

# Roots OF Corruption



 Altered®

**STORYBOOK**

EQUINX



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## Foreword

“Ideas are infectious. They spread through words, travel in the form of images, and take root in the minds of all those exposed to them. They nourish thought and imagination and, in secret, work within the crucible of the mind. They can be insidious, but they always carry power – the power we allow them to have over us. Our world is made of stories and narratives, far more than we tend to realize, and each idea is a building block, something we use to describe reality and, in doing so, to shape it. They help us define ourselves, to express who we are. Ideas carry real power within them. It is up to each of us to recognize that power and to handle them with care. It is also up to each of us to choose which ideas we wish to share and use to forge our identity. It is with this in mind that the world of *Altered* was born, built around ideas and values I deeply believe in: tolerance, kindness, emotion... I hope it has moved you and that it has fed within you the good wolf – the one of light and hope.”

**Yoshiaki Mimura**

# Nightmare



394 AC

I can't tear my eyes away from the spectacle...

I'm dimly aware that Dimuri is waiting for an answer from me, an order, a directive. And I try. I try to silence the dread twisting through my gut, to regain my composure, to gather my thoughts, to sort through the chaos in my mind... but they're nothing more than fleeting impressions drifting past, impossible to grasp. I remain standing there, dazed, surrounded by blurred figures, sealed off from the shouting, the noise, the calls... Cold sweat. Averted gaze. I blink, but everything refuses to come into focus. And that knot in my stomach won't let go.

'What are your orders, Admiral?'

I stare at him. He's just as pale, as though he's seen a ghost. His eyes are wide, and he keeps darting anxious glances toward the bay window, toward the tree, toward whatever it is that's taking root. It's like staring death in the face.

Even when I was little, my father would often take me with him, so I could absorb it all, learn the ropes. He never hid anything from me. He wanted me to understand, from the earliest age, what kind of world we lived in. Mahendra Singh was no choirboy, far from it. He had connections everywhere, whether within the Asterion or in the dens of the Malavita.

*A rotting carcass and spoiled flesh.* The first time I came face to face with death, it was a Chimera. It lay there, motionless in its cage, its enclosure. Its lifeless fur was smeared with blood and burns. It didn't look like a living being, but like a thing devoid of a soul, a mere mockery of what it had once been... The disgust was overwhelming, circling in the dim light of Madelyn Moss's laboratory, along with the sharp, lingering bitterness of bile at the back of my throat—and yet, I couldn't look away. I had seen life taken from it, like a breath.

Mesektet.

I turn toward the Night Barque, now positioned just a few clicks from us. The weapon is still aboard, hidden within its bowels and ready to be used. There are still a few unassigned Chimeras—perhaps enough to launch a volley. It was designed to harness the power of the Tumult, to bring down the Leviathans... by tearing the life energy from the Chimeras.

I clench my fists and turn to the major.

'Have my personal junk prepared, and notify Mesektet that I'm coming aboard!'

'Yes, Admiral!'

I look once more at the darkened tree. The cottony shroud enveloping Asty is now made of storm-laden clouds. Violet and pink lightning tears through the night.

'The Nightmare.'

I turn toward Wanjiru's Eidolon and narrow my eyes in suspicion. A cold anger has gradually replaced the shock, and it is searching for a target.

'That is what we call it,' he continues. 'For it is born from the depths of the human soul, where monsters dwell...'

'How do we fight it?'

The Eidolon looks toward the city. He grows pensive, then exhales slowly.

‘The Reka city is doomed. There is nothing we can do. I do not know what gave rise to the Nightmare, but I fear it is only the least of our concerns. This is no mere tear in the Veil, but a gash so vast that we risk another Confluence... It must have been there waiting, just on the other side.’

I look at him in terror.

‘Another...?’

Beside me, Dimuri is trembling. He looks on the verge of nausea, of panic.

‘Tell your subordinate to pull himself together. Fear, anger, despair... the Nightmare feeds on our darkest impulses.’

I do my best to steady my ragged breathing.

‘Major Dimuri, alert the Tagmata. Organize a full evacuation. Secure the harbor, and hold the line. Contact every vessel still capable of flight. They are to be ready to take on as many people as possible, Asgarthans and Reka alike. You will oversee the operation.’

My aide continues to stare at that world-ending vision, unable to look away from the horror. And perhaps it truly is the end of the world.

‘Major! That’s an order! Move!’

He swallows and snaps awkwardly to attention.

‘Yes, Admiral!’

I turn to Wanjiru.

‘And you. What options do we have? What do you recommend?’

He adopts a thoughtful, almost detached expression.

‘I have agents deployed within the city who are capable of sealing the wound. It would take a miracle, of course—but they can do it... if they can reach the Naos.’

I grit my teeth, then look again at the blighted canopy of the world-tree, withering like a deadly rain.

‘What do you need?’

‘An elite squad to protect a small contingent of Mages. Their objective will be to escort the Qorgan to the breach.’

I nod.

‘A small, mobile unit, capable of moving quickly?’

‘Exactly. And ready to sacrifice themselves for the greater good. They will face Stigma—and worse still, perhaps what we call Plagues...’

‘And if the mission fails?’

He turns to me, a pained look on his face.

‘Then it will fall to you to weigh the lives of a few Chimeras—even Alter Egos, if necessary—against the survival of the world, and decide accordingly...’



# Swansong



394 AC

--- ATSADI ---

The Stigma continues to crumble, ash flaking away as it drifts through the air like snow...

Sunn had stood before me, backlit, her hand clenched around her mace, still pulsing with a sickly green glow. She had stared in my direction for a long moment, and I had read hesitation on her face. I had simply nodded. She had said it herself. All that mattered was the mission. In that instant, she knew, just as I did, that I had reached the end of my road.

At last, she turned away, reluctantly. It was what she had to do. Leave me there. There was no resentment. Perhaps a few regrets. She couldn't afford to be burdened with a wounded man in her ranks. She had to stack the odds in their favor, and I was a dispensable weight. And for my part, it was the sacrifice I had to make, so that a new dawn might come, even if I had little chance of seeing it rise...

How much time had passed since she left? I no longer knew...

My hand presses against the gaping wound as best it can. It cannot stop the rivulets of blood soaking my clothes before running down across the smooth paving stones. My broken jian lies on the ground, its pommel smeared, its blade split. My vision blurs.

I close my eyes as I feel life slowly slipping out through the gash, where the Stigma's claws tore into my flesh. It had been a necessary sacrifice, to give Sunniva the opening to strike, to deliver a powerful blow saturated with Mana and bring down our foe. I had given her a vital split second...

My thoughts turn to my beloved. Was she waiting for me beyond the boundaries of reality? Would she take me into her arms? Had I left enough of a mark upon the world to hope to exist with her beyond death? Nothing was certain. I had not fulfilled my quest, and she remained locked in her eternal prison...

Surge crackles, forming a protective shell around my body. It struggles, trying to push back the indistinct shadows of the Nightmare, which seek to seep into me. Under different circumstances, it might have tried to cauterize the wound, but it has no such chance. Nothing can save us now. Sunniva and her band are gone. All that surrounds us is a ravenous horde. And I refuse to let the corruption take hold. I would rather die, and meet the blade that severs broken fates...

All at once, the world seems to ignite, and I open my eyes as heat radiates from a roaring inferno. A figure rushes toward me, wreathed in flame...

--- YEONG-GI ---

The Squire kneels beside the mutilated swordsman. We form a circle so he can evacuate the wounded man. The smoke from the incense drifts through the air, suffocating the Nightmare's ravenous tendrils wherever it passes. We arrived in time, which is a blessing. But I cannot allow myself the slightest distraction, much as I might wish otherwise.

Back to business.

I adjust my glasses on the bridge of my nose, a bad habit I've never managed to shake, and fix my gaze on the roots of evil, writhing like a nest of snakes or a mass of worms, depending on how you look at it. Eye to eye. Easier said than done when a thousand pupils bloom and blink in unison all around us. That's what I call cheating, in a staring contest... But it's not going to impress me. Quite the opposite. I enjoy being the center of attention. The more I'm seen, the brighter I shine.

I raise my oversized incense staff the way a duelist might lift a rapier.

*En garde? Is that what one says?*

The glowing tip smolders heavily, and I wave it like a trapper driving off a pack of wolves with a burning brand. The amorphous mass of the Nightmare contracts when the ember comes near, but presses forward again when I pull back too far... One step at a time, to drive it back. To give the fellas time to get out.

Fortunately, I'm not alone. Auraq and Fen round out our little team. Together, we push back the darkness, like shepherds guiding a herd. In our wake, we leave behind dense smoke laden with floral scents. It's as if their fragrance were a poison against the venom the Nightmare constantly exudes. The other two Exalts move up the main artery toward the Volta, while Ember and I are, I think, heading toward the market. Not for shopping, unfortunately.

I would probably rather be arranging ikebana in my workshop on Utca Chlorisa, right at the entrance to the Nishaanfjord, than staring horror in the face... No, not really. That's just a passing thought I watch drift away. It's always what we lack that draws us. In a life of excess, one longs for peace. The Qorgan sought me out because my floral creations had a way of attracting Eidolons. I was here because peace had become dull and suffocatingly boring.

One step at a time. Like a tamer cracking the whip to drive back a beast. One step at a time, to push the threat away...

--- FEN ---

All we can do is play the role we've been given.

Yeong-gi is forcing the nightmare roots back in one direction, and Auraq and I are doing the same in the other.

'Stay close to me, pumpkin. We'll lock down the perimeter, quick.'

That had been my intention...

Juju flutters around me, frantic. During the invasion, a tendril had smashed open Crowbar's pumpkin head, and my Chimera had to abandon its costume. I'd have to make it a new one once we were safe again aboard the Ouroboros...

As we set the incense sticks and pink, blue, and yellow smoke spreads in thick layers, I notice that an entire section of the city has already fallen into the void. There used to be a theater there, and farther off, a floating pool... Now there is only a dizzying emptiness, where clouds swollen with Tumult churn. The vapors, along with the positive thoughts they carry, form a protective barrier, but I have to admit I feel exposed... Our incense won't last forever.

Behind us, Kojo helps Atsadi to his feet, and the two of them stagger toward the evacuation zone, safely shielded behind Aerolith barriers. Good. At least that's something. I sort through what we still need to do...

Suddenly, Juju lets out a trill, and its perception overlays my own. It faces a figure whose violet hair streams in the wind, along with her tattered cloak. She is accompanied by a goat with

twisted horns, its red eyes smoking. Hers are blood-red as well as she fixes her gaze on Auraq and me.

Esmeralda...

'Stay with me, Fen. This isn't the Shepherdess we know.'

Auraq's arm comes up between us, as if to stop me from going to her. And she's right. Her skin has taken on a sickly hue, and her expression is devoid of the kindness I had known all my life.

'Come to me, Fen. Join me,' she hisses, her voice cadaverous.

No, this isn't my Esmeralda, but a corrupted Eidolon. I shake my head.

'Fen, whatever she says, don't listen to her, do you hear me?'

Auraq's voice is firm, and Esmeralda's mouth twists into a grin.

'So, you know.'

I frown, confused.

'What does she mean, Auraq?'

She falls silent for a moment, and for once her face holds no mischief. She smiles at me gently, almost with pity.

'The Kasirga Clan hid your true lineage from you, Fen. I don't know who knew, but the Venerables certainly did. There is a secret they have kept from you since the moment you were born. Something unnatural, concealed from most, and it concerns you directly...'

I stare at her, caught off guard. Meanwhile, Esmeralda and Djali keep advancing toward us, slow but relentless, as colonnades collapse behind them like dominoes...

'You are not entirely human...'

Everything seems to slow. The Eidolon's smile widens.

'You are mine, young mortal. Join me, my daughter, or I will come and claim you.'

My eyes widen in shock as she lunges.

### --- KOJO ---

I glance at his face. His features are drawn tight, his teeth clenched with every step, but he's conscious, even if his eyes are ringed with black and struggling to stay open. I support him as best I can, one arm under his, my other hand gripping his wrist to keep him from collapsing. Every step is a battle. Every inch gained is a trial.

Behind us, Booda and Surge fight together, fire and lightning. They keep the Nightmare's roots at bay, forcing them back with crackling bursts and snarls. If they hadn't been there to cover our retreat, the roots would have already seized us, dragging us away or worse, infecting us.

The streets roar as the city comes apart. For all we know, the next intersection could vanish and swallow us whole. But I can't think about that. All that matters is the next step. My thighs burn with pain, and my master does what he can to move forward. But his feet slip, and he can only drag himself along. I grunt and haul him forward a short distance, blinking away the sweat stinging my eyes, trying to ignore the pain in my arm.

'You're lagging, Squire.'

I snort, caught between offense and laughter.

'I was supposed to be the dead weight, Master. Not the other way around.'

He stifles a laugh, which quickly turns into a grimace.

'Stubborn as a mule.'

*And proud of it.*

A few meters to the left, another block disappears in an unreal rumble, swallowed by an even more incomprehensible silence. The silence of the void, of nothingness. No way. I won't let it take us.

'We're close, Master. Just a little more.'

Just a little more and we'll see it. Just around the corner and it will be there. The AES *Ulysses*. The last exploration vessel, waiting for stragglers like us. Our last chance to make it out. Our lifeline...

Suddenly, I hear a hiss above my head, and I look up to see a building sheared off like a stalk cut by a sickle. My instinct is to throw myself forward, but with *Atsadi*, it's impossible...

Debris cascades toward us, and a shadow falls over us, devouring all light.

### --- ISAREE ---

You always have to show off. You really need to work on that. It's not exactly healthy, and it lands you in situations like this. Still, I was right. *Bash's* shield was more stable, maybe even stronger. Maybe. But my theory held: when the gravitational field generated by *Aerolith* collapses in on itself, the force produced is colossal. Shame I might die before I can share that discovery. And before I can rub it in my rival's face. Yeah, you were right, girl, but as usual, it got you into trouble...

I fire another volley, and the *Aerolith* surge crushes everything in its path. The corrupted creature I just targeted implodes, along with the ruin behind it. Gotta be careful... The problem is, a single shot drains an entire cylinder. The less you're seen, the better...

Go.

I launch forward, sliding along the ground to take cover. No time to linger, I propel myself again, zigzagging through debris toward another shelter. My lungs burn from the effort, and for a split second, I promise myself I'll be more consistent with my workouts...

I eject the empty cylinder and slot a fresh one into my gauntlet. Three cartridges, and five hundred meters to cover... doable. *Totally doable, right, Peb?* He floats beside me, no bigger than a small pebble. He hasn't stopped feeding me *Aerolith* the entire way, tearing pieces off himself to give me a chance at survival. Given his condition, I can't ask anything more of him.

Worst case, I could throw it at another monster, but that wouldn't help much. Worse, it might just make it angrier...

Go.

I run again, vault over a fallen column, cut through a collapsed house to avoid the main street, far too exposed. I slip through a shattered window. Two or three more blocks and I'm safe.

Go.

I burst from cover and sprint across the alley. Just keep going straight and— Out of the corner of my eye, I spot two figures struggling through the rubble. I also see the black shape above them, like smoke or night, waiting to strike. Its clawed fingers dig into the roof... I try to shout, but I'm too far away for them to hear over the noise. I veer off course, adjusting the power and frequency of my gauntlet.

There you go. A real sucker for trouble. Always playing the hero. But was it ever really a choice? During the strikes, I naturally sided with the protesters. Not out of ideology, but because it was the right thing to do. Still, there are days to play hero, and days to avoid it. This was definitely the latter, and I hadn't even taken a second to think... Some things were never going to change. Or only in a very brutal way.

I deploy the Aerolith shield at the last possible instant, and it forms above Kojo and Atsadi just in time to keep them from being crushed to pulp. The debris shatters against its surface, making the barrier crackle, its patterns resembling the shell of an armadillo.

I snap a new cell into place, replacing the cartridge I just ejected.

‘Get the hell out of there! I’ve got you covered!’

Some people never learn.

### --- DELLA ---

My eyes are fixed on the distance, my hands clenched tight. I watch the ship vanish into the high-altitude clouds with a sigh of relief. Ira is aboard, and I pray to all the Oneiroi that he reaches safety. He struggled, tears streaming down his face, when the Aegis agents took him aboard. He never took his eyes off me, and I didn’t look away either. Now he’ll know what it costs to be a hero. I wish it had been otherwise. If I hadn’t given in. If we had stayed in Asgartha...

Then I would have betrayed everything we swore to be. Did I make the right choice, Vern? Will he have a good life, even without you or me? Was there ever any real justice? No. Only people who choose to put others first, or choose not to.

‘Over there, straight ahead!’

Two survivors, dazed, covered in ash, gray and white like ghosts... That’s all it takes to snap my thoughts back. It’s always been that way. I don’t need to signal Bolt. He’s already running toward them. I rush alongside him to help Kojo carry the swordsman.

‘She stayed behind, she’s in danger! Isaree!’ he shouts before I reach him.

I move on instinct. I pivot sharply and dash through the smoke. Shapes flicker in the half-light, struggling forms. A mass like shadow, another like fire. They claw and lunge at each other as buildings tremble and collapse like houses of cards. I recognize Booda, its blazing glow piercing through the colored haze. My eyes widen as two wings, like jets of flame, burst from its back, and intense heat floods the alley.

Isaree staggers toward me. Her leg is bloodied. She offers no resistance as my mechanical arms scoop her up like a bundle of feathers. Suddenly, a wall explodes nearby as Booda slams into a building facade. The shadow isn’t far behind, its eyes twin wells of light in a body made of night.

‘Ember!’

A small shape appears above the blazing feline, suddenly swelling with its fire. The tiny coal glows red, then white as it devours the flames. I raise a hand to shield my eyes as it blazes with blinding light. I barely make out Yeong-gi, swinging an incense stick like a baseball bat. He strikes with all his strength.

Crack! The impact erupts in a plume of smoke as the staff shatters. The tiny ember shoots forward like a blazing missile, piercing the nightmare creature clean through before the abomination explodes...

Yeong-gi turns toward us, wiping his glasses.

‘I suggest we don’t linger.’

### --- AURAQ ---

‘No!’

Fen shouts at me, but I don’t listen. I dodge the goat’s horns, then its kick, and blow it a kiss. It’s far from harmless. It’s an enchanting kiss, a devastating one. A chime rings out. The ideas that make up Djali shatter, disembodied under the pressure of my will. I am the voice of Thalia, and

the Nine Sisters are, and will always remain, the supreme authority in this world. Of course, this is only a diversion. In the blink of an eye, Esmeralda is upon me, the bells at her wrists and ankles jingling wildly. Her hand strikes her tambourine once, sharply, and in response, long strips of tattered silk spring to life, writhing toward me with the clear intent to strangle.

The gallows. Of course. It could be nothing else...

But she does not know who I am, nor whose power I wield. She is merely a product of imagination, and I am both poet and demiurge. I am Aed Auraq, Matriarch of the Tisdhera Clan, chosen of Thalia. I paint the world as I paint my face. Darkness cannot touch me, for I deflect it with humor.

A snap of my fingers, and my own rope coils around her neck. It is time to punish the heresy, to end this masquerade.

'Auraq, no!'

The rope tightens. Curtain call.

Fen stares at me, horrified. I walk toward her as she stands near the edge of the precipice. Poor thing must be asking herself a thousand questions. I liked her, in the end. She was determined, and despite being a hopeless dreamer, she cared for others. Perhaps more than for herself. People like that must learn not to give too much. They often choose to sacrifice themselves for others...

'Auraq, what does this mean?'

I place a hand on her cheek.

'It means you are half Oneiros on your mother's side, child. That the man you called grandfather was in fact not who he claimed to be. That your parents adopted you to hide an unspeakable, taboo secret. I believe that is what the Venerables wanted. The rise of hybrid beings...'

Fen looks lost.

'But why?'

I ruffle her hair.

'That's a question I'll ask them when we get back home.'

Her expression hardens slightly, even as tears run down her dirty cheeks.

'Then I want to be there too. I have a right to know.'

I wipe her tears, smearing grime across her skin.

'I know, little one... You have every right to know. You never asked for this. In the end, you were only a pawn... The Kasirga Clan will answer for this.'

She wipes her face with her sleeves. All it takes is a push. She never sees it coming. I don't hesitate. She falls backward in deathly silence. A gasp of surprise cuts off her scream. Her eyes go wide as she plunges, and I paint the most stricken expression I can summon across my face. She was innocent. But I could not allow her to exist. Her braids whip through the air as she falls, dropping like a stone before vanishing into the clouds.

Her Chimera dives after her, and I let it go.

Innocence is one thing. But it does not absolve the crime committed by her kind... Sometimes, one must turn the heart into a steel vise, and do what must be done.

--- ZHEN ---

I scan the smoking ruins, watching for any sign of life. Zephyr circles over the collapsing city, searching for survivors. But with every passing moment, the chances of finding anyone alive grow slimmer...

I glance east and see the AES *Benares* casting off. The heavy cables detach, hanging from the embarkation platform like severed snakes. After it, we will be the last ship to depart... And when we are gone, anyone left behind will be doomed. I grit my teeth. We have done what we could, but I cannot help thinking of all those who never made it to the *Ulysses*. The stragglers, those trapped in the rubble, or hiding, paralyzed by fear.

Move...

Zephyr trumpets in my mind, urging me to pay attention. Through my Chimera's perception, I see Auraq standing at the edge of the precipice, and I order my Alter Ego to snatch her up and bring her to the *Benares*, which is closer to her position. The Alterer turns toward me, face set.

'Admiral! Eleven o'clock!'

The young cadet with the gold-banded brow points toward our boarding dock, and I nod in relief as I see Yeong-gi, Della, and Isaree struggling toward us. Booda rushes ahead at full speed, rejoining its Alterer sprawled on the deck of the *Ulysses*, clutching his arm.

'Go help them!'

'Yes, Admiral!'

The young recruit and others rush forward. Three more lives saved. Three more victories. We must cling to even the smallest success, or despair will take us...

The AES *Benares* has now passed the *Tempest*, which is covering our retreat. The *Ouroboros* is still there, glowing with a strange light. Both ships are likely preparing to depart. Time is running out. The hourglass is nearly empty...

My swan trumpets again, and I cannot suppress a sigh of relief. They are running through the crumbling streets. The Qorgan's witch leads them, with Sunniva close behind. A wolf carries Kauri in its jaws while bearing little Nadir on its back. Matz and another Yzmir Initiate bring up the rear, dazed and pale...

I shout orders to prepare the vessel. The moorings are released, the dorsal and lateral fin-sails deployed. The moment they are aboard, we set sail as fast as we can...

Zephyr flies above them. At this distance, it will only take minutes.

Move...

My eyes widen. Behind them, I suddenly see the Naos shudder. Then, in an eerie silence, it begins to fall, as if in slow motion. Its roots, now black and corrupted, tear free of the ground as the central district collapses. Its thousands of leaves form a dark halo as they rise like a swarm of moths...

The world-tree is sinking, and a surge of clouds and Tumult is forming where it disappears beneath their surface...

Move, damn it...



# *A Breach between Worlds*



394 AC

--- MATZ ---

Maybe I should have been a conductor...

Of course not, Matz. No one would have wanted to sit through a concert of droning buzzes, or dared brave the stings just to hear the music of thousands of beating wings. It's just that you would have rather been somewhere else, anywhere at all, as long as it was far from this end-of-the-world chaos.

All around me, the city continues to come apart. Irreversibly. The golden veins that once reinforced its structures dim, then turn a sickening violet. They pulse, swell, bulge, tearing free like strands of shadow. And that's not even counting the eyes opening along their surface, blinking... watching me.

My wasps keep building. They gather Sap, using it as mortar to slow the rapid disintegration. This is entropy in its purest form, and fighting it is like trying to hold back a flood with a spoon. But the goal isn't to stop the ruin, only to patch enough to buy a few minutes, maybe an hour or two at best. Because every minute gained means lives saved...

Corinna, Dimitra, and Eudora must be far away by now. Safe, among the hundreds, the thousands of refugees. If I could still connect to the Gestalt, I would have taken the chance to check on them, to make sure they were being treated well. All I can do now is cross my fingers and hope for the best.

I suppress a smile.

I find myself daydreaming about what the future might hold. I had no doubt Asgartha would take in the Reka survivors. I wasn't naive. It was a perfect opportunity to spin the story, to wrap the rout in pretty paper and call it a success. Look, we are welcoming more lost children of humanity. A triumph...

There was irony in that. The world was collapsing. Part of the Asgarthan fleet had been destroyed. The Reka would be more mouths to feed; a massive influx of refugees would surely reshape society, spark tensions. The Rediscovery Endeavor would suffer a severe blow. But appearances had to be maintained. So that hope might endure.

And yet that isn't all that's crowding my thoughts. There are also the dreams of what my future might have been, had I reached one of the evacuation ships. I would have taken Corinna and Dimi in my arms. I would have reassured them, told them what life in Asgartha was like. I would have told them about my home overlooking the Aroro Lighthouse, about that cozy little restaurant by the lagoon where I liked to watch the gulls while eating seafood... I would have loved to show them all of it.

The world is collapsing, and I am smiling.

--- SAM ---

Hahahahaha!

Wooahoo! This is amazing! You hit them and more just keep coming! They crawl out of cracks, half-open gaps, even from under beds and out of dresser drawers. I mow them down with a sickle, crush them with a big mallet, bring down my axe, pop them like soap bubbles! More, yeah, more, more! Hahahahaha!

They told me hours ago to let the Bravos handle it, to conserve my strength until we got close to the Naos, but now that we're only a few hundred meters away, I can finally let loose! At last! After years, decades of being told to stay quiet, not make waves because I was some kind of secret weapon, I can finally unleash it all! I kept it all sharp, polished my spiked mace until it gleamed. And all that time, they said not to burden me with the Fagn, that the Megalith was under control, that the Black Wave already had its contingent...

The Nightmare's specters surge in dense waves, one burp after another, as we near the breach. So? A potential Second Confluence is important enough for me to step in, I reckon? I've spent ages buried in Ayxas's grimoires. "Be ready." "It's not your time yet..." I was trained to be the bogeyman of bogeymen, practically from birth! So I get to play now, right?

I gut something that looks like a mix of flesh and machinery, rip out its cables. I clench my fist and unleash a burst of sticky ectoplasm, shredding a little imp unlucky enough to cross my path... I lick my lips. I'm on cloud nine. Finally! Finally! Splat, you pincer'd thing, come here, Tooth Fairy!

Taima is skewering a few Nightmares to my right. She pierces with her needles, stitching up the gashes torn in reality. The big tear, that one's mine! Mine! Hoyt is protecting the other Initiates while they channel Mana, shaping the streams of ideas pouring from the rift. More, give me more! And where's Yeong-gi? Probably taking it easy, like always! I do wish Gray were here, though. He's dealing with the Worm chewing on the tree. If he tames it, he'll cause absolute carnage... Though honestly, it'd be better if he failed. That'd leave more for me...

Heehee! Watch this, big brother. This is how it's done!

### --- GRETTEL ---

My mace smashes through a mass of tentacles, and I dodge as several tendrils try to grab me. I've seen what happens when one of those things manages to plant a seed of darkness inside you. It's not pretty. Not pretty at all...

The Yzmir Mages are carving a path toward the source of evil... All we have to do is keep as many Nightmares as possible from reaching them. Easier said than done. Luckily for me, Rust has my back, and the old armor does a solid job protecting me.

Suddenly, the world seems to crack, and I shake my head, hit by a wave of dizziness—well, "wave" is putting it mildly. It's as if the very fabric of reality is fracturing under the pressure of the nightmare hordes. In some places, the faceted surface of the Veil becomes brittle as glass. Elsewhere, the Eidolons we summoned seem to be assaulted by malignant ideas, slowly reshaped into infernal versions of themselves... We won't last long at this rate.

When we signed up, we all knew it would probably be a one-way trip. To my relief, many had volunteered, Asgarthans and Reka alike. Of all those brave—or reckless—souls, only a handful remain. I don't know where Carmela is. She vanished after luring monsters away as a diversion. Anguri fell after shielding the Mages with his own body. We had to leave Atsadi behind, and Silje too—she sacrificed herself to slow them down...

Only Priya, Kotani, and a Reka named Somboon are left with me. Four. Not enough to make a fist. Some defensive line. We're all that's left as the final barrier... I suddenly see a wave swallow

Somboon, dragging him into a putrid mass. I see Hoyt facing a monstrous thing whose face is nothingness itself. I see Turuun coughing blood as she lies against a rock.

A one-way trip...

*Sunniva!*

I spin at the whistle of wind and barely manage to block a blazing blade aimed straight at my heart. I silently thank Rust before facing my new opponent... My stomach drops as realization hits, twisting my insides. Or maybe that's just hunger...

Aoife stands before me, her hair streaming like fire. Her blades hiss white with heat. I let out a strained chuckle tinged with despair. If a Phoenixian Dancer couldn't drive back the Nightmare, what chance do I have?

'Give up, Sunn. Abdicate. You'll find peace in surrender's embrace...'

'Uh... no thanks,' I reply as politely as I can.

Not a chance. After that speech of mine, it'd look pretty bad if I were the first to quit. I'm a Bravos. I stare fear in the eye and kindle the flame. I raise my lollipop-shaped mace. Worst case, sugar meets fire and turns to caramel. I like caramel.

'Are you sure you want to add fuel to the fire?'

I smile. I had only just discovered who I really was. The Oneiroi could be reborn, reincarnated. Even if they forgot themselves upon awakening, their nature never fully vanished. Gretel. The one who shoves witches into ovens to roast them. Gretel, who, like her brother, has more than a few tricks up her sleeve... There was a name for beings like me, apparently. A Paragon...

'I think you're the one about to get cooked, Aoife.'

### --- NADIR ---

They strike blow after blow, trapped in a deadly dance. Mace against swords. The same fiery hair. And I just stand there, not knowing what to do. A specter approaches, and Bubbles swallows it like a pellet. The ones that dodge its fins, I turn into paint and splatter across the walls in messy streaks.

I know Samhain is waiting for me to really step in, but that means I'll have to run again, find a new form, or end up serving the Qorgan, or even worse, locked in a prison or a lab. No... I don't want to relive what happened at the Cebir. Not at all. And if no one knows what happened there, it's because someone is still covering it up.

I don't know why Sam stayed. When the first Exalts escaped, we all could have run. Mama Hayley created us, but we were failed experiments. She wanted Exalts like they are now, not hybrids like us—half human, half Chimera. The first generation had fully fused. Chinook, Gregale, Harmattan, Matanuska, Vardar, Vendavel... They answered the call of the Tumult, of their nature, and went into the Terra Incognita...

I think Ostara and Levanter followed them, to find our big brother Vendavel. Beltane and Bora are probably hiding somewhere, like me... As for me, I eventually fused with Gilavar to become what I am now... The second generation had a reprieve before full assimilation.

"Imperfect." That's what they called us. Sometimes worse—"monsters," "aberrations." Even Mama Hayley said so. We were just lab rats. Only with Bai Shan-shu did they finally strike the right balance between human and Chimera...

The dance macabre continues. Blades slice through the air, making the mist crackle. The mace smashes walls, shatters paving stones. Two raging forces, two furies. If I help, will they finally stop calling me a monster? Will they accept me?

'So, Im? You coming?'

I turn toward Sam, who looks like she's having the time of her life. She hovers above the ground, brimming with Mana, and my stomach growls. I want Mana too. Did they accept her? Or did she just accept being a tool?

Suddenly, Sunniva slams into a parapet as her mace strikes the ground like a judge's gavel. She's covered in bleeding cuts, exhausted—too much to win like this. If I don't step in, she'll die. I clench my fists and turn to Samhain.

Imbolc. I'd almost forgotten that was my name.

I surge forward, absorbing Bubbles, then charge straight at the Phoenixian Dancer.

### --- KAURI ---

We finally reach the top of the escarpment. It was hard to recognize, but this is part of the Consortium that broke off from the trunk and sank among the roots of the world-tree...

At the foot of the Naos, Bravos and Yzmir are fighting hordes of monsters. My eyes go wide, my mouth dry with fear. Do we really stand a chance?

*Little human. The Pack is with you.*

Puff turns his head toward me and studies me. I swallow, uneasy now that I know what he really is. Do I really know? I know he's a wolf, disguised as a ram. Like in fairy tales, he put on a costume. I think he's the Big Bad Wolf—the one who secretly ate my flufflings.

*I told you, just enough to satisfy my hunger.*

Right. He can hear every thought I have. I'm not sure I can blame him. Wolves eat sheep.

*Exactly.*

But he isn't just the Big Bad Wolf. He is White Fang, and Raksha. He is the Beast of Gévaudan, and the She-Wolf of Rome; Ysengrin, Fenrir, Garmr...

*And the Pack has answered the call.*

One by one, other wolves gather around us. Börte Cino, Geri and Freki. Amaguq, Akela and Oupaouat too...

*I told you, little human. I am the spirit of the wolf, in all its forms.*

The word leaves my mouth before I fully grasp it.

'Sarwa.'

'But this is no time for words or stories. This is a time for blood and fangs, for claws and the frenzy of the hunt. The prey is here, little cub. It is time to hunt—and to kill!'

They all howl as one, muzzles lifted to the sky. They snarl and bark, driven by hunger and fever. This is no mere pack, but a horde. And they are not alone. Mowgli and his family are here too, unbidden. Other Eidolons have appeared of their own accord, joining the assault.

They surge forward with us, and I cling to Puff's wool as his ram's head begins to unravel, revealing a maw lined with sharp fangs.

I howl too, and we charge down the slope.

### --- TURUUN ---

I can't move anymore. My left shoulder must be dislocated. My other arm is broken in at least two places. I have several broken ribs—perhaps even my spine—because aside from a faint ghostly tingling, I can barely feel anything.

The Initiate has risen toward the breach, carrying more Mana than I have ever seen. She hangs pinned in the sky, chanting, trying to seal the gaping wound before another cataclysm shakes the world...

I have faith. Faith in her, faith in nature, faith in the future. Reality will heal itself. It will clot, and in time, it will mend. Unlike me. A coughing fit shakes me, and I grimace in pain. I will not see another day. I examine the small bundle I hold close, the one I protected at the cost of myself... It seems intact. A shame I won't be able to return it to Arjun—or whoever should receive it. But at least it means there is hope for the Spindle. Someone will save it. That much is certain.

Scraping, growling, snarling...

Something warm runs down my chin, and I blink to stay awake. My blood—and with it, my life—draining away. But I don't want to slip into unconsciousness. I want to face death head-on, even in its most hideous form. Come, then. Let's be done with it. I've been ready for a long time...

'Turuun!'

My eyes snap open as a massive bear steps between me and the Nightmare creatures. It rises on its hind legs and slams its claws down on the black tendrils reaching for me. Standing tall, it roars, scattering the specters.

Rin rushes to my side and kneels.

'Come on, get up, I'll get you somewhere safe!'

She tries to pull me up, but stops when she hears my low, pained voice. Her face is stricken, tears streaking through the grime on her cheeks. I fight to stay conscious and manage a smile.

'It's too late for me, dear child.'

'No,' she insists. 'No, don't say that. You'll be fine. I'll get you to the port. We'll be safe.'

I shake my head.

'Rin, listen to me. My injuries are too severe. I don't have long. But I have one last request, one final task... like when I asked you to pick peaches, remember?'

She begins to cry.

'Take this. And give it to Arjun. It's vital. Do you understand?'

'Turuun, no, I can save you, I—'

'This matters more than either of us. Take it.'

I manage to place the small, oval bundle in her hands.

'Please, Turuun, let me hel—'

I use the last drops of my Mana to summon my proud mount—the one that carried me across half the world to bring me here.

--- RIN ---

Sharp talons close gently around my shoulders, almost tenderly, as multicolored feathers—purple and violet, then green and yellow—wrap around us like a cloak. A shadow crosses Turuun's face, over her sorrow-tinged smile. Then I feel myself lifted from the ground, pulled upward, torn away from my mentor...

Orchid takes flight, slicing through the Nightmares that try to follow us, while others swarm toward my teacher like a closing cloud, leaving her no chance to escape.

I scream, but the roaring wind swallows my voice. Tears stream down, blurring my vision. Memories drift through my mind like waves: the two of us riding yaks across Anthea, her grumbling about taking the wrong path; at the forest's edge, as she lights a fire while I wait beside her, freezing... her habit of naming every plant we passed, of catching insects for me to study...

The dapeng glides between white towers as they collapse. It does not linger, heading straight for the last departing ships. Below, I see a pack of wolves and woollybacks plunging into the heart

of the battle. I see Nadir painting something that looks like a massive carnivorous plant. I see the Qorgan's witch standing at the edge of the rift, encased in light, as if cauterizing a wound...

Then a strange sensation grips me. Like a breeze, or a melody, coming from the gaping rift. I turn toward it, my hair whipping across my face. It's like a song, a familiar, nostalgic scent. The tear seems to call to me, to invite me inside. But the dapeng keeps moving away, and the music fades, like a fleeting impression you wonder if you imagined.

A searing light suddenly tears through the night, like a sunrise that never announced itself. The branches and leaves of the Naos are painted in light and shadow, and for a split second, everything becomes a silent theater of silhouettes... Then the world roars again, and the gash snaps shut like a mouth.

At that moment, the Ouroboros begins to glow like a wheel of fire—a blazing crown. And at its center, a black sphere begins to form, as if it were devouring all light.

A rush of wings, and a rain of feathers...

I cling on as best I can while the dapeng begins its descent.



# Ulysses Down



394 AC

--- TREYST ---

I run a trembling hand over his dented casing as tears gather at the corners of my eyes. For the first time in ages, the throbbing pain drilling into my lower back fades into the background, eclipsed by grief...

Rossum's eyes are dark, though I can still feel his mind pounding from within the inert shell. His arms have been torn off, as have his mechanical legs. His Kelon battery is drained, his armor split open...

He had stepped in when Paju tried to strike a fatal blow at me. In that instant, I had felt something like relief. The end of the journey. Peace regained. Rest within reach. No longer feeling the pain of being alive... all of it had seemed strangely appealing. I hadn't moved an inch as the tentacles turned toward me like snakes, their maws pulsing with pink energy.

The next moment, before I could even process it, Rossum was in front of me, shielding me with his entire body, and the concentrated Aerolith plasma struck him head-on. His eyes flickered, and for a fleeting second I saw an expression of pain cross his smooth face. Or was it my own?

He had embraced me, his steel skin beginning to melt. And again, I was flooded with dark thoughts I had believed buried years ago, locked away in the deepest recesses of my mind. Guilt. Resentment. Loss. The weight of abandonment... In the end, some wounds had never healed. The loneliness, the anonymity of the Kurung, the search for a family... finding Paju, only to lose him further down the road...

The abomination had nothing to do with Paju. It was my own death drive, disguised in familiar features. Just a monster parading in his likeness to deceive me. A monster born from my trauma. My hand closed around my Construct. He wasn't the one I needed to save. Nor was it myself. Rossum needed me. He was the one who mattered...

Attacking Paju hadn't been easy. I had drawn on my rage, on my pain. But it hadn't been enough. Only when I leaned on my friendship with Rossum, on the hope of seeing him happy, did my blows begin to land.

And now I stood before his battered hull. Him, I could still save...

My fingers tighten around my welding gun.

I could still save him.

--- SUBHASH ---

I watch Treyst working relentlessly, fingers stained with oil. Tears stream down his face, but he doesn't stop. I consider going to help him, but Vera is still trembling in my arms. I kiss her forehead, running my grimy hands through her hair. Even though we weren't out of the woods yet, it already felt like a miracle that we were here, aboard the *Tempest*. She was probably the reason I was still alive, and I didn't know whether to thank her or resent her for it.

I had been ready to go back. I had already deployed around fifteen shields in the Volta district, carving out an evacuation corridor for the survivors. When I came back for more, her hand had grabbed mine and refused to let go. In the end, I stayed. For her, because she needed me. Or maybe out of cowardice...

I did the best I could. When everything goes to hell, there comes a point where you have to stop pushing and settle for what can still be saved. I could come up with all the justifications I wanted, but in truth, no excuse would change anything. When the machine jams, sometimes the only option is to scrap it and hope someone else can build something new from the remains...

I could have done better. Or differently. Maybe. Probably. Certainly. In other circumstances, things might have turned out differently. But there's no point listing all the "what ifs." I played every card I had and did what I could, on my level. There's nothing more to it...

I wasn't deluding myself about the situation. The devastation spoke for itself. Black smoke, everything collapsing, clouds rumbling with lightning and static. The Reka city was lost. Plain as day. All we could do was save people. That's what mattered. The Reka, the Asgarthans, Marmo, Vera... You can rebuild. But you can't bring the dead back.

I couldn't blame her. If I'd stayed, it would have been one less spark to count on. I was still alive, and that meant I still had moves left to play. The future belongs to those who remain, not those who die as heroes...

I never chased glory. I was just there, at the right place, at the right time...

That alone was already a kind of luck.

### --- NEVENKA ---

She sat among the other refugees, her broad shoulders slumped. I scanned the crowd for Fen, but she was nowhere to be found. Strange. When the swan had brought her in, I had pushed through the crowd, packed tighter than a cable car at rush hour on a holiday during a strike, murmuring the customary "sorry, excuse me," as one does. But I found her alone, that big painted matron, her makeup running down her cheeks like a sad clown.

'Where is she?'

Auraq turns to me, grave, her face as deflated as fig jam. She looks at me, then slowly shakes her head, like a doctor stepping out of an operating room. My eyes widen, and I grab her by the collar without thinking. I shake her like a bunch of grapes, and she lets me.

'What do you mean?' I snap, mimicking her gesture.

Her hand closes over mine, still clutching her collar.

'I'm sorry. I couldn't do anything...'

A thousand expressions flicker across my face. Denial? Despair? Anger? Panic? Confusion? I don't know which to choose. In the end, I brush them all aside like swatting a fly. I settle on a mask devoid of emotion, mirroring the one she chose to show me.

'What did you do, Auraq?'

With a sharp motion, she frees herself.

'Madness is a mask you wear well, Nevenka. But it's time to take it off.'

I meet her gaze.

'I will if you do the same.'

She sighs deeply, and I feel her drop the pretense.

'You're the one who convinced her to seek Mnemosyne, aren't you? Why? What was your intent? Is this one of Kalu's schemes?'

'It's nothing more than a response to your own machinations. What are the Muses hiding, Auraq? Or should I say Aed Auraq of Clan Tisdhera?'

Her jaw tightens.

'You cannot imagine the weight of the secret you're asking me to reveal. That knowledge is madness. It's better left buried forever...'

'Madness is something I know well. And it knows me.'

'Nonsense. Madness is what you wear so no one suspects your true intentions. Tell me I'm wrong. I don't think I am.'

She wasn't wrong. And in that moment, Amahle's suspicions were confirmed. That was what this was about. He had trained me to be his agent, to uncover what both the Matriarchs and their Muse patrons were hiding. Something was wrong with the Lyra, and it was my task to find out what.

'I'll give you one last chance, Nev. Walk away from this. Nothing good will come of it.'

### --- TEIJA ---

The wounded keep coming. I crouch to give a child some water, call out instructions to move the stretchers toward the secondary deck. The smell of blood is so strong it overwhelms my senses, just as it does Nauraa's.

The lightly injured over here, those needing surgery over there... and those contaminated by the Nightmare... I draw my ivory blade and begin cutting away the parasitic ideas. They can be immaterial: despair, grief, terror, alienation, apathy... or physical: clusters of eyes sprouting along someone's arm, or purplish streaks across another's face...

Suddenly, an argument breaks out between an Asgarthan and a Reka. The latter insults him, blames us for their suffering. Are we to blame? With a sharp motion, I sever the idea of hatred that has latched onto him, and he collapses, unable to hold back his sobs. The enemy feeds on these emotions. Someone has to do something... Where are the incense stores? Can't the Lyra...

They're doing what they can, surely. A child hums a lullaby. A young flutist plays, cheeks streaked with tears. A skald plucks a few notes, while others distribute food and calming drinks. I recognize a few faces, but most are strangers, Asgarthans and Reka alike. And what about all those I didn't see on deck? Are they on another ship? Did they stay behind? A broad-shouldered man covered in stylized tattoos weeps against the railing. Others stare at the ruined city being swallowed by clouds...

*Pull yourself together.*

I wipe my own tears hastily. Nauraa is right. This isn't the time to fall apart, even if everything in me is calling for it. That would only serve the Nightmare... We need to organize, to respond as best we can. Chaghagan and Cat are already at work. They're used to crises like this. They'll coordinate things. On the Reka side, no Hexarch seems to be present on board. I need to identify those who can serve as leaders.

Suddenly, a shadow falls over us and latches onto the stern deck. Turuun's dapeng. Rin climbs down, pale and stunned, while her Chimera clatters its mandibles to keep anyone from approaching. I hesitate to call out to her, to ask what happened near the Naos, but stop when I see her heading toward Arjun, terror written all over her face...

### --- ARJUN ---

She practically collapses into my arms, and I hold her as sobs shake her frail body. She reminds me of Flore, when she used to come to me in tears, unable to cope with some small hardship. I stroke her hair as I did with my niece, murmuring soft words. But truthfully, I struggle to find them myself. The pain in me is just as great.

All I can do is cry with her. Because nothing can truly ease what we're going through. She pulls back suddenly, and I see immense grief etched across her face. Terrible suffering. I understand immediately what she has witnessed.

Without a word, she presses a small bundle against my chest, wrapped in cloth and Naos leaves. I take it from her, my fingers trembling as I begin to unwrap it.

'Turuun wanted me to give you this. She said it was vital...'

I peel away the last shriveled leaf and look at the fruit Rin has entrusted to me. A fleshy berry, white and pink like the others from the Naos. But its shape is different, as if born from a cross, a hybrid with another plant.

'It's a fertile specimen... She wanted you to have it.'

I clutch the fruit to my heart, and now it's my turn to break into sobs. Spike presses against me, and I rest a hand on his head.

*Arjun, no cry.*

I can't help but smile. Even in all this devastation, there's still a glimmer of hope. This seed is proof of that. It will need a suitable place, wide enough for a new world-tree to grow. It will need rich soil, clear water, and abundant light, so that the seed becomes a sapling, then a tree with a vast, majestic canopy.

I miss the earth, and with it, the feeling of plunging my hands into humus, the coolness, the scent. The quiet of gardens and forests, the sound of water lapping over stones, birdsong echoing all around...

Rin rests her head against my shoulder, sniffing loudly, and gently strokes the fruit's velvety skin, as if it were a newborn's downy head.

*Eat?*

I shake my head at Spike.

*No, Spike. No eat.*

He pouts, of course.

### --- BASIRA ---

*Baz.*

My eyes are fixed on the sturdy silhouette of the Naos, lost in the distance. Its trunk is streaked with violet and mauve, like diseased veins. Did the small squad succeed? A handful had volunteered, led by Sunniva, to escort the Qorgan mages to the heart of the Nightmare. All we can do now is hope, and pray for...

Suddenly, the world-tree seems to shudder. Its branches thrash, its trunk shifts, then tilts dangerously. I try to shout, to raise the alarm, but my voice dies in my throat. The entire Naos is tipping, listing, plunging beneath the cloud cover.

Its fall scatters the clouds, sending a rolling tide of vapor across the city, drowning the lower districts. I clench my fists.

*Kai, get our gear ready.*

I can't just stand here doing nothing. To hell with caution. There are still people down there, and we can still save them. Out of the corner of my eye, I see the AES Ulysses leaving the port, rising toward us. It's passing near the Ouroboros. We need to intercept them.

*With pleasure, growls my Alter Ego.*

Detonation.

As the Tumult clouds crash into the *Ulysses*, a strange light bursts from the Lyra flagship, forcing me to look away. When I open my eyes again, the Ouroboros serpent is spinning at a dizzying speed. The wheel twists, accelerates, tilts...

Around the Lyra vessel, a colossal wave begins to form. I see it slam into the *Ulysses*, sweep away the clouds, while at the center of the ring, reality itself seems to collapse inward. A black sun. An eclipse.

'Hold on!'

I barely have time to shout the warning before the shockwave hits us with full force. My cry is swallowed by the chaos as I grab whatever I can to avoid being thrown overboard. The *Tempest* lurches, its armor groaning and screeching.

I catch an Aegis soldier just as he's about to go over.

Something strikes my face, lashes my shoulder. Sharp pain. The copper taste of blood fills my mouth. Something runs into my eyes. I snarl, tensing my muscles as I drag the recruit back onto the deck.

The boy blinks, stunned. I imagine he just saw his life flash before his eyes...

### --- GULRANG ---

No... no, no, no, no!

Tocsin's hand clamps down on my shoulder, and no matter how I struggle, he won't let go. I lost my shield when we were hit, but I don't care. I need to get to a Tagmata barge. If Zhen's nearby, she can... No, she's on the *Ulysses* too.

*Let go, I have to go. Kojo...*

Kojo is on the ship that's going down. The last message said he had boarded. He should be ascending. Instead, he's losing speed, drifting down toward the clouds...

'Tocs, he's my brother!'

But my Chimera won't budge. He holds me fast, traps me. His other hand grips me too, and no matter how hard I fight, I can't break free.

*Gul.*

His voice is steady, unyielding, and slowly, reason returns to me, along with the realization that it's too late. That there's nothing I can do. Memories come rushing back in a bittersweet tide. The time he wanted to show me his swordsmanship and I gently put him in his place. The time he threw a snowball at me and I buried him in powder. The Carnelian Crown, and the impostor syndrome that gripped him. His radiant smile when his team lifted the cup for the first time, and I reminded him it was their victory, not his.

'Look!'

He had leapt from one low wall to another, climbed the side of the house, nearly slipped on the tiles before standing proudly on the roof. Mom and Dad had told him to come down immediately, but he just looked toward the Muir Concordia and breathed deeply. Damn dreamer.

He held a wooden sword, playing with his friends in front of the house.

'Look, big sis, I'm Rune!'

I had looked up from my military booklet and glared at him. He had used Mom's shawl as a cape and borrowed a helmet far too big for him, left on the table by Venka.

'Stop fooling around! Can't you see I'm working?'

'Come on, Gul, come play!'

I drop to my knees, my eyes filling with tears. What I wouldn't give to go join him, just across the street...

--- SOL ---

I run to the railing, push off, and hurl myself into the void.

I vaguely hear Veora's cries, Magda's warnings... but I ignore them. I let myself fall, free-falling to build as much speed as possible. Below, the AES *Ulysses* crashes into clouds lit by dawn and begins to sink. Not this time. I had already seen the *Sune* fall like this, and I had been sickened by my helplessness. I couldn't live through that again...

I seal my mask to breathe again after holding my breath during the first seconds of descent. I glance toward the Reka city, breaking apart further, and slip below its stationary altitude line.

I spread my arms and legs to begin decelerating. I know exactly where my Leviathan is, and I adjust my approach vector so it can catch me without bleeding off too much speed. There's no time to waste. Every second counts...

The *Ulysses* grows rapidly in my field of vision. Its golden fins catch the sunlight for a fleeting moment before the swell swallows it. Even in the turmoil, they can hold for a few seconds if they maintain course.

Halua bursts from the clouds and aligns with my trajectory.

I grab the reins just before the clouds engulf me. I feel them rolling over my suit as the Tumult tries to cling to it, to take root, to seep into my flesh... A thousand thoughts like hooked fingers, like thorny brambles. Then the winds surge again. Halua absorbs them, thankfully limiting my exposure to the mutagenic currents...

There it is, just a short distance away. That impassable boundary the Reka call the Grand Stir. And the *Ulysses*, its silhouette lost in plumes of black smoke, is drifting toward it. I won't reach it before it's swallowed. But Halua... Halua can enter it, seize it, and drag it skyward. With luck, the effects of the Tumult won't be lethal. If I can endure them for a moment...

The Grand Stir closes around us. Fleeting impressions begin to latch onto my mind. It feels like the Tumult is alive. Like it's welcoming me.

I draw on every ounce of strength to resist the pressure of these foreign thoughts.

Just... a few... more... meters...



# Ouroboros



394 AC

--- AKESHA ---

The underbelly of the Ouroboros feels like a maze of hissing, whispering guts. She holds my hand and pulls me deeper inside. I didn't know where she was taking me, especially when the others needed us, but she had asked me to trust her and of course I trusted her.

Her palm is damp in mine, though that's only natural in this vapor-choked air. My senses are on edge, yet at the same time I feel a sluggish, feverish haze, as if I am both sharply alert and slightly out of step with myself.

We move alongside a vast reservoir of clear water, a succession of turquoise basins. Cables plunge into them, releasing plumes of mist where they meet the cold surface. The darkness is almost tangible. Saskia doesn't slow, despite the gloom. Perched on her shoulder, a small, luminescent snail is our only source of light.

'Where are we going? The others, they—'

'They have their mission, and we have ours, Kesh. Something even more important.'

Taru drifts through the murk, his tentacles undulating in unison to propel him forward. He doesn't look reassured either. Saskia tightens her grip on my hand, as if to steady me.

We pass through an opening into another cyclopean chamber.

'Where are we?'

'At the center of everything. At the beginning.'

I frown. 'The beginning of what?'

'Of everything, my love.'

We cross what looks like a stone bridge and emerge onto a platform overlooking the trembling waters. At the center, swallowed in suffocating darkness, an opening faces us within what seems to be a spherical chamber. Saskia slows, and I notice the stone walls are etched with patterns resembling serpent scales.

'Step away, Kesh,' a cavernous voice commands.

I freeze as Afanas steps out from behind an ornate column. Senka perches on his shoulder, its quills aimed at us like arrows ready to fire.

'Afanas?'

'Get away from her,' the Mage hisses.

I turn to Saskia, trying to make sense of it.

'You have nothing to fear from me, my love. I mean you no harm.'

'Don't listen to her, Akesha. You don't know who she is. What she is.'

'Sas?' My voice trembles. 'Why did we come here?'

Her hand remains clasped in mine.

'There is much about me you do not know. I have not told you the full truth of who I am. Saskia is the name of this borrowed body, the latest in a long line of vessels that have housed my soul and mind across the ages.'

A shiver runs through me.

‘Sas, I... I don’t understand...’

‘I was born more than two centuries ago.’

She turns toward Afanas. Across her body, phantom insects, gastropods, and mollusks begin to appear, glowing faintly like moths.

‘But I am not your enemy, Mage. Wanjiru is mistaken about what we are.’

‘He will have ample time to put you to the question, Perjurer.’

My eyes widen. I can feel the power radiating from Saskia, from all the beings moving on and within her.

‘My true name has always been, and will always remain, whatever form I take: Sewit, third disciple of Niavhe, and founder of the Bark Refuge. Turn your vengeance elsewhere, Mage—’

‘Turn it on me,’ says a masked man, emerging from the darkness.

He wears a smooth enamel mask, expressionless, its surface catching the faint light.

### --- AFANAS ---

I can’t help but smile.

At last. After all these years of pursuit, he was finally within reach. He brushes past Taru, and to my surprise, Akesha’s Chimera coils affectionately around the hand he extends, leaving the Initiate stunned.

‘Go on, my dear. I’m right behind you,’ says the biologist Muna.

I grimace. So I have been wrong. She was the Eugenist, the one responsible for the Storhvit. She had found a solution to the Belasenka threat because she had been its creator. That made the Warlock the Anathema, most likely. For some reason, she was targeting Akesha. As if I would let that happen. I loose blazing bolts toward her. She deflects them effortlessly, but I press the attack, intent on pinning her down.

‘Oh, I don’t think so,’ a voice murmurs at my ear.

The Chrysanthemum-Cloaked Warlock is upon me in an instant. My assault had only been a feint to draw him in, and he has taken the bait eagerly. Senka coils around me, shielding me as I draw from the arsenal I have forged in the Empyrean.

Eidolons first, to begin my grim dance: Marduk and Prospero, wielding the Imbullu and the storm, clashing against the Kraken’s arms erupting all around me. The first exchange thunders through the chamber like a cracking whip.

‘You are mistaken, Afanas. You’ve let Wanjiru turn you into his pawn.’

‘I am no one’s pawn!’

I freeze the water into a coffin of ice to trap the cephalopod, summon constellations across the vault above, each sign granting its boon. The Sagittarius sharpens Senka’s quills, the Aquarius unleashes a deluge to drown the beast, Aries fuels the battering blows I rain upon my foe.

‘I taught you how to channel your rage. To give it purpose,’ he says with unsettling gentleness.

‘You taught me nothing!’

He reveals his own arsenal, cloaking himself in major arcana: the Chariot to counter the Bull, the Tower to shatter the pillars I sent crashing down, Temperance to restrain the torrent from my invocation, and the Wheel of Fortune to turn my attacks back against me.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see the one calling herself Saskia shielding Akesha from the devastation, guiding her toward the opening. But I no longer care. My target is here. My goal is within reach. So close to vengeance.

‘I will make you pay a hundredfold for the death of my kin, and for murdering my master.’

‘But Afanas... I am your master.’

He bends reality itself to evade a blazing strike.

'Lies!'

His tattoos flare, and he lashes the air with a tangle of thorny vines.

'I pulled you from the water. I gave you back the will to live. I gave you purpose. Qaasin was only one of the guises I wore for a time...'

What was he talking about?

'You were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. That cargo was bound for the Cebir. There was nothing personal about it.'

A wave of dizziness hits me.

'Your family was collateral damage.'

One of Senka's quills pierces through the thicket and strikes his face. The enamel mask splits in two, revealing one eye beneath.

'Afnas, you live only because I showed mercy. Because I pitied you.'

No. This is just a ploy. A cruel deception.

'You should be thanking me, not opposing me.'

### --- SITINA ---

Saskia remains outside to ensure no one interferes.

The door closes behind the Initiate like a trap. I watch her retreat toward me without seeing me, frightened and disoriented. How can she understand? She will soon learn that her entire life has been built on deception and manipulation. But for now, she's defenseless, blinded by love, by Afnas's fury, and by an innocence she is about to lose.

I stay in the shadows, unhurried when I should be. Time is short and yet, in another sense, we have all the time in the world.

I try to remember what she must be feeling in this moment, but it's impossible. Too long has passed. Too much has happened. I can only imagine it, even as I, at the far end of her existence, work to mend what needs mending so that everything might make sense.

This is both an ending and a beginning.

Treyst has laid the groundwork for transmigration, which would give rise to the metempsychosis we will use to pass from body to body.

Kalu has played his part, even if he believed he was fighting fate, ensuring the Ouroboros stands exactly where it must, here and now. Soon, the serpent will bite its own tail, and the loop will finally close.

Basira has entrusted the Phoenix egg to Kojo. It is incubating within Booda, awaiting rebirth. And Kojo... by now, he must have been marked by the Nightmare, glyphs inscribed across his skin like runes to contain the spread.

Atsadi will oversee his training, of course, and his odyssey will soon truly begin, until he is crowned again, for the second time.

Saskia will be part of that journey. It is she who will, perhaps out of love, bring Akesha back to life so she can ensure the cycle continues, on and on and on, by becoming me. One day, at the height of her existence, the Muna will succeed in shaping the perfect Exalt, the union of herself and the Alter Ego that was always meant for her.

Sylas will try to guide Ayxas, to steer him away from madness, preparing his soul to bear the weight of knowledge. Until the very end, he will believe it was knowledge of the Nightmare that drove him insane, when in truth it was something else entirely. Like all of us, he will learn the

hard way that we are all bound by fate, until he himself becomes an agent of resignation and of the Fates, taking Kesh under his wing even beyond death.

To shape me.

The alpha and the omega.

The beginning and the end.

The Tempus fugit.

I close my eyes and exhale, feeling the gears of destiny turn and lock into place like the pieces of a puzzle. Akesha will soon receive the Ouroboros within her, and through her the circle will become perfect. At the center of the ring, the Eclipse will take root, the Singularity of Time. And those who will fall beneath the clouds will have to pass through the underworld to master it, sealing it once more within a mortal vessel.

Thus I will be reborn.

Thus Aysun will be born.

They call me the prodigal child. In truth, it is a curse.

This knowledge is my burden, for eternity, and I have shared it with very few.

I had made the mistake of revealing it to my son, not knowing what it would bring. Like Sylas, I believed we had changed the course of things by training Ayxas as best we could... and instead, we brought about ruin.

They call us Perjurers, yet nothing can be further from the truth. We are the Ananke, the architects of necessity, of what must be. To rally all peoples in a distant land where a phoenix nests. To bind them under a single banner, borne by a twice-crowned king. To prevent the rise of the Paragons so humanity might retain its free will. And finally, to ensure the flow of history runs its course, unbroken, without paradox to hinder it.

I step toward Akesha, and she can now hear my footsteps echo beneath the stone dome.

Only one thing remains.

To tell her a story.

For what is unfolding today is the foundation of a dream.

A dream that will come to be called Asgartha.



# Homecoming



394 AC

--- WARU ---

'I failed.'

It feels strange to see him like this, far from the basileal palace, dressed as nothing more than a gardener. He is turning the soil, pulling weeds, miles away from the splendor and burdens of his former office. He straightens slowly, drawing a long breath.

'I tried to hold the reins of the Expeditionary Corps. I tried to...'

My voice breaks, and I lower my head. The weight of guilt bows my shoulders. Just days ago, I stood before the war memorial, silently reading the names of those who had fallen, or never been found. Among them were faces I remembered: Sunisa Suong, Aoife Dunlevy, Hoyt Ibanez... too many to count, and that didn't include all the Exalts who had perished.

'We did what we could with the tools we had,' he says simply, perhaps as consolation.

'The Rediscovery Endeavor is a failure... I betrayed the trust you placed in—'

Avkan's hand rests on my shoulder.

'No, my friend. You are mistaken. You led that first expedition exactly where it needed to go. It is not a failure. Far from it.'

I turn to him and realize he has knelt to meet my gaze.

'It is I who failed our friendship. I did not reveal everything to you. I kept you in the dark about the true purpose of this endeavor... It was only a first step, before others would take it up and make it their own. Believe me, we achieved our goal.'

I stare at him, uncomprehending.

'Everyone will say this initiative ended in bitter failure. A rout... So many resources and efforts invested. For what, exactly?'

Avkan lowers his eyes with the faintest hint of a smile.

'Let them talk. Let them gossip. Let them tarnish my name. I know the truth, and that is enough.'

'But...'

He removes his gloves and lets them fall at his feet.

'I have always seen the Rediscovery Endeavor as a heavy and terrible burden, for obvious reasons, but also because of chains far more difficult to bear than public opinion or the legacy I will leave behind. The consequences of our actions are more staggering than anything you can imagine...'

What did he mean by that?

He turns back to me, and for the first time in a long while, the weight and fatigue of age show on his face.

'It is time I confided in you. I am weary of carrying it alone. And you have earned the right to know the truth. The whole truth.'

Around us, birds chatter and trill, while insects buzz and drift above the garden beds. We are nothing more now than two old men in a secluded garden, with no one to overhear us...

And it is there, far from prying eyes, that the truth finally blossoms.  
In a stillness that feels like thunder.

--- SIGISMAR ---

'Ayxas was right.'

Anuncia turns to me, startled.

'What do you mean?' she asks, a note of apprehension in her voice.

'We are not ready. Not even close. You weren't there. You didn't see what we faced...'

'The Nightmare.'

I nod gravely.

'He tried to prepare Asgartha for its coming.'

She shakes her head sharply, as if rejecting my words outright.

'And that justifies tyranny? Is that what you're saying?'

She takes my hand and looks into my eyes, her gaze clouded with tears.

'You have no idea how relieved I am to see you back here, safe. When I heard what happened, when I thought you might have... I know I can't fully grasp what you went through... but if Ayxas had succeeded, Asgartha wouldn't be what it is.'

My sister... an idealist.

'Even if that means its downfall?'

I pull my hand away.

'Now that we know, we have no choice but to face it and act accordingly. When the Nightmare comes knocking at our door—when, not if—we must be ready to stand against it. We've been lucky so far. We must adapt, or we will perish.'

Her expression turns pleading.

'Sig...'

I kiss her on the forehead and leave her in the antechamber, heading toward the Basilissa's offices, heavily guarded. The doors open and close behind me, and I allow myself a long sigh now that I no longer have to maintain appearances.

'Long day?'

Somayeh pours herself a glass of wine. Another is already filled, and I am about to decline when I realize it isn't meant for me. Shiramun is already there, lounging comfortably on a divan. The Basilissa hands him one of the glasses, then takes a sip before even toasting.

'We were just raising a glass to the celebrations ahead.'

I drop onto the seat beside the Technophant, a touch nonchalant.

'What celebrations? I'd rather not count my chickens before they hatch.'

Somayeh only smiles.

'It is our turn to act now. We have much to celebrate. First, your appointment as Kaiser, high-commander of Asgartha's armies—a position no one could reasonably contest under the current circumstances. Second, our engagement, though it is still too soon to announce it, to best reflect the union of political and military power...'

Shiramun chuckles, but I pretend not to notice.

'But above all, Kelsang, must I remind you that we celebrate the rise of the Dominion—and the supremacy of humanity over ideas?'

I turn toward Somayeh and, for the first time, notice how tall and well-built this body is compared to my previous incarnation.

‘Then keep a bottle sealed for me. I’ll toast when our dynasty is firmly established, and all imagination lies under our dominion...’

She finishes her glass without flinching.

‘Of course, my dear...’



# Neverending Journey



394 AC

--- MOYO ---

She stands before the rows of graves, head bowed. Her chameleon does the same.

Many of the Reka had perished in the fall of the *Ulysses*. Not necessarily from the crash itself, though the impact had claimed many lives, but during the crossing of the Grand Stir, when the Tumult seeped into the vessel and the mutations began to take hold.

By all logic, we should have died as well. Yet something had prevented the ideas from taking root within us. They had sprouted and blossomed, only to disincarnate moments later, like Moths fading after a few fleeting minutes of existence. What distinguished the Asgarthans from the Reka? The level of Sap... or something else?

The cocoon, most likely.

The Reka Exalt had survived. Was it because the Chimera had siphoned off the Tumult?

I force these questions into the back of my mind, setting them aside for future experimentation. Now is not the time for such considerations, but for sheer survival. Given the state of the *Ulysses*, there was no hope of rejoining the rest of the Corps. In any case, the force of the Grand Stir would likely have made that impossible.

Della was overseeing the rescue operations, working to free any remaining survivors, while Bolt tended to those who could still be saved. Zhen had sent out her swan on a reconnaissance mission, to determine whether any threats still lingered nearby, Nightmares or otherwise.

Eyota, Osric, and young Kauri had helped dig the graves, before Yeong-gi placed a single stick of incense on each one.

Nadir and Sam had withdrawn into isolation, and Sunn had done the same. No one could blame them. Everyone copes with trauma in their own way.

All in all, we were not as badly off as we might have been: eighteen Exalts in total, and close to two hundred survivors. The losses had been severe, but there was still enough strength left to hope for a way out of this mire. Axiom artisans to build makeshift shelters, Bravos explorers to survey the surroundings, enough Ordis soldiers to maintain order, other Mages to monitor the Tumult... The Muna might be able to feed everyone. As for the Lyra... one could only hope they would do more than play their lyres.

There was also the enigmatic Odysseus. His Eidolon had manifested and introduced itself as the champion of Athena. It had offered its assistance, to guide us safely, to lead us toward our destination. Though that raised another question: did we even know where we were going? Asgartha? Or somewhere else entirely?

Then there was the thorny issue of Maw, now bound in chains to prevent further harm. It was said it had devoured his Alter Ego in order to molt. The Qorgan Mage remains at its side, determined to tame it, though success is far from certain.

I rest a hand on Silk's surface. It lifts its bulbous eyes toward me.

'You wouldn't do that, would you?'

--- SIERRA ---

I can feel him nearby, clinging to life after going into power-saving mode. I deploy the antenna I hastily assembled, trying to pick up his signal and triangulate his position.

*Hold on, Oddball. I'm coming for you...*

I asked Isaree to recover as much Aerolith as possible, both to rebuild her golem and to lighten the structure of the vessel we've decided to construct from the stripped carcass of the Ulysses. If we cannot take to the skies, we will still need a means of traveling beneath the clouds, a way to search for an exit.

'All I can do is inscribe Glyphs to slow the spread of the infection... but it will keep advancing within you.'

Kojo stares at the purplish markings etched across his arm. Thankfully, the eyelids remain closed... but for how long? Matz runs a hand over his face.

'Let me know if it spreads. I'll carve a new series of runes to contain it.'

Atsadi's Squire nods, though the prospect clearly does not reassure him. He rises and returns to his mentor's side, still bedridden.

*Dad...*

I lift my gaze toward the sky, toward what I assume is the direction of the Reka city, or what remains of it. With any luck, he managed to board an evacuation vessel and reach safety. Many of us had been separated from our loved ones. Eyota was determined to find her brother, attempting each day to contact him through the Gestalt, so far without success. Della wept often for her son, left behind up there...

Above us, directly overhead, Halua stretches across the sky like a parasol, his undulating fins silhouetted against a waxy, ill-omened firmament. Yet even more than that sickly vault, it is the black celestial body that terrifies me. It looks like an eye drifting across the sky, moving from zenith to horizon without any discernible path... I shudder, seized by the sudden impression that it is watching me in return.

There is something strange here, as though time itself has stalled, as though reality, once subject to the raw chaos of the Tumult, has taken on structure after our fall. It feels as if our thoughts and imagination are being guided by an external force... Some thinkers claimed that reality is shaped by its observers. Were they right?

I sigh and push the thought aside. What matters now is rallying everyone and organizing our efforts before despair sets in. We will need to summon Eidolons to help us build an Espar, secure food and ration it, ensure the safety of the survivors, chart our position...

And construct a vessel large enough, perhaps even a fleet, to carry us forward.

'A trireme...'

I turn toward the Eidolon, who studies me intently. I cannot tell whether he has read my mind or merely anticipated my thoughts.

'What do you think of naming it the *Homer*?' he continues. 'A grand odyssey awaits us, one that may, who knows, carry us to the very edge of the world. It would be fitting, wouldn't it?'





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