

Planets of the Wild

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a story from the
Children of the Storm
anthology

Chapter 1

A Face on the Wall

Again I was a child. In a single instant, reason lost its grip on my soul. At once, I was subject to the tides of emotion! At once, I was haunted by the reckless flight of my imagination.

A face had appeared upon the wall.

The abruptness of its intrusion startled me right from the doze of my slumbering strides. Sudden alarm rushed me to a mortal panic! In that feverous state, I froze. Rigid desperation strained my eye leftward on the wall. Its horrid eyes pierced over me, spilling from the shadows there. Even from this frightful periphery, the uncanny nature of my demon showed its strange peculiarity.

It both was, and yet was not.

It was distinct against the normal things: the books, the furniture, the adornments and the curtains. Yet it also was *composed* of those assorted things! It was an angled happenstance of fate, which my thoughts twisted to give life. Shivers flared through me. The great discomforts of shock rattled and whipped in a whirlwind of thought! My mind was still halfway asleep; like an ill-tempered child it writhed as I abruptly demanded it waken! For this reason, I could not be certain if what I saw was a dream slipped into my waking thoughts...or else a horrid reality nearly missed, owing to my slumberous saunter. However, before I could think further... the *apparition* passed.

It vanished! I stood alone once more.

It was gone! I snapped from my paralyzed panic.

Quickly, I retraced my steps! Hurrying back, I stood as I had moments before, though now with eyes wide and frantic. Investigative fervor wrested myself from any hope of quickly retiring to bed. I beset the hallway with a careful inquisition. Sudden gusts of reason began to reassure me then, and my fear contested little. For under scrutiny the wall was once again: *just a wall*. The dangerous gait of my heartbeat finally began to lessen.

I recall how treacherous this hallway seemed in my youth; estates *must* certainly be for adults more than for children. Labyrinthine convolutions of the manor had ever daunted my brother and I! The long trek grew fearsome each night; twas a trial I must pass, should I wish for the relief of the bathroom

on its end. Yet age gives growth to reason. And reason had taught that sprites in shadowed hallways were more a fiction than a fact.

All the same, I contented myself to circumspect twice more about, peering intently past some presumptive point in space. Yet scanning the far wall of my study with cautious looks, I was lowered fully to ease. My fear had been unwarranted. Indeed, reason caught up completely to the start I had taken! It lay hold of what terror had not gripped me since childhood, quelling it to dormancy.

It certainly had that bizarre quality of a dream, I'd reasoned then. For as I stepped through my hallway the appearance of that ghastly smile on the wall was both surreal and also felt tuned *specifically* to my mind. This was of course the sure test of a dream; it revolves around a person. Though another thing weighed against this fact. For it's countenance somehow was at odds with what supremacy my mind has over such lucid fancy! *It possessed also that frightening demand to believe it, which only real things may command*. I certainly *must* have seen that face, that horridly real and yet eldritch formation of objects grinning in my hallway.

Perhaps Dr. Thornton had been accurate in his prescriptions; perhaps lacking such passion in my waking hours, plagued me with these ethereal notions in slumber? Surely from such prolonged deprivations of true adventure, compounded by my arduous fixations, these fantasies of the night have broken my threshold and invaded my waking gaze! My callow dreams must be seeking some outlet for their fascinated energies. Perhaps I am too withdrawn inside this house after all?

I certainly could use a holiday.

Resolved upon this conclusion, I turned thence to continue on. At ease, I thought once more of the vision I had seen — content to treat its occurrence with an air of rational and detached distance.

It is strange, how the mind spins. It turns inwardly throughout such grand wheels. Those wheels seem to me now, tethered also to what annulus runs the furthest rims of creation! So we may imagine greatly. Yet also it stoops to creaturehood and baser instincts. As the mind soars to breach the bounds of mortal ability, it may turn at the same instant and behold panics likened to the lowest of beasts.

So I was then.

That even as I consoled my waning fright, waxed over by sapient exercise, the former flared up yet again! As I turned back to continue... I saw its grin a second time. There, out of the corner of my eye, it looked.

That face.

That horrid countenance glanced with grim apathy from amid the far wall!

I froze, again unmoving. I turned neither to nor fro. But I let my left eye peer askance, and study. Worried I was, that were I to turn thither it should vanish as before! Quickly, I decided I ought to gather what I may of its composure, while from this bleary angle.

It seemed that here, from such an exact perspective, was found an amalgam of many precisely situated objects! These worked to form the eclectic visage now watching me. How can it be said? But that as I mentioned once: this face both *was* and yet *was not*. From any direct angle it ceased to be.

Though from this strict position – what’s more from *only* this tangential line of sight – it glared forth to me. Only askew did it come to life.

I wondered at this, thoughts drifting again to childhood, and the behemoths constructed from any and all objects whilst blanketed in the dark, and I blanketed in daydream. But before I could reason meaningful thoughts from this, I discerned a voice that called out *my name*.

“*Simeon*,” it whispered, “that *is* your name, then?”

My mind halted, ears preening with sudden attention.

But for all their straining, silence greeted me.

Had this face just spoken? My mind began to race in such wonder, pouring over how all this could be. It seemed I had sunken into some state of questionable cogency! But what was the cause?

“There you are again,” came the voice.

Consciousness searched frantically, with without much explanatory success. How may I evaluate this second utterance? Again, like a shadow, it fled my investigative light. Yet this brought certain ideas to mind. Perhaps the voice, like the face, was only found wherefrom it was *not focused on*... Twas existent only in passing. Whence I looked, the face vanished. Whence I listened, the voice dissipated. But turning away the face appeared! And when thinking aught else, so sounded those whispers. I was soon confirmed in this theory as my ratiocinations were thus interrupted...as soon as when I began to form them.

“Here you are once more! Ah, I say then: grab a hold of me quickly, if you may. Quickly then chap, before you dart off again!”

In wonder I strained my eyes.

What looked like a hand now outstretched from the wall.

Yet it was also... *not a hand*. Indeed it surely must have *always* been there. From this angle, it simply had *always* appeared to be so. A perfect circumstance of factors aligned to reconstruct both the face and now the hand. They always were but only now were they known, only significant from this narrow poise. All the same I felt compelled. Though reason told me this be some faint imaginary thing, the thing itself beckoned with that strange *edict of reality*. The command to believe its call was echoing in my ears...to reach out and grasp that hand.

What can be said of this? How strange was this thing, which gripped my wonder thus to reach out and grip the mysteries laying beyond? Aye. *Beyond* is the word; for what fascinations of adventure may plague the young, in the old grows only stronger. Deceived unto hibernation are they. Thus, when wakened in mid-life or elsewhere, they are become violent surges of passion and determination. So it was that while fear still flooded me: this stronger notion urged me wayward. Further it was reason itself, which at last goaded me on!

I was so convicted of control and of sanity that I let out my hand, and swept it through where I was *certain* there to be only air. That mysterious face and its hand surely only *appeared* extended to me. Twas surely some work of manipulative depth, carefully circumstantial angles, and the darkness of the hour!

It is strange...how in wisdom we are foolish and in folly we are wise.

My hand caught midway as the other hand gripped my own.

In horror then, I whirled thus!

Away from my carefully posed perspective, I turned!

I looked straightly into the eyes of the other, suddenly swallowed in its gaze. All else for a moment was bound from me. Twas an experience altogether alien to any other thing. For when startled by the grip of the ghostly arm I whirled about! But on so doing, an ineffable exchange occurred.

Upon spinning thus, from the hallway to stare into the eyes of my phantom, I had expected to have my world righted to reason. To see there was some explanation of the madness, I sought to resolve composure.

From careful angle, I had felt confined in a work of fiction. Turning away, that world ought to fade! It would vanish, as if I'd turned from the pages of a good book when roused on the shoulder by some companion. When one becomes engrossed in literature or in art, the world about them fades a moment. Their view narrows into that frame, or to those pages. Even if for only an instant, all else dissipates. Yet in these, whence one removes their concentration, the enveloping network of the piece fades! It's overshadowed by reality pouring back in.

Imagine then to have dived into fiction: the reticulum of its art surrounding the soul. Yet then imagine, while so engaged, turning away find that art has extended past its borders! It now lays all around! Suddenly whirling thither to the frame, it's found to hold not that painting... but the former reality. Reality has exchanged itself with the enveloped fantasy.

So it was.

As I turned, I found myself fallen *toward* and *into* the pages, not away from.

The fantasy seemed the wider world!

My study became the narrow page.

The moment I turned leftward and stared at last upon the wall, I discerned that every angle around me, pardon this direct line of sight, now bore sights totally foreign. The feeling that I had turned a wrong corner washed me. I'd drifted in thought while driving the road, and suddenly realized I'd gone too far! At once, I was in some unfamiliar country. For locking eyes with this man before me, my study fled from view. It diminished until it existed only in the reflection I could see upon his spectacles.

I blinked, not trusting my eyes.

Before me stood a man. He appeared about my height, though a few years my elder. His thoughtfully bright eyes studied me from behind prismatic lenses, their warm brown strokes magnified owlshly through these golden mechanical rings.

Shocked unto stupor I released my grip of his hand and let mine own fall beside.

We stood in what looked to be some workshop. The far walls were full of shelves, whereupon numerous books and pieces of bronze machinery lay scattered — open as if half read, loosely and haphazardly bestrewn as if half constructed. Still smitten, I looked back to the man, caught by some glint in his gaze.

There! In the reflection of his spectacles surely retained the image of my study! Just as I had seen it moments before, there it remained. I whirled about. Somehow I expected, for its absurdity, to find my study behind me — as would naturally produce such a reflection. This proved futile. It lay only thereupon his gaze, not in true existence. Yet again, it persisted to fade the more I bent my thought upon it... until vanishing completely.

Somewhere I knew even then, that it was my industrious fixation, which had pressed it further from reality to nonexistence. But I was compelled by fear to furrow my gaze thither! The very gust, which my grasping flails had wound up, brushed the fleeting petals of my home out of reach! Perhaps if I had known this then, reality would have exchanged itself straight away with these far and inversive wilds. But alas...I was sundered. The other departed, whilst I remained.

And then it was gone.

Totally distant as a fleeting thought within the mind.

“Welcome!” said the man, smiling widely and breaking my daze, “so good to meet you, Simeon.”

Chapter 2

The Man Called Courtly

“How fascinating,” quipped my host, hurrying from me toward a desk on the far side of the room. His thin form nimbly navigated the piles of papers and misshapen gadgetry. Then, totally ignoring my presence, he proceeded to fetch a quill from its perch and scribble furiously on a piece of parchment.

The room, despite the scratching of the quill and the ticking of what I counted to be no less than six oddly constructed clocks, was somehow wrung with vacuous silence. It was perhaps the rush of all the attention that suddenly had since abated.

“I... where...” I stuttered from the vacuum.

“Ah yes, precisely!” he answered without looking away. I turned my head to him, mystified and expecting a further answer to follow. Yet this seemed the only reply I was to expect on the matter. For again we were surrounded by silence but for the clocks and the quill.

“I say, sir,” I formulated at last, “where am I? What is this vision?”

“No no no—that will not do,” replied the man to himself more than to me, continuing ever to write. “That is not the question, no. Tis not *where* thou art, but *why!* *Why* art thou come, Simeon?”

“You ask me this, sir? I know it not!”

“Ah yes, excellent!” he affirmed again.

“Can *you* answer this?” I queried.

“Answer thee what?”

“Why I’ve come?!” I exclaimed.

“*Why?* Nary that I should expend an instant on *that* question! This matter was answered long moments ago. Make haste, to now approach the proper question!”

“Which is?”

“No, definitely not that one.” The man shook his head then, as hurt by ignorance.

“You misunderstand me...” said I with simmered frustration. “I wish to inquire of *your* meaning, sir.”

“Ah yes! I speak of course of the *question*. The one framing all things! It is this: *why not?* Aye, that is the question! *Why... not*. For whence a man knows why a thing must *not* be—only then may he discern why such a thing, *which ought not to be*, is.”

Lost for words, I instead elected to near my host and press a thought of inquiry I had growing within. Whatever had just happened just, I reasoned, was born from this man’s gaze. Surely those eyes are they, which first caught my attention in my study, wherever it may be now. Perhaps these eyes, being the first things to breach my awareness, were also they which made the fatal tear. I neared him.

“Ah!” I exclaimed, whence nigh.

“Hmm?” he answered halfmindedly.

“Your glasses, sir! What sort of contraption are they?”

“Ah, yes! Well done, Simeon. These spectacles are of my own invention. These are they which allow me to peer through reason.”

I tilted my head in thought.

“You mean to say they grant you reason? As in, to see reasonably? What sort of totem may allow for such a metaphysical feat?”

“Nay, don’t be daft. That sort of visor has long since been in existence; this is nothing so infantile. These spectacles are not to see *reason*. But these allow me to see *through* it. To *look past* it.”

“I do not follow you, sir,” I lamented, still wondrous sat all this. “It is beyond comprehension.”

“Ah! Good, now you’ve got it.”

“What? No indeed. What you say is contradictory, totally incorrigible.”

“Precisely said! Well done indeed. *Contradictory*—yes! Such an observation often takes folk some time to arrive upon.”

“Surely,” I groaned inwardly, “then most have more patience than I for such nonsense...”

The man laughed rapturously. I, in my sardonic disposition, was taken slightly aback.

“Well put, Simeon! Good that!”

“What? I am at a total loss, sir!”

“Indeed! But that is the intent of these, which I call the *unthought lens*: to see past what is reasonable and rational and find all that which is left over.”

“Sir, this is utterly nonsensical. Alas, I must request you to return me, inversely by whatever manner you have raptured me hither—!”

“Indeed. Straightaway, Simeon my friend.”

“—or else I!” but then I registered his agreeable reply. “Oh...Indeed. All right then.” I paused for a moment unsure what to say next. But a thought occurred to me, as I was relaxed by the ease of his consent. “I am curious sir, how is it that you know my name?” posed I at last.

“Ah, I espied first your books, whence I looked into your room. Your appellation was inscribed on many covers.”

“Hmm.” I answered him, feeling within a sudden flare of haste to be rid of this place. If not for this urge, I’d have certainly been consumed with feelings of violation due this intrusively ontological optometrist.

“And your name, sir? If this be some trick and I find you’ve inebriated me with some drug, I must labor to locate and then indict you whence I return!”

He laughed.

“No, tis not a trick, Simeon. I apologize certainly. I hadn’t known that you could see me, any more than I knew you truly existed in the world I saw! I thought it more likely that I had stumbled upon some lost repository of knowledge, rather than a home. And what a large estate! Indeed, at the least I thought to have looked only into a potential world, into fiction you see—that you were not real but some phantasm of possibility. Nonetheless, I am called *Courtly*. Ian Courtly.”

“Well, Mr. Courtly,” I addressed, “may your ‘unthought lens’ return me?”

At this, I first noticed my host’s face contort in thought, as if sobered.

“I am not certain,” came his reply. He removed the spectacles from his nose and laid them on his desk gingerly. So hunched over them then, his brow set in a contemplative and brooding manner. His fists were stacked upon each other, forming a small pillar upon which his chin rested. “I tend *not* to be sure exactly where the ethereal constant of reason is truly rooted, so as to fully sunder my mind from it. But if indeed its laws may be violated, then what left is impossible? Further, if this has been done once, it can be done again. Yet, you must understand, this experience is no doubt equally odd for both of us! Here I am, tinkering with my hobbies as I have ever done...then suddenly I have summoned a man into my very room! Imagine the sensation!”

I was about to question him on this further, when a loud crack thundered from beyond the confines of Courtly’s enclosed atelier. It was then I realized that the room, having no windows, could very well have been a single studio or shack, rather than part of a larger abode. Indeed, the proximity of the sound from beyond the doorway would solicit such a theory. It sounded as if a large object of some sort had impacted the earth just there!

“Good heavens!” I exclaimed, “What in the...?”

“Oh yes,” said Courtly interrupting, “I had quite forgotten about them. Your arrival has been decidedly diverting!” he exclaimed as he rose. “I would prepare yourself though, they tend to be quite rough, this lot,” he encouraged with a pleasantly disarming smile.

“What?” I barely managed to reply, before the door of the shop was burst open.

Some masked figures entered forcefully, rushing to restrain both Courtly and myself. They were upon us before I could utter a word of protest! More then entered, crowding the already small space. I looked in fright to my host: frantically inquiring what should be done, or rather simply to know what was occurring. He simply stared back at me with an insouciant smile.

“Ian Courtly,” addressed one such figure from behind a shining black mask, “you have been summoned by orders of King Neito to appear before his court on Opal-Zed. Your compliance is not required, but you may extend it if you wish. Do you comply?”

“Oh, most certainly,” said Courtly cheerfully.

“Very well,” returned the trooper. Then to his fellows: “escort Dr. Courtly to the transport.” Next he turned to me. “State your name and planet of birth.”

“I...am Simeon Cordwell, from Princeton...err...Earth,” inwardly vexed for my stuttering.

“Identification not recognized,” he concluded, “you will come with us also.” He then turned and exited the shop and the other guards followed, dragging us along.

Suddenly aware of my predicament, I attempted pitifully to wrest myself free and snatch the unthought lens from the table where it lay. I am not entirely certain what I intended to accomplish by this; the device was totally foreign to me. But in my confusion, my mind suddenly decided that it ought to do so. Perhaps I saw the lens as the sole means of my return? It is possible, even though all thoughts of home, if any, were soon lost from me. It was a futile effort all the same. I hadn't the chance to make as much as an attempt, for the troopers held me firmly! I was torn from the shop... and from the unthought lens.

“No! Please, I need those!” I struggled nobly, if without avail.

Out from the atelier, Courtly and myself were taken into the brisk and veiled night — I wailing the entire way thence in a fashion entirely unbecoming. It seemed the atelier was indeed a lone room, though there appeared another set of rooms above it, oddly branching outward the further up the building reached into the barren and vacant sky.

I couldn't discern any other such buildings around us – for it was quite dark – though another thing soon caught my attention. Twas the craft toward which we were being taken.

It seemed a sort of airship, made of some black, steely material. It was not unlike rubber in texture, though cold to the touch. Most features were unclear in the late evening, pardon the faint orange lines glowed about its contours and lended definition. Further, there emanated a hum that rose ever distinct as we neared. My resistance waned some at the first sight, taken in with these things. Yet toil soon rekindled once the large hatch opened on his side! The thought of entering the ship birthed a sudden angst in me. Twas abrupt enough that I recommenced my avid wrestling. But I was not a strong man, nor physically wary. My efforts were rewarded only by a small slip from their grasp enough to clatter my skull about the frame of the vessel's door.

My world rushed into blackness.

The sound of humming and an engine's whirl greeted from afar, rocking me off to sleep.

Chapter 3

The Windup King

Coming to wakefulness a few hours prior to our landing, I sat arms folded where fastened. Across me, where he was fastened in like manner, I could discern Courtly's eyes attempting to commune with mine. His face seemed set in a perpetual grin, the sort suited to implore attention and response. Despite the social awkwardness that would ensue in any normal circumstance at a prolonged denial of such a glance, our situation was anything but ordinary. So did I desist. Yet more to the point, I was still vexed at him. Riled even further was I, for I suspected he hadn't comprehend the wrong he'd done me! His lack of repentance bode in me a want to slap the smile right from him.

Thusly did we make the rest of our trip — he pining for conversation and I not appeasing him. It is odd, how youthful my companion acted. I came to question my former conjectures regarding his age. For at the first I thought him possibly older than myself, a man in his sixties. Yet, in the cleaner light of this chamber, I determined the gray of his hair to have been disjunct with his sprightly pallor. Indeed he could be even younger than I, who was then not yet forty.

Such a notion was incredible to me at the time: to be as gray and yet as young.

Yet, all that followed brought me to reevaluate the boundary of what is possible.

Before too long the quiet hum of the craft was surpassed by a prolonged series of loud rattling tremors, and rushing of air from beyond our enclosed chamber. I could only assume that this entailed an end to our journey, though I hadn't ever flown by aircraft before. The confounded things had been buzzing about the skies of my home a few years now — though I still had yet trust them. All the same, the smoothness of our trip had passed. I could now discern the tipping and turning of our transport until it came to a steady rest and the hum simmered low. At this, the troopers who sat near us unfastened our belts and opened the hatch, leading us out.

The sky outside the craft was an odd mixture of light and dark. For as much as it seemed to be night, the courtyard we entered seemed lit with a neon hue about the borders of all its contents. Indeed the heavens were alive! All above us were hung a number of natural satellites, though in a far greater range of colors than our own moon. There were orbs of grayish purple, others of jade or still of amber. These all lit the night, adding to the wideness of the expansive garden. The feeling of openness lay about

the scene. It was as if one could simply reach out from the earth, or whatever planet this was called, and grasp one of these worlds that hung above. The courtyard itself seemed to run up to each horizon. Its expanse was scattered about with narrow spindling trees, through which ran woven paved walks and the occasional gazebo or atrium. I wondered how vast its borders grew. But before I could question Courtly on this, I espied the palace.

Rising high, from above the low sweep of verdure, its opulent face was colored with a vast crystalline array. Furthermore, shining for the most white, the subtle corners of its dimensions carried faint reflections of the celestial pallet's array. All this brilliance lay enunciated by the black of the heavens so near behind it — though a single green orb did hang beside the tip of his highest peak.

“King Neito's palace,” Courtly informed me as our captors lead us toward the castle.

“Oh, indeed!?” said I, with a sarcastically inflated sense of revelation.

But this gesture was lost on my companion.

“Indeed,” he continued undaunted, “he rules the whole system. But he himself, and all the kings before him, haven't left Opal-Zed for the past thousand years. The whole of the planet is, you see, his estate. His palace is here on the east pole, and his vacationing villas lay across the west.”

“You've been here before?” I questioned.

“Once,” he said smiling.

“Hmm.”

“But this is uncommon. You see, few outside the royals or system elders are admitted here.”

“All right. Then why are we here now?”

“Ah. I'm not sure.”

“You haven't *any* idea?”

“Well... last time I was here, the King had asked me for aid. I am a progenitor by trade, you see.”

“A what?”

“A *progenitor*. A maker of things.”

“Oh, indeed. Like an inventor?” I sought to clarify, but he shrugged off this suggestion.

“In any case, the King was in need of a singular item. Something only I could construct. When last I was here, he commissioned me thus, and gave me the materials to accomplish this thing. Indeed the more I think on it, I seem now to remember that he also bade me to complete this task within twenty convolutions.”

“Convolutions? What are those?”

“Ah. One convolution is completed whence the three most central planets of our system, rotate a full spiral outward from the middle. But only when at least six or so minor moons are caught in their orbit by this process, and tugging through the central space in such a manner as to, by the drag of their momentum, compress and swell the whole system. It is truly quite an event!”

I returned his explanation with a blank stare, signaling my confusion.

He acquiesced.

“Yes, well... it’s really quite a complicated process... and I haven’t even addressed the ongoing debate on how many moons are required to satisfy this, or how many fathoms the system must pass to be considered worthy of recognition! And, now that I mention it, there is also the matter of determining *which planets* are most central. Most planets in our conglomerate consider their own sphere the very center of the system, regardless of the actual circumference... Goodness. We really do need a more regulated method of measuring time! In any case – as is understandable – I, myself, must have lost track of how long it had been since that day. Apparently, that time has come at last.”

“And this thing, do you have it ready for him?”

“Which thing?”

I groaned, unremittingly and with much volume. “Why *the invention*, Courtly! The invention he commissioned you to make for him!”

“Oh! Of course, I see now... no. Indeed, I have not. I had quite forgotten about it until a few days ago, when I detected the royal crafts headed toward my world! Karn-Sabal is one of the furthest planets you see. I have the luxury of a few days head-start whence ships are launched in my direction.”

“A head-start indeed! Why then did you not make this thing for him once you recalled the task? Surely incurring the wrath of a king is not a good thing!”

But my companion waved my protest aside.

“You must understand one thing about me, Simeon my friend. If I am anything, I am a creature bound by inspiration. I cannot be commissioned or constrained. The king had granted me ten stones of blue-glass. This mineral is one of the most complex substances in the known universe! And he ordered me to make for him a mirror. A mirror! Twas a waste, Simeon, a waste. I could not do it.”

“But the stuff was not yours, Courtly. It belonged to him! You should have just refused him outright rather than risk such a ploy. What is there now but to confess your trespass, and now return to make this mirror? You must do this, Courtly! I will not become a hostage in your insanity because you won’t fashion a silly mirror—this is madness!”

To this Ian Courtly just smiled.

It was a look which could not rightly be called mad...nor could it quite be called sane. But it was a look of excitement, an adventurous grin. Alas, for my great love of order, it was a thing which was infectious. Already its fingers had touched my soul. From that moment on, I could feel its warmth growing in me, though as of yet I hadn’t known it.

“Even if the king allows me to return and complete the task, I could not,” said he.

“Why so?” asked I in wonder.

“For I haven’t any glass *left*, dear Simeon. Once I recalled the coming of the King’s men, I remembered the glass itself, and began working with it. It’s all been spent on what device has brought you here: the Un-thought Lens!” Horror spread across my complexion, and was met with his encouraging smile. “But not to worry, chap! I’ve been in worse spots before! Things will sort themselves out.”

I moved to reproach him further, but my attention was drawn away. Our party had reached the towering doorway. It loomed up from sable earth like a ghostly cathedral, austere and forlorn against the

black. Hushing against its inner atmosphere, the large frames began to swing inward. Dense air, cool and quiet, rushed to escape their press and breezed past us into the garden.

The chamber within the castle was vacuous. A score of pillars palisaded about the court on the right and on the left. They framed the open center, which led unto the throne afar and aloft. The tile of the floor and walls were multicolored. A resplendent rainbow of alabaster, their array was pale. Though the whiteness was trimmed about their edges with a translucently tinted luminescence. The vaulted ceiling far above was blanketed by an intricately designed painting. There were a great many figures, posed as if in motion, warring about between the worlds that hung around them. Other figures seemed indifferent to the conflict and sat on their celestial orbs — like lawn chairs as in thought, or with an instrument as in song. Of gods and men, it seemed to tell of stories and legends of these worlds. But we neared the throne, and I was drawn to the cynosure of all such intrigue.

Here at the end of the shimmering hallway was the throne. Its golden dais lifted a few feet above our plane, and its chair seemed what one would expect of a kingly seat: a high arched back and cushioned interior with regally rolling arms. But I could not remember it too clearly, for at once I was engaged upon by the oddity that was King Neito himself.

The king was a strange creature. I mean this in all ways of the term.

Courtly had heretofore seemed human to me. At least in appearance. I had further assumed the troopers who had escorted us hence to also be of like kind...though now I doubt very much this was so beneath their helms.

For while Neito *seemed* human in shape, his skin shown with an unsettling amber hue, and his hair with shades of oceanic blue. This startling visage stared at me with torpid eyes. They were eyes like that of a cat, refracting light as if aglow. His crown, or what I thought then to be his crown, hung with an odd asymmetry about his feathered locks. The right side seemed an apparatus not unlike those in Courtly's shop: strung about with external gears and cogs. The left protruded out with a crooked metal shaft: not unlike a crank used to wind an automobile engine.

The closer I looked at his gaze, the less I felt the intelligent sight of a fellow creature. Instead I saw the aimless gaze of a *thing*. Or perhaps, it was more like the lidless eyes of a creature whilst asleep. For indeed, the king sat slumped as if lifeless against the back of his tall throne.

We came to a halt before this seat of power. The troopers stood straightly, snapping to attention. Courtly seemed at ease with himself, as usual, and I tried to display as much. I rather think I accomplished this...for all my trepidations.

Once we halted, three aides appeared on cue from some passage behind the throne. These drew near the king — one on either side and one descending two steps down the dais, equidistant between us. The aid on the right sat upon a small seat, which protruded from the throne's side, and produced a large scroll with bronze and copper fixtures. The scroll held a switch on one such fixture which, when clicked on by the aide, began to purr mechanically and grow a number of metallic spidery legs. It proceeded to level itself to the aide's height, fixing itself firmly before him with its legs acting as podiums.

Yet I could not allow myself the proper astonishment at such a device, as was this mechanical scroll, for the device I was *next made* to witness. Indeed, for as this occurred, the aide on the left side reached up and gripped the lever attached to the crown. The servant proceeded to crank it a number of times, heaving and breathing heavily. All the while, at each turn of the lever, Neito's body twitched. A light came flickering into his eyes, as a reel of film through the projectors' lens when sped to rapidity. His body sat up straightly. And the gears on the side of his crown began to whirl and click like a pocket watch.

Attaining crescendo, the device made its significant catch and began to run! The king now moved normally. Sitting forward in his chair, he let his gaze drift down from its heretofore inanimate fixation, meeting our onlooking eyes. He smiled when he noticed Courtly, but he did not yet speak.

The aide on the lower steps turned from the king, where she'd been awaiting this awakening. Her narrow, beady eyes drilled us with their pitiless stare.

She cleared her throat.

"Welcome guests! King Neito the Green, Lord of the Nonmentai System, Keeper of the Hall of Auras, Guardian of the Elder's rule, and Beetle of Power Forgotten, welcomes you!" announced the aide triumphantly. She paused for effect.

It was a long pause.

I looked at Courtly for an explanation but none was offered. I was beginning to discern that all things I wished to know from him were expectedly to be overlooked... while all things I couldn't care less for would be thoroughly expositated.

"The 'green?'" I hurriedly whispered to him in the silence.

The aide still held out her arms, as if to prolong the magnificence of her proclamation.

She obviously took her task quite seriously.

"Each king must have a unique title," Courtly explained quickly, leaning slightly toward me and speaking from the side of his mouth. "Yet all such adjectives as 'the mighty,' or 'the magnificent,' were long since taken and the last few kings have been resigned to elect colors. It's that or begin to employ terms of questionable praise. He couldn't very well be called the likes of 'the foolish,' now could he?"

"All right," I said shaking my head. "And the *beetle* bit? What of that?"

But the Aide lowered her hands and recommenced her introductions. Courtly seemed not to hear me but returned his attention wayward.

"Behold! The King speaks! Harken your ear...!" entreated the aide, leaning forward and cupping a hand to her ear dramatically. Then, whilst bowing lowly, she backed a few feet away, rounding the dais and knelt down. Courtly and the troopers did likewise. I followed suit.

Neito swung his arms out, as if to embrace a friend. His head turned compassionately to the side.

"Ian! How have you been?" he warmly graced, voice as thick as malted chocolate: smooth and deep.

Ian rose, his left hand courteously gesturing to his chest as he bowed his head to speak.

“My king,” he said voice dripping with flare. “It is so good to see you! May your thoughts be ever wound, and may your mind be ever spinning!”

“Yes,” rumbled Neito. “My mind is turning still.” Gripping the arms of his throne, he dramatically let his head fall downward to the right, his blue locks sweeping across his face as to enunciate his passion. “Alas, for all my continuance, I am yet without what prize I value most! The fabled *Mirror of Duplicity!*”

I fidgeted slightly. But Courtly simply closed his eyes and nodded sorrowfully, along with the King’s impassioned theatrics.

“For all my brilliance, I am left without any to advise me soundly, for none can rival my own intelligence!” continued Neito, moved as if to tears.

“O king, how sad tis so!” agreed Courtly.

“Alas, twas only this thing that may end my lonesome reign! For should this thing of legend be made, I may gaze unto a second version of myself! One with all my faculties, though sundered from my soul. Only then may I converse with a being of powers equal to mine! I may set its pane before me here, and ever gaze into it and know my own thoughts, so grand sometimes I even may forget them! Then, may I talk...talk...*tck tck*... I may...I may...*tck tck* talk... I...*tck tck*...”

But the king, mid sentence, began to stutter. His shoulders jerked spasmodically. Then, the light which shown from his gaze ruptured. He began to lean forward, as if to fall. But the left aide then rushed beside him and gripped the lever, winding it a number of times. As before, Neito straightened incrementally until upright, and again began to move more fluidly. Courtly acted as if this were completely normal; I am sure that I bore some bewildered and flabbergasted expression.

“Then!” repeated the King’s triumphant conclusion as if no time had passed. “Then, I may talk at last to another brilliant mind!”

“Truly, my king!” encouraged Courtly, as if nothing strange had occurred.

“Yes! So tell me, Ian. Hast thou done this thing, which I asked of thee? Bring unto me: the *Mirror of Duplicity*, which thou hast created!”

“Indeed I shall tell thee of the Mirror, my King,” began Courtly, as I held my breath, “But first, allow me to introduce to thee my friend, Simeon! He may be of singular interest to your majesty!”

The king’s face looked at me confused, studying me as if to discern something engaging.

“For you see, O green one,” my companion continued, “Simeon comes from a world far from here!” The king’s eyes widened as Courtly pressed further, “Brought through the dimensions... perhaps with knowledge not yet beheld!”

“Oh yes!?” exclaimed the King, leaning forward toward me.

I could feel my cheeks flush with nervousness. Completely lost as to how such diversion should, in the end, serve to aid *me*: I was remiss but to follow Courtly’s lead. There was naught else for it.

“Uh... err... yes! O king,” I conceded, the words sounding foreign on my lips. “I come from the world of Earth, and know many things.”

“*Earth...*” the words formed slowly on Neito’s lips in thought. But his eyes brightened. “You must tell me of these things!” he ordered emphatically. “For I must know all there is to know within Nonmentai!”

“I... uh...” I stammered. With a quick plea for assistance I glanced to Courtly. I immediately chided myself for this. My companion merely looked to me with brow lifted in passive indifference, neither worried nor thoughtful. I had then thought to concoct some fairytale, and speak it out. It would have surely been rubbish, had I the chance. Fortunately for me, at that instant the large doors at the head of the throne room burst open.

A number of small crafts, not unlike mechanical horses with metal wings, zipped into the chamber! Zooming toward us in dazzling arcs, their pattering wings beat the air with an incessant buzzing. The Troopers around us whirled about and dropped to their knees! Uplifting long spear-like poles, they let bursts of orange lightening peal upward — but the buzzards twirled in their approach letting the strikes pass between. The lightning was evaded! Slipping past to singe the pillars and ceiling, their electric arcs fanned out and their flaming bolts narrowed. The nose of each craft then began to send forth their own countermeasures! Bright waves of blue light emitted and struck the ground all around us.

As the waves met my limbs, I could feel a measure of dystrophy encompass me. I toppled hapless to the alabaster floor. All the troopers I could see, and Courtly too, fell to the ground. It seemed that only Neito was immune to these seizing undulations, and he stood outstretching his hand. His right hand, which I could now see was not of flesh – as was his left – but of machinery, extended toward the attackers. It lit up with a golden fire as he bellowed his deep baritone.

“Folly! Thou pirates! Thou vagabonds! Come to taste thy doom! How couldst thou think to enter my domain without my summons? Wilt thou sequester me unhindered? Nay!! But I am...but I... *tck tck...*I am...am... *tck tck...*”

He unceremoniously clattered to the floor, as the gears on his crown ceased spinning and his eyes flickered off yet again.

I groaned to myself and struggled to espy the looming buzzards, despite my waxing paralysis. They swooped over me and my companion, the arms of their riders snatching and laying us across the abdomen of their speeding vessels.

Then as quickly as they entered, they darted from the palace, sweeping us along with them.

Chapter 4

Indignant Scholars of Merza

Light came crashing in as the sack was whipped from my head.

Thick ropes resisted immediate attempts to stand; I succeeded only in a brief stuporous thrash. Then futility chided my pride, and I abated my struggle. Sight reluctantly adjusted to the glare and I glanced about for Courtly, but could not see him. Instead I found a number of shoes, standing just within the beams! Faint outlines of figures above their soles soon developed, where I imagined the rest of their bodies loomed. It seemed I was tied to a chair, and surrounded by a multitude of hidden onlookers!

Waves of heat washed over me then. Not from the light, for the room was rather chilled, but from within. I suppose some measure of inner agitation had finally breached my composure and lashed out upon my captors.

“Now listen here!” I exclaimed, “I’ve had quite an ordeal this past day, and I’m in no mood to be lead about by further antics! So shut of this blasted light, and show yourselves! Or else I’ll not give you all an inch!”

My remonstrants were met with silence. But I could detect my captors shifting slightly from my words and turn, as if to confer. At last a click was sounded from the dark beyond. A hum, which I’d not yet noticed, faded from resonance along with the beam of light. Warm overhead wicks ignited. The room bathed with a rich golden glow. It seemed my chair of imprisonment lay within what looked to be a library of sorts. All around in neat rows, were lined shelves of books and ancient looking tomes! Across the median of the room were many conjoined desks, with neatly ordered table lamps. These all stretched beneath the rows of chandeliers, which now lighted the whole affair.

I looked my captors down squarely. Whatever alien courage I’d mustered, persisted to embolden me. Though I think twas simple resigned annoyance, wearing the face of bravery. They surrounded me, a group of about fifteen men and women, about this vacant space on the end of the long room. Yet they were not the sort of folk I had expected. For their features and apparel did not bear the aura of ruffians, as much as they shone with a conservative and academic air. Indeed their shirts were nicely tucked, their collars neatly folded, and their outfits matching in their plainness and unimposing display. A few of them boasted eyeglasses, and others a waistcoat. Though all wore their hair combed in perfect facsimile of one

another: parted to the right, and tapered down unto the ears. I could not withhold myself. I laughed riotously.

“What is this? Have I been accosted by a host of librarians? Where are the warriors who attacked us in the palace?”

“Twas us!” declared one woman, stepping forth from their congregation. “We abducted you!”

I chortled further. “Indeed; and now you all seem so unsure of yourselves. Why do you all mire there at a loss for words? *Goodness!* What is with everyone in this place?” I sighed to collect myself; The absurdity astounded me. “Who are you, and what do you want with me?” I labored at last.

Another stepped forward, this one a man.

“We are the Scholars of Merza, a society of knowledge, seekers of truth!” he exclaimed confidently. But it was the sort of confidence a child has whilst repeating their parent’s adage verbatim, not the intrinsic sort.

Thus was I further moved to scoff, though I withheld myself.

“*Indeed you are,*” I consoled him. “And you have taken me...*why?*”

“We have taken you to our secret base, to find the knowledge that will right this monopoly, which Neito the Treacherous has claimed!” said another quietly. “Many years ago he parlayed with us to gain access to our great volumes...but then...BETRAYAL!” she concluded with an abrupt shout.

“O the betrayal!!” echoed the congregation in lament.

“For he took all these unto himself,” she sang on, “and declared himself the sole keeper of all truths-that-are-known. That any and all truths-that-are-known should be known to him first and foremost or not at all! Since then we’ve spied upon his court, hoping to learn some truths-that-are-known not to him, that we may attain them first, and know what he does not. Then, we may have...have...HOPE!”

“Ah! The hope!” the rest repeated.

“A noble task,” I empathized, gushing with a sarcasm lost to them.

“Indeed!” began another stepping out to join the others who had spoken. “So, should you ever hope to leave this secret base: you must reveal to us all truths-that-are-known not to Neito, which we heard you declare are known to you moments before your capture. Or else you may never escape this secret hold!”

I looked around their ‘hold.’ A thought occurred to me then. I remark upon my past that *this* was truly the first sort of thought I had of its kind...though it framed *many* that were soon to follow.

It was a following the ridiculous, an engaging with the inane. This place had brought me to see that *silly things* were its common mode of operation! Here I was. I then simply conceded from reason, and elected to proceed on what I assumed to have been *most absurd*.

In this place it was *most likely*.

“I am on...Merza, aren’t I?” I ventured, recounting their own admission. “Your *secret base* is on Merza?”

Color drained from their faces.

“How could you know this?” said one aghast scholar.

Obviously, I hadn't known this until their faces confirmed it to me. Yet, it was a simple deduction, given their society's name. *Goodness*, I mused, *given the capacity of the folk on these worlds, I should be lord over them within the month.*

"Ah," I waxed eloquently, assuming the highly dramatic tones I'd witnessed Neito and Courtly exchange, "but I come from a place where all truths-that-are-known are made plain to me! This also is one such truth!"

Astonished coos reverberated about their number as they exchanged awestruck glances. I am not sure if this was intended to be covert, but they then began to whisper among themselves. Their flurried dialogue was easily eavesdropped on.

"Is it he?"

"It can't be..."

"But he knows the truths-that-are-known!"

"And he walks from worlds-that-are-not-known!"

"And he speaks with strange words!"

"At last! We are saved!"

"Yes, we have... HOPE!"

"HOPE!!!!"

"This means Neito is *not* he who shall know all, and we are not consigned to serve him!"

"This means we may yet find retribution for his great... BETRAYAL!"

"BETRAYAL!!!!"

"Come let us ask him!"

"What if he denies us?"

"If he will not lead us, then he is not the one-who-knows."

"Then we shall ask."

Their susurrous huddle broke. They turned and pattered over to me like a flock of peering penguins, faces questioning and cautious. I leaned ever so slightly back in my chair. Yet they waddled nearer, until I could nearly feel their breathing on me.

"We must ask you a question," said one.

"A *very important* question," said a second.

"Indeed. And your answer is *also* important," clarified a third.

"You also must answer correctly!" exhorted a fourth.

"Are you ready?" questioned a fifth.

"Uh... yes," I stated plainly.

Their collective breathed in deeply and exhaled, as one nervous animal.

"Are you, the—"

But they were interrupted.

At once, the chandeliers released themselves from their ceiling chains, and crashed upon the table! My host of scholars leap a full foot into the air and dashed about. For a number of small fires sprang up about their manuscripts, flickering brightly.

I had scarce a moment to register this when a familiar voice met my ear from just behind.

“Hullo Simeon!”

“Courtly!” I exclaimed, surprising myself that I was actually relieved to hear his voice. “How...?”

“Ah, those chaps had me tied in the room just there,” he said gesturing to the door on the left wall as he fiddled with my bindings. The scholars’ chattering filled the room, dashing to and from the fires. “But my pocket-watch doubles as a small saw,” he explained, “so I managed to free myself!”

“Excellent. Well I’m certainly glad to see you! Yet...how did you employ use of your *pocket* watch when your hands were bound behind the chair?”

He paused his work and stared ahead blankly, bewitched by thought.

“I’m not sure...” he said thoughtfully. “How odd. In any case, I made that diversion and thought to free you. Come now! We’ve not much time!”

“Time? Wait—time for what?”

But my friend had finished his work and scampered back through the far door. I leapt from my chair! And rushed after him, we left behind a room of studious intellectuals consumed with their extinguishing toil.

Courtly led me through his former cell, a room similar to my own, and onward past a series of further doors and hallways. It was dazzling, how deftly my friend navigated the labyrinthian library. Its intricate passages were profuse with complex angles and nonuniform architecture.

“How exactly are you...?” I began, wondered at this.

But he held up his hand for silence, pausing suddenly.

“Before you ask...I haven’t a clue,” he confessed. “I honestly haven’t the faintest where I’m going. I just pick a direction and run with it, you know? Ah—this way!” He darted on.

Not even two days ago, such behavior would have infinitely bothered me. He’d no idea where he was going? Such a display of confidence should accompany *surety* not an ignorant conjecture. Yet, much had passed in the last few days. Worlds were born before me, strange peoples met and conversed with. Space was travelled through. Even causality was called into question, seemingly given to abrupt changes of mood! Thus, at this, I now simply nodded and chased after him.

At the end of the next hallway we entered a much larger room. It looked to be a hangar of some sort. A number of crafts were set about, and I noticed the dozen or so ornithopters that had accosted us from the throne room earlier. I realized also, however, that I was no longer quite certain exactly how much time had passed since then — much less since first arriving in Courtly’s atelier.

One day? Six hours? A half-week?

My internal clock had stalled. Or had it sped up rapidly? I truly had no idea.

But that was the telling thing.

The common factor across all these lands, I realized.

That everything and everyone...truly hadn't a clue.

We ran past the thopters to a larger craft, which bore an enclosed cockpit unlike the others. Its shape was odd, but definitively distinctive. Large and triangular, its isosceles borders stretched aft into a single jet at its rear. Its third side comprised the long flat nose, like an aquatic stingray or a kite of some sort. Yet it was its gaudy orange stripes set against dark green spread that were most alarming to the senses. Text across the largest, most central stripe read: '*Feller's Cleaning Agency*,' and then in a smaller font beneath this it said, '*We may or may not have any valuables on us. What is the meaning of true value anyway? Think about it.*' I paused to read this as we drew near.

"Make haste!" shouted Courtly, as he opened its hatch and entered. "We are found out!"

I obeyed and grasped the frame of the hatch, turning about. A number of scholars poured into the hangar, arms flailing, and tears pouring from their eyes! Their wails echoed across the open room, indistinguishable though stentorian. But I closed the hatch quickly and nested myself within, as my friend ignited the engine. Fastening myself in the co-pilot's seat and watching Courtly haphazardly press flashing buttons and pull switches, I desisted from asking my immediate question – pertaining to his experience and ability in flying such crafts – and instead questioned him on our destination.

"Ah," said he as we lifted from the floor, hovering out of reach from the mob below, "there is only one place in the whole of the Nonmentai system where we may attain the blue-glass we need. To make the mirror for Neito, allowing us to safely reveal to him our fiction concerning you, then to get this lot off our back in the process and safely return to Karn-Sabal and the unthought lens!"

"All right," I processed in an astounding leap, "and where is that?"

My friend smiled, eyes lit with excitement.

"The forests of Bruel, on the moons of Zoidal-tee! For only there remain the Beetles: mightiest of all creatures in our worlds. The blue-glass, you see, is made up from their shells."

I nodded, as we jetted from the hangar.

"So we are looking for some insects? Shouldn't be too difficult."

My friend laughed whole heartily as we increased to a dizzying speed and tore upward, arching through the atmosphere.

"Good one, Simeon! Ha! Not too difficult indeed!"

Chapter 5

The Beetles of Power Forgotten

“I must ask,” I asked, as our kite moved about the dotted black of space, “what is the meaning of this vessel’s title? On its side? *Feller's Cleaning Agency*?” I thought that lot were librarians.”

“Surely,” laughed Courtly. “For some time the interplanetary space has been plagued with rival gangs of pirates. Since this began, it’s become prudent for such vessels who wish to pass about freely, to mark their hulls with nondescript logos and seemingly inconspicuous business names.”

“How strange. But this is understandable, I suppose. Yet, why then the subtitle? *We may or may not have any valuables on us. What is the meaning of true value anyway? Think about it.*’ Why would anyone say such a thing if their wish were to avoid detection?” I questioned. “It seems as it would draw, not repel unsatisfactory folk!”

“Ah. You aren’t wrong, my friend. You see, in response to everyone’s ideas about inconspicuous titles, the thieves simply began targeting all ships that bore logos altogether. As a result, all such ships that wished to pass unnoticed were found, many more transported valuables were stolen, and an increasing number of harmless small businesses were robbed in the crossfire! This simply would not do. In response, common folk began to be *as conspicuous* as possible. Proudly displaying all of their valuables, or at least images of potential ones, on their hulls in the hopes of dissuading any such heists. Yet at this, they were waylaid all the same...

“It seems that space-pirates don’t really care *in the least* what the ships looked like, or what their sides read! So, to finally outwit them, everyone then began to add a third clause on their crafts! This time, folks wrote some question of metaphysical ethics, or a philosophical proposition. This, you see, actually began to work. For now whenever a robbery was to occur, the pirates would see the question and reflect introspectively about their actions. Grown so meditative, they wouldn’t notice the ship eluding them until too late!”

“Wow... I just... wow,” I gasped, amazed.

“Hmm. Indeed,” said my friend. “Of course, this *also* generated a whole new race of pirate-monks, who were both philosophically sound in thought as well as skilled in thievery. But these sorts

mostly keep to themselves nowadays. Preferring to answer *big* questions than steal *little* things. I suppose the custom has since simply persisted by habit—ah! Here we are then!”

Tugging the wheel to the right, our conspicuous orange and green triangle careened toward the planetary system. The planet itself, Zoidal-tee, seemed pleasant enough. It looked to have temperate land masses and comely blue seas. But its sphere held also a number of natural satellites fixed about its heavens in an eclectic array of diversity. Some appeared to be an incessant storm of dark grays and streaks of lightening, others had vast orange clouds passing over purple plains and fields.

We moved about through their collection, our great speed returning to my awareness by the proximity. Yet I was not afraid at this, while Courtly zipped cavalierly between the moons, employing their gravity to ride by zigging and zagging. Their surfaces passed by. At times, not a kilometer away from the glass they flew. Against this glass I pressed my hands, and peered through in astonishment. Truly, in that moment, I was surprised at two things. There were two thoughts. They were warming in my soul. They passed upon me, with a seamless coalescence...

First, I was not afraid.

And second, I was caught in wonder.

This was the moment I realized the beauty of these bizarre worlds. They laid about a common heaven in a mysterious exhibition of color and confusion. All held varied kinds of people, caught about their own cultures. All were aware that, while all so differed, they yet composed this confluent harmony. All were content to be what they may. All were happening simply by nature of happening, and with an ease that comes from an intuition unbound by overthought.

In my eyes, the lens through which I see my world, there I beheld these brilliant orbs.

They were captured by my gaze.

I was captured by their fierce and untamed beauty.

We were enamored together unto such affection.

I could spend my life here, I'd thought for the first time.

I could ever romp about their savage elegance.

Courtly slowed our pace, and I withdrew my contemplations. A larger moon dawned above us, blanketed by what looked to be swaying blue seas. Yet, as we turned over and brought its horizon beneath our perspective, I discerned that these were not seas but a single grand forest — a jungle of deep blue-leafed trees, with trunks of blackened wood.

“The oceanpines,” Courtly denoted. “This is Bruel, the ninth moon of Zoidal-tee. The only place in the known universe where dwell the Beetles of Power Forgotten.”

“Have you been here before?” asked I.

“Nay,” said he, as we made our descent. “Too dangerous.”

I wondered at this, what sort of thing my friend would call dangerous. This was he who stared down kings, he who burned down buildings, and who loved to look through dimensions. But I would soon know well enough.

Circumnavigating the orb for a few moments more at a lower altitude, we at last espied a clearing. 'Twas camouflaged in that it, while clear of swaying blue trees, bore in their glade'd absence pale shifting waters. Slowing above the small woodland lake, our vessel's jets pressed about the surface sending white waves from our keel. Small protrusions extended from our underbelly and stuck into the earth beneath the shallow pond. How Courtly determined this to have been shallow enough for us to land, or whether he had simply guessed and been lucky, I knew not. Though I suspected the latter.

The hatch hissed and opened. We disembarked.

The waters were cool and pleasant. They lit with a beautiful refraction from a source unknown; indeed, the heavens were black as ever. The trees also glinted shimmering golden rays. Yet again, there was no sun. As much as I knew, this system did not have a single star within reach, and yet each world was warmed and lighted. It seemed that each globe faintly shown and illumined the next, brightening an eternal relay of light about the system. Yet where would the light abide, when traced back from this set of endless reflections? I knew not. But the faint penumbral glow about things on the other worlds had fostered my fascination less. Less so, than this moon of Bruel: for this seemed lit with an *inner* fire dancing along its shades of blue.

Stricken by this wonder, I hushed. Courtly was also quiet, and uncharacteristically so. My friend stared, intent about the treetops as if listening to their wind-born chorus. Without a word, he waded forward from the lake to the nearest bank. I followed silently.

We entered the oceanpine wood.

The bark of their trees was black and slightly metallic, as if onyx. Still...it bore that pervasive tone of life, which all living things emit. The silent sound of breathing, the sightless scene of growing, and the single strand of joy and sadness was held about their airs. The atmosphere beneath the colossal canopy was thickened by these tones. Forward, as if drawn, we pressed inward between the dark shafts. They passed us like ancients watching, whispering their stories.

Courtly stopped suddenly. I paused beside him, face questioning. But he looked ahead.

There before us it seemed as if the trunks began to hum. I wasn't an audible sort of hum though, for all was quiet. There sighed only a faint breeze above. But the hum, which swelled like life within, poised beneath the warming sun. 'Twas the hum of the cosmos throbbing and groaning, echoing off the edge of darkened space. It was refracting from the corners of creation.

Then, the trees before us drew apart. Their thick and mighty beams bowed at the middle, bending outward, to present a verdurous tunnel between. Golden light drifted down from above to illumine this newfound vale. Yet such radiance poured like dew drops from the *leaves above*, not from the stars beyond.

So came the Beetle.

Its approach was blurred, as if resistant to focus. Indeed the wood's calm could never be *abruptly* altered. Nothing abrupt could happen here, nothing but the gradual. It was a truism immediately known to those who beheld it. For there remained some sylvan demand for serenity upon the air. Thus, as the great thing drew in from beyond the archway, its visage seemed veiled by many eons. Despite how

keenly we attempted concentration, it remained lost somewhere between our waking and closing eyes. Bleeding like lights through a teary gaze, did it wade. Yet it was not from simply *beyond* the archway spatially, but also *within* it. It passed forward as if the trunks of sable wood were not trees at all.

Instead they each were chasms, tears in space. Their black was not a thing—*but an absence*. It showed through to the far rim of space, spilling through this threadbare point of reality's scape. Each pine was a pillar: cylindrically wound shoot of space-time reaching up. They towered and bore these azure leaves as the fruit of their contusion with *this* point in time. They were a nexus of the prime dimensions.

Thus, what titan drew nigh, came not from *between* the trees.

Nay, but *from* the trees, which were themselves an aperture between realities. The present moment lay strewn about what fissure they tore. Many pines carried pieces of its advancing form, reflecting like curved and narrow mirrors. Winding toward us discordantly, the pulchritude of the wood unbroken. Its ethereal hum and sway went ever dancing. Until, seamlessly and without breaching this a rhapsodic gradual cadence, there it stood. It was looming before us in full clarity, as if it always was so and couldn't ever have been otherwise.

Vast and mighty, the great insect bore down upon us with eyes, black and starlit like nebulae.

It stood highly: terrible antlers arching, fiercely crowning our sky.

It stood deeply: abdomen reaching far out of sight the way it came.

It could not be known, or written, how tall or long it was. For the further one beheld it, the further one realized no measure could capture it. For unlike all other things that are, it was not *near enough to reality* that it may be compared.

It was not beside the trees, nor was it before us.

And yet... it *was*.

It was not in this present moment but far across time!

And yet... it also was here.

How that we may judge its boundaries or estimate its girth? But all time and space seemed woven around it. That its height seemed to stretch indiscernibly upward. Twas as if height itself, *that intangible idea*, was bound to define this prominence. Behind it, all space curved as if to concede that it could not contain the depth this being wore in its endlessness. Twas as if depth itself, *that ethereal notion*, was first thought of to express this being.

Yet it did not seem infinite; there was some ineffable quality attesting to its creature-hood.

It was wise but not *all* knowing.

It was boundless, but only so within the bounds of creation: *not eternal*.

Thus could I not look away from its gaze. Presumably, Courtly was held in a similar trance. Looking back, I remember clearly our intention in attending this nigh-omnipotent court was to attain blue-glass from this behemoth. But there was no delusion with force enough to compel such an aim to remain in one's thoughts when proximate to such terrible power. Already, without such ploys, one's futility in existence is prevalent to the senses before this presence: It who has walked along the ages, it whose home

was the spaces between the spaces. It could *not* exist before any lesser things without exposing, by nature of its dominance, that lesser thing's frailty. 'Twas the nature of true might.

So did we stand, all thoughts of attaining our former ends not abandoned, but simply eradicated.

Stillness settled, gilding our thoughts and the breeze upon our skin.

Then came our question. For those winds swept by us – through us – brushing our mental complexions. They were stirring up some deeply forgotten wonder. It rose upon our lips. Despite our fright, the question burst forth into the open air.

“Who are you?” asked Courtly and myself, in a nearly simultaneous manner.

The antennae of the beetle quivered atop its helm. As the conductor of an orchestra, it quickened the air. That breeze, which stirred our question from us, rushed back the way it had come. With its passing arose the answer we sought for; it sprung up, as is from our own reasoning. As if, by our contemplations we knew in part the unspoken answer to our question. Yet it surely was the winds. This we knew beyond any power of self-deception. It was the forward winds that answered us.

“The Power Forgotten,” we whispered in unison. We lowered to our knees.

Again it woke the winds.

Thoughts, like feelings, rushed within along the winds that rushed beyond us.

So came its answer.

It had drawn us near, by all these many means. It was, of all creatures found in flesh, most mighty. One of few races, along with man, with a soul that held both form *and* spirit. So were they brought about, these ancient carthipods. They were born to roam the old worlds, finding the corners of time and beat their wings. Such a fury was brought forth by their wings! They were the instrument of a mighty Storm, which echoed through the cosmos. Its echo called us, here to the wood that lay between the spaces.

“Why have we come?” we asked, questioning from the wayward wind.

The answer swept back the way it came.

Far and aloft, a beetle had perished! Not the first to have so fallen — but it was the only within our time. Shedding its flesh, its mortal remnants raced about the heavens. Each half of its great shell folded and condensed into a nexus sphere. Each was blue, yet ever glowing a lucent gold. They lit with unmatched resplendence! For in them collided the great lights: white rays that shone from the dawn of time, and orange infernos blazing at its end.

After eons of corrosion, these magnificent spheres devolved into the comparatively feeble substance called ‘blue-glass.’ But at the height of its half-life such spheres could harness unparalleled dimensional power.

A beetle had passed. Two spheres were forged. These required sanctuary until they also slept into the mild glass. Realization of our task dawned, and we bowed low. Our foreheads rested on the blackened earth, amid dazzling blue leaves scattered like flecks of sky.

The throbbing hum of the great forward winds rushed! For the titan made its siring feat upon our souls. At the crown of its great antlers emerged those nexus spheres of power, floating to descend upon

our shoulders. Alighting there, as sparrows of a higher realm, the shifting sapphirine surface breathed. It became those winds against our flesh, throughout our thoughts, upon our souls.

A third time then, the wind quickened beyond us...

We quickened within, to rise.

Our eyes were lit with fires of crystal blue starlight.

Chapter 6

The Engine and the Oceanpines

Harkened to the heavens, we heard the roar of coming engines. Courtly and I emerged from the pines of thick cosmic wood, and looked above. *It was that engine of humanity.* Upon their mortal purposes we watched. With quickened souls of starlight, we understood their vices.

Some great metamorphosis had catalyzed our courage! It worked in us great tuning feats of calm and resolve. Although, its might was born from *empathy* and of seeing all that *truly was*. The purposes of our little creatures, were naught beside the plight of that Storm! So we looked up as countless ships attended our horizon.

The great engine of humanity approached!

What ceaseless turning! Grinding against the wheels of time, ran the plight of man. What order lived within their heart; their very soul wrestles against fate, purposing to define itself and fulfill its native urgings. What external thing may define their boundaries, or conform them to its character? Now we saw its truth...

Truly — within the inmost being of man lay *not* mysterious waters. Many yearn that it were so. Many wish, that deep within them are held unfathomable and wondrous mysteries! They wish to be gods, and lords of creation. But unlike the *infinite and the eternal*, humanity has *many boundaries*.

Truly — *neither* in man lay purely natural lands. They do not carry the mark of lowness, which the Mother lays in the rest of the animal world. Others of the human race imagine themselves not *divine* but only natural: a thing able to wreck about creation as all the other beasts, carefree and uninhibited. But unlike the *finite and the animal*, humanity has *many dimensions*.

Truly — within man there is *only* the machine. There is what organizing apparatus works in endless toil to order its surrounding world. They are not divine. They are not natural. They are born of some unknown force, which both orders and destroys. They are that place between. They are both stewards of an earthen kingdom, and arbiters of a heavenly one. Why is this so? Why exists this disjunct imposition? While everything else moves toward peace, *be it wild*, why does man run toward order, *be it far from beautiful*?

Tis by this soul of structure: the inner engine.

We know this, although we have now forgotten. We sense it in the distance we feel, against the otherwise homely soil. We hear it in the strangeness we perceive, beneath the otherwise majestic sky. For the winds of nature are ever building in their accusation! Its billows clash upon the doorsteps of our towers, with the animals. Its fathoms reign over our highest citadels, with the divine.

We learned this then, beholding the advent of our mortal foes. The stillness of the oceanpines, was resting through our spirit's tranquil seas. *Know thy place engine of humanity*, thought the winds my friend and I partook together. *We have not escaped the roar, the call of the great beyond!*

What planets of the wild beckon?

What worlds of yonder mystery call?

Our hearts aligned unto the Storm. The lasting gale, it rages through both time and space: ordering all things into what beautifully untamed lands remain. This wilderness was undaunted before the coming engine, its own might a matchless industry. We are now the stewards of its call: the aegis of its majesty. We are the guardians of what dominion runs even from Earth to Karn-Sabal! These cornerstones were founded, and we were tasked to keep their borders safe.

Thus, dawned before us were these ships of many banners. Yet we looked up as if to peer *through* them. With eyes shimmering, we looked beyond their great array. Royal spears of bronze and blue, neat eclectic scholars lamenting, mayhap some monkish pirates also: these all tore unto our ninth moon. Its ocean tones glowed above, lit by that peal of orange mortal fires. They looked down seeing only their own intentions, not the wider lands.

So came the thoughtless minds of man to ensnare the mindless thoughts of nature.

Those mortal engines were loud upon the heights.

Those eternal forests were quiet on the ground.

Was come Neito, the Green: that he should wish for knowledge and for power? Was come Merza, the Scholars: that they should waylay him thus? Nay. But lost ones, one and all these came! For hither hath their blindness led them.

So *balanced* did we emerge then, my friend and I out from the wood.

He came sobered by the truth from his recklessness. I came enlivened by the wonder from my wariness. We came together tempered by our difference into a singular thought. Past those coming did we look, up from the woodland moon. Past unto those many worlds laid together all around, we set our new intentions. For then, within our souls quickened the power of the nexus. Our sight became our avenue, to cast off and venture there.

There! Aloft were held many wonders.

They hung *above* like chandeliers upon the black expanse around us.

They whispered *below* within what relics we now guarded in our hands.

They turned *surroundingly* about their astral ballet, bold and beautiful.

Upward leapt our loves! In a flash, my friend and I emerged, as a bolt of light up from the ground! Past the armada of Neito we flew, and the array of nonmentai as well. Two streaks of celestial light struck the black of space, beyond their mortal reach...

To see what careful dreams are come to mystify our fascinations, we run to ever be enchanted!
Should we embark, to roam, to travel their lands and meet their peoples? Aye! For of truth we were
given, beyond all reason! Of joy were we gifted, beyond all jest. Come kings and laymen, we shall evade
thee! We turn away unto the distance, flying. Untoward thy vices we stand, thou lost humanity. Onward
to exotic corners we turn, finding full the bloom of what celestial verdure adorns the heights of all
creation!

We to romp the wilds undaunted!

We to hold the heavens ours.

We to soar throughout creation!

We to laugh about the stars.

COMING SOON...

How did you enjoy Book 1: *Planets of the Wild*? Interested to know more about the *Children of the Storm* universe, to meet new players in the epic narrative? Want to know what happens next to Simeon and Ian, as well? All this and more will be answered throughout the rest of the anthology, beginning with the next serial installment coming soon. Stay tuned!

Book 2:

In His Hands

Mystery surrounds the young boy Henry. Discovering an ominous truth about his father's death, enemies near him on all sides. Strange and sudden events begin — vanishing passages and voices. He has only a matter of time to learn his true nature, before his father's fate becomes his own.