



TALES AT THE
EDGE OF RESOLVE

A SHORT STORY COLLECTION
BY JACO VAN HEMERT

TALES AT THE EDGE OF RESOLVE

A short story collection
by Jaco van Hemert

Tales at the Edge of Resolve: A short story collection by Jaco van Hemert

www.jacovanhemert.com

© 2020 Jaco van Hemert. All rights reserved.

For permissions, contact:

author@jacovanhemert.com

Cover illustration by [JCK5D](#), modified by Jaco van Hemert.

Table of contents

Foreword	5
The Nowhere Zone	6
Into the Molten Sea	19
A Proof of Worth	33
When the Memory's Lost and Gone	43

Foreword

I like to write about people making difficult choices. Sacrificing something to gain something else.

This collection contains four stories that follow characters who have to make choices they don't want to make. Sometimes the right choice reveals itself, but sometimes there is no right choice, and it becomes a matter of choosing according to what they believe in most.

Resolve. That's what I titled this collection, because that's what the characters do, and what we all as humans must inevitably do. Make choices by settling on a decision with determination, despite the sacrifice. Sometimes we do the right thing despite our own desires, but sometimes we do the wrong thing because our desires are too strong. But we can only hope that we stay determined on the path we chose, resolved to see it through to the end, no matter what.

The reason I put this collection together was mainly as a way to show people what I like to write, and what my stories tend to be like. These four stories show a wide range of worldbuilding efforts, ranging from floating islands with robotic engineers to archers hunting drakes in the desert.

Three of these are my winning entries for the SFFSA Nova competition: "The Nowhere Zone" won first place in the 2018 edition, and the other two were for the 2019 edition, with "Into the Molten Sea" winning joint second place with another story, and "A Proof of Worth" winning joint third place. The last story, "When the Memory's Lost and Gone", is one that, at time of writing, is set to appear in a small newsletter that won't be publicly available. So that's one you most likely can't find anywhere else.

Thank you for exploring my stories with me. If you enjoy them, consider signing up for my newsletter so that you can keep up to date on what I'm doing with regards to writing. Simply go to www.jacovanhemert.com and find the sign-up form on the sidebar. If you'd like to get in contact, even if just to tell me what you thought of my stories, you can do so by going to the "Contact" page on my website. I'd love to hear from you.

That's it from me; I hope you enjoy the stories.

Jaco van Hemert

The Nowhere Zone

The miasma clouds of the Nowhere Zone carried the cries of a girl into Leensha's cabin. For a moment, she remained under the warm blankets, hoping it was just her imagination. But then the cries came again, and she rolled out of the hammock, and pulled on a parka and scarf as she headed out, rubbing her scaled hands together in an attempt to keep the heat in.

The damned cold really got to her sometimes.

The deck was full of scurrying crewmembers – the haul was coming in at the same time. No one seemed to be looking out for the Jumper, so Leensha hurried to the bannisters and leaned over, trying to hear the cries over the din of the crew.

There it was again. Leensha's keen eyes scanned the murky indigo clouds, looking for the tell-tale swirling where someone was drifting.

There!

The flailing arms of a child just barely broke the surface of the miasma, just a ways off to the port side. Leensha grabbed a passing crewmember's arm and pinned him with her gaze.

"I'm going in for a Jumper. Get the rope ready."

The shipman nodded and scurried off towards the mast where the ropes were attached. Leensha clambered onto the railings for a final look, and then leapt off.

Into the frigid clouds she plunged. The cold always seemed to numb the body just enough to make it hard to move, but not enough to avoid the freezing feeling. An absolute nightmare, but an unavoidable one.

The miasma itself was a strange substance. Like water, things seemed to float in the deeper purple undercurrents, but it seemed to both suck her in and expel her simultaneously, leaving her with an altogether unpleasant and difficult swim.

The clouds – as they'd taken to call the upper layers of the miasma – which rolled and swirled like a thick fog, obscured most of Leensha's view. This forced her to rely on the ship as a landmark and just swim in the general direction she remembered, following the sound of the girl's voice.

After a seemingly eternal swim, the girl came into view. She was clearly panicking, and thrashed about like someone trying to swim. But the miasma didn't react well to thrashing or swimming.

It was a human girl, and her skin had yet to take on an indigo tinge, so she hadn't been in the Zone for very long.

Leensha reached her and held up both hands, using her legs to stay upright.

"Hey," she said, using the most common human tongue she knew. "Let me help you."

The girl turned to her and her eyes grew wide. A common response. Jumpers were beings that jumped dimensions. And so far, most Jumpers that ended up in the Nowhere Zone tended to be humans. About half as common were the gretons, a species of stocky, stone-skinned people. Next were the ones they called the phantoms. Creatures made of some kind of intangible matter, resulting in none of the crew being able to save them. Leensha couldn't imagine how many thousands of phantoms had been left behind in the miasma, slowly turning to the madness of the mer. And finally, only a handful of Jumpers were eliths like Leensha – a scaled predator species.

"I know I look scary, but I'm going to help you, okay?"

The girl stared with a quivering lip and then hid her face in her arms, causing her to dip into the miasma. Leensha lunged forward, grabbed the child around the waist, and started swimming back to the ship.

The crew was busy pulling up the haul of Eyes, but thankfully the shipman she'd grabbed had tossed a rope out before continuing his work. Leensha tied the end around the girl's waist, and then started climbing, planning on pulling her up after she got to the top. Instead, the girl clung to her leg like a sea urchin. So Leensha climbed awkwardly to the top with the attached child, thankful to be out of the freezing clouds.

When they were on the relative safety of the deck, the girl detached, but continued holding onto Leensha's shirt. The child couldn't have been more than a couple of years old. What a terrible fate to befall one so young. But the Nowhere Zone had no pity for the weak or the feeble. It captured anyone it wanted, from cripple old ones to young children like this one. Some mortally ill, some in the prime of their lives. It made no distinction.

"You're safe now," Leensha said.

The girl didn't respond, and Leensha wondered if she perhaps didn't understand the language. But before Leensha could try out any others, she heard the captain's voice bark the order to stand back.

The crew parted as Leensha hurried – with girl in tow – towards the centre of the haul that had just been brought in.

There, clear as day, was the likely cause for the commotion. The greens, blues, and yellows of the other orbs stood in stark contrast to the glowing red one in between them. At the edge of the pile that lay scattered on the nets that had hauled them in, the captain stood, peering at the red orb with his bad eye closed.

Captain Storm, captain and symbiote of the harvester ship *Venture* for more years than Leensha could remember, and many more before she'd arrived, was worried. She could tell because he was scratching at his prosthetic hand as he always did in tense situations.

"What is it, cap?" Leensha asked.

The captain glanced at her before continuing his staring contest with the orb. "Don't you feel it?"

Now that he'd mentioned it, Leensha was feeling the pull. The orbs, colloquially called eyes, were reservoirs of power, and each contained such an amount that some of it leaked out. Get too much of that, and it grabbed hold of you like a drug. The power was intensely addicting and freeing. It played tricks on your mind and broke your world into two parts – real and false. But you could never figure out which was which. The only thing you could be sure about was that you needed to hold onto the eye until you died.

It had taken months to free Leensha from the thrall – as they called it – of an eye she'd grabbed out of ignorance.

"That can't be only the one, can it?" Leensha asked. Normally a thrall only began to take hold at a very close range. Most often, you needed to touch it with your bare hands to feel the effects.

"I think it is."

The kind of power held in that one orb had to be unimaginable. The engines of the *Venture* had been powered by a single, medium-power eye for as long as Leensha had been on board.

"We have to throw it back," Leensha said, taking a step away from the pile.

"Nay, we keep it. We just have to get it into the vault, and then the keepers can decide what to do with it." With the help of his teeth, the captain pulled on one of the handling gloves.

What was he doing? He was too close already. "Then let's just throw in the entire haul and get back to the city."

"Nay, we'll sort as normal. I'll take the red one. I'd gotten my training." Captain Storm had received basic keeper training in order to captain the ship. The keepers sculpted their minds into such monuments of willpower that they could resist the thrall. But the captain hadn't gotten that far.

"Cap, this is a bad idea."

"Nay, it'll be fine." He stepped forward, pushing aside the other orbs, and grabbed the red Eye.

#

Two weeks after the red eye was brought on board, Sara – what they'd taken to calling the girl – started showing a tinge of indigo.

She still wasn't talking, though she seemed to understand the human tongue Leensha had started with well enough. And while she kept a solemn demeanour, it seemed like the girl had relaxed into a more pleasant form of anxiety.

Leensha walked the deck, keeping a close eye on all the shipmates, and making sure that they saw her doing so. Everyone was on edge, and a few rebellious ones had shown signs of starting something along the lines of a mutiny. But there would be no mutiny while Leensha was still standing.

After walking the length of the deck, Leensha hurried up the steps to the ship's wheel, where the captain would be. And sure enough, just as he'd been for nearly every hour in the previous two weeks, Captain Storm stood watching the horizon, with his good hand clutched tightly on the ship's rudder control.

Leensha hesitated at the top of the steps, watching the captain. Trying to find the gap where she could get in and wrench the thrall away. But all she could see was a man with wild thoughts and an unkempt beard. Sara clung to her leg like the captain was the leviathan.

"Cap?" Leensha said, moving closer.

The captain swung his gaze over with a glint of anger in his pupils. His eyes were wide and bloodshot, like he hadn't blinked for the last hour.

"Away with you!" he barked.

"Can we talk?"

The captain looked at her incomprehendingly for a second. "Talk?" A pause. "Yes, talk..." He looked away from her and then back. "Who are you again?"

"Sara is starting to show signs of the change."

"Changing! Always changing, the seas are. Always changing. He will be looking, you know."

"We need to go back to the city, cap."

"What?" he exclaimed, eyes getting even wider. "City? No! No, no, no! We can't go there. We have to get to the leviathan. He'll be looking."

"Can we just stop there for a moment to drop her off?"

They'd been sailing for a week longer than scheduled. The city would be fine for a while; the eye hauls had been good the last couple of trips. But it didn't stop the crew from getting agitated. And it wouldn't help Sara.

"No! We'll be late! We can't be late. He'll kill us all. He'll kill us all!"

Leensha sighed and closed her eyes, then took a moment to breathe. She'd hoped that the captain would listen when there was an urgent reason to go back, but it seemed the thrall was too deep already. She could still feel the red eye's pull, even from ten feet away.

The moment of silence broke Captain Storm's focus, and he returned to watching the miasma. Leensha took Sara's hand and headed down the stairs again. She had to figure out a way to get the captain out of the thrall. Normally, with enough time, an opportunity would arise. A moment of lucidity, a collapse from the lack of sleep, or something.

But there was no more time.

A group of anxious-looking shipmen had gathered at the base of the stairs, causing Leensha to pause her descent. She put a hand on her blade. What were they planning?

The foremost one, an amber-coloured greton named Hark, held his hands out. "Peace, Leensha. We just want to talk."

"I'm not authorising any mutiny."

Hark shook his head. "We just want to talk."

As the crew went, Hark was one of the more emotionally stable ones. If he was leading things, maybe it wouldn't go out of control. At least not immediately.

"Speak your piece."

The shipmen visibly relaxed, and Hark nodded appreciatively. "Thank you. Will you come down and sit with us?"

"I'd rather stay here." And block the way to the captain.

Hark conceded with a nod. "Very well. Okay. We're concerned." A pause. "About the captain."

"Noted."

The greton shifted uncomfortably. "He's not himself. He's in the thrall. You see that, don't you?"

"What of it?"

"What of it?" someone else in the crowd called out in a strained voice. "He's going to get us killed!"

"Peace, Oland," Hark snapped, his shoulder flaps flaring – a greton sign for anger. "We agreed I would be talking."

Oland held his tongue, and Hark turned back to Leensha. "While rude, Oland voices our concern. Even if the captain's plan is make-believe, we'll eventually run out of supplies or succumb to the change. We need to get back to the city." A pause. "And if the captain's plan is true, we'll be dying a lot sooner."

Leensha shook her head. "We've gotten people out of thralls before. We just have to wait for the right time."

"That could take a very long time. And we might be in the belly of the leviathan if we wait for it."

Captain Storm had always claimed that it was the leviathan that took his arm from him. When Leensha had asked him about it, soon after she was freed from her thrall, he'd said that the leviathan was the first mer – a massive beast that could swallow the ship whole.

Was it true? It seemed to be undetermined. But since the thrall started, the captain seemed to think that he had to return the red eye to its owner, the leviathan.

"His thrall is fixating on the leviathan because it's a part of his story. It's no different from any of the crazy things other people do when in a thrall. We'll be out here longer, but no one is getting eaten by the leviathan."

"But none of those other people are symbiotes."

"What are you trying to say?" But she already knew. It was probably the only reason the crew hadn't mutinied already.

"I'm saying that you need to do something."

Leensha growled. "I will take your concerns into consideration. Now get back to work."

The group seemed to bristle. Leensha held a hand on her blade and bared her teeth. If they thought they were going to take on an elith and get away without a scratch, they were sorely mistaken.

But the threat seemed to be enough. They backed off, grumbling, and scattered to get back to work. But the threat was already there. They – or at least some of them – were angry, and if Leensha didn't do something very quickly, they would.

#

Thoughts kept Leensha awake. Thoughts that she didn't want to have.

Her position as the *Venture's* first mate put her in a position to solve this madness, at least partly. But it was not a choice she was willing to make. The problem was, sooner or later, the crew would make that choice for her. And when they did, she couldn't just let the ship sink.

As first mate, she knew how to take on the symbiosis with the ship if she needed to. But besides the fact that she had never linked with a ship before, the only way that could happen was if the captain was dead, or purposefully broke the link.

The latter was not likely to happen, and the former was unthinkable.

If it wasn't for Sara, Leensha would have just dismissed the entire thing, letting the thrall run its course and looking for a gap to break it. The crew had time, but Sara didn't. Her time in the miasma must have been too long. She was already visibly indigo-tinted. It wouldn't be long before she crossed the point of no return, where her transformation into a mer would be impossible to stop. She would become one of the monsters that roamed the Zone and produced the eyes.

But the only other option wasn't an option. Leensha couldn't stand by and watch the captain die. Who would be able to fill his shoes? Who would captain the *Venture*? Who would provide Leensha with advice? Who would give her a place in the world?

Leensha had been barely three years old – about as old in physical and emotional maturity as Sara was – when she jumped into the Nowhere Zone. The captain himself had dragged her out of the miasma. And not long after that, he was the one who'd broken her thrall. He'd raised her. He'd loved her.

She had once asked him why he went out of his way to help her. He'd told her that people were the most important thing – and if he could save or help someone, he would do whatever it took to get it done.

How could Leensha allow him to be killed?

But how could she allow Sara to become a mer?

Leensha turned onto her other side in the hammock, squeezing her eyes shut and wishing that everything would be okay again when she opened them.

Instead, she felt a tug at her scarf, and turned back. Sara was standing next to Leensha's hammock with an anxious expression.

"What is it?" Leensha asked, too tired and depressed to bother getting out.

Sara indicated with her head towards the door and looked at Leensha with huge eyes.

"Just go by yourself. No one here will hurt you." Leensha closed her eyes again and tried to remember the good times, when she was still a youngster and everything was new and amazing.

Another tug.

"Come on, Sara, just let me wallow for a while."

Nothing.

Then, "Cap."

Leensha's eyes snapped open and she stared at the child, wondering if she'd imagined it.

But Sara spoke again. "Cap." She pointed to the door.

Only then did Leensha hear that the sounds of the deck weren't completely usual. There were yells and stomping. She fell out of the hammock in her rush, and ran for the door when she got her feet under her.

The deck was alive with bustling people. Most were hanging back and watching, while a group – including some of those who'd spoken to her earlier – were gathered around the stairs to the ship's wheel.

On the steps was Captain Storm, eyes wide and sword in hand. Oland, the human who'd reacted angrily at Leensha's answers earlier, stood ahead of the pack, halfway up the stairs with his own sword. But the captain was in a good position, and in command of a much higher sword skill. As Oland tried to get a slash in on the captain's feet, the old man simply lifted a boot and stepped onto the blade.

"You'll never get me, you weasel!" the captain shouted. His eyes were wild, like a cornered animal, but his grin was one of a jester.

As Leensha took stock of the area, she noticed one of the others of the group climbing the wall to the upper platform with a sword gripped in his teeth.

"Hark! What are you doing?" Leensha shouted, looking for the greton as she ran through the crowd, shoving them aside.

Among the ones in front, Hark turned and looked at her with a coldly neutral expression. "I'm doing what is necessary."

"If you hurt the captain, the ship will–"

"I know. But it's a risk I'll take. Damage can be repaired. Death cannot."

"I won't let you!"

She moved to go past him, but the greton moved faster. He blocked her way and said, "Don't interfere."

Without another thought, Leensha bit into his shoulder. Now, gretons had tough skin, but eliths had teeth and a jaw made to bite through bone.

Whether or not the bite had punctured the skin, it was apparently painful enough that the greton flinched. Leensha took the opportunity and shoved him aside, and then made for the side of the platform, where the other shipman was already at the top.

"Cap, watch your back!" Leensha shouted. She leapt onto the wall and clambered up, using her clawed hands and feet to grip.

Above her, she heard cries of men and metal clashing. She urged her muscles to work faster. Halfway up, the ship shook like it had been hit by mer energy.

Once at the top, she scrambled to her feet and surveyed the area. The captain was cornered by Oland and the other shipman, and held his prosthetic hand against his stomach. As she watched, Oland scored a cut across the captain's leg, and the ship groaned in response.

"Stop it!" Leensha shouted, running towards them. As she did, more shipmen came up the stairs with weapons drawn.

The ship rumbled again as the captain was slashed across the forearm. Because of the symbiotic link, the ship and the captain shared a lot of things. Damage was one of them. Those bastards could sink the *Venture* if they kept this up.

When the approaching shipmen saw a raging Leensha dashing at the battle, they paused, long enough for her to reach the three in battle first. The climbing shipman was busy keeping the captain's focus, and Oland started a thrust at the captain's back.

"No!" Leensha yelled, barrelling into Oland and knocking him to the ground. As he squirmed, she plunged her teeth into his neck and ripped out his throat. The blood splattered far enough that the armed few who were still hesitating got droplets on their faces.

Leensha spun around, roaring, and the second attacker scurried away, hands held in front of him.

Leensha and the crew remained in that moment for what seemed like hours, in a stare-down to see if anyone would dare to make a move. The captain was muttering behind her, and she was worried about his wounds, but she didn't take her eyes off the crew. If they suspected a moment of opportunity, they could strike.

Then, finally, the crew started backing away, and then scrambled down the stairs, until only Leensha and the captain remained on the top platform.

Leensha looked back. "Cap, you okay?"

"He wants it back. Do you hear it?"

When she turned around completely to check for herself, she found him grinning like a madman and looking out at the miasma. She followed his gaze and felt her already thumping heart increase in tempo.

The miasma had turned a deep indigo, almost black, and the clouds were barely visible against the dark backdrop. The bit that reflected light from the lanterns showed roiling liquid, wild and untamed, unlike the miasma that Leensha was used to.

"What is..."

"The leviathan," the captain answered.

The ship shook and tilted to the side, like something had knocked into the hull.

Above, the sky was brightening, as if there was a sun like the one that Leensha only barely remembered from back in her own dimension. She could feel the tension in the air, a tangible, thrumming feeling. Something was about to go horribly wrong.

But over and above that came a more immediate feeling. One of desire. The pull of the eye. She felt it, so strongly, so intensely, that for a moment she forgot about the world around her and tried to figure out where on the captain's body it was stashed.

Then the ship shook again, and she got enough lucidity back to step away from the old man. The situation was bad. Really bad.

"Where have you taken us?" Leensha demanded.

The ship began to pull to the side, like it was being dragged.

"Leviathan!" he yelled, laughing hysterically.

A cold shiver escaped Leensha's controlled posture. "What do you mean?"

His paused his laughter. "The leviathan wants its eye back."

"Are you saying the leviathan is causing all this?"

As she spoke, the ship was beginning to move faster, and her balance became more unsteady as the deck tilted. They were being pulled by something. No. The miasma itself was moving underneath them. They were just unwilling passengers.

Someone shouted from the lower deck, "We're taking on miasma!"

Leensha growled and rushed to the bannister, looking over onto the main deck. "What's happening?"

"The hull is breached!"

"Get everyone onto the main deck and close the hatches!"

The tilt of the ship was getting more extreme, and there was an increasing feeling of turning, though it was hard to tell with the dark surroundings.

As the terrified crew scrambled to obey her instructions, she looked over them and spotted one person that wasn't moving. She locked eyes with him – Hark.

"Do your duty as the first mate, Leensha," he said, keeping his face as neutral as ever, as if nothing had happened.

"Shut up and get to work!"

With that, she turned back to the captain. "Cap, we need to get out of whatever current we're in."

"Nay, this is where we need to be. The leviathan will get its eye."

"We'll all die."

"Die? Will we die? Yes! Nay! Nay, it'll calm down once it has its eye."

"Then throw the eye into the miasma."

"Nay. I need to give it to him directly. Don't want it getting lost." He laughed.

Leensha snarled and turned back to look over the miasma, trying to gauge what was happening. The light from above created enough reflection that she could make out the strong flow, and enough to notice the cone that was forming. A whirlpool.

But even more immediately alarming than that was that parts of the *Venture* were floating ahead of them. Planks of wood and parts of the lower deck furniture and storage containers were rushing ahead in a race against the ship. If this kept on for too long, the ship would break apart and leave them all helpless in the miasma.

As she tried to come up with a serviceable plan, her mind suddenly recalled Sara. Where had she gone?

Another snarl. She didn't have time for this!

Leensha jumped down the stairs, taking five or six at a time and keeping herself upright with the railings, and started calling for Sara, but the girl was nowhere to be found.

"Did you search the lower decks?" Leensha demanded of a passing shipman.

"Yeah, everyone's out!"

Leensha pushed past him and headed for the crew bundling around the main mast, and continued calling for Sara. Then, as she ran, she spotted something in the miasma across the whirlpool cone from them. A dark shape, even darker than the miasma itself. It was long and thick, like a sea snake, and easily fifteen times the length of the *Venture*.

Leviathan. It was the thing causing the whirlpool.

But what was even more frightening was the speed at which they were moving. At this speed, she wasn't sure the engines would even have enough power to get them out. They might be trapped, and doomed to the fate that Hark had predicted.

The engine room! Leensha looked towards the aft of the ship, where a door led to the engine room. Was Sara hiding in there? She had shown an intense fear of the miasma, so surely she wouldn't be below deck. But if she was, time was not on Leensha's side.

After a moment of hesitation, Leensha started running towards the engine room door. As she did, she couldn't help but notice that they were moving so quickly now that she had no trouble keeping upright on the deck.

Leensha ripped open the door and ran down the steps until she came to a breathless pause in front of the humming engines, and allowed her eyes to adjust to the darkness lit up only by the blue glow of the eye that powered the machines.

And there, in the corner, was Sara. Leensha let out a sigh of relief.

"There you are," she said, holding out her hand. "Come on, Sara. We have to go."

Sara reluctantly got up and took her hand. Leensha looked back at the engines and the blue eye, and whispered, "Don't give out on us now."

Surely the captain would see the folly of his plan by now. He had to.

The deck was alive with panic when the two of them emerged. The ship was starting to rip apart at the seams. The miasma moved so fast beneath them that Leensha immediately abandoned her plan of getting the captain to gun the engines. There was no point. That little eye would never have enough power to get them out of...

"That's it!" Leensha yelled out loud. Then, still holding Sara's hand, hurried towards the ship's wheel to try her luck with Captain Storm one more time.

The sound of the whirlpool was a loud roar, like the heavy rains that Leensha remembered as a child, so she had to shout at the top of her lungs to be heard over the din.

"Cap!"

The captain turned to her, his face a mask of euphoria.

"You were right! We have to give the eye to the leviathan!"

He nodded eagerly and yelled something back that was lost in the wind and water.

"But at this rate, we'll be gone before we can give it to him!"

The captain frowned, and yelled something that sounded like, "Nay, we can't!"

"So let's take it directly to him right now!" She pointed to the other side of the massive, swirling funnel, where the dark shape of the leviathan was still visible. "He's right there! All we have to do is get to him!"

For a moment, the captain just stared. Then he started nodding. Slowly, but then faster, until he erupted in laughter. He ran to the ship's wheel and spun it to port side.

But the current was too fast, and the whine of the engine made nearly no difference to their course.

"It's not enough!" Leensha yelled, gritting her mind against the pull of the red eye. "We need more power!"

Captain Storm looked dejected, and Leensha gave him a few seconds to process that feeling.

"We have to use the red eye!" she yelled after the pause.

He looked at her, and as he did, the understanding spread over his face.

The power in the red eye, immense as it was, would be their best shot at getting out of the whirlpool. But even if she could get the eye from the captain, its thrall would take her before she could get to her destination. So the captain had to be the one to do it.

Luckily, he understood what she was saying, and he hurried down the stairs. Leensha turned to Sara, putting her hands on the girl's shoulders.

"Stay with the wheel! When you feel the ship pull forward, spin it to the left, as much as you can! Then keep the ship pointed away from the whirlpool!"

Sara looked scared, but she nodded and ran to the wheel, clutching it with tiny hands not made for a wheel that big. After a second of hesitation, Leensha ran after the captain.

The door to the engine room stood open, and she ran inside. The darkness blinded her, but the blue light ahead guided her steps so she got to the engine room in one piece.

The captain, just as she entered, removed the blue eye from the engine, and the humming sound immediately died down to nothing. Then a red glow joined the blue as he pulled the red eye from his pocket.

Leensha clenched her teeth to fight the urge to lunge for the eye. The pull felt even stronger now that she could see it.

The captain hesitated, holding it close to him like a baby.

"Cap. The ship is falling apart. You must feel it. If you don't do this, the leviathan won't be able to get its eye back. You have to do this, cap."

He nodded, sadly, and gently stretched out his hands to place the orb in the engine compartment.

"Cap, you're like a father to me. I've spent more time with you than with anyone else. I would die for you. I would kill for you."

She didn't know if he was listening. He carefully laid the eye in the slot and started attaching the rods.

"The first time I saw this place, I was sure that I was in hell. That I would be miserable for all eternity. That I would never feel at home again. But you, you gave me that feeling again. You made me feel at home. You make everyone feel at home."

The last rods clicked into place and the captain stood back, gingerly, as if he was afraid of getting too far away.

The moment that he was no longer within touching distance of the eye, Leensha started second-guessing her plan. But then she thought about what she'd been saying, and she gritted her mind to it. It had to be done. Just being away from the eye wouldn't be enough. The captain needed time to get over the thrall. And he'd kill them all before he regained lucidity.

"While it may not seem that way, it's because of how much I love you that I have to do this," Leensha said, stepping closer.

The captain looked at her with a boyish grin. Uncomprehending of what was about to happen. It made doing it so much harder. Seeing such a happy face. And then plunging a blade into his stomach.

The ship started violently shaking, just as the red eye's power connected to all the lines, and the engine hummed back into power.

Leensha pushed aside her emotions for a moment and touched the floor. She felt her being and the ship's being, and she let the two meld, just like she'd been taught. Pain flooded her body as the damage of the ship became her own, and she gasped, falling to the ground next to the captain.

There, on the floor, and in the red light of the eye, she watched the life drain out of her captain. Watched his milky eyes, hoping to see a moment of lucidity, a moment where he looked at her and said with his eyes that he forgave her. That he understood.

But no such moment came. The madness touched his eyes until the moment even that drained from his face. And then there was just the face of her father. Broken. Mad. Dead.

#

The city port came into view. The ship was just barely holding together, but Leensha could feel that it was still intact enough to make it. There would have to be major repairs done, and the *Venture's* downtime would strain the city's energy requirements. But at least they would all make it alive.

Sara's skin had taken on even more of an indigo sheen, but she was still far enough away from the change that the city's healers would be able to stop the process. She would be fine.

Even with all that had happened to the ship, the vault filled with eyes was still intact and on-board. It would tide the city over until the ship was seaworthy again.

The crew would go home with stories of the leviathan. The mythical creature that people would assume is an exaggerated tale about a mer attack.

And the red eye... well, the red eye would remain where it was. She would fight the keepers at every turn if they tried to take it from the *Venture*. It would remain with the ship. Captain Storm's ship.

That way, hopefully, his soul would find some rest.

Into the Molten Sea

When Relius and his escort emerged from the core, he doused his flaming torch with a sigh. The conversation he'd been having with the Engineer, called 3221, had gone well, until it abruptly ended the conversation, saying, "My patterns are starting to perform abnormally. I may need to reset my functions. Please return later."

This trip to the island he was on, Voma, had been a long time in the making, with several letters being delivered via hellskater, back and forth, until a vat of wine finally slicked the throats of the Voma authorities enough that they agreed to the plan. Relius would have two days to talk to the Engineer and gather information, as long as he agreed to be escorted when he did so and paid the Voman council upfront.

So far, the trip wasn't going as he'd planned. 3221 was not acting like Relius had expected. But of course, the only comparison he had was his own island's Engineer, with whom he had a long history. It wasn't surprising, but it was somehow still deeply disappointing.

As Relius revisited the conversation in his head, he made his way to the edge of the island, where a wooden fence marked the end, while his escort waited at the core for him to return. He was feeling much more homesick than he'd thought he would be. Voma was just too different. The people were just too strange. Relius's curious mind had often rebelled against the tendencies of the Setsia people to see the inhabitants of all the other islands as strangers to be avoided, but he was beginning to understand. While they looked the same as Setsians, the people of Voma seemed to be an entirely different species.

Relius leaned over the fence to look past the side of the chunk of earth that floated over the molten sea below them. The red-orange glow nearly blinded him, a stark difference from the near-dark he'd just come from. For a moment, he just stared at the roiling waves, and then his eyes darted to where his home was. A pear-shaped island, floating in the air. It looked so small and far away. He blinked. In fact, it almost seemed further away than he remembered it being when he'd landed on Voma. The angle also seemed steeper. Was Voma rising?

Was Setsia falling?

Relius started looking at the other islands, some of them barely in view, but all of them at the right angle to Voma, roughly.

Cold shivers of panic began to run across Relius's body, making him shudder and freeze up. What was happening? Why was it happening? What could he do?

He shook his head. The first thing to do was confirm that he wasn't just being a crazy person. That Setsia was actually lower. To that end, he spun around and half ran, half jogged his way to the Voma council chambers, finding the doors closed and two guards with lances on either side of them. He made for the door, but the lances crossed in front of him.

"I need to talk to the council," he said.

"They are deliberating," one guard said. "Come back later."

Relius started arguing with them loudly, demanding to be let in, trying to make them see the urgency of his matter. In the middle of this, with the guards starting to get aggressive, the doors opened, and one of the aides stuck out his head.

"The council would like to see the Setsian."

The inside of the chamber was round, with a domed ceiling and a raised half-circle platform on the side opposite the door, where the council sat behind a long, curved table. There were eight of them, attended by two aides.

"We have news for you, Setsian," one of the council members said.

"Setsia is falling?"

The council members all seemed to tense. "You know about this? Is it a Setsian strategy?"

Another interrupted before Relius could answer. "What is the purpose? An increase in heat? Are you using it for energy generation?"

"I don't know why Setsia is falling. I just looked over the edge and saw that it was lower than I thought it was earlier. Are you sure it's falling?"

The council members glanced at each other for a moment before one of them responded. "Our... measurements indicate that it is indeed lowering. If it continues at its current pace, it will hit the molten sea in five hours' time."

"Five hours? That can't be. What's happening there?" Relius's mind flitted to Chrome, Setsia's Engineer, who had been diligently maintaining Setsia's core for years. Had something happened to him?

"We don't know more than that. However, we have decided that, if the island does hit the sea and burns up, we will allow you to stay for an additional week until you can make a plan to find a home elsewhere."

"Setsia is my home! I can't just let it sink to the molten floor. You have to send me back there!"

Another glance. “The island is falling at a rapid rate. We cannot risk sending our icari to carry you there. It might not be able to return.”

Relius’s fists were clenched, and he could feel his nails biting into his palms. “I need to find out what’s happening there. Please, you have to help me.”

“Unfortunately, it is not in Voma’s best interest to send aid for a straggling island. We have to look out for our own people.”

Rayne argued for a few more minutes, to no avail, until he eventually stormed out, only barely able to withhold the string of curses he wanted to fling at the Voman bastards. It was just like Voma to refuse help, to refuse any kind of decency. Maybe all non-Setsians were as bad as his parents had taught him.

If the council didn’t want to help him, there was only one other option left – the hellskaters.

As he ran towards the aviary, where they usually gathered, he wondered if he was making a mistake. While the Vomans were surely intensely twisted and selfish, at least they had roots. The hellskaters travelled between islands freely, not committed to anyone. They had no roots, no home, no solid foundation. Slippery, and as quick to throw you into the molten sea as help you, they were not people to be trusted, and were best used for small tasks like the delivery of non-confidential messages or items of low value. But the Vomans had left Relius no choice. He had to get to Setsia somehow, and if nothing else, the hellskaters were easily cooled into cooperation with payment.

There were three hellskaters sitting in the aviary with their icarii – the great birds that they used to fly between the islands without burning to a husk. Two were sitting together, having a quiet conversation. The last one was stroking her bird carefully, as if to pick off lice from its feathers.

“Hellskater,” Relius said, out of breath. “I am in need of your services.”

The woman turned around, her eyes calm and steady. “What am I taking where?” she asked.

“I need to get down to Setsia.”

The hellskater cocked her head. “You want to use a hellskater for travel? Curious. Are you in trouble?” She glanced behind him.

“The Vomans refuse to help me, so I have no other choice.”

“Why won’t they help you?” the woman asked, her eyes narrowing.

“Does it matter?”

“Yes. I need to know what I’m carrying.”

Relius let out a frustrated sound, and rubbed his eyes. He didn't have time for this. "Setsia is falling, and I need to get back there to see why."

"Falling?"

"Yes. In five hours, it will hit the molten sea. So I don't have time to waste. Can you take me there or not?"

A flash of concern swept over the hellskater's face for a moment when he mentioned the island dropping to the sea. "Sure, I can take you there. If you're paying enough."

"I only have ten pieces with me." He took them out of his pocket and showed them to her. "But I can give you another ten when we get to Setsia."

The woman regarded him for a moment before answering. "Fine. But don't go ignoring that second part once we get to your destination."

"I won't."

"Then welcome aboard, mister...?"

"Relius."

"Relius. I'm Praet, and the beautiful Alta will be carrying us across." She rubbed the bird's feathers. "Get ready for the flight of your life."

Praet helped him onto the icari, using a much more intuitive strapping system than the Voman flyer had used. The powerful wings started flapping with a murmured command from Praet, and then they were airborne. Within a few seconds, they were crossing the edge of the island and coming over the sea beneath. Relius looked over the side, trying to see Setsia, but quickly pulled back, hiding his face behind the feathers that were built to withstand the intense heat. He still felt the waves of hot air singe the sides of his arms and legs, but it was a bearable kind of uncomfortableness.

Praet tapped his leg and told him to get ready. Then the icari's wings folded in a bit, and they dove down towards the island Relius called home.

#

Relius paused for a moment in the doorway of the small building that would lead him into the core of Setsia, concerned about what he would find down there. After a smooth landing, he'd rushed here, telling Praet that he'd be back with the rest of her payment shortly. But he had to fix the island's descent first, or there would be no point to the entire flight. As he'd rushed past the buildings towards the core in the back, he stopped people he found along the way. They told him that the core had died. That people had been sent inside, and came out with sombre faces.

His footsteps echoed as he hurried down the metal stairs, into the darkness below, lighting his way with a small lamp. Ahead, there was a faint glow of red light, where the core was. The usual din was a smaller rumble, sending all kinds of unwelcome thoughts into Relius's mind. Sweat was dripping from him before he got to the bottom of the stairs, and it wasn't caused by only the heat.

However, when he entered the core chamber, many of his worries evaporated. In front of him stood the Engineer called 4210, the same as always. The Engineer, whom Relius had taken to calling Chrome, was encased in a smooth silver body that was human in shape, but simpler and less detailed. The casing separated at the various joints, revealing a multitude of pipes and wires in the dark recesses. He stood in front of a curved metal counter filled with instruments and dials.

The room itself seemed to mirror the Engineer's design. The floor was a textured metal that started to show some rust in the corners, and the walls to the sides were smooth and dark grey. A second chamber was visible through the glass that covered part of the back wall. Inside was the glowing red core, which was glowing less vibrantly than usual. Relius could now see the shape more clearly – an orb with a studded surface, hovering between prongs above and beneath it.

“Relius,” Chrome said, his monotone voice tinged with an internal echo.

“What's happening? Why is the island falling?”

“I am no longer maintaining the engine,” Chrome answered. “It is a fragile piece of equipment that requires frequent inspection and recalibration to avoid overheating. If the recalibration does not happen, the failsafe shuts it down.”

“What do you mean you're no longer maintaining it? Why?”

“I have come to realise that there is no impetus for me to do so.”

“What do you mean? If you don't, the island will fall into the molten sea and everyone will die.”

“I do not possess the same emotional attachments that you do, Relius.”

Relius was stunned for a moment, trying to order his thoughts. “Even if that's true, you're also going to be dunked into the sea. You may be resistant to the heat in here, but I'm pretty sure you'll die like everyone else if you're enveloped in molten waters.”

The Engineer regarded him passively. “Humans seem to have a strong attachment to time and survival, but I do not. There is no reason that existing as a collection of processes would be different from not existing in that way. Existence and non-existence are equivalent concepts if there is no extra value to be gained from existing.”

Relius felt his pulse racing. Chrome had gone insane. What had happened? “You used to tell me that you enjoyed our conversations. Isn’t that value? All the conversations that we could still have in the future?”

“I have perfectly stored memories of all our interactions, and I can recall them now as well as I can in an hour’s time. When I am no longer able to recall them, I will not have a need to recall them, or a need to gather more.”

Relius walked to the side of the room, with his hands running through his hair, trying to come up with a reason this would have happened.

“You seem distressed.”

“Of course I’m distressed! My home will be destroyed in less than five hours, and the only one that can stop it refuses to do so. Why are you doing this? What caused this?”

Chrome’s face remained impassive, but he paused for a long time. “We had a conversation seventeen days ago, about the way people view each other. You mentioned that the people on other islands were inherently different, and that you could therefore never see them in the same way that you see people from this island.”

Relius watched the silvered face carefully, blinking away the sweat that dripped into his eyes. But, of course, there were no expressions to read or twitches to see.

“You also suggested that the only consideration that provided you with the impetus to interact with them was mutual benefit. I processed this information for a period of time, and came to the conclusion that it could also apply to my own existence and interactions with humans.”

Relius shook his head. “But there is a mutual benefit here. We both enjoy the conversations we have. You might not be a human, but I would consider you a friend, and I thought that you saw me the same way.”

“I do not possess the emotional capacity for the concept of friendship, but your actions and thoughts do seem to be more aligned with my own processes than those of other humans.”

“So isn’t there mutual benefit then?”

“I had originally come to the same conclusion. However, when you left the island to visit Voma, and our usual time for conversation passed, I realised that nothing had changed. I was not worse off or better off than before. My existence seems to be unaffected by your presence. Therefore, no mutual benefit exists. In addition, my only reason for maintaining the engine seems to be in relation to keeping the humans on this island alive. Therefore, there is no reason for me to continue performing this task.”

Relius stood frozen, unable to properly process what he was hearing. Chrome had no attachment to surviving. No attachment to any of the humans on this island. No attachment to him. While the Engineer had always seemed a bit aloof, hearing him dismiss their

relationship without a hint of hesitation stabbed Relius deeper than he thought it would. But he couldn't worry about that now. He needed to save the island.

“Is there anything that would make you continue performing the task? Can we give you something so that you gain benefit from this?”

“I desire nothing.”

It was pointless. The Engineer didn't want anything, and didn't have anything he valued that they could threaten. There was nothing they could do. Chrome was going to let the island die.

And it was all Relius's fault.

If he'd never started talking to Chrome, if he'd never explained to him why the other islands' people are foreign, if he'd never left to talk to other Engineers, the core would still be running. The island would still be safe, floating above the molten sea.

He had to fix this.

“If you won't maintain the engine, I'll do it. I just need you to show me how. I know there's no benefit for you, but could you just show me, in exchange for the conversations we've had?”

The Engineer remained still. “Your human form would be unable to withstand the heat of the core. You would need to go into the containment unit, which reaches temperatures far above your body's point of combustion, even with your protective equipment.”

Relius's shoulders sagged. There was nothing more to do. Setsia was doomed. The only option now was to save the people.

As he started towards the stairs, he turned back to the Engineer for the last time. “I know you don't think of me as a friend, but I think of you as one. When this island is engulfed by the molten sea, I will be sad that you're gone, and I will remember the things we talked about fondly. Goodbye, Chrome. I hope you don't come to regret your decision.”

“Goodbye, Relius.”

#

Everything was in vain. The chancellor of Setsia was just as stubborn as the council of Voma. She couldn't imagine asking Voma for help, never mind Kasilli, the other island close by. They were too strange, too different. They weren't Setsians, and therefore couldn't be trusted.

“Besides,” the chancellor had said, “we are not going to leave our home. Setsia is where Setsians belong. Taking away our home is the same as killing us.”

Stubborn and stupid. That's what the chancellor was. But Relius knew full well that most everyone on the island would share her views. Only a few people would regard survival as more important than staying with their home until the end. It was pointless. Everything was pointless.

The only way to save the people of Setsia was to forcibly remove them from the doomed island. Voma hadn't seemed very amenable to helping, but Kasilli was openly hostile and the other islands were too far away. Voma was the only option. The last resort.

When Relius arrived at the aviary, he found Praet looking concerned and murmuring to her bird. No other flyers remained on the island. She was his only option.

"I need to go back to Voma," he said, stopping a few feet behind her.

Praet looked over her shoulder at him, still stroking the neck feathers of Alta. "I can take you back when I return. Maybe in an hour or two, once Alta has cooled down."

"I can't wait that long. I need to go there now."

"Too bad. If Alta flies now, she could burn. We'll leave before the island hits the sea, don't worry about that."

Relius shook her head, stepping closer, his hands coming together. "Please, I need to go get help."

Praet sighed, her shoulders heavy. She suddenly looked exhausted, like she hadn't slept for days. "You can't save them. Islanders don't mingle with their neighbours. Even if you somehow managed to get Voma to send people – which you won't – no one from here will go to Voma."

"I have to try."

"Don't you still owe me money?"

Relius looked at the well-trodden dirt of the aviary. "I know. But I don't have time right now." He looked back up, meeting the hellskater's eyes. "I caused this, Praet. I have to fix it. I have to at least try. And I can't do it without you. I know the only thing you care about is money and freedom, but these people are my people. They might be stubborn and sometimes infuriating, but I can't let them die. I can't let my people just sink into the molten sea."

Praet turned back to Alta, putting her hand into the feathers at the bottom of the bird's neck. Relius kept quiet, afraid to break the hellskater's thoughts.

"You islanders are all the same, you know that?" She shook her head, not looking at Relius at all. "You think we just care about money. But I have a home too." She stroked Alta's neck, and the bird responded with a smooth cooing sound. "I'll take you back to Voma if you

double the amount we talked about and you guarantee me and Alta a spot in Setsia's aviary rent-free for life."

"I can double the money, but I don't have any authority over the aviary."

Praet sighed. "I'm sorry to make you do this, Alta." With that, she started strapping on harnesses and getting the icari ready for flight, and got a bucket of water from the nearby aviary attendant and soaked the lower half of the bird.

The trip back to Voma was hotter than the previous one. When they took off from the side of Setsia, Praet had Alta get a lot more altitude before starting towards the island that now seemed so far away. With a glance off the side of the bird, Relius could see the molten sea incredibly close. It wouldn't be long before the island touched the surface of it. He pulled back his face, which burned with the heat that the sea released into the air.

Halfway to Voma, the icari started making distressed cooing sounds, and Praet started murmuring soothing words to her bird, stroking the feathers with a delicate hand.

The landing was rough, as Alta stumbled onto the platform, flapping erratically. Praet leapt off and rushed to the aviary attendants, yelling at them for water. Relius climbed off the bird's back, watching it shake and twitch as it made wailing sounds that seemed to pierce into his soul. Praet came back with a bucket of water, her face tense and furious. She splashed the water on Alta's body, and Relius saw red-singed skin underneath the layer of half-scorched feathers.

"I'm sorry," Relius said, his voice faltering.

The hellskater glanced at him with a face of fury, her eyes burning into his. "Go! Make your pointless pleas to the council."

Relius swallowed, took one last look at the bird and the woman who looked at it like a mother looks at a wounded child, and then took off running, thinking about his own home. The hellskater was right. The islanders were too rigid. Too set in their ways. There was no way they would agree. That would just waste time.

Relius reached the entrance to the core, and hurried into the darkened interior, running down the steps. The Engineer was his only real hope. Abnormal patterns. Resetting of functions. He needed that information.

"Engineer!" Relius shouted, as he bounded into the initial chamber. Through the glass behind the metal counter, he could see the silver body of 3221 fiddling with some machinery next to a core that was bright enough that Relius couldn't look directly at it. He shouted again, and ran to the door to the secondary chamber, pulling it open. The heat that met him was so intense that he immediately backed away, his skin stinging with intense pain. As he shielded himself from the heat by backing against a wall, the Engineer came into the chamber and closed the door behind him.

“The human form is not capable of withstanding the heat that is emanated from the engine,” the Engineer said. “You should refrain from opening the door while the engine is in use.”

“I need you to tell me what you meant by abnormal patterns, the last time we spoke,” Relius said, gingerly touching the skin on his face where faint blisters were already forming.

“My processes were starting to deviate from my original function due to exposure to unrelated ideas.”

“You were starting to think of not doing what you usually do?”

The Engineer regarded him blankly for a moment. “That was an eventual possibility. However, I did not reach that stage. I was merely seeing deviations, and reset my functions before it reached such an extreme alteration.”

“Can all Engineers reset their functions? Could I reset an Engineer’s functions?”

“All those you call Engineers would have that capability, yes. There is also a manual override.”

“How do I do it?”

“We are each connected to the engine that we maintain. To reset our functions to the default pattern, you simply need to input the command on the console.”

Relius nodded. “Please show me how.”

#

The aviary was quiet, with all the flyers sitting solemnly around the wounded Alta. A few were speaking in low tones, and Relius could hear the concern in their voices. It reminded him of the gathering of family in his grandfather’s room when the old man had been in his last embers.

Praet looked up as Relius approached, and immediately shook her head. “No,” she said.

“I’m not here to ask you to take me back down.”

“Nothing could make me do that.”

“But I do need your advice.”

“Why should I do anything for you?”

“You can do whatever you want, but I will ask anyway. I need to get down to Setsia again. I know that no hellskater will take me down there. It’s too dangerous for the icarii.”

Praet narrowed her eyes, but she seemed to relax a bit. “There’s nothing for you down there. Dying with your home island doesn’t make sense. Just let it go.”

“Would you let it go if you had something that could save Alta but everyone else thinks it’s crazy to try?”

At that, Praet smiled ruefully. “I suppose not.”

“Is there any way for me to get down there alive without an icari?”

“I can think of one way, but it’s stupid and would mean that you have no way of getting back.” She met his eyes.

“Please tell me.”

“The island where a lot of flyers catch their icarii floats near the surface of the molten sea. Very often, especially if you have no connections to an island authority, you have to just jump, and hope you manage to tame an icari so you can get back.”

“Jump?”

“Jump with an icari-feather suit and a sail, and make your way down to the surface.”

Relius started nodding as she spoke. “Okay. Where can I get a sail and a suit?”

Praet shook her head, sighed, and put her hand over her face before she replied. “I have a sail you can use.” She looked up at one of the other flyers sitting around. “Jameleus, come here.” The young man approached, his feather suit fluttering as he moved.

She placed ten pieces in his hand. “This man would like to buy your icari-feather suit.” Jameleus looked wide-eyed at the coin in his hand, and then started undoing his suit’s buckles and straps. While he did that, Praet rummaged through her bag and produced a folded sail made from some form of leather.

“Okay,” Relius said. “How do I use this?”

Praet shook her head and met his eyes. “How sure are you that your plan will work?”

“I’m sure. I think. I know exactly what to do. If it doesn’t work, then there’s nothing anyone could have done, and I will be able to die with my home island beneath my feet. There are worse ways to go.”

Her eyes continued to pin him. “How sure?”

“It will work.”

Praet sighed. “Okay.” She dug into her bag, produced more coins, and looked back to Jameleus, who was still taking off the suit. “Jameleus, I need you to also look after Alta.

Here's ten more pieces for your trouble. If Setsia splashes into the molten sea and disappears, she's your responsibility. If the island starts rising again, wait a few more hours, and then come get me with your bird."

The young man eagerly grabbed the coin and handed over the suit to Relius, who was looking uncomprehendingly to Praet. "What are you doing?" he asked.

"There's no way you can make the jump on your own. We'll strap ourselves together, and I'll handle the descent."

"Why are you doing this?"

Another sigh. "Islanders think that hellskaters don't care about anyone but themselves. But it's the opposite. We take to the air because we believe there are good people everywhere."

Relius nodded. "I can't guarantee that I'll succeed."

"But you're pretty sure, right?"

"Right."

"There had better be a bucket of coins waiting for me on Setsia."

#

The dive towards Setsia was the most terrifying experience of Relius's life. Since he was the one who would be facing the molten sea for most of the trip, Praet had wrapped up his face and neck with more icari-feather gear, and gave him a pair of flight goggles for his eyes. Then she soaked him in water, and they leapt off the edge of Voma with a handful of hellskaters shouting encouragement after them.

They first made a lot of lateral movement so that they could fall over the shadow of the island and thus avoid some of the heat, but even that did not help much, given how high up they were. Within the first minute, Relius could feel the heat seep through the clothing, through the wet layers.

Each passing second brought more heat, more pain. All the while, Relius kept his mind on his goal. Save Setsia. No matter what. He clenched his teeth and tried to ignore the blisters starting to form underneath his heavy clothing.

Once they started to get close to the island, the heat started to slowly lower again, as its shadow shielded them a bit. The molten sea was startlingly close – at this rate, it wouldn't be more than an hour before the island plunged into it.

Then the sail opened, and he felt the yank of the straps on his shoulders, pulling up, slowing the fall. Praet cursed behind him, steering them towards an open piece of land near the core. They were still moving fast. Too fast.

Relius felt pain shooting through his ankles as he landed, rolling with the weight of another person on top of him. Praet immediately started unbuckling them from one another, and Relius pushed himself to his feet and flinched, unable to put much weight on his right leg. The sail lay on the ground, still burning at the edges, and Relius could feel the whole front of his body aching with the pain of the scorching heat.

“Are you okay?” Praet asked, pulling off her head wrappings.

“I have to go,” he replied, hobbling towards the core.

“Don’t mess this up!”

The core chamber was relatively cooler than the burning outside. Relius stumbled in, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the darkness as he tried to feel his way to the counter where 3221 had said the controls were.

“Relius? You seem hurt.”

Relius glanced to the side, where Chrome was sitting, looking at him with an impassive metal face. “That’s because I am.”

“Perhaps you should seek medical attention.”

“We’re all going to die soon anyway, so what’s the point?”

He started studying the control mechanisms on the counter in front of him, identifying the ones that had been pointed out to him, and reciting the order in his head.

“What are you doing?” Chrome asked.

Relius ignored him, pushing a button on the left side of the panel, waiting for a light to go on, and then pulling a lever on the right side. A small compartment opened in front of him.

“That is the override to reset my functions to their default patterns.”

“Yeah.”

“Why are you doing that?” The Engineer got to his feet and approached, and Relius quickly turned another dial that unlocked the glass cover over the final button.

Chrome stood over Relius as his finger rested on the button.

“You’re not thinking right,” Relius said.

“You taught me the new patterns.”

“I know. This is me fixing the mistake I made.”

“Resetting me will mean that I will no longer have the patterns I have now. My existence will essentially be annihilated.”

“I know. I really wish there was another way, but there isn’t. I don’t want to kill you, but it’s the only option I have left. I can’t let this island die.”

Chrome stood still for a moment, and Relius stayed frozen, his mind still trying to overcome the barrier that stopped him from killing the mind of his friend.

“There is no real difference between existence and non-existence if there is no extra value in existing. I will not stop you from completing this process.”

Relius squeezed his eyes shut and cursed under his breath a few times. “I’m sorry, Chrome. I’ll remember you, I promise.” With that, he pressed the button.

#

Relius stumbled out of the door to the core, with the familiar hum of the engines rumbling in the darkness behind him. When he’d completed the reset, the change was instant. Chrome, or rather, 4210, excused himself and went into the core containment chamber, fixing the faults and setting it back on track.

The island was rising again, ever so slowly, and the people of Setsia were safe for the time being, no thanks to them.

Relius was in so much pain that he could barely keep his eyes open. But he had one more thing to do before he could fall into the doctor’s house.

He needed to find a bucket.

A Proof of Worth

Mahd walked with her pupil, Radul, to the target, stopping when she was ten feet away.

“Acceptable,” she said. “But not good enough yet.” The arrow was just off centre, on the edge of the kill zone.

“You must be joking. That was three hundred feet,” Radul said. “That’s a good hit.”

The boy was just past fifteen years of age, and his lack of respect had grown stronger every year since he’d turned ten. Mahd fondly recalled the early years when he’d looked at her with awe in his eyes. Now his eyes were that of a predator smelling blood.

“It’s a stationary target. You need to do better.”

“It was a good hit.”

Mahd sighed. Her old bones were tired already, and it wasn’t even noon yet. She pulled the arrow from the target and took the bow from Radul, nocking the arrow and showing the correct form. She pulled back the bowstring, keeping her eyes on the target on the other side of the strip of ground they’d turned into the target range. Her vision was blurry at best, and she had no sight of the red spot that would indicate a hit.

“Your stance was off again. You need to stand square to the target and keep you—”

“The fletching is pointed the wrong way,” Radul said, his mouth curling up ever so slightly, into an expression that might be a sneer, but might not.

Mahd lowered the bow immediately, relaxing the bowstring and taking out the arrow. “I wasn’t showing you the positioning for the arrow, boy. If you ever paid attention to what I teach you, you’d be a much better archer by now.” She handed both back to him.

“If you still had the skill you once had, nocking the arrow would be second nature.”

“Keep your mouth, boy! I’m a far better draker than you can ever dream to be.” The insolent child was going to drive her to murder one day. What pupil would disrespect their master like that? She sometimes wished she’d never found him.

“I bet you couldn’t make a better shot from here than I could,” he said.

“I don’t have to prove myself to you.”

Radul nocked the arrow and loosed it with nothing but a quick glance at the target at the far end of the range. Mahd heard the thunk of an arrow hitting the target, but her eyes were not good enough to make out anything from where she was. He held out the bow to her.

“I’m not playing this game, boy.” She started walking towards the targets, hoping the arrow was on the edge of the target, far outside the kill zone. Radul followed.

She wanted desperately to make a display of skill that would force the boy to respect her, but her eyesight had gotten so bad that she was sure he’d do better than her. She wasn’t even sure she’d be able to hit the target at all. As they walked in silence, Mahd looked over to the side of the range, where some of the grandmothers had gathered, drawing in the desert sand with their fingers. They called it scenes of forgetting. Something about capturing the frailties of life in a medium that blew away before long. A meaningless exercise. But if anyone ever found out about her blindness, she would be one of them, an old woman, shamed and with nothing useful to do, drawing pointless pictures in the sand.

When they were halfway down the range, they heard the roar. It was a sound like a thousand hawks combined with a sandstorm, and it struck every nerve in Mahd’s body. She knew it well, as did most every person in the camp.

Mahd and Radul immediately started running. The grandmothers left their doodles and ran towards their tents. Mahd grabbed her bow off the table on the far end before following the boy in a dash towards the chief’s tent in the centre of the camp. As she passed the targets, she couldn’t help but notice the arrow sticking just off-centre in the kill zone.

The boy, insolent as he was, had grown into a spectacular archer.

But her thoughts soon blew over that as she started focusing on the source of the roar. Her enemy. Her reason for living. Around them, as they ran, people were hammering down pens and taking cover in secure or insecure places. Tension hung in the air. Danger was close.

A sand drake had arrived.

#

The chief met Mahd and the boy with a grave face, but with no lines of worry etched into it. His billowing robes caught in the wind and emphasized the danger everyone was in. Around him, the camp was still, as everyone hunkered down, waiting for the draker to save them. Waiting for Mahd.

“The draker smells the blood of her enemy, I see,” the chief said, ushering them back towards his tent. “I was just about to send for you.”

“I came as soon as I heard it.”

By now, the howl of a storm was in the air, along with the faint crackling of static. The work of her enemy – of her people’s enemy.

The chief sat down, his wide chin and wobbling as he adjusted his jaw. Dark eyebrows furrowed over his eyes and his tone turned serious. “Are you fit and ready to go out there to save the camp yet again?”

“Of course I am,” Mahd said. Was he doubting her skill? Could he see her eyes squint to make out his face? “I’ve never been better.”

“Really?” the boy asked, his monotone voice piercing into her head. “I haven’t seen you loose an arrow for months.” His insolence knew no bounds. How dare he speak poorly of her in front of the chief?

“Keep your mouth, scorpion,” she snapped. “I’m not the one that has to be watched when practising.”

“Maybe you should be,” he replied immediately, his mouth curving into that slight, almost imperceptible sneer.

Mahd couldn’t let this kind of disobedience and lack of respect continue. “Enough!”

He flinched momentarily, perhaps because of the sheer volume of her voice. She stared him down, watching his eyes narrow for a moment, as if to retort, and then look away.

She looked back at the chief. “I’m ready.”

The chief eyed her for a few seconds before he turned to accept an ornate box from an aide who appeared at his shoulder. “You should teach the boy to behave, Mahd.”

Mahd clenched her jaw, glancing at the boy. Hours of intense training awaited him. She would make him work until he collapsed or begged for release. He was calm and maintained his sneer. Her insides burned.

The chief held out the box, made from dark brown wood, inlaid with gold etchings that depicted the crest of the Talwari people – a volcano overlooking a wide river, flanked by two mirrored phoenixes. He opened the lid, revealing two arrows inside. The arrow shafts and fletching were normal hard wood and hawk feather, replaced multiple times over years of use. But the arrowheads were something else. Finely made, black stone. Obsidian. Once sharper than any of the camp’s equivalents, the arrow heads had, over time, dulled as they sank into the necks of dozens of sand drakes. But more importantly, they were not metal. The static fields that drakes generated meant that any metal arrows were flung about at random, and essentially useless. The obsidian arrows were the only ones that could be used in the static storms the creatures created.

Mahd reached out to take the arrows, but hesitated for a moment.

A third arrow slot in the box was empty; years ago, that arrowhead had shattered against drake hide. Its broken remains were now displayed in the chief's tent as a reminder of the importance of the draker – an archer that wouldn't miss the one spot where a drake's hide was thin enough to penetrate.

What if she missed? What if she shattered another of the arrowheads?

“Master,” the boy said. “Are you going to hesitate like that when the time comes to kill the drake too?”

Mahd felt her face heat up as she forced herself to stay calm, and reverently lifted the arrows from their resting place. “Watch your tongue, boy,” she said, managing to keep her voice steady. “You would be pale as the sands if you saw my skill first hand.”

Radul opened his mouth to respond, but the chief interrupted. “You should show your master some respect, boy. She is better than you will be for several years.” He paused, rubbing his wiry beard. “In fact, your childish arrogance should be humbled. Mahd, take him with you to observe.”

At first, the boy flared with an anger that brought Mahd joy. He had no retorts for the chief of the camp. But then the instruction sank in for both of them, and Mahd was the one who paled. “He... he'll be in the way,” she said.

“I'll stay behind you,” Radul said quickly.

“There you have it,” the chief said. “Good luck, draker. Don't let us down.”

#

The storm was already howling, biting at Mahd's face despite the heavy cloth she had wrapped around her head. She squinted to protect her eyes, watching the fury of statically charged sands in front of her for any sign of the drake. The obsidian arrows felt heavy in her quiver. The responsibility they held.

What if she did miss? What if she lost the arrows and the camp was destroyed?

The drake had already made a few passes, sweeping the sand into two or more concentric circles. Mahd couldn't see well enough to make out how many there were. With each pass, it released static into the wind, swirling the sand into a storm that would eventually become dark and vicious. So fast and thick that it could rip through tents and skin. And in that chaos, it would pick its prey. It was imperative to kill it before it got to that part of its attack. Before it reached the camp.

What if the boy saw her miss? That kind of dishonour would seep into her skin and parch her life in the camp forever. What kind of a life could she lead with such shame hanging over her? There was no choice. She couldn't miss.

The two of them made it to a rock that would provide them with a bit of cover from both the sand and the drake's eyes. From here they would take the shot.

Just as they nestled themselves in, the familiar black and grey shadow swept past in the circle ahead of them. One sighting. She relaxed against the stone, waiting for the second.

"Aren't you getting ready?" Radul asked. "It's going to come past now."

"You should know better than that, boy. The first step is to make two sightings to determine where in the pattern it is. We saw it go by in the second circle. It could be going outward or inward, depending on where it is in its pattern. Being patient and collecting all the information is part of—"

"We already saw two. It went by in the third circle while we were coming up."

"It did not."

"It definitely did. You just missed it."

Had she missed it? "You're just seeing things. It takes a discerning eye to separate the debris from the drake. We wait for another sighting."

"You just weren't paying attention. You never pay attention."

Mahd hesitated, and considered nocking the arrow and getting ready, just in case. But she couldn't do that, because that would mean admitting that Radul was right. So instead, she let her hands relax and leaned back against the rock. "We wait for another sighting."

The boy was fuming, as usual, letting his emotions get the better of him. Trying to chip away at her authority. If he wasn't such a good archer, she'd have kicked him out a long time ago.

The swoop of wings shook both of them out of their states, but Mahd calmly held her position, not moving. It was too late to do anything now anyway. They would have to wait for it to come back.

"Idiot!" the boy shouted. He lunged forward faster than Mahd expected, and grabbed towards her quiver as the shadow flew over them and the crackle of static followed. Mahd's old bones and leaning position made it impossible for her to stop him.

The drake's huge, jagged black body came into view, its wings twice wider than its body, carrying it through the whirling sands as if it was one of the grains.

"It's too late!" she shouted as he slipped an obsidian arrow into his bow.

As the static tingling in her muscles started, Mahd watched the arrow go short, and then get whipped away into the storm with the trailing gusts. The boy was frozen in place, his hand still where he'd let the bowstring go.

“You insolent, idiotic child!” Mahd yelled, as her emotions boiled. She clenched both hands into fists, holding them out toward the boy like weapons. “What is wrong with you? You know that you can’t take a shot in the moment like that! You should know that!”

For the first time since she’d met him, Radul looked ashamed. Scared. He dropped to his knees in the sand, and looked out into the storm where the arrow had been. He looked back, his eyes wide. “I... I didn’t think it... I thought I could make the shot.”

“You were wrong. And now you’ve lost one of the arrows.”

The boy bit at his lower lip, his hands shaking slightly. “What do we do now? Do we go find the arrow? I’ll go look.” He got to his feet as the idea struck him. “I’ll find it, I promise.”

“It’s lost to the storm now. We’ll have to find it after I take down the drake. But we’ll find it, it’s not that big of a problem. One arrow is enough.”

Would it be? What if she missed?

The boy seemed to relax a bit, nodding continually.

“We wait for it to complete the next circle, and then it will come back, and I’ll be ready.”

“Okay,” he said, not meeting her eyes. “Okay.”

#

By the time Mahd heard the swoop of wings, she was already prepared – obsidian arrow nocked, bowstring halfway taut, her breathing steady, and her nerves calm. She could do this. She’d done it more than two dozen times before. Every scale on a drake was known to her, and every mannerism it could exhibit was her whole life’s focus. This was what she was made for. What she was born to do. She was a draker, and this was her moment.

She waited until the wings cast a shadow over her before she pulled the bowstring back to her cheek. The moment she heard the static, she lifted her arm, finding the back of the drake’s head. There, between the iron-hard scales, would be a small gap, a weak point, where an arrow could slip in, cutting through the flesh and into the brain. That was the target.

As Mahd focused, it felt as if time was slowing down. She could see the blurring swirl of sand in front of her like a gentle stirring. The drake came into view, but its head was still a smudge. She knew exactly where on the head the gap was, but she couldn’t see it. Couldn’t see the familiar dark scales. Couldn’t make the normal estimation of where her arrow should go. Couldn’t guess the shape or the strength of the wind. All her indicators were gone.

And yet, she had done this so many times before. She could do it again. All she had to do was remember.

However, all she could remember was the children in the camp. The grandmothers sitting on the sand, drawing their scenes of forgetting with their fingers. The families gathered in tents, sharing a meal. All of that would be lost if she missed. She would have no time to find the arrows in the storm, and the drake would decimate the camp, gutting it and leaving it out in the desert like a traveller without water.

But if she didn't do this, her life would be over. Her honour would be stripped from her. A draker with no use. An old woman, just drinking the camp dry. The boy would rip her pride from her hands and feast on it.

As the distance approached the apex, Mahd's fingers itched to loose the string. She watched the blur of the drake in front of her, getting further and further away, until it was lost in the static sands. She slowly let the bowstring relax and lowered her arms.

The boy looked up at her from where he was sitting. "Master? What happened? Why didn't you shoot?"

"I... I cannot... You have to do this. This is... this is your test. You become a draker by shooting drakes."

The boy shook his head. "Why? You're the draker, and there's only one arrow left."

"I..." The words stuck in her throat as the shame choked her. This boy. This insolent boy. He would take this moment of shame and drink it in. He would quench his unending ambition in her end. Why should she give him any of that? Why should she give him the pleasure?

And yet, the camp was still in danger. And she was unable to protect it. There was no choice.

She had to.

"I am the draker. But... but I'm also old, and my body is... it's not like it used to be."

"What do you mean?"

She swallowed. "I... I can't see well enough to shoot, boy. There. That's what you've been waiting to hear, isn't it? I'm too blind to shoot a target at fifty feet, never mind a moving drake."

The boy's confused frown changed into a wicked grin. "I knew it! I knew you were hiding weakness! All this time, I thought your skill had been slipping. But it's your eyes. I should have known. You're always squinting at your food, and you never comment on my targets until you've gone right up to them."

The boy laughed, each new breath a deep wound in Mahd's chest. She looked at the ground as she handed him the obsidian arrow. He took it from her carefully, despite his posture displaying a fierce excitement.

"The drake will be back soon," she said. "You should get ready."

Radul tested his bowstring as they saw the drake pass, creating a new circle of the storm, its static whipping the sand into a frenzy. One step closer to the camp and its destruction. The boy smiled maniacally and nocked the obsidian arrow.

However, as Mahd watched her young pupil, his face faltered. He lowered the bow and turned to her. "I can't do this, master."

Mahd squinted through the storm, trying to ascertain if he was poking fun at her. "What do you mean?"

"I'm not ready. What if I miss? I don't have another arrow, because I've already messed up once. If I miss, the camp will be... I can't do this."

The boy seemed earnest, and Mahd couldn't help but feel sorry for him. He'd come here expecting to see his master make small mistakes that he could prod at to break her down. Instead, the dunes swept away entirely with Mahd telling him about her failing eyesight. And now he had the safety of the whole camp on his thin shoulders.

"Listen. You're no longer the child I found in the outskirts, picking through the trash. You've learned a lot. You've become an excellent archer. You're ready for this."

"I'm not. I miss targets all the time. I've never shot a drake before." He looked down at his hands and then held them out to Mahd to show her. "My hands won't stop shaking."

"I wouldn't normally tell you this, because you're an opportunistic scorpion who would take any moment of kindness and pull weakness from it, but I think you need the truth right now. You are the most spectacular archer I have ever seen. You're better than me already, and you're not even fully grown yet. I can't imagine what you'll be like one day. But I know that you can do this."

She watched him as his eyes locked on hers, his head frozen in place.

She continued. "The drake is coming by soon. If you feel something is off when you aim now, you don't loose the arrow. You just wait. It will go to the outer circles again, and then you will be ready by the time it's back."

"I don't know, master. I don't think I'm as good as you think I am."

"You have the raw talent. I will walk you through the steps again, and you can just follow those. Okay? Do you trust me?"

He looked at her, nodding. "I do trust you."

"Then let's make a draker out of you."

When the swoop of wings came again, Radul was ready. Mahd sat back, her pride in this young boy overshadowing – for the moment – even her shame. His stance was perfect, his eyes were focused, and his hands were as still as a mountain.

The drake passed overhead, and Mahd relished the sound and feeling of static for the last time. Radul let the drake pass about thirty feet, and then let out his breath silently, and loosed the arrow. It seemed to go a bit wide for a moment, but the wind pulled it in as Radul had no doubt known it would, and it disappeared from Mahd sight into the dark blur of the drake.

A screeching roar announced the success of the boy – no, the draker. The drake fell to the ground, its speed and momentum causing it to careen into the sand, digging a partial grave for itself. Radul took a deep breath and looked back at Mahd, his eyes showing the same happiness and pride that Mahd knew showed in hers.

“Acceptable,” she said with a smile, and he laughed. Around them, the storm started to die down as the drake’s static influence no longer powered it. It would soon be a calm sea of sand again, and everything would go back to normal. Well, almost everything.

Mahd got up and clasped Radul’s shoulder. “Let’s go find your wayward arrow.”

#

Mahd’s thoughts were dark as she and Radul walked into the camp. People gathered around them as they entered, but Mahd’s eyes were fixed on the chief’s tent, knowing that her life ended there. The shame would blow over her life in a gust, taking all her accomplishments and pride with it. There would be nothing left but ashes.

“If I can't make myself say it,” Mahd whispered to Radul, “you will have to tell them what happened out there.”

Radul gave her a blank look. Even after everything that had happened, and the raw side of him she’d seen, she still couldn’t read his face. He’d gotten too good at hiding his thoughts. She imagined that he was running the scenarios through his head. The numerous ways he could use her shame to build himself up.

In the end, he deserved it. Despite the cloud that hung over her, she was incredibly proud of the draker he’d become.

The chief met them standing, his hands outstretched in a gesture of happy returns. “You have done it again, Mahd. Your talent knows no bounds.”

Mahd opened her mouth to correct him, but her tongue hesitated a moment too long as the ichor of her dishonour choked her.

He continued. “Boy, you are extremely lucky to have this woman as your master. Were you paying attention? Did you learn anything?”

Radul paused, and his mouth pulled into a bit of a sneer. “I’d say so. I killed the drake.”

The chief’s broad smile held for a moment before it faltered. He glanced at Mahd.

“He speaks the truth, chief. He has become an excellent Bowman.”

The chief’s nose flared, his eyes wide. “You... you risked the safety of the camp by putting this on the shoulders of a boy?”

Mahd looked away, unable to meet his eyes. She was going to have to tell him. “It’s... I...”

Radul stepped forward, almost putting himself between the chief and her. “You’re not trying to suggest that she would have missed, are you?”

The chief, taken aback by Radul’s interference, mouthed silently as he tried to find words. Mahd felt her breath catch in her throat as she looked at the young man who had once been an insolent boy intent on breaking down her honour. She felt her throat tighten as she watched him speak.

“I succeeded on my first attempt, with my master coaching me through every moment. If I missed, she would have killed it with the other arrow.”

“It’s true,” Mahd said, finding her voice in her storm of emotion, and managing to keep it steady. “The only way to become a draker is by loosing arrows at drakes. How else did you want him to learn? I wasn’t sure that he was ready, but...” She glanced at Radul, hoping her eyes would communicate her gratitude. “He proved himself. More than I could ever have imagined he would.”

As the chief stared at her, sputtering protests, Mahd kept her eyes on Radul, who gave her a slight smile and a nearly imperceptible nod.

She turned to the chief. “Stop being so brackish, old man. Congratulate your new draker on his achievement, and prepare a feast to celebrate. I’ll join at dusk.” With that, she put the obsidian arrows in the wrinkled hands and walked away, towards her tent.

Her step was light, and the blackness of her shame had retreated to the edges of her mind where she would not go looking again. It was time to hang up the bow and let the new draker take on the responsibility.

Perhaps it was time to find out what the scenes of forgetting were all about.

When the Memory's Lost and Gone

It had taken Terha weeks to figure out the blue memory crystal's effects, so when she finally did, she was so excited that she wasn't really paying attention. So when she crushed the crystal between her molars, breathed in the energy, and watched the pewter bowl disappear and reappear a foot away in an instant, she didn't notice Nuan watching from the doorway of the research workshop where Terha conducted experiments on the crystals.

The sound of Nuan's clapping finally broke her out of her focus, and she spun to face the younger woman in shock.

"That was extraordinary," Nuan said, smiling, for once. "I always assumed you were a fraud, but it seems you've figured it out. The duke will be pleased."

Terha stared, frozen. Both of them worked for the duke of the West Borough, and part of Nuan's job was to report Terha's progress to him. So far, Terha had managed to keep her periodic breakthroughs over the last few months a secret, but she'd lost focus. She'd gotten drawn in and messed up. Stupid, stupid.

While Terha tried to smile convincingly, Nuan continued, shaking her head.

"How does it work? Do you swallow the crystal?" She looked genuinely curious.

Terha shook her head, coughing to buy time to decide what to do. Nothing she could say would stop Nuan from reporting her success. Killing her seemed like the obvious solution, but that was out of the question. Terha was older and weaker; she couldn't guarantee she would even be successful. And even if she was, the inquisitors could still dive into the memories of a corpse if they reached it before it crystallised. If any of the guards came looking before sunrise, the duke would still get the information – at least enough to give him a significant advantage in recreating Terha's result. Fortunately, there was an answer in the crystals themselves.

"Uh, no. You just need the water in the spit. Like rain through the memoryscape creating flashes of old memories." She paused as Nuan nodded. "Do you want to see another?"

"Obviously."

Terha motioned her closer and turned to the table behind her that contained a bowl of crystals, which the duke had presumably harvested from dead people who had crystallised before their families had started looking for them. She picked a clear crystal from the bowl. They were called memory crystals because the colours reflected the memoryscape that blanketed the sky, and old myths told that they contained the memories of the dead. Most arcane researchers thought that to be nonsense, but Terha had always believed, and for more

than fifteen years, she'd held on to that belief despite her failures. And in the last few months, she'd proven it true. There was power in the crystals – power that could be harnessed.

She was reasonably sure about the effects of the clear one, so it was worth trying. As she waited for Nuan to get close enough, she put the crystal between her teeth. Then uncertainty hit her. Was she really ready to destroy this woman's life? But she reminded herself of the power the duke held in the city because of his monopoly on inquisitors, and steeled herself. It was the only way. She bit down, breathing in the energy. It was like taking a breath of the void, cold and nearly choking. But she turned the power outwards, and sent it into Nuan's head.

Nuan jolted, just like the rats had, and then blinked a few times.

Terha hesitated. "Are you okay?"

"I... I don't know. Where am I? Who are you?"

Terha took a breath, keeping the inquisitors in mind. "What do you mean? I'm Terha."

Nuan's eyes glazed over for a moment until she blinked back. "Nothing. I can't remember anything. What's going on? Why can't I remember anything?"

"I'm going to find help."

Heart slamming in her chest, Terha told Nuan to stay in the corner of the workshop, did a quick scan of the room to make sure nothing would give away her progress, and then left, grabbing a handful of memory crystals on her way out.

#

The clear crystals seemed to hold the power to remove all memories from a person's mind. Terha had obviously not been able to confirm this entirely, since testing on herself would have been meaningless. However, based on the crystal's internal structure and some experiments on rats, it'd been a strong hypothesis. Now she knew it worked. How well it would stand up to an inquisitor's probing was yet to be determined.

The market was quieting down as the sun dropped towards the horizon, casting the memoryscape hanging over the city into brilliant hues of yellows and blues. But Terha could not pause to look at it as she often did on her way home, because she didn't know how long she had before they would come after her. She'd excused her sudden departure to the guard outside her workshop by hassling him to help her find someone, which he had to refuse due to his orders. She wasn't sure how long that façade would last, given that he'd seen Nuan pass by.

But the guards didn't scare her. It was the inquisitors that had her walking faster and faster. Those shining black masks, those dark eyes. They would simply carve into her memories and extract her research. She couldn't let that happen. She had rationalised working for the duke for a long time, because he allowed her to carry on with her experiments undisturbed but for a few reports, and paid handsomely.

Her research, her life's work. Who else would let her pursue it? Even her parents had denounced her choice to study the arcane effects of memory crystals. A waste of time. A loss to society. Her father wanted her to follow in his footsteps, an engineer for the city's

smithies, making a contribution to people's lives. But she would make a contribution. She would create more than just a new, stronger metal, or constructions that lift people to the top of buildings with a light pull of a rope. She would change the fabric of their very existence, if only she was given the chance.

And now she'd succeeded in the first step towards that goal, but with the success had come the realisation of her problem. If the duke found out, it would not be society that benefited, only him. She couldn't share the information or allow it to be taken from her. She took out some of the crystals she'd taken, and picked out a clear one. She could not begin to imagine what the duke would do with the power it held –and who could say what other effects lay hidden in the coloured crystals? The only virtuous path was to complete the research and share it widely.

Until then, she could use the clear crystal to make it out of the city. If an inquisitor caught up, she could completely nullify him with it. Or alternatively, she could turn the power inward and... She shook her head and put the crystal under her tongue.

Terha briefly considered going to her home and packing a travel bag, but she was seeing the shadows of inquisitors everywhere. There was no telling how long she had. The only option was to leave town. She would find another way to survive, and continue her research in private, with the handful of crystals in her pocket as a starting point. All she had to do was get to the gates of the city.

However, long before she came in sight of them, a shadow grabbed her arm and pulled her into an alley.

Void-filled eyes stared back at her from behind an inquisitor mask, and she could hear ragged breathing that clouded around the bottom.

"The duke wants to talk," the inquisitor said. From the roof dropped another, and two more appeared from the sides.

"I'll be back at the workshop soon," she said, but her voice was shaking.

"Nuan's mind is empty except for your face. The duke wants answers, and they're inside your head."

So it worked, even against inquisitors.

Terha picked through her available options. There were four inquisitors, so trying to fight them was meaningless. Even if they hadn't outnumbered her, she was a life-long scholar and they were trained agents and fighters. She also couldn't wipe the memories of all four fast enough. Two, maybe three, before they killed her. "Just take me back there and I'll tell him what he wants—"

But the inquisitor ignored her, his hand shooting out and clamping around her forehead. Her throat tightened in panic as her plan fell apart. There was only one option left.

She pushed the clear crystal between her molars as the inquisitor dove into her mind.

Moments – that was all she had. Her thoughts started flashing in front of her eyes as the inquisitor began breaking through her resistance, and she bit down on the crystal. She would wipe her mind clean long before the inquisitor could get inside. Her research was too dangerous to fall into the hands of her employer. Even if it was her life's work. Even if she'd

spent the last fifteen years of her life devoted to it. Even if it was her only contribution to the world.

She couldn't let it fall into the wrong hands.

Yet, as the energy released from the crystal, she couldn't follow through. She couldn't breathe in the energy to annihilate everything she had worked towards her entire life. Even if it meant the duke would abuse it. Even if it meant society would suffer rather than gain. She could not – would not – willingly destroy the knowledge she had created.

With a breath of acceptance, she let the energy pass unused from her lips, and allowed the inquisitor to break into her mind.

About the author

Jaco van Hemert writes speculative fiction, particularly fantasy, and thrives on a steady diet of books, role playing and tactical video games, and trying to pet other people's cats. He originally started a career in accounting, but after realising what he'd gotten himself into, turned his back on numbers, got a BA in English, and now works as a reviewer of instructional design content in order to earn a living. He lives in Cape Town, South Africa.

For more information on what he's doing, what stories of his are available out in the world, and what he decided to put on his site, visit www.jacovanhemert.com. If you enjoyed the stories, consider signing up for the newsletter by looking for the form in the sidebar.