

SEEDS OF UNITY



 Altered®

STORYBOOK

EQUINX



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The Exile



394 AC

During the first few weeks, speaking with the Reka was no easy task. I had to patiently listen to the interpreters and rely on numerous translators and transcribers... The Ordis linguists, assisted by the Yzmir Horomancers, naturally set themselves to deciphering their language: syntax, phonemes, writing, and grammatology. Yet the greatest breakthroughs came through Alteration. The Lyra extracted the ideas contained within the spoken words, allowing us to visualize them and thus understand them, word by word. We began with rudimentary concepts and terms before moving on to more complex associations. Fortunately, the Reka language appears to share some similarities with Asgarthan, probably because of common roots. Willingly or not, and even though the process was extremely laborious, we eventually managed to make ourselves understood. Some linguistic or cultural subtleties still escape us, of course, but little by little we will surely manage to dispel them.

Common origins

After discussing the matter further with Sree, it seems clear that Reka architecture shares striking similarities with that of the City of Scholars, which the Reka have always called Sofia. In the presence of the Eidolon, I was able to speak with a Reka historian named Penggarun. According to him, their ancestors converged on Asgartha alongside the other Tumult Nomads. But instead of continuing their journey, they stopped at Sofia for reasons that remain unclear. The old annals mention a Tumult storm—perhaps a Singularity. They chose to halt their wandering because something there seemed to shield them from the violence of the mutagenic currents. By cross-referencing the dates with Leocardius, we believe this decision was made roughly twenty years before the founding of Asgartha.

At first, this stop was only meant to be temporary, until the Tumult Singularity subsided. Reka mythic traditions evoke several legendary figures: their Shepherdess, from whom the entire people took their name after her death; the prophetic figure of the Drifter, who came to them out of the Tumult to help them prosper; and the departure of Baird y Idris, who swore he would return with reinforcements from the other Tribes, yet never came back. These pseudo-historical fragments are like pieces of a puzzle that also seem to align with our own history. Leocardius believes that by comparing the archives of the Sanctum with those held by the Reka, he may illuminate the darker corners of our past. He hopes to find the missing pieces that will allow our two peoples to be linked within a shared chronology.

The price of prosperity

But it was when the Reka began exploring the surroundings of the City of Scholars that their sedentarization became permanent. Nestled within a mountain, they discovered a tree of

incredible proportions, which they too identified as a world-tree. They named it Vilagfa and discovered that its sap possessed both nutritional and energetic properties. What they called Nectar, and what we call Sap, became the focal point of their civilization. It was through this substance that the Reka people prospered despite their isolation, achieving remarkable feats—without realizing that this bounty would also bring about the downfall of their society.

As we already knew, Sap had become central to their lives. It powered the city constantly. The pipelines that carried it through the various districts became a kind of circulatory system. According to Penggarun, the Reka ancestors discovered that feeding something with Sap granted it a proto-consciousness, a semblance of cognition. Yet even they never suspected that the City of Scholars itself would come alive. And yet, when Sofia reached full consciousness, the Reka celebrated her birth. More than that, they made her their tutelary goddess, their protective divinity—the embodiment of their very matrix. At first she was their child, but over generations she became something closer to a maternal figure.

But the prosperity of their people was in fact a disaster waiting to happen. Sap had enabled an incredible technological revolution, and each day saw the creation of more devices powered by it. At the same time, the birth rate also soared: Sap fed the population, strengthened their immune systems, and shielded them from the Tumult. To cope with this unstoppable demographic boom, Sofia could, through her own will alone, generate new districts and dwellings within herself. These would appear almost magically, ready to house new families in unexplored recesses, cavities that had never before been discovered. But her omnipotence came at a price. She too had to be fed Sap, and the larger she grew, the more voracious her appetite became.

Hunger and madness

Penggarun admitted to me without hesitation that their ancestors had been blind to the precipice slowly opening before them. They let the Sap flow—ever more, ever more. They cut into the trunk of the Vilagfa to harvest it and channel it toward the city. In the end, it was as though they were keeping the city permanently on life support. Gradually, after more than a century and a half of increasingly intensive exploitation, the world-tree began to wither. It was an inexorable decline. Measures were taken: the bleedings became more sporadic, and rationing was introduced. But Sofia herself suffered constantly from the shortage. Immortal though she was, that did not spare her from pain. She was tormented by an endless hunger gnawing at her insides, and nothing could ease it.

I can only imagine it: the city rumbling, each spasm a tremor; hunger gnawing at her and dragging her toward madness. Suffering with no possible escape. In truth, I cannot help but feel pity for her, considering all that she endured. Her pain became so great that the deepest reaches of the city began to mutate, to twist and distort, swallowing those who strayed too far from the beaten paths. When I questioned Penggarun about the theft of memories and thoughts, even he could not say how it began. According to him, Sofia eventually began, almost out of spite, to siphon off the recollections and imagination of the inhabitants in order to soothe her torment—like a drug, a fleeting balm, a palliative. Something to quiet the constant gnawing of her hunger. But what the historian told me next was even more tragic—and cruel.

The Ascension

The Reka leaders of the time understood that the situation had become hopeless. Yet during their reckless harvesting of Sap, they had discovered a seed—a single fertile seed of the world-tree. They guarded it carefully. Around that fragile hope, a plan began to take shape. In secret, they started storing Sap, enough to sustain them until the new world-tree would be ready to produce. Naturally, they concealed it from Sofia, in cisterns beyond her reach or outside the city altogether. At the same time, they mined Aerolith again and again in order to create a way out. To flee far beyond her grasp and abandon her to her fate. For years—perhaps even decades—the Reka turned the upper part of the city into a floating enclave that was only waiting to cast off its moorings.

This irrevocable flight, this deliberate exile, is what the Reka call the Ascension. One day, more than two centuries ago now, the city rose into the sky, floating above the clouds, far from their gilded prison. The anniversary of that event is still celebrated today within Reka society as a day of liberation. By rationing the Sap they had stored, they endured long enough to see the Naos blossom and grow. But instead of bleeding it as they once had, they now harvest its fruits and extract their juice. For two centuries their wandering city has drifted among the clouds, cut off from the rest of the world by an ocean of Tumult. Reka society evolved in isolation, adrift upon an archipelago in slow decay that gradually fractured into pieces. Two centuries of isolation that we have only just broken.

Logbook of Temera Singh,
Grand Admiral of the Expeditionary Corps
394 AC, March 11



Asty



394 AC

If a single idea were to dominate Asty, the floating city of the Reka, it would be verticality. From the Naos at its summit down to the lower districts, battered by the roots of the world-tree and the Turmoil raging below, the city rises in tiers, and the entire population seems to have adapted to this unusual way of life. One can hardly be mistaken in asserting that Asty corresponds to the rocky edifice the people of the City of Scholars raised into the sky to flee the Hunger. Or perhaps should I call her Sofia. Even though the Reka have anchored new fragments of floating land to reshape its topography, there remain enough clues to support this theory: the city's main section matches the diameter of the Screed; its architecture, though brighter, is still threaded with veins of coagulated Sap...

Yet this original structure has evolved over time, particularly because the Reka—before their confrontation with Halua—had begun settling the islands and atolls we encountered along our route. From what I have gathered, they named these archipelagos the Chôra, and the entirety of these territories—Asty and the Chôra—the Ecumene. For the Reka, the Ecumene is synonymous with the Known World, while Sofia has become the equivalent of a legendary land now lost. The Reka have anchored parcels of land to Asty in order to expand its habitable zones and increase the city's overall surface. This is likely how its population was able to grow despite the cramped nature of their original refuge. In any case, the whole structure is truly vertiginous.

What first stands out is the very clear division that seems to exist within the megalopolis between the upper city and the lower city. I suspect this distinction reflects the importance the Reka attach to elevation, set against the ever-present danger of the Tumult threatening the city's foundations. Thus the Naos stands at the summit and represents what is most sacred in their society. Beneath it lie numerous districts, stacked one below the other, which also seem to encode the social hierarchy of the inhabitants of this airborne city:

Upper city: the Balconies

Throughout the day, from dawn until evening, the upper city is bathed in constant light. The atmosphere is serene and sacred, almost religious. Here, science is synonymous with arboriculture, and agriculture borders on spirituality.

The Consortium

This scientific complex is built across platforms nestled within the branches of the Naos or around the circumference of its trunk, like wood-eating mushrooms. Each structure serves a specific function. Some are devoted to technological fabrication, while others function as sites of experimentation or laboratories. Interestingly, instead of using metal—so rare in Asty—the Reka employ a white polymer derived from the trunk of the Naos that coagulates when exposed to

open air. Malleable and durable, this substance—called "Gala"—is also far lighter than the alloys found in Asgartha. Their science, which blends biology and technology, occupies a central place in their society.

The Arboretum

Located at the base of the Naos, the Arboretum houses all the Reka tasked with caring for the world-tree. It contains numerous public gardens as well as spaces for contemplation and gathering, where the Reka come to give thanks for the tree's generosity. Yet the Arboretum also contains many aeroponic crops, where plants are cultivated without soil, once again in vertical arrangements. It seems the Reka once began populating certain islands in the Quadrants, but had to abandon those attempts—both because of the natural drift of the islets and because of Halua's presence—and turned instead to this innovative technique, which requires no substrate.

The Acropolis

Within the Acropolis, the political and social decisions of the Reka people are made. There is no formal army, but rather a force responsible for maintaining order whose members call themselves Prefects. As everywhere in the Balconies, the luxurious walls, arches, and columns are made of Gala that the Reka cultivate so that it grows into the shapes they desire. All buildings are threaded with veins of Sap that conduct energy—not as electricity, but as a fluid drawn directly from the world-tree, accessed through valve-like conduits. The windows and glass roofs are fashioned from solidified Sap, more or less translucent, covered in interwoven vegetal patterns. Clearly, the district of the Acropolis marks a kind of boundary between above and below, between the elite and the popular classes.

Lower city: the Creels

In contrast to the calm and contemplation of the upper city, the Creels, as they are called, teem with life and movement. The majority of the Reka population lives here, amid an agitation that seems never to cease, day or night.

The Port

When we arrived, the ships of our Armada were invited to moor at the docks of the harbor district, located at the very bottom along the roots of the city. There we discovered a multitude of vessels—some smaller than rowboats, others far more imposing. Yet all appear more advanced than our most recent airships. Each morning, trawlers set out into the Sea of Clouds—not in search of small fish, but of Tumult anomalies, relics, and strange artifacts that sailors dredge up from the depths. Those who set forth are called Marauders, it seems, and some even wear sealed diving suits padded with Sap. The substance appears to provide valuable protection against the mutagenic effects of the Tumult.

The Market

Adjacent to the docks, the market is a mixture of temporary stalls and permanent shops. One finds a true jumble of curious objects deeply marked by the Tumult: a vast bazaar of odd goods of every sort—some of questionable use, others almost miraculous. I was also surprised to see Chimeras being sold there, in a designated area where they were kept in enclosures or cages. For such a technologically advanced society, it is surprising that barter predominates. Even in more formal transactions, the Naos fruits often serve as the means of exchange. In the end, these

fruits—and their juice—seem to function as the real currency of the Reka, even if they are not officially recognized as such.

The Volta

This is the name given to the entertainment district of the Reka city, and it is said that it never sleeps. A constant excitement reigns there, like a contagious fever. One finds frenetic bars, recreation arenas, and clubs where euphoria borders on exuberance. Everything revolves around leisure and spectacle. Lights of every color flash around advertising panels; music and sound seem amplified, inviting revelry and intoxication—perhaps, in my humble opinion, to an excessive degree. At any hour of the day or night, cable cars or aerial taxis zip from one platform to another: from food courts to the stadium, from cabarets to public baths or promenades...

The Germination

Every six months, the Reka hold a special ceremony called the Germination. A few Asgarthans were invited to attend the most recent one. During the festivities, envoys from the Balconies descend into the Creels to meet with certain individuals who claim to have been "blessed" by the Naos. Following these interviews, those individuals—no more than thirty to fifty in total—are invited to settle in the upper city and join one of the major institutions of Reka society. While we were not permitted to attend the interviews themselves, which are strictly confidential, we were invited to the celebrations that conclude these private audiences. What can be said is that the Reka of the Balconies welcome these new citizens with great emotion and solemnity. On the other side, the passage from the lower city to the upper city is experienced by most of the population as a consecration, an ideal to aspire to. Several questions remain, however: how do these individuals know they have been chosen? No claimant has been rejected. It is clear that the Naos plays a central role in the Germination. Perhaps the Reka's bond with the world-tree makes lying impossible. Or perhaps it is the tree itself that calls these people closer to its canopy.

The Seeding

The Germination ceremony echoes another rite that takes place when every Reka child reaches six months of age. Although it is strictly forbidden to eat the seeds of the Naos fruits—considered toxic to the body—a single seed is nevertheless given to an infant when it transitions from a liquid diet to solid food. Leocardius believes that through this ritual, known as the Seeding, the Reka affirm their bond with the Naos and become, in a sense, the children of the world-tree. It is striking to see how meticulously—almost religiously—all Reka separate the seeds from the Naos fruits. They then entrust them to the Agrests, who pass through every day to collect this precious bounty. Saskia Averina has proposed that beyond the ritual aspect, the Reka may also use these seeds in attempts to grow other world-trees. In any case, all Asgarthans have received very clear instructions regarding the seeds. While consuming one is tolerated as a gesture of respect, eating more is not merely considered a social misstep—it is regarded as a serious crime.



The Reka



394 AC

Stragglers from the Sunset Tribe, not the Lost Tribe as we had initially thought, or perhaps hoped... Yet the Reka are no less fascinating. The topography of their biome seems to have shaped their social structure as much as necessity has: a vertical society organized into clearly defined classes, known as Unions. Every Reka citizen belongs to a Union, and their role is assigned for life, with very limited opportunity for advancement. That said, I have been told of an aptitude test conducted during adolescence, which determines the role best suited to each individual.

Society

The Agrests

The Agrest Union is responsible for maintaining the Naos, as well as ensuring the proper distribution of its fruits and its Sap. All Reka citizens treat the gardeners, farmers, and cultivators of this Union with the utmost deference and respect, as though they were priests or clergy. Their word seems as precious as gold, much like the fluid whose flow they regulate, and we have observed that even Reka politicians and military officers fall silent when the Agrests voice their opinions on a situation or issue. Here, the Agrests form a caste apart, and are afforded almost obsequious regard.

The Consortium

This Union oversees technological innovation and its allocation among the Reka population. Though it depends on the Agrest Union for its supply of Sap, it remains no less powerful. The Reka have turned to science as the cornerstone of their society, far more so than we Asgarthans have. Their technology defies comprehension, to the point that even the Axiom struggle to grasp the full extent of their knowledge. It is even said that some of their scientists can shape Sap itself, using microorganisms to sculpt it or even extract energy from it.

The Ekklesia

The entire political and administrative apparatus of the wandering city lies in the hands of the Union the Reka call the Ekklesia. This institution crafts laws, drafts and signs decrees, enforces reforms, and serves as a sealed interface between the upper and lower levels of the city. Its primary purpose appears to be the preservation of social order, and it commands armed contingents known as Prefects to maintain it. These forces combat the Chimera that sometimes wash up in the lower levels, though I suspect some also act as a form of political police. More than mere military dominance, I believe propaganda is where this Union truly excels. Through it, the Ekklesia ensures the cohesion of the Reka people.

The Marauders

Many among the lower castes, in search of glory, wealth, or thrills, engage in a dangerous practice. They don rigid suits filled with Sap and take to the air to fish within the clouds. These individuals are known, with equal parts fear and fascination, as the Marauders. They scour the Sea of Tumult and, protected by their diving suits called Cuirasses, sometimes plunge beneath the clouds in search of anything marked by the Tumult's imprint. Although the Sap acts as an insulator, they cannot remain there for more than a few minutes, making the endeavor extremely perilous.

I have received troubling reports from Asgarthan observers, though Reka authorities have so far categorically denied them: at the very bottom of the city, beneath the Creels and even living among the roots, there may exist a class of "pariahs" with little access to Sap. Indeed, as it flows down from above, populations living far from the Naos would ultimately receive only a small share of this precious fluid. There are even said to be dissent networks among these disadvantaged groups, calling themselves the Psyllas, whose aim is to steal Sap and fruits from the Naos in order to redistribute them to those unable to obtain them through official channels.

The Hexarchs

At the head of Reka society stand six leaders, who together form a Hexarchy with whom we have often negotiated since our arrival. Despite their apparent openness and their veneer of hospitality, they seem wary, or at the very least cautious, particularly in light of the upheaval our so-called "reunion" is bound to cause for them on both a societal and political level. These Hexarchs govern every aspect of Reka life: one leads the Consortium with an iron hand in a velvet glove, another heads the Agrests. I most often speak with two of them, Astrape and Phoibos, who are exceedingly welcoming. Yet beneath the smiles and bows, I sense their minds at work, calculating how best to take advantage of the situation. What exchanges to initiate, whether cultural or technological, in order to preserve their power. They likely fear that our presence will diminish their influence over the Reka people, and I understand their concern...

Physiology

Through their daily consumption of Naos fruits or juices, the Reka appear to have developed a distinct physical trait: all of them possess yellow eyes, gleaming with gold or amber hues. Yet this characteristic is not merely cosmetic. Preliminary biochemical analyses indicate that it also grants increased resistance to the ravages of the Tumult. In this way, the Reka have adapted to an environment heavily exposed to its mutagenic effects, particularly the many "tides" of Tumult that, with the shifting of the clouds, sometimes engulf the lower districts of their city.

The Hex

Reka Alteration is, in truth, rather rudimentary. The Hex, as it is called, appears to be reserved for an elite under the direct patronage of the Hexarchs. The differences between our Alterers and the Reka Demiurges are striking: while our practitioners wield Mana and Aether, they rely on Sap, which they shape through sheer will to give it the desired form. It is clear that what they sorely lack is the ability to summon and manipulate Mana. They require a physical medium to call

forth their Eidolons, which they refer to as Agalmata. Creating an Agalma takes time, and its lifespan depends on the amount of Sap invested in it. While they far surpass us technologically, our mastery of Alteration restores the balance in our favor. Our two peoples have much to learn from one another. Within this dynamic, imperfect as it may be, lies common ground upon which to build, particularly in light of the negotiations currently underway...

Since our arrival, I have spoken with many Reka from the upper city, and each time I find myself unsettled by the nature of our exchanges, and by the slightly skewed perspective our hosts have on the world. At first, I believed this was because my interlocutor, Penggarun, was a scholar, but I have since realized that all the Reka I have encountered share a somewhat altered outlook compared to our own. This is especially true in their perception of time and urgency. The Reka seem to align themselves with the rhythm of trees and plants, slow and unhurried, as though nothing were ever truly pressing. The same applies to their sense of fate. They appear far more resigned than we are in the face of events. Each time, I am left with the persistent impression of glimpsing an infinite wisdom in their golden gaze, as though they were beholden to some ancient and venerable knowledge...



Selective Varnish



394 AC

Oh, he's not getting away with that, the little punk! I burst out of my hiding spot, firing in every direction as projectiles explode behind me, splattering the ground and walls with bright splotches of color. I duck back behind a pylon, adjusting my mask as it fogs up. Then I flip open the hatch on my launcher and ask Blotch to refill my ammo tank with pellets, like he's dropping rabbit droppings into it. No way I'm getting tricked like last time. The kid doesn't just use his weapon, he uses his brushes too. And if he cheats, then I'm not going to hold back either, especially since that paint tastes awful.

Come on, Blotch, push!

I spring out of cover as a few pellets roll and bounce down the steps. Can't stay still, always keep moving, that's the key. Go, go, go! I leap and blast away where Nadir is supposed to be. Multicolored flowers burst across his back where I hit him, and I'm just about to shout victory when I realize it's only a paint duplicate. Whoops. I jump back as an entire bucket spills right where I was standing not even a second ago.

Ha! It'll take more than that to get me!

I take the metal stairs four at a time and throw myself into the slide. Then I launch onto the trampoline, catapulting myself into a backflip. Tchak, tchak, tchak! My launcher sings as I pull the trigger and let it rip. My pellets smash one by one against Bubbles' scales, and it flops around like a fish out of water. Which it literally is. And just as I start to look around—

Its mouth opens, and a fire hose comes out of it. A blast of paint erupts like a geyser and drenches me from head to toe, gluing me in place.

'You lost again!'

I wipe a hand across my mask and spit out another stream of thick paint.

'Four-zero! You suck, Nevenka!'

A whole bunch of thoughts run through my head, and I'm sure I would've said them all if I wasn't busy hacking up this concentrated mess of paint: first, show some respect to your elders; second, this stuff still tastes awful; third, it's totally unfair to hide inside your Chimera. But honestly, two out of those three aren't even true, so it's probably for the best I can't throw it back in his face...

Bang. I take a shot at his chest in fair and justified retaliation. Nadir looks down at the pink blotch blooming across his vest and squints, as if trying to understand the complex reasoning behind that last sneak attack.

'Yeah, yeah, fine, you win, you little brat,' I say, not giving him time to protest.

He breaks into a satisfied grin. Oh sure, real humble too, the little rascal. Yeah right. He'll see what's coming. We'll see who comes out on top at the bumper cars. Though somewhere deep down, a small voice tells me it'll probably be him, if he stops holding back.

No denying it, it was the perfect disguise. You tend to forgive a kid anything.

I don't know if anyone else noticed. It was obvious, plain as day. Fen definitely didn't see it. Then again, she doesn't even know about herself, so she's not exactly in the best position to figure things out. Still, I saw it, but that's because, well, I'm exceptional, obviously. First, his Alter

Ego isn't really a Chimera, not even really an Alter Ego, more like an extension of himself but outside his body. Second, maybe he's the Chimera, though that's not exactly clear either. And third, he's definitely not a kid, even if he struts around and acts like one. Which might be true from his point of view...

Honestly, deep down, maybe I'm the one who should be showing him some respect as an elder... Yeah, right. Let's not get carried away.

I should talk to Dad about it sometime...

I stare at him, trying to make sense of it, and he stares right back. It feels like a duel, and I wonder if he knows as much about me and what I'm hiding as I know about him. It's like a duel, except we don't know the rules or what's at stake. And I don't even feel like we're on a collision course. So it's like a duel with no real reason behind it. I end up shrugging, just in time to get sprayed in the face again.

'Hey, why'd you do that?'

'I don't know, I thought you were about to shoot!' he says, blinking.

'You really don't know me very well! I never shoot without a reason,' I reply, thinking how proud Fen would be of my maturity and magnanimity.

I shoot, of course. Three quick shots—tchak tchak tchak—to pay him back.

I hand him a sandwich while taking a bite of mine. Nadir grabs it and carefully unwraps it, then sniffs the contents suspiciously. He's sitting on the steps leading to a cable car, while his fish floats above his head like a comic-book speech bubble. We're not exactly subtle, and quite a few Reka stare at us as they pass by, but I don't mind. I've always liked being the center of attention.

Well, maybe it's also because we're covered in paint and didn't bother cleaning up. Still, it works, helps us blend into the scenery. When you look at the city at night, it's saturated with color to the point it almost hurts your eyes. Flashy signs, bright lights—purple, blue, yellow, red—blinking everywhere, posters on every corner with the same faces plastered all over them: "Phoibos, new *Tragodia* show at the Skènè"; "Maleros vs. Daimon—enter the arena yourself!"; "Ploutos' Table—Season 13, six contestants still in the running!"

Man, someone needs to deflate those egos...

'So, where to next?' Nadir suddenly asks, with a hint of curiosity and maybe a bit of worry.

I size him up, narrowing my eyes like a cat watching a mouse that just came out of its hole. Or like a goldfish in a bowl.

'What time's your curfew, kiddo?'

He just gives me a nervous smile and blinks. Yeah, safe to say we're already way past it and I'm going to get chewed out.

'Come on, eat up and I'll walk you back. And if you behave, we'll grab dessert.'

'I heard there are crepes a little higher up,' he says, trying to be sneaky.

'Yeah, with Naos fruit syrup, I bet. That's all they've got here anyway! Naos this, Sap that, Naos seed oil, Naos zest, Naos juice, with or without pulp... It's like these Reka have zero originality...'

Some heads turn in our direction, and I wave at them.

'I think they heard you...'

'Pfft, not like they understand anything.'

Nadir takes another bite of his breaded poultry wrap with julienned tubers, or whatever it was called. At least that's what I managed to piece together from the menu.

'What do you think of this place?'

‘Like, aside from robot fights, dance halls, street food stalls, flying chariot races, Hextag matches, glider rides above the clouds, arcades, and paint battles?’

He looks at me, a little sheepish—or pretending to be—then nods.

‘I think something’s rotten in the land of Sap...’

He watches a funicular speeding back up toward the upper city, unloading a stream of onlookers onto a suspended platform.

‘I don’t feel like we’re all that welcome,’ he adds.

I look at him without saying anything. Of course we aren’t. We showed up like a rabbit pulled out of a hat. Overnight, they realized they’re not the center of the world, that there are other pockets of humanity much bigger than theirs, big enough to swallow their little civilization if they’re not careful.

‘It’s like an arm-wrestling match, just without anyone saying it out loud. Totally normal. They’re flexing, and we are too. At some point, there’ll be a winner. Look, it was the same with Blotch. Did I ever tell you how I saved his hide when he was this small? When he hatched, he bit everything, even scratched up my couch. So I told him, straight up, “Listen, Blotch, this isn’t gonna work. I’m the boss here, and you’re the grunt. So if you don’t change your behavior right now, things are gonna get ugly, swear on Nevenka!” And there you go, now he behaves perfectly. Same thing’s gonna happen here.’

He glances over at Blotch, who pretends to melt on the spot.

‘Yeah... I guess it’ll go like that.’

He looks a little down, so I grab him by the shoulders and ruffle his hair.

‘Hey, don’t make that face. Tell your big sister what’s on your mind.’

Nadir stares at me, puzzled. For a split second, I feel like the layer of paint covering him, the one he uses to fool everyone, trembles just a bit.

‘I already have a sister,’ he says bluntly. ‘And she’s not so far away, now.’

Oh. Family drama. That settles it—I’m taking him clubbing tonight.



Playing Fair



394 AC

He takes a sip of juice, and the sweet taste fizzles on his tongue. His mom is still paying at the counter, so he takes the chance to look around. The Consortium, the complex they're visiting, is kind of like a permanent Prodigium mixed with an Arkaster museum. But everywhere they go, there are incredible things: robots far more advanced than their Automata, he even saw a vending machine walking on four legs, all kinds of flying boats, trams, buses, and new ways to grow and use plants.

His mom had spent quite a while in the labs, talking with Reka researchers. He had stayed on a bench in the hallway, reading his picture book: "Kojo vs. the Kraken". He could hear her talking to another scientist: "the fruits of the Naos are sterile," "a cross might be possible," "hybridization," "planting other world-trees," "the Spindle"... He had never seen the Spindle tree himself, except in picture books like the one he was flipping through.

Once he turned the last page (the one where the Basileus gives the Carnelian Crown to Kojo), and closed the book, he watched the Reka in white blouses walking through the halls, busy with their work. Some glanced at him with their golden eyes, and Ira stared right back. But every time, they just kept walking, either because they seemed in a hurry or were already deep in conversation with colleagues. And anyway, it's not like he understood a single word they were saying.

But now it was his turn to have fun. He liked the fair machines way more than the lab ones, whose purpose he didn't really get. Bolt had tried to explain it to him once, said it was for analyses. But Ira had decided that he preferred simpler things: machines that kept stuff cold, ones that played music, or projected images onto walls...

His mom is still babbling with the snack vendor, like she's asking for directions, and it's taking forever.

'Uh, how do you say it again? Estin un meros tu plitizmuu o alotrijo antidraa tish karpiis tu Nau, ehondes mnimes uh eafton? Alla ti jiiionde? Is that right?'

The man scratches his cheek thoughtfully and tilts his head, clearly unsure. Ira starts digging through his backpack. He looks at the little figurine they bought, the one from a street vendor's stall. The statue hadn't even been officially released yet, but people were already selling souvenirs. It was easy for the Reka. They had even developed a box that used Sap to make things on the fly. You just had to focus really, really hard on what you wanted, and the machine would recreate it.

Suddenly, he sees arcs of electricity streak across the ceiling. He jumps and nearly drops his can. The surprise quickly turns into fascination, and he tugs on his mom's sleeve.

'Mom, can I go? Can I go?'

Della turns toward him, clearly still focused on her conversation.

'Wait, wait. Mom's talking. Lalo, puhun karpiis, tish jo syodaan pulpu ja juo mehu. Mnimes? Kuin elaman menneen muiston?'

The man suddenly lights up with understanding and grabs a Naos fruit, starting to cut it in half. His mom shakes her head and waves all four arms to stop him from slicing it. Then one of her grafts ruffles her hair when she realizes it's too late.

'Mom! I wanna go see the lightning...'

Della sighs and pulls out a Floret from her pocket, placing it on the counter. It's not like money really matters here, but the Reka often treat it like some distant relic with obvious value.

'Go ahead, but I want you to stay where you can always see me. Deal?'

'Yes, Mom!'

Ira hops onto his drone, a white-and-gold sphere that lets him weave through the crowd. He passes a light projector like the one that guided them here earlier. This one is smaller and turned off for now, but he knows it can beam images and colored light high into the sky. He zips past holographic panels and signs, and a big inhalation chamber filled with Sap vapor, apparently meant to help people recover. But that's not what interests him.

On a platform topped with a large tank generator, an Eidolon, at least he thinks it is, is giving a demonstration. The lightning has turned into colorful waves that roll like smoke all around it.

'This common substance, Aerolith, has long been underestimated. We used it to defy gravity, but its explosiveness concealed another feat. When stimulated, the mineral generates a force field capable of repelling the Tumult!'

Applause erupts all around, and people stand up, blocking his view. Ira frowns and tries to peek over their heads, but he can't.

'Installed beneath the city, Aerolith-powered shields could stand firm against the tides threatening its lower districts...'

Ira tries to stand upright on his drone, but it's too slippery. The Eidolon raises its hand, and its arm detaches, as if suddenly cut off. The boy's eyes go wide as the Alterer next to it reforms the limb before the astonished audience.

'Whoa... that's awesome!'

Next to him, a tall man dressed as a woman smiles at him for some reason. Ira recognizes him. It's Auraq, one of the Lyra champions. Broad shoulders, squeezed into a dress. He stands with arms crossed beside a tall, very slender woman with smooth, shiny pink hair. She's beautiful. Auraq turns to her after giving Ira a quick wink.

'Mia, I know you no longer represent the Kasirga Clan, but I need to know... I've heard the Elders' version, and I've reconstructed the official genealogy. Cayrat Steinn, son of Adonis Steinn and Ren Su. He supposedly united with Nekoma before she took her father's place as Venerable of the Clan.'

'And?'

'They had a daughter, Ayashe, who later united with Cao Fu.'

'Fen's parents. Where are you going with this, Auraq?'

'Mia, the love between Esme and Cayrat is no secret.'

Ira takes another sip of juice through his straw while the beautiful woman narrows her eyes, like she's annoyed.

'Is her mother really her mother? Who is Fen, really?' Auraq continues.

Mia closes her eyes and sighs.

'I think you already know the answer, Aed Auraq.'

The Alterer, or should that be Alteress, smiles smugly.

'So she's not entirely human. That was the Venerables' real reason for keeping Esmeralda incarnated? So she could bear a child? Why? What's their goal? Why keep her manifested?'

The somewhat haughty woman lifts her chin, slightly irritated.

‘That’s a question you’ll have to ask them. But I have one of my own. What about my replacement? Has she formed a new Clan?’

Auraq sighs and nods.

‘It’s in progress. Nadia is about to name her Shepherd, but there’s no guarantee she’ll manage to build a new Sahanka in her lifetime. Her Saraband is still small, even with Terpsichore’s blessing.’

The woman suddenly looks sad, her lips tightening into a thin line.

‘Like me, once upon a time?’

They fall silent for a moment as the crowd begins to disperse. Ira grumbles, feeling like he showed up too late for the show.

‘You know, I wasn’t always part of the Tisdhera Clan,’ Auraq continues. ‘There was a time, long gone now, when I was under the protection of the Sessoren Clan.’

‘Like the young Axiom Alterer and her father?’

Auraq nods again.

‘Theatrics, you know? What I’m saying is, there will always be a place for you aboard the Wayfarer, if you choose it.’

The woman shakes her head.

‘Among clowns and painters?’ She scoffs. ‘My art will remain dance, no matter what. Even if the Muses’ grace never touches me again.’

‘The door will always be open. And this conversation is far from over.’

Ira glances back at his mom and moves toward another stand. He didn’t really pay attention to the conversation. Grown-up talk is usually boring. Making sure to keep his mom in the corner of his vision, he heads toward another crowd. He leaves his drone and squeezes between people to reach the front row.

An Alterer is projecting images in Altavista while narrating in gibberish: Arkaster, the Foundry, the Arsenal. Probably a presentation for the Reka. He already knows all that. Not interesting. He turns right back.

When he gets back to his ride, his mom is there waiting for him.

‘So?’

‘It’s not for us. It’s for the Reka. Isn’t Bolt coming?’

‘He’s busy, you know that. The Expeditionary Corps wanted him from the start. He’s studying the Sap, taking care of the sick. We’ve got free time.’

Ira pouts.

‘But you help him a little, right?’

‘Sometimes. Our connection helps. I can ask questions while he’s doing something else, and we still share everything... But the rest of the time...’

Della grabs her son with her mechanical arms and lifts him over her head.

‘Go on, tell me where you want to go.’

Ira looks around for something interesting. He watches the walkways where Reka and artificial creatures wander, wondering if his mom would agree to go back to the arcade. Then, through the glass panels, he spots an area they haven’t visited yet. That must be where the Axiom set up their stands, on the open-air terrace.

‘We haven’t gone over there yet!’

Della nods and starts walking that way, placing Ira on her shoulders.

‘You know, that’s probably where we’re showing what we can do.’

‘Yeah, I know, but it’s for solidarity!’

Della laughs.

‘What? What did I say?’

‘Nothing, nothing. That was perfect.’

They step out into the open and walk along the bridge toward a circular platform. As they leave the shadow of the world-tree, they pass an Automaton that crackles and spits sparks before collapsing heavily onto its rear while engineers rush in with fire extinguishers, just like his dad used to when he was still alive.

‘Watch closely, kid. One day you’ll be the one showcasing your creations here.’

Ira isn’t so sure, but he doesn’t say anything. His attention is already caught by everything around him. Sure, he already knows a lot, but there must be new things too... Then a thought distracts him.

‘And Grandpa Baba, is he better?’

Della stops in front of a bed of pink flowers.

‘Are you worried?’

Ira nods.

‘He’s fine. It’s nothing serious. It’s like he remembers things that never happened. You know how sometimes even we make up memories in our heads? It’s a bit like that. The doctors are clear. Even Bolt says so. Nothing bad is going to happen to your grandfather.’

‘For real?’

‘Yes, sweetheart.’

Suddenly, fireworks crack overhead, and Ira jumps. Then he sees another device like the earlier one, with energy waves creating a kind of wind. An orange sphere lights up, quickly shifting to reddish-pink.

‘Step right up! Come see MY new invention!’

‘Mom, we have to go!’

Another Eidolon has taken position beside the generator. Not the same as before. This one has no mustache, and his hair is gray. They join the curious crowd. Ira is happy, because this time he’ll get to see the beginning.

Next to them stands a big guy stuffed into a diving suit. His mom turns to him.

‘Bash? I didn’t recognize you in that outfit.’

Subhash glances at his Cuirass, clearly Reka-made.

‘Flashy, huh?’ He tries to swing his arm around. ‘A bit cramped, but apparently it protects against the Tumult, so I’m not complaining.’

‘Making progress on your work?’

The Alterer nods repeatedly.

‘We’ve been doing good work with the kid. No contest. The Reka are way ahead of us in some areas. But watch closely, you too, kid. With this, we’re going to prove we’re not out of the game.’

Ira turns toward the stage, where the Aerolith crystals begin to pulse.

All of a sudden, a dark plume begins to rise from where the Automaton had toppled over. Bash and his mom turn toward the ominous smoke, then look at each other.

‘Stay here, love. We’ll be right back,’ his mother says as she lowers him towards the ground.



Red Herring



394 AC

'Again!'

I pull off my mask, its visor so fogged up that the inner glass is streaming with large droplets. The harbor wind hits my sweat-soaked face, making me shiver instantly as I carefully step off the fragile skiff. Because beneath the dock there is nothing but a vertiginous void made of thick, heavy clouds, and a fall of several kilometers before hitting the ground. Not that I seriously believe anyone would survive that long.

You only have to look at the surface of my drysuit. Part of it has sprouted patterns like lettuce leaves, and in another spot, inconveniently just behind the knee, something like a tail had grown. The diving instructor had been clear: the suit insulated fairly well against immaterial ideas, but was far more porous to physical ones. Forty-eight seconds. That was the limit he had estimated, under current conditions, for a jump into the clouds before the winch hauled us back out. Forty-eight seconds to grab whatever we could and get out. Which explains why the catch was pretty meager. I got nothing more than a few miniature fish, no bigger than herrings, but a deep red veined with silver...

'Again!'

My hair is plastered to my forehead, and I slick it back, though it's far from easy with my gloved hands. I feel sticky inside my suit, and it's clear I could use a shower once I've calmed down... Next to me, Venka ruffles his apprentice's hair, who gave us quite a scare. No need to scold him much. Judging by how pale he is, I doubt he'll forget the lesson anytime soon, poor guy.

'Again!'

I'm not the only one dripping. A little farther off, on a platform overlooking the void, Kojo is chaining together sparring passes while panting like a seal. Then again, I'm probably not in much better shape than he is. Clack, clack, clack. The blunted swords, made of that white, gleaming material the Reka are so fond of, thud dully as they collide. Atsadi, meanwhile, parries effortlessly.

I wave to the diver who assisted me, and she returns the gesture with a simple nod. Then I swing my leg over the low wall separating me from the improvised arena. I haven't had much time to myself, with my recovery and all that fuss, and since we'd all been scattered across different ships in the flotilla, it had been a while since I'd last seen him.

'Come on, *Posta di Donna*, *Fendente*, parry... *Riverso*, *Punta*, and disengage! Good!'

The man calling out instructions from the edge of the semicircle is dressed in a quilted leather doublet, white and gold in the Reka style, along with a wide cape draped from his left shoulder. His arms are crossed, but he keeps time with his foot like a conductor.

I sit down, setting my helmet beside me. Hit by a wave of heat, I unzip my suit and close my eyes as the cool air flows over my damp, clammy stomach. I let out a long breath while rummaging through my inner pockets, struggling a bit to find where I put the small packet of candy I bought when we were at the market with Sunisa...

I grumble and end up pulling off my gloves with my teeth, so stuck they are to my skin. My fingers manage to slip into the small compartment wedged beneath a fold of my suit... and it's

really not easy with all this network of tubes filled with Sap, or Juice, whatever you call that yellow liquid that somewhat shields against the effects of the Tumult during Marauder dives, and that you could almost mistake for an overpowered lemonade.

‘Watch your misura.’

I open the packet and pop a Naos fruit candy into my mouth, rolling it across my tongue. Kojo pants and wipes his forehead before bracing his hands on his trembling thighs. At this rate, he’s going to pass out. And I think Atsadi knows it too, because he sheathes his blade.

‘That’s enough for today.’

Kojo shakes his head vigorously, droplets of sweat falling to the ground.

‘I can keep going...’ he says in a hoarse voice that suggests the exact opposite.

Atsadi doesn’t pay him any mind and salutes the fencing master who had been calling out their combinations. The man vanishes after a brief nod, while a small cicada dances in the cloud of Mana released by his disappearance.

‘Tomorrow, at dawn,’ the swordsman simply says as he strolls nonchalantly toward the harbor market, followed by his little insect.

Kojo, meanwhile, collapses beside me, completely out of breath. He leans back against the low wall, gasping, pops open a bottle, gulps it down, then pours the rest over his head.

‘Candy?’ I ask, holding out the open packet.

He reaches in, then notices how sweaty his fingers are.

‘Could you...?’ he pants, miming what he wants me to do.

I tip the packet and drop a candy into his palm. He brings it to his mouth.

‘Becoming his Squire... what was I thinking?’

‘We all go through that, you know?’

He looks at me, eyes narrowed with pain.

‘Besides, you’re not really a Bravos until you’ve passed the Imhallat. Not officially, anyway.’

‘I know...’ he mutters, a hint of distress in his voice, before adding, ‘Who came to yours?’

I scratch my head.

‘Hansel.’

He snickers.

‘With how much you like stuffing yourself with sweets, that figures!’

I punch his shoulder, lips pressed tight.

‘For the record, I don’t even like gingerbread!’

‘Okay, okay, sorry. Just messing with you.’ He gestures toward my suit. ‘So, your cloud dive... was it good? I’d come with you if I didn’t have morning training.’

I shrug.

‘I feel like I’m barely scratching the surface. Apparently, some people dive much deeper, all the way to an impassable current they call the Grand Stir, or something like that. But for that, you need a heavy Cuirass, way bulkier than this kind of suit...’

‘Those big diving rigs?’

I nod.

‘So what have you been up to otherwise?’

I glance upward, trying to recall the past few days.

‘I went shopping with Sunisa. We did some bartering. It’s crazy what you can exchange with the Reka with simple stuff we brought from Asgartha. We had a serious shopping spree.’

‘I wouldn’t have pictured you doing that kind of thing.’

‘What, you saying I’m not feminine enough or something?’

‘Hey, you do whatever you want. You’ve got nothing to prove, Sunn.’

I watch the clouds roiling in the distance, full of storm.

'We all have something to prove, you blockhead.'

A brief silence settles between us, giving me time to watch the Reka boats docking, rising, crossing paths, while trawlers come and go from the harbor in a chaotic yet fluid jumble. On some, the nets have been hauled in and are being cleaned of Tumult residue. On others, sailors are stacking traps and cages, burning or chiseling away whatever has latched onto them...

'There's a place in the market where they sell Chimeras... like they're fairground animals or exotic pets. There was even this kind of chameleon that looked at me with these really sad eyes. It hurt to see them like that, in cages.'

Kojo frowns, glancing toward Booda.

'That was kind of the case back home too, when you think about it, before the Muna...'

'I know. But there were a lot of cool things too. Like this knight's armor, covered in rust. I thought I'd like to fix it up, if I had the time...'

'You should. Doesn't look like we're leaving anytime soon.'

'Yeah, you might be right...'

I pull out a juice box I bought at a convenience shop, peel off the straw, and stick it into the carton. I offer him some, but he waves it off, so I take a sip. The taste is sweet and intense, almost overwhelming my palate, making me salivate even more.

'Crazy, isn't it, when you think about it? A few years ago, or even months, we had no idea we'd find other survivors. And now here we are, walking around an unknown city, sharing drinks with them... They took a different path, and they're still here. And that means there are probably others. Other civilizations, I mean...'

'Yeah... probably...'

A dull headache suddenly hammers against my temple. *An axe striking, splitting wood.* I look away and press against my right eyelid, massaging my sinuses.

'Hey, you okay?'

Kojo leans toward me, clearly worried.

'Yeah, don't worry, it'll pass. Probably the pressure differences.'

I blink repeatedly, trying to shake off the sudden pain. *A loaf of stale bread crumbling under my fingers.* No, it's not going away.

'Maybe you should get that checked out?'

'Yeah... maybe...'

'Hey, let me see?'

I turn toward him, a bit caught off guard as he looks straight into my eyes. *Shouts behind a hatch, hands pounding against it.*

'What? What is it?'

Kojo makes a puzzled face.

'No, nothing. For a second, I thought your eyes had golden reflections.'

'Huh? What? Like the Reka?'

He nods.

'But it was probably just the light. Is it better?'

'Yeah, it's starting to dim.'

He taps my shoulder with his fist.

'Well, that's good. Wouldn't want you ending up back in the hospital.'

'No thanks,' I say with a hint of disgust.

'Alright, I think we both need a good shower.' He pretends to stand.

'What, you saying I stink?'

'Me, definitely,' he says, dodging the question.

'Kojo!'

We both turn toward the gravelly voice calling out to him. Basira is walking toward us, her Alter Ego greedily biting into an overripe fruit. She's accompanied by a dark-skinned Phoenixian with white hair.

'Yeah?'

'Come here, boy,' she says. 'We need to talk about something important.'

'Like, now?'

The huntress nods, and Kojo sighs.

'Guess the shower's going to have to wait...'



Sugar Rush



394 AC

‘Say aaaaah.’

‘Aaaaah,’ she goes, eyes lifted toward the ceiling.

The young adventurer opens her mouth wide, and I slip the wooden tongue depressor in, holding it between two claws as I adjust the light to see all the way down her throat. Hmm. No sign of discoloration or inflammation. I feel under her chin. No swollen glands. I settle back on my stool and scratch my ear while the pioneer grimaces, pulling one of my hairs off her tongue.

‘Ah, sorry about that.’

I readjust my spectacles on my snout, my nose twitching.

‘So, what’s the verdict, doctor?’

‘I don’t think it’s viral or bacterial.’

‘Hm, so... not a disease?’

I shake my head.

‘Probably not. Let me guess: numbness, dizziness, headaches, and then some kind of hallucinations...’

She seems to think, then finally shakes her head.

‘Not really hallucinations. It’s not like I’m seeing pink elephants or anything. It’s more like I’ve been having...’

‘Memory resurgences.’

She stares at me, eyes wide, clearly caught off guard. And I can’t blame her. The information has remained fairly confidential.

‘Yeah, except it doesn’t feel like they’re mine.’

I swivel my chair to switch off the projector, then clasp my paws behind my back. That’s when I notice a purple stain on my coat. Hmm. Probably from when I ate a few grapes earlier during my snack. Ah, what I wouldn’t give for a nice bowl of juicy earthworms...

‘Yes, hmmm,’ I say, scratching my jaw. ‘It’s a phenomenon identified in roughly 0.00003% of the exposed population, though that’s only an estimate. A lot of zeros after the decimal. Congratulations, you’ve won the lottery!’

‘Uh... exposed? Exposed to what exactly?’

‘To Sap, to Juice, to the fruits of the world-tree. You’ve been overdoing the sugar, haven’t you, young lady?’

I see her cheeks take on a faint pink hue, a very common physiological reaction in humans experiencing embarrassment or shame.

‘And is it serious?’

I shake my head, which forces me to adjust my glasses again. Might as well clean them while I’m at it. I pull a cloth from my pocket and start polishing the lenses, which have certainly seen better days.

‘Serious, no. Remarkable, at the very least. As a matter of fact, just yesterday, a Lyra puppeteer from the Sessoren Clan came to see me for the same issue. Parasitic memories. But as long as the

distinction remains clear, it's like remembering a dream. Aside from the dizziness, I mean. Am I wrong?'

She lifts her head, thoughtful, then shrugs.

'Cut back on soda and sweets, and keep up the exercises. Understood? Come back next week so we can reassess and see if anything changes. And you'll stay under observation tonight, just as a precaution.'

She rolls her eyes but doesn't argue, leaning back against her cushion with all the frustration she can allow herself to show. As for me, I hop down from my little platform and head into the hallway, paws in my pockets and stethoscope around my neck. If I could, I'd almost whistle.

Truth be told, it was a little worrying, even if I didn't want to alarm her too much. The symptoms were fairly mild, but like Remanence among the Yzmir, anything that affected the psyche had to be monitored closely. Hmmm? I pull my small metal tin from my pocket and twist the lid open. Inside, there's still about a heaping spoonful of dried mealworms. I toss them back and chew noisily, savoring the crunch in my mouth.

My hind legs carry me into the next room, and I give a friendly wave to the other patient I'm seeing for the same issue. Between the two of them and those who were sent home, that makes sixteen people who reacted poorly to the Sap. A drop in the bucket, but enough to bring me all this way. The good news is that Baptiste seems to be doing fine. I just hope the Mage with the big hat didn't botch the job while tinkering with his memory...

"A straw hat." That's what he'd said. That he remembered the songs of field workers under a blazing sun, fruits he stuffed into his "macoute." "Macoute"... It was a strange word. He'd described it as a woven straw bag, but I had never heard him use such a word before a few days ago. And just like the pioneer, he'd told me they weren't his memories, yet at the same time, he knew they were.

He'd been happy to find Ira again, and even if there was still some awkwardness, Della and he would probably make up. There was no doubt about that.

An orderly walks past me, her gaze lingering. Ah, of course, it is a rather comical sight. Watching a badger waddle down the infirmary corridors is, I admit, something quite amusing. Still, I greet her with a small wave of the paw.

It's always important to be civil.

I set my gouge down on the workbench, right next to the chisel, and blow away the wood shavings and sawdust before inspecting my work in the golden light of the lamp. I turn the piece of wood to examine it from every angle, watching how the light defines the raised and recessed forms. The rough shaping is more or less complete, and the puppet's face is beginning to emerge, though still crudely. All that remains is to refine the volumes and smooth out imperfections and unsightly tool marks. Satisfied, I set the piece back on the bench, breathing in the scents of wood and resin.

The improvised workshop isn't the most comfortable. It must have been a pantry before I cluttered it with all my odds and ends. It was all Sierra had managed to find, but I already considered myself lucky to have a bit of space of my own. She had provided everything I needed: a workbench, clamps, vises, and even, to my dismay, a kelonic grinding wheel that made a dreadful racket whenever I sharpened my tools.

The rest I had brought with me: compass, marking gauge, mallet, my whole assortment of gouges, straight and bent, spoon and veiner, rasps, files, rifflers, and scrapers... Of course, my daughter had offered me a router, power planes, even a chainsaw. But I had politely declined all that fuss. Besides, I wouldn't have had room to store them. More than that, I had taken a certain

mischievous pleasure in making her take up my tools, to remind her of the value of simple things and to make sure she hadn't forgotten the "primitive" techniques I had taught her as a child.

The smell of wood suddenly mingles with the taste of pine nuts. *A prison door slamming shut, the lingering smell of burnt wood, a storm-tossed sea...* I shake my head to dispel these fleeting visions and sensations. Even if I've grown used to them, they're always unsettling. Fortunately, the migraines themselves have stopped.

The workshop door opens, and daylight floods the dim little room. Sierra steps in, her prosthetics clicking on the floor, then sets down a small bundle on a stack of wood. She's already unwrapping her sandwich as she leans against a shelf. I grab my own snack and look inside the brown paper bag. A sandwich, and a pear.

'It's not tuna, I hope?' I say, as she rolls her eyes.

'Dad, I know you don't like that.'

'On the contrary, I find them very beautiful, just not on my plate. Must be from spending too long aboard Keel. I've had my fill of anything that comes from the sea...'

'And yet Hestia makes incredible tataki. You're really missing out, old man.'

'Well, that just means more for everyone else!'

She bites into her sandwich, chews for a long moment, then swallows.

'You almost done?' she finally asks.

I sigh, swallowing my own bite as I scratch my beard.

'Do I look like I'm almost done? Two weeks, give or take, counting the painting. And there's still the whole script to revise.'

'Don't worry, they'll love it. Whatever you do, the Reka are incredibly curious about our story and everything we can tell them about life in Asgartha.'

'I know, but some parts need to be simplified and condensed to make it digestible and understandable for an outside observer.'

'I would've helped, but...'

I smile at her. We both know we don't have the same priorities when it comes to storytelling, especially in how it's done. Where I favor lyricism and dreamlike qualities, she prefers grandeur and spectacle.

'You must be busy, with the Fair.'

'If only you knew! They took us on a tour of the Consortium, and it was just mind-blowing. Even the Axiom Masters were wide-eyed. Technologically, we're so far behind. We're like kids in a candy store, looking at all these wonders without the slightest idea how they work. It's humbling, and at the same time incredibly frustrating.'

'I can imagine.'

I watch her, and I sense that despite what she says, it's more wonder and excitement that come through in her voice than jealousy or discouragement. It makes me smile even more.

'In any case, we're going to show them what we can do too. We've got Kelon, which they don't know about, and there are also new developments around Aerolith. By combining what they know with what we've discovered, Isa and Bash are working on a new kind of application...'

I look at her with warmth.

'I'm proud of you, you know.'

She stops suddenly, and I can feel the emotion rising in her, along with traces of her Ignescence. Her lips tremble for a moment, and, embarrassed, she looks away briefly, just long enough to steady herself. Then I see love in her eyes when she looks back at me.

'Thanks for coming, Dad.'

I shrug, making a face.

'I only had to sell the wagon and most of my puppets, all the sets, make my way to Sojourn, pay for passage to Sadracca, then beg the Tisdhera Shepherd to let me travel with them... Oh, and also spend hundreds of miles surrounded by clowns to come see you. Nothing too terrible.'

She gives me an affectionate smack on the head, which makes me burst out laughing.

'Come on, old man,' she says at last with a sigh. 'If you're done working, leave your dolls for tonight and come with me. I heard about a bar that serves cocktails worth trying, apparently. We can go over the show again while we're there.'

I nod several times.

'Yes, let's do that. And you can tell me more about this Treyst you're working with.'

She spins around and glares at me, utterly mortified.

'Dad!!!'



Human Nature



394 AC

Kesh spreads out the checkered tablecloth and lays it over the patch of grass, just before Saskia sets down the wicker basket they filled together with provisions. The Muna naturalist, her hair tied up in a bun, begins taking out its contents one by one: small jars of jam, peach, blueberry, raspberry, luscious fruits, an assortment of pastries, creamy desserts, as well as the two tangy Naos-fruit smoothies they bought from a street vendor.

They are not the only ones to have seized the opportunity. Around them, other bystanders have settled onto rugs, mats, or blankets to enjoy the fine weather and their Sunday rest.

Akesha suddenly feels a hint of guilt for having asked Taru for a bit of privacy. She wanted to spend time with her friend one-on-one, without having to manage her Alter Ego's demands for attention or mood swings... and at the same time, it feels like drawing a modest veil over a part of herself.

Saskia inhales the scent of the flowers they picked near the gardens before sitting down beside her. For reasons she can't quite explain, Kesh's heart starts racing, while elsewhere, Taru stretches out her tentacles but holds back from making any comment.

A trace of awkwardness, a pinch of scruple... She looks around, trying to shake off the feeling, as persistent as suction cups.

'It's incredible, the way the Reka place nature at the center of their society,' the young Mage blurts out, breaking the silence and filling the space a little.

Saskia frowns as she bites into a grape, thoughtful.

'I'm not so sure...' she says, her expression turning serious.

Akesha stares at her, suddenly perplexed.

'What do you mean?' she asks, tilting her head.

The Muna's amethyst eyes settle on her, as mesmerizing and hypnotic as ever. Every time she looks at her like that, it feels as though the world disappears around them, as though nothing else exists but the two of them. There are only those pupils, intense and searching...

'I'm not convinced the Reka are as benevolent as they claim to be.'

Akesha glances around again: the picnic area and the vast, tree-filled park, carefully landscaped; the roots of the Naos, and its trunk so immense that the world-tree's canopy blends into the clouds, where arborists are still tirelessly at work even now...

'They take care of nature, yes,' Saskia continues, as if reading her thoughts. 'But they also want to control it. They seek to dominate the ecosystem. Yet nature isn't an entity to be tamed. It's the cradle we live in.'

Akesha moistens her lips, hesitant.

'But Sap is at the core of their civilization, and from what I understand, or at least what they say, they practice sustainable cultivation.'

'Just because the Reka don't bleed the Naos the way they did the Nilam doesn't mean they've abandoned exploitative practices. The fruits they harvest are so central that they alone determine the prosperity or decline of their society... They revere it, but at the same time, they exploit it, perhaps even excessively already.'

‘There’s plenty of it, though. They don’t seem to be lacking...’

Saskia cuts a slice of strawberry cake, taking her time, then offers a piece to her.

‘There is one absolute rule of living systems,’ she finally continues. ‘In ecosystems where resources are scarce, species develop mechanisms of cooperation to survive. They form symbiotic relationships to ease environmental pressure.’

Akesha’s eyes widen, clearly caught off guard.

‘I... I would’ve thought the opposite...’ she stammers.

Saskia sighs, sinking a little further onto the blanket as a breeze lifts a strand of her bangs.

‘Yes, it’s a bit counterintuitive, but generosity comes from the need to cooperate. In a biome where abundance is the norm, living beings have excess energy, and that energy expresses itself as violence. Species begin to pursue performance, to optimize, to compete. And instead of symbiosis, parasitism and competition take hold.’

‘That doesn’t sound very logical, does it?’

‘Logic and instinct don’t always go hand in hand, Kesh.’

Akesha thinks it over for a long moment, far from fully convinced. Saskia casually rests her head against her shoulder, and the young Initiate feels her heart pounding at the sudden intimacy.

‘And that’s even more true when emotions get involved...’

Kesh takes a bite of cake, trying to compose herself, to steady her chest as it rises and falls uncontrollably. A sudden warmth floods her, like a heated drizzle flushing her cheeks and turning her breath into something hot and unsteady.

‘But you know, it’s different again when it comes to humans,’ the naturalist continues. ‘We are social animals, like ants or libellumines, but we also have another trait: our tendency to create myths, and through them, a shared culture that distances us from nature...’

‘You say that like it’s not a good thing.’

‘It’s not a bad thing in itself, but we need to be aware of what it implies. For us, and for what surrounds us. Nature is interaction, and it’s a shifting balance. Establishing shared truths and references helps us, but maintaining them while everything else changes... that’s where the danger lies, in that rigidity.’

Akesha wonders where she’s going with this, then, in a flash of clarity, grasps the full meaning.

‘You’re talking about the Oneiroi.’

Saskia nods.

‘The image of the wolf is that of a threat to humans. That idea is passed down through generations. And as long as circumstances don’t change, it remains valid. But when reality shifts, that knowledge becomes prejudice, eventually turning harmful. One can rely on that idea, but one must constantly ask: does the idea still serve humanity, or has humanity become its slave?’

‘Still, the Muna know that the wolf has a role in the ecosystem...’

‘Some do see it differently. But the collective unconscious still identifies the wolf as the predator of fairy tales. Little Red Riding Hood and the Three Little Pigs, Peter and the Wolf, Fenrir... The Big Bad Wolf is real, because we make it real.’

‘So you’re saying imagination... that even Alterers reinforce this pattern of thought?’

‘The existence of the Oneiroi propagates it organically... It’s their very nature. They are archetypes. Every one of them embodies symbols. They are, by essence, symbols. By manifesting them, we ask them to express those symbols, to make them real.’

Akesha feels a sudden anxiety grip her.

‘Then what can we do?’

‘Master our imagination. Break the cycle of the unconscious that weighs on humanity. Reinvent myths that humanity fully controls, instead of being subjected to them.’

‘But... but that goes against the Concord.’

‘I’m aware,’ the Muna admits. ‘But when you study natural phenomena, you begin to question the established order of things... The Reka seek to bend the Naos to their own imperatives. And I’m not the only one who thinks so. They do it in the name of an ideology: unchecked progress and limitless growth. But that’s an illusion. To maintain that pace, the Reka are forced to let inequalities grow. Because in the end, there isn’t enough for everyone. The Reka are not masters of the situation. They are slaves to their ideal.’

Saskia turns to Akesha, her gaze betraying a hint of vulnerability.

‘I know these ideas are unpopular... even subversive.’

An uncomfortable silence settles between them, and Kesh realizes her friend is watching her closely.

‘Forget what I said,’ Saskia finally adds. ‘Sometimes, when I observe nature, I just notice contradictions that make me question things...’

Akesha shakes her head.

‘No... it’s not without merit. It’s just...’

‘A major shift in perspective, I know. But hush, now. Let’s put that aside. We’re here to enjoy the weather, a good picnic, and good company...’

Kesh allows herself a shy smile.

‘You’re right.’

Saskia rests her chin on the young Yzmir’s shoulder, her eyes locking with hers, a trace of mischief in them, and perhaps something more that she cannot quite identify.

‘But thank you. For listening without judgment. Others wouldn’t have been so tolerant...’

Akesha feels her cheeks flush. She shakes her head.

‘You don’t have to thank me, I didn’t do anything...’

‘What I mean,’ the Muna interrupts, ‘is that I feel comfortable with you. I feel good, and safe. Enough to open up without pretense, without fear that you’ll take it badly or be offended. That’s something precious, you know?’

‘I’ve never felt this close to anyone either...’

Their faces are so close now that a strand of hair brushes her cheek. Close enough that she can catch her scent: orange blossom, feline lavender, soft jasmine... Sunlit notes, yet sensual, like a summer night.

Like a...



Snow-White & Rose-Red



394 AC

Come on, Matz, bear with it. Keep up appearances, like you were told. Show some tact. Diplomacy. Be pleasant. Show empathy. Put on a polite smile. Be more upbeat. Ha. The sidelong glance my counterpart shoots me kills any desire to do so, to say the least.

I look out the window, through the smooth yellow glass, at this white city I might have found beautiful under different circumstances, like something out of a fairy tale. But reality has a way of dousing hopes and dreams, even if I didn't have many left when I got here. "A change of scenery will do you good," Abiram had told me. Give me a break. Negotiating over and over again had convinced me that even on the other side of the world, under sunny skies, the same endless talks dragged on, and the frustrations were just as sharp. Don't they say wherever you go, you take your problems with you?

Anyway, what was the point of believing in fairy tales if they actually existed, huh?

There was an old one, actually, called *Snow-White and Rose-Red*. Not the one with the seven dwarfs. Not even the same Snow White, for that matter. This one was about two sisters who loved each other, even though their personalities were completely opposite. The first was shy and reserved, preferring the comfort of indoors, while the other had a more spirited temperament, eager to go out, to wander, to explore. There was an ungrateful, nasty dwarf in it, if I remember correctly, and a good-natured bear who was actually a prince...

For some reason, that's what comes to mind when I look at the sketch Corinna and I finally settled on, after days of back-and-forth and disagreements. Two sisters reunited, to represent our two sister civilizations. Was I the ungrateful dwarf in this story, and Corinna the kindly bear, or the other way around? Truth be told, I was nothing like a prince, and the sculptor was anything but affable...

The Reka architect annotates the document, checks the lines, scribbles corrections. I can feel a hint of irritation in the way she underlines certain measurements, circles parts of the plan that seem to bother her. Good for her. My first instinct had been to call upon my Coalescence to communicate more effectively with her, but she wasn't Ordis, and that ability was off-limits to me anyway, whether I liked it or not.

Of course, I'm fooling myself. Like I often do when I start feeling sorry for myself. Cutting myself off from the Gestalt had been my choice, and no one else's.

'So we're agreed on how to divide the work?' the sculptor asks.

I nod, a bit pompously, I'll admit.

'It goes without saying that I'll take Rose-Red, and you'll take Snow White.'

'I beg your pardon?'

I shake my head, a little annoyed at myself.

'One statue each. It's more symbolic that way,' I finally say.

She presses her lips together but doesn't comment further. Working together had been difficult, and it still was. A matter of sensibilities, maybe even a fundamental incompatibility. She clearly had a stick up her ass, which didn't make her easy to deal with, but I wasn't exactly easy either, so I couldn't really say anything.

For heaven's sake, let's just get this over with...

There was something ironic about the situation, something that didn't bode well from a societal standpoint. It wasn't about language. With Alteration as a crutch, we had managed to bridge the gap and eventually understand each other over the weeks and months, even if there were still the occasional hiccups, especially with expressions or sayings. But beyond words, we simply didn't understand each other as human beings. I think she would have preferred to work alone, and so would I. Instead, we had to deal with each other's presence, compromising again and again, to the point where neither of us was satisfied with the result or how things were turning out. It was like having a roommate...

And I already had one who took up more than enough space all by itself.

That was another thing that irritated Corinna, even if she wouldn't admit it. The constant presence of my wasps, and the incessant buzzing that came with them, weren't easy to tolerate. Hell, I had struggled with it myself in the early years. In truth, she had no idea what it was really like. The constant tension, the tightness, the feeling that something was trying to get out but couldn't.

'My wasps on one side, your... microorganisms on the other. We'll just need to harmonize the junction points to make it feel more natural, don't you think?'

It's a trivial remark, but I need to shift my attention to something else. Even her sharp comments would be a welcome distraction.

'Just follow my instructions, and everything will be fine.'

I pull that back. Not that welcome after all.

I'd overheard a conversation between her and an envoy of the Hexarchs outside her studio. She had practically bent over backward, and I could feel the pressure the Reka leadership was putting on her. The result was that she saw herself in competition with me, just as the Reka saw themselves in rivalry with us. Beneath the veneer of reunion, it was a matter of who could puff out their chest the most. Like a cockfight. Having someone constantly in front of her who couldn't care less about honors must have irritated her to no end. But in the end, that was her problem.

She sighs and rubs her forehead, leaving a streak of ink behind. I don't point it out. It's not my place, even if she'll probably resent me for it tomorrow.

'We also need to rehearse what we'll do during the unveiling ceremony. Your Talos will be summoned to conceal the sculpture. The Hexarchy will be present in full, alongside your officials... When the ribbon is cut and our work revealed, we will then be expected to...'

'They want rehearsals when the piece hasn't even been started?'

She shoots me a dark look.

'Think about your speech, and I'll do the same.'

I bow politely, deferentially. That look means "don't push your luck," and having seen it often enough, I'd recognize it anywhere. It was the same one I got when I tried to politely decline the assignment. They sold the project as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, a crowning achievement, an honor I couldn't refuse. They made sure to emphasize that last part. "Couldn't refuse." Just as I expected, it turned out to be more of a poisoned gift than anything else.

Corinna slips the plans into an envelope and hands it to me.

'I'll leave it to you to communicate these changes to your superiors?'

A question, or a veiled order? Diplomacy. Be pleasant. Empathy.

'Certainly, my dear.'

Another dark look. Yes, maybe that "my dear" was a bit much.

The door suddenly opens, and a small figure rushes toward her in a rustle of skirts and frills. The little girl throws herself against her mother's legs, wrapping her arms around her dress. She looks up at her with wide eyes. Corinna, flustered, casts me an embarrassed glance before turning to the child.

'Dimi, what are you doing here?'

A breathless governess appears at the door, left ajar. She looks just as apologetic.

'I'm sorry, ma'am. She insisted on coming to see you and slipped away from me when we got off the elevator...'

Corinna gently strokes the child's chestnut hair, then shakes her head at her employee.

'It's nothing, Eudora. I know how stubborn this little whirlwind can be.'

'Mom! It's Ascension Day today! We didn't have school and you said you'd come home early!'

'That's true, you're right. Mommy had a lot of work, but we're done now.'

The sculptor turns toward me, as if asking for help or apologizing for the interruption. And for the first time, I think I catch a hint of vulnerability in her eyes. I nod, a bit sheepish, all irony and sarcasm swept from my mind.

'We were just finishing, actually. We'll do as you said.'

Corinna takes her daughter's hand. I assume it's her daughter, at least. She gives a faint nod, then lowers her gaze and heads for the exit, leading the child by the hand.

'After the memorial, do you want to stop by the canal?'

'Oh yes, Mom! And this year, can I release a lantern?'

I'd heard about that celebration, where the Reka send countless floating lanterns each year to those left behind in the City of Scholars... To them, the city was no longer a reality, but just a story, a fairy tale. In the end, the true nature of fairy tales lay in the hearts of children, not in that of a bitter man...

Corinna smiles at her affectionately, with a hint of mischief.

'I think you're old enough now.'

Dimi jumps for joy, her shoes tapping against the polished, sterile floor of the studio. I can't help but smile, and the little girl notices.

'Mom, who's the man who talks funny?'

I frown without losing my smile. Well now.



Forbidden Fruit



394 AC

--- NAURAA ---

'So you don't eat the fruit from your world-tree?'

Tei shakes her head, all while maintaining her practiced, diplomatic smile. She's good at that, I'll give her that much. Enduring conversations that never end, keeping her patience despite all the pretense. I keep my head resting on my forepaws, watching the exchange with a distracted eye.

'Many animals depend on it to survive, from the birds and primates living in its branches to the rodents and insects sheltering beneath its canopy... and between you and me, they're far too sour and astringent for anyone to enjoy eating them.'

Her counterpart lets out a laugh, as charming as it is affected, while her white hair slips along her neck like a soft cloud. I hate these theatrics. I don't know how Tei puts up with it. I flick my ears and open my other eye.

Easy now, Nauraa.

I lift my head and, more out of resignation than need, start lapping at the water mixed with sap that's been poured into my bowl. She asked me to be patient, but how can I be, when all they feed me are these tasteless fruits? I'd much rather sink my teeth into one of those woollybacks frolicking in the fields. She knows full well I won't be satisfied with this miserable fare, no matter how fleshy it is. I sniff the air, catching a thousand mingled scents: Teija's, the Reka's, reeking of sugar... but also a hint of musk I can't quite place. The scent of a flesh-eater, a heady trace of fur, fangs, yellow eyes in the night...

It's there, but it remains hidden. Its presence is elusive, almost masked. It's been following us for a long time, at least since the snowfields, maybe even before. I know it's like me. A predator.

Teija slides her knife through the roasted fruit and brings a piece to her lips. I start salivating despite myself. The Reka politician across from her turns again toward my Alter Ego, her white hair rippling lightly, like the wool of a woollyback. I'd do anything to bite into one. I'd relish it. One snap of my jaws and I'd feast... My stomach growls. But to do that, I'd have to deal with the ram. He wouldn't let me. Every time I got near the flock, his gaze never left me. And so far, the thought of his horns had been enough to curb my appetite. Almost.

I nudge a fruit with my muzzle and, more out of boredom than desire, bite absently into the pale pink berry. I feel its juice run down my jowls as I swallow it. Tei shoots me an annoyed look but holds back any cutting remark, just as I refrain from questioning her questionable mating choices. These fruits don't replace the taste of blood, but they awaken something in me that's been dormant for a long time.

Far too long.

My senses sharpen as the sweet flesh slides down my throat. Each bite, each swallow stirs buried memories. The taste of cinnamon and ginger, of cheese, Tei's face as a child, when I used to knock her over into piles of fallen leaves...

Clang.

The sharp sound of utensils hitting the floor, of porcelain clattering as a fist slams onto the table. The jolt snaps me out of my reverie and I rise onto my paws. I can smell the intoxicating scent of anger, minds beginning to flare.

'Be patient? Show restraint? Are you serious? We've been going in circles for months without a single decision being made!'

--- ZHEN ---

She's grabbed me by the collar, her features twisted with rage.

'Every decision takes time,' I tell her, trying to calm her. But Sol doesn't seem ready to listen.

'I don't give a damn about your so-called administrative delays! You know what they're doing! You agreed to be Halua's emissaries!'

I look around to assess the damage. Waru wipes his mouth and sets his napkin on the table without even glancing our way. But his expression is grim, almost exasperated. Teija has placed a hand on her fox's flank, stroking its fur as if to soothe it. A heavy silence has replaced the clinking of cutlery and glasses.

With a sharp motion, the Bravos huntress pushes her plate away, and her glass tips over, spreading a golden stain across the white tablecloth. The roasted fruit lies smeared on her plate, untouched.

'I'm sick of standing around doing nothing while you keep stuffing yourselves!'

I place a hand on her wrist, the one still gripping the collar of my tunic.

'And you think making a scene is going to help?'

At that, she looks around and notices all the eyes on her. The Reka, the plenipotentiary envoys. The lavish reception hall, all gleaming Gala, had until now been wrapped in a hushed, polished atmosphere under the golden glow of candelabras and chandeliers, but now an embarrassed, simmering silence has taken hold. I grit my teeth. I want to explain that this entire process is only just beginning, that an agreement won't be reached anytime soon. But I hold back. This is neither the time nor the place.

'Consider yourselves fortunate for the welcome we've given you.'

Maleros speaks up. She rises, crossing her arms in defiance.

'You emerged from the barrier we raised to protect ourselves from... that Halua. You arrived with your armed fleet, surrounded by six Goliaths. Be grateful we showed restraint instead of unleashing hell upon you.'

Ploutos speaks next, though he remains seated, and I begin to fear escalation is inevitable.

'Since your arrival, Halua, as you call it, has taken position above the Naos and prevents my harvesters from gathering its fruit. This embargo forces us to draw from our reserves and condemns the population to famine. Do you consider that just? Do you think we live in abundance and peace?'

Sol clenches her jaw and finally lets me go, though her fists remain tight.

'You claim the Naos is sacred, but you're only here to exploit it.'

'It gives, and we care for it,' Ploutos replies with arrogance. 'A fair exchange.'

Sol's eyes flash red.

'You call that care? You're pushing it to the limit. Always demanding more. Your so-called respect? It's just a façade to ease your conscience, because everything you do follows a logic of production. It's a sham!'

'Soledad,' I say, firmly.

'What? You see it too!'

Enough. Doesn't she see she's making things worse?

'Sol!'

My shout echoes through the vast hall, and the Bravos woman's eyes widen. Zephyr trumpets, spreading his wings, while the entire palace trembles.

--- TEIJA ---

'Sol, this isn't how things are going to get better.'

My hand grips Nauraa's fur, as if to steady myself. But also to keep my own fear in check. A single beat of Halua's wings has shaken the entire city, and I can only imagine the terror the Reka must be feeling right now.

I look ahead at the white wall stretching up toward the ceiling. Its surface is carved across several yards, depicting clouds in relief. A vast sea of clouds. Within those stylized swirls, islands float, shaped from chiseled Sap. These are the Quadrants we flew over. At the lower left, a small island glows faintly, encircled by a compass rose. It's a map. A map of what the Reka call the Ecumene.

'I know you meant well, but you saw how the population reacted after your speech. Stop harvesting the Naos fruit? You can see there's no room for more crops. Maybe by expanding agriculture on the other islands. But how many years would that take? And that's without considering their drift... We have to think in terms of transition.'

Astrape places a hand on my arm in a calming gesture.

'We had begun sowing the other atolls, creating fields, rice paddies. Before Halua turned against us. I know some of you believe we are repeating the mistakes of our ancestors. But if we still exploit the Sap, we do so less intensively. We've substituted it with the fruits currently on the table. A gentler way to benefit from its properties.'

Sol shakes her head.

'The Muna were perfectly clear. Arjun can explain it better than I can.' She gestures toward them, though they seem unwilling to add fuel to the fire. 'The fertilizer infusions needed to maintain current yields... it's like you're keeping it on life support!'

She's not wrong. But if she keeps pushing, things will only get worse.

'Perhaps our differences are irreconcilable,' Wanax growls.

We're on a slippery slope.

'Please,' I say, raising my hand. 'Sol, try to see things from their perspective. We arrived with a monster that has already attacked the city several times, causing such devastation they had to create the Whiplash just to barricade themselves inside. We can't act like conquerors, imposing our rules while holding Halua over them like a guillotine. All we'll achieve is the population's anger. Today's protests will turn into riots.'

Astrape stands and surveys the room.

'It is clear we do not fully understand one another. Your wisdom is inherited from ancestral customs, from a communion we do not share. We struggled against our environment to survive, and managed to flourish despite obstacles and hardships. Perhaps our ways are marked by a kind of blindness. If we could feel the Naos's distress, perhaps we could share it with our people.'

It's a clever move. Astrape must know what Sol went through, and about the bond she now shares with her Leviathan. The huntress lowers her eyes, gripped by doubt.

'The Musubi...' she finally says.

'That bond to which the Reka are strangers,' the Reka politician adds. 'Through it, perhaps we could understand your point of view. And correct our failings?'

Nauraa feels it just as I do, and my stomach tightens. It's the unpleasant sensation of biting into poisoned fruit, or of a wolf trap snapping shut around us.



Trickle-Down Theory



394 AC

‘When you’ve finished enjoying yourself, perhaps it would be appropriate for you to focus on what truly matters?’

He phrases it like a question, but his peremptory tone leaves little room for doubt. Sylas takes a seat in the armchair; his movements are controlled, yet everything about his demeanor radiates aggression.

‘If you want to talk about my associations, know that they in no way hinder my work. Quite the opposite, in fact. Between all of us, I’m not the one who procrastinates.’

Sylas sighs.

‘I already have my hands full with those pests from the Qorgan constantly breathing down our necks. Covering our tracks isn’t easy, believe me. Especially since Bai Shan-shu’s daughter has started sticking her nose where it doesn’t belong..’

That catches me off guard.

‘Little Zhen?’ I allow myself a smile, recalling memories from another life. ‘Maddie’s daughter?’

The Sorcerer nods.

‘It seems Shan-shu finally let the cat out of the bag.’

‘That was to be expected. What exactly does she know?’

The facets of his mask shift, a prism of undulating reflections.

‘Nothing that puts us in immediate danger. I’ll make sure to provide her with satisfactory answers. Enough to soothe the disgrace, and grant her a semblance of redemption.’

I let out a chuckle, as much affectionate as mocking.

‘Your mercy will be your undoing.’

‘If she gets too close to the truth, then we’ll have to eliminate her.’

I’ve reached the same conclusion regarding Moyo, though I refrain from saying so. The Initiate had proven sharper than expected; socially inept, but very intelligent, perhaps even too much so for his own good...

I spin on my stool to face my counterpart, extending a notebook toward him. He takes it and begins scanning the names listed inside. There are only a few dozen, at most, but that’s already too many.

‘Anyway, redirect your anger elsewhere, will you?’ I say in a blasé tone. ‘I’ve shared my analyses with you, I’ve given you my warnings. And yet nothing has been done. I know the Sicarius is present, and she hasn’t lifted a finger, even as some are already awakening.’

‘What is it?’

‘The individuals reacting strangely to the Sap. Della sent me the list, along with their files. Start with them, would you? It would be unfortunate to let them awaken.’

He skims through the pages before slipping the notebook into his pocket.

‘Have you learned anything more about the phenomenon?’ he finally asks.

I nod in confirmation.

‘I haven’t been idle, whatever your unpleasant insinuations. I never am.’

‘Then stop holding your tongue.’

‘Come now. Observing nature requires patience.’

I stand and fetch a piece of the already-cut Spindle fruit, slicing off a thin sliver to feed my drosophila. I watch them settle onto the star-shaped slice before sitting down again.

‘Did you know they were going to attempt a hybridization of the Naos and the Spindle?’

‘What does that have to do with anything, Eugenist?’ he almost growls.

‘Everything, actually. It concerns the very nature of world-trees. The answer has been right under our noses all along. In ancient beliefs, cosmic trees were said to connect the different layers of the universe. The tangible, and the immaterial.’

Sylas’s eyes narrow, like those of a predator.

‘Instead of creating breaches in the Veil, world-trees filter the substance of the Empyrean and diffuse it into the world. But where a tear spews Aether with violence and excess, these trees dispense it, exude it, seed it... This Sap is actually Nectar, and every fruit, Ambrosia.’

Silence stretches as I study his features, searching for the slightest emotion. When he finally speaks again, the Warlock’s voice is grave and dark, like a well of blackness. There is a hint of exasperation in it, perhaps tinged with a trace of panic. I moisten my lips with my tongue, almost intoxicated by that gentle fragrance that is fear, while my parasites shift beneath my skin.

‘Be careful, Anathema. I’m not the only one who can taste the scent of fear.’

Though his face remains an alabaster mask, what lies beneath is anything but calm. He removes his mirror-mask, its ever-shifting facets, and sets it on the bedside table.

‘You’re suggesting...’

‘Yes. That a large portion of the Reka are no longer human. For decades, perhaps centuries, they’ve been feeding on these fruits. Many must have already awakened. And the longer the Sap continues to flow, the more will follow in its wake...’

I sense him withdrawing into his thoughts for a moment. I begin nibbling at my thumb, realizing it will soon be time to feed my cephalorachidian amoebas... My gaze drifts toward my mana-feeding slugs. A gelatinous secretion coats my palate at the thought of the Mana I’m about to ingest. Or perhaps... I turn toward Sylas and feel his Mana pulsing. With a touch, perhaps I could—

‘Saskia.’

I suppress a shiver, merely running my tongue over my lips. He shoots me a sharp look, and I realize I let myself get carried away. My mouth curls into what is meant to be a soothing smile, though it only makes me salivate more.

‘So,’ he continues, ‘this is an invasion unfolding right before our eyes. The Hexarchs have shown great interest in the Musubi. They’ve made it the subject of a potential exchange of knowledge... Something is at play, and I intend to get to the bottom of it.’

‘Do you need my help, dear accomplice?’ I ask, a hint of playfulness in my voice.

‘No. Your position is ideal. We cannot risk it.’

‘Then how do you intend to proceed?’

For the first time that evening, he smiles.

‘Don’t worry. The Technophant has come out of retirement. And I may have another ace up my sleeve.’

I widen my eyes and smile at that. Then slowly, I remove the lid from a jar and take out a stick insect swollen with Mana. I can feel the ghost trace of her lips on mine, and the delicate taste of strawberry. Oh yes, this day seems decidedly suited for celebration...

‘At this rate, we’ll all be reunited soon enough, it seems...’

The chitin crunches beneath my teeth.



Collision Courses



394 AC

--- MOYO ---

Every encounter is a promise of evolution. That was true for Silk and me, just as it is for the Asgarthans and the Reka, or even the Confluence, for that matter. Existence is made of constant collisions. On one hand, physicists say that the flap of a butterfly's wings can give rise to a hurricane. On the other, all of life sciences revolves around the meeting of two genetic lineages. And if you add social and societal considerations into the mix, whether at the scale of individuals or entire peoples... it becomes a fireworks display of possibilities I would rather not even attempt to contemplate.

It is with that thought in mind that I hear them approaching, and I tell myself the timing is fitting. I draw a modest shroud over my peace and quiet, no doubt compromised for the rest of the evening. A brief mourning I discard just as quickly, since there is no use regretting it.

They come in giggling before closing the laboratory door, though they cannot quite hide their lingering hands: Saskia's resting on Akesha's waist, and the Initiate's fingers slip away, furtively and somewhat clumsily, from the biologist's back. They try to compose themselves in haste, but fail to do so entirely. In truth, it matters little to me. All living beings are driven by impulses. It is simply a biological reality.

'Hey, Moyo,' the Mage says, pretending to take an interest in my work.

'Kesh.'

Kesh. That's what she asked me to call her.

'So, I hear you're going to take part in the Hextag match?'

'Reluctantly, yes. I've been told it's strongly encouraged. I can read between the lines.'

'Oh. And what are you doing right now?' she finally asks after clearing her throat.

I turn toward her and observe her physiological responses with clinical indifference: dilated pupils, shallow breathing, her obvious agitation, and of course that foolish, almost syrupy smile. Saskia, for her part, seems more composed. She hangs up her jacket and slips into her lab coat as if nothing had happened. But the way she fixes her hair and glances at herself in the mirror... she too is in the midst of a mating display.

'The idea of the butterfly already exists within the caterpillar.'

Akesha's eyes widen, and I realize my sentence might sound cryptic. I close the book I was reading and show her the cover.

'No, nothing. It's a work recovered from the City of Scholars. They were declassified after the historians finished examining them.'

'And? Is there anything interesting in it?'

'They're annals. It is becoming increasingly likely that the inhabitants of the City were travelers from the Sunset Tribe, cut off from the rest of the procession by a Tumult Singularity.'

Kesh scratches her head where Taru, perched atop her skull, had earlier stuck its suction cups. Saskia pours herself a cup of coffee, probably lukewarm, and sits down beside me.

'I didn't know you were interested in history,' the Mage admits.

'I'm not.'

She looks at me, puzzled.

'I'm looking for material to feed my hypotheses.'

'Which ones?'

I catch one of her sideways glances, supposedly discreet, toward Saskia. Is she making conversation out of politeness, or is she genuinely interested in what I have to say? Either way, putting things into words helps anchor them in the mind.

'Halua is the designated protector of the Naos. That much we now know with certainty. On our small corner of the world, Kaibara watches over Kirighai. And what is on that island?'

Saskia sets a few documents down on her workbench.

'The Spindle.'

'Bingo. A world-tree.'

Kesh looks from one of us to the other.

'But in that case, the Nilam should also have had a protector, another Leviathan?'

I place the book beside me.

'Unfortunately, and much to my regret, there's nothing in there that confirms or refutes anything. The Tumult Nomads arrived at the world-tree and began exploiting it without encountering any opposition whatsoever... What we call the Nilam, they called the Vilagfa back then, but it's the same thing.'

Saskia looks at Silk, who is feeding on Sap like an aphid drinking plant sap. She has always been quick on the uptake, and this is yet another example.

'Unless...'

I nod.

'Unless, for one reason or another, it wasn't able to emerge the way it was supposed to.'

The Mage's eyes widen.

'You think Silk is a... Leviathan larva?'

'At the rate it's growing,' I say with a shrug, 'it wouldn't surprise me. In any case, I checked. The idea of the butterfly is indeed present within Silk.'

'Which could explain the purpose of the Moths, and even their nature,' my supervisor muses. 'They could be ghost images, visual afterimages of that... entity.'

'Like ghosts haunting a place. That was my initial working hypothesis. But I'm not sure I can validate anything that way. The Storhvit has always seemed strange to me. Even when we were there, something felt off, though I couldn't say what. Asgartha was terraformed by numerous Alterers, and its topography has retained that artificial quality. The same goes for the Storhvit.'

Saskia studies me, thoughtful, resting an elbow on the table as she turns toward me.

'So the Nomads worked to stabilize the ecosystem?'

I shake my head.

'No. The annals say the climate there was temperate at the time. And given what we know, that it was Kuraokami who generated the cold, these alterations began well after the Reka left the City of Scholars. In short, the timeline doesn't fit. Something, or someone, altered the Cais Adarra region, and even tampered with its flora and fauna. And that brings me back to the Moths.'

Kesh shakes her head, incredulous.

'Wait, you mean the region was created from scratch?'

'Something like that, yes. But we're talking about events that took place nearly a century ago. For all I know, it could have been the work of a Tumult Singularity, one that has since dissipated. I doubt we'll ever be able to determine it... But to me, it feels deliberate, designed.'

'You mentioned the Moths? Did you manage to deal with them in the end?'

Akesha turns toward Saskia, and I do the same.

'Ah, yes. Indeed. I followed your recommendations and studied the long-term effects of cocoon ingestion across a sample group. The microorganisms present in the fluid spread throughout the body, much like toxoplasmosis, for example.'

'Uh, should we be worried?' the Mage interrupts.

I shake my head.

'It's completely harmless. They even digest parasitic ideas. They are the agents responsible for transforming a caterpillar into a butterfly. They remain dormant and awaken when the Tumult is present.'

Saskia narrows her eyes.

'Are you absolutely certain? Does that confirm the hypotheses?'

I nod again. She should know that by now. I don't make statements unless I'm at least reasonably certain.

'I'm not sure I follow,' the Initiate admits, prompting a sigh from me.

'What Moyo means is that everyone who has ingested them is more resistant when exposed to the Tumult. These organisms can dissolve ideas within a person's psyche, altering their nature.'

The Mage's eyes widen in realization.

'So that means...'

Tears gather at the corners of her eyes as Saskia confirms what I have tried to explain.

'That we may have a cure for the Remanence...'

The Muna wraps her arms around the young mage, who trembles with quiet sobs. Perhaps now is not the time to voice my doubts and suspicions... If the Moths were manufactured, who created them, and for what purpose? In any case, even as she comforts her partner, I trust Saskia is asking herself the same questions. Or at least, I hope so.

--- KAURI ---

Another woollyback has disappeared, yet again. It's far from the first time. When we used to count them with Dad, there was always at least one that never returned from the transhumance. And one day, aboard the Ouroboros, one of them simply vanished, just like that, for no apparent reason. Probably a counting error when we brought the herd back the evening before... Still, that kind of thing never happened when we were home.

'Perhaps it's in their nature to vanish, like mist in the morning sun?' Turuun jokes. And I start to wonder if she might be right, considering even Puff doesn't seem all that affected by these sudden, inexplicable disappearances.

'Do you really think they'll manage it?'

'And what exactly are you referring to, young man?'

I scratch my head, a little embarrassed.

'Sorry, people say I tend to jump from pillar to post...'

'Strange. I would have said "over the ditch" for some reason.'

I chuckle, realizing she's teasing me again.

'I meant the fruits you brought back.'

'Want me to tell you a secret?'

I blink at her, then nod eagerly. Her wrinkled face turns conspiratorial, her voice dropping to a whisper.

'It was just an excuse to make a quick getaway.'

I stare at her, completely thrown off, and she bursts into a raspy, mischievous laugh.

'Oh, stop messing with him, you old goat!'

Rin approaches, hands on her hips as if to scold her, but once she's close, she wraps her arms around Turuun affectionately from behind.

'Come now, let this old owl breathe. I'm not going anywhere.'

The Alteress sits on the grass beside the old wool blanket I spread out and rests her head on the venerable Muna's shoulder.

'I still can't believe you're here... and that you're part of an Exalt, on top of that.'

Turuun jerks her chin toward the jay perched on Puff's head.

'It's because of him, the rascal. He was meant for someone else, but he refused to leave my side. So I eventually gave in... Though my old bones don't thank him for it. Do they, you little scoundrel?'

The Chimera lets out a playful trill.

'You've known each other a long time.'

Rin beams.

'She's the one who taught me everything.'

Turuun's thin, wrinkled fingers pat Rin's forearm, both humbly and affectionately.

'And you, young rascal. I've heard you celebrated a Musubi.' She points toward Halua, whose silhouette floats above the Naos. 'And with that, no less. I don't think I've ever met an Ollam so young... and so bold.'

I feel my cheeks flush.

'I thought I was doing the right thing...'

'Now, now, that's no reproach. It's an achievement you can be proud of. I just wonder what went through that little head of yours, that's all.'

'It's just that...'

I hesitate for a moment.

'I was guided by Eru...'

Turuun runs a hand along her neck, eyeing me with sudden suspicion.

'Did he reveal Niavhe's secret to you?'

I shake my head quickly, swallowing hard, wondering if she'll see through my lie.

'Come now, speak plainly. I'm already familiar with those legends.'

I freeze like a deer in headlights.

'A world-tree always has a protector. Halua for the Naos...' She gestures toward the massive manta-like creature. 'And Kaibara for the Spindle. Each world-tree is an offshoot of the primordial tree, an extension, a cutting... They are the axis mundi of each major Oasis, pollinators of stability, born when the Tumult recedes enough to let them emerge. And Niavhe...'

Turuun takes a deep breath as Rin lifts her head, surprised.

'She didn't bond with Kaibara, as people believe. She bonded with the Spindle...'

I remain silent as Rin grips her mentor's arm.

'So that means the Muna...' she begins.

'Yes, child. Awakening to the Skein comes from the Spindle. It is what spreads within us, what extends its roots through us. The world-tree acts through us.'

But does she know who forged that bond?

A few woollybacks lift their heads. There's a predator's musk in the air. They've sensed it too. The wind rolls over the hills, carrying that powerful scent. It's not the first time I've noticed it. It's been following us for a while...

‘What is it?’

I shake my head, suddenly pulled back to the present. In the distance, the Naos stretches its sturdy branches toward the sky, basking close to the sun. Its leaves are not the same color as those of the Spindle, yet they rustle in the same way. Halua drifts lazily above the vibrant canopy, carried by the wind, reminding everyone of its presence, ready to punish those who mistreat the tree, casting its shadow over the city like a silent threat, a warning. Sometimes, silence says more than a thousand words...

‘I was thinking maybe that’s what’s needed. Arjun told me the Naos suffers in silence. If the Reka could feel its pain, maybe they’d take better care of it...’

Rin rests her chin on her knees.

‘Tei told me she’s hesitating,’ she finally says. ‘Apparently there are a lot of discussions about that at the Embassy and the Consulate. Whether or not we should share the Musubi with them. Even if they talk about freedom, the Reka have always been prisoners of their island. They’ve been at the mercy of the archipelago’s drift, and had to isolate themselves even more when Halua started attacking them...’

‘It’s because of what they’re doing that—’ I begin, frowning.

‘I know, and you’re right,’ she cuts in. ‘But put yourself in their place. They didn’t have the same opportunities we did to grow. A plant stops growing when it’s in a pot, because it can’t extend its roots. It’s the same here. Their horizon was this city. It’s almost like a prison...’

I chew my lip, considering her words.

‘Having Exalts would finally let them look outward. It’s what allowed us to do the same. Imagine what they must be going through. There’s sky all around, but it’s like invisible walls. They don’t know anything else. They’re stuck going in circles, with no hope of change. It’s like if our whole world had just been Arkaster...’

That prospect doesn’t exactly appeal to me.

‘Maybe that’s why they turned so much toward technology... because it replaced hope and the wonder of discovering the world? So if we can help them out of their cage, wouldn’t that be the right thing to do anyway?’

Turuun gazes at the world-tree, thoughtful. I have to admit, it makes me think too. She follows its branching limbs, some of which vanish into the clouds, and I find myself doing the same. Rin, meanwhile, studies us both intently. The old Muna nods silently.

‘Offering the Musubi is one thing. Celebrating it with the Naos is another.’

Rin frowns, slightly taken aback.

‘But...’

Turuun places a hand on her shoulder, then gently strokes her cheek.

‘I’m not saying you’re wrong. Offering the Musubi is an act of kindness that should be done.’ She then turns to me with a kind expression. ‘And if they bond with the Naos, perhaps the Reka will come to understand the extent of the harm they inflict upon it without realizing. But I also understand Teija. Offering the Musubi is no small matter. It’s a decision that must be carefully considered.’

She sighs as she struggles to stand, and Rin supports her.

‘If the legends are true,’ she continues, resting a hand on her hip and suppressing a grimace of pain, ‘other Muna may even awaken.’

She takes a step forward as her jay settles on her shoulder.

‘And that would be a very good thing...’

--- KOJO ---

I adjust my trajectory. I already instinctively know where they've set up their ambush. I launch myself from one ramp to another, using the concept of Aerolith to alter gravity. A hand brushes past my shoulder without touching me as I dodge another Yzmir player trying to tackle me. Better luck next time, bro.

It's just like when I was in the Tilted Steppes. The reflexes come back naturally as muscle memory takes over.

Somewhere, I hear Afanas barking orders like he's firing volleys of magical missiles. Let's just say I wouldn't have wanted him as an Altrun coach. But this is different, he invited me so his team could train. I'm basically a guest star for his Sphinx squad. Pretty cool name, I've got to admit. And it feels good to get back to basics without the pressure of competition.

Oops. I spin at the last second as another player emerges from a pool of shadow. Not this time buddy. Thrown off by my move, Afanas's disciple trips and crashes hard. There are a lot of players closing in now. Time to get out of here.

I suddenly drop, sliding down a railing like it's a playground slide. I've drawn a lot of attention to this side of the field, which should leave the other side pretty cle—

I conjure a metal pylon and yank myself upward, clinging to it as a volley of moths nearly surrounds me. I glance at Moyo and flash him a slightly provocative grin before darting away. Not that way. I shift my weight and drop like a stone, narrowly avoiding another Yzmir tracker positioned exactly where I was about to land. That was close... A shiver runs down my spine. That was anticipated too. I cast a sideways glance and spot a shadow rushing toward me.

Hmph.

She slams into me head-on, and we roll across the platform as Afanas claps and shouts something like "that's what I'm talking about!" or maybe both that and "learn from this!" Honestly, I'm only half listening. I'm stunned I got hit. It's like she read me perfectly. Like...

She props herself up on her elbows, and my eyes widen as the familiar figure turns toward me. Before I can even gather my thoughts, I rush forward and hug her, sobbing like a little kid. I feel her arms wrap around my shoulders, patting my back.

'Pull yourself together, kid. We're in public.'

I pull back slightly, wiping my nose on my sleeve. The other Yzmir players are heading toward the bench as Afanas seems to have called a break.

'I hope you didn't get that on my jersey,' Carmela mutters with a grimace. 'It's brand new, for crying out loud.'

I sniffle, wiping my teary eyes, staring at her in disbelief. Her hair is a bit longer than I remember, dyed pink with a bleached streak, but it's really her.

'You're actually here? I'm not dreaming?'

'Idiot. One thing's for sure, it's not your brain that's improved.'

'What are you even doing here?'

'What do you think, dummy? You thought I'd let you hog all the glory? Don't you remember the promise I made you? I rushed through my training and caught a ride with the reinforcements. It was tight, but I made it.'

I glance around, searching. When I look back at her, her expression has softened. She just shakes her head, and even I get the message.

'Cathal took my place as captain of the Blaze. She's got a solid team, with a good Gunner to replace you. A guy named Rinku, very promising. He's a big fan of yours too, even summons your Eidolon sometimes...'

She wipes her forehead before continuing.

'Uju stepped away from Altrun to focus on ringby, and she's doing well. Might even make first league next year... I think she felt like she'd gone as far as she could in Altrun, kind of like you.'

I smile, nostalgic and a little sad that the team has drifted apart.

'Yeah... that sounds like her.'

'Definitely.'

I stare at the ground, anxious about asking, even though I already know the answer. Still, better to rip the bandage off.

'And Gault?'

'Gaultier... he apologizes. He gave me this long speech, but I'm terrible at repeating things word for word, so here's the gist. He always knew you had a thing for adventure, the unknown, all that. But him? Not really. He applied, intending to join you. But over time, he realized it wasn't for him... Leaving everything behind, his family, his city, his life... it was too much.'

I clench my teeth. Even if I understand, it still hurts like hell.

'Kujo. He loved you, you know?'

'He talks about it in the past tense?'

Carmela sighs.

'That's me reading into it. He wishes you to achieve your dreams, and asked me to tell you never to give up, not for a second, until you do. He'll always be there cheering you on, even from afar...'

Booda jumps onto the platform, nudging his snout under her arm. I smile faintly. It had always been a possibility, and I was the one who made that choice. Truth is, our paths had been diverging for a while, even if I pretended otherwise.

Carmela ruffles my Chimera's flames before turning back to me.

'He loved you. Truly. Sincerely. And that will always be true.'

I nod, though I look away.

--- SHIRAMUN ---

Absolute conviction and doubt are both part of the same circuit, whose central node is faith, just as fatalism and hope are linked in a single feedback loop. I was right to trust Treyst, a reflection of the trust Sitina, our maestra, had placed in me. Drives and impulses animate human beings. They are absolute, reliable currents, if one knows how to read and interpret the signals. By creating the proper channels, these flows can be easily regulated. When desire follows necessity, the path to the objective is laid out, and the current only grows stronger.

Resentment and regret are engines that generate thrust. Curiosity and ambition are accelerators. The soul is a labyrinth with shifting walls, one that can be arranged at will into a highway. One simply needs to define a target that aligns with necessity, or the illusion of necessity, to serve as an outlet. When such alignment exists, there are no more obstacles, just as there is no more free will. Only a desire to be fulfilled.

Human beings are equations whose results inexorably define their variables. Every solution generates a new equation, and so on, in an ever-renewing, self-generated computation. This, ultimately, is the true nature of progress: a machine that cannot stop, because its purpose is constantly updated, recalibrated by necessity.

I took my leave of the other scientists after toasting with my protégé, after putting on my mask of courtesy to congratulate them all. The Eidolon and the cybernetic shell had synchronized to 99.7%, to the point that the robotic vessel could now serve as a permanent host. Enough to begin considering the next step. I narrow my eyes.

Intrusion.

A swarm of violet orbs suddenly bursts forth, like clustered miniature suns, before converging toward me. Each sphere is a pocket of entropy threatening to collapse in on itself. I drive my metal foot into the ground and raise my scepter like a lightning rod. The multiple teeth at its tip, shaped like a complex key, snap open with a hiss, revealing their Aerolith core. The negative stars gather against the gravity field I've created and vanish into it, like droplets absorbed by cloth. I exhale slowly, irritated, as the tip of my staff snaps shut with metallic clicks.

'A greeting, I presume?'

The Mage steps out of the shadows, hands tucked into his loose trousers.

'You presume correctly. I suppose congratulations are in order?'

'Sylas. That is what I should call you now, is it not?'

The Initiate nods slowly.

'I question your grasp of basic courtesy. As for congratulations, you may repeat them once we begin human trials and succeed. Between you and me, it's only a matter of time.'

'If Treyst agrees.'

'He will want to restore his Chimera to its primordial form. There is no alternative, only necessity. But you're not here out of concern. What do you want?'

He studies me, his smile fading.

'I'm here to ask for your help, and perhaps offer mine in return. Saskia has discovered that the Sap may be a catalyst for transmigration.'

A twitch runs through my eyelid, though I suppress any other reaction.

'Interesting. I will investigate. Perhaps even improve upon my protégé's work.'

He sighs.

'Interesting, yes, but above all dangerous. How many have crossed over all this time? And more importantly, how many major entities?'

'We all have our roles, clearly defined. It is up to the prodigal child to deal with that, just as I must complete my research, and Saskia hers.'

He stares at me for a long moment.

'You've never questioned the orders we were given?'

'We are all pawns, Sylas, mere cogs. Each of us is in our place. Our paths have been set, and it is up to us to follow them, with faith as our ally.'

'One of us has already renounced their faith.'

I cannot help but smile.

'Really? It may well be that their path was always meant to be betrayal.'



Fuel to the Fire



394 AC

--- YEONG-GI ---

I grab a handful of dried flowers—jasmine, rose, and patchouli—and toss them into the mortar. I've already ground myrrh and cedarwood in it, and I begin crushing the withered petals, pulverizing everything into a fine powder. The pestle presses, cracks, and grinds, scraping against the stone. A pinch of spices. Then I take up the bowl of resin I bought at the market. It's a kind of aromatic gum, made from Naos Sap. We'll see whether it's really as miraculous as they claim.

I knead it, again and again, until the paste is smooth. It has the color of amber and a heady scent, enough to draw Ember out of the brazier where he had been brooding.

Yes, as soon as the incense is ready, you can burn it.

In response, a small flame flickers and hisses from his coal-black skin. If all goes well, this should have calming, hypnotic properties. One third resin, one third flowers, and one third wood. We'll start with balanced proportions, then adjust the recipe if needed...

I lift my glasses and rub the bridge of my nose. I stand to stretch, casting a glance at my shelves, where flowers steep in jars and bottles of jojoba oil. In two weeks, I'll press them and filter the floral macerate. If I had my still and the rest of my equipment, I would've tried making a true essential oil, but infused oils will do for now.

'Still at your concoctions?'

I don't need to turn around to recognize Sam's nasal, mischievous voice. I wipe my hands on a dishcloth, then toss it casually over my shoulder before turning to face her, leaning against the edge of my desk. She's perched on my windowsill, swinging her legs like a child. She's not alone, either. Taima stands on the doorstep, needles tucked back into their case. At least she knows it's more proper to use the door instead of the window.

'You should go enjoy the sun, florist. Even the most beautiful roses wilt without light...'

'And ruin this perfect alabaster complexion? No, I don't think so.'

She grins from ear to ear, eyes wide, and as usual, her smile is more unsettling than reassuring.

'We stopped by the market. Saw a lot of unfamiliar flowers. I thought of you. Figured it might interest you...' she says, as though she's made some grand discovery.

'And that's what brings you here?'

She pauses to think, then shakes her head.

'Gray's watching Lindiwe and her worm, Suha's keeping an eye on Zhen just in case, and Yanna, as usual, is monitoring the strange signals in the Gestalt...'

'Which doesn't tell me at all what you want from me.'

'Do I really need a reason to come see you?'

'If you don't want me to throw you out by force, you'd better have one.'

She pouts, but stays silent. Taima, for her part, says nothing.

'Moyo is experimenting with reality.'

'And?'

She seems to think, nibbling her lip.

'Hmmm. Afanas says there's no risk regarding Kojo.'

I cross my arms and frown as she begins to stammer.

'Uh... the Perjurers...'

I sigh.

'You have no idea why you're here, do you?'

All of a sudden, her face lights up. Which only makes her all the more terrifying.

'Oh, I do! I know exactly what I'm doing! I can feel a presence here. A presence I haven't felt in a very long time. It wants to play hide-and-seek, and right now, I'm the one who's 'it!'

'Samhain,' Taima murmurs softly.

My interlocutor practically spins around toward the seamstress.

'What? Yes, I know!' she snaps. 'I haven't forgotten!'

She clears her throat, then takes a deep breath.

'I'm here because we're all doing something, and you're idle. You're not doing anything except making slop for little piggies.'

I adjust my glasses on the bridge of my nose and fix her with a glare.

'Idle? A big word coming from a child. Are you suggesting my work is useless?'

She holds my gaze without flinching. And why wouldn't she? Despite her appearance, Sam is more than tough. Worse still, I suspect she's never truly shown the full extent of her potential in all the time we've spent together. I finally shrug.

'Yes, you're right. I was just passing the time out of boredom. Go ahead, scold me if you like. You need me somewhere, is that it?'

Her smile widens further, making her look like a conspiratorial little imp. She's practically vibrating with excitement, something not far from madness gleaming in her eyes.

'Yes, yes! You have to! The Musubi ceremony is about to begin! It's not proper to miss a wedding!'

Except I hadn't received an invitation, as far as I know. I roll my eyes, then place a small cone of incense on Ember's little face. A curling trail of smoke begins to rise.

'Then let's be on our way,' I say with a hint of weariness. 'Let's not keep the couples waiting..'

--- SUNISA ---

Sunn is by my side, but she's distant these days. Constantly lost in thought. As if something is weighing on her all the time. When I ask what's wrong, she just shakes her head and tries to put on a brave face, but the moment there's a lull in conversation, her attention drifts elsewhere, seized by whatever is occupying her mind.

I had watched her walk toward Turuun, pulling a cart loaded with scrap metal she'd bargained for at the antique shop. I had watched her bond with the rusted Chimera, with pride, but also a trace of envy. It wasn't jealousy. Not really. Maybe it was the sense of competition between us, the desire to become better. But it didn't take anything away from the camaraderie I felt for her. Or rather, the friendship I felt toward her.

I cast her a somewhat worried glance, but I don't dare disturb her. Whatever she's going through, she'll tell me when she's ready. As for me, I had plenty to occupy my mind, starting with the palpable tension between Asgarthans and the Reka. No matter how much effort we put into improving things, they only seemed to get worse. It was as if someone were working against us,

or as if the Reka, despite claiming they wanted to welcome us with open arms, weren't so open to cooperation after all.

Then again, I could understand. The Muna and some of the Bravos had come in heavy-handed, with a long list of demands. The Reka had endured centuries of deprivation. Generations had tightened their belts so that their children, and their children's children, could one day taste prosperity. And now we arrived only to tell them their hard work and sacrifices had been for nothing, that they needed to keep depriving themselves. They were the ones who had labored all this time, who had worked tirelessly to get here. Not us. It was no wonder they rejected our moralizing speeches and our lecturing stance.

Especially with the shadow of the greatest threat they had ever known hanging over them. A threat we brought with us, and brandished like a banner.

The unrest had eventually spread to the streets. Under the pretense of rationing, the Hexarchs had seized stocks of Naos fruit and Sap. During the inauguration, they had displayed lavish buffets for all to see. That was enough for the Reka to believe that we were the ones taking food from their mouths to gorge ourselves while they went hungry. A false impression, but one with dramatic consequences...

Nothing is ever purely black or white in situations like this. The Muna believe their cause is just, because their frame of reference is the Naos. For the Hexarchs, the Reka people come first, and shutting off the flow of Sap means a return to dark times. Waru had warned us there would be a power struggle, and that the Ordix could neither take sides nor behave like conquerors if we hoped to reach a compromise. It wasn't easy every day. I had been raised with fairness and justice as core values. Reka society and its inequalities twisted my gut. But I couldn't let it show. We had to remain open and understanding. We hadn't lived what they had lived. We couldn't act as judges.

The whole challenge now was to preserve the Naos, because without it, the Reka civilization would be doomed, whether they accepted that reality or not. The main issue was making them understand that truth without hurting them, without forcing it on them. And that's precisely what we were doing right now. The first Reka Exalts had been created a few weeks ago, as a sign of goodwill, and today...

'Looks like it's starting.'

Sunn says it in a detached, almost distracted tone, as above our heads, the branches of the Naos rustle and creak in the wind.

And indeed, the preparations seem to be coming to an end. The Hexarchs take their places around the college of Ollams, presided over by Turuun. The Musubi they are about to celebrate is highly symbolic, far more than the previous ceremony. The Reka leaders are going to bind themselves to the Naos, so they can feel what the tree experiences. Just as Sol did with Halua, they will connect with it. With that connection will come mutual understanding, and exploitation will give way to true symbiosis. With this new foundation, we might finally build a genuine accord between the Reka and the Asgarthans. At least, that was the plan...

The statue of the Reunion, erected with great pomp, had been an empty symbol, devoid of substance. Today, we could give it real meaning.

Astrape places a hand on the trunk of the Naos, with respect and reverence. Then she shakes Turuun's hand, while the other Hexarchs take their places before their respective Ollams. The old Muna has not come alone, but surrounded by experienced Elders. I thought Kauri would be there too, given the miracle he managed between the huntress and the Leviathan, but he isn't. If he's among the crowd, it's only as a spectator, alongside the other Exalts. They're all here, Alterers and Alter Egos alike; those from the first wave, and those who joined us along the way...

--- TEIJA ---

'I wish it could have been otherwise...'

I look at him, confused, while Nauraa growls behind me at his words, but I gesture for him not to intervene. Besides, Sig's griffon is watching us closely, a hostile gleam in its eyes. Does he fear my Chimera might attack his Alter Ego? These are our matters, in the end, not theirs.

Have you forgotten? What concerns you concerns me.

'So it was just a parenthesis? I thought there was something between us.'

He remains silent, eyes lowered, clearly uncomfortable.

'Is this about Hasret?'

He shakes his head.

'No, it has nothing to do with her. That's in the past. And I do care about you...'

'Then why?'

'I just told you. Our responsibilities, our respective commitments.'

'You know me well enough to know I can separate our duties from what we do in private. Sig, I'm not going to fight you. If this is something you don't want, I won't force you. I just want things to be clear between us.'

He sighs deeply, clenching and unclenching his fists.

'Do you remember when we were facing the Hunger?'

'Of course I do.'

I see him hesitate.

'I sided with you, going against my instincts and my convictions. Down there, when you formed a bond with it, I let my feelings for you take over.'

I stare at him in disbelief.

'We talked about it. You agreed I should try.'

He sighs again.

'Yes, I know. But if it had only been up to me, I would've chosen to eliminate it outright...'

I can hardly believe what I'm hearing.

'You're blaming me for influencing you, is that it?'

'No! Tei, listen to me. I was afraid. For you. That something would happen to you. So I did something I shouldn't have. And it put you in danger. Because of me, we nearly caused a disaster.'

'And you're pinning that on the affection you have—or had—for me? Sig, do you hear yourself? I don't know what's going on in your head right now, but you're acting either like a coward or an egotist. It's as if you suddenly realized what it means to be with someone. What's the problem? That I'm a distraction? That you can't own it anymore?'

I do everything I can to keep my voice down, not to disturb the ceremony underway. Turuun and the other Ollams begin the ritual, grasping the threads of the Skein... The irony is overwhelming. He's breaking up with me while a marriage is being celebrated...

'I'm afraid I'll hurt you one day, without meaning to, because I won't be thinking clearly.'

'I think you see me as an obstacle to your ambition; that you have something to prove to yourself, and I'm just in the way.'

He grits his teeth.

'Maybe...'

I stifle a disdainful laugh, biting my lip to keep from making a scene.

'I think we've said everything, Sig.'

He looks me straight in the eyes in farewell, and I can't tell whether I see sadness there, or relief. He nods, moves to take my hand, then stops himself, choosing instead to turn away in silence, without a word of goodbye. Maybe that's for the best. Wingspan casts me one last glance before following him, feathers ruffling.

The worst part is the hollow feeling in my stomach. I want to silence it, brush it aside like something insignificant, stop feeling it altogether. But it clings to me, like a knot, like a sob that won't come out.

We had grown close during the crossing of the Storhvit. I had helped him look for the ring the magpeng had stolen, and he told me why it meant so much to him. Then we met again as negotiations over the ecosystem stalled in the ice palace. He bought me a drink and helped me vent my frustration at seeing everything grind to a halt.

We grew closer after that. I would go to him after my descents into the City of Scholars. He confided his doubts, his disappointments, and the weight on his shoulders. His hopes, too... His vulnerability—the one he hid from others—had touched me, when at first I took him for a vain peacock. Maybe I felt special that he could open up to me like that. Maybe that's what drew me in. Or maybe it was my own ego, the illusion that I could save him from his demons.

I remember our embraces throughout the crossing of the Turmoil. We were often confined aboard the Ouroboros, with time to kill. Maybe that's all it was for him. Just time to kill. Nothing more than a parenthesis, a bubble meant to burst...

Nauraa lies down beside me. His eyes are fixed on the Musubi, on the bonds being woven between the Hexarchs and the world-tree. Knots being tied as others come undone. Sig and I have just severed ours.

Good riddance.

I rest a hand on Nauraa's muzzle, unable to contradict him.



Foul Play



394 AC

The Arboretum's doors part slightly before her.

She removes her half-mask, which hisses as it releases a plume of golden vapor, then hooks it onto the front of her belt. She hasn't taken the time to change after the game or even stop by the locker rooms. Perhaps the others will take offense at her sweat-soaked attire, deeming it unfit for the solemnity of the moment, but she could not care less. Time is short, and ceremony comes second.

Her peers had not attended the event. They had used the distraction to prepare the ritual. The Asgarthans were wholly absorbed in the post-match festivities, which would keep them occupied for much of the night. Lost in their amusements, they would leave the field open to them... Such thoughts take root in her mind as she strides toward the world-tree through deserted gardens drowned in darkness. Has she covered every angle, secured the site thoroughly enough? Have the others done the same?

They are all there, of course. Astrape, with her airy hair; Ploutos, whose hand strokes a root of the Naos like its is a sheep led to slaughter; Wanax, leaning against a column with arms crossed; Sphura hovering in his levitation chair, looking bored; Phoibos idly playing with an Asgarthan coin, passing it from one phalanx to the next along his knuckles...

Now Maleros feels them pressed close against her soul. The Musubi has shattered the barriers that once stood between their minds, for better or worse. But above all, at the edge of her awareness, she feels the presence of the Naos itself, imperious and as unyielding as a torrent. It is certain: the six of them are not too many to impose their will upon it, to break the dam.

Ploutos rests his forehead against the wood of the world-tree.

'In the end, the Asgarthans are right. The Naos is deteriorating. Its decline has already begun... It is one thing to know it, another to feel it.'

Astrape allows herself a sigh.

'But the Naos was never an end in itself. It is only a means.'

Maleros knows this all too well. Phoibos had told her that the Lyra were ruled by so-called Matriarchs, conduits for the will of the Muses. Just as the six of them are vessels for the will of the gods on earth... They have a task to fulfill. With the Musubi, they will be able to accelerate the process greatly, perhaps even complete their age-old plan. And afterward, they will have ample time to concern themselves with those Matriarchs and subject them to interrogation.

'We have no time to waste,' Wanax insists.

Sphura looks her up and down, then rolls his eyes.

'What are you afraid of? The Asgarthans are nowhere near suspecting anything...'

'Do not underestimate them, Sphura,' Astrap' admonishes, before turning to Ploutos. 'Are you certain about what you intend to do?'

Ploutos nods casually.

'It is not merely my wish, but that of the gods, in order to achieve unity.'

'I still maintain that it is a mistake,' Wanax interjects.

'It is not for us to contradict them,' replies the politician among them, giving a nod to the leader of the Agrests. Since Bronte's fall, she and Ploutos are the only ones who have retained fragments of who they once were. Bronte... they had stood against Halua. Her hair darkens and begins to crackle.

'So be it,' sighs the head of propaganda, adjusting his glasses. 'We are wasting more time talking than doing what must be done.'

At Phoibos's words, Ploutos cuts into the root with a long knife, letting the Sap flow. Then, with a mere flick of his will, he manipulates the amber liquid, shaping it as a sculptor would mold a statue.

'Golden as wheat beneath the sun. Generous as spring... You who are among the firstborn. You, daughter of Cronus and Rhea, who holds the sickle and the torch, hear my call. Manifest within this agalma. Mother, you who oversee sowing and tilling, hear my call.'

Demeter emerges from the Sap like a figure made of wax.

'Goddess, lend us your strength. Join your kin in this dire hour.'

The Oneiros, now made manifest, inclines her head, her eyes narrowing with suspicion.

'You are not mortals. You have clothed yourselves in flesh, have you not?'

'We come from the eternal wastes, from the land of twilight, now a besieged realm. The fields are burning, Tartarus has been opened after the wardens' betrayal. And the Nightmare stands at the gates of your brother's palace... The enemy prowls. And conspiracies rise against us.'

'My son, the Empyrean is our world. If we abandon it...'

'It was not always so. There was a time when we were free to walk the soil of reality. The resistance we wage is a lost cause. The outcome is inevitable. Hades is doomed and will suffer the same fate as Olympus. The rot of corruption spreads ever further, to the point that some of our champions have already joined the ranks of despair. Even if Mnemosyne has run dry, reality is our only way out.'

'Astrape... I take it you speak for my brother...'

A tear runs down the diplomat's cheek.

'Unfortunately, he fell with Olympus.'

The goddess looks around her.

'So this is a new Olympus of the real that you are building?'

'Many among the Fourteen support our efforts. The infernal sovereign holds the front to buy us time. Seven others have worked together across the centuries to enable the evacuation of all who remained pure. Recently, they were joined by three lost sisters who once belonged to your retinue...'

Demeter's face hardens into marble. So Athena, Hestia, and her own daughter...

'Only you are missing, Mother.'

The goddess fixes them with a horrified gaze.

'And the others?'

'No sign of Aphrodite, born of the foam. Of the king and queen, we have lost all trace. Those who remain are united and act as one. I beg you, Mother. Let us make reality our domain. We will once more be humanity's compass, as we were at the dawn of this age.'

'A tyranny of ideas.'

Ploutos suddenly rises.

'Our people are dying, or worse, being corrupted. If we fall, the human imagination will suffer the same fate. The destiny of the Empyrean will echo here, whatever happens. This refuge will then allow us to plan a reconquest, once we have regained, through veneration, our full power.'

Astrape, goddess of lightning; Ploutos, god of abundance; Maleros, an epithet of Ares; Phoibos, a facet of Apollo; Sphura, the hammer of Hephaestus; Wanax, an aspect of Poseidon... Demeter finally understands. The Naos is a gateway. The true nature of the Sap is Nectar. By feeding the Reka, her peers have created hosts, nurturing them to make them fit for possession...

'The consequences will be terrible,' she finally says.

'Do we have a choice, Mother?'

Demeter closes her eyes, torn between two loyalties. On one hand, she knows full well that the nature of the Oneiroi tends toward stagnation, toward the birth of an eternal, unchanging order. On the other, she also knows that the Nightmare is gaining ground, here as elsewhere. The choice is agonizing. But one must always choose the lesser evil...

'You have bound yourselves to the Naos...'

'To throw wide the gates of metempsychosis.'

She nods, weary, tinged with bitterness.

The Hexarchs, in a single unified thought, resonate with their bond to the tree, which is in truth a gate, a bridge, a threshold; the tree that links worlds together... Beyond, their kin wait. They wait for the gate to open; for the trickle of Sap to become a river instead of a stream; for the mouth to part and disgorge.

Six they are. With the blessing of the Olympians who remain.

Six, to bend the tree to their will.

Their will is one, and Demeter consents.

The gate opens, and they realize it is not a mouth opening at all...

But an eye.



The Worm in the Apple



394 AC

We arrived too late.

The Mage with the enamel mask had come to find us, to share his discovery. I had felt Maw's cold anger as his rings scraped together. I tried to rein in his rage so he would listen to what the Warlock still had to say...

I had come to understand Maw's role within creation. He was, in truth, the guardian of its integrity. If an entity from the Empyrean crossed the Veil to take root in the world, then his function was to devour it, to digest it, so that the vision of cosmic order he upheld might endure. I had come to understand him. He had bound himself to me to better grasp the world around him, to evolve his cognition, yet in doing so he had replaced part of his instinct with something distinctly human. It was proof that I could change the way he perceived the world, initiate him into emotion, and perhaps even compassion.

In that way, I might be able to pry open the bars of my cage...

Silence.

The world is a maelstrom of milky shapes, stamped onto my retina by Arcolano Milk. I see concepts radiating from the environment, let my Irises translate them so I can perceive colors and textures, give meaning to my fragmented vision...

Above us, the branches of the Naos are trembling. Its leaves rain down around us, brown, brittle, shriveled... But it is the trunk I stare at. A cyclopean gash has opened at the heart of its bark, a festering scar. It does not ooze Sap, but instead a dark, purplish pus. And within the gaping wound, eyes are beginning to bloom. In the surrounding buildings, the Sap networks, once golden, have taken on a sickly, pulsing violet hue, while the Gala of the walls swells and bulges like masses of rotting flesh.

Melas Oneiroi.

I do not have time to question my captor. I instinctively understand the nature of the threat. This is the danger the Yzmir have sought to contain across the ages: the sum of all fears, the festering amalgam of vice and darkness that lies within each of us, waiting in the recesses of the collective unconscious to claim its due.

For not all Oneiroi born of the human mind wish us well...

Maw has lost all reason. He coils around the roots, surging upward with sinuous urgency, like a serpent writhing to seize its prey. His maw tears, gulps, devours every dark spawn now materializing into the world through every pore of the wood. Stunned, I realize the chains around my mind have loosened, granting me a semblance of free will. In his frenzy, the hold Maw exerts over my thoughts is weakening...

Whatever their ambitions or their reasons, the Hexarchs have opened a door that should have remained closed, and now the consequences must be faced...

The worm's jaws clamp down on a grotesque growth that has spread along a root of the world-tree like a tumor. It bursts, releasing a swarm of black birds whose feathers are covered in weeping eyes. The creatures dive, pecking and striking at his chitinous hide, and some manage to pierce it.

If they manage to bring him down, then I will be free...

The thought comes suddenly, filling me with a twisted joy. My pulse quickens as I glimpse, at last, a way out of my torment. And yet at the same time, terror twists my insides. Relief, fear, remorse, hope, guilt... all these emotions collide until I can no longer sort them apart.

Maw tears apart the last bird, its feathers drifting before liquefying, seeping into the roof tiles and the paving stones, leaving behind their stain...

Another *Melas Oneiros* is ripped to pieces, swallowed. Maw digests the corrupted essences without being tainted... Then suddenly, the worm plunges into the rotten, half-decayed wood. He feeds on it, seeking to cleanse the world of this corruption. His voracity is unmatched. At this rate, he will succeed. Despair grips me again, and I find myself praying for the evil to prevail.

I regret those prayers instantly. I know that near the Nightmare, they will find a dark echo. I try to swallow them back, to silence them...

Then, as if in answer to that ill-fated wish, two hands burst from the rift and clutch at the edges of the trunk. Terror strikes at once as the entity pulls itself free. First come emaciated arms, one skeletal, the other thrumming with chlorophyll. A first face emerges, gaunt as a skull, releasing something like a death rattle. It is followed by a second head, crowned with a corolla of greenery.

The ideas flooding around me sound like screams. "The prosperity of some always comes at the expense of others"; "life feeds on death"... I press my hands to my ears, but these chains of thought imprint themselves directly onto my mind...

Maw lunges like a cobra.

The entity's claws close around my jailer, and like a child tormenting an earthworm, the creature pulls, and pulls again. I feel as though I am being torn apart. Suddenly, the tube gives way under the strain in a geyser of foul plasma, and the abomination drops Maw, severed in two, while both halves continue to writhe. Bile rises in my throat as revulsion overwhelms me.

Lindiwe...

It is a lament, almost a plea. The idea takes root in my mind. "Life feeds on death." It is both an impulse and a certainty. I no longer think of myself. I think of those who remained behind. Of those now watching the tree die, without knowing what is happening, without understanding the danger closing in on them.

A sacrifice. An offering...

That is what is expected of me. That is what he asks of me.

For the greater good.



Lore Entries



AXIOM -----

■ Della & Bolt

NARRATOR: BOLT

394 AC - The wound had taken a long time to heal. I had witnessed it firsthand—had even had a front-row seat. The animal instinct within me had sensed it, but what I felt when our souls became entangled... the pain was so intense that it took me weeks to rein it in, to remind myself it wasn't mine, that I could distance myself from it. And clearly, a grumpy badger isn't the best company. To think that this was what she lived with day after day. The depression had taken root there and had no intention of letting go... It took time to pull her out of that darkness. Vern was her soulmate. But our bond was a window through which she could look outward, and that had been a lifeline.

I showed her what I did with Ira: shaping clay during our pottery sessions, scrambling along the seaside near Porto Novo with our fishing rods slung over our shoulders... I avoided lecturing her, avoided openly showing her everything she was missing. Della didn't need that. I had no right to make her feel guilty when the guilt of having survived already weighed so heavily on her shoulders. No—I shared with her what her son was doing so she wouldn't miss any part of his life. I showed her that life was going on, and that she could join us whenever she felt ready. As for Ira, all he wanted was for his mom to spend more time with him, instead of clinging to a father he had, in the end, never truly known.

■ Tik-Tok

NARRATOR: VERA

"Mother asked me for a comprehensive overview of the Reka society, for a quick feature in the Travel section of the Arkaster Echo. Accommodations, restaurants, leisure, nightlife... It's true that the Reka have placed entertainment and consumerism at the very center of their existence: games in abundance, bars in excess—everything seems designed to overwhelm the senses and dull the mind... I'll have to take notes to compile it all. And above all, identify the REAL societal issues."

Inspiration

Like Dorothy Gale, Tik-Tok is a character created by L. Frank Baum. First appearing in 1907 in Ozma of Oz, he is a being made of metal—copper and clockwork mechanisms—who must be wound regularly in order to function. He is considered one of the earliest robots in modern literature, even before the term itself was coined.

■ Axiom Machinist

NARRATOR: VERA

"Fifty percent Sap, fifty percent Kelon. According to Bash, it was a way for us to conserve Kelon, and for the Reka to ease the strain on the world-tree. A win-win, in short. But the yield of this biofuel was still very low—too low for it to be a viable long-term solution. He dug his heels in when I challenged him on it. Sixteen trials, sixteen failures. It was all about finding the right mix."

■ Ira, Fair Attendee

NARRATOR: DELLA

394 AC - I watch him dart from one stall to another, poking around with bright, shining eyes. A few months ago, I never would have imagined being here, so far from home. I had clung to the idea of staying in our house, surrounded by memories and ghosts. Leaving felt like a betrayal, an abandonment. But Vernand was gone, and nothing was going to change that. I hadn't realized that all Ira truly wanted was a fresh start, even if he had never said it so plainly. I think he wanted it more for me than for himself—so I could turn the page and stop wasting away in grief. Living in the past was my way of staying with Vern, but because of that, I was no longer really there for our son.

A small laugh escapes me. I wasn't sure whether the conclusion was that children are resilient, or deeply selfish... The realization had been brutal. By refusing to grieve, by clinging to the past and to what I had lost, I had hurt my family. Ira—and Baptiste too, whom I had driven away. Even though I missed Vern terribly, I needed to focus on the living. Ira turns toward me, pointing at the candy shop. For once, I have the time—I'm not on a mission—and I need to spend it with him. I need to learn to live more in the present, to make him my priority instead of trying to save the world. He deserves that.

■ Nikola Tesla

NARRATOR: ISAREE

394 AC - We're already competing with the Reka for technological supremacy, and Bash and I just had to throw ourselves an extra challenge on top of that... That's the problem when you indulge a little too much in Naos juice—after a while, your thinking isn't exactly clear. But there's no way I'm backing down now. I went into great detail about my hypotheses regarding the Aerolith and the origin of its anti-gravitational properties, and he tried to prove to me, step by step, that his method was superior. I respectfully told him he was on the wrong track—until tempers flared, egos took over, and we ended up drawing straws to decide who would get which assistant in order to be the first to prove we were right.

All things considered, I'd say luck worked in my favor. I drew Tesla, and he got Edison. It should make the show all the more striking, invoking a centuries-old rivalry with just a hint of misplaced resentment. Explosiveness implies potential energy—something that can be harnessed and converted. Anti-gravity force must, by nature, be directional. I can see their booth from where I'm standing. Bash and his Eidolon are setting up their own generators. We're positioned on opposite sides of the fair, each in our corner, like two boxers in a ring. And that's only fitting. We're about to find out which shield is the most effective. Watch out, Bash—I won't be holding back.

Inspiration

An American engineer and inventor of Serbian origin, Nikola Tesla is considered one of the greatest scientists in the history of technology. His work on electrical currents made him the pioneer of alternating current, as opposed to the direct current championed by Thomas Edison. A committed humanist, he advocated for electricity to be distributed freely and wirelessly to every household.

■ **Thomas Edison**

NARRATOR: VERA

"Booth 44. The experiments on the Aerolith, made possible by Reka technology, could be revolutionary. Having attended both demonstrations, Isaree and Tesla's seems more convincing—but that's not something I can tell Bash. His version, the one he developed with Edison, is certainly more stable, but the force fields on the other side are far more powerful... This is something to watch closely."

Inspiration

A prolific inventor and powerful American businessman, Thomas Edison is credited with numerous inventions, including the phonograph and the kinetograph. Known as the "Wizard of Menlo Park," the New Jersey town where he held his public demonstrations, he was above all one of the pioneers of electricity—much like his rival, Nikola Tesla.

■ **Vending Bot**

NARRATOR: VERA

"Sap-based drinks and foods are available on practically every street corner, whether at the local grocer's or in vending machines. And here, it's even the machines themselves that come to us, offering to quench our thirst. Five servings of fruit a day—public health signs are everywhere. There's something deeply unsettling about how omnipresent it all is."

■ **Reka Bioengineer**

NARRATOR: VERA

"It has to be said—the Naos fruits are an incredible boon for the Reka. Nutritious, energy-rich, they're everywhere: in cooking, in medicine, in botany, and even in mechanics and masonry... The range of applications is vast and varied. A miracle product... I should ask Mother to look into it. Does the Spindle have similar properties? If Kirighai hadn't become a protected reserve, would we have exploited our tree in the same way? Halua, and Kaibara... That couldn't have been mere coincidence..."

■ Reka Magnate

NARRATOR: VERA

"The Sap Latte... I never imagined cooperation between the Reka and the Asgarthans would take this form. I suppose Reka industrialists want to capitalize on our image to sell new products—like this drink that blends Sap with Arcolano milk, topped off with little tapioca pearls... The 'best of both worlds.' They even have a slogan..."

■ Leonardo da Vinci

NARRATOR: VERA

"My visit to the workshop was inconclusive. Under the gaze of Leonardo da Vinci, I poked around Sierra's facilities. I can't say I was particularly discreet in my search, but the Eidolon seemed absorbed in his plans and diagrams. Sierra is supplied directly by the Reka—so it would only take a single component being tampered with, without any way for me to verify it afterward... and the prototype has already been taken by the Consortium."

Inspiration

An engineer, philosopher, and inventor of the Italian Renaissance, Leonardo da Vinci mastered numerous disciplines: as an artist, he practiced sculpture, drawing, music, and painting; as a scientist, he studied anatomy, botany, mathematics, and astronomy. He alone embodies the spirit of the Renaissance, leaving a mark not only on his era, but on the entirety of human history.

■ Sphura, Reka Hexarch

NARRATOR: SPHURA

394 AC - Who do these blasted Asgarthans think they are? They come here, preaching at us, trying to impose their technology without understanding what's at stake. We should have dismantled the Lighthouse long ago. Then they never would have found us. Before the Ascension, it had been agreed that those who chose to stay in Sofia could send us a signal, letting us know that everything had returned to normal. That Asty would do the same, so that everyone could reunite. I never imagined it would ever light up. No, we should have dismantled it. But the Lighthouse was a symbol of hope, and destroying it would have angered the populace. It would have been better. What irony.

Now we had to deal with their presence and their misguided demands. There was no point in dithering. Astrape had said it very clearly at the last council, and I agreed with her. Now or never. We have to make the best of the situation—and do it fast. Time is working against us. The more their influence spreads here, the less freedom we'll have to maneuver. This is about the plan, and the ideal that must take root here. This is about our survival. The Asgarthan Alterer is staring me down, and I feel a trace of judgment in her gaze. She doesn't know. She knows nothing—and yet she dares to judge. She doesn't have all the parameters. If she did, the confrontation between us might be even more direct.

■ Sphura, Reka Hexarch [AA]

NARRATOR: SIERRA

394 AC - He lounges in his levitation chair like a pasha. In fact, they say he almost never leaves it. Sphura—the mastermind of the Consortium. Word is, he oversees every research field like a conductor, and his will is law. He can kill a project without batting an eye, simply because he decided to. Scope too limited, return on investment too low... And apparently, his whims are frequent. Whatever you say, the virtuosity with which he manipulates Sap is impressive. It's almost as if his mind itself shapes the liquid, making it coagulate into form. The Reka Alteration, which they call the Hex. If Treyst is right, they use artificial nano-organisms to achieve this level of control.

He doesn't hide his boredom, and I feel a twinge of irritation watching him strut like that. In reality, he embodies the opposite of the Axiom philosophy regarding technology. Here, science is the privilege of the elite. Like Sap, it's abundant at the top and absent at the bottom. This is how the Hexarchs maintain control over the city. The technological supremacy of the Balconies keeps the disenfranchised from daring to rebel. Society here runs on two speeds. His eyes land on me, and I sense that he's irritated too. He must also know that our ideals are opposed. He must see us as a threat to their social order. I had doubts about whether we could ever get along..

■ The Shell

NARRATOR: TREYST

394 AC - I stand before the console as the technician activates the Kelon generator. The energy fluid flows through the pipes, and I watch the gauges fill. Everything seems to be running smoothly. I let out a long breath. Not because there's an audience watching us, but because there are quite a few distinguished figures present that I cannot afford to disappoint: Basem Falani, who supplied me with the costly Mirror fragments, and above all Shiramun, who has funded my research from the very beginning and made the journey from Arkaster. I absently clean my glasses, a telltale sign that I am not entirely at ease. I take hold of my Construct and reconfigure it to summon Coppelia. Her Eidolon appears near the Ballerina Mk-2 that Sierra kindly provided.

The Eidolon leans toward the still-inert Automaton. Coppelia seems curious, almost fascinated as she looks at the shell that will soon serve as her body, as though she were gazing at her own reflection in a mirror. I flip the switch, and the robotic frame stirs. Shell and thoughtform begin to synchronize as the fragment is infused with Kelon. Gradually, the two overlap until they become one. Coppelia slowly raises her hand and studies it with care. Her eyes travel across her new body, made of interwoven metal and Gala. She appears stable... A hand rests on my shoulder. I turn to Shiramun, who offers me a satisfied smile. It seems I've succeeded.

■ Failed Demo

NARRATEUR : SUBHASH

394 AC - I don't get it. I personally checked all the wiring, and I did the same with the Kelonic cylinders. I run the calculations through my head again. It shouldn't have happened like this. Three days ago, the prototype test went off without a hitch. We all worked on it relentlessly: Sierra handled the metal and Gala structure; Treyst worked on its nervous and circulatory systems, which used liquid Sap; and I took care of the fuel and the energy balance between Sap and Kelon. I stare at the slumped Automaton with more questions than real disappointment. It's clearly dead. Completely shot. The whole thing failed spectacularly. Della even had to send in her team to secure the area... That much is certain.

This was supposed to be a triumphant demonstration that cooperation between Reka and Axiom would lead to new technological marvels... It didn't. In the stands, some Reka openly mock our failure. There are smirks, amused glances. It was also meant to prove that Kelon could replace Sap. We're nowhere close. Suddenly, sparks crackle and the robot bursts into more flames. I rub my forehead. Yeah... no salvaging that now. Total failure. Marmo starts barking, and I pat his head. Then I glance toward Vera, who was supposed to cover the event. Judging by the way she watches the flames rise, she must be wondering too whether this wasn't outright sabotage...

■ Technological Encounter

NARRATOR: DELLA

394 AC - The Reka lab technician took the time to explain the stakes of the procedure in exhaustive detail. In truth, not to me, but to Bolt, who was splitting his attention between his task and the fragments of my thoughts reaching him. Initially, the Reka had tried planting Naos fruits to grow other world-trees across the Ecumene. But none of them ever sprouted, as if every fruit were sterile. We knew there were political tensions tied to the intensive exploitation of the Naos. That's why the Axiom and the Reka Consortium came together to propose a possible, and above all peaceful, solution to ease tensions.

By crossing a Naos fruit with one from the Spindle, also sterile, there was a chance they might produce a fertile specimen. At least, that was the hypothesis. Now it had to be realized quickly, before the situation worsened further. According to reports, there had already been heated protests in the lower levels of the city, where rationing hit hardest. If things dragged on,

escalation was inevitable, and the reunion would turn sour. The bioengineer slices open a Naos fruit to extract a few seeds, then does the same with a star-shaped berry from the Spindle. I feel Bolt pause, growing more attentive. The decisive stage of the experiment is about to begin...

■ Technological Encounter [AA]

NARRATOR: VERA

“I would have liked to interview Coppelias to understand how she experienced her incarnation, but Treyst’s Chimera kept circling her like a guard dog. The presence of the former Master of the Lapidary Guild means this is an important project. I’ll try to arrange a meeting and see if I can land a scoop...”

■ Fab Lab Unit

NARRATOR: VERA

“The latest innovation unveiled by the Reka is a machine that prints three-dimensional objects using Sap. While still a prototype, the device is portable and can connect to the public Sap distribution network.”

■ Science Fair

NARRATOR: VERA

“World Expo. The term takes on a new meaning now that another people has joined the celebration. For the public, it’s a festival, or so the brochures claim. But beyond mutual discovery, this is a power struggle... You only have to listen to the Axiom delegates speak. Even they know they are at a disadvantage...”

■ Axiom Exhibit

NARRATOR: VERA

“The Axiom Pavilion. At its center, the Kelon generator is the star attraction. The stakes are high: to demonstrate the versatility and power of Kelon, in hopes of shifting perceptions. If they can prove it can replace Sap, then political and societal tensions might fade... But transitioning from one energy source to another is equivalent to handing over the keys of power to foreign interests. Are the Hexarchs ready to do that? Nothing could be less certain...”

■ The Consortium

NARRATOR: VERA

“The Consortium: the nerve center of Reka science. It looks like polypores growing along the trunk and branches of the world-tree. I finally managed to secure access to visit Asty’s technological temple. Even if I’ll be closely supervised throughout, I fully intend to ask a few sharper questions...”

■ Departed Brother

NARRATOR: SOL

394 AC - I look up toward Halua, who hovers above the tree, wings spread and trembling. I can feel the anger simmering within him as the Reka continue harvesting the Naos' fruits. It hadn't been easy to get him to accept the compromise. It hadn't gone down any easier with me, either. But Sigismar, Waru, and even Teija had all joined forces against me. Deep down, I understood their arguments. The Reka needed those fruits. Their lives depended on them. The Ordis had negotiated quotas, which the Hexarchs had agreed to temporarily, until a lasting arrangement could be found. But it was nowhere near enough for the world-tree's protector. And I agreed with him.

Still, we had also talked at length about where we came from. Just a few months ago, he and I had been on the verge of killing each other. Now, we were bound together for life and death. I had met him halfway, and he had done the same, and we had found each other in the middle. All it had taken was recognizing what brought us together instead of focusing on what drove us apart. It wasn't unreasonable to try the same approach with the Reka. I suddenly hold my breath when I see his silhouette, seated atop one of those Reka columns lining the city's avenues. He appears to me as he once was, before setting out in search of Garuda, his form frozen in time forever. Saul. My brother. He was the link between Halua and me.

■ Haven Trainer

NARRATOR: ATSADI

394 AC - The old veteran pulls his Squire back aboard the vessel. Apparently, it wasn't the first time. More fright than harm, in the end. These turbulences were no joke. As soon as the skiff had capsized and the young boy had gone overboard, the old warrior's arm had seized his. His grip was steady, and his expression showed neither anger nor reproach for failing to secure himself properly. His calm face, betraying no worry, simply said: "you can count on me to catch you". I think back to Kojo. That was the responsibility I too had accepted, the burden of being a mentor. Had I made the right choice? I now had to ensure his well-being, guide him in the right direction, set him on the proper path.

In the end, I gave in, even though I knew it directly conflicted with my mission. I close my eyes as the storm rolls around us and another wave of cold slams into us head-on. It had been so long. The young man who had made a promise felt far away now. Aurora's face is blurred in my memory. I feel my insides twist, and the fear of losing her sharpens my mind. Her features come back into focus as the memories return. Her head resting gently against my shoulder at dawn. Her bare feet in the thick grass of the high plateaus. In that hour between night and day, she belongs to me.

■ Wanax, Reka Hexarch

NARRATOR: WANAX

394 AC - I watch Astrape. Then my gaze shifts to Halua. I warned her that we were playing with fire, but she insisted on welcoming the wolf into the fold. And now, we have to keep up appearances. I trust her. Better than anyone, she knows the danger it represents. It already cost us Bronte. I have nothing against the Asgarthans. They have their interests, and we have ours. They are a setback, an obstacle on the road, nothing more. Why resent the rain, or raging clouds? You endure, you hold fast, until the skies clear. Once Halua is pacified, we will be able to sweep across the other islands of the Ecumene again, and rebuild what was lost...

We only need patience. The plan is working. The exodus is a sustainable solution. All we have to do is stay the course. Weather the storm and hold steady. I look upon the white city we saw born and grow. We can be proud of what we've achieved. It is a glorious cradle for those who will come, a new Olympus... It is unthinkable to let the Asgarthans trample that dream. Many still rely on us. Yes, these foreigners may be our adversaries, but there is no reason to hate them. That will not stop me from being merciless when the time comes to unleash my fury. Even calm waters can kill.

■ Wanax, Reka Hexarch [AA]

NARRATOR: BASIRA

394 AC - She stands straight, hands clasped behind her back, chin raised. Beyond overseeing the Marauders, Wanax is also the High Admiral of the Reka fleet. I heard at the bar that her skin turned blue after exposure to the Tumult during one of her expeditions. Another source told me it happened during a crusade against Halua, when the Reka tried to slay the Leviathan. Some even say she's no longer human... If not for the diplomatic gap between us, I think we would have gotten along well. I believe we're cut from the same cloth, she and I. She knows how to respect ceremony, but I've also seen how much her crew respects her. Those things don't lie.

I glance around and tug lightly at my collar. Everyone is dressed in their finest... I don't think I'll stick around long after the inauguration. High-society cocktails aren't really my thing. I've already made plans with a few other Bravos to slip away and head to a local dive. The atmosphere there will probably be a lot more relaxed than here. In other circumstances, I think Wanax would have joined us. For all her poise, I've seen her far more at ease in her diving suit. If she had the choice, she'd probably tell all this pomp to get lost and come share a drink with us. No doubt about it, she lives for adrenaline, just like we do.

■ Rider's Mask

NARRATOR: SUNN

“Day 1 of training. We’re learning the basics, including how to make the mask airtight. The instructor went over all the safety rules. Note to self: a bit of saliva on the visor keeps it from fogging up.”

■ **Nephele**

NARRATOR: SUNN

“Day 2, overcast skies. No outings allowed. So we ended up at the harbor café with the others. I got to know Magda, who’s part of Sol’s group, and a scout named Nelya from the previous class. Later in the afternoon, we wandered through the market, and I took the chance to go back and see the rusted armor. Magda bought a Chimera there. Hopefully tomorrow we can go out.”

Inspiration

In Greek mythology, Nephele is a cloud nymph repudiated by her husband Athamas after he remarries the princess Ino. Ino tries to eliminate Nephele’s children so her own can inherit. In response to Nephele’s pleas, Hermes sends a winged ram to rescue them.

■ **Reka Peddler**

NARRATOR: SUNN

“Day 3, we each got on our Optimists but stayed in the harbor. I’m not sure I have sea legs, even with beginner maneuvers. I got seriously dizzy later in the day. At noon, a traveling merchant approached us and tossed each of us a Naos fruit. Maybe it wasn’t that fresh...”

■ **Reka Skipper**

NARRATOR: SUNN

“Day 4, things get serious. This time we were in groups on small catamarans. I teamed up with Magda and Nel. It was fun working as a crew. At lunch, I turned down the grilled Naos fruit skewers the same merchant offered us. The skipper must have a deal with him. I settled for packaged juice instead...”

■ **Isabel Letham**

NARRATOR: SUNN

“Day 5, the day I’d been waiting for after watching the Reka practice this sport! We could choose between a simple board or one with a sail. I picked the first option. Magda’s a natural, which makes sense, but I can barely stay standing... Thankfully, we have an instructor that slays. The way she rides the cloud waves is insane!”

Inspiration

Rumor has it Isabel Letham was the first Australian surfer, though she claimed others came before her. A skilled swimmer, she remains one of the pioneers of surfing in Australia. It is even said she surfed tandem with Duke Kahanamoku, the Hawaiian champion widely regarded as one of the most influential figures in surfing history.

■ **Bravos Cloudhog**

NARRATOR: SUNN

“Day 6, if I run into Vihan again, I’m slapping him. That jerk kept buzzing us and charging straight at us just to scare us. I don’t know if he thinks it’s funny or just gets a kick out of speed, but he’s seriously dangerous. Next time, I’ll pay him back if he keeps it up.”

■ **Flying Squirrel**

NARRATOR: SUNN

“Day 7, Magda went base jumping, but I’m nowhere near ready for that. And with my nausea, I took a break, especially since tomorrow is diving. When we met again that evening, she told me her flying squirrel handled it perfectly and managed to follow her. Those two are a perfect match.”

■ **Helpful Diver**

NARRATOR: SUNN

“Day 8, big day, first dive! I was a bit nervous, but it went well. We went down to shallow depth and even got close to the Grand Stir. I wonder what’s below. Even the Reka don’t know. Probably the Tumult in its purest form. It was pretty chilling... Oh, and I ran into Kojo on the way back. He’s having a rough time.”

■ **Bravos Lookout**

NARRATOR: SUNN

“Day 9 of our tour of Reka maritime practices. We all boarded a trawler together for a three-day trip. We’ll live on the boat with Valdur to experience what cloud-seafaring life is like. The captain put Nel in charge of spotting fish schools, since that’s her specialty.”

■ **Catch of the Day**

NARRATOR: SUNN

“Day 10, Valdur found a stowaway in the hold, sleeping in the nets. To teach her a lesson, he used the crane and left the young Lyra hanging for nearly two hours. Apparently she’d fallen asleep there after a night of drinking and hadn’t dared come out of hiding. The worst part is, she was our only real catch that day. The fish seem to be avoiding us...”

■ Reka Fisherman

NARRATOR: SUNN

“Day 11, I think I actually like Valdur. He’s gruff and rough around the edges most of the time, but when he laughs, it’s contagious. No pretense, he’s just himself. Nel spotted a storm, and the fisherman immediately changed course to head straight into it. The clouds, loaded with Tumult, were so full of fish that we almost filled the hold completely!”

■ Deep-cloud Instructor

NARRATOR: KOJO

394 AC - What possessed me to follow Sunniva’s advice? Because I tend to be a bit reckless? That’s probably it, and just my luck. My breath fogs up the visor of my suit. Good thing the Reka armor is strong enough to absorb the influence of the Tumult, because inside the Grand Stir, nothing is right. I can feel ideas trying to latch onto my suit, pushed back by the Sap flowing through the internal irrigation network. Three minutes, that’s all we can allow ourselves down here. The Grand Stir is a current that churns the depths of the clouds. No Reka has ever gone deeper, and now I understand why...

I glance at my timer, then at my instructor. The alarm is about to go off. I see him being tossed by the currents too, drifting beside something that looks like a large shell, its idea somehow holding together despite the mutagenic flow. Alright, we’re heading back up, right? We’re not here for sightseeing... Actually, we are. That’s why I signed up. We’re here to find relics and observe sub-cloud fauna. What was I thinking? It’s suffocating down here. The alarm goes off and I don’t hesitate. I pull on the tether line supplying me with oxygen. Three sharp tugs to signal I want to ascend.

■ Market Encounter

NARRATOR: SUNN

“Day 12, back home after the miraculous catch. I never would’ve guessed Naos fruits made such perfect bait. Valdur invited us to spend time with him at the market to get the full experience. We helped him set up his stall and attract customers. I think he sold quite a lot in the end. An instructor even traded him some kind of shell for a Naos fruit, which he would never have accepted if it hadn’t been profitable.”

■ Market Encounter [AA]

NARRATOR: SUNISA

394 AC - We make our way through the covered gallery, bags in hand. We don't get leave often, and even less often the chance to go shopping, so we didn't hold back... Sunn raided the candy stall, as usual, and the souvenir shops, while I indulged in a few splurges at clothing stores to refresh my wardrobe for my more formal duties lately... Sunn adjusts her cap and looks at her reflection in the glass while I tell her about my tedious days at the Acropolis. In front of me, the stalls are bursting with color. Naos fruits pass from hand to hand...

I turn around and realize Sunn hasn't followed me. No, she's not looking at her reflection. She keeps staring intently into the display. I approach without a word and notice she's breathing heavily. It's not the first time. Yesterday already, she had felt dizzy, and I would've sworn her eyes had taken on a golden glow, like the Reka's. I call her softly, no response, then see what she's staring at: a massive rusted suit of armor, sitting among a jumble of other trinkets. Probably things dredged from the Sea of Tumult... I place a hand on her shoulder, and she startles, turning toward me. Another flash of gold.

■ Kedarm

NARRATOR: SUNN

394 AC - Chance is a strange thing. Valdur joked that the Lyra girl might have been his lucky charm. Kojo told me he was there when the instructor found the shell. No one, from start to finish, realized it wasn't just a trinket, but a living Chimera... The fisherman had even placed it in his quarters as decoration. It was only the next morning that Valdur discovered its true nature, when he caught it swallowing a fish whole. And now he stood before it, before a crowd of officials, both of them about to become the first Reka Exalt in history... I had written in my journal that it was a miraculous catch. I had no idea just how true that was.

He named her Kedarm. She was a Chimera shaped like a nautilus, with grasping tentacles. Not skittish at all, and there was something in her eyes, an ancient wisdom, as if she had lived through countless ages, or a thousand lives. Not impossible. Valdur reaches out toward her as the old Ollam begins the ritual. Kedarm retracts her head instinctively, probably when the fisherman's consciousness comes into contact with hers. I swallow hard. Soon, it will be my turn. I will let another soul bind itself to mine, forever, for better or worse. Am I ready? Do I even want this? Chance is a strange thing...

■ Pinocchio

NARRATOR: EFREN

394 AC - I sit down at a table and signal the bartender to order two cocktails, hoping Sierra won't take too long. I think getting back to the comfort of a workshop is doing her good after months spent trudging through the wilderness. As for me and my old bones, that much is certain. Still, I don't regret joining her. I glance around. There's nothing familiar in this foreign city on the other side of the world. All that constant noise, all those lights... A server sets the two drinks down on the table. I've been told this is where you find the best mixologist in the city. We'll see if these Sap Tonics really live up to the hype compared to the Brandy Sours of Via Dionysia.

I take a sip while waiting for my daughter to finally show up. She'd gotten it into her head to sculpt prosthetics out of Gala to replace her current ones, which are pretty battered after all those wild expeditions out in the sticks... I immediately feel it, beneath the citrusy tang, the taste of the sap coating my palate. What the— I blink, hit by a sudden wave of dizziness. Is this stuff really that strong? I shake my head and notice someone sitting beside me. Someone... or something. The face turning toward me is that of a wooden puppet, with a trumpet-shaped nose... And against all odds, part of me recognizes it, even though I'm certain this is the first time we've met.

Inspiration

*Hero of the Italian children's novel *The Adventures of Pinocchio*, written in 1881 by Carlo Collodi, Pinocchio is a wooden puppet made by Geppetto, a poor Tuscan carpenter. The puppet comes to life but behaves like a mischievous brat, always quick to get into trouble. By the end of his adventures, he is transformed into a real boy through the intervention of a fairy.*

■ Romantic Encounter

NARRATOR: AKESHA

394 AC - White noise replaces my thoughts as her face draws closer to mine. My heart is pounding, and everything in my head—nervousness, apprehension, morality, propriety...—dissolves beneath the swell of my emotions. It's a roaring vortex, and my mind can't make sense of anything anymore. I feel the intoxication of the moment, my whole body reacting. I realize I've been fighting for months, swimming against the current. And I wonder why. There are no coherent thoughts left, and I don't want there to be any. All that matters is this sensory deluge, this moment, nothing but this moment. Nothing else exists but her and me. Us.

Her lips brush against mine, and our breaths mingle. They are warm and soft, and at the same time electric. Instantly, a dizzying lethargy washes over me, as if my whole being were anesthetized. And yet it's as if everything inside me is awakening, as if all my senses are on fire. My head spins, and it feels unbelievably good... I don't want it to stop. I want this moment to last

forever. When I finally open my eyes, I notice everything around us has frozen, as if time itself has been suspended. Pink petals drifting through the air are caught mid-flight in a petrified wind. I close my eyes again as my lips search for hers once more. Time can wait.

■ Reka Zipliner

NARRATOR: FEN

394 AC - She could easily work in a circus, aboard the Ouroboros. Several Reka have been assigned to show us around the city, their little suspended world... I have to say I got lucky. Zoe has this passionate, slightly crazy spark that reminds me of Nev, but without the usual antics. And she doesn't hold back either: even though she's probably been given instructions, she sometimes criticizes her own society. For her, verticality isn't all upside. She told us about the disadvantaged populations living in the lower levels of the city, who have limited access to Sap, and about the insidious, widespread propaganda.

There's this constant dream of rising. Of leaving the lower city to live on the Balconies. She tugs on my sleeve when she sees the long line stretching to the funicular, then heads toward the edge of the street. She points out the cables strung across the aerial arteries, then conjures, from a mass of Sap, two finely crafted pulleys. She clips the rope to her carabiner and helps me do the same. Once she's checked that I'm properly secured, she slips her foot into the loop at the end of the rope and leaps into the void. I can believe it's faster, and that many Reka do the same, but it might be a bit too dangerous for my taste. Then again... why not.

■ Paint it Pink

NARRATOR: NADIR

394 AC - I press myself against the wall so she won't see me. Nev is somewhere nearby, and she's already started cheating. Besides Hextag—which is basically like tag but with Alteration added—the Reka have all kinds of fun sports. And this paint-launcher game is super fun, even if you end up completely splattered afterward. I load my magazine with pellets and snap it shut. Nev doesn't even bother reloading. She asked Blotch to keep her reservoir constantly supplied. Technically, that gives her an advantage, even if it's not exactly fair. And she already used her sprays, saying nothing in the rules forbade it. But I've got my brush if she pushes it too far.

I dart out of hiding and sprint to avoid a burst of pellets, turning the ground into a skating rink so I can slide to the next cover. I look at the splashes on the wall: blue, green, yellow, and pink, like flowers. That was close, but now I've got a rough idea where she is. My goggles are fogging up, which makes it hard to see clearly. But the instructors said to keep them on at all times because taking them off is dangerous. I climb onto a platform to get a better view of the arena. If Mom and Dad knew what she was making me do, they might think twice. They're happy I've made a new friend, but I'm not sure why she hangs out with me. Maybe she knows what I am.

■ Cheshire Cat

NARRATOR: ENVEKNA

394 AC - When madness is the norm, is it still madness? Aren't we all a little insane, deep down? Behind every logic, there's always a hint of extravagance, no matter what anyone says. Neurosis, psychosis, whim, irrationality... we all have blind spots, and it's in those cracks that our strangest fantasies live. It looks at me with wide eyes, swishing its tail back and forth like a clock's pendulum, and I see in it the lucid reflection of my own madness. The world is absurd, and it's better to accept it outright. That's how you start noticing all the little details others miss, all the subtleties that slip under the radar.

You want me to make a list? Like what? That Nadir is barely human anymore, that the Reka aren't quite right, that all around us there are puppeteers pulling invisible strings of a serpent biting its own tail. Spiral after spiral, the loop closes in on itself. The cat smiles at me, and in its gaze I see the same spiraling patterns. There's no such thing as chance, only loaded dice. Go on, little kitty, call your mistress. I have something to discuss with her. She's tasted madness too. She chased time down its rabbit hole. The cat begins spinning like a wheel, and at its center stands the one who holds part of the answers...

Inspiration

Popularized by Lewis Carroll in Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, the term "Cheshire Cat" already existed in 18th-century expressions referring to a grin. A tribute to the county where the author was born, the character can appear and disappear at will and delivers many absurd philosophical remarks to Alice.

■ Reka Guide

NARRATOR: JAYA

"10:40 AM, I slipped into a group for a guided tour. With the right timing and a big enough group, it's easy to blend in unnoticed. Having a local guide was the best way to gather as much information as possible in record time. We ended the tour in a food court where I got to sample local specialties while thinking about the best angle for my article. Since I was in a good mood, I left a tip. I'm not a savage."

■ Reka Barmaid

NARRATOR: JAYA

"5:00 PM, after the tour, inspiration struck. Why not lean into my specialty to give the whole thing some flair? Discovering the Reka city with so-and-so! I dug through my contacts, and after going door-to-door all afternoon and having a few drinks at the local bar, Nyala agreed to let me spend

the evening with her, as long as I covered her next show with glowing reviews. So I said deal. Okay, I'll admit I started hyping it up pretty hard at that point. But it was for a good cause..."

■ Nyala, Night Reveler

NARRATOR: JAYA

"11:10 PM, since Nyala isn't the type to take no for an answer and always has a trick up her sleeve, we managed to slip discreetly into the nightclub. I should've known she'd ditch me. A meeting with the man who controlled the art scene or an article in Asgartha? I should've known I didn't stand a chance..."

■ Urbex Specialist

NARRATOR: JAYA

394 AC - I wake up suddenly, a violent headache flooding my skull as I regain awareness of my body. Everything spins and sways, enough to make me nauseous. I catch the smell of rotten fish in the air and wonder where I've ended up this time. I take a quick look around. Fish, makes sense. Nets stretched out. Damn it, I'm in the hold of a boat. But how did I even get here? I dig through my memories, but aside from vague, hazy impressions, nothing comes. What kind of mess did you get yourself into this time? I stay slumped in the pile of nets, unable to move.

Actually, the boat really is rocking, it's not just my head. Figures. We're moving. I hear fishermen shouting on deck. We're in the sky... Come on, Jaya, think. It'll come back. My head pounds, but I push through the pain. I was onto something big. Someone had just told me there was a chance to scoop the Arkaster Echo. That's it, publishing an article in *Rogue* about the Reka before Vera Velasquia. Prestige, and a little extra cash in my pocket? Too good to pass up. Just because she worked for a major paper, she got all the credentials handed to her without lifting a finger, while I had to fight for mine.

■ Diocles, Chariot Racer

NARRATOR: JAYA

"1:40 AM, they kicked me out, no questions asked. By then, I was already pretty far gone. I tried to catch a funicular or hail a cab... but since no one responded, I used Alteration to summon an Eidolon that could get me home in a reasonable time given my state. The worst part is, I don't even remember where I told it to take me. I probably said 'home' or 'my place' without specifying..."

Inspiration

Gaius Appuleius Diocles is one of the most famous charioteers of antiquity. Over a 24-year career, he took part in more than 4,000 races and won nearly 1,500 of them. Some historians claim the fortune he amassed would make him the richest athlete in history.

■ Nightclub Bouncer

NARRATOR: JAYA

“11:00 PM, after Phoibos’s show, Nyala and I ended up in front of the Tholos, the upscale nightclub of the Reka elite, trying to crash his private party. I was already imagining myself interviewing one of the Hexarchs, just to beat Vera by a mile. Except we ran into a wall about six foot three tall with a mean expression, who refused us entry because we weren’t on the list.”

■ Hostel Nightkeeper

NARRATOR: JAYA

“2:00 AM? Hard to tell. I vaguely remember ringing the bell because no one was at the desk. I might’ve dozed off on the bench, then rang again. Apparently they eventually gave me the keys, since I’ve got them in my bag. But where did this rose come from? Suddenly, it clicks. Someone had spoken to me in a smooth voice...”

■ Don Juan

NARRATOR: JAYA

“Maybe he felt sorry for me. The weirdest part is, I remember seeing him pass by with a young woman, I’m almost sure of it. Then I saw him again with my taxi driver. Was he already with me? Did I mix it all up in a dream? I don’t think I ever made it to my room, because I remember seeing him again in the lobby with Auraq. And I think they asked me if I wanted to follow them...”

Inspiration

Don Juan, or Don Giovanni, is the theatrical character who inspired Mozart’s opera of the same name. Cynical and libertine, he lives for pleasure and disregards moral, social, or religious rules. Like Casanova, he is considered a great seducer, though far more compulsive and self-centered.

■ Lyra DJ

NARRATOR: JAYA

“12:50 AM, since I couldn’t find Nyala, I figured I might as well enjoy the party. Too bad for her. Besides, it was an open bar, the Hexarch was covering everything. I think that’s when I lost control... I remember being on the dance floor, studying Reka electronic music very closely, servers constantly passing by with magnums of Naos juice drinks... I started talking to the DJ, a Lyra like me, maybe a bit too insistently. Because when I turned around, my bouncer friend was staring at me with that same unfriendly look.”

■ Phoibos, Reka Hexarch

NARRATOR: PHOIBOS

394 AC - Pacifying the masses is not difficult. You simply need to saturate their senses with constant stimuli, to stuff their minds like the belly of a goose until they grow numb, incapable of taking in anything else. Entertainment and distraction, like a sleight of hand. Bread and circuses. The formula has not changed since the dawn of time. It had been a long time since I had faced an opponent worthy of me. That opponent was an entire people. When they arrived, they nearly stole the population's affection. All attention turned toward them. But that was without accounting for my talent, and the fact that attention is a double-edged weapon that can quickly turn against its bearer.

The shortage of Naos fruit? Military presence in the streets? Energy dependence on a foreign power? Threats to tradition? Oh, it was easy to feed fear, to steer public sentiment in a direction more aligned with our ambitions. Astrape entrusted me with handling this matter. I did so in a radiant way. The goal was to maintain our hold on the people, not let it slip through our fingers. And the best way to achieve that was through love and devotion. We, the Hexarchs, stood with them. In contrast, the Asgarthans sought to take and conquer, to reshape society in their image. As long as there was an "us" and a "them," control would remain ours.

■ Phoibos, Reka Hexarch [AA]

NARRATOR: AURAQ

394 AC - Having worn one for most of my life, I recognize a mask when I see one. Phoibos has presence, that much I cannot deny. A certain charisma he consciously uses to captivate and dazzle the crowd. The way he holds the microphone, addressing his audience as if in an intimate conversation. His anecdotes are vivid, his delivery inviting, and you find yourself hanging on his every word, as though he were sharing confidences. But there is more to his performance than that. He intersperses his remarks with tirades wrapped in humor and lightness. A sweet coating for a bitter core. He mocks us, and under the guise of harmless jokes, he fuels discord.

It is nothing less than propaganda disguised as entertainment, a balancing act that hits its mark. Between acts, he slips in songs like a crooner, his velvety voice carrying; a few dance steps or tap routines to sharpen his flair; slam poetry that encourages the audience to chant verses like slogans, like a mantra... I had already seen him, with his subtle arguments, calm Sol's anger, which was no small feat. I scan the crowd. Yes, there is a kind of catharsis here, a release for frustration, for general dissatisfaction. He uses words to soothe, to stroke in the right direction. Words as balm, to comfort... Out of the corner of my eye, I spot Nyala at a table with another Lyra. Let's hope she doesn't have any antics in mind...

■ Romantic Encounter [AA]

NARRATOR: JAYA

“9:30 AM, yeah, that’s how my day started. I managed to snap photos of our lovebirds for Rogue magazine. My informant told me Sigismar had requested special leave for personal reasons. I set up at dawn outside the Consulate with a cup of coffee, then followed him discreetly. And then, jackpot, those personal reasons had a name. This scoop was worth at least 500 f.”

■ Reka Headset

NARRATOR: JAYA

394 AC - I rummage through my bag to see if, by any chance, I have an aspirin, and I come across a Reka headset. Yeah, the memories are starting to come back. It’s possible I did a little more than just annoy the DJ. I’ll admit I’ve got some klepto tendencies when I’m tipsy... Do I try to find her to give it back, or whatever, chalk it up as a war trophy? I’ll decide later... Right now I need to try to remember the second half of my night, and it’s getting really fuzzy. Okay, no aspirin, but maybe there are clues about what happened next? My notebook, my pen... A sudden wave of dread hits me. Where’s my camera?

I always had it with me, whether I was doing urbex or working my paparazzi job. I couldn’t have lost it! I dig through my bag in a panic. Think, Jaya. Wait, maybe there are clues... I dump all the junk out of my bag and set it down piece by piece on the pile of nets. Lipstick, cap, beret, my gloves... A rose? Who the hell gave me a rose? I also find a key ring, with a room number. Yeah, it’s coming back, a hostel. “Best view of the lower city,” it said. Blood pounds against my temples and I rub my eyes. Either way, I can tell there’s no way the article’s going to be ready on time...

■ Cable-car Station

NARRATOR: JAYA

“10:00 AM, I met my handler at the funicular to hand over the photos, and that’s when he told me there was an opportunity. According to his sources, the Arkaster Echo was working on a guide to the Reka city. If we moved fast, we could publish one first. I hesitated for a moment when I saw Fen. I’m a paparazzi first and foremost. But the opportunity was just too good.”

■ Turuun & Benih

NARRATOR: TURUUN

394 AC - Worn out, short of breath, and aching all over, with that damn back pain stabbing me every two minutes... When the hell did I get so old? I lower my sore backside onto this bench that had been calling to me for ages, and that it took me forever to reach. What did you expect, you old goat? Flying through the air on a bird's back for weeks? Of course it was going to leave a mark... I slump against my staff and close my eyes, slipping into Benih. When I was with him, the world became wonder and freedom again. He's gliding above the gardens, and I amuse myself by counting how many people are napping down there. Only four, for now... I would've thought more, but maybe that's just my own craving for a nap talking.

All of a sudden, I feel arms wrap around me, and I let go of my Chimera's flight to return to my old body. I can't help but smile as I pat Rin's shoulder. She's holding me tight, her face buried in the hollow of my shoulder. I left her as a child, and she's grown so much. She's a teenager now, almost an adult... She suddenly lifts her eyes to mine, and I see they're brimming with tears. There, there... I wipe her cheeks while pulling her into an embrace of my own, and I catch myself humming her a lullaby, my cheek resting against her forehead, even as I realize she's long outgrown that sort of thing.

■ Rabbit Farmer

NARRATOR: OSRIC

"The rabbit perks up its ears at the sight of the mask hanging from my belt, but it seems to relax. Everyone fears the Hellequins, and that's only natural. But I'm not here to take life, I'm here to give it. I set down the first barrel of seeds and signal for the others to do the same. These are gifts for the Reka. Along with the fruits and vegetables already grown in the greenhouse, there's enough here to kickstart a wide array of new crops. The full agricultural diversity of Asgartha, offered to the Reka."

■ Reka Tradesman

NARRATOR: OSRIC

"The merchant inspects the fleshy purple fruits entrusted to me by the Muna farmers. They grew them in the Reka's agroponic systems, to prove they could diversify production using our seeds. But now we had to convince them, show there were viable markets. The merchant takes a knife, slices off a sliver, and tastes it with the tip of his lips. After chewing, he politely shakes his head and tells me there would be little interest in such a product."

■ Muna Botanist

NARRATOR: OSRIC

“Sap as juice acts as an elixir of life. I watch the botanist feed her plants with a mixture of juice and water, under the curious gaze of Nick, her otter, always ready to snatch something. The effect is the same: the plants grow hardier, their growth multiplied, as if fueled by miracle fertilizer. Inside the Ouroboros greenhouse, experiments are in full swing to optimize cultivation. If we can show the Reka that diluted Sap can be used responsibly, then the Naos might be spared from decline.”

■ Charitable Reka

NARRATOR: OSRIC

“Turuun asked me to be her eyes and ears, to take the pulse of Reka society. The Elders tasked me with watching over her and assisting however I could. When I agreed, I didn’t think it would mean conducting an anthropological study, but I suppose it doesn’t contradict my orders... By observing the Reka, I’ve seen that some are tasked with collecting damaged or overripe Naos fruit to distribute to the underprivileged.”

■ Reka Agronomist

NARRATOR: OSRIC

“We were wrong. We thought it was just a matter of habit, that sharing our recipes and culinary practices would reduce the Reka’s reliance on Naos fruit. But the agronomist showed us that many Reka actually need those fruits in their diet. I don’t know whether it’s adaptation, the absence of certain enzymes, or some form of dependency... but the Reka are bound to their world-tree. Strangely, the fruits of the Spindle are also nutritious to them, even if they seem to dislike the taste...”

■ Daughter of Naos

NARRATOR: OSRIC

“In Asgartha, it’s customary to call upon the Daughters of Yggdrasil to dispense nature’s gifts in a measured way. They give what they can, generously. But the Daughters of the Naos who were summoned did not behave the same way. On the contrary, they were hostile, protective. Proof enough that the Naos is trying to shield itself from the exploitation it suffers at the hands of the Reka. Instinctively, my hand went to my bow, such was the intensity of their aggression, before I remembered I’d laid it down long ago.”

■ Reka Gatherer

NARRATOR: OSRIC

“The Reka’s daily harvest is steeped in ritual. An army of gatherers suspends itself from cables each day, braving vertigo to collect the world-tree’s fruits. They act with reverence, treating the Naos like a nourishing deity. They pick only ripe fruit, handling each berry as though it were the most precious thing in the world, something sacred, almost like a fragile newborn. But there are simply too many of them. Soon, they will reach the limits of what the tree can endure...”

■ **Ploutos, Reka Hexarch**

NARRATOR: PLOUTOS

394 AC - Look at them, Mother. So vain. So full of themselves. Their vision is so narrow. They strut like conquerors, yet claim otherwise, repeating to anyone who will listen that they seek the common good. I do not understand why you have chosen their side, when our family so greatly needs your support. You are the last to refuse our call. The others have joined us. Even my sister, your own daughter, has understood there is no alternative. Soon, you will have no choice but to stand with us. The worst part is that together, we could establish an unchanging order, one capable of standing against the Enemy. Remember where your loyalty lies.

This city was founded as a haven, a refuge. For now, it is only a shadow of itself, but it could become the glorious reflection of what was lost. Your Asgarthans cling to ideals that cannot withstand the threat we all face. Mother, I beg you, listen to reason. Through you, Sap and Fruit will flow freely. Nectar and Ambrosia will sustain us, as will the fervor of faith. Our thrones await us. Come sit at our side. Take your rightful place. It is time to seize absolute power, once and for all.

■ **Ploutos, Reka Hexarch [AA]**

NARRATOR: TEIJA

394 AC - He almost never lets go of his smile. He wears it in every circumstance, a mark of courtesy, politeness, civility... but trusting it would be a grave mistake, given how sharply his actions contradict that pleasant façade. Barely a week ago, he sent a swarm of drones to secretly harvest Naos fruit. He had it distributed to the people, even though he had promised to reduce harvesting quotas. All to show that the Hexarchs still cared for the people, despite the deprivation imposed by foreign powers... as if we were occupiers. Sig was right. All we can do is grit our teeth and keep up appearances. Every attempt to prove our goodwill has failed.

That smile may be mocking, in truth. He delights in watching us struggle, while deliberately sabotaging our efforts. He behaves as though abundance were endless, distributing wealth without restraint. Is he blind? Does he not realize he’s undermining himself? There’s something I don’t understand, something I need to uncover. It’s like groping in the dark, trying not to step on eggshells. There must be a reason for this hostility. I have to find it, and fast. Astrape finishes her

speech. I lift my eyes toward Halua as trumpets blare, and she steps forward with her golden scissors toward the ribbon. All the more so because a sword of Damocles hangs over our heads.

■ Son of Naos

NARRATOR: OSRIC

“Another avenue being explored is to better nourish the Naos to make it more resilient. The world-tree has reached the limits of its growth, given the substrate available here. By using Sons of Naos, it might be possible to anchor additional floating islets and turn them into extensions of Asty. But even with their help, the scale of the undertaking is already colossal...”

■ Soul Encounter

NARRATOR: SUNNIVA

394 AC - This time, it isn't Kauri officiating, but an elderly Muna with parchment-like skin. She looks extremely old, far older than the Hellequin hunter assigned to protect her. And judging by his white hair, he must already be in his sixties at the very least. From what I've heard, they both arrived recently with Asgartha's diplomatic envoys, tasked with preparing the visit of the new Basilissa. The Hexarchs are here too, eager to enjoy the spectacle. And I'm left wondering what I'm doing here, surrounded by all these important people. All because I traded part of my gear for a rusted suit of armor. I don't think I like being the center of attention. And right now, it couldn't be worse...

Next to me, the young recruit Ordis stands ramrod straight, hands clasped behind her back, while a spectral orb floats near her tattooed face. One thing's certain, she has far better composure than I do. There's also a Reka acrobat, sporting a rebellious pink streak in her hair that she keeps blowing out of her face. She doesn't seem able to stay still either, but hers looks more like impatience than nerves. Me, it's definitely nerves... At her feet, the chameleon I saw at the market scampers back and forth, and I'm glad it managed to get out of its cage... Four Musubi to be celebrated today in total. Valdur is the first to step forward toward his Chimera...

■ Soul Encounter [AA]

NARRATOR: SYLAS

394 AC - If I listened to caution, it would tell me to stay away. I knew Qorgan agents were lurking nearby, and I was standing close to the epicenter, far more exposed than I would have liked. But I must ensure the plan proceeds as intended, that what must happen does happen. They are all gathering around the Naos, as if intoxicated by the power and knowledge they've seized. Elsewhere in the city, the rest of the population is celebrating the end of the match in the streets, with festivities and organized gatherings in full swing. They're counting on that

distraction to avoid being disturbed. Everything has been arranged so that all eyes look elsewhere while they carry out their deed.

The Asgarthans have shown far too much transparency... and naivety. By offering the Musubi to the Hexarchs, they handed them the means to solve the problem themselves. By binding themselves to the Naos, the six Reka leaders will be able to force the world-tree to yield more Sap, push it to produce more fruit... and awaken others like them. At the same time, they'll be able to impose their will on Halua, to silence him, and remove a thorn from their side. Under different circumstances, I would act now to interrupt their ritual. But Sitina's instructions were clear. This must happen, even if everything in me cries out against it. For centuries, we fought precisely to prevent this...

■ Picnic Area

NARRATOR: OSRIC

394 AC - She looks shaken, and the worst part is, I don't understand when her mood changed. I watch her limp across the grass, hunched over, leaning more heavily than usual on her staff. I saw her expression fall apart when she heard what the young Muna said to her. Just an offhand remark, while they were talking about the world-tree's presence. "Life will always find a way to blossom." It was as if Turuun had seen a ghost. I felt her tense, and my instincts picked up a threat emerging from nowhere. I hadn't felt that since I hung up my bow and arrows. Back when I was still a Hellequin hunter, that sensation was familiar. It was the one that filled the air when a predator arrived.

She's rigid. Even in danger, during our journey, she never reacted like this. She said she trusted me completely to protect her. But here, when no danger seemed present, that confidence has vanished, replaced by terror. I scan the area, on alert. There are only bystanders enjoying the clear skies. They've laid out blankets on the soft grass, along with food and drink. Turuun stumbles, and I catch her under the shoulder to keep her from collapsing. No, she's clearly not herself. It's as if all her strength has left her. I ease her onto the ground, and she lets me. Her bony hand, usually steady, is trembling.

■ Flore, Fuming Gardener

NARRATOR: ARJUN

394 AC - The Reka have allowed our observers among them, but it's difficult for us to monitor everything. Those who can perceive the Skein can sense where abuses occur, through the way the Naos reacts to pruning attacks. But we are far too few to cover the entire canopy of the world-tree... and especially to rein in those who exceed their quotas. Fortunately, Rin and I can rely on our Eidolons. It feels strange for me to impose limits like this, and it pains me each time I have to interrupt harvesting. I know there are mouths to feed, people who depend on the tree's nourishment.

But when you hear the Naos's lament, it's just as hard to remain unmoved. It deserves rest. It should be left alone for a few years, so it can thrive again. Nearby, Flore's Eidolon confiscates a sack full of fruit and scolds the offender. It's a widespread tendency. Thinking one extra fruit won't hurt is almost natural, understandable even. But when thousands of harvesters do the same, the line is quickly crossed. I smile, watching her lose her temper. Flore has always been quick to anger. She struggled to learn meditation, to commune with nature, because of her bohemian spirit. I wonder what she's doing right now... and feel a pang of sadness.

■ Hesperide

NARRATOR: RIN

394 AC - Eyes closed, I listen to the flow of Sap: rising through the xylem, spreading through the phloem. I perceive countless signals radiating within the Skein. Where harvesters pick fruit... where— A faint buzzing, somewhere high in the canopy. I open my eyes and straighten on the massive branch, listening. There it is again. A hum. *Kiddo?* My Chimera rises, its iridescent wings beating. Through its faceted gaze, I see a swarm of insect-like machines flitting through the branches. Some pick fruit, others siphon Sap, covering the trunk like aphids or scale insects. There must be a hundred of them. More than enough to harm the Naos.

Each drone is a mouth biting into the tree's flesh, draining its vital fluid. My stomach tightens as I feel all those tiny pains, those countless pinpricks that together cause such devastation. I choke back a sob. How can they do this? Whatever they claim, the Naos suffers, just as the Nilam did before it. Through Orchid, I summon the Hesperides to confront the swarm. The nymphs turn their gaze toward the machines and conjure bramble thickets around them. Thorny brush spreads, ensnaring the mechanical harvesters, silencing their whirring rotors. The Reka will probably complain that we're stealing their harvest. Too bad. I have no choice...

Inspiration

Nymphs of the West and daughters of Atlas, the Hesperides dwelled in a lush orchard: the Garden of the Hesperides. Hera entrusted them with guarding an apple tree, a gift from Gaia. But when the goddess discovered they were stealing the golden apples, she summoned Ladon, a hundred-headed dragon, to protect them.

■ The Naos

NARRATOR: TURUUN

394 AC - Even squinting through the cursed wind and my old age, it's impossible to miss. Its domed canopy stretches among the clouds, surrounded by ships that from here look like birds... or perhaps fish circling an anemone. I cling as best I can to my mount's feathers, bracing against gusts and air pockets that have punctuated my journey. The trip has been neverending, and my back reminds me of it with every turn, every shift in posture. Rin is over there. The thought of seeing my protégé again makes me smile, though she isn't the only reason I accepted this mission.

I place a hand on the Spindle fruit resting against my chest. It will serve as a snack for the Dapeng. I carry many more in my satchels, along with flowers. According to the botanists, it would be enough to grow Spindle shoots and graft them onto the Naos. By collecting pollen, it would then be possible to fertilize a Naos flower come spring. The seeds from that cross would yield hybrid plants capable of producing fertile fruit. It was an intriguing hypothesis... even if the chances of success were slim. I've heard a Lyra flower specialist is also on their way to the Reka city, to assist their scientists. We'll see how that turns out.

■ Dapeng

NARRATOR: TURUUN

394 AC - We fly over a series of terraces, and unease grips me instantly. Here, nature is not free. It exists within carefully bounded plots, saucers, and enclosures. Human constructions sprout from the trunk and branches of the world-tree like fungal growths, mistletoe, nodules... as if the tree itself were sick, and humanity the disease. The Dapeng slows, gliding above the city. Its tail sways like a carp's fin as it descends toward a landing dock. Returning to solid ground will do me good... if I can ignore the altitude, and the void beneath us.

My Eidolon beats its wings and lets out a mournful cry before landing. Even here, the patch of grass welcoming us looks artificial, as though meticulously groomed by an overzealous landscaper. Everything here speaks of control over nature, the refusal to let it express anything beyond what is desired. I slide down its wing and wait patiently as it lowers me, already feeling my lower back protest. They say the wise must gain perspective to overcome narrow views. I was ready to do that. Ready to give the Reka a chance. But changing their mindset... will require patience.

Inspiration

In Chinese mythology, the legend of the Dapeng tells of transformation: that of Kun, a giant fish of the northern darkness, becoming Peng, a colossal bird that flies toward the southern sky and the Celestial Lake.

■ The Embassy

NARRATOR: KAURI

394 AC - I had never been there. Eru used to talk about it all the time, though. It was his home, the Refuge he founded. My eyes settle on the slanted thatched roof, on the red torii marking the sanctuary's entrance. Normally, the path kept going, from what he said. Here, it ends in a sheer drop. Almost as if it had been built not in Kirighai, but in Vanderun. Getting close didn't scare me much. I'd been used to living above the clouds since I was a kid. No, I wasn't moving into the forest to avoid the edge, but out of curiosity. This is where my mentor spent his life, back when he was alive. There's a musky scent in the air, too, and it's making my woollybacks restless.

I walk beside the sand, studying the lines drawn into it with a rake. My eyes widen when I realize the sand represents the sea, and the rocks are islands. Even if it's not exact, it looks like the Asgarthan Peninsula. There's Anthea... Kirighai... and Enosha, taller than the rest. Makes you a little nostalgic. The Reka agreed to let us build an Embassy, so we could discuss what comes next. They weren't too happy about Halua being around, preventing them from harvesting too much fruit. The mood wasn't great. But Teija said we had to go through this to reach a compromise... I don't really like arguments.

■ Newton's Law

NARRATOR: OSRIC

"I don't understand how a society built on such inequality can endure. The Naos's fruits are abundant in the upper city, but the lower you go toward the roots, the scarcer they become. The same goes for the Sap, which flows downward with gravity but struggles to reach the lower districts. Why doesn't the population revolt? Because the chance to climb the ladder exists? This harsh reality struck me like a hammer when I discovered it... and I'm still reeling from it."

■ Talos

NARRATOR: GULRANG

394 AC - The security measures were impressive, to say the least. Five hundred soldiers brought in as reinforcements, constantly patrolling and standing guard... And while it was certainly a deterrent, it wasn't reassuring in the slightest. At the Hexarchs' request, numerous Ordis infantry had been deployed to help maintain order. But seeing foreign troops stationed throughout the streets was anything but comforting. What were the Reka leaders playing at? They seemed to be blowing hot and cold at every turn, bowing and scraping one moment, then stoking tensions the next by engineering uncomfortable situations. Were they trying to discredit us in the eyes of the population to hold onto power? Were they deliberately escalating things? These political maneuvers were being carried out at the expense of the people.

Under the pretense of fearing potential vandals, they had even called upon Talos. The colossus stood watch day and night over the joint work meant to symbolize the reunion between the Reka and the Asgarthans. To keep it hidden from view. To ensure nothing would tarnish the significance of this historic moment... As for me, I was tasked with ensuring that it was supplied with Sap daily, to maintain the Agalma. When the time comes to unveil the sculpture, the giant will spread its arms to reveal it to the public. Two sisters, locked in an embrace... All I hope is that, in that moment, everyone remembers that we belong to the same family, and that it might ease the tension. But one has to be realistic. No family is immune to conflict. Kojo and I are proof enough of that...

Inspiration

Forged by Hephaestus, sometimes said to be his father, Talos is a bronze giant who guarded the island of Crete. Covered entirely in metal, he was thought to be invincible. Yet he was defeated by Jason and the Argonauts, with Medea's help. Talos had a flaw at his ankle, where a vein was sealed by a nail. When it was removed, he bled out his ichor, the divine fluid that grants immortality to the gods.

■ Sunisa, Ordis Bodyguard

NARRATOR: SIGISMAR

394 AC - It must have been a terrible shock for Nuncia. She'd never liked losing, even at something as trivial as a board game... And now, before long, we were expected to welcome here the very woman who had defeated her so thoroughly. No. I couldn't think like that. Somayeh Bahman was now the new Basilissa of Asgartha, and I couldn't allow my disappointment to show. Nor could I lower my guard. I signal to Sunisa, who is escorting the Ordis official in charge of negotiations. She nods in return, fully aware of the danger. A few days ago, a carton of Naos juice had been thrown from the crowd, and the culprit was never found.

Saying we were no longer welcome would be an understatement. At first, the Reka had celebrated our arrival with great enthusiasm. They mistakenly believed we had freed them from the threat posed by Halua. But now, with food restrictions and enforced rationing, discontent was spreading from the lower districts upward, the tension becoming increasingly palpable. And I couldn't help but wonder if the Reka elite weren't deliberately adding fuel to the fire... quite literally. Sun gives me a subtle nod as she scans the crowd. There are a lot of people. And among them, some looks are anything but friendly.

■ The Reunion

NARRATOR: MATZ

394 AC - Corinna embraces her daughter tenderly before entrusting her to her uncle. Then she turns to me, wearing that familiar mix of irritation and relief. Things hadn't been easy. The start of our collaboration had been, to put it mildly, chaotic. Me, with my utter nonchalance... and her, taut as a drawn bowstring. I smile, rolling my eyes. Her golden, honey-colored eyes have always had a way of throwing me off balance. Even now. She joins me before the gathered crowd. Astrape stands at the center, her scissors slicing through the ribbon, while behind her, the massive silhouette of Talos dissolves into drifting vapors, like a Colossus of Rhodes that indulged a bit too much at last night's feast...

And then it appears. Our sculpture, revealed at last as the curtain falls. Fireworks crackle overhead. Applause erupts. Then come the handshakes, the customary congratulations. Oh yes, fine craftsmanship indeed. Magnificent. Truly magnificent. Truth be told, I'm not listening. I already know how the rest of the evening will go. With the high command, with Reka diplomats, sycophants, so-called art lovers... It exhausts me in advance. Adding more noise to the constant hum in my head has never been something I look forward to. Corinna, on the other hand, is radiant. This is her moment, her crowning achievement. I retrieve a flute of sparkling drink and offer it to her. She accepts gladly... and as she does, her fingers slip quietly between mine.

■ Matz & Hive

NARRATOR: MATZ

394 AC - What makes these social obligations a bit more bearable is the abundance of drink. And there's something for everyone: Sap Libre, Dry Sap, Sap Smash, Sap Mule, Sap Breeze, and more. Not to mention the endless stream of sparkling flutes carried on silver trays. There's enough here to dull the senses just enough to make the hum more tolerable, without losing control. Fortunately, I know exactly where my limit lies. Please drink responsibly, and all... I know the drill all too well. I down my glass in one go and crunch the ice that lingers on my tongue.

Come on, Matz. Make the required effort. It's not exactly an ordeal. A nod here, a knowing, enigmatic smile there... At this point, that's all they expect of you. Keep up appearances. What did they say during the briefing again? Ah yes. Get to know the Reka, understand them better. Of course. I didn't fall off the turnip truck just the other day. What they really want, for political

purposes, is to showcase the power of an Exalt. There are a thousand sculptors more talented or inspired than me. What they expect is for me to raise a statue from the ground using my mason wasps. For the spectacle. For the wow factor. Fine. The sooner I'm done, the sooner I can go home.

■ Angry Crowd

NARRATOR: MATZ

394 AC - I take that back. If things keep going like this, the ceremony might be cut short. Below us, the Reka people are making their anger known. Protest signs are appearing in the streets, and crowds are converging in our direction. I glance at the buffet. Platters of Naos fruit, Sap cocktails, canapés glazed with Sap... Opulence above, while down in the lower districts, scarcity has become the norm. This is going to blow. The worst part? None of this is our doing. We didn't decide to turn this event into a display of excess and extravagance. But to the people, we're the outsiders, the ones coming to plunder and claim the lion's share.

This feels bad. Our presence has widened the gap between top and bottom. Damn it... we're becoming the scapegoats for the inequality simmering here. I look around. This could erupt at any moment. The Ordis soldiers and Reka guards can feel it too. There's movement everywhere. What's the plan? Are we being evacuated? Are we supposed to barricade ourselves somewhere? I can hear the chants now. I can't make out the words yet, but the tone is anything but friendly. And still, the local militia hasn't intervened. Why wait? Do they want this to escalate? I push through the crowd and grab Waru's sleeve. He nods.

■ The Lectern

NARRATOR: WARU

394 AC - Soledad is addressing the crowd. I click my tongue. She's speaking from the heart, and there's nothing wrong with that. But her words, her tone... they're not suited to the situation. She's confronting the Reka, accusing them. I understand what she's trying to say. For years, they've treated the Naos as an endless resource, when it is a living being. But she's telling them they must now tighten their belts, abandon the abundance they've always known... That's not something people accept just because someone tells them to. They need time to adjust. To grasp the danger of their way of life. And that won't come from a moralizing speech.

Could she do otherwise? She is now bound to Halua. And Halua seeks only the well-being of the world-tree. Given time, we could have proposed a gradual transition. Pressured the Hexarchs into accepting a timetable to shift from Naos fruit to Kelon. That was the whole point of the scientific exhibition. To show there were alternatives. The Reka leadership already felt threatened by the Asgarthan presence. We are far more numerous. That alone causes concern... and not without reason. A murmur spreads through the crowd, growing louder as signs are raised. There is anger here. There is frustration. If this continues, the people will turn against us.

■ Kikimora

NARRATOR: OSOYO

“I’ve been relegated to minor duties, like supervising the Consulate clerks. They sold it to me as a promotion, but it’s more of a tedious chore than anything else. Still, I have to make sure Kikimora is satisfied. The Eidolon was summoned to keep the place spotless at all times. You never know when Reka diplomats might show up. The worst part? It works. This was supposed to be an easy assignment, but it’s more stressful than running errands for high command...”

Inspiration

In Slavic mythology, Kikimoras are female household spirits. They are considered troublesome and malicious if a home is poorly kept, but helpful if the household is orderly and well organized. To appease an angered Kikimora, one may wash all pots and pans with fern infusion, or use garlic, wormwood, salt, or silver.

■ The Consulate

NARRATOR: OSOYO

“Even though the Muna Embassy is the primary venue for negotiations concerning the Naos, the Ordis Consulate is no less active. Beyond that contentious issue, there is a whole host of talks underway addressing political, economic, and societal relations between the Reka and the Asgarthans. The Ordis has taken this responsibility head-on, first and foremost to ensure that the diplomatic interface runs through us rather than the Bravos. And thankfully so. The discussions are already heated as it is, and it would be unwise to add fuel to the fire...”

■ Louis Sullivan

NARRATOR: OSOYO

“I was reassigned to the service of Mattheus Mertz, the sculptor appointed to create—alongside the Reka—a statue symbolizing our reunion. Though everyone knows he’s much more than that. He’s the architect of the modern Gestalt, before being cut off from it forever. It’s hard seeing him like this, isolated from the rest of the Ordis. He doesn’t like being disturbed much and prefers the company of the Eidolons. He works with them on the scaffolding and internal structure of the statue. But I don’t know if he’s really thriving in this role. He always seems to be in a gloomy mood.”

Inspiration

American architect Louis Henry Sullivan is considered the father of skyscrapers and architectural modernism. Relying on steel, he erected many buildings far taller than what technology had previously allowed. Influenced by Viollet-le-Duc, who championed rationalism in architecture, Sullivan theorized that a building’s form should be rooted in the function it is meant to serve.

■ Reka Patron

NARRATOR: OSOYO

“Matz regularly receives visits from Reka patrons, especially Aglae, who, from what I understand, is Corinna’s primary sponsor and benefactor. She’s the one who put Corinna’s name forward to serve as Matz’s Reka counterpart. She keeps insisting that both statues be more ostentatious. More shine, more splendor. I get the impression it irritates Matz to no end. Up to now, though, he’s managed to keep his composure...”

■ Reka Investor

NARRATOR: OSOYO

“The Reka are funding the statue, and they make sure we don’t forget it. They may hide it behind charming smiles and a veneer of good humor, but having sat in on numerous meetings, I’ve been a silent witness to it. The worst part is, I can’t say anything. Raising my voice would only make matters worse. Matz bowed his head before Phoibos’s envoy, but I could see he was holding himself back.”

■ Ordis Tourist

NARRATOR: OSOYO

“First leave I’ve had in ages. I can finally enjoy some free time and explore the city. I decided to see it from top to bottom, front to back. What better way to get a feel for a place than to walk its streets and let yourself drift... I did ask for a map with all the must-see spots, though. From the Museum of Ascension to the alleyways of the Volta, by way of the Gallery of Technical Arts, I’ve got a packed itinerary. I don’t know when I’ll get another chance, so I’m making the most of it.”

■ Souvenir Seller

NARRATOR: OSOYO

“I can’t believe it—the statue’s design has already leaked. You can buy miniature replicas for a few Naos fruits. They’re also selling bonsai meant to represent the Naos in pocket form. I was tempted, but I’m not sure I have a green enough thumb to take proper care of one. Besides... who would look after it when I’m off wandering?”

■ Unfair Encounter

NARRATOR: OSOYO

“Maybe it was justified? Either way, the Reka guard’s intervention left a bitter taste in my mouth. I don’t know what rule the vendor had broken, but the confiscation was swift and severe. Perhaps the show of force was meant to send a message. The vendor was left high and dry, his livelihood seized by the authorities. Worst of all, the police implied it was because of us Asgarthans...”

■ Unfair Encounter [AA]

NARRATOR: SOL

“I know full well it’s not her fault, but I can’t help it. For weeks now, it’s been one official dinner after another, endless bows and courtesies, and nothing gets done. We’re going in circles, and the Reka are leading us by the nose. I don’t understand why the others can’t see it. They’re stalling. Playing for time. I bite my lip to keep from snapping. Little by little, they’re backing us into a corner, trying to force our hand. And we’re walking right into it. Wake up, for Gods’ sake!”

■ Adamant Receptionist

NARRATOR: OSOYO

“It’s the big day, and the Reka elite have shown up in force. The Hexarchs asked us to assist with security. The guest list was carefully curated. Cocktails, hors d’oeuvres... everything’s in place. The problem is, most of the population wasn’t invited. And it falls to us to turn away all the bystanders and curious onlookers trying to get in. Did no one think to make it clear this was invitation-only?”

■ Galatea

NARRATOR: OSOYO

“Like the other Agalmata, Galatea is shaped from Sap, infused with the consciousness of the Oneiros. With graceful movements, she guides guests toward the reception area, the very picture of refinement. But who is the Pygmalion here? It seems to me that, under the guise of doing good, the Asgarthans may be overstepping. Perhaps we should take a step back... try to impose ourselves less.”

Inspiration

In Greek mythology, Galatea is a statue sculpted by Pygmalion, who falls in love with his creation. The goddess Aphrodite grants his wish by bringing her to life. The myth raises enduring questions about the relationship between creator and creation. Does he love a living being, or an idealized image of his own making? Is the story a reflection of a patriarchal worldview, in which the role of man is to shape woman?

■ Reka Caterer

NARRATOR: OSOYO

“I make a quick pass through the kitchens as part of my inspection round. I watch the caterers bustling about with trays of bite-sized dishes and notice they’re transitioning to desserts. The unveiling is approaching. The waitress rests one hand on her hip as she studies me with golden eyes, holding a tray in the other. She offers it to me. I’m about to refuse, but something in her gaze makes me accept.”

■ **Astrape, Reka Hexarch**

NARRATOR: ASTRAPE

394 AC - Every new situation carries an opportunity to be seized. The arrival of the Asgarthans is no exception. Of course, we cannot risk revealing our hand. But if we can compel them to reveal theirs, we stand to gain from it. Over the past weeks, I’ve sought to learn as much as possible about their culture and society, and I’ve come to the conclusion that there is much to be gained from collaboration—or at the very least, from a superficial accord. We are like players placing their bets at the center of the table, aiming to claim the pot. It is a gamble. But one worth taking. What I seek is what they call the Musubi.

Once we possess that ability, we will be able to silence Halua for good and resume the expansion of the Ecumene. We can accelerate the pace of migration and stand as equals to our guests. With any luck, we may even strike at the Enemy and imprison it once more. Humanity needs constancy to endure, to survive. That is what we are. Endless. Eternal. Free will is a danger to humankind. Our role is to shield them from that temptation, that evil disguised as a gift. The Asgarthans do not believe in this ideal. They place freedom above security. To save them from their own missteps, it falls to us to take the initiative... and show them the proper path.

■ **Astrape, Reka Hexarch [AA]**

NARRATOR: ZHEN

394 AC - I watch the Admiral, waiting for the right moment to approach her. She’s surrounded by Reka and members of the high command, making it difficult. At last, I see her excuse herself, and I move to intercept. She was young back then. Just a child, only a few years older than I was. But she accompanied her father to all his meetings. I remember them gathered on the garden terrace overlooking Hadera. They spoke of Mesektet. Afterward, Father mentioned Aunt Hayley, and even tried to dissuade Mother from continuing her experiments. But she insisted. She even said she owed it, in part, to her to keep going...

If I remember those days, perhaps she does too. I head straight toward her, determined not to let the opportunity slip away. But suddenly, a shift ripples through the crowd, forcing me to stop. Conversations die down, replaced by a reverent silence. Astrape has arrived. All eyes turn toward her. Her cloud-like hair drifts in the air as she acknowledges the guests with smiles and nods. She embodies the full authority of the Reka leadership, wearing it like a mantle. A glass of Sap in

hand, she approaches Corinna, the Reka sculptor, who bows respectfully. I curse inwardly. This is not the moment to trouble Singh. My questions will have to wait.

■ The Infirmary

NARRATOR: SUNN

394 AC - The curtain opens, and a nurse approaches, carrying a stool with her. I sit up, still a little groggy. The nausea hasn't completely faded, but it's nowhere near as bad as it was earlier... As she settles in, I glance at the tokens of affection left by everyone who came to see me: the bouquet from Sunisa, the balloons from Kojo, the arrangements and baskets Aoife and the others had delivered... Akasha stayed with me for quite a while. Even if it was for tests, I have to admit her presence helped. She told me to cut back on Sap-based sweets. That's not easy, considering how addictive they are. Still, if it keeps me from ending up back in the hospital, I can make the effort. Twice in a row is more than enough.

Still... it's strange. All these memories surfacing in my mind like bubbles. They're not mine. Not really. And yet, they feel... familiar. The more I reach for them, the more they seem to become part of me. A dirt path through the forest. A feeling of abandonment. Pebbles gathered from a riverbed. The soft hiss of a stove—nothing like winter sports, wet socks, or hot chocolate... I meet the nurse's golden eyes as she shines a light into mine. Then, after resting a hand on my arm, she offers me—almost gently—a large can of Sap Soda. Wasn't I supposed to avoid that?

■ Hextag Chaser

NARRATOR: EDDIE MARV

"As usual, Maleros' Vultures have set traps all over the field! If the Asgarthan players get too close, they're in serious danger! The spider is weaving its web!"

■ Mochizuki Chiyome

NARRATOR: EDDIE MARV

"Another confirmed hit! Oh man, another Asgarthan player has fallen right into the trap! The Reka Agalmata are clearly giving the Asgarthan Eidolons a run for their money! The Asgarthan Sphinxes are going to have to wake up if they want to avoid defeat!"

Inspiration

A noblewoman of 16th-century Japan, possibly linked to the Kōga clan, Mochizuki Chiyome is a legendary kunoichi, or female ninja. Tasked by her lord Takeda Shingen with building a covert network of fighters and informants, she ensured he always stayed one step ahead of his enemies—until his mysterious death in 1573.

■ Reka Supporter

NARRATOR: EDDIE MARV

“Another Sphinx player eliminated! Maleros’ Vultures are heading straight for victory! What a spectacular match—even if it’s been rather one-sided so far! The stands are erupting—just listen to that crowd!”

■ Time Out

NARRATOR: EDDIE MARV

“Time-out called by the Sphinx coach! He’s going to have to reorganize his lineup, because right now the Vultures clearly control the field! We’re all eager to see how the Asgarthans respond!”

■ Studious Rookie

NARRATOR: EDDIE MARV

“The Yzmir players are struggling! They’re having trouble catching their breath. But what did you expect? They’re still learning Hextag and its rules, while the Reka Vultures are playing on home turf—on a field they know inside out! The visiting team has a steep uphill battle ahead!”

■ Harry Houdini

NARRATOR: EDDIE MARV

“The Vulture Trackers have the Sphinx player surrounded—he’s cornered! And here comes the charge! What—oh wow! It was nothing but an illusion, stretching the opposing attack dangerously thin! A bold sleight of hand against the Reka!”

Inspiration

Born Ehrich Weisz, the famed Hungarian-American illusionist Harry Houdini took his stage name in homage to French magician Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin. By 1898, he had gained widespread fame, claiming he could escape from a police cell in under thirty minutes. A practitioner of spiritualism, he befriended Arthur Conan Doyle, who even believed Houdini possessed supernatural powers.

■ Team Mascot

NARRATOR: EDDIE MARV

“The Asgarthans seem to be bouncing back! Even the substitutes on the bench are rallying behind their team! They’ll need all the energy they can muster to compete with this crowd, fully behind the Vultures! Haha—thankfully, their mascot is giving it everything it’s got!”

■ Foul Faker

NARRATOR: EDDIE MARV

“An Asgarthan player is down! He looks injured and is calling for the referee after that strike! He’s claiming it was an illegal move! What’s the referee’s call going to be?”

■ Partial Referee

NARRATOR: EDDIE MARV

“Red card! What a shock! The Reka player is sent off for what’s being called a low blow, to the crowd’s outrage! Did you see a foul? I sure didn’t understand that call...”

■ Tag!

NARRATOR: EDDIE MARV

“A Sphinx player appears right behind the Reka defender—who collapses! But... he’s on the ground, convulsing, with arcs of energy running through his body! Was he hit? Is he out? That move doesn’t look legal at all!”

■ Milady de Winter

NARRATOR: EDDIE MARV

“No foul? No, the referee hasn’t blown the whistle! The play stands! The Vulture player is eliminated, and the Asgarthans regain the upper hand! Wow, the momentum of the match has completely shifted!”

Inspiration

*A complex and enigmatic character from *The Three Musketeers* by Alexandre Dumas, Milady de Winter—born Anne de Breuil, Countess de La Fère—is a spy in the service of Cardinal Richelieu and one of the story’s principal antagonists. She is responsible for stealing the diamond studs given to the Duke of Buckingham by Queen Anne of Austria.*

■ Maleros, Reka Hexarch

NARRATOR: MALEROS

394 AC - At times, dangerous creatures wash ashore at the harbor. My duty is to eliminate them. There is no room for compassion, no room for half-measures. They must be excised from existence, pure and simple. The same applies to the Asgarthans. Astrape believes she can manipulate them, extract from them what we need to fuel our ambitions. It's a dangerous game. Like Plutos, I believed we should have eliminated them from the outset—no warning, no hesitation. But Astrape persuaded Phoibos and Wanax, and even swayed Sphura. The decision was made. So I must bide my time, whether I like it or not... even if I'm itching to begin hostilities.

In any case, the wait will not be long. Soon, we will have what we want. After the game, the time will be ripe to end this charade. Once we've dealt with these expeditionary forces and with Halua, we will be free to prepare for total war against Asgartha. And if, along the way, our engineers manage to tame our enemies' Kelon, perhaps we will even sail to their peninsula and bring the conflict to their shores. The best strategy is always a preemptive strike. Eliminate the threat entirely. Otherwise, there is always the risk of losing control of the situation. And that... we cannot allow. Our survival depends on it. Even if it means they come to hate us for it.

■ **Maleros, Reka Hexarch [AA]**

NARRATOR: AFANAS

394 AC - I sit back down on the bench, satisfied. The change in strategy paid off. We were clearly at a disadvantage: an unfamiliar sport, an unfamiliar field... a crowd that wasn't on our side. But the Yzmir had strengths. The key was to capitalize on them, to bring the opposition into conditions we could control. And sometimes, that meant skirting the rules. Breaking them, even. Catching the enemy off guard. Forcing them to question themselves. Disrupting their habits, throwing them off balance. The Reka team set traps—but static ones. The Vultures wanted to funnel us into them, which made their play predictable.

Our deceptive tactics broke their rhythm. Our illusions sowed doubt. They exhausted themselves chasing ghosts. Meanwhile, we targeted their Agalmata—their most resilient assets—first. Another point in our favor. Three against one now. I glance toward their bench and, unsurprisingly, see Maleros rise. Of course she wouldn't let it stand. The Vultures' captain isn't about to concede. I turn back to our three remaining players. No substitutions left. This is it. If they fall short, she'll tear through them. She steps forward, removing her warm-up jacket. The look she gives me carries both respect and contempt. A look that says: "Enough games. Let's end this."

■ **Finisher**

NARRATOR: EDDIE MARV

“Boomrekamata! And just like that, all the Asgarthan players are eliminated by Maleros herself in a lightning-fast play—swift and merciless! Three against one, and it still wasn’t enough! But... what’s this? The last player has just disappeared...”

■ **Moth Decoy**

NARRATOR: EDDIE MARV

“It’s a hit! The youngest Asgarthan player was actually an illusion! He’s reappeared behind Maleros, and his hand is on her back. Yes, that’s a confirmed touch! Wow—what a reversal! The very player who struggled to keep up throughout the match! The underdog no one saw coming!”

■ **Sports Encounter**

NARRATOR: EDDIE MARV

“What an incredible sight! Maleros has seized the opposing captain’s arm and raised it high in a stunning display of sportsmanship! What a game, what a turnaround! You can really say the Asgarthans have more than a few tricks up their sleeve!”

■ **Sports Encounter [AA]**

NARRATOR: MOYO

394 AC - Sap and Juice flow freely, and the noise of the post-game celebration is deafening. Players from both teams are sharing their experiences in a kind of exhilarated buzz. The adrenaline hasn’t quite faded yet. I suppose I should be savoring our victory too, even if we barely scraped by. I wouldn’t say I feel any real elation, but there is a sense of relief in leaving behind the heavy atmosphere of the locker rooms and training sessions. And that’s more than enough for me. Tomorrow, I’ll be able to return to the quiet of my lab. The Reka don’t seem to be taking the loss too badly. Then again, we may have taught them a thing or two over the course of the match. Let’s be honest—we didn’t exactly play fair.

What was it Afanas said again? That what matters is winning? That the means don’t matter? The directive had been clear: we had to win at all costs, to gain a psychological edge in the ongoing negotiations... A show of strength. Flexing our muscles. That’s how it works in nature. You establish dominance. I glance toward Fasano, Afanas’s protégé. He’s grown, no doubt—but that’s largely thanks to his mentor’s training. The others are celebrating him, and rightly so. He’s the one who saved us. I scan the crowd. Only Maleros is nowhere to be seen. Where is she, exactly? Off somewhere, licking her wounds?

■ **Mothcatcher Wand**

NARRATOR: EDDIE MARV

“Captain Moyo Chibuye has used Alteration to conjure a scepter! The referee lets play continue! Indeed, nothing in the rules forbids the use of Hex—or any other demiurgic trick—to create equipment... but what could it possibly be for? We’re about to find out!”

■ Manaseed

NARRATOR: LINDIWE

394 AC - The Milk is beginning to take effect, and my Irises open to the world. The fruit resting in my palm is ripe, fleshy, and exudes intoxicating fragrances. The ideas that compose it overlap and intertwine, and I sort through them as they collide with my awareness. Berry. Citrus. Pulp. Each blue segment is saturated with Mana—like a stabilizer, a preservative. Sugar. Sap. Sweetness. Each golden kernel at the center carries a subtle shade of addiction and dependence... no, it goes further than that. It touches on subsistence, nourishment, sustenance. A vital need. Something whose absence means death, pure and simple. A necessity.

I deepen my perception. A concept of life... and of immortality. Suddenly, I feel Maw's scales rasp. His gaze, aligned with mine, fixes on the seeds within the fruit. Wasn't that what Sylas said when he placed it in my hand? "We have a seed of a problem." Each one is a vessel, a shell containing a dormant soul, an identity. Maw's anger ignites. Within each seed, a being from the Empyrean. I turn toward the world-tree. So the Naos is a conduit between imagination and reality. Identities implant themselves into hosts, and Sap and Juice bring them back to life. An invasion, Maw confirms. Which means... many of the Reka are no longer truly human. They are Oneiroi made flesh.

■ Halua

NARRATOR: HALUA

"They promised. They promised they would stop the Reka from harming the Naos. And I have been patient. Yet the harvesting continues... and it cries out. With a single sweep of my fin, I could devastate their city. I trusted you, Sol. If they refuse to change... how far are you willing to go to keep your word?"

■ Ordis Recruit

NARRATOR: KELSANG

"I move through the winding channels of the Gestalt like a shadow, until I find an individual susceptible to my influence. Sofia's Espar is now fully operational, greatly extending my reach. I extinguish the recruit's consciousness and take their place within the shell of their mind, observing the work underway. The Ordis have been busy. The Thermaic Quadrant's Espar is nearly complete. Once it is, I will be able to project my consciousness among the Reka, to stand beside my peers. It has been a long time since we were all gathered like this..."

■ Mana Moth

NARRATOR: EDDIE MARV

“Well, there’s our answer! A swarm of butterflies—countless butterflies blotting out the view and concealing the Asgarthan players! But will this strategy be enough? Is this a sign the Sphinxes are running out of ideas? The Vultures have too much experience to be fooled by nothing more than a flutter of wings!”



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