



STORIES FROM TELSAN

Example Stories for Inspiration

Abstract

[Draw your reader in with an engaging abstract. It is typically a short summary of the document.]

When you're ready to add your content, just click here and start typing.]

John Hoffer

[Email address]

Contents

Example Stories from Telsan:	3
Title: Plicity	3
Prologue	3
Chapter 1	11
Chapter 2	18
Interlude 1: First Consequences	27
Chapter 3	29
Interlude 2: The Consequences of Coin	37
Chapter 4	43
Chapter 5	54
Chapter 6	63
Title: The Rift Boy	64
Title: The Meteor	68
The Prism's Wrath	68
The Nexus Collapse	68
The Call	69
The Messenger's Guide	71
Arrival in the Radiant Realm.....	73
Title: A Path Foretold.....	76
The Quiet Temple	76
Outline for Bratt Out of Hell	80
I. The Call to Adventure	80
II. Journey into the Underworld	81
III. The Obsidian Halls	82
IV. The Heart of the Earth	84
V. The Return.....	85
Tile: The Ambush.....	87
Character sketches	92
Plicity	92
Jocko	92
Belanie Ma'Chortle (The Oracle).....	92
Dubious	93

Bratt Tumbledown93
Healer Brin94
Thavesen (Mad Plicity's Companion).....94
Rylan (Caravan Leader).....95

Example Stories from Telsan:

Title: Plicity

Prologue

The morning light filtered through the leaves, casting soft patterns on the clearing where Plicity stood. She raised her hands, letting her fingers brush the cool, pulsing surface of a crystal lodged firmly in the ground. The air around it hummed softly, its quiet energy familiar to her, a gentle reminder of the life she'd built here.

"Now remember," she called to the small group of children gathered around her, their wide eyes fixed on the crystal. "You don't *pull* at the crystal's energy. You ask it. Gently. Just as you would ask a friend."

A little girl, barely old enough to grasp the concept, scrunched up her face, her fingers twitching in front of her as though trying to feel the energy for herself. Plicity smiled, her heartwarming as she saw the girl's small spark of concentration. Each child here, every eager face, every curious glance, filled Plicity with a sense of purpose so deep, so grounding, it was impossible not to feel blessed.

In her world, Tappers were more than teachers; they were the keepers of balance, guiding others to respect the energy flowing beneath Telsan. Today's lesson was simple—a way for the children to sense the subtle hum of power that only a Tapper could coax from the crystals embedded in the land. They were learning how to feel for that resonance, a skill that would guide them in small, gentle ways for years to come.

"Just like that," Plicity encouraged, her voice as soft as the leaves rustling around them. Her gaze drifted to her own children, who were a bit older than the others and already more attuned to the crystal's energy, their small hands hovering confidently above the ground. Her heart swelled at the sight, a wellspring of pride mixed with a quiet, constant gratitude. She had her family, her work, and her world—a fullness she rarely paused to consider but always felt.

A familiar presence moved through the trees, and she turned to see her husband, Kyris, standing at the edge of the clearing, his tall frame relaxed as he watched her and the children. His gaze met hers, warm and steady, with that look of quiet admiration he often wore when he saw her teaching. Their eyes locked, and he gave

a small nod, a silent acknowledgment of the life they shared, of the family they'd built, of the joy she took in these simple lessons.

She felt a blush warm her cheeks. Even now, years into their marriage, he had that effect on her. Kyris was her other half, her confidant, the calm anchor in her life's quiet currents. He'd always understood her need for purpose, for the slow, deliberate work of shaping young minds, guiding them with a love for their world. She couldn't imagine life without him—or without the laughter of her children filling their home each day.

She turned back to the class, holding onto that thought, savoring it like the taste of fresh honey on a summer morning.

"Remember, everything here has its own rhythm," she continued, crouching beside the children, her voice as warm as the sunshine on their faces. "You're just a part of it. Let the crystal feel *you* just as much as you feel it. You'll know when it's right."

The little girl's face brightened as her fingers brushed the crystal, and Plicity could almost feel the tiny pulse of energy pass between them. Moments like this were why she loved her work. These children, her family, the crystalline harmony of their world—it was everything she could want, everything she'd ever need.

She took a deep breath, filling her lungs with the crisp, dew-kissed air, feeling a peace so complete that it seemed almost sacred. Her world was right, her heart was full, and her life was as close to perfect as she could imagine.

And then, somewhere distant, almost beyond her sense, she felt a faint, unfamiliar shift—a ripple she could barely place. It passed as quickly as it came, but she found herself glancing toward the edge of the clearing, a subtle unease stirring, though she couldn't say why.

In an instant, it was gone, and the children laughed, their voices carrying away on the breeze, light and innocent, as if nothing could ever touch this place.

Here's a draft for the middle third of the prologue, showing Plicity's warm connections to her family, friends, and the life she loves, as well as her seamless use of Tapper powers in daily life, all setting up for the sudden yank that disrupts everything.

As the lesson drew to a close, the parents began to gather at the edge of the clearing, their soft chatter and easy smiles a comforting backdrop. One by one, the children

drifted away, laughing as they ran toward familiar arms, each pair of eyes bright with excitement to share the day's adventures. Plicity smiled to herself, giving a small wave to her friends, mothers and fathers she'd grown up with, now sharing the same moments of parenthood together. They traded nods, some of them calling thanks as they left with their children. Here, in this small, tight-knit community, the bond between them all was unspoken yet woven deeply, as natural as breathing.

She felt Kyris approach, his warm hand brushing her shoulder. "You made quite an impression today," he said, nodding to the young girl who was still animatedly mimicking Plicity's careful gestures with the crystal.

Plicity chuckled, leaning into his touch. "I think it's the first time I've had such a young audience so captivated," she said, glancing up at him. Then, remembering the strange sensation from earlier, she frowned slightly. "I felt... something. A ripple, I think, during the lesson."

He turned to her, attentive though he couldn't fully understand. Kyris wasn't a Tapper—his world was rooted in the tangible, the solid, but he always listened, always respected what she could sense. "What kind of ripple?" he asked, his tone soft and steady.

She thought back, trying to place it. "I don't know. It was quick, like a thread of something thin, barely there." She shook her head, unsure of how to describe it. "It's gone now, but it was strange, like something was just... off."

He gave her a gentle smile, brushing a stray hair from her face. "Well, if it's gone, then maybe it's nothing to worry about," he said, though she could see in his eyes he was only trying to reassure her, not dismiss her concern. "Still, if it comes back, you'll know what to do. I trust you."

Before she could answer, their children ran up, laughing and tumbling over one another in a flurry of limbs and bright voices. "Mama, can we have stew tonight?" asked her eldest, his face lit with anticipation.

"No, we want pie!" chimed in his younger sister, her hands waving excitedly as if the idea itself was almost too delicious to bear.

Plicity laughed, reaching down to ruffle their hair. "Well, stew *and* pie, maybe," she said, feeling Kyris chuckling beside her. "But you'll have to help me make it."

The youngest clung to her leg, his small arms wrapping around her as he looked up with big, earnest eyes. "Can I stir?"

"Yes, you can stir," she said, sweeping him into her arms, feeling the solid weight of him against her, his small heartbeat against her own. It was in these moments, amid the giggles and jostling and little everyday requests, that she felt her joy most acutely. She was watching them grow, day by day, each one another moment to cherish, another piece of the life she had always dreamed of.

Kyris, looking at their children, gave her a soft, knowing smile. "They'll be grown before we know it, won't they?" he murmured, a trace of wonder in his voice.

Plicity nodded, feeling the quiet weight of that thought settle over her. "They will. But I can't wait to see it. To see who they become. To see all the moments we'll have together." She met his gaze, her heart swelling with a love so deep it felt like an endless reservoir within her. "And all of it with you by my side."

He reached for her hand, squeezing it gently before releasing her. "We're lucky, aren't we?" he said quietly, his voice filled with the same deep contentment she felt.

"Yes," she replied, her smile widening. "So very lucky."

Kyris glanced back to the trail, nodding toward home. "I'll take them ahead, start getting the stew pot ready. Why don't you finish up here?"

She nodded, watching as he gathered the children, their laughter drifting through the trees as they skipped along the path. She lingered for a moment, watching them disappear down the trail, before turning back to her task.

The small clearing was littered with leaves and little imprints where the children had sat, evidence of their presence. Plicity moved slowly through it, straightening things here and there, her hand resting briefly on the crystal in her pouch, allowing her to feel a faint echo of the crystal's power running through the lines of power she knew flowed beneath her feet and across all Telsan.

Without a second thought, she drew a crystal from the small pouch at her waist, letting its energy flow through her fingertips. She waved her hand over a stubborn stain on one of the smooth stones, murmuring a soft request as she felt the crystal respond, drawing on the faint threads of energy around it. The stain seemed to melt away, the crystal's energy replacing the old mark with the cool, polished sheen of new stone.

In the morning, she'd gathered a few crystals during her walk, sensing the day's potential in their smooth, weighty forms. She drew on them now, using their latent power for these small, practical tasks. A clump of weeds near the edge of the clearing dissolved, their presence replaced with a small patch of freshly sprouted grass, drawn from the surrounding area as easily as she might have moved a handful of dirt.

It was second nature, these little acts of care and adjustment, a quiet ripple through the unseen fabric of her world. These shifts, subtle as they were, were a Tapper's privilege—a means to keep her space in harmony with itself, a gift that felt as natural to her as breathing.

She was nearly finished, gathering the last few items, when a faint breeze stirred the leaves, carrying with it a warmth that felt out of place. Plicity stilled, something deep within her sensing an odd shift, a pull she couldn't place. She straightened, looking toward the path that led home, her thoughts filled with her children's laughter, with Kyris' smile.

And then, with a force she couldn't have anticipated, she felt a yank—a physical pull that took hold of her entire being. It hit her with such ferocity that she staggered back, the world around her spinning as if she'd been thrown from herself. The trees blurred, her vision tilting, her balance giving way to a sharp, relentless force that left her gasping, her heart racing as though some unseen hand had reached across reality to claim her.

The crystal in her hand flickered with light, and for a single, terrifying moment, she felt the familiar energy twist and fracture within her, as if it no longer belonged in her grasp.

Here's a draft for the last third of the prologue, showing alternate Plicity's attempt to use her full power to resist the pull. This showcases her strength and determination, foreshadowing the force she will later unleash, and leads into her descent into madness after realizing her loss.

Prologue (Final Third)

The force continued to pull at her, a relentless tug that seemed to come from the very fabric of her being. She staggered, pressing her hand against a tree to steady herself as a rush of panic began to rise within her.

“No,” she whispered, clutching the crystal tightly, feeling its energy pulse in response to her desperation. She shut her eyes, reaching deep within herself, pulling at every fragment of power she’d ever wielded, gathering it with an intensity that made her fingers tremble. Whatever this was—whatever had latched onto her—it wasn’t stronger than her. It *couldn’t* be.

With a surge of focus, she raised her hands, the crystal in her grasp glowing with fierce light. She tried to anchor herself, sending waves of energy into the ground beneath her feet, commanding the soil to hold her steady, to resist the pull. The soil around her began to harden, a circle of rock forming beneath her, almost like the roots of an ancient tree clutching deep into the ground.

The ground around her shuddered as she summoned more power, a rising intensity that turned the air heavy and charged. She reached deeper, her arms lifting as though to draw on every grain of soil, every pulse of Telsan beneath her, calling on her power to create an impenetrable barrier around herself.

“*Stop,*” she commanded through gritted teeth, the word barely audible over the hum of energy swelling around her. Her vision sharpened as she extended her will, feeling the land around her respond, the crystal in her hand blazing with light. She felt a growing strength, a tightening of every atom of her being, as if she could hold herself in place with sheer force.

And for a moment, the pull seemed to waver.

But then, like the force of a breaking wave, the pull intensified, ripping through her barrier as if it were no more than cobweb. The light around her flared and shattered, and the stones beneath her feet crumbled as though her own power was now turned against her.

“No!” Her scream was ragged, frantic, as she threw every ounce of strength into one final push, her hands raised in defiance. The forest around her shuddered, branches snapping, leaves swirling in a vortex of energy that whipped around her in wild abandon. Trees bent, their roots lifting from the ground as she sent shockwaves outward, her desperation carving a path of fractured land in every direction.

But it was no use.

The pull overtook her, consuming her power, her control, even her sense of reality. She felt herself slipping, her surroundings warping and shifting as though she were

being folded into another dimension, the world she knew disappearing into a fog of distorted shapes and colors.

Her fingers loosened, the crystal slipping from her grasp as darkness closed in around her.

When she opened her eyes, she lay sprawled on cold, unfamiliar ground. Her head throbbed, her limbs heavy as if weighed down by stone. She pushed herself up slowly, her senses disoriented, the world around her a muted blur.

It took a few moments for her vision to clear, and as it did, her heart sank. This wasn't her home. The trees were strange, their shapes wrong, their colors dull and lifeless compared to the vibrancy of her world. She blinked, reaching out to touch the ground, feeling its unfamiliar roughness beneath her fingers.

"Kyris?" she whispered, looking around, a small glimmer of hope rising. "Children?" Silence. Only the faint rustling of leaves in a cold, distant breeze.

Her heart began to race, a chill settling into her bones as the realization crept over her, slow and relentless. She was somewhere else—*nowhere* she recognized. There was no sign of her village, no familiar paths or landmarks. Just an eerie, empty quiet.

A tear traced its way down her cheek, her mind struggling to grasp the enormity of what she'd lost. Her family—her children—they were gone, left in a world she couldn't reach, a world they would never understand her absence from. She knew, in her heart, that they had no way of knowing what had happened to her. They would be left wondering, forever waiting, perhaps even believing she'd chosen to abandon them.

The weight of that thought crushed her, her body curling in on itself as a broken, hollow sob escaped her. She pressed her hand to her mouth, trying to contain the sound, but it broke free, one anguished cry after another.

And then, in the midst of her despair, she *felt* it—a faint pull, distant yet unmistakable, somewhere far away, drawing her with a quiet persistence. She sensed a presence there, a presence that had to be the source of her pain, the cause of her broken world. That pull held the answer. It was a direction, a purpose, a way to right what had been so cruelly taken from her.

"Kyris," she murmured, her voice thick with grief, clinging to the name like a lifeline. "Yes. I can make it right again. I must return the things lost to find my heart."

A twisted giggle escaped her, a sound she didn't recognize, her eyes bright and unseeing. She felt herself shift, her focus sharpening to a point, her mind narrowing to a singular purpose.

"*That*," she whispered, pointing a shaking finger in the direction of the pull, her gaze fierce, unyielding. "That will bring me back to them. Or... it will end *that*."

Grasping a crystal still imbued with power from her morning gathering, she willed the landscape to conform to her memory, recreating her outdoor classroom, piece by piece. Plants and shrubs that had surrounded her moments before twisted and unmade themselves, rearranging into something familiar, something lost.

In her fractured mind, she knew and didn't know that this wasn't the way back. But perhaps, she thought in the creeping madness that clouded her mind, recreating her world would return what she lost. Perhaps her husband, her children, all that she held dear, would reappear.

"Yes," she murmured, a wild light in her eyes as she cackled softly. "If I return it to the way it was, they'll come back. Or... or I'll end *that*. The one who caused this."

And with that, Plicity the teacher, the mother, the wife, took her first steps toward the source of her pain, unaware that her target was herself—her other self, the one who had unwittingly torn her from the life she had loved beyond measure.

Chapter 1

The early morning light filtered softly through the shutters, casting delicate lines across the floor of Plicity's small room. She moved quietly, as if afraid to disturb the stillness, her fingers lingering on the practical clothing she had chosen for the day. It had been months now since she'd last worn anything other than the pale white of mourning, months since the days had bled together in muted shades of gray and loss. Today, though, she had chosen differently. Today, she had reached for color, for texture, for something that hinted at a life still waiting to be lived.

Her hands smoothed over the thick corduroy of the trousers, dark and durable, suited for the rough paths she and Dubious would likely take. She pulled them on, the material snug and familiar, like the feeling of coming back to herself. Next, she slipped on a long, deep blue shirt-dress, the fabric soft against her skin, with bands of delicate floral patterns draping down the front on either side. She wrapped her hair in a yellow silk scarf, knotting it firmly at the back of her neck. Loose curls of auburn framed her face, softening the angles that had grown sharper in recent months.

Settling onto the small stool before the mirror, she gazed at her reflection. The freckles scattered across her nose and cheeks stood out in the morning light, a reminder of long summer days beneath a warm sun. Her lips, naturally red, needed no color, but their softness had become unfamiliar to her. She studied the red of her eyebrows, the slight curls that peeked out from under her scarf, wondering if, after all the loss, this was still her—the same Plicity who had once known happiness, once known a future that stretched out in bright, promising hues.

Her thoughts drifted back to those days, to the soft, shared mornings with her husband by her side. She remembered his laugh, warm and unrestrained, the way his hand would brush against hers as they walked, his voice whispering plans for a life they'd build together. She felt his presence still, lingering in her memory like an aftertaste, familiar and bittersweet.

She blinked, and for a fleeting moment, she thought she saw him in the reflection—a shape just behind her shoulder, faint, but so familiar. Her heart caught, the breath in her chest tightening as she turned quickly to look. But there was nothing. Only the plain walls and the quiet light.

She laughed at herself, though the sound came out shaky, almost fragile. A trick of the mind, she thought, a product of too many lonely mornings and lingering

memories. She shook her head, pushing the feeling aside, reaching instead for her practical walking boots and pulling them on with steady hands. This was the life she had now, and there was no use pretending otherwise.

When she'd finished, she stood and moved to the cedar hope chest in the corner, her mourning clothes folded neatly in her arms. The chest was old, its surface polished to a rich, warm sheen, carrying the faint scent of cedar even after all these years. It had belonged to her grandmother before her, and her grandmother's mother before that—a piece of home passed down through generations, a part of her past that had come with her to this new village when she'd married.

She lifted the lid gently, the hinges creaking softly, and placed her folded mourning clothes inside, arranging them with care. There, she thought, as she pressed down the last piece, smoothing it flat. She let her fingers rest on the fabric, her heart heavy with the weight of both past and present. She wished, in that moment, that she could somehow be someone else, or that she could change the way things had happened—undo the twists of fate that had led her here, to a life marked by loss.

But that wasn't her reality. All she had now were memories and the strength to keep moving forward, even if some days that strength felt thin, stretched like thread over a vast chasm. She closed the lid with a finality that echoed in the small room, breathing deeply as she straightened.

"Plicity! Are you ready?" came Dubious's familiar voice from outside, her tone carrying a note of cheerfulness that felt like a balm on Plicity's quiet reflections.

Plicity allowed herself a small smile as she turned toward the door, leaving the shadow of her past in the silence behind her. With one last glance at the room, she squared her shoulders, the practical weight of her boots grounding her, and walked out to meet her friend.

Plicity found Dubious waiting for her at the kitchen table, a well-worn basket already half-filled with bread, dried meats, and a wedge of cheese wrapped in cloth. Dubious looked up as Plicity entered, her brow arching as she took in her friend's choice of clothing.

"Well, I'll be," Dubious said, a small, approving smile touching her lips. "Didn't think I'd see the day you'd part with that ghostly white of yours."

Plicity's hand drifted to the hem of her blue shirt-dress, smoothing the fabric almost self-consciously. "It was time," she replied softly, though even she felt the weight of her words. "Figured I ought to look forward, not back."

Dubious gave a thoughtful nod, her eyes warm with understanding. "I remember that day myself," she said, folding a cloth over the bread. "Not the same for me, though. I was a little less... graceful about it." She chuckled, though the sound held a note of sadness, like a song sung just out of tune. "I remember flinging the blasted gown across the room and letting it fall where it may. Left it there, a white heap in the corner, as if leaving it behind meant I could leave the whole mess behind too."

Plicity looked down, a faint smile tugging at her lips. "I can see you doing that."

Dubious shrugged, her mouth twisting wryly. "You were there, in a way. Had just married yourself not long before. Seemed every other soul in the village had their mind on a wedding while I was at home wondering what comes after the funeral."

A brief silence fell between them, each lost in their own memories. Plicity felt the familiar pang of loss, but in that moment, there was something shared in the quiet—an understanding that needed no words.

"It's funny, isn't it?" Dubious broke the silence, her tone softer, as if she were treading lightly over fragile ground. "How you can fold up a dress and put it away, thinking it's over. But the ache—it just lingers, like a stone at the bottom of a pond, always there even when you don't see it."

Plicity nodded, her voice just a murmur. "I think it's less about the clothes and more about choosing not to be haunted by them." She closed her eyes briefly, feeling the weight of the past settle into something more bearable. "Sometimes I still feel him here," she admitted, her gaze drifting toward the window. "Just... shadows. I'm learning to live with them, rather than against them."

Dubious's hand reached out, giving Plicity's a quick, firm squeeze. "Well," she said, her voice brightening, "let's leave the ghosts to mind themselves today, shall we? I've packed enough for an army and thought we might take a walk up to those foothills." She tilted her head toward the basket. "Haven't ventured that way yet, and I'm not about to go without the best company this village has to offer."

Plicity's mouth twitched into a smile as she took the last of the food and slipped it into the basket. "Sounds like you planned this out."

“Didn’t plan on you looking so spry,” Dubious replied with a grin. “But I figured you’d say yes. You could use a good stretch, maybe some sunlight. Heaven knows you’ve been shut up like a moth in a drawer for far too long.”

“Not that long,” Plicity protested with a faint smile.

Dubious snorted. “Long enough for the village children to wonder if there’s some sort of specter haunting my house. Heard young Therren mention it last week. Said he swore he saw ‘a pale figure’ through the window at dusk. Nearly sent him running for the hills.”

Plicity couldn’t help but laugh, a sound that felt unexpectedly easy. “Perhaps I’ll wear white just once more and give him a good fright.”

“Ah, there’s the spirit,” Dubious said, her own laugh joining Plicity’s as she tightened the lid on the basket and hoisted it up. “If the ghosts don’t want to leave, they can come along and learn a thing or two about enjoying life again.”

With a final look around, Plicity straightened, feeling lighter somehow, as if putting away the mourning clothes had lifted a veil that had dulled everything she touched. She watched Dubious with a sense of gratitude for the friend who’d stood by her, who understood even without asking too much. Together, they’d borne the weight of things they couldn’t change—and in the company of each other, perhaps they’d both found something close to healing.

Dubious glanced at the door. “Ready to get going? Daylight’s wasting, and these foothills won’t explore themselves.”

“Ready,” Plicity replied, her voice firmer than it had been in a long time. She stepped forward, reaching to open the door, her heart quietly racing with a renewed sense of purpose.

The morning had warmed into a clear, crisp day as Plicity and Dubious followed the well-worn path through the fields, the faint scent of wildflowers hanging in the air. The ground beneath their feet was firm, familiar, and it carried a quiet sense of reassurance that had come to define their walks over the past few weeks. Together, they had traced these trails so many times that each bend and curve felt as known to them as the back of their own hands.

But today, Dubious’s gaze lingered on the small woods just off to their right, where a faint trail veered off, hidden between a patch of brambles and slender, leaning trees.

“There,” Dubious said, nodding toward it, her eyes bright with interest. “I spotted that deer path last week. Heads off toward the foothills, if I remember right.”

Plicity followed her friend’s gaze, squinting at the subtle line through the underbrush. She could see the faintest hint of a trail weaving into the trees, half-shadowed by the canopy above. “I thought you wanted to stick to the easier paths,” she teased lightly, but there was a glint of curiosity in her own eyes.

Dubious shrugged, an easy grin spreading across her face. “Well, no harm in a bit of adventure. Besides,” she added, pointing toward the distant edge of the foothills, “if I’m right, this path’ll lead us close to that cliffside—you know, the one you can see from the upstairs window.”

Plicity nodded slowly, remembering. They’d talked about exploring the cliffside before, but for some reason or another, they had never ventured that way, their mornings filling up with other paths, other distractions. Today, though, it felt right, like the kind of day where anything was possible, where new paths beckoned with quiet promise.

As they moved into the woods, the air grew cooler, shadows gathering around them in soft pools, their steps quieter on the padded soil. The trees seemed older here, their branches stretched overhead like watchful arms, and the occasional call of a bird echoed through the underbrush, a faint reminder of the life that teemed beyond their view.

“So,” Dubious said after a while, breaking the comfortable silence, “you think you’ll keep those blue dresses in the chest for good now, or will we see you haunting about in white again someday?”

Plicity chuckled, shaking her head. “I think my haunting days are done,” she replied, her tone light. “Feels strange, though. Like I’m leaving part of myself behind.”

Dubious glanced over, her expression softer now, her gaze understanding. “Strange, maybe. But not all bad, I hope?”

“No,” Plicity said, her voice just a murmur, thoughtful. “Not all bad.”

They walked on, their conversation drifting toward small things—the birds that had nested in the tree outside Dubious’s bedroom window, the early blooms they’d seen on their last walk, the way the sky took on a lavender hue at dusk. For a while, it felt

as if the world was simple, the path before them clear and steady, each step just another beat in the easy rhythm they'd shared since coming to live together.

As they reached a small clearing, Dubious paused, scanning the area with a pleased look. "This spot'll do for a picnic," she said, setting the basket down. "Good view of the hills, plenty of sun."

Plicity nodded, glancing around. She felt a faint pull, a subtle tug from deeper within the woods, like a quiet suggestion pulling at the edge of her awareness. She couldn't quite explain it, but something about that direction felt... charged.

"Go on then," Dubious said, noting her distracted gaze with a raised eyebrow. "Looks like something's got your attention."

"Just curious, I suppose," Plicity replied, giving her friend a small smile. "I'll be right back."

She stepped away from the clearing, her boots sinking softly into the soft soil as she followed the strange tugging sensation. It was faint, like a whisper on the wind, yet it held an undeniable allure. She made her way through a narrow patch of trees, weaving around low-hanging branches until she reached a slight rise where the ground sloped gently toward the edge of the cliffside.

And then, just as she took another step, the land beneath her shuddered.

It was a subtle tremor at first, a faint quiver that ran up her legs, so unexpected that she froze, feeling the stillness give way beneath her. Then, with a deafening crack, the ground split, a jagged line tearing through the rock just feet from where she stood. She staggered, her arms reaching out to steady herself, but the ground danced and lurched as if caught in a violent, unnatural rhythm.

"Plicity!" Dubious's voice called from behind, faint and filled with alarm, but Plicity barely heard it. Her senses were flooded with something else—a bright, pulsing sensation, a feeling of raw energy seeping into the air around her.

And then she saw it: a massive crystalline formation, exposed as part of the cliff face crumbled and fell away. The crystals shimmered with an intensity that took her breath, their edges jagged and bright, as if they held the very light of the sun within their depths. She felt the energy surge from them, thick and radiant, reaching out, searching.

The power hit her like a wave, slamming into her chest, her body freezing under its force. She tried to back away, to turn, but her limbs wouldn't obey. She felt herself sinking to her knees, her vision filling with a dazzling light as the world around her dissolved.

And in the blaze of light, she saw *her*—a figure just like herself, yet not, a woman with auburn hair and laughing eyes, her face lit with joy as she stood in a world Plicity didn't recognize. She saw children running to her, arms outstretched, a man by her side with a warmth in his gaze, a life rich and full.

Then, in an instant, the image shattered, the woman's joy giving way to horror as she was ripped from her world, torn across a void that Plicity could barely comprehend. She felt it—the tearing, the anguish, the raw rage that followed. And she knew, with a dawning horror, that *she* had done this. She didn't know how, didn't know why, but she knew in her bones that this other life had been destroyed because of her.

A jolt of searing energy snapped her back to reality, the crystals blazing with a power that surged through her veins, hot and electric. She could feel it pooling within her, heavy and volatile, filling her with a strength that was as intoxicating as it was terrifying.

And then, just on the edge of her awareness, she sensed it—an emotion, deep and festering, a hatred so profound it chilled her blood. It was coming for her, a presence somewhere distant yet unmistakable, drawn by the same force that now surged through her own body.

“Plicity!” Dubious's voice broke through the haze, her hand reaching out, warm and solid, grounding her in the here and now.

Plicity blinked, the daze lifting, her head throbbing as the visions faded. She felt herself pulled back to her senses, but the feeling of power still simmered beneath her skin, like a fire barely contained. Slowly, she rose, meeting Dubious's concerned gaze with a look of her own, one filled with fear and something darker—a deep, unshakable sense that whatever had been unleashed, there would be no going back.

Chapter 2

A gentle breeze whispered through the branches above, casting dappled shadows over the soft forest floor. Plicity stood in her familiar outdoor classroom, sunlight filtering through the trees, painting her children's faces with warmth and light as they looked up at her with eager, trusting eyes.

"Now remember," she said, her voice carrying a calm assurance. "You must *ask* the crystal for its energy. No pulling, no force. It is a friend, and you are to treat it with respect."

The children nodded, their small hands hovering over the crystals embedded in the soil. Her heart swelled with pride as she watched them, feeling the hum of power in the air, the bond that linked them all to the land beneath their feet. This—this was her world, her place, her joy.

Then, a sound like cracking glass echoed through the clearing, sudden and jarring. She froze, every muscle taut as she searched the faces before her. Her children were still there, their expressions serene, but their eyes had gone dark, vacant, as though they were looking through her instead of at her.

A low murmur rippled through the clearing, growing louder, closer. Her children's faces twisted, their features blurring, stretching into shapes she couldn't recognize. One by one, they vanished, dissolving into thin air as if they'd never been there at all.

"No!" she cried, reaching out, but her hands grasped only empty space, her voice swallowed by the growing silence. Her feet felt rooted to the ground, her limbs heavy and unresponsive. She tried to turn, to look for her husband, her anchor, her constant—but he, too, was gone, replaced by a shadow that loomed where he'd stood moments before.

And then the shadow spoke, its voice a twisted, distorted echo of her own.

"You brought this upon yourself," it hissed, its tone filled with accusation, the words scraping against her mind like nails on stone. "You tore yourself from them."

Plicity stumbled back, clutching her hands to her ears as the voice grew louder, an unending, merciless chorus that tore through her with a fury she couldn't escape.

"You are broken," it whispered, each word biting deeper than the last. "There is something *missing*. Something *wrong*."

She tried to scream, to deny it, but no sound escaped her. All she could hear was the echo of her own voice, as if the truth of the words had lodged itself inside her, a thorn she could not pull free. Her mind spun, fragmented images flashing across her vision—her children

laughing, her husband's warm smile, the trees of her world stretching endlessly upward, safe and familiar.

But those memories, so precious to her, began to blur, slipping away like water through her fingers. It felt as if her very thoughts were disintegrating, as if something vital had been torn from the depths of her mind, leaving behind a hollow, aching emptiness.

She fought to hold onto something—*anything*—but the void grew wider, a dark chasm pulling her down, deeper and deeper.

In the next instant, the dream shifted, and she was running through an endless field, alone. Her legs moved beneath her with a frantic energy, her breaths ragged and shallow, but no matter how far she ran, the emptiness only expanded around her. Shadows lurked at the edge of her vision, shapes that shifted and twisted, faces she thought she knew, though they slipped away each time she tried to grasp them.

“Where are you?” she called out, her voice weak, hollow. “Where did you go?”

But the darkness gave no answer.

In her dream, she suddenly found herself in a strange, distorted version of her home. The walls curved, bending at unnatural angles, the floor shifting beneath her feet like sand. Her children's laughter echoed from the corners, distant and mocking, filling her with a hollow sense of dread.

She moved toward the sound, her heart pounding, but as she rounded the corner, the walls stretched impossibly high, closing in around her like a trap. She looked down and found her hands covered in dirt, her fingers twisted, unfamiliar. When she touched her face, it felt wrong—foreign—as if she were touching a mask that didn't belong to her.

And then she heard the voice again, taunting and dark.

“You are not *whole*.”

The words echoed through the twisted room, sinking into her bones with a truth she couldn't deny. Something was missing, some vital piece of herself she couldn't name, but felt keenly in every corner of her mind. Her thoughts scattered, fractured, as if they were shards of glass swept up in a storm.

She tried to remember who she was—tried to pull the pieces back together—but they slipped through her grasp, leaving her adrift in a sea of half-formed memories and lost faces.

“No,” she whispered, her voice shaking. “This isn’t right.”

The shadows pressed in, crowding her, choking her. She clawed at her throat, gasping for breath, feeling as if something were suffocating her, pressing down with an unrelenting weight. Her chest tightened, her heart pounding erratically, and she felt the world closing in, every edge sharp, every surface hostile.

With a sharp gasp, she jolted awake, her hands clutching at her throat, her breaths coming in ragged, desperate gulps. Her heart raced, a wild, erratic beat that left her dizzy, disoriented, as if she’d been dragged from one world into another. Her skin was damp with sweat, her limbs trembling with an unfamiliar weakness that made her feel as if she were still half-trapped in that twisted dream.

The forest loomed around her, shadows creeping over the edges of her vision, and she struggled to steady herself, to remember where she was, who she was. But even as she took in her surroundings, the sense of wrongness clung to her, an unshakable weight that sat heavy in her mind.

She couldn’t place it, couldn’t describe it, but she knew with a certainty that something within her was broken, a crack that ran deeper than flesh, deeper than bone. Her thoughts felt... fractured, like they belonged to someone else, scattered and sharp, shifting whenever she tried to hold onto them.

She pressed her hands to her temples, as if she could somehow force the pieces back together, make them whole again. But the harder she tried, the more they slipped away, leaving her feeling hollow, incomplete.

The memories of her life—her children’s faces, her husband’s voice, the sunlight through the trees—were fading now, as if they, too, were part of the dream, slipping away from her grasp, leaving her alone with the echo of the shadows and the cold, empty weight within her.

She wanted to scream, to claw at the ground, to tear at whatever invisible force had shattered her mind and left her with this aching emptiness. But no sound escaped her, only a low, hollow gasp that hung in the air, unanswered.

Curling into herself, she let the silence wash over her, the remnants of her dreams lingering in the edges of her vision, taunting her with the memory of who she used to be—who she could never be again.

When the trembling subsided, and her breaths finally slowed, Plicity's senses began to trickle back to her, each one carrying a faint, hollow ache. She lay on the forest floor, surrounded by shadows that felt thicker, darker than they should be. She wrapped her arms around herself, the cold emptiness within her pressing down like a weight she couldn't lift.

The silence was oppressive, almost stifling. Her eyes scanned the unfamiliar terrain, an expanse of tangled underbrush and twisted trees, none of it comforting, none of it familiar. She was alone. Utterly, irrevocably alone.

The realization settled into her, a quiet but relentless echo. She was not only separated from her family, her children, her life—she was cut off from everything she'd ever known. There was no friendly voice, no hand to hold, no warmth. Nothing but the memory of a world she could no longer touch.

With a trembling sigh, she pushed herself up, sitting back on her heels. She was weak, disoriented, every part of her feeling as if it had been turned inside out, but one sensation pushed through the rest: thirst, sharp and raw, pressing against her dry throat.

Her eyes drifted around the clearing, seeking any trace of water. But there was none, only the tangled underbrush, the dry, cracked land, and the unsettling silence. A faint, instinctual pulse stirred within her, and without fully understanding, she reached out with her mind, tapping into the crystal energy she still felt, an undercurrent pulsing within her. She focused, the need for water sharpening her thoughts into a point of intent, and with a sudden surge, she felt the ground shift beneath her.

A trickle of clear water bubbled up from a crack in a large rock in the ground, quickly swelling into a spring, the liquid pooling at her feet, cool and crystalline. She stared at it, heart pounding, both relieved and deeply disturbed.

"This... this shouldn't be possible," she murmured to herself, a tremor in her voice. Tappers were never meant to do this—change the natural order, bend reality to their will. In her world, it would have been impossible, forbidden on a level far beyond law. Power was to flow from the crystals, controlled and measured, always in harmony with Telsan's rhythms.

But here, in this strange, unfamiliar realm, she'd managed it with nothing more than a thought, a single focused need.

"There's something different about the crystals here," she muttered, her words drifting into the emptiness around her. "Something... potent."

Her mind struggled to understand, fragments of her past teachings surfacing, each one clashing with what she had just done. The act felt like a breach, a tearing of some fundamental rule she couldn't name but knew instinctively was there. And yet, it had felt

natural—as if her power had expanded, slipping easily into some hidden potential she'd never known she possessed.

She knelt by the spring, dipping her hands into the cool water, letting the clarity of it calm her thoughts. She drank deeply, the liquid soothing the dryness in her throat, bringing a clarity that felt foreign yet oddly invigorating. As she caught sight of her reflection in the water, she barely recognized herself. Her hair hung limp, tangled, streaked with dirt, and her clothes, once soft and colorful, were now grimy, tattered reminders of what she'd lost.

She reached up, smoothing her hair with a grimace. "I must look like a ghost," she muttered.

The idea of summoning more sprang to her mind—a soft voice that whispered, reminding her of the spring she'd just created. If she could do that, perhaps she could do more. She focused again, letting her mind search through the thin, gossamer threads of nearby realities, feeling each one, the energy sharp and responsive under her touch.

It was a strange, alien sensation, but some part of her knew it should be impossible. Back in her world, she would never have dreamed of pulling from the realms beyond, reaching into them as easily as one would reach into a stream to scoop up water. But here, that boundary seemed to fade, her power able to pierce through the veil between worlds as though it were no more than mist.

She closed her eyes, feeling the steady thrum of possibilities at her fingertips. She focused on what she needed: a fresh, clean garment, something simple, practical, yet fitting for who she was—who she still felt herself to be, despite the cracks she could feel within.

With a sudden surge, she felt the pull, and a garment materialized in her hands, soft and clean, smelling faintly of some unknown fragrance. She looked at it, her fingers running over the fabric, marveling at the smoothness, the vivid colors—colors that seemed more real, more alive, than anything she remembered.

Nearby, the spring had pooled into a small, clear gully, the water catching the light in a way that felt almost inviting. Driven by an instinct for normalcy, for some semblance of who she'd once been, she removed her tattered clothes, stepping into the cool water with a shiver. She let herself sink down, the water washing over her, rinsing away the dirt and grime, each drop carrying away a fragment of her exhaustion.

She reached out again, her thoughts shaping her intentions, and a bar of soap appeared beside her, as if in answer. She held it in her hands, surprised at how easily it had come, how natural it felt to bring these things into her reality, to draw them from somewhere she couldn't see.

As she lathered her hair, scrubbing away the layers of dirt, she felt a strange kind of power running through her, a strength she couldn't explain. It was as if every strand of her being was connected to something vast, endless, a well of energy that waited for her command. She took her time, savoring the feel of the water, the scent of the soap, the faint sense of control that steadied her unsteady mind.

When she'd finished, she stepped from the spring, wrapping herself in the clean garment she'd summoned. She ran her fingers through her now-clean hair, the soft auburn strands catching the sunlight that filtered through the trees, glistening with hints of gold. She felt renewed, strong, a flicker of the person she had once been, even as the fractures within her mind pulsed with a faint, ever-present ache. On a whim she used her newfound power to summon a green silk kerchief and wrapped her hair in it, her slightly curled tresses popping out here and there, she could tell, but it was somehow comforting.

She stood there, head high, her posture straight, her face lifted to the sun, letting its warmth soak into her skin. The world around her was silent, as if holding its breath, waiting.

Even as she soaked in the warm sunlight, feeling the comforting weight of her newly summoned clothes, the pull nagged at her again—a constant, gnawing sensation that tugged at the edges of her mind, as if some invisible force were trying to draw her forward, away from this clearing, away from everything she knew.

She took a steadying breath, trying to ignore it, even as the whisper of that tug became sharper, more insistent. It was relentless, a feeling that threatened to overtake her, to drag her toward a destination she didn't understand, a presence that gnawed at her with a bitter familiarity. But she pushed it back, determined to hold onto this moment of calm, however fleeting.

It was then that she noticed the stranger.

The man lingered at the edge of the clearing, his clothes dusted with the dirt from his travels, his face a mixture of astonishment and unease as he stared at her. She watched as his gaze flicked from her to the bubbling spring, his eyes widening as he took in the gully that held the fresh, cool water where there had been none before.

"Pardon me," he said, his voice cautious, as though unsure of what he was witnessing. "I... didn't mean to intrude."

Plicity tilted her head, studying him with a curiosity that teetered between fascination and distrust. His face held something familiar, a shadow of the kindness she had once known. For a fleeting moment, she thought of Kyris, of the way he'd looked at her with gentle admiration, the way his presence had made her feel safe, grounded. This man was no

Kyris—she knew that with a certainty—but something about him, some faint echo, made her feel like she could trust him, that he could be a new companion in this strange, twisted world.

A smile crept over her face, wide and oddly intense. “You look... familiar,” she murmured, more to herself than to him.

The man took a cautious step back, but his mind was already calculating, taking stock of the situation with a practiced eye. Here he was, out on an isolated path, only to stumble upon a woman with unnatural abilities—and, it seemed, a mind teetering on the edge of reason. His instincts warned him of the danger, but a small smile crept into his thoughts. Danger had always been a close friend, hadn’t it?

He gave her an easy nod, his movements carefully relaxed. “This spring,” he said, letting a hint of awe touch his voice. “It wasn’t here before. I’ve traveled this path many times, and I’m certain there was never any water here.”

Her smile grew, a flicker of pride lighting her face. “I brought it here,” she said, as though it were the most natural thing in the world. “This place is... different. It responds to my touch in ways I never could have imagined.”

His mind raced, cataloging every word she spoke. If she was telling the truth—and if that display was any indication—she possessed a power beyond anything he’d encountered, power that could be useful in his line of work. More than that, the way she spoke revealed a fractured mind, a lack of understanding of her own strength that might just give him a subtle edge.

He let his face show surprise, even shock. “You made a spring appear? Just like that?”

“Yes,” she replied, her voice carrying a hint of defiance. “Where I come from, we follow rules—boundaries that limit what we can do. But here...” She glanced down at her hands, as if marveling at them for the first time. “Here, the power flows freely. I can reach through realities, pull things from places you wouldn’t understand.”

Feigning just the right mixture of hesitation and awe, he widened his eyes. “Another... reality?” he echoed, trying to keep the curiosity from tipping into disbelief. “That’s... well, it’s not easy to believe, is all.”

Plicity’s eyes narrowed, her smile fading. “It doesn’t matter if you believe it,” she said, her voice cold. “It’s the truth.”

For a brief moment, he felt the thrill of risk, of walking a razor’s edge. She was unbalanced, yes, but if he played his cards right, he could use that to his advantage. He could keep her

close, gain her trust, maybe even guide her power to his benefit. And besides, he wasn't exactly in a rush to be anywhere else. Between jobs, as it were.

He chuckled, a smooth, measured sound. "I don't mean to insult you," he said, letting his voice drop to a placating tone. "You're obviously... gifted. I've just never met anyone who could do... *this*."

Plicity's gaze didn't waver, and he could feel the weight of her scrutiny, a chill spreading through him as he realized just how precarious his situation had become. She was watching him with an intensity that felt unnatural, as though she could see past his words, into the calm calculation simmering behind his carefully crafted mask.

"You doubt me," she said, her tone quiet but laced with a dangerous edge. "Perhaps you need to see what I can do. A demonstration, so you understand what you're dealing with."

Before he could respond, she turned her gaze to the edge of the clearing, where a small creature—a rabbit—had wandered, sniffing curiously at the foliage. Without a word, Plicity extended her hand, her fingers curling as she focused, the air around her thickening with an unseen force.

The rabbit froze in fright as just beside it some thick leaved plants materialized, replacing the grass the creature had been nibbling on when Plicity spotted it. Small, hunched over and vine-like, the plants were clustered, mottled with unnatural shades of deep purple and green, the edges serrated and hungry-looking. Their wiry stems swayed lightly as if responding to the slightest movement around them, and at their base, tendrils lay coiled, faintly pulsing with a life that seemed to hum with its own alien rhythm.

Without warning, one of the tendrils shot forward, wrapping around the creature's slender neck with a sudden, deadly grip. Other tendrils followed, coiling around its small body, squeezing until the rabbit lay still, its bright eyes dulled, the life drained from it.

The plants remained still for a moment, as if savoring the kill, before drawing the lifeless creature into their thick undergrowth undoubtedly to be consumed by the vicious flora over time.

The man kept his face carefully controlled, only allowing a slight widening of his eyes to betray his reaction. Inside, however, he felt a chill race down his spine, even as a voice within him whispered that he could turn this to his advantage. This woman was dangerous, certainly, but she was also vulnerable, untethered by sanity. If he could keep her from turning that lethal focus on him, if he could guide her...

"Well," he said, his voice a measured calm, his face carefully composed. "It seems I misjudged you. I didn't mean to question your power."

Plicity tilted her head, a pleased smile returning to her lips. “Then you’ll join me?”

A flash of calculation passed through his thoughts. Keeping her close, playing along—yes, that was the way to approach this. Let her think he was in awe, that he was following her lead. In time, he might be able to influence her, manipulate her power for his own ends. If he could learn to guide her madness, direct her toward whatever goals he might set, the possibilities were endless.

He gave a deferential nod, letting his voice take on a respectful tone. “I’d be honored to accompany you. Your... abilities are beyond anything I’ve seen. If I can be of any help, I’d consider it my duty.”

Plicity’s eyes brightened, her expression softening with a relief he could only interpret as gratitude. “Good,” she said, her voice carrying a note of quiet satisfaction. “You’ll do well by my side.”

She turned, gesturing for him to follow as she began walking toward the path ahead, her posture poised, regal, the image of a woman in complete control.

As he fell into step behind her, he allowed himself a brief, satisfied smile. This alliance, if he managed it properly, might be more valuable than any contract he’d ever taken. He cast a final, lingering glance at the lifeless rabbit on the ground, a grim reminder of her instability, and his own resolve to navigate her fractured world.

For now, he would keep his intentions hidden, carefully weaving his plans in the shadows of her mind. There was risk, yes, but also potential. And he’d always been willing to take risks for the right reward.

“My name is Thavesen, by the way”, said the man.

“I don’t care”, the mad woman responded as she continued walking along, but then she pause and cocked her head for a moment as if listening to someone speaking quietly to her. “Well met, Thavesen” she said before adding “don’t touch me.” as he stepped forward and proffered his outstretched hand.

Shrugging, Thavesen dropped his hand and pulled from the pack on his back a wooden whistle and started playing a tune. “The wild one”, which our mad Plicity would not have known and therefore had no irony for her, if she’d even paid attention to the high pitched, but pleasant tune.

Together, they continued down the path, the sun casting long shadows that stretched across the ground, as though even the light itself was hesitant to touch her.

Interlude 1: First Consequences

Back in the clearing, the plants remained still for some time after the pair had departed. But moments later, faint popping sounds punctuated the silence, as several of the larger plants released seed pods, sending a spray of fine, sticky seeds across the clearing. Each one settled into the soil, seemingly innocent, but with the promise of something darker hidden within.

Nearby, a faint trickle of water began to flow, creeping across the forest floor as it filled the newly formed gully. A thin, clear line of water slipped over the lip of the gully and down the incline, gathering speed as it traced the uneven dips and hollows of the forest floor. Small rivulets formed, winding through roots and stones, and as they joined, they grew louder, their combined flow a quiet murmur that echoed through the stillness of the woods.

Animals gathered near the gully's edge, cautious yet curious, drawn to the cool, unexpected bounty. A fox lifted its nose to the air, the scent of fresh water mingling with the Telsany musk of leaves and soil. Rabbits, quivering with alertness, dipped their noses to drink, their eyes darting nervously as they sensed the change in their familiar world. The birds flitted between branches, their song briefly stilled as they watched the small stream carve its way through the underbrush, inching deeper with each passing moment.

It was only the beginning.

As the spring continued to bubble from the ground, its flow grew more insistent, pressing outward as though it sensed no limit to its release. The gully began to fill, each new drop forcing the water higher until it overflowed, pouring over the land in thin sheets that spread outward like eager fingers. The trickle became a steady rush, spilling across rocks and roots, carving a path through the land that had once been dry and undisturbed.

Hours passed, and the water pressed forward, cutting through the dense foliage, pooling in low places, then surging onward, relentless. It followed the path of least resistance, a winding, uncertain journey that carried it farther from the forest's heart, reaching toward the wider world. By the time night fell, a narrow stream had formed, meandering through the quiet woods, threading through the thick growth like a new vein.

As the days passed, the effects of the stream spread like ripples on a pond.

A family of deer, accustomed to the seasonal rhythms of drought and rain, lingered at the new water's edge, drinking more than they had in days. The soil here was softer, moister, the plants lusher, enticing them to linger. Each hoof step pressed into the mud, leaving faint trails that would guide others to this unexpected gift, drawing more creatures to its banks.

Further downstream, the growing water began to erode the fragile soil, loosening stones and carrying them along, each fragment of soil swept up in the current. Small shrubs, their roots weakened by the ceaseless flow, leaned precariously until, with a final tremor, they toppled into the stream, swept away by the surge.

Unaware of the origins of this new river, villagers from a nearby hamlet noticed the shifts, subtle at first. Crops planted along the banks of a once-dry trench were suddenly soaked, their roots weakened, the familiar cycle of rain and dry interrupted. Fields that had been reliable for years now bore signs of rot and decay, leaves yellowing as their roots drowned in the unexpected flood.

The village elders murmured among themselves, noting the curious change, the shift in a balance that had once been predictable, steady. They debated the cause, wondering if it was the result of some heavy storm on the distant plains they did not see or hear. But the rains had been mild that season, the sky clear and blue.

Further down, in a quiet clearing, a group of hunters discovered that their trails had been altered, paths they'd known since childhood now cut through by water, rerouting the way to game-rich grounds. The animals had moved, sensing the disruption, their patterns shifted, leaving old trails empty and quiet.

And yet the spring continued to flow, heedless of the lives it touched. What had begun as a trickle was now a young river, winding its way from the gully to the forest and beyond, forging a new path through the land. In the weeks to come, it would keep growing, its presence weaving through the fragile tapestry of the forest, the fields, and the villages beyond.

And somewhere, far away, a woman walked with her new companion, oblivious to the trail of changes she'd left in her wake, a new stream born from her broken will, carving its own mark on the world with every drop. Carnivorous plants never meant to be in this world, already proliferating within minutes of being drawn into this now changed world.

Chapter 3

Dark shapes swirled in her mind, murky and undefined, pressing down on her with an ominous weight. She felt herself slipping, drifting through a haze of shadows that seemed to whisper, though she couldn't catch the words. There was a sense of something—someone—waiting, watching her from a distance, a presence thick with malice. She tried to pull herself away, to escape the shadows, but they clung to her, filling her with a growing sense of dread.

Plicity's eyes opened with a start, her heart racing as she blinked against the warm sunlight filtering into the room. For a brief moment, she lay still, feeling the unfamiliar bed beneath her, the softness of the linen sheets a stark contrast to the rough blankets of her own home. Her gaze drifted over the room—bare wooden walls, a sturdy table with neatly arranged jars and bottles, the faint smell of herbs lingering in the air.

Where...?

She tried to sit up, but a wave of weakness held her down, her limbs feeling unusually heavy. As she lay there, taking in her surroundings, she became aware of something strange within herself—a feeling, pulsing softly, like a quiet hum resonating through her veins. It wasn't unpleasant; in fact, it felt oddly comforting, an energy that filled her with a quiet, steady strength. Yet, it was also unfamiliar, and as she focused on it, she felt an underlying thrill, an edge of excitement that quickened her pulse.

It was almost like the feeling she'd had after a strong drink of tea, the kind that left her feeling light and sharp, every sense heightened. But this was different—more enduring, like a current of life itself, running through her in a constant, unending flow.

Her thoughts wandered back to the crystals, to the moment the hill had split and the blinding light had surged into her. She remembered the power, the force of it crashing through her senses, and now, lying here in this strange room, she felt that power within her still, alive and pulsing.

Then, a darker sensation crept in, brushing against the edges of her awareness. It was subtle, a faint pressure at first, but it grew, spreading like a shadow across her mind. She couldn't explain it, couldn't understand why, but she knew—*knew*—it was coming from a particular direction, like a dark stain somewhere in the distance, emanating a malice so intense it sent a shiver down her spine.

She closed her eyes, willing the feeling to subside, but it clung to her, insistent and oppressive, as if some force beyond her understanding was reaching out to her, calling her.

She swallowed, trying to shake off the sense of dread, her heart pounding as she lay there, her mind racing with questions she couldn't answer.

What had that crystal done to her?

The hum of energy within her stirred again, as if responding to her thoughts, and with it came a faint, tingling sense of pleasure, a rush that felt almost intoxicating. She could sense the power waiting for her, inviting her to draw upon it, to feel its full force. For a moment, she imagined reaching out, touching the energy with her mind, letting it course through her—but the thought unsettled her, and she pushed it away, uncertain of where it might lead.

She took a steadying breath, trying to center herself, when a memory of Dubious flashed in her mind. She wondered if her friend had noticed her absence, if she would know where to find her. But even as she thought of Dubious, she felt a reluctance to speak of what she'd experienced, to put words to the strange sensations that lingered within her. How could she explain what she didn't fully understand herself?

Just then, the door creaked open, and Dubious stepped into the room, her face lighting up with a mixture of relief and joy as she saw Plicity awake.

"You're finally up!" Dubious exclaimed, hurrying over to the bed. "Thank the stars—are you alright? You've only been out since last night, but I was starting to worry you'd sleep forever."

Plicity offered a faint smile, feeling a sense of calm wash over her at the sight of her friend's familiar face. But even as she tried to steady herself, the hum of power within her remained, a constant reminder that something inside her had changed, and with it, a quiet, nagging dread that she couldn't quite ignore.

Dubious, standing at the door, glanced back down the hallway before calling out, "Healer Brin, she's awake!" Her voice echoed softly down the corridor, and without waiting for a response, she hurried over to Plicity's side, taking her friend's hand in both of her own and squeezing tightly.

"Oh, Plicity," Dubious murmured, her relief evident in the warmth of her grasp. "I was so frightened. When that quake hit, I was thrown to the ground, and by the time I'd gotten back on my feet, I didn't see you anywhere. It wasn't until I started calling your name that I found you lying there... but you didn't look hurt, not a scratch. Just..." She paused, her eyes flickering with unease. "Just as if you'd fallen asleep."

Plicity offered a faint smile, though she could still feel the strange pulse of energy within her, steady and insistent. "I don't remember much," she admitted, "just a blinding flash of light from the cliffs."

As if on cue, the door opened again, and Healer Brin entered, his steps quiet but deliberate. His presence filled the room with a sense of calm authority, tempered by years of tending to the village's needs. He was a striking man, with silvered hair and a steady, focused gaze that seemed to notice every detail. Though Plicity noted his handsomeness with detached appreciation, Dubious's eyes lit up mischievously, a familiar expression she reserved for friends. The healer caught her look and smirked, sharing the unspoken jest between them.

"Well, Dubious, it's rare to see you here without some minor catastrophe you've brought upon yourself," he teased, his voice warm.

"Ha! I'm not here for myself, Brin," she replied with a grin. "But if you're offering your best charms to calm my fears, I might reconsider my complaints."

He chuckled softly, shaking his head before turning his attention back to Plicity. His expression grew serious as he looked her over, his gaze assessing. "I must admit, Plicity, when Dubious brought you here, I was prepared for the worst. I checked you over thoroughly, but... nothing. No bruises, no injuries, not even a scratch. It's as though you simply fainted, though after a quake, that's quite unusual. If I didn't know better, I'd say you had quite the restful sleep."

Plicity hesitated, considering how much to share. "There was... a flash of light, something strong. It happened right as I approached the cliffs." She took a shaky breath, her eyes darkening as the memory resurfaced. "When the cliff face sheared off, I thought I was done for... that the whole thing was coming down on me. The noise, the dust—I could barely see, but I noticed something gleaming in the void left behind."

Dubious and Brin both watched her, their expressions tense, waiting for her to continue.

"There was this... mass of crystals," she said, shivering at the memory. "I've never seen anything like it. They were enormous, filling the entire side of the exposed cliff, and they... they shone with a strange light." She swallowed, her voice barely a whisper. "And then... the light from the crystals grew so intense. I remember feeling this force, like it was reaching out, burrowing into me." She shook her head, feeling slightly absurd even as she tried to explain. "It's hard to describe, but it was as if that light entered me somehow. And since then, I feel... different."

"Different how?" Brin asked, his brows lifting in interest.

“I feel as if... there’s something in me, almost like a hum,” she said, glancing away. “It’s not unpleasant, just... strange.” She paused, choosing her words carefully, not wanting to reveal the full weight of the power she felt coursing through her. “It’s as though there’s a spark of energy I can’t ignore.”

Brin listened intently, nodding slowly as he absorbed her words. “The light you saw,” he said after a moment, “was it a particular color?”

Plicity blinked, momentarily surprised by the question. “Yes,” she replied, picturing the vivid image in her mind. “It was a deep, almost radiant blue, and it seemed to pulse, like a heartbeat.”

At this, Brin’s expression grew thoughtful, almost guarded. He glanced at Dubious, then back at Plicity. “Wait here,” he said, and without further explanation, he turned and left the room, his steps quick and purposeful.

Dubious shot Plicity a bemused look. “Well, that’s mysterious,” she said. “Wonder what’s got him all stirred up?”

Moments later, Brin returned, a thick leather-bound book in hand. Its cover was worn, the edges frayed with use, and a thin strip of cloth marked a page near the back. He held the book with reverence as he returned to the bed, a faint smile touching his lips.

“Remarkable, isn’t it?” he said, running a hand over the cover. “This is one of the newer printings. Printing presses are springing up everywhere these days, making books like this affordable for the first time since my youth. It’s no longer just the province of the wealthy, having printed words instead of handwritten manuscripts.”

Dubious grinned. “Oh, Brin, don’t act so old! You’re not that ancient.”

Brin chuckled. “I’m older than you think, Dubious, and I remember a time when books like these were a rare sight.” He opened the book, his fingers carefully flipping to the marked page. “This is called *The Legends of Telsan*. Just last week, I happened to read a chapter that caught my interest, though I dismissed it as a fanciful tale at the time. Now, hearing what you described, Plicity...” His voice trailed off as he found the passage he was searching for, his eyes scanning the page.

“This chapter,” he continued, “describes a practice, old and shrouded in mystery. Some scholars refer to it as ‘the power of the deep’ or ‘the hidden touch’... though those are just rough translations. The text suggests that certain crystals,” he tapped the page, “contain a unique energy, something beyond the natural, that can be... tapped, for lack of a better word, by certain people.”

Dubious's eyes widened. "Are you saying... that Plicity might be one of those people?"

Brin nodded slowly, his gaze shifting to Plicity. "It's only a legend, of course, but the book cites historians who were once respected scholars. According to them, some individuals could use these crystals to draw upon a force, a power connected to Telsan itself. It's said that this force could grant them strength, insight, and other abilities—though the details remain obscure."

He held the book out to Plicity, his expression solemn. "You might find something familiar here. Read through the chapter and see if it resonates with your experience. Sometimes, legends hold grains of truth, and you might find answers—or at least clues—as to what happened to you."

Plicity accepted the book, her fingers brushing over the worn leather. She glanced at Dubious, who gave her an encouraging nod, then looked back at Brin, feeling a quiet gratitude for his guidance. There was something weighty in his words, a sense that he took her experience seriously, even as improbable as it sounded.

As she opened the book to the chapter on the crystals, she felt the faint, steady hum within her pulse again, stronger now, as though the energy itself were urging her to look deeper, to understand what it was that had stirred within her.

Plicity settled back against the pillows, the old, worn book open on her lap as she skimmed the marked chapter of *The Legends of Telsan*. The words described a mystical practice, hinting at individuals who could tap into a power called "The Deep Force" by using crystals. These people, the book said, could reach into neighboring realities, pulling fragments from those worlds into their own.

Each line resonated with the strange hum within her, as though some dormant part of her recognized this power, stirring to life with every word. The book spoke of abilities both wondrous and cautionary, yet Plicity found herself riveted by the possibilities.

But as she absorbed these strange insights, a creeping dread remained. She couldn't shake the sense of malice lurking at the edge of her awareness, an ominous presence inching closer with each passing moment. It was subtle but constant, like a shadow slowly encroaching. The thought of doing nothing, of simply hoping it would pass, felt foolish.

Plicity glanced up at Dubious, who was watching her closely. "It all sounds so unreal," she murmured. "But... I can't deny that I feel something. And whatever it is, it's coming closer."

Dubious squeezed her hand, her face troubled. “Do you think it could be someone? Or... something?”

“I don’t know.” Plicity shook her head, setting the book aside. “But it’s not friendly. I can feel that much.”

Brin, who had been listening with a quiet intensity, finally spoke up. “You have a choice here, Plicity. You can ignore this feeling and hope it’s nothing, or...” He gestured to the book. “Or you can seek out those who might know more. The Red Order, if they exist, are said to be scholars of this force. But they’re located in a distant city on the coast.” He hesitated, then added, “I’ve never heard of them outside this book. None of my healer colleagues know anything about them. If they’re real, they may be hard to find.”

“So you’re not sure if they even exist?” Dubious asked, brow furrowing.

Brin sighed. “No, I’m not. But some legends carry grains of truth. If the Red Order is real, they may be the only ones who can help you understand what’s happening.”

Plicity bit her lip, anxiety flickering in her eyes. She’d never wanted anything but a quiet life with her husband, free from danger. But that life was gone, and this looming malice wasn’t something she could ignore.

Brin seemed to sense her hesitation and offered a gentle smile. “There is something we could try, here and now,” he suggested. “A simple test of sorts.”

“A test?” Plicity echoed, glancing between him and Dubious.

Brin stepped to a nearby cabinet, retrieving a glass jar that was half-filled with cotton balls. “According to the book, those connected to the Deep Force should be able to shift small, familiar things from nearby realities—things that already exist here but could use a little ‘filling up,’ if you will.”

Plicity stared at the jar, uncertainty flickering in her gaze. “You mean... pull something into it?”

“Yes,” Brin said, setting the jar on the table. “Try to fill it with cotton balls. Focus on the feeling within you, and see if you can reach out.”

Dubious watched, a mix of skepticism and nervous anticipation on her face. Plicity took a deep breath, her heart pounding, and reached out mentally, willing the jar to fill. She closed her eyes, trying to focus on the hum of energy inside her, reaching out to find... something.

A faint tingling spread through her senses, and she felt a subtle shift. She opened her eyes to see cotton balls materializing in the jar—but not just in the jar. A cascade of cotton balls was spilling out, scattering across the table and floor in a soft, chaotic mess.

Dubious gasped, her eyes wide with shock. “Did... did you just do that?”

Brin stared, mouth slightly open, his eyes locked on the overflowing cotton balls. He had half-expected something to happen, but seeing it—the absolutely impossible made real—was beyond anything he’d prepared for. “It... it worked,” he muttered, almost in disbelief.

Plicity, however, was barely paying attention to their reactions. A wave of warmth flooded her, a blissful surge that left her feeling energized, almost euphoric. It was as if the power itself rewarded her, filling her with a pleasant rush. She couldn’t help but smile, even as she felt Dubious’s hand grip her arm.

“Plicity,” Dubious said, her voice laced with concern. “Are you alright?”

“Yes,” Plicity whispered, still caught in the lingering euphoria. “It’s... it feels good. It’s hard to explain, but it’s like a warm drink after being cold for hours.” She paused, her gaze distant. “I almost want to do it again.”

Dubious’s expression darkened, and she shook her head. “Be careful, Plicity. You remember how my husband was—he’d get that same look in his eyes before he went too far and... couldn’t stop.” Her voice softened. “I don’t want you to fall into that.”

Plicity’s smile faded as her friend’s words settled over her, a hint of guilt creeping in. She nodded, sobering slightly. “You’re right. I have to be careful. Whatever this is... it’s more than I realized.”

Brin cleared his throat, regaining his composure. “If you’re serious about seeking out the Red Order, you’ll need supplies and guidance for the journey. The road to the coast isn’t safe, especially not for someone unfamiliar with travel.”

Dubious nodded. “We’ve only just settled in here. Neither of us is used to the road.”

Brin’s gaze softened as he looked between the two women. “I can’t join you—I’m far too old for such a journey—but there’s a caravan guide named Rylan who travels between villages with a group of protectors. He’s familiar with the way to the coast, though he doesn’t come cheap.”

Plicity’s heart sank as she realized the cost involved. Her mind drifted to the few valuables she had left, the sentimental items she’d kept since her husband’s passing. Selling them would be painful, but if it meant she could escape whatever was approaching her, it might be worth it.

Brin seemed to sense her thoughts and placed the book in her hands. “Take this. The knowledge in it may serve you well on your journey. And... be careful, Plicity. This power is rare and precious, but not without risks.”

Plicity clutched the book to her chest, glancing at Dubious, who gave her a reassuring smile. The feeling of malice still loomed in the back of her mind, but now, with a path ahead, she felt a flicker of hope.

“Thank you, Brin,” she said, rising shakily. “We’ll find this Rylan and set out as soon as we can.”

Brin nodded, stepping back as she stood. “Then may the stars guide your path.”

As he and Dubious left her alone to dress, Plicity’s mind drifted to the expenses of such a journey, and she frowned, weighing her options. She remembered the blissful sensation that had filled her during the cotton ball incident, the ease with which she had pulled something into her world.

She glanced at her empty coin purse, her thoughts drifting toward an idea she couldn’t quite shake.

What if...?

Closing her eyes, she reached out again, this time focusing on the feeling of wealth, on the touch of gold. A soft tingle brushed against her senses, and when she opened her eyes, her breath caught. Several small stacks of coins lay on the table, gleaming in the light, each coin thick and heavy.

The rush of euphoria returned, a deep, warm glow that spread through her as she counted the coins, her heart racing. It was more than enough to fund her journey.

But as the euphoria faded, a twinge of guilt crept in. The thought nagged at her—had she stolen this money from someone in another reality? Some lord, a merchant, someone counting on it? She imagined the confusion, the anger of whoever discovered the missing gold, and a pang of unease settled over her.

Yet, she couldn’t think of a way to return it, and the sense of safety the coins brought her was undeniable. Guilt lingered at the edges of her mind, but she brushed it aside, focusing instead on the journey ahead.

With a quiet determination, she tucked the coins into her purse, still basking in the lingering warmth of the power as she prepared for the road that lay before her.

Interlude 2: The Consequences of Coin

In a bustling town square within a reality close to Plicity's, where narrow stone streets twisted like threads in a tapestry, a man named Loran hurried toward the local magistrate's office, his heart pounding in his chest. The bag of coins he had placed on his desk the night before was gone—vanished as if it had never been there. Those coins were supposed to pay off his last debts, settle a dispute with a neighbor, and, finally, free him from the endless cycle of scarcity that had defined his life for years. Without them, he risked imprisonment or, worse, being branded a thief and exiled.

As he arrived at the magistrate's office, Loran's hands were shaking. The crowded waiting area was noisy and tense, filled with others arguing cases or seeking justice. But there was one person who caught his eye, a young woman dressed in muted robes marked with strange symbols. She was a Seeker, one of the few in their land trained to sense and study disturbances in the natural order—disruptions they called “residues” of power.

Loran approached her cautiously, unsure if she was his last hope or just another figure in this chaotic morning. But she glanced at him, and something in her gaze made him speak up.

“Please,” he stammered, “I know this sounds strange, but I swear, I had the coins right there. They disappeared overnight. No one else was in the house, and the door was locked.” He fidgeted, his gaze pleading. “I can't prove anything, but... isn't that why you're here? To investigate things beyond our understanding?”

The crystals investigator, named Alira, tilted her head thoughtfully, considering him. She had been dispatched here by her order because of an uptick in strange occurrences around town: items disappearing, animals turning up in places they didn't belong, weather anomalies on the edges of the forest. Many were convinced it was bad luck or mischievous spirits, but Alira suspected something else.

“What did these coins mean to you?” Alira asked, her voice calm, measured. She was trained to understand that power didn't simply vanish things—it shifted them, altered their purpose, affecting lives in ways that often went unseen.

“They were everything,” he said, his voice barely a whisper. “My future, my family's reputation. Without them, I'll be... I'll be lost.”

She nodded, her gaze sharp but sympathetic. “Wait here,” she instructed him before heading down a narrow side hall into a chamber designated for her work. This room was filled with objects vital to her practice—artifacts and tokens crafted from crystal, each one

designed to harness or focus the Deep Force. There was a finely ground magnifying lens, made from a rare type of crystal, which sharpened her ability to detect faint traces of power residue. A diadem rested nearby, its structure carefully imbued to help calm and center a Tapper's intent when channeling the force. Most importantly, she held a small crystal known among Seekers as a "resonator," a tool refined to draw out the lingering energy of any disturbances in reality.

She slid these items into a worn, cross-body satchel, its leather soft from years of use, and returned to gather Loran and asked him to lead her to the scene of the crime. "Lead the way," she gently demanded, already suspecting there was not much she would be able to do beyond identifying the means of theft, given what Loran had described.

He gave her a curt nod and headed out into the street, shoulders hunched under the weight of loss. Alira fell into step beside him, letting the silence settle around them as they moved through the winding alleys. She kept her focus outward, attuned to the faint, steady thrum of power running beneath the cobblestones, a quiet hum that wound its way through the streets and alleyways like a heartbeat under the town. She'd never had the gift to tap deeply into it, not like the real Tappers—those whose talents turned legends into reality. But she could sense it, feel the occasional ripple, an electric shiver in the air whenever someone nearby called on a crystal's power.

They passed a bustling tailor's shop, and Alira felt a faint surge ripple through the ground as someone inside mended a tear in fabric with a subtle pull of the crystal's power. The fabric, once frayed, now held a seam as neat as new, though the energy it took left a slight tremor in the air around her. *Small things*, she thought, recognizing the familiar ripple. *Simple work, but a reminder of the crystal's touch on the everyday.*

They reached the quieter edge of town, where the sounds of the marketplace dulled to a murmur. She noticed Loran's shoulders tense as they neared his modest home, a low building tucked between two others, its crooked doorway betraying years of slow settling. She felt another, softer surge of power nearby—a child likely lighting a small crystal lamp or perhaps a Tapper practicing a minor spell—and for a brief moment, she wished she could give Loran something so simple, some ease or comfort that didn't require her to confront the truth he'd soon have to face.

The power hums all around us, and yet we're helpless in the ways that matter most, she thought, glancing at him. *What good is power when it can't save a man from losing everything?*

Loran fumbled with his key, fingers trembling, his expression a mix of bitterness and shame. Alira averted her gaze, giving him a moment to compose himself before he

unlocked the door and stepped aside. She moved past him into the room, the faint hum of power receding as the thick, stale air pressed in, heavy with despair.

The space was sparse, with a simple table, a few rough-hewn chairs, and a shelf against the far wall holding a small collection of items. Each was arranged with an almost reverent care, and she could feel the weight of it—the way people handled their belongings when they had so few, their small treasures tended to as if they could hold back the cruelty of the world. *This is all he has left to him*, she thought, a pang of sympathy settling in her chest. *And even that can't give him any comfort now.*

“This is where I kept them,” he said in a low, broken voice, nodding to a small wooden box on the table. Alira followed his gaze as his hand hovered over the box, trembling, reaching for what he could no longer touch. Her eyes softened as she watched him, feeling the futility in every movement.

She knelt down, unfastened her bag, and began unpacking her tools: the resonator, her crystal-tuned lens, and a few small tokens she kept for focus. As she laid them out, she sensed another flicker of power nearby—someone in another room warming water, perhaps, or sealing a letter against prying eyes. Such small things, these mundane uses of the crystals' power, yet they served a purpose that no power could fulfill here.

Loran watched her with a mixture of hope and grief, his eyes fixed on her hands, as if willing her to undo what he'd lost. *They always hope*, she thought, feeling the familiar weight of their expectations settle over her. *And yet, all I can offer is a truth they're better off never knowing.*

For a moment, she felt the crystals' subtle pull, the quiet strength that thrummed beneath the surface of her mind, urging her to draw on it. But even here, in a room thick with his grief, she knew the crystals could offer no comfort, no absolution. All they could do was reveal what was lost, and how far beyond reach it truly lay.

Alira took a deep breath, preparing herself. Tapping into the residue was not something she did lightly; it took a toll, leaving her mentally exhausted and often disoriented, but it was her duty. She placed her hand on the resonator, her fingers gently tracing its facets as she whispered the familiar invocation, words meant to help focus her intent. “Guide my sight, crystal, let me see the unseen.” Though the words themselves held no inherent power, they sharpened her focus, aligning her mind with the resonator's energy as she reached out to follow the trail of Loran's missing coins. She steadied her breathing, centering herself as she would instruct her students, trusting the crystal to reveal the traces of power left behind.

The crystal glowed faintly, responding to her call. Shadows flickered across the room, and a vision began to form—a blurry scene of hands reaching out, bare and unadorned, pulling the coins into existence. The figure in the vision wore simple night clothes, and the space around them was dim, suggesting a modest, enclosed room rather than any known setting in her world. She saw, too, a faint, ethereal trail tracing the coins' movement across realms, as though they had slipped through the fabric of reality itself, drawn from one world into another by an unseen force.

Her breath caught. She had never encountered this level of displacement before. Usually, the residue of an object's disappearance faded quickly, but this... this felt recent and potent, like the aftershock of a cataclysm. She sensed something more profound at play, a shift in power that was foreign to anything she knew.

The vision faded, and Alira opened her eyes, her heart racing. She understood now that Loran's loss wasn't a matter of simple theft or mischief. It was something far larger—an intrusion from another realm, a power that shouldn't have been able to reach them. Whoever had taken the coins had crossed boundaries most people didn't even know existed.

She looked at Loran then, her face pale. "I can't give you back the coins," she said softly, "but I can assure you this was not an ordinary theft. I sensed... a disturbance, a kind of pull that took them somewhere far beyond our world."

Loran's face fell, and he looked away, his shoulders slumping. "So, that's it? They're just gone?"

"Not gone," she said carefully, choosing her words. "Taken. By someone—or something—that should never have been able to reach us." She hesitated, glancing at Loran's anxious face. "There's residue left behind—a faint trail—but it's too distant, too far removed from anything our reality touches. Even the most skilled Seekers couldn't retrieve something taken across such a divide." She softened her tone, her gaze steady but sympathetic. "The force that took them is beyond our reach, and whatever lies at the end of that trail... it's best left undisturbed."

Loran stared at her, desperate. "But what am I supposed to do now? I've nothing left."

Alira placed a gentle hand on his arm. "Listen. This disturbance is beyond either of us. The residue suggests a power used recklessly, without knowledge of the boundaries between worlds. I believe this is a one-time incident, an anomaly, but it's left a scar. The Seeker order will take note, and perhaps in time, we will understand it better."

Loran took a deep breath, trying to process her words. The idea that something from another realm had stolen his coins was difficult to grasp, yet somehow, it felt oddly reassuring. It wasn't his fault, nor something he could have prevented. But the weight of his debt remained, looming over him.

Alira, noticing his despair, was moved with pity and offered him a small pouch of coins from her satchel. "I cannot replace what you lost, but perhaps this will help ease the immediate burden. I'm sorry, Loran."

Loran stared at the small pouch of coins Alira offered, his fingers trembling as he took it. The weight in his hand was meager, a hollow gesture against the magnitude of what he'd lost. His gaze was distant, and his voice, when he spoke, was strained, barely holding back the bitterness.

"Thank you," he choked out through tears of despair, though the words felt dragged from him. He looked down, his grip tightening around the small pouch, fighting the urge to hurl it to the floor. "But what good does it do to know, if I can't get back what was mine? My debts are still there, my family still needs feeding... and now, everything I'd scraped together is just... gone." His voice dropped to a whisper. "What am I supposed to do now?"

Alira's expression softened, her face drawn as she tried to meet his gaze. "I'm sorry, Loran. Sometimes... sometimes all we can do is accept that there are forces beyond our control. I know it doesn't make this right."

She hesitated, then added gently, "I can place a seal on this space. It won't stop all intrusions, but it could prevent future... disruptions, to a degree."

Loran's eyes flickered with a faint hope, but it quickly dimmed. "That might help someone else. But for me? I've already lost everything." He shook his head, his eyes burning with frustration and weariness. "No one can replace what's gone. All I have to show for it is this." He held up the small pouch with a bitter smile before his shoulders slumped, resignation settling into his expression.

Alira gathered her things and started for the door, resisting the urge to apologize to the man despite having no involvement in his loss. She stood outside for a few minutes after the door had closed behind her and remained rooted to that spot, unable to shake the unsettling feeling left by the residue of the otherworldly power. It was as if something had briefly torn open the fabric of reality, leaving a faint but indelible mark. The world had shifted, if only for a moment, and the ripple of that shift now moved outward, claiming innocent lives.

What kind of being could wield such a force so carelessly? And, more troublingly, did they even understand the pain their actions left behind? She shook her head and pondered wording of the report she'd have to send her superiors by the next day.

Chapter 4

Thavesen glanced at the road stretching ahead, noting the tired slump in Plicity's shoulders. The days of relentless walking had taken a toll, and even he felt the fatigue deep in his bones. He turned to her, his tone coaxing but cautious. "Plicity, we've been on this path for days now. This village up ahead, it is really more of a small town than the cots we've passed through and it could offer us some rest. Just a day or two to gather our strength."

Plicity's face tightened, her eyes narrowed as if warding off the thought. "We don't have time," she replied sharply, her voice filled with a strange urgency. "We're close—I can feel it." Her gaze drifted down the path, as though the tug that had been haunting her lay just beyond the horizon.

"But what use is reaching it if we're too worn down to face whatever it is?" Thavesen countered, choosing his words carefully. "A brief respite. Food, fresh water, a chance to sleep in a bed. It'll do us both good."

She hesitated, her hand absently clutching at her chest as if pressing against the tug that pulled her forward. Her eyes were distant, unfocused, as if locked onto something only she could see. "We're closer," she repeated, softer this time, a flicker of doubt crossing her face. But the exhaustion in her limbs was real, the toll of constant travel pressing down on her.

At last, with a sigh that held a tinge of defeat, she nodded. "One day. But that's it."

Thavesen's mouth curved in a small smile. "One day, then," he agreed, guiding her toward the village nestled in the valley ahead.

The village spread out before them like a tapestry woven with life and color, its narrow streets lined with bustling stalls, open-air shops, and vendors calling out prices in lively voices. Mad Plicity's gaze swept across the scene, her eyes widening as a sense of familiarity gripped her. For a moment, she stood transfixed, her expression softening as if she were seeing something precious and long-lost.

As they reached the heart of the village, Thavesen's gaze swept over the crowded market square. Plicity had paused, entranced by the bustling scene, her expression softened as she took in the lively sights and sounds, almost as if she'd been transported back to a place she once knew.

Seeing his chance, he leaned close to her, keeping his tone low and reassuring. "I'll find us a place to stay, maybe pick up some supplies," he said smoothly. "Take a moment to rest—I'll be back soon."

Plicity barely nodded, her gaze still fixed on the vendors. Thavesen took this as his cue and slipped away, expertly weaving through the crowd until he spotted what he was looking for: a small, inconspicuous tavern at the edge of the market. Above the door, carved discreetly into the wooden sign, was a small mark—a triangle with an intersecting line through its center. To most, it would mean nothing, but to those in the know, it was a silent beacon of syndicate allegiance.

He stepped inside, his eyes adjusting to the dimly lit room, and approached the barkeep, a burly man polishing a row of glasses. Thavesen slid a handful of coins across the bar, each bearing the distinctive crest of a distant city known for its underground dealings—a subtle signal that he was more than just a traveler.

The barkeep's eyes flickered over the coins, his expression unchanging. "Looking for something particular?" he asked, his voice as steady as his hands.

"A friend of mine back in the city," Thavesen replied, keeping his tone casual. "Wouldn't want the message getting lost in the usual channels."

The barkeep gave a brief, almost imperceptible nod and took the coins, pocketing them without a word. Thavesen quickly scrawled a coded note on a slip of paper, carefully crafted to disguise his true meaning. Mentions of a "unique asset," "tremendous potential," and a "risky endeavor" would be clear enough to his associates but innocuous to anyone else. He noted his location and the description of his current companion, emphasizing her instability and the danger she posed if not handled properly.

With a final glance at the bartender, Thavesen folded the note and handed it over. The barkeep tucked it into a small box behind the counter, nodding once. Their transaction complete, Thavesen turned to leave, allowing himself a small, satisfied smile. The message was sent; he wouldn't be in this village long enough to receive a reply, but he trusted his associates to follow the trail he'd left.

As he made his way back toward the market, Thavesen shifted his expression to one of casual calm, ready to pick up his role with Plicity once again.

Beside her, Thavesen watched her reaction with a calculating eye, his face unreadable. He'd quickly learned that her moods were unpredictable, swinging from fragile calm to violent fury without warning. As they moved through the throng of villagers, he kept a close eye on her, looking for any sign that her tenuous control might fracture.

"Apples! Fresh apples!" called a vendor to their right, his voice carrying over the crowd. A trio of children darted between the stalls, laughing as they chased each other, their bare feet kicking up dust. A woman with an armful of wildflowers brushed past them, giving

Thavesen and Plicity a polite nod before vanishing into the crowd. Plicity's gaze lingered on the children, her lips parting as if she meant to call out to them.

"They look like—" Her voice broke off, her hand twitching at her side. Thavesen caught the tremor in her fingers, the look of longing that flickered across her face before her brow furrowed in confusion. She blinked, the spell breaking as she shook her head slightly. "No, they can't be," she murmured, almost to herself.

Thavesen placed a steadying hand on her shoulder. "Are you all right?" he asked, his tone gentle but probing. He wanted to see where her mind was drifting, to understand the extent of her instability.

She hesitated, looking at him as if seeing him for the first time. "It's just... I thought I saw them," she whispered, her eyes distant, voice filled with a strange, almost childlike wonder. "Harlan..." she began, then caught herself, blinking rapidly. She looked away, embarrassed. "No, sorry... Thavesen."

A smile tugged at the corner of Thavesen's mouth, though he quickly masked it with a sympathetic nod. "It's all right," he said, his voice soft. "Memories can be powerful, especially in a place like this." He allowed his hand to linger on her shoulder a moment longer, a quiet, reassuring presence.

They continued walking, passing a blacksmith's shop where sparks flew from the anvil, the rhythmic clang of hammer on metal creating a steady backdrop. A small cluster of children peered in from the street, their faces lit with fascination as the blacksmith worked. Plicity's eyes followed the scene, her gaze softening once more.

"I used to watch my father work like that," she murmured, almost to herself. "Back when... back when things were simpler."

Thavesen nodded, encouraging her to continue. "Tell me about him," he said gently, keeping his tone neutral, almost disinterested, though his attention was fully on her. He was beginning to see a pattern—an opening he could use.

"He was kind," she said, her voice tinged with both sadness and reverence. "Strict but fair. Always knew what to say to make me feel safe." She paused, her eyes growing distant again. "Like you," she added quietly, almost as an afterthought, though there was something more to it—something closer to a revelation. She blinked, then quickly looked away, as if embarrassed by the comparison.

Thavesen raised an eyebrow, his smile turning inward. He could see where her mind was going, the lines of reality blurring as she wove him into her fractured memories. He let the silence stretch between them, letting her grow comfortable with the idea before he

responded. “It’s good to remember,” he said at last, voice soft. “Sometimes memories are all we have left.”

Her shoulders relaxed, her posture softening as his words washed over her. She looked at him again, her gaze lingering, and this time, she didn’t correct herself when she murmured, “Thank you, Harlan.”

Thavesen inclined his head, his expression one of practiced sympathy. “Always,” he replied, matching her tone. Inside, he felt a flicker of satisfaction—she was beginning to accept the idea, to see him as someone he was not. It was a dangerous game, he knew, but the rewards were worth the risk.

As they moved further into the village, the crowd thickened, and the scent of fresh bread mingled with the earthy smell of leather and wood smoke. A flower-seller approached them, holding out a small bouquet of wildflowers, her face creased with a warm smile.

“For the lovely couple,” she said, her voice cheerful. Plicity looked at the flowers, her expression softening further, and for a moment, Thavesen saw her as she must have been before—gentle, kind-hearted, filled with quiet wonder.

Plicity smiled, accepting the flowers and tucking one behind her ear. She turned to Thavesen, her gaze tender as she offered him the rest of the bouquet. “For you,” she whispered, her voice carrying a depth of emotion that made his stomach tighten.

He took the flowers with a polite nod, hiding his discomfort behind a practiced smile. He hadn’t expected her to turn the gesture around, and it unsettled him, a reminder of just how deeply she had fallen into her own delusion. But he played along, keeping his expression soft and gentle.

“Thank you,” he murmured, his voice warm, though his mind was racing with calculations. Each moment she grew more attached to this illusion, his influence over her strengthened. She was seeing him not just as her companion but as something far more significant—a role he could leverage, so long as he stayed within the boundaries of her fractured memories.

As they passed the central square, Thavesen noted the inn up ahead, its wooden sign swinging gently in the breeze. He steered her toward it, resting a hand on the small of her back in a guiding gesture. “We should rest,” he said. “It’s been a long journey, and you’ll feel better after some sleep.”

She nodded, her expression peaceful, as if the world around her had settled into perfect harmony. “Yes... rest,” she echoed, her voice soft.

They approached the innkeeper, a stout, jovial man with a booming laugh, who greeted them with a warm smile. “A room for two?” he asked, eyeing them with a knowing glint. “You look like you could use a good night’s sleep.”

Thavesen felt Plicity’s hand slip into his, her fingers threading through his as she gave him a trusting smile. “Yes, a room for two,” she replied, her voice steady, as if she’d spoken those words countless times before.

The innkeeper handed over the key, and Thavesen guided her up the narrow staircase, his hand still resting at the small of her back. His mind was already racing, calculating his next moves, but he kept his demeanor calm and comforting, mirroring the man she believed him to be.

At the top of the stairs, he led her into the room, closing the door softly behind them. She moved to the window, gazing out over the village, her face illuminated by the soft evening light. “It feels like home,” she murmured, more to herself than to him. Plicity pondered the darkening village, her face softened by the dim light. She reached for Thavesen’s hand, her voice a whisper as she murmured, “I’ve missed this... us.”

Her words struck him, confirming just how deeply she believed in the illusion he’d allowed her to create. As she turned to him, her eyes filled with longing, he let her pull him close, his hands resting gently on her shoulders as he met her gaze with practiced warmth. When her hands moved to his face, her touch tender and trembling, he knew she was beyond doubt.

She whispered his name—“Harlan”—and leaned in, her lips brushing his. He felt her trust, her belief, and it spurred him to play the part fully, drawing her into the embrace she so clearly desired.

Afterward, as they lay together, she rested her head against his chest, her breathing growing slower as sleep took her. Thavesen watched her, noting her beauty marred only by the many freckles dotting her face as his mind spinning with calculations even as she drifted into unconsciousness, wholly unaware of his true intentions.

The scene faded into silence, leaving Thavesen alone in the dim light, a satisfied smile curling at his lips. She trusted him completely now, and her madness was his to manipulate. But beneath the surface, a flicker of unease lingered, reminding him of the precarious game he was playing.

Thavesen awoke to a scream that sliced through the quiet of the early dawn. He jolted upright, instinctively reaching for the dagger he kept hidden under his pillow, but froze when he saw Plicity. She was sitting up, her eyes wide and unfocused, clutching the sheets

tightly around herself. The scream faded into ragged breaths, her face twisted in horror as she looked at him with an intensity that felt painfully clear.

“What... what did you do?” she whispered, her voice trembling, her gaze sharp and accusatory. She was seeing him with an awareness he hadn’t encountered before—a raw, unfiltered recognition that he was not who he claimed to be.

For the first time, Thavesen felt genuine fear claw at his throat. He had played the part of her lost husband so seamlessly, woven himself into her fractured reality so thoroughly, that he hadn’t anticipated this—a moment when she would see him for what he truly was. And in that heartbeat, he understood just how dangerous she could be if fully aware of her power.

Plicity’s hand lifted, her fingers flexing in a way that made the air seem to vibrate. Shadows deepened around her, and he sensed a shift in the energy, a gathering of something heavy and violent. She didn’t need a weapon, didn’t need words—she was power incarnate, and she was seconds away from unleashing it upon him.

“Plicity, wait,” he stammered, his voice breaking as he raised his hands. “Please, listen to me!”

But her fury only intensified, her face tightening as if readying herself to strike. Then, from the doorway, a soft voice called out, breaking through the tense silence. “Is everything all right?”

Thavesen turned, his heart still pounding, and saw a young girl peering in, her face filled with concern. She had dark hair that fell in soft waves, much like Plicity’s eldest child in her memories, and her expression of worried innocence stirred something deep within Plicity. The storm in her eyes softened, the rage dissipating as she gazed at the girl with something approaching maternal warmth.

“There you are, sweetheart,” she murmured, her voice gentle now, filled with a heartbreaking tenderness. She looked back at Thavesen, her delusion wrapping around her once more, and whispered, “Harlan, our daughter’s here. We can’t be fighting in front of her.”

The girl looked from Plicity to Thavesen, confusion etched on her face. Thavesen seized the opportunity, nodding to the girl with a soft smile. “Thank you for checking on us. We’re fine.”

The girl hesitated, then gave a small nod before retreating down the hall. Thavesen exhaled, relief flooding him as Plicity’s gaze softened, her expression once more clouded by the layers of illusion he’d woven around her.

“Yes, love,” he murmured, reaching out to take her hand, careful to project the warmth of the husband she believed him to be. “Let’s not fight. Everything’s all right.”

She smiled, the rage forgotten as quickly as it had appeared, and together they dressed and ventured into the village. They strolled through the busy market square, where villagers haggled over goods, children darted between stalls, and vendors called out in lively voices. Plicity took it all in with a serene expression, her mind drifting in and out of memories as Thavesen guided her through the bustling scene, ever watchful.

As they passed a small, cluttered stall near the edge of the market, Plicity’s attention caught on a collection of crystals laid out on a worn cloth. They sparkled under the sunlight, their facets catching the light in a way that seemed almost unnatural. She stopped abruptly, her eyes widening with a glimmer of recognition.

“Harlan,” she breathed, her voice filled with reverence. “Look.”

Thavesen turned, following her gaze to the crystals. They were small, most the size of a walnut, their surfaces smooth and glittering in the sunlight. To him, they looked like ordinary stones, albeit finely polished, but Plicity’s reaction hinted at something he couldn’t perceive. The stall’s proprietor, an elderly woman with wrinkled hands and a weathered face, watched them with a smile.

“These are wonderful,” Plicity murmured, reaching out to touch one of the crystals, her fingers grazing its smooth surface. “We need them, Harlan. All of them.”

Thavesen hid a frown, feigning a look of regret as he shook his head. “Love, I’d get them for you in an instant, but I haven’t any coin,” he said, voice laced with an earnestness that belied the lie, his small hoard of coin stashed away inside his belt, hidden from prying eyes.

Plicity turned to him, her eyes clouded by disappointment, but then she shrugged, an odd look of calm settling over her face. She lifted her hand, and without warning, a cascade of golden coins clattered onto the stall’s table, more than enough to cover the woman’s entire stock. Plicity sighed and winked at Thavesen. “Almost as good as last night, my love.” She stated without further explanation.

The stallkeeper’s eyes widened, her mouth falling open as she stared at the heap of coins that had seemingly appeared from nowhere. She nodded eagerly, her hands shaking as she gathered up the crystals, wrapping them in cloth and handing them to Plicity with an awestruck look.

As they turned to leave, Thavesen caught the stallkeeper murmuring to a passerby, her voice laced with confusion. “Whose image is that? I don’t recognize it...”

He glanced at the coins once more, but shrugged off the comment, focusing instead on keeping Plicity in check. She clutched the bundle of crystals to her chest like a prized possession, her face filled with a joy that made her look almost childlike.

“They feel... right,” she whispered, her voice tinged with an almost sacred reverence as they walked away from the stall. Thavesen, ever calculating, noted the change in her demeanor, wondering if these crystals would deepen her delusions or sharpen them. Either way, he knew they would be useful for keeping her pliable.

They continued through the village, Plicity’s eyes alight with a newfound energy, the crystals pressed close to her heart. Thavesen kept an arm around her, guiding her toward the quieter parts of the market, careful not to let her linger too long in any one place. She was calm now, almost blissful, but he knew the fragility of her state, how quickly it could shift.

The crystals hummed softly in her grasp, their power amplifying her presence, wrapping her in an aura that others could sense without understanding. Thavesen felt it too—a faint tingling along his skin, a strange prickling sensation that set his nerves on edge. He glanced at her, watching her serene expression, a subtle worry growing within him.

The market faded into the background as they moved toward the edge of the village. Thavesen kept his gaze forward, though he couldn’t shake the lingering sense of unease. Something was building within her, something he couldn’t control, and it made him wonder just how much longer he could keep her tethered to his illusion.

He tightened his hold on her, pulling her close, hoping to ground her in the small, familiar gestures. But beneath the surface, he could feel it—the power of the crystals, waiting, biding its time within her grasp. And though she seemed calm, there was a flicker of something darker beneath her gentle smile, a storm gathering strength just out of sight.

As they moved through the crowd, Plicity’s attention suddenly snapped to a young girl darting between the stalls. Her heart skipped, her breath catching as she took in the girl’s dark curls and delicate face. The girl looked achingly familiar, and for a heartbeat, Plicity’s heart swelled with a fragile, desperate hope.

“Elara?” she whispered, her voice trembling.

The girl turned, startled by the sound of her name—though it wasn’t her name, of course, but to Plicity, it was enough. It was everything. Her mind raced, the vision of her own daughter blurring with this stranger’s face until they were indistinguishable. Her heart began to pound, and an unsettling warmth spread through her chest. The crystals nestled close to her skin pulsed in sync, feeding off her growing desperation.

Without thinking, she lifted a hand, reaching out as though to pull her daughter back into her arms across the impossible chasm of realities. Energy surged from her fingers, invisible but potent, wrapping around the girl like a wave. The girl's expression twisted, confusion giving way to terror as she struggled against the unseen force.

"Plicity!" Thavesen hissed, alarm flashing across his face. "Stop this! She isn't—she's not who you think!"

But Plicity didn't hear him, or perhaps she simply couldn't understand. Her mind was filled with memories of Elara, memories that she tried to overlay onto this bewildered girl who trembled under the grip of her power. The girl's form wavered, her features distorting as Plicity's will reshaped her into a vision of the past.

"Elara," she whispered, a tear slipping down her cheek, but the transformation was grotesque and incomplete. The girl's features melted and reformed in horrifying ways, her limbs twisting as if caught between two shapes that refused to align. Her life flickered out as her form collapsed to the ground, silent and motionless.

The villagers around them gasped, some backing away in fear while others shouted in alarm. Plicity's eyes gleamed with a terrifying joy as she watched her 'daughter' take shape, oblivious to the girl's lifeless body.

"It's working!" she cried, elated. "Harlan, look! She's coming back to us!"

Thavesen's stomach twisted in disgust, but he forced a placating smile, his voice soft but urgent. "Yes, love, but... but you have to let her breathe. You're scaring her. You don't want to frighten her, do you?"

But Plicity was beyond reasoning. The euphoria of the power coursing through her veins drowned out all thought. Her body trembled as more energy surged, spilling out into the world around her. The ground shook, cracks splintering beneath her feet as the stones themselves seemed to groan under the pressure of her will.

Villagers screamed and scattered, some trying to pull others to safety, but Plicity's gaze was fixed only on the girl's body, her face serene as she walked toward others nearby. She reached out, touching a merchant with a featherlight brush that sent his life extinguishing in a heartbeat, his form twisting grotesquely into the figure of an old friend from her past. She smiled, seeing only what her mind wished to see, completely unaware that each of these transformations ended in lifeless forms.

"Plicity, stop!" Thavesen shouted, his voice frantic. "You're hurting them!"

But her laughter was the only response he received. “It’s all coming back to me, Harlan,” she whispered, her voice thick with ecstasy. “I’ll rebuild it all. Our home, our family... we’ll have it all again!”

She reached out to the villagers around her, touching them lightly with her power, each brush warping them into twisted versions of the people she’d left behind. An elderly man stumbled as his form shifted, his skin taking on a sickly pallor, his face contorting as he became something unrecognizable, a nightmarish echo of someone from her past. He, too, collapsed, his breath stilled by the force of her touch.

Beside her, Thavesen’s face drained of color, horror blooming in his eyes as he watched her turn people into misshapen, broken versions of the loved ones she’d lost. He stepped forward, desperation clawing at his voice. “Plicity, you’re not seeing clearly! None of this is real!”

She turned to him, her expression wild, her eyes gleaming with fevered delight. “But it is, Harlan! Don’t you see?” She spread her arms, her laughter echoing through the chaos. “This is our home. I’m bringing it back—just as it was meant to be!”

More energy poured from her, and with each wave, the destruction intensified. Stalls crumbled, the foundation of the marketplace twisting into grotesque shapes; the animals tied nearby wailed, their bodies convulsing as they, too, were caught in the brutal distortion of her power. The villagers who escaped her immediate touch watched in horror as friends and loved ones fell, their lives snuffed out as they were remade into warped echoes of Plicity’s memories.

Thavesen grabbed her arm, his voice a desperate whisper. “Please, stop this. They’re innocent people, Plicity. You’re going to kill them all.”

But she merely laughed, brushing him off as though he were a bothersome fly. Her eyes were fixed on the chaotic scene, a twisted smile playing on her lips. “They’re not strangers—they’re my family. They’re finally coming home to me.”

With a roar of triumph, she lifted her arms, and a final, overwhelming wave of energy radiated outward. The marketplace trembled, stones rising into the air, then shattering into dust. The twisted plants she had conjured writhed, their thorned tendrils spreading, wrapping around anything in their path.

In the midst of the chaos, she felt it again—that pull, that irritating tug drawing her attention like a splinter in her mind. She paused, her eyes narrowing as she focused on the sensation. It was moving. Further and further away, slipping out of reach.

Her face twisted with fury, the realization snapping her back to a terrible lucidity. The marketplace, her illusions, the broken remnants of her recreated world—all of it faded into insignificance. She turned, her voice a low growl. “It’s getting away,” she hissed, her tone laced with venom. “Come, Harlan. We don’t have time to waste.”

Without a second glance at the devastation she’d wrought, she strode out of the marketplace, her movements precise and controlled, though her eyes burned with madness. Thavesen, dumbfounded and horrified, glanced back at the smoking ruins, then at her retreating form. He hesitated, his mind racing with plans and contingencies.

But as she walked, Plicity raised her hand, and with a single motion, she conjured a pack of food and tossed it to him without breaking stride. It landed at his feet, a stark reminder of her power—and of the danger of refusing her.

Staring at the pack, Thavesen quickly bent to pick it up, glancing over his shoulder once more at the destruction left behind as he followed her down the road, clinging to his thin veneer of control.

As they disappeared into the forest’s edge, a young man, unnoticed by either of them, watched from the shadows. His eyes narrowed, taking in the destruction before he set off quietly after them, keeping a safe distance but moving with purpose.

Chapter 5

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Dubious asked, casting a sidelong glance at Plicity as they approached the caravan camp just outside the village. Dubious’s tone was laced with worry, though Plicity could sense the underlying pride her friend held back. Dubious had always been the strong one, grounded and pragmatic, yet here she was supporting her friend in a venture that was both daunting and necessary.

“Brin said it was the best chance,” Plicity replied, adjusting her pack, though she knew it contained little of what she’d need for the journey. “He believes Rylan’s the one who can guide me safely to Calithara.”

The camp was a modest sprawl of wagons, horses, and bustling figures preparing for departure. Rylan, a rugged man with a weathered face and the steady, unhurried demeanor of one who had seen many such camps come and go, stood near the largest wagon, directing the final preparations. He turned as they approached, his sharp eyes scanning them both with an appraising look.

Dubious gave him a nod of acknowledgment. “Rylan,” she said, her voice carrying a mix of familiarity and respect. “It’s good to see you again.”

“Dubious,” he replied with a hint of a smile, his tone warm but professional. His gaze shifted to Plicity, lingering for a moment, sizing her up. “So, you’re the one looking to head to Calithara.”

Plicity swallowed, feeling the weight of his scrutiny. She had never imagined herself a traveler, let alone prepared for such a journey. “Yes,” she replied, managing to keep her voice steady. “Brin said you might be able to help.”

Rylan crossed his arms, his eyes narrowing slightly. “That depends. Are you prepared for what this journey entails? The road isn’t kind to those who don’t know how to meet its demands.”

Plicity glanced uncertainly at Dubious, who gave her a slight nod of encouragement. “I’m... not sure what I need,” she admitted. “I was hoping you could tell me. I don’t have much experience with travel.”

Rylan’s gaze softened, though his expression remained serious. “Well, you’ll need more than just hope and courage out there. First off, get yourself some sturdy clothes—something that’ll keep you warm and dry. The weather’s fickle, and if you’re drenched by rain or shivering through the night, it’ll break you down fast.”

Dubious gave Plicity a supportive nudge. “See? Practical advice. You’re not going alone into this.”

Rylan continued, his tone a mix of patience and pragmatism. “You’ll also need a bedroll that’s light enough to carry but thick enough to keep the cold off. And don’t skimp on a good water skin. You’ll want one that’s easy to fill along the way, especially when we reach the barren stretches.”

Plicity nodded, absorbing each piece of advice as though committing it to memory. She was unaccustomed to thinking about such practical details, having always lived within the predictable bounds of village life.

“And food?” she asked, feeling slightly foolish but wanting to cover every possible aspect.

“Dried rations that won’t spoil, and enough to last until our next stop, just in case,” Rylan replied. “Bring a bit of bitterbrush, too—it’ll keep the biting flies off your skin. Trust me, you don’t want to be swatting at them the whole way.”

Plicity made a mental note, though the thought of gathering all these items felt overwhelming. Dubious, sensing her friend’s uncertainty, leaned in with a reassuring smile. “We’ll get it sorted. It’s not as daunting as it sounds once you start gathering things.”

Rylan’s expression softened as he added, “And one more thing: bring something to trade. Calithara values more than just coin; something unique or with a story attached can go a long way. It doesn’t have to be truly valuable—just something that seems like it might be.”

Plicity’s heart sank slightly. She didn’t have much in the way of personal items, let alone anything with a story worth trading. Her mind drifted to the coins she had materialized, a faint pang of guilt shadowing the thought. But she knew they might be her only option.

She took a steadying breath and asked, “When do we depart?”

“Dawn,” Rylan replied, his tone leaving no room for uncertainty. “Be here and be ready. We don’t wait for stragglers.”

Plicity gave a resolute nod. “Thank you. I’ll be here.”

As Rylan turned back to his preparations, Plicity and Dubious walked away from the camp, heading toward the village. Plicity felt the weight of what lay ahead, but a sense of purpose began to settle over her, quieting some of her fear.

“Well, that went well,” Dubious said with a teasing smile. “Now, let’s see what we can scrape together from my place and what you might need to buy.” She shot a look at Plicity’s nearly empty pack. “You might need every coin and then some, but we’ll make it work.”

Plicity glanced at her friend, grateful beyond words. “I don’t know what I’d do without you,” she murmured.

Dubious waved her off with a grin. “You’d figure it out eventually. Now let’s get you properly outfitted so Rylan doesn’t think he’s taking a village fool with him.”

As they reached the cottage, Dubious started gathering items from around the house, while Plicity paused near the doorway, her gaze drifting northward. She closed her eyes, probing for the familiar but unsettling sensation that had haunted her—the malice. With Brin’s old map still fresh in her mind, she could pinpoint the feeling’s source, somewhere north of the village, like a dark weight pressing at the edges of her consciousness. The more she focused on it, the more a nauseating dread spread through her, a sickening pull that seemed to grow stronger the closer she came to acknowledging it.

Forcing herself to pull back, she let her mind settle instead on Dubious. Her friend’s voice, familiar and comforting, filled the room as she rummaged through supplies, making lighthearted comments to ease the tension. Plicity felt a rush of gratitude and love—deep, unbreakable, and sisterly. Leaving Dubious would be like leaving a part of herself, and that thought alone was nearly enough to still her feet.

But as her thoughts drifted again, she knew, deep down, that getting far away from these attachments, these loves, was necessary. Whatever was out there—whatever malice was creeping closer—seemed to be searching for her. And until she could understand what it was or how to stop it, staying here was too dangerous. For now, she would have to find her strength in the act of letting go.

Plicity took a deep breath, the crisp morning air filling her lungs as she stepped into the bustling market square. Sunlight filtered through hanging cloth awnings, casting dappled patterns onto the cobblestone path. Beside her, Dubious kept her arms folded, a slight smirk tugging at her lips as she observed Plicity’s wide-eyed curiosity.

The two women wove through clusters of vendors, their movements drawing a few glances from passersby. Plicity’s auburn curls bounced with each step, catching the morning light and revealing strands of copper, while a scattering of freckles danced across her cheeks, accentuating her soft, thoughtful gaze. She wore a simple dress, practical but cut from fabric that carried faint floral embroidery along the hem and cuffs—a small indulgence that hinted at her love for beauty in the everyday. Dubious, a bit taller and fuller in figure, walked confidently beside her, her dark hair braided down her back and her blouse comfortably fitted to her ample bosom. While less adorned than Plicity, she had an earthy warmth and ease that was just as eye-catching.

“There she is,” Dubious murmured, nudging Plicity’s shoulder and nodding toward an older woman seated behind a small stall brimming with dried goods and travel supplies. “That’s Alene. She’s been making hardtack and stocking supplies for travelers since I was a kid.”

They approached the stall, and the vendor, Alene, greeted them with a nod and a knowing smile. “Dubious, bringing another one to my little collection, I see,” she said, eyeing Plicity with a gleam of humor. “Are you looking to stock up for the road?”

“Yes,” Plicity replied, glancing over the items spread across the table. The scent of herbs and the faint mustiness of leather filled the air around them. “Rylan suggested a few things, and I want to be as prepared as I can.”

Alene gave a chuckle, her eyes crinkling at the corners. “If Rylan says you need it, then you’ll need it.” She reached behind her table and pulled out a tin filled with hardtack biscuits. “These’ll keep you going for weeks if need be. Not much flavor, but they’re tough as nails. Try one,” she added, handing a piece to Plicity.

Dubious snatched it before Plicity could take it, grinning as she attempted to bite into the biscuit. Her teeth barely made a dent, and she gave a mock scowl, rubbing her jaw as Alene laughed. “Best to dunk that in water before you try to eat it,” the vendor advised.

“Otherwise, it’s just a weapon in disguise.”

Plicity and Dubious shared a laugh, the ease between them momentarily quieting Plicity’s lingering worries. She began picking through the supplies Alene had available, her gaze drifting over the selection of dried fruits, nuts, and jerky stacked neatly beside bundles of twine and fire-starting stones.

As she reached for a small leather pouch, her fingers brushed against something smooth and solid. She looked down and found a cluster of crystals, each a different size but all sharing the same shade—a deep, rich teal, the exact color she’d seen on the cliffs where her powers had first been awakened. A faint shiver passed through her as she stared at them, a feeling both thrilling and unnerving.

“These aren’t really for sale,” Alene said, her tone shifting as she noticed Plicity’s interest. “Found them washed up in a riverbed a while back, pretty little things. Thought I’d keep them for good luck.”

Plicity hesitated, her fingers lingering over the crystals. “I... I’d like to buy them, if you’ll take one of these.” She reached into her pouch, producing one of the mysterious coins she’d summoned. Its metallic glint caught the morning light, and for a moment, she felt a pang of guilt and unease.

Alene's eyes widened as she studied the coin, and after a moment, she nodded. "For that? Take them all. I wasn't planning on selling them, but I suppose they might mean more to you than they do to me."

Plicity gathered the crystals carefully, slipping them into the pouch she had just purchased. The weight of them, their familiar gleam, grounded her, though the sense of power humming beneath her skin grew stronger. She could almost feel the pull, the faintest whisper urging her to use her abilities again. But she forced herself to ignore it, focusing instead on the warm smile Alene offered her as they completed their transaction.

With a growing collection of supplies, Plicity moved through the market, guided by Dubious's cheerful commentary. They visited a tanner for a sturdy leather belt and a cobbler who provided a pair of boots with thick soles and a hint of delicate floral stitching along the sides—a subtle touch of beauty that made her smile. She bought a flask for water, a small tin of herbs to ward off insects, and a few more rations. At each stall, she felt the weight of the coins diminishing, a tangible reminder of her strange new power.

As she passed by a fabric vendor, she noticed a cloak hanging on display, made of thick wool with a lining patterned in delicate vines. It was both practical and lovely, the rich forest-green hue contrasting against her auburn curls. She tried it on, feeling the warmth wrap around her shoulders, and when she caught Dubious's approving nod, she knew it would be her last purchase.

Each item felt like a small step toward her journey, yet the growing sense of urgency, of some unknown force bearing down upon her, lingered in the back of her mind. She kept the feeling suppressed, focusing instead on Dubious's easy banter and the vibrant life of the market. Yet every so often, her thoughts drifted to the crystals tucked away in her pouch, a quiet reminder of the powers she carried and the strange compulsion she felt to use them.

By the time she'd finished gathering everything, the sky had shifted to a pale blue, the morning slipping toward noon. She turned to Dubious, her heart tight with both gratitude and a budding sadness. They walked back toward the edge of the village, where Rylan and his caravan were making final preparations for the journey.

"Well, looks like you're ready," Dubious said, her voice light but her gaze lingering. "And here I thought I'd be sending you off with nothing more than a blanket and a bit of stale bread."

Plicity laughed softly, but her heart clenched as she glanced at her friend, seeing the fondness and worry etched in her features. "Thank you, Dubious. For everything. I couldn't have done any of this without you."

Dubious waved her hand dismissively, but her eyes were bright. “Just make sure you come back, alright? And don’t go getting yourself into trouble. Or if you do, at least make it interesting.”

Plicity gave a small nod, forcing a smile as she adjusted the strap of her pack. “I’ll try.” She felt a pang in her chest, a part of her clinging to the familiar warmth of her friend’s presence. And yet, another part of her knew this separation was necessary—an unspoken truth that whatever malice was following her needed to be kept far from those she loved.

Dubious stepped closer, pulling her into a quick, fierce hug. “Take care of yourself, Plicity. And don’t forget where you come from.”

Plicity swallowed, returning the embrace tightly before stepping back. She offered a final nod, her gaze lingering on Dubious for just a moment longer, memorizing the kindness and strength that had always been her friend’s anchor.

Then, with one last look at the village she had only begun to call home a few years before, Plicity turned and walked toward the caravan. Ahead lay Calithara—and with it, the hope of finding someone who could explain what had happened to her, and perhaps answer the question of what mysterious force seemed to be drawing ever closer.

Plicity tightened the strap on her pack, feeling its weight settle squarely across her shoulders as she approached the caravan. She’d chosen a practical outfit—a deep green woolen cloak over a simple dress, her sturdy new boots laced tightly and her hair pulled back to keep it from tangling in the wind. The floral stitching along her boots added a delicate touch that made her smile, a small nod to her love of pretty things even in the midst of practicality. She’d tucked her smaller items—bitterbrush, a flask, a few rations—into the various pouches at her belt, but the heavier items rested comfortably in her pack.

One of the caravaners, a wiry, older man named Thom, nodded at her as she joined the group gathering near the lead wagon. His clothes were worn but clean, his hands calloused and steady. “You’re heading all the way to Calithara, then?” he asked, looking her over with a curious glint in his eye.

“Yes,” Plicity replied, adjusting the pack again. “I’ve... never been outside the village before, actually.” She felt a flicker of embarrassment, but his expression was kind.

“Calithara’s a big place,” he said, scratching his chin. “Not everyone who goes stays, but there’s a lot to see if you know where to look.”

Beside him, a younger woman named Mirin chimed in, her dark hair tied back with a simple strip of cloth. "I'm only going as far as Westmarch," she said, glancing at Plicity with a friendly smile. "A week's travel at most. You'll be going a fair bit longer, I imagine."

Plicity returned the smile, feeling a touch of excitement. "About two weeks, Rylan said."

"That sounds about right," Thom replied with a nod. "Good thing you're prepared. The road to Calithara's not the kind to walk unprepared."

Another traveler, a tall man with a weathered face named Edrin, overheard them and joined the conversation. "Calithara, eh? A city of guilds and guildmasters, they say. Full of merchants, entertainers, even palaces, if the rumors hold true." He shrugged, a bemused expression crossing his face. "I'm just heading to Riversbend to pick up some tools for the farm, but you... sounds like you've got something big planned."

Plicity felt herself tense a little at his words, unsure how to respond. She still wasn't certain what she would find in Calithara, or even what she hoped to find there. "I don't know about 'big,'" she said softly. "But I'm looking for someone who might know about... well, about something unusual. A group called the Seekers. Have any of you heard of them?"

The group exchanged glances, curious but collectively stumped.

"Seekers?" Mirin shook her head. "Doesn't ring a bell. But then, Calithara's big enough that I doubt anyone knows every group or guild there."

Edrin shrugged. "I've heard of merchants who claim they can find anything in that city. So if this Seekers lot exists, Calithara's probably where you'll find them. But keep an eye out; plenty of folks would sell you rumors just to make a coin."

Plicity nodded, though a small thread of doubt wormed its way through her. She thought of Brin's old book, the faded words that hinted at the Seekers' knowledge of the strange, mystical powers that now seemed entwined with her life. She couldn't shake the feeling that finding them might be her only hope of understanding what had happened to her, and perhaps even figuring out why this sense of malice lingered so heavily.

As she stood with the group, Rylan's voice rang out, calling for the final loading of supplies. Plicity adjusted her pack one last time, checking the knots and straps. She'd made sure her heavier items—extra food, her bedroll, and a small tin of herbs—had been tucked away on one of the wagons earlier. Her crystals, however, she kept in the small pouch on her belt, feeling the slight weight of them with every step. Their familiar hum of energy reassured her, even if she didn't fully understand why.

“Well, looks like we’re off,” Mirin said, giving Plicity a final smile. “If you make it back through Westmarch, be sure to stop by. My family’s inn always has an extra bowl of stew for travelers.”

Plicity grinned, feeling a small spark of warmth amid the uncertainty. “I’ll remember that,” she replied.

As they began moving, the wheels creaked and the horses snorted, adjusting to the first steps of the long journey ahead. Plicity took one last look at the village she had only begun to call home a few years before, watching as Dubious waved from a distance, her expression unreadable but steady. A sense of bittersweet familiarity lingered in the air, and Plicity held on to the sight of her friend’s reassuring presence for as long as she could.

The caravan rumbled forward, wheels creaking over packed earth as they left the village behind. Plicity walked in a daze, her senses still swimming in the wake of her farewell to Dubious. Though she tried to focus on the steady rhythm of the wagons and the low hum of conversations around her, something strange gnawed at the edges of her awareness—a feeling she couldn’t place, shadowy and vile, like the murky scent of rot drifting faintly on the breeze.

A shiver ran down her spine. She glanced around, noting the easy chatter of the caravaners, their relaxed postures and soft laughter. Whatever she felt, she seemed to be the only one aware of it. For a moment, she considered it might be nerves—her mind conjuring phantoms of doubt now that the journey had truly begun.

But as they passed through a wooded stretch, the feeling sharpened. Her stomach churned, and a wave of nausea rose with it. Images, blurred and hazy, danced at the edge of her vision—snapshots of chaos and ruin that made no sense. The sickly sensation seemed to wrap around her, filling her lungs with something rancid and dark. She gasped, a thin, sharp sound that drew the attention of a few nearby caravaners.

“Are you alright?” one of them, a woman with a weathered face and kind eyes, asked, stepping closer.

Plicity forced herself to nod, though her head spun, the sensation worsening as she clutched at the small pouch holding the crystals she’d bought from Alene. In desperation, she focused on the crystals’ energy, hoping their presence would calm her. But the moment she connected with their power, the images shifted—became sharper, almost real. She could see vague, ghostly shapes moving in a fury, torn earth and twisted remains, scenes of wanton destruction that made her feel as if she were trapped inside a waking nightmare.

The nausea intensified, but so did something else: a thread of euphoria, subtle yet unmistakable, creeping up alongside the horror. The sensation was chillingly similar to the thrill she'd felt the first time she summoned the coins and cotton, a rush of exhilaration that blended dangerously with the sickening visions. She pulled her hand away from the crystals, hoping to sever whatever connection she had awakened.

"Are you sure you're alright?" another voice asked, this time a younger man walking near the rear wagon. His brow creased in concern as he watched her press a hand to her forehead, her other hand gripping the edge of a cart to steady herself.

"Yes, I'm fine," she managed, her voice strained. "Just... a bit lightheaded. It'll pass." She forced a small, shaky smile, trying to mask the lingering feeling that something was deeply, horribly wrong.

Forcing herself upright, she continued walking, willing her feet forward even as the dark visions and nausea slowly ebbed. She struggled to shake off the remnants of the experience, though the anger, like a smoldering ember, lingered. It wasn't her own emotion; she felt certain of that. It was as if something cold and furious had slipped through the edges of her mind, grasping for her before finally letting go.

The sensations faded, but her skin prickled with the echo of the connection. Whatever presence she had felt—whatever anger had pulsed across the link between her and that unknown force—had sensed her departure, as though it recognized she was moving. With a final, shuddering breath, Plicity steadied herself, trying to focus on the mundane sounds of the road, the chatter of her companions, anything but the inexplicable darkness she had glimpsed.

Her vision cleared, the world around her regaining its solid shape and color. The caravan trudged onward, carrying her toward Calithara and whatever answers awaited her there. The shadow of malice lingered, but for now, she was free to move forward.

Chapter 6

Title: The Rift Boy

The moon hung low over the narrow isthmus that bridged Telsan's northern continent to the dense jungles of the south. The air was heavy, carrying the scent of salt from the seas flanking the land. Plicity trudged along a faint path, her charged crystal pulsing faintly in her pouch, its light barely illuminating the way. The trail, once clear, had been overtaken by creeping roots and vines, each step a struggle against nature's quiet reclamation.

The Zanith cat materialized beside her, its fur shimmering like starlight. It purred softly, weaving between her legs before leaping ahead to perch on a twisted root.

"You're leading me somewhere, aren't you?" Plicity asked, her voice breaking the stillness.

The cat's only response was a flick of its tail before it disappeared into the shadows. Plicity sighed and adjusted her scarf, which clung to her damp skin. The night was warm, but the unease prickling at the back of her neck sent a chill through her.

The forest felt heavier tonight, the kind of stillness that made the air itself feel alive. Plicity pulled her cloak tighter against the humid chill, her eyes scanning the narrow path ahead. Every so often, she glanced up, catching faint glimmers of light as the Zanith cat darted through the gloom. It moved like a wisp of smoke, its form shifting between shadows, always just ahead of her.

The deeper she went, the more the world changed. The usual sounds of night—the rustle of leaves, the soft chirp of insects—faded, replaced by an eerie hum that seemed to rise from the earth itself. The ground beneath her boots grew softer, almost spongy, and the air carried a faint metallic tang that tingled on her tongue. The scent of moss and damp stone mingled with the salt in the air, making her stomach churn faintly. She paused, her fingers brushing the crystals in her pouch. They were warm—warmer than they should have been.

Ahead, the path opened into a clearing, where a fractured Arcane Streams nexus shimmered faintly, its energy spilling erratically into the air. The sight stopped her cold. The crystals in the clearing were jagged and dark, their usual hum of power replaced by a discordant whine. At the heart of the nexus, a rift had formed—a jagged tear in reality, pulsating with chaotic energy.

The ground was littered with jagged shards of crystal, glowing faintly blue, their surfaces etched with swirling patterns that pulsed in rhythm with the earth's hum. They jutted from the ground like jagged teeth, and in the center of it all was the rift—a tear in reality, shimmering like oil on water. Its edges curled and snapped, revealing fleeting glimpses of

something beyond—a golden field, a stormy sky, a child’s face. It shifted so quickly she couldn’t trust her eyes.

The Zanith cat leapt lightly onto one of the larger crystals, its fur glowing faintly in the rift’s light. It tilted its head, staring into the tear, and let out a soft, musical hum. Plicity’s heart quickened. She stepped closer, the hair on her arms standing on end as the rift’s chaotic energy pressed against her.

The rift wasn’t just a tear—it was alive. It seemed to breathe, the air around it rippling like heat over stone. A faint whisper carried through the clearing, words too garbled to understand. The hum of the crystals clashed with the rift’s presence, creating a disharmony that made her teeth ache.

She froze, her fingers tightening around the crystal in her pouch. The voice came again, clearer this time. “Please... someone, help me!”

Plicity’s breath caught. “This is why you brought me here,” she murmured, her voice low.

Her instincts screamed at her to turn back, but something deeper urged her forward. Her chest tightened. She shouldn’t interfere—she knew that. Rifts were dangerous, unpredictable, and the things that came through them... they didn’t belong. But the voice was so human, so full of fear. She couldn’t just leave.

She knelt beside one of the larger shards jutting from the ground, its glow pulsing faintly in time with the hum of the Arcane Streams. Placing her hands gently on its jagged surface, she closed her eyes and reached out with her will. The crystal’s energy surged through her like a tidal wave, making her head spin and her fingertips tingle with raw power. She braced herself, drawing the flow into focus, and extended her will toward the rift. The chaotic energy crackled and snapped like fire, resisting her touch, but she pushed harder, bending it inch by inch until it finally yielded to her command.

With a burst of light, the rift flared wide, and something tumbled through.

It was a boy, no older than ten. He collapsed into her arms, his body feather-light and cold as frost. His breath came in sharp, shallow gasps, and his wide eyes darted around the clearing in terror.

“What... what happened? Where am I?” he stammered, his voice trembling like a leaf caught in a breeze.

Plicity steadied him, her heart sinking as she took in his translucent form. He wasn't fully here—not in the way a living person should be. His body shimmered faintly, almost like a reflection on water, and his hands flickered at the edges, as though he might vanish at any moment.

“You were... caught in something,” she said carefully, trying to keep her voice calm. “I pulled you out, but... you didn't come through all the way. You're not... whole.”

The boy clutched at his chest, his breath hitching. “I don't understand. I— I was running... there was this... this light, and it pulled me in. Everything went dark, and then I felt like I was floating, but I couldn't move.” His voice broke, and he looked at her with wide, tear-filled eyes. “Am I dead?”

She shook her head quickly. “No. At least... I don't think so. But you're not the same as you were. This place...” She gestured to the glowing crystals around them. “It's special. The energy here—it's holding you together. Without it, you might... fade away.”

He stared at his hands, his face pale and drawn. “I'm see-through,” he whispered, his voice trembling. “What's happening to me? Why can I see all... this?” He gestured to the clearing, his eyes widening as he took in the glowing Arcane Streams running through the ground, the shimmering crystals, the rift still pulsing faintly in the center.

“These are called Arcane Streams,” Plicity said softly. “They're... like rivers of energy that flow beneath the ground. Most people can't see them, but you're... different now.”

The boy swallowed hard, his translucent form flickering faintly. “Can't you just send me back? To where I was before?”

Her throat tightened. She shook her head. “I... I can't,” she admitted, her voice trembling. “I don't know how to do that. I've never seen a rift like this before, let alone understood how to control it. If there's a way to send you back, I don't know it.”

His expression crumbled into quiet despair. “So... I can't go home?”

“I'm so sorry,” she whispered. “I wish I could, but the rift is gone. Even if I could open it again, I wouldn't know where to send you.”

He sat down heavily, or as heavily as someone half-made of light could. “If I stay here, what happens to me?”

“You’d be tied to this place,” she said gently. “The energy from these crystals would keep you whole, but you wouldn’t be able to leave. It would keep you alive, in a way, but... it wouldn’t be the same as living.”

“And if I go?” he asked, his voice small.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “You might fade completely, or you might find... something else. Somewhere else. I can’t promise what’s waiting for you.”

He was silent for a long moment, staring at the glowing crystals. The Zanith cat padded over to him, its luminous fur brushing against his ghostly hand. He flinched, then stilled as the cat let out a soft, resonant hum. “It feels warm,” he said, his voice awed. “Like it knows I’m here.”

Plicity’s chest ached as she watched him. “Talor,” she said softly. “It’s your choice. Whatever you decide, I’ll help you.”

He looked up at her, his translucent eyes filled with quiet resolve. “I think... I think I want to try. If I stay here, I’ll just be a shadow. But if I go... maybe I’ll find my mom again. She used to tell me that after we die, we go somewhere beautiful. I think I want to try.”

Plicity nodded, swallowing the lump in her throat. “Okay,” she said softly. “I’ll let you go.”

She pressed her crystal to his chest, feeling the fragile threads of energy that tied him to the ley line. Slowly, carefully, she unwound them, her own power trembling with the effort. Talor’s form began to shimmer, brighter and brighter, until he was a figure of pure light.

“Thank you,” he whispered as his form began to dissolve. “For giving me a choice.”

And then he was gone.

The clearing grew silent, the Arcane Streams energy settling as the disturbance resolved. Plicity stayed kneeling, her hand resting on the shard of crystal, her heart heavy with the weight of what she had done. The Zanith cat nuzzled her arm, its luminous eyes full of something she couldn’t quite name—comfort, perhaps, or understanding.

She closed her eyes and whispered, “Be free, Talor. Wherever you are.”

Title: The Meteor

The Prism's Wrath

The skies above Telsan burned in shades of radiant gold and violet, a fiery streak slicing across the heavens. People across the land paused mid-task: farmers wiping sweat from their brows, children holding half-eaten loaves of bread, traders haggling over the price of salted fish. All eyes turned skyward as the brilliant and ominous object arced downward toward the northern horizon.

In the bustling market of Huruth, a baker brushed flour from her hands onto her apron, squinting against the glare. "Looks like a fireball!" she exclaimed to a nearby merchant, who scratched at his chin and muttered a prayer to Espara.

"A fireball? More like a sign," a bearded man interjected, his voice trembling. "An omen, sent by the gods. Mark my words."

Further down the street, a young child pointed skyward, their voice high with wonder. "Is it a falling star?"

Jocko, standing in the narrow courtyard of a barrister's academy, watched the fiery trail with narrowed eyes. The fireball's glow reflected in the polished blade of his saber as he froze mid-thrust during a fencing match. His sparring partner's sword nicked his sleeve, but Jocko barely noticed.

"That's no ordinary falling star," he muttered under his breath. His mind churned as he sought the right term. "It's a meteor."

The instructor barked, "Jocko, you're wide open!" but his words failed to shake Jocko from his reverie. His silver and blue hair shimmered in the waning light as he continued to stare at the descending meteor, a sense of unease settling over him.

The Nexus Collapse

Deep in the heart of the Great Wood, a Arcane Streams nexus pulsed with quiet energy, its crystalline formations humming softly in the sunlight. The air here was always thick with magic, vibrant and alive. Until the meteor struck.

A family of emerald-furred foxes frolicked at the forest's edge, their kits tumbling over one another in a playful sparring match. Overhead, a flock of bluejays darted through the treetops, their shrill cries echoing like laughter. Below, a doe and her fawn drank cautiously from a crystal-clear stream that wound near the nexus. Life moved in harmony, unbothered by the unseen power that hummed beneath their paws and hooves.

Then the meteor struck.

The impact was deafening, a soundless roar that sent waves of energy cascading outward. Crystals shattered like glass, fragments spiraling into the air as the nexus erupted in a burst of light. The ground splintered, deep fissures zigzagging outward, and the once-harmonious hum turned into a cacophony of discordant wails. The emerald foxes bolted, their kits' yips of panic swallowed by the thunderous chaos. The bluejays flapped furiously, but a shockwave of energy knocked them from the air, their delicate forms falling limp onto the shuddering forest floor. The doe screamed, a sound so raw it cut through the noise, as the ground opened beneath her, swallowing her and her fawn whole.

The nexus's destruction rippled across Telsan's Arcane Streams network, the delicate balance shattered. Villages built on Arcane Streams crossings experienced tremors, and Seekers, sensitive to the lines, doubled over as waves of pain radiated through their bodies. Even those unaware of the Arcane Streams felt something shift—a deep unease, like the ground itself was uncertain beneath their feet.

****The Call****

Jocko sat in his modest chambers within the Eternal Citadel, poring over legal texts illuminated by the dim light of a single candle. His mind wandered to the meteor, now no more than a distant memory on the horizon. He absently ran a hand through his hair, the blue and silver strands falling into place with practiced ease.

A sharp knock interrupted his thoughts. Before he could respond, the door creaked open, and Bratt strode in. His boots thudded against the stone floor, and he dropped a satchel onto the desk, scattering papers.

“Ever hear of knocking *and* waiting?” Jocko drawled, leaning back in his chair.

Bratt smirked, brushing a strand of hair from his forehead. “No time for manners. The gods are calling.” He pulled out a scroll bearing Chortle's seal and tossed it onto the desk.

Jocko raised an eyebrow, studying the seal that shimmered faintly even in the dim light. “Chortle again. He’s got a knack for picking the worst moments. I suppose this is another installment of ‘seventh son saves the world?’” There was a mix of exasperation and familiarity in his tone, a wry acknowledgment of his history with the god.

Bratt chuckled as he leaned against the desk, crossing his arms. “You know, most people would be thrilled to have a god on speed call. Not sure if it’s destiny or just your luck that he picked you. Anyway, that seal wouldn’t open for anyone else, so I’m guessing he’s banking on you to fix whatever mess this meteor caused.”

Jocko sighed, running a hand through his hair again as he reached for the scroll. “And how did this end up in your hands?”

Bratt’s grin widened. “A new messenger from Chortle tracked me down while I was at the smithy pounding out horseshoes to keep my smithing skills sharp. Said it was urgent and made it pretty clear I was just the delivery boy.” Bratt paused as Jocko eyed the scroll and added, “Oh, and he was sure to tell me that Chortle still can’t see you and has to have a conduit companion who sticks close to you for contact. That’ll be my new title, Bratt the Conduit.”

With a sense of irony as his friend joked around, Jocko broke the seal. The scroll unraveled to reveal terse, angular handwriting detailing the Radiant Realm’s distress and the opening of strange, unstable boundaries between the divine plane and Telsan. The lettering glowed faintly to his eyes, something Bratt, without any connection to the divine or arcane, would not be able to discern.

His expression darkened as he read, and he finally stood, buckling his saber onto his belt.

“This doesn’t sound good. Let’s go. He needs us to actually go to the Radiant Realm. Where’s that messenger?” he asked, glancing at Bratt.

Bratt slung the satchel back over his shoulder, his expression unusually serious. “The cavern. The one we found years ago beneath the Citadel. The messenger said the rift’s opened there. Whatever’s waiting, we’re going to need that place to cross over.”

Jocko exhaled sharply, squaring his shoulders. Memories of the creature they had to dispatch in that cavern of glowing crystals and lichen came to mind; one of the first seriously dangerous situations he and Bratt had to deal with. “Of course it’s the cavern. Let’s not keep destiny waiting, then.”

The Messenger's Guide

Bratt and Jocko descended the forgotten stairways beneath the Eternal Citadel, their steps echoing faintly in the narrow corridors of worn stone. The air grew cooler, thick with the smell of damp earth and moss, illuminated only by the faint glow of lichen lining the walls. This secret passageway, known only to them, led to a nexus long abandoned by those who once knew of its power.

As they entered the cavern, memories of their previous battle flooded Jocko's mind. The remains of the giant cave beast—its ribcage arched like a grotesque cathedral—lay scattered across the cavern floor. Picked clean by rats and fish, its bones gleamed faintly under the light of crystalline clusters that had grown more prominent since their last visit. Shards of smashed crystals from their desperate fight with the beast still littered the floor, their jagged edges dulled by time.

"Funny," Bratt said, nudging a shard with his boot. "You'd think after all these years, someone would've stumbled down here. It's not every day you find a graveyard like this."

"Most people don't even know this place exists," Jocko replied, his voice low. "And if they did, the beast we faced back then would've been enough to scare anyone off. Let's just hope there isn't something new lurking down here."

Bratt scanned the cavern, his hand instinctively brushing the hilt of his sword. The air shimmered faintly near the nexus, where crystalline growths jutted upward, casting eerie, angular shadows. Though the main Arcane Streams feeding the nexus had weakened long ago, energy still pulsed faintly within the crystals, their hum rising and falling in irregular patterns. It was unlike anything Jocko remembered.

At the center of the chamber stood a tall figure cloaked in simple robes. The messenger radiated a presence that was both mundane and otherworldly, his face lit faintly by the surrounding crystals. He adjusted the cuffs of his sleeves, revealing intricate glyphs that glowed faintly along his wrists. His expression was calm but carried an urgency that was impossible to ignore.

"You're late," the messenger said, his voice smooth and steady. "I expected better from the ones chosen by my lord."

Bratt scoffed, crossing his arms. "Nice to meet you, too. Are all of Chortle's servants this charming?"

The messenger's eyes flicked to Jocko. "You, mortal, are the one he called. My name is Elias, servant of Chortle and guide to your path."

"And what exactly is that path?" Jocko asked, stepping closer. His gaze shifted to the crystals surrounding the nexus. The energy seemed to react to Elias' presence, their faint glow pulsing in time with his movements. "This nexus is stable, for now. What's your interest here?"

Elias raised a hand toward the nexus, his fingers brushing the air. "This nexus is a thread in a web that spans all realities. Though it is intact, the damage done by the crystalline meteor has sent shockwaves through the Arcane Streams. Weaknesses have formed, fissures between realms. The rift you see here leads to the Radiant Realm, and it is your only passage to my lord."

Bratt squinted at the shimmering distortion near the nexus, where light bent and swirled in unnatural patterns. "So that's the way in, huh? Doesn't look too welcoming."

Elias turned to Bratt, his expression unchanging. "It is not meant to be. The barrier between realms was never designed for mortals to cross. Yet, here we are."

Jocko folded his arms, frowning. "If Chortle wanted us to help, why not bring us there himself? Why go through all this trouble?"

"The gods cannot traverse freely to your reality anymore," Elias explained. "The disruption of the nexus system has severed their connection. I, being human, am tethered to Chortle's will and can act as his envoy. But only you, as mortals with ties to this realm, can pass through and assist him directly."

Bratt sighed, stepping closer to the rift. The distortion sent waves of heat and cold in equal measure, raising the hairs on his arms. "And let me guess: this isn't going to be a pleasant trip."

Elias gave a faint smile. "You will live."

"That's reassuring," Bratt muttered. "Let's get this over with."

Elias raised his hand, the glyphs on his wrist glowing brighter as the rift expanded, revealing a shimmering gateway. The cavern filled with a low hum as the crystals vibrated in unison, their light intensifying. Jocko took a deep breath, gripping the hilt of his saber.

"Stay close," Elias said, stepping into the rift. Bratt followed with a grimace, and Jocko was the last to step through, the air around him warping as the Radiant Realm consumed them.

Arrival in the Radiant Realm

The transition was disorienting, a kaleidoscope of color and sensation that left Jocko gasping for air as his feet landed on unfamiliar ground. He steadied himself, gripping the hilt of his saber as the world around him came into focus.

The Radiant Realm was unlike anything he had imagined. The sky stretched endlessly in shades of gold and azure, punctuated by floating islands adorned with crystalline spires that shimmered like prisms. Rivers of light wove between the islands, their currents pulsing with rhythmic energy. The air hummed with a strange vitality, each breath tingling in his lungs.

Bratt stumbled beside him, shaking his head as though trying to clear it. “Well, this is... something,” he muttered, his voice trailing off as he took in the surreal landscape. “Didn’t expect it to look so—shiny.”

Elias stood a few paces ahead, his posture unshaken. “Welcome to the Radiant Realm. Do not be deceived by its beauty—this place is no less dangerous than your own.”

As they began to walk, Jocko’s eyes darted to the ground beneath them. It was a mosaic of translucent stone, each piece refracting light in a dazzling array of colors. Tiny motes of energy drifted around them, their faint chiming sounds adding to the realm’s ethereal ambiance. One of the motes brushed against Bratt’s shoulder and disappeared with a soft pop.

“Is everything here alive?” Bratt asked, glancing nervously at a nearby crystalline tree that seemed to sway without any wind.

“Alive, aware, and watching,” Elias replied cryptically. He gestured for them to follow. “My lord’s domain is close.”

As they walked, the shimmering landscape seemed to shift around them, as though the realm itself were adjusting their path. Jocko felt a faint tugging sensation, not unlike the pull of an Arcane Stream but deeper, more deliberate. It wasn’t long before a structure emerged on the horizon—a sprawling palace of mirrors and light that seemed to grow out of the very air.

The palace’s walls refracted the surrounding brilliance, casting shifting patterns of color across the ground. It was both dazzling and disorienting, its design a testament to the chaotic yet calculated nature of its occupant.

Bratt let out a low whistle. “That’s Chortle’s place? Figures.”

As they approached the entrance, the sound of faint laughter echoed from within, a mixture of mirth and mischief. The doors swung open as they drew near, revealing an opulent hall lined with crystalline pillars that sparkled in the ambient light.

Chortle awaited them at the far end of the hall, seated on a throne that appeared to be made entirely of shifting reflections. His form was radiant yet approachable, his eyes twinkling with the same mischievous energy Jocko had come to expect.

“Ah, my favorite mortals!” Chortle exclaimed, spreading his arms wide. “And you brought company! Elias, you’ve outdone yourself.”

Elias bowed his head slightly. “My lord, they have come as you requested.”

Chortle rose from his throne, his movements fluid and theatrical. “Jocko, my dear seventh son, it’s been too long! And Bratt, always a pleasure. Now, I suppose you’re wondering why I’ve called you here.”

“Something about saving the world?” Jocko said dryly, crossing his arms. “Again.”

Chortle chuckled, the sound like a chorus of bells. “Yes, yes, the usual heroics. But this time, it’s a bit more complicated. The destruction of your nexus has thrown the Arcane Streams—and by extension, the divine laws—into chaos. If the balance isn’t restored soon, well... let’s just say things will get very messy.”

“Messy how?” Bratt asked, narrowing his eyes.

“The laws that bind us gods will unravel,” Chortle explained, his tone growing uncharacteristically serious. “Imagine a world where divine power runs unchecked, where even the most minor deities can meddle freely in mortal affairs. Your realm—and countless others—would become battlegrounds.”

Jocko frowned, his mind racing. “Why can’t you fix this yourselves? You’re gods, aren’t you?”

Chortle sighed dramatically. “Oh, we would if we could. But the disruption has severed our connection to your realm. That’s why I need you. Mortals like you can traverse the fissures and stabilize the nexus from within.”

“And how are we supposed to do that?” Bratt asked, gesturing at the surreal surroundings. “We’re a swordsman and a barrister, not miracle workers.”

Chortle’s expression softened, and he placed a hand on Jocko’s shoulder. “You, my clever mortal, already have the tools you need. The divine laws are woven into the very fabric of this realm—and now, they’re in you as well.”

Before Jocko could protest, Chortle pressed his palm against Jocko's forehead. A surge of light and energy coursed through him, and his vision was filled with ancient glyphs and phrases etched in fire. Words like "balance," "flow," and "binding" echoed in his mind, accompanied by the unmistakable preamble: *As long as magic flows, the divine laws remain bound.*

Jocko staggered back, clutching his head. "What the hell was that?"

"A gift," Chortle said with a sly grin. "Or a burden, depending on how you see it. The knowledge of divine law is now yours to use. I trust you'll make the right choices."

Bratt stepped forward, his hand on his sword. "And what about me? What's my part in all this?"

Chortle's grin widened. "Oh, you, my brave conduit, have the most important job of all. When the time comes, you'll deliver the key to ensuring those laws stay intact. But for now, let's focus on getting you to the next step."

Title: A Path Foretold

The Quiet Temple

The temple was still, save for the groan of ancient beams. Belanie, alone in her chambers, sat cross-legged on the cold stone floor, her calloused fingers brushing the edge of a Telsanian Oracul card spread. A single candle trembled on the low table, its light flickering against the vaulted ceiling.

She tugged at the frayed edge of her sleeve and pushed a stray curl from her face. Her brow furrowed as she studied the cards:

- **The Spire:** upheaval.
- **The Veil:** introspection.
- **The Malice:** lurking threat.

Her eyes lingered on the last card, The Conflux, its swirling Arcane Streams promising harmony through chaos. Tapping the card's face absently, she murmured, "Harmony through chaos... or after?"

Unease

Belanie shifted, the cold of the stone floor biting into her skin. She tucked a stray curl behind her ear, casting a glance at the heavy oak doors. Silence answered, save for the faint crackle of the candle.

She exhaled sharply, folding her hands. "Chortle, guide me," she whispered, her voice tight. Closing her eyes, she sought the divine thread, willing it to hum within her. A faint warmth stirred in her chest, but it felt distant, unsteady.

Doubt crept in as her fingers tightened against her knees. *Am I wrong?*

Ambiguity

Shaking off her unease, Belanie reached for her bag of runes, her fingers brushing the smooth, carved stones. She pulled three and cast them onto the cloth:

- **Conflict:** a blazing sigil of fire.

- **Transformation:** the coiled glow of a serpent.
- **A blank rune.**

Her lips pressed into a thin line as she brushed the blank rune aside.

“Ambiguity,” she muttered. “It’s always ambiguity.”

Before she could interpret further, dizziness swept over her like a sudden gust of wind. Her fingers gripped the table, but the world tilted. Unseen currents dragged her into the unknown.

Radiant Conclave

Belanie blinked against the overwhelming light. Golden and warm, it surrounded her, vast and infinite. She floated in a sky of shifting color—amethyst, emerald, and sapphire, speckled with the glimmer of countless stars.

Low, musical voices filled the space. Around her, gods and goddesses shimmered like living sculptures, some humanoid, others abstract and otherworldly. Their forms blurred at the edges as they spoke in harmonious tones.

Belanie realized she had interrupted a conclave. The gods turned their eyes toward her briefly, their gazes brushing against her like the warmth of the sun, before returning to their discussions. She fidgeted, lowering her eyes.

A booming laugh broke the tension.

Greetings

“Late to the party, I see!”

The voice was warm and familiar—Chortle, a friend among the gods. He stood nearby, his broad, round form exuding joy, with a belly that bounced slightly as he walked. His bald head gleamed like polished marble, and his laugh was as rich as rolling thunder.

Belanie managed a small smile. She found Chortle’s presence comforting, though his humor had a way of testing her patience.

“The cards are unclear. The runes—”

“Unclear?” Chortle interrupted, tilting his head with exaggerated concern. “Or inconvenient?”

Belanie stiffened, brushing an errant curl from her cheek, ready to retort. But before she could, the light around them shifted, deepening into something far more profound.

Manifestation

The gods fell silent, and the Radiant Realm shifted. A beam of pure light pierced the space, brighter than the sun.

Belanie flinched, shielding her eyes—but it wasn’t blinding. Instead, the light was comforting, wrapping around her like a warm embrace.

“The One God,” she whispered, sinking to her knees. Her breath caught as the light pulsed, filling the space with a resonance that made the air itself hum.

The other gods dimmed, their forms bowing to the radiant beam. Belanie pressed her hands against the radiant floor, trembling.

“The storm approaches,” the One God’s voice echoed, deep and absolute, carrying both truth and command.

Warning

Shards of images swirled around Belanie: a blazing sky, trembling earth, and faces she didn’t recognize. The light pulsed, wrapping her in its weight.

“The storm is not for you,” the One God’s voice rang, “but through you.”

Belanie’s heart twisted, her gaze dropping to the radiant floor. “What must I do?”

The light flared, but no words followed. Instead, the beam receded, and the warmth began to fade. The gods murmured again, their focus shifting away from her as she pondered the words spoken.

Chortle’s presence, still nearby, filled the growing quiet.

Farewell

Belanie turned to Chortle, her shoulders heavy with the One God's words, a tingling sensation spreading through her body.

"Off so soon?" Chortle asked, eying her as the transition started, his round face softening. He rested his hands on his belly, his expression caught between humor and concern.

"You know I don't choose when I come or leave," Belanie murmured, brushing a lock of hair behind her ear.

"Ah, if I could, I'd choose to have you linger," Chortle replied with a grin as Belanie felt her spirit returning to Telsan. "Next time, I hope you are here long enough to enjoy the view."

His laughter followed her as the Radiant Realm dissolved into darkness.

Returned

Belanie gasped as her eyes snapped open.

The chill of the stone chamber rushed back to her, grounding her. She gripped the edge of the table, her breath shallow.

The cards and runes lay scattered as before. Her fingers brushed the blank rune again, its smooth surface gleaming faintly.

"The storm approaches... through me," she whispered. Her voice trembled as the One God's words burned in her mind, the rest of her visit to the divine realm fading from her memory like sand through her fingers.

She stared at The Conflux card, its swirling Arcane Streams more foreboding than before. The faint candlelight trembled, casting long shadows on the walls.

Resolve

Her hands curled into fists as she exhaled her unconsciously held breath. She straightened her back, pushing a strand of hair behind her ear.

"The storm approaches..." The One God's words rang in her mind. What would ripple through her would demand more than she could yet understand.

Her fingers brushed the necklace at her throat, the embedded crystals a familiar comfort. A symbol of her connection to Chortle and the divine purpose she had embraced.

Her gaze shifted to the flickering candle, its flame bending but unbroken. “Through me,” she murmured, her voice steady.

The candle sputtered, casting her shadow long and thin against the walls. The storm was coming—not for her, but through her.

Outline for Bratt Out of Hell

I. The Call to Adventure

Setting the Stage:

The story opens with Bratt and Jocko back at the Eternal Citadel after their last nexus-stabilizing mission. Jocko is researching Arcane Streams disruptions while Bratt, restless, keeps himself occupied with smithing and sparring.

The Incident:

A strange, deep rumbling shakes the earth, unlike anything felt before. Bratt and Jocko discover that it’s not a surface quake but a pulse from beneath the mantle, tied to the negative Arcane Streams. Jocko, sensing something through his arcane connection, theorizes that the “positive” Arcane Streams are being drawn downward into the deeper earth, threatening to destabilize Telsan from its very foundations.

The Summons:

Bratt is contacted—possibly in a dream, or through a cryptic messenger—by an entity claiming to reside in the depths of Telsan’s earth, within a realm called The Obsidian Halls

(our allegorical Hell). The message is urgent: if this growing imbalance isn't corrected, the Arcane Streams will tear apart both surface and underworld realms.

Bratt's Decision:

To Jocko's dismay, Bratt feels compelled to answer the summons. The entity hints at a prophecy tied to Bratt's destiny as the "one who can traverse all realms" (tying back to earlier stories where Bratt acts as a conduit). Bratt, driven by stubborn heroism and curiosity, decides he has no choice but to go.

Jocko: "Let me guess. You're going to say this can't wait, aren't you?"

Bratt: "It can't wait, and I'm going with or without you."

Jocko sighs and reaches for his saber. "And here I thought we were overdue for some rest."

II. Journey into the Underworld

The Descent:

Bratt and Jocko journey through forgotten tunnels beneath the Eternal Citadel, delving past crystalline formations, magma-lit chambers, and Arcane Stream fissures glowing ominously red. Jocko begins to feel the effects of the negative Arcane Streams—they resist his Arcane abilities, leaving him frustrated and vulnerable.

The Land of the Restless Dead:

As they descend further, the duo encounters the Silent Fields, where souls of the dead linger. The land is eerie but beautiful—crystalline tombs glowing faintly, red energy arcing overhead like lightning. Here they meet their guide:

The Ferryman: A grim but charismatic figure who offers to lead them through the Fields safely. He warns that disturbing the dead will bring torment upon them, but Bratt's natural charisma earns his respect.

Ferryman: "You're either brave or stupid, boy. Both work, I suppose."

Traversing the Fields:

The pair witness the dead in various states—some peaceful, others writhing in torment, held there by unfinished business. Bratt is struck by the tragedy, while Jocko remains wary, noting how this land feels fundamentally "wrong." A brief encounter nearly goes awry when Bratt disturbs a restless spirit, but Jocko's quick thinking saves them.

III. The Obsidian Halls

Arrival in the Underworld of the Gods:

Emerging past the Silent Fields, they reach the Obsidian Halls—a vast and radiant underground kingdom. Unlike the celestial brilliance of the Radiant Realm, the underworld is darkly resplendent:

Black stone palaces adorned with molten veins of red light.

Rivers of liquid crystal flowing like blood through the caverns.

Gods who have chosen to dwell here are grand, ominous figures, draped in shadows yet glowing faintly with their own power.

Bratt: “It’s almost... beautiful.”

Jocko: “If you like nightmares dressed in their Sunday best.”

The Gods Below:

The duo is brought before the Obsidian Lords, gods who rejected the Radiant Realm in favor of this underground splendor. They explain the truth:

The crystalline meteor shattered not only the nexus above but weakened the “boundary” holding the negative Arcane Streams in check.

The energy imbalance is now threatening to consume both realms, and without intervention, the Arcane Streams will collapse completely.

The Obsidian Lords, bound by their own laws, cannot act directly. They need mortals—Bratt and Jocko—to venture to the Heart of the Earth, where the Arcane Streams converge, and restore balance.

IV. The Heart of the Earth

The Perilous Journey:

Bratt and Jocko, armed only with the guidance of the Ferryman and Jocko's dwindling Arcane abilities, traverse treacherous landscapes:

Magma Caverns: Rivers of lava pulse with energy, forcing them to navigate narrow ledges.

Crystal Wastes: A shattered landscape of jagged red crystals, where the energy drains their strength.

Jocko's Revelation:

Jocko begins to understand the negative Arcane Streams, realizing that their energy is chaotic but not inherently evil. By adapting his techniques, he finds a way to tap into the red Arcane Streams—albeit with effort and risk.

The Final Trial:

At the Heart of the Earth, they encounter a massive, corrupted crystalline entity—born of the instability caused by the meteor. It pulses with both blue and red energy, a symbol of imbalance.

The Climax:

Bratt fights the creature head-on, using brute strength and his indomitable will to keep it at bay.

Jocko, channeling both positive and negative Arcane Streams, stabilizes the flow of energy, his body glowing faintly as he becomes a living conduit.

Together, they restore balance, sealing the Heart and preventing the collapse.

V. The Return

A Narrow Escape:

The Ferryman leads them back through the Obsidian Halls as the realm begins to stabilize, the red energy softening into a deeper harmony. The Obsidian Lords acknowledge their success but remain cryptic about the future.

Reflections at the Surface:

Bratt and Jocko return to Telsan through a Arcane Streams fissure, emerging battered but alive. The earth beneath the Eternal Citadel is now quiet, though faint red energy occasionally flickers in the depths.

Jocko: “Next time you get a summons from the underworld, Bratt, leave me out of it.”

Bratt grins, wiping soot from his face. “You’d be lost without me, and you know it.”

Foreshadowing:

As they leave, a faint tremor shakes the ground—perhaps a reminder that balance is always fragile, and the realms of Telsan have many more secrets yet to reveal.

Tile: The Ambush

The Greatwood grew darker as the sun dipped lower, its canopy casting long shadows across the road. Freya frowned, her hand brushing the pouch of crystals at her side. The hum of the Arcane Stream beneath her boots felt... uneven.

The Greatwood stretched wide and ancient before them, its canopy casting dappled light across the caravan trail. Freya rode at the front, her posture steady, though her mind churned with unease. She adjusted the straps of the satchel at her side, its weight a constant reminder of the commission she'd accepted.

Inside the satchel, the dull glow of uncharged crystals pressed faintly against her awareness. Most were part of the caravan's cargo, to be delivered to the Eternal Citadel for recharging. But a few were hers—tools she hoped to renew at the Citadel's Nexuses, assuming they made it there intact.

Her fingers brushed the satchel's clasp. She'd heard too many stories of crystals destabilizing under the wrong conditions, though the ones she carried were carefully packed and shielded. Still, the road they traveled gave her pause.

Beneath her boots and the wheels of the caravan, she could vaguely sense the faint distant hum of an Arcane Stream. Its flow was not direct or simple; like all Arcane Streams, it twisted and meandered like a river carving through unseen terrain. Freya couldn't decide whether the road had been intentionally built to follow the Stream or if its proximity was a coincidence. Either way, the Stream's presence added both stability and risk.

"Always twisting, always flowing," she murmured under her breath.

"What was that?" Cray Riffard, the Caravan Master, called over his shoulder from the front of the line of well built, wood sided wagons.

Freya glanced at him. He rode a gray mare with the easy confidence of a seasoned trader, his weathered face set in a perpetual squint. Cray had a reputation as one of the few who could reliably navigate the route to the Eternal Citadel, and for good reason.

"The Stream," Freya said, gesturing ahead. "It's not a straight line—it never is. But it's close enough to this path to make me wonder why."

Cray chuckled dryly. "From what you explained to me about those streams of power—if they're really there—maybe someone thought it made for a safer route." He shrugged, adding with a grin, "Then again, safer's a matter of perspective."

Freya didn't miss the subtle jab. She smirked faintly. "Which is why you hired us."

Cray nodded. “Damn right. Free passage for you and your sword-swinging friend back there, in exchange for keeping us in one piece.”

As if in response, from behind her, Yairn’s voice broke in. “It’s too quiet.”

Freya turned to see him walking alongside the second cart, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword. He glanced at her, his sharp eyes narrowing. “You feel it, don’t you?”

Freya froze, reaching out with her attuned senses, focusing on the Arcane Stream she’s been aware of for miles. “Something’s wrong,” Freya replied, her voice low.

Cray fell back to ride beside her, his gray snorting at the indignity of not leading the way. Cray’s gaze darting between the two. “What is it?”

Freya didn’t answer immediately. She dismounted, forcing the cavern master to stop and signal his drivers to slow their forward progress. Freya’s boots crunched on a patch of gravel as she crouched, pressing one hand to the ground. The Arcane Stream below was sluggish, disrupted, as though something unnatural was feeding off its energy.

“There’s a disturbance,” she said finally, rising to her feet. “A big one.”

“Great,” Yairn muttered. “And here I was hoping for a quiet trip.”

Cray swore under his breath. “Everyone! Stop the carts! Now!”

The caravan ground to a halt, the drivers pulling on their reins as the horses snorted nervously. Freya scanned the tree line ahead, her heart pounding.

Then, it happened.

Something new to Freya emerged from the shadows—a creature; a twisted, translucent figure with clawed limbs and a pulsing crimson glow beneath its skin. More followed, their distorted forms flickering like broken reflections.

“Riftlings,” Freya muttered, reaching for her pouch.

Probably noticing the being at the same time Freya did, one of the drivers shouted “Monsters!”, his voice high with panic as he pointed to the creature. The horses reared, their hooves striking the ground as the drivers fought to keep them steady.

“Stay calm!” Cray bellowed, dismounting with surprising agility for a man of his size. He drew a short blade, holding it with the confidence of someone who’d defended a caravan before.

The Battle

Several more creatures emerged, their very presence touching her soul, thrumming with the familiar feel of something recently transversed through a portal. They surged forward as Freya hurled her first charged crystal into their midst. The resulting shockwave sent two of them sprawling, their forms dissolving into unstable energy. Yairn was already moving, his blade flashing in the dim light as he cut down a Riftling that lunged for the second cart.

“Protect the carts!” Freya shouted, her voice sharp.

Cray barked orders at the drivers, who scrambled to secure the horses and pull makeshift weapons from beneath the seats. One of them, a young man with a fierce look in his eye, grabbed a spear and stood his ground beside the lead cart.

A riftling leapt at him, its claws outstretched. Freya reacted instinctively, drawing another crystal and sending a burst of energy into the creature before it could reach him.

“Thanks,” the young man said breathlessly, his grip tightening on the spear.

“Don’t thank me yet,” Freya replied, her gaze locking onto the riftling leader at the edge of the clearing. It raised a staff crowned with a corrupted shard, its crimson light pulsating in time with the Arcane Stream beneath them.

“It’s the shard on that one’s staff,” Freya said pointing, her voice tight. “It feels like t’s anchoring them.”

Yairn slashed through another Riftling, his movements fluid and precise. “Then we take it out,” he said, stepping to Freya’s side.

“Cray, hold the line!” Freya shouted, already moving toward the shard.

The Caravan Master nodded grimly, rallying the drivers. “You heard her! Keep those things away from the carts!”

Breaking the Connection

Freya knelt beside the corrupted shard, placing a charged crystal on the ground. She pressed her palm to it, her breath steady as she focused on the faint remnants of the Positive Arcane Stream beneath them.

“Cover me!” she shouted.

Yairn stood guard, fending off two Riftlings that lunged for her. One managed to swipe at his arm, leaving a shallow gash, but he gritted his teeth and pressed on.

The young man with the spear joined him, his movements clumsy but determined. Together, they drove back the attackers, though it was clear the effort was taking its toll.

Freya dropped to one knee, pressing her left hand into the dirt. She closed her eyes, blocking out the chaos around her, and focused on the Arcane Stream pulsing faintly beneath her. Pulling energy from the Stream was never easy—it demanded all her concentration and strength. She remembered a Practitioner she'd met once, how effortlessly they'd drawn from the Stream, their mastery making her own efforts feel clumsy by comparison. But Freya wasn't here to compare herself to anyone.

The crystal in her hand, a high-quality shard with excellent amplification properties, warmed against her palm as she forced the raw energy into it. The air around her shimmered faintly, the crystal flaring to life in a burst of blue light.

The Riftling leader screeched, the sound distorted and unnatural, its head snapping toward her. The jagged shard atop its staff pulsed crimson, matching the erratic rhythm of the Arcane Stream beneath them.

“Freya, now!” Yairn shouted. Blood dripped from his arm as he drove his sword through another attacker, his movements growing slower with exhaustion.

Freya didn't hesitate. Rising to her feet as she let the chaos back in again, she raised her right hand and aimed the newly charged crystal at the Riftling leader. She directed its stored energy into the corrupted shard atop its staff. A beam of brilliant blue light erupted from the crystal, slamming into the crimson shard. The impact sent a ripple through the clearing, the opposing energies clashing in a deafening shockwave.

The crimson shard cracked, its light flickering wildly before it shattered completely. The Riftling leader let out one final, desperate screech before its body dissolved into crimson wisps.

The remaining Riftlings faltered, their forms flickering and unstable. Many turned and fled, loping back toward their fallen leader in what seemed like instinct or confusion. The rest dissolved into nothing as the corrupted energy anchoring them faded.

The clearing fell silent, save for the faint hum of the Arcane Stream returning to its natural rhythm beneath Freya's feet.

Aftermath

The clearing fell silent, the tension in the air dissipating as the Arcane Stream returned to its natural flow.

Cray approached, his blade still in hand. “Well,” he said, his voice steady despite the chaos. “You two earned your passage, that’s for sure.”

Freya managed a tired smile. “Glad we could help.”

The young man with the spear slumped against the cart, his breathing ragged. Yairn clapped him on the shoulder, offering a rare moment of approval. “Not bad, kid. You’ll live to fight another day.”

Freya glanced at the shattered remains of the shard, her expression grim. “But whatever this was, it wasn’t random.”

“Another job for another day,” Yairn said, sheathing his sword. “Let’s just get to the Citadel in one piece.”

Freya nodded, though her unease lingered. The Eternal Citadel was still far away, and the dangers of Telsan were never truly gone.

Character sketches

In what is considered modern time on Telsan for story writing purposes, a cast of characters exist who are the main focus of many of the Telsanian stories. Writers are free to write stories prior to or after the modern era but should avoid writing stories that contradict the canon stories that are part of the world.

Plicity

Plicity: She has auburn hair and pale skin, and initially grew up in a small village. Her powers are tied to crystals and Arcane Streams, making her an outlier in her world. Plicity has the potential to reach a higher power level compared to others who are limited in their abilities. She has been forced into exile due to her powers, and much of her journey involves learning to control and understand her abilities, which can be both a blessing and a curse. Her journey is full of struggles as she encounters the Seekers and Tappers, who also interact with crystal magic.

Mad Plicity : A fractured version of Plicity from a parallel reality, Mad Plicity was pulled into Telsan due to Plicity accidental use of power. She is driven by rage and madness, blaming Plicity Prime for her displacement. Unlike Plicity Prime, she had mastered crystal powers before her traumatic experience.

Jocko

Jocko: The youngest of eight sons in a noble family, Jocko felt overlooked compared to his older siblings and turned to a life of cleverness. He has an extensive barrister training background and has studied Arcane Streams powers, though mostly as a hobby. Jocko is also skilled in fencing and uses Arcane Streams powers for short bursts of energy for extra speed or for enhancing feats of skill. He is witty, pragmatic, and struggles with his own insecurities, using sarcasm to hide his true feelings. He has distinct blue and silver hair, which hints at his special nature but also subjects him to scorn from others.

Belanie Ma'Chortle (The Oracle)

Belanie Ma'Chortle (Oracle/Martial Artist):

Has a natural gift of Divination, honed through intense training, Belanie was treated as royalty yet enslaved. She excels in martial arts and illusions. She possesses prophetic ability. She serves as a spiritual guide to her companions but often struggles with doubts about her faith.

Belanie was raised in the temple of Chortle, a minor god of health and humor. She grew up revered for her prophetic abilities, but this came with a price: she was treated as both royalty and a tool. Her training included not just divine rituals but also practical skills like martial arts, blending physical prowess with mystical insight.

Belanie draws divine magic from the gods, particularly her main patron, Chortle, making her less dependent on physical materials like crystals or Arcane Streams. Her divining methods include - tarot card reading, rune casting, and transcendental visions—but they are uniquely tied to humor and irony, or associated with healing or health. For instance, her divinations often hint at outcomes through riddles or jokes, adding an enigmatic twist to her readings and prophecies.

As an oracle, she is both a spiritual guide and an occasional comic relief, grounding the group with her wisdom and her surprising practical skills in combat. Her insights often foreshadow critical events, but her inability to fully control the humorous nature of her divine connections creates tension.

Tall, dark skinned with voluminous black curled hair with sharp yet approachable features. She wears simple robes adorned with bright colors, symbolizing her god's focus on humor and vitality. She wears a necklace of tightly woven gold that is like a choker with hanging diadems. She carries an obvious card holder with a deck of tarot cards and a velvet or leather pouch carrying her rune set which hangs from her belt.

Introspective and serious at times, playful, and occasionally sarcastic at others, she is always Wise. Belanie balances her divine duties with a grounded perspective, often using humor to defuse tension. However, her past as both revered and exploited leaves her wary of forming deep personal bonds.

Dubious

A close friend of Plicity, Dubious has been a steady companion but is conflicted about Plicity's growing powers. Her fear of what Plicity might become, as well as the malice following Plicity, leads her to decide to stay behind when Plicity sets out on her journey. This decision deeply affects Plicity, making her feel more isolated as she ventures into the unknown.

Bratt Tumbledown

Bratt is a very handsome, brawny young man, making him noticeably attractive. His imposing physical presence is complemented by an inherent charm that draws people to him.

Bratt possesses a naturally good-natured and amiable disposition. He is charismatic and at ease in social situations, capable of winning people over with ease. His demeanor is typically upbeat and optimistic, exuding a sense of confidence and warmth.

He is naturally talented in swordsmanship, demonstrating both skill and a keen instinct in combat. His physical prowess is notable, making him a formidable warrior.

Coming from a background that is not deeply explored, Bratt finds himself at the center of a crucial prophecy. Despite his potential for numerous romantic entanglements, he is more focused on his adventures and fulfilling his destiny as outlined by the prophecy. His life is largely influenced by this prophecy, which states that he will not die until he is old, surrounded by friends, holding the hand of his best friend. This prophecy significantly impacts his decision-making and approach to dangerous situations.

Bratt has a close and complex relationship with Jocko, his ally, and friend, whose motives in their friendship are initially self-serving but evolve over time. The dynamic with Belanie, the Oracle, is also significant, as she plays a crucial role in his life through her prophecies and their shared adventures.

Over the course of the story, Bratt's character is poised for significant growth and development. As he navigates through various adventures and challenges, he learns more about himself, his destiny, and the true meaning of friendship and loyalty.

Healer Brin

Brin is a pragmatic town healer and Tapper who serves as a bridge between traditional medicine and the mystical elements of the world. He is well-read in local myths and occasionally references *The Legends of Telsan* when assisting with unique phenomena.

Brin's vast medical knowledge and experimental nature make him resourceful. He's willing to collaborate with mystical figures like Belanie, even if he remains skeptical of their methods.

Grounded, logical, with a wry sense of humor. He is fascinated by Plicity's emerging powers but cautious about their potential for harm.

Brin provides practical guidance and occasional comic relief. He mentors younger healers and helps the group navigate the line between science and mysticism.

Thavesen (Mad Plicity's Companion)

A rogue mercenary with a history of deceit and survival. Thavesen encounters Mad Plicity in her fractured state and sees her as an opportunity to gain power or wealth.

Witty and cunning, Thavesen is a chameleon who adapts to situations for personal gain. His loyalty is questionable, but his skills and quick thinking make him invaluable in high-risk situations.

Brin acts as an ambiguous ally to Mad Plicity, feeding her delusions at times but secretly fearing her instability. His moral flexibility contrasts sharply with Prime Plicity's values.

Rylan (Caravan Leader)

A seasoned caravan leader who helps Plicity and Dubious on their journey. He's practical, resourceful, and often skeptical of mystical matters, but he respects results.

He is tough but fair, with a dry wit. He views his work as a means of survival and values competence above all else.

Brin provides logistical support and grounded perspective. His experience with dangerous routes makes him a steadying presence during chaotic moments.