

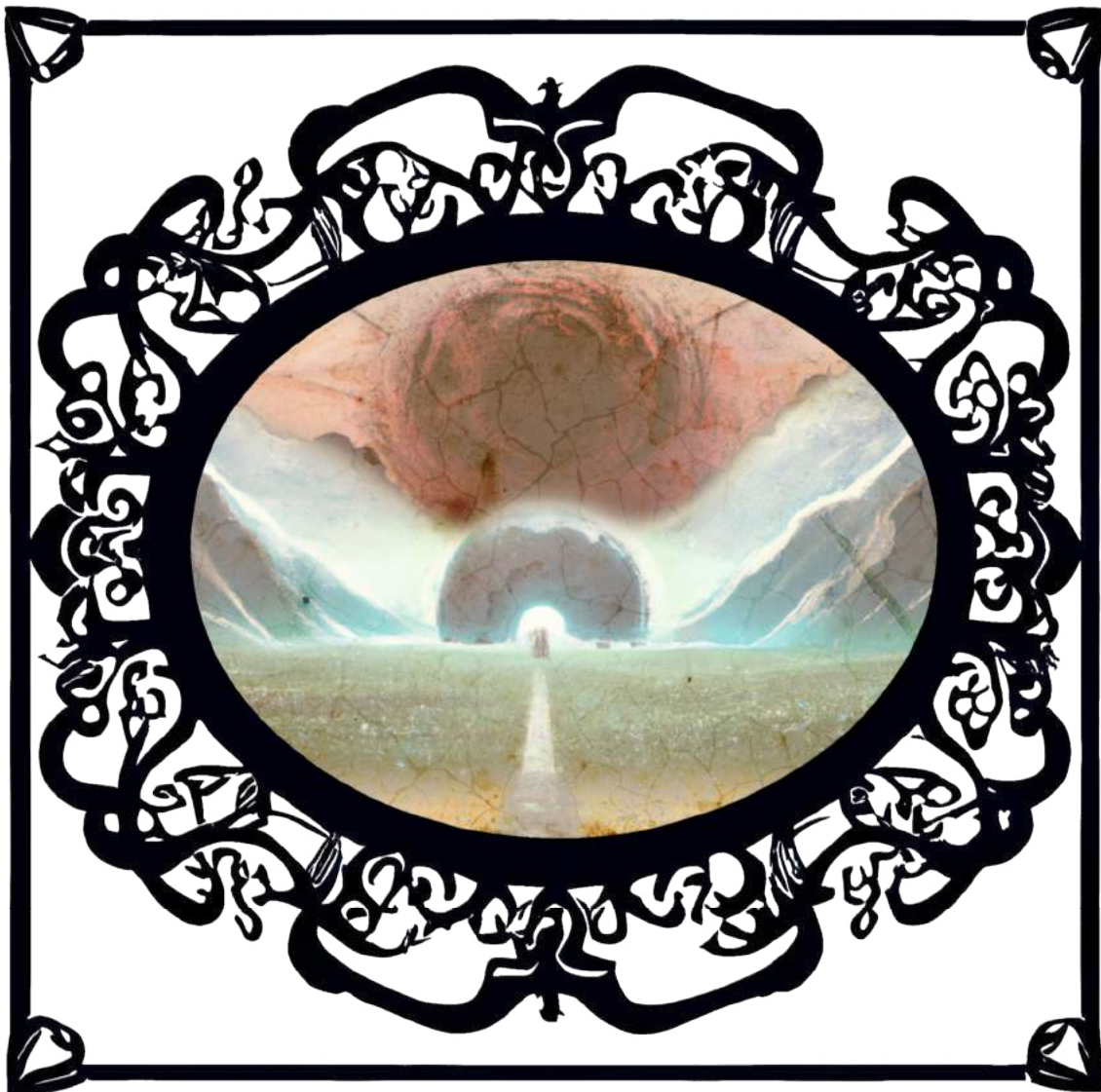
THE DEITY AND THE PURGER

BY

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CHAPTER I – THE END



The child's large vermillion-coloured eyes roved the surroundings from underneath the tangled mess of blue hair that was now lying plastered to his forehead. He wiped it away with a careless motion of his forearm as he finally stopped running. He knew he should keep going, but was relieved for an opportunity to finally catch his breath. He was faster than his elder, but not quite as longwinded.

As the child was panting, small clouds of vapour forming in the chilled air upon each exhale, he looked up at the massive void that had swallowed most of the night sky.

There was an almost penetrating darkness emanating from the thing he knew wasn't actually close to him, but rather somewhere far away, deep in the vastness of space. Even still, looking at it the young one would not have guessed that. It looked so big, so near. He stood up straight, shook his head, squinted, and again tried to stare into... it.

He did not know the name for the phenomenon. He knew it had appeared a long time ago and that it at first had only been visible through the most powerful astrosopes on the planet. Then to the people living on the orbiting stations. Eventually it had become visible to the naked eye. This he had learned in the curriculum centre, during the standard cartography lessons. Other things he had learned during visits to the sanctum, where he had accidentally overheard some of the acolytes discussing it. They had said that people had sought out the phenomenon to investigate, but had not returned, something the elders had proclaimed as accidents. The child had been able to tell the acolytes didn't believe that.

As he stood there and watched he could not escape the feeling that the darkness was both hauntingly pretty, in a certain way, yet utterly, wholly, terrifying.

"What are you doing, we have to hurry!"

The pondering youngling was abruptly pulled from his train of thought by a brusque pulling on his arm. A large man with the same-coloured hair, albeit slightly more faded and not quite as tangled, looked down on him with bewildered eyes. "We have to get to a ship!"

The child stood still even as the elder urged him on, and finally managed to avert his eyes from the thing in the sky. Instead he again became distressingly aware of the chaos happening all around them.

They were standing in a large valley, with grey pillars of rock reaching up on both sides, twisting inwards as they reached their summit, making the valley appear as a large corridor. Patches of grass and plants stood out among the dirt-covered ground, spread out where the rays of light could breach through the rock. In the middle was a clear walkway made of a transparent material, revealing the ground beneath, yet seeming perfectly clear and mint. The walkway was big, and could support a great

number of people walking to and fro, and the valley in itself was even bigger. It would have been no problem for a hundred individuals to stand side by side.

Only, no one was standing, everyone was running, not minding if they were on the walkway or trampling the purple and cyan flowers growing in the blotches of grass, as they were heading towards the large grey dome at the end of the transparent thoroughfare.

The dome was a magnificent structure, reaching well above the valley's pillars, almost touching the clouds. It was wider than the valley and even though it was getting increasingly darker the dome shone brightly, its artificial lights illuminating it from invisible spots around it, highlighting the surface's complex hexagonal patterns. Large spotlights shone upon the oversized archways that signalled the multiple entries into the structure's bowels. This dome was one of many identical structures located all over the planet, each one serving the same purpose, each one just as grandiose as the others.

In almost timed intervals openings appeared in the buildings solid surface, and sleek slivers of metal shot out, almost faster than could be perceived. One of the gigantic crafts blasted by over the place the child and the elder where standing, the vibrating barrage of noise produced by its engines piercing through the air.

As it got higher up in the atmosphere the child followed the craft's path of flight. He knew it was heading for one of the many jumpgates orbiting the planet. That was his and his elder's destination as well. To get to one of the ships waiting, and then fly into a gate.

It bothered the child that he didn't know where the gates led to, or what was on the other side. No one had ever told him. He wasn't even sure anyone knew. He also could not help but notice, as he continued to track the ship, that the higher up in the atmosphere it got, the more it was slowing down. As if being pulled back by an unseen force.

The ground shook violently, and the child looked down. No one else had seemed to notice it, all eyes focusing on the building ahead, but the dirt and small rocks surrounding them slowly began to rise from the ground, gently hovering upwards.

He thought about what he knew, what he was witnessing today, what he had heard the elders and the acolytes talk about. He had always had an exceptionally sharp mind, and an eye for details, being able to connect seemingly unconnected events with remarkable accuracy, almost bordering on premonitions. His elders used to say, only half in jest, that he was destined to transcend. His mind quickly correlated the information and with a twinge of dread he came to an abrupt realization.

The elder, clearly on the verge of panic, hoisted the blue-haired child up in his arms and quickly picked up his pace, following the massive crowd in front. "What were you thinking! We have to hurry, we have to get to safety."

The child slowly turned his head and his tear-filled eyes - no longer the colour of vermillion but instead a dull brown - met the elder's, as he spoke in a voice far more gravely than any child should have ever been able to, "There is no safety anymore."

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Despite the hour they had already spent together, the prophet's stare once again fell on the form of The Deity, as if his eyes could not really fathom what they were seeing. She was truly beautiful - he thought - her smooth skin dancing with bright iridescent lights at every movement, and her long golden and white hair continuously swirling in an unnatural flow, as if underwater, gravity-defying. She stood taller than him, in a majestic fashion, as if proudly overlooking everything around her. Formless, yet familiar. Naked, yet at the same time not. Her most peculiar, and most alluring, feature was however her eyes. Sometimes gleaming of azure, sometimes of harlequin, and sometimes completely black, they were whirlwinds of eternity, giving promises of things others were not meant to understand.

"A walking testament to how wrong a person can be about the things they know everything about," the prophet contemplated to himself.

The Deity kept her gaze in front of them, but twisted her lips into a soft smile, as if she had read his mind, and spoke, "Again, I apologize for the lateness of my arrival, but I had matters to attend to. And I do not often do this, if it is any consolation, people can usually not handle my mere presence, which during the current circumstance hardly matter. But you are different, you had already peered through, you had begun to understand. I felt I had to."

"Thank you for being here now," the prophet responded gratefully. "You have no idea how long this has plagued my mind. The answers of the universe always just outside my grasp, growing with each passing year. I have memorized every cosmic map my people have ever constructed. Even improved on quite a few of them. But there were always questions."

"As is the nature of intelligent life. Curiosity is a most wonderful thing, I have always admired it. Is there anything else you would like to know?"

Her words, although spoken normally, seemed to almost sing in the air, easily standing out over the ever-present roar in the air. A roar that was coming partly from the ships flying by, but also from something else, something unseen. It was an unnatural noise, almost as if the very soundwaves were being stretched, pulled towards something.

"You have already told me so much, I can scarcely think of anything else. And the more I think about it, the more I start to not care about the answers. Not at a time like this, it is simply too late."

"I admire your composure upon hearing all this," said The Deity. "If you do have more, do not hesitate to ask. Just remember though, I am not omniscient. I can not give you all the answers."

"No, I assumed as much." The prophet thought for a moment and then continued. "And thank you. I suppose the opportunity should not go to waste after all. That said,

many wards of mine have always wondered, even though I think I know the answer; are we alone in the universe?"

"You were not. But it was all but impossible for you to ever have had the opportunity to meet any others. The distance was simply too great for you to ever physically come in contact."

The prophet gave a slight smirk, and continued, "Heh, I told them that many times. It is..." His smirk quickly went away. "It was, as I suspected. Were they similar to us?"

"Yes, in many ways. Such is usually the case. For all of life's diversity and wonder, the basic carbon form seldom varies much. I have always found that aspect of creation interesting."

They stopped walking, instead looking around at the scene happening in the valley. The prophet pointed at a couple running past them on their right side. They were wearing white, silken clothes, formfitting but with shavings of cloth hanging down in selected places forming ornamental patterns. The clothes were similar to what the prophet was wearing, although less intricate.

"That couple, I know them. They spend a lot of time at the sanctum. Excellent curriculum enhancers. We talked once, over a ceremonial gathering. They were worried their young was spending too little time at their centre, instead opting for long sessions at the nearest astroscope facility. They asked me for advice."

"What did you tell them?" The Deity looked at the prophet.

"I told them that a great many things happen outside our planet, and that looking for answers to the questions posed by the universe is as noble of a way to spend time as any. Our young do not always share our own path."

As the couple ran out of sight, the prophet nodded in the direction of a woman passing them. She was walking rather slowly - a stark comparison to the surroundings - seemingly paying attention to the patches of flowers, shooing away people that tried to trample them.

"That woman I met while overseeing a scheduled upkeep of the dome near here. She was walking around planting seeds of lilac flowers in these patches of grass in the

valley. The same patches she appears to be vehemently trying to protect now. I had asked her then why she was doing it, and in her own way communicated that she felt it was her duty to help spread the bounty of our nature to as many people as she could. She had no interest in the curriculum, nor the inherent capability for it, and felt this was her way of contributing. I always respected that commitment." A wave of bitter remembrance washed over the prophet's face. "So many lives I have been a part of during my time here."

"I can relate to that." The Deity looked at the divine man.

"Tell me, are there others like you?" He asked.

The Deity turned her head and paused for a moment as she reflected on her answer. "Not entirely like me."

"How long have you known about what is happening here?" Asked the prophet.

"Too long. I have spent many, many years trying to prevent it. The process has been in motion longer than you know, long before your transcendence. That was 6000 years ago was it not?"

"A little more than 7000."

"Ah yes." The Deity smiled again, and the prophet, for reasons beyond him, felt contentment, if only for a moment.

They kept on walking, falling far behind the frightened horde of individuals running ahead of them. The prophet slowly removed the coat he was wearing over his silken clothes and folded it carefully over his arm. It was covered in precious gems, and decorated with sigils made of a magnetic metal mined from the planet's closest moon. A traditional garment. All the intricate features, albeit beautiful, made it heavy and cumbersome to wear, and he began to wonder why he had even worn it at all. He was revered by his people, and he had guided them to best of his abilities, with great success. They would not have cared. And he did not need it for warmth. He was long since past such concerns.

He looked around at the population he had been trying to protect for all these years as they ran past - and through - the aura concealing himself and The Deity from sight

and touch. People were shouting, some had even stopped and were now looking up, making vulgar motions against the sky. The prophet's face contorted in disapproval as he heard words being shouted he had not heard in his lifetime, words he only knew through the old archives. Words he thought their civilisation had long since forgotten, being spoken in the old language. A language he knew, but that was seldom used anymore. He slowed down their stride even more.

"You disapprove?" The Deity asked.

"You understood that?" The prophet raised an eyebrow in surprise.

The Deity glanced at the man and said nothing.

"Of course," The prophet felt stupid, for the first time in many years. "In a manner, yes, I disapprove. My people have all throughout history, long before my time, worked with the singular goal of bettering themselves. Each individual striving to serve both their own sense of place in the world, and at the same time serving society in the best possible manner, to the best of their abilities. Be it through science, meditation, art, or anything else, like the woman planting the flowers. Ever since the need for resources was diminished, and the little need left easily replicated, we have rejoiced in such enlightenment."

"I know. I have spent time observing you, and I have always enjoyed it. You have taught me many lessons that I will bring with me."

The prophet felt a pang of pride from this praise. Praise coming from a power higher than himself had not happened before.

"I'm glad to hear so. And the problem with the old words is that they have long since lost their meaning. There was a time when such curses could in fact be bestowed upon other people and other objects. They were effective, depending on the mental capacity of the user, even though it was forbidden. There are even mentions of people being killed by them. But with the rise of technology, such archaic practices were cleansed, as the number of people being exiled greatly reduced. The words are counterarguments against enlightenment, that is why I disapprove."

"A worthy reason," The Deity retorted. "I am aware of the work of some of your predecessors, but I never met any of them. I am not certain they would have been able to handle it; I fear their minds would have broken. But I am sure we would have had much to discuss as well."

"So you know how rare it is for one of my people to achieve transcendence?" The prophet's voice was solemn.

"I do."

"I am the last one to do it. Were you here when it happened?" He hesitated before continuing, "Seeing as how you are partly responsible?"

"I am sorry to say I was not. I felt it happen and as such wanted to be, but my attention was locked elsewhere. It is quite rare for someone to contact me like that." The Deity's voice was soothing. "And I am not responsible, do not lessen what I understand to be your grandest achievement by suggesting otherwise."

The prophet nodded slowly.

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7023 years ago.

The acolyte slowly approached the sanctum. His steps were heavy and he almost had to drag himself forward, his feet shuffling on the ground. He walked through the gates and glanced up, squinting in the bright sunlight. The white surface of the building always appeared unnaturally clean. He continued through the small garden that stretched out over the main courtyard, and stopped for a moment. He blinked sluggishly and let out an audible yawn.

The smell of flowers was heavy in the air, and all over insects were buzzing about, doing what they do at that time of the season. The acolyte followed the motions of a fat grey beetle as it climbed up the stalk of a large circular flower with shaded sprouts of hazel. The beetle searched about for a moment, and then pressed itself between two

petals, and disappeared. It emerged a few seconds later, climbed down the stalk, and scurried on towards the next flower.

The acolyte rolled his head on his shoulders and continued towards the building, grateful for the momentary display of nature he had just witnessed. It was a welcome distraction, knowing what he had to face in his meditation chamber.

The large plate covering the entrance to the building slid quietly into the wall as he approached. He entered the main hall and paused for a moment. It was a massive room stretching up far above his head, covering more than fifty floors, interconnected through an elaborate system of hovering platforms. All over people were moving about, indistinctly chattering, both mentally and with words.

The acolyte sighed, and stepped on to the closest platform, doing his best to avoid the gaze of the others around him. The platform quickly buzzed to life, and with a steady drift it effortlessly moved through the air of the hall. The pulsating blue light of the platform dimmed as the acolyte stepped off on the fifteenth floor. He walked along the ornamented railing and looked out over his left shoulder, down towards the ground he had just been standing on. More people were entering. He hurried as fast as his weary body allowed, and went right, down a corridor.

The corridor was spacious - much like everything in the building - and on both sides was evenly distributed, numbered doors. The acolyte proceeded with sure steps and finally stopped in front of one. He did not bother looking at the number, he had spent far too much time in there by now to not be sure it was the right one. The door, like every door in the sanctum, slid open silently.

The chamber revealing itself was perfectly round, perfectly spaced. A carpet stretched out, covering the floor from side to side, in faultless symmetry. The walls were completely white, with one side containing six large drawers, only their narrow outline revealing their position. On the opposite side a number of small sensors formed an oblong square on the white wall. Opposite the entry was the outline of another door, leading into a small facilities room.

The acolyte entered his chamber, the door closing behind him, and sat down in the floor, right in the middle of the carpet. A blue-glowing light shone down upon him from three centred spotlights in the ceiling as he rubbed his tired eyes. Once again, going on for weeks now, his sleep had been plagued by terrible nightmares. He adjusted his position and sat up with a straight back. He closed his eyes, focused, and as he dissipated into a meditative state, he recalled the latest night:

"I am standing in the middle of a field. I recognize it from my childhood. It is warm and the lilac flowers are in mid-bloom. Over there in the distance are the grey mountains, their peaks twisting in strange formations inwards towards the valley. It is getting dark. Why has the artificial lights not turned on? The field always looks very pretty in the white glow coming from the ground. I am looking up, towards the dimness of the night sky. Soft lights from a few dozen stars blinks back at me with their familiar twinkle. But suddenly something else catches my attention. What is that? It's a dark spot in the sky, much darker than the rest. It's getting bigger. I am feeling uneasy. I look down, the flowers have withered. I can no longer see the mountains in the distance. I can just about make out a sound in the distance. A powerful roar. I look up and everything is dark, completely dark. A feeling of immense dread. Suddenly a flash of red emerges from the darkness, burning the eyes from my head, leaving two smoking holes."

The acolyte shot his eyes open and with a jolt got up on his feet. His eyes were hurting in his head. He looked down at his hands. They were drenched in sweat, and more was dripping down from his forehead onto the beige carpet covering the floor.

"What does it mean?!" His mind was loud as he began to pace back and forth in the room. *"A premonition, maybe? A warning?"*

He went over to the wall with the sensors and made a gesticular motion. The small nodes pinged to life with a vibrant display of green light. Beams shot out at various angles, forming a large holographic display, covering the better half of the room. A

screen displaying a starmap appeared on the wall that had been white a mere moment ago, and quickly expanded into the hologram's frame, taking on a 3-dimensional form.

With security the tired acolyte continued to make motions with his hands, carefully navigating around the map he was standing in the middle of, exploring it. A planet, his planet, was in the middle of the hologram. It was surrounded by three small moons, and orbited in a circumbinary path around its two stars. He skilfully manoeuvred the map, zooming past planets, stars, nebulas, galaxies, and everything between.

"We have mapped our own galaxy, and the surrounding superclusters to a great extent, but our understanding of what is beyond is purely hypothetical," he consorted with himself. A small chime let him know his words were being recorded to his journal. "It is a shame the last prophet never returned. With the technology we have now, we could have mapped the rest. I wonder what happened? So many questions left unanswered. How do we not know the universe's origin yet?"

He stopped, and concentrated on the map again, and with an intricate motion a sensor hidden in the ceiling sprung to life. The universe on display shifted tone as its 4-dimension layout processor was activated. As he zoomed around the map, watching stars transform from supernovas, to white dwarfs, finally reduced to cosmic dust, he reached a sudden stop in the data being projected.

"This is it, why can no one get past this point? What secrets lie beyond this wall?"

He took a few steps back, and looked at the information being presented, as he tilted the map of time back and forth between the point he could not get past, and the succeeding moments.

"The spread of cosmic dust is too great for matter to have emerged from a singularity. And the subsequent inflation far too randomly spaced for the time interval to make sense. Like a blank canvas that someone suddenly started to throw paint at."

The acolyte started pacing again.

"Everything points to matter coming into existence well past the formation of structures and stellar evolution. That would suggest the universe is infinite, and in a steady state, but that doesn't make sense either. Previous prophets claim to have seen

the edge, meaning it does not expand. Yet they can't seem to penetrate the barriers the other way. Why? Not to mention some kind of entanglement seemingly holding it all together..."

Then, suddenly, he saw it. A small dot at the very edge of the map. For all intents and purposes, it was meaningless, indistinguishable from other specs of dark matter, not even labelled by the cartographers. But as he stared at it he knew. That was the answer. With a quick motion the screen and its projections went away, and he sat down in the middle of the room again, and closed his eyes:

"I am in the field again. The flowers and mountains are here. I will look up and find the dark spot. There it is. I will not avert my eyes this time. I don't need to look to know, but the lilac flowers have now withered. It is getting bigger. I feel the hairs on my body stand up as I am filled with dread. I will withstand it. The darkness fills everything now. The dread is still here. The red flash happens. I almost wake up, but manage to stay in state. The pain is almost unbearable, but I must endure. It is still dark. Does my physical body even have eyes anymore? The pain increases even more, spreading, it is tearing the skin from my bones. I feel the tremors in my body telling me to stop. I can't, I must endure. My heart is beating faster, it is breaking. Let it. I must remain in state. The pain increases to impossible levels. There it is! I can see a silhouette through the darkness. The pain finally decreases. I can almost make out the silhouette. It's a face. A beautiful, luminescent face. I have never seen eyes like that. They tell tales of wonder, of infinity. What is this? Who is that? I couldn't stop now even if I wanted to. What is happening? I can no longer feel my heart beating. Or my lungs draw breath..."

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A loud bang awoke him. It came from the door. The world was spinning as he got up on his feet, not entirely sure what had just happened. For some reason he didn't feel

tired anymore. And his eyes weren't hurting. The door slid open as he stumblingly approached, clinging to the wall.

"What is it," he said with a weak voice.

"We were doing a routine check and just saw that you have been in here for three weeks, what's happened? You must have run out of provisions a long time ago, we were worr..." The ordinance stopped abruptly, and her face immediately became drained of all colour as the former acolyte stumbled into the door frame.

"What do you mean three weeks?" As his vision returned to normal, he looked at the ordinance standing there mouth agape in stunned silence.

"What's wrong?" The being that emerged from the meditation chamber reached out an arm towards the ordinance's shoulder, but stopped as he saw his hand. It had changed colour. It was almost translucent. He looked around. As his vision finally stabilized, he found that he could see clearer than he ever had before, as if the world somehow had gotten more colours. He walked past the still stunned ordinance, through the hallway. It felt as if he was walking on a soft layer of clouds, the air crackling with psionic energy as he passed through it.

He arrived at the main hall, the same main hall he had arrived in three weeks earlier. It was just as full of people as on that day, with the same distinct chattering. He didn't bother waiting for a platform. He could already feel the telekinetic energies flowing from his mind as he walked downwards through the empty air. As he slowly approached the middle of the hall, the chattering became quieter as one after another laid their eyes upon what was happening.

As he stood still, resting easy on invisible energies, the new prophet looked around on the faces of the people. Faces that stared at him in equal parts amazement and equal parts reverence.

"I am glad you survived, not everyone would have," The Deity spoke in a compassionate voice. "As I said, I felt it happen, and I do regret not being there."

She kept her eyes forward, but tilted her head downwards, almost in shame. She did not want to meet the prophet's eyes. There was a reason she rarely partook at this point. So many wonders that had happened, so much she had missed. It didn't matter how many times it had happened, she always felt like she betrayed the inhabitants of the countless worlds, the worlds under her watch, worlds that did nothing but peacefully survive.

This was the last one. It wasn't even the other one's fault this time, the structure had been flawed from the beginning. All it had taken was one galaxy orbiting too close to the event horizon of an attractor for it to begin its usurpation. Once the happening was in motion there was little that could be done. It grew, swallowing the closer nebulas, the local cluster, the galactic filaments and beyond, and in doing so ruining the delicate balance of gravity that perpetrated throughout existence. Now everything was moving in incalculable speeds towards the attractor's centre.

Even if she somehow could figure out a way to stop it, it would have been too late. All was dead. This world was dead, having already left its orbit. It was just going so fast the inhabitants had not yet had time to experience the results of the light and warmth of its stars no longer reaching their planet. So many lives already lost. This planet, this civilisation, had been at the outermost edge, hence why it was still even existing. So much had it gone through already. Countless cataclysms and catastrophes, sometimes threatening many lives, sometimes threatening all. Whenever in the face of certain doom the ingenious beings of this world had found a way to avert it. The Deity had enjoyed observing them, and she had learned a lot from it.

It was only a matter of minutes now.

"There is one thing I have wondered above all, since that day," the prophet began precariously. "Was there a significance to the red flash? Does the colour symbolise something I am missing? It was such a clear aspect of the event, it must mean something! I had to defeat it to even see you."

The prophet waited patiently while The Deity seemed to formulate her answer. If she could look distressed, this was it, he thought, and he started to feel guilty about his question. Finally she spoke, "Yes, the red flash does have meaning. I could tell you its true meaning, but it will not bring you any peace, only the possibility of more pain. I will tell you that it does not have significance on the events happening now. It is merely a residue of a previous near-encounter I had the misfortune of experiencing. As much as I would like to put blame elsewhere, I cannot."

"I see." The prophet couldn't help but feel dissatisfied. He knew there was more to it. But it didn't matter now anyway.

"You said you blame yourself for what is happening. You shouldn't, it is pointless. And I understand blame, I really do." The prophet spoke more quietly than before. "Until you arrived I felt as if I should have done more, tried more. Perhaps if I had figured it out sooner, I could have saved us."

"I am sorry, but you could not," The Deity responded.

"I know. But it's still hard not to wonder. And I did try."

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1420 years ago.

The prophet proudly overlooked the construction site, as he floated high up in the air, watching the giant machines effortlessly piece the structure together. It was one of the most ingenious technological progresses his people had ever conceived, and one he was extremely proud over. And this wasn't even the only one! An intricate network of underground tunnels would connect the domes to each other, from all over the planet, each dome housing and powering enough ships to transport more than two hundred thousand people on every run. Each ship with a direct path to one of the many jumpgates already in place orbiting the planet.

The prophet had supervised the construction of every dome across the planet, and this was the last one. A thousand years ago they would not even have been possible, but

due to the diligent research, guided and directed by his knowledge, at last here they where.

The prophet had travelled across the planet countless times. It was part of his duty, and necessary for his research. His lifespan was much longer than rest of his people, and thus much lay upon him to preserve and spread the knowledge the archives could not. And although he didn't have an exact homestead, every sanctum having facilities for the current prophet, he still considered this, the place of his birth, his true home.

Despite the many years that had passed he still enjoyed the nature of the valley and its surroundings. The smell of flowers on a warm day, and the way the grey mountains twisted on themselves as they reached into the sky. He had deliberately waited to build this dome because of it. Because of nostalgia. He was certain the construction process was accurate from the beginning, but there was a reason he monitored each construction. He had to make sure each dome served its purpose without fail and without delay to their exact specification; safety and the survival of his people.

The prophet brought himself down to the ground. He rarely bothered to use his telekinetic abilities much anymore. The strain was considerable after a while, and it felt somehow unnatural. Too much like a parlour trick. The great machines were almost finished anyway.

His bare feet stroked the grass with each step as he made the short walk to a small encampment next to the build site. As he entered, the team of people present there were finishing up their analysis of the construction, as the machines were etching in patterns on the surface of the enormous building they had just made. The closest person was looking fixedly at a screen for some time before noticing the prophet, and immediately stood up straight.

"Are you satisfied?" The technician asked.

The prophet let his eyes wander over the scene. "Yes, quite. They are marvellous, are they not?"

The technician seemed to fidget as she was standing there.

"What's the matter? Do you not trust me?" The prophet looked at the woman with a stern yet kind look.

"Yes, no, of course I do. It's... it's just, I have looked at the schematics, and I... I have spent days and nights studying them, bit by bit. The entire process. It's just... I can't figure out where the jumpgates lead to. None of the formulas can give a clear answer. All our probes have submitted data for the short time they were able to, sure, but it still concerns me."

The prophet glanced up at the sky, and for the faintest moment the technician though she saw a hint of fear on his face. The revered man averted his eyes from the sky and looked intently at the technician in front of him. "Remember, they are merely an emergency resort, most likely they will never have to be used. But please trust me when I say they go to a suitable location. Should a calamity strike our planet, one we can not overcome, they will take us somewhere we can continue to live our lives." He lightened a bit and continued. "You have done our people a great service here. You have helped to further guarantee the survival of our civilisation. I am proud of you."

The technician smiled heartedly, gave a slight bow, and walked away.

The truth was the prophet didn't know exactly where the gates led to, and he had struggled with that realisation since the project's very beginning. He was the leader, people looked up to him for guidance and protection. And he lied to them. It made him feel shameful, and it was a burden he had to live with.

He had tried for so long to get the molecular teleportation more accurate. The process could transmit particles faster than light, and upon arrival reconstruct everything down to the smallest quark, but the pathways of the universe could not be conquered. A considerable radius could be set from the original transmission point sure enough, and the arrival point was certain to be relatively empty, with whatever small matter already present decimated upon the sudden displacement of energy. But the spot could still differ by millions of light years. They simply lacked the ability to generate enough of the initial power necessary pierce spacetime itself. The prophet, for all his guidance and knowledge, was still hindered by technology, by evolution. He could feel

it. There was energy out there, in almost endless amounts, he just couldn't quite put his finger on it. Spread out among the infinite all, binding, connecting. Enough to power his ships and his gates for a billion years. If only he could figure it out. Nevermind, he still had some time.

The ships launching from the domes that travelled through the jumpgates could however house its passengers for up to twenty generations, should the need arise. *"That has to be enough time to find a suitable location for settlement regardless of where we end up."* The prophet could hear the uncertainty in his mind. He wasn't even sure what they would be fleeing from, not really. So much time had passed since he had first seen the hole in the sky. Every effort to research it had failed, and every time his mind reached out to it, something blocked him. Like it was somehow too big for his mind, impossible as that might be.

"No, this is it, we can flee across the universe if need be. This has to be the right thing to do. Yes, this is it, this will keep us safe." He gave one final look around at the people there and then slowly exited the encampment. He steered his steps towards the sanctum and reflected upon the figure he had seen beyond the darkness, that day almost 5600 years earlier. He had not been able to forget it anymore than he had forgot the hole in the sky. Through intense meditation he had even been able to see the silhouette again. Each time more faded than before, but still, it was there. The image of the eyes however was etched as clear as day. It was them that had guided him. There was an eternity beyond his reach, beyond the darkness. He knew that.

He had spent so much time in the beginning just looking for any mention of what he had seen. He visited every sanctum, every archive, and he spoke to any ancestor of people that might have interacted with any previous prophet. He had all but ignored his duties. People had been worried, but it was his prerogative as the prophet to do. The effort had, to his growing despair, mostly been fruitless, but deep in the archives of a city that no longer existed he had found it, written more than sixty thousand years ago, in the old language: "The Deity is watching."

∞

"Let us rest, I cannot keep up this aimless walking," the prophet said, stopping in his track. He glanced down at the coat still hanging from his arm and finally let it drop to the ground, making sure to avoid any flower patch.

The Deity stopped alongside him, looking at the doomed lifeform. "Please trust me when I say that if it was within my power to do something, to do anything, I would."

"I know, it never occurred to me to ask," he replied.

The Deity looked surprised, a feature seldom seen on her face. Even now, this civilisation still fascinated her. "Why not?"

"As I already said, I know there's no point. I think perhaps somehow I knew then already, 7000 years ago. A common trait found in transcendents are a certain amount of premonitions, and I had seen the hole in the sky even before then. But I have never seen anything beyond this point. I understand why. I am not naive. I too have tried to prevent it after all. My mind has reached out to every corner of the universe within my grasp. I had the domes and the gates constructed. To no avail, I understood some time later of course. I never told the people. It wouldn't have made any difference or prevented anything. I felt it better to give them one last chance of hope. And it is truly the grand pinnacle of our achievements. While I never did solve the issue of location accuracy, I almost conquered it, the last threshold. I was close, so very close. There is energy out there, I can feel it. In my meditations I can almost see it. Yet I have no way to reach out too it, to draw it in. I feel the connection to it, yet it remains intangible. Do you know what I speak of?"

The Deity remained quiet, pondering for some time. "Yes. But I do not believe it would have been possible, if even somehow remotely feasible."

"Hmm, I suppose. Maybe there are some things we are simply not meant to meddle with," the prophet almost snickered to himself. He truly had been blinded by thoughtless ambition.

The Deity glanced at the man by her side then looked up at the penetrating darkness, now covering all but a fraction of everything in their sight. Even with her eyes it was getting hard to make out the features of the once beautiful valley. The few flowers that had survived the stampede had now withered. The roaring sound of inevitable demise got louder. She could feel the gravitational forces slowly ripping the earth from beneath their feet as they approached their doom.

"There is a certain beauty to it though, is it not?" The prophet sounded almost serene. "One can not avoid having respect for such impossible power. Its perfect symmetry and balance. Pure, in a sense. However, would you be so kind as to do me one last favour?"

"Yes?" The Deity's sweet, multifaceted voice still perfectly clear.

"Will you hold my hand? I am afraid."

"Of course." The Deity grasped his hand, and closed her eyes as they both kneeled down. She sensed it. As the particles making up the atmosphere surrounding them were being crushed into nothingness, and with the hand she was holding disintegrating in her grip, she gasped, and all went quiet.

∞

The allbringer of time and space was still kneeling. "*A silly title,*" she thought, bestowed upon her by an entity from a universe long since gone, but one she could not forget none the less. This moment always came with a rush of unexpected emotions and memories, some welcome, many providing nothing but regret.

She didn't need to open her eyes to know what the solid matter beneath her was; the substance was all too familiar. She had gotten used to it a long, long time ago. It was hot and cold at the same time, fluctuating, everchanging. A crystallised hardness, yet at the same time gentle and soft. She had failed once again. Would she ever succeed? After all this time, so many universes come and gone, all the lives lost, it sometimes seemed like an impossible task.

She slowly got up on her feet and opened her eyes to the familiar sight. The Arc, in its entire splendour never did cease to impress, despite her desire to never witness it again. She stood in a gargantuan hall, made up of the substance that was neither hot or cold, nor hard or soft. The walls and ceiling shaped in irregular, impossible patterns as the substance seemed to have randomly proliferated itself into existence. If existence was even a term that could be used in that place.

She slowly walked over to an opening in the wall and looked out over the infinity before her. She scanned it, the cosmic all, where every conceivable colour danced around on its own, where every atom continuously changed its structure and properties, only to immediately return to both its former and its latter state. She fixed her gaze on the dark stronghold across the bridge protruding from her own dwelling. It always filled her with disgust.

Her stare landed on one of the appalling structure's openings. For the faintest instant a shadow stirred, and The Deity could not shake the feeling that she thought she had seen, if only for a moment, those hideous red eyes peering back at her.

THE SHORE



The man slowly opened his eyes, squinting hard against the bright light of the zenith sun. The gentle heat stroked his face, and the distant sound of birds cawing mixed with the calm breeze and crashing of waves made for an almost meditative carpet of sound.

The man closed his eyes as the comfort of the elements and softness of the ground almost made him drift off into sleep before he realized he was in fact lying on sand, and that small sprinkles of water was splashing on his face. More importantly, the last he could remember it had been night time, and he had been in his domicile in the city.

He fought the initial instinct to sit up, without really knowing why. Maybe he was just dreaming? Or maybe he didn't want to face the reality of how he, for no logical or comprehensible reason, suddenly found himself at a beach, in the middle of the day.

He thought back on what he could remember, what he had been doing, and not really finding the answer satisfactory; he had simply been pouring over the data from the latest excavation, the very same thing that had been the activity for most nights the past months. All that information, it had taken a long time to process. The results had been fascinating, he knew that, but for some reason at that moment he found himself hard-pressed to remember them. Why, it made no sense... They had found some monoliths in an underground cavern, with markings from an unknown language. Then they had found similar artefacts all around the solar system, all with the same set of symbols, albeit in different orders. He had begun to decipher them; the subsequent derivative of different universal constants turning out to be coordinates. Separate, yet part of something bigger, connected through entanglement.

He hadn't even reflected over how such a thing was possible. He had a mind for things like that, always had, being able to see patterns where others couldn't, solving calculations that on the surface made no sense. This ability had made him invaluable at the institute, and had granted him special privileges, along with access to otherwise unattainable technology.

The coordinates in combination with descriptions of interstellar phenomena had made such a pattern, showing a location in a nearby galaxy. He had entered them into his deep-space scanner, connected one end to the visual output, one such unattainable piece of technology, and then the other end to his cerebral headjack... Suddenly he had felt a surge of pain run through his head as colours of white and red flashed before his eyes. There was something there, an unanswered question. Whirlpools of eternity, flowing red patterns...

He could feel himself lose consciousness, the cawing and the breeze becoming more and more distant, as he slipped into darkness.

The man's eyes shoot open, and he quickly sat up. As blood rushed to his head, the fading remembrance retreating to the corners of his mind, his blurry vision tried to make out the surroundings. The sun was still right in the middle of the sky. He couldn't help to wonder if it was because he hadn't been passed out for more than a minute, or because the sun did in fact not move. He did know one thing; he didn't recognize this place. It was massive, almost improbably so. The beach seemed to go on forever, he couldn't even see the end of it, it just went on in a curved line, stretching out into infinity. Not far inwards enormous mountains reached up into the sky, with solid surfaces, like they were made out of crystals. It was clear this was not a place one could easily leave. Nor get to...

Growing more bewildered by the second, he ran his fingers through the fine-grained sand. It was almost completely white, and extremely smooth, easily sipping and sliding between his fingers. He had never seen anything like it, not on his homeworld anyway. He peered out over the ocean. The aquamarine water went on as far as he could see, with nothing standing out against the horizon besides the occasional flying bird, no doubt the source of the cawing. He slowly, tentatively, stood up, noting that at least he was wearing the same clothes he had last night, even if they were wet. The same loose-fitted shirt and fine-quilted trousers. Regretfully, the same lack of footwear. He was however quickly pleased to notice that there didn't seem to be a pressing need for them, the sand was just as soft on the soles of his feet, and the temperature was pleasantly temperate.

The man's eyes wandered inwards, towards the land, trying to find something, anything. Suddenly he saw it, wondering how he hadn't immediately done so. A large wooden building stood nestled in shadows of the looming mountains, at least three stories high, a row of windows on each side of the immense wooden door no doubt leading to whatever was inside. A pleasant light shone out through the windows, standing out against the shadows, and smoke was pouring out through a chimney on top of the stone covered roof. The building looked like it had stood there for thousands of years, weathered and with tear, but standing none the less. A large staircase led up

towards the door, and above it, a wooden dilapidated sign saying “Welcome Traveller”, written in his own language. He looked around and made the obvious decision that whatever was happening to him, this is where he was supposed to go.

As the man unhurriedly made his way towards the house he found himself soaking up the environment. It had been a long time since he had been out in any kind of natural setting, being stuck either at home or in the institute office for the last year sorting out and piecing together the various remains found throughout the solar system. With sudden concern he looked up into the sky, again squinting against the sun. That was not his sun. He was fairly certain there was no sun like that in any habitable system in his galaxy. He stopped in his tracks. Was this a dream? A hallucination? Maybe exhaustion had finally got the better of him. He focused on his body. No, this was decidedly real. He just then realised he was quite parched, and his stomach was growling. He also desperately realised he needed to relieve himself. With his eyes fixed on the house he took a deep breath, and made the short trek towards the wooden building, climbed the stairs, and with far less certainty than he desired, knocked on the door. After some moments of silence he knocked again to no avail. He turned the handle, and unsurprisingly found that the door was open. He didn't know why, but he had expected nothing less. He took another deep breath, and proceeded inwards.

Jociye looked at the new arrival from behind the rows of bottles lined up, creating a certain wall of familiarity as she stood in the safety behind her bar counter. She hadn't seen someone like this before, his pale leathery skin standing in stark contrast to her own scaly, green hide. Her large bulbous eyes were quite accustomed to the smoky interior of the tavern, and she could see him eyeing it, adjusting to the sudden change of light. *“A cute one this time, that's something at least,”* she thought to herself with a shy smile.

“Welcome!” She announced stretching her small stature as much as she could.

The man almost jumped in place at the sudden call, obviously surprised at her appearance.

“Oh, he- hello”, he sheepishly replied as he took a few steps closer to the bar.

Jociye reached out a three-fingered hand towards the man, the standard customary greeting for his race, as she knew it. "Welcome to the tavern, I'm Jociye."

The man looked down at the hand, and unknowingly hesitated for a moment before reaching out in response, "Jack", he said while weakly shaking the hand of the strange amphibious woman standing before him. "I'm sorry, I'm not quite sure what is going on? Where am I?"

Jociye smirked slightly. Always the same question. She wasn't surprised, she had asked the same thing when she had first washed up on the shore. Even though it had been a long time ago now, she still remembered that feeling. Without a word she took a glass and poured a drink of clear liquid from a bottle that had long since lost its legibility and gently pushed it towards the man who called himself Jack.

"Please, drink this, it will make things easier as I try to explain."

Jack looked at the glass, and then at the face of the bartender standing before him. After some quick pondering he decided things couldn't possibly get any stranger anyway, and took a few sips of the drink. A very pleasant taste immediately filled his mouth. It vaguely reminded him of a type of berry juice his mother had used to make when he was young, but with a slightly tangier texture. He immediately felt more at ease, and couldn't help but get a soft smile on his lips.

"Yes, it's good, right?" Jociye said, knowing perfectly well what he was experiencing. "The liquid bonds with your body's chemical mimetic memory, everyone's experience is different. Improved with my own special blend as well. Truly fascinating stuff, can't find it anywhere else. I'm also betting you are not hungry anymore, right?"

Jack looked down into the glass. Not only was he not hungry or thirsty, he didn't need to relieve himself anymore either. This was already a day of impossibilities, so he didn't bother to inquire further about the seemingly magical properties of the drink in his glass, but rather quickly proceeded to empty its content.

"Thank you, Jociye was it?"

Jociye nodded in response.

"I'm sorry," Jack continued, "I still don't understand where we are?"

“Well, to put it simple, we don’t know. You or your consciousness somehow got transported or placed here when you reached your... well, we call it enlightenment,” Jociye started with a tone of unexpected familiarity.

Jack stared at her in utter bewilderment as she continued, “Yes, I know how it sounds, I didn’t believe it first either, but think about it. What’s the last thing you remember? Where were you? Not anywhere near here, I reckon. And look around, everyone here has experienced the same thing. You are trapped in an illusion of a world, that we quite frankly don’t know whether is reality or not.”

Jack turned around, almost instinctually analyzing the room and only just realized they were not alone. It was a fairly large room, 10 or so tables spread around, with comfortable looking sofas lining the walls. The light was dim, and a fireplace was crackling comfortably in the corner. People were sitting spread out around the tables, some looking lazily at them, some engaged in conversation, some looking barely awake, their heads almost drooping into their glasses. Jack recognized some of the races from his interstellar excursions, but most he had not seen, nor even heard of before.

“You see Jack, what happened to you has happened to me and to everyone in this building, in some fashion or another,” Jociye continued matter-of-factly as she poured Jack another drink.

“You came in contact with the truth. At the very least you touched upon it. The universe is not what you think it is, never has been. Its foundation was created, not sparked, or rewinded, or exploded into reality.” Jociye leaned in closer towards the stunned looking man, as she spoke in a hushed tone, “Tell me, who did you see?”

Jack stared at the woman’s face, her large eyes peering intensely at him. Somewhere in the back of his mind he did know what she talking about. He had seen something on the screen in his mind, something he wasn’t supposed to see.

“I remember colours,” he started. “Blinding colours, red and white. There were shapes there, figures...”

Suddenly Jack could almost sense the prickling of ears around the room as the previously uninterested patrons suddenly started listening fixedly.

Jociye let out a small gasp “Oh my, both of them? And you survived, very impressive.” Her smile quickly went away. “And quite worrisome, something big must be happening.”

“We are getting close to the end,” a raspy voice harked from the back of the room.

“This is Dorian, he’s been here the longest,” Jociye gestured towards the figure sitting with his back against the wall. “I think he might do a better job at explaining this than me, I never quite got the hang of it.”

Jack quickly finished his drink and went over, seating himself in a chair positioning himself on the other side of the wooden table separating the two. He eyed the man. He was large, much larger than him, with grey skin, and long flowing hair in a tangled blond mess. He was wearing clothes made from some type of leather, just about matching his complexion, looking almost grafted to his skin. A large rimmed hat kept his face in a muted shadow, even in the dim light.

“You know what’s going on?” Jack said, realizing immediately how stupid he sounded.

Dorian chuckled lightly. “Yes, as much as one can. Welcome to the tavern at the end of existence.”

“Well, I am more than eager to get more details,” Jack said, trying his best to remain rational, getting the feeling that the slight buzz from his drink was the only thing keeping him from panicking.

“Well, as our dear Jociye explained, we are in fact not certain. You might think it’s a dream or hallucination, and I wouldn’t fault you for doing so, we have all thought that. What is certain though is the fact that we are stuck here, unable to contact the outside world. Don’t bother trying to leave the shore, it just kinda loops around on itself. Sometimes people just fade away, but it can’t really be predicted. Of course, you could always go for a swim. You will drown, but that seems to be about the only way out, if you have the guts for it.”

Jack just kept staring at man in front of him, mouth agape.

“Now over the years we have pieced together quite a bit of information,” Dorian continued, apparently unbothered by the look on his tablemate. “There are beings out there far beyond anything you think is possible. You think you understand the laws of our universe? I assure you, you don’t. That’s what Jociye was talking about. The universe didn’t happen into existence, it was created. And has been so before, and will be so again.”

Jack leaned back in utter disbelief, while at the same time, for some unfathomable reason, believing every word the man in front of him said. “Who? Who did I see?”

Dorian took a large swig from the mug sitting in front of him, and continued, half under his breath, “I only saw one of them. Eyes like whirlpools of infinity...”

Jack knew immediately. A big part of him didn’t want to admit it, he had spent his life serving science after all, he knew how the world worked. It wasn’t that complicated. He had visited more star systems than most men, observed events and happenings few had, he knew how things worked!

“What is she?” He inquired with resolute.

“They call her The Deity,” A voice from the other end of the room blurted out, and Jack again became aware that everyone was in fact listening to them. Dorian made a motion of agreement, and took another gulp of his beverage.

“Who calls her that?” Jack demanded.

“Listen, you have to understand something,” Dorian put his mug down and stared at Jack. “Think about what I just said, what you have seen. You are a smart person, you wouldn’t be here otherwise. Why do you think the sign outside welcomed you in your own language? Why do you think Jociye knew how to greet you? Where do you think the drink you had came from, huh? You are not at home anymore. You should have died, but you didn’t, instead you came here, because your mind couldn’t let go. We don’t know who created this place, but somehow it exists. I don’t think she, or they, know of it. But it adapts. People come and go, it is very unclear for how long. We do know that time is somewhat fluid here, the outside world passes at a much quicker pace. At the very least our perception of it. No harm will come to you. It can’t, unless

you wish it. You can drink though, as much as you want. And lucky us, it's the only thing that combats the boredom," Dorian said with a smile as he finished his mug, liquid dripping down on his grey chest as he gesticulated towards the bar.

Jociye emerged with two mugs and slowly walked over to their table, sat them down, and then leaned in towards Jack and whispered in his ear, "There are other things we do to combat the boredom as well." With a wink she returned towards the bar, and Jack could swear she was almost sashaying. He admitted to himself that he did find it enticing.

Dorian smiled towards Jack, and put his mug up towards him, proposing a toast. Jack raised his in return, shook his head, his mind filled with a thousand questions, while simultaneously already knowing the answer to most of them. He emptied the contents of his mug, barely breathing in-between sups noting it was almost as tasty at the one he had had before.

"Tell you what, at the top floor there are rooms with beds in them. Go have a rest, you will have the best sleep of your life, and when you awake, everything will feel better. We will be here when you wake up," Dorian said with tone of someone who had lived for an impossibly long time and in doing so had accidentally learnt the secret to happiness.

Jack merely nodded and stood up. As he started walking towards the sign marked stairs, he turned around and asked, "Hey, how will I know which room is the right one?"

Dorian's face lit up in a big smile, "Whichever room you choose will have what you need."

Jack stood frozen for a moment, almost fearing his second question, "Who was the other one I saw?"

Suddenly Dorian's face turned grim as he looked into his mug. "No one here right now has seen him. Very few have, and most can't stand it for long. They go for a swim. The Purger..."

Many years later.

Jack slowly opened his eyes. A very dim light shone in through the window. The sun had sunk even lower. He turned his head and looked over at Jociye lying naked besides him, still sleeping, her back facing him. As his eyes wandered over her voluptuous form, images of the previous night flashing before him, he couldn't help but to smile wistfully to himself. He slowly got up, got dressed, and headed downstairs.

The tavern was almost empty, and although he instinctually looked over to Dorian's spot, Jack was still sad to see him not sitting there. Even though it had been quite some time since he had at last faded away he still missed him.

Jack stood there, almost frozen in time for a while contemplating his situation, thinking back to the day he had first arrived. He had had a lot of time to reflect over his situation, and he had spoken to everyone in the tavern enough times for them to get quite sick of him. A lot was clear, yet he still had unanswered questions, but now almost everyone was gone. He took a bottle from the counter, not bothering with getting a glass. It's not like it mattered anyway, there were always new bottles. He went over to an empty table but quickly changed his mind, turned around and went over to the door. He opened it up, and stood in the frame, looking out over the shore, lazily starting to drink. He could swear the sun was moving faster and faster for each passing day. Whatever a day was here.

Before long he heard Jociye emerge from stairs. She paused for a moment and went over to him. "What are you doing, isn't it your turn to bartend?" She said her voice betraying a tone of worry.

"What difference does it make, there's barely anyone here, and there hasn't been any new arrivals in forever," Jack answered apathetically. Jociye snuggled up besides him, her cold skin feeling pleasant in the warm light of the setting sun.

"What's on your mind, really? Don't think I haven't felt you being distant," she said softly.

“Have you noticed the birds have disappeared?” Jack started, pointing out to the horizon. “Anyway, ever since Dorian faded I’ve been thinking. More than usual anyway,” he continued. “The first thing he ever said to me was that we are getting close to the end. And here we are, at the end of time, and he’s still the only one to ever mention... the other one? Everyone seems almost afraid to talk about it. And that’s been bothering me. We know there are two of them. We know, or at least assume, that someone, or both of them created this place either consciously or unconsciously.” Jack looked down into Jociye’s eyes, as she removed her arm from him, and leaned against the other side of the door, pulling the robe she was wearing tighter.

“What’s your point?” She asked.

“Well, The Deity created the universe. This we know, you saw that yourself, right?” Jack continued, as Jociye merely nodded in response. “But we don’t know the true purpose of the other one. Everyone assumes he’s an opposite, but I don’t think it’s quite that easy. I couldn’t be, there is no way they would be that intertwined if that was the case. I saw both of them. When I close my eyes I can still see them. Why is that?”

Jociye looked down for a moment before she answered, “I don’t know.”

“No one does, and time is running out,” Jack squinted against the sun. “And I don’t think she created this place, I think he did. Every story I’ve heard here, this omnipotent Deity, she seems almost reckless, desperate of sorts. Not cruel in any sense, but lacking in awareness, in perspective. If I didn’t know better, I’d say she is naïve. Think about what we have here. The comfort? People drink, and that’s it, but to what end? To forget?” Jack eyed the beach back and forth. “No, this is a refuge. It’s designed for us to go on living, if that’s indeed what we are doing. There’s no lack of awareness there, it’s deliberately about giving people a choice, and it’s getting them comfortable enough to not fear the inevitable. And there is only one course of action left. I have to make the choice myself. I’m not afraid of the truth anymore, I see it so clearly, almost as if I’ve been blind and can see clearly for the first time. I understand how the universe works, I understand what must happen now, and what must happen again.”

Jociye's eyes shoot up as she stared at Jack. "You are not saying what I think you're saying?" She croaked.

Jack stared out over the ocean, the waves slowly rolling over the aquamarine seascape. "I'm afraid so. I am grateful that I washed up on your shore, and for the time we have spent together, but I must move on. I can see the red patterns out by the horizon, I know where to go, I don't fear it."

Jociye stared at the man she loved, contemplating the meaning of her next words, allowing the realization to sink in. After some time she spoke, "You know, I've been here longer than you, almost as long as Dorian had. I tried to figure out answers myself, for a long time. You know what I did before, how I ended up here?"

"Yeah, you were a scientist of sorts, like most here. You have vehemently refused to talk about it though, you always answered that it didn't matter anymore," Jack responded.

"Yeah, I guess I did," Jociye admitted. "I suppose it's bitterness. I am, or was, one of the most skilled chemists on my homeworld after all. And what have I managed to accomplish here? Make a drink taste slightly better? I haven't even been able to identify all the ingredients in it, just that it contain traces of some kind of strange dark matter I haven't seen anywhere else, but that's about it."

Jack looked at her, and admired the spark of passion that lit up in her eyes as she continued, "You know, my greatest forte was always in the field of consciousness expansion. I wanted to increase our potential. I succeeded too; I was part of a team that created a potion that allowed you to unlock the mind's true limit, to allow us reach our full potential. It was supposed to be the next step in our evolution. That's what I thought anyway. It was truly impressive, like nothing we had ever made before. We were supposed to wait and perform artificial trials, but I was too impatient. I don't know exactly what happened, but my mind did reach new heights, new limits. But it went too far. I saw creation, or a residual image of it anyways. And then she looked at me, all flashed white, and I woke up here. I have tried to recreate it, but I can't, not here, not

with what is available. I doubt it would work anyway. My gifts are wasted in this place, but yours aren't. I trust you, let me join you."

Jack looked at her. He smiled, and took both of her hands in his. "You truly are the most beautiful thing I've ever encountered. Yes, if that is the choice you make, it would make me very happy."

Jociye gazed out over the ocean, feeling somehow not at loss, but more at peace than she could remember. "What shall we do?" She asked, feeling more and more calm in her decision by every passing second.

"I think we will have another drink, and then we'll go home," Jack said with a smile. He took a big swig from bottle, and passed it on to the woman he loved. She emptied its content, and merely dropped in the sand as they walked hand in hand towards the ocean.

The water was nicely lukewarm, as they slowly made their way out into the emptiness, the shore growing more and more distant. Soon they could not see it anymore, and the sun seemed to be setting, the world around them getting darker. As they both floated on their backs, waiting for the inevitable, they clasped hands again, and focused on the sky above them, whatever doubt they ever had draining away.

Jack looked over at Jociye, who looked back at him, and they both smiled.