

CLARA  
OSWALD  
THE UNTOLD ADVENTURES

# A CITIZEN OF THE UNIVERSE





# **CLARA OSWALD**

## **THE UNTOLD ADVENTURES**

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*For years, every morning, I drank  
from Blackwater Pond.  
It was flavored with oak leaves and also, no doubt,  
the feet of ducks.*

*And always it assuaged me  
from the dry bowl of the very far past.  
What I want to say is  
that the past is the past,  
and the present is what your life is,  
and you are capable  
of choosing what that will be,  
darling citizen.*

*So come to the pond,  
or the river of your imagination,  
or the harbor of your longing,  
and put your lips to the world.*

*And live  
your life.*

— Mary Oliver



# A CITIZEN OF THE UNIVERSE

## Prologue

There was no one else on Westminster Bridge that night, for few dared brave the storm. It had descended upon London like a force of reckoning, draping the city in a thick veil. The ashen sky growled as if the clouds concealed a great beast that roamed out of sight, hunting those desperate or foolish enough to venture from the sanctuary of their homes. The stranger on the bridge gripped the rim of their hood against the gale while bitter raindrops struck their face. Lightning framed the Houses of Parliament and Elizabeth Tower as shadows waiting across the Thames, passing silent judgment on a woman out of time.

Clara Oswald ignored them, finding it preferable to stare at the pavement as she walked. The cold air caught in her lungs, a pungent infusion of coal smoke, manure, and foul river water. *Lovely*. In hindsight, perhaps she should have parked right outside. Of course, that wouldn't have given her time to think about what she was going to say when she got there.

Yeah... she really should have parked right outside. Could've at least spared her the miserable stroll down memory bridge.

What *would* she say? She pictured their puzzled expressions, the exchanged looks of concern, the unspoken words hovering between them like irksome flies. She knew the questions they'd have, and had no desire to answer them. Then there was the worst one of all to consider, no doubt the first thing they'd ask:

*"Where is the Doctor?"*

It was this question that had led Clara to leave the TARDIS a fifteen-minute trek from her destination. She drifted over to the balustrade and watched the waters churn amber beneath the bridge's Gothic lanterns. Maybe Ashil— *Me* was right, maybe coming here had been a mistake. Not that she'd admit it.

She crossed over to the other side and proceeded up Victoria Embankment, a cortège of lampposts guiding her through the haze. The trees that ran parallel to her

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swayed and creaked ominously; one had already fallen, its splintered remains littering the pathway. Voices hollered at the riverside, their owners trying in vain to steady the cargo on their steamboats amid the blare of distant foghorns. Further along, a few valiant carriages clattered past. A peal of thunder resounded. The horses champed the bit and tossed their heads in alarm before yielding under their driver's whips. They paid no notice to Clara.

When the screaming started – shrill enough to pierce through the storm – Clara resisted the urge to roll her eyes. *Really? Now?* Could she not set foot anywhere without this happening?

She hesitated. Simply being here was a risk; getting involved was a luxury she couldn't afford. Not anymore. *Keep walking, keep walking...* That was all she could do, there wasn't another option. *Just keep walking...*

The screaming persisted; a siren in the tempest. Clara closed her eyes. Then, with a heavy sigh, she headed towards it.

A house was burning. Flames reared defiant against the downpour from the roof, coalescing into impressive plumes that bled into the London smog. Onlookers had amassed around the foot of the building, but their attention was not on the fire. Hunched before them was a sobbing woman wrapped in a shroud. A policeman, custodian helmet askew, squatted beside her.

"Mrs Deering, please," he said softly. "Come into the warm. It's no good you being out in this weather."

The woman raised her stricken face. She couldn't have been much older than Clara – younger, even – yet her appearance was haggard; her cheeks blotchy, her gaze unfocused. "You ain't seen what I've seen," she rasped. "It's like they said in them sermons..."

"You've had a fright –"



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“Not three days he’s been in the ground. Facing eastward like they told me. But I must’ve done something wrong.” She pointed a shaking finger at the house. “It was watching me, aflame...”

A bald man with a bushy ginger beard wearing a stained overcoat spoke up. “That’s old Tearson’s place, God rest his soul. No one’s lived there in near a dozen years. You needn’t worry, missus. The Brigade’ll be here soon, if the rain don’t put it out first.”

Mrs Deering wasn’t listening. “Its form was as a child’s...” Her lip trembled. “But no child has such a face.”

Hanging back, Clara removed her hood and brushed her sodden hair from her forehead as she scanned the windows. Many were boarded up, and others had panes missing. True enough, the place looked long abandoned. There was a glint of... *something* protruding from near the chimney pipes, obscured by the blaze but distinguishable. Tracing her view downward, she caught a flicker of movement in the topmost storey. Her stomach lurched.

It was a hand, grasping helplessly at a window latch. Someone was in there.

Nobody else had noticed; they were still preoccupied with Mrs Deering. Taking her chance, Clara skirted around them and hurried to the door. Wiping off the pair of sunglasses she had stowed in her coat pocket, she popped them on and focused on the lock, which – after a brief whirring – opened with a satisfying *click*.

The house was just as dilapidated on the inside. It was unfurnished, save for a fallen bookcase, and the plaster was cracked – the wallpaper peeling. Dust coated everything in sight, but there was no disturbance to indicate that anyone else had entered prior. Clara didn’t have time to dwell on this detail. The fire hadn’t yet reached the stairs, allowing her passage to the upper floors. She hoped she wasn’t too late.

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Dense smoke flooded the second landing, forcing her to navigate through at a crouch. It wasn't long before an orange glow penetrated it, growing more fervent as she drew nearer. Coughing, she called out. "Hello? Can anyone hear me?"

No response.

The stifling air bore down upon her. It was all she could do not to choke on the fumes – the acrid taste of soot stung the back of her throat. Her eyes watered and her skin pricked as the moisture evaporated from it. How much longer could she hold her breath in this?

*Oh. A dangerous thought landed. You don't need to.*

Tentatively, Clara exhaled. Though her every instinct objected, she didn't breathe in again. It wasn't a pleasant feeling, like being suffocated without the passing out and dying part. Still, better than the alternative of actually asphyxiating.

She made it to the loft. Her view cleared a little as the smoke dissipated, and the source of the fire became evident. The object she'd spotted from the exterior wasn't part of the structure: it had smashed clean through the roof. Sparking and hissing, it was no larger than a car, and could have been mistaken for one if it weren't for the lack of wheels. In any case, it didn't belong in the late nineteenth century. The capsule's hull – as best as she could describe it – had split open, spouting steam in a steady torrent. Not far from it, someone wearing a filthy white jumpsuit was huddled in a corner, head buried in their knees, arms shielding their small frame. A child.

Clara stepped forward and almost lost her balance. The fire had weakened the floorboards, leaving a smouldering gap in the middle of the room. She rolled up her sleeves. Moving to the edge, she inched along a rafter, using the wall behind to steady herself. It groaned under her weight. The child looked up, revealing a startled face charred with soot and streaked by tear tracks. Peering out from under a mop of dirty auburn hair were two wide, frightened eyes.



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“Hey, it’s alright, I’m here to help,” said Clara, more hoarsely than she’d anticipated. “I need you to grab my hand, okay?”

She reached out. The child stared at her palm and backed into the corner.

“I’m not going to hurt you.”

The capsule shifted, driving itself deeper into the floor. It wouldn’t hold for much longer. Changing tactic, Clara adopted a more conversational tone. “What’s your name?”

The child sniffled and wiped their nose, confused. “Why?” they said.

“When you’re escaping from a burning building, it’s always nice to know who you’re escaping with. I’m Clara, by the way.”

“Ser— Seren.”

“Well then, Seren, I know you’re scared. I’ll let you in on a secret, so am I.” She glanced at the crackling flames below her. *But not of this.* “But there’s only one way out of here, so—”

“It’s too far!” Seren interrupted, their voice quavering with despair. “I can’t make it.”

“You can, and you will. You know why?”

Seren shook their head.

“Because you’re gonna choose right here, right now, to live. That’s all fear really is, our bodies reminding us that we want to survive. And once you realise that, you can do anything.” Clara lent out further. “Come on, let’s be brave together.”

Seconds passed. The wind whistled through the draughty shutters as the storm raged on outside. Embers and ash floated in the space between them, producing

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the effect of time slowing. Cautiously, Seren got to their feet and approached, treading across the creaking planks.

“There you go, see?” said Clara. “There’s nothing to worry about—”

A sickening crack. What remained of the floor gave way in a crash of cinders and fractured wood.

With a terrified cry, Seren leapt.

Clara caught them just in time, the force knocking them both backwards onto the opposite ledge. She used her body to protect them from searing debris sent up by the collapse, the gust of heat scorching her exposed forearms. Seren clung to her waist, whimpering. Clara hugged them back.

“I’ve got you, it’s okay.” She watched the fallen capsule erupt in the inferno, joined by the broken beam she’d been standing on a moment before. “You’re okay.”

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Back on solid ground, Clara led Seren away from the house to an alley where they wouldn't be seen or overheard.

"You came to this planet in that ship, didn't you?" she surmised, getting down at their level. "An escape pod, judging by the size. But you lost control in the storm, and it crash-landed?"

Seren nodded.

"What were you running from?"

They squeezed their eyelids shut and didn't reply, shaking their head vigorously.

Clara decided not to press that particular subject further. "Okay, where were you running to?"

"The safe place," Seren whispered.

"Safe place?" Clara repeated. "As in, here – in London? Where—"

She broke off. A chill stole over her that had nothing to do with the frigid rain. Big Ben tolled in the background, announcing the arrival of midnight.

"Listen," she said, composing herself. "I'm not really from around here either – well, technically not. I was on my way to see some friends, it'll be safe there."

They walked hand-in-hand through the streets, lamplight rippling on the paving stones. Clara's skirt stuck to the back of her legs and her damp jumper itched; she'd be drier if she had jumped headfirst into the Thames. Seren wore her oversized green coat, zipped to the top with the hood pulled up to hide their alien attire. The odd passerby would regard the two of them with pity, or else make an effort to look everywhere but in their general direction. Clara shot each of the latter with a glare that would make a Dalek wither. She supposed the two of them must

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have resembled an oddly dressed pauper and her ailing child on a fruitless search for refuge.

A train rattled overhead as they passed under the station bridge to Ludgate Hill. Seren startled at the engine's whistle, looking to Clara for reassurance. She couldn't help but smile. The silhouette of St Paul's was wreathed in fog when they turned from it into a narrow lane, choir song echoing from it with such conviction one might believe a hymn could drown out thunder. Clara found herself stopping outside a rundown publisher's firm – the faded letters of 'Whittaker and Co.' emblazoned upon it – to read the sign to the adjacent street: Paternoster Row.

Why was she so anxious? Granted, the prospect of having to recount recent events wasn't an appealing one, but it couldn't be more daunting than explaining how she'd wound up in the oesophagus of a Tyrannosaurus rex with a delirious old Scottish bloke, surely?

No... This was definitely worse.

Thinking it best to be discreet, she came by the rear entrance to 13 Paternoster Row. She and Seren took cover behind a stone wall and surveyed the residence's muddy courtyard. It was just as she remembered it, bordered by tarnished granite buildings with their blue painted doors. Of their own accord, Clara's eyes rested on a straw-strewn spot of the courtyard, where something should have been. Her hand went to the chain around her neck and clasped the cold metal of the key that hung from it until it hurt.

Nearby, someone coughed. Brought back to Earth, she hastily tucked the chain beneath her collar.

A moustached man in a tweed jacket dithered at the back doorstep, twiddling a bowler hat in his fingers. He appeared to be in the midst of an internal debate. Meanwhile, through the house's mullioned windows, Madame Vastra and Jenny were immersed in some style of waltz, accompanied by the throaty melody of a phonograph. Both dressed in sumptuous gowns after the period fashion, the two



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bobbed in and out of view in time with the music. Vastra led the dance, twirling Jenny expertly before pulling her in close. They shared a passionate kiss.

Making up his mind, the man rapped on the door. Inside, the dancing couple froze. From her vantage point, Clara could just make out Vastra's annoyed hiss.

*"Where is Strax?"*

"He's upstairs, polishing his proton blaster," replied Jenny in an undertone. "He insisted that he not be disturbed – something about 'manning the barracks.' I think the storm's set 'im off."

Vastra huffed. The Silurian broke from their embrace and stalked from the room, shortly appearing in the doorway to greet the man waiting. The threshold cast a welcoming shaft of light into the gloom.

"Good evening, Madam Vastra," the man said with a polite nod. "I tried the front, but Mr Strax, he—"

"Oh, I will be dealing with him, don't you worry." Vastra's smile was taut. "To what do I owe this unexpected pleasure, Inspector Gregson?" It was quite clear that she did not consider his arrival unexpected nor much of a pleasure.

"Sorry to trouble you at this hour, Ma'am. We've had reports of the peculiar, you know how it is." The Inspector gave a nervous little laugh, then seemed to think better of it. "Mrs Deering's been in a right state, ranting and raving about a demon child running rampant 'round Wych Street. Tearson's bookseller's set ablaze as well, her wailing it's an act of 'divine retribution'." He added under his breath, leaning in, "You know, the barber's widow – bit of an odd one. Sargent Porter swore he could smell whiskey on her."

"I am not wont to dismiss the account of someone in distress, however outlandish their claims may be," said Vastra in the manner of one choosing their words with

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care. “But... perhaps the witness in question is not the most reliable, given their present condition?”

“You’re quite right, of course,” agreed the Inspector, as though he’d thought this all along. “I spose it’s to be expected, a woman in her position. Prone to hysterics, fits of the fancies. She shouldn’t be out in public if you ask me, it’s not decent.”

Vastra scrutinised him coldly. “But I did *not* ask you, Inspector. Eleanor Deering has recently suffered a terrible bereavement. I’d admonish your lack of humanity, but humanity – as it pertains to your species’ nature – counts for little in my experience. She is to be treated with the utmost kindness, not shunned and demeaned for the crime of losing her husband. Loss is the most relentless of monsters, one that haunts us all.”

The Inspector blanched. “My sincere apologies, I spoke in poor taste.” He bowed his head.

Fortunately for him, this was enough to mollify a distracted Vastra, whose gaze skated over where Clara and Seren were lurking after the latter had let out a loud sneeze. Clara withdrew behind their cover, pulling Seren with her and praying neither of them had been spotted.

To her relief, Vastra addressed the Inspector again, having apparently not registered anything suspect.

“Yes, well, I shall tend to the matter in the morning, after this dreadful storm has subsided. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have important business I must attend to.”

“Right you are, Ma’am. I’ll be on my way then.” The Inspector, also relieved by the sound of it, donned and tipped his bowler hat then made to leave. “Oh, and Merry Christmas to you and your” – he cleared his throat – “companion.”

Vastra returned the courtesy and closed the door. Once the Inspector had trudged away, Clara took his vacated place, Seren still holding on to her. She lifted her free

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fist to the wood. It was shaking. *Why is it shaking?* Music had resumed in the living room. She heard laughter.

Jaw clenched, her arm fell by her side.

After taking a moment to steel herself, she turned to Seren and gently placed her hands on their shoulders.

“Seren, I am so, so sorry, but I have to go.”

The same fearful expression met those words. “Why?” they whispered.

“I need you to knock on this door, like that man did,” Clara continued with difficulty. “When someone comes, tell them... tell them the Doctor sent you. Tell them he said they’d help you... Don’t mention me.”

“Who’s the Doctor?”

Clara blinked back the rain – was it the rain? “That name will always find you help, wherever you are. Never forget that.”

“Can’t I come with you?”

“I wish you could, I really do, but...” Clara wished she were back in the burning attic; being in mortal peril was so much easier. “I’m...” *Dead*. “I’m not who you need right now. Please, do this for me. I promise you’ll be fine.”

Seren didn’t protest. Instead, to Clara’s surprise, they threw their arms around her. “I hope you’ll be fine, too,” they said. Clara was relieved they couldn’t see her face. “Thank you.”

While Clara kept watch from her position by the wall, Seren did as she had instructed. They cast a wary glance towards her. She nodded in encouragement.



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“Jenny dear, would you get that?” called Vastra. “And kindly remind the Inspector that I have made my intentions clear. I fear I may lose my patience if I go again.”

“May I suggest an acid-based deterrent?” interjected a familiar voice.

“Not now, Strax! However, I would like to have a word with you...”

Jenny, expecting someone several feet taller, didn’t notice Seren when she first opened the door. She couldn’t hide her bewilderment when she found, peeking up at her, the little figure still enveloped in Clara’s anorak. She bent down to listen to Seren’s message, murmured something in response, then put a comforting arm around them and led them indoors.

Clara didn’t stick around. They’d take care of Seren – better than she ever could. Allowing herself a final glimpse of the courtyard, she set off into the dreary night alone.

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The weather had eased by the time Clara reached the TARDIS, which was tucked among some shabby warehouses around the back of Waterloo Station. Me was leaning against a wall perusing a copy of *The London Evening Standard* in the shelter of an awning. Spotting Clara, she folded it up and tossed it onto the ground.

Clara nodded to the discarded paper. “Read anything interesting?”

Me took in Clara’s drenched clothes and dripping hair. “Not especially, I was merely trying to jog my memory.”

“Wondering what the other you is up to?”

“Something grim, I’m sure, given the timeframe,” Me said indifferently, picking at her cuticles. “As I recall, my community was rife with outbreaks and attempted revolts in

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its early days; would've required a strong hand and an even stronger stomach. Though of course, that's just conjecture."

"Just as well you didn't come with me, then," Clara said. "Running into yourself really isn't as fun as it sounds."

"How did it go?"

Clara forced herself to make eye contact. "No one home. They must have been out on a case or something."

A locomotive screeched on its rails on the platform above them. "Do you want to try another time?" Me asked.

"Nah, probably wasn't worth it anyway," said Clara brightly, the effect belied somewhat by an involuntary sniff. "Let's get going."

Me stayed where she was. "What happened to your coat?"

Clara flushed and started wringing out her hair as though it might remove the evidence. "Oh, um, someone needed it more than me."

She had the distinct impression that Me was on the cusp of saying something, but the immortal conceded to enter the TARDIS.

Alone once more, Clara allowed herself to relax. She examined her arms, running her fingers along skin miraculously unmarred by burns or blisters from the fire, then gazed up at the overcast sky, letting the drizzle fall on her face.

Whatever happened, she wasn't coming back to London. Never again.

The clouds parted. A waning moon gazed back at her, surrounded by a field of endless stars.

**CLARA  
OSWALD**  
THE UNTOLD ADVENTURES

# A CITIZEN OF THE UNIVERSE

WRITTEN BY RUTH LONG, ALEX  
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# THE UNTOLD ADVENTURES

## Chapter One

Earth looked so small. It hung in the void below, the sun illuminating its western side like a marble in candlelight. It would be night in London: Clara imagined herself curled up on the sofa in her flat with a cup of Earl Grey and her hardback copy of *The Night Thief of Ill-Harbour*, ignoring a growing pile of school papers that were begging to be marked.

She preferred it up here.

*Mind you, it isn't half chilly in space.* Clara drew her legs in towards herself a little, resting her feet on the ledge. The TARDIS roof was a squeeze for two, especially as you both had to avoid sitting on the lamp. But she didn't mind; even with a protective atmospheric shell around them, she was grateful for the extra warmth of another body beside her. The Doctor stared out into nothingness – in the metaphorical sense as well as the literal – with an odd expression on his face. One who knew him well enough might call it contentment.

Clara nudged him. “Er, Doctor, you still there?”

“Hm? Oh yes, just examining the...” He gestured to nothing in particular.

“The what?” she asked, amused.

He glanced at her, and smiled back. “Never mind.”

“You didn't listen to a thing I just said, did you?”

“Well,” he mumbled, “I did listen. I might not have heard.”

She laughed. “Okay then, fine. As I was saying before you decided to tune out on me, Cassiopeia.”

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“Gesundheit.”

Clara gave him a look. Not dignifying his comment with a response, she indicated a cluster of stars ahead of them. “Constellation of the Seated Queen. You can tell because of the ‘W’ shape, it sort of forms the chair she’s sitting in while she admires herself in her looking glass. And just next to her is Andromeda, the Chained Lady, right?”

“I’m impressed,” said the Doctor. Clara sensed a ‘but’ was coming. “But let’s make it a bit more challenging.”

“All eighty-eight constellations memorised, come on. That’s got to be a record or something.” She huffed in mock exasperation and shook her head. “So hard to please.”

The Doctor was messing with her, she knew. A smirk playing on his lips, he dramatically pointed to another position, his extended arm obstructing her view. “There, the little yellow one at the end of the arc. Name, coordinates, and story! Chop chop!”

Clara shoved his arm down. “How am I supposed to identify every star at random? There’s, er, quite a lot of them if you hadn’t noticed.” She paused for a moment. “Oh, don’t tell me you can.”

The Doctor, however, was now busy fumbling with the inside of his jacket. Clara watched in bemusement. He retrieved two steaming mugs, offering her one. “Hot chocolate?”

“How did those not spill inside your pockets?”

“Magic.”



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“Ha.” She took the mug from him and gave it a suspicious sniff. “This one’s not ‘recycled’, is it?”

“No,” he replied. “I just used whatever I could find in your kitchen cupboards, which isn’t much, by the way.”

“Well I’ve not exactly been around long enough to go grocery shopping, have I?”

The Doctor grunted, his brows furrowed. Clara took a sip to restrain herself from retorting and breaking the sulky silence that had just materialised. Her commendable attempt was thwarted when the drink made her splutter. “Did you put chilli powder in this?”

“Thought it would offset the taste of sucralose. The Aztecs swear by it.”

“I’m not sure they meant adding a tablespoon of the stuff to instant cocoa.”

The Doctor sampled his own hot chocolate and grimaced, leaving a line of froth on his upper lip. “Seems perfectly drinkable to me. You still haven’t told me about that star. Go on, teach, educate me.”

“Like you don’t already have the answers, o’ wise Lord of Time,” said Clara. “You’ve even got the moustache to prove it.”

“Humour me.” He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“*You*” – Clara punctuated the word with a playful poke – “are doing that thing where you ask me something I obviously don’t know just so you can show off.”

“Ah,” said the Doctor, nursing his shoulder. “You’ve seen through my cunning ruse.”

“Cunning isn’t the word I’d go for,” she said. “It’s a favourite tactic of pretentious twelve-year-olds. No one likes a smart-arse.”

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“Are you speaking from experience?”

“Shush. What are you waiting for, then? Your cover’s blown, brag as much as you like.”

The Doctor did as he was told. “Endrador Major. Sun of the planet Samos, which is home to a species I once met that had a legend to go with each and every object in the night sky.”

“So basically like humans, then,” interjected Clara. “Us, I mean.”

“In a manner of speaking, but no, it was far more than that. When your ancestors walked the Earth, they didn’t need spaceships or vortex manipulators to see the wonder of another world and age. Astronomy is history, a telescope is a time machine; a window to the last light of long-perished stars. The Asrathons understood this, perhaps better than anyone.”

Clara didn’t say anything. He was going into one of his reveries – best get comfortable. She shuffled nearer to him and rested her head on his shoulder. A distant comet shot through space, its tail as delicate and bright as filament.

“The Time Lords,” the Doctor continued, his Scottish burr softening, “wherever they are, would disagree, of course, but that’s just typical arrogance. You see, the Asrathons, like man, used the stars to navigate, mapping them out in astonishing clarity. As they did so, they developed their myths, and myth became religion. Study of the cosmos as faith, spirituality from science. They admired the universe by worshipping it, for amid the deep and infinite dark, they saw something worth believing in.

“Oh, come to Auros, the land of providence,” he recited in the tone of a man lost among his own memories. “Where to find paradise is to simply look above you.”

Clara perked up. “Auros?”

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“The Asrathon city. Some call it ‘The City of Burning Sapphire’. Bit of a misnomer really, it’s not actually made of sapphire.”

“What is it made of?”

“A unique form of chromastrite crystal,” he explained. “Characterised by its ability to change colour under different lights. But that’s only one of its properties. The Asrathons are a very clever bunch; they devised a way to harness stellar energy using a special crystal as the conduit. Geniah, they called it, the ‘Heart of Light’...”

The Doctor’s eyes became unfocused again. “Oh, those stars, Clara,” he said in almost a whisper. “I’ve been under many skies in my lives, but none were quite like the nights over that city. It’s said that the heavens of Samos are alive, a host of stars on a great odyssey, charted by the mortals below...”

“Hang on.” Clara, who until now had been listening wide-eyed, suddenly frowned. “In all this time you never thought to mention this place to me before?”

“Well, it’s never come up in conversation.”

“You’re an idiot, you know that?” she said fondly, huddling closer. “In case that’s never come up.”

“I thought that was common knowledge, but bonus points for candour.”

Clara took her chance. “Can we go?”

The Doctor tensed. His wry demeanour vanished. “What?”

“Go there,” she repeated. “You and me. Right now.”

He shifted his position, having become intently interested in his right shoe. “No, no, I don’t think so.”

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Then he clocked the look on Clara's face.

"Look, I'm romanticising it. It was a very long time ago. These things are always more impressive in the mind's eye, once time has worn the flaws away. You'd just be disappointed."

"Oh come on!" Clara couldn't hide her frustration. "You can't talk about somewhere like that and then backtrack on it!"

The Doctor took a deep breath. "Fine, I'll take you there one day, how's that?"

"One day isn't today."

"It's the best I can offer you, Clara. Please."

The silence was back again. There was something in that plea that made Clara hold her tongue. Something imploring, desperate.

"In the meantime," the Doctor finally said, draining his mug in one go and shuddering. "I have a better suggestion!" He quickly regained his enthusiasm, though Clara could tell it wasn't genuine. "Iribalis, the Elysian Sanctuary! A garden of exquisite beauty, the most magnificent of its kind in this universe, or the next." He paused, then muttered to himself, "Or maybe it was the second-most..."

Clara studied him, with his untamed hair, his mismatched jacket and hoodie, his silly old face drawn into a characteristic scowl. He'd unearthed something, a recollection that, for whatever reason, he wanted to lock away again.

"Alright," she said, "the 'second-most' beautiful garden, then. On the condition we stop off to see Jane first."

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The Doctor relaxed. “Deal. So long as the two of you don’t con anyone else. I’m not bringing Jeremy Clarkson to the nineteenth century again just so you can swindle him at poker.”

“I make no promises.”

“Same goes for the other thing,” he hastened to add. “I hate being the third wheel.”

“Hypocrite.”

He snorted. Hopping from the roof, the Doctor deftly manoeuvred himself so he landed within the TARDIS. From the doorway below, he reached out to help Clara down. She followed suit, grabbing his hand on her way so he could pull her safely inside, careful not to spill her unfinished hot chocolate – not that it would have been any great loss.

Steadying herself as she entered, Clara watched the Doctor while he busied himself with the controls. She felt a rush of affection, mingled with concern.

*What is it about Auros, Doctor? she wondered, what aren’t you telling me?*

She made a mental note to ask him about it when they got back from the Elysian Sanctuary – when the time was right.

“All set?” The Doctor grinned at her from behind the console.

Clara returned it. In unison, they each yanked a lever. The central column sprang into life, its rods of molten glass rising and falling, wheezing and groaning...

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It was a while before Clara realised she’d stopped breathing. She woke with a start from her fitful slumber – if you could even call it that. It had become clear within the first few days of being time-looped that proper sleep was no longer attainable.



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Instead, Clara was resigned to a semi-lucid state known to many an insomniac, her mind left adrift through the shadows of her restless subconscious.

Perhaps it was the absence of a heartbeat. That remarkable sound, content to fade into the background like the ticking of a clock until it drums through the temples as one rests their head at night. A dutiful rhythm announcing a miraculous fact to the universe: *I am alive*.

She missed that feeling.

Now even her breathing had stilled. What should have been vital was little more than a habit, something that she could simply *forget* to do if she were preoccupied enough. Clara abruptly opened her eyes and sat up. Out of instinct, she started hyperventilating as if her body were trying to compensate, desperate to draw in air it didn't need. Her chest tightened; an emotional response more than a physical one. Breathing, whether she needed it or not, maintained the illusion that she was as alive as anyone else, not suspended somewhere between life and death.

Manually inhaling and exhaling so that it slowed and – she hoped – sustained (the sensation felt like restarting a biological motor), Clara scanned the room. Like most of the TARDIS, it was bare except for the faintly glowing roundels that seemed to populate every wall and the broad, silver pillars which stood in corners and around doorways. Her bed was the only piece of furniture to break the monotony of stark whites and greys.

She had no idea if this TARDIS had once belonged to somebody else. Perhaps some unfortunate old Time Lord had submitted their time capsule for repair at the Gallifreyan capital's workshops, only for it to be stolen by their new president and his illicitly extracted companion. *If someone did own this before, they must have had really dull taste*. Clara held back a smile. The Doctor would probably be upset if she'd said that; he'd insist that it was 'elegant' or 'minimalist'. Actually, 'genius' was the word he'd used.

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An uncomfortable lump threatened to swell in her throat. Clara's breaths faltered. She tried her best not to think about him, about any of what had happened. But her efforts to suppress those memories had proved unsuccessful, to say the least. On the contrary, she often found herself replaying scenes of recent history in disconcerting clarity; a cruel irony that wasn't lost on her.

*"Smile for me. Go on, Clara Oswald, one last time..."*

Her eyes were stinging again. She didn't know whether to be thankful or resentful that she was still able to cry.

Not wanting to remain there (besides, it's not as if she *needed* to sleep), Clara climbed out of bed and headed through the door, emerging into a wide, hexagonal corridor with the same simple monochrome design. A gentle hum pulsed throughout the TARDIS. It pervaded Clara's thoughts as she wandered down the empty hallway, past an endless series of identical doorways and passages.

What was she doing? Barely a week – if that – outside of her timeline and she'd already allowed herself to get sucked into things again. She was on the run for God's sake; under the circumstances, visiting old friends sat squarely in the 'terrible plan' category. What had she expected? To announce to Vastra, Jenny, and Strax over tea and scones that the Doctor had selective amnesia and she'd snuffed it? Of course, leaving a kid on their doorstep wasn't much better...

She was flying blind, with no real notion of what the consequences would be, yet she still clung to the shaky assumption that everything would be *fine*. It troubled Clara that she didn't care – not enough, anyway. Otherwise, she would have done what she was supposed to do and gone straight back to Gallifrey.

Was that not why she and the Doctor had parted ways in the first place? Because neither of them knew when to stop?

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Clara noticed she was gripping the inside of her wrist again, a nervous habit she'd developed. She let go, coming to a halt.

Her feet had led her to the main control room. In the centre, the lone console unit twinkled with intermittent lights while the time rotor revolved lazily in its transparent column. Clara walked over and ran her hand along the console's surface. A soft, electronic warbling accompanied its vibrating: it reminded her of home. Not that she had one anymore.

No matter how in awe she was that this machine, this *TARDIS*, was hers to fly, it could only ever be a temporary reprieve, couldn't it? 'The long way round' had felt so *right* when she'd declared it to Me, confident in the freedom granted by a technicality. Now, Clara wasn't so sure.

*God, I'm getting morose.*

"Just your luck, hey?" she addressed the console out loud as she leaned against it. "Waiting for someone to take you into the stars and you end up stuck with a woman in her pyjamas having an existential crisis."

Clara half-expected, half-hoped for a response, but the *TARDIS* continued to whirr placidly.

"Well, if it helps," she breathed, staring at the rotor, "I don't think we'll be doing this for much longer."

That was the decision she had to make, wasn't it? Carry on taking chances, or honour her duty to the universe. Face the Raven, like she should have from the beginning... before the Doctor had gone through hell to bring her back. The stubborn git, why couldn't he have just accepted her death?

Clara's eyes burned. She knew the answer. She was the only one who did.

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Tapping her fingers, she flicked a switch on one of the control panels. In the corner of the room, an entrance – concealed as a bank of roundels – swung open, and Clara stepped into the annexed diner. She'd rarely come in here since they'd left Nevada; the control room already had functional exterior doors, making the area somewhat redundant, a byproduct of the faulty chameleon circuit they'd still not figured out how to fix. Without sunlight cascading through the windows, the blue and pink neon contouring the ceiling bathed it in a violet hue. This, along with the vacant booths and luminous signs, gave it an eerie, nostalgic ambience, like the place had been plucked and realised from an un-lived memory.

Clara lingered at the threshold, hugging herself. She searched the tiled floor in front of her for an absent figure strumming on a guitar.

*“Never be cruel, and never be cowardly, and if you ever are, always make amends.”*

But what was more cowardly: bowing to the inevitable or running from it? It was her responsibility to right all of this. Why was she so determined to delay that?

A metallic grinding came from the other end of the diner, jolting her attention. The Wurlitzer jukebox had crackled into life of its own accord. Selecting a record, it began to play:

*Don't stop me now,  
I'm having such a good time,  
I'm having a ball...*

Frowning, Clara approached it. The music – a lively jazz cover – had the muffled quality to be expected from 1950s technology, but was clear nonetheless. She knew the song too well; she'd picked it out a short time ago.

*Don't stop me now,  
If you wanna have a good time,  
Just give me a call,  
Don't stop me now,*

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*Don't stop me I'm having a good time,  
I don't want to stop at all—*

She turned it off. Beyond the jukebox, through the open blinds, the outside world was dark and indistinguishable. They'd opted to land on a desolate moon after London, lay low for a while. Which is what they should have been doing anyway.

"If you're trying to cheer me up," Clara called out, "I'm afraid you're not doing a very good job."

"It's the thought that counts," a voice replied.

Clara spun around. Me was standing by the door, hands clasped behind her, composed as ever. She was wearing the same worn jacket and ankle-length mauve skirt as earlier, her long hair and clothes immaculate despite the torrential rain they'd been out in. "Are you okay?" she asked.

"Yeah, fine," said Clara automatically. "Couldn't sleep."

"You realise you don't have to?"

"I know." She moved to the counter and perched on one of the stools, itching to change the subject. "So, been looking through the library?" Daft question. Me did little else during downtime on the TARDIS. *I'm usually better at this...*

"Yes." Me smiled mildly. "I've found my diaries."

Clara sat up, taken aback. "Seriously?"

Me nodded. "I'm not sure how, but the TARDIS has managed to archive most of the volumes." She joined Clara at the counter. "I've been studying them, re-familiarising myself."

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Clara blinked. “Didn’t know they could do that,” she remarked, turning her seat back and forth with her foot. “You’re clearly having more luck than I am. TARDISes and me... you could say we have a bit of a rocky history.”

“It hasn’t played music for me yet.”

“She,” Clara corrected. “And no, but I bet you’ve never had a hologram leopard set on you, either.”

Me rested her chin on her hand. “I wouldn’t know,” she said. “I could have. Perhaps I’ll read about it.”

It was a lighthearted comment, but Clara still felt a pang of sadness for her. *There must be a hell of a lot to read.* The young Viking girl she’d first met had long been buried under the weight of eternity; she barely recognised her now. But in fleeting moments, like her look of awe when they’d taken off after first leaving Earth behind, she’d glimpse something refreshingly... *young.*

What would Me do when she was gone? She’d have the TARDIS (assuming the Time Lords didn’t confiscate her upon their arrival – they’d have to prepare for that scenario), and she’d picked up piloting faster than Clara could teach her, but where do you go next after living to the end of everything? She wouldn’t have Clara dragging her around, and maybe that was for the best.

They’d lapsed into silence, both women absorbed in their own thoughts. Clara bit her lip. “Me?” she ventured after a while.

Me raised her head.

“We’ve done enough, right?”

She narrowed her eyes. “What do you mean?”



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Clara rubbed the back of her neck – another habit. *How do I put this?* “I mean, I thought maybe we should...” She sighed. “Go back. To Gallifrey.”

Me couldn’t read minds (not to Clara’s knowledge, anyway), but she certainly had a knack for giving that impression whenever she paused for thought. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” Clara said in as casual a tone as she could manage, fiddling with a dial on the radio next to her. “There’s no point in putting it off anymore, is there?”

“What happened to ‘there’s wiggle room’?”

“Well, I said we’d stop off and now we’ve done that.” Hoping – but doubting – that settled the matter, she slid off the stool and made to go back to the control room.

“Is that really all you wanted, Clara?” Me called after her. “A few days, a few short excursions. That’s it?”

Clara stopped, holding the door halfway. She glanced over her shoulder. “Does it matter?”

“It’s your life,” Me said.

“Was my life,” said Clara as she continued to the console and began priming the TARDIS for flight. Me followed with her arms folded. “But,” Clara added, striding around and pressing buttons, “I don’t see why we can’t go on one last trip.” A consolation she was offering to herself as much as Me.

“One *last* trip.” Me didn’t sound convinced.

“We’ll make it a good one.” Clara tucked her hair behind an ear. She looked up from the controls. “I promise.”

Resigned, Me played along. “Do you have somewhere in mind?”

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*“Oh, those stars, Clara...”*

*A shock of wavy grey hair; a loose red button on the cuff of a frayed jacket sleeve; the smell of ozone, old books, and hot chocolate; old eyes steeped in sorrow that left an unanswered question on her lips...*

In reply, Clara yanked a lever. The central column sprang into life, rising and falling, wheezing and groaning. In spite of everything, she grinned.

“I know the perfect city.”

## Chapter Two

The TARDIS lurched violently. Clara wrestled with the controls, which had developed a mind of their own; hellbent, it would seem, on impeding their landing.

“What’s wrong?” asked Me, using the console to steady herself.

“Dunno.” Clara thrust one of the levers down hard; the engines protested with a juddering moan. “She’s not happy about something. Then again,” – with a grunt of effort, she slammed another – “it’s probably just ‘cos of me.”

At least, she guessed that was the reason.

“I assume this is that ‘rocky history’ you were referring to in action?” Me said.

“Textbook demonstration, yeah. And here I was thinking we were getting along!” Clara glowered at the rotor. *These time machines and their attitude problems, honestly.*

Accepting defeat, the TARDIS ceased her tantrum. In one last show of defiance, however, she made no attempt to touch down smoothly.

While Me was getting back to her feet, Clara’s eyes were glued to the monitor in anticipation. The dancing Gallifreyan symbols flickered and gave way to reveal...

Nothing.

Nonplussed, she hit a switch and started towards the whirring doors, only to be met with a solid wall of rock.

“Are you certain this is the right place?” Me had a hint of amusement in her voice as she brushed herself off.

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“Coordinates check out...” Clara said, peering down a gap to her left just wide enough to squeeze through. Shifting along and sucking in as hard as she could, her elbows grazing against the rough stone, she managed to come out on the other side.

“So we’re in a cave, apparently,” she said, her voice reverberating off the walls. The only light emanated from the TARDIS interior, though it did little to cleave through the darkness ahead. “I’m gonna have a look. Coming with?”

“As enticing as that sounds, I think I’ll leave you to enjoy the view,” Me replied from inside. “Do let me know if you find anything.”

“Right. Sure.” Quite a change of pace, knocking about with someone who didn’t have the poise and self-restraint of a preschooler. Unless she counted the TARDIS, of course. Clara did her best to ignore a slight twinge of disappointment.

Using the sonic sunglasses to guide her, she followed the tunnel with only the sound of her footsteps for company. Every so often she swore she could hear a soft rumbling, at one point pausing for a good minute to try and pick the noise out, but it was so faint as to be almost indistinguishable from the ambience of the cave itself.

A sliver of gold soon appeared in the distance. Clara quickened her pace, pocketing the glasses and squinting as the cave mouth opened before her.

“Oh, you are kidding me...”

If the phrase still held the same meaning for Clara, she’d call the sight that greeted her breathtaking. She was standing on a cliff that fell before an immense valley, guarded as far as the eye could see by mountains powdered with snow. Verdant hills spilled onto the landscape, meeting at the edge of a shimmering lake fed by a lattice of streams. Interspersed among copses of woodland, the hills were stippled with delicate pink and yellow flowers. Elsewhere, sweeping fields, pale-leafed

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orchards, and what resembled vineyards encircled a city that rose forth from the lakeside. The sky was a vibrant cyan, shot through with curling wisps of cloud.

The city, which Clara assumed could only be Auros, was a marvel. Layers of ivory buildings were capped with domed roofs hewn of what must be the eponymous crystal; a brilliant array of vivid blues, turquoises, and greens glistening as though fashioned from the sky itself. Unsupported bridges stretched across great crystalline spires. Aqueducts and viaducts reached out to the surrounding countryside, white train-like vessels gliding along some of them.

Nothing, however, drew her attention like the tower at the heart of the city. It ascended high, carved into a spiralling, sceptre-shaped form bearing an enormous dome of dazzling sapphire aloft.

A tingling sensation – or some semblance of it – ran through Clara’s body. It was a picture from a fairytale – well, excluding the fact that this was evidently an advanced civilisation. Ships whizzed overhead like metallic bees, settling in or departing from some kind of spaceport nestled at the city’s outskirts. A cool wind brushed Clara’s hair into her face; the air was crisp and carried a bracing scent reminiscent of peppermint and pine.

Eventually regaining her senses, she pulled herself from the view and returned to the TARDIS. Me was still at the console, browsing through a thick tome bound in red leather that Clara took to be the ship’s manual – why Me considered it engrossing reading material remained a mystery to her. She glanced up as Clara entered. “Any luck?”

Aware that she couldn’t stop beaming, Clara said, “You’re not gonna believe this.”

Me set the book down with a decisive thud. “Try me.”

“You’re on.” Clara wavered, an idea forming. “Just... do me a favour. Close your eyes.”

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To her surprise, Me obliged and allowed herself to be led out onto the bluff.

“Okay, yes, my parking was off the mark. But you can’t deny this is... pretty awesome.” Clara guided her into position, then patted her shoulder. “Welcome to Auros.”

It felt that there was little left that could impress Me: living forever had a way of doing that to you, Clara supposed. She watched, curious, as the immortal blinked her eyes open and took in the scenery. Her reaction was – as expected – inscrutable, except for the smallest flicker of something Clara couldn’t quite place.

“Well,” Me said at last, “I suppose you’re right.”

“Yeah, get that a lot,” Clara quipped. “Let’s go see it up close!” She skipped back into the cave, saying, “Shall we aim for the city centre, yeah?” Before adding under her breath, “Operative word being *aim*...”

Me hadn’t budged. “Clara?”

“Hm?”

“You’re still wearing your pyjamas.”

“... Ah.”

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After some trial and error on Clara’s part, they settled on an abandoned, shaded courtyard in which they left the TARDIS. The outer shell stood among ancient arches and tarnished flagstones in all its retro Americana glory. It should have looked ridiculous, but the sight had the whimsical, inexplicably grand quality of children’s tales and irreverent science fiction. *No wonder Clara likes it*, thought Me.



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“You’ve wedged us in,” she observed, stepping from the front entrance of the diner. Indeed, the building stuck out awkwardly between some columns.

“Beats being stuck in the open,” said Clara, pulling on a jacket as she closed the glass door behind them. “I really don’t want to have to explain our pop-up restaurant routine to the locals.”

She paused with her fingers still on the handle, staring at the lock.

Me turned from her appraisal of Clara’s parking job. “What is it?”

“Just realised, I don’t have a key.”

“We’ve not needed one.”

Clara tore her gaze away and cleared her throat. “And I suppose now we never will. Cheery thought.”

Sensing her unease, Me steered the conversation elsewhere. “So, our destination?”

Clara shrugged. “Anywhere.”

Me pursed her lips and said, “As much as I appreciate the sentiment, you’re playing coy again.” She wouldn’t pretend that this tendency of her companion’s wasn’t frustrating. *That, and her erratic TARDIS piloting...*

“I didn’t exactly come with an itinerary,” said Clara. “Never been here before.” She went over to the large, rusted gates set into the wall across from them and unlocked them with a quick buzz of the sunglasses. “Look, let’s just see what we fancy. Immerse ourselves in the local culture, taste the food, kiss a stranger – whatever. You know, the gap year approach.”

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Me *didn't* know, but elected not to say as much. "Would it have killed you to research the place beforehand? The data banks are good for more than just looking up directions."

"Oooh, no points for tact. Where's the fun in knowing everything? C'mon, live a little." Though her tone remained bright, Clara's face lost some of its lustre. "After all, I'll be dead—"

A chunk of crystal landed at her feet with a *thud*. They both looked up to see a little human girl sitting on a moss-covered roof that overlooked the courtyard, her legs dangling over the edge. She was gaping at the two women as though they'd spontaneously materialised from the aether – which, admittedly, they just had.

"... tomorrow."

After an excruciating pause, Clara offered a sheepish smile. "Um, hello."

The girl flinched, her large, olive-green eyes wide. With surprising speed, she scrambled down the other side of the roof, dislodging more crystal fragments in the process.

"Hey, wait!"

But it was too late: she had already disappeared from sight.

"Case in point," said Clara, turning to Me, "why I'm all for discretion."

With that, she pushed the gates open – the other sides of which were plastered with signs declaring: 'Beware, Keep Out' – and strolled down the adjoining alleyway. Me watched after her, taking a moment to heft her heavy knapsack a little higher on her shoulder before catching up.

They passed through elegant streets whose buildings were draped in foliage, the crystal domes refracting coloured patterns onto the path like stained glass. Before

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long, they came out onto a bustling thoroughfare. It extended at an incline towards the tower, which loomed, monolithic, against the mountainous backdrop.

The area was a cacophony of activity, teeming with beings of all manner and origin. Several finned aliens with nautilus shells for heads conversed among themselves, erupting in polite laughter that sent bubbles spurting from their beaks; an individual that Me recognised as an Ailuri, which bore an uncanny likeness to a red panda (six limbs notwithstanding), reclined on a stone bench smoking some variety of strong-smelling herb with its prehensile tail. And there were even more humans, most of whom had gathered around a tall, dark-haired woman in navy uniform. “All arrivals from the Delta Shuttle to me,” she declared in a modulated voice. “We’ll be commencing the tour in seven minutes.”

Clara regarded a pair of giggly teenagers, her expression torn between delight and confusion. “It’s a lot more... touristy than I expected,” she admitted. “I thought these people lived here – Asrathons, I think they’re called?”

“What do they look like?” asked Me.

“I’ve... no idea, actually.”

“Well, would you like to join the tour? *They* surely have an itinerary.”

Clara reeled at the thought. “Stuck following someone around while they waffle about stuff you could discover for yourself? That’s the travel equivalent of wearing toddler reins.”

Me refrained from pointing out the hypocrisy of that statement. “If you’re sure.” She considered for a moment, then asked, “So, since you’re serving as my guide, how does this work?”

“You’re not telling me you’ve never actually time-travelled before?”

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“Before I met you? Only in the tedious, chronological sense as far as I know. I assume similar rules apply to touring alien planets as they do to traversing history?”

Of course, Me was no stranger to interstellar travel, though the experiences had faded from her memories. But indulging Clara’s enthusiasm was a small kindness she could offer her.

Clara gave a strained laugh, as though at a private joke that had soured. “There aren’t any ‘rules’, not really. It’s more of an art than a science. Knowing when to make waves, and when to let things be. Almost like... intuition, I guess.”

“And what does your intuition tell you now?”

“That this is how it should be,” she replied, smiling wanly. “No dashing about, no making a fuss, just... a nice note to end on. Think of it as, I don’t know...”

“A last hurrah?”

Clara made a face. “If you like. But the point is, let’s not get mixed up in anything more dangerous than haggling over snow globes at the gift shop, okay?”

“I never meant to suggest otherwise,” said Me.

“Well, just so we’re clear.”

“Crystal.”

“Wait a minute, was that a pun?”

“I don’t do puns.”

“... Shame.”

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They continued up the thoroughfare, past busy market stalls peddling elaborate instruments, talismans, and other curious wares in the shade of silken canopies. Blossoming trees of cornflower blue scattered their petals over the cobbles with the finesse of bridesmaids throwing confetti.

Clara ushered them into the heart of the festivities, saturated with rich aromas of exotic flowers – fresh juniper, Ucari eucalyptus, and the citrus notes of satona chlorensis were just a handful that Me was able to identify. Everywhere she turned, she was met with an ever-growing jumble of sights, sounds, and smells. A group of Iborians – chimeric aliens somewhere between lizards and centaurs – lounged by a round table, downing multiple shot glasses of a smoking magenta beverage with various townsfolk cheering them on. Children of all species barged past, zooming towards vendors who were loudly promoting their goods. A flock of swallow-like creatures soared overhead, their wings composed of glass that caught in the sunlight.

It was suffocating.

The bustle and chatter stifled Me, yet she deftly weaved through the crowd with such familiarity that it caught her off-guard. When had she last walked among people? Victorian London had been relatively remote, having driven most away with its storm, and her previous detours with Clara had been decidedly low-key. This entire scenario was alien to her. She was certain that she'd have embraced the experience once, but now she merely felt like she was being swamped by a sea of the dead, ready to disperse at the slightest touch.

Clara seemed to suffer from no such thoughts. Petals settling in her hair like fresh snowfall, she sauntered ahead, eyes darting over everything there was to see: fire dancers swaying to their own psychic symphony, tourists admiring their newest astronomical trinkets, students hoarding the food stalls without shame. Her gaze rested on a cart laden with strange goods where the vendor, who could be best described as a smarmy-looking bipedal lynx, was hawking at passers-by.

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“Well met, fair one!” he boomed to Clara in greeting, baring a set of crooked yellow fangs. Me assumed he was going for a friendly grin, but the effect was quite the opposite. “Might I catch your fancy?”

Clara, however, seemed rather taken with his brand of disingenuous charm. “Depends. What are you selling?”

With a flourish, he motioned at the twinkling objects placed in rows before him. “Bottled starlight, pure and simple. Consecrated by the Visionary himself. I call them my ‘Stars in a Jar’.”

“How much for one?”

The vendor leaned forward conspiratorially. “For you, my dear? Six hundred lys.”

Me spared the spherical jars a cursory glance. From that alone, she determined that they *weren’t* worth the price. Expecting to be led away to pastures new, she began to turn, but faltered when Clara stooped low to examine the jars more closely.

“You’ll have to forgive me – I’m fairly behind on my exchange rates – but six hundred lys sounds like a lot.”

“Oh, no,” he chuckled, “I’m giving you a special discount. Half-price.”

“Aww, that’s so sweet of you—?”

“Androcles.”

“Androcles. Lovely name. Suits you.” Clara picked up a jar and twirled it. The liquid inside glowed azure as it swooshed back and forth before fading back to a clear sludge. She made a convincing show of puzzled innocence. “This ‘starlight’, it’s all squidgy. Is it supposed to look like that?”

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“Yes, yes, indeed!” he said. “It’s locally sourced. Harvested and refined here in Auros.”

Abandoning all pretence of the gullible tourist, Clara measured him with a stern expression. “I think you and I both know that’s a load of rubbish.”

Androcles dropped his genial manner with equal abruptness. “And I think you’ll find you’re mistaken.” Despite the conviction in his tone, his tufted ears flattened against his head, and his fur stood on end.

“Come off it, I wasn’t born yesterday. You know what I think this is?”

“Now listen here—”

“I think it looks a lot like bioluminescent algae.” Her announcement had the desired effect. Androcles’ eyes bulged, his jaw slack. Clara smirked in triumph. “Used some to stop a nasty horde of shadows once. Are you a con artist, Androcles?”

He laughed nervously. “Perish the thought.”

“Really. I’m sure the local authorities will take a shine to your story. Unless there’s something you’d rather tell me?”

The vendor licked his lips. His gaze flitted beyond Clara’s shoulders for the briefest of seconds, but Me had honed herself to catch such fleeting gestures. She cast a glance backwards, and noticed something she hadn’t before: faceless silver figures with skeletal, mechanised limbs patrolling the populace. The local police, no doubt.

“Confound you,” Androcles said with a low growl. “Fine, I’m a common fraud, coaxing what I can from unsuspecting visitors. One has to make ends meet somehow.”

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“I’m sure it’ll be seen that way in the eyes of the divine,” Clara declared. Me posited that she could give the swindler a run for his money and instil the fear of God simultaneously.

But Androcles found little humour in the situation. “Please,” he implored Clara in a hushed, desperate voice, “I’m begging you, don’t expose me. I vow on my devoted allegiance to the Star Seers that I’ll give up this disreputable lifestyle.”

“Alright, money where your mouth is,” Clara said. “Pack up shop and don’t come back until you’ve settled on an honest trade.”

Androcles exhaled in relief. “I give you my word.” Placing a paw on his chest in a salute, he bent down and threw a shabby tarpaulin over his merchandise to prove his commitment.

“Good. I’ll be checking in.” Clara made an ‘I’m watching you’ sign with her fingers as she walked away.

The vendor muttered a colourful selection of phrases Me wouldn’t have needed the TARDIS to translate the meaning of. He then looked at her, registering her presence for the first time. “Would you —”

“No,” she said bluntly before hurrying after her companion.

“Enjoyed that,” Clara said as soon as Me had caught up.

“I could tell. ‘The eyes of the divine’?”

She smirked again. “Pillow talk with Jane Austen. You pick up a lot of melodramatic turns of phrase.”

Me looked on reticently. “You’re in good spirits.”



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“Yeah, well, ticking countdowns make you appreciate life all the more.”

Clara pulled her by the hand and they plunged once more into the throng. But their encounter with the merchant had piqued Me’s curiosity. The dizziness that had overwhelmed her gave way to the rousing of former instincts – her own keen intuition, which had ensured her survival through the ages. There was something in the air, cloying it like a stench. Me knew it well, though she had grown desensitised to its influence long ago.

*Fear.*

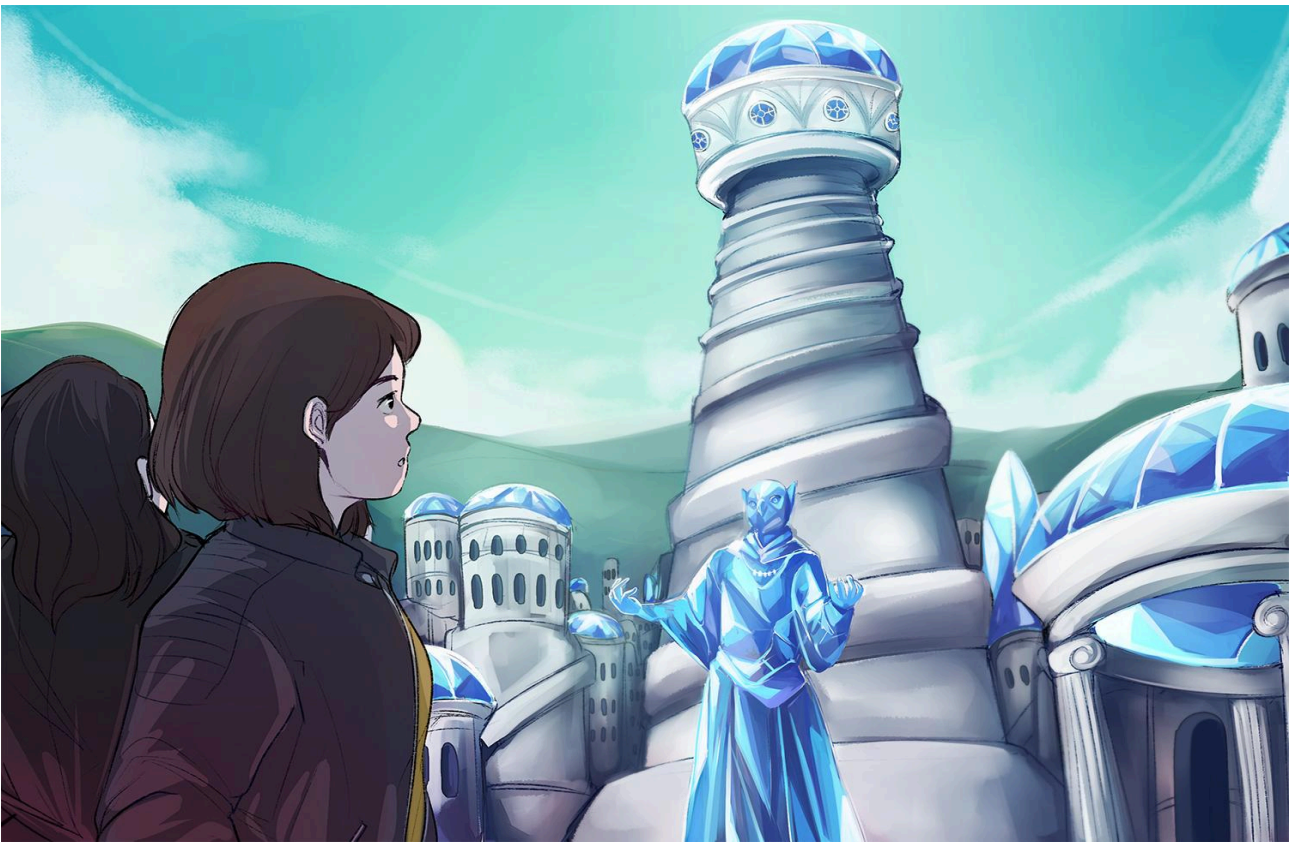
Much like the canvas of an old oil painting, one need only look closer to notice the cracks. It was easy to tell the visitors apart from the locals: while the former basked in luxurious ignorance, the latter wore smiles that didn’t quite reach their eyes. They moved with hunched shoulders and brisk, stumbling gaits as they rushed to their destinations, shared furtive glances in silent solidarity. A society in the grip of some unspoken torment, restless beneath the veneer of pomp and revelry yet not daring to openly acknowledge it.

If Clara had picked up on this, she kept her thoughts to herself. Me didn’t wish to trouble her, not now.

*Let her enjoy this while it lasts. It’s the only time she’s got, after all.*

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## THE UNTOLD ADVENTURES



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As they walked under a set of arches the road became broader, spreading out into a vast, round forecourt that finished at the foot of the tower. A crystal monument welcomed the arrivals. Humanoid in form, avian in features, the sculpture raised its arms in exultation, its crested head turned to the sky. Me watched as Clara dawdled before it, reading the inscription etched into its pedestal aloud:

“‘Tarchus, first Visionary of Auros, custodian of Geniah and founder of the hallowed Observatory. If you seek paradise, simply look... above you...’”

“One of the Asrathons, presumably,” remarked Me.

Clara didn't seem to have heard.

The tower's pearly walls sparkled in the late afternoon sun. Winged gargoyles perched on the building where it widened at the base, surveying the square with gemstone eyes.

The tour guide and her entourage gathered behind Clara and Me. “The Observatory, also known as ‘Geniah's Cradle’, is the seat of Auros’ cultural prosperity, religious heritage, and spiritual authority,” she said, sounding disinterested in her own monologue. “It predates much of the city by centuries; established by early settlers almost a thousand years ago to house the sacred crystal and its mechanism.”

Despite the density of people populating the square, most gave the tower a wide berth. But Clara, ever drawn to where others feared to tread, stepped boldly forward, beckoning for Me to follow.

The two women joined a scarce line of lavishly dressed devouts climbing the stairs to the building's grand doors, which led into an airy entrance hall. A brass orrery decorated the room; its many arms, each holding a polished globe, orbiting around a glowing orb to simulate the local solar system. On its far side was an ornate, golden elevator guarded by two of the silver automatons, who stood as motionless as suits of armour.

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Beside the orrery, a robed alien that resembled the statue outside greeted them as they passed through to the adjoining chamber. In person, they appeared almost owl-like; flat-faced with great round eyes, and covered in fine iridescent plumage.

“The Star Seers welcome you,” said the Asrathon. “Go forth into the chapel, where the ceremony will commence.”

When Clara and Me crossed his gaze, however, he stared daggers at them. Clearly, their presence here was considered a faux pas. Me didn’t need to rack her brain to work out why. All these people clothed in finery, heavy amulets stricken with constellations hanging from their necks, rings of moonstone wrapped around their fingers or talons. For all that this was a public ceremony, it seemed to be attended by a certain class of worshipper. A privilege reserved for the rich and esteemed; some concepts were universal.

The chamber beyond was arranged like an amphitheatre. Stone benches ran around the circumference to encompass a shallow pit with a dais at its centre. Diamond-cut crystals mounted on brackets gave off a soft glow, revealing intricate murals adorning the walls; depictions of Asrathons holding telescopes or staffs, and more of the gargoyles from outside in flight or alighting on astronomical objects. Clara and Me settled themselves in one of the middle rows, the former swept up in the infectious sense of anticipation that filled the chapel.

Once everyone was seated, the Asrathon cleric took his place on the dais. He addressed the congregation. “We are blessed this day, for it has been ordained that our exalted Visionary, Gallius himself, may bestow his prognostications upon us. Heed them well.”

With a bow, he withdrew to the periphery. All grew silent. The crystal lights extinguished, plunging the room into darkness. Some in the congregation gasped.

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Within their midst, a glimmer of light appeared, pulsing with a red glow. It felt at once close enough to touch and a great distance away. *A projection?* Me wondered. No, it was too perfect for that. Too real.

Above their heads, on a crystal platform overlooking the assembly, a figure rose from the shadows: a great Asrathon, their wingspan wrapped in dark manifold robes, the fabric covered with golden runes.

*“Geniah, the Heart of Light.”* The rich, baritone voice that spoke seemed to course through the very foundations of the tower... Through the air, the body, the mind. *“Our fallen star, the lifeblood of Auros. But what of her kin?”*

One by one, tiny pinpricks of light formed above them. Everyone craned their necks – if they possessed them – to better take in the twinkling expanse. Something stirred deep within Me: a chorus of inexpressible beauty, mournful and joyful.

The voice intoned, *“The creators and destroyers of the cosmos. The architects of change and the agents of chaos.”* The stars above flared into supernovae with brief but blinding intensity. *“The light-bringers and the world-enders. The masters of gravity and the sovereigns of time. The citizens of the universe.”*

As the stars died, their fragments swirled and danced like dust, merging into spheres: planets, which in turn became birds, soaring around them. *“We are their children, fashioned from their ashes, forged by their breath...”* The birds disintegrated, their feathers forming the stars once more. *“We are their forebears, our bones dispersing across these endless skies to be born anew.”*

The song swelled, joined by many voices and none. *“We are they, and they are us, bound in the union of immensity and eternity. Death in life... Life in death.”*

*“Who are we, then, to deny that a star must burn?”* The voice suddenly cracked and grew rough with fury. *“What arrogance has taken hold of us, those who dwell below,*

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*that we dictate the fate of those above? How can we profess to worship that which our acts despise?"*

Me shifted her attention to the cleric. He hadn't strayed from his post, yet he appeared overcome with horror. She hazarded a guess that this Visionary, whoever they were, had gone off-script.

*"We look upon ourselves with such disdain that we would see our own hearts turn to stone. I say to you: no more. Let there be a reckoning."*

On his final word, a powerful earthquake shook the chamber. The apparitions vanished and the song abruptly ended, breaking the spell they had cast on the audience, who broke out in cries of alarm. The crystal lights reignited, still clinking in their brackets. The congregation whispered among themselves as they hastily rose to leave, each a different measure of awed, baffled, and unsettled. Neither the cleric below nor the Visionary above, meanwhile, were anywhere to be seen.

"I think that's our cue to leave, don't you?" Me said, turning to her left.

But the seat next to her was empty. Clara had disappeared into the tide of departing worshippers.

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The cleric set off at a brisk trot, out of the tower and past the monument, darting through clusters of startled pilgrims and tourists. Clara followed at as discreet a distance as she could without losing sight of him. She tailed him through an arcade that stemmed from the square, bursting out into a lush ornamental garden on the other side. The hedges and topiaries were gilded by the evening light, and a fountain in the shape of an armillary played in the centre.

Eager not to lose her quarry, Clara broke into a jog as the hem of the cleric's robes vanished behind a wall of shrubbery. She rounded the corner just in time to see him rush deeper into the maze. After pursuing him through many twists and junctures,

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growing more and more intrigued at the randomness of his route, she skidded to a halt.

A dead end. *Damn it.*

The little cul-de-sac was fringed by tall hedges, the only feature of note a worn statue overgrown with ivy. There was something striking about it, about the pose: a sense of proud nobility that stopped Clara in her tracks for a second.

Shaking herself out of it, she searched the space, but it was no good; the cleric had managed to slip away. She cursed herself for getting so easily distracted.

“Enjoying a little snooping?”

Clara jumped. Me had appeared at her side.

“Oh, hey!” Clara said with a fit of forced laughter. “You’re making a habit of almost giving me a heart attack.”

“And you’re making one of rushing off without a word of explanation.”

Clara’s hand went to her chest. “Now you’ve done it. I’ve gone into cardiac arrest.”

Her joke was wasted on Me, who was wearing an expression she herself reserved for when the Doctor wore a particularly egregious piece of headwear. Clara blew out her cheeks. *Tough crowd...*

Growing serious, she said, “Listen, that sermon. It didn’t sound like a prophecy; it sounded like a threat.”

“In my experience, same thing,” said Me.

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“Either way, something’s off here. I mean, the earthquake was more than a little portentous.”

“Not to mention,” replied Me, “that every resident we’ve come across has been —”

“—scared out of their wits,” Clara said at the same time.

“So you did notice.” Me looked at her curiously. “Why didn’t you say something?”

Clara deflected the question. “Why didn’t you?”

“I didn’t want to ruin your fun.”

“Hmm...” Clara diverted her gaze to the statue: a weathered figure, cape billowing behind them, wielding a gaudy-looking lance beside a strange, cone-shaped object. In the distance, the chime of bells could be heard, their hollow tones ringing out across the city. “Sun’s almost down,” she said. “Let’s get a move on.”

Together, they returned to the arcade.

“O-kay,” said Clara slowly. “Where the hell is everyone?”



### Chapter Three

What had been a hive of activity mere minutes before was now totally devoid of life. A few stray leaves and petals skated across the ground; the only sign of movement left in the deserted square.

“Those bells, perhaps they’re a call to prayer?” Me suggested.

“For the whole city, tourists included?” said Clara.

Across the square, one of the silver guards spotted the two women, approaching with a rhythmic *clack* from its mechanical joints. Upon reaching them, the chrome surface comprising its broad, flat head shimmered and bubbled like mercury. Features pushed through to form a lifelike impression of a human face, warping through various identities before settling on a youthful, feminine appearance.

*“Non-residents are required to leave the city at the appointed time,”* it stated in a tinny voice. *“Return to your chosen transportation and depart forthwith. The Aerolith network will cease operation in fifteen minutes.”*

As soon as it finished the last sentence, the guard’s expression became totally blank, as if an unseen puppeteer controlling it had released their hold and allowed the face to fall limply back into its default position.

“Oh, we were just going,” said Clara cheerfully. Me looked at her askance as the bells continued to toll.

The guard stared at Clara for several seconds, then reciprocated her smile in a most disconcerting manner. Science will tell you that there’s a kind of chemical magic in a smile, that it’s a neurotransmitter for all sorts of positive feelings. Suffice it to say, this did not translate well into design principles; the guard’s mouth turned a little too fast, and there were no warm crinkles around its glassy eyes.

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*"Your honesty is appreciated, thank you."* It promptly marched away, no doubt to intimidate more unsuspecting late-goers.

"Phew," said Clara. "If those are in charge of 'keeping the peace', I don't much like the crime rates in Auros."

Me, however, was silently wondering what *other* sounds the tolling of the bells were intended to drown out.

They'd made it a little way into the thoroughfare, which was itself eerily empty, when without warning Clara grabbed Me by the elbow and pulled her into a recess.

"What are you doing?" Me hissed.

"We're in the city of the stargazers and everyone's up and left now night's coming around?" said Clara. "Doesn't that strike you as just a little bit odd?"

"I thought the plan was to stay *out* of trouble?"

"It is," insisted Clara. "But there's no harm in looking into things a little, is there?"

"Famous last words," muttered Me. *And you seem to collect them.*

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They waited in the alcove, watching the sun settle behind the mountains, igniting the sky in a blaze of orange and gold. The buildings, in turn, became flaming beacons in the dusk; a multitude of candles congregating, as one would find at a wake. The city was so deathly still it may as well have been in mourning.

Clara sat cross-legged with her back against a wall, huddled beside Me with a closeness that suggested a greater familiarity than they yet shared.

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“Well, now we know where the ‘Burning Sapphire’ name comes from...” Clara trailed off.

For the sunset had only been the prelude to an even more extraordinary spectacle. As the last tongues of flame extinguished themselves on the horizon, they gave way to the night of Auros.

Billions and billions of stars revealed themselves; an enormous spiral form exploded into a rhapsody of fractal colours; scintillating orbs scattered to the heavens like fairy dust; effulgent nebulae swirled and blossomed in every shade of the rainbow; twin moons were absorbed in an endless dance, held together in a rapturous embrace.

It was pure, chaotic bliss.

Clara was sure that if she marvelled at it for too long, she risked becoming lost in the sight forever.

“It’s beautiful,” said Me.

“Yeah...” Clara murmured.

“The fair, wild Night,” Me recited, “with pity touched at length, crowned with her chaplet of out-blossoming stars, creeps back repentantly upon her way—”

“—To kiss the dying day,” finished Clara. She glanced over at Me. “Didn’t have you pegged as a Maud Montgomery fan. They have Anne of Green Gables at the end of time?”

“Don’t I wish,” said Me with a snicker befitting the age she resembled. “I could’ve done with it. The Cloister Wraiths didn’t make for the most riveting of conversation partners.”

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It occurred to Clara that in all of the chaos surrounding their reunion, she hadn't once thought to ask Me anything personal. A hesitancy to pry, perhaps, or was that just an excuse she used for being so self-absorbed of late? "What was it like?" she blurted out.

Me tilted her head. "The gradual combustion of the universe? Dreadfully dull. You didn't miss much." She breathed in the cool evening air. "It's funny, I can scarcely remember when I last saw a star that wasn't in its death throes. I'd forgotten how... *brilliant*, they could be."

"But how did you even last that long?" asked Clara. "That chip you got from the Mire, it can't still be going, can it?"

"The thing about immortality," said Me, "is that you have plenty of time to get very good at it."

Clara pictured Me back in that armchair among the ruins of Gallifrey, sole witness to the swan song of existence. A life that long seemed beyond comprehension, not least because hers was over. "It's a shame," she said.

"What is?"

"That things do have to end." Clara lifted her head once more to the sky. "Still, it's a hell of a view to go out on."

She waited for Me to say something, but the immortal remained frustratingly quiet. *Oh, no you don't.* She'd gotten more out of her in the last few hours than in the days they'd spent travelling together.

But whatever Clara might have said next was drowned out by the eruption of a bone-shaking rumble. It resounded through the earth, as deep and ominous as a war horn's call. The nearby blossom trees quivered, relieving themselves of more petals.

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“Okay, so the one during the sermon wasn’t just for dramatic effect,” Clara whispered, getting up.

“I believe we’ve just heard whatever this city is so afraid of,” said Me.

Another rumble; a discordant, guttural noise akin to the grinding of heavy machinery. Clara raised a provocative eyebrow. “Wanna go find out what's making it?”

“I get the impression you’re going to regardless of what I think.”

“You’re learning.” Clara set off down the path, safe in the knowledge that Me would tag along no matter how much she claimed to disapprove.

Taking care to avoid the patrolling automaton guards, they made their way through the deserted streets, now tinged a deep red by the crystal, which radiated from the lights inside. Some of the doors, they noticed, were marked with crudely painted symbols.

“Warding signs?” Clara wondered, inspecting them closer.

“In all likelihood,” agreed Me. “Civilisations this old are often built on superstition. I’ll wager this one is no exception.”

Before long, they’d retraced their steps to the Observatory square, which was, Clara noted, now left conspicuously unguarded. She placed her hands on her hips next to the crystal statue of Tarchus, who was himself revering the cosmic display.

“Lo and behold, the horrifying noises appear to be coming from the giant, foreboding tower. Who’d have thought?”

As if in response, the Observatory’s dome opened like a crimson bud, its crystal panels unfolding to expose a ruby red core pulsing inside – Geniah, presumably, the so-called ‘Heart of Light’. Emitting a trill that punctuated the sonorous rumble, the

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crystal drew to itself gossamer-fine threads of light from the atmosphere, growing steadily stronger in its intensity.

“Auros doesn't let up with the showing off, does it?” Clara said. “Not that I'm complaining.”

“Despite what they'd have you believe,” said Me, “the Time Lords have never had a monopoly on stellar engineering.”

“The Doctor wasn't kidding when he said this lot were clever,” commented Clara. “Everything about this place... it's amazing.” She shook her head in awe. “Well, minus the dodgy priests, creepy droids, and the whole city-wide curfew thing. He conveniently glossed over those details... What's that look for?”

“That's the first time you've mentioned him.” Me was looking at her with an expression far too close to pity. “Since—”

“Yeah, I get it.” Clara grimaced and turned back to the tower. “So, guessing this starlight-gathering machine is what's causing all the commotion – probably.”

“Yes, probably,” said Me. “If you subscribe to wishful thinking.”

Clara ignored the jibe. “See? We've checked it out, seen the stars, mission accomplished. No getting into trouble, like I said.”

At her words, a cry sounded from somewhere in the vicinity; the terrible, strangled wail of a person in unbearable pain. Without a moment spared for irony, Clara and Me sprinted towards it.

They reached a cloister that bordered a collection of stately buildings. The active tower projected flickering red light onto the flagstones, which was interrupted by the odd pillar and the silhouette of a lone figure who stood, rigid and motionless, with their back to them several feet ahead. Had the wind not disturbed their cloak and

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the feathers on their plumed head, they might have been another Asrathon monument.

Clara edged forward. When dealing with someone in potential distress, common sense dictated that she should make her presence known. Yet something compelled her to remain silent.

Getting within a metre of the stranger confirmed her suspicions: it was the cleric who had vanished earlier. Clara coughed, but this elicited no reaction. She extended a wary hand and touched his shoulder, to the same result. With a rising sense of dread, she moved to view him from the front and recoiled.

He looked as though he'd been stuffed; his eyes vacant, limbs rigid, beak-like mouth agape in a silent, unending scream.

"Oh, my God," she gasped, at once fascinated and disgusted. "What the hell did this to him?"

Me leaned in and pulled down one of the cleric's lower eyelids; it didn't so much as twitch.

"No," she said, "the question is what is *doing* this to him? Something must be keeping him upright, and it's not rigour mortis..." She stepped back, scanning the shadows around them. "Clara, we're not alone."

Clara whirled around, alert for movement. "Then why haven't they done the same thing to us?"

"Don't you think you've tempted fate enough this evening?"

Clara had to give it to Me, the aeons had endowed her with quite the sardonic wit. "Trying to ask the relevant questions here," she retorted. They were standing back-to-back now. "I can't see anyone, you?"

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“Nothing,” said Me. “Which is what worries me.”

An odd, creeping numbness took hold of Clara's extremities, not unlike pins and needles. She squirmed at the sensation. Beside her, Me winced, flexing her fingers. With no discernible cause for the phenomenon and a horrible inkling that this is how it had started for the cleric, Clara searched wildly for an answer, until...

*Gotcha.*

“So, er, Me,” she said in a low voice, backing away. “You familiar with the myth of Medusa?”

At this, Me looked perplexed (a novel occurrence worth savouring in other circumstances), but as she followed Clara's gaze, understanding dawned on her face, along with something else.

If Clara hadn't known better, she'd say that it was fear.

Above them leered a mascaron, a sculpture of a face protruding from the stonework. Easy to mistake for a simple ornament, except for one telling detail: it was all but identical to the silver guards. Glazed eye sockets bored into them amid the silver visage of a young woman, the same one as before.

“Oh, hello again.” Clara gave it a little wave. “When I said we were clearing off earlier, I was being a *bit liberal* with the truth, sorry. Bad habit. Now we're just innocent bystanders, but I'm pretty sure you weren't counting on us stumbling across your handiwork here.” She gestured to the petrified cleric. “What have you done to him, and why?”

The mascaron carried on staring, giving no indication that it had registered.

*God help me, I'm monologuing to masonry,* thought Clara. Her body twinged; she tried to shake some feeling back into her muscles. Whatever they'd done to her in



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that extraction chamber appeared to be buying her time – enough, perhaps, to get some answers.

“Fine,” she said, “I’ll do the talking – which is your first mistake, by the way. Some kind of remote paralytic effect, am I right? As for why—”

“Clara...” Me croaked.

“—I’d bet he knows something you don’t want getting out. That’s usually how this goes, isn’t it? Silencing dissenters and rabble-rousers – wait, is *that* what the curfew’s a cover for? Oh, that’s clever. Forestalling potential witnesses. Lets you pick off anyone who might give you trouble. Bad news for us, I suppose.”

The mascaron’s mouth opened wide, contorting into a grotesque parody of anguish.

“Clara...”

“Aha!” exclaimed Clara, triumphant. “You *can* hear me. So, who am I speaking to? I mean, no offence, but you’re just an interface, right? A glorified security camera with a built-in—”

The sob that cut her off was so wretched that Clara had trouble processing who it had come from.

“Oh no...” Her confidence evaporated.

She rushed over to Me, who convulsed with suppressed agony, frozen in place as though in a perverted game of musical statues.

“Stop it!” Clara shouted at the mascaron, shielding her as best as she could.

“Please.”

The mascaron was impassive, still trained upon Me – did it even know Clara was there? Once more, its face changed, assuming the forlorn features of a weeping

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child. The wall beneath it began to shift, the ancient bricks scraping against each other, moving aside to reveal... *a maw, a stomach – both?* Clara didn't want to find out what would happen if Me was pulled inside, though she had a sickening feeling she was beginning to understand why there was such a broad database of faces for the technology here to draw upon, and why the streets were devoid of homeless people...

Clara wrapped her arms around Me's waist and heaved with all her might, but it was useless; she was rooted to the spot.

Something flitted in the corner of her vision. Clara readied herself for a fight, though she was in no state to take on anyone. *God*, she was an id—

“Hey, idiot! Get out of the way!”

A figure wrapped in a headscarf emerged from the shadows. Against the urge to do otherwise, Clara complied. The mysterious newcomer was striding towards them with a compact mirror in hand. They shoved it between the mascaron and its target, which caused the face to undergo multiple transitions of identity and emotion in quick succession.

“Muddles the readings,” the stranger explained. The voice was deep and firm – a woman's voice, one that might have been warm, once. “Enough to break the lock. On three, we're going to grab your friend and get her as far away from it as we can, alright?”

Clara swallowed. “Yes.”

“Good, because we've got company heading our way.” As if on cue, the clatter of footsteps echoed up the passage. Reinforcements were coming. “One...”

Clara got into position behind Me, hooking her arms under her armpits.

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“Two...”

The *clack-clack-clack* of clockwork limbs was growing louder. Closer.

“Three!”

There was a low, electric buzz as the stasis field fizzled out, static in the night air. Me drew a sharp breath and collapsed into Clara’s arms, twitching and trembling. Clara was struck by how light she felt.

Meanwhile, the stranger grabbed a large stone from a nearby rock feature and lobbed it at the mascaron, smashing its face in a shower of sparks. A palm-sized, spherical object fell from the shattered remains: she pocketed it before moving to assist Clara. “Let’s go!”

The flagstones rang with the syncopated beat of the women’s feet as they fled the cloister, supporting the semi-conscious immortal between them. Clara threw a glance behind her to glimpse the cleric’s inanimate body being roughly manhandled by the arriving automatons and dragged inside the wall opening. She reined in the impulse to turn around and intervene: there was nothing they could do. Except join him.

They darted through the streets, taking sharp turns – left, right, and left again, leaving the main avenues to enter a series of interlaced alleys. Wildflowers cascaded down the walls from private gardens or terraces, their fragrant scent hitting Clara in gusts as they zig-zagged along. She could hear the mechanisms of their pursuers, synthetic ligaments stretching and gears realigning themselves. They were close, and gaining on them.

Suddenly, as they passed a small house nestled amid the city’s more modest outer ring, their rescuer let go of Me, running up to the door and throwing it open in one swift, practised motion. Ushering both women inside, she closed it behind them lightning-fast.

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They stood in a cosy living room, patterned carpet over the stone floor, dust floating in the air. Immobile and silent, as if the mascarons were paralysing them again. Only the sounds of two breaths, the deep rumbling still vibrating through the city, and the clockwork monotony of the automatons beyond the walls of this safe haven broke the stillness of the moment.

The guards' heavy metal boots stopped outside. It was disturbing how distant danger felt to Clara now. Only a few days ago, adrenaline would have been coursing through her body, sweat dripping from her brow, goose pimples on her arms, her lungs burning. But now, it was as though she were dreaming. She was viewing herself, and the world, from a remote vantage point, like the Visionary in the chapel.

A new sound: metal on stone again, now growing faint on the barren street, blood-red beneath the watchful gaze of the heavens.

## Chapter Four

The stranger slumped against the door, letting out a deep, relieved sigh.

“Tourists, I swear...”

“Tourists?” repeated Clara, affronted.

“You were violating the curfew. After just *waltzing* into a ceremony! Confidence paired with ignorance – it’s practically a tourist’s MO.” The stranger walked over to a lumpy beige sofa in the corner and plumped up its pillows. “Put her down here. It’ll take some time for the effect on her nerves to dissipate. What I can’t wrap my head around is why you’re not in the same state.”

“Maybe I just got lucky,” said Clara, carefully laying Me down. It felt wrong, seeing her so vulnerable. She seemed smaller somehow, frailer, as if she were Ashldr once more, the innocent girl whose heart had given out in a Viking longhouse so very long ago.

“Lucky is an understatement,” the stranger was saying, pulling out the round object she’d retrieved from the mascaron and inspecting it. “What in the world possessed you to babble at a Face of Amity like that?”

Clara didn’t answer, feeling her cheeks grow hot. In the calm glow of the house, electric candles scattered across the bookshelves, she could make out the woman’s features. A few strands of black, grey-streaked hair, dislodged by the running, poked out from under her blue headscarf. Her skin was brown, its smooth surface irregularity ruptured by wrinkles in a way that made it impossible to guess whether they originated from stress or simply from age. Her dark eyes, piercing and quick, seemed to indicate the former; there was something in that gaze, an anxiety without name, clouding her eyes like rolling mist.

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“Hang on,” said Clara. “You’re the tour guide. The one who was showing people around near the tower.”

The woman scowled. “I have a name, you know. Sunita. Sunita Joshi. And I suppose tour guide’s one word for it, if you’re being charitable.”

“What else would you call it?” said Clara, pulling back the corner of a hanging tapestry above the sofa to find an assortment of maps and schematics tacked to the wall behind.

“Propagandist? Public relations? I don’t know. The Star Seers hand me the words, and I regurgitate them to a bunch of oblivious sightseers who nod along. Then I pray, very hard, that none of those people decide to blunder into our local politics and make a bad situation worse through their...” Sunita looked on the verge of dropping a very rude insult, but stopped herself at the last second. “... blundering.”

Clara bit back an indignant retort, instead opting for a more diplomatic approach. “The Star Seers?”

Sunita looked to the ceiling and gave an exasperated laugh. “Dear God, you really are clueless, aren’t you?”

“Well, it’s never too late to learn,” Clara replied, though she was growing increasingly resentful at being spoken to like a student who’d been caught smoking behind the bike shed.

Sunita chewed on that argument, then planted her fists on the table in front of her, still gripping the strange object. “Then let me lay it all out for you.” She leaned forward. “You’ve landed yourselves right in the middle of a conspiracy.”

“Gathered as much, yeah,” said Clara dryly. “So these ‘Star Seers’, guessing they’re some sort of religious order?”

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“To use their full name, ‘The Star Seers of Siderius’ – try saying that five times fast.” Removing her headscarf, Sunita pulled up a chair and began fiddling with the silver sphere, prizing it open and teasing out wires.

“What is that thing?”

“The Face’s memory cortex. Don’t interrupt. You were there for the ceremony, so you would’ve met Gallius...”

“You mean the guy standing over everyone like a pyrotechnic Pope?”

“What did I just say?” Sunita snapped. She paused. “... Huh, actually, the analogy’s not that far off. Gallius is the sitting Visionary, leader of the Star Seers and sovereign head of the state. In theory, his job is to study the night sky in that observatory of his and bless us lowly mortals with his wisdom – well, the more... *distinguished* among us, anyway. The rest of us have to settle for second-hand sermons.

“Not that anyone has ever seen him in the flesh,” she added. “Let alone beyond the tower. Visionaries love to surround themselves with a veil of mystique.”

An elusive autocrat operating from the shadows, how novel. “But it’s not that simple, is it?” Clara said.

“Rarely ever is. You see, the Observatory also happens to be the primary means by which the entire city is powered. And the only ones who know how to work the mechanism, the only ones with the authority to—”

“Let me guess: are the Star Seers. So much for the separation of church and state.”

“The church *is* the state here,” said Sunita, who was now rifling through a set of drawers. She took out a device that resembled a large, bulky monocle and brought it back to the table. Sticking out her tongue in concentration, she fed the memory cortex’s wires into a port on its side. “The Visionary is believed to be the sole arbiter

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through which the ‘will of the stars’ is revealed: their word is law. Transgress those laws... and you’re never heard from again.”

*Is this why you were so cagey about bringing me here, Doctor?* thought Clara. *Of course, I didn’t listen...*

“So where do the noises come into all this?” she asked.

“They started a few months back, not long after Gallius was inaugurated. The sun set, and the night screamed. We all had our suspicions as to the cause, but voicing those was... *fraught*.”

“Did they happen to involve the Observatory at all?”

“Well guessed. It was the first structure built in Auros; the whole city is built on top of a subterranean generator system. But the technology is centuries old, it’s bound to be liable to failures. So, naturally, most of us assumed the generator was at fault, some even hired a technician team to investigate—”

Clara knew how this story went. “And they didn’t come back.”

“Exactly. The Star Seers hushed the whole thing up, of course, but word gets out; it always does. They soon realised they couldn’t ignore it any longer, so in steps Gallius with his own explanation – hold on, the footage should be in this thing’s memory banks somewhere...”

The makeshift optical port that Sunia had wired to the cortex whirred, warming up like an old-fashioned television as the cathode-ray tube fired a burst of electrons held in a holographic field. A grainy image began to take form, resolving into footage of a large crowd gathering in the chapel before the same obscured figure.



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*“—y —ople.” The audio processor sputtered to life. “We are, all —us greatly concerned, but —say to you now, this is a time to rejoice, not to fear! For these disturbances are no ill omen, they —rald an astral spirit.”*

*“This is the best they could come up with?”* said Clara, incredulous.

Sunita responded with a look that unambiguously read, *‘Shh!’*

*“The Star Seers —aken extraordinary measures to appease this spirit with nightly rituals. We urge you to follow our guidance and remain indoors during these times of contemplation, for it is your great sacrifice, your collective effort, that signals —urity of our intent. Do this, and we shall all prosper!”*

This was, Clara surmised, a fancy way of letting the people think that the curfew was a civic service they were contributing to. But as the weeks passed, Sunita went on to explain, the novelty of this reasoning faltered when no spirit ever showed up. The noises and tremors only intensified, and the measures had to be ‘strengthened’. Descending even further into a police state was the inevitable next step.

*So this is what you’re up against*, some part of Clara whispered. “Everyone else seems to buy into this superstition. So why don’t you?”

“Not everyone,” Sunita said, perhaps a little too quickly, straightening her shoulders. “But you’ve seen what happens to those the Star Seers consider a nuisance.”

“Why turn on one of their own, though?”

“I think they’re getting desperate. They know their cover story is flimsy and that it’s only a matter of time before someone exposes the truth. To say nothing of Gallius himself sounding more unhinged with every sermon. Who knows? Maybe there’s someone left among their ranks with a conscience.”

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Sunita flicked a switch on the device, and the holographic image morphed into a map of the wider region, not unlike her concealed plans on the wall.

“These are trade routes and transport lines, dated after the curfew announcement.” She pointed to the lines that branched out from Auros across the rest of the continent like veins, connecting the outlying cities and spaceports. “Notice how they’re largely unaffected beyond a schedule change? For corporations and tourism bureaus, this is all little more than an inconvenience. The economy ticks along while we get picked off, one by one, for daring to fall out of line.”

They were interrupted by the sound of footsteps creaking on the stairs, causing Me to stir on the sofa. She squinted at the stairway as she shifted through states of consciousness, mumbling something. A single word seemed to linger on her lips, though she hadn’t the strength to say it.

Sunita rubbed her face. “Ess!” she called.

“I wasn’t listening, Ma!” came a shrill voice in reply.

“You do realise that only makes you sound more guilty?”

A young girl poked her head around the corner, wiping the sleep from her eyes. She ogled the passed-out stranger on the sofa, her hands restless as she fiddled with the cord of her flannel dressing gown.

“Hello.” Clara beamed, stepping forward to properly introduce herself. “I’m Clara, this is Me. We met before, didn’t we? In the courtyard?”

“While she should have been *at school*, yes,” said Sunita pointedly; the girl’s cheeks turned red. “These are our guests for the night, Ess. As you can see, one of them is very tired and has already gone to sleep.” She put on her best ‘*Just like you should be, young lady!*’ eyebrows.

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Ess looked at the floor, rolling back and forth on the balls of her feet. “Are they here to help find Katherine?”

The look on Sunita’s face was one Clara recognised. She’d worn it on her own many times before (“*Wear it well,*” she imagined the Doctor telling her, keeping her honest). Sunita went up to her daughter and put her hands tenderly on the young girl’s shoulders, directing her back to the stairs. “Let’s get you to bed,” she said.

Ess wriggled in resistance. “But I can’t sleep! The noises, they’re worse than *ever*.”

“Have they been giving you nightmares again?”

She bit her lip, then nodded.

“Okay...” Sunita ran her fingers through her hair. Clara knew from experience that few had the knack for improvisation possessed by weary parents – or indeed, teachers.

“Hmm, I think I know just the thing.” Sunita sat on the bottom step and motioned for Ess to join her. The girl plonked herself on her mum’s lap. Clara studied the projection from the optical port with pretend interest so as not to intrude on their conversation.

“Long ago,” Sunita started, “a demon fell from the stars—”

“It wasn’t a demon!” Ess cut her off with a bluntness only children could master.

“Ma, you’ve got to do it *properly*.”

“Hey, who’s telling this story? Um... a *colossus* fell from the stars, descending on Auros to consume the city in fire and brimstone. It roared terribly, striking fear into the hearts of everyone who heard it. All, except for one...”

Ess squealed in delight. “The Pilgrim!”

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“Mhm-hm. A pilgrim, who sailed the stellar winds in a magic swirling ship. He came to call in Auros’ most desperate hour, slaying the colossus and sending its remains back into the void where it came from.”

“Pow!” exclaimed Ess, brandishing an invisible weapon.

“He left as quickly as he arrived, but Auros never forgot the Pilgrim, or what he did for its people. They say that one day, when we need him most, he’ll return to keep the monsters at bay.” Sunita tickled her daughter, and she burst into uncontrollable giggles, squirming in her arms. But all too soon, the girl’s laughter faded.

“Do you think he’ll come back to stop the noises?” she asked. Her gaze wandered to Clara, who stood stock-still, listening raptly to Sunita’s every word.

“I don’t know. But keep an ear out. Because if you’re very still, and listen very hard, you might just hear his ship sing. It’s a song in a language none of us can understand, but somehow, everyone knows what it means.”

“What does it mean?” Ess whispered.

“That you are *safe*, that you needn’t fear the nightmares ever again, because someone has come to chase them away.”

Ess hugged her mum tight. “Maybe he can bring Katherine back, too.”

“... Maybe.” Sunita stroked her daughter’s chin. “Now, *bed*.”

Yawning, Ess stretched and slipped off Sunita’s lap. Casting a final inquisitive glance at Clara and Me, she trudged up to her room.

Several moments went by in tense silence before Clara asked, “Who’s Katherine?”

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“That’s none of your concern,” Sunita said curtly as she stood, a warning in her voice.

But Clara pressed on. “That’s why you were breaking the curfew, isn’t it? What this whole setup is for.”

When Sunita made no response, she sighed and said, “Listen, whatever happened, we *can* help, I promise you.”

Otherwise, what was the point of her?

Sunita rounded on her. “Is *that* what you were doing out there? Helping? Who the hell do you think you are?”

For the space of a heartbeat, the two women locked eyes, and what Clara saw reflected back at her made her words die in her throat.

“Trust me,” said Sunita slowly, “the best thing you can do, for *everyone* here, is leave while you still can.”

She turned away and sat back down to return to work on the memory unit. “Put the blanket in that basket there over your friend. You can have the spare room.” Her tone made it clear that their conversation was at a decisive end.

Clara wanted to protest, but she knew it was a losing battle. “What are you going to do?”

The tour guide didn’t look up. “I’ll erase the two of you from the cortex, then you can be on your way first thing tomorrow.”

“Thank you,” Clara said quietly, as she covered Me with the blanket. “For saving us.”

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Sunita's expression softened, but her gaze was far away. "I just wish I could have done it the first time."

Clara spent the rest of the night staring blankly at the ceiling from a creaky camp bed, focusing on her breaths lest they cease altogether. The noises continued their lament deep into the early hours when the sky grew pale and the stars dimmed. While twilight enjoyed its fleeting reign in Auros, the crystal domes began their transition to the colours of day, and the buildings beneath them gleamed like whitewashed tombs.

## Chapter Five

*"I need something from you..."*

*The Doctor froze halfway down the steps to the lower levels of the TARDIS, his back to Clara as if struck by some creeping realisation that had rendered him a tall, dark statue.*

*She held her gaze on him, and when he turned to face her... Well, it was always the eyes, wasn't it? He seldom bore his soul in any other way than through the eyes of a lost child.*

*"I need the truth."*

The Anamn Lake was beautiful in the dawn. Golden light danced on the waves as they raced to the shore, meeting the sand with a warm embrace. According to Sunita, the chemical composition of the waters of Auros was said to be enriched with nootropic qualities, gifting great clarity of thought and memory.

Right now, indulging in memory was the last thing Clara Oswald wanted to do.

Jaw set, arms crossed vice-tight, she occupied herself with staring at the horizon. It was a lie. *All of it.* What else could it have been? The fabled Auros, with its promises of paradise, was always destined to be a façade. Clara was well-versed in such disappointments, though she'd rarely considered them so at the time. When a carefree trip turned out to be steeped in complications, it was par for the course – hell, she'd counted on it. *Lived* for it.

Yet a tiny part of her had dared to hope that maybe, just maybe, the fairytale had, for once, been true.

*"I need something from you." He stood, eyes pleading. So very far away now.*

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Here, on the last page, she had hoped to find some peace...

*"I need the truth."*

She thought she could feel close to him again.

As they neared a small stone gazebo, Me, who by now had fully recovered, broke the mutual silence that had accompanied them since the previous night. She lingered a few steps behind. "Why did we come here?"

"You know why," replied Clara, determined to keep her focus ahead.

"No. I know what you've told me."

Now Clara, too, came to a standstill. "Meaning?"

"Well," Me said, "for someone so intent on non-interference, you do have *quite* the tendency to interfere. Now all of a sudden, at the first real hurdle, you're just... giving in. One could be forgiven for calling that mixed signals."

"This isn't giving in," Clara protested. "It's being realistic."

"I see." Me entered the gazebo and rested on the parapet, admiring the rolling fields, which sparkled with pearls of dew. "'Today was the day I should have died'..." Her words hung in the air like the morning mist swathing the lake before them. "Yes," she said softly, "I think that's how the story goes."

Clara, against her strongest desires to the contrary, found herself settling beside the immortal, who proceeded to pull the same hefty, leather-bound book she'd been perusing in the TARDIS from her bag. With a practised hand, she turned to the very beginning, then cleared her throat.



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“Let’s start with page one.”

*Today was the day I should have died. Instead, I was reborn, by my hero, a man called the Doctor. He came from beyond the sea, bringing with him a world foreign to us. Be he man or trickster god, I still cannot fathom. I only know that he was kind. But he was not alone.*

*Her name was Clara. She saved my life, and our village. At first, I thought her a Valkyrie, clad as she was in strange armour, come to bear our warriors to Valhalla. But as I witnessed her face Odin himself without fear or hesitation, I knew that she was something else. I regret, now, that I didn’t hold my tongue, for I am certain the fiend would have fled had I not challenged him, so cowed was he by her words.*

*We were to confront the false Odin’s dreaded army in battle, with our warriors slain, our hearts broken. The Doctor had little hope for us. Deploring us as fools, he left us to our fate. I believed, then, that I had surely condemned us all. I was wrong.*

*I do not know how Clara changed his mind, how she turned the tide and persuaded him to stay, but I am grateful. If the gods deem that we are to one day meet again, I would like to thank her. In my heart of hearts, I know it will be so, as surely as Jörmungandr encircles the world.*

“The Midgard serpent,” concluded Me, by way of explanation. “A favourite tale of mine, so I’ve read.”

For a while, neither woman spoke, listening to the gentle ebb and flow of the waves and the distant calling of alien birdsong, united in a symphony heralding the sunrise.

“How is this the same?” When Clara found her voice again, she merely sounded defeated. “This isn’t a village, Me, it’s a city. This isn’t a raiding party, it’s a whole

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bloody empire to tear down. And I'm not..." Her voice broke. "I'm not him. I'm not anything anymore. I shouldn't even be alive."

"Nor should I," Me countered. "And yet here we both are. Two women who refuse to do the honourable thing and die."

"I'm not refusing anything."

Me raised a quizzical brow. "No?"

"Oh, spare me the sarcasm!" Clara fired back. "And don't you *dare* lecture me on events you can't even remember."

She caught herself. "I... I didn't mean—"

"No, you're right." Me met her eyes; they alone betrayed her composure. "I don't remember. But does forgetting make the story any less true?"

Clara said nothing, lowering her gaze.

*I understand*, Me wanted to say. Ashldr had known her own end once, as her mind connected to the Mire's neural network. She had comprehended the vastness of an alien intelligence... and expired. She died for who she was and who she loved.

*I understand*, she wanted to say, because Ashldr's sacrifice was ripped from her grasp to appease an old man's conscience. It's a terrible thing, to come to realise, once the relief has faded and the truth sets in, that the world is no longer meant for you. Where the very act of living is a mournful song that lingers past the curtain call. How can one carry on in such a world?

But then again, how does anyone carry on?

*I understand*, she wanted to say, because in a way, everybody knows their future. Maybe not the specific events, but everybody knows with absolute certainty that,

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someday, it will all be over. They will never exist again. Along the way, there will be sorrow and pain, moments where life seems overwhelming and impossible to endure. We will suffer, deeply, because we must.

But there can also be beauty and love. Tiny, monumental moments where life feels perfect and profound. If only Me recalled what those felt like.

*I understand*, she wanted to say, because if we let ourselves be consumed by the fear of life, we can never experience it. We will hide away until we're filled with nothing but regret, and can only ask, 'What would I have done if I wasn't afraid?'

"I don't understand," she said. "Another utopia reveals itself to be in ruin. Don't tell me you expected anything else."

"We don't have time for this," snapped Clara.

"There's always time." Me stood, feeling her grip on her diary tighten. "Far too much of it. So tell me, Clara Oswald, what are you going to do about it?"

*"I don't know," said Clara, holding the TARDIS door open.*

*The Doctor turned to look at her, confused. "I'm sorry?"*

*"You asked me if you're a good man, and the answer is... I don't know. But I think you try to be, and I think that's probably the point."*

\*\*\*

Clara froze, holding the TARDIS door open. They'd found the ship just as they'd left it, anachronistic as ever among the crumbling colonnades. Me had accompanied her back to the courtyard without judgment or complaint, having recomposed her serene demeanour. But it was this, more than anything else, that had given Clara pause.

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At that moment, her hand firmly gripping the door frame, she noticed something reflected in its glass pane.

“It’s okay, you can come out,” she said. “I know you’re there.”

A small figure stumbled out from behind a column. Ess Joshi blushed furiously. Her eyes were puffy beneath the locks of hair that had escaped from her ponytail.

“Why were you following us?”

She sniffed and shuffled her feet. “Your magic ship... It sang, like in the story.”

Clara grew numb. She slowly closed the diner door, then crouched down beside the girl, gazing intently at her. “The one about the Pilgrim?”

Ess nodded. “Ma said you’d come back. It’s really cool that you’re a girl now. But don’t worry,” – she lowered her voice to a hopeful whisper – “I know you’re undercover, that’s why you’re pretending to leave, isn’t it?”

Clara rubbed the nape of her neck as she stood back up, guilt squirming in her insides. Me, on the other hand, was smiling at Clara, with a sincerity she’d not seen since their maiden flight in the TARDIS.

“Does your mother know you’re here?” Me asked Ess, not unkindly.

Ess shook her head and mumbled a bashful “No.”

“You’d better think of an excuse, then. By my count, you’ve got about fifteen seconds.”

With impeccable timing, there came a hammering of footsteps from the alleyway. Sunita charged into the courtyard, her face stormy. “Ess Joshi!” she panted as she stopped short of them. “What have I told you about wandering off?”

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“I’m helping them look for Katherine!” declared Ess, tossing back her fringe.

“Yeah, that’s right,” said Clara quickly, giving the girl a wink. She questioned her before Sunita could launch into an admonitory speech. “You were sussing this place out when we first got here. Why?”

Ess glanced at her mum. “Because... because it’s where—”

“Where Katherine was last seen,” Sunita said, her expression grave. She knelt by Ess and cupped the girl’s little face in her hands. “This won’t bring her back, sweetheart. Let it go.”

“You haven’t,” said Clara.

Sunita sent her a resentful glare. Tears brimmed in Ess’ eyes – not, Clara could tell, for the first time in recent days.

“What was she even doing here?” Clara urged, ignoring Sunita’s ire. “I mean, this isn’t exactly a bustling hub.”

“It’s just a remnant of the old city,” said Sunita, standing with a protective hand on Ess’ shoulder. “Though Kat always did consider ‘keep out’ signs an invit—”

She stopped short, finally registering the transdimensional elephant in the room. Blinking a few times to confirm she wasn’t hallucinating, she gestured to the TARDIS in utter bemusement and said, “Where the hell did that thing come from?”

“Oh, right. That’s ours.” Clara said with an innocent shrug. “You know, most people just call them diners.”

“Do you make a habit of being a smart-arse?”

“That’s not normally *my* job, no.”

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“Could’ve fooled me.”

Me, who was canvassing the area, cut their bickering short. “What happened to Katherine?”

Sunita deliberated on how to respond, her eyes dropping to the mossy cobbles. She scratched her eyebrow and sighed. “We’d argued. Kat was convinced this whole thing went deeper than a faulty generator.” She grimaced. “I told her she was just being paranoid. That negligence and incompetence were reasons enough for the Star Seers to cover their tracks. But she wouldn’t drop it. Journalist’s stubbornness, I guess.”

“She’s a journalist?” said Clara.

Sunita nodded. “An outspoken one, which already put a target on her back. Whatever she discovered must have given them the excuse they needed to silence her.”

“What was she expecting to find?”

“Her logic was that if someone’s compromised, their instinct is to reinforce their pressure points,” replied Sunita. “But in doing so—”

“—They can inadvertently telegraph them,” finished Me.

“Right. She got it in her head that the Star Seers must have closed this place off for a reason. They weren’t loud about it, but if you’ve got a sense of things you pick up on breaks in pattern. Faces have been buzzing around this place like flies. They threw on some warnings for good measure. Nothing too alarming, but enough to make any discerning reporter suspicious.

“There’s more, though.”

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Sunita fumbled in her pocket and handed Clara a crinkled scrap of paper.

“Someone sent her this ‘tip’ the day before. Might have been our erstwhile cleric.”

Clara read the note, which was accompanied by a sketch of the courtyard’s gate.

“‘To get to the heart, open his eye.’ Okay, so this is some sort of code?”

“That’s what Kat believed. But I’ve scoured every brick; there’s nothing here.” Sunita took out the small mirror that she’d saved them with the night before, opening and shutting it like a castanet. “This was the only trace of her I could find. Not exactly solid as leads go.”

Ess tugged at the hem of Sunita’s cardigan. “What about the picture?”

“Picture?”

“On the ground,” she said. “I saw it from the roof.”

Sunita circled the parameter, frowning at the fine grooves carved into the courtyard’s floor. “It doesn’t look like much.”

“From down here maybe...” said Clara, struck with an idea. She got a purchase on the fire extinguisher case attached to the front of the diner and used it to haul herself onto the building’s flat roof, where she surveyed the courtyard below. Viewed from above, the indecipherable lines came together to form a cohesive image. “Bingo.”

“So it’s a trick of perspective,” said Me. “A message addressed to the stars.”

“As above, so below,” said Clara. “Good catch, Ess.”

The girl grinned, standing a little taller. Sunita smiled fondly in spite of herself.

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Clara squinted and tilted her head to better pick the symbol out. “Well, I think we’ve found the ‘eye’. It’s inside a sort of sun shape – Sunita, does that mean anything to you?”

The tour guide furrowed her brow. “Okay, that is strange.”

“How so?” Clara clambered back down and wiped her dusty palms on her jeans.

“If you’re right, then this” – Sunita indicated the symbol with the toe of her boot – “is the Visionary’s sigil.”

“The plot thickens!” Clara remarked, folding her arms. “So, how do we open it?”

“Your guess is as good as mine.” Sunita bent down and took a closer look at the centremost stone where the eye’s pupil should be. “Applying pressure to these doesn’t work. Believe me, I’ve tried.”

Me turned to her. “Katherine’s mirror.”

“Sorry?”

“What do you notice about this place?”

Clara sighed, even as she was surprised by an inexplicable ache of familiarity. “Me, I really don’t think any of us are in the mood for a pop quiz.”

“It’s dark!” Ess exclaimed as she thrust her arm into the air, hopping on her tiptoes.

“Precisely,” Me confirmed with an approving nod. “It’s designed in such a way that limits direct sunlight. If I’m not mistaken, and I seldom am, the symbol tells us the solution. Maybe the eye can only be opened at a certain time of day or year, when the sun’s at its zenith. Only, Katherine wouldn’t have needed to wait, not if she was clever. May I?”



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Sunita passed the mirror over. Moving to stand beneath a small patch of sunlight that just peeked its way into the courtyard, Me held the mirror aloft and angled its reflection until the beam touched the centre stone. As if by magic, the stone began to glow, the effect spreading through the grooves in the floor to highlight the symbol. Gradually, the entire segment rose and rolled out of the way, leaving a sizable gap in the floor.

“Well, Katherine was definitely onto something,” Clara mused, peering into the opening, the bottom of which was submerged in shadow. “There’s something here they want to hide.”

“Like what?” said Sunita.

“Let’s find out.” Clara sat on the edge, ready to enter the hole feet-first.

She caught Me’s eye, who gave her a look that said, *‘I knew you couldn’t resist.’*

*‘Shut up.’* Clara mouthed, her lips twitching.

Sunita faced her daughter. She was hovering by the TARDIS, watching proceedings with nervous excitement. “Ess, go home, please.”

The girl snorted like a Shetland pony and stamped her foot. “But I was the one who—”

“No buts. You head straight there and you don’t stop for anything. If I’m not back after an hour, you go to the Falkarians two doors down. Is that clear?”

She pressed her lips together, trembling with frustration.

“I said, is that clear?”

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Her head shot up. “No!” she yelled. “You’re not the only one who loves her! Why won’t you let me help?”

“Because I can’t lose you too!” Sunita’s voice cracked, but she didn’t back down. “Now do as you’re told!”

Ess glared at her mother, defiance blazing in her eyes. She remained there for a moment, looking to Clara and Me, as though expecting an intervention that would not come. Then she ran from the courtyard, slamming the gate behind her.

“Don’t you think that was a bit harsh?” said Clara as the ring of struck metal subsided.

Apprehension hung over Sunita’s drawn face. “We don’t know what we’re going to find down there.”

“She’s right,” agreed Me, returning the mirror to Sunita before leaning into the diner and tossing her bag inside. “This is the perfect site for an ambush; we’d best be on our guard.”

Without further ado, Clara lowered herself into the hole, dropping into the chamber below. She landed knee-deep in lukewarm, stagnant water.

“Ugh!”

“Have you ever heard of the phrase ‘look before you leap’?” teased Me, who descended a rusty ladder running down the side of the opening with Sunita in tow.

“Well, that’s slightly mortifying...” muttered Clara as she swept her gaze around. She popped on the sonic sunglasses, prompting a quizzical look from Sunita.

“Not dark enough for you?” commented the tour guide.

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“I’m scanning.”

“Of course you are.”

The chamber was spacious relative to the courtyard above it, and by contrast, exceedingly opulent. Through the murky water the floor was an elaborate mosaic fashioned from tiles of crystal, though many of them were chipped or missing. The vaulted ceiling had been painted with a detailed fresco of the night sky, the reflections cast from the ripples shimmering over its mildew-blemished surface. Across from them, arranged like a shrine beneath a great marble arch, stood a stone sculpture of an Asrathon, their eyes hidden beneath a blindfold. In their talons they held a splendid turquoise jewel level with their chest.

“This place is almost a millennium old,” said Clara, receiving the sonic’s findings.

“Plumbing might leave something to be desired, but it looks like a mausoleum to me.”

“For someone of eminence,” Me said, touching the reliefs that decorated the pillars.

The place had clearly seen better days, yet it possessed an air of former grandeur reminiscent of the guttering Cloisters, festooned with fibre-optic vines in the decaying light of the last supernova. Clara wondered for a moment if the immortal felt at home, but her expression indicated otherwise.

“Stars...” Sunita gasped. “I think... No. That’s impossible.”

“If I had a pound for every time someone said that...” Clara said under her breath.

“What is it?”

Sunita joined Me in examining the reliefs. “I think this is Tarchus’ tomb.”

“What, the guy from the monument?”

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“Yes, the first Visionary. But it’s always been purported that his final resting place was never found. Why leave it to waste away in secrecy? By all reason, it should be advertised far and wide as a holy site like the Observatory.”

“History is an unreliable narrator,” said Me.

Clara waded up to the jewel. Upon closer inspection, it was carved into the shape of an anatomical heart, valves and ventricles glittering in the half-light. “So, if this is a tomb,” she said, “where are the remains?”

“You’re looking at them,” Sunita replied. “Submit the carbon in one’s ashes to high enough pressure and temperatures, and voila. It’s a kind of purification process for Visionaries when they die, intended to evoke the stellar cycle. You know, death in life—”

“Life in death,” Me finished. “And the heart shape?”

“Modelled after the Geniah crystal. The source of Auros’ prosperity.”

“Just as well we’ve got a tour guide with us,” Clara said. “This has to be what the note was referring to.”

Her gaze strayed to the wall behind the statue. “Hang on, there’s something engraved here.”

“Looks like old Noctuan.” Sunita approached and stood on her tiptoes to run her fingertips over the markings. “Give me a minute, I might be able to translate some of it...”

“One step ahead of you,” interrupted Clara, who went on to read aloud:

*Here I lie, amongst the twilight,  
I dwell now on my deepest sorrow,  
That aeons may pass,*

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*And the legions may migrate o'er cosmic planes,  
While the lost one weeps,  
Their cries unheard, their hopes forgotten.  
As I relinquish my fetters to this earth,  
To rejoin the dust from whence I came,  
May those whose Vision follows mine take solemn vigil,  
In atonement for this sacrifice,  
'Til the night his oath is satisfied,  
And bids her return to Siderius.*

"Well, that's... cryptic," she remarked.

"Am I missing something?" Sunita said in disbelief. She pointed to the wall. "This is a dead language from a planet you *claim* you've never been to before."

"TARDIS translation circuit," Clara said offhandedly as she put away the sunglasses. "Basically, our ship did a clever thing."

Sunita massaged her temples. "When you say 'ship', you mean the tacky diner upstairs, don't you?"

"Uh-huh."

"And I'm supposed to believe that... how?"

"Because we're standing in the middle of a secret tomb in a fantasy city built by owl people. It's all relative," Clara retorted. "More to the point, this inscription."

"Siderius is a term used to describe the heavens," Sunita explained, trying valiantly to refocus on the task at hand. "The endless expanse to which we all return, in the end."

"You mean space? Or this religion's afterlife?"

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“In Asrathon doctrine, they’re one and the same.”

“It’s a confession,” said Me. “A final testament of sorts.”

“But confessing to what?” asked Clara.

Before anyone could answer, a hollow, scraping noise issued from the far end of the chamber.

“You were saying about an ambush?” hissed Sunita.

As they had in the cloister, the stone bricks comprising the far wall twisted and grated against each other, rearranging themselves into a gaping hole. With synchronised movements, three silver figures emerged.

“I won’t be able to stun all of them. We’ll have to try and talk our way out till there’s an opening,” Sunita murmured, discreetly holding Katherine’s mirror behind her.

“Say as little as possible. And whatever they ask you, answer truthfully.”

“Why?” asked Clara.

“You can’t lie to those things. They’ll always know. Always.”

The Faces of Amity advanced on them in rapid formation, cutting off their escape before they could reach it. Sunita cursed.

*“Our sincere apologies,”* one of them stated. It wore the burnished guise of a middle-aged man with craggy features and a cleft chin. *“You have been identified as a Level One threat to public order. I regret to inform you that you will now be neutralised.”*

“We’re honoured, truly,” said Me. “But what did we do to deserve being so high on the Star Seers’ priority list?”

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*“Your return has been prepared for,” it said simply. “We have protocols in place should technology of Gallifreyan origin be discovered in Auros.”*

Clara and Me exchanged a meaningful glance. *The TARDIS?*

The lead guard addressed them both. *“We hope your stay in our city has been pleasurable.”*

“Oh yeah, lovely, thanks,” said Clara. “Really hospitable.”

*“Your feedback is appreciated.”* With a smile, the Face locked its dispassionate gaze onto them. Once more, the unpleasant tingling sensation enveloped Clara’s body. Sunita writhed in place, fighting the invisible bonds that held her fast. Her numb fingers lost their grip on the mirror, which plopped into the water.

Me meanwhile reacted so quickly Clara barely had time to register what was happening. With the dexterity of an acrobat, she twisted in a pirouette, striking the lead Face with a precise blow to its collar joint that sent it reeling backwards. Clara took advantage of the distraction to direct a kick at the guard nearest to her. Its knee buckled, releasing its hold on Sunita enough for her to struggle free.

“Get to the TARDIS!” Me shouted, dispatching the third guard with a sweep of her leg.

She and Clara bolted for the ladder and leapt onto the rungs. They were halfway to the top when they realised Sunita was not with them. Clara threw a desperate look over her shoulder.

Though no longer bound, the tour guide hadn’t moved. She was staring, transfixed, at the lead Face as it sprang back to its feet and recalibrated itself, making a sickly noise akin to the cracking of bones. Its appearance had changed. The facsimile of a woman, no older than forty, bespectacled and full-faced, stood dripping before her.

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“Kat...” The name left Sunita’s mouth in a gasp. Her entire body was trembling.

“What have you done with her?”

The Face stretched out its spindly hand before replying in the woman's voice, infused with a soft New Zealand accent, *“Do you wish to find out?”*

Clara and Me jumped down from the ladder, closing the distance in seconds. They grabbed Sunita by the arms and pulled her away from the automaton’s reach, Me having the good sense to retrieve the mirror and flash it at the Face as they did so. Coming to her senses, Sunita rasped her thanks. But their relief was short-lived.

Sunita didn’t cry out when it happened: she simply drew a sharp breath, as though winded, then drooped forward in their grasp. Behind them, another Face flicked its wrist, the barrel affixed to it smoking.

Not even Me could outmanoeuvre the next blast; it hit her squarely in the chest as she turned. Her eyelids fluttered in a spasm, and she collapsed into the water with a splash. The Faces then simultaneously revolved their heads in Clara’s direction, the leader’s mask still fluctuating from the mirror.

A high-pitched buzz. Searing pain. An electric current charged down her spine, shooting all the way to the tips of her fingers. Dark spots bloomed in Clara’s vision until they had eclipsed it altogether as her mind sank into oblivion.



## Chapter Six

The first thing Clara became aware of was the heat; oppressive, dry, and unaffected by her body's suspended processes. The air carried a strange, caustic odour that called to mind igniting magnesium over a Bunsen burner while covering Mr Moore's Year 9 chemistry class – Lilly Rowley had nearly blinded Tobias when she stole his goggles during that lesson, she recalled. Clara groaned, opening her bleary eyes, and found nothing but darkness. She attempted to move and felt the tug of shackles on her wrists. *Okay, inconvenient, but nothing you can't handle.*

"Me?" she called as loud as she dared. The word reverberated through the air before being swallowed by the abyss. Wherever she was, the space was immense.

"Your friend is still unconscious. As should you be, by all accounts." A familiar, husky voice echoed from her right.

"We thought you were dead!" Clara said to the Asrathon cleric in surprise, straining her eyes to see him in the gloom.

"Oh, no more than you. Not yet. Though I wish it were so."

"You know, I'm really not the best basis for comparison there. Loving your optimism, though." Clara shifted her ankles, which also turned out to be bound. *Brilliant.* "So, where are we, exactly?"

"Deep beneath the city," replied the cleric. "We're in the crucible, awaiting our summary execution."

"Okay, good-oh." She twisted her wrists this way and that experimentally. As far as she could tell, the sonic sunglasses were still tucked inside her jacket pocket. But trying to reach them proved a futile effort; the restraints only tightened with the strength of coiled pythons. Well, that complicated matters, but at least they weren't real snakes this time.

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As she grew accustomed to the dark, Clara assessed her immediate surroundings. The ground was covered in a thick layer of sand and debris. Jutting from it, like palaces from a desert, were clusters of raw crystal, one of which was close enough to touch even with her restricted movements. A great expanse of rock lay ahead of them, dotted with dimly lit braziers and the faint impressions of minecart tracks.

Most importantly, she was tied up beside someone. Clara extended a hand and found warm flesh under her cold fingers. The hunched outline of Sunita stirred, accompanied by the clink of chains scraping over a rough stone surface.

“Cl-Clara? Is that y-you?” she asked, tripping over the syllables as she came to.

“Yep. Looks like we’re having an impromptu underground sleepover.”

“Is it just us? Where’s Me?”

“Think that’s her next to you. Plus there’s Gonzo here.” Clara inclined her head towards the Asrathon, who was slumped a little way from them.

Sunita took one squinting look at him and twisted her lips in disgust. “And there I was assuming the Faces had nabbed someone halfway decent.”

“You know each other then?”

“Yeah, you could say we’re acquainted.” She didn’t bother to hide her contempt.

“Hello, Slypher.”

The cleric flared his crest. “You’ll use my title, you featherless biped! I am the Vice Hierarch of the Star Seers—”

Clara tutted at him. “Well, right now, you’re a prisoner along with the rest of us – amazing how that reframes your political values, isn’t it? But we should probably

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work on *not* being prisoners anymore. Ideally before that whole execution business you mentioned.”

This was normally the part where she would assume an authoritative stance to draw attention, but the chains weren’t allowing for the most theatrical of performances. “Okay then, brainstorming session—”

A moan of pain interrupted her speech. “Hey, Me, you alright?”

“Mildly concussed and irritated by the incessant noise, if that counts.”

“I’ll take that as a yes. Slypher, wasn’t it? Care to bring us up to speed?”

“I wouldn’t listen to him if I were you,” said Sunita. “He’s the one who drafted the curfew laws, put the whole city into lockdown. Sycophant in chief, isn’t that right, Slypher?”

“Oh, dispense with the idealistic drivel, Joshi,” the cleric snapped. “You were perfectly happy to follow our script in exchange for money; you’re hardly in a position to cast judgment. We don’t expect your ilk to understand the difficult choices determined by the course of the stars...”

“You can shove that talk right up your clo—”

They continued exchanging increasingly creative Aurosian insults, but Clara didn’t step in. Something else had caught her attention.

She looked over at Me, who nodded. She’d seen it too.

The cavern’s centre was dominated by a rocky peak, an opaline crystal formation rising dozens of feet into the air. Above it, vast quantities of machinery, lenses and brazen gears and cables, drew a complex web, stretching so far that neither woman could perceive the end of the mechanism.

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But that wasn't all.

The crystal was moving.

Up and down, up and down, in a regular rhythm.

It was *breathing*.

Sunita had stopped arguing, having noticed the uncanny sight, her mouth hanging open. Slypher merely sneered with pompous satisfaction. "Good. You've figured it out."

They were imprisoned with a gigantic, slumbering gemstone beast.

"What... *is* that?" Sunita's voice lost its acerbic edge.

Slypher extended a talon. "That is Lucida. Consider yourselves privileged. Few have seen one of her kind up close; even fewer have lived after doing so."

"Well, that's reassuring," muttered Clara.

It was hard to distinguish her features in the darkness, but Clara could still spot things: here, an enormous hind leg, ending in claws as long as a man is tall; there, an impossibly large wing composed of crystalline feathers, folded around the sleeping shape like a cathedral-sized bat.

"We call them Empyreals," said Slypher. "Sentient beings said to be woven from the very fabric of the universe, acutely attuned to Time itself. No one truly knows what they are, or how they came to be, but we've watched them roam the reaches of the heavens for millennia."

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Sunita seemed overcome with fear, but Clara, though she had tried to conceal it, was smiling. There was something achingly beautiful about the giant in front of them. A dreadful, apocalyptic sense of calm.

Me, meanwhile, had more practical concerns. "I always thought they were old spacefarers' tales," she said. "Dreamed up by romantics who fancied shooting stars as winged beasts soaring on astral currents. A nice story, nothing more."

Despite herself, no doubt, Me's voice carried a note of excitement. Laying eyes on the new and unexpected must be a strange experience for her. "Though I suppose there's a grain of truth to every myth."

"What you see before you speaks to this one's veracity," agreed Slypher, impressed by her wisdom if nothing else. "This specimen is barely a shell, however. In their full majesty, they are as living suns, drawing energy from the surrounding stars to the point of incandescence."

"So they feed off starlight?" said Clara.

"To put it in crude terms, yes."

The stillness that followed was shaken by Lucida's not-quite-breaths. Waves of heat radiated from the creature, crashing onto the sweating faces of the prisoners before receding into her dormant form.

"You can guess what my next question is gonna be, right?" Clara asked.

Slypher ruffled his feathers. "No doubt you expect me to disclose the entire shrouded history of our city?"

"Stop pouting and just tell us what the hell is going on!" snapped Sunita.

He sighed, letting out an exhausted, condescending warble. "It happened in a time long past. The Observatory stood proudly amidst the valley, while the city itself was

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a mere draft to the wonder it is today. The founder of our order, Visionary Tarchus, put to the test the device contained within its walls before a dazzled crowd of settlers.”

“A device that channels starlight,” Clara chimed in.

“Yes.”

She sucked air in through her teeth. “Oh.”

“Quite. It was the perfect lure for a young Emphyreal, a child lost in the cosmos. She tumbled to the planet’s surface, and would have drowned the newborn city in starfire had the heavens not smiled on us that night. For Tarchus was in the company of a travelling wiseman from a distant land. He devised a way to avoid a cataclysm, harnessing the tower’s capabilities to drain Lucida of her power.”

“*The Pilgrim and the Colossus...*” Sunita whispered.

“They were left with a terrible quandary,” continued the cleric. “Tarchus believed their only option was to put the Emphyreal out of her misery. But the Pilgrim stayed his hand, convincing him to trap Lucida below the Observatory using ancient magic he had obtained from the Old Iron King.”

Sunita frowned. “But every version of that story claims the Pilgrim killed the monster.”

“Alterations were made over the centuries. It was a cleaner narrative. Good versus evil. No sacrifice of an innocent creature for a civilisation to be born. It is the burden of the Star Seers: a necessary act for us to prevail, but a regrettable one. The Pilgrim shared that regret. He fled Auros in shame, vowing never to return before finding a way to release Lucida without causing untold destruction.”

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“‘Til the night his oath is satisfied...” Clara recited, pensive. “So what’s changed in the past few months?”

“Why, it’s Visionary Gallius. He’s gone quite mad. He wants to open the cage himself, break Lucida free.”

“Why would he do that?” Sunita cut in. “What would he possibly have to gain by razing his own city to the ground? It’d be chaos.”

“Chaos is precisely what he seeks,” said Slypher. “Gallius has always been a... *troubled* soul. He doesn’t share his secrets, but I can theorise. I think he came to worship Lucida, as an embodiment of the stars themselves. To him, unleashing her full power would be a miracle, and Auros burning... ascension, for us all. The road to Siderius, by way of a pyre.

“When we first heard the noises,” he continued, “we in the clergy recognised them for what they were: after nine hundred years of dormancy, Lucida was waking up.”

“An astral spirit indeed...” said Me.

“Some truth to sweeten the lie, yes. Much as it pains me to admit it, Sunita, you were right: I ordered the curfew, increased the patrols by the Faces of Amity. But I did so at the behest of the Visionary. We believed in him, the one anointed by the heavens, and he deceived us.”

Sunita bristled. “You’re really pleading ignorance?”

“Why would we have doubted him? Faith doesn’t embarrass itself with questions.”

“Faith without doubt isn’t faith at all,” she retorted. “Not that I’d expect you to know the difference.”

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“Gallius told us he would contain the situation!” insisted Sypher. “Pacify the creature. That he just needed more time. But his demands... his demands went too far.”

“How far is too far for you?” Me mocked while fiddling with her chains, looking for a way to lockpick herself free.

The cleric glowered at her. “He asked for the dissenters – those who asked too many questions – to be sacrificed to Lucida.”

Clara’s unbeating heart sank. She scooped up a fistful of the fine sand around them, letting it run through her fingers. Except... this wasn’t sand at all, was it?

“Slypher?” she asked.

“Yes?”

“Would this sacrifice involve...” – she glanced at Sunita’s horrified face – “*heat*?”

They were *ashes*.

Ashes and brittle, blackened bones, flaking into dust.

She turned to the tour guide, whose eyes were filled with imagined tragedy. “Sunita, listen. We don’t know if she was here.” She laid a hand on Sunita’s own. “I swear, as soon as we get out, I will search every inch of this city if I have to, okay? Stay hopeful. Stay alive.”

Sunita responded with a weak nod, grateful, if still doubtful. “Slypher,” she said hesitantly, “do you... do you know what happened to Katherine Shaffer?”

The Asrathon seemed to measure his words before answering. “I’m afraid not.”



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“But you sent her that tip about Tarchus’ grave!” Clara said. “You must have known what you were getting her into.”

Slypher looked taken aback. “I sent her no such thing!”

“Then who did?”

“That, I do not know. All I can tell you is that if there are survivors, then Gallius never disclosed it to the clergy. But you must realise the odds that she perished are considerab—”

He immediately abandoned his sentence when Me sent him a glare strong enough to pin him against the wall like an overgrown moth.

The Asrathon cleared his throat, emitting a few melodious notes in the process. “To return to the matter at hand,” he went on cautiously, “I became increasingly uncertain of Gallius’ leadership. I had to see for myself. Yesterday, after the evening ceremony, I slipped down the hidden passage to this chamber, and found Lucida more active than ever.”

Clara was pretty sure she had the measure of Slypher by now. A petty little bureaucrat, not exactly a paragon of virtue, but ambitious. She could use ambitious. Contemptible though he was, people like him could be useful when playing ‘topple-the-regime’.

Now all that remained was filling the remaining gaps in the puzzle. “I saw you sneaking off, yeah. Guessing you confronted Gallius after that?”

“Yes, the foolish boy as good as confessed he’d been reviving her with syphoned energy from the generator – as though he were proud of it! I tried to reason with him, make him understand the danger Lucida posed, the sheer cost of this madness... but to no avail. I then warned him that, if he didn’t stand down, I would have no

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choice but to have him deposed. And I would have done just that, had the Faces not turned on me before I could alert the rest of the council.”

“If you were in charge of the lockdown, couldn’t you control the guards?” asked Me.

“Gallius must have anticipated me defying him. He removed my signature from the Star Seers’ systems, branded me a heretic. I daresay he’s since framed me as the traitor so that he can exact his plans unhindered by the clergy’s scrutiny.”

A heavy silence fell.

“So,” said Sunita, a desperate quiver to her voice, “what’s the plan now?”

“I’m thinking,” Clara replied.

More silence.

“Could you hurry up?”

“There’s always a way out,” she assured her in the absence of an answer. “We’ve just got to find it. Me, any ideas?”

“Short of one of us severing a limb, no,” said Me.

Clara raised her eyebrows. “Seriously? How many prisons must you have escaped from in your life?”

“Likewise. But you heard the cleric, this isn’t a prison, it’s an altar.”

“And?”

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“A prisoner might be permitted to leave for a trip to the torture chamber or chopping block,” said Me. “But these manacles are sealed shut. No fastenings or seams of any kind. There’s only one intended way out of them, and we’re sitting in it.”

Something echoed through the cavern.

The gears overhead groaned into life; clunking, growling, grinding. One by one, the distant braziers erupted with pale turquoise flames as the tower’s gilded elevator floated down the shaft, coming to land at the feet of the beast.

Gallius came into view next. He stepped from the platform, his demeanour unsteady. In awe of his star-god, perhaps, or fearful of the grim deed he was about to carry out. Clara was able to get a better look at him, now: strikingly small, far smaller than the imposing silhouette they’d seen in the chapel. He was crowned with a canopy of dark blue feathers, glinting like a rare, precious metal. Golden ornaments were woven into the quills of his crest. And yet, despite these riches, there was an unkempt quality to his plumage, something dishevelled and disorderly about the Visionary.

He didn’t look at them. Not out of pride or contempt, Clara sensed, but guilt, forcing his reflective eyes to focus on Lucida. He knelt by the Emphyreal’s head, gliding his talons over the living crystal in a tender caress. The heat pattern pulsating through the cavern changed; its peaks became longer, more defined as they passed over the prisoners – like some kind of thermal purr.

The Visionary murmured something to her. A prayer, an incantation, or some nefarious plot? No. These were gestures of confession, of secrets told in the dark, away from all things. Absolute trust and devotion transcribed into words. Clara couldn’t make them out, but they had a certain telltale cadence to them. It was beautiful. And like most beautiful things, lethal.

At last, Gallius mustered the resolve to face them, one knee still to the ground. He opened his mouth to speak—

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The gears of the Observatory began to turn once more, drowning out the words. Sparing them a rueful look, Gallius returned to the platform, the grille clanging shut behind him. The elevator ascended into the darkness, rousing the great mass of Lucida beneath it. She staggered to her feet, cast her slender, gryphon-like face upwards, and roared a deafening roar, straining against the thick chains that bound each of her four legs. The whole place shook with every mournful cry.

“How long were we out for?” Clara said in alarm.

“The whole day, I should think,” answered Slypher.

“You couldn’t have mentioned that detail sooner?” Me hissed.

“What difference would it have made? You said as much yourself: there’s no escaping this.”

A trill sounded high above them. Belching clouds of steam, the pistons and pumps of the Observatory mechanism activated. The lenses slowly revolved into perfect alignment, and starlight cascaded onto Lucida, a stream of pale gold whose rivulets seeped into the skin of the star beast. She drank the light ravenously, glowing from within like hot coals stoked by bellows. As she shone brighter, her form became more alive, her movements more fluid – almost feline. The surrounding crystals shone with her, flaring a brilliant scarlet.

The temperature was rising continuously now; the valleys were rarer and the peaks more acute. Her aria of radiance was nearing a rapid crescendo, and its resolution would be the low hiss of sizzling skin.

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## Chapter Seven

Clara didn't know what to do.

It had all been over, the night before. She had contemplated the sea of stars with a quiet sense of certainty. Like watching a storm from afar, cooped up in a cosy bedroom. Even now, a part of her whispered that she could still let go. Embrace the fire, and the finality it brought.

*A burning building, a child crying.*

She wasn't very good at that, obviously. But die tomorrow, die today. What was the difference? No need to win now.

She gazed at the blazing Empyrean; formidable, terrible, astonishing.

And then she looked at Sunita.

She saw a mother who would never see her daughter again. Tears of grief spilled down Sunita's cheeks, vapourised by the blistering heat before they could fall. Dry sobs escaped her throat as she uttered, over and over again, "I love you, sweetheart. Forgive me for leaving you. Forgive me."

*A burning building, a child crying.*

There wasn't any choice, was there?

"Alright, everyone! I've got a plan."

*Going through the motions again. Like taming an unruly class. Figure it out before you're overwhelmed.*

*You can do this.*

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*You can still do this.*

*You're not dead yet.*

"Slypher," Clara asked, "what do you know about those crystals?"

The cleric was panicked, his speech breathless. "I... They're chromastrite. The same as in the city."

"Meaning they capture light?"

"Yes."

"And heat?"

His eyes widened. "You're not proposing we—"

"—Use them. On our chains. Heat them up enough and maybe we can pry them off. Only need to do it once, to one person and then – you can lead us to that secret passage, right? Please say I'm right, 'cos dying wrong would really ruin my day."

"Of... of course," Slypher stammered. "But the pain... Whoever tries it will die of shock if the burns don't kill them first."

*A burning building, a child crying.*

Burning – flames, flames that didn't leave a mark on her.

*Risky. Hard to know what this body can bear.*

Then again, the Raven. Death. Pain like never before awaiting her. Surely this was child's play by comparison.

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*I can take it.*

“I’ll do it. I’ll manage. Better than being slow-cooked to death.”

Sunita was aghast, but Me fixed her with a piercing look. “Clara, you’re looped in time, that doesn’t make you indestructible!”

“You don’t know that,” Clara said, doing her utmost to project confidence. “Am I wrong?”

Me just glared back. *It’s all an act, isn’t it?* thought Clara. *Behind the aloof pretence, she’s as unsure as anyone else.*

“Thought so. Maybe I am, maybe I’m not.” Clara struggled to disguise the tremor in her voice. “But right now, maybe is all we have.” She shuffled towards the nearest crystal cluster, feeling the heat emanating from it. “Get ready, you lot. As soon as I’m done freeing you, run.”

The metal around their ankles was starting to sear their skin, ever so gently for now; a dull sting, but one that promised only agony.

Clara brought her breaths under control, then stopped them completely. She reached for the smouldering crystal, arms trembling. Sunita averted her gaze, while Slypher and Me watched with trepidation. Clara gritted her teeth, scrunched up her eyes and, letting out a traitorous whimper, pressed her manacles hard against it.

The effect was almost instant. All it took was a few seconds of contact for the metal to turn red-hot and rapidly expand. Biting down on her shirt collar to stifle a scream, Clara wrenched her wrists away. The link broke apart with relative ease, crashing to the floor as the nauseating odour of charred leather filled the air. Slypher made an odd noise and nearly fainted, suspended by his chains.

Pain overwhelmed her, all but blinded her, yet somehow Clara succeeded in recovering the sunglasses. Eyes streaming, she slammed them on, willing herself to



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concentrate until her remaining restraints gave way. She fought to stay conscious as she crawled over to help the others. Sunita... Me... Slypher... One by one, she freed them of their bonds. Someone yanked her to her feet, their firm grip keeping her upright. Me shouted something – she could see her mouthing the words – but no sound came. An unbearable ringing was pounding through her skull...

*“This way!”*

Me dragged her by the hand. They ran through the torrid ash, through the swirling cinders, through the shimmering air. But Clara couldn’t keep pace. She lost her footing, stumbled forward—

And collapsed onto cobblestones.

The sonic sunglasses flew from her face, skidding across the leaf-littered street. Clara picked herself up with shaking legs.

At the end of the street, the Raven cawed, lifting off its perch.

Clara approached it.

*“Let me be brave,”* she heard herself whisper. *“Let me be brave...”*

She threw her arms wide. The Raven streaked towards her—

It froze.

Everything went utterly still.

A line of light split the wall next to her and opened into a narrow doorway. The ringing in her head intensified, reaching a fever pitch.

*“I can save you,”* echoed a distant voice.

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There was no one there.

Her forearms burned. A woman screamed. The light fractured. Time shattered. The floor crumbled beneath her and she plummeted into the cold unknown...

“Clara!”

Me’s face was inches from hers, her expression one of pure dread.

“What... what just happened?” Clara croaked.

“Nothing good.”

Clara got to her knees, blinking away the bands of colour that fringed her vision. They were still in the sweltering cavern. Lucida was in extreme distress; thrashing wildly, she let out a blood-curdling howl. Her frenzy sent powerful shockwaves through the chamber, dislodging stalactites from the roof.

“Slypher and Sunita have gone ahead,” Me yelled over the chaos. “Can you stand?”

“I think so...” Clara was staring at the raging Empyreal, transfixed. Lucida swung her fiery head in their direction. For the briefest of moments, the creature hesitated, as though surprised to find she wasn’t alone. Her fervour temporarily died down.

“Clara, snap out of it!” Me grabbed her by the shoulder. “We have to get out of here!”

Clara started. “Right, yeah. Not getting burnt to a crisp. Good shout.”

With Me in the lead, they made a break for a fissure in the far rock face. Lucida roared, moving to charge after them, her thunderous steps physically jolting them. But the chains held her back. She wailed in anguish as the women scrambled up a slope of ash and squeezed through the crevice.

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Jagged walls clawed at their backs as they sidled past. The passageway snaked around before broadening, allowing enough room to walk along it. Not long after, it became a flight of innumerable stone steps. They'd managed to make it a short way up when Me suddenly stopped, doubled over, and broke into a nasty coughing fit. Clara, with a stab of horror, realised there must be little oxygen left down here. She rushed to Me's aid, but the immortal shook her off, wiping the sweat from her forehead. She was singed from head to toe, and her hands bore furious, blistering burns.

"You're hurt," Clara breathed.

"I'll live," wheezed Me, not looking her in the eye. "I always do. Come on."

They continued their climb, for what felt like miles. Darkness engulfed them, though they welcomed the cooler air it brought. As the pressure diminished, a dank, loamy scent wafted through the tunnel, carried on a pleasant draft that urged them onward. The darkness thinned, and they saw roots pushing through the soil, felt damp earth underfoot. Soon, they found themselves in a cramped hollow, where Sunita and Slypher awaited them.

"It looks like Hell spat you two back out," said Sunita.

"It did," Clara said weakly, brushing the ash from her hair.

Sunita laughed and pulled her into a hug. "I've never been so glad to see those faces. You actually got us out!"

"Even more impressive is that you survived," said Slypher, eyeing Clara, who was unscathed apart from her heat-ravaged clothes.

"Occupational habit," Clara replied, uncomfortable under his scrutiny.

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Me was skimming her fingers over a spot on the wall. “How quaint,” she remarked, grasping a rope concealed among the roots and giving it a hearty tug. A stone block in the ceiling rose and shifted aside, flooding the hollow with moonlight.

“After you,” Me said to Clara, waving a hand at the opening.

Clara made an attempt at nonchalance. “Don’t they say age before beauty?”

“A phrase coined by someone who had never met me, clearly. I insist.”

She clambered out of the hole, emerging into the Observatory’s lush gardens. The hedges rustled in the wind, mingling with the clamorous noises they could now attribute to Lucida. The night sky was marred by clouds that scudded across it like a spectral fleet.

After assisting her companions, Clara, as if in a trance, walked up to the statue guarding the passage entrance. She parted the ivy enshrouding it, then took a few tentative paces back.

A youngish, handsome man in a pinstriped suit with a tousle of spiky hair stood before her, his face graven into solemn dignity. What she had mistaken for his cloak was, in fact, a long trench coat, which mostly obscured his plimsolls – *sandshoes*, she corrected herself. Lichen and moss clung to his cracked features. The likeness had been eroded by time but was nonetheless recognisable.

“The famous Pilgrim,” said Me, standing behind her. “You knew it was him from the start, didn’t you?”

Clara smiled sadly. “I’d know him anywhere.”

She furrowed her brow. Barely legible words were carved into the statue’s base. Clara bent down and blew away a coating of stone dust to read them.

*For your valour, we thank you.*

## A CITIZEN OF THE UNIVERSE

*For its cost, we mourn.*

*For your recompense, we wait.*

This wasn't an effigy for a forgotten hero, but a monument to a man's debt. The rumbling earth served as a grave reminder that it remained unpaid.

"Oh, Doctor," she murmured, "what have you done?"

## Chapter Eight

Petals fluttered from the blossom tree at the edge of the little garden while Clara sat cross-legged in the grass, captivated by their performance. For these petals didn't fall, they flew. They were living creatures, forming intricately coordinated patterns like a murmuration of starlings. She held out her arm. One of the petal creatures landed on her sleeve, folding and unfolding its delicate, silken wings.

She heard footsteps and looked up to see Sunita walking towards her carrying two steaming mugs.

"I come bearing tea."

The petal creature took flight to join its companions, caught by the currents of the night air; they moved as one, rising high over the crimson rooftops. Clara accepted the mug with thanks. "We're how many light-years from Earth," she said, "and making a cuppa is still a go-to trauma remedy. Good to know some things never change."

"I suppose it's our way of feeling normal," replied Sunita.

"Remind me, what's normal again?"

Sunita snickered, placing her mug on the ground. She removed her scorched cardigan and spread it beneath her. "No sign the Star Seers have learned of our escape yet," she said. "I'd say we're in the clear – for now."

There was a long pause as she plucked at the grass stems. A wind chime hanging from the tree's boughs jangled as Lucida raged on far below them. "Listen, I um... I'm sorry we got off on the wrong foot."

"It's fine, really. You don't have to—"

## A CITIZEN OF THE UNIVERSE

“No, I do,” Sunita persisted. “Truth be told, I thought you were the most insufferable—”

“Smart-arse?”

“Well, yeah.”

Clara smirked. “Oh, please, tone down the flattery. I’d blush if I could.”

“What I’m trying to say – badly – is that I misjudged you. After Katherine... after they took her, I let that cloud everything.”

Sunita twirled a blade of grass in her fingers. “It’s funny, isn’t it? You get so used to seeing someone, you don’t even think about it. They’re a constant in your life. And then they’re gone, and suddenly...”

“Nothing’s quite right anymore,” Clara finished. “You’ve got all that history with no one to turn to.”

Sunita stared at her. “How are you supposed to deal with that?”

“Spare them five minutes a day.”

She scoffed. “Easier said than done.”

Clara saw the Doctor's statue in her mind's eye, with his billowing coat and brooding expression. She didn't voice her thoughts; she didn't need to.

Sunita lapsed once more into a contemplative silence, tracing a thumb over the blade stalk. “She... wasn’t the first,” she said at last.

“Who did you lose?”

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“My husband, Rajnish.” Sunita let that sink in for a moment, drawing up a leg to rest against it, still twirling the blade. “It was a work accident. Structural failure or something – the bastards up top cutting corners as they always do. I didn’t really pay attention, though. I couldn’t pay attention to anything for weeks. That was the worst thing. Couldn’t sleep, couldn’t eat, couldn’t even take care of Ess... My Ess.”

Sunita took a shuddering breath. “That’s when I realised things had to change. We came here for a fresh start, running away to a fantasy land. But my problems just came with me. Still, it wasn’t without its silver linings.

“We arrived on a night like this,” she said, gazing at the sky wistfully. “It was beautiful, but not half as beautiful as her.”

“Katherine,” Clara guessed.

“We met at the marketplace. I wasn’t looking where I was going, tripped over my two left feet. Before I knew it, I’d crashed right into her! I was mortified, but she just laughed it off. Thought I’d never have to see her again, but then she had to go and turn out to live next door.” Her lips quirked upwards in fond amusement. “I could never quite shake her off.

“She always said—” Sunita sighed. “She always says our meeting was fated. I tossed an orange at her whenever she did. She laughed every time. Kat’s good at that – was good at that...?” She broke off, the remaining words failing her.

Clara offered her hand.

Sunita dropped the grass into her palm. “I’ve been told to move on from them. So many times. But how can I with a great big rock in my path?”

Clara tilted her head upwards, losing herself in the inferno of enchanting stars. Contemplative. Nostalgic.



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Sad.

"People always get it wrong," she said. "Forget it, they say. Forge on ahead. But they're looking at it from the wrong angle. Force it all behind you and it'll just become your ball and chain, weighing you down forever. But you can find ways around it, squeeze through the spaces where you can see the light ahead. You're inching forward, and the memories will still be there, by your side, rooting for you. Until one day, hopefully" – Clara opened her palm and watched as the grass drifted away on the midnight breeze – "you won't need your rock anymore."

"I hope I get there someday," Sunita murmured.

*Me too*, Clara thought.

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Me couldn't recall the last time she had treated a wound, yet her hands deftly recounted the motions her mind had ceased to retain. Hands that – according to her diaries – had stemmed bleeding on the battlefields of Agincourt, Zaruthstra, and the Gapon wastelands; had applied ointment to lepers' sores and cauterised the mutilated limbs of workers who'd fallen foul of the Plutonian Quartz mines; the hands of a nurse, a surgeon, a doctor. She winced as she dabbed a compress over her arm, its cool sting granting her skin some fleeting relief.

Ess appeared in the doorway to the small kitchen, resting against its stone frame. When she glimpsed Me's burns she grimaced comically and wrinkled her nose in disgust.

"It isn't polite to gawk," said Me, not glancing up.

"Sorry." The girl came closer and perched on a chair at the small table where Me was sitting, kicking her short legs. "Did the colossus do that?"

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“No,” said Me. “I spent a little too long sunbathing.”

Ess snorted. “You’re making fun of me!”

“I wouldn’t dare.”

“Hmph. What sort of name is Me, anyway?” she asked, crossing her arms.

“What sort of name is Ess?”

“That’s not my *real* name. It’s short for Essie.”

Me sat motionless for several moments. She gazed into the girl’s huge round eyes, gleaming like pools of jade. From the deepest recesses of her mind, echoing through its dusty, cavernous halls, a tender voice sang a forgotten lullaby.

*‘Rough blows the North Wind, cruel blows the East...’*

“It isn’t polite to gawk, don’t you know,” said Ess, mimicking Me’s dry tone.

“It’s... a pretty name,” Me said quietly. “I knew another girl with it, once.”

Ess’s annoyance surrendered to curiosity. Propping her elbows on the table, she laid her chin on her hands. “What was she like?”

*Pages torn away, parchment scarred by tears. Words scrawled in bleeding ink describing Hell on Earth. A head of plaited hair heavy on her chest. The freckled face of a sleeping child, never to wake again. The implacable masks of doctors indistinguishable from carrion crows. The stench of sickness and death burning in her nostrils. Feverish moans, wheezing cries, wretched screams. Hers? Theirs? Mine?*

*‘Heavy blows the South Wind, we all fall beneath...’*

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The lullaby had died with the last breaths of her infant daughter. She had buried her alongside her brothers, Johann and Rue, by a thicket of rowan trees far from the reeking pits piled with corpses. Three empty cots. Three full graves. Three names carved into her memory with three piercing knives, deep enough to endure to the end of time itself. But Time had taken her recollections from her, consigned them to ancient history. Only their names remained; the names, and the song.

“I don’t remember.” Me said in a voice not her own.

Ess fell silent, perhaps sensing something she did not understand but nonetheless knew to be wary of, in the way that children do. “I didn’t mean to make you sad,” she said.

“I’m not sad.”

The girl looked confused. “But you’re crying.”

Me touched her cheek, surprised when she pulled her hand away to find glistening droplets on her fingertips. She examined them with a scientific interest. “So I am. I thought I’d kicked the habit millennia ago.” *But these aren't my tears.* How could she weep for a loss she could not define nor remember?

“Ma’s always sad these days,” Ess muttered, lowering her head. “She doesn’t say it, but grown-ups never do. It’s like you’re embarrassed, or afraid.”

“I suppose we are,” Me replied.

Ess broke into a grin. “It’s alright now though, because you’re here.”

“Yes,” said Me, leaning back in her seat. “To vanquish monsters, rescue fair damsels, and right all the world’s wrongs?”

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The girl's forehead creased, as though the answer was the most obvious thing in the world. "No, to help."

"And that's enough?"

"Course it is."

*When did children get so wise?* "Well, we'll do what we can – whatever that's worth." Me forced a smile. "Now that's quite enough chit chat. I'm sure you've got better things to do than gossip with a jaded old woman."

"You're not old!" giggled Ess.

"Oh, but I am. I just have an exemplary skincare routine."

Ess giggled again as she hopped off her chair. "I should probably check on Ma..." She hesitated, gripping the chair's back, her gaze lingering on Me with those remarkable eyes. The Empyrean far beneath their feet wailed.

"Those noises, they scared me for so long," said the girl quietly. "I thought the monster that got Katherine was coming for Ma next. But now I think it's just scared, too."

"I think you're right," said Me. "'Monster' is often just a word people give to things they don't understand." *Or refuse to.*

Ess' face was thoughtful. "Then I want to understand." With that, she turned and trotted out of the kitchen.

As soon as the girl was gone, Me exhaled. She lifted the compress from her arm: the burns had hardly faded. Now that was new. While the Mire repair kit was no guarantee of invincibility, it had graced – and burdened – her with the ability to recover from injury faster than any mortal man. Something was amiss.

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She'd long held suspicions. All technology, however advanced, must wear out eventually. That was the paradox of immortality: it didn't mean forever, not really. To a mayfly, the lifespan of a human might feel like forever. To a human, the lifespan of a star might feel like forever. To Me, it was all but the blink of an eye. She had joined the last star in the universe. They'd had an unspoken agreement of sorts, that they would perish together. Of course, she had reneged on that agreement, as anyone would for the prospect of more.

The notion that her one and constant companion, the device that had infected her with ceaseless existence, forced her survival through human civilisation and beyond, denied her desperate pleas for rest, would finally deign to expire now... well, there was a poetic irony to it. Whether for a day or billions of years, the end comes for us all, sooner or later. Eternal life was an oxymoron; life, by its very nature, can never truly be eternal. Yet Me felt a stranger in the face of the finite; the limbo in which she now found herself was foreign country. All those many aeons of meditation and preparation unpicked on a whim, because Clara Oswald had barrelled back into her life offering... what, exactly?

What was she to make of this uncertain certainty, swept along for the swan song of a doomed woman? Had she accompanied her out of some sense of obligation, pity, or a simple desire for company before her own demise? Me didn't know, but as she dressed her wounds, and wiped the lingering tears from her face, she took a strange comfort in that fact.

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"Gallius' plans must be accelerating. I've never known Lucida to be so disturbed." Slypher paced back and forth, preening his singed feathers as he went.

They had gathered in the Joshi's living room. Sunita was tinkering with the Face's memory cortex again, poring over scrolling data and streams of projected code, though Clara suspected this was to occupy herself more than anything. Lucida's continued onslaught was impossible to ignore; the half-finished cups of tea cluttering the dining table shuddered, holographic photographs teetered in their

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frames, electric candles threatened to tumble from their shelves, underscored all the while by the Empyreal's tortured howling.

"What's preventing her from bursting from the ground and wreaking havoc at any moment?" asked Me, drawing up a chair opposite Sunita. Her manner was business-like, but her eyes were on Ess. The girl was curled up on the sofa, fidgeting and hugging a pillow as she watched the adults attentively. At first, Sunita had insisted that Ess not be present for their discussion, concerned it would frighten her, until Clara had pointed out that her tendency to eavesdrop rendered the idea pointless. Better that she understand what's at stake, she had told her, than be left to stumble around in the dark.

"Those chains have held Lucida for nigh a thousand years; we can only pray they'll endure a little longer," Slypher was saying. "She won't get anywhere without Gallius. He should be our foremost concern."

"Then why hasn't the city already been reduced to ashes?" said Sunita. "What's he waiting for?"

"The opportune moment, I expect. Whip the creature into a frenzy, tantalise her with the taste of freedom, then unleash her at the height of her destructive potential."

Clara studied one of the holograms. A woman with coiled hair, thick-rimmed glasses, and the second-most radiant smile she'd ever seen capered around the living room while Ess chuckled in her arms. A Sunita from a happier time danced with her, embracing the woman and her daughter from behind as their hips swayed together, caught up in the delight and shamelessness of the moment. Clara turned to her present-day counterpart. She saw the heaviness that had settled in her eyes, the light from the projections flickering over her face. "All that matters right now is that we still have a chance to stop it."

The tour guide rubbed her mouth and cast a sidelong glance at Ess. And Ess, without uttering a word or making the slightest sound, went over to her mum,

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climbed onto her knee and wrapped her arms around her. It was hard to tell who was comforting who.

“How?” Sunita asked. There was no cynicism in her voice, only exhaustion.

That was the question, wasn't it? Clara had a bizarre urge to laugh. At the absurdity of the situation she had landed herself in, at how she had fled from her grief to the edge of calamity, and above all, at the fact that she had kidded herself into believing that this was ever going to unfold in any other way. *Gallifrey waits*, she thought. *The Raven waits*. It breathed down her neck, like a figure poised behind her, a spectre of the inevitable. And she would turn to meet it, of course she would...

She watched Sunita and Ess hold one another, as though they would never allow themselves to be parted again.

As soon as this was over.

“Worst case scenario, Lucida's released, makes it to the surface,” she said, leaning over the table. “I'm assuming she won't just fly away?”

“Even if she did,” replied Slypher, who ceased his pacing, “in full exposure of the stars, or heavens forbid the sun? Auros wouldn't last long enough to see it.”

“What about the rest of the clergy? Gallius has tipped his hand tonight. They can't pretend anymore.”

“Gone.” Sunita tapped the cortex with a scornful expression. “Seems as soon as they realised things were starting to spiral out of their control, they boarded a private shuttle.”

Slypher didn't comment. He parted the curtain and peered out of the window. The red glow of the street threw ominous shadows across the room.

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“Okay, fine, that’s fine. Means they won’t get in the way.” Clara frowned in concentration as she weighed their options. “Any way we could warn the residents, coordinate an evacuation?”

Sunita shook her head. “Not without alerting Gallius. And if he caught wind there’s every chance of him pulling the trigger early. The lockdown prevents any unsanctioned transport from leaving the city anyway.”

She touched her forehead as though staving off a migraine. “Damn the self-righteous prig that left us with this mess,” she said under her breath, much to Ess’ disapproval. “And to think we tell fairy tales about him!”

A tightness formed in the pit of Clara’s stomach. “What if he had no other choice?”

“He did have one,” Slypher cut in as he moved away from the window, “but he took the coward’s way out. We can’t make the same mistake.”

Clara regarded him with disdain. “So you’re saying we should just kill her?”

He flinched at her glare, but didn’t back down. “If we were to get hold of the Observatory’s mechanism, of the Geniah crystal, we could deplete Lucida until her heart extinguished.”

Ess let out a soft whimper and buried her head in Sunita’s chest. Clara’s knuckles whitened on the table’s edge. Maybe it wasn’t such a good idea having her here, after all. “That’s barbaric.”

“Then I presume you have an alternative? Or are you just here to moralise?”

“I do, actually: we talk to Gallius.”

“Did you not hear me in the cavern?” sneered the cleric. “He can’t be reasoned with.”



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“Maybe not with you.”

“Your arrogance is exceeded only by your naïveté. I practically raised him, and he spat in my face. What makes you think he’ll listen to you?”

“Because he’s ashamed, I saw it!” Clara slapped the table, almost shouting over Lucida’s roars. “We’re missing something, and I am not gonna risk—”

“Risk?” Slypher mocked, his bulbous, sallow eyes flashing. “Diplomacy has its limits, *girl*. Are you willing to squander what precious time we have left appealing to a lunatic while his monster bays at the door?”

“If that’s what it takes to save her,” she replied, defiant.

“And what then?” he demanded, losing what was left of his temper. “After you’ve swayed Gallius with your heartfelt speech? Condemn her to the pit to rot for another millennium? How very noble of you. It seems you and the Pilgrim have much in common.”

“Yeah.” Clara moistened her lips. “We do.” *Too much.*

“Look, this is all well and good,” Sunita interposed in a tone that could stop a charging bull in its tracks, “but either way it means reaching the topmost chamber of the tower: the eyrie.” She looked anxiously down at Ess, who by some miracle had managed to nod off despite the commotion, her long eyelashes fluttering on her cheeks. The excitement of the past twenty-four hours must have taken its toll. Sunita dropped her voice. “How exactly do you plan on infiltrating the most secure building in all of Auros?”

The cleric recomposed himself. “I can escort you, but the Observatory is heavily guarded. We’ll need to find a way past the Faces of Amity.”

“Automated defences are easy enough to exploit,” spoke up Me. She raised her head from steepled fingers, as though she’d been in prayer. “It’s a simple matter of

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finding a loophole in their programming. The Faces operate by monitoring and manipulating a person's physiology, correct?"

"More or less," Slypher said.

"Then there's our answer." She turned her gaze to Clara.

Clara did a double-take. "What, me?"

"You're an anomaly to them," Me explained. "With your physical processes suspended, it must be harder for them to get a read on you. We could use that to our advantage, trick their systems."

"You mean bluff our way in?" Sunita said, sceptical. "Would that work?"

"You'd better hope it does," said Slypher, "or every Face in the city will be sicced on us."

"It'll work," Me stated with the calm conviction of someone who had lived long enough to make anything sound like an immutable fact. "Provided Clara plays her cards right."

"No pressure then," Clara muttered. "You know, those things still managed to knock me out cold."

A half-smile appeared on Me's lips. "I think you'll have to blame yourself for that one. Your body might be frozen, but your mind isn't wired to deal with it. I'd wager you reacted psychosomatically; you expected to fall unconscious, so your brain obliged."

Slypher and Sunita shared a rare look of mutual confusion.

"In other words, I made myself pass out." Clara cringed. "Great."

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“I wouldn’t lose sleep over it,” said Me pointedly. “Old habits die hard, even for those who can’t die.”

Clara didn’t wish to dwell on the topic for any longer than necessary. “So we’re agreed?” she said, looking between the faces of her unlikely co-conspirators. “Sneak up the tower, confront Gallius, save the city.” *And hope nothing goes terribly wrong.*

“It’s hardly a surefire plan,” remarked Sunita.

“In my experience, there’s no such thing. We’ll hash out the details.”

“And when we reach the eyrie – *if* we reach it?” Slypher asked her, not without a vestige of animosity.

She stared him down and answered, “Then we’ll do whatever we have to.”

A heavy silence followed. Dust swirled in the scarlet beams that had penetrated the room, agitated by the warm, vibrating air. Determination kindled in Sunita’s eyes, which strayed to the hologram behind Clara. *She’s wondering the same thing*, Clara realised. *If perhaps all isn’t lost. If the tower might hold a tiny, fragile sliver of hope.* And there were few things more tempting – or more dangerous – than hope.

“I must be out of my mind,” said the tour guide, throwing up her hands in resignation, “but what the hell. Let’s do it.”

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Ahead of making their final preparations, Sunita carried the sleeping Ess upstairs while Slypher resumed his pacing with renewed vigour. Clara and Me were left alone at the table. The immortal had held a long, long-standing principle of never wasting her breath on idle chatter. It’s funny how quickly she’d abandoned it since being afforded the luxury of a companion. “That girl’s a crafty one,” she said. “Pretending

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to fall asleep so her mother wouldn't hold back. She had an eye cracked open the entire time."

Clara smiled faintly. "I knew I liked her."

Me cocked her head, attempting to decipher the many intricacies and contradictions behind that smile. The Doctor had been onto something: Clara's arsenal of faces was impressive enough to warrant its own spotter's guide. She made sure that the cleric was out of earshot. "Slypher struck a nerve, didn't he?"

"Just a little bit."

"The worst thing is that he's probably right."

"I know."

"What if he is right? What if we can't get through to Gallius?"

Clara toyed with the Yale key pendant around her neck that she usually kept hidden, fixating on something Me couldn't see. "Not sure it makes much of a difference," she said after a moment.

"Why?"

"Because either way I haven't got the faintest idea what I'll do next."

There was a long pause, in which a great many unspoken things saturated the space between them, heavy like the atmosphere before a storm. "That's not the only thing eating at you," Me noted.

Clara spent some time ruminating before plucking up the nerve to reply, running her tongue around the inside of her mouth. "Back in the cavern," she said, "after I broke us out. What happened to me?"

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“Contrary to popular belief, I’m not omniscient. All I can do is speculate.”

“Then speculate.”

Me drew patterns on the table from a ring of tea left by the cleaned away mugs.

“Fixed points are foregone conclusions,” she began. “Events set in stone. You dying on Trap Street – in that precise place, in that precise way, and at that exact moment – is an irrefutable entry in the annals of Time. Contradict it and—”

“Time fractures. I know.”

“Not necessarily,” Me said, “or the universe wouldn’t still be standing after your stunt with the crystals. Extraction, it complicates things.”

Me wondered if Clara was aware that she had clutched her wrist.

“Complicates how?” said Clara.

“It’s a surgical incision in the fabric of reality. You didn’t change the fixed point because you don’t currently *exist* in Time, per se. Any contradictions will simply be overwritten; the true version of events will always reassert itself.”

“Always?”

“In theory, so long as you close the incision in the end. But this” – Me waved a hand at Clara – “*state* that you’re in, it’s not designed to last for more than a few minutes, let alone long-term.”

“Does that matter? I mean, I’ll just keep... *resetting* to the way I’m supposed to be, right?”

“Maybe. Maybe not. Time can be fickle. A pool’s surface may recover from the drop of a stone, but it still leaves ripples.”

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“Yeah,” said Clara – more to herself than anything, it seemed. “So I’ve heard.”

## Chapter Nine

The Observatory had never looked more imposing when they assembled before it a short while later, scoping out the entrance from the cover of the arcade. An unnatural fog had gathered in the square; spiralling clouds of steam, illuminated by the crystal, submerged the tower's base like a sea of writhing flame. The great ivory fortress resembled a gigantic chess piece positioned on the board by the hand of a cosmic opponent. Their next manoeuvres would determine the outcome of the game.

Clara made the first move. She glanced at Me, who gave her assent, took a deep breath, then strode towards the tower, carving a path through the fog. The ground beneath her feet quaked with each step, booming like oncoming thunder. As was the case on the night before, there were no guards stationed outside of the building, but this time Clara knew why. Walking up the marble steps, she stood in the doorway, assumed a stance of calculated confidence, and waited.

It didn't take long for the mascarón protruding above the doors – previously concealed among the surrounding architecture – to decide on a face. The head shortened, rounded, and widened. As the molten silver boiled, a narrow, upturned nose emerged from beneath eyes as large as a porcelain doll's. The rest of the chrome sculpted itself into dainty features, prominent cheekbones, thick, defined eyebrows... Why, it had even captured those irritating dimples.

"In other circumstances, I'd take that as a compliment, but something tells me you're not interested in flirting." Clara lifted her chin and met the steely countenance of her doppelgänger. "Wearing the faces of the dead – or, thought to be dead. It's a sound intimidation tactic, I'll admit. But you're wasting your time. I'm cleared to enter, so go on, open up."

The Face loomed over her with haughty indifference. Clara repaid in kind, careful not to show the merest hint of unease. Sunita had done what she could to remove any traces of her from the Star Seers' database, but she'd warned that the process was imperfect at best. They had been banking on the automatons finding Clara enough

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of an anomaly to obscure her identity: adopting her likeness did not bode well. Already the Face had begun its assault on her nerves; she felt the familiar pricking in her fingers and toes.

“Open up,” she repeated, standing her ground.

“Your presence has not been authorised,” said the mascaron, in a distorted, metallic approximation of Clara’s voice.

Well, it was entertaining her at least. “I think you’ll find it has. Come on, you can tell when someone’s lying. You’re scanning me right now. Searching for the usual signs: racing pulse, elevated blood pressure, body language cues...” She pulled an apologetic face. “Of course, there’s the rub: you can’t find anything, can you? So let me say it again. I have an audience with the Visionary. Let me in, now.”

The mascaron was motionless for a long time, as though pondering her words, then finally asked, “Who are you?”

The phrasing of the question took Clara aback. “Shouldn’t you know whose mouth you’re speaking out of?”

She regretted her impudence. “Who are you?” it said again in the same monotone, as the paralysis engulfed Clara. In a matter of seconds, her limbs had lost all sensation. *It’s all in your head*, she told herself, even as her body screamed in protest. *Fight it*.

“I’m a novice of the Star—”

“Denied,” interrupted the mascaron. “Who are you?”

“I’m an initiate—“

“Denied. Who are you?”



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“I’m... I’m—“

Her jaw fused shut. Clara’s eyes darted from the mascaron to the edges of her field of vision and back; they were the only muscles she still had control over. But she couldn’t hear the footfall of summoned guards nor the whine of a raised alarm joining Lucida’s harrowing yowls. She didn’t understand. Why ask a question it refused to let her answer? Why not call for reinforcements and get this over with?

Once more: “Who are you?” No change in intonation or semblance of emotion. Just the same relentless order.

And then it hit her: *This is a test. To see if I’m more than talk and party tricks. To prove who I am. It’s waiting for a name. And there’s only one name that could open those doors...*

With a burst of concentrated will, Clara pushed back against the numbness that had overpowered her. *It’s not real. None of what you’re experiencing is real. Accept that.*

“Who are you?”

It took all of her mental strength to prize her mouth open and gasp:

“I’m the Doctor!”

Satisfied, the mascaron released its grasp – or rather, Clara her own mind’s deception. Her legs grew weak at the sudden influx of phantom feelings, and she had to grab the pillared edge of the doorway to remain standing. The great doors parted by themselves, inviting her inside. Clara gave a clumsy signal to the others, who raced across the square and reconvened with her in the entrance hall. Sunita disabled the mascaron for good measure as she passed with a well-aimed brick.

“Are you okay?” Me asked Clara, putting a hesitant hand on her back.

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Clara brushed aside her lingering dizziness. “Yeah. Never better.”

“That was cutting it a bit fine,” said Sunita, catching her breath.

“I got us in, didn’t I?”

“Under what pretence?” Slypher said as the doors closed after them with a hollow bang. “You were meant to pose as a postulant.”

“I had to improvise.”

“The egotist’s word for sloppy. What if word reaches Gallius of our entry?”

“Strolling in through the front door was always going to carry that risk,” said Clara.

“Besides, Sunita has it covered; she did her thing with the facey... doodah.”

“‘Facey doodah’?” Me teased.

“It sounded better in my head.”

Sunita wasn’t listening. She roamed around the orrery, watching the rotating globe that represented Samos and the glowing sphere of the planet’s sun immersed in their graceful waltz, undeterred by the building’s tremoring foundations.

Clara went up to her and gently touched her arm. “Hey, are you sure you want to do this?”

Sunita heaved a shaky, drawn-out sigh. “I’ve got to try. If there’s even the smallest chance that Kat’s...” She trailed off, not daring to say it for fear of being proven wrong. “But I won’t leave Ess for a second longer than I have to. The neighbours will keep her safe in the meantime; they’re good people.” In spite of her efforts to assuage herself, she sounded wracked by guilt.

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Clara was about to offer some hollow encouragement, but it was Me who spoke first.

“You have my word,” she said with conviction, “we’ll do everything in our power to bring you back to her.”

Sunita looked at her with newfound appreciation. “Thank you. I guess that’s as much of an assurance as anyone could hope for. We’d better press on.”

She stopped before the elevator, where the two Faces of Amity stood as lifeless sentinels. “You ready?”

“Third time’s the charm,” said Me, cracking her knuckles as she positioned herself by the nearest one. Clara took her place within their range, ready to serve once again as the reluctant decoy. With a nod, Sunita slammed the call button. The elevator emitted a melodious *ding* and slid its grille open, the women tensed...

But the guards didn’t stir.

“Bit of an anticlimax...” Clara said once it became clear that they weren’t budging anytime soon.

Me waved in front of the guard’s blank face. “Still dormant.”

“Slypher,” asked Sunita uncertainly, looking askance at him, “you said they’d activate if we so much as touched the elevator controls.”

“They should have.” The cleric poked his head out from his hiding place behind the orrery.

“Maybe they malfunctioned?” suggested Clara.

“Wouldn’t that be fortunate?” replied Me. “But I prefer not to rely on luck.”

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In a single, expert motion, she wrested the Face's head with both arms and decapitated it, stepping aside to dodge an eruption of sparks from its exposed neck.

"Remind me never to piss you off..." said Sunita, who winced as Me disarmed the second with equal efficiency.

Me dusted her hands together with a sly smirk. "Let's go."

They crammed themselves into the elevator, which it soon became apparent had not been designed to accommodate four. Squashed against the side by Slypher (who stank horribly of burnt feathers and incense), Clara squeezed past him and pulled the lever, prompting the grille to slide shut. The elevator juddered and creaked under their combined load – further worsened by the quakes – but began its dubious ascent, quickly gaining in speed. Through the gaps in the grille, their surroundings whooshed downwards in a blur.

"Remember, don't stop until we reach the eyrie," said Slypher brusquely.

Not ten seconds had gone by when the elevator lurched to an abrupt halt.

"I thought I told you—!"

"That wasn't me." Clara jerked the lever to and fro in vain. "The lift's jammed."

"Then fix it!" Slypher barked, consternation seeping into his voice.

"You just had to go and lose your Swiss Army sunglasses, didn't you, Clara?" groaned Sunita.

"I was a tiny bit preoccupied with not getting immolated at the time!"

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Me rolled her eyes, forced open the grille and disembarked onto the floor where the elevator had stalled. “I don’t know about you three, but I doubt bickering will make it move again.”

Clara and Sunita joined her in the corridor that ran perpendicular to the elevator, but Slypher remained where he was, wringing his talons, the plumes of his dishevelled crest splayed.

“Not another step!” he exclaimed.

“Why? What haven’t you told us?” Sunita probed him.

“This floor” – the cleric puffed up like a bullfrog – “it’s not safe.”

Me snorted. “Really? And here I thought we’d come all this way to admire the decor.” She marched towards Slypher, seized the collar of his robes, and dragged him out, letting go as soon as he was over the threshold. The momentum sent him crashing to the floor, where he landed in an undignified heap.

Sunita stood over him, her hands resting on her hips. “You neglected to mention this before. Why the sudden concern?”

Slypher staggered to his feet, adjusting his garments in a feeble attempt to soothe his wounded pride. “We mustn’t delay! Let’s not lose sight of why we’re here.”

“Maybe it’s escaped your notice, but we’re stuck here,” Clara said in exasperation.

“There’s got to be another way up in case the lift fails. Where?”

Slypher said nothing, but a reflexive flicker of his gaze conveyed all she needed.

“Now that wasn’t so hard, was it?”

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Clara didn't give him a chance to object. She spun on her heel and proceeded left along the corridor, the other women falling in step beside her.

In contrast to the opulence found in abundance elsewhere in the Observatory, this was an austere, utilitarian area. Its windowless walls were of the same pearlescent stone, but were devoid of ornament or embellishment, giving the place a clinical quality. The air tasted sterile and synthetic, its bracing sting tingling in the sinuses. They followed the curved hallway around, their shoes ringing on the polished floor, until they arrived at a large, circular antechamber. An elegant spiral staircase coiled through its centre like a corkscrew, granting access to both the upper and lower storeys. Across from it, the next room was secured behind a thick brass door scored with a pattern of straight, angular lines arranged like the rays of a rising sun, the eye of the Visionary at its centre.

"Shouldn't we have run into more guards by now?" Sunita said in an undertone.

"I told you, he's onto us!" Slypher hissed as he brought up the rear. The fear of being left alone had apparently won out. "We should turn ba—"

Clara silenced him with a scathing look. Me took the lead and made to go up the staircase, but a curious detail snagged her interest:

Issuing a deep, clunking noise, the sunrise door unlocked of its own accord and slowly creaked ajar.

She stole over and pressed her ear to the metalwork, listening for movement on the other side.

"What are you doing?" said Slypher, alarmed.

"Ignoring you. What is it you're so afraid of, I wonder?"

"I've got nothing to hide. But we can't afford to get sidetracked!"

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“The cleric doth protest too much, methinks,” commented Clara, patting him sarcastically on the shoulder. She followed Me’s example and tried to peek through the gap in the doorway. “He is right about one thing, though: all of this, it’s too easy.”

They were waiting for the penny to drop, for iron pincers to snap shut around them. But there was nothing. Just eerie stillness. Even the sound of Lucida’s roars was muted here.

“I don’t like it,” Sunita said from Me’s other side. “It feels like we’re playing by someone else’s rules.”

“That’s because we are,” said Me calmly. “Let’s see what Gallius has in store for us.”

“And what if that’s our untimely demises?” Slypher butted in.

“We’re in the dragon’s lair: he’s had ample opportunity to spring a trap. No, something else is going on here.”

She carefully opened the door. Slypher, hanging back, watched on tenterhooks.

The room was steeped in gloom, but the harsh glare from the antechamber threw its contents into relief. On the far end was a small bed carved from a slab of marble. A sophisticated mobile dangled above it, describing a star system in precise detail with delicate crystal models. Scholarly paraphernalia was strewn across the cold floor: holographic tablets, star charts, and archaic scrolls whose ink glowed turquoise to display esoteric glyphs and diagrams. A single bound book lay open on the bed. Beside it, a stuffed toy Empyrean, threadbare and well-loved, had been left in a rearing pose as though paused in the middle of an imaginary game.

Clara, as silent as the grave, approached the bed and investigated the book. A hand-painted illustration took up both pages: elegant brush strokes depicted Lucida soaring through the starry sky in all its splendour. Flipping back through revealed various studies of the creature in addition to schematics for elaborate gadgets – no

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doubt of the artist's own design. There were also other, more mundane subjects: a scrap of a tourist flyer extolling the virtues of the Star Seers and the city's sacred landmarks; sketches of schoolchildren playing in their uniforms, their features indistinct as though viewed from afar; pressed blossoms with splayed wings, now desiccated, discoloured, and crumpled.

Further still, the illustrations grew more crude, the artist's progress and age told across the pages in reverse, beginning with simple drawings of a little Visionary. On the first page, scribbled over in a frenzied, smudged scrawl that ripped the parchment, three Asrathon stick figures held hands; the one in the middle little, the other two larger and wearing fierce scowls. It was accompanied by a messy caption reading, *'My papas'*.

She stared at the image, then directed her focus at Slypher, who shied away.

"Why would a temple need a nursery?"

Slypher did his best impression of oblivious innocence. "The Visionary resides in this tower; it stands to reason his chambers would be here. Is that so unusual?"

"And in all these years no one's ever seen him outside the Observatory."

"No one's ever really seen a Visionary at all," said Sunita, catching on. "Not in centuries. They're always cloaked in obscurity and spectacle."

Slypher narrowed his eyes at them. "What are you driving at?"

"I practically raised him,' you said." Clara let out a huff of derisive laughter, her lips curling into a snarl. "Oh, but you left out the part where you locked up a child."

"Don't judge what you don't understand!" he protested.

She tossed the book back onto the bedding. "I'm right, though, aren't I?"



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The cleric blinked and snapped his hooked, beak-like maw, resembling a bird of prey more than ever. "Visionaries are devoted to the pursuit of cosmic wisdom; they can't be troubled with earthly distractions! The clergy are but their humble servants. We nurture each successor from a hatchling. Take in impoverished strays and give them a greater purpose."

He'd spent the interim since the elevator gave out devising an 'explanation'. This much was painfully obvious.

"A Visionary wants for nothing," he ploughed on, heedless of his sceptical audience. "We simply ensure them the solace and security to carry out their duties while managing the day-to-day tedium of city life on their behalf."

"So he's your puppet," said Me. "A figurehead to hide behind while you wield the true power. Naturally, you need someone malleable, easy to control. Who better than a child?"

Slypher lost his nerve. He drew himself to his full height and shouted, "You stupid primates! Gallius is ready to destroy us all at a moment's notice, and yet you stand here and accuse *me* of treachery?"

Me advanced on the cleric, stopping directly before him in the doorway. Although several feet taller, he seemed to shrink in her shadow.

"I've crossed all manner of spineless parasites in my time. Believe me, I know every excuse, every fork-tongued manipulation, every means you could possibly concoct to wriggle out of this. So I would advise you to shut up, my dear cleric."

But Slypher proved incapable of such a feat. He retreated from Me's reach. "Whether you like it or not, you need me."

"Somehow, I think we'll manage just fine from here without you," said Sunita as she pushed past him and returned to the antechamber with Clara and Me.

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“And what of the unfortunate souls who’ve yet to be sacrificed?” he called after them. “Do you really think you’ll find them without my help?”

The women stopped in their tracks and turned to look at him. “What did you just say?” said Clara.

“I’m simply advising that you don’t discard your allies so carelessly.”

“No. No, it’s not that. You told us you had no idea if anyone had survived.”

He baulked. “W-well... I...”

But Slypher had realised his mistake too late. Faster than he could react, Sunita lunged for the cleric and pinned him to the wall. “You’ve been keeping a lot of secrets, haven’t you?” she said through clenched teeth. “Hoping we’d deal with Gallius for you so you could claw your way back to power, is that it?”

“Ah, of course,” said Me. “He needed hostages to negotiate his terms.”

Sunita’s face contorted in fury. “You’re going to answer my next question and you’re going to answer honestly, or so help me you’ll *wish* you’d roasted alive in that cavern: where are they?”

“I’m not at liberty to divulge that information – call it a clerical oath,” Slypher said with malice.

She pressed her elbow to his neck. “If I were you, I’d choose my next words *very* carefully.”

“You’re in no position to threaten me,” he spluttered.

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“Watch me.” She leaned in closer, applying pressure. “The guards won’t save you; your colleagues left you for dead. You have nothing left to barter with except your own worthless skin. I won’t ask again.”

Slypher’s breaths became more laboured, his pupils dilated so that they all but filled his bulging eyes. Clara wavered on whether to intervene, but Me dissuaded her with a stern shake of her head.

“They keep the prisoners beneath the entrance hall,” he finally gasped. “Align the planets of the orrery and the entrance will reveal itself.”

“And Katherine?”

“I don’t know if she’s still among them. You must believe me!”

Sunita released him, drawing back as though scolded. Clara knew that look: the reality of hope had set in. A coin had been tossed; it hung in the air, spinning between relief and devastation. All that remained was to discover where it would land.

“I’ll go with you,” said Me, just as Clara came forward to say the same.

She held Clara’s gaze. “You find Gallius. End this.”

Clara didn’t waste time arguing. “Good luck,” she said, looking at Me and Sunita in turn.

“You too.”

She shot a disdainful glance at the wheezing cleric as she mounted the staircase. “Slypher, you’re with me. Don’t try anything clever.”

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Surprisingly, he did as she asked, hobbling after her with a mutinous expression. Perhaps he had concluded that facing her wrath was the lesser evil while Sunita still looked ready to wring his feathery neck.

Clara peered into the stairwell. It spiralled downwards without end, like an infinite paradox. Sunita was already flying down them, her long hair streaming behind her. All else had ceased to matter: the only mission that counted now was reuniting her family. Me sighed and hastened in pursuit.

And so they went their separate ways. Clara and Slypher climbing, Me and Sunita descending. Each haunted by the unspoken fear of what awaited them.

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When they returned to the entrance hall, Me was quick to note that it had remained totally undisturbed. A building of this scale, age, and significance should be attended by staff regardless of the hour: servants, minor clergy members who lacked the status to flee with their superiors, or even other automated personnel. But all was deserted. The only thing that had changed was the severity and frequency of Lucida's disturbances. Whatever had incited her, she had no intention of calming down anytime soon.

Sunita hurried over to the orrery, frantically looking it up and down. "What did he mean by 'align the planets'?"

"A conjunction, maybe?" offered Me, who was only half listening as she conducted her usual survey of the area.

"The Star Seers and their damn riddles..." Sunita took hold of one of the planets and attempted to pivot it, but the brass arm it was fixed on continued to revolve irrespective of her efforts. The soles of her boots squeaked as it pushed her across the floor. "It's... not... budging!" She eventually gave up her struggle, throwing up her arms. "He was lying, wasn't he? That manipulative—"

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“What if we don’t have to open it?” Me interjected. “Perhaps we need only ask. Am I correct, Gallius?”

She addressed the detached head of one of the Faces that lay on its side by the elevator. Its eyes had slid open upon their entry and were following them around the room.

“I understand your reticence,” she said, “but come now, be reasonable. Your ‘caretakers’ have flown the coop, and you’ve gone to great trouble to dismiss or disable anyone else who might interfere. There’s no need to use these prisoners as bargaining chips. Let them go.”

Her appeal was met with stony silence. The Face’s eyes shut in an apparent rejection of the request. *Too patronising*, she admonished herself. Clara would doubtless fare better.

Sunita made a despondent sound somewhere between a sigh and a sob. She slumped to the floor beside the orrery, holding her head in her hands.

At this, the heavy grind of turning stone resounded through the hall as the orrery gradually rose, rotating, from the floor. Sunita scrambled backwards and gaped at it. The orrery’s marble base, now elevated by a dozen feet, revealed a doorway as it came to a halt.

*“Emergency override activated.”*

The two automatons stuttered to life. While their heads remained inert, their decapitated bodies crab-walked towards them on elongated limbs before recalibrating to a standing position, twitching and clicking in a most unsettling manner.

Sunita swore. “I thought he’d powered them down!”

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Me rushed to help her up. “I don’t think this is Gallius.”

“Oh no...” said the tour guide as they backed away together. “You severed their bodies from whatever control he had over them, didn’t you? Disconnected from the neural network—”

“—they must fall back on their base programming, yes,” confirmed Me. She paused before adding, “I miscalculated.”

“No shit!”

Me cricked her neck and rolled her shoulders. Disabling the Faces’ paralytic capabilities had evened the playing field, at least. “I’ll draw their fire,” she told Sunita, who nodded stiffly. “Don’t move a muscle until I give the signal.”

She performed a sequence of rapid feints – advancing, dodging, then advancing again. The Faces immediately fired the phasers on their wrists after her, but hit wide of their mark. As Me had suspected, their targeting was also impaired, responding only to motion.

“Now!” she shouted.

Sunita made a break for it, practically diving down the secret passage. With quick, decisive steps, Me led the Faces around the orrery, careful not to let them out of her sight. But simply evading them wouldn’t do; she and Sunita would be pursued, or ambushed as they returned from the passage. She could try taking them out herself, but there was nothing preventing them from simply recovering again.

No, the best solution would be for them to finish each other off.

She continued to run them in a circle until, in an attempt to catch her out, one of the automatons moved in the opposite direction. This was exactly what Me had hoped

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for. She stopped, waited until both had caught up on either side of her, then ducked into the passage at the very last second.

She lingered in the opening just long enough to watch with satisfaction as the two Faces blasted each other at point-blank range. They short-circuited from the powerful electrical charges and collapsed in almost perfect sync. Before proceeding, Me couldn't deny herself a mock bow at Gallius, who had resumed his spying through the Face's eyes.

Yet more spiralling steps lay before her, though the descent was mercifully short. She joined Sunita in a small, nondescript chamber at the bottom.

"They won't bother us any more," said Me, answering the question in Sunita's anxious gaze.

Some of the tension left the tour guide's shoulders. "I tried to go on ahead, but..."

"You needn't face this alone. Come on."

They set off down a wide hallway whose construction, with its vaulted ceilings and reliefs, bore a striking resemblance to Tarchus' tomb. This was soon revealed to be no coincidence when alcoves began appearing in the walls, each occupied by a blindfolded statue holding crystallised remains.

"I've often wondered why the Observatory crypt was such a touchy subject," Sunita remarked in a hushed, quavering voice. "We were never allowed to discuss it much on our tours."

Me knew she was making conversation in an effort to ease her nerves. "For a religion that so reveres the stars," she said, humouring her, "why bury their Visionaries?"

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“It’s always been that way. But if I had to guess, the practice was probably started by Tarchus as some form of atonement for what he did to Lucida.”

“Or it’s a reminder,” said Me. “That the Visionaries can never escape the subjugation of their masters, even in death.”

At last, they came to the end. The corridor expanded into a large grotto, which was encircled by eleven more statue graves. At their feet, trussed up like livestock for slaughter, hunched the prisoners. A few of them glanced up wearily at the newcomers, while the rest remained limp and listless. Were it not for the shallow rise and fall of their chests, barely visible in the dim turquoise light given off by the crypt’s hanging braziers, they could easily have been dead.

“Where’s your escort?” rasped one – a Pan-Babylonian, judging by their gnarled, purple skin and elfin ears.

“Out of commission,” answered Me. “We’re here to free you.”

The Pan-Babylonian broke into a bout of either coughing or delirious laughter – it was hard to tell which. “Well, get on with it then.”

Me inspected their restraints. These manacles were considerably higher-tech than the ones used in the cavern, but that made them much easier to remove. Without further delay, she got to work.

Sunita stayed at the threshold, desperately searching for one prisoner in particular.

“I can’t... I don’t see...” Her chest heaved, gripped by a mounting panic.

“Forgotten what I look like already?”

The voice had come from the far side of the room. A woman was sitting on her knees in an almost meditative position within one of the niches, whose statue must have crumbled away or been removed. She was powerfully built, with dark hair that



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fell in tight coils over her shoulders. Beneath a layer of dust and dirt, her tawny skin was stippled with freckles like constellations. A pair of cracked glasses sat askew on her elegant button nose.

Me had scarcely seen someone move so fast. Sunita crossed the space in a few strides and embraced her.

“Hello, stranger,” Katherine said hoarsely when they finally pulled apart.

“I thought I’d lost you...” Sunita held her face and touched their foreheads together, closing her streaming eyes.

“Oh, Sunny.” Katherine gave her a weak grin. “You should’ve known you’d never get rid of me that easily.”

Sunita laughed through her tears and kissed her. “How are you still alive?”

Katherine’s smile faltered. “I don’t know. Everyone here should be long dead by now, but something’s held the Star Seers back.”

“Someone, more like,” interrupted Me, who had finished freeing the others and started on Katherine’s manacles. “But there’ll be time to chat later.” She cast her gaze over the prisoners. “Can all of you walk?”

“We can hobble, if that’ll suffice,” replied the Pan-Babylonian as they awkwardly got up.

“Time’s short. Any among you who is still capable, help the weakest.”

“We’ll be accosted the second we leave the crypt!” protested another prisoner.

“The authorities are the least of our worries right now,” said Sunita.

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Katherine stretched her stiff limbs. “You mean the earthquakes?”

“You were right, Kat.” Sunita met her eyes with grim intensity. “All along you were right.”

A violent tremor punctuated her words. Several of the prisoners cried out in fright. A few lost their balance and had to hold on to each other to remain standing. Those who were the worst for wear slipped from their supporters’ grasps and crumpled to the floor, where they were swiftly gathered up again the moment the shaking subsided.

“Let’s move!” ordered Me, leading them all out into the passage.

The command couldn’t have been more timely. No sooner had the last prisoner staggered from the grotto than the chamber’s ceiling caved in behind them. They didn’t linger long enough for the dust to settle: after a quick headcount, they fled towards the exit as fast as the prisoners’ frail legs could carry them, coughing and wheezing all the while.

“They’re getting worse!” Sunita yelled as they reached the stairwell. “How long before this whole place comes down?”

Me ushered the prisoners up the steps, her face the picture of stoic determination. She merely answered, “It’s up to Clara now.”

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Clara and Slypher arrived at another landing. Its walls were painted in a gradient of soft pinks, vivid oranges, and mellow blues and lined with a blanket of sun-kissed clouds to depict the evening sky. The staircase continued upwards for a dozen or so feet before finishing at a large, crystalline door emblazoned with the Visionary’s sigil. With their destination in sight, the cleric attempted to rush ahead, but Clara blocked his way with her body.

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“No. You’re staying here. Keep an eye out for guards.”

“Very well,” Slypher drawled, each syllable dripping with contempt. “On one condition.”

“What?”

“You said you were prepared to do whatever’s necessary. Time to prove it.”

Clara folded her arms. “Alright, spit it out.”

“While Lucida remains captive, she’s vulnerable. Around the mechanism, there’s a control panel. Look for a golden lever with a pommel of solid chromastrite. Gallius will have already primed the device for syphoning starlight, all you need do is invert it and it’ll—”

“—Reverse the polarity,” Clara finished gravely.

“Yes,” Slypher said with a nasty smile. “She’ll be bled dry, to the last ember. Simple even for you. If you’ve got the spine, that is.”

Clara didn’t grace him with a reply. She turned and hurried up the remaining steps, then, after a moment of trepidation, stepped through the door to the Visionary’s eyrie.

## Chapter Ten

Clara would be loath to describe the space into which she emerged as a room. It was as though the staircase had borne her beyond the confines of the planet's atmosphere to the furthest reaches of Siderius itself. Stars twinkled all around her, as tangible as dandelion seeds on a summer breeze. Shimmering ribbons of aurora meandered among them. Vaporious tendrils in countless hues swirled and spread across the void like drops of coloured ink in water. Only the faintest distortions in the illusion gave away the points at which the chamber's walls met the floor or ceiling. Were it not for this, and the magnificent contraption that thrummed in its midst, Clara would not have been able to say which direction was up or down.

And the contraption was truly magnificent: an enormous armillary sphere elevated on a golden platform, mounted beside an equally impressive telescope. Within the armillary's revolving rings, suspended by brass aortas, arteries, and veins, glowed Geniah, the Heart of Light. Larger than a human skull, the famed gemstone had truly earned its title. It didn't expand or contract, but shone with life, emitting pulses of energy at regular intervals that travelled along a network of artificial vessels. They dove through the simulated clouds – no doubt to feed the generator far below.

"It's more than a fancy name, you know."

On the far side of the device, silhouetted against the spacescape with his back to her, stood Gallius. Undisguised by technical trickery, his voice was measured, youthful, but something about it evoked a branch on the verge of splintering.

"In the old stories," he continued, without moving, "the ones they no longer tell, Geniah was a fully grown Empyrean who collided with the planet millions of years ago. My ancestors discovered her remains, and built a city from them. But they coveted her heart above all else. They locked it away in a gilded cage, exploiting its power so they could declare themselves masters over the heavens."

He turned around and came into the crystal's pulsating light.

## A CITIZEN OF THE UNIVERSE

“And so history repeats itself. I often wonder if Lucida came here looking for her own kind. Maybe she recognised Geniah’s light, only to meet the same fate.”

At last, Clara saw the Visionary as he really was. A fledgling. Barely a teenager, by her reckoning. His robes, which had at a distance adorned him with grandeur and authority, were ill-fitting, draped around the young Asrathon’s frame to compensate for his small stature. A ruff of soft down still lined the navy feathers around his neck, gleaming indigo and bottle green. His eyes were the deepest blue, glittering with resentment and lost innocence.

“You never wanted to destroy the city, did you?” she said softly. “You just want to set her free.”

He bowed his head. “So that’s what Slypher told you. Well, you have me at last. The evil mastermind, the unruly child – take your pick. I expect you’ve come to foil my plans?”

“Yes. But you let me get this far anyway. Why?”

“Because I wanted to show you your legacy, *Doctor*.”

Clara stepped forward so that they were level with each other on either side of the platform, the whooshing rings intermittently obstructing their view. “I’m so sorry for what they’ve done to you.”

Gallius’ features hardened. “I don’t need your apologies. You lost that right the moment you took it upon yourself to decide the future of our people, and then abandoned us to the fallout.”

“Then tell me what I missed,” she asked him. “Everything the Doctor has to answer for.”

“Where to begin?”

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He circled the device. Clara did the same in parallel, using the opportunity to take in the controls of the mechanism and infer their functions.

“I’m sure the Auros of today is different from how you remember it,” he said, bitterness lacing his every word. “You left it in chaos, and in doing so—”

“—Created the perfect conditions for tyranny to rise,” said Clara.

“Yes. Our faith was perverted, the mantle of Visionary twisted beyond recognition. What began as an enlightened astronomer became a messenger for some higher power – the Star Seers, their pious enforcers. All smoke and mirrors, of course.”

As he said this, he pressed a button. The illusion around them dissolved, revealing a black marble floor inlaid with silver constellations and vast round windows that offered a spectacular bird's-eye view of Auros.

“When my predecessor died,” he went on, “the clerics chose me. They hid me from the world, forbade me from so much as feeling the wind on my face, and called it a privilege. I was taught discipline, trained in their rituals and practices.” Gallius slowed his stride to observe Geniah with feigned fascination. “All the while they eroded any sense of who I was, stamped out my hopes, passions, and aspirations, until I was nothing more than a husk, a mindless drone for them to parade to the masses. But their zealotry was their own downfall.”

Clara ran her fingertips along the control panel’s edge, perusing levers, cranks, and whirring gears as elaborate as the workings of a clock. “They introduced you to Lucida,” she surmised.

“It’s a rite of passage for every Visionary. Once we come of age, we’re lowered into the depths each night to appease their pet god. They left me alone in that chasm where I chanted at a lifeless hunk of rock, just as they’d instructed...” He faltered, and his voice audibly cracked. “But I couldn’t take it anymore. There was something in me they hadn’t been able to crush. I cried until no more tears would come.”

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His eyes met Clara's, and for the first time, she saw something more than weariness and hostility ignite within them. "And she heard me. She opened those pleading eyes and I realised... we were the same."

"So you promised to liberate her, whatever the cost," Clara said, the pieces falling into place. "To give her what had been taken from both of you."

"The Star Seers were too proud to entertain the idea that their own creation could defy them. None of them suspected, when Lucida stirred from her ancient slumber, that I'd rigged their treasured mechanism. That each time I was sent to placate her, I was gradually restoring her strength. They used me to cover the scandal I'd started from right under their beaks.

"But before long, they came to see it as an opportunity. To quell rebellion, tighten control, and sow fresh fear among the populace. And the more active Lucida grew, the more bloodthirsty they became. I started to get desperate, careless..."

"The one who tipped off Katherine. That was you, wasn't it?"

Gallius grimaced. "I was tired of fighting alone. That was the first of many mistakes. Eventually, I said too much. Slypher caught on to my plans, and the very next day I hear that a TARDIS has appeared above Tarchus' tomb."

Clara identified what she'd been looking for: a gold-encrusted lever with a crystal pommel reminiscent of the hilt of a sword. She snapped her attention back to Gallius, conscious of arousing his suspicion. "Then you had us all killed. Was there for that bit."

"I never meant for anyone to die; that was the clergy's order, not mine. I got them to spare as many as I could, made up excuses to stay their executions. But with you... I panicked. Slypher would have destroyed everything I'd worked for, and the Doctor and her associates were complications I couldn't contend with. Or so I thought."

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“We could’ve been there to help for all you know. What about his— *my* vow?”

“Do you think I’m so naive as to believe their tall tales about the fabled Pilgrim and their promised return?” he fired back. “I know who you are. Who the Doctor is. The face changer, the rule breaker, the runaway, the chaos maker. Why would I trust the one who started all of this?”

“Because I’m *not* the Doctor,” said Clara, dropping the charade. The corners of her mouth tugged downwards and her throat constricted. “But I know him. Better than anyone.”

Gallius shook off his surprise, his mask of maturity slipping. “It— it doesn’t matter. You’ve already admitted you didn’t come to succeed where he failed, just repeat his mistakes.”

He bent over the control panel, removing a protective cover to expose a small toggle switch. “This is the release contingency. Installed by your Doctor. A flick of a switch, and the chains holding Lucida will decouple. She’ll have enough energy to break through to the surface.”

“Listen to me,” Clara urged as she braced herself beside the lever. “If there was a way to free her safely he’d have found it by now. You understand that, or you wouldn’t have signed our death warrants. Because you didn’t want to face the truth: that if you let her go, *everyone* in this city will burn, including you.”

“I don’t care!” he yelled, reaching for the switch. “Wouldn’t you take that chance for the one you loved?”

Clara locked gazes with the Visionary. “I would do worse. I would tear the whole universe apart if I had to. But if I ever got to that point, was pushed to that absolute limit, then I’d have just one wish.”

“What?”



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“That someone would stop me.”

She gripped the handle with both hands. Gallius eyed her warily, his talon poised on the switch like the trigger of a duelling pistol. They were trapped in a stalemate; an innocent life versus countless others, held in a precarious balance.

Clara swept an arm over the city below. “Look at those houses,” she commanded. “Picture the people inside. How many children are down there, do you think? With hopes and passions and aspirations? Are you ready to do to them what the Star Seers did to you?”

Gallius swallowed and trembled with anticipation. Clara kept her fingers clasped around the lever.

“I know you’re hurting,” she said gently, before noticing that her own hands were shaking. “That you want to save her more than anything. But please, not like this. Not if that’s the price.”

Time seemed to lose all meaning as Gallius wrestled with himself, his eyes flitting frantically between Clara, the switch, and the city, which blazed as though already aflame.

Then slowly, almost imperceptibly at first, he withdrew his talon and backed away from the device. Clara relaxed, expressing a quiet sigh of relief.

“That’s it,” she encouraged. “It’s okay. Trust me, you’re doing the right—”

A nightmarish commotion reached their ears; guttural bellows, crumbling stone, hair-raising shrieks. The entire tower convulsed, hurling them both to the floor. Clara, dismayed, sprang up and ran to the nearest window.

An immense crack had ruptured the main square and was rending its way to the foot of the Observatory. The civilians in immediate proximity were fleeing from their

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homes, tearing through the streets to seek shelter away from the city centre while Tarchus' sculpture wobbled perilously on his pedestal.

Lucida was breaking through.

Clara rounded on Gallius. "What did you do?!"

"Nothing..." he said in a horrified whisper, joining her at the window.

"Then how *did* she get out?"

It was then that Slypher came barging through the doors, screeching at the top of his lungs. "Gallius!" He stormed towards the young Visionary, who cowered instinctively. "Ungrateful, profane child! I warned you where this blasphemy would lead. You've damned us all!"

"And you," he leered at Clara, "are exactly as I estimated. Weak-willed!"

Clara wedged herself between them, a righteous fury rising inside her. "This – *all* of this – is on you."

"Are you mad? I didn't set her loose!"

"Neither did he!"

"Enough!" Gallius shouted in a tremulous voice. "I can hear her... She's not just pining anymore, she's in pain."

"Sentiment has robbed your judgement," Slypher reproached him. "Empyreals have no concept of pain. It's a meaningless distinction."

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“*Meaningless?*” Gallius spat out the word, finding courage in defiance. “You don’t know anything; you never have! If there’s one thing more dangerous than a creature caught in a snare, it’s a wounded one.”

A thought struck Clara with the violence of a physical blow. “Slypher. Before. You said they were sensitive to time.”

“This isn’t the moment for hypotheticals!”

“I have to know!” She could almost feel her petrified heart hammering her ribcage. “Could a big enough, I don’t know, *ripple* in causality—”

“—Provoke her into forcing her way out?” finished Gallius. He searched her face, trying to discern a meaning unknown to him, then nodded, his own face stricken. “It’d be like branding her with an iron.”

Slypher gawked at two of them and burst into a deranged cackle. “That’s preposterous! It would require a temporal shockwave. Some sort of *schism* in space-time. I don’t see what could possibly cause...”

Clara didn’t hear the rest of his sentence. A whine resounded in her head with the shrillness of a clarion call as all else dissolved into muffled background noise. She clutched the control panel, barely registering Me arriving on the scene.

The immortal assessed the situation, then was at Clara’s side in an instant, supporting her by the shoulders.

“Sunita...?” Clara managed.

“She and Katherine have led the prisoners out. It’s just us left. We’ve got to go. *Now.*”

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“And where will you go?” said Slypher, ever the fatalist. “There’s nowhere far enough you’ll be able to run.”

“We’ll be away from you, at any rate,” Me retorted. “Clara” – she jolted her out of her daze – “stay with me.”

Clara stared at Me through swimming vision. “Gallius. He’s coming with us.”

“No.” Gallius was firm, though his rigid posture and rapid breaths betrayed his terror. “It’s right that it should end this way. Maybe... maybe it’s what I deserve. At least Lucida will be back where she belongs. And I’ll finally be free.”

“Take it from me,” said Me, grabbing his talon in one hand and Clara’s in the other, “martyrdom is overrated.” Without a second glance, she hauled the both of them towards the doors.

But before they could make it five paces, the crack bisecting the square opened into a yawning fissure, swallowing Tarchus’ monument whole. Lucida erupted from it like a breaching whale, crying out in agonised ecstasy. The tower shuddered terribly, from its very bowels emitting the moan of a dying behemoth. Alabaster fell from the ceiling in fanciful plumes, showering them with debris. Me changed course and dove under the control panel, pulling Gallius and the still-reeling Clara with her. Slypher, possessed by desperation, floundered for the crystal-tipped lever as the building swayed and banked.

“Get down, you fool!” Me shouted.

“Don’t you see? She’s in the open, she’s defenceless!”

“It’s too late for that and you know it!” yelled Gallius. “You’ll never drain her in time.”

The cleric seized the lever, a maniacal glint in his eyes. “If I can just—”

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No one ever found out what he said next.

For the great Observatory, also known as Geniah's Cradle, which had stood for nearly a thousand years and weathered dynasties and Doctors alike, collapsed in on itself, toppling like a conquered king in an avalanche of dust and rubble.

## Chapter Eleven

Dust. Dust and desolation. Endless, billowing clouds of it everywhere she looked. It smouldered with the colours of a raging inferno, eclipsing the stars, obscuring the broken ground. For moments lasting an eternity, the dust was all there was.

Clara crawled on all fours, spitting grit from her mouth as she grasped for any fragment of clarity in the chaos. Her searching hands found something smooth and cold to the touch: an aquiline nose, thin lips, a chiselled jawline. The haze relented enough to unveil a stern face, bereft of a body, glaring at her accusingly.

The Doctor's face.

The sight brought Clara to her senses. She sat up, turning away from the felled statue lying in pieces among the remnants of the ornamental gardens. Past the ravaged hedges came screams and rumbling growls. Someone called her name. She didn't have it in her to answer.

Soon after, a stooped figure limped through the haze and slumped next to her, coughing behind a tumult of long, dust-smothered hair. Me was covered in bruises and welts, and a deep cut bled on her brow. She tore a strip of fabric from her skirt and bound it around her calf as a makeshift bandage, scrutinising Clara with visible concern.

"Are you all right? Are you hurt?"

The thought hadn't even crossed Clara's mind. She checked herself over, at this point no longer surprised by the absence of the slightest scratch. The memory of pain ached in her bones and muscles, but she knew it was little more than a lie. She shook her head dully.

"You're alive," she said to Me, as though stating it out loud would affirm its reality.

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“Naturally. But I can’t say the same for all of us.”

She gestured to a mountain of rubble a short distance from them. The deformed metal skeleton of the Observatory mechanism had landed on its side, wires and pipes dismembered and smoking. As the dust settled, it laid bare a gruesome tableau. The robed body of Slypher dangled, inert. Impaled on the shaft of the chromastrite lever. Geniah lay fractured at his feet like a macabre offering, the light within dim and frail.

“Every once in a very long while, the universe indulges in poetic justice,” said the immortal. “I doubt many will mourn his loss.”

But Clara’s thoughts were elsewhere. She trudged over to the site and dropped to her knees beside the displaced crystal, picking up a broken-off shard. “That was our only way of stopping her,” she murmured.

She almost waited for Me to contradict her, to reveal some hitherto overlooked solution, but the immortal was at a loss, just as she had been in the face of the Chronolock on Clara’s neck several days or billions of years ago.

“We knew what the stakes were,” Me began. “There was always the possibility—”

“I did this.” Clara cut her off, sobs hitching in her chest. “I had — I had it under control and then... It was me. She escaped because of me. Because of what I did in the cavern. If I hadn’t taken that stupid risk—”

“—We’d be dead and no use to anyone.”

“So what?” she lashed out. “What did it change? Now everyone gets to die together instead? Is that a win in your books?”

“Better to try and fail than give in to despair,” said Me.

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“I *did* try. And it blew up in my face. *Again*.” It was as though a dam had broken inside Clara; the tide of emotions she’d been holding back for so long came pouring forth in a relentless torrent. “I should’ve learned my lesson on Trap Street. Accepted that... it’s over.” She hung her head, tears petering onto the shard like dying rain.

Me knelt at her side. “As far as I understand, those two words have never stopped you before.”

Clara sniffed and wiped her cheek with the back of her wrist. “Maybe that’s the problem.”

Here, in the cul-de-sac, they felt oddly removed from the surrounding pandemonium, as if caught in the eye of a hurricane. The Doctor had once described the phenomenon as ‘the tranquillity of catastrophe’. She’d never really understood what he’d meant by that, until now.

“There is no shame in daring to hope,” said Me, digging into a pocket and opening her palm to reveal a small, silver key. “That in the final hour, at the end of all we know” – she pressed it into Clara’s free hand and closed her fingers around it – “there might be something worth enduring for.”

Clara stared at her hand. “I didn’t know I’d lost it,” she said quietly.

“You hadn’t.”

She pulled back her jacket and found the key to the Doctor’s police box resting against her jumper, beside her still heart.

“She made it for you. The TARDIS. I’ve been meaning to tell you, but, well, impending doom took precedence.”

Clara raised her gaze to Me, and hugged her. Me stiffened at first, unaccustomed to the physical contact, but gingerly hugged her back.



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Then, Clara noticed something.

“Me. The statue...”

Me ended their embrace and followed Clara’s line of sight. Her face brightened.

“Perhaps it’s not over just yet.”

Keeled over in the middle of the shattered marble, its stone facade chipped away, was a conical bronze machine studded with familiar round protrusions.

“What is it?” asked Clara.

Me gave it a closer inspection, hauling it upright onto its squat metal feet. “A Dimension Vault. Dalek technology. Must’ve been how the Doctor moved Lucida underground.”

“He left it with them. As a backup plan,” Clara realised, seized by a sudden giddiness. “Could we use it to get her off the planet?”

“No, he would have already tried that. Look at the core, it’s damaged. Relocating an Empyreal even a mile was probably too much for it.”

“Then how does that help us?”

Me bit her bottom lip in thought. “That’s the device itself, but this” – she bent down and held up the lance-shaped instrument the Doctor had been brandishing – “is the conduit.”

“So?”

“So, if we give it something else to channel...” Me tucked the lance under her arm and twisted the top of the Vault open, discarding the charred power cell. Then, crouching down, she carefully lifted Geniah and, with a grunt of effort, hefted it into

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the empty cavity before replacing the upper fixture. Once the top was secured in place, the device lit up with a flurry of red and blue lights.

“We can still drain her.” Clara broke into an astonished grin. The Dimension Vault beeped, as though in confirmation.

“It’s a long shot,” Me cautioned her. “There’s no telling if it’ll actually work.”

“Still, it’s a shot,” she replied.

“Clara, Me!”

Sunita ran up to them with a woman Clara recognised to her delight as Katherine in tow. “Of course you two made it out in one piece.”

“Good to say the same of you,” replied Me, who was still fiddling with the Vault. “Did you manage to get everyone to safety?”

“Depends on your definition of ‘safety’,” answered Katherine. “I’ve sent our lot to my place, told them to hunker down in the basement, but you can’t control mass panic. Most people are either making a break for it or are still holed up in their houses. They’re counting on the crystal to protect them.”

“And will it?” said Clara.

“To a point, maybe. But whatever that thing is, it’s just getting started.” Katherine interlocked her fingers with Sunita’s, her forehead creased with concern. “Sunny?”

The tour guide’s face was a mask of cold dread. “Ess. She needs me.”

Me stood up straight. “Go to her. I’ll round up as many stragglers as I can.” She cocked the lance like a rifle and handed it to Clara. “Meanwhile, you’ve got a city to save. You’ll know when it’s ready, just activate this switch on the side.”

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“Got it.” Clara nodded, resolute, but was startled by a realisation. She swept her gaze frantically around. “Where’s Gallius?”

Sunita shrugged with visible impatience, eager to get going. “I don’t know.”

“I think I do.”

Katherine indicated a thin trail of blood leading from the tower’s wreckage to what was left of its base.

So he was injured, but alive – for now, at least. Clara thanked whatever cosmic force was responsible for the small yet significant turn in their fortunes. The odds still erred dangerously close to the impossible, but she of all people could work with that.

“Well, here goes nothing.” Clara held the lance close, getting a feel for the weight and balance of it in her grasp. “Oh, and Sunita?” she called after the tour guide as she departed with her girlfriend.

Sunita briefly let up her pace and glanced over her shoulder.

“I’m glad you found each other,” said Clara, unable to stop herself from smiling a little.

Sunita’s troubled expression didn’t shift, but something had changed about her. Clara couldn’t quite put her finger on what, but she felt more... whole. “So am I,” she said. “Don’t let us down, Clara.”

She faltered, as though there was so much more she wanted to express, but she settled for simply meeting Clara’s eyes and saying, “May the stars light your path.”

“Same to you.”

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Clara's gaze then came to rest on Me. The unassuming, diminutive young woman who was anything but. "See you on the other side?"

Me simply gave her a small smile in response before hurrying away. Whether one of quiet admiration or pity, it was hard to say.

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With the lance in hand, Clara sprinted to the foot of the Observatory, kicking up dust in her wake. People continued to flood from the nearest buildings, superstition and fear of the law having yielded to pure survival instinct. She fought against the current of bodies, past the uninjured supporting the wounded, past parents clutching infants to their chests, past Auros' elite and esteemed cradling their most treasured possessions with the same vigilance. Jostled and buffeted by the panicked civilians, who paid no care to anyone or anything around them, Clara began to fear being swept under and trampled by the stampeding feet. But just as this frantic thought took hold of her mind, she managed to burst clear of the crowd. The abrupt relief forced her to pause and get her bearings.

The square beyond was a veritable war zone. Riven in two by the great ravine from which Lucida had emerged, the area was strewn with rubble: crumbled stonework, smashed gargoyles, and twisted brass fixtures lay like corpses across the cobblestones. There were real bodies among them, too. Mercifully, these belonged to Faces of Amity, who had no doubt rallied to subdue the creature and proved a pathetic match. Clara almost tripped over a piece of one's chrome faceplate; her own eyes stared up at her blankly as though from a Venetian carnival mask. She suppressed a shiver as she pushed onward, skirting the ravine's edge.

The Empyreal was lurching around the far side, dazzled by the luminous buildings and unsteady on her unfettered legs. Her crystalline skin was cracked like magma, the body within a roiling molten mass on the verge of spilling over. At last, she lifted her head to the sky, blinking as though seeing it for the first time. With a rapturous howl, Lucida unfurled her immense wings, flapping them in what could only be described as unbridled joy; the resulting surge of wind nearly bowled Clara clean

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over. Commencing their trilling hymn, the stars offered themselves to her, their essence flowing from the heavens to nourish the starving Empyreal.

Clara found Gallius huddled by an enormous chunk of the tower's dome that had driven itself deep into the ground. He bore a nasty gash just above his hip, his robes torn and damp with fresh blood. But if his wound was troubling him, he didn't show it. The Visionary was unable to take his eyes off the creature. "I don't understand..." he said, though otherwise gave no indication that he had noticed Clara's presence. "She's free. Why isn't she leaving?"

"She's doing what all stars do," Clara replied, the lance poised at the ready on her shoulder. "They burn."

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It was a peculiar thing, how disaster brought out the sceptics and spectators. Me hadn't travelled far along the thoroughfare when she happened across an assortment of locals who had concluded that there was no better occasion to stand around and gawk at the unfolding apocalypse. *Self-preservation comes second to stupidity*, Me thought, but she nonetheless raised her voice to a commanding shout. "If you value your continued existence, I recommend you get moving."

"But our home!" wailed a creature covered from head to toe in thick canary yellow fluff. The tips of their bushy antennae didn't reach any higher than Me's thigh. Three even smaller creatures clung to them like baby spider monkeys, peering up at her with huge black eyes.

"You're welcome to cry about it afterwards," said Me. "Be thankful you still have your lives."

"Scaremongering nonsense!" A blue-skinned humanoid spoke over her, stating with total confidence, "It's a hoax, my good people! They're staging all of this so they claim our properties for their own and reap the insurance payouts." He pointed a long, slender finger in the direction of the square, where Lucida could be seen

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looming above the glowing domes. “That monster right there is an elaborate special effect – you can tell from the outline.”

Me pursed her lips. “By all means, go and take a closer look if you’re so inclined. Or better yet, explain to the hoax just how unconvincing it is as it boils your internal organs.”

She preempted the blue alien’s rebuttal; the threat in her glare proved an effective deterrent. “Everyone else needs to shelter inside,” she announced. “Underground, if you can.”

“And I suppose the Star Seers put you in charge?” growled none other than Androcles. The feline merchant was lugging around a crate of his useless stock, looking decidedly worse for wear. One of his tufted ears was torn, and his muzzle was flecked with cuts. Had he come from the city centre?

“But of course,” said Me with mock earnestness, holding out her hands in placation. “Before they fled in their escape craft, your benevolent rulers told me to waste my time trying to convince you all that it’s not in your best interests to volunteer for incineration. Forgive my impertinence for assuming you didn’t have a death wish. I’ll just be on my way.” As she said this, she made a show of leaving.

Androcles set down his crate and waved a massive paw at her. “All right, all right! You’ve made your point.” The momentary lapse in the conversation was interspersed with distant screams. He took on an unexpected solemnness. “Seeing as you’ve got no qualms about being blunt,” he said gruffly, “and seem to be the only one with an inkling of what in Tarchus’ name is really going on, say it plain: is this it? Was Visionary Gallius right about a reckoning?”

“We all have our days of judgment,” she replied, repaying his sincerity with sincerity. “Though it’s not the gods’ judgment you should fear, but your own. Don’t look back on tonight and regret how you acted – while you still have time to regret it.”

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Her words appeared to satisfy Androcles. After a contemplative pause, he craned his neck over the gathering and bellowed, “You heard the human, folks! Inside now, or you’ll have me to answer to!”

This was a night for rare happenings, it seemed, because they did as he said – albeit begrudgingly. Me pulled Androcles aside as the bystanders dispersed. “Thank you. Did I appeal to your oft-neglected sense of decency?”

The merchant grunted. “If we survive this, just do me a favour and keep your friend off my back, will ya?”

Me snickered. A shrewd businessman to the end. “It’s a deal. But I’ve one more thing to ask of you. The city bells, do you know how to access them?”

Androcles flicked his ears. “Aye... What are you driving at?”

“I need you to come with me. We’re ringing them.”

“Eh? You want us to trek all the way to the belfries?” he grumbled.

“Yes, it’s the most efficient way to get everyone indoors. I don’t imagine we’ll encounter much resistance; the guards have more pressing issues to worry about.”

“You’re pushing your luck, you know that?”

“I prefer to think of it as taking a calculated risk. Now lead the way, lives are counting on it.”

He scratched his furry chin and huffed. “Fine. I’ll help you ring the damn bells. But not for your sake.”

Me regarded him with gratitude. “You won’t regret this.”

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“I’d better not.” On that note, the merchant lumbered down the thoroughfare, leaving his crate abandoned on the pavement behind him.

Me was about to follow him when Sunita and Katherine careered into view. It wasn’t necessary to ask what was wrong; the answer was written all over their faces.

“Ess?”

“She’s gone!” panted Sunita.

“Gone where?”

“I don’t— I don’t know!” Sunita clutched handfuls of her hair. “The neighbours didn’t see her leave – she must have slipped away in the chaos.”

Ahead of them, Androcles stopped and sent Me a quizzical look. She urged him to go on with a gesture. Understanding, the merchant gave his patented salute and disappeared down an alleyway, ragged tail whisking behind him. Me would have to rely on the tenuous faith that he would fulfil their mission without her supervision. She returned her focus to Sunita. “Think carefully,” she said in a level tone. “Where would she go?”

Sunita’s eyes darted around as she racked her brain, then they widened in horror. “To find me...” she breathed.

*Of course. When the world is ending, what else would a child do?*

“The Observatory!” gasped Katherine, her hand flying to her mouth. “You don’t think...?”

Sunita swore, looking utterly beside herself. But Me had taken off back up the path.

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## A CITIZEN OF THE UNIVERSE

“Essie?”

Me hurtled into the square. Neither Clara nor Gallius were anywhere in sight among the carnage, but none could miss Lucida as she basked in the starlight, her cracked carapace steadily melting away to expose her white-hot flesh. Me wrenched her attention from the burning beast and scanned the vicinity, urgency and adrenaline honing her already acute senses. Her gut writhed with an unfamiliar sensation that she did her utmost to ignore; she knew better than to succumb to her emotions. Nevertheless, she couldn't escape the foreboding that gnawed at her bones like a winter chill when she could find no trace of the missing girl. Her calls received no answer.

Sunita arrived at her heels, followed by Katherine, desperately yelling her daughter's name. As though unsettled by the sound, the Empyreal reared and tossed her head, sending a tremendous shockwave through the ground. The women took cover by the shell of a nearby building, but not before the force of the quake slammed Sunita into a broken pillar. She collapsed with a yelp, nursing her left leg. Katherine, despite her own weakened condition, hoisted Sunita up by the waist and dragged her into their improvised shelter.

“I'm fine, I'm fine! It's just— *gah*... a sprain,” protested Sunita, wincing as Katherine set her down.

“The hell it is!” Even weeks of imprisonment hadn't dulled the steel in Katherine's voice. Perhaps that was why the Star Seers had kept her alive for so long; an unbroken spirit that they had tried and failed to wear down taken as a sign of divine intervention – or a challenge. “We've got to get you out of here, Sunny. Your friend and I can keep searching.”

“No! If anything's... happened... I'll never... forgive...”

Katherine squatted by Sunita and rubbed her knee. “Breathe, breathe. We'll find her.”

## THE UNTOLD ADVENTURES

A vortex of petals, leaves, and dust whirled around Lucida. The wind, hot and humid, roared in Me's ears like a battle cry. Her mind went to Ashildr's diaries, to Odin and his army and the visions that had plagued her of death and retribution from the gods. As the Empyrean's nostrils flared with tongues of fire, she thought of the great wolf Fenrir and of Ragnarök. Fanciful tales concocted from primitive notions that had set Ashildr's young mind alight with wonder. But Me had walked among innumerable myths, watched them wither and wane, and had concluded that behind every legend there were three simple truths: fear, hope, and pain. In every monster's howl, there was a child's cry.

*A child's cry...*

"Essie!" Sunita called into the maelstrom. She had almost shouted herself hoarse. "Essieeee!"

"Quiet!" snapped Me, who was listening intently.

She had heard a sound that froze the blood in her veins.

There it was again: a pitiful wail, all but lost in the commotion, issuing from beneath their feet.

At Me's signal, they rushed to the edge of the ravine, Sunita driven solely by willpower as she forced herself up and limped over, refusing Katherine's assistance. When she peered into it, she cried out in alarm.

Pressed to the craggy wall below them, teetering on a ledge no larger than the toes of her scuffed trainers, was Ess.

"I'm coming for you, sweetheart!" Sunita yelled, kneeling at the precipice. "Just hold on!"

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“Mama!” was all Ess could muster in reply. She trembled as she hugged the wall, unwilling or unable to move a muscle. One thing was for certain: she wouldn’t stand a chance if there was another earthquake.

Sunita threw her legs over the edge, twisted around, and lowered herself onto a narrow shelf of rock. But her ankle couldn’t bear her weight. She slipped, spraying stones into the abyss, and was only saved by her upper body still clinging to the top. She shouted a curse and pounded her fist in frustration, but moved to try again all the same.

“Wait.” Me crouched down and stopped Sunita with a firm hand on her shoulder. “I’ll get her.”

She forestalled the tour guide’s objections, holding her with an uncompromising stare. “Tell me, what good are you to her dead?”

Sunita clenched her quivering jaw, tears welling in her eyes. “You bring her back.”

Me helped her back up, supporting her by the elbow. “I did give you my word.”

Having ensured that Sunita was safe, Me descended the sheer rock face, getting a foothold on the shelf. The earth shuddered; she dug her fingers into a cleft in the wall to keep herself stable. Ess screwed her eyes shut and squealed, but by some miracle managed to maintain her balance. Though only just.

“Ess,” called Me, “focus on the sound of my voice. I’m coming to get you, but until then, you need to anchor yourself. See if you can get a hold of that root.”

The girl pried her eyes open and shuffled along the ledge, her knees knocking together. Meanwhile, Me shimmied right toward the next set of potential handholds until she was directly above them. Ess reached out and grasped the thick, stubby root protruding from the rock face. Thankfully, it seemed tough and sturdy, a lifeline to hold her steady until Me could rescue her.

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“That’s it. Don’t pull too hard, just let it support you.”

Me deliberated her next move as she looked down. She needed to get to the handholds a good dozen or so feet below her to have any hope of reaching the girl, but without the aid of a rope, there was no option to rappel down. She would simply have to drop.

Such a risk required precision, careful calculation, and time to judge the distance and necessary velocity. Time she didn’t have. Me was at the mercy of luck.

Lucida roared. The world shook as though in deference to the Empyrean. It was a child’s toy rattled in the claws of a god.

The ledge Ess was standing on split with a piercing, penetrating *crack*. Sunita shrieked.

Me let go.

Only by pure reflex did she succeed in snagging the jutting rock with her left hand in time. Pain shot down her arm as the rest of her body jolted and dangled like a puppet on a string. Ess screamed, her legs giving way. Me caught her by the wrist with her other hand, and not a second too soon: the ledge broke away, devoured by the chasm’s gaping maw.

Me’s palms were clammy and her shoulders threatened to dislocate from their sockets from the strain. Now began the treacherous task of climbing back up. But they couldn’t make any progress while Ess was tugging her down.

“Try to catch your feet on the rock!”

Ess merely whimpered, too terrified to respond. Me’s grip started to slip; she clamped her fingers tighter around the girl’s sleeve. It was all she could do to prevent the both of them from falling to their deaths. And she knew that her stamina

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would soon fail her. What had come over her, the ultimate survivor, that she had so willingly, so unthinkingly thrown herself into such peril?

“Essie,” came Sunita’s raw voice from above them. She fought to cover the panic in her tone with encouragement. “You’re almost there, my darling, but first you have to be brave. Hold onto Me, or she won’t be able to move.”

Bolstered by her mother’s words, Ess took several short, sharp breaths and swung herself back and forth, building momentum; Me clenched her teeth as her joints creaked with the movement. The girl then used the impetus to sling her free arm around Me’s hips, where she awkwardly manoeuvred herself into a more secure position hugging her waist. Me stifled a relieved groan.

Something large and purple slapped the rock by her head. A banner of dust-coated, satiny fabric. “Grab on!” Katherine shouted from out of sight. Me seized it with one hand at a time, the friction searing her already sore skin.

Slowly but surely, they were pulled upwards, Me’s front scraping the coarse stone. As they neared the top, Sunita and Katherine reached down to haul them both over the edge with surprising strength. As soon as they let go, Me rolled flat onto her back, gulping lungfuls of air. Ess tumbled into her mother’s arms, knocking them both backwards onto the ground, where they remained in a close embrace.

“I’ve got you,” Sunita said, rocking her tenderly.

“I’m sorry, Mama, I’m sorry,” Ess sobbed into the crook of her neck. “I didn’t w-want to be left behind again. I was so s-scared you wouldn’t come back.”

“I will never leave you again. Not ever.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

## THE UNTOLD ADVENTURES

“That makes two of us.”

Ess sniffed and looked to see who had spoken. Her entire face lit up. “Katherine!” she exclaimed, all fear forgotten.

“Hello, little sunbeam.” Katherine threw her arms around them both and rubbed noses with the girl.

“I knew we’d find you. I knew it!”

Staggering to her feet, Me watched the touching reunion, exhaustion still blurring her vision. The tolling of bells resounded over the reigning chaos. She allowed herself a small smirk of triumph: Androcles had made good on his word.

But the reprieve couldn’t last. Lucida beat her wings and pounded the earth with her great forepaws, oblivious to the destruction she wrought. Their group retreated into the ruins amid the ensuing tremors. What remained of its chromastrite roof emanated with a fierce glow just as the unrefined clusters had in the cavern, containing the worst of the heat. Each building was a guardian protecting its occupants, but the crystal wouldn’t hold back annihilation forever. The horizon was growing lighter: dawn was fast approaching, and with it a star whose power would surely consume the Empyreal.

Me ushered Katherine, Sunita, and Ess into an alcove. The family huddled together as she stared out into the desolate square.

*Come on, Clara.*

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Lucida burned. Brighter and brighter, hotter and hotter, until she was energy itself given form, a spectacle of the likes precious few will ever live to see. And those who witnessed it would remember for the rest of their days. On clear summer evenings,

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when the sky was decked in its finest jewels, they would tell their children and grandchildren of the night a star was reborn on Auros.

Flickering flames leapt up around the closest buildings, shrivelling their flowery garments. Trees, caught alight, resembled torches wielded by invisible giants. The City of Burning Sapphire fulfilled its moniker as the chomastrite domes and spires illuminated the sky like a thousand bonfires. The sweltering air shimmered with a desert haze, and a seething curtain of steam rose from the city waterways. Lucida flared like a phoenix, her howls merging with the starlight's trill to form a euphoric chorus.

Clara was so captivated by the sight that she had almost forgotten the imminent danger when the Dimension Vault's lance emitted a series of beeps to signal its readiness.

The noise also shook Gallius from his awestruck daze. As he turned to see Clara and the device in her hand, anguish fell over his face in its stead.

"You know what this is, don't you?" said Clara in a small voice.

Gallius nodded, his fearful gaze making him look younger than ever. "I..." He swallowed. "I can guess what you plan to do with it. But I need to hear you say it."

"If this works, then it'll absorb her power." Clara rolled her lips together and ran her fingers through her hair. "I don't... I don't want to kill her. I need you to understand that. But I can't promise that it won't."

Gallius nodded slowly again, not daring to look her in the eye. He didn't say anything for a long time. When he finally did, it came out as the softest murmur.

"It would be better for her to die seeing the stars again than to live on in darkness."

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Silence descended between them. Flakes of ash and embers surged all around like a rising blizzard. The wind carried a mournful knell as the city's bells were roused by an unknown herald.

Gallius spoke once more, though Clara could barely make out the words. Perhaps they weren't meant for her. "All that time I spent imagining what I'd have done that night, what I'd say to the Pilgrim. And now I realise... there's nothing."

"I'm so sorry," Clara whispered, her mouth dry.

He closed his eyes and bowed his head. "Do what you must. Just, please, don't let her suffer."

Summoning the last vestiges of her resolve, Clara planted her feet apart, held the device aloft and aimed it at Lucida, her thumb hovering on the activation switch. Blue light stirred at the end of the lance, cutting through the Empyrean's song with a pulsing whine. Clara wanted to turn her face from the act, or run away in shame as the Doctor had done, but she made herself look. Lucida deserved that much.

She was beautiful. Beautiful in a way that defies words, that no poem or fable could capture. Because in that blissful, fleeting moment, she was truly free.

Beside Clara, convulsing with thick, wretched sobs, Gallius could do nothing but cry.

Clara hesitated.

*Hesitated...*

*A hidden chamber in the deepest depths, far beneath the splendour of a shining metropolis. A repository for the dead where monsters dwell and the living dare to trespass.*



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*“My time is up.”*

*The doomed and their would-be saviour. Futile plans to escape the inevitable. Desire. Despair. Desperation. Declarations...*

*“Between one heartbeat and the last is all the time I have.”*

*Words uttered that must never be spoken. A promise made that can never be fulfilled. Forbidden secrets transcribed into song.*

*“People like me and you, we should say things to one another. And I'm going to say them now...”*

*The cavern raged like the pits of Hell, the beast within a vengeful demon preparing to enact her wrath on the damned. And yet, at the height of her fury, driven to the brink by pain and sorrow and yearning, when their eyes had met...*

She had hesitated.

The lance clanged to the cobblestones.

It took a moment for Gallius to realise what was happening. The young Visionary raised his face and gaped at her. “What are you doing?”

*Something insanely stupid*, Clara thought, but the answer came from her in a rush. “What if there *is* another way?”

Gallius sniffled and mopped his eyes with the cuff of a long sleeve. “The Doctor never found one. How can you?”

“Because I have something he didn’t.”

“What?”

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“You.”

She offered him her hand. “Come on.”

Gallius stared at her palm, stray tears still clinging to his feathery cheeks. “If we come any closer, we’ll burn with her.”

But Clara shook her head, her lips quirking into a sad smile. “No. I don’t think we will.”

Cautiously, he closed his talon around her open fingers. “How can you be so sure?”

She guided him forward. Step by step, closing the space between them and the incandescent Empyreal. As they drew nearer, Lucida seemed to grow tenfold in size, towering before them as a mighty supernova. Clara hoped against hope that her hunch wasn’t mistaken, her conviction once again misplaced. But they didn’t slow their approach.

“You’d do anything to save her,” she said softly. “What makes you think she wouldn’t do the same for you?”

They collided with a barrier of super-hot air that stole the breath away. Clara squinted and raised her free arm against the vortex that whipped back her hair and sent Gallius’ robes billowing about him. The Asrathon let out a gasp, tightening his trembling grip on her hand. Debris swept up by the whirlwind pelted them mercilessly. A horrible pressure was mounting in Clara’s head; her skin stung and her scorching clothes stuck uncomfortably to her body. Every inch of her screamed *no further*. But still, they walked on.

There were a few, horrifying seconds when Clara was certain she had led Gallius to his death.

And then the Visionary started to sing a song of his own:

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*Though my feet are rooted to the ground,  
My heart shall take me yonder.  
Though my frail voice dare not make a sound,  
My mind shall ever wander.  
Together, we'll find a true escape.  
Together, we'll greet the stars' embrace.*

Eyes turned to meet them. Eyes reflecting a thousand galaxies. Eyes that blazed with passion, then recognition, and then, last of all, startled comprehension.

Lucida ended her song. But her light didn't diminish as Clara had expected. Instead, it concentrated itself. As though taking a calming breath, she drew in the surrounding energy, extinguishing the frenzied flames and dimming the resplendent crystal. The air grew cool, and supernatural stillness arrested all sound and motion as the Empyrean shone with a blinding intensity. Clara and Gallius shielded their eyes from the overwhelming brightness. For a time beyond measure, there was only white radiance.

And then the world came rushing back into existence. With a spread of her wings, Lucida exhaled, surrendering herself to the heavens. A myriad of colours burst from her, enveloping Auros in an ever-expanding cloak of swirling rainbows. It passed over them like a caress. Clara had a strange sense that the colours were speaking to them, an indescribable meaning conveyed in a symphonic spectrum. The language of the stars.

What remained was a being of pure light. She was smaller than before, yet her presence loomed larger than ever. Gallius let go of Clara's hand and raced up to her, skidding to a halt at the Empyrean's feet. Lucida kneeled and brought her head low so that her face was level with his. He tentatively extended his talon. She nuzzled it as if to say, *'Don't worry, you can touch me. I won't hurt you.'*

Beaming, he waved Clara over. "Lucida, this is..." He paused with a puzzled frown. "Oh dear, I don't even know your real name."

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She chuckled. "It's Clara. Clara Oswald."

"This is Clara," he repeated to the Empyreal. "She saved you. She saved us both."

Gallius took Clara's hand. Noticing her uncertainty, he said, "It's all right. She wants to thank you," before placing it on Lucida's muzzle.

The Empyreal nudged Clara's palm. Clara was surprised to find her warm but not scalding. The sensation was unlike anything she'd experienced before, like touching an ancient magic; the primal currents and eddies of life, the very pulse of the universe, flowing between her fingers.

Lucida slowly stood back up and looked at Gallius, expectant.

"I don't think she wants to leave without you," said Clara.

Gallius choked out a sad laugh. He leaned forward and gently kissed her lowered nose. "Go on. I'll join you out there one day. We'll see each other again, I promise."

Lucida lifted her proud head. Then, in three great, galloping bounds, the Empyreal took off into the sky, leaving behind a stream of silver.

## Chapter Twelve

The sun rose on ruin and relief. The people of Auros began to cautiously emerge from their homes, taking in the aftermath with wide, fearful eyes. Lucida's nebula lingered in the air, a message to all that the danger had passed and a new dawn had broken.

Me spotted Clara first from across the square as she and Gallius navigated the rubble. They ran to each other, their companions not far behind.

"I see you found a third option," said Me upon reaching her, arching her brows in a characteristically stern yet playful fashion. "Typical."

"Nah, that was mostly Gallius," Clara replied. "I just gave him a nudge in the right direction." She grinned. "Wouldn't have tried at all without you."

Me shrugged, affecting nonchalance. "Well, your self-pitying was wearing rather thin. I had to say something."

"Oof. I'm gonna have to get used to the potshots at my ego, aren't I?"

"I'm glad to hear I haven't expended my usefulness just yet. And neither have you, it seems."

Clara looked over Me's shoulder and saw the Joshis making their way towards them hand-in-hand. Sunita was favouring her left leg, and Ess' knees were scraped and bruised, but they appeared otherwise unharmed. "Not bad for a couple of dead women."

Overhearing her, Sunita chimed in, "That little inside joke of yours gets more tedious each time you make it." She measured them both with her steadfast gaze as she and her family caught up. "Of all the extraordinary things I've seen in the past couple of days, it's you two I can't wrap my head around."

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“Let’s fix that,” said Clara. She held out her hand. Sunita shook it, amused. “Clara Oswald. Former English teacher from Blackpool, Earth. Now full-time time and space traveller. As for the ‘dead’ part, I’ll let you know when I figure that out myself.”

At Clara’s prompting (which involved a prolonged back-and-forth via eye contact) Me sighed and followed suit. “Me. Ancient immortal, now reluctant interdimensional hitchhiker. Best leave it at that or we’ll be here all century.”

Sunita clucked her tongue and said, “Believe it or not, this only gives me more questions.”

Clara winked at her. “Exactly.”

Breaking from her mother and Katherine’s grasp, Ess came forward. “So you’re not the Pilgrim, after all?”

Clara crouched down before the girl, her kind smile tinged with regret. “Afraid not. Sorry.”

“That’s okay,” Ess said graciously, glancing back at her mother, who draped her arm around Katherine’s shoulders and pulled her close, their heads resting against each other. “I like this story even better.”

“Thank you both.” Sunita’s voice was thick with gratitude. “For everything.”

All of a sudden, Ess pressed herself to Me’s chest, hugging her with all her might. “Yes,” she mumbled into Me’s jacket. “Thank you.”

Clara’s giggle at the immortal’s surprise tapered off when she realised that there was something more behind those twisted lips and wide eyes. Unease? Sorrow? Fear? She couldn’t decipher it. She wondered if Me even knew.

Me patted Ess’ head awkwardly. “You’re welcome...”

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Trailing behind their gathering, Gallius had resigned himself to silence, overwhelmed by the crowd that was congregating around them. Katherine extricated herself from Sunita and approached him, arms folded.

“So, you’re our elusive Visionary.”

The young Asrathon bowed low. “I owe you all an explanation. For a great many things.”

Without the Observatory's ostentatious technology to project them, Gallius' words couldn't carry far, so he settled for addressing the woman in front of him. The first person to have listened, and an embodiment of his regrets.

He told her everything. About the Star Seers' corruption, the true nature of the Visionaries, the enslaved Empyrean and his desperate quest to free her. Clara, Me, and Sunita contributed where they could, filling in when Gallius faltered and offering their own context. Katherine listened without interruption, only asking the odd clarifying question. The watching crowd maintained miraculous composure throughout. Perhaps it was the shock, or the tranquilising effect of Lucida's aura. The clamour and confusion would come, but for now, the city was content to savour this state of grace.

When at last Gallius concluded his story, he sank to the ground, as though the weight of his conscience was too much to bear. Clara started forward, but Me held her back by the wrist, undeterred by the glare she received in return.

During this tense exchange, Katherine had gotten down beside Gallius. After a moment, she carefully took the fledgling into her arms. “You’re not to blame for this,” she reassured him as he wept. “Auros doesn’t have to be ruled by fear anymore. And neither do you.”

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## THE UNTOLD ADVENTURES

Perhaps it was the romantic in her, but Clara often felt that there was a poignant beauty in the wake of destruction. Or rather, the way in which, against all odds, life prevailed in spite of it. The Observatory gardens were no exception. Green shoots bearing new buds peeked through the piles of dust and ash. Glass swallows glided on thermals in the crisp morning air. The armillary fountain continued its merry flow; its lower basin had split open and sent the water gushing over the path, washing away the debris.

It was here that Clara found Gallius a little while later. He was overseeing the Faces of Amity as they attempted to salvage the Observatory's mechanism. Slypher's body was carried past her on a covered stretcher as she entered the cul-de-sac. She did her best to avoid staring after it.

The Visionary, who had been examining the Dimension Vault with a pensive expression, shot up when he noticed her. The sudden movement made him wince; he clutched his bandaged torso. "Oh, hello."

"Sorry," said Clara. "Am I interrupting?"

"No, no. I was just thinking."

"About?"

Gallius twisted around to face her fully. "Whether the Doctor ever truly intended to return."

"I know he did." Clara paused, rubbing her thumb absently over the inside of her other wrist. "But I think he was afraid. Of what he'd find. That trying would only do more harm. He just... he didn't have the answers."

"Then why did you come?" asked Gallius, his crested brow knitted in curiosity. "Did he send you in his place?"



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Clara shook her head. She crossed her arms, hunching her shoulders a little. “We’re all running from something. Or towards something. Hard to tell which, sometimes.”

“I suppose it depends on what’s driving us,” Gallius mused with a wisdom beyond his years. “But whatever it is that’s driving you, Clara Oswald, I’m glad it brought you here.”

Clara smiled. “Me too.” She turned and looked around them. Just hours ago, she had knelt at this very spot, believing that all hope was lost. How quickly the universe had proved her wrong. “So,” she said, “what will you do now?”

Gallius closed his eyes and breathed in deeply, revelling in the morning breeze. “I’m not sure,” he admitted. “I can’t undo my mistakes, nor the cruelty that the Star Seers have inflicted on this city, but perhaps now I have a chance to make things right. Help build something better from all this.

“After that, who knows? Too long have I watched from afar. I’ve always yearned to see the galaxy up close.”

“I know the feeling,” replied Clara.

“And what about you?”

An uneasy snicker escaped her. “Jury’s still out on that one. But we can’t stay. I’m sorry.”

Gallius nodded in a way that Clara tried not to read as disappointment. “I expected as much.”

He slipped a talon inside the folds of his robes and withdrew a peculiar gadget – a thin, caged cylinder of polished brass, its varnished wooden handle trimmed with a delicate filigree. The device ended in a component resembling the petals of a blooming lotus flower.

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“I want you to have this. I modelled it on descriptions of the Doctor’s sonic device, with a few choice alterations and improvements. All I’ve been missing is a suitable power source...”

He stooped and plucked a small, round fragment of the Geniah crystal from among the rubble. With the precision of a master watchmaker, he inserted it into the empty space between the golden lotus petals, where it clicked into place like a magnet. The Asrathon inspected his work with satisfaction. “There. It fits perfectly. As though it was meant to be.” He gave it to Clara, eagerly anticipating her reaction.

Clara turned the device in her fingers, finding herself uncharacteristically speechless. “Gallius...” she fumbled, “I can’t accept this.”

Gallius linked his talons behind his back. “Consider it a token of our gratitude. Wherever your journey may lead, you can carry a piece of Auros with you.”

In the quiet that followed, their gazes were drawn to the broken remains of the Pilgrim’s monument.

As if reading Clara’s thoughts, the Visionary said, “There’s no need for it now. The Doctor’s promise has finally been honoured.”

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Clara and Me remained in Auros just long enough to witness the immediate fallout. Makeshift medical tents were erected across the city to treat those whom the local hospital could not. Emergency accommodations were made for residents who had been displaced from their homes. Sunita and Gallius combined their technical expertise with Katherine’s journalistic influence and used the Star Seers’ former propaganda channels to spread the truth far and wide. The people of Auros came together in a way not seen in centuries.

The young Visionary did admirably in assuming the role of interim leader. No longer under the thumb of his handlers, his confidence blossomed. Of course, the unity of

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the recovery effort wouldn't last forever, and the surviving Star Seers were unlikely to give up their hold on the city without retribution, but he assured Clara and Me that Auros would be ready to face the challenges ahead.

Nevertheless, the two women were both anxious to depart – albeit for different reasons. After saying their farewells to the others, Sunita and Ess came to see them off.

“So, how exactly did you manage to convert an antiquated Earth diner into a spaceship?”

“It's a disguise, actually.”

“Oh yeah? I can see that. It's very... *inconspicuous*.”

“Now who's being a smart-arse?”

The shaded courtyard, which had been sheltered from the worst of the destruction, was a welcome sight. Shafts of sunlight dappled the walls, merging with the refracted crystal to create artful patterns of turquoise and gold. Singed petals drifted down along with a sprinkling of ash blown from the city centre. Ess jumped to catch them mid-air while Me pursed her lips at Clara and Sunita's banter.

When Clara touched the TARDIS, the ship responded as though waking from a deep slumber. The diner lights switched on in succession: the blue and pink ceiling trim, the frosted glass blocks of the service counter, the novelty neon signs and the rippled wall clocks. The TARDIS crooned like a cat in greeting. Clara could almost feel her reaching out, connecting with some hidden part of her mind. It was the gentle tickle of someone whispering ‘*Welcome back*’ into her ear, their breath warm against her neck. For a moment, the new key pressed to her chest, hanging from the chain with its sister, seemed to flutter with a pulse of its own.

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“Can I see inside?” asked Ess from beside her. She was abuzz with barely-contained excitement.

Broken from her reverie, Clara opened the glass door with a flourish. “Go for it.”

The girl trotted into the diner, staring in wonder at its retro decor. “Oooh! It’s so pretty!”

“Just wait until you get to the next bit!” Clara called.

Reaching the end of the aisle, Ess tilted her head at the stylised words scrawled above the Elvis Presley mural on the far door. “The ‘Restroom’?”

Sunita snorted, but Clara was unfazed. “Why don’t you take a look?”

With a small grunt of effort, Ess cracked the door open and disappeared through it. An elated squeal reached them. Clara beamed.

“Wooow!”

After several minutes in which they were treated to a chorus of hammering footsteps and delighted shrieks, Ess came speeding out, almost crashing into Me, who steadied her.

Clara, meanwhile, was repeating under her breath, “Please say it, please say it, please say it...”

Throwing her arms wide for emphasis, Ess panted, “It’s bigger on the inside!”

Clara discreetly pumped her fist. “Yes!”

“It’s HUGE!”

## A CITIZEN OF THE UNIVERSE

She glanced at Me. “And there I was worrying the effect wouldn’t be the same.”

“All of the gorgeous flowers!” Ess continued to gush. “And the sky dome – it goes on and on forever!”

Clara stopped short, her smirk wiped away by a bewildered frown. “Hang on, the what?”

“It sounds like she’s redecorated,” remarked Me. She gestured inside. “Shall we?”

Clara turned to the tour guide. “Sunita?”

Sunita bit her lip as though tempted by the offer, but politely declined. “Wouldn’t want to keep you any longer.”

“You sure? It’s not every day you get to see inside a TARDIS.”

“I’ve seen enough impossible things for one day. Anyway” – she picked Ess up from behind and lifted the giggling girl onto her shoulders – “there are plenty of wonders right here.”

Clara’s smile was strained when she hugged her. “You take care, yeah?”

“Speak for yourself,” Sunita retorted in a lighthearted impression of her initial hostility as they pulled apart.

“And you, miss,” said Clara, craning her neck to address Ess, “listen to your mum.”

“That’ll be the day,” laughed Sunita.

“Clara,” said Me, who was waiting in the diner’s doorway. “Are you ready?”

## THE UNTOLD ADVENTURES

Sunita waved a playfully dismissive hand at them both. “Good luck – and good riddance!”

As they entered the TARDIS, they heard Ess say, “Ma, watch this! It’s the best part!”

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The control room was unrecognisable.

The first thought to come to Me’s mind was the Globe Theatre. A sleek, modified console unit stood on a hexagonal wooden platform engraved with a blazing sun, the symbol extending outwards to form a design of orbiting planets on the smooth sandstone floor. Archways strung with blossoming vines encircled the room, the walls beyond them studded with hexagons in a beehive pattern. A spiral staircase and golden-grilled elevator led to a gallery level, which was hemmed by a ring of balconies overlooking the control space. Sunlight poured in from a great domed glass ceiling; the cyan sky overhead was awash with warm midday hues.

Clara laughed with childlike glee and raced around the room, exploring each and every new detail. Me watched fondly as she leaned against one of the pillars. While her friend was preoccupied, she pulled back a sleeve and peeked beneath the bandages dressing her hands and arms. Though the skin was still raw and waxy in places, it was gradually turning as soft as a newborn’s. Soon it would be whole again. But not soon enough.

“Oh my God” – Clara had flown up the spiral staircase and was hurtling along the gallery – “it’s incredible!”

Eventually, she calmed down enough to return to the console and set about preparing the ship for takeoff. Pushing herself from the pillar, Me went to join her.

“You wanted to know why we came here,” Clara said suddenly, in a tone that might have been conversational. “To Auros.”

## A CITIZEN OF THE UNIVERSE

Me waited for her to elaborate, listening to the tune of chirrups and beeps as Clara's fingers flitted over the panel.

"Me and the Doctor... It was just somewhere we talked about going. The night before..."

"Before a mysterious party lured you to Trap Street," finished Me.

"Yeah." Clara's eyes didn't stray from her task. She hardly even blinked.

"Closure, then," said Me. "Or curiosity?"

"Both, I suppose."

"And that's it?"

Clara's expression shifted, just a fraction. Someone less perceptive than Me would have missed it, the ghost of a frown that made her think of a house's shutters pulling shut. "Does there need to be another reason?"

"No."

Me didn't press any further. She instead rested her hands on the console's edge and said, "So, onto Gallifrey?"

Clara's head snapped up. "What?"

"That was the plan, wasn't it?"

She fixed her gaze back on the control panel, still fiddling with various switches and dials. "You know, I, um... I think Gallifrey can stand to wait a little longer."

## THE UNTOLD ADVENTURES

Me folded her arms, eyebrows raised in a show of sarcasm designed to put Clara at ease. “Oh, really?”

“Yeah.” Clara gave a small shrug, then cocked her head. “Well, I mean, come on. She’s gone to all this trouble. Be a shame to waste it, right?”

“What *actually* changed your mind?” Me risked the question.

Reaching into her jacket, Clara took out her new sonic screwdriver, marvelling at its intricate craftsmanship. She activated it, and the crystal fragment at the end glowed a brilliant orange-red, emitting a melodious, electronic trill. “I guess I found something worth enduring for.”

A wicked grin spread across her lips. She did a lap of the console.

“Besides, it’s a time machine!” Clara slammed the dematerialisation lever. The TARDIS lurched and spun; Me clung to the machine for all she was worth. As the ship’s engines roared jubilantly into life, the ring of Gallifreyan symbols that separated the two floors began to revolve, the time rotor bobbed and twirled like a ballerina, and the sky overhead dissolved into the psychedelic storm of the time vortex. “So long as I go back, it’s not as if they’re really gonna miss me, is it?”

She was too immersed in her dance around the controls to notice the smile fall from Me’s face.



## Epilogue

“All you’re doing is giving her hope.”

“Since when is hope a bad thing?”

“Hope is a terrible thing – on the scaffold.”

Imparting the High Priestess with a final, piercing glare, the Doctor disappeared into the TARDIS, slamming the door behind him with an insolent whirr. Ohila shook her head in disdain as the winds whipped up by the dematerialising silver cylinder flapped at her scarlet robes and scattered the infernal mist that enveloped the Cloisters of Gallifrey.

“Where can he run?” said the General beside her. The Time Lady’s expression was etched in stone.

“Where he always runs,” Ohila replied grimly. “Away. Just away.”

They fell silent, lingering at the perimeter of the Capitol’s haunted undercroft. The pale blue light penetrating the forest of stone columns cast long shadows, disturbed only by the Wraiths’ silhouettes as they flitted between ancient metal struts and makeshift gargoyles, the odd shriek punctuating their ceaseless whispers.

“Ma’am,” came the voice of Gastron through the General’s communicator. “What do you want to do next?”

She sighed. “Call off the cordon. Then meet us at lift shaft seven.”

“The President, he’s really gone?” Even filtered through the comms, the young man sounded crestfallen.

## THE UNTOLD ADVENTURES

“Yes, soldier. I’m afraid so.” The General disengaged the device on her wrist and turned to Ohila. “Staging a coup, then renouncing his duty for a girl,” she hissed. “He’s a reckless, sentimental fool.”

“He’s a child,” corrected Ohila. “Miss Oswald was right. The gravest mistake any of us can make is to expect the Doctor to react maturely. One will only find themselves disappointed.”

“Immature, yes, but I never thought him stupid. He’s jeopardised us all.”

She offered a thin smile in response. “Then we must act accordingly.”

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“Technically, the outgoing president nominates his successor,” mused the General, her fingers laced together in thought. “In the absence of such a declaration, the mantle falls to the highest available authority.”

“Gallifrey doesn’t need executive authority,” Ohila snapped. “It needs to be kicked halfway ‘round the universe.” She paused, the semblance of a smirk forming on her lips. “But... considering the entirety of the High Council is either banished or becoming acquainted with the planet’s sewers, I believe that makes you heir apparent, General. Or should I say Lady President?”

They had retired to the Presidential chamber. The two women were the sole remaining occupants around the room’s ornate table, attended by Ohila’s two companions from the Sisterhood and Gastron, who hovered awkwardly behind his superior, unsure of whether he should be privy to their conversation.

The General shifted in her ceremonial armour, which was built for a body of wider girth. “*Acting* President. We’ll hold an election as soon as it’s feasible.”

## A CITIZEN OF THE UNIVERSE

“Ah yes, that pompous bureaucratic nonsense you like to think of as democracy.” Ohila turned her head from the window, the copper hues of the night sky framing her profile. “I admire her, you know.”

“Who?”

“Miss Oswald. So succinctly voicing her contempt for Time Lord hubris.”

“Clara Oswald is precisely the problem,” said the General. “If the Doctor is set on reversing her death—”

“I am not under the illusion he’ll get that far,” Ohila interrupted. “As you say, the Doctor isn’t stupid. Or at the very least, he isn’t beyond being saved from his own stupidity.”

“You give him too much credit.”

“And you give her too little,” retorted the High Priestess. “One can run from an enemy all he likes, but never underestimate a friend.”

The General’s hand wandered to the golden seal adorning her chest plate, tarnished by the energy pulse of her own gun. “Are we his enemy?” she said quietly.

“As long as we stand in his way, we might as well be.”

Gastron, having stepped aside to receive a transmission, leaned over and murmured something in the General’s ear. Her face fell.

“Good news, I hope?” said Ohila.

“According to our engineers, the TARDIS was ‘procured’ from the workshop while its security protocols had been disabled for repairs,” the General answered in a

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clipped voice. “Which means we cannot monitor its whereabouts nor remotely suspend its connection to the Eye of Harmony.”

“Naturally,” said Ohila. “The Doctor would have chosen with care. He has experience in such matters, after all.”

“The situation is growing ever more precarious,” the General said. “Must we sit here twiddling our thumbs in the hope he sees sense and returns with the girl?”

“May I remind you that you are at a considerable disadvantage, my dear General. The Time War has ravaged Gallifrey; Rassilon even more so. The Celestial Intervention Agency is no more, and you remain in self-imposed exile. Don’t tell me you have the resources for a universe-wide manhunt.”

“Prolonging an extraction is exceedingly dangerous, Madam Ohila. Such that we can’t even conceive of the repercussions.”

“I’m aware, thank you. I am merely urging a measure of pragmatism – and trust.”

“General!” A voice rang through the chamber, shortly followed by the irruption of a stout woman in a pristine white uniform. Curls of black hair had escaped from beneath her skullcap. “The neural block,” she panted. “It’s been activated.”

The General briefly met Ohila’s twinkling eyes.

“So he wiped the young lady’s memory?” she asked the breathless technician.

The technician flushed. “Not exactly, Ma’am. We have reason to believe the device was tampered with.”

She frowned. “How?”

## A CITIZEN OF THE UNIVERSE

“Remote feedback is limited, but the data suggests its settings were inverted. They could have been reconfigured with a sonic probe.”

“Sunglasses,” Ohila interjected. Gastron let out a loud snort before attempting to mask it with a cough – poorly.

“When was it used?” asked the General, maintaining an air of saint-like patience.

“I think the more pertinent question is *on whom?*” said Ohila.

The General threw her an incredulous look. “You don’t mean to suggest Miss Oswald — ?”

“Purged herself from the Doctor’s mind and is henceforth commandeering a stolen timeship you have no effective means of tracking? You should know I find speculation as distasteful as it is impractical.”

Keenly aware of the technician’s curious gaze, the General thanked and dismissed her. She returned her attention to Ohila. “You jest, but if you’re right, we can’t rely on the Doctor’s goodwill to resolve this. We’re facing an unprecedented temporal violation.”

“The tapestry’s undoing begins with the pull of a single thread,” agreed Ohila. “Rassilon has set quite the series of events in motion, it seems.”

“His paranoia has cost us everything.”

“Prophecies thrive on irony. Those who seek to prevent catastrophe on the word of an oracle often end up precipitating it.” Ohila stroked her chin. “What do you know of the girl?”

“Not much. The Doctor has had many accomplices, most of them human females; she is simply one of the more recent. It’s my understanding she was present on the

## THE UNTOLD ADVENTURES

last day of the War, though as little more than a bystander. Not unintelligent, but hardly exceptional. Without the Doctor she'll be lost, surely?"

"Hmm. It was also she who answered you on Trenzalore, as I recall."

The General nodded slowly. "That's correct."

"And you heeded her."

"Well, yes... We did."

Ohila smiled sweetly. "I told you, underestimate the Doctor's friends at your own peril. Not least one who can compel him to abandon his principles."

Sighing, the General gazed at the intricate tracery weaving its way across the table's surface. "You weren't wrong," she said. "Gallifrey is weakened. But we can't afford to do nothing."

She was still for a long time, then finally muttered, "I see no other recourse."

Gesturing to Gastron, the Time Lady said, with no shortage of reluctance, "Prepare a shuttle... We're bound for High Remorse."

"Yes, Ma'am." The soldier saluted, but he failed to hide the fear in his eyes. He swiftly made his exit, his heavy boots clattering on the dark floor.

"General, I implore you!" Ohila rose from her chair. "Desperation is no reason to take leave of your senses! Hasn't today served as proof enough of that? You know what that creature is capable of."

"I do," the General solemnly replied. She, too, had stood and was striding towards the doorway. "Which is why this may be our only hope."

## A CITIZEN OF THE UNIVERSE

“You are asking a scorpion to extract venom from a wound,” Ohila warned. “Do not be surprised when it turns and stings you.”

The General cast a parting glance at her. “No. I’m enlisting a professional.” Her face had hardened, but her voice was leaden with regret as she departed down the corridor.

Left alone with her demure sisters, Ohila went to the chamber’s window and stared out across the bronze spires to the arid drylands beyond. The horizon bled crimson with the rising suns.

“I pity the poor girl,” she whispered. “Oh, verily, I pity her.”

Clara and Me's adventures continue next time in

**CLARA  
OSWALD**  
THE UNTOLD ADVENTURES

# ÁHREDDAN

**Written by Laine Ferio**

**Illustrated by Redundantz**

*"Memory Stations are known across the galaxy as places where one's memories, whether analogue, digital, or synaptic, can be stored, retrieved, shared, deleted, re-experienced, re-mixed."*

It's an urban legend that the Alpha Quadrant's Memory Station is haunted, but Captain Waldron, space pirate extraordinaire, wasn't expecting the most vulnerable member of her crew to vanish shortly after they boarded it, nor did she plan for the strange creatures roaming its corridors.

Then there's the bizarre matter of the American diner in the cargo bay, and the undead woman inside, offering her help to organise a rescue mission that will lead them through layers of time and thoughts.

They're all going to take a trip down memory lane, but what the past hides isn't always pleasant...



## A CITIZEN OF THE UNIVERSE

"I'll call Basil in," Roop said, kissing Oz on the cheek. "As for Hannigan, if the haul's good, we're good. Usually."

"We'll be careful."

"We usually are," he answered. "You know, I've still got title to that little place out in University Heights, just outside New Malala. Right near where we proposed. The one in the woods with the brick fireplace, and the treehouse out back. It's a bit of a fixer-upper, but —"

"The fireplace and the treehouse are its most appealing features?" Oz teased.

Roop rubbed his cheek bashfully, his eyes soft. "Just know that offer to settle down somewhere quiet..."

"Is still on the table, I know. Someday we'll retire, Roop. Just... not yet."

He grinned. "As I expected. Anyway, I'll collect our kid." He stepped to the side to call Basil's comm.

Oz's comm buzzed again. This time it was Chuck, his voice frantic: "We were loading the rest of the cargo, and this... barrier came down between the *Diamond Hill* and the rest of the docking bay. Ana and Kat are on the ship, but Em and I can't get through to it. Captain, what do we do? What do we do?"

"Take a deep breath, Chuck, and both of you get back here," Oz said. The station was old and abandoned – it had been too good of a thing, the place not having malfunctioned in some way before now. She turned to Roop. "Where's Basil?"

"Oz, Basil's not answering," Roop said, his voice a little shaky. "He must still be out in the station somewhere, maybe in a quiet zone or something."

The uncertainty of the 'something' filled Oz with dread.

"Okay, here's what we're going to do —"

But she was interrupted by a sudden gust of wind and the sound of something mechanical wheezing – an unexpected, almost forgotten sound that pulled her younger self to mind – accompanied by an inexplicable feeling of hopefulness. She spun on her heel and saw...

## THE UNTOLD ADVENTURES

A diner? Great, now *she* was seeing things.