

THE FIRST STEPS

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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PREFACE

Chapter 1: Structural Integrity



The words from the lecture had blurred into the background, much like trying to focus a camera lens on a distant object: clear one moment and slipping out of focus the next.

This was how my mind often operated in class, but especially that day, the focus seemed more elusive than ever. I stared blankly at the whiteboard, and the equations merged into indecipherable shapes.

“Are you okay?” the girl next to me whispered, leaning closer. Her eyes were wide with genuine concern. The classroom noise faded further into the background as I turned to face her.

“Yeah, I’m fine, thanks,” I managed to reply, my voice sounding more distant than I intended. A forced smile briefly animated my features before fading. It must have been clear that my emotions were escaping their internal confines.

I picked up my pen, which had been lying untouched on my desk since the lecture started. I began scribbling aimlessly on the edge of my notebook. The motion was meant to be reassuring, a signal to her, and perhaps to myself, that I was engaged, that I was alright.

But inside, I felt hollow, as empty as the apartment I returned to each night alone. I cast a surreptitious glance around the classroom. Everyone seemed engrossed in their notes; I envied my classmates whose lives seemed seemingly intact. They would go home to lighted windows and dinner conversations, complain about the day’s assignments, and then drift off to a peaceful sleep.

Me?

I'd head back to my dingy apartment.

No parents, no siblings. And my father? I'd never even seen a picture of him, though I'd tried to conjure up an image. He was a blank canvas where I sometimes painted an idealized portrait: tall, strong, maybe once handsome, as we often imagine the best versions in such voids. He was likely far different now. Maybe he was an older man with a beer belly, or maybe he wasn't out there at all.

My mother's image, however, needed no embellishment. She had been genuinely beautiful. She'd raised me alone, treating me like royalty. But her kindness made her loss hit even harder. The nicer someone is to you, the sharper the sting when they are gone. And losing her was the deepest cut of all.

That day's heavy air was loaded with the grief of her memory; it was the anniversary of her death. I hated feeling sad, and I'd done everything possible to push thoughts of her away, but it was tradition to visit her grave each year. It brought back a flood of childhood memories - joyful, yet they always brought me back to the pain I tried so hard to avoid.

"You, Samuel, can you repeat what I've just said?" my professor called out from across the hall.

Oh no, I knew I was in trouble. Of course, my lens was out of focus. I was painfully aware of the stakes; I was on a scholarship, and dropping my GPA this semester would only jeopardize it, potentially forcing me to drop out of university.

Sadness is a vicious cycle: something bad happens, you get sad, and when you're sad, motivation flees, only leading to more unfortunate events. Over time, it begins to feel worse because you eventually become the architect of your own misfortune.

Initially, I could blame the world, external circumstances, or just bad luck. But now, there was no one to blame but myself.

"I'm sorry, I wasn't listening," I admitted, knowing it was the worst response possible, yet it was an honest one. Honesty doesn't always get you far, and it certainly earned me a stern look from the professor. It was more of a warning that I might lose my scholarship.

I was too distracted to even feel embarrassed. The professor didn't seem to care enough about me to give a lecture on paying attention. Life moved on around me, and reluctantly, so did I. I tried to latch onto the next few words the professor said, but my thoughts were unruly, scattering in every direction but the lecture.

I tried to focus afterward, but it was futile. My mind kept wandering to places far from this classroom. I just wanted to go home, although I dreaded what awaited me there. I've mentioned how much I dreaded returning to that hollow apartment, but the prospect of going to work was even worse.

I worked as a waiter from 4 to 9 at a local diner. It didn't pay much, but it was enough to scrape by, enough to keep the lights on and have a meal.

Thanks to my absent father, I inherited nothing, though my mom did her best to provide a good life for me. And she succeeded wonderfully. With her, life was peaceful. I was happy and did well in my studies, which is partly why I was eligible for the scholarship in the first place.

But with her gone, I spiraled downward. The only peace I found was in skipping work, just lying on my sofa and letting my mind wander between the realms of nothing and everything.

That was my plan: to skip work and sink into the cushions.

Yet, it was the anniversary of my mother's passing, so I had to change my routine. Instead of heading to work, I decided to visit her grave directly to honor her memory. Maybe I needed a reason, but I also skipped the remaining two classes of the day.

Looking back, I wonder how I hadn't been fired from work or expelled from university yet.

My university spread out over a vast campus, with my department tucked away in the farthest corner. The mere thought of walking to the bus stop, let alone reaching the campus exit, felt daunting and even more so today. But this was the least I could do for my mom and find some peace for myself.

I boarded the usual bus, the one that passed by the restaurant where I worked. I did entertain the idea of stopping there, continuing my day as usual, visiting my mom after my shift, and avoiding any risk of losing my job.

But I was so lost in deciding what to do that I ended up zoning out until I had passed the restaurant altogether. It seemed the universe had made the choice for me, sparing me the pain of making a decision. I was relieved, in a way; relieved that I didn't have to reproach myself for choosing one over the other.

By 5 PM, I stood by my mother's grave, clutching a single flower in hand that I had picked up along the way. As I knelt down, placing the flower on the grave, the floodgates of my emotions burst open.

Despite my best efforts to steer clear of these painful memories, the love I had for her was too deep, too ingrained to simply forget. I had always tried to keep myself distracted, yet here I was, unable to do anything but surrender to my grief.

As the first tear escaped, I hastily wiped it away, feeling suddenly exposed in the open space. I glanced around, half-expecting someone to witness my moment of vulnerability. But the cemetery was quiet.

"Why did you go, Mom? Why did you leave your child alone?" I whispered, tracing the letters of her name etched in the cold stone.

I hoped that somewhere, somehow, she was listening to my cries. Though she couldn't comfort me with her physical presence, perhaps she could still offer a prayer for me.

I steadied myself, took a deep breath, and reached into my jacket pocket. I pulled out the photograph that Mom cherished most. It was from my 12th birthday. She had taken me to the park and surprised me with a homemade walnut cake, her knowing smile as she watched me devour piece after piece.

We had been happy, just the two of us.

Mom always knew exactly what I loved, a trait of hers that I hadn't fully appreciated until now.

That day, as we sat together enjoying the view, my eyes had been drawn to a family nearby: a father swinging his daughter around. I was so overwhelmed with curiosity that I asked Mom where my father was.

As was typical, she tried to divert the conversation in a little too cheerful voice. If only she had given me a straightforward answer, maybe I could have let the matter rest. But she suggested a game of frisbee instead. Frustration had gotten the better of me, and I had thrown a tantrum, catching her completely off guard.

I often replayed that day in my mind, not just for the tantrum I threw but for the pained expression on Mom's face. Despite everything, I couldn't help but feel resentful for the mystery she left behind about my father.

The sharp ring of my phone cut through the silence, pulling me back to the present.

"Hey Samuel, you're late again," he said sternly, the background noise of the restaurant clamoring through the speaker, "We're slammed, and I needed you here half an hour ago."

I could almost picture him pacing back and forth, phone in hand, his brow furrowed in annoyance. There was a party at the restaurant, and apparently, it was all hands on deck. They needed every available waiter, and here I was, absent and unaccounted for, lost in my grief rather than tending to my responsibilities.

“Umm, I am sorry, I overslept and forgot to inform you,” I muttered, grasping at what was possibly the weakest excuse I could muster.

My manager scoffed through the phone, “Samuel, this is just one more example of how irresponsible you've become. You-”

His words blurred into the background as he continued lecturing me. My thoughts drifted back to memories of my mom, then wishing I could just collapse on the sofa, to worrying about my studies, and then dreading my own inadequacy and my inability to come up with a believable excuse.

I simply wanted to disappear.

By the time I snapped back to reality, the only words that cut through the haze were, “You're fired,” followed by the beep of the line going dead. I should have pleaded and made some attempt to salvage the situation, but I didn't.

And just like that, my job was gone.

That was the final nudge I needed. I couldn't stand the thought of circling back to an empty apartment and staring at the walls that seemed to close in on me by the hour.

Something inside me snapped; I needed a change, a real change.

I rushed home in quick steps. Once inside, I pulled out my backpack and began throwing things into it: a few clothes, essential toiletries, my old, sturdy boots, ropes, a security kit, and, of course, the photo of my mom. Within an hour, I was ready. I didn't plan my route meticulously. Instead, I decided to let the trails guide me.

With my backpack slung over my shoulder, I locked the door to my apartment, perhaps for the last time in a long while. I headed to the bus station, bought a ticket to the nearest mountain range, and soon, I was on my way to a place where the only voices I'd hear would be the rustling leaves and bird songs.

Chapter 2: Blueprints of the Past

I was jolted awake on the midnight bus, the only disruption in a quiet world of sleepers. It seemed I was the only one disturbed; around me, a few scattered passengers remained lost in dreams. Beside me, a father and daughter duo continued their peaceful slumber, her head resting against his chest while headphones enclosed him in his own silent reserve.

Rising briefly, I scanned the interior of the bus for any sign of shared alarm. There was nothing but the gentle rise and fall of quiet breaths. Settling back into my seat, I closed my eyes, trying to drift back to sleep. The bus's steady hum and the cool breeze from the open window were my only companions as my head bobbed with the rhythm of the road.

I lay there, eyes wide open, staring out the bus window. Despite the hour I'd spent trying to relax, my mind wouldn't be quiet. Each attempt to shove away the painful thoughts had failed, and now, exhausted from the effort yet too wired to sleep, I surrendered. I lay motionless, fixated on the moonlit scene outside as a distraction from the gnawing fear that I had nearly destroyed any chance of building a decent life.

The moon hung in the sky as a giant white circle, forming a silver glow on the entire scene. The inside of the bus, however, was pitch black except for the little moonlight that could enter through the windows. The sky was a deep, inky black, dusted with a million tiny diamonds, stars twinkling ferociously.

Down below, far off in the distance, a line of dark humps peeked over the skyline: hills glowing in the soft moonlight, their shapes gentle and rolling. It was no doubt a peaceful sight, though its tranquility didn't budge me.

As I gazed at the stars, my thoughts involuntarily drifted back to nights spent stargazing with my mom. Despite my efforts to keep such memories at bay, the floodgates had opened, and I found myself lost in recollections of her. Stargazing wasn't a rare event in our lives; my mom held a peculiar fascination with the night sky, insisting on these outings at least once a month. Inevitably, one of these sessions ended in an argument.

One New Year's Eve, we stayed up late, my mom spinning tales as we watched the sky. Mid-story, she fell silent, her gaze fixed out the window. The moon that night, much like tonight, hung low, bright and striking. She seemed as if she was in a trance.

"Mom," I said, waving my hand in front of her eyes to regain her attention.

"Uh-oh yes, dearie," she responded, snapping out of her daze. "The moon is so beautiful tonight, and oh, look at the stars. How about we go out? Just you and me."

Without a word, I stood up, slid into my jacket, and dashed to snatch her keys and the telescope. She burst into laughter as she watched me sprint toward the main door.

As always, we headed to the rooftop of our building, thirteen stories above the ground. It was a cold, clear night, but the chill seemed to vanish in my mom's presence. She settled me down and started pointing out constellations. I was twelve at the time; I grasped most of her explanations but not all.

My mom extended her arm toward the heavens, where the stars twinkled like pearls strewn across a velvet blanket.

"Look, Samuel," she whispered, her eyes sparkling much like the stars themselves, "Do you see that group of stars over there? That's Orion, the Hunter. See his belt? Those three stars in a row?"

I squinted, my gaze darting across the sky, trying to trace the constellation she described. "I think I see it," I murmured uncertainly.

"Orion was a great hunter in Greek mythology," She explained, "He was so skilled that he earned a place among the stars as a constellation. And just above his shoulder," she extended her arm, guiding my eyes, "there's a bright star named Betelgeuse. It's a supergiant, much bigger than our sun."

My eyes widened in awe. "Wow, it's huge!" I exclaimed, my voice tinged with wonder.

She knelt beside me, her hand gently pointing to another part of the sky. "And over there, do you see those stars forming a 'W' shape? That's Cassiopeia, the Queen. She was very vain and was punished by being placed in the sky, upside down."

I giggled at the thought, the image amusing. "Does she stay upside down forever?" I asked, picturing the queen in her eternal, inverted throne.

"Pretty much," She replied, laughing softly. "But the sky is full of stories like that. Every star and every constellation has a tale. It's like a giant storybook up there."

We stood in silence for a moment. Fireworks exploded in the distance, their colors briefly illuminating the rooftop. I turned to my mother, "Mom, do you think there are other worlds out there? Like, with aliens and spaceships?"

She smiled, wrapping an arm around me. "You know, I've always believed that the universe is too big for us to be alone. Imagine what it would be like to travel among the stars, visit different planets, meet new life forms, and have adventures beyond our wildest dreams."

"That would be so cool! We could be like space explorers, discovering new worlds and making friends with aliens," I said.

She nodded, her imagination running wild. "Who knows? There might be different worlds out there. You just have to look for them."

"Do you think we could really do that one day, Mom?" I asked, widening my eyes.

“Who knows, Samuel? The future is brimming with possibilities.” She kissed the top of my head gently. “For now, let's dream and allow our imaginations to carry us on those adventures. And maybe, just maybe, we'll find a way to turn those dreams into reality.”

Excitement bubbled up inside me as if I were making a wish upon a star. “Well, then, I dream of a world with you and Dad and me,” I declared. The thought almost made me jump with joy, but then a realization tempered my spirits: my imagination had its limits.

“Mom, can you tell me what he looked like? Maybe then I could imagine him better,” I asked.

She fell silent for a moment, “I'm sure you'll grow up to be as handsome as he was,” she finally said. The smile that had brightened her face faded, and she began to pack up her things, signaling it was time to head back inside the house.

I had always avoided mentioning my father to prevent any rifts during our happiest moments. But this was the first time I had brought him up since the incident at our picnic when I threw a tantrum.

As she turned to leave, I stood frozen, thinking she expected me to follow. Tears welled up in my eyes as I watched her. Suddenly, she stopped, her belongings clattering to the ground, and she ran back to me. What followed was a moment I had tried to erase from my memory. I didn't want to recall any instance where I had upset her. It was nothing extraordinary, just me throwing fits because she always avoided the topic or gave vague responses.

“Are you alright?” the bus hostess asked, leaning in with a look of concern.

“Ah, um, yes. I'm fine,” I replied. I hadn't realized it, but I was no longer gazing out the window. Instead, I was bent over, cradling my head in my hands, which were now soaked with tears.

"It's hard to believe you, sir," she replied. She handed me a glass of water, which I drank eagerly as if parched for days.

"Thanks," I half-whispered with a sigh, letting her know I needed some sleep.

"Alright, but if you need anything, let me know," she said, giving me a big smile before walking away. I could sense her noticing me out of concern.

I glanced around again to see if anyone had noticed how I'd nearly embarrassed myself, but thankfully, everyone seemed lost in their sleep. Turning back to the window, my gaze was caught by a peculiar sight: a cave huddled among hills that looked like layers of sand accumulated over time. It was exactly the kind of adventure spot I had imagined visiting with both of my parents.

"Could it be real?" I whispered to myself in shock. Had I seen this place before, or had I imagined it so vividly that it now seemed to exist right before my eyes?

I wanted nothing more than to yell at the driver to stop, to let me off right there so I could explore the hills that beckoned me. But with no bus stop in sight, there was no way for me to simply get off and chase what seemed like a dream turned into reality.

"I wish this bus would stop," I muttered under my breath, memorizing the landmarks with the intent to return.

Without warning, the bus lurched forward, with a loud crash that vibrated through the cabin, tossing bags from seats and snapping everyone's attention to the front. My heart raced; we had hit something - or someone. I jolted upright as the bus shuddered to a halt, my breath catching in my throat.

The bus had stopped—no, it had slammed into something - or someone.

Terrified gasps and whispers filled the air as the driver sprang from his seat and flung the door open. "Stay in your seats! Stay inside!" he

commanded in a voice that pierced demand over the sudden commotion.

But it seemed nobody could. As soon as the bus screeched to a halt, some passengers bolted to the door, either out of curiosity or concern that someone might be in danger; I couldn't tell. I, too, got off with them. It was the perfect opportunity for me to escape to the hills, a place that seemed to belong in my imagination alone.

As I stepped off the bus, my eyes immediately found the cause of our abrupt halt. It wasn't a person. It wasn't a deer. It was something indescribable: lying there, tangled and writhing in pain. Its form was unclear; its features were a jumbled mess that my brain couldn't quite sort into any familiar shape. Blood matted its fur, or was it feathers? and its breaths came in short, painful gasps.

"Call the police!" someone shouted from behind me.

At that moment, I wish I had been the one to have been hit by the bus. It was hard to feel for the deer or whatever it was. I wanted the same fate for myself.

As the commotion around the injured creature grew, I slipped quietly back onto the bus. Everyone was too distracted to notice me, so I grabbed my bag from the overhead compartment and slung it over my shoulder. It held everything I needed—nothing more. The bus was empty, eerily silent compared to the turmoil just outside its doors. I took a deep breath, steadying myself, and stepped out of the bus.

I didn't glance back. The sounds of urgent conversations and the creature's soft whimpers faded with distance, with every step I took further from the scene and toward the hills that called out my name.

For years, I had felt out of place, as if I was an outsider in a world. Now, I was embracing that separation, choosing isolation over the pretense of belonging.

Behind me, the world carried on, oblivious to my departure. Ahead, the world welcomed me. It was a new beginning or perhaps an end. Either way,

it was mine.

Chapter 3: Freefall into Fantasy

I woke up to the sunlight piercing through the fabric of my tent. It had been three days since I set up camp here. Normally, it gets this bright around 9 AM, but a glance at my watch showed it was only 7:00. Groaning, I sat up straight and unzipped my tent to a breathtaking morning, the only thing I liked about being here.

Outside, the sky was painted light blue and purple, and everything was resting in a soft, pink glow. My tent opened up to rugged mountains in the distance, making it feel like I was on another planet entirely. Not a soul was in sight—just the untamed wilderness and me.

“Ah, what a crazy night,” I murmured to myself. “Was I dreaming?” This was the question I often asked myself ever since I got here.

A good night's sleep would often snap me back to reality, and the decision to skip work and leave my old life behind suddenly felt like the most reckless choice in the history of all decision-making. But this was it; this was now. I was committed to the path I had chosen. Besides, I was finally in the place of my dreams, the backdrop I had always envisioned when imagining adventures with my mom and dad. How many people get to experience such serendipity?

There was no way I was going back to a life where I felt I didn't belong. I turned to glance at my backpack, which lay open beside me, its contents strewn about in absolute disarray.

I picked up the water bottle and took a careful sip. There wasn't much left, just about 300 ml sloshing quietly at the bottom. Each drop felt precious under the circumstances, and so far, I had made no effort to find water.

“What was I even thinking?” I muttered to myself, frustration bubbling up. I'd left behind a web of unresolved issues for this? There was no sign of water or food anywhere, just the hills that stretched endlessly ahead.

Bus stops? A foolish hope.

“Relax, relax,” I whispered, trying to soothe the rising panic. I shifted my focus to breakfast. It was nothing fancy, just a couple of energy bars that tasted more like cardboard than actual food. But they did the trick, subduing the hunger that gnawed at my stomach.

Despite the bleak breakfast, I couldn't help but feel a small surge of pride. I had managed to erect something that at least resembled a tent. It had been a comical battle against my own clumsiness with stakes and ropes, and the flimsy materials I had brought along didn't make the task any easier.

I stepped outside, the ground damp with morning dew, chilling my feet as I moved around. I turned to look back at the tent, noting how awkward and lopsided it stood. It actually made me laugh: a deep, ringing laugh that cut through the silence of the morning. Ridiculous as it looked, it had done its job.

Yes, I was out here, far from any comforts of home, dealing with the potential threat of starvation. But I was also living: truly experiencing the raw, unfiltered edges of life. It was a real adventure, the kind you can't plan for, the kind that tests you in ways you never expected.

I sat there for a moment, wrestling with the idea of whether or not to pack up my belongings. After a moment's consideration, I decided against it. I hadn't seen a single soul in this place for the past three days, so it was safe to say nobody was going to steal my things. Actually, I would have been lucky to find someone around to ask for help.

The landscape around me was neither forgiving nor lush. It was terrain: a mix of rugged foothills and sparse vegetation, hardly the ideal place for foraging. I was unprepared for this. The romantic notion of living off the land was quickly melting away.

With a resigned sigh, I started by searching the area around my campsite, hoping to spot any kind of edible berry or plant. My knowledge of wild edibles was limited to a few pictures I'd glanced at in a survival guide I'd skimmed years ago. Now, every leaf and berry seemed like a potential meal or a poisonous mistake.

After a fruitless hour of cautious investigation, I realized I needed to shift my focus to finding water. Dehydration would debilitate me faster than hunger. With no better plan, I headed in the direction I hoped the water would be.

As I trudged through the underbrush, every rustle in the bushes put me on high alert, half-expecting to see a snake or some other danger lurking. But there was nothing, just the wind whispering through the trees, perhaps mocking my attempts at survival.

I kept my eyes peeled for any sign of moisture, a dark patch of earth, a cluster of lush greenery, or anything that might indicate the presence of water nearby. My throat was dry; each swallow was a scratchy reminder of my urgent need.

The terrain had rocky outcrops and loose stones that threatened to send me sprawling with every other step. The so-called hills were more like jagged mounds. Their uneven surfaces made climbing treacherous, and I found myself frequently stopping, hands on knees, catching my breath, and fighting the sinking feeling of despair.

The terrain had rocky outcrops and loose stones, and I knew they'd send me sprawling any minute. The so-called hills were more like jagged mounds. I found myself frequently stopping, hands on my knees, catching my breath, and fighting the sinking feeling of despair.

It was around sunset when I stumbled upon a tiny little oasis. I nearly jumped with excitement. I began searching for my water bottle to fill up, only to realize with a sinking heart that I had left it back at the campsite. I didn't even know how far I'd wandered off. Disappointed but desperate, I scooped up the water with my hands, the coolness a brief solace as I sat down, again questioning the series of decisions that had led me here.

"Alright then," I resignedly said to myself, feeling the weight of my isolation, "Guess I'll stay here."

And stay I did. I spent around three to four nights in that oasis, and my diet was reduced to eating raw leaves. They were bitter, nasty, and thoroughly disgusting, but hunger made them tolerable. At times, I even devoured them with what could only be described as delight. My hunger was so intense that I felt like I could eat my own raw flesh if pushed to it.

Surprisingly, I hadn't lost all my strength. Sure, I had definitely lost weight, and my clothes hung more loosely around my body, but the thought of going back didn't appeal to me at all. I preferred staying there, eating leaves for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, rather than returning to a place where I felt I didn't belong.

As the days passed, it oddly made no sense, but I found myself regaining strength. Maybe it was my will to survive, or perhaps the body's remarkable ability to adapt to even the harshest conditions. I decided it was time to try finding my way back to the tent. Miraculously, I succeeded.

When I arrived, I found my belongings exactly where I'd left them, covered in sand, which proved that no human had visited this remote spot. I gathered my things and made my way back to the oasis. This time, I knew my path very well.

Over the days that followed, I adapted to a pace of survival that had once seemed beyond my capabilities. Each morning, I went out from my improvised shelter to look for food, learning to identify which plants were edible and which were best avoided. The afternoons were spent setting traps or, on rare occasions, successfully hunting the small animals I could find. Each kill was followed by the painstaking process of making fire. It seemed impossible to me in the beginning, but now, it felt almost second nature.

The evenings were a time of reflection as I cooked my meager yet satisfying meals. The nights were long and chilly, but I had learned to find comfort in them rather than fear. This life, while different from anything I had known, brought a surprising peace and a feeling of being connected to the world around me.

Life was easier, even happier than those first daunting days after my arrival. Often, in the morning, I would lounge on a hammock I had fashioned from straw and other materials found around the oasis. One such morning, I lay back, basking in the warm sun, gazing out into the distance. There were no worries about jobs or the hectic pace of the life I had left behind. It was just me and my simplified existence.

But like all times of peace, it was short-lived. I felt as if someone was behind me, and I sat up in an instant. My heart pounded in my chest. I was sure I had heard the soft shuffle of feet moving through the sand. Turning around, I scanned the area, but there was nothing. Only silence and the soft rustle of the wind.

I tried to lie back down and recapture the peace of just moments before, but it was futile. The feeling of being watched was unsettling. My instincts were on high alert, leaving me to wonder if it was just my imagination running wild or if there really was something- or someone - lurking in the shadows.

I sat up straight with a deep breath, my eyes whizzing across the scene. My heart skipped a beat, the adrenaline sharp in my veins. I hadn't spotted any large animals since my arrival, and certainly none that would dare approach so closely. The possibility of facing a creature, or worse, a person who had stumbled upon my solitude, was both thrilling and terrifying.

I reminded myself of how far I had come. The skills I had gained here were proof of my ability to survive, to adapt, and to overcome. Yet, in this moment of uncertainty, those same skills sharpened my awareness of every rustle and shadow.

I slid out of the hammock, trying not to startle whatever was watching me. The eyes blinked once, twice, then disappeared behind the rocks. Curiosity got the better of me; I couldn't let this mystery go. I needed to know what kind of creature had dared to come so close.

I began walking toward the creature, and as soon as I did, it took a turn and began to move away. I quickened my pace and began to run after it. If anything, I knew I had my meal for the day.

My boots crunched softly on the gravelly ground as I neared where I had spotted it. There was a rustle, and then there was silence. I paused, waiting, my breath held tight in my chest. Nothing. Taking a deep breath, I moved to the other side of the boulders.

Suddenly, a shadow darted out; it moved with graceful agility, a flash of tan and muscle. A deer, I realized with both relief and excitement. But it was unlike any deer I'd seen before; it was larger than a horse.

I couldn't help myself; I started after it. My legs pumped, my lungs burned, but the sight of the deer leaping effortlessly away from me made me want to capture it at any cost. At that moment, I was really amazed, as I had never imagined that I would ever chase after a deer.

We raced across a more open stretch of land, the deer always just ahead, always just out of reach. It seemed to be leading me somewhere, or perhaps it was merely fleeing my intrusion. But then, as the terrain grew steeper, I saw it slip into a shadowy opening in the hillside: a cave hidden among the high grass and the wildflowers that clustered at its entrance.

I approached slowly. I had not expected to find a cave, much less one so cleverly concealed. The deer was nowhere to be seen now. It was as if it had vanished into thin air.

Standing at the entrance, I peered inside. The cave was cooler; the air had an earthy scent of damp moss. It was inviting in its own rugged way. I hadn't experienced anything novel for days now, so I decided to explore. It did look like a better place for shelter than my tent.

As I stepped through the entrance of the cave. The light dimmed as the cave mouth tapered into a narrow throat before opening into a wider chamber. It was supposed to be dark, suffocatingly dark, but it wasn't. Instead, a soft radiance emanated from deeper within, pulling me forward as if the light itself had tangible hooks gently tugging at me. I squinted, trying to locate the source of the illumination, but it seemed as if the light was coming from everywhere and nowhere all at once.

As I rounded a bend, the chamber widened dramatically, and I stopped dead in my tracks. The walls here were covered in symbols. No, not just any symbols, but the very constellations that my mother had shown me in the night sky when I was a child. There were the dippers, big and small, Orion's belt, and even the Pleiades, all carved into the rock with a precision that seemed almost supernatural.

These symbols were illuminated by phosphorescent moss or some mineral unknown to me. I felt like I was looking at the night sky or hallucinating since I didn't have proper food for days. My fingers hovered over the familiar shapes, not quite touching the cool stone. Memories of my mother flooded back, her voice recounting the myths and legends of the stars, her hands pointing up at the sky, tracing the imaginary lines between stars to reveal the heroes and beasts hidden in the constellations.

I swallowed hard, the lump in my throat growing with each recalled memory. She knew these symbols and had drawn them in her notebooks, on napkins, and anywhere she could. I had always thought it was just her passion for astronomy, for myth. But standing here, in this unknown cave, seeing those same symbols etched in stone, it felt like more than coincidence.

I followed the path laid out by the constellations. The cave twisted and turned. It was like walking through a gallery of the universe's history, each connecting my mother's knowledge to these ancient depictions.

As I went in deeper, the cave began to narrow again, funneling me toward a singular point. The air grew denser, the light brighter, almost blinding now. I had to shield my eyes with my hand as I took those final steps toward the heart of the cave. I could, at any point, turn back, but I stayed. I was surely supposed to feel horrified at such a revelation, but everything was starting to make sense. Maybe my coming here was all for a reason.

Finally, I reached a dead end. It was a symbol, unfamiliar yet oddly resonant, that drew me closer. It depicted what seemed to be a celestial map, with spirals and stars interwoven with elegant, flowing scripts of an

ancient language I couldn't understand but felt a connection to. My fingers reached out to trace the luminescent lines. As soon as my skin made contact, a surge of warmth rushed through my body, and the ground beneath me shuddered violently.

In a heart-stopping moment, the solid rock floor crumbled, disintegrating into nothingness. I tried to leap back, but it was too late. The ground vanished, and I was falling, plummeting into an abyss. The initial shock forced a gasp from my lungs, and terror gripped me as I descended rapidly into the earth. I had been running into problems one after another, and this seemed to be the final one.

I knew it. I was going to die.

But as I fell, my initial panic transformed into a calm. Surrounding me, streaks of colorful light appeared, swirling around me in a mesmerizing dance. They seemed to be emanating from my own body. The lights pulsed from soft blues to vibrant greens.

My hands, moving as if they had a mind of their own, began to trace symbols in the air. The movements were instinctive, as if, by some ancient knowledge that I didn't know I possessed. The symbols I drew were similar to those on the cave wall; they seemed to slow my fall, easing the pull of gravity.

It continued until the sensation of falling abruptly ceased. I expected a harsh impact, but instead, my descent ended as gently on what felt like grass. My eyes felt heavy as if I hadn't slept for days. I closed my eyes, and my vision blurred.

Before I drifted into a slumber, I saw a green sky above my head. Everything was green. I was someplace far away from the cave. I didn't know how, and I didn't know what. I just closed my eyes and fell asleep, feeling the calm that I did when I slept in my mom's lap.

CHAPTER 4: TALKING FOXES AND OTHER IMPOSSIBILITIES ◆◆◆

I lay stretched out on a surface that felt as if a thousand needles were pricking my back. I squinted, trying to make sense of my surroundings. Above, what I initially mistook for the sky was actually an array of enormous trees glistening in shades of purple and green, their heights taller than what ten giraffes stacked atop one another might achieve.

It took a moment for my senses to adjust to this alien environment. I remained there, sprawled on the ground, my mind racing as I pieced together the last fragments of memory before finding myself here. The last clear image I had was of chasing a creature - was it a fox or a deer? - into a cave. Inside, mysterious symbols had danced before my eyes, and then suddenly, here I was.

“Could I be in a coma?” I wondered silently, contemplating the silence around me. But who would find me in such a forsaken place and take me to a hospital? I examined my hands, turning them over and flexing my fingers. They were definitely real; I was conscious, in control of my muscles, unmistakably awake.

Attempting to rise, a sharp pain shot through my spine, wrenching a loud scream from deep within my throat. I must have injured myself, possibly a fracture. Carefully, I curled my legs and pushed myself up with a rigid back, moving as little as possible to lower the pain.

The landscape around me had some resemblance to where I had camped, with towering mountains in the distance. Yet, the land itself had transformed dramatically; it was now lush and vibrantly green. The air was different here: it had a unique scent, a blend of sweet floral fragrances with an undertone of something sharp and metallic. What I initially thought was grass turned out to be a carpet of bioluminescent moss that lit up the ground.

I scanned the area for any sign of life, any face that might explain where I was.

Nothing.

The place was utterly deserted. I tried to shout for help, but my throat burned with the rawness of having screamed perhaps for hours, or maybe it was the air here: thick and perfumed from the strange flora. I wondered if perhaps I had fallen into a coma and woken up after some mysterious calamity, but that didn't explain the surreal sky painted blue and pink nor the five moons that hung overhead.

I steadied myself and began to look for something, not knowing what to expect in this bizarre place. My eyes caught sight of strange creatures that defied all known categories of fauna. They resembled tiny dwarfs, hardly the size of my hand, with disproportionately large bellies and noses that made them look both comical and enticing. Curiosity overcame caution, and I reached out to scoop one up, only to yelp in surprise as it nipped sharply at my hand, forcing me to fling it away.

Not far from this encounter, an enormous flower caught my eye. Its petals, broad as umbrellas, gave off a pulsating yellow glow from their centers. I watched, fascinated, as a fly with seemingly fifty wings buzzed closer to it. In a startling display, the flower's core ignited the moment the fly touched it, incinerating the insect in a brilliant flash.

Moments later, the charred remains were expelled from the flower as if it had been spat out. Initially, each new discovery left me in shock, but as these wonders continued, I found myself adapting and accepting the strange as part of the norm in this foreign world.

It wasn't long before something else caught my attention. I stumbled into a clearing that seemed almost designed for serenity. In the center stood a small, quaint cottage that looked as though it had been conjured by the land itself. The walls were made of smooth, rounded stones that caught the moonlight. The roof was covered in golden-brown thatch, perhaps made of local reeds or grass.

The cottage's windows, round like portholes and framed with wood painted a gentle pastel blue, mirrored the playful dance of moonlight on their glass.

The place looked inviting, but then a pulse of anxiety throbbed through me. Who - or what - could be living in such a place, in such a world? Was this the dwelling of a friend or a foe? I was no longer in any familiar place, let alone and what could guarantee this creature wouldn't bite me as well.

I took a deep breath, readying myself to face whatever came next. "I'll deal with whatever comes my way," I murmured to myself, stepping closer to the door.

I raised my hand and knocked hard on the door. I waited, but no reply came. I knocked again, this time harder. A few seconds later, I heard heavy steps coming from inside. I swallowed and took a step away from the door. As the person approached, I heard them complaining loudly about how I'd disturbed his sleep.

To my surprise, it wasn't a person who had appeared at the door. Instead, a fox, its fur a deep, rich auburn, looked at me with an equally surprised expression.

"Oh dear lord, what happened to you?" the fox exclaimed, its head tilting up and down as it scanned me from head to toe. I stood frozen, caught off-guard, without even the chance to apologize for disturbing what seemed to be its peaceful evening.

Before I could gather my thoughts, the scene shifted almost surrealistically, and I found myself inside the house, sitting comfortably on a plush beanbag. A thick, warm blanket was wrapped around me, and I

could feel the heat of a steaming soup as it approached my lips. I almost spilled it due to its unexpected warmth but managed to keep it in as the fox sat beside me, gently feeding me with a small spoon.

“Feeling any better?” he asked with a smile.

Definitely not, I thought, staring in disbelief at a talking fox. “Ah- yes, you can talk,” I blurted out, still in shock. “I-I mean, yes, I’m fine.”

“Of course, I can. What sort of question is that?” The fox looked confused for a second, its brow furrowed in a very human-like expression of puzzlement.

I was at a loss for words, overcome by the absurdity of my situation. Understanding escaped me completely at that moment. “Where am I?” I managed to ask, sitting up straighter and sliding the blanket off my shoulders.

“Also, Foxes can’t talk,” I added.

“Foxes can talk, you silly,” Zephyr replied with a chuckle. “Now I see why you newbies get so confused all the time.”

His response only baffled me further. What newbies was he talking about? My mind raced with questions.

The fox, noticing my confusion, adjusted herself on the cushion beside me, his tail flicking thoughtfully.

“Samuel.”

“Samuel,” he began, “Well, since you’re here and quite obviously out of your element, let me tell you that you’re in Feyiaria.”

“Feyiaria?” I repeated, the name rolling awkwardly off my tongue. It felt foreign and unreal, much like everything around me.

“That’s right,” Zephyr nodded, watching my reaction closely. “Where do you come from?” He paused, seeing my bewilderment deepen, and clarified, “I mean, what planet?”

“Earth,” I responded, still half-expecting to wake up from what felt like a bizarre dream.

“Ah, Earth. Much like it, this is Feyiaria—a land where the mundane and magical meet,” Zephyr explained with a flourish of his paw. He seemed genuinely amused by my puzzled expression. “Don’t worry, I’ve seen Earthlings like you here before. You’ll soon find your place.”

As he spoke, he reached out to a small potted plant beside him. With a gentle touch, the plant shivered and then sprouted a cluster of berries, their colors vivid and inviting.

He plucked one and held it out to me. “Want some?” he offered.

“How did you do that?” I asked, reluctant to touch it.

“Ah, that’s the essence,” Zephyr said as if that explained everything. He saw my blank look and continued, “Essence is the life force, the magic that binds all things in Feyiaria. It’s what lets flowers glow and, well, allows me to talk.”

“Essence?” I echoed, trying to grasp the concept. It sounded like something out of a fantasy novel, yet here I was, experiencing it firsthand.

“Yes, essence,” he confirmed, nodding. “It’s everywhere in Feyiaria, flowing through every living thing.”

Startled, I could only stare as the once small plant now stood robust and vibrant.

“Well, that’s not how it ever happened on Earth,” I said, still trying to wrap my head around the strange turn of events.

“Yes, 'cause it’s the magic of Feyiaria.”

“Many other creatures end up here and are sent back to their planets,” he continued, “Don’t worry. We will send you back to your planet. I just have to speak to the higher-ups.”

The prospect of going home felt like a lifeline, but another part of me was hesitant. Feyraria, though strange and novel to me, had an inexplicable pull.

“Ah, okay. And why are you helping me out?” I asked, trying to understand his motives.

“Well, I consider it my job,” the fox said, his smile widening. Just then, a small fox cub bounded into the room, drawing my attention.

“He's off to bed. You can wait here until morning, and I'll arrange for some help.”

As the cub scampered away, I felt a pang of longing. The thought of leaving this place so soon made me uneasy. Zephyr seemed kind and willing to assist, but the idea of returning to my old life felt rash.

I sat there, the weight of indecision pressing down on me. Could I really just leave this place behind? I began to pace, my mind racing with questions. Was there truly a way back, and did I even want to take it?

The room was quiet; the only sound was the soft rustling of the wind outside. My curiosity got the better of me, and I found myself wandering around the room, examining the various items. There were trinkets and objects, each imbued with its own bit of magic. I picked up one item after another, admiring the use of unfamiliar materials.

My gaze settled on a small potted plant sitting nearby, the same one the zephyr had shown me earlier. He had called it “essence,” though I hadn't fully understood what he meant. I reached out to touch it, mimicking the way the Zephyr had handled it.

The moment my fingers brushed the leaves, the plant reacted. It began to grow, tendrils stretching out and leaves unfurling before my eyes. I stumbled back, startled by the sudden burst of life. The plant's growth was rapid and almost mesmerizing, its vibrant colors filling the room with an otherworldly glow.

“What... what just happened?” I whispered to myself.

As I stared at the plant, I realized that Feyraria held more mysteries than I had initially thought. I wasn't from Feyiaria, so how was I able to wield this magic?

Chapter 5: The Quadrant Realms



I was planning on how to spend my next day, considering the best places to forage for food. As these thoughts circled in my mind, Zephyr stood over me, his face breaking into a large grin. As soon as I opened my eyes, I realized that I had been dreaming.

It was disorienting to wake up to someone - especially a talking fox - after being alone for so long. I had grown accustomed to waking up by myself, to the silence of both my tent and my house.

“Breakfast?” he announced cheerfully, the sound of a spoon tinkling against a bowl breaking the morning silence. “I’ve made some delicious soup.”

I sat up on the sofa, scratching my head and trying to shake off my sleep. Zephyr walked over to a tiny table that sat at the very center of the room, setting down a steaming bowl of soup. The smell made my stomach growl. It was also because of the distinct scent of freshly baked bread that there wasn’t a single loaf in sight.

“Ah, thanks,” I mumbled, still half-dazed.

I walked over to the table, wondering if brushing my teeth was a thing here, but I felt too shy to ask.

As I sat down, I glanced out the tiny window beside the mushy sofa. The five moons I had spotted last night were nowhere to be seen. Instead, a massive orb hung in the sky. At first, I thought it was the Sun, but the light was softer and less intense. It looked like one of the moons had drifted closer to the planet, about to crash into it.

Zephyr, noticing my distraction, followed my gaze out the small window beside the mushy sofa.

“What’s that?” I pointed to the giant moon outside the window.

Zephyr noticed my puzzled expression and followed my gaze. “That’s the Eldrin,” he explained, his voice casual as if talking about the weather. “It provides us with light, though it never really gets dark in Feyiaria. It’s a bit like your Sun, just different.”

My jaw dropped at the sight of the Eldrin, its surface rippling with an iridescent sheen that seemed almost alive.

“How do you know about the sun?” I asked, turning back to him and realizing a moment too late that it might've been a stupid question.

Zephyr chuckled, getting up and walking over to a small coop just outside the room. “Ah, this might surprise you, but I’ve met many here who have come from Earth.” He deftly placed his paw underneath a chicken, pulling out an egg from seemingly nowhere. It was a smooth, pastel-blue egg that seemed to shimmer slightly, just like everything else in this world.

As I watched him move, the events of last night flashed in my mind. The plant, the sudden growth, things I couldn’t explain.

The pot with the overgrown plant still lay next to a broomstick leaning against the wall. I hoped Zephyr wouldn’t notice, but he seemed more focused on breakfast preparations.

“And where are they now?” I asked, putting down the spoon I had just dipped into the soup and sitting up straight. The question felt loaded after I had said it out loud.

“Well, they live in the Earth Kingdom,” Zephyr said, now sitting opposite me, placing the egg in a bowl on the table. His nonchalance made the concept of an Earth Kingdom seem almost ordinary.

My eyes widened in shock. “Earth Kingdom?” I repeated, “And where is that?”

Just as soon as I had said it, there was a loud commotion outside. My heart almost skipped a beat, jolted by the sudden noise. Zephyr, however, remained seated, appearing completely unfazed by the disturbance. He casually glanced toward the door in his casual demeanor. The sounds grew louder; an ear-piercing noise was now hard to ignore.

Zephyr finally got up, stretching languidly before heading toward the door. I followed closely behind, feeling anxious to my bones.

As we stepped outside, the source of the commotion became clear. Two tiny dwarfs were in the middle of a fight, their voices carrying through the air. These dwarfs, with their enormous bellies – much like the tiny creatures I had seen earlier – and stout figures, looked like overgrown guinea pigs. Despite their round, cumbersome appearance, they moved with surprising speed, darting around each other in a silly dance.

One dwarf picked up something that looked like a nut and hurled it at the other. The projectile sailed through the air and nearly struck Zephyr's window, missing it by mere inches. I winced, imagining the glass shattering, but the window remained intact. Zephyr, meanwhile, seemed more amused than concerned, watching the dwarfs with a bemused expression.

I nearly lost my hearing to their screeching screams, which could have been laughter or cries of anger – it was hard to tell.

Zephyr stepped forward, raising his voice above the din, “Shut it, you two!” as if he were scolding misbehaving children. The dwarfs paid him little mind, continuing their bickering unabated.

I could see Zephyr's patience finally wore thin. He took a deep breath and bellowed, “ENOUGH!”

The force of his command was startling, and for a moment, it felt as though the world had stopped. The dwarfs froze mid-action, their eyes wide with shock. The entire area fell silent, the abrupt quiet almost deafening after the noise.

Without another word, Zephyr reached down and grabbed the two dwarfs by their ears. They squirmed in his grip but made no effort to resist as he dragged them toward a tiny pond nearby. With a flick of his wrist, he tossed them into the water. The dwarfs landed with a splash and lay still, floating motionlessly on the surface.

Zephyr dusted his paws off as if he had just completed a mundane chore and turned to head back inside. I stood there, stunned by the bizarre event I had just witnessed.

“What was that?” I finally managed to ask, following Zephyr back into the house.

“Wiggles,” Zephyr replied, “Don’t worry about them. They live underwater, and it’s very important that they stay there. Sometimes the winds blow them onto land, which isn’t their natural habitat.”

“The wind?” I echoed, incredulous. “They don’t look that light.”

Zephyr chuckled, shaking his head. “I know they don’t look it, but they are. And they’re quite silly, too. They can’t process what’s bothering them when they’re on land, and as a result, they become pretty aggressive.” He picked up a large stack of bread and carried it over a cart that stood right outside his home.

I looked back toward the pond, where the Wiggles were now diving and resurfacing, seemingly unfazed by their recent scuffle. “But they looked dead in the pond,” I pointed out.

“It’s because they love it so much there they fall asleep instantly,” he explained, placing the loaves carefully into the cart.

The cart itself was an interesting contraption, resembling a blend between a cycle and a traditional cart. It had two large wheels at the back and a smaller steering wheel at the front, which Zephyr could manipulate. The body of the cart was wooden, with intricate carvings of leaves and vines. The bread, wrapped in cloth, was stacked neatly at the back.

Zephyr glanced back at me, smiling as he secured the last loaf. "They're asleep most of the time. They use their energy when on land - it's for their survival, much like having an adrenaline rush."

He hopped onto the cart, motioning for me to join him. "Wanna join me? I'll show you around the city."

"Come on, get on here; I'm heading to Nexus," Zephyr called, tapping the seat next to him as he adjusted the cart's speed. I quickly hopped onto the cart, eager to see more of this fascinating place. The cart picked up speed, the wind rushing past us as we traveled down a winding path that seemed to lead straight to the heart of the Kingdom.

I noticed the intricate design of the cart's handlebars, shaped like entwined branches. The seat, cushioned with what seemed to be woven moss, looked surprisingly comfortable. I climbed in instantly.

"So where exactly in Feyiaria are we?" I asked as Zephyr started pedaling. The ride was surprisingly smooth, the cart gliding effortlessly over the uneven ground.

"Well, we're in the Kingdom of Earth," Zephyr informed me, his tail swishing back and forth as he steered. "Can't you see all these overgrown trees? And, of course, there's me, a talking fox," he added with a playful wiggle of his ears.

I looked around, taking in the dense, vibrant forest surrounding us. The trees towered above, their branches intertwining to create a covering of leaves in shades of green and brown. The ground was carpeted with vegetation, and the air was filled with the sounds of rustling leaves and distant bird calls.

"But there are no humans," I said, confused. The Kingdom of Earth seemed rich with life, but I hadn't seen a single human since I arrived.

Zephyr continued pedaling, "Ah, you'll meet them soon. We're going to Nexus. It's the capital, where people from all backgrounds come together. As for me, well, I'm just a simpleton living out here in the shrubs," he said

with a chuckle. "But when you leave the woods, that's where you'll see all sorts of beings." He seemed to be talking more to himself, now naming things I couldn't make sense of yet.

My mind swirled with questions, each one vying for attention. I felt guilty for bombarding Zephyr with so many questions, but I had to understand this world.

Zephyr and I rode on the cart. It clattered along the winding forest path. The dense trees thinned gradually, giving way to a more open landscape. The morning air was crisp, and the scent of freshly baked bread wafted from the cart's cargo, mixing with the earthy aroma of the woods.

"So, who else lives here besides humans, or is it just us?" I said, puzzled, thinking I had never heard of this place on earth while so many of us lived here. My cheeks flushed a little when I realized that I was talking to a fox, meaning there really were other creatures here.

"Ah, yes," Zephyr started, keeping his gaze forward. "Feyiaria is divided into four main kingdoms, each unique in its own way. Let's start with Lumina, the Kingdom of Light." He pointed ahead as if gesturing toward some distant, unseen place.

"Lumina is known for its everlasting dawn. The light there never fully fades. The inhabitants, called Luminara, are skilled in light magic. They weave light into everything, from their architecture to their clothing. You'll recognize them by their flowing robes that seem to shimmer in the"

I nodded, imagining a city bathed in eternal eldrinlight. As we passed a bend in the path, the trees opened up to reveal a wide meadow speckled with colorful flowers swaying in the breeze. The flowers were starting to look familiar, though I still couldn't recognize them.

Zephyr continued, barely missing a beat.

"Then there's Umbra, the Kingdom of Shadows," he said in a serious tone. I looked at him, wondering what had happened so suddenly. His face had a grim look. "A place of twilight and shadows that seem to move of

their own accord. The people there, the Umbrarians, are adept at shadow magic.”

We bumped over a small hill, and I glanced back at the dense forest we'd left behind. Zephyr adjusted the load of bread in the cart, keeping it steady.

“And what about the third Kingdom?” I asked, despite trying not to interrupt.

“Ah, Samuel, the Kingdom of Aether,” Zephyr said with a nod. “Aether, the Kingdom of Air. It's the kingdom of floating islands and ever-shifting clouds. The Aetherians are light and nimble, often seen gliding through the air on currents of wind. They wear lightweight, billowing clothing that catches the breeze, almost as if they're made to fly.”

We passed a small stream, its clear water gurgling as it flowed over smooth stones. Zephyr got down, took a moment to sip from a water flask, and then got back to the wagon.

“And lastly, it's the huma- I mean the Earth Kingdom,” I prompted, impatient to learn about the final kingdom.

“Yes, I will drop you where most humans live since you need to be back on Earth.”

Up ahead, the grass transitioned from lush green to a more subdued hue, and the tree line thinned out even further, revealing broader vistas. I wanted to tell Zephyr what had happened last night, but I couldn't bring myself to it. It felt like a lie if said aloud. “And we're heading to Nexus, right? What's it like there?”

Zephyr's face lit up. “Nexus is the heart of Feyiaria. It's a melting pot of all the kingdoms, a place where the elements converge. You'll see people from all walks of life: Luminara, Umbrarians, Terrans, and Aetherians, all mingling together. It's a city of wonders, where the architecture blends the elements of all four kingdoms. Tall spires of light, shadowy alleys, lush gardens, and floating platforms all in one place.”

As we approached a slight incline, Zephyr stood on the pedals, pushing harder. I got down to help him out. The cart creaked under the strain, but it held together. I glanced at the horizon, where the outline of tall structures had begun to emerge.

“Sounds like a magical place,” I said, trying to imagine the city.

“It is,” Zephyr agreed, adjusting the bread sacks once more.

We crested the hill, and the full view of Nexus came into sight. Tall towers glistened, forming reflections across a sprawling cityscape. The streets below buzzed with activity.

“Well, there it is,” Zephyr said, slowing the cart as we reached the city's outskirts. “Welcome to Nexus, the city where all paths converge.”

Zephyr hopped off the cart, motioning for me to follow.

“Let's get these loaves of bread delivered,” he said, a twinkle of mischief in his eye. “There's so much to see.”

Little did I know, the city had been waiting for me for a long time.

CHAPTER 6: CULTURE SHOCK AND SHADOWY BEASTS



Being in Nexus felt like stepping into the heart of Feyiaria itself, where every corner was alive with a thousand different worlds converging. Creatures of all sorts mingled or, in some cases, avoided mingling.

The first thing that caught my eye were the towering figures cloaked in black, their hoods pulled low over their faces, forming deep shadows that obscured their features. They moved with grace, their long limbs gliding through the throngs of people with a fluidity that was almost unnatural. They seemed as if they existed in a world slightly out of sync with everyone else.

“These are from the Kingdom of Umbra,” Zephyr whispered, barely audible. He didn’t just point them out with his paw; he practically slunk lower to the ground as if even acknowledging them too loudly might draw their attention. “They’re also known as the Shadewalkers. They prefer to keep to themselves, even here in Nexus.”

I was trying to keep my gaze forward, but the sight of them sent a quiver down my spine. There was something about them that was inherently unsettling, a coldness that exuded from their very beings. It was like

watching shadows that had somehow gained substance, and I couldn't shake the feeling that they were aware of every whisper, every sideways glance cast in their direction.

As we moved deeper into the city, the atmosphere changed once more. The bright Eldrinlight that had welcomed us at the city's entrance began to dim as if the day was rapidly fading into night. I looked up and saw a thick blanket of clouds hanging low over the buildings. The buildings were lit with an artificial glow, lanterns flickering like stars against the encroaching darkness.

"Why is it so dark?" I asked, craning my neck to try and spot the sky through the thick clouds. The dark made it feel like we had descended underground.

"Above this place is the Kingdom of Aether and Lumina," Zephyr explained. "The clouds you see aren't just ordinary clouds; they're part of the floating isles where the Aetherians live. They command the skies, creating vast kingdoms of air and light. The darkness you see is their doing, a part of how they control their environment."

He pointed ahead to where the cloud cover thinned, allowing a single, sharp beam of Eldinlight to break through. The difference was startling, the brightness like a spotlight on the stage. I squinted against the light and saw two figures descending through the beam, their white hair catching the light like strands of silver.

"These are Luminarians," Zephyr continued, not missing a beat. "They're born of the light and the air, inhabitants of Aether's sky colonies. Their ability to control light is amazing, and they're known for their wisdom. They've set up enclaves all over Nexus, small colonies where they live and work, separate from the more grounded citizens."

The Luminarians touched down gently, their feet barely disturbing the dust on the cobblestones. Their hair wasn't just white but seemed to shimmer with a bluish tint, reflecting the light like a mirror. It was almost otherworldly, the way they seemed to glow softly in the dim street.

We continued our journey, passing through areas where the architecture changed drastically from one block to the next. Buildings of gleaming crystal stood next to structures carved from living wood, and between them were market stalls selling everything from enchanted fruits that hovered just above the counter to mechanical devices that hummed with barely contained energy.

Zephyr pointed out various landmarks, his explanations rapid-fire as we moved along. "This is the market district, where traders from the Earth Kingdom sell their goods: herbs, roots, stones imbued with healing properties. Over there, you'll find the Luminar Artisan's Hall, where they craft items of pure light. The Aetherians often hold debates in that amphitheater, discussing philosophy and the nature of existence itself. And that tower you see in the distance? That's the Mage's Spire, where the most powerful spellcasters in Feyiaria study and train."

It was all so overwhelming. I felt like a small drop in a vast ocean, trying to take it all in but barely scratching the surface.

"And umm, where is the colony where you said only humans live?" I asked, dying to see my own kind and learn their story about how they got here. I had seen animals that resembled those from Earth, but their peculiarities made me question whether they were truly from my world or native to Feyiaria. Everything here had an unearthly quality.

"You'll see them soon," Zephyr replied reassuringly. "I'll take you to the biggest human colony in Nexus, but first, I need to deliver these remaining breads."

We made our way through the city, stopping at various shops and stalls to deliver the freshly baked loaves.

Zephyr introduced me to some Aetherians along the way. They, too, had long, white hair that seemed to float even when there was no wind. Their stature was slightly shorter than the Umbrians, but they carried themselves with equal grace. Their eyes were a shade of blue, reminiscent of a clear sky, and they moved with a fluidity that made them seem almost weightless.

I also spotted a few humans here and there, but I waited patiently for Zephyr to take me to the colony, where I could finally talk to them and learn more about their lives in this strange world.

In one of the shops, I met a man who appeared to be human. He greeted Zephyr warmly, and it seemed perfectly ordinary until the moment he reached for the bread Zephyr handed him. Instead of extending his hand, a tentacle emerged from somewhere beneath his cloak, wrapping around the loaf and pulling it toward him. I stared in shock, trying to process what I had just seen. Was he a human who had somehow adapted to this world, or was he something else entirely?

After completing the deliveries, Zephyr handed me a piece of bread as we returned to the cart. The bread was warm and fragrant, and I thanked him before taking a bite. The flavor was unlike anything I had tasted before, rich and slightly sweet.

“Okay, finally, we can go to Humaria,” Zephyr said excitedly as he hopped onto the cart. “We’ll find some help and get you back to Earth, so don’t you worry.”

The mention of Earth hit me like a wave. I was supposed to be eager to return, but a part of me hesitated. The thought of leaving this incredible world behind felt premature, and I was too shy to admit that I wasn’t ready to go just yet. I truly hoped that someone in Humaria could offer me answers — answers that would help me understand my place here and what it meant that I had the ability to make things grow with just a thought.

Zephyr guided the cart down a cobblestone path that led to a large, open square. The square was surrounded by buildings that had a distinctly human design, with brick walls and tiled roofs, though they also had the magical architecture of Feyiaria. Humans and Feyiarans moved side by side, engaged in conversations, exchanging goods, and going about their daily lives.

We came to a stop in front of a large building that looked like a community center. People were gathered outside, some chatting, others tending to small gardens that seemed to grow with an unusual vibrancy.

Zephyr looked at me and smiled. "This is it," he said. "This is where the human community gathers. You'll find friends here, and I'm sure they'll be more than happy to help you find your way."

A lump formed in my throat. I didn't want Zephyr to leave. He had been my guide, my companion, and the one who had introduced me to this incredible world. How could I tell him that I wasn't ready to go back to Earth? That I wanted to stay and learn more about this place, about myself?

But before I could find the words, Zephyr had already started to turn away, his task complete. "Take care, Samuel," he said, his voice warm but distant. "You have a lot to discover here. Don't rush it. I have a friend to meet. Be here before dawn, and I will pick you up and help you find your way back to Earth."

I watched him walk back to the cart, a wave of sadness washing over me. As he climbed onto the cart and began to pull away, I wanted to call out to him, to ask him to stay just a little longer. But the words caught in my throat.

I turned back to the building, steadying myself. This was where I would find the answers I needed. But the thought of doing it without Zephyr by my side made it all feel just a little bit lonelier.

The building ahead of me had an exterior unlike any architecture I had ever seen: organic as if it had been grown rather than constructed.

As I approached, I noticed that the entrance was a grand archway flanked by columns that twisted upwards like vines reaching for the sky. The doors themselves were made of dark wood, polished to a sheen. People were entering and exiting through the doors, some in groups, others alone.

I stepped forward. Inside, the building was even more impressive. The first thing that struck me was the light. It was soft, diffused, and seemed to emanate from the very walls.

The main hall was a massive open space with high ceilings supported by columns that branched out like the limbs of ancient trees. At the center

of the hall was a large fountain, shimmering with a rainbow of colors into a pool surrounded by benches. Around the fountain, people gathered in small groups and engaged in conversations.

I wandered for a few moments, taking in my surroundings, trying to blend in as best as I could. The main hall was large, with groups of people scattered around, some deep in discussion, others lounging and enjoying the company. A small group of guys, not much older than me, caught my eye. They were huddled together, talking in low voices. They looked like they were from Earth, considering their body language.

I decided to approach them, figuring that it was better to stick with people closer to my own age. As I got closer, I caught snippets of their conversation.

“...those Umbra types always think they’re better than everyone else, just because they live in the shadows,” one of them was saying irritably.

Another guy, leaning casually against the wall, nodded in agreement. “Yeah, and they act like they’re so mysterious, but honestly, it’s just annoying. Half of them don’t even show up in daylight.”

I tried not to look too interested, but I couldn’t help but listen in. It seemed like they had some strong opinions about the Kingdom of Umbra.

“Hey,” I said, inserting myself into their conversation as casually as I could. “You guys talking about Umbra?”

The first guy turned to me. He furrowed his brows but soon calmed his expression. “Yeah, just venting, you know? You from around here?”

I nodded, keeping my answers vague. “Sort of. I’m new to this part of town, though. Just trying to get a feel for the place.”

The guys relaxed a bit, “Yeah, well, you’ll get used to it. Just avoid the Umbra folks unless you have to deal with them. They’re always scheming, always with some hidden agenda. Can’t trust them.”

Another guy chimed in, this one shorter but with a more intense look in his eyes. "I heard they're involved in some shady stuff, too. Smuggling, black market deals - things that could get you into real trouble if you're not careful."

I nodded along, trying to absorb the information. "Sounds like it's best to keep my distance, then."

The first guy smirked. "Yeah, but it's not just Umbra. You've got all sorts of people here in Nexus. Just keep your wits about you, and you'll be fine."

I was about to ask more when one of the guys pulled out a small flask, taking a swig before offering it to the others. "Drink?"

I shook my head politely. "Not right now, thanks. So, what's your take on the other kingdoms? You don't seem too fond of Umbra."

The guy with the flask shrugged. "Luminarians are okay, I guess. They're a bit uptight, but at least they're not sneaky like the Umbra types. Aetherians... they're kind of weird, always floating around, literally. And the Earth-born... well, you know how it is. We stick together when we can."

I nodded, trying to keep my expression neutral. "Makes sense. So, what do you guys do around here for fun?"

The first guy grinned. "Depends. Sometimes, we hang out here; sometimes, we head to one of the pubs down the street. There's always something going on in here. You just gotta know where to look."

I could tell they were trying to suss me out and figure out if I was worth including in their circle. I kept my answers vague, not wanting to reveal too much about myself. The last thing I needed was to draw attention to the fact that I didn't really belong here.

One of the guys, who had been quiet up until now, finally spoke up. "You should come with us tonight. We're hitting up a place that has a view of the whole city. You can see the different sections, including Umbra's dark corner."

I hesitated, unsure if I should join them or not. Zephyr had asked me to come to the spot he had left me in when he was to return. But before I could respond, the guy with the flask nudged me with his elbow. "Come on, it'll be fun. You'll get to see more of Nexus than you would on your own."

I forced a smile. "Sounds good. I'm in."

We spent the next hour or so chatting, mostly about Nexus and the people who lived here. They seemed to know a lot about the city, and I tried to soak up as much information as I could without revealing how little I actually knew.

Just as one of the guys was about to share a story about a bar fight he'd witnessed in one of the shadier parts of Nexus, a distant commotion cut through our conversation. The sound was strange, a mix of shouts, growls, and the unmistakable clamor of something.

Everyone around me paused, their expressions shifting from casual to alert. The noise grew louder and more urgent, and without a word, we all bolted for the exit.

We burst out onto the street. The noise was coming from down the road toward the edge of the settlement. A crowd had already started to gather, some people running toward the source of the disturbance, others retreating into the safety of buildings.

"Come on!" one of the guys shouted over his shoulder as he sprinted ahead. I followed, my heart pounding, unsure of what we were about to face.

As we neared the edge of the settlement, the source of the commotion became clear. A pack of shadowy, wolf-like creatures, each one larger than any wolf I'd ever seen, was attacking the outer buildings, their eyes glowing with red light. Their bodies flickered in and out of the shadows as if they were made of the darkness itself.

People were trying to fend them off, using whatever they had at hand: sticks, rocks, anything that could be thrown or swung. But the creatures

seemed almost impervious to physical attacks, their forms dissipating and reforming as they dodged and weaved through the onslaught.

The guys I had been talking to didn't hesitate. They grabbed improvised weapons from nearby stalls and charged in to help the defenders. I stood frozen for a moment, my mind racing. I had no weapon and no experience in fighting anything like this. But as one of the creatures lunged toward a group of women and children huddled behind a cart, something inside me snapped.

Without thinking, I raised my hand, the memory of the plant I had made grew flashing in my mind. A strange energy coursed through my body, tingling at my fingertips. I felt a pull, a connection to something beyond myself, and then, before I could fully comprehend what I was doing, I thrust my hand forward, willing that energy to protect the people in danger.

To my astonishment, a barrier of light sprang up in front of the cart, solid and shimmering like a shield. The creature collided with it, snarling in frustration as it was repelled by the force. The energy pulsed through me, and for a split second, everything around me seemed to slow down. I could feel the essence of the world around me, the life force that Zephyr had mentioned, flowing into me and out again, directed by my thoughts.

"Sam, what the hell was that?" one of the guys shouted, his voice filled with a mix of awe and disbelief.

I didn't have time to answer. The creatures regrouped, their glowing eyes locking onto me as if sensing the source of their defeat. They charged as one, and I instinctively braced myself, focusing on that strange energy again. But this time, instead of forming a barrier, the essence burst outward, rippling through the ground beneath the creatures. Vines shot up from the earth, wrapping around their legs and pulling them down, holding them in place.

The creatures thrashed and snarled, but the vines held strong, tightening with every struggle. The defenders, seeing the creatures momentarily immobilized, seized the opportunity. They moved in quickly, using their weapons to dispatch the creatures while they were trapped.

I staggered back, the energy leaving me as suddenly as it had come. My head spun, and my knees threatened to give out beneath me. I had no idea how I'd done that, and the effort had drained me in a way I hadn't anticipated.

The fight was over as quickly as it had begun. The last of the creatures dissolved into the shadows, leaving behind only the silence of the aftermath. The street was a mess: overturned carts, broken crates, and the bodies of a few unlucky defenders who hadn't been quick enough.

One of the guys, the one with the flask, came over to me, "Man, that was... something else. You've got some serious power, don't you?"

I shook my head, trying to steady my breathing. "I... I don't even know how I did that," I admitted.

Another one of the guys clapped me on the back, a wide grin on his face. "It doesn't matter how you did it. You saved a lot of people back there. Hell, you might've just saved the whole settlement."

I wasn't so sure. The power I'd felt had been wild and unpredictable, and I had barely been able to control it. But before I could dwell on it, another thought struck me. Zephyr. I needed to find Zephyr and tell him what had happened, ask him what it all meant.

"I've gotta go," I said abruptly, turning away from the group. "I need to-"

But before I could finish, a voice called out from behind me. "You need to rest, Sam. You've done enough for one day."

It was one of the older defenders, a man with a weathered face and kind eyes. He placed a hand on my shoulder, guiding me back toward the building we had come from. "Come on, let's get you inside. We'll take care of the rest."

Before I could say anything, a burly man with a weathered face and a thick beard stepped in front of me. His expression was one of both awe and suspicion. "You're not from around here, are you, boy?"

I hesitated, the urge to find Zephyr battling with the need to keep my origins hidden. “No, I’m not,” I said slowly. “I’m just passing through.”

“Passing through?” the man repeated, his eyes narrowing. “With power like that? We could use someone like you here. Nexus isn’t safe, not with those creatures prowling around. We’ve lost too many people already.”

The crowd that had gathered around us murmured in agreement. Some faces were full of gratitude, others held wariness. They were trying to figure me out, just as I was trying to figure out this place.

“I appreciate that,” I said, “But I really need to go. There’s someone I need to meet.”

Another voice piped up from the back, a woman with sharp eyes and a no-nonsense demeanor. “He’s right. We can’t just let him leave. What if those things come back? He’s the only one who could stop them.”

The older man nodded, his suspicion now mixed with something more calculating. “You belong here, son. Whether you know it or not.”

“I’m sorry, I came here from Earth,” I finally admitted, taking a step back. “I’ve come here from Earth, and I’m not sure if I want to go as well.”

Utter silence fell on the crowd as if I had uttered the most profane claim. The man’s expression hardened. “But we have no such powers. How come you were able to save us then?” he said as suspicion raised on his and everyone else’s faces.

I had no answer to that. I didn’t have the answer to that myself. I was honest about my lack of knowledge in the matter, and the man understood. However, many from the crowd were protesting against me. I could see it in their eyes: the desperation, the fear, and the hope in some of them that I could be their savior.

“I’ll come back,” I said, the words tumbling out before I could stop them. “I just... need to see someone first.”

I walked quickly, the murmurs of the crowd fading behind me. I felt like I was moving through a dream, and everything around me was slightly out of focus. I hadn't asked for this power, and I certainly didn't know how to control it.

As I made my way back to the spot where Zephyr had dropped me off, I tried to steady my breathing to calm the rising panic that threatened to overwhelm me. I didn't know what was happening to me or why I had been chosen for this, but I needed answers. And Zephyr was the only one who could give them to me.

But as I rounded the final corner, my heart sank. The spot where Zephyr had left me was empty. The cart, the familiar warmth of his presence, it was all gone.

I stood there for a long moment, unsure of what to do. Zephyr had said he would meet me here, but there was no sign of him. Had something happened? Or had he simply left, assuming I would be fine on my own?

I turned back toward the settlement, my steps slow. Maybe if I explained to them what had happened, they would understand. Maybe they could help me find Zephyr.

Chapter 7: Heritage Calculations



“Samuel,” a voice called out to me.

I turned around and saw Zephyr standing there, his bright eyes fixed on me. A wave of relief washed over me as if I’d just seen a long-lost friend. I hurried toward him, words tumbling out of my mouth as I tried to explain everything that had happened since we parted—the meeting with the guys in the main hall, the fight with the shadowy creatures, and the unsettling reactions from the people afterward.

“Calm down,” said Zephyr with a snicker, but then his expression grew more serious. He glanced around, his ears twitching as if listening for something. “Okay, I believe there might be a reason that you’re here. Let’s get you somewhere.”

Without wasting time, I hopped on his cart, and we went deeper into the human colony. My mind kept replaying the moment when the Essence had surged through me, wild and uncontrollable. The creatures had been stopped, but it felt like I had unleashed something inside me that I didn’t understand.

Zephyr took me to an old man, the one who had stopped me earlier. He approached with a more serious expression. “That kind of power isn’t something that just happens,” he said intently as we sat in his house. It was mostly dim, except for the four large lamps that hung on the ceiling, providing enough light to distinguish one face from another. “You’ve got something special, son. Something that could help us. It isn’t something that just happens. It’s rare, and it’s also dangerous if left unchecked.”

I glanced at Zephyr, who gave me a slight nod of encouragement. “So, what do I do?”

The elder pulled out a small, folded piece of parchment from his cloak. Its edges were frayed and stained. He handed it to me. “There’s a place you need to go. A hidden library in Nexus. This map will guide you. It’s not easy to find, and not everyone is allowed in, but you need to see what’s inside.”

I opened my mouth to speak. Well, to ask some questions but the man stopped me as if he had just read my mind. “You will find answers to everything once you’re there. Go ahead!”

Zephyr nudged me gently. “Let’s go. There’s no time to waste. If those creatures were here, it means trouble isn’t far. It’s lurking somewhere.”

I unfolded the parchment, my eyes tracing the faint lines and cryptic symbols. I couldn’t make much sense of it, but the urgency in the elder’s voice pushed me forward. As I climbed back onto Zephyr’s cart, I couldn’t shake the feeling that this library held answers I desperately needed. The cart rolled on, the sounds of the bustling colony fading behind us, leaving only the crunch of gravel under the wheels.

We journeyed through narrow streets, past curious eyes and whispered conversations. The deeper we went, the more the scenery changed; the buildings grew stranger, their walls etched with intricate carvings and symbols that glowed faintly in the dim light. The path twisted and turned, leading us away from the familiar parts of Nexus into an area that felt hidden, almost forgotten by the rest of the city.

Zephyr pulled the cart to a stop in front of a grand archway covered in ivy and moss. The air was cooler here, and I noticed a faint glow emanating from the stones themselves as if they were alive. “This is it,” Zephyr said quietly, hopping off the cart. “The hidden library. Whatever you find inside, remember what the elder said—this knowledge is not to be taken lightly.”

I stepped under the archway, feeling a shiver run down my spine. The doors ahead were massive, carved from dark wood and reinforced with

metal that gleamed even in the low light. With a deep breath, I pushed them open, the heavy doors creaking as if they hadn't been moved in ages. Inside, the air was thick with the scent of old books and something else—something ancient and powerful.

Zephyr stayed close as I walked through the towering shelves, each filled with volumes that looked as old as the stones that held them. My fingers brushed against the spines, feeling the texture of time worn into every book. Somewhere in here, the answers awaited. But I had no idea what I had come here for. All I knew was that this place had answers to everything. Especially the answers I was seeking.

Zephyr and I continued through the dim hallways of the hidden library, my mind still reeling from the elder's words. Shelves stretched endlessly, filled with scrolls and ancient tomes that seemed to pulse with a quiet, almost tangible energy. The air was thick with the scent of aged parchment and something unidentifiable but familiar, like the scent of earth after rain.

"Why is it so quiet here?" I asked, my voice ringing softly through the vast space. It was unsettling; a place like this, in the heart of a bustling city, should have been filled with scholars or curious minds. Yet, it felt abandoned, untouched, as if it had been forgotten by everyone except us.

"Not many come here anymore," he said. "This part of Nexus is reserved for those seeking answers beyond the ordinary. Most don't even know it exists. It's hidden from the casual eye, meant for those who are called to it." He paused, "Only those seeking it are able to find it. And of all the knowledge, your eyes will only fall on what you're looking for or what you need to know."

"What are we looking for?" I asked, my voice low as if I were afraid of disturbing whatever slept within these walls.

Zephyr stopped, turning to face me. "We're looking for the truth," he said simply, but there was a weight to his words. "The elder sent us here for a reason. He said your powers were different, didn't he? That they didn't just happen?"

We continued deeper, the space growing more confined as the shelves loomed closer. Zephyr led the way, moving until we reached a small, almost hidden alcove. The shelves here seemed to bow inward as if guiding us to a focal point. In the center, on a raised pedestal, lay a single, weathered tome. Its leather cover was etched with runes that looked eerily similar to the ones I had seen in the cave.

“Over here,” Zephyr said finally, leading me to a secluded corner where the shelves seemed to curve inwards, forming a small alcove. A single, dusty tome lay on a pedestal, its leather cover etched with faintly glowing runes that resembled the ones I’d seen in the cave.

“What’s this?” I asked, my voice barely more than a whisper. Zephyr didn’t answer immediately. Instead, he gestured for me to approach it.

“This,” Zephyr said, his voice low, “is where you might find some answers. It’s the book of answers. It stays empty but turns into any book that has the knowledge or answers to what the seeker seeks.”

I hesitated but stepped closer, my heart pounding in my chest. The book seemed to hum softly as I touched it, a warmth spreading through my fingertips. I opened it slowly, and the pages, though aged, felt almost alive. The first few pages were filled with complex symbols and diagrams of creatures that seemed to be a blend of human and Feyiarian, much like the beings I’d seen in Nexus. But as I turned the pages, the illustrations and writings became more detailed, describing abilities and traits unique to these hybrids.

One image caught my eye—it was a figure, half-human, half-something else, standing between two worlds. Underneath it, a passage described the rare beings known as “World Walkers,” those who could traverse between Earth and Feyiaria, wielding Essence that connected both realms.

My breath caught in my throat. The more I read, the more the descriptions felt uncomfortably familiar. It was as though the pages were describing my own experiences: the inexplicable sense of being caught between two worlds, the strange pull I had felt since arriving in Feyiaria, and the moment of power that surged through me when I fought the

shadowy creatures. The further I delved into the text, the more the puzzle pieces began to fit together. I was one of them. A World Walker.

I felt a rush of emotions; fear, excitement, confusion—all tangled together. Was I one of them? If yes, then I must've been born here. There were no World Walkers on Earth.

I turned to Zephyr, whose eyes were fixed on me, but he didn't say anything. I returned to the book, turning another page, and my eyes fell on a name: Alaric. The text described him in reverent terms, detailing his unparalleled mastery over Essence and his role in bridging the gap between the two worlds. It spoke of his heroism, the way he had moved effortlessly between Earth and Feyiaria, using his abilities to maintain balance and protect both realms.

"Alaric," I muttered under my breath, scanning the passage. It described a legendary World Walker, one who had bridged the two worlds with an unparalleled mastery of Essence. He was revered, almost mythic in stature, known for his bravery and the sacrifices he had made.

But then, my gaze landed on a small footnote tucked away at the bottom of the page. It mentioned Alaric's sudden disappearance years ago, shrouded in mystery and unanswered questions. It spoke of his last known actions—seeking refuge for a child, a hybrid of human and Feyiarian heritage, who was to be hidden away for their own protection. The note was brief, almost dismissive as if this child were just another anecdote in the chronicles of Alaric's life.

I read the passage again, but slower this time. The more I stared at the words, the more the pieces began to fall into place. The stories my mother used to tell me about distant worlds and legendary figures weren't just bedtime tales—they were memories, fragments of a past she had tried to shield me from. I recalled her vague answers whenever I asked about my father, her distant look as if she were seeing something—or someone—far beyond the room we sat in. It wasn't just grief that kept her silent; it was something more, something rooted in the very history I was now holding in my hands.

"No," I whispered, stumbling back. "This can't be real."

"What happened?" Zephyr asked. He looked concerned about me. I went on to explain what I had just read.

"Well, if the book is about him and your experiences align with the missing information here - the way you interacted with the Essence, the way you handled yourself in the fight - these aren't things that just happen. It really means-" He didn't bother to finish his sentence. We had both understood the implications.

"But why - why wouldn't my mom tell me any of this?" My voice wavered as I spoke. The confusion, the frustration of being kept in the dark all these years, threatened to overwhelm me. "Why hide it? Why keep me from knowing?"

Zephyr took a step closer, his expression softening. "Sometimes, the truth is a burden too heavy to share. Your mother might have been trying to protect you from a world that's... complicated, dangerous even. She probably hoped to keep you safe, away from the same forces that made Alaric a target."

I turned back to the book, the words blurring as tears threatened to spill. Alaric's tale wasn't just about power or legend; it was about sacrifice, about keeping something precious safe from harm. And that something—someone—was me. I remembered the way my mother would look up at the stars, the same far-off expression I had now, as if she were seeing more than the night sky. She was seeing home, a home I had never known but was somehow always a part of me.

I flipped the page, searching for more, anything that would make the connection irrefutable. The next page detailed the signs of a World Walker—traits that separated them from ordinary humans and Feyiarrians alike. They could manipulate Essence instinctively, without training, often in moments of great need or emotion. They had an innate sense of displacement, of not fully belonging to one world or the other. Most importantly, they often carried a latent potential that only awakened when

they were thrust into situations where their true nature could no longer be denied.

I thought back to the first day I arrived in Feyiaria when I had unwittingly made that plant grow. I hadn't understood it then, and I had been too afraid to tell anyone, fearing that I might be something unnatural. But now, the evidence was undeniable. My hands shook as I traced the line detailing the power of the World Walkers, the same power that had surged through me when I defended the settlement.

I stumbled back. Alaric wasn't just some figure in a book; he was my father. And everything my mother had done, all the secrets she had kept, had been to protect me from this exact moment—from a world where my heritage could either save or destroy me.

Zephyr watched me carefully. "This doesn't change who you are, Samuel. It just means there's more to discover about yourself. You have the potential to do great things, just like Alaric did."

"I don't know if I can do this," I admitted, my voice barely audible. "I don't even know where to start."

Zephyr placed a paw on my arm, a rare gesture of comfort. "You don't have to know everything right now. The fact that you're here, that you're willing to learn... that's enough. You'll figure it out."

I wanted to believe him, but doubt gnawed at me. I'd spent my life trying to make sense of a world I didn't quite fit into, and now I was being told I belonged to two worlds that were even more fractured. But deep down, beneath the fear and uncertainty, there was a flicker of something else—a determination I hadn't realized was there.

I thought of my mother, of the life she'd given me, the sacrifices she must have made to keep me safe. And I thought of Alaric, the father I never knew but whose legacy had somehow found its way to me. Maybe this was my chance to understand where I came from and find out what had happened to my dad.

“I need to learn,” I said finally, meeting Zephyr’s gaze. “I need to understand what it means to be a World Walker and what I’m supposed to do with this... this power.”

Zephyr nodded, a glimmer of pride in his eyes. “We’ll figure it out together, Samuel. One step at a time.”

Chapter 8: Void Serpent Rising



Samuel had begun to settle into life with Zephyr, gradually adapting to the rhythm of Feyiaria. Each morning, Samuel helped Zephyr with the daily tasks, learning the customs and routines that were second nature to his fox companion.

His day often started with gathering herbs and flowers, which were not just for decoration but were crucial ingredients in the bread Zephyr baked. Each type of plant had a purpose: some were for nourishment, while others had minor magical properties that gave the bread a mild glow or a slight hum, depending on their combination. Samuel had quickly learned the art of identifying which plants were which, his eye becoming sharp, guided by Zephyr's patient teachings.

Together, they would load the day's batch of bread onto Zephyr's cart—a curious contraption that was part wooden wagon, part clockwork machine. Samuel still marveled at how effortlessly Zephyr could pull the cart, its wheels seemingly gliding over any terrain without a hitch. The cart itself was as much a part of Zephyr's world as the enchanted trees and sparkling moss, powered by some unseen magic that Samuel could only guess at.

As they made their rounds through the various parts of the human colony, Samuel started to feel a growing connection with the people they met. They would nod at him in recognition, some offering a friendly wave or a smile. It was small, these gestures, but they were comforting, grounding him in this new world. Even the children would sometimes run up to the cart, excitedly asking about the day's deliveries, their eyes wide with the simple wonders that Zephyr and Samuel brought.

Zephyr, always the conversationalist, had Samuel speaking to locals more often than not. Samuel found himself listening to tales of old battles, of the strange occurrences that seemed to mark this land with regularity, and of the small joys and hardships of daily life in Feyiaria. He learned about the complex relationships between the kingdoms and the ever-present undercurrent of ancient tensions that seemed to touch even the most mundane of interactions.

“Samuel, you’re getting better at this,” Zephyr remarked one day, watching as Samuel expertly sorted through the morning’s harvest. “I think Feyiaria might be rubbing off on you.”

Samuel grinned, brushing off the dirt from his hands. “Maybe. Or maybe it’s just that you’re a good teacher.”

Zephyr chuckled, his tail flicking in amusement. “You’re not so bad yourself, kid. But there’s still a lot to learn, and not just about bread and plants.”

One afternoon, as Samuel and Zephyr made their way through the bustling streets of Nexus with the bread cart, Samuel noticed something unusual in the air. The usual chatter of the townsfolk sounded like hushed whispers and nervous glances. The market square, normally vibrant with the sounds of vendors calling out their wares and children laughing, had a strange, tense undercurrent that Samuel couldn’t quite place.

As they moved through the crowded streets, Samuel overheard snippets of conversations that piqued his curiosity. Words like “ancient,” “danger,” and “awakening” floated through the air like ominous clouds. He caught sight of a group of older men huddled together near a fruit stall, their faces drawn and serious.

Zephyr, always attuned to the mood of the city, slowed their pace and flicked his ears toward the murmurings. “Do you hear that?” Zephyr asked as they passed by a cluster of people who were speaking in hushed tones.

Samuel nodded, straining to catch more of the conversation. “They’re talking about something... or someone. It doesn’t sound good.”

Zephyr steered the cart closer to a group of younger traders who were animatedly discussing something. Samuel leaned in, pretending to adjust the cart, as he listened.

“It’s the Void Serpent, I’m telling you,” said a man with a wide-brimmed hat. “It’s stirring again. My brother said he saw shadows moving at the edge of the forest, like a black mist creeping closer.”

Another man, who looked to be a few years older than Samuel, scoffed but with less conviction. “Your brother always sees things. Last time, it was a ‘shadow wolf’ in his barn, which turned out to be a stray cat. This is just rumors, nothing more.”

The first man shook his head vigorously. “This is different. It’s not just my brother; people all over are talking about it. It’s been decades since anyone even mentioned the Void Serpent, but now... I don’t know, there’s something in the air.”

Zephyr glanced at Samuel, “This isn’t just idle talk, Samuel. The Void Serpent is more than a myth; it’s a force that could tear this world apart if it awakens.”

Samuel frowned, his grip tightening on the edge of the cart. “What exactly is the Void Serpent?”

Zephyr paused, looking around to ensure no one was listening too closely. He pulled Samuel aside and whispered. “The Void Serpent is an ancient entity, a being of pure darkness that feeds on the Essence of both Earth and Feyiaria. It’s said to have the power to bridge realms, but not like the World Walkers. It’s destructive—devouring everything in its path, merging worlds in a way that only brings ruin.”

Samuel’s mind raced as he tried to piece together what Zephyr was saying. He had heard of creatures in Feyiaria, both wondrous and dangerous, but this sounded different. It was as if the very fabric of the worlds he knew was under threat.

“Why is it awakening now?” Samuel asked, his voice edged with concern.

Zephyr shook his head. “I don’t know. Some say it’s the imbalance of Essence between the realms; others think it’s the result of something the ancient seals that kept it dormant. Whatever the reason, if the Void Serpent is truly stirring, then all of Feyiaria and Earth are in grave danger.”

Samuel stared at the bustling crowd around them. The peaceful life he had started to carve out in Feyiaria felt fragile, like a thin layer of ice over deep, dark waters. He realized that whatever was happening was bigger than any one person, bigger than anything he had faced so far.

“We need to find out more,” said Samuel, despite the turmoil inside him. “If there’s anything that can be done to stop it, we have to try.”

“Agreed,” said Zephyr, “But first, we need information. And I know just the place where we might find it.”

With that, they set off again, the bread cart now feeling like a flimsy shield against the growing storm of uncertainty. Samuel couldn’t shake the feeling that every shadow they passed seemed a little darker, every whisper a little more urgent. The threat of the Void Serpent hung over Nexus like a gathering storm, and Samuel knew that whatever lay ahead, he would have to be ready to face it.

Zephyr guided the cart down narrower streets, heading toward a part of Nexus that Samuel hadn’t explored yet. The buildings here were older, with signs of age etched into every stone and timber. The streets were quieter, and the people were fewer but more focused on their actions as if they carried the weight of knowledge and secrets. Samuel could sense the shift, an undercurrent of tension that seemed to pulse with each step they took.

The whispers of the Void Serpent followed them, carried on the wind like a dark melody. For the first time, Samuel truly felt the gravity of his role in this world, not just as a visitor or a passerby, but as someone who might hold the key to a future he hadn’t even begun to understand.

The rest of the day was a blur for Samuel. The chatter of the market, the noise of the city, and even the comforting presence of Zephyr seemed distant as his mind grappled with the looming threat of the Void Serpent. By the time they returned to Zephyr's cozy little cottage on the outskirts of the human colony, Samuel's head was spinning with unanswered questions. He tried to shake off the unease, but it clung to him like a shadow.

That night, Samuel tossed and turned on the small cot Zephyr had set up for him in a corner of the cottage. He tried to sleep, but every time he closed his eyes, his thoughts spiraled back to the conversations he had overheard, to the fear etched on the faces of those who spoke of the Void Serpent.

Eventually, exhaustion took over, and Samuel drifted into a restless sleep. But his mind did not find peace. Instead, he found himself standing in a desolate landscape, the sky a swirling mass of dark clouds and shadows. The ground beneath his feet was cracked and lifeless, and as he looked around, he realized he was not in Feyiaria anymore—nor was he on Earth. This place was something else entirely, a twisted blend of both worlds, yet belonging to neither.

Samuel turned, trying to get his bearings, when he saw it—a massive, sinuous form slithering through the air, its body made of shifting darkness that seemed to swallow the light around it. The Void Serpent. It moved with a terrifying grace, its eyes glowing with a malevolent intelligence as it coiled and uncoiled, surveying the fractured landscape. Samuel's heart pounded as he watched it, frozen in place. The creature's presence was suffocating, like a weight pressing down on his chest, making it hard to breathe.

Suddenly, the ground beneath Samuel's feet began to crumble, and he stumbled, falling to his knees. Shadows poured from the cracks, reaching out like tendrils, wrapping around his limbs and pulling him down. He tried to fight back, but his movements were sluggish, like wading through thick mud. The Void Serpent turned its gaze toward him, and Samuel felt a chill run down his spine. He knew, without a doubt, that if the creature reached him, it would be the end—of him, of Feyiaria, and of Earth.

Desperation surged through Samuel, and instinctively, he reached out with his Essence. It flared to life within him, wild and uncontrollable, but it was enough to break the shadows' grip. He scrambled to his feet, his heart racing, and turned to run, but everywhere he looked, the landscape was dissolving into darkness. The Void Serpent let out a low, rumbling growl, a sound that reverberated through the ground and rattled Samuel's bones.

Just as the shadows closed in around him, Samuel jolted awake, his breath coming in ragged gasps. He was back in Zephyr's cottage, the familiar surroundings doing little to calm the panic still gripping him. The room was dimly lit by the soft glow of a nearby lamp, casting long shadows on the walls. Samuel sat up, wiping the sweat from his brow, his heart still pounding from the vividness of the nightmare.

Zephyr stirred from his spot near the window, his ears twitching as he glanced over at Samuel. "Another nightmare?" he asked.

Samuel struggled to steady his breathing. "It was... worse this time. I saw the Void Serpent. It was like it was devouring everything—both Feyiaria and Earth. I couldn't stop it."

Zephyr padded over to him, "The Void Serpent's presence is growing stronger. These dreams are warnings."

Samuel swallowed hard, his mind racing. "Warnings of what?"

"That the boundaries between our worlds are weakening," Zephyr replied, "The Void Serpent thrives on chaos, on the breaking of natural laws. If it fully awakens, it could tear through both realms, consuming everything in its path."

Samuel ran a hand through his hair, frustration bubbling up inside him. "But why me? Why am I seeing this?"

"Because you're a World Walker, Samuel," Zephyr said softly. "You're connected to both Earth and Feyiaria in ways that few others are. The Void Serpent's threat is tied to the very fabric of what you are. These visions are not just a burden; they're a call to action."

Samuel clenched his fists, the weight of Zephyr's words sinking in. He didn't want to be a hero or a savior; he just wanted answers. But it seemed the world had other plans for him. "So, what do we do?" he asked, his voice tinged with desperation. "How do we stop it?"

"There's a way, but it won't be easy," said Zephyr, "We need to find the four elemental crystals. They're the key to sealing the breach between the realms and putting the Void Serpent back to rest."

"Then we'll find them," Samuel said, his voice firm despite the fear gnawing at him. "Whatever it takes, we'll stop the Void Serpent."

As dawn broke, Samuel and Zephyr prepared for their journey. Zephyr led Samuel through the winding streets of Nexus, moving toward the heart of the city.

Their destination was a small, unassuming building between two towering spires. It looked like a simple cottage, but the intricate symbols carved into the door hinted at something more. Zephyr knocked three times, and the door swung open on its own, revealing a dimly lit interior filled with the scent of incense and old parchment.

Inside, the room was cluttered with books, scrolls, and various artifacts. At the center, an elderly figure sat hunched over a large tome, their face obscured by the shadows of flickering candles. The figure looked up as they entered, revealing a pair of piercing eyes that seemed to see right through Samuel.

"You've come," the figure said in a grave whisper. "I was wondering when you'd find your way here."

Zephyr bowed his head slightly. "Samuel, this is Sage Talarara, one of the oldest living scholars of Nexus. She knows more about the ancient secrets of Feyiaria than anyone alive."

Samuel stepped forward. "I've been told you can help us," he said. "We need to know about the elemental crystals. We're... we're trying to stop the

Void Serpent.”

Sage Talarara’s expression shifted, a hint of a smile playing on her lips. “The Void Serpent... yes, its name has been whispered through the city for days now. The crystals you seek are no ordinary artifacts, young ones. They are the anchors of balance, the pillars that hold the very fabric of our worlds together.”

She gestured to a large, faded map spread out on the table. Samuel leaned in, studying the intricate details. The map depicted Feyiaria in its entirety; each kingdom was marked with symbols representing its unique traits.

“These crystals,” Sage Talarara continued, pointing to the symbols, “were forged in the early days of Feyiaria’s creation. Each one is tied to an elemental force, and together, they maintain the equilibrium between our world and the Void. Without them, the boundaries between realms weaken, and the Void Serpent thrives in that chaos.”

Samuel’s eyes followed her finger as she traced a path between the symbols. “So, what do we do? How do we find them?”

“The crystals are hidden within the heart of each kingdom,” Talarara explained, her voice steady and sure. “The Earth Crystal lies deep within the forests of Terra, guarded by ancient spirits that respond only to those who respect the land. The Light Crystal is housed somewhere within Lumina. The shadow Crystal rests in the depths of Umbra, heavily guarded and protected. And the Air Crystal floats high above somewhere in the Aetherian skies.

“The journey will not be easy,” Talarara warned, her eyes locking onto Samuel’s. “Each crystal requires a test of worthiness, a demonstration of respect for the elemental force it embodies. And not everyone who seeks them will find them. Many have tried and failed.”

Zephyr placed a reassuring paw on Samuel’s arm. “We have to try,” he said quietly. “The Void Serpent is waking. If we don’t act now, there may not be another chance.”

Sage Talarara nodded approvingly. “You have courage, Samuel. That will serve you well. But remember, courage alone is not enough. You must also have wisdom, humility, and a willingness to learn. The crystals are not just objects of power; they are lessons in understanding the forces that shape our world.”

“We’ll find them,” said Samuel.

Talarara gave a slow nod, her expression softening. “May the Essence guide you, Samuel. You are not the first to walk this path, but perhaps you will be the one to finally see it through.”

Leaving Sage Talarara’s cottage, Samuel and Zephyr stepped back into the bustling streets of Nexus.

Zephyr’s tail flicked thoughtfully as they wove through the crowded streets. Samuel kept pace, his mind racing with the revelations from Sage Talarara. The elemental crystals, the Void Serpent, the tests they would have to face—it all felt monumental, and the path ahead was anything but clear. They needed more than just determination; they needed allies, people who knew the terrain and could help navigate the perils that lay ahead.

“We can’t do this alone,” Samuel said, glancing at Zephyr. “The crystals, the trials—they sound like they’ll need more than just the two of us.”

“I was thinking the same,” said Zephyr, “We need a team, one that’s diverse and skilled in the ways of each kingdom. Someone who knows Terra, someone from Ignis, a guide from Undine, and definitely an Aetherian.”

They approached a small tavern tucked between two towering structures, its wooden sign swinging gently in the breeze. The soft glow of lanterns spilled out from its windows, and the sound of muffled chatter reached their ears.

Inside, the atmosphere was warm and welcoming, with a large hearth crackling in the center of the room. Patrons of all kinds filled the tables—

humans, Luminarians, Aetherians with their ethereal auras, and a few others Samuel couldn't quite place.

"There," Zephyr pointed toward a corner table where a group of individuals sat, engaged in what looked like a heated debate. Among them was a burly man with dark hair and piercing eyes, his armor marked with the insignia of the Earth Kingdom. Beside him sat a slender woman with blonde hair, her skin faintly glowing, a clear sign of someone from Lumina. The third member of the group was a quiet figure cloaked in black, unmistakably an Umbrarian. The last was an Aetherian, their translucent wings faintly shimmering as they listened intently.

Zephyr approached the table, and the conversation paused. The burly man eyed Samuel with suspicion, his hand resting on the hilt of a short sword at his side. The Luminarian woman raised an eyebrow, her gaze flicking between Zephyr and Samuel. The Aetherian simply watched, their expression unreadable.

"Gelan," Zephyr addressed the man from Earth Kingdom, who gave a curt nod in response. "Lina, Serim and Noris. We need your help."

Gelan grunted, leaning back in his chair. "Zephyr, it's been a while. You know we're not the kind to just jump into things without reason. What's this about?"

Samuel felt the eyes of the group turn toward him. He hesitated, but Zephyr stepped forward, recounting the events that had led them to the hidden library, the vision of the Void Serpent, and the crucial role of the elemental crystals. As Zephyr spoke, Samuel could see the expressions of the group shift. Gelan's skepticism, Lina's intrigue, Serim's quiet contemplation, and Noris's calm focus.

"So, you're saying the Void Serpent is stirring again?" Lina asked, "And you want us to help find these crystals to stop it?"

Zephyr nodded. "It's not just about stopping it; it's about restoring balance. If the Void Serpent gains enough power, it won't just be Feyiaria

that suffers. Earth is at risk, too. And Samuel here,” he gestured to Samuel, “he’s connected to all of this in ways we’re only beginning to understand.”

Gelan leaned forward, his eyes narrowing. “And why should we trust this kid? No offense, but I’ve seen a lot of people claiming to be something they’re not.”

Samuel took a deep breath, “I don’t have all the answers,” he admitted, meeting Gelan’s gaze. “But I’ve seen the damage those shadow creatures can do. I’ve felt the Essence, and I know there’s something inside me that can help. I can’t do this alone, and I don’t expect you to trust me without reason. But if we don’t at least try, we’ll all pay the price.”

A heavy silence hung over the table as the group exchanged glances. It was Serim who finally broke the silence, “The Aetherians have felt a shift in the winds. There’s been talk of storms brewing that even our elders can’t explain. If the Void Serpent is behind it, we can’t ignore it.”

Noris nodded in agreement. “it has been the talk of the town. I trust you, Zephyr. If the crystals are what’s needed to restore balance, then we have to act.”

Lina tapped her fingers on the table, her eyes blazing. “Ignis doesn’t back down from a fight. I’m in.”

Gelan sighed, crossing his arms. “Guess that means I’m in too. Can’t let you lot have all the glory, can I?”

Zephyr smiled, his tail flicking with satisfaction. “Then it’s settled. We leave at dawn. We’ll need each of you for your unique skills, and together, we’ll find the crystals and put an end to the Void Serpent’s threat.”

Chapter 9: Lumina's Radiant Equations



The group made their way toward Lumina, the Kingdom of perpetual dawn. The air seemed to shimmer as they approached, the sky painted in soft hues of pink and gold, with the Eldrin forever on the edge of rising but never fully setting. The crystal spires that defined the kingdom sparkled in the eldrinlight, forming beams of light that danced in the breeze.

“Wow,” Samuel breathed, looking up at the towers that stretched endlessly toward the horizon. “It’s... beautiful.”

Zephyr nodded beside him, admiring the scene. “Lumina is one of the oldest kingdoms, built on the foundation of light itself. The people here are as much a part of the light as the crystals in these spires. It’s said the city never sleeps because the Eldrin never truly sets.”

The streets were filled with people dressed in white and gold, their clothes shimmering as they moved. Luminarians floated gracefully, their footsteps barely touching the ground, while others seemed to merge with the light around them, forming no shadows.

As the group walked through the bustling marketplace, they noticed a small crowd gathering. Two merchants were arguing heatedly in the city square. The crowd parted as a figure stepped forward, a woman with flowing golden hair with her commanding attention. Princess Lyra.

“Enough,” Lyra said, her voice calm yet firm. “We do not resolve disputes through anger in Lumina. Step back and let the light guide your actions.”

The two merchants fell silent, their heads bowed as Lyra raised her hand. Light flowed from her fingertips, weaving into intricate patterns that shimmered in the air. The light settled over the merchants, bathing them in warmth, and suddenly, their expressions softened.

“Go in peace,” Lyra said, and the merchants, now calm, nodded and stepped away from each other.

Samuel watched in awe, impressed by her ability to de-escalate the situation so effortlessly. He had never seen anything like it—how she had used the light not just as a tool but as a means of healing and understanding.

As Lyra turned to leave, her gaze fell on the group, and she approached them with a soft smile. “You’re new to Lumina,” she said softly. “I can always tell when someone doesn’t belong.”

Lina stepped forward, introducing the group to Princess Lyra. She spoke of their mission, the Void Serpent, and their need for the Light Crystal to stop the looming threat. As he spoke, Lyra’s gaze lingered on Samuel, her eyes narrowing slightly. There was no immediate warmth in her expression, only measured curiosity.

“The Light Crystal,” she said laughing, “isn’t for everyone; its power is not something given lightly. Only those who prove themselves worthy may even approach it.”

Her tone was diplomatic, but Samuel could sense the caution behind her words. This was no mere task, and he knew she wouldn’t simply trust strangers with something as precious as the Light Crystal. Lyra crossed her arms, her radiant presence more imposing up close. “You speak of the Void Serpent as if it’s a tale I should heed. Yet, words are wind. How do I know this isn’t just another group seeking power?”

Samuel felt her suspicion settling on him. He exchanged a glance with Zephyr, but this was something only he could address. He had to prove that they were not mere travelers; they carried a responsibility far greater than any personal quest.

"I understand your hesitation," Samuel began, trying to keep his voice steady though he felt the pressure of her gaze on him. "We didn't come here seeking power. I didn't even know what I was capable of until recently. But the truth is... I'm a World Walker."

At the mention of "World Walker," Lyra's eyes sharpened, and the people around them quieted. The term carried weight in Feyiaria, a name spoken with both reverence and fear. Lyra studied him, not dismissing his claim but not yet believing it either.

"And how do I know that you are what you say?" Lyra asked, raising one eyebrow. "Anyone could claim such a title, but that does not make it so."

Samuel swallowed, trying to figure out how to convince her. Then, the memory of his first day in Feyiaria surfaced, the moment when he had grown a plant without even realizing what he was doing. The Essence that had surged through him when they fought the shadow creatures. His instincts had saved them then. If he truly was a World Walker, then this should come naturally.

"Because I can do this," Samuel said quietly.

He focused inward, trying to feel that connection to Essence he had before. His heart pounded as he concentrated. At first, nothing happened, and he began to doubt himself. But then, a warmth stirred in his chest, slowly spreading through his veins. His hands trembled as the Essence moved through him, reaching out into the space before him.

Suddenly, a small sprout began to rise from the ground, pushing through the dirt at his feet. Samuel's eyes widened as he watched the plant grow, twisting and turning as its leaves unfurled, glowing faintly in the light of Lumina. The crowd around him gasped, some in awe, others in disbelief.

Lyra's expression shifted, her suspicion giving way to something more complex. She stepped forward, kneeling to inspect the plant Samuel had grown. Her fingers brushed the leaves, and they shimmered under her touch.

“A true World Walker,” she murmured. She stood up, meeting Samuel’s gaze with a newfound respect. “There hasn’t been one in years. Even the creatures with essence can’t grow such plants. Well, I, too, have heard of the Void Serpent. Feyiaria is in far greater danger than we imagined.”

The tension in the air eased, but there was still an air of formality in Lyra’s posture. She glanced at the others, then back to Samuel. “You must understand that obtaining the Light Crystal is no easy feat. It cannot be given; it must be earned.”

Samuel nodded, feeling the weight of her words settle over him. “What must I do?”

Lyra gestured toward the towering spires behind them. “The Trial of Illumination lies ahead. You will be tested, not in strength, but in truth. The crystal will reveal your innermost fears and doubts. You will need to face them if you hope to claim its power.”

Samuel felt a knot of apprehension tightening in his stomach, but he nodded, determined. “I’m ready.”

Lyra studied him for a moment longer, then turned on her heel. “Follow me,” she said, her tone softened but still commanding.

The group followed her through the streets of Lumina, past the bustling crowds and under the glimmering spires. As they walked, Samuel’s heart raced. He had proven he was a World Walker, but now came the real challenge, the test that would force him to confront whatever lay hidden within himself.

Samuel’s awe had not worn off, but now it mixed with a sense of dread. The Light Crystal was no ordinary relic, and the thought of a trial that would force him to confront his own fears and doubts weighed on his mind.

The group reached a large building made entirely of crystal. Its walls were translucent, allowing the soft dawn light to filter through, casting rainbow hues across the floor.

“Inside this temple lies the Light Crystal,” Lyra said, stopping at the entrance. “But be warned, the trial will challenge you in ways you cannot predict. You will face the truth of yourself, your deepest fears, and your darkest thoughts. The light does not hide anything; it reveals all.”

Lisa stepped forward, placing a reassuring hand on Samuel's shoulder. “We’ll be here for you. This isn’t a trial you face alone.”

Samuel took a deep breath, feeling the tension in his muscles. He was about to step into something far beyond his understanding. But as he looked around at his companions—Zephyr, Lisa, Noris, and even the burly Gelan—he felt a spark of courage. Together, they could face whatever awaited them.

“Let’s go,” Samuel said, his voice steady but determined.

As they entered the temple, the air shifted. At the heart of the temple, floating above a pedestal, was the Light Crystal. It was larger than Samuel had imagined, a perfect sphere of glowing light that pulsed gently.

“The trial will begin as soon as you step forward,” Lyra said. “I don’t know what you will face, but remember, no matter what happens, you will have to stand your ground.”

Samuel took a deep breath, stepping forward toward the Light Crystal. As soon as his foot crossed the threshold, the air changed, growing heavier, like the weight of the entire temple was pressing down on him. The floor beneath him trembled, cracks forming in the pristine marble. His companions disappeared into the background, and the walls of the temple began to warp and twist like reality itself was bending.

Suddenly, Samuel found himself in total darkness; no light, no sound, only the hollow echo of his own heartbeat. His pulse quickened.

Without warning, a blinding flash erupted, revealing a towering maze of jagged glass walls stretching endlessly in every direction. Each wall was a mirror, reflecting distorted versions of Samuel, each one showing him a different moment of fear or failure—his mother’s distant gaze, the chaos of

his unleashed Essence, the shadowy creatures looming over him, his uncertainty about his father.

The voice returned, deeper and more commanding this time. “To claim the Light, you must walk through the dark. Face your greatest truths, or be consumed by them.”

The walls shifted, the mirrored glass slicing through the air with a piercing sound. Samuel clenched his fists, moving forward cautiously. The reflections in the mirrors mocked him, whispering his deepest doubts.

You don’t belong here.

You’ll never control your power.

You’ll fail like your father.

Samuel gritted his teeth. “No. This isn’t real. I’m in control,” he muttered to himself, forcing his legs to move forward.

Suddenly, the ground beneath him cracked open, and a torrent of blinding light shot up, searing his skin. Samuel stumbled back, his breath catching as the light morphed into a solid form—an immense, glowing figure. It was his father, Alaric, but twisted and broken, his eyes hollow and his body glowing with the power of the Essence. He towered over Samuel, radiating an overwhelming force that pinned Samuel to the spot.

“You are weak,” the figure boomed. “You will never be me.”

The figure of Alaric swung its arm, sending a beam of light hurtling toward Samuel. He barely dodged it, the force of the attack leaving a deep gouge in the ground where he had been standing. Samuel scrambled to his feet, feeling the ground beneath him tremble with each step the apparition took.

“You can’t run from the truth, Samuel,” Alaric’s figure hissed. “You’ve always been afraid—afraid of your own power, afraid of being left behind. And now it’s too late.”

Samuel's heart pounded in his chest. His mind screamed at him to run, to escape this relentless nightmare, but there was nowhere to go. He closed his eyes for a moment, forcing himself to breathe, forcing himself to think. This was a test. The voice had told him that. This wasn't real; this was his fear, his doubt, manifesting in the form of his father.

When Samuel opened his eyes again, Alaric's glowing figure was towering over him, ready to strike. But this time, Samuel didn't flinch. Instead, he reached deep within himself, summoning the Essence that had saved him once before. He focused on it, pulling it from the pit of his stomach and letting it surge through his veins, lighting up the darkness around him.

"I'm not afraid," Samuel whispered, the light within him glowing brighter. "I'm not you, but I don't have to be."

As the words left his mouth, Alaric's figure shattered into a thousand pieces, the glass-like shards floating upward, dissolving into the air. The maze of mirrors around Samuel began to break apart, the reflections warping and distorting until they disappeared altogether.

But the trial wasn't over.

The temple shook violently as a massive chasm opened up in front of Samuel. On the other side, the Light Crystal floated in midair, pulsating with a rhythmic glow. Between him and the crystal, however, was a swirling vortex of shadows and light, spinning like a storm. The path ahead was unstable, the ground crumbling away as the vortex sucked everything into its swirling chaos.

Samuel took a deep breath, feeling the Essence within him. He had faced his fear, but now he had to prove he could harness his power. He stepped forward, feeling the ground tremble beneath him as the vortex grew stronger. The wind whipped around him, threatening to pull him into the void. His feet slipped on the crumbling stones, and for a moment, it seemed like he would fall.

But Samuel wasn't giving up. Not now. He dug his heels in, planting his feet firmly on the ground as he reached out with his Essence, focusing on the light within him. The storm pushed against him, but the more he concentrated, the more the light within him grew, pushing back against the swirling chaos.

With each step, the light around him grew stronger. His fingers tingled with energy, the Essence humming through his body as he forced his way through the storm. The closer he got to the Light Crystal, the more the shadows around him faded, dissolving into the air like smoke. And finally, with one last surge of energy, Samuel reached out and touched the Light Crystal.

As soon as his fingers made contact with the glowing sphere, the storm vanished. The ground beneath him solidified, and the temple returned to its original form. The Light Crystal pulsed beneath his hand, and Samuel could feel its power coursing through him, intertwining with his Essence. It was no longer wild and uncontrollable—it was steady, focused, and clear.

Samuel stood there for a moment, breathing heavily as he absorbed the reality of what had just happened. He had faced his fear, his doubt, and his power, and he had come out the other side stronger. The Light Crystal had accepted him, but more importantly, he had accepted himself.

When he turned around, he saw Lyra, Lisa, Gelan, Noris, and Zephyr standing at the edge of the temple, watching him. Lyra stepped forward, her expression unreadable as she studied him.

Samuel, still catching his breath, could feel the weight of the crystal in his hand, but it no longer felt like a burden. It felt like a part of him, a part he was finally ready to accept.

"Now, we can face whatever comes next," he said.

"You've passed the trial," she said softly, full of admiration. "You've proven yourself worthy of the Light Crystal."

The group turned to leave the temple, the air around them feeling lighter now that the trial had been completed. But even as they stepped back into the perpetual dawn of Lumina, Samuel couldn't shake the feeling that something darker still loomed on the horizon. The Void Serpent was out there, and this victory was only the first step in a much larger battle.

Chapter 10: Umbra's Darkness Coefficient

As we left behind the bright, crystal spires of Lumina, we went straight to Umbra. In Umbra, the light barely penetrated. The air was colder, and a strange sense of unease settled over me as we moved deeper into the kingdom.

Gelan, our native guide from Umbra, took the lead. He moved ahead of the group, navigating through this strange land with no difficulty. Though he looked rather serious, warning us that the shadows here were not mere tricks of the light. "In Umbra, shadows can be alive. They watch, they listen, and if you aren't careful, they will manipulate you."

I wanted to feel at ease, but Gelan's warnings didn't help as we passed through the winding streets. The streets themselves seemed to shift and change with every step. Buildings, which at first appeared solid, flickered at the edges as though they might vanish into the dark mist at any moment.

"Stick close," Gelan said, looking over at us and making sure everyone was present. "The paths in Umbra are not fixed. They change based on emotion, on thought. If you get distracted or lose focus, you could find yourself lost."

Lisa, the Luminarian, walked beside me, the soft glow of light magic in her hands casting faint illumination around us. The Light Crystal that I had obtained pulsed faintly at my side as if reacting to the darkness around us.

As we ventured further, we encountered several Umbrarians: shadowy figures who watched from the corners of the streets, their faces hidden by hoods. Some were wary, their gazes following us with suspicion, while others seemed indifferent.

Gelan approached one group, explaining our purpose and displaying the Light Crystal as proof of our legitimacy. The faint glow of the crystal seemed to calm the onlookers, though their faces remained guarded. The

Umbrarians allowed us to pass, but I could feel their eyes lingering on me long after we moved out of sight.

“The people here are cautious,” Gelan said, noting the strange looks on the faces of the people who passed us by. “They are weirded out by seeing foreigners as people hardly visit us, fearing that they may not be able to return alive.”

I thought it was a bit odd. If others were so afraid of Umbrarians, surely there must’ve been something that kept them away from the place.

As we continued, the shadows around us grew denser, the architecture of Umbra’s buildings towering and pulsing with an energy I couldn’t quite understand. Gelan explained that the very streets and buildings responded to the emotions of the people who walked them. If we weren’t careful, the city could shift against us, leading us into places we weren’t meant to go.

“We’ll be fine,” Gelan said, glancing back at me and the others. “Just stay calm and focused. We’re getting close to the heart of Umbra, where the temple of the Shadow Crystal lies.”

As we pushed deeper into Umbra, the shadows became more tangible as they clung to the walls of the ever-shifting streets. The eerie twilight stretched above us, giving the impression that the sky itself was watching our every move.

Gelan was still ahead of us, leading the way, but the further we went, the more I noticed that the shadows weren’t just passive; they flickered, moved, and occasionally darted out of sight, almost like living entities. The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end as I glanced around, trying to make sense of what was happening.

Suddenly, a low growl echoed through the air, and before anyone could react, shadows materialized from the walls, taking shape as dark, swirling creatures with gleaming red eyes. These weren’t like the simple shadow figures we had passed earlier; these were living shadows, and they moved fast.

“Ambush!” Gelan shouted, pulling out his blade, which seemed to shimmer with a dark light. He immediately engaged one of the shadow creatures, moving with a speed I hadn’t seen before. Noris and Lisa summoned their magic, their hands glowing as they fired blasts of light at the creatures, but the shadows were relentless, swarming around us with unnatural speed.

I tried to focus, but the shadows seemed to disorient me, warping my vision and making it hard to concentrate. I felt a surge of Essence within me, the same wild energy I had felt before, but it was unpredictable, and I wasn’t sure how to control it. One of the creatures lunged at me, and I barely managed to deflect it with the Light Crystal, its glow flaring up for a brief moment as the shadow recoiled.

But we were outnumbered, and the creatures kept coming. My heart raced as I realized we were being overwhelmed. Gelan fought fiercely, using his knowledge of the shadows to strike at their weak points, but even he was struggling to keep them at bay.

Just when it seemed like the shadows would overrun us, a powerful voice cut through the chaos. “Back, you wretched fiends!” A figure leaped into the fray, a massive warrior wielding a weapon that gleamed with a strange, dark light. With swift, precise strikes, the newcomer scattered the shadow creatures, his weapon slicing through them as if they were nothing more than mist. The creatures recoiled, their forms dissipating into the shadows as they retreated, leaving us standing in stunned silence.

The warrior stood tall, scanning us with suspicion. He was dressed in the dark armor of Umbra. His weapon, a large blade with both shadow and light magic, seemed to pulse with energy as he sheathed it. “You’ve got some nerve wandering these parts,” the warrior said gruffly. “What business do you have in Umbra?”

Gelan stepped forward, still catching his breath from the fight. “We’re on a mission to retrieve the Shadow Crystal. We mean no harm, Grimm.” The warrior, Grimm, narrowed his eyes at Gelan and then at the rest of us. “A mission for the Shadow Crystal?” He snorted, clearly unconvinced. “Do

you know what you're getting into? This isn't some treasure hunt. The Shadow Crystal isn't something you just take."

I stepped forward, holding up the Light Crystal illuminating the place, making the shadows retreat slightly. "We know the dangers," I said, "We're here to stop something bigger than just the darkness of Umbra. The Void Serpent is stirring, and we need the elemental crystals to stop it."

Grimm's eyes flicked to the Light Crystal, and for a moment, it looked as if time had stopped. Grimm was about to utter something, but nothing came out. He glanced at Gelan, who nodded in confirmation. After a tense silence, Grimm grunted, crossing his arms. "The Void Serpent... If what you're saying is true, then we're all in trouble. But that doesn't mean I trust you."

Gelan stepped in again, "We don't need your trust, Grimm. We just need your help. You know these lands better than anyone. We need you to guide us to the temple."

Grimm looked over us again, "You've got a lot of nerve, kid," he muttered. "I, too, have heard the Void Serpent is really stirring; we can't waste time." He turned, motioning for us to follow him. "I'll take you to the temple, but don't think for a second that I'll be babysitting you. This is Umbra. If you're not careful, the shadows will swallow you whole."

Grimm led us down a winding path deeper into the heart of Umbra. The temperature continued to drop as we approached the Shadow Temple, its towering spires looming in the distance. The buildings around us seemed to shift with every step, and the shadows flickered, almost alive. I could feel the tension in the air, the weight of what lay ahead settling over me like a shroud.

"The Shadow Temple isn't just a place," Grimm said, turning around. "It's a living, breathing thing, and it will test you. You won't just be fighting shadows—you'll be fighting yourselves. The trial isn't about strength alone. It's about unity, trust, and the ability to rely on one another, even when everything falls apart."

I exchanged glances with the others. I could see the determination in Lisa's eyes and the focus in Gelan's movements. But I also sensed the weight of Grimm's words. Trust wasn't easy, especially when every member of the group carried their own doubts and fears.

The entrance to the temple was an imposing archway carved from the blackest stone. The air around it shimmered with energy, and as we drew closer, I felt a strange pull, as though the temple itself was drawing us in. "Once we enter, there's no turning back," Grimm warned. "The temple will separate us, and each of you will face a different part of the trial. Stay focused, and whatever happens, trust in each other. Many people have tried it before, but none ever succeeded."

With a final nod, Grimm stepped through the archway. He told us that at least four of us must go inside. Zephyr and Gelan decided to stay, while Lisa, Noris, Serim, and I decided to go in.

The moment we crossed the threshold, everything shifted. The world around us dissolved into darkness, and I felt a surge of energy rip through the air. Before I could react, the force separated us, pulling us in different directions.

I blinked, trying to adjust to the sudden shift. I stood in the middle of what appeared to be a labyrinth of shadows, dark walls towering on either side of me, twisting and bending with no clear direction in sight. The silence was deafening, broken only by the occasional crackling of shadowy tendrils that slithered along the walls. I wasn't alone, though. Lisa, the Luminarian, stood next to me, her hand glowing faintly with light magic. We exchanged a tense look.

"This must be the first part of the trial," I muttered, stepping cautiously forward. The ground beneath me felt soft, almost as though it were shifting beneath my weight. "A maze."

Lisa nodded, holding her light out in front of her to push back the shadows. "The shadows here feel alive," she said softly. "Like they're testing us."

As we walked deeper into the maze, the walls seemed to close in on us. The darkness pressed against my skin. I kept close to Lisa, her light casting just enough glow to see a few feet ahead. But even with the light, the path wasn't clear.

"It's changing," Lisa whispered. She was right. The walls of the maze twisted and turned unpredictably, as though the maze itself was shifting with every step we took. I glanced back and realized the path we had come from was gone, swallowed by shadows.

"Where are the others?" I asked, trying to steady my breath. "I think if we panic, we too will get lost."

"I don't know," said Lisa, after trying to call out to them but getting no answer in return.

But it wasn't just panic we had to fight against. The maze was playing tricks on our minds. Every now and then, I could swear I saw flashes of movement out of the corner of my eye—shadows darting across the walls, taunting me, pulling at my focus. But when I turned to look, nothing was there. The darkness seemed to be alive, feeding on our doubts and fears.

"How do we get out of here?" Lisa asked, her voice strained. She felt as if the shadows were sucking the life out of her, and this was true; her light had begun to dim.

I frowned, scanning the shifting walls. "We need light," I said, holding up the Light Crystal. Its glow brightened, and for a brief moment, the walls of the maze seemed to stabilize. The shifting stopped, and the path ahead became clearer. "The shadows are reacting to it. Lisa, you need to hold on for a while. Close your eyes and think of all the happy moments you've lived through."

Lisa did as I had guided her, and that seemed to work in our favor. We continued to move through the maze.

"Samuel, over here!" Lisa called, pointing to a section of the maze where the shadows had parted, revealing an opening. I hurried to her side,

the Light Crystal in my hand glowing softly.

For a moment, it seemed like we were making progress, but then the maze shifted again, and a wall of shadows shot up between us, separating us. I could hear Lisa's voice on the other side, but it was muffled, distorted by the darkness.

"Lisa?" I called, pressing my hand against the shadowy wall. It was cold, and as my hand touched it, the shadows seemed to ripple beneath my fingers. I could feel the maze testing me, pushing against my resolve.

I took a deep breath, closing my eyes and focusing on the light inside me—the same light that had saved me before, the light that connected me to the Essence of both Earth and Feyiaria. As I focused, the Light Crystal pulsed in my hand, its glow intensifying. The shadows around me flickered, and the wall between Lisa and me began to fade.

"I'm here," I said, stepping through the wall as it dissolved into mist. I was amazed at what my essence could make happen. Lisa was waiting on the other side, her light glowing softly.

"You're amazing. I, too, have the power of light, but..." she paused, "The best of Luminarians don't have such strengths."

I thanked her, and we pressed forward, using our intuition to guide us through the remaining twists and turns of the maze. The shadows still pressed against us, trying to disorient us, but we pushed back with our light, slowly but surely making our way through the labyrinth.

Finally, after what felt like hours of navigating the shifting maze, we reached the center. A large door stood before us, made of shadow and light intertwined. I could feel the energy radiating from it—the entrance to the next part of the trial.

"Ready?" I asked, glancing at Lisa.

She nodded. "Let's go."

Together, we stepped forward, pushing open the door and stepping into the unknown.

As soon as we crossed the threshold, the door slammed shut behind us with a resounding thud, plunging us into pitch blackness. I held up the Light Crystal, but no light came from it. It was as though the darkness had swallowed the light entirely.

Panic rose in my chest. "Lisa? Can you see anything?"

"No," her voice came from somewhere to my left. "I can't even feel my magic anymore."

My mind raced, trying to make sense of the situation. We were trapped in complete darkness, our only sources of light and magic rendered useless. But we couldn't give up now. The Shadow Crystal was close; I could feel the Light Crystal repelling it.

"We have to keep moving," I said, trying to keep my voice steady. "We can't let this stop us."

We began to walk forward, carefully feeling our way through the darkness. The ground beneath our feet was uneven, and at times, it felt like we were walking in circles, but we pressed on, trusting our instincts to guide us.

After what felt like hours of walking, we heard a sound—a faint, echoing voice coming from somewhere ahead.

"Samuel..."

I froze, my heart skipping a beat. I recognized that voice. It was my mother's.

"Samuel, why did you leave me?"

My breath caught in my throat. I hadn't heard my mother's voice in years, not since I had left Earth. But how could she be here, in this temple, in this world? It didn't make sense.

“Don’t listen to it,” Lisa whispered urgently. “It’s the shadows trying to mess with your head.”

I wanted to believe her, but the voice sounded so real, so familiar. I took a shaky step forward, my mind racing. Was it possible? Could my mother somehow be here, trapped in this place?

“Samuel, come back to me...”

The voice was louder now, more insistent. My hands trembled as I reached out into the darkness as if I could somehow pull my mother from the shadows.

“Samuel, no!” Lisa grabbed my arm, yanking me back just as a shadowy figure lunged toward us, its form twisting and writhing in the darkness. The figure’s face was obscured, but its eyes glowed with a malevolent light, locking onto me with an intensity that chilled me to the bone.

“Keep moving!” Lisa shouted, pulling me away from the figure. “It’s trying to trap you!”

I stumbled, my mind a whirlwind of confusion and fear. The shadows were playing tricks on me, pulling at my deepest fears and doubts. I shook my head, trying to clear my thoughts. I couldn’t let the darkness win.

“We have to find the others,” I said, my voice firm with determination. “We can’t do this alone.”

Lisa nodded, her grip on my arm tightening. Together, we pressed forward, calling out for the rest of our group. For a long while, there was no response, only the echoing whispers of the shadows and the oppressive silence of the temple.

But then, from somewhere in the darkness, we heard a familiar voice.

“Samuel? Lisa? Over here!”

It was Noris. Relief flooded through me as Lisa and I hurried toward the sound of his voice. We found Noris and Serim huddled together in a

corner, their faces pale with fear.

“The shadows are messing with our heads,” Noris said grimly. “We need to stick together if we’re going to get through this.”

I nodded. “We’re stronger as a team.”

As the group reunited, the darkness seemed to lessen, as if our combined strength was pushing back the shadows. We moved forward together, our footsteps in sync as we made our way through the temple’s final challenge.

But the shadows weren’t done with us yet. Just as we neared what we sensed to be the heart of the temple, the ground beneath us began to shift and crack. Shadowy hands reached up from the floor, grabbing at our ankles and pulling us down into the void.

“We need light!” Lisa shouted, struggling to free herself from the grasping shadows.

I held up the Light Crystal, willing it to shine, but the darkness was too strong. I remembered how I was able to use the crystal to dissolve the wall, and I knew I could do it again.

And then, a voice echoed in my mind—my own voice, reminding me of the trial in Lumina.

“You don’t have to be ready. You just have to trust the light and trust yourself.”

I focused all my energy on the Light Crystal, not just on its power but on my own belief in the light within me. Slowly, the crystal began to glow, its light piercing through the darkness.

The shadows hissed and recoiled, releasing their grip on us. As the light grew brighter, the path ahead of us became clear. At the end of the chamber, bathed in shadow but untouched by darkness, stood the Shadow Crystal.

I stepped forward, the Light Crystal in one hand, and reached out to claim the Shadow Crystal.

The moment my fingers brushed the surface, the temple trembled, and the shadows vanished. The air grew lighter, and the oppressive weight of the darkness lifted.

With the Shadow Crystal now secured in my hands, the air in the temple seemed to be still, the oppressive darkness that had once weighed down on us dissipating. But even though we had achieved our goal, the atmosphere remained tense. It was as if the temple itself was holding its breath, waiting for something else to happen.

Grimm, who had remained absent throughout the trial, stepped forward, his gaze fixed on the crystal in my hand. "You've got the crystal," he muttered, his tone more solemn than triumphant. "But don't think for a second that this is over."

"What do you mean?" I asked, frowning.

Grimm crossed his arms, his expression dark. "Darkness isn't something you can just take away with a single artifact. The Void Serpent... it's still out there, stirring. The Shadow Crystal will help, but it won't be enough to stop it on its own."

Chapter 11: Terra's Living Architecture



As we left the shadow-drenched lands of Umbra behind, weariness hung heavy on each of us. The journey had been grueling, and it had surely tested our limits and courage. Zephyr, who had tirelessly aided me throughout our challenges, was particularly relieved. The prospect of returning home meant not only a well-deserved rest. I thought of his burgeoning baking business, which he had put on hold to aid our quest. The thought of homemade bread and pastries brought smiles to our tired faces.

Zephyr's excitement grew as he spoke of seeing his family again, their quaint home among the giant, life-infused trees of the Earth Kingdom. His eyes lit up as he described the lush greenery and vibrant life that awaited us. The place was still vivid in my memory as it was where I had first landed on earth.

We walked with the dark crystal in our possession, now secured among our belongings, which felt like a heavy responsibility but also a powerful ally. We had overcome the shadows, and now, it was time to seek balance in the nurturing embrace of the Earth Kingdom.

As we approached the border of the Earth Kingdom, a noticeable change in the environment welcomed us. The air was fresher, with the scent of damp soil and wildflowers. The light painted everything in hues of emerald and gold. And ahead of us, the massive living trees stood like sentinels, their trunks wide as houses and their branches forming natural pathways and arches. It was as if we had stepped into another world.

This time, Zephyr and Noris took the lead, as they were natives of the kingdom. It was their homeland, a place where magic pulsed from the very

soil and where life—in its most verdant, sprawling form—dictated the structure of civilization. I felt a thrill of excitement. Every kingdom in Feyiaria had presented its unique challenges and wonders, and I was eager to discover what this new realm had to offer.

“We’ll be heading to an entry point known only to a few,” Zephyr explained, his tail flicking with excitement. “It’s the most direct route to the heart of the kingdom, where the massive living trees form not just the landscape but the very architecture of the cities.”

The journey to the entry point was uneventful, yet the scenery gradually changed as we moved deeper into the kingdom. The ground beneath our feet became softer, richer, and more responsive.

“We should reach Zephyr’s place by nightfall,” Noris said, checking the position of the Eldrin through the leaves. “We can rest there and prepare for our visit to Gaia tomorrow.”

Soon enough, we stood right in front of his house. Zephyr went inside and hugged his children. This once again made me think of my mum. I suddenly missed her a lot.

We settled in for the night. Zephyr led us to a spare room in his house. The interior was cozy, furnished with items that seemed to have grown from the tree itself: chairs shaped from the bends of branches, shelves etched into the wood, and beds of moss and leaves that promised rest, unlike any bed in the mundane world of human making.

As we gathered around a wooden table for a meal, Zephyr shared his plans for the next day. “We’ll head to Gaia’s castle first thing in the morning. It’s not far, but getting there is a bit tricky. The paths like to change, especially if they sense you’re in a hurry.”

His words piqued my curiosity. “Change? How do paths change?”

Noris chuckled, “You’ll see soon enough. Let’s just say that here, nature has a mind of its own.”

Whatever challenges awaited us, I knew we had come far and could face them together. Tomorrow, we would meet Gaia, and perhaps I would come one step closer to understanding the role I was meant to play in this enchanting but perilous world.

The dawn chorus of the Earth Kingdom was unlike any morning song I had heard before. It was a symphony composed not just of bird calls but of the rustling of leaves, the whispering of winds, and the subtle groans of the massive living trees stretching toward the light of the Eldrin. I fell asleep thinking about the first time I was able to grow a plant without knowing anything about essence.

Waking up in Zephyr's arboreal home had a rejuvenating effect that coffee could never match.

After a quick breakfast of fruits and Zephyr's freshly baked bread, we prepared to leave for Gaia's domain. Zephyr seemed unusually excited, almost buzzing with energy as he led the way. "Remember, keep your thoughts clear and your intentions pure. The forest paths respond to your state of mind," he advised.

As we walked, I noticed that the scenery seemed to change subtly with each glance away. Trails that appeared well-trodden and clear would suddenly twist into dense underbrush or open up to reveal hidden clearings that weren't there a moment before. It was disorienting and fascinating all at once.

Zephyr's home had been impressive, but as we ventured deeper into his homeland, I realized it was but a modest dwelling in comparison to the grandeur around us.

"We're close now," Noris spoke softly, as if reluctant to disturb the natural tranquility. "Gaia's castle is just through this grove."

Approaching Gaia's castle was an awe-inspiring experience. The castle itself was a living structure woven from vines and branches so thick and intertwined that they formed solid walls and elegant towers. It looked

ancient, as though it had grown from the very ground eons ago, perfectly in tune with the landscape.

We reached the grand entrance, an archway framed with flowering vines that swayed without any breeze. I expected the doors to swing open at our approach, but instead, they remained firmly shut. Zephyr stepped forward and placed a hand gently on the vine-covered surface, murmuring words too soft for me to catch.

After a moment, he turned to us with a slight frown. "It seems Gaia is not inclined to let us in just yet. She must be testing us."

"Testing us? How do we pass?" I asked, more intrigued than frustrated.

"By proving our intentions are aligned with the balance of nature here," Zephyr replied, glancing over the lush foliage surrounding the gate. "We must wait and respect her decision."

We didn't have to wait long before the ground beneath our feet began to tremble gently. It wasn't threatening, but it was enough to make us all stand alert. The massive trees around us started to move, their trunks groaning as they bent, forming a dome of branches and leaves over us.

Caught in what felt like a cage of natural elements, I couldn't help but laugh. It was both incredible and slightly unnerving to be at the mercy of such a playful yet powerful force. The others joined in my laughter, the sound echoing up into the leaves.

Just as our initial shock subsided, the branches pulled back, and there stood an elderly woman with a mischievous twinkle in her eye. She was smaller than I had expected, her back slightly bent, but her energy was evident. She wore a cloak that seemed to be made of woven leaves and bark, blending perfectly with her surroundings.

"Welcome, travelers," she said, in a rich and earthy manner as the forest itself. "I am Gaia, and it seems you have already learned my first lesson: nature holds all the power here, and it demands respect and patience."

“We-” I began, narrating to her the reason for our arrival, but she interrupted me before I could utter the second word.

“Well, I’ve been expecting you,” she said with a smile, “Grimm has informed me all about your quest.”

“Come, walk with me,” she said, turning on her heel and stepping lightly down a path that had just appeared between the trees.

We followed Gaia through her living domain. She had no guards in her massive castle; it looked as if she lived there alone and all by herself.

Gaia was old, but she moved with such grace that it was as if she was at the peak of her youth and almost as if she were part of the breeze that rustled through the leaves. We followed her down a winding path lined with trees that seemed to lean in, listening to her every word as she spoke of the history and spirit of her home.

“The trees you see,” Gaia began, turning to address us with a sweeping gesture, “are not just plants. They are the very essence of the Earth Kingdom, ancient beings who have witnessed the rise and fall of many seekers and many eras. To live among them is to live with history itself.”

We followed her quietly and approached what appeared to be a clearing, but as we got closer, I realized it was an orchestrated gathering of trees, their trunks twisted and intertwined to form intricate patterns that almost looked intentional.

“Here is where I test the mettle of those who seek my wisdom,” Gaia explained, “But as you have seen, I prefer to do so with a bit of fun.”

Before we could ask what she meant, the ground beneath us shifted subtly. The trees around the clearing sprang into action, their branches lowering to form barriers that effectively trapped us within. It happened so quickly, a natural cage snapping shut, that we barely had time to react.

The initial shock gave way to laughter from Gaia, her amusement clear. “Fear not, this is but a playful lesson. The Earth Kingdom respects strength,

yes, but also a willingness to engage with the world as it is—wild, unpredictable, and alive.”

The trees relaxed almost as quickly as they had ensnared us, their branches receding into the canopy above. Gaia's point was made: here, the environment itself was an active participant in our journey, not just a backdrop but a character in its own right.

With a knowing look, Gaia led us out of the trap and toward a structure that seemed to grow directly out of the ground itself. “Now, to my home. We have much to prepare if you are to undertake the trial for the Terra Crystal.”

As we approached the castle again, this time, the massive doors creaked open at Gaia's approach, welcoming us into a hall that was both grand and utterly organic. The walls were lined with bark, and soft moss covered the floors, giving the impression of walking on a forest floor.

Inside, the castle was alive, quite literally. The furniture was made from living wood, branches, and leaves, and it was shaped into chairs and tables without harming the trees from which they grew. It was as if the entire structure was in a constant state of growth and adaptation.

“Your trial will be tomorrow,” Gaia announced as we settled into the surprisingly comfortable surroundings. “Today, rest and be at peace. You'll need your strength and all your wits about you.”

As evening fell and the castle seemed to breathe around us, I felt an inexplicable connection to this place, deeper and more profound than anything I had experienced before. It was as if the Earth Kingdom was slowly claiming a piece of my soul, intertwining with my essence in a way that felt both exhilarating and a little daunting.

As we rested that night, the gentle pulsing of the life around us was a reminder of the trial that awaited, a challenge that would demand not just physical strength but a deep communion with the ancient spirits of this mystical land.

Morning dawned with a gentle warmth that seemed to seep up from the very soil itself. After a restful night where the living architecture of Gaia's home cradled us in organic comfort, I found myself eager to learn more about the Earth Kingdom and its secrets. Gaia, already waiting for us at the breakfast table adorned with a variety of fruits and nuts, seemed particularly focused on me.

"Today, Samuel, you and I will take a walk," she announced, her eyes twinkling with an intensity that suggested this was no ordinary stroll. "There is much for you to understand about this place and about your role as a World Walker."

The others in the group nodded their understanding, accustomed by now to the individual lessons that often preceded a trial. As we left the castle, Gaia led me to a part of the forest that felt older and more alive than the rest. The air was thick with the scent of ancient wood and the whisper of leaves speaking to one another.

"This grove," Gaia began as we walked between towering trees whose trunks were wider than houses, "is the memory of the Earth Kingdom. Each tree here is a keeper of stories, and if you know how to listen, they will share their history with you."

She stopped before a particularly imposing tree, its bark gnarled and scarred with the passage of time. Placing her palm against the rough surface, she closed her eyes. "Touch it," she instructed.

I hesitated for a moment before mirroring her actions. The moment my fingers brushed against the bark, a rush of images flooded my mind. It was disorienting at first, like glimpsing a thousand lives at once, but then the visions began to focus. I saw the Earth Kingdom as it had been centuries ago: lush and wild, a land of untamed magic where giant beasts roamed freely and spirits danced in the auroral light.

"These trees have seen the rise and fall of empires, the birth and death of heroes," Gaia's voice echoed in my mind, blending with the visions. "They know the patterns of the cosmos and the intricacies of the soil beneath us."

As we moved from one tree to another, each vision became a piece of a larger puzzle. I saw the wars that had scarred these lands, the peace that had followed, and the endless cycle of growth and decay. But then, in the midst of it, I saw a familiar face. It was the same face I had seen in the library. It was Alaric, the legendary World Walker who has been missing for years. I removed my hand that very second.

“Why show me this?” I asked, overwhelmed by all I had seen.

“Because to understand where you are going, you must understand where you come from,” Gaia replied, “You should know that you’re the son of Alaric. You have your father’s eyes.”

I was too stunned to say anything for a moment.

“I knew your dad, and I must say, he was the greatest man Feyiaria has ever seen. The Terra Crystal trial will demand more from you than just strength or courage. It will ask you to connect with the very essence of this world. This will not be easy. I want you to know what your father has done for this land so you can be more confident in your abilities.”

“It is the day of your trial,” she continued, “I wanted to wish you luck. I thought a little help this way won’t hurt.”

She took me back to the castle, where the entire group had gathered outside Gaia’s castle. She announced that my trial would begin soon and asked me to wait with the others.

“Samuel,” Zephyr said, “remember, every trial is not just a test of strength but of heart and spirit. Trust in what you’ve learned, trust in yourself.”

Noris clapped a hand on my shoulder, his smile reassuring. “You’ve got this, Samuel. You’ve come this far. I know you can do so much more.”

Lisa, with a solemn expression, added, “And remember, whatever happens, you’re never truly alone. We’re all with you, in spirit if not in body.”

Their words bolstered my willpower, and with a final nod to my friends, I followed Gaia to the site of the trial—a secluded grove surrounded by some of the oldest trees in the kingdom, their trunks wide and towering, their leaves whispering secrets to the wind.

“This trial,” Gaia began, her voice echoing slightly in the open air, “will challenge you to commune with the part of Earth in Feyiaria itself. You must reach deep into the ground and connect with the life force that pulses through it. Only by fully integrating your essence with the Earth can you hope to access the Terra Crystal.”

She pointed to a large, flat stone in the center of the grove. “You will stand there and plant your hands into the soil. What happens next will depend on your ability to listen and respond to the Earth’s call.”

As I stepped forward, I took my place on the stone, and following Gaia’s instructions, I closed my eyes and pressed my palms against the cool, damp soil.

At first, there was nothing but the gentle hum of the forest around me. But as I focused more deeply, the ground seemed to pulse beneath my hands; each beat a whisper of the ancient magic that flowed through the land. The essence of the Earth Kingdom surged up, meeting my touch, and visions began to flood my mind.

Suddenly, the vision shifted, and I was transported to a time long past, where the first druids of the Earth Kingdom walked these forests. I watched as they performed ancient rituals, their hands raising the very trees around them from the soil. Their connection to the land was complete and unbreakable.

I opened my eyes, still feeling the echo of their magic in my bones. But the trial was not over. The visions had been a guide, a hint at what I needed to do. Like the druids before me, I needed to show that I could not only connect with the Earth but also command its power.

Focusing on my essence, I reached deeper, past the surface and into the core of the kingdom. The energy there was raw and wild, and I struggled to

keep my grip on it. It bucked and twisted like a living thing trying to slip from my grasp.

With a deep, grounding breath, I imagined myself as part of the forest, my energy mingling with that of the trees, the soil, and the very air. Gradually, the wild energy calmed, aligning with my own and responding to my will.

Then, with a final push of will, I directed the energy upwards, feeling it rush through the network of roots and into the trees around the grove. The air vibrated with power as the ancient trees bowed slightly, acknowledging my command.

As the surge of energy receded, a small, glowing orb emerged from the ground at my feet—the Terra Crystal, pulsing with a gentle, green light. I picked it up, its energy warm and welcoming in my palm, a sign that I had passed the trial.

After receiving the Terra Crystal, there was a moment of profound silence in the grove. It felt as though the forest itself was pausing, taking in the significance of what had just occurred.

Gaia appeared out of nowhere; her smile was more than just approval—it was a recognition, an acknowledgment of a bond now permanently forged between me and the Earth Kingdom.

“You have done well, Samuel,” Gaia said, resonating with the rustling leaves around us. “You have shown great respect and understanding for the life force of our land. This connection is not temporary; it will sustain and guide you as you continue your journey as a World Walker.”

She reached into the folds of her cloak and pulled out a small, intricately carved box. “I have something for you, a gift that I believe will aid you in the trials to come.”

I accepted the box, thanking her for the gift. It was made of the same living wood as her castle, its surface smooth and warm to the touch.

Carefully, I opened it to reveal a pendant glowing softly with the same green light as the Terra Crystal.

“This pendant is crafted from the heartwood of the oldest tree in our kingdom,” Gaia explained as I lifted it from the box. “It carries the essence of Feyiaria, and it will help you to call upon the Earth’s power wherever you may be.”

I slipped the pendant around my neck, feeling an immediate warmth spread through my chest. It was as if the forest had taken root within me, its strength and tranquility filling me with a renewed sense of purpose.

“Thank you, Gaia,” I said, “I will carry this with honor and care.”

Gaia nodded, pleased. “Now, go and celebrate with your friends. Today is not just a victory for you but for all of Feyiaria. You have brought us hope. Tomorrow, I need you to go to Aether Kingdom and find your last crystal. I have already informed them of your quest.”

Everyone thanked her and left the castle. Back at Zephyr’s house, Noris, Lisa, and the others spent the rest of the day in celebration, sharing stories and laughter beneath the ancient trees.

I thought back to my early days as a civil engineering student on Earth and how I had longed for something more, something extraordinary. Never in my wildest dreams had I imagined a journey like this, a journey that would lead me to become a guardian of an ancient, magical world.

“Here's to the future,” I whispered to the evening breeze, and somewhere in the rustling leaves, I heard the forest whisper back.

Chapter 12: Aether's Fluid Dynamics



Our journey had taken us across landscapes both hauntingly familiar and strikingly alien, yet our arrival at Zephyr's quiet cottage always felt like coming home. As we approached, the comforting scent of freshly baked bread wafted through the air, along with the crisp aroma of the surrounding woods. That very evening, Zephyr, ever the gracious host despite his many responsibilities, decorated his table with an assortment of loaves of bread he had prepared in anticipation of our arrival. There were loaves studded with seeds, spirals infused with herbs, and plump rolls glistening with a golden crust that crackled satisfyingly under our eager fingers.

During our brief respite, Zephyr shared stories of his family and the small joys of his woodland life. His eyes sparkled as he talked about children who seemed even happier to see their dad finally return home once again. It was during these moments of heartfelt conversation that we collectively decided to leave Zephyr behind with his family for the upcoming leg of our journey.

The next day, Noris, who had ventured into the nearby village for supplies, returned in early morning with troubling news. He looked worried as he relayed that locals were whispering about disappearances that had started occurring with alarming frequency. Initially, these had been dismissed as unfortunate but common enough in troubled times; however, as the numbers grew, a pattern emerged. The missing were primarily those who had voiced opposition to the Void Serpent—an entity whose malevolent influence we had come to both fear and despise.

It was clear that this was no time for prolonged rest. The Void Serpent wasn't just an impending threat; it was actively working to undermine our

efforts by targeting those who dared to stand against it.

Gelan, the pragmatist of our team, was the first to break the tense silence that had settled over us. Rising to his feet, he said, “Okay, if you say I’m ready to pack up this very instant,” he declared. The rest of us agreed to his decision. We had secured three of the elemental crystals thus far and kept them safe in the fabric of our makeshift satchels.

“We know we have three of the crystals, but if the Void Serpent is as powerful as we fear, he can tear down the walls between all worlds.” Gelan’s grim prophecy of what might come to pass if we failed. The thought of such cataclysmic power was enough to hasten our preparations.

As we gathered our belongings, we could smell the fresh bread, a parting gift from Zephyr, our host, and friend who had become much more to us over the course of our journey. He handed us each a loaf, “May these sustain you as you face the unknown,” he said, his voice thick with emotion. We embraced him one by one, feeling the genuine love he held for each of us.

We left the place and began thinking of ways to get to the Kingdom of Aether quickly. Serim, a native of Aether and the only one among us with the ability to fly had devised a means to transport us. He brought a sturdy, magical carriage that he had constructed, hovering above the ground. It was powered by the same air currents that sustained his homeland. With a flourish of his hands and a whispered incantation, Serim activated the carriage, and we felt a lurch as it lifted off the ground. We saw Zephyr’s house get smaller as we ascended higher in the sky and then eventually left our sight.

The voyage through the skies was nothing short of breathtaking. Below us, the landscape transformed from dense forests and rugged mountains to a vast expanse of open sky that seemed to stretch into eternity. Clouds rolled beneath us like a turbulent sea, their shapes ever-changing—now a mighty dragon, now a delicate flower. The air grew cooler and thinner as we approached the Aether Kingdom, the boundary between our world and the next blurring before our eyes.

As we neared the kingdom, the first of the floating islands came into view. These were not mere chunks of earth suspended in the sky; they were wonders of nature and magic, each one unique and vibrant. Verdant greenery cascaded from their edges like the hanging gardens of a forgotten era, waterfalls poured into the abyss below, their spray catching the light and creating rainbows that flickered in and out of existence. The islands seemed to dance around each other, drawn in an intricate ballet governed by unseen forces.

The Aetherians, inhabitants of this kingdom, were as ethereal as their environment. They moved with grace, and their feet barely touched the ground as they walked around the air currents with ease. They wore garments that flowed around them like mist, crafted from fabrics so light they seemed spun from the clouds themselves. The colors of their attire were soft yet radiant—pastels that changed hues with the shifting light. Each Aetherian we encountered greeted us with a nod and a smile, their eyes reflecting the boundless sky.

Our group, consisting of Samuel, Gelan from the shadowy Umbra, Lina from the radiant Lumina, Serim of Aetheria, and Noris from the stalwart Earth Kingdom, felt decidedly more grounded in contrast. We walked through the floating markets of Aetheria and adjusted to the sensation of solid ground that seemed to breathe and shift under our feet. Stalls floated alongside the pathways, tethered by thin, almost invisible, lines of energy. Vendors offered goods that fluttered in the breeze—jewelry that chimed like wind bells, fabrics that changed colors, and foods that seemed to defy gravity, their flavors as light as air itself.

The architecture of Aether was a marvel; buildings were constructed from cloudstone, a material that reminded me of cotton candies. Structures were designed to enhance the flow of air around them, with curves and arches that directed the wind in playful swirls. Every element of Aetherian design harmonized with the sky, showing the connection Aetherians have with their domain.

I could see Serim's demeanor change; he looked excited to meet his family. I turned to Serim, noting the eagerness in his voice as he spoke to

us.

“I need to see my family,” he said, “It shouldn’t take long. I’ll find my mum and be right back.”

“Take your time, Serim. We’ll wait here. Family is important,” I reassured him, encouraging him to take the moment he needed.

With a grateful nod, Serim moved away from us, stepping lightly across the floating pathways that seemed to be made just for those from this airy domain. The market was loud with the sounds of vendors and the light, melodic chimes that resonated softly from the floating stalls.

As Serim disappeared into the crowd, Lina, Gelan, Noris, and I found a small area to wait. The floating platforms where we stood were anchored in place by thin, barely visible energy lines, giving us a stable enough spot to observe the surroundings without getting in the way of the bustling market life.

The architecture here was mesmerizing, with buildings crafted from what appeared to be cloudstone, radiating a soothing light. Each structure was designed to complement the flow of air, with curves and arches that guided the wind in playful swirls around us. It was a beautiful sight, yet my mind couldn’t help but wander to Serim’s reunion with his family.

“Imagine living in a place like this,” Lina said softly.

“It’s beautiful, but it feels so fragile,” Noris added, “Lisa, you are from Lumina; it’s just as beautiful.”

Gelan, who had been quietly observing everything with a critical eye, finally spoke, “It’s another world entirely. Makes you appreciate the ground under your feet, doesn’t it?”

We all laughed, and I felt a pang of gratitude for my companions, each so different yet so essential to our journey.

Time seemed to slow down as we waited, and I began to worry about Serim. Just as I was about to suggest we go look for him, I saw him walking back toward us, a bright smile on his face and a bag in his hand.

“There he is,” I called out, relief washing over me. “Everything okay?”

“Yes,” Serim had said briskly after a pause that seemed to drag, “Let’s get moving.”

I frowned, puzzled by his sudden urgency. “Huh,” I responded in confusion, “Aren’t you going to introduce us to your family? We’ve come all this way, and it wouldn’t be right if we leave without even saying hello to your mum.”

“Yeah,” Gelan chimed in, folding his arms across his chest. “We don’t have much time, but we have enough for a quick hello, and then we can get going.”

Serim looked from one face to another, his features clouded with confusion as if the concept of introducing us to his family was alien to him. “Umm,” he hesitated, the word hanging awkwardly in the air. “Okay, but my house is really far, so it’s not easy for me to take you there.”

We all exchanged glances of surprise and concern. Something was off. Serim’s manner was unusually evasive, and his excuses felt flimsy against the backdrop of our shared experiences and the openness we had come to expect from one another.

“SERIM!” Lisa almost bellowed in exasperation and incredulity. “What tricks are you playing with us? Come on, stop it.”

“I’m not playing any tricks; what do you mean?” Serim’s reply was defensive, his brow furrowing as he looked genuinely baffled by our reactions.

I studied Serim, trying to gauge if this was some sort of jest he was poorly attempting or if something deeper was amiss. The concern was gnawing at me now, a feeling I couldn’t shake off. “Serim,” I began solemnly, “tell me, where were we before we came here?”

"We were umm... in the house," Serim replied hesitantly.

"Whose house?" I pressed, needing to understand if his memory was genuinely faltering.

"Umm... your house," he said, though the answer sounded more like a question, making me more suspicious.

"You sure?" I asked, the simplicity of my question a thin veneer over the worry that was mounting inside me.

Serim glanced around as if looking for an escape from this line of questioning. His eyes landed on a nearby stall selling what looked like shimmering orbs of liquid. "Umm, look over there," he said abruptly, pointing toward the stall. "Wow, that looks yummy; why don't we go ahead and try some sweet bubbles? I love how they taste."

"Do not try to change the topic," Noris cut in sharply, his patience wearing thin. "He's wasting our time for no reason."

"Yeah, we need to get to the bottom of this," Lisa added.

I stepped closer to Serim, lowering my voice in an attempt to reassure him. "Serim, we're worried about you. This isn't like you. If there's something wrong, you can tell us. We're here to help, not to judge."

Serim looked at me, and for a moment, I could see the flicker of the friend I knew. But just as quickly, it was gone, replaced by a flicker of irritation—or was it fear? "There's nothing wrong. I just... I just think we should keep moving. The market is busy, and we have places to be," he said, his voice strained.

Gelan stepped forward, his approach practical and grounded as always. "Let's all take a deep breath and think this through. Serim, if there's something you're not telling us about why we can't meet your family, now's the time. We're all in this together, and if there's a problem, it's our problem, too."

“Alright,” he began, “There’s something I need to tell you all. It’s not easy, and it’s not something I’m proud of, but you deserve the truth.” He paused, taking another deep breath before continuing. “It’s about my family and why I can’t just take you to see them. It’s complicated, and it has consequences not just for me, but potentially for all of us.”

Just as we were about to press the Serim for answers, a familiar voice cut through the market's din, jarring us with its unexpected cheerfulness.

“Ayyy, I’m back!” I swiveled my head toward the sound, my heart skipping a beat as the ground beneath me seemed to shift—figuratively, if not literally. It was Serim. Another Serim.

We all turned, our expressions mirroring the shock that rippled through us as we looked from one Serim to the other. It felt utterly surreal as if we had stumbled into a dream or a strange illusion. The second Serim walked over with a confident stride that matched the first’s, stopping just a few feet away. We instinctively moved back, creating space between the two.

The first Serim, the one who had been with us all along, furrowed his brow in confusion, then in suspicion as he regarded his mirror image. “Who are you?” he demanded in disbelief.

“I’m Serim. Who are you?” the newcomer replied, equally puzzled and defensive.

“No, I’m the Serim,” insisted the first, “You’re just imitating me.”

“No, I am,” countered the second.

They turned to us simultaneously, both asserting, “I’m Serim.”

The absurdity of the situation momentarily broke the tension, and we couldn't help but laugh, a brief respite from the confusion. Then I said, “I know who the real one is.”

“How?” they both asked in unison, eyes narrowing in challenge and curiosity.

“Well, who can tell me where we were before we got here?” I asked, hoping my question would reveal who knew our journey’s details.

“We flew here from Zephyr’s place,” said the Serim, who had just arrived and was not missing a beat.

“Aha, we got our Serim,” Gelan declared confidently, a smirk crossing his face as he turned to the other Serim. “Now, tell us who you are,” he demanded the first Serim, stepping forward slightly.

“Do it before we do something to you,” Lisa added, though it was clear we were all on edge, not sure of what might happen next.

He said, “I can explain,” and then, without warning, burst into laughter, filling the air around us with an unsettling mirth that seemed out of place given the tension. We all stared at him in amazement. His laughter subsided, and he wiped a tear from his eye, still chuckling lightly.

“Sorry, sorry! I couldn’t hold it any longer!” he exclaimed. We remained silent, not sharing in the humor.

Seeing our lack of amusement, his smile faded slightly, replaced by a sheepish look. “I’m Sylph, a mischievous air spirit,” he confessed with a slight bow, his form shimmering slightly as if made of the very breeze around us. “I couldn’t resist playing a prank by imitating myself as Serim—because, you know, we look so much alike.”

The realization dawned on us, and mixed reactions spread across the group. Gelan rolled his eyes, Lina sighed heavily, and I just shook my head, not sure whether to be annoyed or impressed by the spirit's audacity.

“I must say,” Sylph continued, floating slightly above the ground with a playful swirl, “I am quite impressed by Samuel's quick thinking and adaptability. You figured it out almost right away, didn’t you?” His voice held a note of genuine respect as he addressed me directly.

“It seemed the only logical conclusion, given the circumstances,” I replied.

Sylph clapped his hands together, a sound like the tinkling of bells. "Exactly! You are as sharp as the upper winds of Aetheria!" he exclaimed. "As a token of my respect and to make amends for the confusion, I offer you my assistance."

"Yes," I confirmed, wary but intrigued by his offer. "We need to reach Aéras Temple. It's vital to our mission."

"Ahh, Aéras Temple!" Sylph floated higher, his form becoming more ethereal as if invigorated by the mention of the place. "A magnificent choice! The temple is not just far; it's cleverly hidden in the skies. Not an easy journey for mortals, but for me, it's a delightful breeze!"

Gelan stepped forward, his voice steady, "Can you take us there? Without any more... pranks?"

Sylph performed what looked like a mock salute. "You have my word, Gelan of Umbra. No more pranks. This time, it's a serious flight."

"Serim," I looked back at him, "You can stay here with your family. I can see you wanted to see them back. We will come back for you soon."

"Yes, don't worry. I can fly them to the castle," added Sylph.

Serim thanked her and promised to introduce us to his family when we come to him again. We bid him farewell and watched him happily run into the market to meet his mother.

"Then we're ready to go," said Lina, in excitement and caution, as she glanced at the rest of us for agreement.

We all nodded, and with a dramatic flourish, Sylph extended his hands. "Climb aboard my cloud chariot!" he announced, and as if summoned by his words, a shimmering platform of clouds coalesced beneath him, large enough to carry us all.

We stepped onto the cloud, the sensation underfoot spongy and slightly cool, like morning mist. It was an odd feeling, standing on a cloud, but the platform felt surprisingly stable. Sylph, reveling in our amazement, began

to guide the chariot upwards, and soon, we were ascending at a brisk pace, the ground falling away beneath us.

As we soared higher, the landscape of Aetheria spread out below us like a flowing river. The floating islands appeared as mere specks, and the higher peaks of the kingdom pierced through the cloud cover, standing stoic against the blue sky.

“The view is breathtaking,” Noris remarked, his usual reserve forgotten as he leaned over the side of the cloud to get a better look.

“It’s one of the perks of flying!” Sylph replied, “The world from above is a different place—a place of beauty and mystery.”

The journey continued with Sylph pointing out landmarks and telling stories of the skies—tales of ancient air spirits and the clouds they molded into hiding spots and fortresses.

“There it is, Aéras Temple,” Sylph announced, pointing at the massive palace standing in the clouds. It was so white that it looked like it had been made from the surface of the moon.

The cloud chariot descended slowly, allowing us a gradual approach that seemed to honor the sanctity of the site. As we disembarked, I felt a chill not from the altitude but from the awe of standing before such a legacy of the ancient world.

“Thank you, Sylph,” I said, turning to the air spirit who had brought us here. “This wouldn’t have been possible without you.”

Sylph bowed, his earlier mischief now turning into a solemn mood appropriate for our surroundings. “The paths we fly bring us to the places we are needed most,” he said cryptically. “Remember, the journey is as important as the destination.”

With those parting words, Sylph vanished, leaving us to face the temple and its mysteries alone.

We ascended the gleaming white marble stairs that led to the imposing gates of Aéras Temple. We walked up the stairs when Lisa broke the silence that had settled over our group, “Good thing Gyla informed them about our arrival and our mission; we don’t have to prove ourselves again,” she said, adjusting the strap of her bag as she glanced back to ensure we were all keeping pace.

“Yes,” Gelan responded, “I hope so too. She is so old, I hope she didn’t forget.”

“Hey, watch your mouth,” Noris chided from behind, his tone half-joking yet firm. Noris, who hailed from the Earth Kingdom, always had a special reverence for the older members of any community, believing them to be living libraries of knowledge and tradition.

At the very top of the stairs, we were greeted by a massive white gate that marked the entrance to the temple. Adjacent to the gate was an ornate bell, inviting yet formidable in its silent presence.

We hesitated at the threshold, the magnitude of the temple’s architecture rendering us momentarily speechless. I was about to reach out and ring the bell, thinking perhaps to announce our arrival formally, when the doors creaked open of their own accord as if anticipating our touch.

Stepping inside, the interior of the temple expanded before us, grander and more majestic than its outward appearance had suggested. The vastness of the hall was accentuated by towering columns that rose to meet a ceiling painted with ethereal frescoes depicting the ancient air spirits of lore. The floor beneath our feet was a mosaic of clouds and sky, crafted with such artistry that it seemed to move with its own gentle breezes.

In the center of this grand hall stood an old man, white as the temple itself. Contrary to his age, his posture was upright and strong, his eyes sharp and piercing as they fixed upon our group. His hair was a shock of white that matched the marble around us, and his robes flowed about him like mist.

"I know why you have come here, and I have been waiting for your arrival. Come inside," he called out, with an authority that beckoned us forward without question.

I opened my mouth to express our gratitude for his welcoming us so readily, but before I could articulate a single word of thanks, he continued, "I shall waste no time and begin your trial."

The sudden announcement of the trial caught us off guard. We exchanged quick, nervous glances, each of us mentally bracing for what was to come. The old man gestured for us to follow him deeper into the temple, leading us through a series of archways that rang with the soft whispers of age-old secrets.

As we followed the old man deeper into the heart of the temple, a silent tension built among us. The echoing halls whispered with the secrets of the past, amplifying our sense of anticipation and unease. Finally, we arrived at a vast, open hall where the walls seemed to recede into infinity, and the ceiling arched high above, disappearing into a haze of light. At the center of this grand expanse stood a pedestal, upon which rested the Air Crystal, its facets catching the light and scattering it in a dazzling spray of colors.

Sylph, who had been oddly quiet during our approach, cast a bewildered look around the expansive room. "Where is the trial?" he asked.

The old man, his back to us as he faced the crystal, spoke without turning. "The trial begins now, Samuel." He gestured toward the pedestal with a sweeping motion before stepping back, merging almost imperceptibly with the shadows that clung to the edges of the room.

Confused, I stepped forward as the heavy doors behind me thudded shut, sealing me within the vast, open hall; a sense of solitude enveloped me. The room stretched out infinitely in all directions; its lofty ceiling was lost to shadows and light. At the center stood the Air Crystal on a solitary pedestal, shimmering with an inviting yet taunting glow.

I took a tentative step forward, my footsteps echoing in the hushed grandeur of the temple's heart. As I reached out to grasp the crystal, it

suddenly jerked upward, eluding my grasp with an ease that spoke of the challenges to come. I watched, dumbfounded, as it darted higher, playful and elusive.

Realizing the nature of my trial, a mixture of excitement and uncertainty surged through me. The crystal hovered just out of reach as if gauging my resolve. Remembering the teachings about the essence that Zephyr had imparted to me, I closed my eyes and focused inward, attempting to connect with the latent power within.

With a deep inhalation, I called upon the essence, feeling it stir within my core like a waking wind. Tentatively, my feet left the ground, buoyed by an invisible force that I willed into existence. But the unfamiliar sensation of floating unnerved me, and I faltered, dropping back to the ground with a jarring thud.

Determined, I rose to my feet, dusting off the setback. The crystal seemed to mock my initial failure, swirling high above, dancing in the air currents that I had yet to master. I centered myself, recalling the old man's words: the trial was not merely a physical challenge but a test of spiritual connection to the air around me.

With more focus, I lifted into the air again. This time, I moved with more purpose, directing my ascent toward the crystal. It darted away, leading me on a spiraling chase that tested both my agility and my understanding of the air's fluid nature.

I pursued the crystal through the cavernous space, each loop and dive teaching me more about the delicate balance of flying. The air around me felt alive, responsive to my thoughts and movements. I began to anticipate rather than react, my body adapting to the rhythm of ascent and descent as naturally as breathing.

The chase drew me higher, and I maneuvered with increasing confidence, spiraling around columns that touched the sky. The crystal's path became a dance, and I was its willing partner, moving in harmony with the forces that I had once believed beyond my command.

My earlier trepidation transformed into exhilaration. Each near-miss with the crystal pushed me to refine my control to blend my essence more seamlessly with the air around me. I was not merely chasing; I was becoming part of the aerial landscape of the temple.

As I grew more adept, the crystal's flights became more daring, swooping low before soaring abruptly, its brilliant light a beacon in the vastness of the hall. I followed unwaveringly, my body arching and twisting through the air, each movement a testament to my growing mastery.

Finally, in a moment of perfect clarity and synchronization, I surged forward, my hand closing around the crystal just as it attempted another elusive maneuver. The moment my fingers touched its surface, a calm descended over me, and the crystal ceased its flight as if acknowledging my victory.

The weight of the crystal in my hand anchored me, and I gently descended to the floor, the essence slowly receding but leaving behind a trace of its power, a whisper of the sky. I stood there, alone but not solitary, cradling the Air Crystal, its facets casting prismatic lights across the marble.

"I have understood," I whispered to the empty hall, feeling a profound connection not just to the element I had mastered but to the world itself. The trial had ended, but the journey of understanding was just beginning.

The doors of the hall opened again, and the sound of my friends' anxious waiting flooded in. They had not seen the trial, but they would soon see its effects. I stepped out, the Air Crystal secure in my grasp, ready to share the tale of the sky and to continue our quest, bolstered by new strength and insight.

Chapter 13: Trust Fractures



We left Aéras Temple feeling a sense of fulfillment. I had finally secured all four crystals, and the reunion with Serim had brought warmth back to our group that I hadn't realized we needed. As we said our goodbyes to Sylph, who had become an unlikely friend in our time in the Aether Kingdom, there was a bittersweetness in the air. With Serim now back by my side, the rest of the group gathered around, their excitement infectious as we prepared for whatever came next, our spirits lifted by this hard-won victory.

We were one step closer, but as we made our way back to the main route, the challenges of our journey seemed to have just begun. Something in the air felt different, as though a subtle tension had seeped into our fellowship, one that was starting to reveal itself in the small things.

The first incident happened when we stopped by a grove just beyond the Aetherian cliffs for the night. After hours of walking, our energy had dipped, and everyone was eager to rest. Gelan, as usual, took stock of our supplies; his voice was loud as he called out our inventory while Noris scratched notes into his logbook.

"Where's the spare ration bag?" Gelan frowned, flipping open empty packs and inspecting the contents.

Lisa looked up from where she was setting up her bedroll. "It should be in there; I packed it this morning."

"Well, it's not here now," Gelan said with irritation, tinting his words. He tossed aside an empty bag, his gaze shifting to the group, searching for answers. His eyes narrowed a bit, suspicion simmering beneath his frustration.

“Maybe you misplaced it, Gelan,” Noris offered, though his tone lacked conviction.

“No, I remember putting it in there!” Lisa insisted, her face flushing slightly as Gelan's gaze lingered on her as though silently blaming her.

Serim, leaning against a nearby tree, tried to diffuse the tension. “Let’s not worry too much. We’ve enough to get us by for tonight. It could’ve been misplaced during the trial, or maybe we left it back at the temple.” He offered a smile, but even I could see how forced it was.

The incident lingered, hanging over us like a dark cloud as we finally settled in for the night. Lisa was unusually quiet while Gelan mumbled something about double-checking everything before setting off in the morning. Everyone eventually lay down, but the solidarity of earlier was conspicuously absent.

The next morning, we resumed our journey at a brisk pace, heading toward the next waypoint. The landscape shifted from rocky terrain to an emerald-green valley dotted with wildflowers that danced in the wind. The beauty of the surroundings didn’t seem to lift the unease that had settled over us.

Around midday, Serim, who was leading, stopped abruptly at a fork in the road. “This doesn’t seem right,” he muttered, glancing at the map in his hands.

Gelan leaned over, peering at the path ahead. “We’re supposed to be heading northeast, but this looks more west to me,” he pointed out gruffly.

Lisa stepped forward, looked at the path, and then back at Serim as if suspecting him of foul play. “Are you sure you read the map correctly?” There was an edge in the way she spoke that hadn’t been there before.

“I’m reading it as best I can!” Serim snapped back, his patience clearly wearing thin. “The winds must have shifted the markers. It’s not my fault!”

Gelan scowled, “Convenient excuse, Serim. Considering you’re the only one of us who can feel the winds.”

“Hey!” I intervened, stepping between them. “This isn’t helping. Let’s just figure it out and move on.”

But even as I tried to mediate, I could see the distrust blooming in their eyes. Gelan muttered something under his breath that I couldn’t catch, but the glare he shot at Serim spoke volumes.

We took the path Serim suggested, but an hour into our walk, it became painfully obvious we had taken a wrong turn. The rocky terrain grew treacherous, with steep inclines and loose gravel that made the journey hazardous. The grumbling among the group grew, a low murmur of dissatisfaction.

“I knew this wasn’t the right way,” Gelan growled in an accusatory manner as he looked at Serim. Lisa, by his side, seemed to agree.

Serim clenched his jaw, his shoulders stiffening. “If you think you can do better, be my guest, Gelan.”

“Maybe I will,” Gelan shot back.

“Enough!” I raised my voice, the echo bouncing off the rock faces around us. “We all make mistakes. We’ll backtrack and find the right way. We need to stay together if we’re going to succeed.”

They grumbled in response but followed my lead as we turned back, retracing our steps. But it wasn’t just the mistake that had gotten to everyone; it was the implication that someone might be deliberately leading us astray.

A couple of days later, the third incident occurred. This time, it was the loss of Serim’s compass, an enchanted item that helped him sense directional wind currents. We were camped for the night in a small wooded clearing. The group was settling down after an exhausting day.

As Serim rummaged through his belongings, his brows furrowed. “The compass... it’s gone.” He looked up, confusion and disbelief coloring his expression.

“Gone?” Lisa echoed, “How does an enchanted compass just disappear?”

“I don’t know!” Serim retorted, “It was in my pack this morning. Now it’s gone.”

“Maybe it just... fell out?” I offered, though I knew how feeble that sounded. We all knew how careful Serim was with his gear, especially something as crucial as his compass.

“Or maybe someone took it,” said Gelan. The accusation stayed like an unspoken curse.

“Why would anyone do that?” said Noris, frowning, “What purpose would it serve to sabotage one of our own?”

Lisa folded her arms across her chest, “If someone here is trying to derail us, it’s working. First the rations, then the wrong path, and now this?”

The silence that followed was deafening, each of us looking around, wondering if someone among us was truly not who they seemed to be. My stomach twisted, the unease settling in my chest. Trust, once broken, was nearly impossible to repair, and these small incidents were driving a wedge between us all.

“Enough. We need to sleep,” I finally said in exhaustion, “We’ll deal with this tomorrow. But I want everyone to stay where they are, and I don’t want any more arguments.”

I could feel their eyes on me, their uncertainty mingling with resentment. It felt like the group was splitting at the seams, and I wasn’t sure how long I could hold us all together.

I was unable to sleep that night, the doubt gnawing at me. The wind whistled through the trees, and I watched the firelight dance across the faces of my companions, wondering who might be hiding a secret.

We had decided to go back to Zephyr’s house as that place had been the most familiar to all of us, but Serim had lost his carriage, so he couldn’t fly

us anywhere. We had to walk our way to his house, stopping only for the night or when we felt exhausted.

The Eldrin was sitting behind the hills as we set up camp for the night, forming shadows across the clearing. After a long day of struggling to find our way through thick woodlands and steep ridges, everyone was tired, irritable, and still on edge from the previous incidents. It was only a matter of time before things erupted once again.

The trouble started during dinner. Gelan, his face half-lit by the flickering firelight, eyed Lisa with a hard look as she portioned out the last of the stew. She had taken on the responsibility of preparing the meals for the evening.

“You know, it’s strange,” Gelan said, “how we’ve been missing things, losing our way. Feels like someone is deliberately making decisions without consulting the rest of us.”

Lisa didn’t look up, but her hands stilled for a fraction of a second before she resumed serving. “If you have something to say, Gelan, just say it,” she replied.

“Fine,” said Gelan, now raising his voice a little. “I think it’s you, Lisa. You’re always the one taking charge, always the one making decisions that just so happen to get us off track.”

Lisa shot him a glare, “Are you seriously accusing me of sabotaging us? Are you out of your mind?”

Gelan didn’t back down, “You tell me, Lisa. We’ve been led in circles for days now. Supplies have gone missing, and Serim’s compass didn’t just vanish into thin air. Someone’s doing it, and you always seem to be at the center of things.”

I shifted uncomfortably, watching the tension build between them like a storm on the horizon. Everyone else besides the two of them stayed quiet. Lisa's eyes flashed, and she set down the pot she was holding, standing up to face Gelan fully.

“That’s ridiculous, and you know it. Why would I sabotage our own mission? What could I possibly gain from that?”

Noris, who had been sitting a little way off, glanced up at the confrontation but made no move to intervene. Serim’s gaze flickered between the two, his expression one of mounting concern.

“I don’t know, Lisa,” Grimm said, “Maybe you’ve got another agenda. Maybe you’re working with someone else. Or maybe you just like control, like playing the leader and keeping us all guessing.”

“That’s rich coming from you, Gelan,” Lisa shot back, trembling slightly with anger. “You’re always questioning everything, sowing distrust and suspicion. I’m doing my best to keep us moving, to keep us fed and safe. If you have a problem with that, maybe you should step up instead of just pointing fingers.”

“Step up?” Gelan’s laugh was harsh, almost mocking. “Oh, I’d love to, but you never give anyone else the chance, do you? You always think you know best, always deciding where we go and how we do things. Maybe it’s time someone else had a say.”

I could feel the argument escalating, the heat between them becoming almost unbearable. Their voices were growing louder, cutting through the evening silence, and I knew if I didn’t step in soon, it would only get worse.

“Stop it, you two!” I finally shouted, stepping between them, my hands raised. “This isn’t helping. We’re supposed to be a team, remember? We’re all tired; we’ve all been through a lot, but accusing each other isn’t the answer.”

Gelan shook his head, eyes still locked on Lisa, “You can say that all you want, Samuel, but we need to face facts. There’s someone here who’s working against us. Maybe we’re too trusting; maybe that’s the real issue.”

“Gelan, we don’t have any proof,” I argued, trying to keep my voice calm and reasonable. “We need to stick together, not tear each other apart. If

we start turning on one another, the Void Serpent might as well have already won.”

“Samuel’s right,” said Lisa, “We don’t have time for this nonsense. We need to focus on the mission, not fight amongst ourselves.”

“Easy for you to say,” Gelan muttered, though his voice had dropped a few decibels. He cast one last lingering glare at Lisa before turning on his heel and walking away from the campfire.

I turned to Lisa, who was staring into the fire, her face still flushed from the argument. “Are you okay?” I asked gently, feeling a pang of sympathy for her. I could see how much Gelan’s accusations had hurt her.

She gave me a nod, though the unease on her face was still apparent, “I’m fine, Samuel. Just tired of always being the one questioned. It’s like nothing I do is good enough. I’ve only ever tried to keep us on track.”

“I know,” I said, “We’re all on edge, but we need to find a way to trust each other again.”

“I know that too. I just... Grimm has always been like this. Skeptical, stubborn. It’s like he’s looking for someone to blame, and I’m the easiest target,” said Lisa.

I sighed, glancing over my shoulder in the direction Gelan had gone. “He’s frustrated. We all are. But maybe we can turn things around if we find a way to show everyone we’re still in this together.”

“Let’s hope so,” said Lisa, giving me a weary smile, “I don’t know how much longer we can keep going like this.”

Gelan didn’t return to the campfire, choosing instead to keep his distance, and Lisa remained close to the others, her demeanor cautious and guarded. I stayed up longer than usual, my eyes flicking between the fire and the darkness beyond, trying to think of ways to bring us back together.

But the problem was, I didn’t know who was right or wrong. There was a part of me that wanted to believe Lisa and trust her sincerity, but there

was also a nagging doubt: What if Gelan was onto something? What if we were being played, and I was too naive to see it?

The argument had stirred something deep within me, an uncertainty that refused to be silenced. We were supposed to be united, but all I saw now were splintering factions, each member retreating further into their own suspicions.

The journey after that was spent in silence. The tension among the group barely concealed beneath forced politeness and curt exchanges. We had pushed forward again at dawn as we arrived in the city of Nexus.

The day had been long, and the city of Myriad, a bustling hub of traders, travelers, and strange faces—offered us a much-needed respite from the exhausting journey. The streets were lively, packed with people moving about their business, stalls selling exotic items, and strange scents wafting from nearby food vendors.

We had checked into a small hotel, one of the few places we could afford with the limited funds we had left. It wasn't much—cramped rooms, creaky floors, and a window that opened up to a narrow street below—but it was better than sleeping on the ground, exposed to the elements.

Everyone seemed exhausted, physically and mentally. Gelan had distanced himself from Lisa ever since their argument, barely speaking to her unless it was unavoidable, and even then, his words were clipped and cold. Lisa, in turn, had kept to herself, her usually bright demeanor dimmed by Gelan's accusations.

I knew we couldn't go on like this. I had hoped that time and distance from the argument would ease the tension, but each step forward seemed only to deepen the fractures that had formed between us.

After a quick meal consisting of dry rations and silence, I decided to take a short walk, needing some space to clear my head. I left the building to get some Eldrin light. The silence of the streets was comforting, a reprieve from the tension that seemed to hang over our group like a storm cloud.

As I walked, I heard it, soft voices carried on the breeze. It was the unmistakable sound of someone speaking in hushed tones, and the tone immediately put me on edge. I slowed my steps, moving closer as silently as I could, trying to catch what was being said. The voices were coming from just beyond a distance. I crouched low, moving carefully through an alley until I was close enough to make out the words.

“...I’m telling you, it has to be done. You know it’s the only way to make sure Samuel doesn’t interfere.”

I couldn’t believe I was hearing my name.

The voice was low, but it was distorted slightly, as though it was deliberately muffled. I couldn’t quite make out who was speaking. I strained to listen, holding my breath as I edged closer, pressing myself against the wall to my right.

Another voice responded, this one softer, almost hesitant. “I don’t like it. What if they find out? They’ll turn on us, and everything we’ve worked for will be ruined.”

The first voice hissed in response, “They’re already suspicious. That’s why we have to move carefully. If we don’t act now, the whole mission will fall apart, and you know who will pay the price for that. It won’t just be us, it’ll be everyone.”

I felt my stomach drop, the words settling like a heavy stone in my gut. The urgency in their voices, the implication that someone among us was actively working against the group, was all too much. I closed my eyes, trying to steady my breath, my heart pounding so loudly that I was afraid it would give me away.

“What about Samuel?” the second voice asked, sounding almost pleading. “He’s trying so hard to keep everyone together. He believes in this mission. I don’t know if I can....”

There was a pause, and then the first voice spoke again, colder this time. “Samuel doesn’t understand what’s really at stake. He’s too trusting.

He'll be the first to fall if we don't take control of the situation."

My mouth went dry, and I felt a rush of emotions: fear, anger, and confusion, all swirling together. Someone was plotting, and they believed I was too naive to understand the dangers we faced. The words cut deep, not just because they doubted me, but because they confirmed my worst fears, that the fractures within our group weren't just the result of stress and exhaustion. Someone was actively driving a wedge between us, manipulating events from behind the scenes.

I shifted slightly, trying to peer through a gap in the wall, but in my haste, my foot brushed against a loose stone, and it rolled away, clattering against the cobblestones. The voices stopped immediately, and my breath caught in my throat. I ducked down, my heart pounding in my ears as I pressed myself against the wall, trying to become invisible.

"Did you hear that?" the first voice asked.

"Someone's here," the second voice whispered.

I could hear the rustle of movement, the unmistakable sound of someone stepping back, moving away from where they had been standing. I held my breath, every muscle in my body tense, waiting, hoping they wouldn't come my way.

The footsteps grew fainter, and then they were gone, swallowed by the sounds of the city beyond the alley. Slowly, I lifted my head, scanning the area. There was no sign of them; whoever they were, they had left in a hurry.

I stayed crouched there for a long moment, thinking. Who could it have been? Gelan? Lisa? Serim? Even Noris? The voices had been too muffled, too deliberately disguised for me to identify them. The more I thought about it, the more my mind seemed to spin in circles, trying to piece together the fragments of information I had overheard.

What did they mean by taking control? And why was I the one they singled out, the one who "didn't understand what was really at stake"? The

realization that someone among us had so little faith in me, that they believed I was too trusting, too naive, hit me harder than I'd expected. I had always believed in the unity of our mission and in the importance of working together, but now that belief felt like a vulnerability that could be exploited.

Slowly, I backed away from my hiding place, making my way back inside the hotel. When I returned to the room, the others were still there, seemingly oblivious to what had just transpired. Serim and Gelan were sitting near the small window, talking in low voices. Noris sat apart, cleaning his blade with meticulous precision, his face set in a focused scowl. Lisa was by the door, her expression lost in thought as she fiddled with one of her rings.

I looked at each of them, trying to imagine who it could have been and who would have such a conversation behind the group's back. Each of them had reasons to be frustrated, and each had their own burdens, but it was hard to believe that any of them could be working against us. And yet... someone was.

"Samuel, everything alright?" Serim looked up.

I forced a smile, nodding. "Yeah, just needed a walk. I'm fine."

"Good," Serim replied, though his eyes lingered on me for a moment longer as if he could sense that something was wrong.

I moved to my bed, sitting down heavily, my mind still replaying the words I had heard. "He'll be the first to fall." The phrase rang in my mind, a chilling reminder of the precariousness of our situation. There was a traitor among us, someone who believed that what they were doing was for the greater good, even if it meant betrayal.

I sat on a chair, staring up at the cracked ceiling of the small room. The faint noise of the city drifted in through the window, the hum of life that felt so distant from what I was experiencing.

The words I had overheard echoed in my mind. "Samuel doesn't understand what's really at stake. He's too trusting." I replayed them over and over, my thoughts tangled with doubt and confusion. Whoever had said those words believed that I was too naive to see the real danger, too blind to understand what needed to be done.

It stung, not just because it was a betrayal, but because there was a part of me that wondered if they were right. Had I been too trusting? Had I been so focused on keeping the group together and maintaining unity that I had ignored the warning signs that had been there all along? Had my own desire to see us as a team, as a family, blinded me to the truth?

Every time one of them spoke, I found myself questioning their motives. When Lisa offered me water, I wondered if her kindness was genuine or if it was part of a calculated move. When Gelan scouted ahead, I questioned if he was looking for threats or if he was somehow communicating with someone else, plotting behind our backs. Even Serim, who had always been my closest friend in the group, wasn't immune to my doubts. His laughter, his easy-going manner—was it all just a cover for something else?

It was exhausting, this constant questioning. Every glance, every gesture, every word, I dissected it all, searching for hidden meaning, for signs of deceit. I tried to hide it, tried to act as if nothing had changed, but I could feel the strain growing, the cracks widening beneath the surface.

It was clear to me then that the Void Serpent wasn't our only enemy. Distrust had seeped into our ranks, and it was working against us just as surely as any dark magic could. We had faced monsters, spirits, and ancient trials, but I had a sinking feeling that keeping our group intact might be the greatest challenge yet.

Chapter 14: Dimensional Search and Rescue



Just when I was beginning to hope for a return to normalcy, as fragile and uncertain as that hope was, disaster had to strike. It was like the world had a personal vendetta against our peace. We had fought tooth and nail to find a rhythm, something that resembled the life we had once known, but the universe seemed determined to throw curveballs our way.

I thought of the void serpent, and the unknown gnawed at me. Was this enemy a person? Was it a force, a concept, an illusion? Or was it something even more sinister, something without flesh or reason, perhaps animated by some dark magic or ancient grudge? The possibilities multiplied in my mind. No answer seemed to fit, yet none could be entirely ruled out. All I knew was that we were vulnerable, exposed to something beyond our understanding.

We were preparing to leave our temporary lodging when Noris burst through the door. In his hand, he held two small, worn parchments. One of them was rolled tightly and sealed with crimson wax that bore an unmistakable symbol: the intricate, swirling mark of Zephyr.

The fire crackled softly in the hearth, the embers glowing as if they were watching us, waiting for the news that this parchment might bring. My heart skipped a beat at the sight of it.

“We have a letter from Zephyr,” he announced.

“How does he know of our whereabouts?” I asked in surprise.

The only ones who knew where we were supposed to be were right here in this room. We had been cautious, careful not to leave a trace. I glanced at Noris, but he looked as perplexed as I felt.

“Oh, I sent him a letter,” chimed in Serim nonchalantly. He was sitting by the window and didn’t even look up from the knife he was sharpening, “Just to be safe,” he added as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

For a moment, I could only blink at him.

“Good idea,” I finally said. I turned back to Noris, who had been standing there, fidgeting slightly, waiting for us to finish. “So what does the letter say?” I asked, nodding toward the parchment.

Noris glanced at it, then back up at us.

“I don’t know,” Noris said, “I’ll read it out loud.”

He slowly unrolled the parchment, revealing dark ink scrawled across the surface in elegant, looping letters.

Dear Samuel,

I heard from Serim that you've so far been successful in your mission, and I cannot tell you how proud and relieved I am to hear that. The path you have walked has been dangerous, and each day brings a new challenge. You have faced trials that would have broken even the strongest of men, and yet here you are, pushing forward. I truly admire your courage.

After receiving Serim's letter, I went back to visit Sage Talarara. Do you remember when I took you to see him the very first time, back when we first learned the truth about your father? It feels like a lifetime ago, doesn't it? So much has changed since then. I still recall the way Talarara spoke to me about how he seemed to see something in you that none of us could quite grasp. Well, I shared your recent progress with him. But, as always, he surprised me; he already knew all about it. It seems the name of Samuel and his brave companions has spread far and wide across all of Feyiaria. Your deeds are not just whispers in the dark anymore. The people know of you now. Some call you heroes; others call you a beacon of hope in a dark time. You should take pride in that.

However, with good news, there often comes something more complicated. Sage Talarara mentioned something troubling, a small

inconvenience, as he put it, but I fear it may be more than that. He believes that there might be another crystal, one that none of us were aware of until now. It appears that the four crystals you have already collected may not be enough. There may be a fifth, hidden somewhere in Feyiaria, a final piece that you must find to truly unite the power of the others.

We don't know yet where it might be. Talarara spoke in riddles, as he always does, hinting that this crystal might be hidden where “shadows meet the light, where old promises are buried.” I wish I had more concrete information to give you, but it seems we are once again dealing with fragments of prophecy and legend. As you know, time is never on our side, and this crystal may be essential to complete your mission. It may be the key to binding the powers of the four crystals, unlocking something even greater—something capable of turning the tide of the conflict that looms over us all.

Samuel, I understand the burden that this places on you. I wish I could be there in person to help you search and take some of this weight off your shoulders. But I also know that if anyone can find this crystal, if anyone can overcome whatever obstacles lay in the path ahead, it is you.

Know that I am eagerly awaiting your return and that when this is all over, we will celebrate together as friends who have faced the storm and come out the other side.

Until then, may the winds guide you, and may the stars shine brightly on your path.

Please stay safe.

From,

Zephyr

We sat there in silence. It was like when you've been working all day, your muscles aching, and just as you think you might rest, someone hands you another task. The news of another crystal to find with another

mysterious clue was exhausting. None of us wanted to voice the weariness that settled in our bones. We just stared at the flickering fire.

The silence stretched until Lisa spoke up. “Hey, what’s that other letter you’re holding?” she asked, gesturing toward the second parchment in Noris’s hand. Her tone was casual, almost too casual, and I could tell she was making an effort to divert the topic. The tension in the group had reached a breaking point lately, and the idea of discussing future strategies with a possible traitor in our midst didn’t seem like the wisest course of action.

Noris looked down at the parchment in his hand. Unlike the other letter, this one bore no emblem. The seal was a simple blob of wax, hastily pressed down, and the parchment itself was rougher, almost frayed at the edges. He frowned as he turned it over, the uncertainty plain on his face.

“It doesn’t look official,” Noris muttered, inspecting the parchment. “No sign of where it came from or who sent it.” He glanced at each of us, “But it’s addressed to all of us. I guess we should read it.”

We gathered closer, forming a loose circle around Noris. Noris slowly broke the wax seal and unrolled the parchment. His eyes scanned the words for a moment, shifting from confusion to something deeper—shock, maybe disbelief.

“What does it say?” I asked. My curiosity was growing with every passing second.

Noris swallowed hard before he began to read aloud:

“To the Companions of the Four Crystals,

You may think your journey is nearing its end, but I write to inform you of a truth that you must know before proceeding further. Alaric, whom many thought lost to the void, is not dead. He is alive but trapped, confined within a pocket dimension of shadow and light, a place where time stands still, where his voice cannot reach the world beyond.

He has been imprisoned there by forces beyond your understanding, forces that do not wish for you to succeed in your mission. The power of the crystals alone will not be enough to bring him back.

If you wish to save him, if you wish to understand the full extent of what lies ahead, you must act swiftly. But be warned—the journey will be perilous, and not all of you may survive what is to come.

Trust only in each other, and beware of the one who walks among you with deceit in their heart. The path you walk is dangerous, but it is one you must take if you wish to see the dawn.

Signed,

A Friend from the Shadows”

The silence that followed the reading of the letter was like a heavy fog settling over the group, dense and suffocating. I felt my chest tighten as the words played in my mind. Alaric, my father, is alive. My father, the one person I had wanted to know my entire life, the man I thought I had lost forever, was alive. The realization hit me like a punch to the gut, leaving me breathless and disoriented. I wasn't sure if I should believe this letter from an unknown source, but something in my gut told me that it was the truth.

I felt a lump form in my throat, and I looked away, blinking back the sudden sting of tears. I couldn't let them see me vulnerable, broken. The others needed a leader, not someone who was about to fall apart. But it was nearly impossible to keep my emotions in check. Alaric had always been a mystery, a ghost haunting the edges of my life, a man I knew only through whispered stories and fleeting memories from my mother. And now, he was alive, out there somewhere.

“What does this mean for us?” said Lisa. “Samuel, your father... he's alive.”

I nodded, swallowing hard. “Yeah,” I managed to say, “He's alive but... trapped.” The thought of him being imprisoned, stuck in some kind of pocket dimension where time stood still, filled me with a cold dread. How

long had he been there? How much had he suffered while we thought he was gone? The thought twisted in my chest.

Gelan, who had been pacing near the fire, “Trapped in a pocket dimension?” He ran a hand through his hair, “How are we supposed to even begin to figure out how to get him out of there? And why is this the first we’re hearing of it?” He looked at me as if somehow the answers were supposed to be found within me.

“Because there are forces at work here that we don’t understand,” Serim interjected. He glanced at me, offering a nod of support. “We know nothing is ever straightforward in this place. Now, do we find the crystal or Alaric?”

The letter had left us reeling. The news of my father being alive had shattered the plans we had so meticulously laid out, and now, the group was divided.

The crystals or my father? The weight of both options was crushing, and I could feel the expectations pressing on me.

“Samuel, you know I’m with you, whatever you decide. But we need to think this through carefully. We were sent to find the four crystals for a reason: they were our best chance to defeat the Void Serpent. Without them, everything we’ve worked for might be in vain. If we just divert now to save Alaric, we might be risking everything.”

The crystals were supposed to be our path to victory, our way of sealing the breach between our world and Feyarian. But my father, my father was alive, and I couldn’t just leave him. I looked down, my hands clenching into fists as I tried to organize my thoughts. The decision wasn’t just about me; it was about all of us.

“But if Alaric is alive,” Serim cut in, “and if he’s trapped, it means whoever put him there did so because they feared what he could do. Alaric was one of the greatest World Walkers, right? The Void Serpent must be afraid of what he could do if he were free.” He looked at me, “If we save him, we might have a much better chance at winning this. We’re not talking

about abandoning the crystals—we're talking about adding a crucial piece to our fight. We need to think strategically.”

“Strategically?” Gelan laughed bitterly. “Strategically would mean sticking to our mission. We can’t just keep adding more complications! We already have too many unknowns, and now we’re supposed to wander off to who knows where to find Alaric? And for what? We don’t even know if it’s not a trap!”

Lisa glanced at Gelan, “We’ve always had unknowns, Gelan. Everything we’ve done up to now has been a gamble. But Alaric... If he's alive, he could be the key to all of this. We can't just ignore this information.”

“Zephyr once told me that Alaric knew more about the Void Serpent than any of us,” added Noris, “He knew things that none of the sages did. If there’s even a chance that he’s alive, then it’s worth finding him. We need someone who understands what we’re truly up against.”

I exhaled, rubbing a hand over my face. I could feel all their eyes on me, waiting for me to weigh in. The truth was, I was torn. On one hand, I couldn't bear the thought of my father suffering, trapped in a place where time stood still, alone and helpless. On the other hand, the crystals were crucial to saving both Feyriarian and Earth. Every second we spent searching for my father was time lost in our mission to secure them.

“It’s not just about my father,” I said, “It’s about what’s best for all of us. We need to think this through.”

“Finding Alaric could give us a huge advantage,” said Noris, “Especially if he knows something we don’t. But it’s a risk. We don’t know where he is, and we don’t know if the letter is even telling the truth. What if it’s a trap? What if we spend all this time looking for him, and it ends up being a dead end?”

Lisa turned to me and said, “Samuel, this is your father. We can’t ignore that. We will stand by you, whatever you decide.”

Both choices seemed like dead ends, each path littered with obstacles that made my head spin. The burden of the decision at last fell upon me.

I took a deep breath and said, “I think we should find Alaric. As for the crystal... we don’t even know where it might be. But my father—we may have some clue. We have a lead. I know this might sound selfish, but I have a feeling that he might know something, something that could help us more than we realize.”

There was a pause, but then I saw Lisa nodding slowly. One by one, the others followed suit. The decision had been made. We finally had a direction, a goal.

The next day, we left for the library in Nexus, the very place where I had first read about my father. I remembered the way my hands had shaken as I turned the pages of the ancient tome, the realization dawning on me that I was connected to this strange world in a way I could never have imagined. The library itself was a grand structure, its spires stretching into the sky, the scent of old parchment and ink filling the air as we stepped inside.

We spent hours combing through the dusty shelves. Serim and Noris worked together, pulling books from the shelves and scanning them for any mention of Alaric or pocket dimensions. Lisa had found a section on ancient Feyiarian history, scanning the delicate script as she flipped through page after page. Gelan was searching through the archives, eyes growing bleary as the hours passed.

I searched, too, my fingers trailing along the spines of old tomes, my eyes scanning for anything that might provide a clue. But the more I searched, the more hopeless it seemed. There were no mentions of Alaric, no hints or maps that could guide us to where he might be. It was like he had been erased from history, his presence only a whisper, a shadow that had faded with time.

Finally, as the day began to end, we regrouped near the entrance. The expressions on everyone’s faces mirrored my own—disappointment, frustration, exhaustion. We had found nothing. We had come here hoping for answers, but we had found only more questions.

“Samuel,” said Gelan as we stood outside the library, “I think you’re ignoring something important.”

I looked at him, brows knitting together in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“Your Essence,” Gelan said, “It has to be strong. You’re Alaric’s son, and he was one of the greatest World Walkers to ever live. Your Essence, it’s in your blood. It’s a part of you. And I believe it’s the key to finding him.”

I stared at him in confusion. My Essence. It had always been there, this strange, almost intangible force that I had only begun to understand since arriving in Feyarian. I had used it, controlled it, but I had never thought about using it to find someone. Especially not my father.

“How would that even work?” I asked.

“It works more like instinct,” Gelan replied, “Close your eyes, Samuel. Conjure his image in your mind. Think of him not as the hero, not as the legendary World Walker, but as your father. Feel your connection to him. Let your Essence guide you.”

I hesitated. Could it really be that simple? Could I find him just by feeling, just by reaching out with my heart? I glanced at the others, and Lisa offered me a reassuring nod. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes.

The world around me faded away as I focused inward, letting go of the disappointment and frustration that had been clouding my mind. I tried to picture my father, to see him in my mind’s eye. I thought of the stories my mother used to tell me, the way her eyes would soften whenever she mentioned him. I thought of the old photographs, the way his eyes seemed to hold a spark of something otherworldly, something that spoke of adventure and mystery.

I pictured him standing before me, his face clear in my mind. I thought of the questions I had for him, the things I had always wanted to say. I let myself feel the longing, the emptiness that had been with me for so long,

the hole that only he could fill. I reached out with my Essence, letting it flow through me and connect me to something deeper, something beyond myself.

But nothing happened.

The air remained still, the world unchanged. I furrowed my brow, trying again, trying to push harder, to feel something, anything. But there was nothing. Just the cold wind and the distant sounds of the city. I opened my eyes, my shoulders slumping in defeat.

“I don’t feel anything,” I said. The words tasted bitter on my tongue. I had hoped, maybe foolishly, that it would work, that I would feel some kind of pull, some kind of connection. But there was nothing. It was like trying to reach out for a ghost, something that wasn’t really there.

“It’s okay, Samuel,” said Gelan, “This isn’t something that’s going to come easily. It takes time and practice. Your Essence, it’s powerful, but it’s also unpredictable. We’ll keep trying. We won’t give up.”

After that day, we merely drifted from one place to another, moving constantly as we searched for any kind of lead. The days seemed to blur together, one long stretch of endless travel and fruitless searches. Each night, I would sit quietly, trying to focus, trying to use my Essence to bring up the image of my father, but there was nothing. Just darkness, empty and endless. It was frustrating, no, it was heartbreaking. I was beginning to lose hope, the doubts creeping into my mind like shadows that refused to leave. What if I never found him? What if he was lost forever?

We moved through villages and settlements, staying only long enough to rest and resupply before setting off again. We had come so far, but it felt like we were no closer to finding my father than we were when we started.

Then, one day, something changed. We were camped out near a small clearing, the fire crackling softly as the others rested. I sat away from the fire, my back against a tree, my eyes closed as I tried, once again, to use my Essence. I focused on the image of my father, on the stories my mother had told me, on the photographs I had seen. I let the memories wash over me,

letting my Essence flow through me, letting it reach out, searching for something, anything.

And then, it happened.

At first, it was just a flicker, like a shadow passing across my mind. But then, it grew clearer. I saw mountains, jagged peaks that loomed against a dark sky, their tops covered in snow. The vision shifted, and I saw a cave, its entrance wide and dark, the shadows within almost seeming to move. My heart pounded as the vision continued, the darkness inside the cave giving way to a figure, a man, tall and dressed in a black cloak that hung heavily around his shoulders. He looked tired and distraught. But then, as if he could sense my presence, he lifted his head. For a moment, we simply looked at each other, and then, he smiled. It was a small, weary smile, but there was something else there, something that looked like relief. Relief at seeing me.

I woke with a jerk and looked around, disoriented. The others were still asleep nearby. The vision was still vivid in my mind; the image of my father's smile burned into my memory. It had felt so real, as though I had actually been there, standing before him. He had looked at me, and he had smiled. That was what struck me the most: that smile. It was as though, even in the darkness, even in whatever terrible place he was trapped in, he had found some measure of hope in seeing me.

I sat there for a long moment, trying to steady my breath, trying to make sense of what I had just experienced. Was it real? Had I truly seen my father, or was it just a dream, a trick of my own mind, born out of my desperation to find him? I wasn't sure, but there was a part of me, a small, stubborn part, that believed it was real. That believed I had truly seen him.

The next morning, as the Eldrin began to rise, I gathered everyone around the fire and told them about my vision. I expected them to be skeptical, to question whether what I had seen was real. But instead, they listened quietly, growing more hopeful as I described the mountains, the cave, and my father. When I finished, they looked at each other and then back at me.

“You found him,” said Lisa. “You really found him, Samuel.”

“But what if it wasn’t real? What if it was just a dream?”

“No, Samuel. I think it was real,” said Serim. “Your Essence connected with his. You reached out, and he was there. I think it was more than just a dream.”

“We need to figure out where he is,” said Gelan. “The mountains you saw, can you describe them? Anything that might help us narrow it down?”

I closed my eyes, trying to picture the mountains again, the jagged peaks that seemed to pierce the sky. “They were... tall,” I said slowly, my brow furrowing in concentration. “There was snow at the top, and they were dark, almost like they were made of black stone. There was a cave, a large cave, with shadows inside. It felt... it felt old. Like it had been there for a long time.”

The others listened. Noris rubbed his chin as he was deep in thought, “There are a lot of mountains in Feyarian, but the ones you’re describing... they sound familiar. I think I’ve heard of a place like that before.”

Serim’s eyes lit up, and he snapped his fingers. “The Mountains of Sorrow,” he said, “They match your description, Samuel. Dark peaks, snow at the top, and old caves that are said to be filled with shadows. It has to be them.”

“The Mountains of Sorrow?” I repeated. The name alone settled a sense of foreboding in my chest.

“They’re in the far north, past the borders of Nexus.” Said Lisa, “It’s a dangerous place, Samuel. People say the mountains are cursed and that those who enter them never come back. But if that’s where your father is, then we have to go. We have to try.”

I looked around at my friends, who were willing to risk everything to face whatever dangers lay ahead just to help me find my father. They

believed in me, even when I wasn't sure I believed in myself.

"Then it's decided," I said, "We're going to the Mountains of Sorrow. We're going to find my father, and we're going to bring him back."

There was no turning back now.

We journeyed toward the Mountains of Sorrow; our path was indeed grueling. As we made our way north, I found myself leaning more and more on both my skills as an engineer and my growing ability with Essence. It felt strange trying to combine the logic and structure of engineering with the fluid, almost intangible nature of magic. But it was working, somehow. Each day, I found myself understanding a little more, connecting dots I hadn't even known existed.

We were vigilant, always on the lookout for clues that might tell us where my father was being held. We started by searching the mountain paths, keeping an eye out for anything that seemed out of place. It wasn't enough to just look, though. I had to think like an engineer. I had to analyze every structure, every outcrop, every crevice, looking for anything that seemed unnatural, anything that might indicate an entrance to a hidden cave or a pocket dimension.

"Look at this," I called out one morning, crouching down near a rock formation that caught my attention. The others gathered around as I pointed at the unusual way the rocks seemed to have been arranged, almost too perfectly, like they had been placed there deliberately. "See how these stones are positioned? They're not natural. Someone put them here."

Lisa knelt beside me and began examining the stones. "You think it's a marker?" she asked, brushing her fingers against the surface of the rocks.

"Maybe. It could be a marker, or it could be hiding something." I closed my eyes for a moment and then let my Essence flow through me, letting it extend outward, searching. I could feel the energy moving, like a

current beneath my skin, reaching out to the stones, probing for anything that felt different, anything that didn't belong.

There. I felt it, a flicker of something, almost like a heartbeat, pulsing beneath the rocks. I opened my eyes, my heart pounding with excitement. "There's something here," I said.

Gelan moved closer, "Step back," he said. He reached for his hammer, the metal glinting in the sunlight as he hefted it over his shoulder. With a grunt, he brought it down hard on the rocks, the impact echoing through the mountains.

The rocks shattered, revealing a narrow opening beneath them, a dark hole that seemed to lead deep into the earth. I felt a chill run down my spine as I stared into the darkness, the air around us growing colder, the shadows lengthening.

Serim peered into the opening, "This could be it," he said, "This could be the entrance to where Alaric might be."

"There's only one way to find out," I said as I lowered myself into the opening, the others following close behind.

The tunnel was narrow and dark, the air damp and musty. I reached out with my Essence, letting it light the way, small orbs of light flickering to life around us, illuminating the path ahead. We moved slowly.

We had been moving for a while when I heard a faint noise, like the scurrying of feet, growing louder and louder. I froze, my heart pounding in my ears as I glanced at the others. Gelan's eyes were wide. Noris gripped his hammer, his jaw set.

"Something's coming," Lisa whispered as she stepped closer to me.

I reached out with my Essence, letting it extend into the darkness, searching. There—just beyond the edge of the light, I could feel them. Shadows, moving toward us, dark and menacing. My stomach twisted as I realized what they were. The Void Serpent's minions. They had found us.

“We need to move,” I said, “NOW!”

The others didn’t hesitate. We turned and ran, the tunnel twisting and turning as we moved, the sounds of the minions growing louder behind us, their hissing voices filling the tunnel. I don’t remember much of what I felt at that moment except the feeling that someone had punched me really hard on my chest.

“Up ahead!” Serim shouted, pointing toward a narrow opening in the wall. “There’s a passage—go!”

I didn’t think. I just moved, diving into the opening, the others close behind. We scrambled through the passage, the darkness almost suffocating. I could hear the minions behind us and the sound of their claws scraping against the stone.

We burst out into a larger chamber, the ceiling high above us. I glanced around, searching for any way out. There, a narrow ledge was leading upward toward what looked like another tunnel. It was our only chance.

“Up there!” I shouted, pointing toward the ledge. “We have to climb!”

Gelan didn’t hesitate. He moved toward the ledge, his strong hands gripping the rocks as he pulled himself up, his muscles straining. Lisa followed, and Serim was next. I waited for them, watching as they made their way up the ledge. The sounds were getting louder, so loud it felt like they were right behind me.

“Hurry, Samuel!” Noris shouted. He was already halfway up the ledge.

I moved toward the ledge, my hands trembling as I gripped the rocks, my feet slipping on the damp stone.

I reached the top of the ledge, Serim’s hand reaching out to pull me up. I scrambled over the edge, my chest heaving as I turned to look down at the chamber below. The minions were there, their dark forms filling the chamber, their eyes glowing in the darkness as they looked up at us, their mouths twisted in snarls.

“Keep moving!” Gelan shouted, “We can’t stay here!”

We kept running. My legs ached, my lungs burned, but I didn’t stop. I couldn’t stop. Not now. Not when we were so close.

We ran until we could no longer hear the minions, and the darkness around us gave way to a faint light, a glow that seemed to come from somewhere deep within the earth. We slowed our pace as we got closer to the light.

We managed to get out safely, sealing the entrance behind us as best as we could, using both physical barriers and Essence to reinforce the rocks.

“How did you know those were the Void Serpent's minions?” Serim asked me.

I shook my head, still trying to calm my racing heart. “I don’t know,” I admitted, “I just had a feeling. Maybe it was my Essence, some kind of instinct like I could sense their darkness even before I saw them.”

Serim frowned, “So, it was a trap then,” he said, the realization settling in.

“Maybe it was the Void Serpent who sent the letter,” said Gelan.

Noris shook his head slowly. “It could be, but it doesn’t make sense. The Void Serpent can’t control Samuel’s Essence. The Essence led us here—it was guiding Samuel, not the other way around. There's no denying that connection,” he said.

Serim crossed his arms, his brow furrowing deeply. “But the Void Serpent is powerful. It’s possible it could see where Alaric is, maybe even anticipate our move. Perhaps it set traps, not just to keep Alaric imprisoned but also to ensnare anyone who tried to reach him.”

We had come all this way, following the signs, following my Essence, only to discover that we had been manipulated, drawn into a carefully laid snare. But even in the face of that frustration, I knew we couldn’t give up.

My father was still out there, somewhere, and the Essence that connected us had led me this far. It had to mean something.

Chapter 15: Team Building Exercises



Feeling defeated after all that had transpired, we decided to camp near a stream by the mountains. In the early morning, I rose quietly, needing a moment to myself. I wandered out to sit by the stream, watching the light dance on the water, my thoughts drifting to how drastically my life had changed. Everything felt different now. It was both thrilling and terrifying. The weight of our mission, the uncertainties ahead, and the strange beauty of this new world all blended together, leaving me feeling both overwhelmed and strangely hopeful.

Just then, I heard the soft crunch of footsteps behind me. I turned slightly, startled by my thoughts, and saw Lisa approaching. She gave me a small smile, her eyes carrying a warmth that eased some of the tension in my chest.

“Mind if I join you?” she asked, almost hesitant.

I shook my head, gesturing to the space beside me. “Of course not,” I said earnestly.

Lisa sat down next to me, her eyes glancing toward the stream. After a beat of silence, she looked at my hands. “You know,” she said brightly, “I think now's as good a time as any for a little practice.”

I blinked, momentarily confused. “Practice?” I asked, glancing at her in bewilderment.

“Yes, practice. I think if we blend our powers again, we might be able to create something to remind us of why we're still here.”

The idea was a good one. Focusing on something constructive was exactly what we needed. Slowly, I extended my hands, watching as a soft glow began to form and swirl between my fingers as I tried to mold it into something coherent. Beside me, Lisa did the same, and her hands began to glow with a soft, radiant light.

“You're getting better,” said Lisa impressedly as her light merged with the essence I was controlling. Together, the energy took on a new form, shimmering and dancing in the space between us.

I glanced at her admiringly. “It's easier when you're here to help.” The combination of our powers made the energy seem almost alive, twisting into intricate shapes that flickered in different colors.

Lisa smiled brightly at my words, “I think we make a pretty good team,” she added. For a moment before, she looked at me and then looked back at the glowing orb we had created.

“Yeah, we do,” I said. It felt like everything else, the dangers, the uncertainties, the constant pressure, faded away, leaving only the two of us and the beauty we were creating together.

The orb shifted, shimmering in shades of gold and blue, casting soft reflections on the surface of the stream. Lisa's smile faltered slightly, crestfallen as she watched it, her expression turning wistful. She sighed.

I noticed the change and peered at her grimly, “What's on your mind?”

Lisa hesitated for a moment, then spoke anxiously, “I was just thinking... about my homeland. About what it was like growing up there.” Still looking at the orb, which was growing a little fainter now, “Everyone expected me to be perfect. The perfect daughter, the perfect mage, the perfect future ruler. I always felt like I was trapped in this mold, with no room to just... be myself.”

“That sounds... exhausting,” I said glumly. “Having to live up to everyone else's expectations all the time.”

"It was. Sometimes, I envied people who could just be... free. People who didn't have to carry the weight of all those expectations." She said, she said, her arms now crossed over her chest. "That's why I envy you, sometimes. You have this freedom, this ability to choose your own path."

My mouth fell half open, bewildered. "Me?" I said incredulously. "I don't know if I'd call it freedom. I mean, I feel like I have no idea what I'm doing half the time. I just... try to make it through each day without messing things up too badly."

"Maybe. But at least those choices are yours," she said, as a sob caught in her throat, "that's something I never had." She looked away. "Sometimes, I wish I could just leave it all behind. Be like you."

I was quiet for a moment as I didn't understand what she had meant to say, then spoke earnestly, "You know, I think you're stronger than you realize, Lisa. You carry all that weight, but you're still here, still fighting."

Lisa looked at me, crestfallen, still, the corners of her lips lifting in a small smile. "Thank you, Samuel. That means a lot."

We held each other's gaze for a long moment. I suddenly felt a cold thrill go up and down her spine. I could feel a bond that was growing stronger with each shared moment.

"Come on," she said brightly, trying to sound cheerful even though clearly she wasn't. "Let's work again and see if we can make the orb even more beautiful."

We once again began practicing, making mistakes and correcting them. I almost forgot all of my troubles for a while, feeling as if I was free and maybe even in love.

The Eldrinlight began to soften, marking the end of another long day. We gathered around our temporary camp in front of the cave entrance. It had been a quiet afternoon since Lisa and I had shared that early morning

conversation, and there was a lingering sense of understanding between us that made the silence comfortable.

Serim, who had been standing off to the side, observing us, suddenly called out, “Hey! I think it’s about time we did something together, as a group.”

He had a broad grin across his face. I tilted my head curiously, glancing at Lisa before turning back to him.

“What do you mean?” I asked, a slight frown touching my brow.

“I mean, we’ve all got these incredible abilities, but we haven’t really practiced using them together, you know?” Serim explained, gesturing animatedly as he spoke. “You and Lisa were doing great earlier. Why not get everyone involved? Think of it as... a team-building exercise!”

Gelan, who had been lazily sitting on a nearby boulder, perked up at Serim’s suggestion. “A team-building exercise, huh?” he echoed, “Sounds like you’ve got something in mind.”

Serim gestured toward the cave behind us. “I know it’s dangerous, but a cave system a little further from these mountains is pretty famous for its challenges. It’s deep and filled with all sorts of obstacles. Perfect for testing our skills.”

Noris made a skeptical face, crossing her arms. “Testing our skills... or testing our patience?” he muttered.

Lisa chuckled softly. “Come on, Noris. It could be fun. Besides, it’ll help us learn how to combine our abilities.”

“Besides, it’s better to fail in a safe environment than when we’re facing the Void Serpent,” I added, turning more serious. “If we can work together in there, we can work together anywhere.”

“Alright, alright, I’m in,” Noris conceded. “But if I get stuck in a tight corner, I’m blaming all of you.”

With everyone on board, Serim led us to the entrance of the cave. The light from the outside world faded as we ventured inside, replaced by a dim luminescence from the cave walls. Lisa and I lighted the way with our abilities.

“Alright,” Serim said, turning to face us as we reached a larger open area within the cave. “The goal here is to make it to the other side, where there’s a marked exit.”

Gelan smirked, cracking his knuckles. “Sounds simple enough.”

The challenge began smoothly—at first. We encountered narrow gaps, some of which required Gelan’s shadow abilities to help us leap across, and slippery ledges that Serim helped stabilize by using air currents to lighten our steps. Noris used her connection to the earth to mark safe pathways and secure loose stones.

However, as we went deeper, the passages grew darker and narrower. The ground trembled beneath our feet. Suddenly, as Serim stepped on a peculiar stone tile, there was a loud click—a mechanical sound that reverberated through the cavern.

“What was that?” Lisa asked.

Before any of us could respond, we heard a low rumble, and suddenly, water began gushing from the walls, streaming into the cave with increasing speed. I turned in alarm, watching as the once manageable space began to fill.

Gelan’s eyes widened, his normally composed expression giving way to sheer panic. “But how do we even stop it?” he stammered, his gaze darting around wildly as the rising water started to lap at our knees.

“Calm down,” I said, placing a hand firmly on his shoulder. I met his eyes, pouring as much assurance into my voice as I could.

Lisa, whose hands were still holding a faint golden light, glanced over to me, “We need to slow this down first,” she said. “If we can at least buy ourselves time—”

“Got it,” Serim nodded, turning serious as he planted his feet. “Let’s try to hold it off.” He raised his arms, and the air around us began to swirl, a sharp breeze blowing in from seemingly nowhere. The wind surged forward to counteract the water’s advance, pushing against it with everything Serim had.

Lisa was quick to act, stepping closer to the water that poured relentlessly from the cracks in the cave walls. She extended her hands, her light growing brighter and more intense, causing the streaming water to shimmer and scatter the golden rays across the cavern. It was beautiful, but more importantly, the intensity of her magic was starting to slow the flow, as if the light itself was beginning to stabilize the energy in the cave.

Noris dropped to his knees, pressing her palms firmly against the stone floor. “The land is fractured here!” he called out as he tapped into her connection with the stone. “If I can redirect some of it, we might be able to close off one of the channels!”

“Do it!” I said, stepping in beside him. I could feel my own Essence—the combination of all the elements—churning inside me, responding to the urgency of the situation. I closed my eyes, taking a deep breath as I focused on the ground beneath us, feeling the shape of it, the way it shifted and groaned under the pressure of the flooding water.

Noris let out a yell of effort, and I joined him, our powers combining as we reached into the stone, commanding it to move. The ground beneath us trembled, and cracks opened to allow the water back in. The rocks began to seal themselves, the ground folding inward like a healing wound.

The water was still rising, but it had slowed, and there was a new sense that we could fight back. Serim pushed harder, the wind swirling in a controlled gale, holding back the pressure of the incoming tide.

“I can’t hold it much longer!” Serim shouted, “The wind isn’t enough!”

“We need to cut it off at the source!” I realized, snapping to the large cracks along the far wall—the origin of the relentless flow. “Gelan, cover those openings with shadows! Block as much as you can!”

Gelan raised his hands, and the shadows around him deepened, lengthening and pooling around his feet before surging forward. The darkness writhed as it reached out, covering the openings in the wall, forcing itself into the gaps, and slowing the water's advance even further.

"It's working!" Lisa exclaimed. She moved closer to the central flow, "Let's see if we can dry some of this!"

She thrust her hands forward, the light from her palms shining like a miniature sun, its warmth radiating outward, causing the water around her to evaporate in shimmering steam.

I focused my Essence once more, pulling from the air, the earth, the light, and the darkness. I extended my hands, feeling the energy course through me, combining in a swirling vortex of power. "Serim, I need your wind," I said.

Serim redirected the wind, channeling it toward me, and I combined it with the other elements, creating a focused force that pushed back against the water, directing it away from us and forcing it back toward the walls.

"Everyone, together!" I shouted

Noris let out a roar, his hands pressed against the ground, the earth responding to his command as it shifted once more, the cracks sealing completely. Gelan's shadows surged, filling every remaining gap, while Lisa's light blazed like a beacon, evaporating the water that had already flooded in.

Serim's wind whipped around us, and I focused every ounce of my strength on the combined force, pushing it outward. The pressure finally gave way under our combined effort.

Slowly, inch by inch, the water level began to drop, the streams that had been pouring into the cave now reduced to trickles, and then finally, nothing.

The water had finally receded, leaving the cave damp and ringing with our collective breaths. We stood there, our soaked clothing clinging

uncomfortably to our bodies. Each of us was processing the tension we had just survived, the near-fatal flooding that had tested our powers and unity. Just as we were about to gather ourselves and leave, Serim's voice called out to us.

“Wait, everyone. Look over there,” said Serim, gesturing toward a shadowy corner of the cave.

We all followed his gaze, and as I squinted through the dim light, something caught my eye. Partially buried in the slick cave floor, a metallic glint caught the light from Serim's conjured orb. It was unmistakable — the dull reflection of metal amid the rough rock.

“What is it?” Gelan murmured.

I crouched down, pulling away the rocks and debris, my hands wet and trembling. Slowly, the object took shape, revealing itself to be an ancient, sealed chest bound in thick iron. I looked up at the others, my heart pounding.

“It's a chest,” I announced. The others crowded around, and for a moment, a shared excitement washed over us, replacing the tension of moments before.

Lisa knelt beside me, brushing her fingers over the carvings into the chest's surface. “These symbols,” she whispered, “they look... familiar.”

Noris peered closer, “They're old runes. Older than anything I've seen back in the Earth Kingdom.”

Without hesitation, I placed my hand on the chest. It was almost as if the chest were calling to me, resonating with something deep inside. I looked at Serim, whose eyes were fixed on mine.

“Should we open it?” he asked.

“We have to,” I responded. My fingers found the latch, rusted but intact, and with a bit of force, it gave way. The chest creaked open, revealing a

rolled-up parchment. I carefully took it out, unrolling it to reveal an old map.

I stared at the map, and as I did a strange, inexplicable sense took over my mind that this was important. I couldn't describe it, but I knew, deep within me, that this map was connected to something greater. My thoughts turned toward my father, Alaric. The feeling was too strong to ignore.

"I think... I think this might be a clue," I said, "A clue to find my father."

The group went silent. I looked up at them, my eyes searching their faces for any sign of doubt or skepticism.

"Your father?" Lisa spoke softly, "Samuel, are you sure?"

I swallowed hard. "I don't know how to explain it, but I feel it. I think this map could lead us to him."

There was a long pause before Lisa smiled, "Then we trust you," she said, "It was your very essence that got us here. Perhaps we mistook it for indicating your father was trapped here, but it was directing us to this map."

"Yes, it could be that. Now that we have more trust in our abilities, what's another adventure?" he grinned, said Serim.

"Alright. We follow the map," said Gelan. With that, we ventured on our next quest.

Chapter 16: Paternal Paradox



We had gone on countless quests, each more challenging than the last, and truthfully, we had experienced our share of failures. Following the map we had found—a glowing, ethereal document—felt like a shot in the dark, without concrete evidence that it would actually get us closer to finding my father, Alaric. Still, there was a pull, something deep within that made it impossible to ignore. It felt strange to rely solely on this gut instinct, but if Talarara's teachings had taught me anything, it was that Essence often spoke in whispers, and listening to it could be the difference between life and death.

The map led us to Nexus once more. Before we ventured further, we decided to visit Talarara, the sage we had spoken with before, to see if he could give us more insight into the map's purpose. Talarara's sanctuary was easy enough to find. Nestled between towering spires, the small building looked deceptively modest. Yet, as we approached, the symbols carved into the door seemed to shimmer as though they knew we were coming.

Noris knocked three times, and the door swung open on its own, revealing the same dim interior I remembered—filled with books, scrolls, and the scent of old parchment mixed with incense. Talarara was in his usual place, hunched over a large tome. He looked up, his piercing eyes catching mine as if he had been expecting us.

"You've returned," Talarara said. His eyes fell to the rolled-up parchment I held in my hand. "And you've found something, I see."

"Yes," I replied, stepping forward. I unfurled the map, holding it out to him. "We need to know if this is the right path. It led us back here to Nexus, but we're still not entirely sure why."

Talarara studied the map and said, "You were right to return here, Samuel," he said, nodding slowly. "Your Essence is growing stronger by the day. The Void Serpent's rise has upset the balance of all things. Because of this, your instincts—your connection to the Essence—are heightened. This map calls to you because it is tied to your path. Following it is indeed the best course of action."

I let out a breath I hadn't realized I was holding. There was always the risk that we were wasting precious time chasing after empty leads. To hear Talarara affirm that we were on the right path—it was like a weight had been lifted from my chest.

"But where does it lead?" Gelan spoke up with a skeptical frown.

Talarara smiled slightly as he studied the map further. He pointed to a specific set of symbols that began to glow even brighter under his touch. "The Museum of War," he said. "That is your next destination. It is a place of power, one that holds many secrets and relics from the ancient conflicts that shaped Feyiaria. But beware," he added, "The museum is not just a collection of artifacts; it is a place where the memories of war have a life of their own."

"The Museum of War?" Serim repeated and exchanged glances with Lisa and Noris. "That sounds... heavy."

"Well, sounds like we've got our next stop, then," I said, trying to sound more confident than I felt. "Thank you, Talarara," I added, bowing my head slightly.

"The Essence has led you this far, Samuel. Trust in it. Trust in your instincts, and you will find your way. But remember," said Talarara, "the Museum of War is not just about relics—it is a place that tests one's will. Keep your wits about you, all of you."

We left Talarara's sanctuary, stepping back into the bustling streets of Nexus. The Museum of War—what would we even find there? Answers about my father, Alaric? Another clue, or just more questions?

Serim must have noticed my hesitation as he nudged me gently with his elbow. "Hey, we're not going to get there standing around," he said, his usual grin in place. "How about we take a taxi?" He gestured toward a row of colorful, rune-covered taxis parked near the end of the street.

"Those things again?" Noris raised an eyebrow, giving Serim a skeptical look. "Last time, I nearly lost my lunch. Are you sure you know what you're doing?"

"Come on, Noris," Serim said, his grin widening. "This time will be different. I promise." He winked, and Noris let out a long-suffering sigh.

Lisa chuckled as she climbed in. "Better hold on, Noris," she said, amusement dancing in her eyes. Gelan muttered something under his breath, rolling his eyes as he followed.

The taxi was a vibrant, multi-colored vehicle that hovered just a few inches above the cobblestones. Runes glowed along its sides, humming softly. The driver turned to us as we all squeezed in—a wiry figure with sharp eyes that seemed to hold a mischievous glint.

"Museum of War?" he asked, and when we nodded, he let out a cackle that wasn't exactly reassuring. "Hold on tight, then."

The taxi lurched forward with alarming speed, zipping through the crowded streets of Nexus as though it had a mind of its own. We twisted, turned, and even seemed to leap over obstacles, making the ride feel like a wild, unpredictable rollercoaster. The streets around us blurred, and the wind whipped across our faces, making it almost impossible to catch our breaths.

"Alright, maybe this was a good idea!" Lisa laughed.

Meanwhile, Gelan clutched the edge of his seat, muttering about how he'd never let Serim choose transportation ever again. Noris, beside him, just squeezed his. Noris dropped to her knees, her eyes shut.

The driver was quite the character—nice, in his own peculiar way, and certainly strange. Hanging from the rearview mirror was a small,

disembodied head, its eyes animated and expressive, lips moving constantly as it gave directions.

“Left at the next fork, watch the cobblestones,” it muttered in a deep, raspy voice. Its tone was annoyed as if it had better things to do than guide a taxi through the crowded streets of Nexus.

The driver himself was an older man with a tuft of white hair peeking out from under a battered cap; his face creased with age and laughter lines. He hummed along to a tinny tune playing on the radio—until a sharp beep interrupted the music, followed by the serious tone of the news broadcaster.

“Reports continue to come in from across the kingdoms regarding the rise of the Void Serpent. The latest information suggests that the number of its followers has increased dramatically, particularly in Umbra, where—”

The driver clicked his tongue loudly, shaking his head. “Ugh, the Void Serpent,” he muttered, his knuckles tightening on the wheel. “We thought he was gone for good. Now he’s back, and people are losing their minds.”

I leaned forward, curiosity piqued. “The news said people are becoming his followers... If he’s so dangerous, why do people want to follow him?” I asked. It didn’t make any sense to me—who would willingly align themselves with such a destructive force?

The driver gave a heavy sigh, his shoulders sagging a little as though the weight of the world rested on them. He glanced at me through the rearview mirror, his eyes sad. “Fear, my dear boy. It’s fear that drives people to do things they wouldn’t normally do. Some think that by joining him, they can avoid the worst of what’s coming. They think it’s better to be on the side of power, even if that power is evil.”

I nodded slowly. It made a grim kind of sense, but it didn’t make it any easier to accept. I could see Lisa frowning next to me, her lips pressed into a thin line.

The driver straightened up a bit, his demeanor suddenly shifting from reflective to something more resolute. He jabbed a thumb in his own chest.

“As for me, I’ve decided I’m not taking any passengers who show sympathy for that monster. Anyone who thinks the Void Serpent is right can walk. They’re not setting foot in my cab.” He eyed me through the rearview again, one brow arched. “So, what about you lot? Do you hold any sympathy for him?”

Lisa’s eyes went wide, and she quickly shook her head. “Uh, no! No, not at all. Absolutely not.”

“Not even a little,” Noris added with a shudder. “We’re against him. We’re trying to—well, we’re definitely not on his side, that’s for sure.”

The driver smiled, satisfied, and nodded as the talking head hanging in front of him gave a command. “Turn left now!” the head barked, rolling its eyes as if exasperated.

With a sudden, stomach-lurching jerk, the cab made a sharp left. I grabbed the side of the seat as we lurched, the glowing runes around us pulsing as the cab twisted through the air. I felt like I was going to fall right out of the window, but I managed to hold on, my heart pounding from the sudden shift.

“Whoa!” I exclaimed, half terrified. “A bit of a warning next time?”

The driver just chuckled as if this were all a casual joyride. “Ah, that’s the spirit! Just a bit of a thrill to keep you awake, eh?”

Serim, who had been holding onto the seat in front of him with a white-knuckled grip, shook his head with a dazed expression. “If by ‘awake’ you mean terrified for my life, then yeah...”

The driver continued, oblivious to Serim’s discomfort. “The Nexus, you know, it’s been turned upside down since all this started. It feels like there are only two kinds of people left—those who want peace and those who follow that blasted serpent.” He sighed. “I tell you, if Alaric were still around, he would’ve put the Void Serpent in his place. No question about it.”

I felt a pang in my chest at the mention of my father's name. "You knew Alaric?" I asked.

The driver nodded, and he looked at me through the rearview mirror once again. "Oh, everyone around here knew Alaric," he said with respect. "He was a legend in Nexus, you know. Always standing up for what was right, never backing down from a fight. We all thought he was unstoppable." He paused, his voice softening. "He gave people hope."

I leaned forward slightly, "I see," I said, trying to sound casual, though my heart pounded. "You seem to admire him... Alaric, I mean."

The driver snorted, a small smile tugging at the corner of his lips. "Of course I do! He was the one brave enough to go against the Serpent's stupid rules." He shook his head, voice growing more animated. "You know what that man did? He married a human! Can you believe that? A World Walker, someone with the potential to be the Void Serpent's biggest asset, decided to marry someone from Earth instead." The driver laughed, a sound full of admiration and disbelief. "He spat right in the face of everything the Void Serpent stood for."

I furrowed my brow, the driver's words sinking in. "But why did the Void Serpent hate that so much?" I asked.

The driver's eyes narrowed slightly, suspicion evident in the rearview mirror. He turned his head halfway, his gaze sharp. "Sir, are you new here or something?" he asked.

A beat of silence followed, my stomach clenching as I struggled to think of a response. Before I could open my mouth, Serim, ever the quick thinker, chimed in cheerfully.

"Ah, no, no, no! He's just got a bad memory," Serim said, giving a loud, nervous laugh. "Forgets things every day, you know how it is! He's been under a spell—a nasty one—scrambles his thoughts every morning."

The driver eyed us for a moment longer, then gave a gruff chuckle. "I see, I see. One of those memory spells, huh? Nasty business, those are." He

shook his head. "Well, listen closely, boy," he said, growing serious again. "The Void Serpent wants nothing more than pure, untainted bloodlines. He wants to keep each realm, each race, as pure as possible. No mixing between beings from different worlds, no mingling with other planets. That's the way he sees it."

I nodded slowly, "But," I ventured, "if he's so against mixing with other worlds, why does he want to take over other planets? Doesn't that mean constant conflict?"

The driver grunted, his hands gripping the wheel tightly as he swerved to avoid a group of children playing near the edge of the street. "You're not wrong, boy. The Void Serpent wants cosmic power, and that means conquest and expansion. He wants to control everything he sees, make other realms bow to him." The driver sighed deeply, his eyes distant. "But that's the thing—most of us just want to live in peace. Back during his reign, when his influence was at its peak, people hated him for it. They hated the constant war, the constant fear."

He paused, his gaze flicking to the talking head hanging from the rearview mirror, which had fallen uncharacteristically silent. "People aren't following him because they like him," the driver continued. "They're following him out of fear, out of the hope they won't be next. But there's no loyalty there—just fear."

"That's... terrible," Lisa said softly, "Living under someone like that—always looking over your shoulder, wondering if today will be the day everything falls apart."

The driver nodded. "Exactly. But Alaric? He stood up against all that. He refused to bow to the Void Serpent's demands, and he paid the price for it." He glanced at me, his eyes sharp. "Marrying a human—that was his way of saying he'd never follow those rules. He loved freely, without caring about bloodlines or purity." He let out a sigh. "But because of that, there are some who see him as a traitor to our kind."

I frowned, "So, Alaric... he's hated because he married a human? Just for that?"

The driver chuckled, a wry smile on his face. “Not just any human, lad. He married a mortal. Someone who could never wield Essence, who could never truly understand the power that flows through us here.” He looked at me, gaze almost pitying. “He threw away his immortality for love and chose to share his life with someone who would age and die. People thought he was a fool for it.”

Immortality. My heart skipped a beat, and my breath caught in my throat. “Wait, what do you mean... immortality?” I asked.

The silence that followed was deafening. Lisa, Noris, Serim, and Gelan exchanged uneasy glances, their expressions tense. I could feel a shift in the air—something unspoken hanging between us, something they had kept from me.

The driver, oblivious to the tension in the cab, laughed. “Oh, yes, boy. He’s a World Walker.” He looked at me, raising an eyebrow. “World Walkers are blessed—or cursed, depending on how you look at it. They live far beyond what any normal human or Feyririan can. Not forever, but long enough that most would call it immortality.”

I sat back, stunned. Immortality. My father was immortal, and if what the driver said was true, then so was I—or at least, I had the potential to be. I looked at my companions, their faces a mix of regret and guilt. They had known. They hadn’t told me.

Before I could say anything, the talking head suddenly came back to life, its voice sharp and annoyed. “Oi! Turn left! Left, you fool! We’re almost there!”

The driver let out an exaggerated sigh, throwing the wheel to the left with a flourish that had the entire cab tipping at an alarming angle. I grabbed the side of the seat, my knuckles white as I tried to steady myself. Serim let out a startled yelp, and Noris squeezed his eyes shut, muttering something under her breath that sounded suspiciously like, “Never again, never again.”

We stood there, just outside the Museum of War, the wind carrying a chill that had nothing to do with the temperature. I found myself unable to move, my legs suddenly too heavy, like they had taken on the weight of everything I'd just learned in that cab ride. My father's immortality. My companions had known, and yet, I had been kept in the dark.

Lisa's hand squeezed mine as if she sensed my hesitation, but I gently pulled my hand away, my eyes still fixed on the ancient columns before us.

"Samuel?" Lisa said. "Are you alright?"

I turned to face them—Lisa, Serim, and Noris. My heart felt like it was stuck somewhere between anger and hurt.

"No, I'm not alright," I said, trying to keep my voice even, but the tremor in it gave me away. I looked at them, my gaze bouncing from one face to the other. "Why didn't any of you tell me? About my father, about... about me?"

Serim exchanged a glance with Noris, who said, "Samuel, it's not that we wanted to keep secrets from you,"

"Then why?" I snapped, the frustration bubbling to the surface. I wasn't yelling, but my voice was sharp enough to make Lisa flinch. "You all knew, didn't you? Yet, you chose not to tell me."

"Because we didn't want to hurt you," Lisa said, her voice cracking. "We thought... we thought it would be too much, too soon. You'd already been through so much, Samuel. Losing your mother, finding yourself in a whole new world—you were already carrying so much on your shoulders."

I looked down at the ground, swallowing the lump in my throat. "You thought I couldn't handle it?" I asked.

"No, Sam, that's not it," said Serim, shaking his head. "We knew you could handle it. You're one of the strongest people I know. But... we were worried that knowing would make you feel even more isolated. Knowing you were different, knowing what kind of burden comes with being a World Walker—it's not something we wanted you to have to bear alone."

“It wasn’t about doubting you. It was about trying to protect you, at least until you were ready,” said Noris, “We wanted to give you time to adjust, to find your place here, before dumping everything else on you.”

I sighed, running a hand through my hair. I knew they meant well. I knew that they were only trying to look out for me. But still, it hurt. It hurt to know that they had been keeping something so fundamental about myself from me. I looked at Lisa, who was watching me with those wide, earnest eyes.

“I get it,” I said finally, my voice softer now. “I get that you were trying to protect me. But I need to know everything, okay? I can’t keep walking blind.”

Lisa nodded, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears. “We’ll tell you everything, Sam. I promise.”

“Everything,” Serim echoed, a small, sincere smile tugging at his lips. “No more secrets.”

We stepped into the Museum of War, and immediately, I could feel it—the Essence humming through my veins, a subtle whisper that grew louder with each step we took. It told me we were on the right path and that this place held something—perhaps someone—that I was searching for. A chill ran down my spine, and I found myself unconsciously tightening my grip on the map as I scanned the vast space of the museum.

The museum was nearly empty, with just a handful of visitors scattered across the halls, their murmurs reflecting off the stone walls. It was a cavernous building with high vaulted ceilings that seemed to stretch endlessly above us, with murals depicting epic battles. Each panel showed warriors of old heroes with their weapons raised against dark, twisted beasts that I imagined were ancestors of the Void Serpent’s minions.

Tall columns framed the central hall, each one carved with intricate reliefs, and banners from different kingdoms—worn with age—hung from above, their vibrant colors faded. Statues of soldiers and mages stood in

solemn poses, some missing limbs or with chipped features as if even in stone, the memories of war had taken their toll.

There was an unsettling stillness here, even with a few people lingering around. Despite the size of the museum, there was an oppressive, almost suffocating heaviness in the air. It wasn't just the tales the artifacts told or the battles depicted on the walls—it was as if the essence of those wars, the energy of those lost and the hopes they carried, was still alive, trapped within these walls. As I walked past a massive iron war hammer mounted on a pedestal, I could almost hear the distant echoes of a battle cry.

My eyes caught Lisa's, and I saw the worry in her gaze. She must have felt it, too. She nodded silently, and I knew we were on the same page—this place held significance. We needed to stay to uncover what was hiding beneath the surface.

"There aren't a lot of people here today," Serim murmured as he looked around, looking from display to display, his fingers brushing the edge of a glass case holding a set of battle-worn armor. "Maybe it won't be too difficult to hang around unnoticed." He kept his voice low, but his eyes betrayed the same curiosity I felt.

"Still, we can't risk being seen after hours," Gelan added, crossing his arms, almost drowned out by the faint echoes around us. "If we want to explore in peace, we'll need to wait until everyone's gone. Including the guards."

"Bathroom?" Noris asked, already scanning the nearest door marked with a small sign. He had always been the practical one.

"Works for me," I nodded, and after a final glance around, we made our way quietly to the restrooms.

The hours we spent waiting there felt like days. The bathroom was cramped, the air thick with the smell of stale cleaning products. We were all crowded into a single stall, pressed up against each other, our ears straining to pick up the faint sounds from outside—the footsteps of visitors, the

shuffling of security guards, the faint echoes of closing announcements over the intercom.

Gelan grumbled softly, shifting uncomfortably. “Of all the places to hide in, I never imagined this would be part of a heroic quest,” he muttered.

“Could be worse,” Lisa said, offering him a small smile. “We could be hiding in the trash chute.”

Gelan grimaced, his expression softening as he chuckled quietly. “True enough.”

Hours passed, and one by one, we heard the faint voices of people leaving, their footsteps growing more and more distant until only the sound of the security staff remained. At one point, we heard a muffled conversation outside the bathroom—two guards talking about their evening plans, their voices filled with boredom. Then, eventually, silence.

Lisa pressed her ear against the door, her brow furrowed. “I think... I think they’re gone,” she whispered.

I held my breath, listening for any lingering sounds. There was nothing. I nodded, motioning for the others to follow me as I slowly pushed the stall door open. We moved carefully into the bathroom and made our way toward the door that led back into the main museum. I pushed it open cautiously, peeking through the gap.

The museum was empty. All the lights were off, save for a few small sconces lining the walls, forming a glow that barely illuminated the sprawling exhibits. It felt different now—the silence was deeper without the murmurs of visitors to fill the void. Shadows stretched across the floor, shifting as the moonlight filtered in through high, narrow windows.

We stepped out of the bathroom, and the soft click of the door closing behind us rang through the empty halls, the sound amplified in the vast, open space. The museum seemed to breathe around us as if it were alive, waiting, watching. I could feel the tension in the air, the sense of something old and powerful lingering just out of sight.

Lisa moved closer to me, her eyes wide as she took in the museum at night. The displays—armor, weapons, banners—seemed almost to move in the dim light, their shadows flickering across the floor, casting strange shapes on the walls.

“This place feels different at night,” she whispered, “Almost like... it remembers.”

She was right. There was an energy here. It was as if the museum, in the quiet of the night, allowed the stories it held to come alive once more.

We were trying to decide what to do next, with no clue as to where to go in this massive museum. Everything seemed to blur into shadows. My map seemed to pulse now and again, almost as if it was responding to something in the room, but it wasn't giving us a clear direction. We were lost, our nerves on edge. My eyes darted from exhibit to exhibit.

Then I stopped.

I found myself in front of a sculpture, taller than I was, carved from a dark, almost obsidian-like stone. The figure was imposing—a warrior of sorts, clad in an ancient armor I didn't recognize, its face obscured by a helm shaped like a serpent's head, glowed beneath the helmet and seemed to follow me as I moved. My breath caught in my throat. Was I imagining it? I squinted, stepping back, my eyes fixed on those hollow sockets.

I tried convincing myself it was nothing—just a trick of the dim light. But as I turned away, a chill ran down my spine, an instinct that made me glance back. For a heartbeat, I swore I saw its hand twitch, its stone fingers shifting as if loosening their grip on the massive weapon they held.

“Samuel?” Lisa's voice was soft behind me, but it made me jump. I glanced at her, though my eyes flicked back to the sculpture, “You okay?”

“I'm... I'm fine,” I lied, but every nerve in my body was telling me otherwise.

Curiosity won over caution. Slowly, cautiously, I reached out, my fingers brushing the cold, unyielding surface of the statue. And then—it

moved.

With a sudden jerk, the statue's hand shot out, cold stone closing around my wrist like a vice. I let out a yell, trying to pull away, but its grip was impossibly strong. Its eyes—those hollow, glowing eyes—flared to life, a deep, unsettling red. The sound of stone grinding against stone filled the air as the sculpture began to move; stepping down from its pedestal, its massive form towering over me.

“Get back!” I shouted, struggling to free myself, but the statue pulled me closer, its other arm raising the massive stone weapon it carried.

Lisa acted instantly, light flaring in her hands. “Let him go!” she shouted fiercely. She thrust her hands forward, a blast of bright, blinding light slamming into the statue. It staggered back, releasing me just enough for me to pull free.

“Everyone, weapons!” Serim shouted and darted toward a nearby display—a rack of ancient swords and shields—and grabbed the first one he could reach, tossing another to Gelan, who caught it mid-air.

I stumbled back, my heart pounding, eyes wide as the statue moved toward us, each step reverberating through the floor. I grabbed an ornate spear from a nearby display, which felt unfamiliar in my hands, but there was no time to think.

The statue lunged toward me, its weapon swinging in a wide arc. I ducked, the wind of its passing ruffling my hair, and thrust the spear forward. The tip glanced off the stone, barely leaving a scratch.

“It’s like fighting a mountain!” Gelan yelled, wielding a double-edged axe. He swung at the statue's knee, the blade connecting with a sharp crack that echoed through the room. The statue staggered but didn’t fall.

Lisa moved quickly, her light magic wrapping around the statue's head, blinding it, if only for a moment. “Go for the joints!” she called out, her eyes focused, her hands steady as she tried to weaken it. “Aim for where it moves!”

Noris slammed his foot down, the ground beneath us trembling. Sharp spikes of earth shot up from the floor, aiming for the statue's legs. One of them managed to wedge itself into the gap between the knee joint and the thigh, causing the statue to stumble.

"Good one!" Serim grinned, using his wind magic to propel himself into the air, landing on the statue's back. He grabbed onto its helmet, trying to pry it off. The statue thrashed, trying to shake him off, its movements growing more erratic.

I saw an opening—a small gap where one of Noris's spikes had wedged itself. I gripped the spear tighter and dove forward. The spear found its mark, jamming into the joint, and I twisted it with all my strength. There was a crack—a sharp, splintering sound—and the statue's knee buckled.

"Now!" I shouted, and Gelan rushed forward, his axe coming down on the statue's neck. Stone shattered, fragments flying in all directions, and the head of the statue fell to the ground, rolling across the floor before coming to a stop.

The statue swayed, its movements slowing, the light in its eyes flickering before fading completely. With one final shudder, it collapsed, the stone crumbling, the pieces scattering across the floor.

"That... was intense," Noris said, though she tried to smile.

For a few moments, we all stood there, catching our breath. The dust was settling slowly, small clouds drifting lazily in the air, illuminated by the flickering lights of the museum.

Lisa lowered herself to the ground, her legs clearly shaky from exertion. She let out a heavy breath, her eyes meeting mine. "That statue... It wasn't like anything we'd faced before. It was almost... aware."

"Yeah," Serim agreed, running a hand through his tangled hair. "Who knew a bunch of old rocks could pack a punch like that?"

Noris walked closer to what remained of the statue. He prodded one of the fallen pieces with his boot, then knelt down, examining the broken

stone. "This wasn't just a guardian," he said softly, voice almost drowned out by the steady drip of water from above. "It felt like it was protecting something. Something important."

A chill ran down my spine. She was right. It hadn't just been guarding this room—it had been defending something more.

Lisa looked up at me, "Do you think this could have been part of the Void Serpent's influence? A guardian to stop anyone from getting too close?"

I glanced at the crumbled remains, then back at my friends. The idea made a certain amount of sense—like this wasn't just some random relic in a forgotten museum. I knelt down, the rough surface of the stone cold beneath my fingers, as I traced one of the cracks that had splintered through it.

"It's possible," I muttered, "Maybe it was keeping people away from... something." My gaze drifted over to the pedestal where the statue had once stood, the very spot it had fiercely protected. Something felt off, like a gap I hadn't quite seen before.

I moved closer and felt my heart begin to pound again, this time with a sense of purpose rather than fear. I peered down where the pedestal had stood, noticing something that didn't fit—the base was cracked, but not like it had broken when the statue fell. It was different, almost deliberate.

"Guys," I called out, waving them over. "There's something here."

Gelan was the first to approach. "What do you see, Samuel?" he asked.

I hesitated, my fingers brushing along the jagged edges. I pushed against the cracked stone, and a section of the pedestal shifted under my hand, grinding away with a low groan. And then there it was—a dark void opening beneath it, the stone sliding away to reveal a deep hole hidden below. It seemed to lead down into darkness, but there was a glow, faint but unmistakable, somewhere at the bottom.

Lisa leaned over my shoulder, "Is that...?"

"It's a passageway," Serim said, his eyes lighting up, a glimmer of excitement piercing through the fatigue. "Looks like there's more to this place than we thought."

I nodded slowly, the thrum of Essence pulsing within me, whispering that this was right—this was where we needed to go. The hole was cooler, like there was something alive beneath the stone and shadow, something that had been waiting to be found.

"So," said Gelan, glancing at each of us in turn, "who's going first?"

I swallowed, feeling my pulse quicken. There was a sense that everything we'd done so far had been leading to this point. I swung my legs over the edge, gripping the rough stone as I began to descend.

"One way to find out," I said steadily despite the nerves building in my chest. "Let's go see what's down there."

One by one, the others followed. The walls of the passage were cool under my hands, the air growing colder as we moved deeper underground. I could hear the sound of their breaths behind me, a quiet but reassuring presence in the dark.

The glow grew stronger, lighting the way as the passage opened into a cavern—a wide space that took my breath away.

And there, at the far end, was a figure—a man, chained to the wall, his head bowed, his hair a tangled mess of gray. His body looked thin and worn down, as if the years had drained him of vitality, leaving only a shell of who he once was.

My heart stopped. I could feel the world around me narrow, the cavern shrinking until it was only me and that figure, that shadow of a man. Even before I saw his face, I knew. Deep in my bones, I knew.

"Dad?" My voice broke, my throat tightening painfully around the word. It was surreal, and for a moment, I was terrified that this was all a dream, that I'd wake up to find myself alone again, chasing the ghost of a

man I had never truly known. My feet moved of their own accord, closing the distance between us, my legs trembling with every step.

I could hear my pulse in my ears, loud and uneven, each heartbeat ringing with the hopes and fears that had been buried for years. With every step closer, I saw more details—the lines into his face, the gauntness of his cheeks, the bruises around his wrists where the chains had held him for who knew how long. He looked like he had been through hell, and yet, there was still strength in the way he held himself, even as he hung there.

The man stirred, his head lifting slowly, as if the weight of it were almost too much to bear. When he finally raised his head, his face came into view—a gaunt face, deeply lined with exhaustion, with eyes that spoke of pain and endurance beyond what anyone should ever have to bear. Those eyes—eyes that mirrored my own—locked onto mine, and for a heartbeat, neither of us moved. I saw the flicker of recognition, a spark of something that felt almost too fragile to be real.

It was him.

It was really him.

The father I had never known, the father I had dreamed about, the father I had hated and longed for in equal measure. He was here, alive, right in front of me.

A weary but unmistakable smile spread across his face, and his voice cracked as he spoke, filled with relief, disbelief, and something else—pride.

“My son,” Alaric said, “I knew you’d come.”

CHAPTER 17: THE MOLE IN THE FOUNDATION



We took Alaric back to Zephyr's house after I was done crying with him. It wasn't just tears—it was everything I had held in for years: the loneliness, the unanswered questions, the anger, and the hope I hadn't even realized I'd been clinging to. He held me through it, his hands firm but gentle on my shoulders.

"You've grown," he said. "The last time I saw you, you were just an infant in your mother's arms. And now..." He smiled, though his eyes shimmered with unshed tears. "Now, you're standing here, a man. But I imagine this moment makes you feel like a child again."

He wasn't wrong. I did feel like a child—overwhelmed, confused, and unsure of what to say. Seeing him was surreal, like stepping into a dream I hadn't dared to have. He wasn't just anyone. He was my father, the man I had mourned, hated, and longed for all at once. And now he was here.

The journey back to Zephyr's house felt longer than it should have. Alaric leaned heavily on Gelan's shoulder, his steps slow and deliberate. He still looked so frail, as if the years of captivity had hollowed him out. None of us spoke much during the walk. What could we say? The silence wasn't awkward, though; it was filled with the unspoken understanding that this was a moment none of us had ever anticipated.

When we arrived at Zephyr's house, he was waiting by the door, his ears perked and his tail swishing lazily. The moment he saw Alaric, however, his entire demeanor changed. His ears shot up, and his eyes widened to the size of saucers.

"By the Essence," Zephyr whispered, "Is that... Is that Alaric?" He looked at me for confirmation, as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

Alaric gave him a tired smile. "The one and only," he said, though his voice was raspy and weak.

Zephyr's jaw worked soundlessly for a moment before he snapped out of it. "Come in, come in! You—you're a legend! And now you're here, in my house!" He scurried around, clearing a space on the worn couch for Alaric to sit. "You must be starving. No, no, not just starving—famished! Let me get you something."

Before any of us could respond, Zephyr darted into the kitchen, muttering to himself about bread, tea, and soup. When he returned, he carried a platter piled high with an assortment of bread—fresh, crusty loaves, soft rolls, and even something that looked like a Feyrian version of flatbread.

"Here, eat, eat!" Zephyr said, practically shoving the platter into Alaric's lap.

Alaric chuckled—a low, weary sound—and took a piece of bread. "Thank you," he said sincerely. He took a bite, and his eyes closed as if he were savoring the simple act of eating. "It's been so long since I've had real food. They fed me the nastiest things you could imagine. Slop, mostly. Things even animals would turn their noses up at."

Zephyr puffed up indignantly. "Those evil, wretched beings have no respect for life, not even their own. But don't you worry—you'll eat well here."

We didn't press Alaric with questions. It was clear he wasn't in any condition to talk, and the exhaustion on his face told us everything we

needed to know. Once he finished eating, we showed him to a small room Zephyr had hastily prepared. The bed was simple but soft, and Alaric sank into it with a sigh of relief.

He was asleep almost instantly.

The rest of us sat around the small living room, telling Zephyr everything that had happened. No one wanted to disturb the fragile peace of the moment. As the Eldrin began to set, the others drifted off to bed one by one.

But not me. Sleep wouldn't come, no matter how much I willed it to. My mind was too full—memories of the past, questions about the future, and the sheer disbelief that my father was here, alive. I stood by the window, staring out at the night sky. The moons hung low, brighter than I had ever seen them.

I had grown used to seeing multiple moons in the sky—something I would have thought impossible back on Earth. It should have felt strange, but it didn't. In fact, nothing about Feyiaria felt strange anymore. With its magic and dangers, this world had become home in a way Earth never truly had. I hadn't missed Earth once since arriving here. Not once.

And now, I felt truly at home. Meeting my father had filled a void I hadn't even realized was so vast. This was the man I had dreamed of meeting, the man my mother had spoken of only sparingly but with an undercurrent of longing so profound it lingered in my memory like the scent of her perfume. She had deeply and fiercely loved him, even though she had hidden much of that love—for my sake, I now realized. She hadn't wanted her longing to become mine, hadn't wanted to burden me with the weight of her heartbreak.

But I couldn't stop thinking about her now. How must she have felt, living her entire life believing my father was dead? Thinking that the man she had loved, the father of her child, was gone forever? A part of me thought it might have been easier for her to believe he was gone to have that clean break. But knowing what I knew now—that he had been alive all this time, suffering, enduring unimaginable torment—I couldn't help but

wonder how she would have coped if she'd known the truth. Would she have blamed herself for his fate? Would she have lived with guilt, believing that their love had condemned him?

Maybe she had lived with that guilt anyway. I didn't know. I had no way of knowing what was in her heart, what she had carried all those years. The thought stung a sharp, bitter ache that settled deep in my chest.

The sound of soft footsteps drew me out of my thoughts. They were quiet and tentative, but they broke the silence of the house as a pebble dropped into still water. I turned toward the doorway, my pulse quickening as the steps grew louder and more distinct. And then I heard his voice—low, rough, but unmistakably warm.

“Son, what’s keeping you awake?” His voice startled me, low and gravelly, as it cut through the quiet of the living room. I turned toward him and finally took a proper look at his face.

He stood there, framed by the soft light spilling from the moons outside. He was tall, taller than I had imagined, though thinner than I had pictured in my mind’s eye. His hair, dark and thick, fell loosely around his face, and his deep brown eyes—so much like my own—seemed to hold an entire lifetime’s worth of stories. His features were sharp and chiseled, his cheekbones prominent, and his jaw strong. I noticed the faint lines around his eyes, the shadows that lingered there, and the way his thin lips pressed into a faint, hesitant smile.

“Uh, I just couldn’t fall asleep,” I said awkwardly, shrugging. “Are you okay, though?” I asked, though I already knew the answer. He had slept all day.

He gave a small, almost humorless smile and tilted his head. “Am I okay?” he repeated softly. “The better question might be—are you?”

I frowned slightly, confused. “Why?” I asked, unsure of what he was implying.

He hesitated for a moment before he spoke again, now quieter, almost cautious. "Surely... surely you must be mad at me," he said. "For abandoning you. For leaving you and your mother."

His words hit me hard, though not in the way I'd expected. I felt my chest tighten as a whirlwind of emotions surged within me—anger, sadness, confusion, understanding. I didn't know how to answer at first, so I just stood there, my hands clenching and unclenching at my sides.

Finally, I took a deep breath. "Well, yes," I admitted, my voice steady but low. "For most of my life, I did dread the man who left me and Mum. I thought you'd just... vanished. Like we didn't matter enough for you to stay." I swallowed hard, the bitterness of those memories rising to the surface. "But I've come to learn you were in a much worse position than us. Knowing that changes things."

His shoulders relaxed slightly, though his expression remained somber. "Worse indeed," he murmured, a shadow passing over his face. "But no longer. I think you and I..." He trailed off, his gaze thoughtful as he studied me. "I think we'll make a good team, Samuel. It's as if destiny brought you here at the right time—when the Void Serpent is on the verge of regaining his power."

I blinked, surprised by the certainty in his tone. "How did you know that?" I asked curiously.

He gestured toward the sofa nearby, inviting me to sit with him. "Come," he said, settling into the worn cushions with a sigh. "I'll explain. You see," he began, "even while I was trapped, I could sense it. I knew the time was drawing near. It was inevitable."

He leaned forward slightly, resting his elbows on his knees as his hands clasped together. "But more than that," he continued, "I know because I was once close to him. The Void Serpent, I mean."

His words sent a chill through me. "Close to him?" I repeated in disbelief.

“Yes,” he said, nodding gravely. “In my early days, before I met your mother, I worked for him.” He paused, gaze distant as though he were looking back at memories long buried. “My abilities... my skills as a World Walker—they made me valuable to him. I was one of his most trusted agents, though I didn’t see myself as such then. I thought I was doing what was necessary for the good of this planet. But...” He shook his head, “We had... ideological disagreements.”

“What kind of disagreements?”

“He was cruel, Samuel,” he said simply. “Cruel in ways I couldn’t stomach, especially to those who dared to marry or even associate outside of their kind. You’ve likely noticed it even now—the lingering legacy of his reign. The people of this planet rarely intermarry between kingdoms. The distrust, the division... it’s his doing.”

He paused, his hands tightening into fists. “He ruled Feyiaria with an iron grip nearly two decades ago. His laws were absolute, and anyone who dared to defy them faced severe punishment. Those who married outside their kingdom—or worse, outside their species—were either executed or exiled to uninhabitable worlds. He saw it as maintaining purity, as preserving the ‘natural order.’ But in truth, it was nothing more than control. A way to keep the kingdoms divided, to prevent unity.”

“But you married a human,” I said, “And not just any human—someone from Earth. How did you meet Mum?”

A soft, wistful smile spread across Alaric’s face, the lines around his eyes softening as he leaned back, as if letting the memory wash over him. “Ah, your mother...” he began with fondness and a hint of melancholy. “It’s a story I’ve told myself countless times, especially during those years when I was... alone. It kept me sane.”

He paused, gathering his thoughts. “I met her during one of my expeditions to Earth. At that time, I was... well, let’s just say I was trying my hardest to blend in and pass as a native. But Earth is a complicated place, Samuel. And I—being so used to the singular ways of Feyiaria—let’s just say I made some silly mistakes.”

“What kind of mistakes?”

“Well,” he said with a chuckle, “the first one happened at a café. I was buying coffee—what you Earthlings seemed to enjoy so much—and I hadn’t quite grasped how your money worked. You see, here in Feyiaria, we’ve always had one standardized currency, simple and straightforward. But Earth? My gods, the coins, the notes, the denominations—they were all so... chaotic. I stood there for what must have been an eternity, staring at the change in my hand, trying to make sense of it.”

He smiled again, shaking his head at the memory. “And that’s when I met her. Your mother. She was in line behind me. She must have noticed my utter confusion because she stepped forward and offered to help. I’ll never forget how she looked that day—her hair tucked behind her ear, her warm smile. She asked if I was alright, and I, of course, in my panic, blurted out something ridiculous.”

“Ridiculous? What did you say?”

He laughed, the sound genuine and unguarded. “I told her, ‘This kefir is tasty.’ I meant to compliment the coffee, but I mispronounced the word and ended up referencing something else entirely. She burst out laughing, this beautiful, uninhibited laugh, and asked if I was a tourist. I said yes, from a very... obscure country.”

“Obscure?”

“Well, I couldn’t exactly tell her the truth, could I? That I was from another world entirely?” He grinned a bit sheepishly. “I said I was from some far-off island nation. She didn’t press me too much about it, thankfully. Instead, she helped me sort out the money and even gave me tips on where I could get more coffee if I liked it so much. It was... refreshing, Samuel. Meeting someone who was kind without expecting anything in return.”

He sighed softly as though reliving the moment in his mind. “But that wasn’t the end of it. I couldn’t say goodbye to your mother after that. And, it seemed, neither could she. We kept running into each other—well, I

suppose I may have orchestrated a few of those encounters.” He chuckled, the sound rich with the joy of remembrance. “She showed me parts of Earth I would have never discovered on my own. Museums, parks, quiet little bookshops... She had this incredible way of finding beauty in the simplest things.”

“Mum always was like that,” I said quietly. “She had a way of making everything feel... warm.”

He nodded, his expression softening. “Very kind. Sweet. Innocent in the best possible way. She was... everything I didn’t know I was missing. I fell for her, hopelessly, helplessly. But I knew I couldn’t keep the truth from her forever.”

“What happened when you told her?” I asked, holding my breath.

Alaric’s gaze grew distant, “It wasn’t easy. I told her one evening after we’d shared a long walk through the park. I explained everything—who I really was, where I was from, and what it meant for us. At first, she didn’t say anything. She just... stared at me as though trying to process the impossibility of it all.”

“And then?” I prompted, unable to stop myself.

He exhaled slowly. “She asked why I had kept it a secret. She wasn’t angry, not in the way I feared she might be. She was hurt, of course, that I hadn’t trusted her with something so important. But she didn’t judge me, Samuel. She didn’t call me a liar or push me away. She just... listened. She asked questions—about Feyiaria, about my life here, about what it meant for me to be a World Walker. She was curious, not condemning. And eventually, she forgave me.”

His voice broke slightly as he continued. “She told me she loved me, even after everything. She said she didn’t care where I was from or what I’d done in the past. She cared about the man I was when I was with her. She... she accepted me in a way I had never been accepted before. And that was it. I knew, at that moment, that I would do anything to be with her. Even defy the Void Serpent.”

“She must have been incredible,” I said finally.

“She is.”

“Also, er, if you knew you couldn’t marry someone from Earth,” I said, “then why did you let her fall in love with you? Why did you risk it?”

He let out a long, weary sigh, running a hand through his thick, graying hair. “I’m sorry, Samuel,” he said, “I’ve asked myself that question more times than you can imagine. I didn’t intend for it to happen. When I first met your mother, I was... curious, drawn to her kindness, her warmth. I wasn’t thinking about the consequences, not at first.”

He paused as if gathering his thoughts. “And then, before I knew it, I was in love with her. Completely hopelessly in love. I didn’t make her fall in love with me, Samuel. It wasn’t calculated. It just... happened. And I know that doesn’t justify the risks I took, but I don’t regret it, not for a moment. She changed my life. And she gave me you.”

I swallowed hard, feeling the emotions welling up in my chest. “So, what happened then? Why did you leave?”

“She got pregnant with you,” he said softly. “That was when everything changed. I knew the Serpent would never allow it. He would see it as a betrayal of everything he stood for—a World Walker, one of his strongest assets, falling in love with a human, having a child with her. It would be... unforgivable.”

He clasped his hands tightly together and continued on, “I knew I couldn’t continue working for him, not after that. I told him I was done. We’d already been clashing for years—ideological differences, disagreements about his cruelty, his obsession with power. Your mother and you were my breaking point. I told him I was leaving Feyiaria for good, that I would no longer serve him.”

“And he let you?”

“For a while, yes,” said Alaric, “I think he underestimated me, or perhaps he thought I’d come crawling back. I moved to Earth, planning to

live there quietly with your mother, to raise you away from his influence. And for a time, it worked. Those months were... the happiest of my life. I thought we'd found our escape, that we could live a normal life. But the Serpent was biding his time, Samuel. He wasn't done with me."

I felt a shiver run down my spine. "What did he do?"

Alaric's gaze dropped to the floor. "He sent his men to find me. The Void Serpent has always been resourceful, especially when it comes to controlling his World Walkers. He created a portal—an interdimensional gateway—somewhere in the mountains. It connected Feyiaria to Earth, but only those of Feyirian blood could pass through. Humans... they can't cross it. That's when he began his hunt."

"The mountains..." I whispered, the realization hitting me like a lightning bolt. "I came through the mountains to get here, Dad. That's how I found Feyiaria. It's like... I've always been drawn to them, even before I knew what they were."

Alaric's eyes lit up with recognition, and he nodded. "Yes, love. I suspected as much. Anyone with Feyirian blood would feel the pull of that portal. It's an instinct, a connection to the Essence. Even if they lose their way, their gut will guide them to it. It's how our kind is never truly lost or stranded on Earth. The Essence pulls us home."

"So... what happened next? After the portal was made?"

Alaric leaned back, his face grim. "They found me," he said simply. "I was living with your mother and you, trying to keep a low profile. One night, there was a knock at the door. I opened it, and the moment I saw who it was, I knew. They were the Serpent's men."

"How did you know it was them?" I asked.

"Well, all his pupils bear a mark," Alaric said grimly as he looked past me, lost in memories. "It's shaped like a goat with massive, curling horns. A twisted symbol of loyalty to him. You can't mistake it. They wanted to end you and your mother right there and then, but I couldn't let that happen."

His voice trembled slightly, and he clenched his fists as if reliving the moment. "I told her to run. She didn't want to, Samuel. She said, 'We'll suffer together, Alaric. We'll face whatever comes.' But I couldn't let her. I begged her to take care of you, to protect our baby." His gaze met mine, his eyes filled with anguish. "She finally listened, and she ran while I fought them off. I tried, Samuel. I fought as hard as I could, but in the end, I gave up—for her safety and yours. If they'd taken me without a fight, maybe... maybe they'd leave her alone."

"I asked her to promise me to keep all of this a secret from you if I'm not able to come back, and I can see she kept it a promise."

"What did you ask her for it?"

"Well, because I wanted to keep you away from all of this until you were old, and I knew you'd come back on your own and learn things all by yourself. I heard you have acquired all four of the crystals. I'm truly proud of you, son."

"Thanks, Dad."

There was a brief silence, and then his tone softened. "Speaking of your mother," he said, "How is she? Is she here, in Feyiaria? Has she made it here with you?" He smiled wistfully, almost to himself. "I can't wait to see her again, to hold my darling."

The words hit me like a dagger. My chest tightened, the weight of what I needed to tell him pressing heavily on my shoulders. My throat felt dry, and the words were caught there, refusing to come out. How could I tell him? How could I shatter that fragile hope in his eyes?

"Mum..." I started. I looked down, unable to meet his gaze. "Mum died a few years ago."

The smile vanished from his face instantly, replaced by a look of disbelief. His face grew pale, his breath catching as if I'd knocked the wind out of him. "What?" he said, "She's... gone?"

I nodded slowly, struggling to find the words to soften the blow. "She missed you dearly, Dad," I said, trying my hardest to stay calm. "I could see it in her eyes, even though she tried to hide it from me. She never stopped loving you. She talked about this magical land like it was a story—a fairy tale she wove to keep herself and me hopeful. I thought it was all fiction back then, but now I know it was her way of keeping you alive in her heart."

Alaric's hands trembled, and he closed his eyes as if trying to block out the reality of my words. "How?" he managed to ask, his voice cracking. "How did she... what happened?"

"She got sick," I said as the memory of her final days flashed through my mind. I took a deep breath, willing myself to stay steady. "Cancer. It... it was fast. We didn't have much time. She fought so hard, Dad. She never stopped fighting."

He turned away, staring into the distance, his expression vacant. His shoulders slumped as though the weight of all those lost years had finally crushed him. "Cancer," he repeated, almost to himself. "I should have been there. I should have fought harder to get back. Maybe if I had..." His voice trailed off, and he shook his head slowly.

I reached out, touching his arm gently. "Dad, there's nothing you could have done. She loved you. Even though you weren't there, she kept your memory alive. She always believed in you. She told me... she told me you were a hero."

Tears welled in his eyes, and he quickly wiped them away, but not before I saw them fall. "I failed her," he said quietly. "All these years, I held onto the thought that we'd see each other again. That I'd make it back to her. I thought... I thought we'd have more time."

"You didn't fail her," I said firmly, "You did everything you could. You gave up everything to protect us. That's not failure. That's love."

I understood his pain. All those years of waiting, holding onto the hope of a reunion, only to find that when the time finally came, the love of his

life was gone. It was a cruel twist of fate. The days that followed were heavy with silence. Alaric withdrew into himself, a shadow of the man I had only just begun to know. He spent hours sitting by the window, staring at the moon in the sky, lost in memories of a life he would never return.

The others were confused at first. They didn't know what had happened to make him so withdrawn, but when I finally told them the truth about my mother's passing, they understood. Zephyr, Lisa, Noris, Serim, and Gelan all agreed to give Alaric the space he needed to process the loss. They were kind, offering quiet words of sympathy when we crossed paths but mostly leaving him to grieve in his own way.

It took weeks before he spoke up again. Slowly, he began to emerge from the fog of his sorrow, though the pain never truly left his eyes. One evening, as we all sat around the living room, the faint glow of the hearth lighting up the room, Alaric finally broke his silence. He began telling us all about his story and his future plans.

"They took me back to Feyiaria," he said, his gaze distant as he recounted the events. "But I wasn't going to go down that easily. The Void Serpent may have had me captured, but I knew his secret. I knew where his power truly lay."

The room grew quiet, everyone leaning in, captivated by the story. Even Zephyr, who had heard countless legends about Alaric, seemed mesmerized.

"His life," Alaric continued, "his rule, his very existence—everything was tied to the five crystals. They were ancient, elemental artifacts of immense power buried deep within his castle. Together, they sustained him and made him invincible. As long as they remained joined, no force in Feyiaria—or beyond—could hope to defeat him."

"You knew about the crystals back then?" asked Noris.

"I had been one of his closest allies in the early days. I was part of his inner circle, trusted with secrets that no one else knew. That's how I learned about the crystals. But as his cruelty grew, so did my resolve to oppose him.

I couldn't stand by and watch him destroy everything in his quest for power."

"When they captured me, I knew it might be my only chance." He went on, "I managed to escape from his dungeons—barely—and I snuck into the deepest part of his castle, where the crystals were kept. It was a fortress within a fortress, heavily guarded, but I had learned to be resourceful. I separated the crystals, one by one, breaking their connection. The moment the last crystal was removed, the Void Serpent's power began to wane. He lost his hold over Feyiaria."

"That's incredible," she said. "You did all of that on your own?"

"It wasn't without cost," he said quietly. "The guards nearly caught me several times. I was injured and weak. But the thought of your mother, of you, Samuel... It gave me the strength to keep going. I knew I had to finish what I started."

"What happened after you separated the crystals?" asked Serim.

"I returned them to their rightful places," Alaric said steadily. "Each crystal belonged to one of the kingdoms. They were never meant to be united under one ruler, certainly not one as corrupt as the Void Serpent. I gave them back to their people, back to their lands, where they could once again maintain balance and harmony."

"But what about the fifth one?"

"The fifth crystal was different. It wasn't tied to any one kingdom. It was a wild, unpredictable force, and the Void Serpent kept it hidden away, even from his most loyal followers. I couldn't return it to its rightful place because no one knew where that was. So I took it with me, hiding it in a place where no one—not even the Void Serpent—could find it."

"Where?" I pressed, feeling the tension in the room grow.

"Here's where I made a mistake," Alaric said with regret. "I left the fifth crystal in the castle because it belonged to the Void Serpent. That crystal isn't like the others—it's cursed. Anyone who possesses it falls

under the Serpent's control. I couldn't risk that happening to me, not when so much was at stake. So I left it there, untouched, ensuring I wouldn't succumb to its power."

"I thought I had done the right thing. I thought by leaving it where it was, I had removed its influence from my life. But I underestimated the reach of the Serpent. His minions found the crystal, and they fell under his influence. They found me before I could return to Earth. I was so close, Samuel, so close to coming back to you and your mother. And then... I wasn't. I've been trapped ever since."

"But, wait," Noris interjected, leaning forward, "I'm confused. If the crystals are scattered, and the connection between them is broken, how is the Void Serpent coming back? Isn't he supposed to be dead?"

Alaric sighed, running a hand through his disheveled hair. "The crystals don't kill him permanently," he explained gravely. "They weaken him, force him into dormancy. But the Serpent isn't like you or me—he's a force of nature, tied to the very fabric of this world. As long as his own crystal remains intact, he can never truly die. He lies in wait, biding his time, feeding off the fear and chaos in the world."

"Feeding off fear?" asked Serim.

Alaric nodded. "Fear, discord, hatred—they strengthen him. It's how he builds his following, how he spreads his influence. Even now, his minions are working tirelessly to rebuild his power. And when the time is right—roughly twenty years after the destruction of the crystals—he will rise again. That time is almost upon us."

The room fell into a heavy silence, the weight of his words pressing down on us like a physical force. I could feel my chest tighten, my mind racing with questions and doubts. Was it possible to stop something so ancient, so deeply ingrained in this world?

"So," Noris began cautiously, "if his crystal is the key to his immortality... what do we do? How do we destroy it?"

Before Alaric could respond, Gelan abruptly stood, muttering something about needing tea. He disappeared into the kitchen, the sound of cupboards opening and closing echoing faintly behind him.

“Destroying the crystal is easier said than done,” Alaric admitted. “It’s no ordinary artifact—it’s imbued with the very essence of the Void Serpent. It’s nearly indestructible. But it’s not impossible. If we can locate it, there may be a way to end him once and for all.”

“Do you know where the crystal is now? Has it stayed in the castle all this time?” asked Lisa.

Alaric shook his head. “I doubt it. The Serpent’s followers would have moved it by now, hiding it in a place where no one could find it. We will have to look for it. This time, I won’t be alone. I’ll be with you all. Together, we stand a chance.”

We spent hours discussing strategies, potential plans, and what our next steps might be. Alaric’s insights were invaluable, but there was still so much uncertainty. Every path forward felt like a gamble. As the conversation slowed and the fire crackled softly in the background, I glanced around the room.

That’s when I noticed something.

“It’s been a while since Gelan left,” I said, frowning. I realized I hadn’t seen him since he went to make tea, and that had been at least twenty minutes ago.

“I’ll check on him,” I said, standing. The others nodded, caught up in their own quiet murmurs.

As I walked toward the kitchen, I heard faint murmurs—muffled words that sounded like a one-sided conversation. My steps slowed as I approached the doorway, and I peeked inside. There he was—Gelan—standing by the counter with his back to me. He wasn’t alone, though. He was talking to someone—or at least, that’s what it seemed like.

“Who are you talking to?” I asked.

Gelan jumped, nearly spilling the tea he was holding. "Ah, no one!" he stammered, turning around too quickly. "Just... just talking to myself. You know how it is." His laugh was nervous, strained.

I raised an eyebrow, "You've been gone a while," I said, keeping my tone casual though unease was already curling in my stomach. "We started wondering if you fell asleep back here."

"No, no, just taking my time," Gelan said quickly, his words tumbling over each other. He glanced down at the cup of tea in his hand, avoiding my gaze. "Needed a moment to think."

I tilted my head, studying him. Something about his demeanor was... off. His shoulders were tense, his movements jerky. And then I noticed his hands—he was holding them oddly, one pressed against his side as though hiding something.

"What's that?" I asked, nodding toward the hand he was trying to keep out of sight.

"Nothing," Gelan replied too quickly. He stepped back, clutching the cup tighter. "It's nothing. Just—just tea."

"Gelan," I said evenly, "what are you hiding?"

He moved his hand further behind his back, but his body language gave him away. His knuckles were white, his grip tight on whatever he was concealing. My pulse quickened as I took another step toward him.

"Let me see," I said firmly.

"Samuel, seriously, it's nothing," Gelan said, trying to laugh it off. "You're imagining things."

But I wasn't imagining things. My gut told me something was wrong, and I wasn't about to let it go. I lunged forward, grabbing at his arm before he could pull away.

At first, it seemed like there was nothing. His palm was empty, trembling slightly under my hold. I almost felt foolish for pressing the issue

—until I noticed something. His sleeve had ridden up slightly in the scuffle, exposing the bare skin of his forearm. And there it was.

A mark.

Dark and jagged, the symbol stamped onto his skin was unmistakable. It was shaped like a goat's head, the horns curling wickedly around the edges, just as Alaric had described.

Chapter 18: Fortifying Nexus



I didn't talk to Gelan after that, thinking that maybe I was just imagining things. Maybe I had let my paranoia get the better of me. But deep down, a knot of unease refused to loosen, and I couldn't shake the image of that dark mark on his forearm—the twisted horns of the Void Serpent. I never got a clearer look at his hand after that, and it felt like he was avoiding me. I wasn't imagining that part.

At breakfast, Gelan seemed to disappear before I could ask him to help Zephyr with the firewood. At practice, when Serim and Noris sparred with their weapons, he claimed to be reorganizing supplies in the storeroom, his face always turned away. It was subtle, almost casual, but I noticed. And noticing made it worse—like a splinter I couldn't pull out.

"Hey," Lisa said one afternoon when we sharpened weapons and packed food for the journey. She nudged me lightly, her amber eyes narrowing. "You've been quiet lately. More quiet than usual, I mean. Something eating at you?"

"It's nothing," I replied automatically, too quickly to sound convincing.

"Sam, we're about to head out on what could be the most dangerous mission of our lives, and you're brooding. You don't *do* brooding."

I hesitated, my fingers brushing over the edge of my own blade as I pretended to focus on the work. "It's just..." I sighed, feeling her stare boring into the side of my head. "I just feel too tired."

Lisa said some kind words to make me feel better, and soon enough, we moved on with our chores.

It took Alaric a couple of days to get back to full health. The deep shadows under his eyes faded, and some color had returned to his face. I saw glimpses of the legendary man he used to be—the quiet strength, the sharp mind. By then, we had nearly finished our preparations for the final quest. Bags were packed, weapons sharpened, and plans drawn. There was a hum of anticipation in the air, but for me, it was of dread and resolve.

It still felt strange to have my father back—to see him sitting at Zephyr's table, drinking hot tea, and discussing strategies like it was the most natural thing in the world. Stranger still was the fact that we would embark on this mission as a team. A family, even. Something I never thought I would have.

But my eyes, whether I wanted them to or not, kept drifting to Gelan.

He acted like everything was normal—laughing at Serim's jokes, helping Noris string her bow, trading sarcastic remarks with Lisa. But every time I glanced his way, he would look up, catch my gaze, and turn away again, a little too quickly. It was subtle, but I noticed. And every time it happened, the nagging suspicion in my gut grew stronger.

I knew what I had to do.

I had planned on asking him to show his mark in front of everyone. Though this could risk me being a horrible person in front of everyone, doing it one-on-one could delay the exposure and risk us getting into danger. I couldn't take that chance.

When we were about to leave for Nexus, and everyone had gathered in the living room, I found the perfect chance to do what I had been planning for a while. By now, Gelan had most probably stopped thinking about me suspecting him, as I hadn't raised any eyebrows since that day. I would strike when he was the least prepared.

Alaric was crouched by the door, tying his shoelaces with slow precision, when he looked up and scanned the room. "Is everyone ready?"

“Sure we are,” Noris replied, stretching her shoulders as though we were about to run a marathon. He sometimes did that—as if preparing physically for any battle, no matter how mundane.

Lisa carefully packed the crystals into her bag, each one carefully wrapped in cloth like they were newborns. She was deep in concentration, lips moving faintly as she probably counted to make sure she hadn’t missed any. On the other side of the room, Serim was fussing with his expandable sword, adjusting it to his belt while mumbling something under his breath. Knowing Serim, it was probably about looking heroic or “cool.”

But my focus stayed locked on Gelan.

He stood a little apart from the rest of us, near Lisa as she worked. His gaze lingered on the bag in her hands a little too long, his fingers twitching at his side as though he wanted to reach for it but knew better. I caught the faint crease of tension on his forehead, the stiffness in his shoulders—subtle but unmistakable. His whole posture was wrong. Too deliberate. Too controlled.

I seized the moment.

“What are you looking at?” I asked, letting my voice take on a teasing, casual tone. I wanted to sound lighthearted and unthreatening—like I was just making small talk.

Gelan startled slightly and straightened, his forced chuckle just a little too thin. “Ah, nothing,” he said quickly. “Just making sure everything’s in place. That’s all.”

He didn’t meet my eyes. That was all the confirmation I needed.

I narrowed my gaze slightly. “I see,” I said slowly, dragging out the words. Then, as calmly as I could, I struck. “Well, if you want to make sure everything is in place and sorted... how about we have a quick look at your forearm?”

The room froze.

It was like the air had been sucked out of it.

Noris stopped mid-stretch, his arms suspended awkwardly as he blinked at me in surprise. Lisa froze, her hands hovering over her bag as her eyes darted between Gelan and me. Serim, who had just been muttering to himself, went utterly still, fingers frozen on the hilt of his sword.

Gelan turned to me sharply, his expression shifting—from confused to something harder, more guarded. “Why do you want to see my arm?” he asked, his voice level but tight. Beneath that calm exterior, I could hear the faint edge of panic.

Alaric looked up, brow furrowed, his shoelaces forgotten. “Is everything okay?” he asked, genuine confusion in his tone as he scanned the tension in the room.

“Everything’s fine,” I said quickly.

I turned back to Gelan, fixing him with a stare. “It’s just... something’s been bothering me. Call it a hunch. You’ve been acting strange these last few days, Gelan.”

Gelan’s lips twitched into what was supposed to be amusement, but the chuckle that escaped was short and brittle. “Strange?” he repeated, shaking his head as though dismissing the idea. “Come on, Samuel. You’re being paranoid. I’ve been nothing but helpful.”

“Helpful?” I repeated, “Is that why you’ve been avoiding me? Why you can’t seem to meet my eyes? Or why you’re always disappearing when no one’s watching?”

“Avoiding you?” Gelan shot back. “This is ridiculous. What’s gotten into you?”

“Wait, wait, what’s going on here?” Noris stepped forward cautiously, her eyes flicking between us. “Samuel, are you accusing Gelan of something?”

I turned toward him, trying to sound calm even though my heart hammered in my chest. “Maybe I am,” I said. Then I turned back to Gelan, stepping closer, “Gelan, if you’ve got nothing to hide, then prove it. Show us your forearm.”

For a heartbeat, he said nothing. Then his face changed—like a mask slipping. His chest rose and fell quickly, his face pale but defiant, like someone cornered but still grasping at straws.

“Dad, I hope everything is okay,” I said steadily, looking at my dad, “I am not sure anymore, but we’ll find out once we see what you’re hiding.”

“I’m not hiding anything,” Gelan snapped at once, sharp and defensive. “If anything, I’m disappointed—no, hurt—that you’d question me like this. After everything, Samuel? After all I’ve done for you, for this team? For us?” His words came out in a rush, each one carefully chosen to sting.

I clenched my fists at my sides, steadying myself against the wave of guilt he was trying to push onto me. “I don’t deny you’ve been with us this entire time,” I replied, “But being here doesn’t mean your intentions were pure. I believe you had your own goals and your own sinister reasons for helping us. Maybe you needed the crystals too—just not for the reasons you told us.”

Gelan stared at me, stunned for a moment. “Sinister goals?” he repeated. Then he laughed bitterly, shaking his head like he couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “You’re insane. Do you even hear yourself?”

“Maybe you were planning to steal them all,” I pushed further. “To take the crystals and give them to your master—the Void Serpent.”

The room fell deathly silent. Even the fire in the hearth seemed to dim. The words hung in the air like a thunderclap, ringing in everyone’s minds. I could feel every pair of eyes on me—wide, shocked, and searching for answers.

Standing a few steps away, Noris finally spoke up, “Just... just show him your forearm, Gelan,” she said quietly. “Get it over with. Prove him

wrong, and we can all move on.”

Gelan’s head snapped toward him. “Why should I?” he demanded, “Why should I have to prove myself to anyone? This is ridiculous! You think it’s fine to corner me like this? To—what? Accuse me? Humiliate me?”

“No one’s trying to humiliate you,” I shot back. “We’re trying to make sure we can trust you. That’s all.”

“I feel *violated*,” Gelan growled as his gaze darted around the room, searching for someone—anyone—to take his side. “You’re treating me like I’m the enemy when all I’ve done is fight for you, bleed for you! How can you stand there and look me in the eye after everything?”

“If you have nothing to hide, then the only person embarrassed here will be me,” I countered. I turned toward Lisa, who was standing closest to him now, the bag with the crystals clutched tightly against her chest as though they might vanish if she let them go.

She looked from me to Gelan, her face tense but resolute. “Gelan,” she said softly, “if Samuel’s wrong, you have nothing to worry about. Just show us. End this here and now.”

“I don’t owe him—any of you—proof,” Gelan spat. “You want to accuse me? Fine. But you’re not going to shame me into rolling up my sleeve like some criminal.”

“Then why won’t you show us?” she asked. “If you’re innocent, then why?”

“I don’t owe you this. I don’t owe any of you this,” he muttered, taking an involuntary step back.

“Enough!” Noris barked, his patience finally snapping. He tossed his bow onto the table, the clatter making everyone flinch. “Stop dancing around this. You’ve got nothing to hide? Then show us your damn forearm! Otherwise, you’re just proving Samuel right!”

Alaric, who had crept closer, acted before any of us could react.

In one swift motion, he reached out and grabbed Gelan's wrist. Gelan yelped, trying to jerk away, but Alaric's grip was iron. "Stop struggling," Alaric growled, "A lot of lives are at stake here—many lives, many worlds. We cannot risk it all just to spare you a little discomfort."

"Don't touch me!" Gelan snarled, finally managing to stumble back. His voice trembled—rage and desperation mingling together like oil on water.

By now, the room had shrunk down to just the two of them, everyone else forgotten as we watched in stunned silence. His face pale, Noris stood rigid with his fists clenched at his sides. Lisa clutched the bag of crystals even tighter to her chest as though they might offer her some kind of comfort. Serim was half-drawn, his hand hovering over his sword hilt, ready for anything. And me? My heart was hammering in my chest as I watched Gelan inch back toward the corner of the room.

"Enough!" Alaric barked, lunging forward. His hand snatched Gelan's wrist in an iron grip before he could pull away. Gelan yelped, twisting and struggling, but Alaric didn't let go.

"Not until we see the truth," Alaric growled, his other hand moving to grip Gelan's sleeve.

"Alaric, stop!" I called out, my own doubts flaring up. What if I was wrong? What if I'd driven this to a breaking point over nothing?

But it was too late. Alaric yanked up Gelan's sleeve with one swift motion.

Nothing.

The room seemed to exhale at once. Gelan's forearm was bare—pale and unmarked skin stretched over bone and muscle. For a heartbeat, the silence was deafening. I felt heat rise to my face, embarrassment crawling up my neck like fire. I'd been so sure—so sure—that there was something.

Gelan's face twisted into something almost triumphant. "Satisfied now?" he hissed, yanking his arm free from Alaric's grip. "How dare you accuse me of betrayal? After everything I've done?"

The shame pressed down on me like a weight. "I—"

But I never got to finish.

In one swift motion, Gelan's hand shot to the inside of his jacket, and before any of us could react, he pulled out a knife. The blade gleamed wickedly in the light. My breath caught in my throat as he raised it high, his eyes locked on Alaric.

"No!" Lisa screamed.

Everything happened in a blur.

Gelan lunged, the knife aimed for Alaric's chest. Alaric staggered back, his hands coming up to block the strike, but Gelan was fast—too fast. I didn't think. I just moved. My legs carried me across the room, and I crashed into Gelan's side, slamming into him with all my weight.

We hit the ground hard. The knife clattered out of his grip and skidded across the floor. "Get off me!" Gelan snarled, twisting violently beneath me. His elbow jabbed into my ribs, knocking the breath from my lungs.

"Hold him down!" Serim shouted, and suddenly, he was there, grabbing Gelan's arms and forcing them behind his back. Gelan screamed, bucking and thrashing, but Serim was stronger. Noris joined him, pinning Gelan's legs as he writhed on the ground like a trapped animal.

"Let me go!" Gelan shrieked. His voice was raw, unhinged, filled with a kind of desperation that sent chills through me. "I'll kill you all! I'll kill Alaric if it's the last thing I do!"

"Traitor!" Lisa shouted, "You traitor! We trusted you!"

Gelan's screams turned to guttural growls, his body shaking violently as he fought against their hold. "You don't understand!" he wailed. "He'll kill me! He'll kill all of us!"

“You’re done, Gelan,” Alaric said quietly, but there was no mercy in his voice. “You’ve played your part, and now we’ll see the truth.”

Alaric knelt beside him, one hand extended. He began murmuring something, words in a language I didn’t understand—soft and rhythmic, like the hum of an ancient song. The air in the room seemed to thicken, crackling with a strange energy that made my skin prickle.

Gelan’s struggles slowed as Alaric’s chant continued. Then, before our eyes, it began.

The mark appeared slowly at first, as though it were rising up from beneath Gelan’s skin. Dark lines bled to the surface, curling and twisting into sharp, jagged shapes. It spread across his forearm as ink poured into the water until the unmistakable image was there—the mark. The goat’s head, its horns curling like shadows around it, glowed faintly.

Lisa gasped, her hands flying to her mouth. Noris swore under her breath. Serim’s grip on Gelan tightened as though he expected him to burst free at any second.

The room seemed to tilt around me as the betrayal fully hit me. I staggered back, my legs suddenly weak, and sank onto the edge of the sofa.

Gelan had the mark.

It was real.

I pressed a hand to my face, my chest tightening painfully. Gelan, the person I had fought alongside, laughed with, trusted—he had been working for the Void Serpent this whole time. I didn’t know how to process it. My mind flashed through every moment we’d shared—the times we’d saved each other, the nights we’d sat around campfires sharing stories.

Had it all been a lie?

Serim released one of Gelan’s arms and turned to me, “Samuel,” he said softly, “you were right.”

But the words didn’t comfort me.

Across the room, Gelan sagged against the floor, his face pale and defeated. Tears streaked his cheeks, but his eyes were empty. "I didn't want this," he whispered so low I almost didn't hear him. "I didn't want this..."

I didn't answer. I couldn't.

A part of me had suspected this all along, but the truth—seeing it—was worse than I had imagined. I turned away, unable to look at him, and pressed my face into my hands.

The betrayal was like a blade buried deep in my chest. I knew we had no choice but to move forward, but in that moment, all I could feel was the weight of everything Gelan had taken from us.

From me.

The room was deathly silent as we all stared at it, the truth undeniable now.

Alaric let go of Gelan's wrist like it had burned him, and Gelan stumbled back, cradling his arm against his chest as though he could hide the mark again. He looked up at us, his face pale, sweat dripping down his temples, his chest heaving with uneven breaths.

"You betrayed us," said Serim. "You've been lying to us this whole time. Helping us, pretending to be one of us—while leading us straight into a trap, weren't you?"

"No!" Gelan cried, shaking his head violently. "It wasn't like that! You don't get it, he'll kill me. He'll kill all of you if I don't—"

"Enough!" Alaric roared, "Do you realize what you've done, Gelan? What you've risked? Who you've risked?"

Gelan buried his face in his hands, shaking uncontrollably. "I didn't want this," he whispered, the fight finally leaving his voice. "I swear to you, I didn't want this..."

"How long?" I asked softly, though my voice shook. "How long have you been working for them?"

He didn't look at me. His voice was muffled as he whispered, "Since the beginning."

Since the beginning, every moment, every battle, every victory—it had all been a lie.

Later, after the storm had quieted and Gelan had been restrained in the corner of the room, I sat by the window, staring into the darkened horizon. The weight of the betrayal still sat heavy in my chest, like a stone I couldn't shake loose. The room was quiet except for the rustling of Zephyr's tail as he paced by the door.

My mind was a blur—fragments of memories, flashes of Gelan's face, his voice rang in my head. "I didn't want this." I wanted to believe him. But how could I? The mark didn't lie, and neither did the knife he had pulled on my father.

At some point, Alaric came to stand beside me. His shadow loomed large, and I could feel his gaze on me before he even spoke.

"How did you know he was one of the Void Serpent's men?" he asked quietly.

I turned toward him, startled out of my thoughts. I couldn't find the words for a moment, as if my throat had closed up. "I—I..." I faltered. The memory of that day in the kitchen came rushing back: Gelan's sleeve slipping, the faint mark I hadn't been sure of, and the gnawing suspicion that had refused to leave me alone.

I swallowed hard, forcing the words out. "That day you told me about the Void Serpent's minions... about their mark," I said, my voice hoarse. "I caught a glimpse of it on his forearm. It was faint, but I saw it."

"And you didn't say anything until now?"

"I wasn't sure," I admitted, "I didn't want to accuse him without proof. What if I had been wrong?" I looked away, my hands clenching tightly in my lap. "But after that... he started avoiding me. It only made me more certain."

“Certain enough to confront him in front of everyone,” Alaric said, though there was no judgment in his tone. If anything, there was a hint of approval—maybe even pride.

“It felt like the only way,” I whispered. “And... I didn’t think he’d go this far.”

The room remained silent for a long moment. Then Alaric let out a deep sigh and turned to face the rest of the group. Everyone’s faces were tight with disappointment, hurt, and exhaustion.

“Well,” Alaric said finally, breaking the silence, “we can’t wait any longer to move forward.” He said, “If Gelan was sending messages to the Void Serpent, then that means he knows of our plans. He knows we have the crystals. And worst of all, he knows that I’m back.”

Lisa’s head shot up, her eyes wide. “What does that mean for us?”

“It means,” Alaric said grimly, “that the Void Serpent will not sit idle. He will be preparing for us, setting traps, sending his followers to hunt us down. Every second we wait is a second he uses to get stronger.”

“So what are you saying?” Noris asked, straightening from his position against the wall. “Do we leave now?”

“Oh yes,” Alaric said, “We leave tonight. The sooner we act, the better chance we have of catching him off guard.”

There was a rustle as everyone began to shift, their focus sharpening as the weight of Alaric’s words sank in. Noris moved to gather his things, Serim adjusted his sword, and Lisa clutched the bag of crystals tighter as though she could shield them with her hands.

But Serim paused, his gaze flickering to the corner of the room where Gelan sat slumped against the wall, bound and silent.

“And what do we do with him?” Serim asked. He pointed toward Gelan, his lip curling. “We can’t just leave him here. He’ll find a way to escape, and then he’ll tell the Serpent everything else he knows about us.”

All eyes turned to Gelan. He didn't look up. He just sat there, his head bowed.

"Don't worry," Zephyr said suddenly, his tail swishing lazily behind him as a sly smile curled across his fox-like face. "I'll take care of him."

The way he said it made me pause. Zephyr's voice was light, almost cheerful, but there was an edge to it—a mischief that carried something darker underneath.

"What does that mean?" asked Noris.

Zephyr's smile widened as he perched himself on a nearby stool, his paws folding neatly over each other. "Let's just say I have... ways of ensuring he doesn't cause us any more trouble."

"Fine," said Alaric, "Zephyr, he's your responsibility. Do what you must to ensure he doesn't compromise us any further."

Zephyr's smile was all teeth. "Gladly."

As everyone moved to finalize their preparations, I lingered near the sofa, my mind still whirling. Gelan sat silently across the room, his gaze fixed on the floor. For a brief moment, I caught his eye, and what I saw there made me pause.

It wasn't anger or hatred. It was regret.

I turned away before it could pull at the raw edges of my heart any further. He had made his choice, and we were all paying the price.

"Samuel," Alaric's voice broke through my thoughts, bringing me back to the present. "Are you ready?"

"Yeah," I said quietly. "Let's go."

As we stepped into the cold night air, leaving the betrayal behind us, I couldn't help but wonder if Gelan's regret was real. And if it was, what might have driven him to this in the first place?

But there was no time to dwell on it. Ahead of us, the path to the Void Serpent awaited, and I had a feeling that whatever lay ahead would make this betrayal seem small in comparison.

We had a war to win, and there was no turning back now.

We returned to Nexus, but the city felt hollow, as though it had been stripped of its vibrancy. The streets, once bustling with life and noise, now lay shrouded in an uneasy stillness. Market stalls stood half-abandoned, their colorful banners faded and drooping. The sky above seemed duller somehow, a blanket of gray pressing down on rooftops that once gleamed with charm.

People moved like whispers—quick, quiet, deliberate. A man hurried past, his coat flapping behind him as he glanced over his shoulder. A group of merchants clustered around an empty fountain, their conversation terse. One of them flicked his eyes toward a rooftop and gripped the hilt of his dagger, fingers twitching like they expected something to leap from the shadows at any moment.

A sudden gust of wind rattled loose shutters and tugged at tattered awnings, carrying with it the murmurs of hushed voices. Snatches of fear-laden words reached me—broken fragments of rumors, worries, and warnings passed in secret.

A child stumbled near an alley, and their mother's hand shot out like a vice, pulling them close. Her gaze darted into the darkness between buildings as if it might blink back at her. The alleys, once narrow veins of hidden life, now loomed like silent traps, the shadows within deeper, hungrier. This wasn't just fear. It was the kind of silence that comes when something unseen is watching, waiting.

We passed a small group huddled by a merchant's cart, whispering urgently. I didn't catch much of what they said, but then one sentence rang out clearly: "Alaric is back."

I froze for half a second, my heart jolting. So, the secret of my father's return wasn't much of a secret anymore. Gelan really had been relaying our every move to the Void Serpent. Every conversation, every strategy—he'd carried it straight into the enemy's hands.

The whispers grew louder as we moved deeper into the city. It was clear that everyone knew. Alaric's name was spoken with reverence and fear like he was a ghost returned to haunt the living.

We reached a temporary lodging—a small, weathered building tucked in a quieter part of the city. Alaric had chosen it carefully, away from prying eyes but close enough to the main streets for us to gather information.

“We need to split up,” Alaric said firmly once we were inside. “The fewer people see us together, the better. If anyone's watching, we can't afford to draw attention. Blend in, listen, and find out what people know—and what they don't.”

We all nodded, though the unease hung over us like a fog. Lisa adjusted the bag of crystals on her back, pulling her cloak tightly around her shoulders. Serim muttered something about keeping his sword close, earning a faint smile from Noris, who was already scanning the room for exits.

I volunteered to take the far side of the common room, which served as the inn's eating area. It wasn't exactly busy, but there were enough patrons to blend in. Some sat quietly nursing mugs of ale despite the early hour, while others kept their heads low, whispering to one another.

Sliding into a creaky wooden chair, I glanced around and tried to look inconspicuous. Across the room, I spotted a man slumped over his table. He had the look of someone who had been there for far too long, nursing one drink too many. His head lolled slightly, but his eyes—red-rimmed and watery—occasionally flickered around the room with surprising awareness.

I sat close to him, thinking of the ways I could strike up a conversation with him. I hadn't yet figured out how to approach him when he suddenly spoke, hoarse and rough.

“You should try their fish maglets,” he said without looking at me. His words were slurred, but there was a strange clarity to them. “They’re the best. Cooked fresh this morning.”

I blinked, caught off guard. “Fish... maglets?” I repeated hesitantly. I had no idea what a fish maglet was, but I needed information. If food was my way in, so be it.

The man turned his head slightly and grinned, revealing a row of crooked teeth. “That’s right. The best thing they serve here.” He gestured toward a server who was making her rounds. “Go on, boy. You won’t regret it. Who knows...” He trailed off, “Who knows if we’ll even be here tomorrow to eat them again.”

“Yeah,” I said, trying to sound casual, though my pulse quickened. I gave him a faint smile, pretending like I understood. “Yup. Lord knows when the Void Serpent might get us.”

The effect was immediate. The man’s grin disappeared entirely, and his eyes snapped to mine, wide with shock. “Shhhh!” he hissed, one shaky hand shooting up to cover his mouth. He leaned closer, the smell of stale ale on his breath. “You must be one of those brave, foolish ones who take his name with no shame. But names carry power, boy. Power you don’t understand.”

I swallowed hard. “Right. Of course. I, uh... I didn’t mean any disrespect.”

The man squinted at me for a moment as if deciding whether or not to believe me. Then he leaned back with a weary sigh, dragging his hand through his unkempt hair. “You’d do well to be careful. Everyone’s on edge. It’s not just the shadows moving anymore.”

I frowned slightly, trying to sound conversational. “What do you mean?”

His eyes darted around the room, then back to me. “They say something’s coming. Something big. The kind of thing you can’t stop once

it's started. And now..." He paused, "Now they say he's back."

My pulse quickened. "Who's back?" I asked, playing dumb.

He gave me a long, suspicious look before finally muttering, "Alaric. The man who defied the Serpent himself. Some say he's a hero. Others say he's a curse, come back to drag us all into the Void." He barked a short, bitter laugh. "Me? I don't know what to believe anymore."

"Alaric, huh?" I said, trying to sound casual. "So people really think he's alive?"

The man scoffed. "Oh, people think plenty. Words traveled fast. Alaric is back. We stand with him, sir. He will save us for sure." The man leaned forward. He wasn't looking at me anymore, but into his empty cup, a faint smile playing on his lips as if clinging to the idea brought him some comfort. "The evil is rising, that's for certain—but we have someone from our side now, from the common people's side. So we aren't that worried."

I raised an eyebrow, trying to sound casual despite the knot forming in my stomach. "So you really believe he'll save us?"

The man snorted softly, shaking his head with a crooked grin. "Well, I made a bet with my friend—poor bastard is paranoid out of his mind right now. He's already packed his bags twice this week." He laughed, though there was something thin about it, like the humor was a veil for his own unease. "Let's hope I win the bet, eh? Actually, both of us hope I win. If Alaric pulls through, we all live to see another day. If I lose..." He trailed off, his grin faltering.

"That's nice," I said, though my voice came out faint, like my throat was dry.

"Nice," he repeated, scoffing lightly. "It's the only hope we've got left." He leaned closer this time as if to share some secret. "You heard, right? They say his son is here too. Both father and son. Fighting together."

I felt the ground beneath me tilt, my stomach plummeting like a stone. My pulse thudded in my ears, and it took everything in me to keep my

expression neutral. “Oh really?” I managed, my voice sounding far too light. “Tell me more. I’m... I’m actually new to Nexus. Came in from a village, so I don’t know much.”

The man blinked at me, his bleary eyes narrowing slightly as if sizing me up. But then he shrugged, clearly eager to share what he knew. “Well,” he said, lowering his voice as if someone might overhear, “the voi—” He stopped himself mid-word, glancing around quickly before muttering, “The master. You know who I mean.” He wiped his palms on his trousers, clearly uncomfortable even saying that much. “He made a public announcement just a couple of days ago. He’s stopped hiding, stopped working in the shadows. Just came right out and told everyone what his plans were. Bold, if you ask me.”

“Plans?” I pressed, forcing myself to sound curious rather than horrified.

The man nodded grimly. “He’s looking for recruits. Promised power, wealth—you know, the usual. And you wouldn’t believe how many people joined him.” He tapped a finger on the table for emphasis. “But plenty haven’t. Not yet, at least. Those are the smart ones.” He sat back, shaking his head. “There’s gonna be a war. Everyone knows it. We just don’t know when it’ll start. Could be tomorrow, could be next week.”

The word war sat heavy between us, like an iron weight neither of us could lift. I struggled to steady my breathing, my thoughts spinning. Gelan’s betrayal had already given the Void Serpent too much of an advantage. And now this? Public recruitment? If he was openly announcing his plans, it meant he was ready—confident in his numbers and his strength. We didn’t have much time.

The man seemed to sense my silence. “I’d recommend you go back to your village, lad. That’s a safer place. Nothing’s safe here in Nexus, not anymore.”

“And you?” I asked softly.

“Me?” He sighed, shoulders sagging as if under an invisible burden. “I don’t have much of a choice, do I? My family lives here. I’ve got work here. Can’t just pack up and leave everything behind.” He stared down at his empty cup, running his thumb along the rim. “Besides, someone’s gotta be here to see how it all ends.”

I swallowed hard, unsure of how to respond. “Thanks for the information,” I said finally, the words feeling small and inadequate.

He waved a hand dismissively, “Not a problem. It’s all anyone’s talking about these days, anyway.” He gave a humorless chuckle and rose unsteadily to his feet, swaying slightly before gripping the edge of the table for balance. “Take care of yourself, eh? And if you’ve got somewhere safe to go—go.”

I nodded, watching him shuffle out of the tavern. The heavy door swung shut behind him, the creak of its hinges lingering like an echo in my head. I stayed in my seat for a moment, my thoughts swirling. The walls of Nexus seemed to close in around me; the whispered rumors and hushed fears filling every empty space.

Alaric and his son. The words hung in my mind like a shadow. My father’s return wasn’t just news—it was everywhere. The entire city knew about him now. Gelan had really done his work well, leaking every detail, feeding the Void Serpent everything he needed to know.

I stepped out of the tavern, pulling my hood tighter as the wind gusted down the narrow street. The shadows of Nexus seemed deeper now, as if the city itself was holding its breath. Each corner felt like it might hide someone—or something—watching. I moved quickly, my boots scuffing the cobbled ground, my mind still replaying the man’s words. War was coming, and we weren’t ready.

When I turned the corner into the alley where we had agreed to regroup, I saw them—Alaric, Zephyr, Noris, Serim, and Lisa—huddled together. I joined them silently, and Lisa’s eyes immediately flicked toward me. I told them everything I had learned, they had heard the same stories, too.

“Let’s just hope the Void Serpent doesn’t know I’m in Nexus and coming his way,” Alaric said quietly as he stepped away from the group and led us toward a more deserted alley. The shadows were thicker here, the air damp and cold.

We followed him without question, the alley narrowing until the buildings on either side seemed to lean in close, hemming us in. I glanced over my shoulder instinctively, the back of my neck prickling as if we were being watched. “...And that he doesn’t know we’re coming for him,” Alaric added.

The words had barely left his mouth when a slow, cold voice slithered through the dark.

“Too late.”

The air seemed to shatter. We froze.

I felt the hairs rise on the back of my neck, and my heart pounded as I turned, scanning the shadows. The voice had come from everywhere and nowhere all at once, a sound that seemed to seep into my bones like poison.

The darkness ahead stirred—rippled, almost—as if it were alive. Then, slowly, a figure emerged. The shadows bled away from him, revealing a form I had only heard of in nightmares.

The Void Serpent.

He loomed at the mouth of the alley like a creature pulled from the darkest corners of reality. His form was wrong—tall and skeletal, limbs just a little too long to be human. His cloak wasn’t fabric but a writhing, inky blackness that seemed to breathe and pulse, spreading like tendrils of smoke along the ground. Where his face should have been, there was only an eerie, shifting void—a darkness so deep it seemed to swallow the world around it. Faint glimmers, like distant stars, flickered in the hollowness, and yet, somehow, I knew he was watching us.

When he moved, it was soundless, his limbs bending at unnatural angles as if he were a puppet controlled by invisible strings. The air chilled

with his presence, thick and heavy, as though the alley itself recoiled from him.

“Long time no see, dear Alaric.”

Chapter 19: Multiversal Structural Failure



We hadn't had the chance to say anything—not a word, not even a breath—when the shadows around us seemed to swell and solidify. Figures emerged from the darkness and moved in an unnervingly smooth manner, like liquid flowing into shape. Before we could react, they surrounded us. Cloaked and faceless. I barely had time to process what was happening before the world around me erupted into madness.

A heavy blackness descended, engulfing us entirely. It wasn't the ordinary kind of dark—not the simple absence of light—but a deep void that pressed against my chest, wrapping around me like an iron shroud. The silence was like an unnatural stillness that made my pulse roar in my ears. I tried to cry out, but my voice was swallowed whole, leaving me with nothing but my hammering heartbeat.

When I opened my eyes, I found myself lying on a cold, moist floor. Blinking against the faint light, I realized I wasn't outside anymore. My head spun as I pushed myself up onto my elbows. Everything was blurred and disorienting at first, but then it began to clear.

I was in a cell.

Heavy bars formed a cage around me. The walls beyond were rough-hewn stone, slick with moisture, and the air hung thick. It took me a moment to notice the others. In the cells adjacent to mine, I saw shadowy shapes moving—figures I recognized as Lisa, Serim, Noris, and finally, my father, Alaric. All of us, trapped.

Lisa was the first to cut through the haze. "Are you alright, Samuel?" she asked softly.

"I think so," I croaked. "What happened? Where are we?"

Alaric's voice came next, "We're in the Void Serpent's prison," he said. He stood near the bars of his own cell, "I'd know this place anywhere. He kept me here when he first trapped me—before I escaped and met your mother."

"So it's the Void Serpent's palace," Serim said from his cell on the far side. He leaned casually against the bars, "Well, I guess we didn't have to look for it after all. Seems he decided to invite us in himself."

"Ah, nice of him," Noris added dryly from another cell, giving a small chuckle that didn't quite reach her eyes. "Saves us the trouble of knocking on the door, doesn't it?"

Alaric turned to Lisa and whispered under his breath, "Do you still have the stones?"

Lisa's face tightened as she moved to the folds of her skirt, rummaging through it in panic. Her fingers trembled slightly as she searched, brushing against the fabric in hurried motions. For a brief, agonizing moment, her hand stilled, and her face paled. But then her fingers found something solid. She exhaled sharply, pulling out the small, glowing stone. Its light was faint but steady, like a heartbeat in her palm. She looked up at Alaric and smiled tightly.

"It's here," she whispered. "They didn't take them."

Relief flickered across Alaric's face, though it was fleeting. He nodded, his mind clearly already spinning with possibilities.

"Good," he murmured. "The serpent keeps forgetting that I'm a World Walker."

I watched him from my own cell. "What does that mean? Can you get us out of here?"

Alaric's lips curved into a faint, almost mischievous smile. "It means I've been here before, and I know exactly how to make these locks useless." He stepped closer to the bars of his cell, running his fingers along the runes carved into the metal. "These enchantments are powerful," he said, "But they're not perfect. The trick is to find the flaw. There's always a flaw."

Serim's voice piped up from his corner. "Well, let's hope you're as clever as you think you are, Alaric, because I'd rather not spend another minute in this lovely little dungeon."

Ignoring the jab, Alaric placed his hands firmly on the bars and closed his eyes. He began to hum softly. I, too, could feel the faint ripple of Essence stirring around us. The runes on the bars flickered in response, their light faltering like candles caught in a breeze.

"What's he doing?" Lisa whispered to Noris, who was leaning against the bars of his own cell.

"I think he's unweaving the spell," Noris murmured back. "He's using Essence to disrupt the enchantment."

The hum grew louder, resonating deeper, until it was no longer just a sound but a sensation—a tangible force that made the very air around us quiver. Alaric's hands began to glow faintly, the light seeping into the bars like water soaking into cloth. Slowly, the runes dimmed further, their patterns unraveling before our eyes.

With a final, sharp exhale, Alaric stepped back. The bars shuddered, then swung open with a creak that rang through the dungeon. He turned to the others with a triumphant look on his face.

"One down," he said, a wry smile tugging at his lips. "Let's get the rest of you out."

He repeated the process for each of our cells. Serim was the next to be freed, followed by Noris, Lisa, and finally me. When the last set of bars swung open, I stepped out, rubbing my wrists and giving Alaric a nod of gratitude.

“That was... impressive, Dad,” I admitted. “How did you know how to do that?”

“Let’s just say I’ve had plenty of time to study the Void Serpent’s traps. This isn’t the first time he’s tried to keep me locked away. But it won’t work now, and it won’t work again.”

“We need to move,” said Lisa, tucking the stones back into her skirt. “If we stay here, it won’t be long before someone realizes we’ve escaped.”

All of us got ready to leave and made our way to the long corridors that I felt even my dad didn’t know where they led us. It was so quiet that we had to tip-toe our way out, yet it sounded like we would be discovered any minute. But then there were also moments when we thought we might actually escape unnoticed.

But as we reached what appeared to be the exit, a massive wooden door loomed ahead of us, its iron reinforcements scarred and pitted with age. For a moment, as Alaric’s hand rested against the worn surface, a flicker of hope stirred within me. Could this really be the way out? With a deep breath, he pushed the door open, the hinges groaning in protest, and we stepped cautiously into the space beyond.

It was a hall—a vast, cavernous expanse that seemed to stretch endlessly. The space was well-lit by a sickly green light. The walls, blackened and jagged, seemed to drink in the light rather than reflect it. And at the far end of the hall, seated upon a grotesque throne carved from stone as dark as midnight, was the Void Serpent.

His twisted form sprawled lazily across the throne, a horrifying blend of elegance and menace. His void-like face transferred continuously, the faint glimmers of starlight within it flickering like dying embers. He radiated a malevolent amusement, his eyeless gaze fixed squarely on us.

He watched us with amusement, “I knew you’d find your way out, Alaric,” he said, each word dripping with condescension. The Void Serpent’s voice slithered through the hall, wrapping itself around us like a cold, constricting vine. His tone was smooth, almost conversational, but the

menace lurking beneath it was unmistakable. “Did you truly think I’m so foolish as to let you escape?”

Alaric seemed untouched by it, his composure unwavering. I watched him, with admiration and anxiety bubbling in my chest as he stopped just a few steps ahead of us and fixed the Serpent with a calm gaze.

“Well, yes,” Alaric said dryly, cutting through the suffocating atmosphere like a blade. “I was wondering the same.”

“You still have time to join us,” he said, his void-like face tilting slightly as though mocking us with a semblance of curiosity. “Or redeem your mistakes. Or...”—his form rippled ominously—“you can die with your son right here and now.” His gaze fixed on me, though it was more a sensation than a sight, his eyeless visage boring into my soul. “Him I will kill with all my heart, for he is the proof of your defiance.”

Alaric stood tall, defiant contrast to the looming dread that filled the room. “You really think I would do anything like that?” he asked with fury. “If so, then you’re mistaken, my friend. I have suffered all these years—years of torment, pain, and exile—and you think I would forget it so soon?”

The Void Serpent’s inky form pulsed, the faint stars within him flaring and dimming like a storm brewing in the void. “Well,” he drawled, “didn’t I agree to forgive you for betraying me? Generosity doesn’t suit me often, Alaric. You should have taken the offer when it was given.”

Alaric laughed, sharp and bitter. “Forgiveness? From you? I don’t need it. I’ve already decided how this ends. I’m going to die fighting you.”

The Void Serpent’s form darkened, the glimmers of light within him consumed by shadows. “Too late,” he hissed. He turned his head sharply to Lisa, his form leaning forward unnaturally as if gravity itself bent to accommodate his presence. “And you,” he snarled, “I know you have the crystals. I can sense them. Give them to me, girl.”

Lisa’s hands were clenched at her sides, and her face was pale but resolute. “No,” she said firmly despite the quaver of fear that underpinned

it.

The Void Serpent laughed, a sound that reverberated through the hall and made the walls tremble. "Brave but foolish," he said. "Let me show you the cost of defiance." He extended a hand, and the air around us seemed to grow heavier, denser, as though reality itself was buckling under his command.

"The barriers between Earth and Feyiarian realms are already weak," he continued in a silky whisper that nonetheless filled every corner of the room. "It would take but a nudge for my army to flood through, to swarm your precious Earth like a plague. Cities will fall, rivers will run red, and your people will know the price of your obstinance."

Alaric took a step forward, "I don't believe you," he said firmly.

"Don't you?" The Void Serpent gestured lazily toward the hall's high, narrow window. "Then look. See the truth with your own eyes."

We all turned, our footsteps hesitant as we moved toward the window. My heart thudded painfully in my chest, and I could feel the tension radiating from Lisa beside me. Alaric reached the window first, his hands gripping the stone frame as he leaned forward to peer outside.

His sharp intake of breath told me everything I needed to know. I stepped forward, dread pooling in my stomach as I followed his gaze.

The sight outside stole the breath from my lungs. Below us, stretching as far as the horizon, was an endless sea of soldiers. Twisted, grotesque creatures stood shoulder to shoulder, their malformed bodies glinting under a sky-stained crimson. Weapons gleamed in their hands, and the ground beneath them seemed to writhe with the weight of their numbers. They moved with a strange, synchronized menace, their collective presence a tide of destruction poised to surge.

Alaric's voice was low, almost a whisper. "If I give you the crystals," he said, turning back to the Void Serpent, "you'll still do the same. What difference does it make?"

The Void Serpent's grin widened, the stars within his void-like face flaring to life once more. "You're very clever, Samuel," he said, his voice dripping with mock admiration. "Perhaps I'll be a little lenient if you were to join me."

"How lenient?" Alaric asked distrustfully.

The Void Serpent's patience snapped. "JUST GIVE ME THE CRYSTALS!" he bellowed, his form swelling with rage. The entire hall seemed to shudder under the force of his fury, and cracks splintered through the stone walls as though the room itself was trying to escape.

Then it began.

The Void Serpent's body expanded, his form breaching the limits of the hall. Tendrils of inky darkness poured from him, writhing and coiling like living smoke. Above, the ceiling seemed to dissolve, revealing a sky that was no longer the red-tinged heavens of Feyarian realms but an expanse of absolute blackness. Within that void, shapes moved—colossal, incomprehensible shapes that seemed to exist only at the edges of perception.

The serpent's true form blotted out the sky, his massive coils spanning the horizon. His presence was overwhelming, a force that pressed down on us like the weight of entire worlds.

Reality itself seemed to shatter as the barrier between worlds weakened further. Through the tears in the fabric of existence, I caught glimpses of Earth—the familiar blue-green sphere surrounded by stars, now threatened by the encroaching darkness of the Void Serpent's power.

The heaviness of the Void Serpent's presence pressed on us like an iron shroud, leaving the air viscous and heavy. Every glance, every tremble among us, told the same story—fear. Real, suffocating fear. My heart pounded, and I could feel the tension radiating from everyone around me.

Alaric stood motionless, his back straight and his jaw tight, but even he could not hide the conflict in his eyes. His gaze flickered to me, to Lisa, to

the rest of our group. We were cornered, outnumbered, and hopelessly overpowered. For the first time since I had known him, Alaric looked as though he was weighing the impossible. And then, his shoulders sagged ever so slightly—a reluctant surrender.

“I’ll give you what you want,” Alaric said, “But on one condition-”

The Void Serpent’s twisted form rippled, the faint starlight within his void-like face flaring for a brief moment. He chuckled, a sound so cold and cruel that it seemed to chill the very air. “Oh, Alaric,” he purred. “You are in no position to bargain. But since I’m feeling... magnanimous, I’ll indulge your little request. Hand over the crystals.”

A sharp intake of breath came from Lisa, but she didn’t move. Her grip on the small pouch where the crystals were kept was white-knuckled, her body trembling with fear and defiance. “You can’t,” she whispered hoarsely to Alaric. “If we give them to him, it’s over.”

“We don’t have a choice,” Alaric said firmly, though his voice cracked slightly. “Not now.”

The Void Serpent tilted his head, a motion unnaturally smooth and serpentine. “Enough stalling,” he said, his voice sharpening. He raised a hand, and his servants appeared as if from nowhere, shadowy figures that moved like wraiths.

One of them carried a small, ancient box. With exaggerated care, the servant opened it, revealing a crystal unlike any I had seen before. It was jagged and dark, an ominous red glow emanating from within as though it were bleeding light. The sight of it made my skin crawl.

“This,” the Void Serpent announced, gesturing lazily to the object, “is the Bloodstone, a crystal of my own. And now it will be joined by yours.”

The servant placed the blood-red crystal in the center of a circular pedestal etched with runes. The sight of it was enough to make Lisa flinch, but she held her ground until one of the Void Serpent’s guards moved

toward her. He was enormous, towering over her as he held out a clawed hand.

“No!” Lisa cried, backing away instinctively. But there was nowhere to go. The guard seized the pouch from her trembling hands, ignoring her protests.

The first crystal was drawn out with an almost ceremonial reverence. It was the Light Crystal, its golden radiance casting warm, hopeful beams across the dark hall. The moment it was placed next to the Bloodstone, a dreadful shift in the air occurred. The Void Serpent’s form seemed to solidify, his body swelling slightly as though feeding on the energy.

Lisa let out a gasp, a sound caught somewhere between a sob and a cry. She moved as if to lunge forward, but the guards restrained her with ease.

Then came the Air Crystal, its soft blue glow gentle and calm, like the whisper of a breeze. But as it was placed on the pedestal, its light was twisted, merging with the blood-red glow of the Bloodstone. The Void Serpent straightened in his grotesque throne, his form expanding further. Serim let out a strangled scream, his face contorted with rage and grief.

“Stop this,” he yelled. But no one could move against the guards that held us at bay.

The Earth Crystal followed, its rich green hue pulsating steadily as though alive. Its placement made the entire hall rumble, the ground trembling beneath our feet. The Void Serpent laughed, a deep, guttural sound that resonated through the room. His shadow stretched across the hall, growing larger and darker with each addition.

And then, the final crystal—the Shadow Crystal—was brought forth. It was the darkest of them all, its surface an inky void that seemed to absorb light rather than reflect it. Everyone held their breath as the servant carried it forward, moving with deliberate, almost reverent slowness.

I felt as though the world itself had frozen, time grinding to a halt as the Shadow Crystal hovered above the pedestal. The servant lowered it, inch by

agonizing inch until it was just about to connect with the others.

And then, chaos erupted.

A figure darted from the shadows, colliding with the servant and sending the Shadow Crystal tumbling from his grasp. It clattered to the floor, rolling out of reach as the other crystals were knocked askew. The Void Serpent roared, an ear-splitting sound that shook the very foundations of the hall.

It was Gelan.

He grappled with the servant, their struggle fierce and chaotic. The servant lashed out with claws, but Gelan dodged with surprising agility, moving frantically.

I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Gelan, who had betrayed, has had come to help.

"STOP THEM!" he roared, his void-like form rippling violently, the stars within him flaring like supernovas. His guards surged forward, their grotesque forms moving with unnatural speed.

Gelan barely managed to dodge the swipe of a clawed hand as he grappled with the servant who had carried the Shadow Crystal. The two of them rolled across the floor in a tangle of limbs, the servant hissing and screeching like a cornered animal. I reached them just in time, grabbing the servant by the shoulder and yanking him off Gelan with all the strength I could muster. He turned on me, his eyes glowing with malice, but before he could strike, Alaric was there, his blade flashing in the green light as he drove the creature back.

The hall became a battlefield.

The Void Serpent's army poured in from every entrance, a seemingly endless tide of horrors. Twisted figures with jagged weapons, shadowy beasts that moved like living smoke, and towering brutes that shook the ground with every step. We were hopelessly outnumbered, the odds stacked against us in every conceivable way. But we fought on.

Alaric's voice cut through the chaos, steady and commanding. "Samuel, keep the crystals safe! Gelan, cover him!" He slashed through a charging guard.

I scrambled to gather the scattered crystals, my heart beating heavy in my chest as the battle raged around me. Gelan stayed close, fending off attackers with a ferocity I hadn't seen before. He moved with the desperation of someone who had nothing left to lose.

But it wasn't enough. The Void Serpent's forces were overwhelming, and I could see the strain beginning to show on Alaric's face. We needed reinforcements, and we needed them fast.

"Pass me the Earth crystal," Alaric shouted to me over the din. Then he raised his hand, gripping the Earth Crystal tightly, and began to chant. The words were strange and ancient, resonating with power. The crystal glowed brightly in his hand, its green light cutting through the sickly haze.

"What's he doing?" Noris shouted, fending off another attacker.

"Sending a signal," I said, though I wasn't entirely sure myself. Alaric's chant grew louder, more urgent, the glow of the Earth Crystal intensifying until it was almost blinding.

And then it happened. A distant rumble, faint at first but growing steadily louder. The ground beneath our feet trembled as the armies of the four kingdoms answered Alaric's call. From the jagged windows of the hall, I saw them—wave after wave of warriors from Lumina, Umbra, Terra, and Aether. Their banners snapped in the wind as they charged into battle, their weapons and magic blazing with determination.

The Void Serpent hissed, his form writhing with fury as the reinforcements flooded in. "You think this will stop me?" he snarled. "You think your petty kingdoms can stand against my power?"

The battle reached a fever pitch. The combined forces of the four kingdoms clashed with the Void Serpent's army in a chaotic whirlwind of steel, magic, and fury.

And then, through the madness, Alaric and I found ourselves face-to-face with him.

The Void Serpent loomed before us, impossibly vast and terrible. The stars within him burned like dying suns, and his shadow stretched across the hall, consuming everything in its path.

“You should have stayed down, Alaric,” the Void Serpent sneered with contempt. “Now you and your son will die together.”

Alaric didn’t flinch. Instead, he raised the Earth Crystal high above his head, his voice steady as he began to chant once more. The crystal pulsed with a fierce green light, and I watched in awe as it began to transform. The light coalesced, taking shape until it became a sword—a weapon unlike any I had ever seen. Its blade shimmered with raw, unyielding power, and etched along its length was a name.

My name.

Alaric turned to me with pride and urgency. “Take it,” he said, holding the sword out to me. “This is your fight now.”

I hesitated, questions racing through my mind, but there was no time. The Void Serpent roared, his form surging toward us like a tidal wave of darkness. I took the sword, steady and reassuring in my hands, and turned to face the monster.

With a burst of courage I didn’t know I had, I charged. The sword glowed brightly in my grip, cutting through the oppressive darkness as I closed the distance. The Void Serpent lashed out, his shadowy tendrils striking with the force of a hurricane, but I pressed on.

Alaric was beside me, his blade flashing as he fought to keep the Void Serpent at bay. “Now, Samuel!” he shouted. “End this!”

I didn’t think. I didn’t hesitate.

My body moved before my mind had time to catch up. The sword felt alive in my hands, its glow intensifying with every step I took toward the

monster. The Void Serpent seemed to sense my intent because its tendrils twisted and lashed out in a frenzy, a wall of black, writhing limbs determined to keep me from reaching my target. Each strike was like the crack of a thunderstorm, shattering the ground around me, but I didn't stop. I couldn't stop.

"Do you think you can destroy me?" the Void Serpent bellowed, rattling the very bones in my chest. "I am the void itself! You are nothing!"

It wasn't just a voice—it was a presence, an all-encompassing force that seemed to claw at my mind, trying to drown me in despair. But the core's faint light pulsed ahead, an anchor keeping me grounded. Step by step, I pushed forward, ignoring the searing pain of a tendril slashing across my arm, the sound of Alaric shouting behind me, the instinctive terror that screamed at me to turn and run.

Closer. Closer.

In the very centre of the void serpent was his glowing heart. The core wasn't just glowing now—it was alive, its pulsing quickening like a heartbeat, erratic and frantic as though the Void Serpent itself was panicking. The creature twisted violently, its shadows convulsing, its scream tearing through the air as its tendrils flailed in desperation. "You will fail!" it shrieked, "You cannot comprehend my power!"

I was almost there. The heat from the core was tangible now, rippling out in waves that distorted the air around it. The shadows clawed at me, trying to pull me back, but the sword's glow burned through them, carving a path toward the pulsating center of the beast.

With a final burst of strength, I leaped, the glowing blade raised high above my head. Time seemed to slow as the distance between me and the core closed, the faint light filling my vision until it was the only thing I could see. My grip tightened on the hilt, and with every ounce of strength I had left, I drove the sword forward.

The blade pierced the core.

There was no explosion, no shattering sound—just an overwhelming, deafening silence. The Void Serpent froze, its tendrils suspended mid-thrash, the pulsing light of the core flickering violently as if caught in some invisible storm. And then, with a sound like glass fracturing, it began.

The core imploded, folding in on itself as cracks of light spread outward like lightning through the Serpent's shadowy form. The creature let out a piercing scream, a sound so raw and desperate it seemed to split the air around us. Its tendrils convulsed wildly, then began to disintegrate, unraveling into wisps of smoke that were swept away by an unseen force.

The hall trembled as the Serpent's massive form collapsed inward, its monstrous body devoured by the light radiating from the imploding core. The stars within its void-like face burned one last, blinding time before winking out entirely.

"No!" the Void Serpent's voice rang faintly, fragmented and distorted. "You... cannot... destroy... me..."

But his words were hollow, fading into the ether as his form shattered completely, scattering into the air like dust in the wind.

He thrashed violently, his body disintegrating as he let out one final roar. "This isn't over," he hissed, his voice fading as his form dissolved into nothingness. And then, he was gone, vanishing into the air like a wisp of smoke.

The hall fell silent. The Void Serpent's army, once so fierce and unrelenting, collapsed like marionettes with their strings cut. The twisted creatures dissolved into ash, their weapons clattering uselessly to the ground. The oppressive darkness lifted, leaving only a quiet, almost sacred stillness.

I stood there, the sword still in my hand, my chest heaving with exhaustion. Alaric placed a hand on my shoulder and said, "It's over."

For the first time, I allowed myself to believe it. The Void Serpent was gone, his power broken, and the chaos that had consumed us had finally

come to an end.

Chapter 20: Bridging Realities



I could still taste the ash in the air even after the final screams of the Void Serpent's roar faded. I was alive. All around me, people had begun the grim work of clearing battle-scarred rubble and tending to the wounded. I could see clusters of warriors—from slender, golden-haired mages of Lumina to bulky, shadow-clad fighters of Umbra—moving through the debris with tools, potions, and earnest, frantic hands.

We had fought, bled, and nearly broken under the might of the Void Serpent, and yet there we were, survivors among the ruin. My sword arm trembled; I was still clutching the hilt of that blade Alaric conjured from the Earth Crystal's power, my name stamped to it like an oath. The runes on the blade's surface had dimmed, their brilliant light spent. Slowly, I released it from my grip. With a dull clang, it hit the ground, and I fell to my knees, panting.

A soft, warm hand settled on my shoulder. I lifted my gaze and found my father's eyes. Alaric—legendary World Walker, the man I'd thought lost to me for so many years—was covered in soot and bearing a number of cuts across his cheeks and forearms.

"I never doubted you," he said.

I tried to respond, but my throat felt too tight to force out words. Instead, I managed a nod. The tears pooling in my eyes felt hot, and I quickly ducked my head so the others wouldn't see. We had no time for tears. The casualties of this battle were countless, and I had to keep my head.

At that moment, a pained cry broke the fragile stillness. Whirling around, I spotted a figure dragging himself from behind the collapsed remains of what used to be a carved archway. The stones lay shattered like broken teeth, half-buried in an unrecognizable heap of blackened metal and charred timber. I squinted and realized who it was: Gelan.

His once-pristine traveling clothes were in tatters, and blood seeped through a wound in his side, soaking the sash he wore around his waist. He clutched at a slab of fallen rubble for support, swaying dangerously before falling hard on one knee. Several fighters from Terra and Aether noticed him, and I could see hands drop warily to sword hilts.

However, the memory of his betrayal came back to my mind. He was the spy who had led us astray and allowed the Void Serpent to gather intelligence and momentum we could have otherwise curtailed. But in the battle's final moments, he had risked his life to stop the Shadow Crystal from merging with that monstrous Bloodstone. If not for him, the Void Serpent might have succeeded in twisting reality beyond repair.

Still, no one forgot the damage he'd done. I rose from my crouch, wincing at a stab of pain in my leg, and limped toward him. I half-expected him to run or lash out, but instead, he simply bowed his head, pressing his forehead against the debris. His shoulders heaved with something like a sob.

Gelan looked up with a slow, trembling motion. Blood trickled from a gash above his brow, matting his dark hair. "I'm... sorry," he gasped, "I—I never meant for it to go this far."

I opened my mouth to speak but found I had no words. He had nearly cost us everything, yet at the last second, he'd risked his life. My mind spun with questions, demands, and confusion. The hush around us intensified, with curious onlookers forming a loose semicircle at a distance—nobody quite sure whether to help Gelan or restrain him.

Lisa was the first to step forward. She'd once been one of Gelan's closest allies, trusting him implicitly on our travels through the Four Kingdoms. "Why?" she asked, "Why did you jump in when you did? You

must have known the Void Serpent would kill you for betraying him.” She swallowed hard, anger mingling with heartbreak. “It doesn’t make sense.”

Gelan stumbled over his words at first as though each was a wound he had to press. “I was never... never fully on his side,” he rasped. “I was coerced. My family—my sisters—” He paused, drawing a ragged breath. “They’re all I have. The Serpent threatened them. Promised me... he’d spare them if I spied on you. I believed him at first.” His eyes flicked to me, then Alaric, then back to the scorched ground. “But then... I saw what real cruelty looks like. And I couldn’t look you in the eye, Samuel. I was ashamed.”

I noticed Lisa’s lips part in shock, but she didn’t interrupt. Alaric said nothing, though his sword hand gripped the hilt at his belt, a restless motion that betrayed unease.

Gelan continued, “It was all fear at first. And then I understood the Serpent didn’t just want power—he wanted to turn both Earth and Feyiaria into some twisted, perpetual night. My sisters... they wouldn’t have survived. Nobody would have survived.” There was a break in his voice, and he pressed a hand to his wounded side, groaning softly. “I couldn’t let that happen.”

As he spoke, I recalled the moment when the Void Serpent gleefully boasted that entire realms would be merged and subjugated. Gelan’s betrayal suddenly felt like something far more complicated than a simple act of villainy.

“You saved us,” I said quietly, “That last moment... you could have fled. Or you could have kept silent. But you didn’t.”

“I wish I had been braver from the start,” he replied.

Alaric studied Gelan for a long moment before he finally spoke, “Nothing can erase the harm done.” He paused, “but you might have prevented something far worse. Whether that redeems you... that’s for the rest of our people to decide.”

At that, Gelan bowed his head once more, shoulders quaking. He seemed so frail compared to the defiant, self-assured companion we'd once known on our journey. "I'll do anything," he murmured. "To make amends. To earn... if not forgiveness, then at least a chance to undo the damage."

For a moment, no one spoke. Then Lisa rummaged for a small healing kit. She hesitated only an instant before kneeling beside him to pack gauze against the wound at his side. Around us, a handful of the Terra druids, wearing tattered green robes, cast uncertain glances in Gelan's direction. One of them began weaving a soft healing incantation. I sensed that while suspicion lingered, they couldn't just let him bleed to death. That wasn't who we were.

And so we turned, at last, from retribution toward recovery.

As the day went on, the combined armies of the four kingdoms set about more urgent tasks. Wails for missing comrades rang through the battered fortress halls. Fallen fighters from each kingdom were carried to the infirmary behind the fortress gates. Several healers from Aether used their air-based illusions to soothe patients' minds, while Terra druids worked on broken limbs and deep wounds, channeling the essence of the living earth to knit flesh and bone. Zephyr, our resident talking fox, busied himself darting between the rows of wounded. I spotted him nosing a canteen of water toward a collapsed soldier, occasionally glancing around to bark out instructions in his high voice.

Sylph, the mischievous air spirit, flitted overhead. For once, there was no teasing grin on her face. He glided among those searching for survivors, lifting rubble with controlled gusts of wind and pulling trapped soldiers into the pale daylight.

"Sam," said Alaric. "We should see if we can salvage those crystals. They might be scattered around the fortress. We can't just leave them lying about it. And we need to be sure the Bloodstone, or any remnant of that vile creation, is destroyed."

At the mention of the crystals, my gut clenched. So much had depended on them. "Right," I replied, glancing at Lisa. She rose from where she was

helping bandage Gelan's wound.

We began the long, arduous for the crystals through the pockets of noxious smoke that refused to disperse. Debris shifted under our feet. Everywhere I looked, I saw signs of the Serpent's final attempt to merge realms: cracks in the air that glimmered with faint traces of magic, unstable pockets where gravity seemed to twist strangely, and the faint moan of space straining to heal itself.

We spread out, calling to each other when we found glimmers of magic. A small swirl of luminescent dust turned out to be a shattered relic. An ominous dark shard tried to burn my fingers. I picked it up and put it in my pocket to dispose of it later.

It took a while, but we finally managed to find all five crystals scattered around in the debris, partly with the help of my essence.

Alaric surveyed our small treasure trove. "We'll keep them safe until the kingdoms can decide how to guard them," he said. "At least the Serpent isn't here to claim them now."

By the time we returned to the courtyard, an impromptu memorial had begun to take shape. Warriors from Umbra arranged smooth black stones in a circle while a Lumina mage conjured flickers of starlike motes to float gently above the ring. Within that soft ring of light, the bodies of the fallen were laid out, cloths draped respectfully over each form. People knelt, heads bowed in silent vigil. Some placed tokens—a broken dagger, a braided bracelet, a small carved figure—beside those they'd lost or next to friends from other kingdoms who had died bravely.

"Samuel!" came a voice to my left. I glanced over and saw Zephyr bounding toward me. Sylph drifted just behind him, his translucent wings shimmering in the dawn light.

"What's wrong?" I asked, noticing the concern that shaped Zephyr's normally mischievous face.

He drew up short, panting slightly. “It’s Gaia and the other sages,” he said. “They’ve been studying the fractures in the sky, and they need you—Alaric, too—right away.”

A jolt of alarm coursed through me. I exchanged a look with my dad, who urged me to go on. Together, we hurried after Zephyr, with Sylph guiding us near the fortress’s western flank. In the open air, pillars of smoke curled from the ground where scorched soil still smoldered. Rising above the courtyard was a strange, swirling rift—a visible tear in the fabric between Feyiaria and Earth. It glimmered with threads of otherworldly energy, a shimmering distortion that revealed hazy glimpses of a starry skyline beyond.

Gaia stood near a low stone altar, her staff planted firmly in the ground. A half-dozen sages from different realms formed a semicircle around her: a Lumina wizard in white robes, an Umbra warlock cloaked in swirling shadows, two of Terra’s elderly druids, and a pair of Aether spirits faintly hovering above the ground. They were deep in murmured discussion.

Serim was also there, “We were waiting,” he said, looking over at me. “Gaia insists the realms are still in flux.”

Gaia’s old eyes flicked to mine, filled with both kindness and urgency. “Young Samuel,” she said, “you and your father have a unique connection as World Walkers. This rift—” She gestured to the shimmering air above us. “It’s not stable. When the Void Serpent died, he left behind a wound in reality. If we leave it as is, it may either grow, unraveling the boundary between Earth and Feyiaria, or snap shut violently, cutting off travel between worlds entirely.”

My mouth went dry. “Cutting it off entirely—would that be so bad? Many of these... disasters happened because the Void Serpent bridged the gap.”

The sage from Umbra, a gaunt man named Rikard, cleared his throat. “It could be dangerous either way. Uncontrolled merging of realms would be catastrophic. But severing all ties might doom the Earth-born settlers still here or separate families that straddle both worlds.”

“So what’s the solution?” asked Alaric.

Gaia lifted her staff, the faint leaf runes glimmering. “We propose a guided mending. A ritual that heals the rift but leaves a stable passage for those with legitimate reasons to cross worlds. It will require powerful magic—and the help of you and Samuel, Alaric.”

“Me?”

“Yes, You Samuel. You share Alaric’s lineage, half Earth-born, half Feyiarian. That blood—and your newly awakened abilities—tie you to this realm. The crystals you recovered also hold the essence of our four kingdoms. If you channel them correctly, they can stabilize the rift in a controlled manner, forging a safe gateway. But it must be done soon before the tear widens or collapses.”

Another grand magical ritual with cosmic stakes? I wasn’t sure my heart could handle more. But I recalled how close we came to oblivion, how crucial it was to keep both worlds from drifting into chaos. “All right,” I said. “Let’s do it.”

Gaia’s face eased into a gentle, approving smile. “We must gather the crystals, the leaders of each kingdom, and start at once.”

In a matter of hours, the courtyard was transformed into a site of solemn magic. Druids cleared the debris and drew patterns across the cracked stones. Torchbearers from Umbra stood at each corner of the swirling designs. Lumina mages used carefully shaped illusions to guide streams of light into the patterns. Aether spirits fluttered overhead, stirring breezes that carried chanting to every corner of the courtyard. Terra guardians stabilized the ground, reinforcing the perimeter to withstand the raw energy that would soon course through.

Alaric and I stood at the center, with the four elemental crystals arranged on pedestals around us: Earth, Air, Light, and Shadow. I glanced around, taking in the watchers: Lisa and Serim on one side, warily standing near Gelan. Noris and Princess Lyra beside them, arms crossed. Zephyr perched atop a half-collapsed pillar, tail flicking anxiously.

With a soft murmur, Gaia signaled for the chanting to rise. The hum began soft and steady. Over the last day, the Aether illusions had coaxed a gentle swirl of wind to circle overhead, stirring the edges of the flickering rift.

“Place your hands on the Earth Crystal first,” Gaia instructed, stepping up behind me, staff in hand. “Alaric, you are on the other side. You must channel your energies in tandem.”

I braced myself and grazed my fingertips against the Earth Crystal’s rough surface. Across from me, Alaric met my eyes, and we began to concentrate, letting the quiet thrumming of essence build between us.

Gaia lifted her voice in an incantation—ancient words from a time when the bonds between Earth and Feyiaria were first discovered. The runes on the ground blazed to life, lines of green, gold, silver, and violet weaving outward from the crystal. The Air Crystal pulsed with a gentle breeze that rippled my hair; the Light Crystal shimmered with a sun-like glow, and the Shadow Crystal cast a cool hush that felt oddly comforting.

Slowly, I felt the pull of the rift overhead. It was as if unseen hands pressed against my chest, drawing me upward. The chanting deepened, harmonizing with my own pulse. Alaric and I pressed on, focusing on the mental image of a stable gateway. We wanted a door, not a gaping wound.

One by one, the watchers stepped back, shielding their eyes from the glare of swirling energies. A vortex of wind, light, and shadow formed above us, funneling into the shimmering tear in the sky. The crystals’ glow merged into a single, brilliant beam that surged straight upward.

“It’s... working,” Alaric hissed through clenched teeth. “Keep going!”

My every muscle felt on the verge of trembling. I inhaled deeply, drawing on the Earth Crystal’s strength, focusing on the image of two worlds resting side by side. A controlled path. A stable connection. Not a forced melding nor a violent severing. The swirling colors overhead intensified, clashing for a moment like thunderheads. A rush of hot wind battered my face.

Then, abruptly, the tear in the sky began to shrink. Panicked voices rose from the watchers, but Alaric and I kept our concentration, guiding the energy. The tear didn't vanish altogether; instead, it wove itself into a shimmering arch. The outside edges hardened, like molten glass cooling into a shape. Where once there had been an uncontrolled rift, there now formed a gateway—a pulsating portal that flickered with four distinct hues.

I heard Gaia's staff thump on the stones as she channeled one final note of the incantation. The swirling energies quieted, condensing around the arch. With a resonating hum, the patterns on the ground faded. The crystals' glow eased back to a soft luminescence.

I gasped, stepping away from the Earth Crystal. My lungs burned. Across from me, Alaric nearly stumbled, but he remained upright, chest heaving. Above us, that shimmering archway hovered in place, stable—at least for now. Gentle motes of light drifted around it, reminiscent of drifting fireflies.

We had done it.

A stunned hush fell over the courtyard. Then a murmur spread—soft at first, growing louder: astonishment, relief, a quiet awe. I glanced around and saw Lisa smiling through tears, Serim letting out a breathless laugh; Gelan stood stiff, arms at his sides, lips parted with wonder.

Alaric reached out and steadied himself against my shoulder. “You all right?” I asked breathlessly.

He wiped the sweat from his brow. “Yes,” he rasped. “A bit winded.”

Gaia and the other sages approached, each bowing their heads. “The gateway is formed,” said Gaia, “Neither world will be forcibly merged or sealed away.”

A small cheer broke out among the onlookers. Princess Lyra gazed up at the portal with shining eyes. “So... Earth and Feyiaria remain connected. But only if we guard this gateway. Ensure it's not misused.”

“That’s the idea,” said Rikard, the Umbra warlock, “We must form a new alliance—one that ensures the path between worlds is watched by those with wisdom, not ambition.”

My heart dropped. That was exactly what Alaric had once suggested: a World Walker Alliance. The realm had tested us beyond measure and demanded sacrifices I couldn’t have imagined. But perhaps, in this quiet dawn, we could build something better out of the ruins.

In the hush following that final burst of magic, it began to dawn on all of us that the greatest danger had passed. Each crystal was given to its rightful owner Kingdom, and the void serpent’s crystal was destroyed for good.

The rift was contained in the shape of a luminous arch, and by some miracle of combined will and Essence, Earth and Feyiaria remained separate yet connected. In that fragile dawn, there was no raucous celebration, no immediate fanfare. Instead, there was relief as deep as any ocean and a wary acknowledgment that our true work had only just begun.

From the ruined courtyard where we formed the gateway, life slowly fanned out in a thousand directions. My father, Alaric, and I traveled the length of Feyiaria in the months to come, sometimes together, sometimes separately. We visited the re-growing forests of Terra and ventured through Umbra’s twilight realms, too, where Gelan—once our gruff companion—had taken it upon himself to protect wandering travelers from living darkness and roving beasts that still lurked in the corners of his land. The shadows in Umbra had grown quieter but not gone. Yet in each half-abandoned town we passed, people still lit small lanterns at dusk, more watchful than before, yet refusing to surrender their ways of life to fear.

In Lumina, Princess Lyra oversaw the rebuilding of crystal spires. She was no longer simply a princess. She had matured into a leader who walked among her people, forging new alliances to ensure that Lumina, too, remained a beacon of peace.

Despite all these changes, Earth was never far from my mind. A part of me ached to see the old streets and college hallways again, to walk through

a city where people did not carry swords or channel magic. Yet I knew if I returned, it would be as an entirely different person. Half of my heart and lineage was now in Feyiaria—had always been, though it took so long for me to realize.

Zephyr, our wily, talking fox, found a new calling in orchestrating trade between the realms. Though his cunning had once served him best on small-time escapades, he now used that gift for bigger causes. Accompanied by Sylph—who was ever-eager for the next gust of adventure—Zephyr traveled back and forth across the gateway arch, ferrying new Earth technologies into Feyiaria.

He was equally tireless in bringing magical wonders back to Earth. Soon, unsuspecting corners of my home world found themselves in possession of tiny pouches that could regrow seeds overnight or crystals that cleansed drinking water in seconds. No longer were the lines so clearly drawn. Students in Earth's universities began to talk about "Essence theory," while in the Feyiaria settlements, you'd see battered smartphones clutched by local craftsmen, though service coverage was spotty and no one quite knew how long a battery could last in a realm brimming with magical interference.

At times, it was humorous—an Umbra warrior squinting at a bright phone screen or an Earth-born professor so enthralled by the luminous crystals of Lumina that he forgot his papers in a café. But always, there was something poignant about it, too. Worlds that had once collided in violence were now stumbling toward coexistence and the slow forging of friendships that transcended place.

Some nights, I dreamt about the final moments of the Void Serpent's roar. His coils spiraling upward, that last catastrophic cry rumbling through me as I drove the blade into his core. I would awaken in a cold sweat, half-expecting the sky to be on fire again. But outside the window of whichever inn or campsite I found myself in, the morning always brought birdsong or the hush of dawn. The monster was gone.

And yet, as time wore on, I discovered that history wove him into a dark legend faster than I could have expected. In quiet taverns and busy market squares, I overheard people weaving half-truths and tall tales: They say the Void Serpent was the size of a mountain.

I heard he devoured stars to stay alive.

Did you know his roar could shatter the moon?

Some wore amulets fashioned after the serpent's twisting form to ward off evil. Others named rebellious or chaotic storms "Serpent's Rage." Little by little, the real threat—vast, horrifying, and absolutely tangible—morphed into myth. I wasn't sure whether to feel relief or sorrow that the truth was being shrouded in so many legends. My father merely said that it was natural: the living memory of such horror couldn't last forever. Perhaps that was the only way mortals could move on.

Lisa and Serim, meanwhile, found a fate entwined in quieter joys. They had been by each other's side from the earliest days of our journey—Lisa with her bright determination, Serim with his brash humor and kind heart. After the final battle, they traveled together through each kingdom, delivering news of the Serpent's defeat, giving hope to pockets of refugees still too afraid to come home. In those travels, they forged a bond that neither shadow nor war could break.

They married under the ancient trees of Terra in a ceremony as simple as it was heartfelt. The forest leaves rustled overhead, and tiny motes of Essence danced on the breeze. I stood at Serim's side while Lisa approached through the living arch of branches, her face a study in both nerves and radiance. When they exchanged vows, the vow in Serim's voice was so soft it was almost unrecognizable from the boisterous laughter he wore like a second skin. Lisa's eyes shone with tears of happiness, reflecting the green serenity around us.

At that moment, I thought of how we had all changed. The battles we fought might have hardened us, but in many ways, they'd also softened our hearts.

Long, long after everything, I found myself slipping quietly through the hallway of my old apartment building. So much time had passed that the scuffed paint on the walls felt like relics from a different lifetime. Every creak underfoot, every flicker of a failing overhead light, carried me back to the first memories of my life.

With a reluctant twist, I slid the key into the lock of my old front door. It resisted as if time and rust had conspired to keep me out. After a few tries, the knob finally gave way. The door swung open, groaning on its hinges.

I stepped inside and halted. The apartment was dark, the only light coming from the curtain-free windows. In the hush of that moment, the emptiness rang with a memory so strong I could've sworn it was happening now: a younger me setting down a threadbare backpack, exhausted from class, or collapsing onto the sagging sofa with tears still wet from visiting Mom's grave.

The sofa was still here, though dust now took the place of my old textbooks. Everything looked smaller than I remembered, the corners of the room pressed in by time.

This is who I am, I thought. A little bit of everywhere I've been.

A cluster of old photographs still stood on the crooked bookshelf near the kitchen counter. I recognized the one of me and Mom: she was laughing, her arm slung around my shoulders, while I grinned at the camera with a twelve-year-old's innocence. The edges of the photo were yellowed now, tiny flecks of dust clinging to the frame. Carefully, I picked it up and blew the dust away.

"Mom," I murmured. "I'm back."

I was hoping she would hear me. Maybe she was watching me from the skies. I really hoped she would be happy in the heavens above, knowing that his husband and son were alive and well.

Then a voice called from behind, ringing lightly in the emptiness.
“Samuel?”

I froze, startled.

I’d almost forgotten that he had promised to follow me here, eager to see the piece of my life he’d never known. I turned to find him standing on the threshold.

“Dad.”

He looked both happy and sad; it was hard to tell what he was feeling deep down, judging from his eyes, which had begun to twinkle slightly because of the tears shyly forming in them. I was struck by how strange, yet right, it felt to have him in this place Mom and I once called ours.

Mom, I said inside my head, look—I’ve brought Dad home.

I hoped, in some corner of the silence, she heard that.