment stretched too long between the cracks of time.

Then he noticed the crest of the Valenwoods, the one sewn at the top of her breastbone, was gone. His eyes lingered on the absence, on the empty space where the stitched emblem had once rested against her skin, its presence once as much a part of her as her own name. He thought of what it meant—that she had torn it away, that she no longer carried the weight of the Valenwoods' legacy upon her chest. He did not ask. He did not need to.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, it's just all so overwhelming. I thought you were dead."

"I almost was."

Kael's eyes traced the contours of Lysandra's face, taking in the subtle shifts that had occurred since he last saw her. The softness that once graced her features had given way to a resolve that was as striking as it was new. Her eyes, once filled with the lightness of The Meadowlands, now held a depth carved by many trials. "You've changed."

Lysandra met his gaze, her heart a tumult of relief, sorrow, and an aching tenderness she couldn't quite name. She watched Kael, his face a canvas of the journey he had endured, the scars etched upon his skin like a map of his own trials. She yearned to share the burden of her choice, the memory she had let slip into the abyss for a moment shared with him. "Do you remember... *The Nexustratum*... us, catching raindrops on our tongues?"

He searched the depths of her gaze. “What do you mean?”

“Kael, that memory... I really need to know if it’s real for you too.”

His eyes were steady, his expression sincere. “Sure I do.” But the shadows of the past and the complexity of their journey made it hard for her to discern the truth. “Why the doubt, Lysandra?”

“It’s just... after everything that’s happened, it’s hard to trust what’s real.”

Kael nodded in understanding. “We’re here now, together. That’s what matters. And once I’ve recovered my strength, we’ll finally be able to continue our journey.”

She averted her eyes, a subtle shift in her demeanor that did not escape his notice.

“How long have you been here, Lysandra? In The Echoing Expanse?” Kael’s voice was tinged with concern.

“Oh, Kael... I... Thank you for guiding me this far, but... I’ve found a sense of peace here.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“The pursuit of The Nexus no longer drives me. I wonder, deep down, if it was leading me here all along.”

“What about our journey?”

“The Lorath’eeni have given me a sense of belonging, something I thought I’d lost forever.”

“And what about Arin? What about the Damaskian Sisters’ ashes? What about everything we’ve endured?”

“Arin...” Lysandra’s voice trailed off, her eyes clouded with sadness. “You were right. The Nexus is but a dream, Kael. A story we tell ourselves to keep hope alive. But whatever lies beyond its reach will not bring him back.”

“We made a promise... You made a promise to that old woman.”

Lysandra didn’t deny it.

“What am I to do, Lysandra?” Kael’s voice was tinged with desperation.

“I don’t know. Maybe you could join us, Kael. Let Theron guide you.”

“I can’t stay here. I’m an outsider, I don’t belong.”

“So was I.”

“How can you do this to me? After everything we’ve been through...”

“I’m not abandoning you, Kael.”

Kael took a deep breath, his emotions roiling just beneath the surface. He searched Lysandra’s eyes for any hint of the woman he had known, the companion who had shared his dreams and burdens. “Lysandra, you were the one who always saw the light in the darkness. You were the one who always believed in The Nexus. Now, you’re telling me you’re giving it all up?”

She remained silent, her expression a blend of sorrow and determination. Kael felt a pang of frustration, his hands clenching at his sides. “How can you find peace here when there’s so much left undone? Arin’s sacrifice, the Damaskian Sisters, my mother—” He paused. “We can’t just let their memories fade. I can’t let their sacrifices be for nothing.”

Lysandra’s eyes softened. “Peace isn’t something you find; it’s something you make. The Lorath’eeni have taught me that. They’ve given me a chance to heal, to build something new out of the ruins of my past.”

Kael sighed, and knew peace wasn’t something he could find. And though her demeanor was steady, Lysandra could already feel the edges of her wall of peace peeling away with every word he spoke.



She found herself standing alone in the vastness of The Echoing Expanse, the ground beneath her feet as insubstantial as mist. The air was thick with a sense of foreboding, and the silence was oppressive, broken only by the distant, haunting sound of the Memorivores' whispers. The sky above churned with ominous clouds, swirling into a vortex that mirrored the maelstrom that had once separated her from Kael.

And there he was, staring at her with that unmistakable gaze. He tried to say something but she couldn't understand. He tried again and urged her to step closer. He whispered in her ear, barely audible.

We are the abandoned ones. How could we ever find peace?

The ground began to tremble, and gravity turned traitor once more. Lysandra felt herself being pulled towards the sky, her body light as a feather, yet her heart heavy with an unnameable dread. She reached out for something, anything, to anchor her to the world she knew, but her hands grasped only air. Above her, The Nexus appeared, a shimmering portal pulsating with an ethereal light. It beckoned to her, promising answers and solace, yet it remained achingly out of reach. Below, the tribe's fires dwindled into embers, and Kael's figure receded into the shadows, his face a mask of betrayal and sorrow. Lysandra called out to him, her voice lost in the roar of the wind. The gravity pocket ensnared her, pulling her further and further away from everything she held dear. Then, without

warning, she was falling, plummeting through the layers of fear and uncertainty. The ground rushed up to meet her, and just before the impact, she jolted awake, her breath ragged, her body drenched in a cold sweat.



She emerged from her tent, the echoes of her nightmare still clinging to her like a second skin. The night was unusually still, the air holding the crisp promise of dawn. She wrapped her arms around herself, seeking comfort in the cool embrace of the night. As she wandered through the slumbering camp, her feet led her to the edge of The Echoing Expanse. There, the ground fell away into a vast chasm that yawned beneath the stars. She peered into the abyss, and for a moment, it seemed as if the stars themselves were rising from the depths, a river of light flowing upwards.

The Nexustratum was a light travel copy, bound in leather that was worn at the edges. The night was silent around her, the tribe asleep, and the stars above indifferent witnesses to the solitary figure poised at the edge of the void. Lysandra's fingers traced the embossed symbol on the cover of the book. With a breath that felt like her first true breath in ages, Lysandra opened the book one last time. The pages fluttered in the weak gravity, the words blurring before her eyes.

She looked down into the chasm, a darkness so profound it seemed to consume the very light. The book slipped from her fingers and into the abyss, its descent slow and almost graceful. She watched as it fell, turning over and over, the pages spreading like the wings of a bird in flight.

“The path to enlightenment is often paved with sacrifice.” The voice came from the darkness, startling her. “To let go of that which no longer serves us is to make room for new growth, new understanding.”

Adjusting her eyes, she saw Theron standing there. “Did you follow me out here?”

“I was concerned when I saw you leave the camp.” Theron’s eyes seemed to flicker in the darkness. He moved closer to her. “The beliefs we hold are like stones in a river—sometimes they guide us, but other times they weigh us down. We must learn to cast aside the burdens of the past.”

The gentle breeze whispered secrets of the land. Lysandra hesitated, unsure of where to begin. But as she looked into Theron’s eyes, she felt a sense of calm wash over her. “Theron, I am torn between two paths. Kael seeks The Nexus. But I fear that this quest may lead him to ruin. When you first found me, I sought The Nexus as well. But now I fear that it is nothing more than a fool’s errand.”

“And what do your heart and soul tell you, Lysandra?”

“I do not know. Part of me longs to stay here. But another part of me feels compelled to accompany Kael on his journey, to see where the path may lead, and fulfill my promise to the Sisters of Damaskus.”

He paced for a moment. “I believe you are ready if you wish to go. But I won’t deny that I will miss you, and anxiously await your return.”

Theron’s stoic demeanor was momentarily lifted by these words, catching Lysandra off guard. She smiled at him, then dropped her gaze. “Theron... is The Nexus real?”

He regarded her for a time, the words hanging in the air like a benediction

or a curse. “A place is a place,” he said at last, “and it is nothing more.”



She began to gather what little she needed, the quiet sound of her movements sharp in the stillness. Then, a faint sound, a whisper almost, caught her ear. She looked toward the window, her gaze meeting the boy Elian’s for the briefest moment before he ducked out of sight. His face vanished as quickly as it had appeared, a flash of dark skin swallowed by shadow. She smiled, the curve of her mouth small, almost imperceptible, as if it were a thing earned in silence and solitude. “It’s alright, Elian, you can come out.”

His head popped back up. She repeated this as best she could in Lorath’eeni. He clumsily climbed through the window, which stirred a chuckle out of Lysandra. He stood up and gathered himself, staring at a small tapestry she had been working on ever since her arrival. She motioned him over to her and he cautiously obeyed her motions.

“This is my homeland.” She pointed to a spot on the tapestry resembling The Meadowlands.

The boy’s fingers grazed the spot. He repeated the word. “Home... land.”

She smiled and moved his hand over to a patch at the bottom. “And this is The Iron Cliffs.”

“Iron... Cliffs.” The boy understood from the visuals of the quiltwork what the words represented. He moved his hand on his own to an empty section to the right, at the very end of the quilt, and looked at her for an answer.

“I’m not sure yet.”

Elian repeated the words, testing them on his tongue. He seemed satisfied with the answer, or at least with her honesty. Then, his attention shifted, his gaze falling on her pack, half-open, a tangle of belongings spilling out. He pointed at it and said something in Lorath’eeni. She didn’t understand the words, not exactly, but their meaning reached her just the same.

When are you coming back?

She opened her mouth, but no words came.

Elian waited, his dark eyes expectant, but as he shifted, Lysandra noticed something—just a glimpse—peeking from beneath his sleeve. A mottled, unnatural darkness spreading across the skin of his forearm. It wasn’t just a bruise. The edges looked wrong, the skin around it slightly swollen, inflamed.

Her stomach tightened. She said nothing. She wasn’t sure why. Perhaps because she didn’t know what it was. Perhaps because, for the first time in weeks, this moment felt normal. So she let it linger, this fragile illusion of quiet understanding, even as something cold and uncertain stirred beneath it.

But the moment didn’t follow her.

By the time she stepped into Kael’s hut, that quiet had unraveled into something else—something hollow. A chill of worry gripped her spine. The familiar scent of his presence lingered in the air, yet the space felt eerily empty. Her eyes darted around, absorbing the unsettling quiet that hung heavy in the room. The flickering shadows from the lone candle only deepened her anxiety. The disarray of items strewn across the table told a silent story of haste. The uneasy

silence confirmed her fears: Kael had left without her.



The cliffs loomed, monoliths in the dying light, their shadows long and filled with the whispers of the ancients. He could feel the pull of The Nexus, a siren call that tugged at the very marrow of his being. It was a foolish quest, perhaps, but it was his. As night descended, the creatures of the dense lands stirred. His eyes, straining in the dimness, caught the briefest glint of movement. A skittering. A rustling. Then, a presence, as tangible as the weight upon his shoulders. He was not alone. His hand went to the hilt of his makeshift shiv. The creature advanced, and the ground beneath Kael's feet betrayed him, turning traitor as it softened, a quagmire seeking to claim him for the depths.

He fought, every muscle taught with desperation, but the ground was relentless. It pulled at him, a lover's embrace from which there was no waking. Kael's breaths came in ragged gasps, his strength waning as the creature's tendrils wrapped around his limbs, a promise of oblivion.

She moved with the grace of one who had danced with gravity and

emerged the victor. She reached him, her hands a blur as they worked to free him from the creature's grasp. The tendrils recoiled, as if scorched by the very air around her. Kael felt the grip of the soil loosen, and with a final, desperate effort, he surged forward, pulled from the maw of the land by Lysandra's grasp. They stood then, panting, the creature retreating into the shadows from whence it came. Her eyes met his, a storm of emotions passing between them.

"Lysandra..." He looked up at her, his pride a shattered thing. He saw that she was no longer the castaway from The Meadowlands but a daughter of Veridian in her own right.

As soon as they had caught their breath, she pushed him away. "Dammit, Kael. What were you thinking?" her voice was sharp with frustration.

"You didn't have to come after me," he shot back, a stubborn glint in his eyes. "I can fend for myself."

She scoffed, placing her hands on her hips and glancing around as if to find an audience for the irony. "Have you not learned by now?" she retorted.

Kael frowned, confusion clouding his features. "What do you mean?"

"You can't traverse Veridian without respect for its power. After all this time, you still walk around carelessly, as if you have a death wish," she said, her tone a mix of exasperation and concern.

Kael didn't argue.

Lysandra turned away, her gaze fixed on the expanse of darkness beyond them. "You helped me when I needed it most. Now I must return the favor. We will find the way together."

Silence settled between them, thick as the shadows pooling at their feet. The wind keened low, a sound like mourning, its icy fingers threading through their hair. In the quiet, she understood with sudden, startling clarity just how much she needed him—and how much he needed her.

Kael's voice was quieter now, almost lost beneath the shifting wind. "Lysandra, you don't owe me anything."

Lysandra exhaled sharply, a breath caught between frustration and understanding. Then, as if drawn by a force neither of them could name, she closed the space between them. She caught his wrist first, fingers rough and certain, then

moved without thought, pressing against him in an embrace that carried none of the hesitation their words held. She was warm, so impossibly warm, the heat of her breath ghosting across his collar as her arms tightened around him. He didn't pull away. And then, with a suddenness that was neither impulsive nor calculated, her lips met his.

The first light of the moons crept across the land, yet neither of them moved to break their fragile union. Her fingers curled against his shoulder, as if grounding herself, as if afraid of the unraveling that might come after. Finally, she released him. Kael's pulse hammered in his throat, his thoughts an unreadable tangle. He searched her face, trying to decipher what came next, but she only looked at him with something like acceptance.

She swallowed, exhaling as if steadying herself. Then, in a voice softer than the wind, she said, "Come on. We have a long way to go." Without another word, she turned and started forward.

Kael hesitated for just a beat, tasting the ghost of her on his lips, before falling into step behind her. His steps faltered, a sharp sting breaking through the adrenaline that had sustained him thus far. He glanced down at his foot, the dim light revealing a small thorn. He pulled it out and flicked it aside. Nothing could hurt him right now.



They walked on, the land harsh and indifferent underfoot, miles of stone and scrub that stretched toward an uncertain horizon. The world around them seemed vast and empty, the silence a weight upon their backs. But after what felt an eternity, the soil grew softer, the barren stretch of land gave way to something lush, a muted green creeping through the cracks. The air thickened with the scent of moss and damp soil, and the land, once scorched, began to breathe again.

"These ones are safe." She caressed a cluster of dark, almost black fruits nestled among thorny branches.

"What about these?" He stood near a brighter cluster.

"They lure you with their vibrancy, but they're poisonous."

He noticed the way her fingers lingered over the leaves she was inspecting. He cleared his throat, forcing himself to focus. "Alright, what should I actually be looking for?"

"It's not the brightness of the berry but the depth of its hue that holds the truth." Her hands deftly picked through the foliage. "Look for the ones with serrated leaves, like this." She held up a leaf, its edges jagged like a saw. "They're good for healing, for teas. But avoid the ones with smooth edges and a waxy sheen. They'll sicken you faster than hunger."

Kael nodded, his eyes tracing the shapes and colors she described, though his foot throbbed beneath him. He winced, the thorn wound calling for his attention.

Lysandra caught it. "What is it?"

"Nothing," he said too quickly. It was worse than he thought.

She nodded. "Come on. We need to go higher." She stood up with a handful of berries. "Gravity pulls everything down here, including nutrients." She pointed upwards. "The plants up there fight harder to live. That struggle makes them stronger, richer. That's where we'll find what we need."

As they moved, Kael found his gaze drawn to the way the light caught in her hair, how it shimmered with each measured step, catching like fire against the world. He noticed her newfound movement, steady and assured—like she belonged to this land in a way he never could. "You've learned a lot from them, haven't you?"

She smiled back at him. “They’re good people.”

He told himself he was only watching her movements, the way she navigated the uneven terrain with effortless grace—but then his eyes traced the curve of her shoulders, the way her breath rose and fell, steady and sure, and he knew it was more than that.

She glanced back at him, catching his gaze before he could look away. Kael cleared his throat, grasping for the first thought that might steer them back to safer ground. “So... uh, what exactly did Theron teach you?”

She arched a brow, amused by his sudden interest. “About what?”

“You know. The, uh... the gravity stuff,” he said, inwardly cursing himself for how clumsy the words sounded.

She huffed a quiet laugh but humored him. “Most people stumble through the pockets blindly, feeling only their effects, but Theron taught me how to hear them.”

Kael frowned. “Hear them?”

She nodded. “It’s not just in your ears, though. It’s something you feel, almost like a vibration in your bones. If you listen long enough, you start to notice where the harmonies are—safe paths, places where the land won’t betray you.”

Kael exhaled slowly, trying to wrap his head around it. “So... you’re saying the land has a rhythm?”

“Think of gravity zones like weather.” Her fingers traced swirling patterns in the air. “They shift and change, sometimes without warning, making our journey unpredictable. While weather varies day to day, climate is the pattern we see over time. It’s consistent, predictable in its way. There is a pattern of gravity that weaves through the world. It may not be easy to detect, but it is there. The gravity zones, they’re not random; they have an order, a structure that should lead to The Nexus. That is the path we follow.”

Kael ran a hand through his hair. “Right. Makes perfect sense.”

Lysandra shook her head, laughing softly. “Liar.”

Kael huffed. Her smile lingered, but she didn’t push him further. Instead, she turned forward again, leading the way up the incline.

The climb grew steeper, but Lysandra moved with ease, her body attuned

to the rise and fall of the land. Kael, however, felt every inch of the incline like a weight pressing against him. The throbbing in his foot sharpened, each step sending a fresh jolt of pain up his leg. He gritted his teeth, forcing himself to keep pace, unwilling to give in to something as insignificant as a thorn wound.

At the crest of the hill, the air was clearer, cooler. The trees stretched taller here, their branches woven into a dense canopy that dappled the ground in shifting patterns of light and shadow. Lysandra crouched by a bush, her fingers deftly sorting through a cluster of dark berries. “These are good,” she murmured, plucking a handful and tossing one into her mouth.

Kael knelt beside her, doing his best to ignore the way his foot protested the movement. He reached for the berries she’d pointed out, but before his fingers could close around them, she tensed.

“Kael.” Her voice was low, urgent.

His hand stilled. “What?”

She didn’t answer right away. Instead, she pointed past him, her gaze locked on something in the distance. He followed her line of sight and saw it—a Silverscale deer, standing at the edge of the clearing, its sleek hide shimmering faintly in the fading light.

Lysandra moved slowly, her hand reaching for the bow slung across her back. With practiced ease, she drew an arrow, nocking it in a single fluid motion. Kael held his breath as she took aim, exhaling only when she released. The arrow cut through the air, swift and silent. The deer barely had time to flinch before it staggered forward, collapsing into the brush below.

Lysandra grinned, exhilaration flashing in her eyes. “I got it!” Without hesitation, she took off down the incline, disappearing into the undergrowth.

“Lysandra—wait—” Kael started, but she was already gone. She moved like she belonged to this land. Like she was part of it.

Cursing under his breath, he pushed himself upright and started after her, but as soon as he took a step down the slope, his wounded foot faltered beneath him. He lurched forward, the ground rushing up too fast to stop. His knee hit first, then his shoulder, and he tumbled down the incline in a graceless sprawl, finally landing hard on his back. A sharp, searing pain shot through his foot.

For a long moment, he just lay there, staring at the sky, catching his breath. Then, footsteps—Lysandra’s—approaching fast.

“Kael!” She dropped to her knees beside him, worry creasing her brow. “Are you alright?”

He grimaced, pushing himself up onto his elbows. “Yeah. Fine.”

Her gaze swept over him, assessing. “You’re not fine.”

“I—” He exhaled, knowing there was no use pretending anymore. “It’s my foot.”

Her expression shifted, her concern sharpening. “Let me see.”

He hesitated, but the way she looked at him—steady, expectant—made arguing pointless. With a sigh, he pulled off his boot. Lysandra’s fingers were gentle as she examined the wound, but even the lightest touch sent another jolt of pain through him. “This is infected,” she murmured, frowning. “You should have told me sooner.”

Kael sighed, running a hand through his hair. “Didn’t want to slow us down.”

Lysandra shook her head, pulling a strip of cloth from her pack. “Idiot,” she muttered, but there was no real bite in her voice. She glanced up at him then, something softer in her gaze. “Stay still. This is going to hurt.”

Before he could reply, she pressed the cloth against his foot, and the world narrowed to a sharp, stinging ache. He clenched his jaw, exhaling through his nose. “We’ll need to clean this properly when we set camp,” she said, tying off the bandage. “You’re lucky it’s not worse.”

Kael let out a breath. “Doesn’t feel lucky.”

Lysandra smirked, sitting back on her heels. “Well, maybe next time, you’ll listen when your body tells you to stop being stubborn.”

With a groan, Kael took her hand and let her pull him up. His foot still throbbed, but as he followed her through the trees, he found he didn’t mind as much. The pain was manageable, at least for now. They had a deer to find, a fire to build, food to cook. He told himself he’d rest properly later.

But later came too soon.

The cold seeped into his bones, a relentless invader that mocked the heat of

his fever. His breaths were shallow, each one a ragged tear through the silence. The small thorn wound on his foot throbbed with a pain that was both sharp and deep. It was a living thing, pulsing in time with his heartbeat. As he turned on his makeshift bed, a spasm of pain wracked his body, and he retched, the sound harsh and loud in the quiet night. The contents of his stomach spilled onto the soil.

Lysandra stirred beside him, her sleep disturbed by the noise. Her eyes, wide and alert, found him in the darkness. Stepping towards him, she noticed the blood. He lay there, caught in the gravity of his own silence, as Lysandra's hands moved over him, her touch light and sure.

"Wait here. It's okay, I'll be right back." She rose, her silhouette a graceful shadow against the backdrop of the land. Kael watched her go. As he lay there, the pain a constant companion, his mind began to drift, unmoored from the present. Memories flooded in, unbidden yet insistent, each one a fragment of a life that seemed both distant and painfully close. He remembered his mother, her laughter once a melody that filled their humble home. His breath hitched as he remembered her final days, telling him that she loved him, that she was proud of the man he was becoming. The memories came in waves, each one crashing over him with the force of a maelstrom.

Kael awoke to the dim light of dawn, its pale fingers stretching across the land. The fever had passed, leaving him drained but lucid. His side, a throbbing mass of pain the night before, now lay still beneath a patchwork of poultices and bandages. He exhaled slowly, then turned his head.

"Thank you."

Lysandra sat beside him, her hands still stained with the herbs and soil she had worked into his wounds. She nodded, but there was a heaviness in her expression, a sorrow that lingered just beneath the surface. "You went through a terrible ordeal last night."

Kael swallowed, his throat dry. "I dreamt of my mother. She was as real as the stones beneath us, as if time itself had folded, bringing her back to me."

Lysandra studied him in silence, her fingers absentmindedly tracing the edges of his bandages. "The wound was steeped in the flora of the land. Some plants hold the echoes of the world in their sap. They can make the mind wander

through memories, make the past feel like the present.”

Kael laid back, his gaze distant. “I held her in my arms. It was as if she had come back to me, just for a moment. I saved her from the storm.”

Lysandra’s fingers stilled. “Storm?”

He paused, as if reluctant to speak the rest, but the fever had stripped him raw, left him unguarded. “We weren’t prepared. I was still young, barely strong enough to carry firewood, but I remember—” His voice caught. “I remember how the wind howled, how it tore the roof from the old shed. I remember her hands, how cold they were when she shoved me into the root cellar. Told me to stay put, to wait until it was over, that she was going to find my father. But she never came back.”

Lysandra’s breath caught, but she said nothing. She let him speak.

“I waited for hours. Maybe longer. When I finally climbed out, everything was gone. The house, the shed, the trees near the ridge—flattened like they had never been there at all. I found her in the field, near the stream. She must have been trying to reach the neighbors, to get help. I don’t know how long she had been lying there, how long she had been calling for me before she couldn’t anymore.” His voice wavered. “I held her until the sky cleared.”

She hesitated, her frown softening into something sadder. “Kael...” Her voice dipped, gentle but tentative, as if stepping over broken glass. “Earlier, you said she died from GDS.”

Kael blinked, confusion flickering across his face. “Why would I tell you that?”

Lysandra sat back slightly, searching his expression. “After I told you about Arin. Remember? In the cave?”

Kael fell silent. His gaze drifted downward, his mind scrambling for something that wouldn’t come. “Oh.” His voice was barely above a whisper. “Did I?”

The weight of realization settled over Lysandra, cold and sharp. “You told me that memory was real.”

Kael’s hesitation was too slow, too telling. “Lysandra, I—”

“Why would you lie to me?”

The silence stretched between them.

“Kael?”

He exhaled, as if trying to rid himself of something he couldn't quite name. “Because I wanted it to be true. The way you felt about me after that memory. I wanted that feeling to be real. I wanted you to keep feeling that way about me.”

Lysandra turned away, her heart twisting between anger and sorrow. She closed her eyes, willing herself to steady, but the betrayal sat too close, too raw.

“Please don't hate me, Lysandra.” His voice was quiet, almost pleading.

She remained still, back turned, her body rigid with tension. The words left her mouth before she could stop them. “You've been nothing but a burden to me almost every step of the way.”

Regret hit her instantly, but it was too late. She had already seen the way he flinched, how his jaw tensed, his hands curling into fists at his sides.

“I didn't—”

“No.” His voice was quiet, resigned. “You're right.”



Though gravity had begun to soften, Kael's steps grew leaden. What had once been resentment in Lysandra's eyes had turned swiftly to pity—an unbearable softness that gnawed at him, mocking him in the silence of their march. His legs wavered beneath him, and when he stumbled, she reached for him but wasn't fast enough. He hit the ground hard. Her hands found him then, steady and sure, but as she held him up, something cold settled in his chest.

The certainty of his fate.

It was there, woven into his marrow, as if the world itself had whispered it into him.

"I can't help but wonder," he said, voice raw, "why someone like Dorian deserves such a noble death when I have to die like this."

"You're not going to die."

"Just leave me, Lys."

"We're almost there," she insisted, adjusting her grip on him. "Just a little further—I know it."

He let out a breath, almost a laugh. "I don't even care about The Nexus anymore. Let's just go back to the Lorath'eeni."

"Nonsense. We've made it this far. We're not stopping now."

Kael exhaled sharply, shaking his head. "You said it yourself, Lys. The Nexus is a journey, not a place. We've had our journey."

She said nothing.

But he could see it in her eyes—that quiet, terrible truth.

A hollow laugh left his lips. "Veridian. Funny name for this place."

Lysandra knelt beside him, her hands gentle as she braced his weary body. She unfurled a large tapestry blanket, spreading it across the uneven ground before adjusting him onto it. Then, gripping the fabric, she began to drag him forward.

"I'm sorry, Lys."

Her arms trembled with the effort, but she did not falter. He watched as a single tear traced a glistening path down Lysandra's cheek. As it fell, the tear met the soil—a brief touch, a fleeting kiss—and then it was gone, absorbed into the soil that had become both their burden and their refuge. The soil drank the tear

greedily, as if such offerings were rare in this land.

She dragged his body over the terrain, her muscles screaming in protest. Her breath came in ragged gasps, yet she moved with a singular purpose. The silver glow of the moons bathed the meadows in a serene light, but it did little to dispel the confusion that clouded Lysandra's mind, a cacophony of discordant notes, leading her in circles. Exhausted and disheartened, she succumbed to the embrace of the soft, feather-like grass, allowing the whispers of the meadows to lull her into a restless slumber.

She awoke to the sound of hooves, a rhythmic thumping that seemed out of place in the quietude of the land. Squinting against the light of dawn, Lysandra saw an old woman, her eyes sunken and surrounded by dark shadows. Her face, once perhaps serene, was now marred by red, inflamed patches stretched across her cheeks and neck, with areas of darkened, necrotic tissue that spoke of pain and decay. Her hands, gripping the reins of the majestic creature she rode, were similarly afflicted. The skin was mottled and discolored, some fingers wrapped in makeshift bandages. Despite the visible agony, she held herself with a certain dignity.

Across the creature's back, draped like a bundle, lay a small, lifeless figure. Lysandra's heart tightened in her chest. She knew it was a child. A sharp pang of empathy gripped her, fleeting and raw. Without a word, the old woman dismounted, removed some gear from her satchel, and connected Kael's makeshift gurney to her creature. Then she remounted and the creature began to move.

Lysandra rose, her body stiff, and fell into step behind the old woman, keeping her distance. The woman's pace was deliberate, slow enough for Lysandra to follow without effort, though the space between them stretched, unspoken and wide. Together, yet apart, they drifted through the silent world, the distance between them a quiet, unbroken thing.

Lysandra's gaze lingered on the old woman's retreating form as some distance grew between them, the gentle undulations of the land swallowing her silhouette. This woman seemed to know the path. She pressed on, her steps buoyant yet uncertain, as the landscape around her blurred. Time passed, or

perhaps it stood still—Lysandra could not tell. The old woman had vanished, a ghost in the dance of lighter lands. Doubt crept into Lysandra's mind, a creeping vine threatening to ensnare her resolve.

Have I been led astray?

As if pulled from the grip of a dream, Lysandra found herself at the far side of the meandering expanse. The world there was thick with silence, save for a distant, steady thumping that seemed to pulse in time with the heavy air. She squinted against the harsh light, eyes straining, trying to piece together the sight before her. At first, it was a blur, a writhing mass of shadow moving in the haze, a sickly green that hung like fog. But as her vision sharpened, the shapes resolved, grotesque and unnatural, their forms twisting into something too awful to name.

The ground was littered with withered vegetation, blackened and twisted as if scorched by some unseen force. Pools of stagnant, oily water dotted the terrain, reflecting the sickly green glow emanating from the heart of the area. Each step she took was accompanied by the crunch of brittle, dead plant matter underfoot.

Then she noticed them—bodies, dozens of them, floating aimlessly in the sky, preserved in a haunting state of stasis, their limbs and faces frozen in their final moments of life. Some collided gently with one another, creating a macabre dance of the dead, while others drifted toward the edges of the zone, eventually falling and piling up to form towering compost mounds of decayed flesh and bone.

The air was heavy with a foul stench, a mix of rot and chemicals that burned her nostrils and made her eyes water. Her heart pounded, a cold sweat breaking out across her skin as the full horror of what she was witnessing sank in.

The realization hit her slowly but powerfully. The sight of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of bodies floating and colliding in the center of the zone was overwhelming. She could almost hear the whispers of the souls trapped in this grotesque limbo. Every instinct urged her to flee, to turn back and escape this hellish place. But she knew she couldn't.

With each step closer, the reality of the situation became more harrowing. Her senses were overwhelmed by the sight and smell of decay. She could hear the low, mournful wails of the wind as it swept through the desolate landscape, carrying with it the faint cries of despair from the floating bodies.

She spotted a pilgrimager at the edge, their face gaunt and eyes hollow. The figure struggled to carry a wrapped bundle towards the floating graveyard. With a solemn reverence, they released their burden into the void, the small, lifeless body joining the ghastly dance of the dead.

The closer Lysandra got, the more she noticed the extent of the decay on the pilgrims drawn to this cursed place. Their skin was mottled and diseased, bearing the scars of prolonged exposure to the biohazardous environment. The stench of rot was almost unbearable, and she had to fight the urge to retch.

She saw the compost piles at the edges of the zone. Bodies of people and animals alike, entangled and decaying, formed grotesque mounds that rose from the ground. A group of people labored amid the carnage, their bodies stooped and grim, shoveling the dead back into the zone. The task seemed endless, a cycle of horror that seemed to stretch beyond the horizon, as if the land itself had given birth to this abomination, and it would never cease. She could see the signs of

sickness in their gaunt faces and shuffling movements. The realization of the scale of the horror she faced settled in her mind.

The old woman stood at the edge in the distance, her figure small against the vastness of the scene. The creature beneath her seemed to understand the sanctity of the zone, its movements deliberate, reverent, each step slow and measured as though it too recognized the weight of what lay ahead. Lysandra approached, her eyes wide, caught between repulsion and wonder. She watched the old woman, whose grace was a stark contrast to the heaviness of the land. The woman moved with an assuredness that defied her years, her steps steady and sure upon the uneven ground that sloped toward the precipice, leading into the yawning abyss of the unknown.

The child, lifeless yet serene, lay cradled in the arms of the beast that had borne them both to this final threshold. The creature bowed its great head. With hands that trembled not from age but from the weight of release, the old woman began her ritual. She spoke words that seemed to weave through the air, a litany of loss and love that resonated with the very fabric of The Nexus. They were for the child, for the universe, for the very essence of the gravity that had once bound them to life. The woman lifted the child. There was a pause, a breath, a heartbeat of hesitation. And then, with a grace that spoke of acceptance and the unyielding passage of time, she let go. The child's form drifted, caught in the gentle embrace of zero gravity. The old woman's face turned skyward, a canvas of peace and pain.

Lysandra's breath caught in her throat as the small, lifeless body was

swallowed by the shifting mass, joining the haunting dance of the others. As a tear traced its path down her cheek, she reached into her pack and withdrew the pouch of The Damaskian Sisters' ashes, her fingers trembling as they closed around it. Standing at the edge of the zone, the pouch of ashes felt like a weight too heavy to bear, a fragile offering in the face of such desolation. The act of spreading the ashes seemed absurd, impotent here amidst this macabre wasteland. The thought of her loved ones, of Arin, of Kael, joining the ranks of the suspended dead was an unbearable wound, and she felt revulsion and sorrow rise up in her, crashing over her like a cold, relentless tide.

The old woman approached Lysandra, her steps soft and barely a whisper against the ground. With gentle gestures, the old woman pointed towards the zone, then back to Lysandra, and finally to her own heart. She drew a circle in the air, encompassing the surrounding land, and placed her hand over her chest again. Her expression softened as she mimed the act of holding someone close, then letting them go.

Lysandra's initial sense of connection wavered, replaced by a growing unease. The old woman's silent message felt like the ramblings of a mind unhinged by despair. Her gestures, meant to convey solace and understanding, seemed more like the desperate attempts of someone clinging to fragments of sanity. She felt a

wave of self-reproach wash over her as the old woman walked past her. Her cheeks burned with shame as she recalled the countless hours spent in prayer and devotion, the fervent belief that The Nexus was a portal to a better place.

Lysandra turned at the sound of footsteps, her heart leaping into her throat. Two figures, their faces hollow with fatigue, their movements robotic, as though they had long since given up any notion of choice, approached Kael, his body limp and barely conscious in their grasp. The first man, broad and gaunt, gripped Kael under the arms, while the woman at his side, slight but strong, clutched his legs. Their eyes met for a brief, flickering moment—no pity, no remorse—before they stepped forward, dragging Kael towards the edge of the zone.

Lysandra's breath hitched in her chest, and without thinking, she charged forward. Her voice, raw and sharp with fear, cracked in the oppressive silence. "No! Stop!"

They moved as though they had done this countless times before, the end of Kael's life no more significant than the bodies they had cast into the void before. Lysandra reached them just as the woman released her grip, letting Kael's body slip

from her hands. Kael's half-conscious eyes fluttered open, and for a brief moment, he seemed to meet Lysandra's gaze. Her pulse quickened, her heart pounding in her ears, but it was too late. The bodies in the zone shifted and swirled in the zero-gravity, and with a sickening lurch, Kael's body was swallowed up by the current.

Lysandra stood frozen, her hands trembling at her sides, unable to speak, unable to move. The man and woman turned away without a word. She saw the blur of his body, swallowed whole by the endless void, and in that instant the world broke open. Without thought, she leapt, her feet unmoored from the ground as the pull of The Nexus dragged her in, the cold, unrelenting grasp of nothingness pulling her down, pulling her apart. She reached for him, her arms outstretched, and with a cry that was swallowed by the vastness, she caught him. Her fingers clutched at the dead weight of him, the disjointed dance of their bodies carried by the infinite spin of the void. The world around them spun, a dizzying blur of faces and fragments, and they spiraled together, caught in the cruel choreography of the cosmos. She held him tight, her chest pressed against his. She gasped, but there was

no breath to draw, no life to take. Her lungs burned, her chest seized as the suffocating emptiness filled her, the panic rising like fire in her throat. She held him tighter, her body instinctively seeking the solace of his, but the pressure of the nothingness pushed against them, grinding them down into the infinite whirl. Her heart thundered, weak with the pull of death.



It was a slow descent until their forms came to rest upon a small mound. The mound was a soft hillock composed of those who had journeyed before them. The bodies lay intertwined, a macabre garden of carcasses. Creatures, both familiar and alien to the eyes of the living, congregated with a patient reverence. They

awaited the arrival of the newly departed, their presence not one of malice but of purpose. The air was thick with the scent of decay, but amidst it, something strange stirred. A subtle pressure, a force unseen. They fed upon the remains, not in a frenzy, but with a gentle efficiency that spoke of the natural order. In their care, the bodies would return to the universe, their essence fueling the life that thrived in this liminal space.

Strange plants delved their roots into the soft flesh. Their petals unfurled with a slow, deliberate motion. They grew through and around the bodies, a symbiotic embrace that transformed the stillness of death into a canvas of vibrant life. Insects and worms, the architects of decomposition, wove their way through the remains. They created a labyrinth of life within the lifeless, their movements a dance of creation and destruction. These creatures used the bodies as their homes, their nurseries, their sustenance. They were the unseen caretakers, ensuring that even in death, the cycle continued.

Then, it came—like a soft wave washing over her. A trembling breath filled her lungs, shallow at first, but it was enough. She stirred, her eyelids fluttering open. The air felt dense, the gravity of the place pressing her chest in a way she had never known. She blinked against the strange light, the weight of the moment pulling her deeper into the unfathomable quiet. She felt the soft, familiar pressure of Kael's body beside her. Not dead, not alive—somewhere in between.



She moved along the worn-down Strand, eyes sharp, her gaze cutting through the unnatural ripples in the air, the distortions in the ground that spoke of forces older than the ground itself. The past weeks had been hard on her, no different than before. The land stretched out before her, silent and still, but it was a silence that begged for rupture. She had learned, over the years, that nothing here could be trusted—least of all the calm. The soil, the sky, the wind, they could all turn at a moment's notice. And so she did not relax her watch, nor let her mind wander. The quiet was not her ally. The quiet was a trap.

As she stored her canteen, her eyes were drawn to a figure ahead, stumbling along the trail, dragging another behind her. The figure moved with an uneven, unsteady rhythm, as if her body was no longer fully aligned with the will to carry her forward. Her gait was sluggish, lost in a haze of exhaustion. The traveler maneuvered closer, her focus sharpening as she took in the figure's condition. Even from this distance, the signs were undeniable—emaciated form, drawn tight with the strain of illness, each step a struggle. The air around her seemed to tremble with her weariness, and something about her presence, a faint but unmistakable aura of decay, set her instincts on edge.

The traveler drew nearer, her gaze fixed on the collapsing figure. With a final, trembling effort, the straggler let the body she'd been dragging slip from her grasp, its lifeless form landing with a muted, heavy thud. She crumpled to the ground beside it, limbs splayed in surrender. For a long moment, there was only the rasp of her breath, shallow and strained. Then, with a will summoned from some dwindling reserve, the straggler lifted her head. Her hollow eyes, wide and desperate, met the traveler's—pleading, wordless, filled with a silent cry that pierced through the stillness like a knife.

"Help... please," the straggler rasped, her voice barely audible.

The traveler's chest clenched at the sight, though her face remained an unyielding mask.

“You have to get him... to a healer.”

She took in the woman’s ravaged arm, flesh discolored and broken by creeping decay. She knelt beside them, her shadow stretching long in the failing light. “Stay with me,” she said, her voice low and steady, a command tempered by something almost tender. “You’re safe now, I’ll get you some help,” she said, as if willing the world to reshape itself around her words.

“In the quiet embrace of oblivion, the departed find solace, for in death, memory fades and the burdens of the living are lifted. It is not a curse but a release, a return to the cosmic embrace from which all life springs.”

- ***From “Reflections on Existence and Beyond”***
By Seraphina Nethra

VIII

He woke to the sharp sting of sterile air in his nose, the dim hum of machines around him. His body felt sluggish, weighed down, but something was wrong—something beyond the haze of sleep. He tried to move, and a sickening absence sent panic clawing up his throat.

His right leg was gone.

His breath hitched. His hands trembled as they traced the empty space where his leg should have been, fingertips brushing against tightly wrapped bandages. His heart pounded against his ribs. The world tilted, the walls pressing in as his breath came faster, sharper—

A hand touched his arm. Firm but gentle.

“Breathe,” a voice instructed.

He blinked up at a woman in a faded white uniform. A nurse. Her eyes, lined with exhaustion, studied him with something like practiced patience. “I know it’s a shock, but you need to stay calm.”

Kael swallowed, his mouth dry. “W-what—?”

“You’ve been in a coma for a few weeks,” she said. “We had to amputate your leg. The infection was spreading too fast.”

Infection. The word rang hollow, meaningless in the face of everything else. His fingers curled against the sheets, his nails digging in.

“Where did you pick up the disease?” the nurse asked.

Kael didn’t answer. His mind latched onto something else, something more urgent. “Where’s Lysandra?”

The nurse exhaled, shifting slightly. “You mean the girl who brought you in? She was sick, too, but...” The woman frowned, as if trying to make sense of something. “She healed. Quicker than we expected. Then one night, she disappeared. Stole several vials of the vaccine and vanished.”

Kael’s chest tightened. “She left?”

The nurse gave him a look like she wasn’t sure if he was slow or just refusing to believe it. “That’s what I said. We’ve been getting more and more cases of this illness recently. She must’ve had her reasons for stealing the vaccine, but I don’t know what they were. It really sets us back though.”

Kael barely heard the last part. His thoughts were already racing, piecing together fragments of memory, fear, and something darker—the feeling that none of this made sense. “No,” he rasped. “No, no, no—this isn’t—”

The nurse placed a firm hand on his shoulder, her expression unreadable. “You need to stay calm.”

He shoved her hand away and swung his remaining leg off the cot, his body lurching forward before he realized how unsteady he was. The world tilted violently. His arms flailed for balance, but there was nothing to catch him. He collapsed onto the cold floor, a shock of pain ricocheting up his side.

“Stop—” The nurse was suddenly at his side, trying to lift him, but Kael fought her off with whatever strength he had left. His vision blurred at the edges, his body betraying him as sweat slicked his skin. He had to leave. Had to find Lysandra. Had to fix this—

“Sir, please.” Her voice softened, almost pleading. “You’re hurting yourself. Just breathe.”

He wasn’t listening. Couldn’t. His fingers clawed at the floor as he tried to

drag himself toward the door.

The nurse sighed. A moment later, he felt a sharp prick at his neck.

“No—” he croaked, already feeling the edges of the world slip away. His limbs went slack, darkness seeping in as his body betrayed him once more. The last thing he saw was the nurse watching him, her face drawn with something that almost looked like pity.

Then, there was nothing.

When he awoke again, his body felt heavy, his thoughts sluggish, but this time, the panic had settled into something quieter, something sharper. His breath came evenly, his mind no longer caught in the frantic blur of before. The dim light filtering through the infirmary shutters cast long shadows along the walls.

Something caught his eye—a slip of paper on the table beside his cot. His fingers trembled slightly as he reached for it. The paper was thin, creased at the edges as if it had been folded and unfolded too many times. The handwriting was neat, deliberate. He traced the letters with his eyes, his heart thudding against his ribs.

“I’ll find you.”

His grip tightened around the note. He could see it now—her slipping out into the night, barely recovered, moving with purpose. She had stolen the vaccine. Not for herself. She was going back to the Lorath’eeni.



The crutches had been easy enough to steal—left leaning against the wall in a supply room. He adjusted them under his arms, wincing as he put weight on them, then maneuvered to the window. To his surprise, it was unbarred. Either they trusted their patients to stay put or never expected them to be desperate enough to leave. They were wrong.

He hoisted himself onto the ledge, the muscles in his arms burning as he braced for the drop. It wasn't far, but the landing was rough. His body hit the cold ground harder than expected, sending a sharp jolt through his spine. He bit back a curse, dragging himself upright and pulling the crutches under him again. No time to hesitate.

He moved fast, keeping to the broken edges of the Strand—a long stretch of ruined road, half-swallowed by time and neglect. It was foolish to travel this way, exposed and vulnerable, but he had little choice. His head throbbed, his body still weak from weeks of stillness. Every mile felt heavier than the last.

Eventually, headlights appeared in the distance. He hesitated. Hitchhiking was a risk. He had nothing to bargain with, no way to defend himself if this went wrong. But walking wasn't an option, not like this.

He raised his arm.

The vehicle rumbled to a stop—a cargo hauler, old but sturdy. The driver was a broad-shouldered man, his face weathered from years on the road. He leaned over, squinting at Kael through the dim light. “You look like hell,” the man muttered.

Kael grunted. “Feel like it too.”

The driver exhaled through his nose, considering. “Where you headed?”

Kael gripped the doorframe, forcing himself to meet the man’s gaze. “As far north as this trail will take me.”



The cargo hauler’s brakes hissed as it rolled to a stop outside a squat building hunched at the edge of a skeletal pine forest. A flickering neon sign buzzed overhead: *The Frostline*. Through the grimy windows, shadows moved like sluggish fish in murky water. He shouldered the door open, the bite of northern air sharp against his sweat-damp skin. His crutches slipped on icy gravel as he climbed out. The driver muttered something about “suicide runs” before the hauler rumbled away, taillights dissolving into the dusk.

Inside, the bar reeked of woodsmoke and sour mash. A handful of patrons

hunched over drinks—miners with dirt ground into their knuckles, trappers in frayed pelts, a mercenary type cleaning a rifle at the back table. He ignored the stares, making for the bar where a grizzled woman with a scar splitting her eyebrow was polishing a glass with deliberate disinterest. “I need a guide,” he said, voice low. “To The Echoing Expanse.”

She leaned forward, her breath reeking of gin. “Look at you. Half-dead, half-legged. Whatever you’re paying, it’s not enough to drag a sane soul out there this time of year.”

A trapper at the bar swiveled toward Kael, eyes bloodshot. “Heard the Basin’s crawling with Lorath’eeni these days. That why you’re in such a hurry? Got a death wish?”

Kael’s jaw tightened. “I’m looking for someone. A girl.”

“A girl, eh? Aren’t we all?” He laughed a hearty laugh.

Kael turned to leave, but the mercenary spoke. “Here’s some free advice,” he said. “Go home. If the cold doesn’t kill you, the things in the fog will.”

The bartender slammed her glass down. “Ryn, you’re a damn plague—”

Kael didn’t stay to hear the rest. He stumbled back into the cold. The first snowflakes were falling, the sky a roiling bruise.

He moved through the days like a man damned. The crutches carving grooves into his shoulders. The stump gone purple with cold. He dragged himself into hovels and outposts where the wind screamed through the walls and the men who lingered there studied him with eyes like stone. At a crossroads storefront slouched in the shadow of a dead volcano the proprietor squinted at him through smoke. He wore a necklace of bear teeth and spat into a tin cup. “You won’t find no guide here,” he said. “What’s out there ain’t for men with two legs let alone one.”

East was a cracked alkali pan where the suns hung white and lidless. A cabin crouched in the scree. A woman splitting wood with a rusted axe paused to wipe her brow. Her children peered from the doorway. Ghostfaces. Snot frozen to

their lips. “Now why would you want to go that way?” The woman asked.

The icefields were a shattered plain. Wind-scoured and scabrous. A chapel of sorts stood lashed together with wire and driftwood. Inside a man in a rotting cassock blessed him with hands blackened by frostbite. “The Weaver’s mercy ain’t for the likes of you, son. By the looks of it.”

The wind gnawed at the ruins of the waystation. A roofless shack. A dead firepit. A figure crouched there, turning a spit of charred hare over the coals. His face was a topography of scars, one ear sheared clean off, his hands gloved in old burns. Kael’s crutches sank into the ash-streaked snow as he approached. He recognized the man, back when he had adorned wings, as a member of the Nomad Drifters. The man did not look up.

“Jerek,” Kael said. The wind creaked through the dead pines. The hare’s fat hissed. “What happened to the Drifters? Did you make it?”

Jerek’s knife paused mid-carve. His remaining eye flicked to Kael’s missing leg. A muscle in his jaw pulsed. He stared into the coals. The scars along his neck gleamed slick in the firelight, keloid and cruel. “They walked into that fog and it *changed* ’em. Started clawin’ at their own skins. Sayin’ they heard voices in the ice. Then they just... stopped. All of ’em. Sat down in the snow and let the cold take ’em. All ’cept me.” He touched his missing ear.

“Why?”

His breath reeked of rot and gin. “Ain’t no answers out there. Just the thing that wears the dark like a coat.”



The bar crouched at the edge of the wastes like a scavenger picking at carrion. Its walls leaned under centuries of grit, the windows filmed with dust that glowed amber in the failing light. He sat hunched at a corner table, his crutches propped against the wall like accusatory fingers. The barkeep had long ceased offering him rotgut. Even the flies avoided the pool of stale beer at his elbow.

The wind began first—a low, keening moan that pried at the doorframe. Candles guttered. Ash hissed in the hearth. A hum seeped through the walls, a vibration that set Kael’s teeth on edge. Then—a knock. Once. Twice. Delicate, almost playful. The door creaked open. Dust swirled in the sudden draft. He smelled it then: ozone and burnt sugar. The shadow fell across his table. Not a man’s shadow. Something *older*.

When Kael finally looked up, his pulse hammered in his throat.

Marek stood there, his silhouette sharp against the dim, backlit by the dying sun as if the light itself recoiled from him. The wings were gone, but their ghost lingered—in the way his shoulders arched faintly, in the unnatural stillness of the air around him. His face was a blade honed by cruel grins, eyes like shards of obsidian reflecting a hundred fractured versions of Kael’s own face.

“Heard there was a man,” Marek said, sliding into the chair opposite. His

voice was gravel wrapped in silk. “Asking after savages in the deep.”

Kael’s beer had gone ice-cold in his hand. Marek leaned back. He tilted his head, a jackal considering carrion. “They ever tell you their tale of the Scorpion and the Rain? No?” His smile split, revealing teeth too sharp for comfort. “Lorath’eeni mothers whisper it to brats who stray too far from campfire light. Goes like this—”

A calloused hand flattened on the table, fingers splayed like legs. “Scorpion crawls into a dry riverbed. Prayin’ to the Rainmaker. *‘Drown the world,’* it says. *‘Drown it ‘til the sands sing.’* Rainmaker laughs. *‘You’ll drown too.’* Scorpion doesn’t care. Stings its own heart, pumps venom into the dirt. Clouds swell. Rivers boil. Rain falls black.”

Marek leaned close, his breath reeking of juniper and iron. “Whole valley floods. Scorpion floats on its back, tail curled in prayer. Watches the drownin’ world. Smiles.” He paused, eyes glinting. “Lorath’eeni loved that story. Thought it meant faith. But it’s not about that. It’s about what happens when you let poison things want.”

He sat back, fingers drumming the table. “Their camp stank of burnt sage and rot. Children drew that scorpion in the dirt while I torched their shrines. Shamans chanted it like a hymn when I pegged their skins to the trees.” He tilted his head, birdlike. “They fought. For a time.” A shrug, effortless as a landslide. “They wanted their flood. I just brought the rain.”

The barkeep vanished into the back. The other patrons studied their drinks. The air thickened. Kael’s missing leg throbbed. “Lysandra—”

Marek stilled, his head cocking like a hound catching new scent. “Lysandra,” he repeated, tasting the name. “What’s she to them?”

Kael said nothing. His hands tightened on the crutch, knuckles bleaching to bone. Marek watched him, eyes narrowing, the slow unfurling of a smile. “Ah,” Marek breathed, the syllable curling like smoke. “She was supposed to be there.” He leaned back. “Lucky girl.”

The sack of Looms hit the table with a leaden clatter. Marek nudged it forward, coins spilling like scales from a gutted fish. “Your cut from the fights. Spend it on whiskey. A whore. A wooden leg.”

Kael stared at the coins. They glinted cold, indifferent. “Why?”

Marek stood. “You bled in my arena. This is what it bought.” He turned, his coat slicing the air like a scythe, and strode toward the door. The bar’s patrons shrunk back, eyes averted, as if his shadow carried a contagion. The door slammed behind him, its echo lingering like a gunshot.

Kael sat. The Looms glinted on the table, their edges sharp enough to draw blood. He traced the grooves of the coin under his thumb, the metal cold as a dead man’s stare. The barkeep mopped a glass, the rag squeaking. A fly circled the spilled whiskey, drowning slowly.

The bar door groaned shut behind him, its echo swallowed by the wind. Kael stood in the street, the crutches biting into his palms, the Looms a leaden sin in his coat. The town hunched around him, its buildings leaning like tombstones in the dust. Somewhere, a shutter clapped. Somewhere, a dog howled. He did not turn to look.

He walked.

The gravel road unspooled beneath him, each step a reckoning. The crutches slipped on loose stone. The stump burned. He did not stop. A wagon passed, driver hunched under a frayed tarp. Kael raised a hand. The man spat into the dirt and cracked his reins. The wheels churned dust to smoke.

The stationmaster’s booth leaned like a drunkard against the rails, its timbers warped by decades of grit and sun. Kael slid thirty Looms across the counter, their serrated edges catching the lamplight. The clerk squinted, weighing them in his palm as if they might be teeth plucked from some nameless thing. Kael added thirty more. The clerk spat on them, polished the blood tarnish with his sleeve, and slid a ticket through the grille. “Last car. Don’t talk to no one.”

The train hunched on the tracks, its boiler coughing black phlegm. Kael boarded, his crutches echoing in the empty car. He chose a seat flecked with old vomit, the remaining Looms a cold weight in his coat. The whistle screamed. The wheels churned. Somewhere, the train's rhythm whispered *coward*.



The hovel stood as a wound in the earth, its door hanging slack on rusted hinges. Kael shouldered it open, the crutches slipping on grit. Inside, the air hung thick and tomb-still. Sunlight pierced the grime-choked window, cutting the dust into jagged shards.

His father's chair sat vacant by the hearth—cold ash pooled in its belly, the iron grate spiderwebbed with rust. No boots by the door. No pipe smoldering in the clay dish. The table bore a plate furred with mold, a fork still embedded in its leathery remains.

Kael limped to the hearth, his shadow lurching across the walls. He touched the ashes. Cold as the coins in his pocket. A bottle lay toppled nearby, its contents long evaporated, leaving only a stain like old blood on the stones. He dragged a finger through the dust on the table, revealing the wood beneath—a scar in the grain. Somewhere, a beam groaned. Somewhere, the wind pried at the walls.

Calvaron baked under the twin suns, its bones bleached and brittle. Kael limped past the well, its bucket rotted to lace. The same salt-crusted faces nodded from porches, but their eyes slid away too quick. The wind carried no clang of hammers, no gossip, only the dry rasp of dead grass.

Orlan's shop was gone. In its place squatted a lean-to of warped planks and tarpaper, its gaps stuffed with burlap. A sign hung crooked: Sundries & Salvage. Through the slats, Kael glimpsed empty shelves, a chair splintered to kindling. The ground where the boulder had crushed the old storefront lay bald and seared, as if fire had licked it clean.

He moved on, crutches kicking up dust-devils. The tavern's doors gaped, stools upturned on tables. A flyblown ham swung from a hook. At the end of the street, the temple loomed. Its doors stood open, the threshold strewn with ash and wilted sage. From within, a murmur rose and fell, the cadence of a chant older than the town itself.



He found himself at the bottom of the largest cliff by the sea. There, sitting against the jagged stone, was a small hovel. Its silhouette barely discernible against the night, but a faint light within flickered like a firefly caught in a jar. With a deep breath, Kael stepped into the hovel. Inside, the air was tinged with the scent of burning wood and the sea. He saw Jorin sprawled across the rough-hewn floor. An old, worn book lay open across his body, pages yellowed and curled at the edges, rising and falling with his steady breaths. His face was obscured by a thick, dirty beard, one that made him appear older and more weathered than Kael remembered. His skin had taken on the same rugged, salt-kissed look as the cliffs themselves. Time had been kind to neither of them.

Kael knelt beside him, his hand brushing against Jorin's shoulder, nudging him gently. He stirred, his eyes fluttering open, bleary with sleep. He squinted up at Kael, a look of disbelief crossing his face, as though his mind struggled to make sense of the figure before him. His gaze traveled across Kael's features, searching, unsure, as if the very presence of his old friend was something too impossible to

believe. For a moment, Jorin didn't speak. His breath was slow, as though he was trying to catch up to the world. Then his lips parted, and a hoarse whisper escaped. "Kael?" His voice cracked like old wood, but there was something else in it—an unspoken question, a wariness that hung between them like the fog of a half-remembered dream. "You're... here?"

"Good to see you, Jorin."

The embrace was rough, urgent, Jorin's hands gripping Kael's coat like a man clinging to driftwood. When they broke apart, Jorin's eyes narrowed, then dropped. His gaze snagged on the crutch, traced the void where Kael's leg should've been.

"Weaver's Loom, man—where've you been?" Jorin's voice frayed, his throat working. "Just left me to rot here?"

"I had to."

"Had to?" Jorin spat into the fire. The flames recoiled. "Your father vanished the day after you did. We all thought he'd gone after you."

Kael shifted his weight, the crutch groaning against the floorboards. Jorin's eyes flickered to the sound, his jaw tightening.

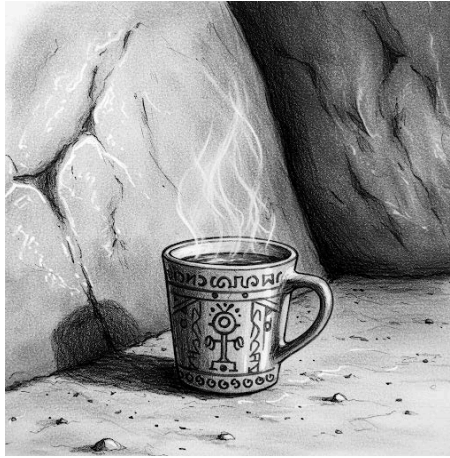
"With me?"

"Aye." Jorin leaned back, his face half-lit by the embers. "Then Dorian Valenwood rode in. Asking after you. After his wife." His gaze sharpened, lingering on Kael's stump. "What were you doing with her anyway? And what in Weaver's name happened to your leg?"

Kael stared at the fire. "He wasn't with me."

Jorin's hand froze mid-reach for the whiskey jug. The rag he'd been using to wipe the bottle hung limp in his grip. "Great Weaver," he muttered, his voice sandpapered thin. "Then where...?"

The question died in the salt-stung air. Outside, the sea roared, relentless. Jorin tossed the rag into the flames. It blackened, curled, vanished.



Kael sat up, cradling a steaming cup of some foreign hot liquid that Jorin had poured for him. The aroma was unfamiliar, yet oddly comforting, as the steam curled into his nostrils. He watched Jorin intently, waiting as his friend absorbed the weight of his story.

Jorin took a long time to respond, his face etched with disbelief and concern. He saw the forlorn look in his friend's eyes, felt a pang of empathy. He realized how much Kael had endured, how much he had lost. He took a sip from his cup and looked at his friend. "I'm sorry about Lysandra, Kael," Jorin said softly, his voice thick with emotion. He reached out and placed a hand on his shoulder. For a moment, they sat in silence, the weight of their thoughts lingering in the cool night air. "Why'd you go with her? After everything... why her?"

Kael's thumb traced the rim of his cup. The steam had stopped rising. "She... reminded me of her," he said finally, his voice fraying at the edges. "Of my

mother. The way she'd tilt her head when she talked. The way she walked." He swallowed hard. "A part of me wanted The Nexus to be real. That maybe she'd be there..."

Jorin listened as the fire popped. Embers spiraled upward, dying before they reached the rafters. "And you never found it?"

"I don't know. I don't suppose we did." He took a sip from his mug. "Dorian said The Nexus was a lie. A wasteland."

"Do you believe him?"

Kael stared into the dregs of his drink. "He said we were abandoned here. That there may be life out there, but they don't care to make contact with us."

Jorin studied Kael with quiet concern, his eyes tracing the lines of weariness etched deep, as if searching for something still unbroken beneath the burden he carried. "What are you going to do about your father? About... Lysandra?"

A hollow laugh escaped Kael. He leaned back against the rough wall, the firelight carving gaunt shadows under his eyes. "I don't know what I can do." His voice dropped to a whisper. "I'm so tired, Jorin. Not just a normal tired either. A deep tired. The kind you can't sleep off." He pressed a fist to his sternum, knuckles white. "It's in the *marrow*. Like I've been carrying that wasteland inside me long before I ever saw it."

Jorin shifted, resting his forearms on his knees. "Yeah," he replied softly, his gaze distant, as though searching for meaning in the dancing flames.

Kael turned to look at him. "You don't have any wise words for me?"

Jorin shook his head, a sad smile touching his lips. "Not tonight."



He woke in the dark, breath ragged, sweat cold on his skin. The dream lay coiled in his mind like a serpent that refused to be shaken. He rose and stepped outside, the sand yielding beneath his feet. The beach stretched endless and pale under the brittle light of stars scattered across the heavens.

After a time, he heard the soft tread of footsteps behind him. He turned to see Jorin approaching, his face shadowed, rubbing sleep from his eyes. “Couldn’t sleep?” Jorin asked, voice rough with drowsiness.

“Couldn’t stand to dream anymore,” Kael said.

They stood there beneath the endless sky, the ocean whispering in the distance, its murmur a constant in the stillness. The night was heavy, as if the weight of all things unseen pressed down upon them, waiting for something to break the silence.

Jorin spoke then, his voice low, barely more than a murmur carried by the wind. “What was it?”

“What?”

“The dream?”

Kael reached down and picked up a small stone from the ground, feeling its cold edge in his palm as he turned it over and over. The distant waves crashed against the cliffs like the echo of his own thoughts. The stars above were the same as they’d always been, but they felt colder, more distant than they had the night before. “I dreamt that I was standing in a place, but it wasn’t a place I knew. Just dust and stone, stretching out for forever. And the sky above, it kept changing. It was like it was trying to be something it couldn’t. Red and gray, like a fire that’s burning, but it doesn’t have the strength to burn right.”

Jorin said nothing, just waited.

“There were trees,” Kael went on, his voice distant now, like he wasn’t speaking to Jorin at all but to the darkness around them. “But they weren’t real trees. Just shadows. Like things that once were but aren’t anymore. I tried to walk towards them, but every step I took they stayed where they were. Always out of reach, always just ahead of me. No matter how far I walked.”

He paused for a brief moment, letting the ocean fill the silence. “I saw a light,” he said, his voice cracking slightly. “A fire, maybe. It was far off. I knew it was something, something important, but it kept moving away, like it didn’t want me to find it. And the ground was shifting under me, always changing. I couldn’t find my way. The land kept turning, like it wasn’t real either.”

Kael paused again, his gaze lost in the distance. He swallowed hard, the words coming slower now, as if each one was heavier than the last. “There was a figure,” he said at last, his voice thick with something Jorin couldn’t place. “I couldn’t see its face, but I knew it was waiting for me. It didn’t move, didn’t say anything. Just stood there, watching. And then it asked me a question. It asked me, ‘What are you waiting for?’ And I couldn’t answer. I couldn’t even move. The land was too still. The ground felt like it was holding me, pulling me down, and I couldn’t break free.”

He was silent for a moment, his eyes distant, his voice hollow when he spoke again. “When I turned back, the place was gone. The trees, the light, everything. And it was just shadows. Nothing but shadows stretching forever.”

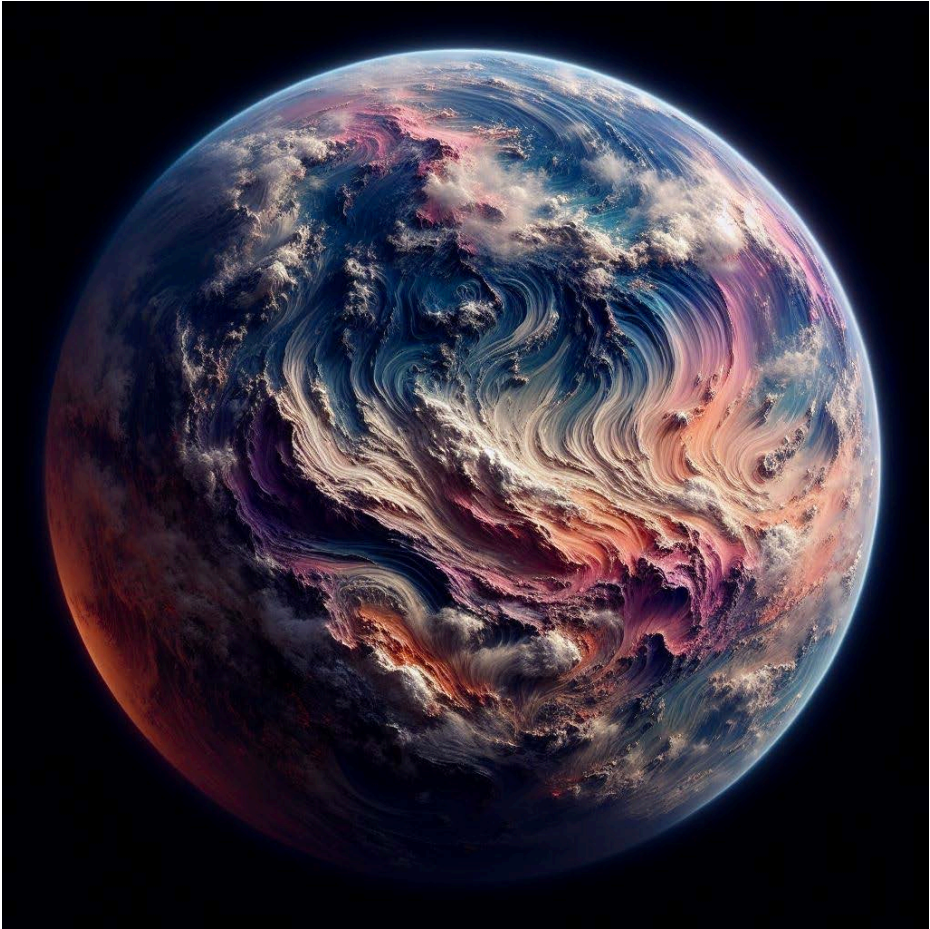
Kael’s eyes were fixed on something far off, but Jorin knew he wasn’t seeing it. His hand closed around the stone, and for a long while, the silence between them stretched, broken only by the distant sound of waves against the shore. And the stars above—those ancient, burning remnants of a world they would never truly know—burned on in their quiet, indifferent light, as the two men sat together, under a sky that seemed endless, but one that would eventually fade, as all things did.

The desert night was a mosaic of fractures—static stars, the jagged silhouette of dunes. She walked. Her boots found purchase where the sand stiffened, subtle as a breath. She drifted west, then south, her steps unhurried, adjusting to the tug beneath her ribs. To most, the wastes were directionless. To her, they hummed.

A scar ached at her side. Old blood, older pain. She pressed a palm to it, and for a moment, the wind carried a phantom scent—sage, iron, a campfire's resinous smoke. She did not linger on it.

The sky shifted. A star blinked, faint but persistent, just above the horizon. It pulsed now, not with light, but with a quiet magnetism, like a lodestone wrapped in velvet. She followed. Not toward the star, but where the gravity pockets sighed into alignment. Her body moved instinctively, weaving through dissonance. The star kept pace, a silent companion.

By dawn, the dunes gave way to hardpan, then to brittle grasses that snagged her boots. Salt stung the air. Somewhere ahead, cliffs sheared into the sea, their edges softened by mist. She paused, kneading the stiffness from her hands. The star had faded with the rising sun, but its imprint lingered—a thumbprint of heat behind her eyelids. She touched the knife at her belt, its hilt notched in a pattern she'd learned in another life, and walked on.



Veridian

“The desert does not care if you kneel. It does not notice your prayers. It remembers only the weight of your footsteps, the salt of your sweat, the way your shadow clings to the sand long after you’ve gone. And when the wind finally scours your name from the stones, even the stars will forget they ever watched you bleed. But walk anyway. Walk, and let the wasteland wonder why.”

- **Unknown**

