it will not obey you

by rhythmantics

Summary

"Against the standing place of the gods it has directed its terror,
In the sitting place of the Anunnaki it has led forth fearfulness,
Its dreadful fear it has hurled upon the land,
Kur, its dreadful rays of fire it has directed against all the lands."

An extension fic, taking place two years after the end of the series. Canon compliant. Ignores TGIS. No shipping. Major spoilers for the main series.

Notes

See end of chapter notes for specific warnings. See the end of work note for footnotes.
How are you supposed to treat the day you were resuscitated from the dead?

Do you start to celebrate it like it’s a second birthday? Or do you just smile oddly at the calendar whenever it rolls around, knowing that every new second that passes is a second that you weren’t supposed to live? That each minute is a minute you weren’t meant to exist? Even though the grand schemes of destiny, fate, or random happenstance were usually filed under "topics your parents like to have 'civil discussions' about," it's hard not to wonder, when it's late at night, and it's quiet, and all you can hear is the air in your lungs and the heartbeat in your ears. Dying, and then living again, it's an odd truth to bear. Every moment thereafter feels significant. You've always been significant.

Two years of terror. Two years of supervillains, mercenaries, fight-for-your-life; two years of uncertainty, fate-of-the-world, rests-in-your-hands.

Eleven to thirteen, that's the time it spanned. But it had started long before that, hadn't it? Before you were even born. Settled around your shoulders was a destiny that came creeping up from millennia past, one that you'd never asked to bear.

Maybe it was too much to ask for it to be over. Too selfish, or too greedy.

But you couldn't help the hope.

”ARGOST LIVES,” reads the graffiti that adorns the cities you fly over, but there’s an Argost-shaped hole in the world now, you know. Maybe you hadn’t been alive to witness it, but for a moment you felt it in your bones – foolish, foolish yet again, blindly ambitious, engineer of his own destruction. You know, and you will always know, even if the world doesn’t.

The cleanup had been messy, because messes like these can never really be wrapped up with a pretty little bow like they can on TV, as you’ve learned. Even with Epsilon and his full, trice-notarized apology, the backing of his entire society, the world was still trembling in the aftershocks. Calls came pouring in, kept all of you busy for weeks. Months. All the hostility that may have built up between you and the other Secret Scientists evaporated in the face of the paperwork, fieldwork, work work work. And then…

It really had looked like it was over. It really had.

”Animals reacting to climate change.” That was the story they were going with. Most people hadn’t even been directly affected that day, brief a war as it had been. Sightings? Hoaxes. Videos? CG, maybe some sort of strange viral promotion. Within months, it was like nothing had happened at all. Business as usual, Weird World re-runs at nine-eight Central, calls on the hotline that you went out to investigate, nights spent relaxing on the new furniture in your house, its beams coming together as it was slowly re-built.

Exactly the same, except it wasn't at all.

You’d thought they were part of your growing pains, at first. You were fourteen, going through your first set of growth spurts, finally catching up to Wadi, who'd started hers a few months earlier. Sometimes your joints and bones just ached when you woke up. Wasn’t it only reasonable to
expect something small like headaches, too?

Except they hadn’t been “something small.” Six months ago? Maybe seven? A dull throb at the front of your brain that grew into a shrieking, clawing monstrosity. And then it disappeared as suddenly as it came on. These phantom migraines, when you were rushed into the med-bay fast enough, had no apparent cause. They were head-scratchers, all right. They were an enigma, a puzzle without a solution.

A mystery.

And your parents were in the business of mysteries. So, like any good scientists, they set to work trying to solve it.

Was your spinal alignment out of place? No, the x-rays said, that wasn’t right. So they tried another avenue. Imbalance of neurotransmitters, maybe? That wasn’t right, either - all your tests, MRIs, they came back normal. Latent trauma? PTSD? But the symptoms didn’t match. On and on, ad nauseam (and you were nauseous, now, half the time, a constant vertigo).

It kept your parents thinking. If not those, then what? A curse? A hex? Mom couldn’t discount the possibility, even if dad had been adamant that somehow, some way, the anomaly would show up if only they could figure out where the origin was. If only they could figure out what had gone wrong.

Maybe you WERE supposed to die. Not in any suicidal sense, but sometimes you would wonder, when the dull ache grew too intense for you to open your eyes, when you found your limbs so sapped of energy that you could barely even stand up unaided, if maybe some force like destiny existed. And then, you'd go on, if it did – that maybe you being alive had made it angry, and now it was throwing a hissy fit because all its neat little plans had been messed up by your family’s intervention.

Fisk and Komodo became constants at your side. Some days were better than others, of course – some you could run and jump and whoop and laugh like there was nothing wrong – but that also meant that some days were worse, days where you were practically bedridden, days where you would be functioning just fine until a migraine just hit and you crumpled to your knees, on the verge of emptying your breakfast onto whatever you were standing on. And it was getting worse.

It was too dangerous for you to be out in the field, your parents deemed, even if that didn’t stop you. Because you knew, somewhere in your bones, that there was something out there for you, and you were hungry, starved for it.

Why couldn’t things have turned out alright?

After everything you went through, didn’t you deserve to catch a break? After everything – Argost and the Nagas, Doyle and the People, the Secret Scientists, Legion of Garuda, Weird World, Lemurians, Abbey Grey, Leonidas Van Rook, Piecemeal and Fisk, Zon, Komodo…

It wasn’t fair and you knew it, everyone knew it. Watching on the sides with pity in their eyes. You pushed through because you wanted so desperately, angrily for it to be fine, for it to be alright, for it to be the happy ending you knew you were supposed to get, but…

Does it get to be fine for you? You’re Zak Saturday, after all.

You’re Kur, after all.
Mentions of Van Rook's and Zak's death, lots of descriptions of Zak having headaches, then he falls off a tree but doesn't die.
may it never be restored.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Doyle had inherited a whole mess of troubles with Van Rook’s death - a staggering amount, really, considering how poorly his business was doing after it’d been stolen from him. Abbey Grey had been meticulous about keeping vendettas towards her teacher out of her hair, and so now all the cleanup was left to her predecessor. Supposedly, it was bad luck to speak ill of the dead, but that didn’t seem to stop all the debtors coming to call.

So the merc had taken Zon out with him, before the trouble with the headaches began, and checked in often as he could, but he was usually too tied up in his own matters to be of any help to the rest of the family. Scores had been settling down some, he’d said in the last call, so he might be able to swing by for a flesh-and-blood meeting soon; unfortunately, it’d been about a week of radio silence since then, and prospects were looking slim.

It was doubtful Zak would be up for a meeting, though, even if Doyle did surprise with a visit. He’d come down with what seemed like a cold - shivering, hot and cold flashes, lethargy – but, like the headaches, there didn’t seem to be any rhyme or reason to it. No medication worked to alleviate the symptoms, and no tests were able to come back with a cause. Meanwhile, the migraine attacks were still ravaging him, pretty much at random, and while Zak adamantly refused to be bedridden, neither was he up for any sort of real action. It’d taken all his persuasive might and puppy-dog eyes to get his parents to let him go with them on missions, and even then, despite himself, he usually had to turn back early.

Since nothing had been found as to the nature of his affliction, the family had decided there was little they could do but keep an eye on him and go about life as usual. That Doc and Drew pulled late nights searching for something – anything - that could help wasn’t a fact they thought Zak needed to know. He already had his own life to worry about, without him worrying about theirs. But he noticed their efforts, and they knew he knew, so what could any of them do? No one felt comfortable bringing it up, so instead they'd chat idly about anything else.

One of Drew’s latest theories was that the headaches were being caused by some kind of hungry ghost, maybe in a Buddhist or Shinto tradition. Doc, as a testament to how far gone he was, had started to worry that she might be on to something.

If there was a silver lining at all, it was that Zak had been able to rest in the comfort of his own home, now that the globetrotting adventure to save the world was over. He hadn’t realized how much he’d missed not being constantly on the move, constantly being hounded by Scientists out for his life, constantly being stalked by a crazed megolomaniac supervillain, until he’d finally been able to rest. A surprising amount was salvageable from the ruins Fiskerton had left in his instinct-fueled rampage, and while the east wing was still under construction, contractors buzzing around it like bees in a hive, the only things that weren’t more or less rebuilt were the bedrooms. Doc and Drew had set themselves up in the control room; Zak and Fisk had claimed the living room. They’d immediately gotten video games hooked up to the new TV (Zak may or may not have used "saving the world" as an excuse to wheedle the latest consoles out of his parents) and made themselves comfortable on the couch, which had already turned into a veritable pillow fort, with a blanket awning and a secret snack compartment. If he was going to be bedridden, he'd do it in style.

Doc would spend most of his time cycling between the med-bay and his own personal tech lab searching for answers, a path that usually took him behind their setup, where they'd grunt out
greetings to each other as he passed, his nose buried in digital readouts from his commpad. Drew spent her days in the library, reorganizing what was left over from Fisk's rampage, taking stock of what was left of their collection. In a stroke of luck, some of the shelves had collapsed in such a way as to shield the entire Sumerian section from falling debris, and in turn the debris had shielded the aging tomes from the elements. The entire collection had survived completely intact.

How suspicious, Drew had thought, as her finger traced down a yellowed page.

They were still on-call for cryptid activity, but the volume of requests had dwindled down to what it was before the mess with Kur had started in the first place, a break for which all the family was grateful.

If he was being honest, Zak had been concerned about running back into the field without his powers. They'd been with him for years before he even knew what "Kur" was, after all, and he wasn't sure what he'd do without them. Doc replied, smartly, that they'd managed before and they could manage again. And to his credit, they DID manage, one way or another.

Still, Zak hadn’t realized how much his powers had meant until he lost them. It wasn’t just that he suddenly had to start being careful, now that he couldn’t sense a cryptid’s general presence (though that was certainly part of it); it was that the creatures that used to readily accept his company as if he was one of their own now turned and hissed, bit and scratched like they would toward any other human.

Any other human. He should feel happy about that.

More than the frustration he felt with his inability to connect, however, was the emptiness he couldn’t shake - the certainty that some essential part of him was missing. The hollow space inside his heart was something he couldn’t get used to, no matter how many times he crossed paths with one of the creatures he used to know. Every time his eyes would meet the gaze of a cryptid, Zak felt himself unconsciously reaching for something that wasn’t there, something that used to be scorching-hot and familiar. Its absence now left him cold and off-center, stranger in his own body, scrabbling for purchase on empty air.

Encounters like that led invariably to headaches, but worse than the shooting pain of the migraines was the thought of never interacting with cryptids ever again. That fear always gripped Zak with an unspeakable sadness.

Fiskerton was ever-present at Zak’s side now, leaving only for nighttime cavorts when Zak was asleep. They were a team - no, they were brothers, so he’d insisted on hovering, over Zak’s protests. And sure, he smelled like dog and woods and whatever it was he’d eaten for dinner last night, but the warmth of his body and the strength of his grip saw Zak through some of his worst. Zak was grateful, even if he didn’t say anything out loud.

With their best efforts, they tried for normalcy. Even if Zak’s body protested that something was very, very, very wrong.

It was one of those "normal" mornings that finally broke the silence, one that found Zak and Fisk under the blanket fort, Zak thrashing the lemurian 2-1 in a racing game.

“Bhrrbazawah! Garrarugu!!” You cheated!

“Did not.”

“Mrrrr…” Fiskerton did not sound convinced.
“Look, not telling you about the shortcut on Misty Castle isn’t cheating, it’s giving myself a tactical advantage. And I beat you the first time fair and square.”

“Dree-ouda-firrve.”

“You’re on.”

The cheerful guitar riff was about to announce the start of a new game when Doc poked his head into the room. “Have you boys seen your mother?” he asked. His brow was creased with concern and he seemed a little lost in thought.

“I think she’s in the library, like usual. Is something wrong?”

“Oh, uh…” he paused to think. “You know what, I think you ought to see this too. Can you two go get her and meet me in the conference room? It’s…important.”

Well, that was vague. “Like, bad-important or good-important?”

“I-don’t-know-yet-but-it-doesn’t-bode-well-important.” He gave a short account of the call he’d just received with some trepidation in his voice.

Fisk growled, Zak grimaced. “Oh.”

He leapt to his feet and tugged Fiskerton after him down the hall. The hallways were still somewhat bare and sparse in furniture, and family photos in cracked frames leaned against the wall where the parents insisted they’d eventually hang them up. The library was at the end, big double-doors with temporary handles on them while the wiring for the automatic sensors was being set up.

Drew looked up from her seat as the door was pulled open. The Wiccan’s Guide to Supernatural Maladies, Zak caught the title as she set it down.

“Witches?” He asked. “Seriously?”

She shrugged with a sheepish smile. “I’m ready to give anything a shot at this point.”

Komodo, who’d been keeping her company, gave a big yawn and ambled over.

“So what do you need?” Drew said.

“Um,” Zak scratched the back of his head nervously. “Before I get to that…you know how you said you’re ready to give anything a shot?”

She raised an eyebrow. “I don’t like the sound of that.”

“Uh, anyways, dad wants us in the conference room.”

“Don’t change the subject on me…”

“I’m not, it’s related. He says he just got a call from a snake. Or more like a snake dropped into the room and told him to get the rest of the family together.”

It took a moment for his words to register in Drew’s mind. She swore.

“Nagas,” she said.
A ring-necked snake was coiled up on the keyboard, illuminated by the pale blue glow of the screens, lazily flicking its tongue in and out like it had every right to be there. It didn’t seem to notice Drew’s death glare, nor did it seem to register Fiskerton’s warning growls; dimly Zak remembered his father once teaching him that snakes did not have eyelids.

Snakes never blinked.

Zak was the last one to enter the room, both his mother and his brother having pushed him behind them for protection. The serpent did not stir until Zak entered its line of sight, whereupon the front half of its body rose smoothly into the air and bowed in his direction in greeting. Drew stepped aggressively forward.

“What do you want?” she spat.

Rani Nagi’s voice issued smoothly forth from the serpent’s open mouth, cool and venomous.

“Calm yourself, Saturday woman. We mean no harm to you or yours. We merely wished to make a bargain. It will be mutually beneficial, I assure you.”

Doc was standing off in the far corner, arms crossed and brow low. “‘Mean no harm’?” he asked. “For some reason I find that hard to believe. Our son’s not Kur anymore, so I don’t see where all this supposed goodwill is coming from.”

“I assure you, human, there is no goodwill involved,” Rani hissed at him. “We are simply fond of simple methods. Your human hands can do for us something we cannot; in turn, we have something you may be able to make use of. One in turn for the other. And I am quite sure you will find it hard to refuse.”

“We’ll do our best,” Drew said.

The snake turned to look at her out of its left eye, its tongue drawing in and out. “I do not think it wise for you to make up your mind before you at least hear our offer, Saturday.” Her tone was measured, but tinged with glee, as if she had already won the argument. “We know what it is that ails your son. More importantly, we know how to fix it.”

Drew’s mouth twisted. She’d expected as much – there wasn’t anything on the table that would be as effective a bargaining chip, after all – but hell if she was going to let these twisty snake bastards win. “Prove it.”

“We cannot.”

“Then no deal.”

“That would be unadvisable,” Rani Nagi purred, “as the child has less than a year left to live, and I suspect that we are your only hope.”

“It’s a scare tactic,” Doc growled, but Drew still hesitated. She’d expected what their offer would be, but not an expiration date. Fiskerton babbled in concern, high-pitched and worrying.

Should they believe in the naga’s words? The snakes favored playing off emotional weaknesses, but it was hard to think of a time where they outright lied. Rani Nagi herself seemed supremely confident in her diagnosis. And...it wasn't like the Saturdays had found any answers. If anyone
would know...then it may be the ancient race of mystics, their magic black as it may be.

In the end, the Saturdays simply did not know enough. The fact was, Zak's ailment - its nature, and its cause - eluded them. Was secret to them.

Doc and Drew were both tired, bags beneath their eyes. Fiskerton tried not to show it, but the worry was eating him, too. It killed Zak to see his family like this, more than his cold, more than his migraines, it really did. If the naga were being truthful, then would it be worth the risk?

Zak steeled his glare and stepped forward, shaking off Fiskerton’s hand against his protests. If they were going to be negotiating with the naga, then let him be the one to speak - he, who knew them best.

“Not saying that we’re accepting,” he said, ”but what exactly do you want from us?”

“Zak,” Drew warned, but she was cut off by Rani Nagi’s laugh.

“The child seems to know what’s best,” she said, turning to look at him, and he winced as a needle of pain shot up behind his eyes when he met that gaze. “Very well, little Saturday, let me lay out the exact terms. We seek the ancient greatspear Sharur, the weapon wielded by the blasphemous human that stole our late master’s life five thousand years ago. It lays in Kur’s ancestral home, but our kind cannot approach it; it is warded against snakes. We will tell you what we know once you retrieve it; you need not surrender the weapon until you verify our information as true.”

“And why exactly are you after this ‘Sharur’?” He tried to ignore the building pressure, his heartbeat throbbing sickly in his ears.

“It has sentimental value to us,” she replied coolly. “We should like to burn and destroy the foul thing. Fear not – aside from its ward against snakes the spear holds no special power. This you can verify with your own hands.”

“And something like that’s worth curing me?”

“Humans are insignificant,” the snake flicked its tongue out, “whether they live or die is of no consequence to us. And as you are, you are a mere human.”

Something about Rani Nagi was rattling the pain into the open. The nausea and vertigo were worse than usual; the room swayed beneath his feet. Still, he held his ground, fists clenched at his sides. Zak Saturday was not in the business of running from a fight.

Nagas were…liars, tricksters, untrustworthy; Nagas were the scourge of the ancient world, black magic practitioners, venomous backstabbers. That there would be a hidden, poisonous twist to this deal was not plausible, it was certain. They’d waited to tell the Saturdays, they’d waited until the Saturdays were desperate, desperate enough to hear them out. Desperate enough to agree.

Of course it was about Kur again. It had to be - why else would the naga act? Why else would they come here? And though Rani Nagi denied it, Zak knew that meant it was about him again. So that’s why only he…

He could tip over at any moment, but he dug his nails into his palms and put one excruciating foot in front of the other until he was standing so close to the waiting serpent that it could reach out and bite him.

“No deal.” He said those words loud enough that everyone in the room could hear him.
And then, under his breath, before turning away, he whispered in a low voice so that only the serpent could hear him.

“Wait until after dark.”

The snake hissed angrily at his retreating back and disappeared through the ventilation shaft.

Night came slowly, as Zak watched the sun paint the sky in orange and red from the corner of his eyes as he recovered from the afternoon migraine amidst his parents’ fussing. In low tones, they were arguing, back and forth, about the veracity of the snake queen’s claims, about whether or not they really might know the secret that would bring their son back to them. Intermittently, Zak slept, as the pain quietly began to ebb out of his bones, and by the time the sky was black, and his parents were in bed, and Komodo had curled up at the foot of his couch, snoring as loud as a lizard could, and Fiskerton had disappeared for a nightly cavort, Zak was feeling about as in his sorts as he
Out on the balcony, he found the naga’s messenger waiting for him.

"So you have decided to accept my bargain, little Saturday?"

The tone she was using was almost sweet, and Zak shuddered from a combination of the chilly night air and flashbacks of the first time she’d dragged him underwater and nearly drowned him. The water rushing in where air should be and the flickering of his powers to the dark promises she’d made...a pang shot through his skull.

"Not accepting. I just need more information."

"How shrewd of you..." her tone held some impatience, but she did not refuse.

He’d had some time, after sleeping off the worst of his migraine, to give the situation a careful examination. He’d been given time to prepare, and he’d come armed.

"Well then, child? What do you have to ask of me?"

She was being nice. She was being too nice, that was what he’d decided. Even if all that bull about Zak’s life being insignificant enough that they’d wager it for a spear was true, there was still no reason for them to act so accommodating - especially when they had such a trump card as a cure on their side. But what exactly did that mean?

He had to keep Rani Nagi talking, test how far she was willing to go.

"On a scale from one to death trap, how hard is it actually going to be to get that spear?"

"I admit we were not entirely truthful about ease of access," Rani Nagi admitted. "The spear lays at the bottom of a cave, and the cave is protected by a spell that turns away all who are not sure of their destination. Thus, we will have to provide you a guide. There may be remnants of magic protecting the inner chambers...but, of those, we are as blind as you. However, that damnable human Gilgamesh entered and returned to tell the tale; surely your lot will be capable of it, as well."

That was more honesty than he’d expected. They weren't trying to be evasive. Interesting.

He had to admit he was at least somewhat intrigued by the idea of following in Gilgamesh’s footsteps, but he shook off the thought. Negotiating with an evil snake queen now. Fanboying over a five-thousand year old myth later.

"This sounds like the perfect setup for a trap," Zak said.

Rani Nagi laughed. "If we wanted revenge on your family, we would have simply sent a viper to bite you in your sleep."

Scary a thought as it was, that was a fair point. But she'd let the conversation slip from her, making assurances rather than demands, letting Zak's concerns take the lead. The Rani Nagi Zak knew was neither this patient nor this kind. Upon meeting resistance, her preferred method was to overpower, not compromise - so her willingness to do the latter meant that she needed this deal to go through as much as Zak did. And that meant that her true goal in all of this had to be...

He didn't let his epiphany show on his face.
"Mom and dad'll never say yes. They don't trust you - I mean, neither do I. And I don't know if you've noticed, but mom has kind of a grudge."

"Your parents do not need to know."

"How'll I get away?"

"We can provide you the distraction you need."

"Where exactly is this cave?"

"In a valley in the Zagros mountains, to the northwest of Tigris and Euphrates."

Just a hop-skip away from Sumer.

Zak pretended he was torn, like something was still biting at him. He let the crickets fill up the silence as he counted his breaths, one, two. Rani Nagi had come this far, offering a solution to every issue he presented, and he knew desperate when he saw it - and he'd weaseled too many things from his parents to not know how to take advantage.

Five...six. Rani Nagi took the bait.

"Are the terms not agreeable to you, Saturday?"

He deserved a goddamn Oscar.

"I'm just thinking," Zak said, with a fake tone of indecisiveness, "if this 'guide' of yours is one of those big, buff snakes you usually have as bodyguards, this still might be a trap. Bad guys like getting revenge with their own two hands, and, let's face it, we pretty much ripped your god out of existence. That's plenty motive for revenge in my book."

Rani Nagi hissed at the reminder - Zak smiled innocently - before she collected herself. The snake reared up to its full height, Zak's eye level, and the serpent queen delivered her ultimatum.

"Fine. Then we shall send with you the weakest of our kind, one even you would be able to kill unarmed. But I will make no more compromises, Saturday boy! Remember that it is you who needs this deal to live."

"I'd say let's shake on it, but it looks like you don't have hands."

"One week, little Saturday. You will know us when we come."

With a pompous flourish, the snake turned its back and slid down the railing into the forests below. Zak stood in the night breeze alone, taking in the West Coast sea tang, coming down off the adrenaline. His head was starting to pound again, though not as hard as earlier in the day; he was about to turn back towards the house when a big furry blur dropped into sight and nearly scared him over the veranda.

"Brrzhwer!! Aazhuwah!!" Are you absolutely out of your mind!

"Fisk! Oh my god. How long were you listening to us?"

"Grrrrherewer..." He was wagging his finger, with a look of stern disappointment on his face.

"No, are you crazy? You can't snitch on me to mom and dad! Look, if you'll just listen for a second..."
Fisk turned his nose up. "Bubrrzhr."

Oh, no. He had to explain fast. "Look, Fisk, she was crazy desperate to make that deal. So I thought, 'what's so special about the spear that killed Kur that would make the Nagas want it that badly?'"

"Mrrr..."

"It's the same thing they've wanted this whole time. Find Kur, destroy the humans."

"Guzhr...krrshuhrrshrr..." he gestured his confusion. Kur had been destroyed, been literally zapped into non-existence. Where the heck was Zak going with this?

"Yeah, but think: how did Kur come back in the first place?"

Fiskerton was into it now, brow furrowed in concentration. When the lightbulb went off, he tapped his palm with his fist. "Krrstrrn."

"Right, the Kur stone." His eyes twinkled. "Because it contained some of Kur's essence, yeah? So what else do you think would have enough Kur juice to make a new Kur?"

Fisk's ears drooped as he came to Zak's conclusion. "Sharur."

"Right," Zak said, grinning triumphantly. "So that's why we're going to find it. And then we're going to destroy it."

The "distraction" had taken the form of a pair of serpents wreaking havoc in the human settlements on the Zagros mountains - they were really more like legless lizards, Zak thought to himself, but it seemed Rani Nagi's powers didn't care to make that distinction. It had been easy to feign a headache so he and Fisk would stay behind on the ship (and since his head always did kind of throb at least a little, technically it wasn't even really a lie); from there, it was simply a matter of grabbing a prepped spelunking backpack and slipping out. The condition Fisk had for going along was they contact the parents at the first hint of trouble.

Their guide had met them in the woods, startling them with her jet-black scales and bright red eyes, but she quickly destroyed herself any intimidation factor she may have had.

Mucalinda, or Muca, as she'd introduced herself, was quite possibly the least intimidating thing Zak and Fisk had ever seen.

She was maybe a head taller than Zak was, that was to say, a total runt of a naga, an excitable thing with big bright eyes and a constantly wagging tail that gave Zak the unshakeable impression of a puppy. She talked like a puppy, too, in a high-pitched, overly-cheerful squeak. Her clothes were modest in comparison to Rani Nagi's royal guard, mostly leather with sparse golden decorations, and she had a shock of raggedy red hair tied loosely into a ponytail.

Fisk relaxed around her when he realized he could probably snap her in half with his bare hands.

Her age ("I am only one-hundred and thirty-six years old, barely even a hatchling!") accounted for her small size; this was the farthest she'd ever been from home. But no worry, she insisted, she
knew the way even better than she knew the catacombs of the naga's nests, which she was always getting lost in. The location of Kur's ancient home was a secret dearly guarded by the historians in the naga tradition; Muca had been promoted to court historian just two years ago.

The brothers had learned all this within the first twenty minutes of their hike down the mountain, as Muca chittered endlessly about whatever crossed her mind. Somewhere in the middle she'd given an apology - this was the first time she'd had contact with non-nagas, she was nervous - but it was swallowed up by the rest of her monologue.

Zak struggled to imagine Rani Nagi putting up with Muca's rambling until he was informed that the queen actually spent most of her time trying to keep Muca far, far away. To be honest, Zak was surprised Rani Nagi hadn't just gotten fed up with Muca and eaten her. Muca had assured him that none were more surprised than Muca herself.

"Rani Nagi does not have a high opinion of us tablet scratchers, you see." The downward slope was easier for Muca to traverse than Zak, and she often paused to wait up for him.

"So why don't you just quit?" Zak asked.

"Oh, well," Muca said, fidgeting. "I might. After this assignment. Have I mentioned my excitement?"

"Only like, five times."

"I will miss the libraries, however. Very big, full of rock slabs with writing all over them, very rat-infested. So there is always something running around to eat."

"Oh," Zak said. "So you uh, eat rats?"

"They're very BIG rats."

"Right."

"You do not?"

"I'm more a...soda and potato chips kinda guy. Fisk might, though."

"Gawawr!" He was offended, even though the accusation was true.

"Oh, I see! Humans really are disgusting," Muca said, without change to her cheerful tone of voice. "I hope they all get wiped out."

"Uh," Zak said, raising an eyebrow at the sudden shift of topic. "By who?"

"Oh, um, hum. Anyone, I suppose. Though Kur would be the best choice. But, really, anyone. The important part is the death of the humans."

"But Kur’s gone," Zak said, innocently, like he had no suspicions whatsoever.

"Yes," Muca agreed.

Then they were silent for a while.

And then the brothers realized that the forest had grown silent, as well.

A bird called from far away, and then fell still, and the only sounds were the sounds of their
passage through the dampened leaves. The water had begun to collect in the valley, further muting
the heavy quiet. Fisk had been overcome with a sense of unease, checking over his shoulders every
few steps, tensed for a threat that wasn’t there. Something great and horrible dwelled here, in the
silence. He was sure.

Small pools and puddles had formed here and there, standing water still and unperturbed, glassy
reflections of the canopies above; the only ripples forming as the party walked by. Blue-green
moss covered the bark, witnessed their passing.

There were no birds. There weren’t even any bugs. The temperature dropped in the shade of the
leaves, which had overgrown so thick they choked out all the branches near the ground and left the
gnarled trees bare and naked and cold. Even they seemed lifeless, despite their greenery - even they
seemed to be waiting.

Something in Zak’s heart was shivering. This earth had not been touched for thousands and
thousands and thousands of years.

“ - for long.”

Muca had started talking again, but she sounded fuzzy and far away. “What?”

“We will not be walking for long, now,” Muca said, and Zak was sure that that was not what was
said before.

“Stop here,” she reached out an arm as they reached their destination, a soft reverence having crept
into her voice. It was dark here, the darkest it had been; quiet, the quietest it had been -

At their feet lay a massive pore in the earth, a hole sunk deep into earth and rock, sides slick with
snowmelt. It stretched into dizzying blackness, hundreds - thousands, maybe - of feet below. The
sides of the hole yawned so wide the canopy could not fully cover it; a single sunbeam dove like a
needle into the depths of the gaping maw, was swallowed up by the shadow within.

Zak peered over the edge and saw black.

Black after black after black.

Kur-Gal, Muca breathed the name behind him. The netherworld.
Chapter End Notes

Exposition, Zak has a really bad headache, and makes what seems to be a bad decision. Rani Nagi speaks through a snake and offers a deal to fix him.
To the netherworld they descended.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Gilgamesh, the warrior-king of ancient Sumer, lived circa 2850-2750 BCE. His heroic exploits were detailed in a series of tablets known collectively as The Epic of Gilgamesh. Unfortunately, almost none of them survived the ravages of war and time. The few that remain detailed, in broken fragments, his victory against a malevolent snake-god, and the mysterious stone left behind; all else is now dust and ash.

Roughly five thousand years ago, Gilgamesh journeyed to the netherworld. Roughly five thousand years ago, Gilgamesh alone journeyed out.

The cave, now crypt, had been untouched ever since.

“Gwerzhrrrv…” Fisk grumbled.

“Oh, shut up,” Zak grumbled back. “At least you have fur to keep you warm.”

The pattering of falling snowmelt dripping like rain echoed down the cave, obscuring the sound of their footprints. Zak wondered if he'd ever be dry, ever again.

"Speaking of which - hey, Muca, you’re cold-blooded, right? Aren’t you, uh…cold?”

“Oh, I am. Definitely,” Muca said. Zak raised an eyebrow when she said nothing more.

All in all, aside from the dark and the damp, this certainly was one of the nicer caves Zak had explored. The absence of animal life outside extended within - honestly, he’d expected there to be more skulls decorating the lair of an evil god.

The cavern walls were dug into limestone, glazed smooth by the constant flow of water down their sides. It pooled near the edges of the cavern in holes worn out by time, bordered by stalagmites that seemed new in comparison to their surroundings. Small blind fish drifted listlessly through the stagnant pools, or so Zak thought, until a closer look had him jump back, spooked, by the dozens of greasy black eyelets running down the worms’ segmented sides.

What his parents wouldn’t give to see this, he thought in horrified fascination, as Cambrian annelids swam languidly in their ancient pools, untouched by the extinctions that should have wiped them out. Above them was a mural painted in the fossilized bone of the Mesozoic sea, massive hints of ancient fish that died while in the middle of spawn, so perfectly preserved they looked like ghosts.

His dad could probably come up with a better explanation of how those two time periods ended up next to each other, all the way into the present day; his mom would probably say something about the magic so thick Zak could choke on it.

He winced. His parents. He prayed that Rani Nagi could keep them distracted for long enough.

And he hoped this adventure wouldn’t be something he’d make them regret.

The path sloped down in a gentle spiral, yawned high above them. The floor in the center of the cave was worn smooth with the commutes of the cavern’s late owner, now treacherous for the
griseous sheen the water left calcified on the ground, as the blackness of below drew them ever closer to the center of the earth.

A predatory lineage was carved into the cavern wall: dunkleosteus to ichthyopterygia, ichthyopterygia to mosasauroidea, and mosasauroidea to basilosaurus. Zak could trace their descent by the fossil record, a biblical record of prehistory. Humans were the blink of an eye.

He paused to imagine the creature that used to live here, a being defined more by what wasn’t known than what was. “Ancient before man’s time began,” Argost had boasted to him once, but even when he was Kur’s reincarnation, Zak had never felt ancient - humans just weren’t equipped to understand that scale of time. But standing here, in a cave decorated by the remains of creatures Kur had outlasted, Zak suddenly felt very small. He felt like he could almost understand what ancient meant.

In the end, they knew so little about the cryptid Kur. And everything was over before they had a chance to learn more; they’d shut the door, sealed the edges, and locked it. It was just the safest thing to do.

The light level rising in the cavern happened so slowly that they didn’t notice it at first; it was Fisk elbowing Zak to point out the bioluminescent lichen that grew on the wall that made him exclaim that he could see without his lamp on. Muca extinguished her torch. Though it took their eyes a little to adjust, yes, indeed, it was bright enough that they could see - dim, like twilight, or maybe the sunrise. The blue light was almost welcoming, if only because its ambience didn’t throw every shadow into sharp relief, make every crevice look like a hiding-hole something was waiting to jump out of.

No, it wasn’t just the pale blue illuminating the cave - there was something else, something deeper in, something further down. How long had they been walking? How deep had they penetrated into the crust? Was it unreasonable to expect the mantle of the earth?

The slope didn’t feel very steep, nor did they seem to have been down here for any more than an hour, and yet…

The path widened into a cavern, and then another, and another, each cave ringed with translucent stalagnites, each ceiling covered with the thousand teeth of ancient stalactites. The echoes of their footsteps were swallowed by the distant sound of running water. Annelids and primitive mollusks preened in the rippling pools.

The hackles on Fisk’s neck still raised up, despite himself. He didn’t like where they were going. He didn’t like what was up ahead. He nudged at Zak's arm, itching for him to break the silence. Zak obliged.

“Kur’s old home, huh? You know, I was expecting it to look more evil. This place almost looks...nice.”

“Mm?” Muca said, snapped out of her reverie. “Oh, yes! Well, I admit, I did, too. Certainly something with more death and fire and destruction. But this is also good. Well, everything about Kur is pretty good, I think.”

Zak rolled his eyes. “I dunno if ‘good’ is the right word to describe an evil genocidal snake god.”

“He wasn’t just genocidal and evil,” Muca protested. “Only mostly. Most of the time.”

“What was he the rest of the time?”
“According to the ancient tablets, he was very, very mean.”

Fisk grunted, deadpan.

“You never met him yourself?”

“Well…” Muca said, “I met you. But your predecessor, no. Our queen was his advisor…”

That annoyed him. “I’m not Kur anymore.”


“Really? Then what were you - “

Fisk managed to pull him out of the path of a giant stone halberd just in the nick of time. The boom of its impact against the ground echoed through the netherworld, rattled through Zak’s bones, threatened at a headache about to erupt.

“Whoa!” he yelped. “What the - “

The weapon lifted and their assailant came into view, a giant stone statue with an angry scowl carved on his face, facsimile of armor carved in his red, sandstone body.

Shit.

“Run, this way!” Muca called, visibly shaking. Fisk ran to meet her, stone sentinel hot on his heels, as they rushed deeper into the caves.

“What the heck is that thing?” Zak yelled over the soldier’s footsteps. “Rani Nagi didn’t mention giant rock statues coming to life and trying to kill us!”

“I’m sorry!” Muca yelled back, panicking. “I don’t know!”

“You don’t know??”

“I have a confession to make! I am not qualified to be a full court historian! It’s just that our old one died a horrible painful death and there’s no one left!”

The weapon came down again, missed Muca’s tail by only a breath.

“I kind of figured!” Zak yelled, when the ringing in his ears subsided.

“Even still a statue of a human soldier carved by human hands doesn’t seem like the sort of thing a snake without arms who tried to murder a lot of humans would use so I would assume it is probably not an original addition - “

“Breathe, Muca!”

Muca did. “It is probably something someone put in after Kur died! So we wouldn’t know about it! That would be my guess!”

“Great! Now how do we beat it!”

“Ummmm!!!!!!”
Fisk didn’t have time for this. The path in front of them took on a sudden, sharp downward slope. He grit his teeth and bared them in a snarl. It was already hard enough to run, with how slippery the ground was, without - oh.

Zak was thinking the same thing. “Fisk!”

“Garr!”

He grabbed Zak by the shirt, turned on his heel, and threw him to the other side of the cavern, where Zak dug in his heels and skidded to a stop, one hand already on the claw. He grabbed it and swung - the hand at the end, prongs open, went flying; it was caught deftly by the Lemurian, as Muca watched from the side, where she'd been thrown by Fisk for safety. Together, the brothers pulled the string taut, and together they rushed the stone sentinel with the claw between them.

The statue ran into it and its ankle caught and for an bated second it was poised mid-run, Zak and Fiskerton straining against its weight, before momentum and gravity took their dues and toppled the golem headfirst down the slope. Its stone head cracked and crumbled and went clamoring down into the blackness.

For a brief moment the two shared a breathless triumph, flashing smiles, until the string pulled tight again, claw having caught on the rough rock of the automaton, and Zak was pulled screaming down into the black depths of the cavern with it.

Fisk yelled and ran down after him, and slipped on the water. He slid uncontrollably down the slick path, scrabbling for purchase the entire way. His stomach turned and fluttered and felt sick and the bottom of the cave dropped away and gravity had stopped and then Fisk was falling - screaming - until he hit cold water that muffled and distorted the world, distorted the yellow-orange glow -

He broke the surface with a gasp, dragged himself, heavy with snowmelt, onto land.

Zak. There was Zak, standing, dripping, facing something in the center of the room.

“Zhrk!”

He didn’t respond.

“Zhrkk!!”

He didn’t even notice Fisk was there.

It was so bright. Too bright, compared to the rest of the cave. Odd shadows were thrown on the walls of the crypt by the stalagmites sticking up in even rows, smooth and covered with the lustrous sheen of crystal, reflective, refractive, an echo chamber of something bright like fire burning in the center of the room.

Ribs - those weren’t stalagmites, they were ribs. Massive ribs, jutting out like stone pillars, coated in the same crystal as the walls, frozen, untouched, for thousands of years, lined up like ivory fangs, curled inwards like angry claws -

Fisk was too wet, too heavy, too unwieldy - he ran for Zak, couldn’t find any purchase, fell hard on his chest.

He called again, after Zak’s stumbling frame, which was being pulled inexorably towards the mouth at the center of the cavern, great teeth of the snake god pried open in death throes, a pavilion to house Sharur still buried deep in Kur’s ancient skull.
Something terrible would happen if Zak were to touch it. Unforgivable. That primeval part of Fisk’s mind, the buried instincts, the howling warnings of something he knew but didn’t know - he had to stop Zak, before it was too late. Before it was too late.

The light bound by Sharur was blinding. It was beautiful. It was warm, like a hearth, like a heart, like...like something Zak couldn’t even remember, something rooted in his bones and teeth, something pulsing through his arteries. The pain, the headaches - he recognized them now: hunger; he was hungry, starving, dying for this.

What he’d been reaching for, what he hadn’t been able to find, that something essential that he’d lost without even knowing he’d lost it - here it was! He’d found it! He could almost laugh at his good fortune, at this windfall, at his ridiculous elation. It was right here this entire time.

He moved without thinking, reached out without thinking, ignored the dim clamor of someone screaming his name. He needed this.

He extended his hand into the orange flames. The cavern exploded in energy and light.

The fire burned him, singed him, seared his entire being. Like a fever, it chased away the dull aches, the stiffness in his joints, the heaviness he hadn’t known he’d been carrying. Those hollow spaces, empty places, it poured in like lava, hissing where it met him, heart, body, mind, and soul -

This scorching flame, it cleaned him. It comforted him. It welcomed him back into the world of the living. He felt like he was taking his first breath.

And then, as the light subsided, as the magic in the cavern crumbled, as the netherworld gave a shudder and began to collapse in on itself, Zak closed his eyes and slipped soundlessly into the blackness.
Chapter End Notes

Mentions of worms and mollusks, not too vividly described but what I did describe were, like, the grosses parts, and near the end Fisk has a moment where he's submerged underwater, so watch out for that. In the middle there's some stuff where a giant stone golem pretty much nearly kills them, but that's pretty on-par with the series' level of darkness.

Also if you're a super nerd like me, then all that hobgobberish at the beginning about Gilgamesh and Sumer and those made up dates - that's just the Gilgamesh in the TSS/my headcanon TSS universe, so don't pay it any mind. I took and will take kind of a whole hecking ton of Artistic Liberty throughout this work, so if factual inaccuracy's morally reprehensible to you, then this is probably not the work for you.
ex nihilo.

The First Memory is of the sea.

The warmth and way the currents sidled up to its body, how they washed over it like liquid silk, worried gently at the edges of the scales that keeled into the stream. How when the vents exhaled, the smoke tasted like rust and life, curled into its nose, spun languidly to the churning waves. How it dappled the red glow of the breathing planet below, how it scattered and dulled the scintillating blue of lightning above.

How alive the Earth was back then, when its skies were in a frenzied state, blackened clouds of ash and smoke choking out the youthful sun, when mountains were pitched and blown over in a single breath, when the moon had just begun a faltering waltz with her planet and the two celestial bodies fumbled clumsily toward each other in an effort to keep time.

The First Memory stretches on and on and on. The First Memory is a drowse, is a sleep. Is half awake, preconscious, a glassy reflection blinking at itself in a quavering tide pool. Is millennia – longer than millennia can describe. Eons and eons and eons passed by gently, quietly, lovingly, tenderly, as it lay uncoiled in the hadal of the Primordial Sea.

Below it, the heaving planet shuddered and cried, then steeled itself against the raging storms, found itself in sheer cliff faces and mountain slopes.

It watched the light filter through the smoke of the vents, envious of the way it danced.

It watched the darkness purr over the waters, sift down like dust to close the raw wounds of the planet’s growth, to seal them up with gentle kisses, one by one.

It watched as the light turned from electric blues to warm pinks and gold, as the planet’s first dawn peered lovingly over the quiet hills, the silent seas.

It watched the sun reveal herself shyly, as if a bride on wedding day.

And, pulling its great, shuddering body out of the warm womb of the Sea, it met her gaze, and held it…
Fiskerton broke gasping back into the light of the sun, Zak’s limp frame grasped tightly to his side. The earth below him groaned its dying breaths as the cavern collapsed, burying the body of the great snake forever beneath the bones of the ancient oceans. Gilgamesh, the first human to set foot in Kur’s primordial lair; Zak, the last.

In Zak’s swaying arms he held Sharur still, knuckles white with their grip like it was his lifeline pulling him back to shore.

Muca, the snake, tried to draw closer.

Fiskerton’s wrath turned her away.

He set the boy gently on the ground and then roared at her, all the frustration and fury and that nagging sickly feeling still at the pit of his stomach, as if trying to eviscerate her with his anger alone. He’d be attacking her with his fists and teeth if he hadn’t had the rise and fall of Zak’s chest against his own to assure him that the boy was still alive.

She drew back, miserably, coiled into herself. “Apologies,” she insisted, “apologies. It was – it was the only way.”

The only way to do what?

She flinched, claw-fingers grasping onto each other so tightly they left marks in her scales, a mockery of the pious in prayer. Before the lemurian’s wrath she was shaking, acutely aware that if she died here, her body would never be found. They held, a tense minute, before she found it in herself to give him a straight answer, to stare him in the eyes in what she was sure would be her final moments.

“How can he live without his soul?” She asked, with a trembling voice. “He returned from death incomplete. This was – this was the only place left that could help him.”

Fiskerton did not say a word.

“To the very end and even beyond,” she said, in her tremulous pride, “we serve our lord and master Kur.”

The lemurian regarded her with contempt before finally pointing his finger behind her, all snarls and disgust. Too grim to be gratitude, too reluctant to be acknowledgement.

Leave, he growled, and then he picked up Zak’s unconscious body and trudged up the mountain for home.

The moon was waxing. Tonight was the night.
Two hunched figures worked in the dark and quiet of a cavern carved into the ancient mountainside, heavy with the task of reviving a god.

He would have kept some of his essence alive in something of his. They brought it with them, crackling with energy, something dark and disturbing and heavy.

The large one gave a questioning look as he ran his hand over the flat rock that had been chosen by the alignment of the stars, a smooth granite taller than he was.

“Yes, this is it,” rasped the smaller one. “It will be here that he will be reborn.”

The large one nodded and cleared a clean space out of the snow before the rock face. Even with his efforts, it was not long before the snowdrift from the hole above left a thin dusting of white over the ground. The large one moved to clean it, but the small one held up a hand and bid he wait.

The small one was not bothered by the cold.

He sat in the center of the circle of light, waiting for the moon to take its place. He turned his face upward and closed his eyes, legs crossed as if meditating, final piece of the Kur stone held close to his breast in what may have been grief, may have been sorrow.

_Ah, old friend_, he sighed in his native tongue, _wouldn’t it have been better if you had wanted less of the world? If I have a conscience, I should throw this away, and let you be born anew, clean of all your sins, that I may prevent your fate._

He gripped the stone tighter to his chest.

_But it seems as though the both of us are lacking…_

The large one grew worried, unable to understand the smaller one’s soliloquy.

“It is all right,” the small one assured him. “I will make sure to carry it out.”

The large one was not appeased, but all the same he looked away.

_Doubtless you will chase that same destiny the same doom, old friend. I know you too well to know otherwise. So…forgive me._

The cavern began to grow bright with the reflected light of the moon, and the smaller one stood, orange fur turning white in the glow. The odd shadows refracted onto the stone face began to focus into a figure, too tall to be human –

_I want to see you again. I’ve missed you. So please return…and, though you will not listen -_

He threw the rock piece to the ground so hard that it shattered; its energy, released, searched the room voraciously until it found the granite stone, features being chiseled by the light of the moon. The tall one’s eyes filled with hope as the small one looked away.

_I beg you, let us meddle no more in the affairs of life and death and humanity._

But even as he uttered his wish, he knew it would not be granted, as it was swallowed up by the manic laughter that filled the cave and echoed down the mountainside, that whipped up a storm to obscure the moon, that frenzied the winds and ice and snow into a terrible, grotesque, and familiar dance.
The Xing-Xing cast his eyes away as a terrible storm began to brew.

The peaceful waters of the Hadean sea dissolved into the soft blue of the nightlight and the hum of the ship’s engine beneath him. Zak felt…stiff, tingly. Groggy, heavy.

But heavy was a welcome change from lightheaded, and the solidity of his limbs beneath him a welcome change from vertigo.

When he tried to push himself up to his shoulders, he found that he still grasped Sharur tightly in his right hand. Unflexing his fingers actually hurt, joints aching where they’d been locked in for… for who knew how long. He’d had to pull his arm up from the side of the bed, the side facing away from the door – he glanced over to see Fiskerton’s sleeping form keeping watch – so perhaps that positioning was his way of keeping the spear from being found by his parents.

Sharur, so proud in its place in Kur’s mouth – though Zak’s memories of that cavern were hazy at best – looked so much more its age up close. It must have been a cruel and noble weapon when Gilgamesh had wielded it, but now – now it seemed more fit to be a museum display than an instrument of the battlefield.

It was faded with time and age, metal cloudy and corroded, broken speartip dull and grey. Even the shock of fur that joined metal to shaft had faded from a proud, angry red to a matte brown. The wood itself was of good quality, still firm after these thousands of years, grain of the woodwork warm under Zak’s thumb, even through the milky crust of the crystal that coated the cavern.

He squinted where his finger caught, something carved into the whorls. He didn’t know enough to make sense of it, but he recognized it as the same script as was on the Kur stone – something carved lengthwise in Sumerian pictographs down the weapon’s side.

“Zhrrk?” Fiskerton’s voice, groggy behind him.

“Fisk?”

“Zhrrk!” In a moment, Fisk was over him, grabbing his face and turning it in the dim light, grip too tight like he was afraid to let go. “Irsshrryyo?”

Is that really you?

Zak’s eyebrows furrowed in confusion. “Uh, if by ‘you’ you mean ‘starving’…”

That was answer enough. Overjoyed, Fisk pulled Zak to his feet, Sharur forgotten on the bed, and nearly dragged him out of his room to the part of the ship that served as a kitchen. Somewhere along the line, Zak noted, he’d been changed into his pajamas, and while his hair still stank of the waters of the netherworld, it’d been dried into a tell-tale mess. Well, at least he wouldn’t be catching a cold from the ordeal.

Drew was rummaging around the drawers, which caused Fisk to freeze in nervousness, before he tried to act natural and lead Zak to the counter. Zak cocked an eyebrow at him. So his parents didn’t know about their trip, huh…

The clock above her read eleven-thirty PST, well past his curfew, but considering he had just spent
the last few hours asleep, he figured no one would press him about it. He took a seat at the counter while Fisk got them juice and his mom’s head peeked up to look at him.

Yowch. There were twigs in her hair and grass stains all over her suit, which she hadn’t yet bothered to change out of. Those lizards must have really given her a run for her money. She was happy to see him, and her mouth quirked upwards as he winced at her state. “Hey, kiddo. Your dad managed to call the shower before me, so…”

“Wow, he finally won.”

“Give me more credit than that, Zak. I let him win first dibs. After all, he was the one that got swallowed by the female, not me. I’m surprised the stench didn’t wake you up.” She fitfully opened another few drawers, before closing them when what she was looking for evidently wasn’t in them. “Have you seen the oven mitts? I can’t find them anywhere. I wanted to pop some cookies in the oven while I waited…”

“No, haven’t seen them,” Zak said, gratefully nodding to Fisk as he was handed a glass of OJ. “You could probably just use a pair of gloves we got on the thermal suits, though.”

She smiled at the suggestion. “If your dad was here, he’d complain about how ‘it cost twelve thousand dollars to make that suit, you can’t just use them to make cookies because the oven mitts pulled a Houdini!’ Good thing he’s washing digestive slime out of his armpits, huh?” She walked around the counter to grab them, pulling Zak into a forehead kiss on the way. She wrinkled her nose at the odor caught on his hair. “You smell like you could use a shower yourself, kiddo.”

“Oh, well, you know,” Zak shrugged, “sleep farts.”

She gave him a laugh before running off to the hallway to grab the gloves and returned just in time for the oven to beep that preheating was over, already pulling the white material over her hands. “This might not be super sanitary, but I figure whatever’s still left on these gloves’ll just burn off.” The blast of heat as she opened the front to stick the tray in felt nice on Zak’s skin. He closed his eyes.

“Are you up for leftovers?” Drew asked, already opening the fridge. Fisk whistled hungrily.

“Yeah. Actually, I’m so hungry I could eat Fisk.”

Fisk started “Wrh!?”

Zak snickered. The lemurian grumbled and slumped down next to Zak’s seat when he realized the boy was joking.

This was nice, Zak thought. He’d forgotten what it was like to have an appetite. God, he’d forgotten what it felt like to be able to breathe to the bottom of his lungs. Forgotten what…

His eyes snapped open.

Forgotten what it was like not to have a headache.

He shook his head, ignoring his mom’s asking what he wanted. The room didn’t spin out from underneath him, nor did the sick throb that usually sat on his occipital like a gremlin begin to pulse.

Had it taken this long for him to realize that his hearing was crystal clear since he woke up? Actually, how long had he lived with the white-noise buzz in his ears? How long had he lived with
the prickling black spots on the edges of his vision that he only noticed in their newfound absence? How long…

Fisk and Drew were both at his side, fearing another attack. He surprised them when he laughed, a genuine bubbling thing that he couldn’t keep back, like uncorking a bottle of soda.


Their grip on them tightened, Fisk’s face was concerned, but he didn’t have any reason to be, so it just looked ridiculous for the situation. Everything was a little ridiculous, a little hilarious, a little delirious right now. But this was also the most elated Zak had been for…for the better part of a year.

“My head doesn’t hurt anymore,” he said, giddily. “I feel great.”


His stomach growled, loudly, protesting that the miracle cure was getting in the way of more pressing matters. His mom stared at him, then dropped her hands and ran back to the open refrigerator door.

“We’ll, uh, see how long it lasts.” Her expression was twisted, like she wasn’t sure if she wanted to let herself believe that some stroke of luck had saved him. Was it allowed to be that easy? “Until then, we should probably get some food in you. Does yesterday’s gumbo sound good?”

Zak broke out into a wide smile, squeezed Fiskerton’s hand. “Yeah, mom. That sounds awesome.”

Fisk loosened his grip as Zak repositioned himself at the table, grinning ear to ear. Unfortunately, unlike his brother, the lemurian could take no joy in the sudden development. Not when he knew the why and how.

Nothing that the nagas endorsed could be any good in the long run. No cure they proffered came without a price. And somehow, Fisk feared that Zak’s initial guess to the role of Sharur was right – that the restoration of Zak had been the resurrection of Kur. How many times did the world have to prove that the two were one and the same?

“Incomplete,” the word the small one had used to describe his situation. Indeed, given that diagnosis, the symptoms made sense – the dying throes of a soul trying desperately to hold onto its body, wasting away like sand in the wind. And now that soul was made complete, fixed with a graft from the original source. Fisk knew better than to think it would be so simply open and shut.

But, as Zak nuzzled him and asked what was wrong with big worried eyes, as Zak dug into the stew like a man starved, as Zak laughed genuinely for the first time in – in months, Fisk decided it would be too cruel to divulge his fears. At least for now.

His appetite was gone with the proof that the naga’s cure had worked. But for Zak’s sake, he could eat, could pretend – at least for one night – that he didn’t suspect something was wrong.

Just for the night, he could pretend that his instincts – which hadn’t failed him since he’d awakened to them – were screaming about something terrible just on the horizon.

A storm, they whispered urgently in his ear. A storm was brewing, a calamity.
And without a doubt, Zak Saturday would again be right in the thick of it.

Chapter End Notes

I don't think this chapter is very bad at all!
“So the guy’s base is burning all around him, his girlfriend just left him for his helicopter chauffeur, and his gun just got eaten by a shark – you know, all-around, he’s just not having a good day. The boat’s sinking fast, we’re the only two left on it, I’m the one with a jetpack, and what does he decide to do?”

Zak and Fisk were enraptured. In the corner, Doc had his arms crossed, trying hard not to openly roll his eyes.

“He rushes me with a fork. A fancy, expensive, sterling-silver fork. He almost got me with it too, I was laughing so hard. How are you even supposed to react to that?” Doyle grinned when he got the reaction he was looking for, Zak and Fisk snorting inelegantly into their hands. “Anyways, I catch him by the wrist and pin it behind his back, then knock him out by ramming him into the wall. We drop him off at the nearest police station back on land. And that’s how Jurassic and I sank an illegal oil rig off the coast of Indonesia.”

He procured the fork from his pocket in a swift motion, twirling it in the light. He let Zak take it from his hands, with all the reverence of passing on a family heirloom. “It’s yours, Mini-Man.”

Zak’s voice was hushed with awe. “You mean it?”

“Yeah. But I’d wash it before using it, if you know what I mean.”

Too late – Fisk had already stuck the entire business end in his mouth.

Doc spoke up from his place in the corner, causing everyone to turn to him. “Thank you for the story, Doyle. It was very…” he paused to come up with the right word. “Factual.”

“I’ll write you up a bibliography, professor,” Doyle bit back, good-naturedly.

“Make sure it’s in APA.”

“Like I’d do you any less.”

Doyle leaned down to whisper in his nephew’s ear. “Do you know what a bibliography is?”

_________________________

Uncle Doyle, in Zak’s opinion, was always a welcome distraction, no matter who or what he was distracting from. In this case, he happened to land on Saturday property just in time to interrupt the tail end of a series of tests Dr. David Bara (the Australian nutjob extraordinaire) had been running on his brain. Not a moment too soon, Zak had thought, as he’d run out of the room at top speed with Fisk and Doc hot on his heels. The boy shuddered to think what that pointy, sparking metal probe Dr. Bara was holding up could possibly have been used for.

Doyle looked a little rough around the edges, though he’d clearly made an effort to clean up some before arriving at the house. His hair was a bit longer than last Zak had seen him, and the shaven
edge of the mohawk not as distinct as he usually kept it, little red fuzz blurring the edge, but all-inall he didn’t seem to have any obvious new scars or injuries, and Zon looked as chipper as the day Zak brought her home – he supposed he couldn’t ask for anything more. The mercenary was not lacking in his usual bravado, and upon being invited inside he’d immediately made his home all over the new furniture, cracking jokes that he didn’t feel so bad about trashing the house that one time, now that he wasn’t the only one who’d done it. Fisk spluttered, offended.

He seemed bushed, taking lulls in the conversation to rest his head back against the couch and close his eyes. However, the moment Doc was called into the communications room by a blip on the cryptid hotline, Doyle sprang up and leaned over to have a man-to-man with his nephew.

“I saw Abbey a couple days ago. …Well, ‘saw’ is a bit of an understatement.”

“What, really?” Oh, Abbey. “How did she look?”

“Uh, evil.”

“R-right. I mean…just, how did it go?”

“First off, about as good as a meeting with an ex CAN go. Second, I managed to scare her off, but I’m pretty sure she got whatever she was going after.” He seemed displeased – the fight didn’t go in his favor, looked like. “Since we’re in the same business, meeting up probably couldn’t be avoided. I dunno who she’s working for now, just that her money definitely isn’t clean. Still: she sure is making a lot of it.”

“What was she after?”

He sighed. “Just some artifact en route to the Louvre – I didn’t get any details. It’s probably decorating some crime lord’s bathroom wall now, though.”

“Wow. Things went that bad, huh?”

Doyle just let out a grunt in response. “At least things have been going better for you, Mini-Man.”

“Yeah.” Zak smiled. The dreams he was having were getting weird, but dreams were just dreams, right? His parents were only trying to get to the bottom of them for science’s sake; Zak tried not to worry about it. What was much more important to him was the fact that he could go on missions again, be useful again. He’d missed the crunch of jungle underfoot, the crisp air. That was what he wanted to focus on.

“Hey, you know what would get Abbey off your mind?” Zak asked, with a devious grin.

“Oh boy. What?”

“Doing some cryptid stuff with us! Dad’s on the hotline right now, which means that we might be flying off somewhere soon – “

“Are you sure?” Doyle leaned forward, cautiously interested. “It’s not exactly like my methods have meshed well with Mr. Professor’s before…”

“Awh, Uncle Doyle, I just wanna spend some family time with you, since we never see you around these days…” Zak put on his most sweet puppy-dog look he could, with Fisk joining in on the act. Doyle laughed.

“Well, if my favorite nephews are asking, I guess I could try to rein it in a bit so I’m not stealing
Doc’s thunder…too much.” He smiled. “Besides, we could do with a short paid vacation, huh, Jurassic?”

Zon cawed in response, nuzzling up against Zak and Fisk. Doc had entered the room just in time to catch the tail end of Doyle’s reply.

“What’s this about a paid vacation?”

Zak turned his pleading look to his father instead.

Doc shook his head. “No. Nuh-uh, no.”

“Aw, but daaaaad, Uncle Doyle hasn’t been around for so looooong - “

“I don’t mind if he comes along for family time, but I’m not paying him – “

“But I can come along,” Doyle said, grinning.

“Wh – I didn’t – “

“You can sleep in my room on the ship!”

“He’s not coming – “

“Sounds like a plan. When do we leave, Doc?”

Doc heaved a sigh, defeated. “Two hours. I’ll go…prep the ship. Zak, you’ll go tell your mom when she and Dr. Bara are done?”

“You got it, dad,” Zak said, already dragging Doyle off for a game of armband tag in the cryptid plant basement.

The call had been from northwestern Wales, in an old town that had historical roots in the Kingdom of Gwynedd. There had been reports of villagers getting attacked at night by giant black dogs with flaming eyes; when traditional animal control methods were unable to even catch a sighting of the creatures, the Saturdays got the call.

Since the events of the Kur stone, the family found themselves enjoying a measure more fame than before, which meant that some of the more obscure cases had begun to pop up from remote locales. This one was exciting for Doc, personally – he loved any chance he could get to go exploring old historic sites. Drew preferred ancient ruins, herself, since they tended to have more mysticism, more power, but the combined expertise of the two of them together covered practically all of civilized human history.

She had come out of the lab room a little distracted, but when she heard news of the report, she found she could put her focus on the cryptids for now, and discuss what Dr. Bara had said to her with Doc once Zak had gone to sleep. There wasn’t any immediate danger, the paraneurologist had concluded, so she had time to bring it up.

She was apprehensive when she heard Doyle would be coming along, and gave him a stern warning not to get too rough too fast (remembering the fiasco with the owlman), staring him down
with her best glare before pulling him into a crushing hug. He returned the gesture after an awkward hesitation, and Doyle ran off immediately to combat practice with his nephews, opting to skip out on the history lesson that Doc was clearly gearing up for.

The ship quieted down when Zak, Doyle, and the cryptids finally retired to bed in preparation for the trip. Even with the airship’s normal speed, a flight across half the globe still took time; Doc and Drew, in the cockpit, were also planning to grab a couple hours’ worth of sleep before they arrived in Wales. But that could come later; for now, the two were reclined in the cockpit, lights dimmed, blinking displays illuminating the room.

If there was a time, it would be now. Drew turned to her husband and got his attention; then, with the Pacific Ocean spreading out underneath them, she told him what the paraneurologist had concluded earlier that day.
Chapter End Notes

it's doyle!!
Man.

It was impressed with the words it found at its tongue. They were specific; they were useful.

Pursuit predator, meaning they hunted their prey. But they were by far more suited for endurance than speed, catching what their cousin canids and felids could not through sheer persistence, walking their prey to slow exhaustion before they sank their jagged rocks in to finish what they could not do with bare hands alone.

What a cruel, sadistic way to hunt. It couldn’t help but be impressed.


Fire.

Fire to cook, fire to roast. Fire to soften the food. Less time to chew meant more time to grow. Less time to chew meant more time to think.

They grew. They thought.

Opposable thumbs, the hallmark of their order. Erect posture, their genus. Increased cranial size, their species.

With these they choked out all their siblings wherever they encountered them, as they spread their numbers across the earth.

Monotypic taxon, a genus with only one species left.

(Not that that was any reason to judge.)

It liked the words that they invented. They were good at naming things.

Two hundred thousand passes of the earth around the sun. They invented many names for it.

Those names, it did not bother to remember. They were names of fear, whispers of a monster that encircled the earth and bit its own tail. They were names of reverence, words for something beyond their mortal comprehension. They were names of hatred, for a callous god whose frivolous tempers would rend their tribes limb from limb for no apparent provocation. They were names of warning.

If you encountered it and escaped unharmed, good fortune was upon you, for great and terrible evil had passed you by.

It cared little for the morality of men.

It was a great many years before they settled on a name for it. It caught on quickly for its brevity
and succinctness, all the fear of millennia encapsulated in a hushed, single syllable. They whispered it amongst themselves when they thought it could not hear (though its eyes and ears stretched everywhere, and there was little it could not know – how pathetic their attempts at secrecy were). They cried that name when it came and answered their challenges, proved to them time and time again how futile their short lives were against its infinity. They gurgled that name in dying gasps, wailed it in their grief.

But man was nothing if not persistent.

They sought out the mysteries of the earth and tamed them to their usage, keeping captive prey and captive grains. Less time to hunt meant more time to think. They thought, and they grew, and they built, and they built, and they built.

They built amazing things, things in such size and scope that they marred the surface of the earth, dug deep gashes in its side. They built wondrous things, things carved out of sandstone and lime that would not disappear for millennia after their architects died. They built horrific things, things that reworked the planet to their selfish ends, offerings to gods that didn’t exist.

They screamed its name when it came to tear them down.

It remembered the ground stained deep red with their blood, and still they screamed and screamed and screamed.

It liked the name they gave him. Very eloquent, it thought.

Kur.

Evil incarnate, the destroyer, the end. Kur, the blackness of the world, the serpent that held their deities at bay, that bit the throat of benevolence and mercy and envenomed its blood with fury and hate.

Kur, the scourge of the human race.

Well, it thought, it was the scourge of a great many things.

Humans always did have an issue with their ego. It relished in crushing its spine out as it begged for a mercy that didn’t exist.

They had such good names for what it would do to them. It’d always liked their words.

In their words, it would mar and maim and kill them.

It’d devour, quell, break, extinguish, quash, thrash, and annihilate them.

It’d shatter, lacerate, mutilate, execute, massacre, strangle, slaughter, destroy, erase, ravage, ruin, raze, wreck, waste, swallow, consume, abate, eradicate, obliterate, and end them.

It’d cremate them in its orange flames, it’d incinerate them to ashes in the wind.

And the sheer, unabashed glee with which he bore that thought had Zak Saturday awake in a cold, dread sweat by the callous light of the waxing moon.
It's not very graphic, but there are mentions of genocidal levels of human-slaughter, and there is a blood mention warning.

This is actually a re-upload; I realized it worked better if chapter 7 came first.
The blue-orange maps of the MRI results sat heavy and queasy in Drew’s gut, tacked to one of the laboratory walls like an indictment. Beside her, Dr. David Bara slowly gathered his supplies, waiting for Drew to break the silence that hung over the room like a fog.

“I could give you a better diagnosis if you gave me more to work with,” the paraneurologist said, quietly.

Zak’s hippocampus was so bright it was practically glowing, little fireworks sparking off in the thalamus and amygdala. Damning him in neon orange, splattering the page like an ink spill.

Drew bit her lip. “Not a word to the other scientists?”

“Ever heard of a ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’? I’m not about to run your boy through hell again just because of a hunch, Drew. An’ I don’t think it’d help anyone, least of all your boy there, if we act on just an assumption a’ what his future holds.”

“You’re a good man, David.” She uncrossed and crossed her arms again, struggling to find the words. “One week ago. He followed a lead down to Kur’s dead body and pulled a spear out of it. For lack of a more scientific way to put it, it gave him a life essence transfusion straight from the source.”

“I see,” Dr. Bara nodded. He walked to the wall with the results taped up, took one of them down to study it closer. Drew looked over his shoulder. “You still got that spear he pulled out?”

She shook her head. “He said it disappeared from where he left it in his room. We don’t know where it went.”

“Mm,” he said. “Well, I guess it’s fine. I think I got enough to give it a shot.”

Drew swallowed. “What’s your opinion, David?”

“Memory,” he said, tracing the limbic system with his thumb. “That’s what this says to me. Honest when you lot came to me about ‘weird dreams’ I thought you were trying to insult me. Dream interpretation’s a load a’ hooey, but this – this is...something.’

“Memory?”

“Something’s tickling the places responsible for it, see? And from what you’ve told me, it’s probably a few million-billion years of something. One reason people sleep is it gives their brains some time to sort their recollections through. I’d guess your son hasn’t been dreamin’ – he’s been remembering.”

He stopped to think for a moment, choosing his words carefully. Psychology, neurology – they could uncover answers about humanity like nearly nothing else, but those answers were often truths that weren’t easy to bear.

“We like to think, Drew,” he started at last, “we like to think there’s some essential essence that makes us ‘us.’ Like a soul, or spirit, or something like that.” He tried to smile reassuringly, but
there wasn’t ever an easy way to put it. “The truth is, though – there ain’t. What we do have is a brain. One-point-four kilos of axons, dendrites, and electricity. That’s what makes up you, that’s what makes up me. An’ if something ever happens to you that permanently alters it? Well…”

He trailed off, coughed, and began again. “Whatever you end up turning out as, that’s it – you – forever.”

She could already guess the implications, but couldn’t stop the question that slipped out. “So what does that mean for Zak?”

Dr. Bara paused to gather the right words. He wasn’t a delicate man, he knew this, but at the least he could try.

“Best case…” he started. “Best case is, it all settles down on its own, you get Zak some art classes and he can paint you a historically accurate Tyrannosaurus.”

“And the worst case?”

Dr. Bara let out a breath. “Worst case is, when all the sparks die down and everythin’ is said an’ done…whatever comes out on the other side of that tunnel won’t be someone you can call ‘Zak’ anymore.”

The moon hung glut and nearly full like an eyeball in the sky, blurred behind the thick clouds that drifted across its empty white. The town around them lay deserted, lights out. The black hollows in the windows of the stone houses hid eyes, Zak thought. They were being watched, weren’t they? He couldn’t shake the feeling, somehow, a feeling that prickled the back of his neck.

Fisk cast him a wary gaze, eyes bright red and reflective in the dark.

Zak had tried to describe the dream to his brother. He had. But how could he find the words? How could he even begin to articulate a nightmare where he was no longer himself, but instead, a force of primeval darkness, everything he’d spent his life fighting against? How could he say that, for a brief moment after awakening, he’d wished he’d never taken the Naga’s bargain at all, and would rather have been left for dead?

Buyer’s remorse.

Something dark was gnawing on his soul, a dread. What if? What if he’d been right, that the Nagas were planning to resurrect their master? What if? What if he’d fallen for the trap they’d set, hook, line, and sinker? What if?

And if so…then what? Months spent with the Secret Scientists on their tail. Tsul’Kalu chasing after him, the vivid visions of burning cities, wails of grief. Argost, the Nagas, and -

Even though everyone had tried to keep the numbers a secret from him, he knew that the death toll existed, for that year of strife where his life went to ruin.

But he wasn’t Kur. He couldn’t be. After everything he’d been through to get rid of that name, that syllable that hung on his destiny like a parasite. He wanted to be rid of it. He wanted “Kur” – everything about “Kur” – to disappear. After everything that happened, hadn’t he finally earned the
right to just be Zak Saturday, and nothing – no one – else?

So he refused it. Whatever this was supposed to be, he didn’t want it. He wouldn’t, wouldn’t, wouldn’t. No matter what it took, no matter what the cost, there was no way he could accept that he’d had the carpet whisked out from under his feet again. Because the cost of that admission was too great, because he couldn’t lose everything and everyone for the second time.

So in the end, he’d had nothing to say.

His parents had been strange since this morning, too. Like they were hiding some secret between themselves, afraid to approach him. The silence felt the same as his own, but what secret could they be keeping mum about that would call for all those short, awkward pauses, the words that died before they left his parents’ throats?

Even if it ate at him, it wasn’t like Zak was in any position to confront them. Not when he was hiding his own mysteries. If he tore off their cover, he felt like he’d be bringing his own shadows to light.

He was only trailing behind the group by a couple feet, but he’d never felt so far away.

Doyle, on the other hand, hiding nothing at all, continued brashly and obliviously on as the vanguard, snarking on his surroundings incessantly, a welcome distraction from the dark cloud plaguing the rest of the family.

“This place looks like it was evacuated,” Doyle said, wrinkling his nose. It really did – child’s toys were left in the street where they fell, mail sat unopened in mailboxes, fluttering in the breeze.

“The buildings here give me the creeps.”

“They’re just old,” Doc replied, taking the lead with the light of his glove.

“Old people give me the creeps, too,” Doyle replied. Zak managed a weak smile at that.

Doc rolled his eyes and pretended not to notice the retort, choosing instead to focus on the display of the holo-map he’d pulled up over his wrist.

“The mayor said that you can hear howling coming from the marshes right outside the castle,” Drew was peering over his shoulder, scrolling the map with her finger. “Local legends have always said they were haunted.”

“The closest match to the mayor’s description we can find in the cryptopedia is the gwyllgi. Location matches, it’s canid, measures to about the size of a horse, has glowing eyes.” Doc said. “The problem is that the behavior doesn’t match up. Gwyllgi are solitary. The legends call them ‘omens of death,’ but no one’s ever reported an attack before.”

“More of the ‘black cat crossing your path’ omen of death than the actual instigator,” Drew finished.

“Maybe something’s wigging them out?” Zak piped up from the back. “Like, new land development? We’ve seen that before.”

“Could be,” said his dad, “though if that’s what’s happening, it’s illegal. This whole area’s a historical site. The laws for building new property are so strict that most companies won’t even bother, and the ones that do tend to care about where and how they’re building.”

“Like that’s ever stopped anyone,” Doyle remarked.
There wasn’t much they could say to that. As bitter as it was to admit it, he had a point.

The buildings became plainer as they travelled out of the tourist area into residential districts. Eventually, those gave way to utility buildings, and, finally, there was nothing but marshland before them, trees rattling as their branches clanged off each other in the breeze, the only sound to be heard for miles and miles.

A shiver ran down Zak’s spine as they crossed the threshold out of town.

Something felt very off about the whole thing. It couldn’t just be the dark and the damp – he had no problems adventuring through the dark, in biospheres more dangerous than this. Just that – no matter how he tried to figure out the logic behind the attacks – somehow, it felt like he was missing some piece of the puzzle. He looked up to his brother, and the furrowed look of confusion evident on his face told Zak that Fisk thought so, too.

Regardless, the two of them said nothing, and so into the marshes they marched, path lit by the light of the moon. The moonlight blurred the scenery, dampened it, drove dark shadows out dancing where they shouldn’t be, fogged the sound of their feet on the gravel path that was slowly giving way to dirt.

Zak couldn’t shake the feeling of eyes on them, though when he looked back there was nothing to see.

*Whatever it is, it’s close.*

He ignored the words that flitted into his head like someone had whispered them in his ear. He forgot them with a shake of his head, crowded them out.

The adults had begun to discuss the possibilities in quiet voices, a back-and-forth of the outlandish and mundane. How to deal with, how to fight if fighting became necessary. Keep Zak out of harm’s way – no, he can handle himself – Zak wasn’t paying too much mind.

Fisk’s hackles had raised up above his neck, and he’d begun swinging his eyes warily around the marsh, darting between the shadows of the scrub and trees and the dark pools between folds of grassy hill. A piercing luminescent red gaze, eyes almost glowing with the reflection from the lanterns the Saturdays held up. Out of all of them, he had the best night vision, even when Doc had his equipment to help him out. His hearing was more sensitive, too, and his instincts, ever since he’d honed them during the Kur madness, had been a reliable skill ever since – bordering on precognitive. The family had begun to count on him to be the first to raise an alarm, and if he hadn’t given the signal yet, then that meant that they must be safe for the time being. Still...

Zak squeezed his arm. They shared a look, both sure.

Something was lurking out there in the marsh.

”Zak’s already almost sixteen. You know, by that age, I was already gatecrashing triad bunkers in Hong Kong. You can’t keep treating him like a kid.”

”He IS a kid,” Drew said. “A fifteen-year-old should only be worrying about SATs and college applications, not putting his life on the line.”

”Do I get a say in this?” Zak asked, but the adults didn’t seem to hear him.

”Weren’t you raised in a Tibetan monastery?”
"I still took my SATs."

"How…" Doyle shook his head. "The point is, he’s not always going to have you guys around to coddle him. You’re going to have to let him grow up at some point."

"We’re his parents," Doc said. "We appreciate your concern for him, but we fully intend to be with him every step of the way. That’s what family is about."

There was a finality in his voice that made it clear that the argument was over. Doyle bit his cheek and sulked.

Zak stayed quiet.

"Doyle," Drew said, in a softer tone, "You know that we’re your family, too."

But before Doyle could work up some kind of response to that, Fisk yelped, and the family turned to look behind them.

The first howl lilted up over the trees, a lonely and baleful sound that chilled them to the bone. Instinctively, the group drew tight, Fiskerton stepping out in front of Zak, Doc and Drew drawing their glove and sword, Doyle’s stance widening, Zon and Komodo hissing into the black night.

There was another howl to answer the first. Then another, and another. Five. Six.

Seven, eight. Eight pairs of green glowing dots peeking out over the crests of the hills. Surrounding them. Closing in. Flaming eyes, the cryptopedia had said. An omen of death.

A thick cloud drifted over the moon, snuffing out what little light was illuminating the countryside. And in that moment, their technology sparked, fizzled, and died, leaving them stranded in the dark.

In that moment, the gwyllgi were upon them.

Time moved in double and half, visibility limited to the sickly green glow, flashes of white teeth, snarls and growls, yelling and screeching. Claws and slobber, metal and fire. The gwyllgi were fearless, ruthless, a well-coordinated pack, fangs scrabbling with bright blue sparks against the flat of Drew’s blade, the curve of Doc’s gauntlet. Sickly and gaunt, voracious and wild, and enormous. Each one, alone, would be more than a match for Fiskerton’s strength; the only advantage the family had was that they, too, were a well-coordinated team.

It was happening so fast Zak barely even had time to think. Still, something was throbbing in his head - there was something wrong, something wrong…

When Zak closed his eyes he could see the gwyllgi like they were supposed to be. Proud and regal, lonely and brave. This – these starving, hungry wraiths, this mindless wrath, this misplaced, reasonless fury – this was not –

His skull felt like it was pulsing. Familiar but painful. He didn’t want…

If he could just reach out and touch one then maybe -

Fisk screeched and pulled him back out of the snapping, snarling maw just in time, hot breath and saliva against his fingertips. Something in him bubbled uneasily, tried to break through the shell of his self-control. Magma, he thought, lava. If he puked it’d be bright orange-yellow. Would melt a hole through the ground straight to the core of the earth.
Orange. Yellow. Red. What’s wrong with this picture?

Zak cried out in a strangled tone and he was almost afraid he’d tear himself open with the force of it. “Their eyes! Mom, their – “

The snap of jaws mere inches from his face, the hot breath and slobber on his skin, and Fisk’s furious, worried shriek drowned him out.

”Gwyllgi aren’t supposed to be able to short electricity,” Doc yelled, frustrated, tossing one hound into another.

”Who would have thought,” Doyle remarked with a snide tone as he sidestepped a pounce with Zon’s help, “that the unexplained magical dog-beasts from hell would be using weird, mystical powers.”

”Do you have to do that to everything I say?”

Doyle shrugged. “Yeah, probably.”

”Doc’s right, though,” Drew said, though, lost in thought, it came out too quiet for anyone to hear. “And this behavior is totally atypical…”

A gwyllgi came at her and she parried it, its teeth sending up big white-blue sparks as they dragged down the flat of her blade. For all the banter, the family was losing this fight – in the dark and without electronics, the gwyllgi had the clear advantage. The Saturday family circle grew tighter and tighter, and they were pushed into lower and lower ground, until Doc’s boot sinking almost to his knee in wet mud startled him and one of the hellhounds would have torn his throat out if Komodo hadn’t come out of nowhere to clamp his jaws around its front ankle and topple it with its own momentum.

”We can’t keep up like this,” Doc said. “The terrain is to disadvantageous. We have to fall back.”

”But the town is in the other direction,” Drew said. “One way or another we’re going to have to fight our way through.”

”I heard ‘flash grenades,’” Doyle volunteered. “You guys said ‘Doyle, use your flash grenades and let’s all make a run for it,’ right?”

”That,” Doc grunted, grudgingly, “would be a good idea. Thanks.”

”Though, just so we’re clear – you’re paying for them.”

”What? I never - “

Before he could finish his thought, four loud bangs and an intensely bright light flashed for a brief, dazzling moment. The gwyllgi, with night-vision eyes, let out whimpers and shrieks, some falling dazed to the ground, and the Saturdays took the reprieve to beat it out as fast as they could towards the few small lights of the town just over the hill.

Somehow, the flashbangs seemed to have driven the gwyllgi off, because even after its effects should have worn off the Saturdays weren’t being pursued any further. They slowed down just outside town, sweaty and grimy and out of breath, their systems rebooting as they drew near civilization.

It was still too dark to see anything except by the light of the few systems they were getting
"It just doesn’t make sense,” Drew mumbled out loud. “They’re territorial. Solitary. That attack was way too coordinated! And using the terrain to their advantage? These aren’t creatures that consider that sort of thing!”

"Cryptopedia’s back online,” Doc said. “Maybe we missed something.”

The holographic display came up, bathing them all in a faint greenish light.

"That’s definitely what we saw out there,” Doyle confirmed.

But Drew wasn’t convinced. There was something wrong, if only she could put her finger on it – What had Zak been trying to say? While they were fighting, words drowned out by the snarls of the gwyllgi like they were trying to shut him up on purpose. Their eyes. “Their eyes…”

Drew’s widened. She stepped back and frantically searched the party, head swiveling left and right because no, no, no, it couldn’t be true, he couldn’t –

"Drew?” Doc asked.

"Their eyes are supposed to be red,” Drew said, panicking. “Not green. Red. Doc…”

"Oh,” Doc said. “Oh no.”

"Where’s Zak?” Drew yelled. The hills echoed her question back to her, a fading repeat like the darkness itself was mocking her.

"Where’s Zak?” It went, getting further and further away. “Where’s Zak? Where’s Zak?”
Chapter End Notes

Big dogs attack. Brain talk. IDK. I'm back also, hi!
The view from the top of the Empire State building paired well with glass of Zinfandel and a platter of aged gouda infused with sun-dried jalapeños (artisan and imported from the city in South Holland itself). The Louvre museum, and the rest of France sprawling underneath them, went excellent with the delicate fragrances of Merlot and lamb grilled extra rare. His own mansion, Weird World, was best enjoyed with a generous cup of well-aged Cabernet Sauvignon a hearty slab of prime beef cooked chateaubriand.

And Castle Gwylnos?

Well, that, Argost decided, paired very well with a flute of Pinot Grigio, and a silver plate covered in oysters and roe.

A light meal, perhaps, but this was merely the hors d’oeuvres to a main course that would be many times more delectable.

Cage-free, organic, raised with care, aged for fifteen years.

Argost didn’t need to turn around to see them – the three gwyllgwi standing guard around the pair gave Argost the best view in the castle.

Zak’s face was shoved against the stonework of the ramparts, arms bound behind his back at a painful angle, with Munya’s clawed foot keeping him pinned to the ground. His furred “brother” – Argost scoffed at the sentiment – was bound by his side, spider webs tying his arms to his body and ankles to each other, one thick wad acting as a gag to keep him from making any noise louder than a grunt.

The last thing Argost wanted was for his barbaric monkey screams to interrupt his moment.

“Greetings and bienvenue, dear Saturday. My goodness, but it’s been an age and a half, hasn’t it?”

“Argost,” Zak growled, and the way he set it sent tingles up Argost’s spine. Oh, if he had to give the Saturday boy anything, it would be that he knew exactly how to play into a dramatic moment. His last words, whatever they might be tonight, would likely be just as satisfying as his current performance. …Well, begging for his own life wouldn’t be so bad, either.

“I should have known it was you the moment I heard there was a castle involved.”

“Oh, but you didn’t. Why was that, I wonder?”

There was no reply from the boy, just the sound of his teeth grinding together. It wasn’t hard to extrapolate what he wanted to say – that Argost had been disseminated from reality, that it was impossible that Argost could be sitting here, alive and well, when Zak had seen with his own eyes the end of Argost’s existence.

“My dear boy,” Argost said, every word dripping with a gleeful malice. “If you thought that simply being rent from the fabric of space-time itself was enough to put me down…”

He drew up to his full height, and, ah, there was that look of fear on Zak’s face he had been hoping
to inspire. This new body was young and supple, stretched easily to the nine feet that a yeti ought to be, no longer stooped by decades of hunching over to speak with humans at their pitiable eye level.

He turned to grin at Zak, fangs and snarl free of his usual mask, silhouetted by the light of the waxing moon.

“Then I am wounded by your lack of faith.”

Alright, so, pros and cons of the situation. Pros: they weren’t dead yet. They’d faced Argost before; they’d survived Argost before. And Fisk was here with him.

Now for the cons.
One, Argost was massive. Two, he had Munya with him, and three gwyllgi, and some orange humanoid cryptid Zak vaguely remembered seeing in the cryptopedia, making this, effectively, a six-on-two fight. Three, Argost had his powers. Four, Zak didn’t.

And five, one of those damn headaches was back, pounding in his skull, stabbing behind his eyes with every word from Argost’s mouth.

…On a scale from one to screwed, Zak estimated their position as roughly around the “very, very” mark.

His only hope –

“You’re thinking you’ll stall for time until your precious little family gets here, aren’t you?”

Zak was yanked into the air by Argost’s clawed hand on his collar, brought close to those sharp white teeth. The sudden movement sent a wave of nausea through him, and it took all his strength not to vomit right onto Argost’s face. Even if it would have been satisfying,

“I think you fail to understand the full gravity of the situation, boy. This isn’t a sitcom showdown, where the villain gets driven away and you get to live to fight another day. This is already my complete victory.”

“What…what do you mean?” Damnit, if only it didn’t hurt to think –

“Come now, little Saturday, there’s a limit on how disappointing one mere mortal can be.” His leery grin turned manic, his grip on Zak’s shirt tightening. Fiskerton made a muffled scream, trying desperately to move his bound body over to where Zak was, but Munya slammed him into the ground before he could do anything.

Argost leaned closer, hot breath wild and animalistic against Zak’s throat. “What is there stopping me from simply stamping out the human race?”

He waited until the weight of that question sank in, until the fiery defiance in Zak’s eyes changed to an honest fear. A terrible expression of anguish and despair; how dearly Argost had hoped to see it.

He gently set Zak back down on his feet, dusted off his shoulder with the back of his hand. He ripped through Munya’s spiderwebs binding Zak’s wrists together with a swipe of his claws, careful not to injure the flesh below. Even though he was freed, Zak found himself standing dumbly in place.

What was stopping Argost from making good on every evil intention he’d ever had since the moment the Kur stone was discovered?

Argost had merely folded his hands behind his back, smugly watching Zak’s expression as his brain worked its way through every implication.

Argost still had his powers. He still had all his memories, and he obviously knew that Zak hadn’t returned with his. How long had Argost been revived for? In all that time, how far along could his planning have gone?

If…if at any time, he could have amassed his cryptid army, and set it loose upon the world, but instead, he was here, he’d come here specifically to bring Zak to the castle, to gloat, to let him live…

The yeti’s eyes glinted cold and triumphant and pitiless in the light of the moon. There would be no
mercy to be found there, no salvation to be had.

Argost was going to kill him.

This – all of this – was nothing more than a sideshow before the main event. Oh, Argost was brilliant, he was cunning and clever and cutthroat, but he was also petty and vengeful in equal measure.

When the war on humanity started again, there was no guarantee Argost would be there in person to squeeze the life out of the Saturdays that had vexed him for so long. There would simply be too much going on at any given time, too many forces to direct and capitols to crush; it was just unreasonable to think he’d be able to exact remuneration for his personal grudge by his own hands once everything had been set in motion. But Argost wasn’t a fool; he’d never do something so stupid as give away his presence if there was any chance he could lose as a result.

There just wasn’t any way he could lose.

Even if Zak managed to escape with his family somehow, Argost would simply snap his fingers and unleash hell on earth once more, and no one would have enough time to prepare for it. And even if they somehow incapacitated Argost – even if they killed him first – if being disintegrated down to the subatomic level wasn’t enough to get rid of him, then nothing they did would be.

He’d…won.

And the person who’d gotten rid of the only thing that could have stood in Argost’s way was none other than Zak himself, two years ago, when he’d gone down into that room alone, knowing full well what Argost’s intent had been.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

The grin Argost gave him when he looked up was all the confirmation that he needed.

When Argost finally spoke, breaking the silence between them, it was in a voice full of kindness, a mockery of sympathy. It was a gloat, plain and simple, savoring a victory hard-earned.

“It’s been a good life, hasn’t it? Parents who cared for you, friends who would stare down an apocalypse for your sake?”

“Shut up,” Zak hissed. Both to Argost and to the ringing in his ears, the buzzing in his skull.

“If you look over the parapets right now, you can see your family coming up the hill. How relieved they’ll be to see their precious son alive and well, hm?”

He should be terrified right now, but instead, something inside him was furious. It took every ounce of concentration not to simply leap onto Argost’s body right now, not to choke the light out of Argost’s eyes, for ever daring to –

Daring to –

“Munya, if you would…”

A thick, blunt impact hit his back, and before Zak could react he was pulled back into Munya’s crushing grip by a spider thread, held up off the ground by his waist. No matter how hard he struggled, he couldn’t break free; Munya’s skin, armored and hard, deflected all his weak human blows.
Fisk, too, was slung over Munya’s other shoulder, wriggling and writhing but ultimately unable to break free, either. With Argost taking the lead, Munya and the other orange cryptid followed him into one of the turrets on the side of the ramparts and down the stairs, plunging them into inky black.

“Where are we going?” Zak asked, hands curled up into tight fists, though he already knew the answer.

“Your family is practically at our door. And we, the actors of this tragédie, must be in our places when the curtains rise.”

Zak understood once his feet touched the ground, what Argost had meant by “tragedy.”

“No,” he said, trying to keep himself together. “No, you can’t!”

Fisk had been placed on the other side of the castle’s courtyard, opposite Zak’s position. His eyes were wide, panicked, darting nervously from wall to wall, from Argost and Munya to the gwylgli – a full pack – skulking around the edges of the garden, standing guard with fangs bared. He hadn’t figured it out, yet, what this setup was all about, but Zak had.

Argost’s grin only widened. Yes, this was the way things were always meant to be; those foolish humans left only to scream and cry and curse him, powerless against him. This was what he had always wanted, what he had dedicated his life to – finally, he was the apex, the top of the food chain, the end of the line.

Too bad this moment couldn’t last forever.

“You will find there is very little I cannot do anymore, boy.”

He came to stand over where Fiskerton lay, causing the Lemurian to flinch back from him. How funny. Argost couldn’t help the sneer that came to his face.

“The last of the Lemurians. I’ll be honest with you, dear beast, I was worried you would come to stand in my way at the last moment with some ridiculous deus ex machina. But in the end, you’re nothing more than an animal, aren’t you? Sweet thing.”

He reached into the darkness of his cape and pulled from its depths the instrument of his apotheosis.

The Fang glistened with a cruel luster as Argost twirled it in his hands. Fisk nearly yelled into his gag at the sight of it, desperately trying to inch away. He knew what it would do to him – the loss of control, the frenzy, the pain – no, he wouldn’t, he wouldn’t, he had to keep Zak safe –

But Argost was having none of that.

His powers jumped to life with a crackle, sparking green all up his eyes and down the shaft of the Fang right into Fiskerton’s brain. And even behind the gag Fisk screamed, fighting against the intrusion with every ounce of willpower he had.

“Stop!” Zak screamed, grabbing the claw at his waist and rushing forward. Moved by adrenaline
and desperation more than anything, he closed the distance faster than he ever could have otherwise, but before he could reach the two and disrupt them, Munya caught him with another spiderweb and yanked him backwards into the dirt, knocking all the breath out of him.

Glaring behind him the moment he recovered some of his breath, he severed the silk with a sweep of his claw. But then Munya’s body was on him, muscle and armor, wrenching his arm behind him, pinning him facedown into the grass that left little cuts on his cheeks, forcing him to watch Fiskerton writhe.

Except Fiskerton’s struggles had taken on a different form, now, no longer the agony of resistance, but a wild and crazed thrashing that slowly worked Munya’s spider threads off. With each jerk of his limbs, the threads came looser and looser, until, finally, they had sloughed off to the point where Fisk could stand, panting and growling, to face the yeti.

And then he turned, and the green sparking off his eyes told Zak he was lost.

Again, that alien fury was burning in his chest, searing through his heart and bone. He felt like he could spit fire, like if he bared his fangs and roared it’d come boiling up his throat.

“Get out of his head,” Zak growled, though what he really meant was how insolent, how dare he –

But Argost only laughed, putting on a gleeful falsetto. “Make me,” he taunted, with a small flourish of the Fang, and Zak saw images of that body breaking beneath him.

He was pulled to his feet faster than his mind could catch up with it and shoved roughly forward into the ring. Fiskerton, eyes crackling with energy, fists curling and uncurling, foam frothing at the edges of his mouth – no, Zak refused to let it end here. Fisk was in there, somewhere, and he didn’t care how much it might amuse the yeti for him to spout those clichéd lines. That was his brother, someone he’d gladly lay down his life for.

Argost knew, and was counting on that, when he sent Fiskerton lunging forward.

Fisk hit like a truck, all muscle and bone, and even though Zak had blocked the blow with the shaft of the claw it still sent him skidding backwards on the dirt. There was hardly any time to react before the next blow came, Fiskerton pouncing on the empty air where Zak used to be.

Zak knew Fiskerton’s movements, and he was running on the adrenaline high of his life, but he knew this wasn’t a battle he could win. Fiskerton out-powered him, out-sped him, and had far more endurance than Zak did, even without the Monday-Kur’s frenzy. His family was coming soon. Zak just had to last until then. Stay alive, wake Fiskerton up, escape. No matter how futile that might be, no matter how impossible, he wouldn’t let himself lose Fisk again, and he couldn’t afford to lose.

Fiskerton roared and lunged at him again, and Zak was only able to escape by a hair’s breadth, twisting to the side, feeling the rush of wind Fisk left in his wake.

“Fisk,” Zak yelled, “fight it off! You know how to do it, I know you do! You don’t want this!”

“The Lemurian can’t hear you right now, I’m afraid,” Argost laughed. “Can you, pet?”

Fiskerton roared in response and lunged again, this time catching Zak by the shaft of the claw and pinning him to the ground. Just inches above Zak’s face, jaws snapping open and shut just over his eyes.

I'm sorry, Zak thought.
He placed a foot on Fisk’s stomach and kicked upwards as hard as he could, flipping Fisk off his body and maneuvering himself back to his feet. If he couldn’t reach Fiskerton through words, then all he had to do was knock him out until his family got there and they could all escape together. That couldn’t be so hard, right?

Except there wasn’t an opportunity to even try, not when Fiskerton’s fists were coming at him from all sides, when the only role he could play at all was a defensive one. There was no opportunity for counterattack, no blind spot to attack him from. Zak was quickly growing tired, his reflexes dulling, his limbs starting to shake.

No human could have been expected to keep up with this assault; it was already impressive Zak had lasted as long as he did.

Fisk finally managed to hook him in the stomach, under the ribs, with a blow from his fist, and Zak crumpled around it, falling to the ground. Big hands grabbed him around the shoulders and threw him into the ground; Zak went sprawling on his back, pain screaming from every inch of his body. Wrists bruised where Munya had grabbed them, arms aching from Fisk’s throw, his spine aching, his legs sore, and that pounding in his head worse than it’d ever been.

Exhausted, he could do nothing but lie on the ground and breathe. Through the black spots in his vision he could see Fiskerton retreating slightly, and through the buzzing in his ears he could vaguely hear Argost giving the order – wait until the signal, then give Zak the death blow, for everyone to see.

Tears welled up in the corners of Zak’s eyes, his fists clenching uselessly in the dirt. Was this how it was all going to end? No, it couldn’t be. He couldn’t accept it. But whether he accepted it or not, his vision was fading and going black.

And still that fire burned. So hot that it could cremate him, so hot that it could melt him down and leave no trace, clothes, flesh, bones and all.

A scraping sound made Argost turn, and there he saw Zak, pulling his battered body to its feet.

A glutton for punishment, wasn’t he? Still, Argost didn’t dislike that aspect of him. Toys were no fun if they broke too easily, after all; as well as Zak had done to last for as long as he did, it was still disappointing that it’d been over so quickly.

A cloud had drifted over the moon, plunging them all into the darkness, but all present except the human were equipped with eyes that could see in low light.

Zak swayed on his feet, only once, before his stance became steady, the Claw still grasped in one of his hands. With the other, he reached up to wipe the dirt out of his eyes.

Yes, he wouldn’t be a Saturday if he were not so frustratingly persistent. The Fang jumped back to life and Fiskerton roared, falling to all fours, muscles tightening.

“You should have stayed down, boy,” Argost jeered, and Fiskerton pounced, three-hundred and forty pounds of muscle and teeth and fury.

Unsurprisingly, Zak made no move to get out of the way. What was surprising, however, was what
he did instead.

When he raised the Claw, Argost thought he’d been moving to block the blow, but, instead, deftly, he’d turned it around in his hands until he held it ready in reverse, the head at the end pointing forward.

In the split second before the two collided – not a moment sooner and not a moment too late – he struck, hooking the butt end of the claw into Fiskerton’s open mouth and pivoting, driving all Fiskerton’s momentum and weight crashing into the ground headfirst.

Quite frankly, it left everyone speechless. Cold and simple, it’d turned the tables in an instant. Without even hesitating, Zak then brought his foot down on Fiskerton’s throat, pressing into it even as Fiskerton thrashed for breath, until those wild spasms became small twitches, and then nothing.

The Lemurian was still breathing, after Zak stepped off him, but only just.

Argost was distinctly reminded of a viper’s strike. A cold shiver ran down his spine. Still, this was his stage, and this was his moment, and heavens be damned if he was about to let this upstart brat steal the show from him again.

“My, my, little Saturday, I had no idea you were capable of such cruelty – “

“Quiet,” Zak interrupted.

The yeti was taken aback. He snarled. “My boy, you seem to forget the position you’re in – “

“Is there a part of ‘quiet’ that you don’t understand?”

He didn’t raise his voice at all, but he didn’t need to; the venom dripping off every syllable stopped Argost in his tracks all on its own. The one who glared up at him was not the same person as the boy who had defied him earlier.

This, whatever it was, was something far, far more ancient than the Saturday boy ever was. He took a step forward and, moved by a primal instinct Argost didn’t understand, he and Munya and all the rest took a step back. Danger, danger, danger.

“The worm is given a thorn and thinks itself a serpent. There is bravery, and then there is arrogance, and then there is impudence, yeti.”

A fire was spreading from the Saturday’s eyes, wreathing his entire body. Suddenly finding himself, Argost sent his power out to the gwyllgi that had been keeping watch, but found he was unable to compel them to act. One by one those connections sizzled and snapped.

The ancient thing inside Zak’s body was grinning now, cruel and sadistic, each step forward causing the crowd to shrink back against the walls.

It couldn’t be. But it had to be. Even though every record had said the Saturday had lost his powers, here was that familiar orange flame gathering before his eyes.

The deathworms Argost had called in underground, the small armies they were bringing in their tunnels – backups, because he’d had no intention of letting the Saturdays live – his connection with them was severed one by one.
Argost suddenly found himself very alone.

And without the voices crowding around his own thoughts, he was able to recognize that fear within him, give a name to the being that was slowly stepping towards him. He suddenly found that he knew exactly who—what it was that stood before him, just as suddenly as he found he knew what a horrible mistake he’d made, to push the boy this far.

“You’re Kur,” Argost breathed. His back hit the wall; he couldn’t tear his eyes away.

The Serpent didn’t even need to acknowledge it. They both already knew it was true.

It glanced around the courtyard using Zak’s eyes, slowly taking in every assembled beast that was held at bay by its presence.

“I will give you a choice. An eye for an eye. Your companions are here; I will give you a slow death at their hands.”

Argost swallowed. “And my other option?”

Kur grinned. “A swift death by mine.”

…No.

No!

What was this? Acting so pathetic in front of nothing more than a child. He was Vincent Vladislav Argost! He’d fought for decades for the world that should have been his birthright! And now he was being expected to simply let all his hard work come to an end at the hands of someone who’d shown up to the party late?

He roared and lunged, intending to crush all the life from those eyes in one blow. Kur didn’t even flinch, standing firm with that mocking grin plastered all over Zak’s features. He didn’t need to even move; before Argost could even reach it, he was yanked back by his cape, sent crashing to the ground.

“It seems they don’t want you to do something that foolish,” Kur commented, releasing, momentarily, the orange fire from Munya and the Xing-Xing’s eyes.

Argost growled, mind racing.

“Are you dissatisfied with my ruling?” The smile dropped instantly, became cold disdain. “Pitiful. You cast aside your nature to live amongst the humans; you pandered to their interests until you become the most popular of their kind. An entire lifetime spent flattering the race you wanted to rule, and you still harbored dreams of ruling them?”

It laughed, humorless.

“You don’t have followers, you have fans. You don’t have power, you have bravado. And even if you’ve managed to hide yourself away from me, you are still one of mine. I have judged you, yet. The verdict is the end to your miserable condition. Watch carefully: this is power. Engrave it into your soul.”

And then Argost felt it, that burning pressure against his mind, that seized both his underlings, all the gwyllgi, that blazed itself across the world. It was glorious as it was terrible, breathtaking and inexorable, ancient and primordial, a fury that could devour the entire world, a force of nature...
contained in a single point.

The gwyllgi had pinned the yeti down, the other two held back by the same primal fear that had invaded Argost’s heart. Kur raised the Claw above its head, blunt end down, a wicked and gleeful smile wrought on Zak’s face.

“Let’s meet again in your next life; there, do not make the same mistakes.”

And it brought the weapon down.

Chapter End Notes

this chapter gets pretty violent. lots of mentions of death.

argost's new body is based off a bear because a disproportionate number of "yeti" fur samples are bears. Also because it's way more intimidating than pig-gorilla-man.
The seismometer sat ticking innocently in the corner, like it hadn’t just spit out the least comprehensible data ever. Even though Cheechoo had done everything short of dismantle it to make sure it wasn’t broken (and it wasn’t), the fact remained that, only a couple hours ago, it had decided to sound the earthquake alarm, effectively waking Cheechoo up with a panic attack.

But there was no earthquake, and certainly not one on the scale that the seismometer had reported.

A nine-point-eight on the Richter scale, something that ought to bring untold disaster, but when Cheechoo poked his head out of the observatory he’d been holed up in, the village below him was completely untouched, quiet in the dead of night.

If his devices weren’t broken, then he could rule out a misprint. These were top-of-the-line machines – he should know, he invented them himself.

Not only that, but the data from all his other devices reported the same, even the ones from halfway across the globe. His phone had been ringing all morning with calls from those who had bought and employed his seismogram – the numbers varied from point-zero to point-nine, but for a brief couple seconds, on paper, a calamity of epic proportions had erupted from every pore of the earth.

What an absolute mystery.

It seemed only the instruments with Cheechoo’s level of sensitivity had reported on anything at all. Was it a fault with the machinery, or some greater mystery hovering overhead?

Maybe it was just seeing the number 9.8 flash on his phone screen, or maybe it was just the rude awakening, but something in his gut felt queasy about the whole affair. Still…if there hadn’t actually been a natural disaster of epic and untold proportions just now, then there was still work to do.

He’d have to pretend it was a misprint until he had some more free time. Even though, while he had no evidence to back it up, his gut feeling told him that, even in their limited way of expressing it, the seismometers had been right.

Pochi hadn’t stopped barking all night. This fact was only aggravated by the fact that Pochi’s barking sounded much more like a tiger’s roaring, and that her clawing at the door left deep gouge marks in it from tiger claws, and also that Pochi was currently inhabiting the body of a tiger.

Dr. Mizuki had eventually grown exasperated and had to tie her up outside, something he’d immediately regretted when she’d started whining and clawing at the door from the other side. And Talu Mizuki was a patient man, but, then, Pochi was also usually so much better behaved, and, frankly, the whole situation was simply incomprehensible.

And besides that, he just felt bad for the poor beast. Sighing, and leaving his computer to compile data for a few hours, he pushed aside the enormous wooden door and stepped outside.

Pochi was crying miserably against the rock face outside the cave, trembling into Mizuki’s touch.
He sighed, untying her heavy-duty rope and leading her back inside.

“What am I going to do with you?” he asked her in Japanese. She seemed to have calmed down, now, or at the very least exhausted herself, collapsing on her bed next to his own and huffing into the soft material.

She’d been spooked by something, obviously, but the problem was Mizuki had no idea what it could have been. And he was as superstitious as the next Japanese person; he’d entertained the idea that some ghost or monster had been enraged by their decision to move in, except they’d already been living in this cave for more than two years and there weren’t particularly any local legends surrounding the area.

Still, he thought, maybe they should trek down to the local land god's shrine and make an offering once it got dark again and there wouldn’t be human visitors there. There wasn’t exactly any use worrying about it now – he’d just pulled an all-nighter and he was exhausted.

He’d almost snapped again when he looked back and saw that his dog had climbed onto his bed, but then decided against it, merely rubbing the bridge of his nose, sighing, and climbing in after her.

The visage of Dr. Bara flitted through his mind. Shortly after Mizuki was inducted into the Secret Scientists, the Australian had all but assaulted him, begging to use him as a case study. He’d said something about recent research finding evidence that memory might not necessarily be stored in the brain, but Mizuki had found his demeanor uncomfortable and not just a little bit intimidating, so he’d ended up turning the neurologist away.

Maybe that had been the wrong choice.

He wasn’t usually this irate, especially where his dearest companion was concerned. As he ran his hand through her fur, he tried to calm his own heart.

A few hours ago, when all this panic had begun, he’d felt it too; a dark shiver in his heart, his body reacting to something his brain didn’t understand. He glared out the corner of his eye – fully capable of seeing in the dark, he’d discovered – at his work station, still softly whirring in the corner, small lights still blinking on and off.

He’d practically recreated the device already, everything but the physical model. But even that wouldn’t take too long to make, since his new position as one of the Secret Scientists afforded him both funding and the necessary connections for creating even the most specialized of parts. No, the problem was…

Whose body could he even use? It was probably possible to get the clearing to grow one from scratch without a brain to begin with, but that was ethically ambiguous at best, and probably a few more years of research besides. Maybe he could find someone who’d donated their body to science? But he had no idea if his device would work on cadavers, and he wasn’t exactly excited at the prospect of being the test subject for that.

…But no, those were all excuses. He knew that, especially with the support network he had now, a solution could be found within a few years.

He was putting it off because he no longer had any real desire to return to humanity, was the truth of it. He’d gotten used to his body, he’d made himself a cozy home, and he regularly met with the other Secret Scientists and their associates. Honestly, he had everything he could want – good friends, good food, and a means of helping the world like he’d always intended to do. And, on top
of that, he was nine feet tall, incredibly strong and agile, and owned a pet tiger. Since everyone that really mattered to him accepted him, terrifying hibagon body and all, he’d never felt the pressure to go back to being an old man with weak shoulders and age spots all over his face.

But when Pochi had started barking he’d been seized with such an impulse to join her that it had terrified him. He’d thought – all this time – he’d maintained for so long that he was not the beast whose body he had come to own, that he was something above and beyond that. Now that he realized his complacency with his position, he’d become scared that the line had blurred. What if it was already too late to go back?

He must begin preparations to return to a human body at once.

Though fitfully and uneasily, he managed to calm himself enough to sleep. Strange images fluttered through the black of his dreams.

Deadbolt malfunctioning didn’t really come as a surprise. By this point he was basically a chimaera of different bits of code and random pieces of hardware jammed in – Miranda was a quantum physicist, not an expert in robotics. Actually, now that she thought about it, it was strange the Secret Scientists hadn’t yet introduced a robotics expert into their fold, especially with how popular a field it was becoming. She almost yelled out for Deadbolt to make a memo for her to ask the two Saturday adults about it, until she remembered that, currently, he sat dissected and braindead all over her workbench.

Well, he was still more reliable than a human, on average, the occasional hiccup notwithstanding.

On a good day, he’d make it through without a problem, fetching what he was supposed to fetch, getting the door, answering the phone. Miranda was a harsh mistress, and before all that business with Kur, that was all Deadbolt had been meant for – after driving off her last intern (Shelley Abernathy, she remembered, a very bright young girl who’d quit after fainting on the job from exhaustion – as an apology, Miranda had set her up with a letter of recommendation to her own alma mater), she’d finally taken the advice of her colleagues and made herself an assistant that could work more than sixty hours a week, fifty-two weeks a year.

On a bad day, however, some simple but out-of-the-way task Miranda would ask for help with would cross with one of his battle protocols and he’d end up freezing up until she force-reset him. And on really, really bad days, his head might simply fly off his body, clanging against the ceiling before falling to the ground.

And today had been exceptionally bad.

In simple terms, he’d crashed. Permanently. There’d been some fatal error in his programming and it’d caused all of his systems not only to shut down, but corrupt to the point of irretrievability. The only thing Miranda had managed to salvage from his hard drive basically amounted to a crash report and a solid wall of technical gibberish that she simply had no idea what to do with.

As frustrating as it was, this was simply something she didn’t have time for. Sure, she could definitely sift through all the gibberish on her own, hit the books and go to town, but prior experience taught her that that could take anywhere from a few minutes to a few hours to a few days, and, besides that, she just hated coding. Her own chosen field of study was just as fiddly and
detail-oriented, perhaps, but at least it was actually fascinating. Coding was a tedious procedure that was merely bearable in when done in small chunks. Unfortunately, this didn’t seem to be a small chunk sort of problem.

So instead of tackling it on her own, she decided to outsource the project so she could hurry up and get on with her life, and settled to ask for help from the one person she knew was always just itching for a chance to prove their competence.

She wouldn’t be talking to him face-to-face, though. *That* would be more trouble than it was worth.

**M_Grey@scientiaest.ss**
Dr. Arthur Beeman,
I’ve run into some trouble with Deadbolt’s programming. My diagnostic says that his hard drive has permanently failed. Attached are the crash report and what I’ve managed to salvage of his internal coding. Help repairing him to a functional state would be appreciated.
Best,
Miranda Grey

Almost within a second of her sending it off, she got a reply, and then another, and then another. Definitely not enough time for him to actually have looked at the files attached. She sighed.

There was research to be done, dammit! Unfortunately, despite how little patience she usually had for her coffee stooges, she’d grown attached to her robot, and so fixing Deadbolt had taken priority over discovering the secrets of the universe at a sub-sub-atomic level.

**bman@scientiaest.ss**
who is this

**bman@scientiaest.ss**
oh its u chell. good thing ur photo shows up when i hover over ur name.

**bman@scientiaest.ss**
have u tried turning it off n back on again

Not for the first time, Miranda wondered why she ever expected anything from this man.

Still, as she was typing up a shorter, snappier reply that yes, she *had* tried turning him off and back on, her inbox chimed that he’d already sent her yet another message. She saved her draft and went back to it, hoping that this time he’d actually have something useful for her.

**bman@scientiaest.ss**
that crash report is weird.

**M_Grey@scientiaest.ss**
Dr. Arthur Beeman,
Yes. I know. I wouldn’t have come to you for help if it was something I had time to decipher. Speaking of indecipherable, this IS a matter that concerns our professional work. Would it kill you to type with a little more professionalism?
Miranda Grey

**bman@scientiaest.ss**
dont ask questions u cant handle the answer 2.
looking @ data now. 1/2hr eta. stay 2ned.
Beeman,

“You’ve reached a new low.

After he failed to respond for several minutes, she figured he’d finally shut up and set to work. Half-hour ETA? Then she had some time to put Deadbolt back together.

It was relaxing, practically ritualistic, a routine she’d gotten used to two years ago. Every few days they’d manage to track down the Saturdays through Beeman’s extensive global monitoring systems; every few days they’d tear Deadbolt apart, every few days she’d put him back together.

She hadn’t disassembled him like this since the aftermath of the cryptid war, actually. He’d done surprisingly well once the Secret Scientists reunited with the Saturdays, and they all turned their efforts to mitigating Argost’s potential damage. It wasn’t obvious how powerful his attack arrays had become until after he was no longer fighting a family that regularly wrestled the most dangerous beasts on the planet – in the heat of battle, he’d surprised everyone with his reliability.

Miranda was even a little bit proud of him.

That was the other nice thing about putting him back together, was the empty space to reflect in. Her usual studies were strenuous on both her mind and body, desperately trying to do advanced calculations in her head before the particles could become too unstable. Failure was usually… explosive, so it took up all her concentration and at least a few gallons of coffee whenever she got into the thick of things.

So it was a little jarring to have the email notification sound interrupt her thoughts, but, well, she couldn’t blame Arthur for that one.

i hope wall-e was robot baptized, bc hes robot dead.
danger perception program u wrote was solid, parameters not high enough tho. smth tripped it so bad it broke the internal logic. dominoed down some other programs. part of it caught fire, 85%.
also questioning why emergency arm detachment protocols r 1 boolean expression away from foot massage. seems dangerous.

Dr. Arthur Beeman,

That can’t be right. He’s equipped to deal with even the worst of natural disasters in at least eight different forms of perception at the same time. How does something even break those limits?

Thankfully, it seemed he fell into the 15% of not spontaneously combusting; his hardware all looks fine.

I was tired that night, needed a foot massage, and it was the most efficient way to program that in. If I remember correctly, didn’t Doc manage to give you quite the shiner that day…?

Miranda Grey
hypotheses: 1. some innocent thing randomly triggered a danger response in 9 perceptions. ai does that sometimes. wouldn’t b surprised considering how haphazard most of the code is. 2. a real disaster happened. unlikely bc i would kno abt that. 3. u showed it smth truly horrible n beyond comprehension. but hey, were all in2 weird stuff. im not abt 2 judge.

Miranda couldn’t help the smirk. Beeman was still sore about everything that had happened with the Saturdays, after all; mentioning it was a surefire way to get under his skin.

Still, that was disheartening news. If Beeman said the robot was dead, then it basically meant it was salvageable (nothing was unsalvageable, they were the top genii in the world), but for an amount of time and effort not worth the result.

Well, that was annoying, but Miranda had basically just been asking if there was an easy fix.

M_Grey@scientiaest.ss
Dr. Arthur Beeman,
Thank you for your help. That’s all I needed.
Best,
Miranda Grey

From the robot parts still lying about her lab she picked out his main CPU, a small green chip about the size of a postage stamp, and tossed it into a drawer of ones just like it, all in varying states of having been melted into slag. She supposed she should just get rid of the roasted parts altogether, since they were now good for nothing but taking up space, but she could never bring herself to do it.

Instead, she stooped down to open another drawer, this one with little postage-sized chips still in their clear, plastic packaging – she’d figured out early on to stockpile parts, though she hadn’t had to bust into this particular drawer in the two years since the war – and cracked the case open, sliding the CPU into a special slot on her computer.

It’d take a few hours for the backup to write itself into the chip, especially since she couldn’t take too much processing power away from the other programs her computers were running. Maybe she should go ahead and throw another upgrade in, for old times’ sake?

Not that she would, because it would be a waste of several million research dollars. But the thought made her smile as she turned Deadbolt’s arm chassis around in her hands. He should be up and running again in no time.

Twin Peaks, the cold-weather geology member of their scientific cabal, had the decency to use the video phone, rather than send him a string of emails the way that Chell did. That left both of Beeman’s hands free to enjoy his daily meal. He prided himself on efficiency, and his was as efficient as it came: a bagel, cream cheese-flavored nutrient spread, and coffee so black that if it were any blacker, he'd have to give it an event horizon. If he didn't eat at least this much, then Doc would end up yelling at him to take care of himself better - at least, he would have two years ago, before the Kur incident had burned that bridge. Either way, a daily meal had become Beeman's habit. Sometimes two meals in one day, if he was feeling prissy.
He wasn't feeling that prissy today, as he stared down the other Scientist over the bread.

“Hey, Arthur,” the geologist said, in his usual upbeat tone. He seemed a little less put-together than usual, his hair loose and messy, his glasses askew. Beeman acknowledged him with a grunt, feeling no need to make casual conversation. There was only one reason the Scientists ever bothered to call him up these days - they wanted his advice. That was always how it was with him. Even if they didn't like him, he was still their greatest asset; as long as that was true, he was here to stay.

The geologist’s expression dropped just slightly at Beeman's blatant disregard. Still, it had had the desired effect: he cut straight to the chase, and Beeman didn't have to waste time on pleasantries that no one really cared about.

“Earlier today, the seismometers using my blueprints all gave false reads at the same time,” he said. "I know I gave you one about half a year back – did it also…?"

“Wouldn’t know,” Beeman said, scraping the last of the spread against the crust with the grating crunch of toasted bread. "Unplugged the damn thing about eighty days back, it makes this - ticking noise, drives me up the wall. And you know my field of expertise is outside the planet, not in it."

The geologist stuttered a bit, while Beeman ignored him. It had been a Christmas gift, not that Beeman observed Christmas. And he appreciated the gesture, but he didn't really have a use for a seismometer, and he didn't see the point of letting it drain power if he wasn't going to be using it.

“Uh…are you listening, Arthur?”

“Yeah-huh,” Beeman said, disinterested.

“…Somehow I doubt that, but I'll continue anyways. I think it's really weird for all of them to give the same malfunction at the same time when they're all custom jobs, and I wanted to see if you had any insights."

Beeman finally set the knife down on the plate and took a bite. It was with his mouth stuffed full that he answered the geologist's question.

“Listen, Woollybear – “

“It’s Paul,” he interrupted. “Cheechoo. You know, you can just tell me if you forgot my name – “

"I know you sit in your log cabin with a tectonic heartbeat monitor and nothing else most of the time," Beeman said, "but I've currently got a 147 individual scans going on at any given time. Surveillance is my job."

“Really?” The geologist asked with a grin. "I thought your job was getting the high score at online Minesweeper."

“You're just mad because I beat yours,” Beeman said. “Look, I know a thing or two about false positives. For one, there's no such thing.”

“‘There's no such thing’?”

Beeman set the bagel down, leaning forward, peering over his glasses. “Either it’s a ‘true’ positive that your equipment’s broken, or it’s a ‘true’ positive for something you didn’t think you were monitoring for in the first place.”
The geologist’s brow furrowed as he considered that perspective. Beeman could see his mind ticking through the possibilities; it was in the quiver of his eyes. Satisfied that his work was done, he leaned back and waited for the other man to deliver the closing small-talk.

“Like what?” the geologist asked, right on schedule.

"That, Mammothfur, sounds like your job, not mine."

The geologist sighed. "Right. Thanks as always, Arthur."

“No problem. Say..."

Mammothfur cocked his head. "Hm?"

“This pseudo-calamity of yours didn’t happen to have – where are you again, UTC -2?"

“Iceland."

“12:47 AM?"

There was a pause. “Yeah, actually.”

“Hm,” Beeman said, dragging his chair back over to one of his computer screens. “You might want to give Steambun a call. Her robot went kaput at the same time earlier tonight.”

As Beeman started tap-tap-tapping away at his own business, his satellite dishes gearing up to begin a new rotation, he watched the implications of his statement sink into Mammothfur's expression.

“I'm...gonna go do that.”

“Mhm,” Beeman said, already lost in whatever was on his computer screen. He didn’t even look up as the call dropped, sifting through the data presented by his systems from earlier that night.

There, in the strings of letters and numbers, something he’d only glanced at earlier. Four hundred satellite dishes, eight high-powered telescopes, access to data from international space stations and select space imagers, all being processed, compiled, analyzed by three supercomputers in a reinforced room buried at the base of the mountain, and there, 6:47 PM at local time, every source agreed:

Conditions for viewing Unukalhai were exceptionally favorable. To the point where, from anywhere on the Earth, it must have seemed like it had shined brighter for a few seconds.

The Saturdays had several different mailing lists stored in their official Secret Scientist email accounts. There was one for world leaders, there was one for Interpol, the heads of the biological science fields, close friends, the local city council, national defense, universities, more. Included with that list was a single option marked in red.

Well, they were all scientists, and no matter how eccentric individuals may be, they could at least be levelheaded when deciding things as a group. And, so, that particular choice was given a very simple name.
“Urgent.”

The list of handles cascaded down the screen. Fifteen years ago, they numbered 50; fourteen, 7. Now, there were 16 of them, with Mizuki as the most recent.

And each one would have a message at the top of their inbox when they checked it next. An outline of what the Saturdays learned tonight, a time and date for those who couldn’t physically make it, and a set of coordinates for those who could.

All that was left to do was send it, except Drew’s finger waivered on the mouse.

“Drew?” Doc asked, brow knitting.

“…”

He gave her a gentle shake on the shoulder. “Drew,” he repeated. “Is there something wrong?”

She shook her head. “No, Doc, sorry. I just…have a bad feeling about this.”

“Well, that’s understandable. To think Argost would be back…not only that, but with the state he left Zak and Fisk in before flying off, it’s like he’s playing with us. Sending us a message that we don’t – “

“Not about that,” she said. “It’s just…with things going like this…it almost feels like déjà vu. Like we’ve gone through these motions before, and the way it left us up last time, world’s most wanted…”

“That won’t happen this time,” Doc said, firmly. “We made sure of it after the war. That was the first time I saw Beeman almost cry.”

They’d taken the scientists aside once the worst of the restoration had passed, and one-by-one they’d all apologized and admitted that there might have been another way, that the Saturdays had been good friends to them all, that it was hasty for them to have jumped to such a drastic measure.

Except Beeman, but it was unlikely any of the Scientists would take his personal opinions seriously ever again.

“I know,” Drew said, though she still didn’t click the button.

“Even though Zak and Fisk are banged up pretty bad and Zak’s still unconscious, they’re both safe. They’re going to be fine.”

“Maybe…” she paused. “Maybe we should wait until he wakes up. See what he knows. I know we talked to Fisk, but there’s only so much he can tell us.”

They had been so scared, terrified, the both of them, when they’d finally arrived through the doors left open for them, only to be met with the limp form of an unconscious Zak, cradled in Fiskerton’s arms.

Bruises all over his body, a splotchy purple mess on his abdomen. Fisk had a swollen cheek, a tender spot on his head.

It could have been worse, they’d thought, but god, what if it had been worse?

They’d pushed aside their panic to deal with the gwyllgi left behind, cowering and crying, letting them free in an uninhabited part of the marshes. Fiskerton had tucked in, exhausted, after the
parents had gotten as much from him as they could, and Zak, bandaged and disinfected, was resting by his side.

“This is an emergency, though, Drew,” Doc said, cautiously. “The sooner we address it, the better. If Argost is back and he still has his powers, then I’m actually even more surprised that he hasn’t already started using them on a global scale.”

“He’s playing with us,” Drew said. “He knows he can end it at any time, what else could there be? Even if we DO contact the others…what if he’s just waiting for us to gather in one place anyways? Doc, we don’t know enough. We need more information.”

Now it was his turn to think. It was true – Argost was not so subtle that he’d leave such an incomprehensible message as this. If he’d really had his powers, and had Zak and Fiskerton all alone, then it was doubtful they would have found Zak in such a relatively unharmed state.

No, Argost was far crueler than that. And this was an emergency on a higher scale than any emergency before, but they hadn’t even had a solid look at the Yeti, just his ship. Maybe his powers hadn’t returned on the necessary scale? Maybe it wasn’t Argost after all? Or maybe it was simply a trial run of a mimicry?

“…It wouldn’t be good to end up gathering them over a false alarm,” Doc said. “I think you’ve definitely got a point. We should see first if this is something we can deal with as a family…but even if Zak doesn’t wake up, we should send the message by twenty-four hours.”

“Agreed,” Drew said, tiredly pushing the mouse away. She rubbed her eyes, stretching back to lean into Doc’s chest.

God, she was tired.

No mission had left her this exhausted in years. Being played, manipulated, Argost did it well; with all his advantages and all his planning, if that was really him, then Zak, relatively safe and sound, must have meant that something went very wrong.

And…there was yet another thing unsettling her, that filled her intuition with a sense of dread.

Komodo and Zon, on the way up to the castle, had stopped in their tracks. The Saturdays had barely even noticed until the two of them had entered the scene well after the rest of the family had already run to Zak’s side. And while it was normal for Zon to be sleeping in the same room as Doyle – they were partners in crime – it wasn’t normal that Komodo had elected to stay in the brig with the two parents rather than be by Zak’s side while he was so clearly injured.

Almost like he was avoiding him, Drew thought, watching Komodo’s tail swish anxiously back and forth.

He recognized this place.

A young forest, overgrown with moss and ferns and horsetails. Giant lace-winged dragonflies zipped by, beetles glittered where they perched on the tree bark, and a thrumming filled the air.

That wasn’t right, was it? The last thing he’d remembered was – broken bits and pieces, Fiskerton
attacking him and then suddenly Fisk was behind him, choking him in a sleeper hold, and Argost and Munya and the other orange hominid were all limping away – the marshes of Wales, the castle courtyard, that’s where he was supposed to be, not a jungle in the tropic zone, dripping with life and humidity.

His mind told him that there should be birdsong, but his memories told him there should not. How could something like that exist here, now? Birds still had several centuries yet to come.

The name came to him suddenly, and he was relieved, knowing where he was. Laurasia, between Pangaea and North Asia, between Triassic and Jurassic. A paradise trapped in time.

“That’s right.”

Like ice in summer heat, washing down Zak’s spine with a chill. He turned.

Whatever he was going to say caught in his throat. What was staring at him did so completely at ease, leaning against the trunk of an ancient conifer, arms crossed. Its hair, shoulder-length and messy, white against black, stirred loosely in the breeze. The black jacket was slung lazily around its shoulders. A smile – or maybe a sneer – played on its lips. And its eyes stared Zak dead in his, shadowed by the bangs that fell into its face and the black bags beneath, only serving to highlight the intensity of the fire burning in its orange eyes.

Zak recognized that, too.

“You…”

“Yes,” the serpent confirmed. “Me, and you.”

In the distance, Zak could hear the sea, rolling and crashing under the summer sun.

The serpent was the first to speak, calm and even, resting its head against the bark of the tree with an easiness that only put Zak further on guard.

He’d long seen this figure in his nightmares, in the flashes and broken fragments left over by the naga’s influence and Tsul’ Kalu’s fears. A version of him covered in blood and ash, laughing in the face of the end of the world. But this was the first time it had ever spoken to him, and in its voice Zak heard his own, darker, deeper, barely above a whisper but thrumming with a power that commanded all those who heard it to listen.

Take heed.

And this time…this time, Zak was sure, it was no longer just a dream.

“There is very little we have to discuss, it seems.”

It took a while to find his voice. “…That’s right.” As much defiance as he could spit. “I don’t have anything to say to you.”

The serpent only smiled at him, a cruel and twisted mockery of Zak’s own expressions.

“At least,” it said, “we should introduce ourselves.”

An innocent enough request.

“…I’m Zak,” he finally allowed. “Zak Saturday.”
“Then,” the Serpent said, grinning even wider, “I, too, am Zak Saturday.”

A fear that scorched him like the burning cold, as he understood exactly what the serpent meant.

“That is one of my many names,” said Kur.
"NO!"

Zak shot out of unconsciousness, only to bang his head against a metal pipe and fall back to the ground, clutching his forehead and writhing in pain. Jesus Christ, and he could all but hear the serpent laughing at him as it retreated to the dark end of his mind. Every day, the news he woke up to was worse and worse; frustrating – so frustrating, frustrating! What was he going to do? His parents. He had to -

Something grabbed his leg and pulled, yanking Zak down the metal shaft.

…Metal shaft?

It was too dark to see, but he could feel the ridges of the welding beneath his back, could hear the slide of scale against steel. The grip around his ankle was firm - reptilian.

"Komodo?" Zak asked, groggily trying to keep his balance as he was yanked around tight corners and up steep inclines.

"PLEASE be quieter, I am begging you. Truly."

Though it took him several seconds to figure out where he remembered that voice from, the moment he did, Zak began to thrash about, desperately trying to break free.

"Get AWAY!" he yelled, kicking Muca's grip loose from his leg. But that only prompted her to pounce on his body and pull that along, instead, one clawed hand covering his mouth, muffling him. It was too hard to see in the pitch black; his wild flailing only met with the metal walls, fists banging uselessly against the steel.

"The weakest of their kind," Rani Nagi had called her. Maybe so, compared to the big buff guards she kept around. Pfft, yeah, right. Zak could take her in a fair fight, maybe, but when she had the advantage of it being dark, cramped, and terrifying...

Eventually, he stopped flailing, more out of the pain in his knuckles than any real sense of surrender. After a few more minutes of navigating through the airship's ventilation shafts - Zak was sure that was where they were, now, from the brief glimpses he managed to get where light leaked through the grates - they ducked down a long vertical drop, Muca's scales finding some kind of purchase on the steel that let them descend smooth, fast, and controlled.

They landed in a dark room, cramped full of machinery, lit by small red and green bulbs all down the equipment. The engine room - Zak knew it from his parents warning him not to go in there unsupervised. Full of dangerous, partially experimental technology, one wrong move might mean your hand on something burning hot or electrically live.

Muca, having set Zak down, was tasting the air with her tongue, pressing her ear against the floor, slithering back and forth between different entrances to the room to make sure the coast was clear.

That was when Zak realized something - the engine was running.
That meant they were still in the sky. Wherever they were, it was morning, judging from the way the light looked and how long he felt like he'd been asleep. And Muca was on the ship with him, Muca had BEEN on the ship with them...

"Are you going to tell me what's going on?" Zak hissed at her, crossing his arms and drawing back. The Claw, he noticed, was still on his belt loop, and he found himself wanting to reach for it, have it in hand.

"That's an acceptable volume, thank you. Especially with the contraptions in here to mask our conversation." Muca whispered back. "Hello! It's me, Mucalinda. Please pardon the rough transit, my...what should I be calling you again? Master? My liege? Most great and terrible Kur, scourge of the human race, end of all that is benevolent, my - "

"Just. Zak." It took a lot of self-control not to snap at her.

"...Alright. Well, my apologies again, Just Zak, but, you see, when you awoke, those currently patrolling the ship were alerted to our presence. So, since I did not want to be eaten, and I did not want you to be potentially destroyed a second or third time, I ran."

"Eaten?" Zak asked, and then, more urgently, "who's on the ship?"

The way she'd said it had made it sound like it wasn’t just his parents. Besides, if she’d been hiding in the vents this whole time, then there wouldn’t be a reason for her to only decide to act now, if that were the case.

"It's really quite the disaster," Muca continued, by way of answer. "Maybe it wouldn't be, if you had had more time to recover your strength, but as-is, it's quite the calamity. I would even dare to say that this might ruin everything! Ah, if the garuda don't eat me, my queen will. Rotisserie!"

"'Garuda'?" He knew that word. "You mean that secret society of illusionists that tried to kill me with the Flute of Gilgamesh?"

"Much worse," Muca said, with a cheerful tone to mask the sheer terror that was becoming apparent on her features. "We should have killed them all several thousands of years ago, but then, several thousand years have passed! It's completely expected for them to have returned by now! A miscalculation. Forgetful! Incompetent! Well, enough about me: two hous ago this metal beetle was accosted and boarded by the garuda and their masters, and, quite frankly, we have a foot in death's door - metaphorically. I don't actually have feet, you see - "

Zak was getting frustrated. Metal beetle? She must mean the airship. So something came on the airship. But what could possibly board while they were in mid-flight? Garuda...garuda...garuda. ...Oh, the memory flashed in his mind. Mom’s book, decals on tombs, ancient artifacts – giant eagles with fiery wings that preyed on the Naga and serpents with impunity. But their masters?

"Who, Muca? Who's on the ship?"

Muca stilled, one of her ears twitching in reaction to something down the hallway. Quick as a lightning strike, she grabbed Zak and pulled him up over the machinery with a deftness Zak hadn't been expecting from her, the vent's grate at the end of her tail. They practically flew into the shaft they had come from, Muca's coils immediately bracing against the metal to keep them suspended over the opening, as she fit the grate back into place with a quiet click just as the door to the engine room slid open.

Rather than say it, she would let him see. Through the black slits of the metal, Zak could just
barely make out what Muca had heard earlier, quiet thudding footsteps from something much heavier than his mom or dad. If he had to say, the sound reminded him of Fisk.

...As did the tan fur that suddenly came into view, the two tufts on the figure's ears, the broad shoulders, large hands.

Zak would have called out for him if Muca's hand wasn't suddenly covering his mouth again, and he couldn't feel her trembling.

Then the figure turned, searching for them.

The eyes, the face, the brown spots - no, it wasn't Fisk. At the same time, it looked just like Fisk; for a moment, Zak panicked, thinking that the smoke mirror version of him had returned, until a closer inspection revealed that this figure was much smaller than the brother Zak knew. That tan was a wrong color, those eyes were the wrong shape. It carried itself differently. That's-Not-Fisk sniffed around, peering into the dark, red eyes looming and ominous and unfamiliar, and Zak was suddenly very glad that he had heeded Muca's warning.

Ah, the garuda were the enemies of the Naga – that must mean their masters…

The Lemurian gave the room one final sweep before turning to go, padding back to the door, letting its automated whirr as it clicked shut see it out. When it had gone so far Zak could no longer hear it walking, he let out the breath he'd been holding, and Muca did the same, before pulling him back up the ventilation shaft, back into the comforting darkness.

"Where is," Zak breathed, so quietly he could barely even hear himself, "my family?"

"The room with all the other metal beetles, there is a door to your parents' chambers. The Lemurians are holding them there."

Just down the hangar bay.

"Why?" Zak asked. "I'm the one they're after."

"They believe you have used your dark powers to influence the others into helping you. Especially the one you call your brother. Which would have been incredible if true, but - "

"They have nothing - I haven't done anything to them! They'd know if they asked - "

Muca only looked at him, and Zak was suddenly reminded that he was talking to a naga.

"Why," he said, putting distance between them, "should I trust you? You tricked me into touching that spear in the first place. You've been hiding out on the ship ever since, haven't you? If I think about it, this is all YOUR fault! We wouldn’t even be in this mess if I hadn’t gotten those memories!"

Muca had shrunk into her coils defensively, hands grasping at each other in - shame? Worry? ...Guilt?

Her voice came out like a squeak. "You would have died - !"

"There had to have been another way." It was a hollow statement – just like separating his own existence from Kur, he already knew the level of impossibility that came with it, but it was all he had.
"If there was one it was not one that we - what other choices did we have? The Kur stone exhausted, the Relic destroyed - what would we do if you were to perish? How would this world turn without Kur?"

"It's been doing just fine up until now!"

"Has it?" She asked, voice cracking, lunging forward and rising as high as the vent would allow. Zak scrambled backwards in reflex, hands slipping on the steel.

They stared at each other, Muca's eyes red and wide in the darkness, her claws cutting scratches into the metal, before her ear twitched again and she whipped around toward the sound that Zak was only just beginning to hear.

"...Zak?"

Mom's voice. It came - Zak looked wildly from left to right, trying to pinpoint where she was calling from.

"Mom!" He yelled back, scrambling down the shaft. This way - yes, this way - he could hear her getting louder -

"Zak - Doc, I heard - "

"Mom, I'm here, I'm in the vents!"

"Zak! My baby boy, oh - "

They met at one of the grates, both of them pressing up against it like sheer force of will would be enough to undo the screws. It was just as well that Doc managed to catch up when he did, power glove on one hand, practically ripping the entire wall out. With it, Zak came tumbling down, into Drew's arms, and he swore to himself he'd never be embarrassed to get a hug from his parents ever again.

"You're safe," Doc said, relief evident in his voice. "I'll radio the others and tell them we found you."

"I thought you guys were being locked up in your room on the ship?"

Drew smiled. "Looks like we took a page from your book, kiddo. Komodo sneaked out through one of the vents and knocked our guards out. Then, well." She pantomimed a couple punches with a cheeky grin. "You know the drill."

Zak couldn't help smiling, either. He wished he was there for it.

"What about you?" Drew asked. "What happened? From the sounds of it, the Lemurians are half-tearing the ship apart looking for you."

"Respectfully," Doc interjected. Every word was seething. "Remember, that's how they phrased it. They're going to 'respectfully' hold us prisoner on our own ship and turn it over looking for our son."

"Ugh," Drew said, with her best don't-remind-me face.

"I..." Zak said, looking up through the grate. As expected, Muca was already out of sight. "It's...a long story. I don't know if we have the time right now. I need to know exactly what's going on,
though – I was unconscious for most of it."

Drew nodded, standing up. He brow furrowed as she tried to remember. "To be honest, it's kind of a blur. These big red eagles - garuda - pull up alongside the ship with Lemurians sitting on them, and next thing we know we're down in the hangar bay welcoming them in like we're all old friends."

"Some kind of charisma ability," Doc mused. "Even I'm not sure how they did it yet. Everything they were saying sounded so...reasonable. Right up until they asked us to hand you over. Even now...

"Even now?" Zak asked, tilting his head.

Doc tilted his head. "You can't hear them?"

"No."

"They're probably not broadcasting to him," Drew said.

"It's telepathy, Zak."

"Telepathy..."

"Which would have been fascinating to discuss in further detail," Doc continued, grumbling, "if the ones using it weren't so..."

"GWARZHA BABAR!!"

The wind was all knocked out of Zak's lungs as he was tackled from behind by big arms and an excited screech.

"Fisk! Oh man, Fisk, it's you, huh?"

"Boo-bu-bu-bu-bu - !" I'm so glad you're safe.

Doyle came jogging up behind him, followed by Komodo and Zon. He smiled when he saw Zak, raising a hand up in greeting.

"Hey, kid. Some Houdini you pulled on us, huh? Good to see you're doing alright."

"Hey, Doyle," Zak said, attempting to raise his own hand out from under Fisk's bear hug. "I guess I'm late to Fisk's family reunion?"

"Humph." Fisk crossed his arms, his displeasure with the rest of his "family" clear on his face.

"How's the situation on the rest of the ship?" Drew asked, turning. Doyle's smile dropped as he became serious, hands curling into fists at his side. "They're gathering in the bridge, looks like a defensive formation. They're probably trying to steer the whole thing somewhere, is my guess. Seven of them in there, all the others are tied up back in you guys' room. But if they got the hands on the controls..."

"They can open the ship if reinforcements arrive," Drew finished, turning to look down the hallway where the control center was. "Seven on six, huh."

"Even numbers if we count Zak," Doyle said. Zak nodded.
"No," Drew said immediately. "He's not going to be in this fight."

"What?!!" Zak and Doyle responded in unison.

"He's the Lemurians' target," Doc said, in his usual calm tone. "Finding and securing him is their win condition - and our lose condition. I would have told you to take him in the Griffin and run, but those eagles have our ship surrounded, and they might be fast enough to catch up. They caught up to the airship, after all."

"Didn't we have this same talk two years ago?" Zak asked, indignant. "Where on the ship could be safer than with you guys?"

"I'm with Mini-Man on this one," Doyle said, and Fisk agreed, crossing his arms and puffing his chest out.

Drew was about to protest again when the ship gave a great, shuddering heave. The family was nearly knocked off-balance. They were starting a descent.

"We're landing..." Doc breathed, before snapping to his senses and pulling his wrist display up. "...And it looks like we're not landing at home."

"We don't have time for this," Zak said, with finality. "We need to get to the controls, and we need to get there as fast as we can, with as much manpower as we can. I'm coming with you guys."

"Alright," Drew acquiesced at last. "But stay in the middle of the pack. Yell out the moment something happens, don't get separated - "

Zak put his hand on her shoulder, steeling his expression. "I know."

Drew returned the look. Her features softened as she put her hand on Zak's, squeezing it tight.

"...You've grown up, haven't you?" She asked.

She closed her eyes and turned, drawing her sword out of its sheath. Following suit, Doc readied his glove, Doyle his blaster, and Zak's hands found the familiar grip of the claw, the hand of Tsul'Kalu clicking open at the end.

"We've only got one shot at this, Doc said. "We'll be too close to the ground to pull out of the descent in thirty minutes, so that's our time limit. Everyone ready?"

Zak could only smile, widening his stance, quashing the uneasiness inside himself. "I was born ready," he said.

"Oh no," Muca said, absently picking at her scales with one of her claws. "Oh no, oh no, oh no."
In the bridge were gathered seven lemurians; around the ship flew eight garuda, each the size of a fighter jet, with scarlet and gold plumage all down their wings and backs. Two flew in front of the ship, visible through the large windows of the command center, while the other six took up escort positions around it.

But the lemurians weren't watching them. Silent and expressionless, their focus was all turned towards the door they'd sealed shut with the ship's internal security systems, to the banging they could hear against the metal as the Saturdays attempted to ram their way in.

Every hit made the steel shudder, though it seemed far from giving way. Still, the lemurians were uneasy, adjusting their white cloth wraps, flexing their fists. Just because they were pacifistic did not mean they would refuse to fight, and just because the humans and animals were innocents corrupted by Kur's dark grip didn't mean they would hold back - that was the consensus that had been reached, when the family had burst its way out of confinement, and had rallied once more around the serpent in human form.
The air was rife with tension and focus, each lemurian polishing their concentration, ready to receive the Saturdays the moment they burst in.

So focused, in fact, that they failed to notice a grate being pulled out of the wall in time with the rhythmic banging, that they failed to notice an invisible lizard slink to the floor.

And then there was Zak, dropping in with as loud of a clatter as he could, whipping the claw around to grab the closest Lemurian and pulling him to the ground, down the stairs. The Lemurians whipped around immediately, and, at that moment, the door opened all on its own. The Saturdays burst in all in one wave, Doc’s glove already glowing from using it to pound the door as a distraction. They took the Lemurians by surprise, and behind the family, Komodo, with his claws on the touchpad that served as the door’s lock, gave a supremely self-satisfied growl.

"Zak," Drew yelled, ramming the butt of her sword into where she guessed the solar plexus must be, "dropping down on your own is NOT 'staying in the middle of the pack'!"

"It's a classic pincer formation!" Zak returned, cheerfully dodging a fist. "I get their attention away from the door, you guys come busting in when their heads are turned - whoa!"

One of the lemurians, an older one with white-streaked fur, had grabbed him from his blind spot, attempting to climb over the rest of the family to get him to the door.

"Sorry, but I've got a reputation of 'favorite uncle' to protect, here."

Doyle was up in his face immediately, rising up to meet him with his jetpack. He moved to throw a punch, but before it could connect, the lemurian had grabbed him with its feet and used Doyle’s own momentum to send him flying into one of the windows.

"Doyle!" Zak yelled. He flailed just a little harder, trying to keep his captor’s attention in that direction, because -

Both of them felt the impact as Zon collided with them, talons first, and they both went dropping to the ground. Zak was caught inches away from the top of a computer - the sharp end - just in time, his sister chirping cheerfully as she set him down easy. Doyle came jogging up to meet them, rubbing his head where he'd hit it, but nonetheless grinning ear-to-ear, glad his distraction play with Zon had worked.

"Favorite uncle?" He asked.

"Well, Zon did most of the work. So favorite sister, actually."

She chirred in agreement. Doyle just rolled his eyes.

"Whatever. I still have - " His hands flew to his chest, then his pants pockets, patting himself down with a clear frustration on his face. "Aw - they took my flashbangs!"

"Uh, not the biggest problem right now - "

The biggest Lemurian was charging at them, muscles rippling under its fur, a good three inches taller than Fisk ever was. Immediately, Doyle was grappling with it, neither willing to budge an inch, though it was clear Doyle was losing in terms of strength.

That was, until Fisk came barreling in, tackling it low and knocking it off balance. With the path clear, the rest of the family came to join them, a defensive formation with Zak at the center, close to the windows, squaring off against the Lemurians. The family would either be captured here, or
they would push the lemurians back; like this, there was no way to retreat to a different part of the ship. But that was fine – if they were going to go down, they would do it together; that was what a family was.

About ten minutes had elapsed out of thirty. Twenty minutes left.

…As much as Zak hated to admit it, his family was starting to look like the underdogs, here.

The lemurians had initially been taken by surprise, but they’d since regrouped, and were clearly capable of fighting as a group just as much as the Saturdays were. To make matters worse, each was as strong as Fisk, if not moreso. The memories - and bruises - of Zak’s own fight with a lemurian were painfully fresh, and if all that the lemurians had to do was fend them off the controls until the ship touched down and reinforcements arrived...

Meanwhile, deep inside him, the voice that had kept quiet up until now let out a small, dark chuckle.

<Human child, you carry a great evil inside you.> Suddenly, a voice in his head. It felt as if the thought emanated from his own mind, resonating within him. A surprise, except Zak had been recently well-acquainted with foreign words inside his head - yes, if he'd been taken off-guard, he could almost have assumed the thought was his own.

Just like the stone statue at Shangri-La, the voice spoke with a smooth, sonorous tone that projected ancient knowledge and wisdom. It practically screamed trustworthy and benevolent, but perhaps because Zak was already expecting just that, or perhaps because of the black hole in his mind where the snake resided, all its charm was lost on him. If anything, his grip around the claw only tightened, as a sense of invaded privacy took hold.

<That darkness, is a cruelty beyond all comprehension. It announced its presence just a few hours ago, as if commanding the world to fall to its knees - and yet, when we fight you, we feel not the bloodlust presented to the world - why is that?>

"Zak?" Doc asked, noticing the stiffening of his son’s shoulders and the widening of his stance.

"They're talking to me," he replied to his father, and then, to the Lemurians, "you guys are about two years late to the party. War of the cryptids? Kur vs. Kur? That already happened. I'm not about to hurt anyone, so why don't we all just go home?"

The Lemurians - expressionless, unsettlingly so, compared to the range of emotions Zak had come to associate with Fisk - glanced at each other, a mental group huddle without physical movement. When they spoke again - somehow Zak could tell that the voice was coming from the aged one, clearly the leader, the one that had picked him up during the fight - it was so the entire family could hear.

<Zak,> they said, <we can sense your hesitation. There is something dark within you, isn't there? A different presence.>

"D...don't use my name," he said, though he winced at the truth.

"What are they talking about, Zak?" Drew asked, quietly.

<You yourself must realize what will happen if it is not contained. You must know it better than all of us. We, also, would like to avoid needless violence. It is clear now that your family truly cares for you...our apologies for the mistake. But the lives of billions hang in the balance; won't you make the right choice and come with us?>
Well, Zak? The other voice inside him was darkly amused. Zak hadn’t been expecting it to speak up, since it’d been so quiet up until now.

Even after everything, these children have only “good intentions.” That much, you can trust. In fact, I even have a guess as to what they intend to do with us…

Images flashed through his mind unbidden. Trees – pines – he knew the species. *Wollemia nobilis*, the Wollemi pine. Mom’s been trying to get a sapling for their cryptid greenhouse for ages. Amber – resin. Yes, its special attribute, a defense mechanism. When threatened, it releases a bubble of resin, supposedly impenetrable, that freezes everything in it as if trapping a moment in time.

Not just for a time, no. Not how the lemurians were intending to use it. Forever.

“You’re going to trap me in magic tree sap?!” Zak asked, incredulous. The Lemurians stiffened – as good as a yes in Zak’s mind. Clearly, they weren’t expecting him to know.

<…The return of Kur means that not even death is enough to keep it captive. The world will not be safe until it is permanently contained – >

But no one in the family was listening anymore.

Doc answered for them all. “If we weren’t about to hand him over to the Scientists that wanted him in cryostasis until they could ‘find a solution,’ we’re *not* handing him over to you.”

Zak raised his weapon in agreement.

<…Perhaps there is no reasoning with those Kur has touched, after all.> For the first time, the Lemurians emoted, lowering their heads and raising their hackles, baring their teeth in feral snarls.

Déjà vu, Zak thought.

“Get to the controls!” Doc yelled out, rushing in with fists raised high. With that, both sides sprang towards each other, fist and claw, tooth and steel.

Hahaha.

“Shut up,” Zak growled to the voice none could hear but himself.

Though each member of the family was well-versed in fighting – indeed, they were practiced fighting even the lemurians, having all sparred with Fisk during their training sessions – the coordination of their opponent was beginning to prove too difficult a challenge to overcome in their limited time. Communicating in complete silence, the lemurians could move to cover any weakness, blocked every attempt to push through. The ship continued sinking, the clouds rushing up to fill the windows with an impenetrable white.

Ten minutes left.

Zak and Fiskerton working in tandem while Komodo confused the enemy – every fighting instinct that had dulled since the Scientists were on their tail was sharpening as the fight wore on. Your arm, my leg, both ends, back-to-back. Carving a path to the main ship controls, as Doc and Drew scrambled madly to get their hands on the touchpad screens, what they needed most to secure.

But every time they swept one of the lemurians out of the way, another sprang up to take their place, a tight-knit teamwork. Like a net, or a fort’s rampart, they repelled any attempt to pass. For them, it was a matter of life-or-death on a global scale; every single one had come with the
conviction to do whatever was necessary to protect the world.

Five minutes left.

The clouds began to dissipate, and then parted entirely, as the ship pushed through them, the high, snowy peaks of a mountain raising up out of the ground to greet them. They were no closer to the controls than they had been at the start – even with everyone giving it their all, teeth grit and breath heavy with exertion – they weren’t going to make it. They weren’t going to make it in time.

And that was when they all saw it, everyone in the brig; a bright orange streak out the corners of their eyes banking and rolling through the clouds. The fight stilled as everyone turned to watch it.

Doc breathed out in disbelief.

“The…Griffin? But who…”

The eagles were chasing it, but instead of flying away, instead, it weaved tightly around the ship, the eagles losing their chances to seize it with their talons as they flapped madly to correct their inertia. All but ramming the garuda escorting the front, missing by a hair’s breadth, the Griffin led the eagles into each other, crashing and talon-locked, and, dazed and confused, the garuda let the jet slip away from them. It flew far out forward, toward the horizon, and it looked like whoever was piloting it would be able to escape – and then it turned around, looped back again…

“GET DOWN!” Drew yelled, mere moments before, at speeds nearly high enough to break the sound barrier, the Griffin came screaming at the front of the ship, crashing through the windows, shooting broken glass and bits of metal over everyone within.

Alarms went off in bright red flashing lights, the smell of fire and exhaust, a shudder that knocked everyone off their feet. Screeching as metal scraped against metal, as the Griffin fell out of the gaping hole it had created.

And Zak was airborne.

Like being dragged out by a hand made of wind pressure, Zak had been sucked through the break in the windows, shards of glass flying with him tearing at his skin, through his clothes. Breathless, windless, practically asphyxiating, he found himself in freefall thousands and thousands of feet above the ground, world spinning around him – no, he was spinning, tumbling without purchase no matter where his flailing hands grabbed, tears streaming out of his eyes from the wind and the biting cold.

Brief flashes in his vision – he’d shout out if his voice could sound – his family falling, the lemurians, too, the eagles flashing red and gold in the sunlight, great black talons reaching out for him, the Griffin underneath him with its window open –

The claws reaching for him whiffed so close to his body he could hear them clack shut, and then his entire body crashed into something hard, unforgiving, and everything hurt, everything hurt, everything hurt –

Noises – an incessant beeping, the sound of the window clicking shut, the droning of an engine, nervous tapping, claws against metal dashboard –

“Ehrm,” Muca’s voice, “the panel is telling me it’s been ‘critically damaged.’ You wouldn’t happen to know how to, ah, make it stop, would you?”

Muca –
“Stop,” Zak begged, broken, as he tried in vain to push himself off from the myriad supplies Muca had haphazardly tossed into the backseat. “Turn back – my family – we have to go back for them!”

“We’d lose,” she said, nervous. “they’ll be safe. I think. Probably.”

“You think?”

“The Lemurians wouldn’t hurt them. They are our…opposite? In ideology.”

“They’re falling – “

“The garuda will catch them. Innocents, you see, not to be sacrificed in pursuit.”

Zak, finally managing to pull himself up, ignoring the bruises and cuts and welts that ached and stung all over, pressing his hand against the glass, gazing back.

The eagles, the people, the ship, they were already so small on the horizon. At this distance, he couldn’t even tell debris apart from living being. Even if they turned back now, they’d never be able to make it in time. The only thing he could do was pray for the best, to whatever could answer his prayers.

Muca’s broken sob turned his attention away, back to the pilot’s seat, where she had awkwardly squeezed herself in.

“Oh, I thought we were going to die. I thought we were going to die and I would be eaten. Did you see the look in that garuda’s eye? I’m too delicious for my own good!”

A ridiculous statement that was just enough to snap Zak back to attention.

“Muca,” Zak said, suddenly serious, “do you know how to fly this ship?”

She perked up as her name was said. “Fly? Oh, yes, that was easy enough to figure out. Very intuitive. You see, tilt like this – “ the plane swerved to the side, sending Zak crashing into the assorted pile of stuff again “ – and it does that, tilt the other way – “

“Stop! Okay. Okay. Uh…” He grasped his head between his hands, trying to block out the pain and think.

“Erm, but, Just Zak, if I may…”

“What?” He snapped.

“I don’t know how to land it.”

Zak stared at her, uncomprehending.

“…What?”

“Erm, I don’t know how to land it. I can’t seem to make it slow down? I can only seem to go faster.”

“How did you even get it out of the hangar bay in the first place?!”

“Sheer desperation!” She replied, just as panicked.

“Move out of the way, let me see the controls – “
She obliged, snaking around the side of the seat to let Zak sit. He stared at the blinking lights and gas pedals, mind blanking, as he placed his hands on the joystick.

“Okay,” he mumbled to himself. Focus. Gotta figure it out. Worry about his family later – make it to the ground alive now.

Mom had given him lessons on how to pilot it before, once he turned fourteen. But he’d never been allowed to do the actual takeoff or landing; he only knew the basics of how to steer.

Think! What did he know about landing a plane?

First – c’mon, Zak, mom went through it on paper with you before, remember! – first, level the plane. Attitude indicator – his eyes searched for it on the dashboard. There it is – they were tilted from when Muca had demonstrated the controls; he eased the joystick to the right until they were level with the sky and the ground. As he eased off the controls and engaged the auto-land, the nose automatically dipped downwards just slightly. Alright, cleared step one.

Two – pull back the throttle, ease off the engine. He could hear it rumbling softer underneath him, until the clouds stopped screaming past and they were drifting, coasting. Almost pleasant, were it not for the rattling of Muca’s tail against what she’d thrown in the backseat, or the constant beeping from the ship indicating its heavy damage and need for repairs.

Three…actually landing. Oh boy. Slats and flaps were on the side of the throttle, let’s see…

“It’s gonna be rough,” he said out loud, though he wasn’t sure if he was trying to warn Muca or himself. Muca, for her part, kept her mouth shut, and only nodded, bracing against the walls.

The Griffin shuddered as the flaps raised and caught the wind, and Zak hurried to stabilize the ship, turn it in toward the crosswind. So, they had flaps.

Next, the slots – but as he opened them, the jet sank, and Zak panicked until he remembered that a sudden drop was normal.

…Right?

They seemed to be falling faster than they usually did with his mom at the helm, flying at an already low altitude over acres and acres of chaparral. But the display was confirming that their speed was dropping, which Zak had to count as a victory.

They continued their descent like that for several minutes, growing worryingly close to a large city in the distance. But pulling up now would also be dangerous, the way the ship’s flaps dragged on the wind. By now, Zak was sure that he’d opened up the flaps and slots too much, but he didn’t know how to ease them to halfway – they were stuck like this, it seemed.

The wilds gave way to carefully cultivated fields, farms. Pens with livestock; they were close enough now that Zak could make out the individual patterns of spots on the cows.

…and close enough to realize how fast they were still going. But it was too late to pull out of the landing, wheels engaged and spoiler ready; oh, god.

His parents should be able to cover all the massive collateral damage he was about to inflict, right?

“Hold on to something,” he yelled, bracing himself against the pilot seat. He didn’t have to turn to see Muca’s expression of pure, unadulterated fear.
They hit the ground with a bang, with a crash, with the angry rumble of wheels moving too fast. As if every part of the Griffin were protesting, creaking and crying, popping up over the uneven terrain as it skidded its way up and down over the hills.

Their wheels hit a rock with a loud, angry bang and the ship was tossed back in the air, crashing back into the ground with enough force to knock the wind out of Zak’s lungs. The wheels must have snapped off or something; the ship was leaning on its side as it continued to slide forward, leaving a trail of dust and a deep gouge in the earth.

They broke through a metal fence, crashed through a couple trees – an orchard, Zak thought, dazed – before finally hitting a stump dead-on and tossing everything out the front windshield (which had come loose when they first hit the ground). Everyone – Zak, Muca, supplies, and all – went tumbling into the dirt, bones rattled, muscles sore, but – miraculously – alive.

“Woo,” Zak said, rolling onto his back and weakly punching the air with his fist.

“Mujhe doktar se milana hai,” Muca agreed.

They lay there recovering for a long time, Zak letting his mind go blissfully blank. It could only have been a couple hours, maybe three, since he woke up, but he was already exhausted; every joint was sore, every muscle hurt to move, and he was probably still bleeding from a split lip or a cut or two, but, right now, all of that was nothing. They’d made it to the ground, they were alive, somehow, there were no major injuries – nothing short of a miracle. Heart pounding, coming off the adrenaline high, right now there was nothing but relief and exhaustion.

But it wasn’t long before all his worries came creeping back up to his consciousness, every anxiety expanding in the open air. His family – Muca said they were probably alright, and Muca hadn’t actually lied to him yet, but until he saw them with his own eyes he just couldn’t rest easy on that point.

Plus, where were they? His communicator had a GPS on it, he remembered. He nearly dropped the device on his own face as he pulled it out of his pocket and powered it up to check. Ah, so they had crashed right outside of Sacramento…

…Huh. He didn’t think that they were in America. Wasn’t Shangri-La somewhere in the Himalayas? What were lemurians doing out here?

…Speaking of lemurians…

Yes, the voice inside his head answered, we’re alive. I’m still here. Good job.

Zak groaned.

Because the Lemurians were right – Zak did know better than anyone just how much of a danger it would be if that thing inside of him went loose. And he was keeping it in check for now, but how long was that going to last?

Not very.

“Shut up, you.”

He let his hand fall back to the ground.

He had no idea where to even start looking for his parents, anyway. He could follow the track they’d gouged out of the ground for an idea of what direction to start the search, but they’d done so
much in-air maneuvering to get here that he had no idea how faithful the direction would be. Plus, the only real look he’d gotten of where the Lemurians were taking the family was an aerial view of some giant mountain, and California was just riddled with those, and they all looked the same from a bird’s-eye view.

Not that the Griffin would be in any condition to fly, after all this.

So did that mean…?

No. He couldn’t give up hope. There had to be something – *something* he could do – he was Zak freakin’ *Saturday*, the latest in a long line of daredevils, heroes, and geniuses; after he got some food in him, after he got some rest, he’d figure something out. He’d find a way to fix this whole mess. He had to. Not even just because of that indomitable Saturday spirit; if he didn’t throw himself entirely into making things right, if he didn’t make a plan, he might just go mad from the worry.

At the very least, he thought, if this was rock bottom, things couldn’t get any worse.

“Well, well, well,” a lilting voice accompanied by footsteps came floating out over the wreckage. Even upside-down, Zak would recognize the bottom of that horrible outdated forest-green trench coat anywhere.

He *had* to stop jinxing himself like this.

“Here lies our golden boy, Zak Saturday. I wonder what sort of utter disaster he’s gotten himself mixed up in this time.”
“Hey, Francis,” Zak said, sarcasm and irritation dripping from every word. “You come around here often?”

Chapter End Notes

welcome 2 da jam
Francis, or, as Zak would put it, the worst. At what? Well, just in general - worst guy to be around, worst guy to look at, just, you know. The worst. So, of course he’d show up here: rock bottom.

Zak pointedly decided to ignore the gloved hand Francis offered to help him up, opting instead to drag his battered body to its feet on his own. Leaning against a nearby tree for support, he crossed his arms and only glared, Francis’s expression remained as detached and smug behind his tinted goggles and his one flappy bang of white hair.

“What,” Zak spat, “are you doing here.”

“When our systems reported a high-power anomaly across several key observational sites, I had a hunch.” He smiled. “And look what we have here. Mommy’s Boy is going through a rebellious stage; I never thought I’d see the day.”

Zak’s fingers curled up into his sleeves. A high-power anomaly? He could only guess at what that could have been.

“I thought we agreed to never see each other again.”

“Yes, well, and I thought perhaps you’d be smart enough to understand that that’s only possible if you don’t get in too much trouble. Alas, it seems the apple falls far from the trees, where intelligence is concerned. Pity, I thought the Saturday genes were stronger.”

He shrugged, raising his arms, before continuing. “Believe it or not, I have every intention of following through with our prior agreement. I’m simply here to confirm that I can.”

“What’s stopping you?” Zak asked.

Francis gestured at the wreckage of the Griffin.

“I fail to believe that this happened due to something my People can just ignore. Which makes it something I just can’t ignore.”

“Try anyways,” Zak said, turning on his heel to limp back to the wreck and salvage what he could. Sacramento was, on foot, what, a day’s trek, maybe two? Less if he could hitchhike.

In the backseat of the Griffin, Muca had piled in practically everything she could steal from the kitchen, looked like. Packets of raw chicken were already festering in the sun, still sealed in shrinkwrap. An entire smashed carton of eggs was splattered all across the passenger side. Cabbages. Carrots. Some strange fruit he forgot the name to that came from the jungles of Sumatra.

Oh, look at that, a miniature cortex disruptor from the experimental vault. Nice catch, Muca.

“Tell me what’s going on, Zak,” Francis said, his tone softening. “The sooner we resolve this mess, the sooner we can all go home.”

“What’s going on is ‘none of your business,’” Zak snapped back. “I had a bad day, took the Griffin out for a spin, and did not stick the landing. As you can see.”
“You don’t expect me to believe that, do you?”

“And you don’t actually expect me to believe you’re just down here to ‘check in.’” He turned around, the mini-disruptor in hand, stance widening. “What’s your ulterior, Francis? If you’re down here it means there must be something really juicy in it for you. I wonder what that is.”

Francis’s fingers went up to the sonic collar around his neck. “You really don’t want to jump to any hasty conclusions, Zak. Is it so hard to believe I might have a vested interest in not having to interact with you any more than I have to?”

“No, it isn’t,” Zak replied, “which is exactly how I know that you ARE talking to me right now because you think you’ll get something out of it.”

“…Hm,” Francis said, his neutral expression finally twisting into a smirk. “I suppose I take back what I said before. You have gotten smarter than the last time I saw you.”

Zak’s voice lowered into a growl – a threat. “Go home.”

“Make me.”

Zak drew his weapon and fired.

With a trained efficiency, Francis moved just a few inches to the left to dodge the beam with only a half-inch to spare, before lunging to the side and firing off a sonic blast. Zak was already anticipating it, however, and was already well out of the way by the time it hit, putting some distance between them, as they both ran along the even rows of trees. In between the wooden trunks he fired off shot after shot, bright blue arcing through the branches and always just barely missing their target.

“Stop jumping around so much so I can shoot you,” Zak grumbled.

“What’s wrong, Zak? Out of practice? Can’t help but notice that that little headache problem of yours seems to have cleared itself up.” God, even his voice was punchable.

But as much as Zak wanted to bite out a retort, he WAS out of practice. At the very least, that was going to be the excuse he would use, since this was getting downright embarrassing. His aim was still good, but whatever training the People were putting Francis through, it was working wonders.

At least Zak still had the upper hand in sheer endurance. Split-second evasions like that were a drain on stamina – Zak knew this from experience. He just had to tire Francis out a little, bit by bit. The jumpy little bastard could only keep it up for so long.

So they continued to trade shots between the trees, the lizards and birds scattering from the sound of gunfire and supersonic blasts that never hit their marks, their feet kicking up dust and pebbles as they skidded, twisted, dodged, and ran. The exertion was starting to wear on the both of them, until finally Francis seemed to be slowing down, the sweat on his pale skin leaving small dark spots in the dirt wherever they fell. Yeah, just like that.

Ready, aim…

The trigger clicked, but no bolt shot out. A red light was flashing on the back panel of the gun when Zak glanced down, teeth snapping shut in frustration.

Out of power. How could it already be out of power?!
“Frick.”

Francis raised an eyebrow. “Only thirty shots?”

“I guess that’s why it’s experimental,” Zak said, holstering it on his belt loop and pulling the Claw out in one motion. That was fine. Whatever. He could deal with it. He was better at hand-to-hand anyways! And Francis’s smug grin looked like it needed a good beating.

Francis took the invitation, taking just one moment to gather himself before lunging straight through the few trees in between them. Just as they were about to meet –

A flash of red and black, and it was only Francis’s training that saved him from death by impalement at the business end of an ancient, faded greatspear.

Zak couldn’t believe his eyes. “Muca…”

“I – I’ll protect you with my life!” She’d already pulled the spear back out of the ground, at the ready, waiting for Francis to make another move, her tail twitching with a nervous energy. Zak had completely forgotten about her in the midst of his scuffle with Francis – and about how fast she could move over uneven terrain.

But that wasn’t the most surprising thing about her appearance. No – what was most surprising was what she was wearing. On her hands, to keep her safe from the greatspear’s magical ward against snakes…

“…You stole mom’s oven mitts!” Zak shouted.

“I stole many more things than that!” She yelled back.

Francis just let out an appreciative hum. “A naga, is it? …Tsk tsk. Zakarya J. Saturday, what have you gotten yourself into.”

“When we kill him,” Muca said, trying to put on a false display of bravado despite her obvious terror, “will I be allowed to eat him?”

“Wh – no!” Zak tried to shove her out of the way. “No one’s eating anyone!”

He glanced down at the disruptor – it was recharging in the sunlight, but slowly – he had maybe one shot on it. Two at best.

“Th…then…the killing?” She seemed terribly confused. “We are killing this one, right?”

“No!”

Francis interjected in a mock-pleasant tone. “That’s a little naïve, don’t you think?”

“You,” Zak said, pointing at him, “can shut up. And YOU,” this time directed at the naga, “can go home. In fact, how about we all go home.”

“That’s not happening, and you’re stupid for suggesting it,” Francis said.

“My home is wherever you are, Just Zak,” Muca said.

“I hate both of you so much,” Zak said.

Francis just shrugged. “Well, since we are all in agreement – “
“Secret attack!” Muca yelled. “Metal eggs!”

“Metal what?” Francis asked.

Zak screamed, the last sound they heard before the flash-bang of the explosions going off.

“The one who stole Doyle’s stun grenades was YOU?!”

…Ringing in his ears.

First that, then his other senses, one-by-one coming back online. The dirt beneath his palms, the grass between his fingers. The spots in his vision clearing as he blinked at the sky between the leaves. The dull ache from every battered, bruised bone in his body.

And, slowly becoming apparent, the sound of shouting just a short distance away from him. He heaved himself back into a sitting position, exhausted and drained of energy, watching Muca and Francis trade blows.

Or, rather, watching Francis deliver blows the snake was barely able to keep up with, the thick leather of his gloves thudding off the wood of Sharur’s handle with every hit. Every instant their weapons met pushed Muca back just a few inches closer to Zak, until she was standing her ground close enough for Zak to make out the individual scales running down her back.

He hated this.

He hated being the target, he hated people trying to protect him, he hated people pinning so much hope on him only to throw themselves away for his sake.

And if ANYONE was going to get the privilege of beating Francis’s face in, it was going to be him, and not Muca.

Gritting his teeth, digging his heels into the ground, he grabbed the claw and lunged for an opening as Francis drew back for a strike. Surprised at the sudden attack, Francis had to dodge to get out of the way, the first opening he’d had the entire fight.

As the end of the claw whiffed, Zak and Muca shared a glance. Quickly, she took advantage of the opening Zak had created, swinging the other end of the spear toward Francis’s head.

His arms came up to block the blow, but he felt it under the thick cloth of his coat, and staggered. Thinking fast, he used the momentum to distance himself, the tip of Zak’s follow-through snagging on the end of his coat as he went.

All three of them were breathing hard, and it was hard to tell who was in the worst shape. Between them, Muca had the biggest advantage in base strength, a naga’s body and reflexes, but she was seriously untrained, and both Zak or Francis could easily handle her. Meanwhile, Zak was beaten badly from the day’s prior events…and Francis was outnumbered. Even two-on-one, this could be anyone’s fight.

Problem was, it wasn’t anyone’s fight. This was between him and Francis.

Zak stepped forward, and, reading his cue, Muca drew back. Francis was rubbing his arms where the spear had hit, glowering and ready to respond to any move Zak might make, the two of them circling each other, waiting for the first strike.

“The sad thing is, by resisting this much you’ve already proven to me both that you’re a part of
whatever’s going on, AND that you know my People will want a slice,” Francis growled. “I don’t want THEM finding out any more than you do. Think using your whole brain instead of just your pituitary, for once!”

“Like I’m gonna buy that,” Zak spat back. “If that was the case, I’m sure you’d find a way to futz with the data back on your home planet.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“It’s what you guys do for a living.”

Francis raised his fists again. “Seems like we’re doing this the hard way, then.”

“Good,” Zak said, and charged.

They met with the dull sound of metal against leather, or whatever kind of padded armor Francis had on under his coat. So, him rubbing his arms like they hurt – that’d been a show, after all. God, could Francis ever do anything without tricks, without his shady manipulation?

Francis was trained to move on split-second reactions. One fight with him like this, and Zak could tell – every block, every dodge, every shift of balance was masterful. He predicted Zak’s moves with ease, analyzing Zak’s patterns, the way he moved his body. Finding the patterns, moving for a swift neutralization.

Good.

Fighting cryptids was nothing like fighting humans. Mom used to say, during sparring matches, that sometimes beginners could get a few lucky hits in against veterans, because veterans became accustomed to certain movements, and the random flailing of a new student was unpredictable.

Cryptids were like new students, mixed with deadly speed and an arsenal of nature’s greatest defenses. So Zak had been trained in his mother’s native Lion’s Roar; he’d been drilled in Xiao Lin and Tae Kwon Do, but he’d learned just as much from his parents as he did mother nature herself. Twitchy animals that could read every subconscious signal your body could send, with hidden claws and venom fangs, a wildness that made people...tame.

It wasn’t hard to make Francis think he had the upper hand. His ego was big enough to block out the sun. All Zak had to do was pause a half-second longer after every blow, pretend like all his dodges were lucky breaks, let a couple smaller passes land.

If Zak had practiced only martial arts, he’d lose. If he’d only perfected his stances and techniques, then Francis would have an advantage so wide the battle would have been lost before it’d even begun. Whatever standards the People held him to must have been near perfection; Francis already moved like an old master, efficiently – effortlessly – redirecting Zak’s momentum, controlling the flow of the battle.

That was how Zak trapped him. He let himself get knocked “off-balance” and feigned an opening he knew Francis couldn’t resist, flailing with his claw to keep Francis’s attention away from the empty hand reaching for his belt. Francis didn’t even notice the miniature cortex disruptor until it had been pinned against his chest, staring at it with disbelief.

"When did you..."

“Night-night,” Zak said, cheerfully, and pulled the trigger, the lightning blue flash sparking all across Francis’s body, leaving him a crumpled heap on the ground. His muscles spasmed a couple
Finally, Zak let himself relax, hunching over and clutching his ribcage where he’d let Francis hit him. A reckless tactic, maybe, but when had Zak Saturday been anything but? The disruptor being experimental and all, he didn’t expect its stun effect to last very long. Better to leave while he still could, get a head start and lose the grey man in the crowd of Sacramento.

He only managed to hobble a few steps away before something caught his foot and tripped him, the claw flying out of his grasp.

“That was…unpleasant,” Francis said, yanking Zak back into the ring. He looked frazzled by the blast, his normally smooth hair sticking out at odd angles, his breath harsh and ragged through his nose, but he was nowhere near incapacitated.

Fuck experimental equipment. Fuck whatever kind of armor Francis was wearing that messed with the pulse.

Zak raised the disruptor again, only for Francis to grab his wrist and torque it, forcing Zak’s grip open as he bit down on his cheek so as not to yell out in pain. He brought his free leg up and kicked against Francis’s chest, forcing him back a couple paces, giving Zak just enough time to struggle back to his feet.

Francis growled and lunged at Zak’s throat, angry like Zak had never seen him.

But without a weapon, Zak was at a disadvantage, and they both knew it. His body was probably tougher than Francis’s, but it wasn’t covered in Kevlar, and it had already been exhausted from nonstop days of beatdown after brutal beatdown.

He braced himself for the hit, but it didn’t come; at the last moment, Muca had charged in with Sharur, pushing Francis aside.

“You…will have to go through me!”

He stumbled but didn’t lose his balance, his expression twisting with frustration, and he changed his priority.

“Fine.”

Poor Muca didn’t even know what hit her. Within seconds, Sharur was ripped out of her grasp, and Francis had her pinned against a tree by her neck, the writhing of her body useless against his grip.

“Last I remember,” he snarled, "the Nagas were firmly on the ‘threat’ side of the threat calculation index. Does this make me the ‘good guy’ in this scenario?"

“Gkkrkrt,” Muca gurgled.

“Get away from her!” Zak yelled, scraping out just enough energy from his battered body to run at him. He tackled Francis down, Muca crumpling to the ground coughing and sputtering, her claws scratching against the dented scales.

Francis kicked the Saturday off, and Zak fell, winded and out of breath.

“This is it, Zak,” Francis said, crouching down and lunging for him.

This can’t be it, Zak thought, glaring. Letting the instinct he’d honed from years in the field take
over, his fingers found the worn shaft of Sharur, and, with the last ounce of strength in his body, with Francis bearing down on him, he struck.

Without even realizing it, he’d thrust it in Francis’s direction speartip-first. Francis, with his rigorously trained instincts, managed to dodge, but, exhausted from the protracted battle, he wasn’t fast enough to move his head completely out of the way; the edge of the rusted spear cut the side of his cheek as it moved, its dull edge wetting with Francis’s blood.

He stumbled and fell, hitting the dirt with both hands, immediately rolling to the side in case Zak or Muca was trying to take advantage of the opening, only to find that neither of them had moved. Instead, they were staring at something, transfixed, and Francis turned to see what was going on.

The moment the head had had sliced Francis open, the weapon jumped to life in Zak’s hands, ripping itself away into the air. The greatspear Sharur was now glowing a brilliant white, levitating, floating three feet off the ground with the tip pointed towards the earth. Around them, the wind had deadened, like the world was holding its breath, waiting.

And then, Sharur fell, like an invisible hand was stabbing it into the ground, driving the spearpoint all the way down to the matted fur where it joined the wood, the white light burning itself into the ground in an outward design, leaving a scorched pattern in its wake. Zak scrambled out of the way as the drawing etched itself into the soil, the white light flowing out of the spear like water, flowing outwards to an ancient scrawl in a ring around the design, before dissipating into the breeze.

Francis’s eyebrows had raised high enough to just about leave his head.

“Spears…don’t…do that,” he said.

Zak just let himself slump to the ground in a small puff of dust.

“Oh man. You can tell I’ve had a bad week, since this is actually only the fourth weirdest thing that’s happened to me so far.”

Muca dragged herself over to look.

“Oh dear,” she said, sitting back on her coils.

“Can you read that, Muca?” he asked, poking at the words that had been burnt into the ground.

“Yes,” she said, nervously. “But I don’t like it. Oh, no. I don’t like it very much a lot.”

Francis decided to ignore the two idiots, pacing around it in a circle, his original objective forgotten. This – whatever this was – this was definitely more important.

“It’s a map,” he said to himself. “But what’s that language written on the outside?”

“Ancient Sumerian,” Zak answered. “I wish mom was here, she can read it way better than me. I sort of recognize some of it…”

“This, we should destroy it immediately,” Muca said, clenching her fists. “Just Zak, this is a danger to your eventual rightful reign! It is an affront to your power!”

“Is it, now.” Francis was smiling to himself. “How so?”

“Muca, shut up,” Zak hissed.
“…Oh. I said too much. Well, being alive was pleasant but I do not mind paying for my transgressions!”

Francis just made a pompous “hmph” noise, arms crossed and fingers tapping on his sleeve with a little impatience.

“So, ‘Just Zak,’” he said, “let me see if I have the gist of the situation. Your powers are back, and they threaten all of humanity – again. And you were forced on the run because of it. Not by your parents, no; those people would fight for you even if you grew six arms and started eating puppies for breakfast. And not the Secret Scientists, because if it were them, my People would already know. And now this,” he gestured to the map still burned into the ground, “whatever it is, apparently holds some key to saving the world from you. How’s my aim?”

The fact that Zak refused to look at him was answer enough.

Francis’s hand went to his chin as he considered the options. Right now, there were the three of them in the clearing: one in a long series of superspy clones, one embodiment of the ultimate evil, and a naga hatchling wearing goofy flower-print oven mitts. Zak’s family was unaccounted for, likely because some unknown force or faction had separated him from them. That force couldn’t be the Secret Scientists; if it were, Francis’s People would know. But then, who? The nagas? But surely, if it was them, there’d be more than just this whelp. The Nagas were on file as moving as a unit.

“I think,” he said, one he’d decided his course, “we should have the Naga tell us what this map says.”

Zak raised an eyebrow. “I didn’t know you could think.”

Francis pretended not to notice the comment. “If this can get rid of the Kur problem, then there’s no reason for the People to intervene, which means there’s no reason for me to stick around. If it can’t, then it’s back to fighting in the dirt like animals. There’s literally no disadvantage for you. Surely you can understand that.”

Zak rolled his eyes, but Francis was right. Part of him thought it might be a moot point – it was probably another “cure” like the Flute of Gilgamesh had been, where getting rid of his powers only came at the cost of his own life.

“Muca, you said you could read it. What does it say?”

“Bad things,” she said, quietly, muffled behind the oven mitts. “I…I do not…is it an order to read it aloud?”

It was only natural she was hesitating, if it really was a “cure” like he was expecting. But – even if it was just a way to bide a bit more time to recover his breath – on the tiniest, slightest chance that Gilgamesh had left behind a miracle – he also had to know.

“Yeah. It’s an order.”

The naga gulped, and then, slowly slithering around to the first passage, she began to translate.

“Child of Humanity, proven by blood,
Who has sought for my guidance, I bestow it upon you.
I, Gilgamesh, king of men, give you Sharur,
And, with its blade, the remnants of my will.
“At each of these locations, drive Sharur into the earth.
   Let it drink from the vitality beneath the soil.
These energies, when gathered, in number, five,
   Will grant you the power that you must seek.

“Driven through the Serpent, Sharur will cauterize its soul, and,
   Without wounding the flesh, will banish its Flame.
Leaving it naught but a Snake, to be judged by the hands of
   Humanity. That from whence we came.

“For this grave task, I name you my heir.

“May Sharur protect you;
May your conviction guide you.

“May your feet walk always of the wind, on solid earth.”

Everyone had fallen silent save the chirping of birds, the wind in the leaves, two minds scrabbling
to understand what they had just heard.

Muca rubbed her neck awkwardly. “Or something like that. I tried to preserve the nuance of the
original language…”

“…Well, Zak. It looks like you found your out.”

Zak was still shocked, only able to nod dumbly. “Yeah.”

What little he could make out matched with what Muca had said, so he found no reason to doubt
her reading. More importantly…

“‘Without wounding the flesh’…Does that mean I don’t have to die for it to work?”

“It seems so,” Muca said, sadly. “This is a blasphemy beyond all possible blasphemies…the
humans truly know nothing of shame.”

“If I…if I show this to the Lemurians, then…”

Francis quirked an eyebrow at the name, but didn’t say anything. Muca was already shaking her
head.

“Those…have never listened to reason. I, Muca, would not trust them to assist you. Why gamble
on a human’s attempt to strip a deity of its divinity when they could guarantee safety with their
own hands? They are not our allies, Just Zak.” She seemed to realize she was lecturing him, and
immediately shrunk back into a submissive posture. “…Th…that is how I would counsel you.”

Zak’s hands curled in the dirt, but he found himself inclined to believe her words. A part of him
(though it was a part he wanted to pretend didn’t exist) agreed with her assessment of the
Lemurians’ personalities. To be honest…if their first thought regarding his family was that he’d
somehow brainwashed them into helping him, then he didn’t think they would be very willing to
help him here.

But as he picked out the major landmasses from the map – the Koreas, the tip of Florida, the island
of Madagascar – something else dawned on him.

He didn’t have transportation. Each location on the map was in a different continent, and one even
looked like it was in the middle of the ocean; with the Griffin totaled and the airship stationed who-knows-where, how could he even make it to the HQ to get a new ride, much less fly out to the middle of China?

…But maybe…well…

He didn’t like it, but he and Muca couldn't have been the only ones to have travelled to Sacramento by air.

“You’ve been pretty quiet about this, Francis. What are you thinking?”

Francis chose his words carefully. “I’m thinking…that you need a lift.”

“Well, if you’re offering…”

“I’m not,” he said, tersely. “To be completely honest, I’m already tired of dealing with you. Now that the risk assessment is over, I can go home.”

“That’s all I need,” Zak said. “A ride home. Then I can grab something out of our hangar and be on my way. We’re in Sacramento, so it’ll only be an hour or two…”

He got up and made for the spear, gingerly stepping over the map. But when his hand reached out to touch it...

“Ow!” he yelped, dropping it like it’d burned him. And, indeed, it had: the skin on his palm where he’d grabbed and pulled it out of the ground was red, puffy. He immediately put it to his mouth, sucking it clean before it could get infected.

“Disgusting,” Francis commented.

“Shuh uhp.” He shook his hand out, the wound still stinging. “It didn’t do that before.”

“It did to me,” Muca said, cheerfully. She held up her hands, with the oven mitts on. “That is why I stole these.”

The spear had rolled to Francis’s feet, and, curious, he picked it up. Through the leather of his gloves, it didn’t seem to have any effect on him.

…This warranted testing.

He pulled the glove off his left hand, holding it in his right, aware that all eyes were on him. He pressed a finger against the wooden shaft.

Nothing.

Two fingers. Nothing. Three? Still nothing. Four, then five, and then he was holding it in his left hand, rolling the wood between his naked fingers. It felt…warm, a little too warm, like if he closed his eyes and listened very hard, he could hear it breathing.

“It…almost feels like it’s alive,” he mused aloud.

Zak let himself collapse back into a squat on the ground, tired. “It probably is. Old stuff like that… mom would say it’s full of magic from here to heaven.”

“How scientific of her.”
“That’s what dad would say.”

“So the spear has a mind of its own. Fantastic. What does that mean in practical terms?”

“You are the heir,” Muca said, raising a little. “The heir Gilgamesh named. It is said only Gilgamesh was able to wield Sharur in the days he was alive…”

“…No,” Zak said, furiously shaking his head. “Nuh-uh. You’re not telling me I have to work together with Francis to visit all these places.”

“Is that what being named ‘heir’ would mean?” Francis asked, horror creeping into his voice.

“Most likely!” Muca chirped. “These places, from the description, seem to be areas with high concentrations of natural power. Our kind refer to them as huaca. It may not be possible to enter without that damnable human’s blessing! That is to say, you!”

“Zak,” Francis said, through grit teeth, “what have you gotten me into?”

“What have I gotten you into?” Zak snapped, angry. “I don’t want you to be a part of this any more than you do! I don’t even know why you’re here. But if you’re the only one that can do it, you’ve gotta. Because, if you don’t, then it’s gonna be a lot more than just a spanking from Epsilon at stake.”

The two stared each other down, neither willing to budge an inch. What are you gonna do about it? Zak thought, tired and exhausted and absolutely not willing to put up with Francis any longer, and eventually Francis broke his gaze, giving an angry sigh and jamming his hands in his pockets, Sharur tucked under an arm.

“…Fine. I’ll think about it. We can stay the night in Sacramento – in different rooms – and decide what to do tomorrow.”

Zak looked like he was about to protest, but Francis cut him off by holding up his hand.

“If I am going to be a part of this…’adventure,’ then I’ll need to know everything you know. And if you’re going to be sitting in my ship for any extended period of time, you need a shower. At least a shower.” He glared at Muca. “Both of you. I won’t budge on this.”

Zak glared at him, too tired and hungry to fight him on the terms.

"Fine," he said. “You’re paying."

The door to Zak’s room swung open with a soft click, and Francis tucked the thin plastic card he had specifically for opening doors back into his wallet. Maybe if they’d stayed somewhere ritzy, it wouldn’t be so easy to shimmy the lock, but Zak hadn’t fought him about choosing a middling-level motel in the outskirts of the city, and all it took was jiggling the latch a little and the door popped right open.

Now then.

Lemurians, Gilgamesh, Nagas, and Kur…none of it was particularly important, was it? Here were the facts, as Francis understood them:
1: Zak was an uncontrolled threat to the world at large, until he gained control,
2: There was definitely something Zak wasn’t telling him, something that made him more
determined than Francis had ever seen him to lock his own powers away, and
3: It was hideously easy to slip something in Zak’s drink, and it should have already kicked in.

The naga, Muca, had been told to sleep outside. After all, it wasn’t exactly like they could just
check her in. She didn’t seem to have any problem with it, especially after Francis had gotten Zak
to ask her, and being in a major human settlement seemed to unnerve her anyways.

So Francis was…quite surprised to find her in Zak’s room, hidden around the corner, two big red
eyes staring at him.

Immediately, Francis put his hands up in surrender, backing away. He could take the naga in a
fight and they both knew it, but that wasn’t his goal. No, his goal was...

His eyes fell on the bed in the room, its covers disturbed, but no one underneath.

“…Funny,” Francis said. “The zolpidem should have him out like a light. And you aren’t supposed
to be here.”

“Um…Francis. That was it, your name, was it? Or is that your title?”

She seemed nervous, definitely not gearing up for an attack.

“…It’s…my name,” he said, wondering how much Zak would have told this creature. He didn’t
seem to be on too good of terms with her, despite the obvious worship she seemed to hold for him.

She didn’t seem to notice the hesitation in his voice. Frankly, she didn’t seem to notice much of
anything, but somehow Francis had the hunch that she was more competent than she appeared to
be. After all, she translated the map with room to spare for “nuance,” and the records indicated that
nagas were cunning as a species. She’d introduced herself as a historian, and had already won over
Zak’s trust, for the most part…so Francis refused to let down his guard.

“Then, yes, Francis, I was told to expect you? And to, erm, direct you to the roof.”

She gestured to the open window, the fire escape outside. Francis walked over and peered out,
watching Muca out the corner of his eyes.

“*It* waits for you,” she said, quietly. “I would not…be slow.”

Ominous.

He registered the feeling and discarded it, his feet meeting the black wrought-iron without a sound,
practiced and quiet.

And what was waiting for him at the top was Zak, of course. There wasn’t really anything else
Francis was expecting.

But the Zak Saturday he had on file was not the kind to be lounging leisurely on a motel roof at
1:48 am, closing the email app on his communicator, after having taken an adult dosage of
Ambien. Francis had never seen him this calm before.

“Look up,” it said, pointing towards the sky. “*Tell me what you see.*”

Francis did as asked, careful not to let his guard down. The night air was cool, even through his
coat, and even at this hour the sound of distant traffic rumbled on through the night. A train sounded, miles and miles away.

“There’s a full moon,” Francis said, unsure what else he was supposed to be looking at.

“Yes,” said whatever was using Zak’s body. “The full moon, and nothing else. The city lights hold all the stars at bay.”

Francis kept his cool, hands jammed in his pockets. He could already basically guess what it was that was sitting in front of him – a being inestimably colder than he was, ancient beyond reckoning.

The Serpent, huh.

“I hardly believe you called me up here to ask me to go stargazing.”

It laughed, humorless. “It seems ‘my’ predictions regarding you were accurate enough. Very well: why did you enter my room tonight?”

Francis kept his expression closed, but his mind was whirring. He deduced that the question was rhetorical, and that this was very much not someone – or something – he wanted to get caught lying to.

Better to stay quiet. Though he couldn’t see its expression in the night, the Serpent was surely smiling.

“Heir to Gilgamesh: neither you nor your kind will be able to harness this power. There is no use in the effort.”

What a confident statement. True, should his People obtain Zak for themselves, bending his power to their purposes was absolutely what they had in mind – whether through persuasion, coercion, or worse. Now Francis had the feeling the first two wouldn’t work.

“Argost managed. So can we.”

“And where is the yeti now?”

Francis glowered. “Ripped from existence, according to our files. We won’t make his mistake.”

“If your ‘files’ aren’t even capable of answering such a simple question, then they are of no use to you, fool.” It turned, the cold, unnatural orange burning in its eyes sending an involuntary chill down Francis’s spine, though he refused to show it.

He pursed his lips. Meaning that Argost must be alive, a disquieting thought on its own, but right now…right now there was a bigger threat before him. It stared him down like it was peering into his soul, behind the layers and layers of self-control. He refused to show it fear.

“Perhaps,” it mused, “I should ask this instead: what use will there be for an organization that directs the world governments, when there are no governments to direct?”

Francis’s fist clenched just a little tighter, a lapse in control he would surely be disciplined for, if Epsilon or the others were watching. What’s stopping you? He wanted to ask, but the better question was always how do you benefit?

Of course, the Serpent may just be trying to bluff him out. With as catastrophic a threat as the existence of Kur – not as in Zak, but as in a “Kur” like the old legends, entirely willing to use the
weapons at his disposal – the fact that no such movement had been made was a red flag on its own. If it hadn’t moved, it was likely it couldn’t move; if it couldn’t move, then it was likely trying to trick Francis into leaving it alone.

But when he met the Serpent’s gaze, he became convinced that was not the case. This was not a creature of treachery and cunning, but one of such magnanimous weight that neither cunning nor treachery ever needed to be employed.

Then…

“…I am correct in assuming that killing you now will do nothing for me.”

A threat on this scale had to be neutralized immediately, one way or another. At the very least, it couldn’t be ignored, but something about its calm confidence told Francis that it had little, if anything, to fear.

“There born of the magic of the earth shall always return in time,” it said. “The fenghuang breathes, flaps, dies, and breathes again. The Lemurians were rent from this earth by Naga fang, but see: they walk once more. So it is with us all.”

Behind his goggles, Francis narrowed his eyes. In other words, Kur – all cryptids – seemed to have immortality, of a sort. Reincarnation may be a better word. It seemed like a hefty secret to give out so freely, something hard to believe and heavy.

And still, he did not know how the Serpent benefitted.

“You almost sound like you want me to run Sharur’s gauntlet,” he said, emotionlessly.

“The one who loses forfeits their rights to ask the winner’s favor,” it replied, just as cool. “Gilgamesh was the victor; I shall respect his will, and the one he has named his heir. To a point.”

Ah, a catch.

“In roughly two month’s time there will be a blue moon. On that auspicious day, I shall consume my human aspect. At that point, I shall be born anew…and all debts owed will be cleared.”

In the end, it was a stupid sense of honor that had kept the Serpent from moving? Somehow, that didn’t seem right. Rather, it felt like there were many secrets being held, both by and from himself, and it unsettled him.

“…In other words, on that day, I’ll be your first target.”

The Serpent gave another hollow laugh, not denying the statement.

“A self-serving point of view.”

“I am a self-serving person. That’s why we’re having this conversation.”

“Hm.”

Like it was being gracious, the Serpent turned away, allowing Francis time to consider his options.

This was definitely a new perspective to his situation. Most pressingly, there was the use of the word “consume,” and the fact that this…thing had only manifested as a result of the influx of memories that came with the initial contact Zak had with Sharur. Even if the People were to use Argost’s methods of transferring the power, there was no guarantee that this identity would not
And if the zolpidem hadn’t been able to subdue the identity, then it was likely it transcended chemical responses, somehow. Meaning cryogenic stasis may not even be enough to hold it.

The space station would be safe, since as far as anyone knew, they were several miles above the range of the atmospheric jellyfish, and there was nothing else in Kur’s arsenal that could touch them. But…even if the atmospheric jellyfish were the only things in range, it could still spell disaster for the organizations the People watched.

Zak’s capabilities during the cryptid war were terrifying enough. Instantaneous communication of all senses across the planet, from multiple sources, directing a global effort with just his mind and a couple cans of an energy drink. It wouldn’t be exaggerating to say it was the kind of power that could destroy the humans as a species, even with all their technological advancements. If Zak struck at a few key locales, at a few key people…Francis knew intimately just how fragile the world’s governments were.

An optimistic estimate for how long the humans could stand a chance was a month. A realistic one was closer to a fortnight.

The most frustrating aspect of this conundrum – second to having to work in close proximity to Zak Saturday – was the vague mysticism that surrounded and obfuscated every aspect of the problem. A hero’s quest delivered by ancient spear? A looming evil in the form of a million-year-old evil personality? The arbitrary time limit set to the blue moon? In a word, ridiculous. It was like grappling an enemy without a form, trying to catch the fog with nothing but your bare hands.

At least with Zak, the People could take their time, since the boy himself was so reluctant to use his powers to their fullest. There would be no such mercy with this being at the helm.

So there was really only one course available to him. Until he had more information, he had to play along with the game.

“Until the blue moon, you say. You won’t interfere?”

“I keep my promises,” it said, coldly. “My human aspect will do as he will.”

“It’s not a lot of time,” Francis said.

“Do not barter with me, Child of Humanity. Until the blue moon. That is as long as my fangs will wait.”

There were, of course, many things Francis wanted to ask, but it seemed the conversation was over, as the Serpent turned back to the sky, untouched by the concrete, the city, the concerns of the mortal world.

“It’s a deal, then,” Francis said, retreating.

An ancient snake, powerful enough to have been considered a god. Mysticism that could be taken for magic, and a deadline that loomed over him as the light of the moon. The nagging hunch that the situation was much more complex than the Serpent tried to make it appear; the disquiet that came with how far off the rails his train had jumped.

But that didn’t matter; what mattered was how Francis would face it. And, on the way down the fire escape, his rigid self-control relaxing, he made himself a pledge.
Whatever happened, he *would* come out of it the victor. That was what Epsilon would do, that was what the *People* would do, and that was what every Francis that ever came before him would do. There was no situation that could not be profited from, there was no existence that could not be made useful.

So long as he made it out alive…he’d make it out on top.

Failure was not an option.
Last time Doyle had to break into the Saturday HQ, it’d been with Van Rook and the cheapest grenades money could buy. This time, he had only Zon and the jetpack on his back.

And the passcode to the front gate. Which made the whole thing a little easier.

It’d been one night since the Lemurians had captured the rest of the family as they fell out the front of the airship, Doyle and Zon just barely managing to escape the eagles. Doyle had tried to help his sister, brother-in-law, get them out there, but when he’d gotten close, Drew had just grabbed him by the shoulders and yelled over the wind for him to find Zak, find whoever was piloting the Griffin, save him.

The parents…they’d be alright. Even as a mercenary working under Van Rook he’d known about the Saturdays; it seemed there was nothing they couldn’t survive. With his luck, he’d find them already inside the house, searching the same avenues he was. Maybe they’d even have a lead.

In the end, he couldn’t catch up to the Griffin, and it’d flown over the horizon and out of sight. Later, when he’d found the wreckage by following the news, all that was nearby was a big circle of overturned dirt, and footprints already blowing away in the wind.

With the airship captured, he had practically no access to the Saturday’s information net. All he really had to go on was predictions and hunches – never a great place to start. The world was a big place, and it was easy to get lost in it.

Still, at least there were some solid stones he had yet to turn. Zak, if he was still able to communicate at all, might have sent his parents a text or something. Doyle didn’t exactly…keep a constant contact number, so it’d have to be to his parents – and Doyle knew for a fact that all the Saturday systems were interconnected, that if it showed up on their parents’ communicators, it’d show up on their computer at home.

He just hoped the Lemurians didn’t know that.

But when he opened the front door to the house itself, something immediately struck him as…off. The feeling he’d get when someone had rummaged through his fridge, moved the milk to the other side to get to the seafood leftovers from last night. An unsettling feeling of things being out of place, but this time, the culprit wasn’t so obvious. Zon chittered nervously at his side, mirroring his sentiment.

Someone had been here, and recently. He just hoped they were friendly.

“Give me a perimeter check, Jurassic. I’ll signal for you.”

She nodded and took off, Doyle watching her ascent until she was a little black dot in the sky. Then he stepped inside the house, closing the door behind him.

He powered up his wrist blaster, holding it at the ready in front of him as he made his way through the abode, peering around the corners. There were signs the place had been lived in recently, but it’d only been about two days since the family had left for Wales, so it wasn’t like there had been time for the dust to settle. Still, the prickling at the back of Doyle’s neck told him he wasn’t alone, and Fisk wasn’t the only one in the family with sharp instincts.

He made it to the communications room without incident, and logged into the system using Doc’s password. Doc didn’t know that he knew what it was, but it didn’t exactly take a genius to guess it, knowing the number of characters and that it ended with Drew’s birthday.
Once the system loaded, he double-clicked the email app and started to root around. Being as prominent as they were, the Saturday’s inbox was full of newsletters and issues asking their attention, most of the problems inconsequentially small or obviously hoaxes. He scrolled through, holding his breath as he scanned the subject/sender lines, until he hit the jackpot: sent at 1:47 am, a subject line reading “CONTINGENCY,” with the sender marked as Zak Saturday, sent from his communicator.

…Marked as “read.”

Before he could click it open, he heard the sound of a footstep and whipped around, finding himself staring down a laser gun like from a cheap 80’s sci-fi flick. He’d make a quip if it wasn’t aimed for his head, and if he didn’t recognize the man standing behind it.

A man in a steel-grey suit, black hair kept short in an undercut, with pink glasses pushed all the way up to his eyebrow ridge. Doyle knew him from the few scuffles he’d been with the rest of the family after the first Kur incident, their first meeting taking place during the Paris meltdown. Dr. Beeman – Doyle could remember his name because it’d sounded funny when Zak had related his babysitting woes.

Well, Beeman wasn’t very funny right now.

“Thirty-six-point-five-eight hours ago,” the scientist began, “the Secret Scientists get an urgent message from Doc and his girlfriend telling them to meet at 41.3 North and 122.3 West as soon as possible. Maybe you don’t speak coordinates; locals call it ‘Mt. Shasta.’ Twenty-six-point-two-seven hours later, a gaggle of Scientists, me included, show up. And Doc isn’t there, but you know who is? A whole pack of Fuzzy-Wuzzies, dressed up like Rome. They invite us in for a meeting.”

Doyle had his arms up, working out how he was going to get himself out of this.

“That’s where we all get debriefed about a certain someone being missing. You wouldn’t happen to know what I’m talking about, would you?”

“No,” Doyle said, “educate me.”

“I think you know him. About yea tall, white and black hair, smells like five wet dogs had a party with a barrel of fish. Seems like he’s some kinda bigshot celebrity. What did they call him again… Kur?”

“I’m pretty sure there’s a ‘no soliciting’ sign on the front gate,” Doyle replied, calmly. "How ‘bout you take your weird religion to someone else’s door?"

Dr. Arthur Beeman narrowed his eyes. “I don’t think I appreciate your tone.”

“Yeah,” Doyle said, “well. I don’t think I appreciate your face.”

Fast as he could, he kicked a metal grate at his feet into his hands, using it to deflect the blast that came at him. When he’d confirmed it worked, he charged, tackling the Scientist out of the room, the two of them crashing to the floor of the living room.

Doyle was back on his feet in an instant, fists up. When Beeman staggered to his feet Doyle was there in an instant, shoving him across the couch and twisting his gun arm behind his back, forcing the joint so hard Beeman dropped the gun.

“OW! Hey, fragile! Delicate instruments, careful!”
Doyle rolled his eyes and pressed down harder. He had to get this done with before reinforcements arrived.

“What do you want with Zak? And – “ he looked around. Before reinforcements arrived…but were there any? He couldn’t hear any footsteps or voices down the corridors. The halls remained as empty as when Doyle had first stepped inside. “Are you…alone?”

“Whatever keeps my head from rolling,” Beeman said, sardonicism dripping off his every word. “By the way, you look like a mercenary. What’re they paying you? Because I guarantee I can outpay them. I’m filthy with research money.” He narrowed his eyes. ”What are you doing in Doc’s house?”

“What am I doing in Doc’s house?” Doyle asked, incredulous. “What are you doing in Doc’s house!?”

“Tracking a kid, duh.” The Scientist gave him a smarmy grin. ”What, you’re not here for the same reason?”

Under his grip, Beeman was actually incredible frail. His body was gaunt and bony, and felt like it could snap if Doyle pressed it too hard - so where was all this confidence coming from? It made Doyle tighten his grip.

“I’m asking the questions.”

“Ooh, good one. Care to spit a few more clichés, Mr. Tough Guy?” Beeman snorted. ”Here’s a request: ‘we can do this the easy way, or we can do this the hard way.’ I pick easy way.”

“Uh, what?”

Beeman continued without taking notice. “Now that that’s settled,” he said, “feel free to get your testosto-hands off me.”

“…what?”

“Not the fastest particle in the accelerator, huh. I said, I’m going to answer your questions.” If his body’s current position allowed it, Beeman would be tapping his foot in impatience. “Look: I’m unarmed, I came alone, and no one knows I’m out here. If you were on orders to kill I’d already be dead, but since you aren’t, let’s help each other out. So anytime you wanna get your meat mitts off me...”

Reluctantly, Doyle let go, careful to sweep Beeman’s pistol out of his reach as he straightened his back and rubbed at his wrist, a condescending grin on his face despite his situation.

“You’re welcome,” Doyle said, sarcastically. “Now tell me what you know.”

Beeman rolled his eyes and sat himself down on the couch. Doyle moved to say something, but stopped himself when he realized he’d probably only get an unimpressed glare in response. This guy was hard to handle - he was sweeping Doyle up into his pace, which was several times faster than Doyle was comfortable with. He was already scrolling through his own commpad, holding it up so Doyle could see.

“Admittedly, I don't know much,” he said. “Kid sent an email to his parents through about five proxies. Location services on all his devices are off, and there’s no facial recognition pinging on any of my cameras; he’s about as far off the grid as he can be without clipping through the map.”
Location services off...that was unsettling. Doyle would think Zak wanted to be found. Unless someone else was using his comm unit...

“What was in the email?” He asked.

“Looked like a shopping list. Maybe it’s a code of some sort, but if it is, it’s an inside joke. I know ciphers when I see them, and this isn’t one.”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” Doyle insisted, crossing his arms. Beeman shrugged.

“Fine. I took the liberty of forwarding it to myself.” He tapped the screen a few times and pulled up the email in question, handing it over to Doyle for him to read.

**ZakAttack@scientiaest.ss**

**SUBJ: CONTINGENCY**

**MSSG:**

AQUA REGIA, STORE IN SILVER
4 OIL OF CRYPTOMERIA
1 DIATOMACEOUS EARTH (DISSOLVED IN DEIONIZED WATER)
2 MILK OF THE FRUIT OF THE TALIPOT PALM
.5 SLIME OF HAGFISH
3 COCKATRICE VENOM, CONDENSED
4 ACID MIXTURE (1:3 NITRIC, HYDROCHLORIC)
AZOTH, STORE IN GOLD
2 PIRANHA SOLUTION
6 SAP OF THE CACTUS CAT
.5 VENOM OF ORNITHORHYNCHUS
1 SWEAT OF NAREE PON
1 OIL OF KIIDK’YAAS
4 VENOM OF PAPUAN GIANT SPIDER
.5 NECTAR OF THE GIANT HIMALAYAN LILY
HEAT MAINTAINED BELOW 366 K, ABOVE 277 K. AZOTH AND AQUA REGIA, NEVER THE TWO SHALL MEET, UNTIL SUCH TIME AS IS APPOINTED - DISCRETION. WHAT IS CONSUMED SHALL NEVER RETURN.

Doyle narrowed his eyes. He’d been expecting a status update, even a ransom letter, but this was... practically unintelligible. A recipe of some sort?

“Does it mean anything to you?” Beeman asked. “Also, if you drop that PDA, I’m charging you for it.”

Doyle handed it back in a hurry. “No.”

“Figures,” Beeman said. He paused, and then - “by the by, since it looks like you've taken me up on my offer, who are you?” The question was asked out of curiosity, not suspicion. The scientist narrowed his eyes, tapped on his chin. “You seem...familiar...”

“I’m his uncle. Doyle? Blackwell?”

No recognition. "There was this big thing where I was working as a mercenary, and then it turns out I was part of the family..."

Beeman was just glaring at him now, like he was telling a lie. "Look, we were in the same room together, during the Paris incident. I'm Zak's uncle."
“That’s not possible,” Beeman said. “Doc doesn’t have any siblings. Hell, he doesn’t have parents.”

“On his wife’s side.”

Beeman’s eyebrows went up. “Oh. Yeah, her.” He shook his head. “You two don't look anything alike. But sure, I remember hearing about you.”

He stiffly held out a hand for Doyle to shake. "Good to be working with you."

“I’m not helping you find Zak so you can turn him in to the Monkey Men,” Doyle said, his grip on the couch tightening.

Beeman only squinted in confusion at that. “No, what? Why would I do that?”

“Um, because that’s basically what you tried to do to him last time. With the cryo-freeze plan?”

Beeman sighed. “This and that are two different things.”

Bullshit. “Then why are you trying to find him?”

“To ask him what the hell is going on,” Beeman said, dragging himself to his feet. “Look, buddy, you don’t know anything. I don’t know anything. The Mystic Monkey Men from Mars seem to know something, but I can't hear them speaking. Had to drag Twin Peaks aside post-meeting to get all the details. Being the person with the least info in the room doesn’t happen to me, and I don't like it.”

“What do you mean, you can’t hear them speaking?” Doyle asked. "It’s telepathy; I thought the whole point was that everyone could understand it.”

Beeman knocked against the side of his head. “Faraday cage. Had it installed eighteen years ago to keep the Andalites out.”

Whatever that meant, he seemed very smug about it.

“Fara…Anda-what?”

“I have a steel cage for a skull so the aliens can’t read my thoughts. Keep up.”

“You have metal plates in your head?” Doyle asked, incredulous. “Why?”

“I like my privacy,” Beeman said, like it was an obvious answer. Satisfied that he’d made his point, he went back to complaining.

“The Furballs don’t even have a written language. That whole meeting was like being blind at a deaf convention. Who’d have thunk I’d have to deal with something that annoying with a terrestrial species…”

“Alright, alright. Just - let me get this straight,” Doyle said. “You, the guy who almost had Zak killed because Argost was also in range of the flute, don’t care that Kur is back; you’re just trying to find Zak because you can’t tell what’s going on. You’re acting against all the other scientists, AND the lemurians, for no reason I can see. Why should I trust you?”

“Are you actually planning not to help me?” He raised his fist and pointed. “Listen, buster. You’re a single guy with a Pteranodon and a jetpack – don’t think I didn’t see you come in. You’re looking for a kid who’s gone off the grid that could be anywhere on the planet right now. You need eyes.
Ears. *Experience*. Who do you think it was that kept the Scientists on the Saturday’s trail? The girl with the robot? Or the guy with access to feeds from every manmade satellite in orbit that isn’t protected by a government passcode?"

Doyle just folded his arms, straightening his back to try and match Beeman’s height. What the scientist said was right, mostly – Doyle’s fighter jet was parked in the hangar, but it wasn’t exactly the kind of vehicle he should be driving on a search-and-rescue. The problem was, he couldn’t trust this guy: Arthur Beeman, whom the Saturdays had all but disowned, did not exactly ooze faithfulness or goodwill. Until he could figure out this guy’s angle – until he knew how to make this guy tick – he didn’t want to accept any help.

“If you’ve got all that fancy tech, then why are you asking to team up with me?”

“You want the real answer?” Beeman asked. "It's because the other Scientists hate me. *Doc* hates me. The kid hates me. He sees me coming and he'll spaghettify trying to run the other way."

Doyle snorted. "Sounds like you got what you deserve."

"I'm going to ignore that," Beeman said, stepping closer. "You can't find him without me. I can't approach him without you. Let's worry about politicking after we find him, hm?"

“"You were trying to put Zak in cryo-sleep," Doyle said. "For 'however long it took.' I feel like I've already got a pretty good idea what you want out of this."

“Sure I did. And then he saved the world,” Beeman said, not budging an inch. “So now I have to change my hypothesis to match the new evidence. That’s how science works, bozo. It's just as likely I'm on his side as I am on team ice nap.”

Doyle felt his lip curl. This man had a natural talent for pissing people off, but he also didn't seem like he was lying. And he was right - the fact was, Doyle had only himself, a dinosaur, and a fighter jet. Beeman had exactly the resources he needed if he were to actually go hunting for Mini-Man, especially if Zak didn't want to be found. He remembered how fragile Beeman was in his grip, and curled his hand into a fist. If things went south, then he just had to pummel Beeman's face in, huh? That'd be easy. It was already hard not to give him a good punch.

“I’m gonna need transportation.” Doyle put on his negotiation voice, firmly laying out his terms. “My jet’s in the hangar, but I can’t use it if I’m going anywhere populated. I also need my expenses covered, and I’m gonna have to charge you for my services since I can’t just take a break from working for this.”

That was a lie; he’d retire if it meant he could make sure Zak stayed safe, but this was a negotiation, a haggle. If at least he could get his expenses covered -

“Fair,” Beeman said. “Just send me the bill.”

- Alright. Well, next point.

“The email doesn’t look like a clue to where Zak is, so we’re still at square one. If we’re doing this, I’ll leave the ‘search’ part of ‘search-and-rescue’ to you.”

“Already on it.”

“In the meantime...I think I’m gonna try getting everything in the email list.” If Zak – or whoever had taken Zak – had really sent it, then there must be a reason. The letter was titled “contingency”…
Contingency for…what?

He didn’t know, but if whatever-it-was rolled around, he wanted to make sure he was ready for it.

“I’ll see if I can figure out what it makes,” Beeman said. “Preliminary searches didn’t turn anything up, but…being a Secret Scientists DOES have its perks.”

“You do that, Egghead. Which ingredient should I start with?”

"Cactus cat," Beeman answered immediately. "We’ve gotta head back to my place first so I can lend you a vehicle, and it’s closest to where I live.”

Doyle stared at him.

“What?” Beeman asked.

“You answered that way too fast,” Doyle said. "Makes me think you do have something up your sleeve."

Beeman rolled his eyes again. Did that make it the third time already?

"If we're going to be working together," he said, slowly, "then let's get something straight, Knuckledragger. I'm smart. In fact, I'm the smartest. And I memorized every item on that list in the time it took you to get here."

He tucked his hands into his pockets. "Cactus cat. Found in the American Southwest. Nocturnal. After that, you should head to the Pacific coast, see if you can't find an aquarium to break into for hagfish slime."

Doyle found himself wanting to punch those glasses in again. He genuinely didn't realize it was possible for a human to be this annoying.

"Fine, I believe you," he said. "So what am I gonna be driving?"

“A reverse-engineered Drodzian scouting ship,” Beeman replied, casually. He turned toward the door, already on his way out, forcing Doyle to jog behind him to keep up. “Nuclear powered, zero radiation, g-force decompressors built into the hull. You’ll need those since it can go from zero to a hundred in three seconds, vertical."

Doyle whistled. “I’m getting a spaceship?"

“'Reverse-engineered' means it’s a replica.” Beeman stopped, and turned around, smirking.

“The original is my ride,” he said.

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Dx7dSc89lzw02@burnermail.cc
miniman, if you get this…i’m going to find you.
have the ufo guy working with me. don’t really trust him, but seems like my best shot. just letting you know so if you see his ship you’ll know it’s me driving it. probably.
you’re going to get through this, we’re going to bust your parents out, and we’re going to rip the lemurians a new one. stay sharp.
Chapter End Notes

fights! drama! beeman!

comments fuel me and give me the strength to continue. this chapter was 10.5k+ words and im dead
The too-sharp brightness of morning light suddenly flooding his brain through his eyelids was what brought Zak to a violent awakening, clutching his face and falling out of the hotel sheets and onto the floor.

“Fisk,” he groaned, “five more minutes, come on…”

“I’m afraid we don’t have the luxury,” Francis said, calmly tossing a change of clothes onto Zak’s face. That was enough to get him awake, blinking into the morning light, throwing a hate-filled glare in Francis’s direction.

“How are you and Muca in my room?”

Muca was keeping her distance, claws fidgeting against each other as she tried to pretend she wasn’t intruding. Francis, meanwhile, just pointed up and out the window.

High, high above the city wheeled an eagle, twinkling with gold and red.

“Shit,” Zak said.

“Eloquently put,” Francis remarked. “Hurry up and get dressed. We need to come up with a plan. Now.”

Zak didn’t need to be told twice. The clothes were civilian. Touristy, even - khakis and a shirt with the word Sacramento written on it and a windbreaker. Francis explained the situation as Zak pulled them on.

“That eagle’s been patrolling for about half an hour now. The naga - er, Muca - was the one who noticed it first.”

“Lunch is the name given to the ones who cannot recognize a garuda in the sky,” Muca said.

“That means the lemurians are here?” Zak asked, hurriedly throwing the jacket on.

“Presumably,” Francis said. “But if they are, they’re not landing. Maybe because this is a populated city, maybe because they’re still searching for where your exact location.”

“That’s what the clothes are for, huh?” Zak asked, tucking his shock of white hair under his hood. “You aren’t gonna change?”

“They’re not looking for me,” Francis said, lightly. “The hotel serves breakfast. Hurry up and meet me there once all your stuff is packed. We should eat while we still can.”

“What about Muca?” Zak asked. “If you’re worried about them spotting me, she’s a lot harder to hide.”

“I will make my way to the vehicle, in secret,” she said, following Francis out the door. “You shall not worry for me! Running and hiding is my specialty.”

She closed the door behind them, and Zak was alone with his old clothes and a plain backpack
Francis had tossed him. Shaking the sleep out of his limbs, he quickly put everything away, hesitating over whether or not to keep the claw on his belt loop before deciding stealth was the priority and stashing it in the pack.

Why was he so tired? Last night…

Last night, he’d talked to Francis on the roof. Or, rather, not him, but…

Us, the Serpent said. We.

Zak shook his head, tuning the voice out.

Two months to visit every huaca. Two months to lay his power to rest. Failure meant a catastrophe on an apocalyptic scale. Yeah, he remembered now.

The deadline only filled him with more determination than before. Two months for five locations? That was plenty of time. He was in more danger of strangling Francis to death than running out the clock.

They just had to not get caught.

Everything had been stashed away, and Zak left five dollars on the counter for the tip. Finally, he grabbed his communicator, paging through the notifications on his way down the hall. Junk, junk, junk, and…

...An email from Doyle.

So Doyle had managed to escape the lemurians, even if the rest of the family hadn’t. That was a relief; it felt like a huge weight was already lifted off his shoulders.

Wait, didn’t he send Doyle an email last night, while he was half-awake? He checked his sent mail as he waited for the elevator, and tried to make sense of the message in their on the way down to the ground floor.

No, no good. A ripple of nausea washed behind his eyes.

It seemed to be a secret the Serpent was guarding; when he tried to remember what the recipe made, he felt pulled down into the Serpent’s blackness like he was falling asleep. The kind of “asleep” he wouldn’t wake up from.

Still, the fact that Doyle was out there, on his side, filled him with a warm sensation. He wasn’t going to be alone in this.

He tucked his comm device in his back pocket and sidled into the breakfast room, amidst other bleary-eyed tourists with cheap pastries on their plates. He helped himself to the buffet and then found Francis in the corner. Zak slid into the seat opposite.

“About time,” Francis said, setting his glass of water down on an otherwise empty half of the table (come to think of it, he hadn’t actually eaten anything for dinner last night, either). “The naga went on ahead. We need to debrief. What do you remember about last night?”

“All of it, more or less,” Zak said, wolfing down his eggs as fast as he could. “It’s fuzzy, but it’s there. Not exact details, but I got the gist of it.”

No emotion registered on Francis’s face, his expression inscrutable under his goggles.
“Then you know I don’t appreciate you keeping such an important secret from me.”

“Yeah, and I don’t appreciate you trying to drug and kidnap me. So we’re even.” He downed half his orange juice in one go. “Are we going to just sit around while hating each other, or are we going to come up with an escape plan while hating each other?”


“If I use my powers on them they’ll definitely figure out where I am,” Zak said. “It’s a risk I don’t want to take. Plus, they’re fast. The garuda nearly caught up with the Griffin; we can’t escape by land or air.”

“My ship doesn’t burrow,” Francis said, an edge of frustration in his voice.

“Maybe it doesn’t need to,” Zak said, pulling up a map on his communicator. He turned the screen around and pointed at a long trail of blue going north-south on the screen. “Sacramento River. It feeds out into the San Francisco Bay and from there the rest of the Pacific. If we can just get into it, we’re safe. If the garuda could dive into rivers, there wouldn’t be nagas right now.”

“It’s halfway across the city,” Francis said, brow furrowing. “But it is our best bet. If they haven’t managed to pinpoint our location, we might just be able to drive over to it.”

Right now, Francis’s ship was disguised as an innocuous, street legal, civilian light-gray van with tinted windows. Zak pulled his hood down low, until it covered his eyes and most of his field of view.

“You think I look enough like a tourist to make it across the parking lot?” He joked.

“No, you just look like an idiot. But it will do.”

“Yeesh. Tough crowd.” He pulled the fabric up a bit so he’d be able to see again, only to stop and blanch when a figure caught his attention out the corner of his eye. Furtively, he lowered his head and gestured with his left hand toward the lobby.

“Is that Paul Cheechoo?” He asked, hushed.

Francis didn’t turn to look; instead, he pulled out a sleek black phone and opened the camera. Turning it towards the foyer of the hotel, the stocky figure of the cold-weather geologist came into view.

“That’s him,” Francis confirmed. “We should go. Now.” He got up slowly, blocking Zak from view. “There’s a back entrance to the hotel that way. When you go through the door, crawl so you’re lower than the windows.”

He didn’t need any more prompting than that. He slipped down the hallway quietly, Francis on his heels, and ducted through the kitchens until they got to the alleyway entrance.

“Do you think they found me?” Zak asked, when the door closed.

“No. He was alone, and he’s useless in a fight. It’s more likely they’re just canvassing the area. Which - “

“Means they DON’T know exactly where I am,” Zak finished, a grin starting to form on his face. “That makes this easier, doesn’t it?”
“Maybe,” was all Francis cared to admit.

They peeked around the corner of the building towards the parking lot (or, rather, Francis peeked and Zak was told to stay put because they were searching for his face), and after making sure the coast was clear, he lead the way to the van.

“Don’t turn and look at him,” he hissed, when Zak tried to sneak a peek at the Scientist through the windows.

“I wasn’t.”

“Liar.”

“Jerk.”

“Idiot.”

“Asshole.”

They climbed into the van, and Francis turned the ignition, the engine purring to life and the decidedly un-van-like control panel flaring into lights. He pressed a few buttons on a touchscreen and a steering wheel unfolded out of a panel.

Zak watched Cheechoo out the rear-view mirror as they slowly backed out of the driveway. He was talking to the man at the check-out desk, leaning on the counter with his legs crossed, telling some funny joke or story or anecdote. The two of them were having a great time - there was a smile on the receptionist’s face.

And then he pointed at their van, which was pulling out of the lot.

Cheechoo whipped around to look at it, and Zak ducked down despite knowing the windows were too dark to see through.

“I can’t believe the guy at the counter would betray us like this!” he groaned.

“Well, there goes our advantage.”

“Damnit, why does Dr. Cheechoo have to be so good at making friends with everyone he meets?!”

Francis rolled his eyes and hit the gas. “In this traffic we can make it a mile, maybe two, before the other Scientists catch up. Considering the lemurians’ supposed charisma ability, it’s safe to assume that being caught by them is the same as being caught by the lemurians. I don’t want to be stuck in traffic with Deadbolt on my tail.”

“We should still be able to escape into the river,” Zak said. “None of them would have brought a submarine here.”

“We are escaping into the river?” Muca popped up out of the darkness and nearly gave Zak a heart attack.

“Yeah,” he said, no time to elaborate. “I think we might have to fly for it. If we stay low to the ground and in tight passages the garuda might not be able to do anything.”

“Hey,” Francis said, sharply. “Do the garuda have heat vision? A strong sense of smell? Anything that would make it so that turning the vehicle invisible would be useless against them?”
“No,” Muca said. “They hunt based on sight. We naga are the ones that employ all our senses.”

“The ship turns invisible?” Zak asked. “Cool!”

“Only for three minutes at a time,” he said, his right hand already tapping away at the touch screen. “It’s a massive drain on the battery, so there’s a ten-minute cooldown between each use. It’s not much, but it may be enough for a quick getaway. And, of course, it’s useless against sonar.”

“But Deadbolt isn’t fast enough to follow us once we’re airborne over the buildings,” Zak said. In the distance, he spotted a multistory parking structure. “There! Let’s get to the top for take-off.”

Francis was thinking the same thing, the ship already retracting its wheels and morphing back into the shape of a bullet with fins. And not a moment too soon - out the rear view displays, Miranda and Deadbolt came into sight, the Scientist riding on her robot’s shoulders, portal gun at the ready.

“Hang on,” Francis said, “I’ll try to lose her. If they don’t know what we’re aiming for, they can’t set up an ambush.”

He banked the ship hard, unfortunate Muca being thrown to the side of the vehicle, and they barreled down an alleyway. The steering wheel had changed shape into a joystick, and Francis had one hand on that, one hand tapping away at the touch screen.

“The collision avoidance on this thing is pretty sweet,” Zak admitted. “Why do jerks like you always get the cool rides?”

“I am colliding with all the loose objects in the back of the vehicle,” Muca added.

Sharur only rattled innocently against the wall it had been strapped to.

But no matter how they ducked and weaved between the buildings, they couldn’t shake Miranda and Deadbolt. At least the robot wasn’t shooting at them - in a civilian area like this, a stray bullet could be extremely dangerous - but Deadbolt was locked on tight, and in the winding alleyways, they were matched for speed.

A portal suddenly opened in front of them, and only Francis pointing the ship straight up and flooring the gas saved them from flying directly into it. Once they’d cleared the city skyline, however, the talons of a giant eagle were rushing at them, and Muca sustained a moderate amount of damage from the quick adjusting Francis had to do to get them out of the way of that.

Zak was definitely going to have a seat belt-shaped bruise in the morning.

“We can’t lose them,” Zak said. “We might just have to make a run for it.”

“Unfortunately, you’re right,” Francis agreed, perspiration from exertion running down his face. He maneuvered them until they went blasting back into the open road, all the streetlights stuttering for a moment as they passed, before banking hard and cutting in front of a honking truck into the winding annals of the parking complex.

The confined space made them hard to follow, the ship’s anti-collision efforts keeping them just clear of all the exit signs and stray vehicles, leaving behind a maze for Miranda and the robot. It looked like they were going to make it, miraculously, shooting out into the open air of the ceiling, only for Francis to skid them to a stop.

“Shit!” He cursed, but Zak grabbed his wrist.
“No,” he said, eyes twinkling. “I have an idea.”

Miranda and Deadbolt finally skidded up to the roof of the complex, where Beeman’s ship was waiting. The vehicle she’d been chasing was nowhere in sight.

“Arthur!” She barked out, and he glanced at her over his glasses and sudoku booklet, sitting in a lawn chair in the shade of his ship, which had been parked on the roof of the garage.

“We’re right next to each other, Blondie, you don’t have to shout.”

“Where’s the ship?”

He pointed upwards, at the rim of his own flying saucer. Miranda pinched the bridge of her nose.

“I meant the one that I was chasing. It just came up here!”

“No ship,” he said.

“That’s impossible.”

“Impossible’ is also what they said about compressing a mag-vortex wormhole generator into a rooty-tooty point-n-shooty, but you did it anyway,” he pointed out. “I heard some guys at MIT were working on hard-light holographic projection. Maybe you fell for something like that.”

“But how - why - would that be here?”

“I wouldn’t know. I’m the UFO guy, not the hard-light holographic projection guy.” He turned a page. “I know I’m a genius, but you can’t copy my homework forever.”

Miranda looked ill at ease, but ultimately convinced. Mostly, she just didn’t want to spend too much more time in the other scientist’s presence, at the pointy end of his barbs.

“Fine. Contact me the moment you see something,” she ordered. “Deadbolt and I will search from a higher vantage point.”

“Sure,” Beeman said, filling in a number with disinterest. “Say, you wouldn’t happen to know if there’s a world record for fastest sudoku booklet solved, or...and...she’s gone.”

Behind his ship, under its metal rim, an innocuous light-grey van flickered into view, and from inside emerged two teenage boys, keeping their heads low and sticking close to the shade of the UFO. Beeman didn’t turn around as Francis and Zak approached.

“So, Pandahead, Bangs.” Francis flinched at the nickname. “I believe you two officially owe me one.”

“Thanks, Uncle Bee,” Zak said, sarcastically

“Why are you helping us?” Francis decided to ask directly. Dr. Arthur Beeman had been the stubborn champion of the plan to freeze Zak cryogenically; the about-face was suspicious at best.

“Gift horse. Don’t look it in the mouth,” the Scientist said, avoiding the question. He tilted his
head at Francis, his expression scrunching up like he was trying to remember where he’d seen him before.

“Does your dad know you’re out here?”

“No,” Francis said, a little too quickly. “And I’d prefer you not tell him.”

“Yeah, rah rah, stick it to the man,” Beeman said, rolling his eyes. “I can always call Rey and R2D2 back, you know.”

“Two months.”

Zak spoke up, and Francis nearly elbowed him for giving in to Beeman’s threat. The Scientist, for his part, didn’t seem particularly surprised either way, a bored expression hanging off his features since the two had first arrived here.

Zak continued.

“I need two months, and then it’ll be like nothing happened. We have a way to fix this, but if we can’t finish it by the deadline...if you guys can cryofreeze me or put me in magic tree sap, do it.” He curled his fists at his side, resolute. “But at least let us try.”

Francis looked like he wanted to comment on Zak’s negotiation skills, but Zak’s gut told him that directly was the only way to ask.

Beeman’s gaze shifted between the two kids, weighing his options. Turn the kids in? Don’t turn the kids in? Betray the other Scientists and the lemurians that were stringing them along like marionettes?

The growing silence made the kids squirm, Zak resisting the urge to bite his lip. Beeman was...uncharacteristic right now. The man in Zak’s memory was always smug and quick with the snarky remark, much moreso that now - but, then, it’d been about two years since his parents had let him speak to Zak face-to-face, and it was only recently and in emergencies that the parents were contacting Beeman at all.

It seemed they were all shouldering secrets. Zak had all but confirmed to the man that the threat the Scientists had been mobilized to contain was every bit as present as the lemurians would have him believe, and yet, rather than turn them in, he was actually seriously considering letting them go.

All the same, when he stood up, both Zak and Francis flinched backward, raising their arms and ready for a fight.

He crossed his arms and rolled his eyes. “Right now my ship is the fastest transport the Scientists have. Designated driver - that’s the only use I am to them.”

“That’s quite the demotion,” Francis commented, emotionlessly. Zak didn’t say anything - part of him felt like Beeman got exactly what he deserved.

“What it means is I’m already lucky they’re letting me come along at all. Whatever you two do, I want to be the one to spot you.”

“You’re trying to use us to up your reputation?” Zak asked, incredulous.

“Quid pro quo,” he said. Something for something. You scratch my back. "It’s the least you can do
for me not calling them on your asses now.”

“We’ll take it,” Francis said, pushing Zak’s protests aside. “We’re trying to dive into the Sacramento River. Once we get underwater, we’ll be out of reach. But if we make a break for it, the Scientists or the eagles can set up an ambush at the bank.”

“Sounds like you need a distraction,” Beeman said. “Can’t help you there. I’m trying to boost my rep, not drown it.”

Francis checked his phone. Five more minutes before the invisibility recharged.

A distraction would be their best bet, but none of them were expendable, and after Beeman had already covered for their “escape” on the roof, Francis could understand why he wasn’t at liberty to make any more moves to help them. A wolf cry could be enough to get him kicked out of his team, or worse.

But what could they use that could be left behind?

Beeman seemed to be thinking the same thing.

“Say, Jailhair. Kur’s back, right? Why don’t you just summon one of your creepy-crawlies, do some collateral damage Godzilla-style?”

“I don’t want to give the scientists more reason to hunt me down,” Zak groaned. “...No, wait. Hard-light holograms...cryptids...”

His eyes lit up. “I think I have an idea.”

“Are you about to tell me that there’s a cryptid that uses hard-light holograms?” Francis asked. “Nearby?”

“‘If it’s weird, check the calendar,’” Beeman muttered. For whatever reason, that seemed to soothe Francis’s exasperation.

Zak raised an eyebrow, but continued. “A long time ago, we got a call about deer on the outskirts of town. Big deer like we were described don’t live in this part of the continent, but it’s not unheard of, so we almost just ignored it. But mom had a feeling there was something else going on.”

It’d been a beautiful spring day just like this one, in the shade of the northern mountains. Zak remembered the huge flock of deer the family had stumbled upon that bounded away into the forest and disappeared, leaving footprints in the mud that just...stopped. No bodies, no fur, no nothing.

“No matter what we tried to use, we couldn’t trap them. They slipped right out of everything like they were made out of thin air.”

“This sounds like a campfire story told by nine-year-olds,” Francis muttered to Beeman under his breath.

“Shut up. Point is: it’s a beetle that lets out a gas cloud that really messes with how light works. I don’t know if it’s ‘hard light,’ exactly, but its illusions are good enough to fool our radar.”

“Which is good enough for me,” Francis said, quick to recover from his initial incredulity. “Can you control enough to make a facsimile of our ship?”
“That’s the real question, huh,” Zak said. “I don’t know. But I can try.”

“Two minutes left on the invisibility recharge. Let’s get in the van and be ready to go as soon as you have the bugs in position.”

“Beetles,” Zak said. “Not bugs.”

“The bugs,” Francis repeated.

Bickering, they walked back to the ship, Beeman watching from the shadow of his.

“Wait,” he called out, as they both were about to climb in. The two of them looked over, not sure what to expect.

“Uh...listen. If Doc were here, he’d tell you two to ‘be smart.’” Encouragement was clearly not his forte, so he both looked and sounded uncomfortable as he delivered his pep talk. “It’s good advice, so I’m gonna say it: be smart. Or else the other labcoats WILL catch you. Got it?”

Zak ducked his head, hiding the conflicting emotions at his dad’s old catchphrase. It was easy to forget that Beeman and Doc had been friends - easy to remember all the times Beeman had gloated over their battered bodies. He’d hated Beeman as an enemy - heck, he’d hated Beeman as a babysitter - but...as an ally? The oddest mixture of distrust and relief.

“Got it,” Zak mumbled to himself, clicking the seat belt shut.

Francis wrapped his fingers around the joystick, pulling up a map on the touchscreen display.

“We’ll use one minute of invisibility to get as north as we can,” he said, tapping the screen at the approximate location they’d end up at. “After that, we’ll de-cloak. When the Scientists pick up our trail, I’ll need your bugs in position here.”

“Can do,” Zak said. “Then I lead them east while we book it west, right?”

“Right. The invisibility won’t last us all the way to the river, but we should be a surprise enough that they won’t be fast enough to stop us.”

“So all that’s left is the bugs,” Zak said.

“Beetles,” Francis corrected. He smiled over Zak’s glare.

“Give me the word when you’re ready to go,” He settled back in his seat, the engine purring beneath them.

Zak sucked in a deep breath, and let it out slowly, closing his eyes and reaching out for that familiar warmth, the glow of his fire.

An icy grip shot out of the darkness and grabbed him, breaking his concentration. The Serpent, with a bruising strength, regarded him with cold eyes, smoldering with dark amusement.

“Let me go,” Zak hissed. “You said you wouldn’t interfere.”

“Not interfering. Simply curious.” If it could sound gentle, it would. “You claim you despise this power, and yet it is your first resort.”

“We’ve got limited options,” he said, through gritted teeth. “This is just the best one.”
“Do not lie,” the Serpent said, hardening. “There is nothing you know that I do not. There is nothing I know that you cannot. There is nothing you are that I am not.”

With eyes full of judgement, it tore through Zak’s flimsy excuses, down all the way to his core.

This had been the first call for him to use his powers since they’d returned to him, and he had been excited.

Even though he knew he shouldn’t be, even though he knew exactly what dark source the powers stemmed from. Still, his fire had pulled to him, had called for him, had licked at his veins.

He’d wanted this, even if he wouldn’t admit it.

“What are they called, those who refuse to recognize when they are lying to themselves?”

His throat felt dry. “I’m not here for riddles.”

“Idiots,” the Serpent said, letting go of him and retreating. “And neither of us are. Remember that.”

“...Jerk,” Zak breathed, in the wake of the Serpent’s absence.

He took a moment to compose himself, shaking off the chills.

The Snake was usually quiet, though Zak sometimes felt its gaze boring into his soul. He hated more, though, when it spoke to him. A nauseous sort of feeling always overtook him, one his parents had been careful to name when they’d first taught him the basics of science and bias. It was called “cognitive dissonance,” a mismatch between ego and truth. A feeling that humans would go to any lengths to quell.

Still, there was no use dwelling on it right now, so he didn’t. Shoving his feelings to the side and steeling himself, he reached out once more.

Like a siren, his fire sang to him, and Zak only hesitated a moment before falling into it, letting it settle across his shoulders and over his heart like a mantle, the hot mantle of the earth itself.

Zak opened his eyes, and they were alight.

Fascinating to watch, really. Zak’s entire posture had changed, though it was still undeniably Zak in that seat. His shoulders had lost some of the tension that seemed to haunt him of late, and his breathing had become even. Francis remembered the first time Zak had ever displayed this power in front of him, four years ago. It had been taxing on the boy back then, exertion written on all his features, and even back then, it had sent an odd prickling down Francis’s spine.

Dangerous, had been his immediate thought. And it had been dangerous, but at the time his mind had meant it in a different sense. Dangerous as in magnanimous, as in complex. A gut feeling uninformed by logic, something he wasn’t supposed to have.

And then, following on that impulse, a second thought, even more out of place in his mind than the first: incredible.

That was unlike him. That was unlike everyone else in his People. And the feeling persisted into
the next time he saw Zak’s power up close, in the Czech Republic, and it persisted even now.

Muca was staring slack-jawed and wide-eyed, so at least it wasn’t only him that found this power fascinating. Though, once she caught him looking, she sent him a glare, like she’d been doing all morning when Zak couldn’t see.

He’d have to talk to him about that.

“All systems go on my end, Franny. Let’s do this.”

“Next time you call me that, I’m kicking you out of the ship,” he said, sliding the engine out of its idle. Zak only grinned at him, and it took a fair amount of self-control to ignore the urge to punch him and get on with the countdown, instead.

“T minus three…”

The ship started to move, backing up to get a running start off the side of the complex, careful to stay shaded by Beeman’s ship.

“Two…”

Muca braced herself.

“…One.”

It flickered completely out of sight and lurched forward, morphing out of its civilian disguise as it shot down the complex, lifting off like an airplane, flying a straight shot up Main Street over the streetlights, the civilians, the clogged traffic, all of it. In his head, Francis was counting the seconds down of their allotted time, and once they hit ten, he ducked into an alleyway. In the cover of an awning, he let the invisibility fade, shooting back out into the streets, low to the ground and at a slower speed. On a street this wide, they were impossible not to see…and it was only moments before Miranda and Deadbolt were on their tails once more.

“We’ll lose them in an alleyway,” Francis said, mostly for Muca’s benefit. The ship made a sharp right-angle turn into the dark corridor behind a building, the scientist and her robot hot on their tails. Predictable. Dr. Miranda Grey was the kind to face a problem by throwing bigger guns at it, after all.

He liked when people matched up to their files; it made the world easy. Miranda Grey was traditionalist, Cheechoo shied away from fights and direct confrontation, Cheveyo was weak-willed and mild, and Mizuki could hold impressive grudges. If only the Saturdays could take a hint and stay on-script. Then his life would be easy.

“What did Beeman mean when he said ‘check the calendar’?” It was Zak who spoke up, one hand to his temple, one hand on the claw, his eyes ablaze.

“Really?” Francis asked, sweat on his brow with exertion, “You’re going to do this now?”

“What, you can’t drive and talk at the same time?”

He should not be this good at goading him.

“Fine,” Francis said, spitting the word out like a curse as he twisted down the narrow passageways. “It’s a saying the other Scientists have. Are the insects ready to go? We’re almost there.”
“Ready,” Zak said. “You were saying?”

Francis sighed. “It goes, ‘if it’s weird - ‘”

They were fast approaching the rendezvous, but their path straightening out meant Miranda and Deadbolt were catching up. Francis pushed down on the gas just a little harder.

“... - check the calendar - “

His finger hovered over the touchscreen, the button that activated their invisibility. Almost there...just right around the corner...

The moment he turned out of sight, he hit the button and rocketed the ship up into the sky. Below him, a solid replica of his vehicle continued down the alley, twisting and turning while Miranda and Deadbolt followed. Even his own display showed a dot moving east through the city, much larger and more substantial than a small swarm of insects.

“... - ...it might just be a Saturday.’”

They turned west and Francis hit the gas, barreling towards the river as fast as it could. It lay gleaming in the sunshine, their safe haven, passage to the ocean, where they’d be home free.

“I can’t believe they say that about us,” Zak huffed. “I can’t believe Beeman says that about us. Who even came up with that?”

“Cheechoo,” Francis said. Zak just pouted in his seat.

“...Yeah, that sounds like something he would say,” he finally admitted.

Their invisibility died out about a minute away from the water, but, by that point, it was already too late for Miranda to catch up, though Francis did see her out of his rearview cameras as the ship hopped the guardrail surrounding the water’s edge and dove deep into the river below. It automatically switched to submarine mode, taking a couple seconds to get its bearings before blasting downstream, ferrying the three of them towards the Pacific Ocean.

Finally free, Zak released his hold over the ghost deer, and slumped back in his seat, grinning and flush with adrenaline and victory.

Muca spoke up from where she’d coiled herself around the wheel to the top hatch. “Are we done with the tilting and the trying to murder me in the vibrating vehicle?”

“Yeah,” Zak said, pleasantly.

“Wonderful!” She fell to the ground with a heavy thud and did not stand back up. Francis raised an eyebrow.

He set the ship to autopilot and reclined his seat back, pulling out his phone.

**GADFLY SATURDAY**

Zak, this is Francis.

oh god. how did you get this number
I think you need to talk to the naga.
She’s been glaring at me all morning.
I’m worried she’ll pull something if we leave her alone.
What you’re trying to do isn’t exactly something her religion approves of.

ugh...you’re probably right
do you have any suggestions, o mission control?

I don’t know how nagas work.
She seems to look up to you.
You can use that.
Convince her that our mission is “the will of Kur,” or some other nonsense.

can you stop being shady for like 2 seconds
i’m serious

If you don’t like it, get a new Heir.

yeah lol. after you, i;m sure anyone else would be a breath of fresh “heir”

ba-dum-tshh

is your blood “kur”dling?

No.

Stop this.

i feel like were not gilga”mesh”ing on this.

I will turn this ship around and let the garuda take you.

it’s a coping mechanism, shut up.
i’ll talk to her.

Good. And, while you’re at it, try to weasel out some more information on this place we’re going. The middle of the Pacific Ocean is not very specific.
i wouldn’t worry too much about that.
even if muca doesn’t talk, i have an associate ;)

I really don’t like the sound of that.

good :)

Before he could leave his chair, however, his phone buzzed with an incoming message.

“Who’s that?” Francis asked.

“Beeman,” Zak said, opening the letter. He leaned forward so Francis could see, too.

bman@scientiaest.ss

hairtie & robot are pissed. “i cant believe it was hard-light holographic projections!” ngl, hilarious.
will pass along ur time limit 2 mohawk. msg back asap w/ deets.

“Mohawk”? Francis asked.
“Probably Doyle,” Zak clarified.

“Ah, the mercenary.” Francis considered the message. “I can write him back if you go talk to the naga,” he offered.

“I don’t really trust you with my comm device, though.”

“Please,” Francis snorted, derisively. “The last thing I want to do is root around in your private files to find your secret shames. I hate you enough without wanting to get to know you. Just go. I’ve got a better sense for this sort of thing, anyways.”

Zak glared at him distrustfully for a good few seconds before relenting. “Fine. But only talk to Beeman.”

“Mhm,” Francis said, noncommittally.

ZakAttack@scientiaest.ss
so basically, the lemurains WAY overestimated how much kur is back. we found a way to seal it away for good, but it takes 2 months. we need cover for those 2.

bman@scientiaest.ss
wow. useful. try telling me sth u didnt already. like mb what last nights other email was abt.

Other email? Checking to make sure Zak wasn’t watching, Francis surreptitiously opened the “sent” tab on the email app.

…

Zak did not send this. Francis had the creeping suspicion he knew who did. If the Serpent had planned a “contingency”...

ZakAttack@scientiaest.ss
you should gather the things, but don’t mix them together. the person who sent u that from my device knows more than they let on, but i wouldn’t trust them entirely.

bman@scientiaest.ss
who?

Francis started typing out a reply, when the comm pad pinged again with another message from the Scientist. Francis glowered - email wasn’t a PM-ing system, keep it all in one message! - but Beeman was going to Beeman, no matter what anyone did or said.

bman@scientiaest.ss
i dont like being treated like a flight risk.
whats with this meandering? its like talking 2 a genie.
1: what r u doing that needs 2 mo. 2: who sent the email last night 3: what do u need me 2 do that i can do.

ZakAttack@scientiaest.ss
sorry. it’s hard to know who i can and can’t trust right now.
gilgamesh had a spear, and it can seal kur powers away without killing me. but to do that we need to activate it at 5 different places. there’s a few minor other issues, but only we can do it. if we can’t make it in 2 months, the stars go out of alignment or something, and my powers might...go a bit crazy.
the person who sent you the email was the one who told us all this, some old guru from Iran. any smoke you can throw in the direction of the scientists for just these 2 months would be helpful.

There - a message full of lies and half-truths, plausible enough not to be questioned, a few threads to pick at of little consequence.

If Beeman knew about the genocidal, sadistic other half camped out in the recesses of Zak’s subconscious, Francis doubted he’d remain on their side. Even Francis had contemplated forking Zak over to the lemurians, who seemed to have a viable neutralization plan, but ultimately decided there was little to be gained in that. Nothing ventured, nothing gained, that sort of situation.

His gut feeling - the one that shouldn’t exist - told him there was an untold trove of treasure in following the greatspear Sharur’s route, instead. And something about Zak WAS infectious, aside from the 30-40 exotic diseases he must be carrier of. He made Francis make poor decisions - uncharacteristic decisions.

_Dangerous_, his instincts warned. _Incredible._

**bman@scientiaest.ss**
ur not gonna tell me anything else huh.
fair enough.
thx for the update, goggles. tell black-n-white ill pass the memo along.

**ZakAttack@scientiaest.ss**
What gave me away?

**bman@scientiaest.ss**
sumer is in iraq.
g2g, been in restroom so long other scientists r getting suspicious.

A frustrated sigh escaped Francis’s nose, his grip tightening.

_Sumer is in Iraq. Your lie was too flimsy. Idiot. Idiot!_

He could practically imagine the irritation and disappointment that would be on Epsilon’s face.

Dissatisfied, but task completed, he tossed the device onto the chair next to him. Zak and the naga were still arguing, and because neither of them was particularly good at regulating their volume, he could catch bits of their conversation even from where he was sitting.

“- I lack the sense of taste required to enjoy ‘seasoning;’ raw is entirely fine with me! I can digest bones!”

Not for the first time, Francis raised an eyebrow.

“I mean, I know, but I just - rats have lots of diseases, especially from the city. I’m just worried for your health!” He shook his head. “No, look, nevermind. We’re getting off topic. The point is - you’re supposed to listen to me, right? So just - doing this, sealing away that...thing inside me, is the best for everyone I care about.”

“And that does not include the naga?” Muca asked. “The arabhar? The lou carcolh, the taniwha...those, you will not protect?”

“Kur is the ‘ultimate evil,’” Zak said, stating the obvious. “There aren’t any happy stories about it protecting _anything._”
“Kur has always been a protector!” Muca said, almost as if she were angry about how wrong Zak was, before remembering who it was she was talking to. “…Does...Just Zak disagree?”

“Rani Nagi told me different,” he said. “She told me - everyone told me - that Kur wanted the total annihilation of all humans.”

“My…” her claws dug into her scales, disbelief coloring her voice. “My queen said that?”

“‘Kur, the destroyer,’ she called me.”

Muca stared at him.

“That is...that is…” she sank down into her coils, looking as miserable as a snake person could. “…Something I may need time to consider.”

“...Are you going to try to stop us? From finishing Sharur’s gauntlet?”

“If it is your will...then let it be done,” she said, resigned. “I offer my services...as the naga were meant to do.”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “It’s...Zak. Just call me Zak. I’m really not...the dark snake messiah or whatever it is you’re hoping for. I’m just a dumb human kid.”

“Not ‘just’,” Muca said. “But yes...that is evident now. I need - I need time to consider.”

“Alright,” Zak said. “You do that.”

Muca mumbled something in her native tongue, something with colored with flecks of Hindi. Something about not being what the record said, something about wishing her teacher were alive. Zak came back to slump into his seat, and Francis pretended not to have been listening in.

**GADFLY SATURDAY**

**hey.**

what do you think? i know you heard most of that.

Yes, Zak?

Francis looked over at him, considering his options.

**GADFLY SATURDAY**

Tell me your thoughts, first.

I don’t want to color your opinions.

i dunno.
like, you've met the guy.
i could see it try to kill all humans,
not exactly friendly.
i just can't see it being like…
not
the bad guy.
you know?

I hope you’re not looking for moral support. I’m on short supply.

god.
you are actually the worst human being i know.

I choose to take that as a compliment.

fine. don't say anything just let me rant, alright?
this is...kinda the first time i've ever been somewhere without family to...you know, talk to and it's just...driving me kinda nuts like look at this, i’m actually talking to YOU about my feelings kinda scraping the bottom of the barrel.

✓ Read at 15:51 pm.

yeah, that's much better, keep doing that.
i just - i never wanted this. any of it.
i used to think my powers were the coolest thing ever, but now - look! my parents are in monkey jail, and the people on my side are you and beeman and a freaking naga, like

I know that there are stories about Kur and its general status as the “ultimate evil,” but I was never so deep into the mythos that I knew any specifics. Why are we all so hung up on that, again?

you seriously never heard the stories? jesus, talk about late to the party… why do you even want to know?

It just seems like a sort of broad generalization. Until now, there’s never been a reason to doubt it, but if the naga suddenly says that Kur is fundamentally a “protector,” then perhaps it would be best to review the defense. That’s all.

fair enough… basically, since kur was slain by gilgamesh around 3500bce, all stories we have about it come from before then, so… it’s a little hard to tell fact from embellishment.
you ever heard of jormungandr?
Vaguely. Some myth about a snake that bites its own tail?

or leviathan?
or yamato no orochi
or gong gong?
probably not gong gong, that one’s kinda obscure

What point are you trying to get at.
those are all giant, evil mythological snakes, and they all probably trace back directly to kur.
(source: my mom and dad wrote like 3 papers on it)
death, destruction, apocalypse
that’s what kur’s associated with
some of the stories can be directly pinpointed to villages or citystates that used to exist...keyword “used to”
according to the stories, they didn’t once kur was done with them.

...Doesn’t that strike you as odd?
what?

If it really wanted to, Kur probably could have annihilated humans in just a few weeks. It only takes a small army to steamroll a village, and, let’s face it, you had much more than a “small” army at YOUR prime, let alone Kur during its heyday.

Even now, I’m fairly certain you could topple the world in just a few weeks, if you were strategic about it.

Total genocide of the species may take longer just because of how many of us there are, but it’s certainly within the range of possibilities.

thanks.
i don’t actually know where you’re trying to go with this. it’s not making me feel any better.

I don’t like inconsistencies.
They mean that at least one person has the story wrong.
Do you want to talk more about your feelings and how bad they are?

not really. you’re kinda terrible at this.

Good.
And he would have left it at that, except Zak’s mood stayed foul the next hour and a half, kicking listlessly at the dashboard despite Francis’s protests. Was this a purposeful attempt to drive Francis insane, or was Zak actually just this naturally gifted at being the world’s most annoying person?

“Kur, the destroyer.” Of Francis’s patience, maybe.

“Fine,” he said. “I surrender. What do you want from me? A pat on the head and a kiss on the cheek? They didn’t exactly create me to be comforting, Zak.”

“I don’t know,” Zak said, frustrated. “I just - it’s...a lot of pressure.”

Francis scowled in displeasure. “You think you’re under a lot of pressure? With that family? Those parents?”

“I’m not saying your life’s sunshine and roses, okay? If you wanna talk about it, I’ll listen! But if you’re not gonna - then don’t complain about me talking about mine!”

“That argument doesn’t even make logical sense. Why don’t you try getting your thoughts together before screaming at me?”

“Not everything can be solved with logic!”

“This is the problem with you,” Francis said, “you’re irrational! You can’t process problems that are bigger than yourself and let yourself get bent entirely out of shape. There’s nothing you can do about your parents’ situation and you’re already doing everything you can about the Kur one, there’s no point in wasting effort worrying about them. So don’t.”

“And that’s your problem, Francis. Do you think - do you think being an emotionless robot makes you better than me?”

“It does,” he affirmed. “Objectively.”

“‘Objectively,’ you’re a jackass,” Zak huffed.

“Very mature, Zak.”

“Ugh,” he groaned. “Fine. You want mature? I’ll give you mature. ‘Look at me, I’m Francis, I’m the biggest hypocrite Zak knows! I think repressing my emotions makes my dick bigger and you bet I rub it in all over everyone I meet!’”

He shouldn’t stoop down to that level of taunt. He shouldn’t let Zak drag him down to Zak’s level. He knew this, and yet -

“‘Well, look at me, I’m Zak Saturday, and I function on the same base instincts as the animals my family wrangles and wouldn’t know subtlety if it bit me in the arse! I’m a coward that complains about change instead of adapting! Compared to me, even my brother, the actual monkey, has a clearer head and more self-control!’”

“You leave Fisk out of this!” Zak growled.

“Or what? You need me to get rid of your problem. If anyone is the liability here, it’s you.”

Zak was livid, eyes wide and working his throat like he wanted to scream, but it wasn’t coming out. His fists clenched and unclenched, his knuckles turned white, and then, finally -

“...Fine. You’re right.”
Of all the responses he expected, that was not one of them. Before Francis could stop himself and come up with something clever, a “what?” escaped his lips.

“You’re right,” Zak said, again. “I’m terrible at bottling up my feelings, and there’s nothing I can do, and you win, because my stomach’s still bruised from when Fisk tried to kill me, and my back’s still sore from falling out of the airship, and my jaw’s tired from trying to talk to you. I’m tired. I’m done. So that’s it. You’re right. You won.”

Francis gaped at him for a good few seconds before the neurons in his brain managed to spark back to life, a dumb “alright” falling out of his mouth in lieu of anything else.

Zak just snorted at him, disdain across his features, pulling himself out of the passenger-side chair and trudging to the back of the ship.

“You’re gonna make a great Epsilon when you grow up,” he spat, a hard-earned last word to end the conversation.

Francis could only sit stunned in his seat. the sound of his own heart was hammering in his ears, and his fingers were frozen on the armrests, digging indents in the faux leather.

Below him, the ship rumbled on, heedlessly ferrying them toward Pacific blue.

This was unlike him. He should - he should have something to say, some last biting word, some final edge in. That Zak had had the last laugh was...incomprehensible, but perhaps not so much as the fact that it had pierced through all of Francis’s bravado.

No matter how much he would not - could not show it…

...It’d stung.

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Monsoon season. Lessons were cut short that day; no one wanted to miss the revelry on the surface world, the water rushing down the rivers fast enough to kill, the trees bowing before the might of the wind. It was like a festival, and the only ones left behind were the blind old historian and his favored student, reorganizing the tablets scattered all across the cavern floor.

His eyes were milky, clouded like he was about to shed, but that was simply a marker of his venerated age. He stood with a stoop to his shoulders, which made him appear only marginally larger than Muca herself, and his scales - which had once been glossy brown in diamond patterns - had faded into a matte beige, and his claws were dull and worn from years of handling rock. Every tablet he picked up, the contents he had to check with his snout, rubbed shiny from years of reading by touch.

“Mucalinda, dear,” he said, dropping her title as a sign of familiarity since the two of them were alone, “why don’t you go outside and enjoy the storm? It is not befitting for a young lady to be accompanying a creaky old male on such a day.”

“It is fine, Itihaskar. The others are better suited to testing their scales against the winds than I am. If I go out there, I may just blow away.”

“Don’t say that, dear. Itihaskar may be the most venerated position a male could hope to have, but
you have many more options available to you. Why, you could be a noble. Or a general of the army. Or even the queen herself. The next one shall come from your clutch, after all.”

Muca could only shake her head. All the high titles available only to the females were decided equal parts by cunning and strength, and she had little of either. Her clutch-mates were quick to remind her of her deficiencies, especially of her lack of the latter, and her tail still stung from when some of the girls had pushed her down and picked off her scales like scabs, singing songs about the runt of the litter.

Early-hatcher, tablet-scratcher, boyish-stature, plague-rat-catcher.

No, someone like her could never even dream to be queen.

“Would that I had been born a clutch earlier, instead,” Muca huffed. “Then I could have seen the splendor of Kur with my own two eyes.”

Itihaskar laughed. “Spoken like a true scribe.”

Beneath her claws, the etchings in the stone practically pulsed with meaning and significance. This one, she knew it well. The breaking of the ocean’s pride, one of Kur’s greatest conquests, one of the naga’s greatest memories.

“What do you...do you think Kur will ever return?” Muca asked, hesitantly.

Often, after the crueler teasings, she’d retire to the repository and lose herself in the world of the Great One’s tales. Judgement and power and queens of old; loyalty and duty and a sense of faith, of gravitas.

She held those stories dear.

“It has already been more than two centuries,” she continued. “We have already sacrificed so much, killed so many in its name...”

“Kur shall always return, dear one. Even the Great One is not exempt from the rules that govern all us touched by the magic of the Earth, as the queen is not free from the laws that guide our people.”

“Then...why has Kur not?”

Itihaskar took time answering, carefully choosing his words, tapping on his chin with one of his dull claws.

“Perhaps, my dear, that is a question you will ask it yourself, one day. I do not presume to know.”

It was a dissatisfying answer, but the only appropriate one, and Muca acknowledged that.

“Still,” Itihaskar said, reassuringly. “When that time comes, it will be glorious. And, should you have succeeded me by then, then perhaps Kur may even come to you for guidance. Study hard to reach the point where your counsel is just as sharp as your queen’s fangs, won’t you?”

“Of course,” Muca said, bowing her head.

There would be no higher honor than that.
Muca gave the human’s body a couple shakes, rousing him from his slumber. The vehicle was small, but even so, the two humans had decided to sleep on opposite ends, Francis in the reclined driver’s seat and Zak in a sleeping bag in the back. From what Muca could glean of the terse dialogue they’d shared later that night, after Francis had left to do menial errands in the city and retrieve food, Zak apparently had some kind of “contact” that would guide them to the first huaca, the one in the middle of the sea. They were now travelling further into the ocean to meet them.

All that to say, she hadn’t been doing her job properly, if there was an outside source Zak was relying on for help, rather than her. Well, there was time now to remedy the wound.

He seemed to startle when he saw her in the dark, jolting up before something in his mind connected and he instead just slumped forward, disappointed.

“You know, your eyes glow red in the dark, Muca,” he muttered. “What’s up?”

She tapped on her scales nervously, until she realized what she was doing and forced herself to stop.

“I...wished to speak with you. Is that alright?”

He ran a hand through his hair and let out a long breath. “Sure.”

And there was much she wanted to say - all the history she’d crammed into her skull, all the studying she’d done of the enemies to her kind - but she forced herself to swallow them all. No, this Kur would not care about those. This Kur wanted something different than the one that came before.

“There used to be many naga,” she began, settling across from him. “A small army of a few hundred. Every hundred years a new clutch would be laid, and a queen would be chosen every fourth clutch. This is because of our lifespan: we live for about seven hundred years, and reach an age of maturity after one hundred and fifty. I believe...you can see a disparity.”

Even groggy, Zak could follow, the math adding up in his head. “Your queen is older than seven hundred.”

“Yes,” Muca said. “This is because we entered into a hibernation, two hundred and fifty years after Kur perished. We had only intended to sleep until Kur’s return, but when we had been awoken, four thousand years had passed. This was fifteen years ago.”

When you were born, Zak. He seemed to be absorbing the knowledge with passivity, a guarded distrust in his eyes. How much had the naga failed him, that he had come to scorn his once most loyal retainers?

“When we had finally awoken...only us few, the few you have seen, have known, remained. The rest...” she paused to compose the waver in her voice. “The rest, whether by natural disaster or by the hands of our enemies, perished years and years ago.”

Zak narrowed his eyes. “Sorry, Muca, but it’s already a bit too late to make me feel bad for you guys.”

“I understand!” She said, quickly. “And that is not my intention. I simply - wanted to let you have
the truth. Whatever you intend to do with it.”

He gauged her honesty, her earnestness. Eventually, he seemed to relent.

“Why did only you guys survive?”

“My queen and her harem were sequestered in the deepest, most impenetrable chamber in our caverns. And I...was lucky.”

The truth was shameful. The truth was, frankly, embarrassing. But Zak would appreciate the truth, wouldn’t he?

“My clutch-mates refused to let me sleep with them. My teacher - mentor - the old historian whose title I now hold - was with them, as he was their teacher, too. And I had nowhere else to go, so I...there was a small cave. A hole, really. I’d run there to escape tormentors sometimes. It was just barely large enough for one. It was purely by chance that I was the only one not in my queen’s chambers left unharmed.” She shook her head. “No, it was a mistake. Would that any other had survived in my place.”

“Oh,” Zak said, blankly.

“I think you would have liked my teacher,” she said. “He was odd. Funny.”

“What happened to him?”

The memory hurt. In the end, there had been nothing left but shattered, calcified bones, picked clean by the ocean.

“A device called an ‘oil platform’ punctured their cavern. Crushed their bodies. All those deaths, and yet the structure was long-abandoned by the time we awoke.” She smiled. “There is not even anyone left to hate.”

No secrets, no lies.

Kur had been a point the naga had wagered everything on. They had awoken to a world where human structures rivalled the height of mountains, where cities gleamed with tamed light under thick clouds of poison, where the numbers of their enemies had swelled to rival the stars in the sky.

And Kur counted himself among their number. Wished to return to their fold. Yes, the naga had bet on Kur. They had bet on Kur, and they had lost.

“Honor,” among the naga, was a foolish notion. Life was hard-earned and precious; so long as one had wits and cunning, claw and fang, then they must live with everything they had. Honor was only meant for when destruction was guaranteed, when no salvation would come. Face life with treachery, with caution, with fury. Face death - only death - with honor.

Yes, this may be the end of her kind. If it was, then let her meet it with dignity.

“It is frustrating to know that Kur has returned, and wants nothing to do with that destiny. It is maddening. But it is also your choice to make, Zak.”

“You know there is a Kur inside me that will be everything you guys wanted,” he said, voice low. “I know you know. If you sabotage us, then that Kur wins. It takes over, the humans die. Why are you on my side?”
“It is not a matter of sides,” she answered. It was simple. “Kur is Kur.”

His eyes narrowed, a hot, sick anger rising in his throat. “I’m not Kur. I’m not Kur anymore. What else do I have to do to prove it? When we finally finish this stupid quest will it finally be enough to prove to everyone that I’m not - “

“You are,” Muca said, gently. “You always will be, powers or no. Just as you always will have been born a human, too. One does not destroy the other. Both are the ‘truth’.”

Both are the “truth,” huh...

He buried his head in his arms and gave a long sigh, letting all the frustration of the day fall out of him like his mother had taught.

Deep inside him, the Serpent stirred.

No, he was not that. That thing inside him craved fury and destruction, domination and control. The slaughter of weak, helpless innocents. No matter how Zak looked at it, it was every inch as evil as he’d been lead to believe.

...Right?

Maybe, the Serpent whispered, dark amusement tinging its voice. Zak shuddered and pulled away.

He would never be that. His resolve was made of stronger stuff.

“Hey,” he finally said, lifting his head out of his arms. “Try to get along with Francis, alright? I mean, I know he’s a jackass. And I guess the naga have a pretty good reason to hate humans. But, I mean, he’s...had it rough. I dunno, just - “

“Yes, I suppose I have been unfair,” Muca admitted. “We know, too, how it is to be targeted for the scales on our backs. I will accept this human ‘contact’ of yours, as well.”

“Oh,” Zak said, awkwardly, “right. Uh. About that…”

“Zak,” Francis called, tersely, from the front of the ship. How long had he been awake? What had he heard? “You didn’t tell me that your ‘contact’ was about the size of Constantinople.”

“I mean, he’s not,” Zak said. “The citystate he’s king of is.”

“Oh.” Muca said in a flat voice. “Oh no. Zak…”

“‘Oh no’? ‘Oh no’ what?”

“Okay,” Zak said, “In my defense, I wasn’t friends with Muca until like three minutes ago.”

There was a tapping on the glass windshield, which immediately had Francis in a panic to turn on the lights. Who could possibly - ?

The figure the lights illuminated was neither man nor fish, but, rather, something in between - tall, lanky, in loose clothes that billowed out around his frame in the inky water, with a necklace made of kelp hanging loosely around his neck.

He put one hand on his hip and raised the other in a wave, a cheeky smile on his fish-man face. Weakly, Zak waved back, even as Francis sat stone-still in shock and Muca recoiled back in terror.
“His name is Ulraj,” Zak introduced him. “He’s the king of Kumari Kandam.”

“I hate Saturdays,” Francis groaned under his breath.

Chapter End Notes

formatting those text messages was a royal pain
“Zak,” Ulraj said, his jaw clenched tight and his arms crossed, the fin on his head puffed up to its full height, “I hope you realize that that is a naga.”

Kumari got big - an adult stood a head taller than even Doc - and Ulraj was beginning to shoot up into his eventual full height. He stood a full head taller than either human, bearing himself with an odd, alien regality, using every inch to impose himself.

“I was unaware Zak was friends with...fish,” Muca said, with an obviously false bravado. “The king of fish, even.”

She had shrunk back against the side of the van. What was the saying - even a cornered rat will bite the cat? Zak had never seen her so venomous before. Unfortunately, she wasn’t intimidating in the least.

Ulraj’s eyebrow ridges shot up at the dig, regardless, turning to Zak with a look of incredulity on his face.

“You see it, right? The naga. I am not hallucinating. For some reason there is a naga - bane of the ancient world, agents of the living apocalypse, et cetera et cetera, in the ship with us.”

“Yes, yes, and forgive me for being presumptuous, but did we all forget the whole thing about the naga being - “ Ulraj scowled. “ - what’s the word...our sworn enemies?”

In the midst of all this, Francis was silent, miserable, his eyes fixed on the slowly expanding puddle beneath the kumari’s feet. “He is tracking seawater into the ship.”

Ulraj narrowed his eyes at him. “Well, you are tracking a ship into my seawater.”

“It’s going to rust,” Francis mumbled, ignoring him.

“So,” Zak said, faking positivity as he stepped between them. “Ulraj, this is Francis. Francis, Ulraj.”

Neither of them said a word.

“...Right. And, uh, Ulraj, this is Muca. Muca, this is Ulraj.”

“Yes,” Muca said.

“Don’t call it by a name,” Ulraj growled. “You’ll get attached.”

They stood in an awkward circle for a good three minutes, Ulraj and Muca glaring each other down over Zak’s shoulders, Francis wishing he was anywhere but here, until finally the agent-in-training threw up his hands in defeat and slumped back into the pilot’s chair.

“I can genuinely say that hate all of you,” he said. “I don’t care. I just don’t care anymore. Fish-
man, snake-girl, evil god, whatever. If you want to tear each others’ throats out - good! But while we are in my ATV, either you do it outside, or else you kill me too. Let me know when you’ve decided; I’ll be waiting, sat right here.”

All three of them shared glances. None of them were particularly comfortable with the silence, but neither were any of them willing to make the first move to break it. Finally, Ulraj, with all the dignity he could muster, ventured forth.

“So, uh, Zak,” he said, letting his glare drop. “You...said you wanted my help guiding you somewhere. And, knowing that I cannot resist the call of adventure, you lured me in despite knowing one of our ancient enemies would be coming along. May I ask how it’s tricked you into leaving it alive?”

“She’s helping us,” Zak said, quickly. He hadn’t actually realized how deep the bad blood ran. Still, he needed both of them on this journey, and he only needed them to hold together long enough to get to their first destination. “She’s our ancient language translator.”

“You know I can do that, too,” Ulraj huffed, hurt. “You do not require that thing around.”

Zak raised an eyebrow. “Can you read Sumerian?”

There was a long pause.

“...No,” Ulraj admitted.

“Then she’s our translator,” Zak said. Muca nodded in relief.

Ulraj rolled his eyes and re-crossed his arms. “Alright,” he said, grudgingly, “but you can’t trust a naga, remember that. They don’t stop at anything to get what they want. And I’m not turning my back on it, lest I wind up with fangs in my back.”

“Sheesh,” Zak muttered. But still, he knew better than to press it. From what he understood, nagas had massacred his kind - massacred Zak’s kind, and would do it again.

It was easy to forget when he looked at Muca, but nagas were, as a species, bad news. In human art and architecture, the best light they ever got cast in was in the role of agitators - evil deities to be overcome on the path to enlightenment. Daughters of Mara. As desperate as he was to have anyone on his side - anyone in his corner, he had to remember that the nagas weren’t. Not really.

He glanced at Muca, who was holding her tail and pressed against the wall. So he couldn’t trust her species - sure. The rest of them didn’t care about him, they only cared what he could do for them. But what about her? Was she on his side? Or was she - like everyone else in her damn snakehole - a liar?

Ulraj only snorted and tossed his head, still thoroughly displeased with her presence. “I suppose it’s a good thing for her she looks so weak. If she were full-grown she might actually pose a threat.”

“Yeah,” Zak agreed, halfheartedly. “Listen, let’s just - get to business.”

Ulraj glowered, but acquiesced with the barest shrug of his shoulders. “Fine. There was a Kur problem, you said? You asked the right king for help, Zak.” He looked around. “Where’s Fisk? I know you told me your parents were taken, but - “

“Him, too,” Zak said, voice dropping a little. “And Komodo. Doyle and Zon got away, but...well, we can’t really meet up right now.”
“Oh,” Ulraj said, expression softening. He sighed, and loosened his stance, arms falling to his side.

Clearing his throat, and widening his feet, jutting his chest out, he forced himself into his usual charming bravado.

“So this is a secret mission, then,” he spoke with the booming voice usually reserved for announcing a toast. “Excellent!”

He clapped Zak on the shoulder, beaming. “There’s always something exciting going on around Zak Saturday. You’ll have to give me a full account on our way.”

Zak’s mouth twitched up just a little at the attempt to cheer him up. “Yeah, totally.”

Ulraj was still keeping a clear distance between himself and Muca, but for Zak’s sake, was pretending to be alright with her. It’d been only a few days since this crazy adventure started, but it felt like it’d been years, and between Francis’s mutual hatred and Muca’s over-the-top respect, he’d almost forgotten what having a real friend felt like.

It was nice.

“Yes,” Ulraj continued. “I think I understand the situation. A heroic quest, like epics of old, and the very first step lies in the middle of the ocean.” Putting on a haughty air, he turned to the driver’s seat and pointed. “Bring me the map!”

A completely unmotivated Francis reached one arm out toward the touchscreen and pulled up the photo he’d taken of Sharur’s scorch marks. Just as listlessly, he zoomed in on the point in the middle of the Pacific, while Ulraj drew close, carefully watching Muca from the corner of his eye.

But soon his entire focus was on the map in front of him. His countenance grew grim and heavy, one hand stroking his gills, quiet for a long time until even Francis turned to see what was concerning him.

“Hmmm,” he mused, dramatically, after a long pause. “Yes, it is very good that you two humans have asked for my help with this. Truly, there is no destination more fitting for your companion to be the king of Kumari Kandam.”

Francis furrowed his brow. “Is it dangerous? Or something the ATV can’t handle?”

“No,” Ulraj said, serious expression turning into an excited grin. “It’s just this is someplace I’ve always really, really wanted to go.”

The kumari once had a sister species, or maybe more like a sister breed, and that sister’s relative fame helped the kumari slip into the deep, dark waters of obscurity. No one was looking for the lost city of Kumari Kandam when the lost city of Atlantis was of so much more renown. All the better when their name faded into the world of myths and legends, when reports of kumari food-harvester breaching trips were met with human ridicule; “you’ll be telling me you found Atlantis next.”

It was too bad the Atlanteans were all long-gone. Legend had it that a demon, monster, had come to punish them for breaking the Old Laws, and now all that was left of them were ruins and tales,
passed down by kumari fry-mothers to scare fingerlings into behaving.

Though there was really only one ruin: the proud Atlantean capital, built on the ridge of the Marianas Trench, buried leagues underwater at the bottom of the sea.

Challenger Deep.

“We have an old agreement with the Atlanteans, from thousands of years ago,” Ulraj explained, as the ship descended through the water. “We split the ocean horizontally. The serpent-riders, kumari, took to the top of the ocean, every place the sun could reach. The Atlanteans took below.”

“Why are they called Atlanteans if their capitol is in the Pacific?” Zak asked.

“They were never very good at human geography,” Ulraj shrugged.

Challenger Deep was far below where the city-serpents deigned to swim, and the kumari cities were not built to withstand the water pressure besides. For those two reasons, save a few expedition teams several hundred years ago, no kumari had since ventured into the ruins - at least, none who were ever heard from again.

“Scouting parties - the initial ones, the ones that survived - said they believed that Atlanteans were their own undoing. That their population grew too large for the city to handle, and their infrastructure was too corrupt for them to build new living spaces fast enough. Eventually, the whole thing collapsed under its own weight.”

Ominous, the passengers thought. Sharur rattled against the side of the van.

As their ship descended, the largest city-serpent passed them by, rocking the little gray vehicle in the jetstream of its wake. Muca and Francis both stared at it with distrust, while Ulraj and Zak waved at the city built on its back. Far in the distance, little more than blurs, swam the other two snakes, metropolises fastened to their hides.

They were headed into uncharted territory, something deep, dark, and secret. How did that old saying go? That they knew less about the bottom of the ocean than they did the surface of the moon?

Francis wasn’t used to big like this. He was used to human-sized problems, in human-sized places. There was a statistic: even if all the humans on the planet were rounded up and stood shoulder-to-shoulder - every of the several billions of them - they’d only take up a space as large as the city of Los Angeles.

How big, then, was the ocean?

Colossal. Endless.

He hated the sea. At least they could terraform the surface of the moon, someday.

Eventually, their descent took them from dim moonlight to absolute pitch-black, which even the highest settings on the headlights did nothing to alleviate. Zak watched the bars on his commpad tick down from five, to three, to one, to a little spinning circle futilely searching for a connection to the world above. The vehicle’s seams creaked from the thousands and thousands of tons of water that bore down on them. One opened seam in the metal and it would all be over.

“Are you sure we’re going the right way?” Francis asked, scowling at the blackness of the ocean. Not being able to see was borderline maddening, especially since they’d turned off the headlights
to save on energy.

“Oh, yes, quite sure,” Ulraj answered. “We kumari are never lost at sea, you know.”

He touched the control console. “May I?”

Francis shot him a glare. “Are you dry?”

“Yes,” Ulraj lied. After a long second of angry silence, Francis stood up and let Ulraj sit down in the driver’s seat.

Zak was dozing off in the passenger-side, and Muca appeared to be sleeping in the back corner of the van, buried in her own coils. However, she stirred when Francis drew close, sliding down to the ground against the back door, head back against the cool metal, listening to the engine purr.

He was hoping she’d stay quiet, but lately, nothing was going his way.

“Good day,” she said, sleepily. “Well, it looks like night. But it is morning. So good day.”

He decided to ignore her. Maybe she’d shut up on her own.

“Zak has many kinds of friends, does he not? A fish-man. Peculiar. To think he’s decided to ally himself with them, of all things.”

“I’m not really in the mood for polite conversation,” he said, crisply.

“I assure you it is not polite,” she said. “I am being quite rude, in fact. I am insulting his species.”

Francis sniffed. “Why? You two look about the same to me.”

“Oh,” Muca said, eyes sparkling, “so you are doing it, too! Rude. Say more unpleasant things about us. This is the fabled…’gossiping with friends’!”

He stared blankly at her.

“The kumari helped wipe out most of your kind, right?”

“Mhm.”

“But you guys slaughtered countless numbers of them?”

“Mhm.”

“So you’re both genocidal monsters.”

“Oh, yes. Though your kind isn’t much better.”

Francis sniffed - she had him there. “No. I suppose not.”

“Say, heir to humanity, tell me.” Her tail was twitching, scales rasping against the metal floor. “Doesn’t...this all...seem odd to you?”

“I’m conversing with a half-animal, half-teenage abomination while another one pilots the ship towards the lost city of Atlantis,” Francis deadpanned. “So yes - it is a little odd.”

“Yes, yes, there is that, but - but! I mean to say, that is to say...doesn’t everything seem...convenient?”
Francis narrowed his eyes.

“What do you mean?”

“. . . I am not sure,” she admitted. “I’m unsure if I can voice it. But ever since Kur’s tomb, I have had a suspicious feeling crawling beneath my scales. It makes no sense. The way things have been arranged.”

She leaned in like a conspirator, confiding her worries in a hushed whisper.

“It makes one wonder what happened five thousand years ago. Doesn’t it?”

“I know what happened,” Francis said.

Muca stared quizzically at him. “You do?”

“Yes. Your side lost.” He heard an amused snort from the driver’s seat.

“Oh,” she said, taking it in stride. “But how?”

“How would I know?”

“Heir to humanity, would you not understand humanity better than I?”

“‘Heir to humanity’ - listen, I’ll tell you what I know about humans.” He was getting really tired of that title, that for whatever reason she insisted on using. “Humans are stupid. They’re irrational, they’re illogical, and they’ll eat each other alive for no good reason at all, but at least they’re not friendless, tactless, gormless armored worms like you.”

He was hoping maybe the jab might get a rise out of her, but she seemed barely affected. In fact, she had on a funny look, and the difficulty he had reading her expression was frustrating. Humans, humans were easy, he’d spent hours and hours memorizing microexpressions and body language across every culture from every major player in the world. But the fishman and the snake girl? They moved wrong. In Muca’s case, she moved too slow, her features carved out in harsh ridges and rigid scales. Francis got the feeling that she was unbelievably expressive by naga standards - that all her weird fidgeting with scales, twitching of her tail, they all meant something - but it was too foreign, alien, and he felt uneasy around her. He couldn’t read her like he could read Zak; he couldn’t tell what she was thinking. For what machinations the gears turned.

“Say this, heir to humanity,” she tilted her head, “do you think humans are inadequate to inherit the earth?”

He snorted. So it was some speciesist soapbox spiel she was going for, huh?

“Most of them can barely do what’s good for themselves, let alone something like the earth.”

But that didn’t seem to be enough for her, since she asked again. “Do you think they are worth saving?”

“By and large? Let me put it this way: they still debate on saving the planet like it’s a political issue. They’ll just get what’s coming to them, one way or another.”

...Ah, he could almost recognize that expression, even he couldn’t understand why.

Concern.
“You don’t have much love for your own kind, heir to humanity,” she said.

“And why should I?”

“A fair argument,” she acknowledged. “Even still, you are human. If you hate even something so fundamental to yourself, then how do you live with the rest of it?”

He wanted to be done with this conversation. His lips pursed into a thin line.

“So naga,” he said, “how does it feel to know all your friends are dead?”

“Oh, it’s alright.” She did seem genuinely unaffected. “I never had friends in the first place.”

“Your teacher,” Francis pointed out, now on the offensive, “he’s dead.”

“Hm, yes. He is.” She crossed her arms. “You are quite good at this impolite conversation thing. Are you self-taught?”

Francis sighed into his hands. First Zak, now Muca, getting in the last laugh on him. He was losing his touch.

“Allow me to put it as plainly as I can,” he said, quietly simmering. “I don’t like you. We are not friends. And this ‘heir’ business is one big steaming pile of pixie farts, and I’ll be glad to be rid of it.”


“Go away,” Francis said. “Leave me be.”

Nervously, she tried to oblige, scooting toward the front of the ship, only for Ulraj’s glare to send her back. Sighing with frustration out her nose, she buried herself in her coils, leaving only the steady, rhythmic tapping of her claws against her scales to annoy Francis until he, too, dozed off, head resting against the warmed, aged wood of Sharur, strapped next to him on the wall.

“Hey, shithead, we’re here.”

Francis caught Zak’s wrist with a bruising force before it reached his shoulder to shake him awake, and he glared up at the other boy with a scowl.

“Don’t touch me.”

“Sheesh,” Zak said, as his arm was released. “I didn’t want to anyway.”

He felt groggy as he got up, his senses unacceptably dull and his limbs heavy and slow. That wasn’t a good sign - he hadn’t been planning to sleep longer than an hour.

“How long have I - “

“We gave you a few extra hours,” Zak shrugged. “Ulraj’s idea.”

“Well, tell him next time not to bother. I’m trained to run on low sleep.”
“You can tell him yourself,” Zak bit back, before pointing at Sharur. “Bring it with you. Ulraj and I’ve been scoping the place out.”

And with that, he leapt out the side of the van, and scrambled off down the road. Francis’s eyes, still blinking themselves awake, winced in the bright sunlight pouring in from the front windshield of the van.

...Sunlight? They were at the bottom of the ocean, weren’t they?

Nervously, his hands fumbled for Sharur, and he slung it across his back. He stepped down out the front door and into the light, shielding his eyes as they adjusted. He had to work very hard to bite back the noise of pure awe that almost bubbled out of his throat.

Above his head stretched endless black. As he squinted to get a better look, he realized that the black was not of the night sky, but of the abyssal ocean water, being held at bay only by what appeared to be an enormous glass triangle. It met three others in a point far above his head. Beneath the pyramid was a metropolis.

The city that lay before him was obviously a true sight to behold back in its heyday, but was now a glorious, beautiful, ruined mess. Its lights, which pulsed in an almost biological way, had given it the impression of being lived-in at first glance, but as he drew closer and noted the crumbling walls, the empty windows, and the streets filled with debris, the illusion quickly vanished. Two giant pillars, decorated with imagery of fish and ocean vents, topped with the likeness of a spiked seahorse, clearly boundary markers for the city limits, were the only monuments that remained proud and beautiful. Everything behind them was run-down, in disrepair - but it still gleamed in the artificial light, everything a child’s wild fantasies of the sunken paradise were made of.

However, Francis had never had the luxury of childlike wonder. He was standing in the lost city of Atlantis, nestled inside a crystal pyramid at the bottom of the ocean, but there was no magic to be had in his eyes, only the tattered remains of urban decay.

Sighing, he shifted Sharur so that it sat more comfortably on his shoulders, and picked his way across the crumbling mother-of-pearl road until he caught up with the rest of the group, who were all ooh-ing and aah-ing over the broken remains of the city.

“Truly incredible, the architecture,” the fishman was saying. “Our sister species was always renown for their civil engineering, but - you see this inlay? This beautiful coralwork?”

“I don’t think it’s coral,” Zak said, inspecting a chunk of wall. “It kind of looks...crystalline. How old did you say these ruins were? They’re so well-preserved, there practically isn’t even any dust on it - “

“Dust?” Ulraj asked, clearly somewhat unfamiliar with the term.

“Dead human skin cells,” Francis deadpanned, pushing past Muca.

“Oh,” Ulraj said. “That’s gross.”

Zak was pretending not to notice Francis’s intrusion - good. They walked in silence as they journeyed deeper into the city, as the decay became more and more evident. Large tracts of the city were almost immaculate, a postcard-perfect snapshot of life if only there were people - fishy or otherwise - walking around. As it was, however, inns and restaurants stood empty and hollow; homeless shelters and grungy stalls sat abandoned and dry, and the overcrowded streets were silent save the sound of three footfalls and one set of scales slithering over deep-sea rock.
He did have to hand it to the Atlanteans, he supposed. Their buildings curled in conch-shell spirals high above their heads, scraping the sides of the pyramid, and the streets, while cluttered and littered with trash and debris, were straight. He had been expecting, perhaps, a quaint sort of city, like in artist’s renditions of ancient Greece or Rome, but the impression he was left with was instead of seedy New York, or the worst parts of inner Detroit - skyscrapers, abandoned shopfronts, barred windows, and a looming claustrophobia. The uneasy feeling was only compounded by the steep uphill slant of the roads, as they journeyed deeper into the once-proud Challenger Deep.

That it was an abandoned ghost town was eerie enough, but something more was gnawing at Francis’s instincts. Something far more sinister.

The metropolis was abandoned, despite showing every sign of overpopulation, but…

Where did everybody go?

He clenched his fist and walked on.

A few minutes later and they arrived at the heart of the city. The height of the pyramid had made it seem much larger than it was; all in all, the actual livable space could only have been a few dozen square miles. He remembered the proud seahorse pillars that had marked the entrance to the city, where their walk had begun.

What a far cry it was from the scene before them.

Buildings had been toppled, statues torn down, lying broken on the pavement. The city here looked eviscerated, practically torched, and weapons lay scattered, broken and discarded. Angry foreign scrawl had been chiseled into stone walls, had been signed with stains that looked like either burns or blood.

“What happened here?” Zak asked, voice hushed.

Francis could only answer the truth.

“A riot.”

“A civil war, more like,” Ulraj said, fingers brushing the scrawled graffiti. “It’s crude, but it’s quite telling. ‘If you will leave us hungry - ‘”

“’ - then we will eat you,’” Muca finished.

Ulraj glared at her, but acknowledged her translation. “More or less.”

Fascinating, but he wasn’t exactly here for a history tour. Brushing his way past Zak and up to their guide, he nudged aside a broken spear. “So we’re here in the city,” Francis said. “Let’s hurry up and get to the huaca so we can be on our way.”

“Right, yes,” Ulraj said, pulling himself away from the graffiti. “Well, that might be a little more difficult. The city’s layout is similar to how we build ours, but…”

He started to walk a slow circle around the square, his ears twitching as he considered the collapsed buildings and the narrow, claustrophobic streets leading out. He stopped at the largest building, which looked like it must have been beautiful at one point, broken bits of gold and mother-of-pearl still inlaid along its smooth, spiral surface, but now looked like an empty husk, burnt from the inside-out.
“Normally, this would be where the temples are. The heart of kumari cities. But this?” He rapped on the wall. “It’s a bank.” He pointed down at all the other impressive buildings, similarly in states of ruin, battered by civil unrest. “Courthouse. Taxation office. Atlantean Wal-Mart.”

“Sounds like a well-organized town,” Francis said, impatient.

“No no,” Ulraj said, his brow furrowing. “Let me rephrase: this is where the temples should be. Which is where your power source would be. But we are at the highest point of the city, and there is nothing here.”

Nervously, they all looked around. True enough that there didn’t seem to be anywhere that looked half as significant as here - if Ulraj hadn’t read the signs, then Francis would have assumed, himself, that he was in some kind of temple courtyard - but why would a mystical hotspot ever be inside a bank? It seemed absurd.

Zak was the one who broke the silence, squinting his eyes at the downhill slope of the roads. “Ulraj, kumari cities are built going up, right? So your castles are in the middle of town and your temples are on the floors above.”

“Yes, that’s right,” he said.

“Well, your cities are also on the backs of sea serpents. There’s nowhere to go but up.”

Which meant...that what they were looking for was below. All three of them turned to stare at the ground, as if looking hard enough would let them see through the carefully laid bricks.

“Are you suggesting they buried their temple?” Ulraj said, a slight note of outrage coloring his tone. “That would be - “

“How would we get down there?” Francis asked, interrupting. “The streets are solid. I haven’t seen anything to suggest a path to below.”

“Um,” Muca said, but was ignored.

“Maybe there’s a way down in one of these buildings,” Zak suggested.

“It doesn’t seem likely,” Ulraj said, gills flapping in agitation. “But I suppose we won’t know until we look around.”

“Uh,” Muca said, again. Again she was ignored.

“Well,” Zak said, “let’s split up, then.”

“I’m not going with the naga,” Ulraj said.

“Me neither,” Francis chimed in.

“Erm...”

“Fine,” Zak said, “I’ll go with - what is it, Muca?”

She’d finally resorted to tugging on his shirt, and, wordlessly, she pointed into the sky.

A giant, wormlike creature, with a mouth full of sharp teeth jutting out in every direction, and a single, bulbous glowing yellow eye, with a horizontal slit pupil, was staring down at them from between the spiral buildings. Thick, viscous drool leaked out of its maw.
The first head was joined by a second, and then a third. On their left came a fourth, and on their right, a fifth. Each one was drawing closer with a malicious curiosity gleaming in its eye, leaving great, big puddles of drool as their jaws worked open and shut, and their sharp, lance-like teeth rattled against each other.

Slowly, Zak reached for his claw, and Francis found his hand instinctually brushing against the warm wooden handle of Sharur.

“The demon,” Ulraj breathed next to him, pulling his fists close into a fighting stance.

Francis’s lips pressed into a thin line. Now he had a pretty good idea why there weren’t any bodies.

To their left, Zak and Muca were drawing back to back, Zak’s powers fizzling as he struggled to make a connection. “It’s not working, they - no, you shut up,” he growled, to seemingly no one. “Just let me - stop talking - “

The first head gave a wet gurgle, and lunged.

Immediately, everyone sprang into action. Ulraj moved lightning fast, dodging two of the worms at a time, with reflexes even Francis was envious of. It seemed like he must have had eyes on the back of his head, as he dodged every swipe at his blind spots with a practiced ease.

Francis couldn’t watch for long, however, as he was forced to parry an oncoming bite with the wooden handle of Sharur. For a moment he cursed himself for his idiocy - no way thousand-year-old wood could handle this kind of force - but it held firm in his hands - grew warm, even - and Francis thought, dumbly, that maybe this must be more of that hocus-pocus horseshit.

Still, the sheer strength of the monster drove him backward, shoes skidding against the stonework, until his back hit the wall of the bank. Francis narrowed his eyes as he worked through his options, until he remembered one of Sharur’s other horseshit abilities.

He let go of the spear, and the moment the creature’s jaws began to close around it, there was a sizzling zap and it recoiled with a gurgle of pain, dropping Sharur back into Francis’s hands. He smirked, clenching his hands around the wood that felt fire-hot.

None but him could wield it, after all.

Halfway across the square, Zak was struggling against one of the monsters that had come out the side alley, dodging and rolling, using his claw’s telescoping shaft for aerial mobility. He landed on the monster’s back, claw raised high, as he tried once again to get it to heed his call, fire flaring in his eyes, but it hesitated only a second before shaking him off. Cursing, he dragged himself back to his feet, and threw himself back in for another go.

Meanwhile, Muca was running and hiding. She’d been right: she was quite good at it.

Francis took a deep breath in to ground himself, as his own monster shook off the pain and turned back to glare at him. It almost seemed to be weighing its options, now that it knew it couldn’t simply charge him.

And Francis could swear it grinned.

It reached down and tore off a large chunk of the city center, wound its neck back, and threw. The chunk of stone shattered against the bank’s wall with a loud crash, shards of stone pelting off Francis’s back as he dodged. Little bits of gold and mother-of-pearl went skidding across the town square, the monster already working on dismantling another piece of architecture.
Ulraj had taken a moment to watch, and he and Francis shared an uneasy glance between them. Not only were these monsters big, they were smart. Scrambling to his feet, Francis ran to Ulraj, taking up a position at his back. As if they already knew to be wary of him, the heads Ulraj was fighting drew back.

“They’re soft and plushy,” Ulraj said to him, grimly. “Covered in slime, terrible to touch. Blunt blows won’t work. Can you cover me long enough for me to grab that javelin off the ground?”

“It’s probably going to break in one hit,” Francis said, moving into position nonetheless.

The monsters came rushing at them again, and Francis parried their blows, the blunt wood of Sharur’s handle redirecting the heads’ strikes, over and over. Sweat trickled down his brow, but Francis held his ground, slipping into a combat mode that analyzed every inch of his surroundings, began memorizing his opponents’ strategy of attack. While he was busy, Ulraj slipped away from his side, grabbing a fallen weapon from the ground and dashing into cover as another chunk of makeshift artillery exploded against the pavement.

The two monsters Francis was now engaged with were wearing him out, but he wasn’t losing his footing at all. The stutter at the start had come from being taken off his guard, but now that he’d had time to analyze his opponents, he found that they still weren’t that clever. Obviously, they weren’t used to their prey being as well-trained in combat as the gathered adventurers were, and bit by bit the fight became easier as Francis slipped into an easy rhythm. In fact - there! Taking advantage of an opening, the tip of Sharur slashed at one of the monsters’ throats, catching at the skin and ripping it open.

It recoiled in pain, gave Francis a moment to catch his breath, before he leapt in, finally on the offensive.

But he stopped halfway, as the heads pulled uncharacteristically backwards, and his instincts kicked in, flinging his body sideways just in time to dodge a giant chunk of wall hurtling towards him.

He looked over towards the creature that had thrown the debris at him. It gurgled at him in anger for dodging in time, drool flying off its jagged teeth. Behind it, there was a glint of light - off the obsidian tip of an Atlantean spear - Ulraj had climbed one of the skyscrapers next to the head, and was running towards where part of the building’s side had fallen off. Francis watched as Ulraj leapt from a building at its throat, the point of a javelin glinting in his hands. He watched Ulraj nail it on the side of its throat, the handle of the spear shattering with the impact, embedding the speartip in the roaring beast’s side. Ulraj fell to the ground, landing in a graceful roll, before he came running back to Francis’s side.

Between Ulraj’s strike and Francis’s injury, and the hit Zak managed to land directly on the eye of his monster, they seemed to decide, at the same time, that this was more trouble than it was worth. Retreating, the heads let out a thunderous roar all at the same time, and everyone had to cover their ears for the noise. Coordinated, the giant red worms went into a frenzy, bashing their heads into ground with all their strength, each slam resounding and echoing inside the pyramid, vibrations rattling their bones.

At first Francis didn’t know what to make of the behavior, until an ear-splitting crack rang in his ears, and a fissure began to spread across the pavement in the city square.

They were trying to bring the city down.

He ran. As fast as he could, he scrambled to make it towards the others, who had all realized the
same thing. Every coordinated bash sent Francis flying up into the air, sent more and more cracks spiderwebbing across the ground. His footing became uneven, as the fissures became skewed planes, as the air filled with dust. His fingers just barely managed to brush against Ulraj’s still-slick gloves before the ground beneath him gave way to empty air, and he and the city were felled into the buried, hollow cavern below.

He was surprised to find all his limbs intact. Surprised to find his fingers still tightly curled around Sharur’s handle, its thrumming heat keeping him warm in the cold, dark cavern he was blinking into. Surprised that he was still alive.
Maybe less surprised to find Ulraj alive, as the kumari seemed to be made of tougher stuff.

“Are you alright?” Ulraj asked again, offering out a hand.

Wincing at the new bruises he could feel forming across his body, Francis pulled himself to his own feet, ignoring the king and brushing past.

Above them, about three stories up, was the hole they’d fallen from, a beacon of light. it illuminated the still-settling dust, the rubble of the Atlantean Wal-Mart.

“The monsters…?”

“Retreated, but perhaps not for long,” Ulraj said. “I think they collapsed the city to trap us down here while they go lick their wounds.”

A reasonable enough assessment.

“Where are Zak and Muca?” Francis asked.

“They fell further down,” Ulraj said. “They’re going to wait for us. Since the demon was so kind to open up a way to the bottom layer for us, we might as well take advantage.” He dropped the hand that Francis had ignored. “You know, any kumari would trade their air sac to get the king to offer them a hand up. You could be more grateful.”

Francis rolled his eyes. Birds of a feather flocked together, and Zak’s friend, king or not, must be just as annoying as the boy himself. It wasn’t worth his time or energy to acknowledge his jibes.

“Further down?” He asked, looking around.

Ulraj shrugged. “They fell to what they think is the bottom layer. According to them, there’s three layers counting this one. That’s what the naga says, anyways. The fall knocked Zak unconscious.” He snorted. “Likely story.”

Three layers...too many to simply rappel down, then.

“That thing that attacked us,” Francis said, following Ulraj as he picked through the debris, “what was it?”

“I don’t know. Do you have a light? It’s quite dark down here, and you don’t have shark senses.”

Scowling, Francis fiddled with his goggles until a flashlight turned on, illuminating the city that continued on underground.

“This is…” he said, momentarily hushed as he took in his surroundings. “A slum, isn’t it?”

If the surface was a densely packed urban jungle, then this was an ant hive tangled up in the roots. It even still smelled rotten, though everything that could rot had rotted away long ago. Musty, humid, and disgusting enough that he might have been nauseous if he was less well-trained.

“I know our scholars had said Challenger Deep was her own demise,” Ulraj shook his head, “but I never imagined this. These aren’t just a slum, they’re a veritable slave quarters. I can’t imagine anyone living here.”

Indeed, it looked like it could be just that. Floor to ceiling was stacked rooms on winding streets, small square windows. They looked like prison cells, cold and barren. The only reason they weren’t a fire hazard was because they were underwater and made out of stone. The lights - which,
as best he could make out, were some kind of glowing slime mold - were few and far between, casting deep shadows into the tiny alleyways between blocks. The insides of the buildings were black and abandoned. Haunted.

“Your cities are different?” Francis asked, trying not to let it get to him.

“Much,” Ulraj said, grimly. His hands traced another etched graffiti, this one a long sentence in flowing script. “Oh, Kumari Kandam, a marvel of architecture! That’s what the humans used to write about us, back during our trading days. Though that was thousands of years ago.”

“Hm,” Francis said, not bothering to comment more.

The architecture told a sordid tale as they passed through the empty alleyways. Every now and again they’d run across some tiny crustacean or ugly little arthropod, which had all seemed to have adapted specifically to living in this ruin. Their oily little eyes glinted at them from the darkness, the only living residents of the once-overcrowded Challenger Deep.

When the living spaces got too cramped, the rich built up. They built up until they had nowhere else to go, and eventually even they, in their ivory, mother-of-pearl towers, which had been built - literally - on the backs of cramped, claustrophobic slums, came crumbling down.

“It’s what they get,” Ulraj said, breaking the silence after they’d been walking for a good half an hour. “Our gods passed down to us a set of laws for a reason. This was exactly what they were trying to avoid.”

“Do you really believe in that? ‘Gods’ and ‘old laws’?”

Ulraj shrugged. “To be honest, it doesn’t really matter what I believe. Whether it was because of divine providence, or because a council of elders thought I was best for the job, I am king either way.”

...That was a surprisingly pragmatic answer.

“Hey, look,” Ulraj said, running ahead. “There’s a great stairwell here. Looks like our way down.”

The next floor was the same as the first, for the most part, though the buildings seemed better-planned, more spacious. Almost even comfortable. The lights were beginning to grow a little brighter, too, though it was still too dim for Francis to put his torch away.

“Wait,” Francis said, suddenly. “You’re king. A council of elders picked you out?”

“Along with the help of my teachers, caretakers, and the current parliament, yes. Why?”

“I thought ‘king’ usually implied a hereditary position,” Francis said.

“Does it?” Ulraj asked. Francis almost thought he was joking, but he seemed serious.

“Wasn’t the old king your father?” That was what he’d read from the files his People had filched from the Secret Scientist databanks.

“Yes…”? Ulraj narrowed his eyes and tilted his head. “I’m beginning to think that word doesn’t mean what I think it means.”

“Your biological progenitor,” Francis said. “One of them, anyway.”

“I’d have no way of knowing,” Ulraj shrugged. “We all hatch from the same eggs. Our princes and
princesses are chosen from the fingerlings based on merit. That’s how I know I’m the bravest, and noblest, and wisest in my age. Not to even mention how good-looking and charismatic I am.”

Francis rolled his eyes, and Ulraj laughed. “Well, I say that, but I was actually the second choice. Their first choice turned the position down.”

Francis raised an eyebrow. “Why’s that?”

“She wanted to pursue a career in art.”

He couldn’t help the little snort that escaped him, and Ulraj took it as a good sign, stretching his arms up and crossing them behind his head.

“That’s what I thought - who turns down a position like that? But I do think she made the right choice. I don’t think she’d have liked being king, but I do. The job comes with a lot of perks.”

“And a lot of free time, apparently.”

“Less than I’d have hoped, but yes. Quite cushy.”

It was...easy to talk to him, Francis found. As cocky and bullheaded as he’d seemed at first, over the course of their conversation, it’d become obvious those were just fronts he put on so he could tell jokes. Not that he wasn’t self-confident, of course, but as much as he liked to make light of his station, Francis thought that Ulraj seemed to be quite well-aware of the responsibility on his shoulders.

As they approached the center of town, the space seemed to widen up a little, and went from cramped, dense little apartments to spaces that actually seemed...habitable.

Ulraj had started talking about kumari culture, after he’d noticed Francis’s interest in the subject. He had a lot to say - everything from the structure of their government to the food delicacies, all with implicit invitations embedded in his words for Francis to visit someday. He talked about their religion, their creation myth, their end-of-days myth, the story of how their gods gifted them with wisdom, with the Old Laws, with the first city-serpents, long before humanity’s time.

Francis learned that kumari myth and religion was more a philosophy than a worship, and more a history than philosophy. All physical evidence of the old days had been washed away by the tides of the sea, but they had the city-serpents. Their scholars couldn’t explain why the great snakes had come to the kumari, why they seemed to share a bond with the race. That, for Ulraj, and for most of his people, was proof enough that there was some kind of kernel of truth in the myths of the past. Challenger Deep, he said, was proof that there was, more importantly, practicality in them.

“We’ve had philosophers, lawmakers writing on the Old Laws for centuries,” he said. “They’re worded kind of esoterically, but they basically boil down to keeping our society sustainable. My father once said...sustainability isn’t natural. It’s not in our nature, our drive as biological creatures.”

Perhaps not. But it was in their culture, embedded right down to its very heart. And the ruins of Challenger Deep proved that the Atlanteans had grown arrogant in their advances in technology, in architecture.

Like what Ulraj had said about being king, it didn’t matter if the cause for the civilization’s demise was unnatural or not - whether it was divine retribution for spurning the Old Laws, whether it was a demon that had been set loose upon them, or whether it was civil unrest and a broken infrastructure - either way, a once-proud city had been brought to ruin through no fault but its own.
They shuffled on.

“Francis, was it?” Ulraj asked, after a pause. “Zak’s told me much about you.”

“All good things, I imagine,” Francis deadpanned.

“Oh, no, mostly bad,” Ulraj admitted, freely. “But now that I’ve finally met you, I don’t think I dislike you. Though I can see where Zak is coming from. You and I are similar.”

“How do you figure?”

“Well,” Ulraj said, cheekily, but unlike his usual tone, he was measured this time. Calculating. “We’re both politicians, after all. Do you think I can’t recognize a scheming vizier when I see one?”

“That would be my father,” Francis said. “I’m still in training.”

“Haha. Yes, I thought as much. So we have common ground, after all.”

His shift in tone and posture had Francis standing up a little straighter. Ulraj was suddenly no longer “Zak’s friend,” he was the king apparent of Kumari Kandam.

“Then,” Francis said, “let’s talk politics.”

“Of course,” Ulraj answered, gracefully. “Why don’t you begin?”

The flashlight swept slowly from side to side as Francis composed his questions.

The truth was, though he’d been stubbornly ignoring it since Zak was involved, friendly relations with an undersea king could not be anything but useful. In fact, it would have been very shrewd of him to have approached Ulraj with geniality first. Respect, even. But the thought of Zak calling him out for being a suckup was nothing short of infuriating, so he’d instead given Ulraj the cold shoulder. The whole time Ulraj had been talking about his people, Francis had mentally been taking notes. Now he realized that Ulraj had specifically been talking about his people not because he’d thought Francis would find it interesting, but because he was initiating a cultural exchange.

He’d been appealing to Francis’s information-gathering nature because he had an ulterior motive.

Francis’s goggles glimmered in the dark.

“I’m afraid I’m not entirely sure about this situation,” he chose his words carefully. “I almost had the impression that this trip was a personal leisure. But it seems that was not the case.”

Ulraj merely listened, impassive.

“You represent the interests of Kumari Kandam, I assume,” Francis continued. “I have to admit, I’m curious what they are...and if Zak really is ‘just’ your friend.”

Ulraj hummed noncommittally, lacing his fingers behind his head. “The king of Kumari Kandam has three major duties, you see,” he began. “First, we are tiebreakers for the general assembly. Second, we are generals during war, and have the final say on declaring it. And third, we are our nation’s ambassador...and ultimately decide who we are allied with.”

He turned to face Francis and continued walking backwards, deftly avoiding obstacles in his path. That must be the shark sense he’d told Francis about, what had also been at play during their earlier scuffle with the monster. “Let me be clear: the kumari have not allied themselves with
humanity. And I heard your conversation with the naga last night - neither, it seems, have you.”

Essentially, the king was asking Francis’s affiliation first, before he was willing to divulge a more comprehensive answer - how shrewd of him.

“My People serve their own self-interest,” he said, simply, “as any reasonable group would.”

“Yes, absolutely,” Ulraj said. “So you understand how we have nothing to gain from such a partnership. Humans just -” he shrugged. “- Don’t have anything to offer us.”

They were self-sustaining, after all. Anything they wanted, their engineers could make themselves.

“Now, don’t misread me,” the king continued, “Zak is a personal friend, first and foremost. The king has to remain impartial with matters concerning the state, so inter-kumari personal relationships are forbidden. Around Zak, I don’t have to be king. I can just be Ulraj. To be honest, I’d pretty much given up having any real friends for the rest of my career.”

Because Ulraj was, after all, still what Francis would call a “good person.” He liked Zak, and he would have come on this mission even if Zak wasn’t Kur, even if Zak had just invited him out for an adventure, not to stop a world-threatening calamity.

“Do you think Zak’s realized that you’re trying to win Kur’s favor for the good of your people?”

“No,” Ulraj said. “Frankly, I don’t think we could have been friends if he was the kind of person to consider that in the first place.”

“He’s an idiot,” Francis said.

“He’s honest. And since I live my whole life around shifty politicians, it’s a trait I’ve come to value.”

But honesty only got you as far as until someone betrayed it.

Ulraj just leered at him with an eyebrow raised. “You know, travelling with him might be less miserable if you think of him like that.”

Francis just scowled at the thought. Getting along with Zak, what a horrible idea.

“...If we fail,” Francis said, “and Kur returns, what will the kumari do?”

Ulraj was silent for a long time.

“...I suppose we’ll wait and see,” he said, a careful non-answer.

“If he targets the humans, and you know there is no way to save Zak’s consciousness. What will the kumari do then?”

“I think you said it yourself,” Ulraj finally acquiesced, a dull humor in his voice. “My people look after their own self-interest.”

“...Then why bother being friendly with me?”

“Because you’re Zak’s friend,” Ulraj said, “because I like you. But you won’t be satisfied with answers like that, I assume?”

How could he be? “I’m afraid not, your highness.”
“Then perhaps it’s because I think there’s as much benefit in a friendship with Kur as there is in a friendship with the ‘heir to humanity’.” He stopped, suddenly, and whipped around, crafty little smile on his face. “Perhaps I think you can see the sense in that.”

He extended his hand once more.

“So, what do you say, Francis?” He asked. “Friends?”

Hesitantly, Francis reached out to take it.

“Friends,” he said, narrowing his eyes.

Ulraj gave his hand a firm shake, chuckling. “You look like you’ve never had friends a day in your life.”

“I haven’t,” Francis answered.

“Tacitly untrue,” said the king, wiggling his fingers. “You made one just now. No backsies.”

“The Serpent sat cross-legged on a stone that jutted out from the water, its hair and jacket swaying in time with the currents that rocked the greenery back and forth. It, too, was facing the sun, watching the little rays of light that peeked through the waving strands of algae, how they mottled onto the ocean floor.

“But you won’t tell me?”

The Serpent laughed, derisive and ugly. “I am not silent. You wish not to hear.”

Its eyes glinted at him from beneath the shadow of its eyebrows, from beneath the shadow if its soul. They burned at him, they constricted around his throat, they seared his flesh and bone.

“Coward,” it spat. “You are afraid of me.”

Zak flinched, but returned the insult with a glare of his own.

“I’m not afraid of you.”

“Do not lie to me,” it hissed. “Do not ever lie to me.”

“You should be scared of me,” Zak said. “We’re going to get rid of you.”

“And you think that will be a ‘good’ thing?” It leered at him, and the sea was cast in darkness. “Then you are a coward AND a fool. If you are so brave, then reach inside me and pull out your
answers. But I warn you - “

And it grinned, a smile without any humor or warmth, the visage of the monster that could devour the world.

“ - If you throw yourself into my maw of your own accord, then I will not stop my jaw from snapping shut.”

“I said shove it, Furface. Get out of my way.”

Beeman’s nasally voice barked through the holding cells with all the authority a single man could carry. Drew muttered a curse under her breath as she stuck the piece of stone she’d been whittling into a prison shank beneath the makeshift mattress of cloth and moss she’d been given. As much as she didn’t want to see Beeman right now, she couldn’t go wasting her hard work on him. Beside her, Doc stirred, drawing himself up to a full sitting position, while Komodo clawed at the cage bars across from them.

Behind the curtain of vines separating this (admittedly cozy) prison from the rest of the intra-mountain paradise, lemurian grunting could be heard arguing with the Scientist, as he refused to let it get a word in edgewise. Finally, angrily, he stormed in past it, short the weapons usually holstered around his hip and the utility belt slung across his shoulders, the lemurian guard following while carrying them with concern.

Beeman turned to snap at it. “I said alone. Como se dice ‘solo’? Yeah? Or are you as dumb as you look?”

The lemurian bristled, but grudgingly retreated, bowing out behind the curtain. Beeman made the “shoo” motion at it until it disappeared, its shadow back in its usual post at the cave entrance.

“What do you want, Beeman?” Doc asked. He’d have sounded venomous if he didn’t sound tired, the evidence of long nights spent pacing the cell trying to think of a way to escape. “Come to try and convince us we’re on the wrong side?”

“I don’t think you need convincing of that,” Beeman said, sourly, pulling a small device out of his sock and planting it on the ground between him and the lemurian. Doc and Drew recognized it as he laid it into position and switched it on - a soundwave barrier. Immediately, the distant sounds of the goings-on of Mount Shasta grew almost nonexistent.

Whatever he’d come here to do, he’d come to do it in private.

“So, Doc.” He said, tucking his hands into his pockets as he turned to face them. “Drew. Been a while.”

“Yeah,” Drew said, cautiously. “Sure has.”

“How’re the kids?”

“Bastard - “

“Drew,” Doc said, putting a hand on her forearm. “It’s not worth it.”
Beeman smirked, but, like most of his expressions, it lasted for only an instant before it was wiped away by his usual glower. He took a few steps closer, so he was standing right in front of their cell, and crossed his arms.

“They lost him in the Pacific. If he sticks to populated areas or major waterways, they might not catch him for a while.” He glared down at them from behind his glasses. “You’re welcome.”

“He’s safe?”

“Don’t make me repeat myself.”

Method of delivery aside, this was the first real news Drew had gotten about Zak since they were separated, and the relief of it hit her like a sack of bricks. Doc, too - she could tell from the way his grip squeezed around her arm, the small escape of air from his lungs.

Zak was alive. Zak was free. They could work with this, definitely.

“Let’s not beat around the bush, then,” Doc said, leaning forward. “You wouldn’t have smuggled in a four-million-dollar piece of spy tech just so you could bring us good news. What are you here for?”

“Not much,” Beeman said, squatting down to eye level with them. “I have a few questions.”

“We have a few of our own,” Drew said.

“Nuh-uh,” the Scientist shot down. “We talk on my terms or not at all. I already gave you my bona fides, so don’t get greedy.”

“Fine,” Doc said.

“Doc - “

“Something is better than nothing,” he reminded her, gently. “And I assume if we’re helpful we can expect more visits.”

“Maybe,” Beeman said. “You’re believing in me too easily. What if I was lying?”

Doc sighed. “If nothing else, Arthur...I’ve known you to be a man of integrity. Maybe not by my standard of integrity, but you wouldn’t tell such a blatant lie for something as frivolous as getting on our good side.”

“You’re right,” Arthur said, dully impressed. “I wouldn’t.”

“So ask,” Doc said. “Whatever these questions are. If they’re something we can answer...”

“Right,” Beeman said, lowering his gaze as he searched for the words.

Drew had never particularly liked Beeman. He and Doc went “way back,” according to him, but the first time she’d ever met the man was the incident that both landed him a spot with the Secret Scientists and very nearly a spot in the ICC. Since then, he’d been nothing but rude - not just to her, but to everyone he’d ever met. His brain was, to be sure, massive - incomparable, even amongst the other Scientists - but that had never given anyone license to go stomping all over everyone else. What made him especially distasteful, though, was that he knew that, but acted the way he did anyway. She just couldn’t understand why someone would go out of their way to be such an...asshole.
Doc was better at dealing with him than anyone else in their organization - his patience was endless, and he seemed to have a particular fondness for the UFOlogist that extended beyond rationality. Of course, that fondness, and any other goodwill the two of them may have harbored for the man, had soured during the Kur incident all those years ago, when Beeman had been the first to take up the charge against their son.

She wouldn’t trust him farther than she could throw him. And she didn’t know why he’d taken a stance so counter to the other Scientists, who had all been swayed by the lemuriens’ charisma, but it smelled like ulterior motives. Foul play.

“...If,” Beeman said at last, raising his gaze to stare directly into their eyes, “if that boy of yours turns out to be everything south of what we’re hoping, what will you do?”

“He’s not going to ‘turn into’ anything of the sort,” Doc said, with conviction. “He’s our son. He always has been.”

“...Let me phrase that another way,” Beeman said. “If he’s the one - not me, not the fuzzballs, not the Scientists - if he’s the one telling you to pull the trigger, what will you two do?”

Drew’s grip on her husband’s arm tightened. “What makes you think - “

“My terms,” Beeman interrupted, “or not at all.”

“What she means is,” Doc said, “we don’t have enough information to make that call based only on that hypothetical. You understand when I put it like that, don’t you?”

“Don’t patronize me. Of course I do.”

They glared at each other for several seconds in unnatural silence, before Beeman let out a loud sigh, hunched forward, and rubbed the back of his neck, showing his fatigue.

“Doc,” he asked, “how long have we known each other?”

“Since college,” he answered.

“A little under twenty-seven years,” he corrected. “And in that time - in those decades we’ve known each other - haven’t I only made rational choices? Haven’t I only ever done the most good, for the most people, based on the cold, hard evidence on hand?”

He looked up at them with something foreign in his eyes, something raw and unshielded.

Drew wanted to say a million things, a million personal, private grievances, all boiling down to he’s only a kid, he’s my son, he’d never want to hurt anyone, but what would that achieve here? She looked to her husband, who was clearly thinking the same, his jaw clenched so hard a vein ticked in his temple, but he was always so much cooler under fire.

“...Yes,” he finally allowed. “That is the kind of person that you have always tried to be.”

Doc pulled himself close to the bars, resting his forehead against the cold steel.

“Arthur, what’s going on? It’s not like you to ask questions like that.”

The Scientist didn’t answer, only growled with frustration as he curled his head into his arms. Fingers grasping at his skull like claws, he dug into his scalp with his fingernails. He held himself in that position for a count of ten, before uncurling, exhaling, expression unreadable.
“I think,” he said, carefully, quietly, so quiet even Drew had to lean in to hear him, “…I think I’m making a mistake.”

And then, before the two could respond, he was back on his feet, stuffing the soundwave nullifier into his pocket, yelling at the guard to give him his stuff back as he stormed out beyond the vines, beyond where their voices could reach him.
still seemed shaken by the fall, or something. He was nervous, and jumpy, and looked like he was about to explode, holding it in only because Francis and Muca were present. Above their heads yawned the hole they’d rappelled down from, light twinkling down from above, and before them was the bottom layer of the city, beautiful, ancient, and abandoned.

The road ran downwards in a spiral pattern, before meeting the base of an enormous, curling colosseum that reached up to the ceiling in a conch-shell spiral. Across its glittering facade ran bands of the luminescent moss, in patterns of dolphin pods and fish schools, ocean currents and effigies.

It was the size of a football stadium, and was surrounded by pillars - later additions, ugly alabaster structures - that held up the roof of the cavern.

The buildings here were the most ramshackle yet, broken and crumbling. They’d clearly been looted for the gold and mother-of-pearl inlays that once decorated their walls, and then been forgotten about - indeed, even the temple was stripped bare down at floor level, the beautiful glimmering surface becoming matte and dull where it came into the reach of the average Atlantean. And then, like everything else in this most ancient of caves, it had been built over, and forgotten.

This was the city Atlantis lost.

Francis shifted the weight of Sharur on his shoulders. “Better get going, then.”

Their journey down the spiral slopes felt like a pilgrimage. Indeed, that was probably the reason the city was constructed this way.

Ulraj and Zak being together again, the two of them were running ahead to inspect the ruins, babbling excitedly about history and architecture and archeology, a myriad of subjects that Francis’s education glossed over. Even Muca was contributing to the conversations sometimes, slowly and grudgingly earning Ulraj’s acknowledgement.

She was still being kept at arm’s length, but the discussion had brought her over to his side in an argument with Zak. A heated debate that Francis didn’t think he’d have any place in, about history, or culture, or humanity. He was only straggling by a few feet, but the distance felt like an insurmountable chasm: his existence was too removed from theirs.

Ulraj looked back at him. “What do you think, Francis?”

“Not much,” Zak answered for him, and Ulraj elbowed him lightly.

“He’s right,” Francis said, catching up to them while they were stopped, waiting. “This sort of thing isn’t my forte. The snake is probably better conversation than me.”

“Sometimes an uninformed mind is a better judge,” Ulraj insisted. Francis’s doubt must have showed on his face, because Ulraj stepped forward to ask the question again. He seemed determined to hear Francis’s answer.

“Who would win in a fight? Kumari Kandam as she is now, or Challenger Deep in her prime?”

Francis gawked at him. He continued. “I say Kumari Kandam, but I’m biased. The naga takes my side, but Zak takes the stance that Challenger Deep would win. Since apparently - “ he looked at Zak “ - my opinion doesn’t count in this argument, we need a tiebreaker.”

“I…” Francis mumbled.
“Challenger Deep is a classic fortified city,” Zak argued. “I’m betting that crystal pyramid can survive anything you throw at it, and it’s stupid easy to defend, if it’s only got like one entrance.”

“Easy to defend? Easy to starve out!” Muca rebutted. “The kumari have more resources. Even if Challenger Deep can repel her invaders, they have no way of bringing the fight to the kumari!”

“So you’re saying Challenger Deep can win against Kumari Kandam on their home turf?”

“O heir to humanity,” Muca said, clasping her hands together like a prayer, “please strike Kur’s terrible argument down.”

Ulraj was laughing and Zak was even smiling, unable to resist a good joke even if it was at his expense.

“It, uh, would definitely end up being a siege,” Francis allowed, uncomfortably. “But I wouldn’t have a good idea who’d be the winner without seeing some intel on each side’s weapons counts and rations - “

“Francis,” Zak groaned, but Ulraj interrupted.

“It’s not really about who would win,” he said, “it’s about picking a side and sticking to it.”

“Oh,” Francis said, not seeing the point.

“Yes,” Ulraj continued, “so if you are unsure, then join our great kumari alliance! So magnanimous is our city, so noble and proud, we have even recruited a naga, defector to her kind!”

“I’m treasonous!”

Well, Francis supposed that that made up his mind for him.

“I think Challenger Deep would win.”

“Traitor!” Ulraj shouted.

“Humans are beings that know only cruelty,” Muca said, clutching her heart dramatically.

Zak eyed him suspiciously, but he couldn’t turn down the extra man on his side.

“The city is an architectural marvel,” Francis argued, “it’s a display of ingenuity. The siege would give them enough time to figure out a means of counterattack. Meanwhile, the kumari...aren’t they a little too conventional?”

“So it’s not only a battle you want,” Ulraj said, dramatically. “It’s the whole damn war!”

“War!” Muca cried. “Death to the humans!”

“To arms!” Zak yelled, jumping at Ulraj with his claw. But Ulraj saw the move and parried, brushing the claw aside and using Zak’s momentum against him to pin an arm behind his back.

“Our first prisoner,” Ulraj crowed. “Perhaps I should feed you to the nagas, to make an example of you?”

“I thought you two were sworn enemies!?” Zak asked, struggling to break free.

“Oh, we are,” Ulraj said, “but the enemy of my enemy is my friend.”
“Don’t tell the kumari,” Muca stage whispered, “but we are planning to betray them as soon as we have annihilated the opposition.”

“Not if the kumari betray the naga first!” Ulraj cried. “Death to the humans!”

“Francis!” Zak yelled, dramatically reaching out to him. “You’re my only hope!”

“You’re doomed, then,” Francis said.

“Oh my god. You can’t play along for like, five seconds?”

“No, no, it’s not that,” Francis said. “It’s just that...well, my People don’t see the benefit, is all...”

Zak stared at him in disbelief for all of two seconds, before breaking into a grin.

“I’ll give you a coupon that shuts me up for an hour if you come help me.”

Immediately, Ulraj had to let Zak go in order to parry the flying kick Francis launched at him.

“Such a low price!” Ulraj said, in mock disbelief. “I can’t believe you were bought so easily.”

“And you,” Francis said, quickly discovering for himself how troublesome the kumari’s shark senses were in direct combat, “so quickly playing nice with your ‘sworn enemy’ just because Challenger Deep would have won, and you know it.”

Ulraj was agile, quick on his feet, and had no blind spots. What he’d meant only to be a halfhearted display of “camaraderie” had become a serious spar. The kumari king reminded him of the worst sessions he ever had with Epsilon, which inevitably ended with Francis acutely aware of how far he still had to go, while Epsilon could give nothing but a disappointed sigh, as he left the room, untouched.

It wasn’t really that Ulraj was as skilled or honed as Epsilon was, but his scary reflexes meant the blows landed few and far between. He barely looked like he was building a sweat.

In the sparring rooms it was always his loss. In one vein, it made sense that he could never win; Epsilon was simply the culmination of “Francis,” the finished product. On the other, the impatience with his progress was always palpable. It made him wonder if he’d come out defective.

Epsilon was always in perfect form. Epsilons were always in perfect form. Efficient, brutal, and effortless. And Francis...

He...he had to win this one. Whatever it took.

He left his flank open and Ulraj took the bait. The king’s fist against his ribs was painful even under his padding, but grimacing through the pain, he grabbed the kumari’s wrist and vaulted over his shoulders, pulling him into a chokehold with an arm pinned behind his back, slamming him into the nearest wall.

“I yield, I yield!” Ulraj surrendered, snapping Francis out of his reverie. Immediately Francis let go and stepped back several paces, the king falling to the floor, leaning against the wall for support.

He’d never meant to let it go this far. He was...he was swept up by the flow of things. How stupid -

“Francis, that was awesome!” Zak shouted, clapping him excitedly on the upper arm. “I’ve never seen anyone take Ulraj down like that. I mean, besides my mom that one time. That was so cool! Teach me that move!”
“I, uh,” Francis muttered.

“And don’t think I didn’t recognize my strategy in there,” he said, something - pride? - swelling in his voice.

“I…”

He couldn’t stop staring at Ulraj, who was picking himself up off the ground, clutching at his shoulder. He waited for the words of condemnation or biting rejection, but none came. Instead, all he got was another playful tap on the shoulder, Ulraj grinning down at him.

“You sure don’t know how to hold back, huh?” He laughed, rolled his shoulder. “Next time, it’ll be my victory. Don’t think you can pull the same trick twice on the king of Kumari Kandam!”

He gave Francis a reassuring smile. No harm done. No grudge incurred.

Francis just crossed his arms. “You’re...not half bad...either.”

Zak gave him another pat on the arm. “Don’t push yourself, man.”

Francis glared.

It was with Muca’s entering the room behind them that they all took stock of the chamber they had stumbled into. Without meaning for it, and without noticing, they’d all stumbled into the temple’s antechamber, a small room with a doorway that lead off to their left, covered in glowing moss and deep indentations where gold and mother-of-pearl once decorated the walls. Huge sections of the wall had been crusted over by a white-colored mineral, and the stone was stained with chemical discoloration.

Zak put a hand up to it.

“It’s damp,” he said, surprised. Ulraj came closer to inspect it, while Muca’s ears twitched as she looked around.

“I can hear running water,” she noted.

“The huaca?” Francis asked, hand on Sharur’s handle.

Zak shook his head. “Not yet,” he said. “But it’s close. I can feel it.”

“How reliable,” Francis grumbled, but without any real venom. Honestly, at this point, whether or not Zak “felt like” it was close may as well be as trustworthy as a ground-penetrating radar.

“The whole floor here is made of stone anyway,” Ulraj pointed out. “Hardly anywhere to jam that spear. We might as well go deeper in...I can’t say I’m not excited to uncover what lies beyond.”

He turned toward the bas relief that had been etched into the wall. “This is our creation myth, from what I can tell. I expect we’ll see the others lined up in chronological order as we descend. The oldest parts of the kumari temples are only about four thousand years old - after the naga attacks, they ended up completely decimated. We had to rebuild them from the ground up.”

“Sorry,” Muca said.

“No, it’s not so bad,” he said, “the new ones are armed with cannons. Still, based on the writing...I’d say these are much older, by thousands of years.”
Despite himself, Francis could feel his heart beginning to race, just the slightest bit, at that revelation. On the surface, even he knew ruins seldom lasted even five thousand years, buffeted by the elements and by human intrusion, but here…

“Even I am having trouble reading this script,” Muca said, as they passed by more and more reliefs on their way down the slope.

“Oh? And here I thought you were supposed to be the translator,” Ulraj said, grinning.

“Well, I, it really - I only - can you read it?”

“Not really.”

“Ulraj,” Zak laughed. The king only flashed a cheeky grin.

As they delved deeper, through giant, yawning doorways, as the slope curled down, the walls became more and more well-preserved, untouched by greedy looters’ hands.

Eventually, even the humans could pick out the sound of running water, and sometimes it would drip down from above, leaking out of enormous aqueducts that leaned towards the center wall. The structure seemed to be built like an onion, in two layers; a circle wrapped around a giant middle chamber. And the whole time, it was descending, looping in dimly-lit circles toward the center of the earth.

Even though they’d started their descent with banter and teasing, as they walked downwards, ever downwards, the oppressive, sacred air of the temple hushed their voices. Fish-man kings from ancient times, holding artefacts of power, gazed down at them with eyes full of judgement and greed. Personified fish and cetaceans whipped the ocean tides into being, set the moon and sun into motion. Lines of succession were named and followed. Wars were played out, armies advancing on either side of the room.

The only ones speaking, eventually, were Ulraj and Muca, as Kumari Kandam’s king pointed out the myths he recognized, and Muca read for him what little she could make out.

The floor at the bottom was covered in a thin layer of water, maybe three-fourths a centimeter. The path split in two directions, opposite each other: a closed door that lead into the main chamber, which they had been circling around, and an open arch that lead to a darkened room.

Francis didn’t need the shiver that ran down Zak’s spine or the sudden warmth of Sharur on his back to deduce that the huaca lie beyond the closed doors, but they were made of heavy stone, crusted over with salt, and wouldn’t budge no matter how everyone pushed at them.

There was an inscription carved over the two sides of the door, badly marred by erosion and time. Muca clawed the salt off, translating as best she could.

“Take...erm...the blessing...across, maybe? ...This last part assuredly describes the door opening, but this part in the middle is either indecipherable gibberish or very lewd.”

“Across,” Zak repeated, peering into the open room opposite.

“Or we could return with explosives,” Francis groused.

“I wouldn’t,” Ulraj said. “I’m pretty sure the temple is helping to hold up the other three layers.”

Zak fumbled around his belt for his flashlight, but Francis stopped him as he was about to step
“I’m rather new to this, but is it a good idea to just walk in? Aren't there usually...traps in old ruins like this?”

“Well, yeah,” Zak said, easily. He seemed to have forgotten all their earlier animosity; he was talking with the gentle, corrective voice his parents often used when describing what they were dealing with to the other Secret Scientists. “Tombs have tons of traps, since they’re all about keeping people out. But temples never do. I mean, you’re not exactly about to get donation money from your parishioners if the cathedral likes to kill off the guys with bad reflexes, right?”

“...Alright,” Francis agreed, letting go.

So a beam of light shot out into the darkened room, sweeping the walls from side-to-side. The room was circular, like everything else of Atlantean make, and across the wall ran a massive bas relief, thrown into dramatic black shadows and glimmering white highlights as the light caught off all its striking edges.

But perhaps more striking was the massive set of statues in the middle of the room.

There were times, when exploring ancient ruins, where a single discovery is enough to change an entire paradigm. These were the types of discoveries that would get people killed.

Doc and Drew had lived one - only one, fifteen years ago, when they had been excavating in Iraq and unearthed an ancient map that set a world catastrophe in motion.

And now, fifteen years later, Zak, Francis, and Ulraj were living their first.

“No,” Ulraj breathed, frozen in shock.

“Like it or not,” Francis said, quietly.

“I can’t accept this,” Ulraj repeated, stepping forward.

“Dayaaluta was not a naga!”

But the proof against his claim held her eyes peacefully shut, the water lapping at the base of her statue, rippling where two city-serpents came rising out of the sea, tamed by the ancient magics of the once-noble, once-pious naga race.
Chapter End Notes

13k words please kill me

LOOKS LIKE PLOT IS PICKING UP HUH

canon-typical violence and fantasy racism

LET ME KNOW ! WHAT YOU THINK ! FOR I HAVE SLAVED OVER THIS MONSTER FOR WEEKS !
“Her heart bled with her regrets, the clement queen.”

“You!” Ulraj cried, grabbing Muca by the straps of her tunic and shoving her against the wall. “What kind of trick is this? What kind of sick, twisted - “

“Ulraj!” Zak yelled, trying to pry him off, but he wouldn’t budge.

“She bowed her head low to Calamity, beseeched the blackness that threatened our souls.”

“Nothing!” Muca choked out, behind the stranglehold. “I didn’t know, no one knew!”

“You think I’ll believe that?” Ulraj growled, shaking Zak off his arm. “You think I’ll believe anything a naga says?”

“She journeyed to the netherworld, to seek a kinder answer.”

“Ulraj!” Zak yelled, throwing himself at the king again. “This isn’t getting us anywhere. You know Muca couldn’t fight her way out of a paper bag!”

“It’s true,” Muca gurgled.

“And upon her return, the gracious queen Dayaaluta brought with her…”

“Anti-personnel field, on.”

“What are you - AUGH!”

A bright crackle of yellow electricity lit up the room, Ulraj’s forearm sizzling where Francis had reached for it, Muca crumpling to the floor.

“As much as I hate agreeing with him,” Francis said, emotionless, hand falling back to his side. “Zak is right.”

Ulraj glared at him, rubbing his arm, and looked away. Francis’s expression didn’t move an inch.

“Ulraj,” Zak said, quietly. “I know this is...a lot to take in.”
“A lot to take in?” Ulraj hissed at him. “That my people’s religion - the basis of our beliefs - is a lie? That everything we know is - ”

“Your highness,” Francis interrupted, coolly. “There are larger stakes at play. Surely you understand that.”

Ulraj was quiet, staring down at the floor, at the naga at his feet, who was coughing her little lungs out. She shook, and looked up at him, eyes big and red in the darkness.

Zak shivered, tucked his hands under his arms. He knew, firsthand, just how terrible naga could be - he couldn’t imagine how it must feel for Ulraj, whose race was massacred by them. The most he could say was half-hearted at best - Muca was every bit a fanatic Kur loyalist as naga were made out to be, and while she proved, at least, that naga could be reasoned with, that naga did exist that wouldn’t turn around and stab you in the back (immediately, anyway) - what could he say here that could bury the thousands of years of hatred between them?

He already knew that Ulraj was holding in his distaste for Zak’s sake. And, when it came down to it, Ulraj was more his friend than Muca was. That didn’t mean he could just watch Ulraj strangle her to death, but if he had to pick a side…

Still, Francis’s words had an effect on the king, cooling him down into a frigid stiffness, making no advancements toward the naga as she recovered from his grip.

Ulraj turned away.

“...We don’t have any physical representations of Dayaaluta,” he finally said, stepping towards the statue. “After Kur was sealed away, the kumari - and the rest of the races that had allied with each other to fight it - were ravaged by the naga. Our race nearly perished. We survived because we abandoned our cities and hid in the dark depths of the oceans, passing down our stories and myths through oral tradition for the two and a half centuries the nagas raged, and the decades of our rebuilding.”

He shook his head bitterly. “Isn’t it funny? Even though humans dealt the final blow, they didn’t build their cities on the backs of giant snakes. All we did was trade with them, and that was ‘alliance’ enough for the naga to turn their vengeance on us. And we suffered more for it.”

“So somewhere in those three hundred years, the fact that this…’Dayaaluta’ was a naga just vanished?” Francis asked. But Zak shook his head no.

“That sort of thing doesn’t just disappear,” he said. “It got wiped out. Rewritten. They didn’t want to remember.”

“So that’s that, then,” Ulraj said, bitterly. “No wonder we say nagas are all backstabbers.”

“I have...heard of this Rani Nagi only once,” Muca rasped, picking herself off the floor.

“That doesn’t look like her,” Zak pointed out.

“No, no. ‘Rani Nagi’ is a title. Show of respect, to refer to a higher station by title. This one...’Dayaaluta,’ I’ve heard her name only once before. My teacher...mentioned she was one of the queens Rani Nagi - the one we currently serve - she was hated by Rani Nagi, all her records destroyed.”

Zak raised his flashlight to the stone queen once again, the looping, spiral inlays glittering in the light.
“Guess this is why,” he said.

Mom, the anthropologist, had a lot to say about historical revision. Rani Nagi’s message, and her rule, were based on the idea of naga as conquerors, warriors, as a superior species. For her, this Dayaaluta would be a black mark on their history, a counterpoint to her claim.

His eyes widened. “Wait. If a naga helped the kumari out, then doesn’t that mean…doesn’t that mean that Kur was also…”

“The myth goes,” Ulraj said, quickly, “that we were being beset by beasts for thousands of years. When our cities grew too large, they’d be massacred, razed to the ground. The last time it happened, Dayaaluta begged the chaos spirit for mercy on our people, and it relinquished with a gift and a condition. The condition was the Old Laws we follow to this day. And the gift was,” he pointed at the two city-serpent statues rising out of the water. “Those.”

“It sounds like that ‘gift’ was really just another means of controlling your race,” Francis noted, “naga have the power to command serpents, after all.”

“It does, doesn’t it?” The words were spat out with venom. “I suppose that’s why the Atlanteans said no deal.”

Ulraj groaned, head in his hands. “We are solving questions that have puzzled our scholars for centuries and the answers are all things I would have preferred never to know.”

“Yeah,” Zak said. “Sorry.”

In the belly of the Antarctica cryptid, Argost had told him that Kur’s power had laid waste to civilizations. And here he saw the proof, etched into the walls. Kumari faces were twisted with terror and grief, screaming for mercy, felled at the claws and fangs of beasts with blazing eyes.

Skillful work, the Serpent crooned from inside him. He could feel its sickening satisfaction welling up from the black patch in his soul. Wouldn’t you agree?

I hate you. Because he didn’t have any other way to describe it, the burning in him that felt so much like guilt, disgust, horror, and fear.

They screamed so loud it could be heard from above the waves.

Shut up, shut up, shut up. He clutched at his head, shaking it like he could dislodge the Serpent out of his ear.

Heed it well, the Serpent laughed, retreating. This, all this, is yours. It is what I am. It is who you are.

“That is wrong,” Muca said. Zak snapped up, wondering if she had heard anything, but she wasn’t even turned to face him, instead directing her words at the kumari king. Her eyes were fierce, the same look Zak sometimes saw in his father’s eyes when he felt morally, ethically compelled to speak the truth. “The only sea serpents that exist on this earth are the ones that home your cities. And yet they were given to you by we, who command serpents as our steeds of war. It is as though we took our greatest weapons and entrusted them to you. And for the thousands of years between this temple and the death of Kur we did nothing to interfere, nothing to disturb your kind.”

“What do you mean?” Ulraj asked.

“Whatever our current queen may have decided,” she said, inclining her head, “Dayaaluta was
sincere. This was an act of peace.”

This conversation had been marked by long patches of silence, as everyone worked through the new information they’d been given. As convincing as Muca’s story was, and as convinced as she was in its telling, no one felt completely comfortable accepting her explanation. The scars inflicted by the naga ran too deep, Zak thought. It was nearly impossible to reconcile the naga they’d all known with the past, with a queen who had prayed for peace.

Distantly, far above them, they heard the gurgling roar of the demon that had destroyed this city.

“We shouldn’t delay any longer,” Francis said, uncomfortably. “We can argue about motivations later; we have a missive to complete. Neither of you will be betraying each other here - Muca’s translation abilities are valuable, and we could pummel her to death individually if we wanted to.”

His words were mostly pointed at Ulraj, who received them without any change to his expression.

“Yes, that’s true,” he admitted.

“So my suggestion is,” he said, calmly, “that you officially strike a truce with the naga to set everyone at ease. I know that your race and hers have history, but that’s irrelevant right now. We need to get what we came here for and then leave, safely. As long as she’s useful, we should use her.”

Even the king of Kumari Kandam couldn’t argue with that logic. His reluctance showed on his face, but eventually, he did turn to the naga, who had kept quiet out of concern for her own safely, and inclined his head in a small bow.

“Naga…” Ulraj began, before clearing his throat and standing up straighter, one hand over his chest. “I will be forthright: I still do not trust you, nor your kind. But Zak has some kind of faith in you, and I believe in him. As long as we are united on his front, then we are allies. After all…anyone who agrees that Kumari Kandam would win in a fight can’t be all bad.”

Muca breathed in deeply, rose up to her full height, and returned the gesture. “Yes. Long live Kumari Kandam.”

She offered him a small smile, and, hesitantly, he returned it - forced, maybe, but a gesture of goodwill if there ever was one. Zak breathed out an internal sigh of relief, glancing at Francis’s expressionless face out of the corner of his eye. Much as he hated to admit it, he couldn’t have settled this any better.

Francis turned back toward the statue, while Muca and Ulraj broke off to look at the murals, who had those same salt-stained runes etched into them as the rest of the temple. Zak hesitated for a moment before joining Francis as he made his way toward the center - it wasn’t like he had any knowledge of fish-person writing in the first place, so he wouldn’t be of any help to the two translators.

Though it was hard for Zak to look at the walls for other reasons.

“Hey,” he said, quietly, once the kumari and naga were out of earshot.

“What?” Francis asked, dully.

“Thanks for...settling things back there.”

Francis stiffened. “There’s no reason to thank me. We all need to work together; even they can
understand that.”

“Yeah,” Zak said, “but still, thanks.”

Francis inched away from the display of gratitude, and Zak gave a little smirk. He gave his head one last shake and set to work, the archaeologist's senses his mother instilled jumping to life. For what purpose was this room made? Well, it was a temple, so worship, obviously. But apparently it held some secret blessing that was needed to open the holiest of holies.

So maybe that made it a test.

He threw an arm in front of Francis to keep him walking closer to the statue, when they’d made it about a fourth of the way into the room.

“Hey - “

“No, look,” Zak said, shining his light down at the floor. It was subtle, but visible in the bright beam of light was a seam where the dark blue stone floor melted into a inky black hole beneath the surface of the shallow water. Sweeping the beam of the flashlight across the floor, the two of them found that the statue rose out of an enormous pit in the ground, a couple dozen feet in diameter, jet-black and bottomless.

“I thought you said temples don’t have traps,” Francis groused.

“They don’t. This isn’t a trap.” Slowly, he began to walk around the rim of the sinkhole, coming to realize that the water in the room was draining from it. He dug into his backpack and pulled out an apple, tossing it in. It splashed as it hit the water, drawing Muca and Ulraj’s attention, and it was quickly sucked below the surface, dragged below by a powerful current.

“It looks like a trap,” Francis said.

“It’s a test of faith,” Ulraj realized. “We figured out that the statue must have been key, but...this complicates things.”

“‘You can’t collect donation money if the parishioners get killed off,’ hm, Zak?”

“This wouldn’t kill a kumari,” Ulraj said, pointing at his gills. “I imagine it drains out to outside the city. If you fail, you just have to walk all the way back.”

“A naga can hold their breath for hours. Big ones, days,” Muca added.

“So basically, screw me and my human squishiness,” Zak sighed. “Alright. So we know we have to get to the statue, and we know we don’t wanna screw up. Even if you two can survive being thrown out, with that... thing out there it’s probably still a bad idea.”

Muca nodded vigorously; Ulraj cracked his knuckles.

“So how do you suggest we get across, Zak?” Ulraj asked.

“Simple,” he said, realizing just how simple it was. He pulled the claw out from his belt and grinned. “You cheat.”

The hand of Tsul’Kalu wrapped itself tightly around Dayaaluta’s arm, and pulled Zak across the chasm, dropping him onto one of her coils. Checking with his flashlight to see if there was a foothold, he let himself fall to the ground at the base of her statue, and waved at the group across
the ravine.

“Hey, hey, this is a sacred site for my people, you can’t cheat!” Ulraj cried, running around the hole until his senses picked out for him a careful path. Muca and Francis followed close behind him.

“Lucky for me, I don’t ascribe to your religion! Betcha I can get that ‘blessing’ before you can make it across,” Zak taunted. “Whoa!”

Thinking fast, Ulraj had picked Muca up by her shirt and thrown her at him, Zak just barely dodging out of the way. She smacked into the stone effigy and fell to the floor beside him with a small splash of water, woozily picking herself back up out of her coils.

“If she can figure it out first, it’s our win,” Ulraj yelled at him. “And also you have to admit Kumari Kandam would win in a fight!”

“I didn’t agree to that,” Francis said.

“Then you’d better hope Zak can find the switch before Muca does.”

“Oh, he called me by name,” Muca said, still dazed from the impact.

“Upon further consideration, I’m changing my allegiance. Consider me part of the kumari alliance now.”

“Francis, you traitor,” Zak yelled at him. “I’m taking that silence coupon back!”

“No backsies,” Francis muttered. “Am I saying that right?”

“It is so weird to hear you say those words. I’m getting chills and not the good kind.”

“‘Vaunted sons and daughters of the mineral sea, to receive my blessing’ - “

“Muca! Read inside your head, inside it!” Ulraj called.

Zak tried to ignore them as he put his hands on the statue, carved out of stone and lustrous mother-of-pearl. If it was a ritual of some kind, it’d have to been repeated over and over again; there’d have to be some kind of evidence. Statues meant to be touched became worn and smooth. Monuments meant to be painted ended up stained with color. Here…

Her lower coils were water-damaged, even though they sat several feet above the whirlpool. They were also completely dry, unlike the dampness that had marred the rest of the temple. So that was odd. Maybe he was meant to rub water on it? After all, the water gathered at their feet seemed to be a feature of the temple, and not a problem of leakage. But it felt like it couldn’t be that easy. There had to be something else to it. That was when white, white at the bottom of the statue caught his eye.

The water damage on the lower coils lacked the crust of white salt that coated even the base of the statue, where it sat above the sea. He furrowed his brow, leaned forward, and licked the stone - because sometimes science involved licking - and there was no hint of salt, no mineral taste at all.

Curious.

That was proving the hypothesis formulating in his mind. He had an idea, his hand fumbling for his bag. So it was a hunch - it was only a hunch, but…
He reached for the water bottle on the outside pocket of his backpack and unscrewed the lid, sucking in a deep breath, before pouring purified freshwater onto the base of the statue, where it dripped and splashed and mixed with the saltwater below.

The inlays on Dayaaluta’s statue flared to life, pulsating with a dazzling white glow, which faded into blue, cool and gentle, lighting up the water from below and throwing the pathway into sharp relief. Francis and Ulraj stopped in their tracks, halfway, watching the light wind through the chamber, around and around the circular floor, before flaring out the entryway.

From across the hallway came a great, crackling, grinding sound, as the two giant stone doors pulled open, breaking the salt crust that had sealed them up for millenia.

“Challenger Deep for the win,” Zak breathed.
Buried in the basement of a chateau overlooking Loch Ness, a monster with white fur sat hunched over ancient tomes, its claws shivering against the forgotten scrawl.

Once, these records had only filled him with ambition and drive. Charcoal rubbings from monuments long-forgotten, of the most sacred, most primeval, most archaic of human worship.

_Death incarnate._ This collection was his dearest treasure.

_End of benevolence._ He could imagine the humans singing, hymns of praise, of begging for mercy, from a monster that knew not the meaning of the word.

_The living apocalypse._ He would have gladly traded his life over a thousand times if it meant he could one day _be_ this creature, so feared, so awed, so cursed. And with such aplomb he’d play the role! Sometimes kind, sometimes cruel, but always with the best of taste; how beautifully he’d have rewarded humanity if they had learned their place, and danced as the actors on his stage, where he was the eternal star.

He’d been stupid. So, so stupid.

The memory of those burning eyes had etched itself into his very soul.

_You don’t have followers. You have fans._

Every word rang in his ears, stronger than a memory. His claws dug into the paper, leaving small indents where he was just barely able to hold himself back. The soul inside him crackled, singed him with electricity that howled against the _shame_.

Never before had he been laid so bare, so naked. His heart had been ripped out his chest, still-beating, and had been forced to face the ridiculous farce that had been his dream, his life’s ambitions. His spirit was raw and red and stung when the air breathed on it, how close - how close he’d been - to everything coming to naught. To ashes!

_An entire lifetime spent flattering the race you wanted to rule, and still you harbored dreams of ruling them?_

Even if his soul had been safeguarded against the monster’s terrible power, his body still belonged to the earth, and he could feel the Serpent’s magic pull at him like an ocean current, a million arms, hooks dug into his flesh, fangs poised to strike, rip-tear his skin to bone.

He had never known insignificance before. Not when he was a nameless spirit feared by all on the mountains, not when he was the host of Weird World, dazzling audiences worldwide. In the eyes that had seen eons pass by, he was nothing and no one. He was less than a millisecond. A whisper of a memory of a passing thought.

What was he?

“Old friend,” said the Xing-Xing, setting a small porcelain cup of tea on the table between them. “This place is no good for you. You need fresh air. Snow. Come home to the mountains with me, won’t you?”

Argost bared his teeth, but didn’t dare snap at the one who had nothing for him but concern.

“I won’t have all my efforts be wasted,” he said, instead, turning back to his papers.

Why was he so weak? Why were his fangs so ineffectual, his claws scrabbling for purchase against
the hide of the ancient beast?

It all came down to knowledge. It always came down to knowledge. Power slept in the same bed as secrets did. He, who had grasped so many bitter victories from those Scientists who named themselves so, knew this better than anyone.

“This is foolish,” the Xing-Xing shook his head. “We belong to it. That is our nature.”

“That may be your nature,” Argost said, voice low. “It is not mine.”

“It will always be yours,” the Xing-Xing said. “...It, and I, will always be waiting for you.”

“Leave me be,” Argost growled. “Please, leave me be. Next time, have Munya bring the refreshments.”

The Xing-Xing could only shake its head in sadness, bowing politely as he retreated back up the stairs.

*Watch carefully: this is power.*

He needed power. He needed knowledge. He needed secrets.

Growling, only the priceless and one-of-a-kind nature of the books and artifacts before him kept him from sending them crashing into the floor. These human relics, a mere several thousand years old, these mortal records would tell him nothing.

He needed secrets. Ancient secrets, secrets older than any mortal race. Secrets held by those who knew the Serpent best. Those for whom that knowledge was engraved on their very souls.

And he knew where to find them.

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*Open your hearts and sing!*

*O vaunted sons and daughters of the mineral sea.*

Holiest of holies, the innermost sanctum of Challenger Deep.

It glittered, the blue stone turning a dark, starry black, which twisted up the walls in coils and curls that crashed against each other, so many black shards of rainbow-flecked opal keeled like snakescales, like razor-sharp claws, bleeding out of the circular walls. The soft blue light of the queen Dayaaluta was consumed by these echoic spines, this great, black beast. Bit by bit, the darkness devoured its gentle glow, until, gazing upwards, all they could see was black.

From the walls ran water. It fell from the chaos’s spines like rain, in some places crashed into the ground like a waterfall, holes punched through the stonework floor, leading into nothing but darkness below. In this room, too, a giant crater was sunk into the center of the floor, ringed by giant black spines. From the blackness above, an enormous stream of water fell into its center, disappearing once more into darkness. The distant roar of where it met the bottom of the drop filled the room, echoing across the walls and through their bones.

“There’s a power here,” Zak breathed, his hands meeting the opal. “This is it. This is definitely it.”

“Incredible,” Ulraj said, ears twitching. “The room feels as if it’s alive.”
Sharur’s speartip stabbed listlessly at the stone floor, plinking off the tiles, breaking the solemn atmosphere.

Francis looked up at them, an unimpressed expression clear on his features. “Is it working?” he asked, dryly, tapping the spear against the stone.

“I don’t think it is,” Muca replied, the sarcasm clearly lost on her.

A “power”? No, Francis didn’t think so. The architecture was striking enough, he supposed: the black spines, the stupidly high ceiling, the water effects, they all combined to make the chamber look sacred and, yes, even magical, but the moment he admitted that would be the moment that he was irreversibly sucked into Zak’s downward spiral.

He looked at the spear in his hand, at its worn wood, its innocuous engravings, and wondered how something so innocent could possibly cause so much trouble.

“It’s probably at the bottom of the hole,” Zak pointed out. “Everything else about this place suggests ‘going down’ is our best bet.”

They all peered over the black spikes ringing the waterfall, where it went crashing down into a seemingly bottomless pit.

“You can’t seriously expect me to jump down there. We have no idea how far it goes.”

“Well, we can go back and get the rope,” Zak said. “Look, magic mystic Kur instincts say it’s down there. Ninety, ninety-five percent sure.”

“That’s exactly why it doesn’t inspire confidence, idiot,” Francis bit back.

“Can you two not argue about it right here?” Ulraj asked. “This is holy ground, technically. If you two get cursed, I don’t want to be collateral. I don’t think the spirit of chaos that presides here appreciates your bickering.”

“Please, your highness,” called out a sickly-sweet voice that froze Zak and Muca in place. “Call it by its name, won’t you? This is an ancient temple dedicated to our master, the great and powerful Kur.”

From the other chamber emerged slitted red eyes, writhing, scaled bodies, as Rani Nagi and her royal guard pulled their bodies up out from under Dayaaluta’s statue. Water shimmered off their scales in the blue light, as they drew up to their full heights, tongues flicking in and out of their mouths in anticipation.

Francis tightened his grip on the spear, while Ulraj shifted into a fighting stance, and Muca cowered behind Zak.

“And you are correct,” she said, enunciating each word with glee, “you have been cursed. It’s...fitting that this will be your grave, isn’t it?”

There were, in total, four naga: the apparent queen, a blue one with intelligent eyes, a black one with a pointed head, and one orange-brown with a cobra hood. Fascinating, he thought, to see them in motion; one could almost assume from the blurry video footage they had on record that they were men in rubber suits.

This was pretty bad. Muca could hardly be called a combat unit, especially when compared to her brethren, which meant they were outnumbered. And naga were big, especially in real life, meaning
they definitely had the advantage in terms of sheer strength. To be honest, the smart money wasn’t on their ragtag team of humanoids. But he also figured the naga weren’t going to welcome him if he defected, especially as they levied their gaze on Sharur, clenched between his hands.

“Go home, snake-breath,” Zak growled.

“Oh, great one,” Rani Nagi laughed, “it truly is such a pity that the humans have sunk their claws so deeply into you. Why must you so continuously deny your true nature?”

“I still wouldn’t party up with you,” he spat. “You don’t even care about Kur at all. You only want me as far as I can get you what you want. So I’m only gonna say it again once: go home, snake-breath. Final offer.”

Rani Nagi only laughed, a horrible hissing noise under her breath.

“Kill the human first,” she ordered. “Leave Kur to me.”

Immediately, the blue and black ones surged toward him, mouths open, hissing. The orange one - Francis caught sight of it through the corner of his eye - lunged at Ulraj, while the queen drew herself up to menace Zak and Muca, her fangs bared in a wicked grin.

Francis dodged the blue snake’s strike and used the momentum to deflect the black one’s blow, the spear flashing bright white as its claws scraped past the spear shaft, and it recoiled in pain. “My queen,” he said, in a gravelly voice, “the spear retains its ward.”

“Then don’t get hit by it,” she hissed back, pouncing on empty air as Zak spun out of the way. Seeing as it was getting no help from his queen, the naga turned back toward his enemy, who was already back in a fighting stance.

Sharur was warded against snakes, Zak had told him. To the naga, Francis essentially held one long taser. Suddenly, being stuck with an ancient greatspear for a weapon didn’t seem so bad.

The naga circled him, cautiously, and Francis did the same. He’d go on the offensive if he were reckless like Zak, but he’d been taught to observe, counterattack, especially when his opponents were so elusive that no solid record of their fighting abilities existed on file.

“Francis, watch out!”

Ulraj’s voice alerted him just in time to the cobra naga dropping from the wall, and he felt the rush of air whistle past its claws as it pounced down on where he’d been standing. The other two immediately closed in on the opening, fearlessly throwing themselves at him even as his parries left them hissing in pain.

He didn’t like this. The floor was slippery and wet, and the nagas were strong. Each blocked blow threatening to knock him off-balance; the light was dim, and all three of them seemed to be focusing him down despite Ulraj’s best efforts to interfere. Sharur’s anti-naga ward seemed to offer him some respite, but its reach was limited, and the naga were well-trained, resistant to pain. It seemed like a losing battle.

His foot hit one of the worn-through holes in the blue-black tile and he slipped, falling back against a wall with a small splash of water. Gleefully, the naga descended upon him, and were only held at bay because one of his fingers reached the sonic collar in time. The high-frequency blast stunned his foes just long enough for Francis to scramble back to his feet, breathing hard.

The soundwave echoed around the chamber, and it rumbled, bits of debris falling from where age
had loosened them, and Francis noted it probably wasn’t a great idea to use it again. The last thing they needed was to be buried together in the bottom of the bottom of the sea; if he had to share a watery grave with Zak, then at least he wanted to kill Zak with his own two hands.

Then, about the naga. He was backed against a wall, three-on-one. But he’d been observing their movements this whole time - now, it was his turn to attack.

So he did. He lunged with the spear at the big blue one, and it backed up to avoid the hit - so Francis pushed the spear forward with his other hand, the tip of the weapon catching against the naga’s abdomen, and it screamed in pain. Without sparing a movement, he pivoted out of the way of a claw slash, using the spear as a vaulting pole.

His continued resistance agitated the naga, who had been expecting a quick and easy fight. They grew more vicious, but less coordinated, a deadly mistake against Francis’s trained, calculated movements. If the blows hit too hard, don’t get hit. Dodge, counter, dodge again.

Ulraj, like an assassin, leapt out of the shadows with a long black spike he’d pulled off the wall, and wrestled the black snake to the ground. With the temporary distraction provided, Francis lunged at the hooded cobra, jumping off the wall, aiming for the spot between its eyes.

Sharur proved too dull to pierce the naga’s armor, but the direct hit and the spear’s ward was enough to knock the naga out of the fight, leaving it crumpled on the ground.

The black one, at that moment, managed to throw Ulraj off, the king hitting the wall with a bang. It turned to menace Francis, hissing, its tail lashing back and forth in the frothing water. Francis narrowed his eyes and lunged forward, Sharur catching the naga under its jaw, and with a bright flash of light, it, too, fell defeated. But that move left him wide-open, and the blue naga pounced, slamming him against the ground. The tile scraped against his cheek, and he tasted salt water, and Sharur was still held firmly in his grasp, though at this angle, there wasn’t anything he could do with it. The naga reared up to deliver a fatal bite, when a small blur of black and red tackled it from the side - not enough to shift its weight off of him, but enough to postpone the end.

““You turn against your own kind, Munshee?” The blue naga hissed. ““This is treason!””

““This is not the will of Kur,”’ she hissed back, ““and I want you to get off my friend!””

And then she bit him, her fangs just barely penetrating his armor. He roared in indignation and ripped her off, flinging her at the wall, but that was enough for Francis to scramble out from under his grasp, and with a swing of Sharur and another bright white flash, the final member of Rani Nagi’s royal guard went crumpling to the ground.

Francis pulled himself to his feet, leaning against Sharur to support his weight. Three naga lay at his feet, and across the room, Muca and Ulraj were recovering against the wall, battered but alive. Francis narrowed his eyes. That was everyone accounted for, except -

“Ulraj!” Zak’s voice from the other room. He’d been dragged away in the struggle, without anyone noticing. Grimacing, Francis began to run, dashing over the exhausted naga bodies and out the doorway.

The queen turned to hiss at him, eyes big and bright and red in the darkness, Zak dragging behind her as he desperately tried to free himself from her coils wrapped tightly around his foot.

Francis ran and lunged, but she parried him easily, not even reacting in pain to the bright flash of light as Sharur bounced off her arm. She was bigger and stronger than the others, and her parry
sent Francis stumbling back, his body wide-open for her body slam across his abdomen, knocking all the wind from his body as he went slamming up against the wall.

“So you are the human that inherited Gilgamesh’s will,” she said, drawing up to him, one of her smaller arms pinning Francis’s spear hand to the wall by the wrist, the other pushing him back by the shoulder. Zak was raised into the air, dangling from his ankle, scrabbling wildly for purchase. His eyes, desperate, met Francis’s, before the queen’s body blocked them from each others’ view.

Francis only regarded her coldly. From a distance, one might mistake her for a beautiful woman; high cheekbones and a wicked smile. Up close, however, all her potential beauty fell away into cruel, sharp angles. She drew close, tongue flicking out into the air, millimeters away from his face.

“You taste artificial,” she mused, “Such a shame. You would have made a fine meal, otherwise, heir to Gilgamesh. Fit for a queen.”

“Oh, bugger off,” he said, and pressed the button on the sonic collar, and blasted her with it full-on in the face.

She screamed in agony, writhing backward, clutching at her ears. Naga ears were sensitive, Francis thought, remembering how Muca noticed the sound of running water first. Even on a minimal setting, so as not to upset the architecture, it was enough to force her to let go, his body wobbling as his weight dropped back to his feet.

But it was also, unfortunately, enough to force her to let Zak go, and he yelped as he fell into the water, breaking the surface just once before the current dragged him down.

“No,” Francis said, under his breath, and he went running to the edge of the pool. But it was already too late by the time he got there, Zak managing only to take a single gulp of air before the current swallowed him, his hand the last thing to submerge beneath the surface.

Francis sat there, dumbly. One hand still clutched Sharur, but its weight now felt mocking in his hands. But before he could even fully realize his failure, a thick coil wrapped around his ankle and yanked him into the air, and again he was pinned against the wall, both his hands incapacitated, left struggling futilely against the queen’s grip.

She was furious, her already cruel visage twisted in incoherent rage, her normally cool and collected hiss more akin to an outraged scream. She tore the collar from his throat, and it went clattering to the ground, and with the other, she squeezed, fully intending to bleed the life out of him like this.

“I will make it hurt,” she promised, her claws digging into the armor he wore beneath his clothes. His vision began to darken, as the blood began to pound in his ears, and he could do nothing but writhe, kicking at empty air with his only free limb.

But it was futile, he knew it was. Eventually his struggles died down, along with his lack of oxygen, and his only hope remained that she would let him go in time for his auto-resuscitator to kick in. He closed his eyes, his body growing faint and cold and weak, and Sharur went clattering to the ground.

...And then, suddenly, he was dropped to the ground, his body coughing and shuddering and gasping for air by reflex. Once he’d recovered, he realized that the blue light of the room had turned bright, angry orange, like the light of a bonfire, or the setting sun. Slowly, he turned to look toward the center of the room, as Rani Nagi backed up against the wall beside him.
Rising out of the water was one of the great, fanged red heads of the demon that had attacked them when they’d first arrived in Challenger Deep. And atop it, eyes blazing, sat Zak Saturday.

...No, not Zak Saturday.

He could tell as it touched the ground, carefully and deliberately and without a single wasted movement, as the demon’s other heads rose out of the water, eyes blazing that same, fiery orange, as they ringed around Zak’s body like an entourage of monsters.

No, this was not Zak. This was Kur, the Serpent itself.

The others - Ulraj, Muca, the royal guard - came running, but they all froze in the doorway. Kur did not turn to look, casting them only a cursory glance before turning his attention back on the two gathered in Dayaaluta’s chambers.

Slowly, it walked toward them. Francis, still breathing hard from nearly being strangled to death, only barely had the strength to pull himself to his feet, leaning against the wall. The Serpent stopped before him, expression cold and unreadable, before bending down and reaching for Sharur.

The greatspear flashed bright white as its hand made contact with the wood, sizzling against its skin, filling the chamber with light. Unfazed, the Serpent stood again, and held the weapon out. Hurriedly, Francis rushed forward to take hold, the wood hot in his hands.

"Do not drop it again, heir to humanity," the Serpent said. Francis said nothing in reply, mouth pressed in a cold, thin line.

Then the Serpent turned to the doorway, the naga stiffening, but it paid them no heed.

"King of Kumari Kandam," it said, "step forth."

Ulraj hesitated, but did as he was told, drawing up to his full height before Zak’s body. Even a head taller than the Serpent, he seemed small before the absolute pressure of Kur’s presence. True to his training as a king, only the tightening of his grip betrayed Ulraj’s uncertainty.

The Serpent studied him, slowly. "My retainers have troubled you," it finally said, "and so they shall pay reparations."

Ulraj’s eyes widened, but he said nothing. Kur reached out its hand.

"Rani Nagi. Offer to the king your services, to be called upon in a moment of Kumari Kandam’s need."

"You...you expect me to bow my head to -"

Kur’s eyes flashed.

"Is my mercy not great enough for you, Trishna?"

There was venom in its voice, bitter cold, and it froze them all dead in her tracks. It didn’t raise its voice at all, but it didn’t have to. The air around them trembled with the Serpent’s hiss.

A small chorus of quiet murmurs emerged from the naga watching, and Rani Nagi flinched back as though she’d been struck, indignation and terror in equal parts clear on her features.

Finally, she placed her great, scaled hand in his, and bowed her head to the kumari king.
“...I, Rani Nagi,” she said, in a strained voice, hissing it like a curse, “swear to come to Kumari Kandam’s aid in its hour of need.”

Ulraj took a deep breath. “I accept,” he said, keeping his voice as even as he could.

The Serpent didn’t acknowledge him, simply turning to face the doorway once again.

“Itihaskar,” it called. Muca looked frantically around, before she realized it was talking to her. The other naga all turned to look with grave silence at her.

“Y...yes?”

“Do you not have a duty to perform? Your queen grows old.”

She flinched back. Another round of quiet mumbling emerged from the naga watching. “...Yes,” she admitted.

And that was enough answer for Kur, who turned its gaze at last back on the naga queen, who had yet to raise her head or move from her spot.

“Return home, Rani Nagi,” it said, an imperial decree that left no room for argument. “There is nothing for you here.”

Her eyes darted to and fro, between everyone gathered in the room together, her tail lashing at the water. Clearly, she wanted to dissent, but there was no room in Kur’s pitiless gaze for her to do anything but obey.

“As you wish, my master,” she said, her vindictive spite barely masked in her low, submissive tone. She turned, and, with as much dignity as she could muster, leaving only a ripple of disturbance on the surface of the water, she sank beneath the current as though she’d never been there at all.

The other naga all hesitated only a moment before rushing to join her, splashing into the water one-by-one as the demons watched, until finally only Muca was left.

She looked back at them all, red eyes wide with some kind of clear intent.

“I will be back,” she promised, before she, too, slipped beneath the water, leaving only three figures basking in red-orange light left in the room.

The demon, too, gave them one last stare as some silent order was communicated to it, and it sank below the water, and the room returned to a cool blue glow.

Finally, the Serpent collapsed, Zak’s body crumpling to its knees, and Ulraj rushed to his side.

“Zak?” He shook him, but there was no response. Even from this distance, though, Francis could tell he was breathing.

If Zak was breathing, he’d be fine. Francis slid to the ground, rested his head on his arms, one hand gripping Sharur’s handle so hard it hurt.

They’d survived. Somehow, they’d survived.

Do not drop it again.

Zak’s palm was open, and Francis could see the burns Sharur had left.
“He’s alive,” Ulraj said. “Can you help him up on my back? I want to carry him somewhere dry.”

Wordlessly, Francis moved to help, arranging Zak’s soaking-wet body into the Kumari’s arms. Slowly, the two of them began to walk back up the winding temple to the “surface,” blinking into the brighter lights.

They set up shop in one of the abandoned homes, swapping out Zak’s wet clothes for a dry pair from his waterproof backpack. Francis, meanwhile, opted to stay in what he was wearing, and together, wordlessly, he and the king sat cross-legged on the floor, as Ulraj broke into the rations he’d brought for himself, and Francis unscrewed his dietary substitute pill bottle and downed his daily meal with a swig of water. Ulraj watched, eyebrow raised.

“Is that all you’re eating?” he asked. He seemed to be trying to ignore what had happened in the depths of the temple, and Francis couldn’t blame him. What he’d been gifted as “reparations” would weigh heavily on a king’s mind, and it wasn’t exactly something to discuss with an outsider.

Besides, Francis had thoughts of his own to stew in.

“It’s got every required nutrient for daily functioning,” he said, listlessly. “And leptin.”

“Uh-huh,” Ulraj said, unconvinced. “I’m sure it can sustain your body, but that can’t possibly sustain your soul, friend.”

“Souls don’t exist,” Francis said.

“Sure they do,” Ulraj said, breaking off a piece of his jerky. “Or else no one would ever eat.”

Francis’s first instinct was to refuse, but in the end, it was still good to play nice with the king. So he took what was offered to him, giving it an experimental sniff before taking a bite out of it.

Every now and then, so their digestive organs didn’t shut down entirely, Francis and Epsilon were prepared an actual meal. Of course, since those meals served an entirely practical purpose, they were cooked with minimal spices and maximum nutritional efficiency, practically a slurry of lab-grown meats and vegetables with the flavors boiled out.

He didn’t know why he’d started crying.

Ulraj watched with fascination as he began to sniff, and his eyes began to water. The jerky was -- good, extremely good. Was it only kings that were allowed field rations this decadent? His mouth, his throat, even his lips were tingling, practically on fire. The little he’d been given disappeared in an instant, and Francis chased the aftertaste, lifting his goggles just slightly to swipe at his watering eyes.

“Er, Francis,” Ulraj said, nervously, “do you need some water?”

Well, his mouth was essentially a blazing inferno of flavor, so he nodded, not trusting himself to speak. If he breathed, he’d fan the flames, he thought. So, stiffly, he unscrewed the cap of his water bottle and downed half the contents in one go.

“That’s...very good,” he said, panting out the words. He could be forgiven for his weakness here, right? If it was used for flattery. But Ulraj didn’t seem flattered; his eyebrows were still raised in wonder as he stared Francis down.

“Francis…” he couldn’t stop himself from grinning. “Could it be you’re bad with spicy food?”
Francis froze. “Spicy” - he knew the theory behind “spicy,” he knew that it was the result of capsaicin binding to nerve receptors in the mouth, but he could never have predicted it would affect him like this.

“I’m fine,” he said, tersely.

“This is barely even mild,” Ulraj said, a laugh creeping into his tone. “I thought from the look of you you’d have a higher tolerance, but - I wouldn’t have offered if I had known.”

Slowly, the burn crept back up into his mouth. It took all his self control not to pant openly to try and soothe the flame. “I - I don’t need your pity,” he said. “I’m fine.”

“You’re really not.” Ulraj was basically openly chuckling now. He pulled a yellow wedge of fish-curd cheese from his rations, and broke off a piece and handed it over. “Here,” he said. “Capsaicin is soluble in oil. Nibble on this, fingerling, it should help the burn.”

“...Thanks,” Francis said, sullenly. “...Please be honest with me, your highness. If Zak found out that I’m...bad with spiciness, as you say, is he going to make fun of me?”

“He’ll never stop,” Ulraj confirmed. Francis’s heart sank.

“Well. I guess that’s my fate now.”

“You could ask me to keep quiet.”

“You know as well as I do that you will tell him the moment he wakes up.”

“True. But you could still ask.”

The king hesitated a moment, casting a worried gaze over Zak’s unconscious form.

“You aren’t worried,” he said, “so does that mean this has happened before?”

“I don’t know how frequent it is, but I saw it happen once. He was fine again in the morning.”

“Alright,” Ulraj said, chewing thoughtfully. “I’ll be honest with you, Francis, it felt like years were being shaved off my life. So that was Kur, huh?”

“Yes, it certainly has...presence.”

“‘Presence’ is a good word for it,” Ulraj sighed, leaning back against a wall. “Enough to encircle the world. Will you allow me to use you as a sounding board, to put my thoughts in order?”

“Why not wait until Zak wakes up?”

“Because I love Zak to death,” Ulraj said, “but what I need right now isn’t a moral compass, but an objective pragmatist. You fill the role better than he does.”

He supposed he could give it a shot, then.

“Alright. Is this about the ‘reparations’?”

“In part, but in part about you.” He gestured at Zak. “And him, as well.”

Francis stayed silent, and let the king organize his words. It was quiet for a long time before Ulraj spoke again.
“Why were you chosen to wield Sharur?”

Francis furrowed his brow. “I was under the impression that the first human to bleed on it got it. There was no special meaning; it just ended up that way.”

“No,” Ulraj said, shaking his head. “Things don’t ‘end up’, not when it comes to stuff like this.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, think about it. The only family of cryptid specialists in the world have a son, and their son ‘ends up’ being the reincarnation of what is essentially a cryptid god.” He narrowed his eyes. “His adopted brother ‘ends up’ being one of the last surviving lemurians, a Kur guardian, and yet one of the only ones not affiliated with the cult currently chasing him. And you...you ‘end up’ being the one chosen by Gilgamesh to carry on his will. So I ask again: why you?”

“There are holes in your theory, your highness,” Francis noted. “For example, even if those two can be attributed to some kind of karmic destiny, it doesn’t explain everyone else. Argost, a random yeti, ‘ended up’ as an anti-Kur. There’s no meaning behind that. So why assume there is meaning in any of it?”

“Fair enough,” Ulraj said, “but indulge me, as though I’m onto something.”

“Much of the information you’re asking for is classified,” Francis responded, coldly.

“Fine,” Ulraj said, clearly miffed, but not pressing the issue. “Then at least you can entertain my conjecture, can’t you?”

“I suppose.”

“The humans have every reason to oppose Kur the way the Kumari hate the Naga, and yet, Gilgamesh, who holds the weight of all humanity’s grudges, does not provide a lethal solution.”

Francis nodded; Ulraj continued.

“And Kur, the world’s most terrifying evil, has promised not to interfere. If anything, it’s been helpful.”

Francis nodded again.

“And finally - this has been on my mind since the Kur frenzy began, all those years ago, but I’ve always thought it’d be bad taste to bring it up - the Kur stone does not lead you to Kur. And yet, it held Kur’s essence - and yet, the map was written in Sumerian, a human language.”

“But the Kur stone did lead to where Kur would be revealed,” Francis pointed out. “They figured it out in Antarctica.”

Ulraj shook his head. “There is no such wording in the legends. I have even consulted Zak’s mother on it before. ‘The Kur stone will lead you to Kur, and with Kur’s power, one can control the entire world.’ It had always been variations of that lie.”

“Your theory, then?”

“...I don’t know,” Ulraj said. “The conclusions I am drawing are preposterous, no matter how I consider them. And there’s not enough evidence to speak them aloud in any official capacity.”

He leaned in, voice dropping quiet and low, conspiratory. “But just between you and me...I think
Gilgamesh may have been the one who sought to turn Kur human. That Gilgamesh may have sought to control it. That Kur is not as evil, nor Gilgamesh as good, as any of us would like to believe.”

On the ground beside him, already dry despite the damp still clinging to Francis’s body, Sharur only glinted innocently at them, a puzzle older than millennia.

He reached for it and held it between his hands, inspecting, again, the aged wood, worn smooth between Gilgamesh’s hands, the pointed tip, the metal cap, the shock of fur.

What had Gilgamesh’s intent been, on passing it forward, millenia and millenia after his death?

He didn’t know. It felt like a secret, like many secrets were still being held.

Clutching it close to his chest, he stood. At this time, he was unable to give Ulraj an answer, so instead, he turned for the door.

“Where are you going?” The king asked.

“We’ve still got a huaca to collect,” Francis said. “I’ll go ahead and do it while I can still escape Zak’s commentary.”

“Alright,” Ulraj relented. “Be careful.”

Francis acknowledged him with a stiff nod, but, feet tapping against the ancient stone tile, he thought to himself that perhaps it was already far, far too late for that.
“<Trishna. It called her Trishna.>”

Hushed whispers as they swam for home, several leagues behind their queen. Still, they spoke quietly, though there were so few of them left that they all knew none of them were expendable. Even so, none would dare provoke the queen’s wrath by referring her by name within earshot; such an act of disrespect was easily punishable by death, or worse.

And yet, Kur had called her Trishna.

It was tantamount to calling her unworthy of her position as queen. A grave insult if anyone - anything else - had delivered it, and it had come from the mouth of Kur itself.

Muca remained quiet, swimming near the back of the pack, fidgeting with her hands. Should she
say something, do something?

She only knew she’d been ordered back home to pick up where her predecessor had left off. There were, true, many tablets to recover, many fragments to be put back together, many chambers to be reorganized; yet she could not help but feel as though she could be of more use by her friends’ side than here, in the den of snakes.

They continued to whisper among themselves, in hushed voices, quiet hisses.

“<And it called her Itihaskar.>”

Muca’s ears pricked up.

“<Itihaskar. It recognizes her?>”

“<’Your queen grows old.’ Itihaskar, she is the last surviving member of her clutch.>”

“<It can’t be serious. That thing, queen? Rani Nagi is sure to tear her to pieces.>”

“<But she cannot. Itihaskar. It recognized her. If Rani Nagi is to kill her, Itihaskar, there are those among us who cannot condone it. And surely, Kur, itself, will not condone it.>”

Itihaskar, historian. Her teacher’s old title. She’d been promoted simply because she’d been the only survivor, and no one really recognized her position. They still called her Munshee, scribe, tablet-scratcher, fit only to run about underfoot.

Itihaskar. She’d been recognized as such by Kur itself. Slowly, it dawned on her what the Serpent had meant when it had said her queen grew old.

Her heart stuttered in her chest as the full impact of it hit her. She’d told Zak before, that the next queen would come from her clutch. But she’d never thought - she never imagined she’d actually stood a chance, since she was born small, runt-of-the-litter, since becoming queen meant forcibly deposing the old one. Certainly, Rani Nagi had felt the same way, and even now a new nest was incubating. She’d figured the next queen would hatch from there.

Itihaskar. More than qualified to be a candidate for queen. There was precedent.

“<Janaral>,” she called, to the general of the royal guard, and he turned, his arms and coils treading water. Normally, he’d either ignore her or snap at her to scare her off, but he had always been a traditionalist; if Kur recognized her as Itihaskar, then he would, too.

Emboldened by the fact that she was being listened to, Muca continued. “<Th...there is recovery work to be done in the libraries smashed by human encroachment. May I borrow a soldier from you to assist with the manual labor?>”

There was a long, terse silence as her request was considered. For a race that valued strength above all, to be forced to answer such a weakling was an insult at best.

“<Janaral, you cannot seriously be considering it.>” the blue one hissed, running his fingers over the bite wound she’d left on him. “<She chose the humans over her own. She is a traitor to us.>”

“<If I am not mistaken, the very purpose of an Itihaskar is to consider those not of our kind. Therefore, Itihaskar can never be considered treasonous.>”

“<She is weak! She is an insult to us naga; she is an insult to Kur!>”
"<Oh?>" Janaral asked, tilting his head. "<And what does that make you, who she wounded in a fight?>"

The blue one hissed but bowed his head, properly scolded, while the others snickered quietly. Janaral turned to face Muca once more, giving her a small, brisk incline of his head.

"<If Itihaskar so wishes, then so it shall be. It is a reasonable enough request. I shall have one prepared for you by tomorrow.>"

"<Thank you,>" she said, giving him a full bow, but he stopped her.

"<A small bow is fine,>" he said, quietly. "<If you are Itihaskar, you should act the part.>"

"<Y...yes. Yes, as you say.>"

And with that, the general turned, leading the royal guard forward with him once more.

Muca let out a long, shuddering breath. That could have gone wrong - very, very wrong. But it seemed she had been protected by her title; in a way, it was as though the mantle of her teacher was draped around her shoulders, guarding her from harm.

She would not fail him, she thought, as she swam ahead. She would not falter. She would not fail.

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Zak stared at his raw red palm, which hand burned against Sharur when the Serpent had picked it up and which still stung in the dry, salty air at the bottom of the sea.

"Are you alright, Zak?"

"...No," he answered. "I don’t know what to do."

"That’s never stopped you before." Ulraj tried to cheer him up, but it didn’t take. "Let me bandage up your hand."

Zak offered it to him, and, gently, Ulraj wiped it down and began dressing it with light-green bandages from his own supply satchel. Zak watched as his fingers were bound.

"It’s called the akkorokamui," he said, hollowly.

"Huh?"

"The ‘demon.’ It’s called the akkorokamui. It’s a giant octopus from Greece, but it’s been spotted around Japan...it probably followed the atlanteans back to Challenger Deep after they made the Atlas Pin. Each of its tentacles has a separate brain - bundle of nerves - thing. So I couldn’t control it, since it’s split nine ways."

"I see," Ulraj said, gently.

"Kur can do it, though." He closed his eyes and shuddered, despite the city’s warmth. "Kur can do all sorts of crazy - crazy things, Ulraj. And I’m just a human. How am I supposed to compete with that?"

"You don’t have to," Ulraj said. "That’s what Francis’s role is."

"Yeah?" Zak asked. "And what’s mine?"
“I don’t know.”

“Well, I do.” He flexed his bandaged hand, closed his eyes against the sting in his palm. “I’m the big, bad monster at the end of the line. I’m what everyone else is trying to stop. I - “

“Zak,” Ulraj interrupted, firmly, holding him by the shoulder and squeezing. “While it may be true that you are Kur’s reincarnation, you are not the Kur of thousands of years ago. Let me tell you what you are: you are my friend. You are an impulsive, hotheaded and - frankly? - sometimes idiotic teenage human boy - “

“Thanks,” Zak muttered.

“ - But you’re also one of the most honest and kindhearted people I’ve ever met. And no ‘Kur,’ no ‘Gilgamesh,’ no ‘fate’ is going to change that.”

Zak sniffed. “Thanks,” he repeated, but he meant it this time.

“And finally, you are a Saturday,” Ulraj said. “What is it your parents always say? ‘Things have a way of working out for Saturdays,’ I believe it was. Things will work out, Zak. I feel it in my air sac.”

With that, Zak’s face cracked into a grin, even if it was hesitant and faltering, and Ulraj grinned back.

That was right. Ulraj was right. He was Zak Saturday, and if Kur thought that this was going to be enough to stop him, then it had another thing coming. He didn’t spend as long as he did, go through as much as he did, to be brought down by the spook of Kur snapping its fangs just once or twice.

“We’re going to stop that snake,” Zak promised, “even if I have to drag Francis down to each huaca with my own two hands.”

“That’s the spirit!”

“Even if I’ve got to break his kneecaps and load him onto a sled! I’ll pull it myself!”

“Yeah!”

“...Hey, where is Francis, anyway?”

It was cold. Every tap of his foot against the stone tile sent great echoes up and down the chamber walls, reflecting off the black crystal spines and humming in his own empty heart.

“Heir to humanity.” Another useless, unwanted title to add to the mounting pile. He had never wanted this grand, epic quest; he had never wanted Sharur burning beneath his fingers, or the chill beneath his skin as the water soaked him through.

The rope was tied and he tugged at it, to make sure it would hold. One last time, he peered into the black abyss, where the water fell and disappeared, and he wondered if he would reach the bottom at all, if he wouldn’t just end up spewed out on the other side of the globe. Enough bullshit had happened today that it was entirely within his new parameters of logic.

To be honest, he’d never wanted any of this at all.

By now, they had probably realized he was missing from his post. He wondered how severe the punishment would be, once they got their hands on him. And, to be clear, it wasn’t a question of
“if,” but “when” - because Francis had been careful, sure, careful to falsify the tapes and to rip out the GPS locator in his vehicle, but he harbored no delusions of being competent enough to escape Epsilon’s watch in any permanent or meaningful capacity.

So why was he doing this at all?

He pondered it as he slid down the rope.

There wasn’t a great debt to humanity he felt like he owed, and certainly no one of his People would have approved. Plus, Zak grated on his nerves every time he opened his stupid mouth.

So...who was he doing this for, then?

He didn’t know.

But still, his feet hit the floor, sank to his knees in seawater, and he began to walk.

The Serpent lived in a human body, but Francis could not call it human. There was a coldness in its eyes, an ethereality to the way it walked, as if it was not wrought of flesh and bone. Kur was like a ghost; like Francis could reach a hand through its very body, at the risk of being burnt to cinders.

And when the Serpent looked at him, it looked through him.

The water came up to his waist now, as he walked further and further down. Black, jagged spines rose out of the water. These were different from the ones above - older, he thought. Their gleaming surfaces danced with rainbow patterns where the beam of his flashlight hit them.

He didn’t feel like Kur was a monster he needed to eradicate, like the knights in stories normally felt about dragons. At the same time, he was utterly convinced it wasn’t something that could be controlled, no matter how Epsilon and his people might try. So why? Why was he treading through water that had risen up to his chest, why was he purposefully walking down deeper and deeper into the maw of the earth?

Finally, he could walk no more. The water lapped at his chin; he tasted salt on his lips.

But that was fine, because the road had finally come to an end. In the beam of his lamplight stared back at him a great, black stone bust, the Serpent’s head modelled in gleaming black opal, its eyes wide open, gazing back at him. Cruel spines decorated its visage, slick with water, small rolling waves lashing against its wicked fangs.

“I’m here,” Francis said. The statue was silent, and Francis cursed himself for thinking it would speak, would reveal some kind of secret to him.

He unstrapped Sharur from his back, and held it between his hands, point downward, the end of its shaft poking above the waves.

The Serpent merely stared at him, its endless judgement hidden behind cold, crystal eyes.

Beneath his feet, Francis could feel loose stone tile, the soft give of dirt. If it was going to be anywhere, it would be here, in the temple’s deepest, darkest, most sacred chamber.

He took a deep breath, to steady himself, closed his eyes, and plunged Sharur deep into the water. Its tip met the earth and flared bright with brilliant, dazzling white light, Francis bracing against the floor as the water pulled past him, threatened to pull him with it, as it drained out of the temple, beyond the Serpent’s maw.
The statue heaved a big whoosh of air, sad and soggy, like a grievance, like a sigh.

And then it closed its eyes, and the water began to rise.

It rose at a terrifying pace. Wrenching Sharur out of the ground, Francis began to retreat, and, when it became clear that the sea was not planning to stop, he started to run, as fast as he could, back up the way he came. The water started dragging down his ankles, then his knees, and then it was up to his waist, pushing him forward, stumbling, then his chest, and then, taking a deep breath, Francis let it wash over his head, let it grab hold of his body and pull it up back into the faint blue light. Hands were immediately on him when he broke the surface, gasping, and they pulled him up to shore, his body heavy with water that was already rising up over his fingers, over his wrists.

“We have to - go,” he said, coughing, as Zak and Ulraj helped him up to his feet. Nodding, they began to run, back up the slippery stone spiral, the sound of water still rising echoing in the temple below. Several times, it caught up to their heels, their bodies shivering with exertion and cold, and it spurred them on, bid them run faster, faster, to outrun the flooding of Challenger Deep.

When they finally reached the light of the bottom layer, the water quickly followed, running like blood into the ruined buildings, the dilapidated city. But at least they had time - time to recover, catch their breaths, before again trudging forward. They pulled each other up the cliffs ringing the city, before they found a way out.

By the time they were set to leave the bottom layer of the city, the water had risen to the rooftops of the bottom floor. The rest of Challenger Deep would probably last a day.

Ulraj closed his eyes and said a prayer, before turning to follow them up out of the ruins.

It was only after they had collapsed, exhausted, into the vehicle, and had shucked their soaked clothes and set them up to dry against the hum of the engine, that any of them spoke.

“I hate,” Francis said, trying to tame the wet, salty mess his hair had become, “everything. I was going to say ‘Saturdays,’ or ‘Kur,’ or ‘Gilgamesh,’ but - no. No. I hate everything. All of it.”

“What did you even do down there that made the whole city flood like that?” Zak asked, having already given up on his own hair.

“Nothing!” Francis said. “I did what we were apparently supposed to do! I found a patch of earth and shoved the stupid spear into it. There was a bright light and then the city began to flood. If you’re going to blame anyone, blame Sharur for sending us on this stupid suicide quest in the first place.”

With that, he slammed Sharur on the floor of the van, venting his frustration. That was when he noticed it.

Zak and Ulraj did, too, now that they had time to look, in the bright light of the city.

The spear had shed its milky crystal coat, and now the firm, brown wood of its make shone through. The corroded metal cap at the end, still dented, was now clear of its tarnish, as was the speartip, still broken and bent, but now clean, like it had been forged only days ago.

But most shocking at all was the dull, matte fur gathered under the metal. Gone was the faded red hue, gone was the tattered, ratty look - the mane was now glossy, and thick, and black as the night. Zak almost reached out to touch it, before Ulraj swatted his hand away.

“...I suppose it worked as intended,” Ulraj said, finally. “Even if I don’t particularly approve of the
fact that I’ll be sending my scholars to a completely waterlogged city.”

“You guys have gills, you’ll be fine,” Zak grinned.

“It’s the principle of the thing. How would you like it if we flooded New York?”

“Didn’t your city almost do just that?” Francis asked, dryly.

“Irrelevant,” Ulraj said.

“Got ‘im,” Zak said.

Francis sighed, got up, and strapped Sharur back to its place on the side of the van. He slumped back into his seat and pulled up the map again, Zak and Ulraj crowding around the screen once more. Muca was no longer there to translate for them, but Francis had the foresight to note down all the observations she’d already made.

“The next huaca is there,” he said, pointing at a spot in the middle of Asia. “It’ll probably be another hour or two before we’re close enough to the surface to access the internet - but until then, does anyone have any guesses where the hell that’s supposed to be?”

“No clue,” Ulraj said. “It’s rather discriminatory that four out of five of these things are on land. I suppose we’ll be parting at the shore, Zak.”

“Hm?” Zak said, distracted. “Yeah, yeah. I...I think I recognize that place. No, I know I do. It, um...it’ll come to me.”

Francis sighed. “Well, hopefully it - “

“Yu!”

Francis scowled. “What?”

“No, no. Yu. It’s a name. Yu the Great.” Zak jabbed his finger at the screen, babbling excitedly. “You know, semi-mystical Xia dynasty, supposed great founding emperor of all of Chinese history...you know?”

Francis and Ulraj could only give him quizzical looks. They did not, in fact, know.

“That’s a dig site. I’m like, 90% sure. But the timeline matches up, right? Yu was around like two, three thousand BC. About a year ago they found this huge underground tomb-thing, and they started to dig it up, but they had to put it on hold because they were worried their current tech wasn’t delicate enough to excavate without destroying the mechanisms. There’s supposed to be - well, there’s something big down there. No one knows what, but it’s huge. Huge. Find of the century. That sounds like the kind of place a huaca would be, right?”

“It does seem rather likely,” Ulraj mused.

“...We’ll wait until the systems are back online, and see if it matches up,” Francis allowed.

“You’ll see,” Zak said, grinning. “You’ll see. Oh, man. I wish mom and dad were here for this. They’re gonna flip with jealousy when they hear I got to see the insides first.”
Chapter End Notes

Violence (fight!) other than that, not much to warn about. Uh...
Hey all! One quick update from last chapter -

Saamaany => Janaral

I think I may have been using the Hindi word as in "in the general sense" rather than "leader of a military group" like intended. Oops! Please let me know if you catch any other mistakes like that!

“Francis,” Ulraj called out to him on the last day they’d be together, “can I sit with you?”

Landfall was still over the horizon, but if Ulraj were to make it home, he’d need to leave before they hit the shallows. Up in the passenger seat, Zak was fast asleep. Ulraj had been, too, until only a little while ago, dozing off in the pilot seat while Francis tried to get the salt out of everything in the back of the van. As things were, they were sleeping in shifts - between the rumble of the engine and the cold steel floor, it was actually a wonder how Muca had been sleeping in the back while the humans took the only two comfortable chairs. But it was well before Francis’s turn, and, nodding quietly to Ulraj to acknowledge the king’s request, Ulraj took a seat across from him.

“Something the matter?”

“Does something need to be the matter for us to speak?” Ulraj said, with a grin. “Our first meeting is coming to a close quite soon. I figured I should cherish what little time we have left, since who knows when we shall be meeting again.”

“Forgive me if I’m not particularly gifted at small talk,” Francis said.

Ulraj snorted. “That’s fine. I have enough talent at saying many empty words for us both. That’s eighty percent of my job, after all.”

“I thought you liked being king.”

“Of course! Overall. But there are no good things without bad; likewise there are no bad things without good.”

Francis frowned. “Is that an example of those ‘many empty words’?”

That got a laugh. Ulraj nodded and leaned back on the metal side of the van.

“...In the end,” Ulraj said, glancing up toward Zak, “whether or not the humans are destroyed has little to do with Kumari Kandam. And now that we know our Old Laws were given to us by Kur, we hardly have anything to fear on that front - since Kumari Kandam has always adhered to them.”

“And it was pretty friendly with you last time you met.”

Ulraj nodded, gravely. “Yes.”
“So? Why bring it up to me?”

“Because,” Ulraj said, gesturing to Sharur. “You’re something like humanity’s representative, at the moment. I suppose I wanted to hear your thoughts on that.”

“...You’re saying that we will not be receiving the support of Kumari Kandam, in the event of the worst-case scenario?”

“Our losses for merely trading with your kind were too great. The wise move would be non-interference.”

Ulraj frowned, and looked off to the side.

“But I don’t like that, personally. It troubles me. I may be swayed by the words of a friend.”

“...That would be irrational of you, highness.”

Ulraj snorted. “Show me a rational ruler and I will show you a fish that swims tail-first,” he said. “In the end, I’ll still probably be vetoed by the council. But I know where my heart lies.”

Francis just scowled, though he didn’t say anything. Ulraj was only confiding in him like this because he was the “heir to humanity” anyway. Had he not had that grand and useless title foisted upon him, Ulraj would probably, like Zak, hold him enmity, if not outright hostility.

“Hey,” Ulraj said. “You know, it’s bad form for me to be the only one confiding. Being bad at small talk, I can forgive, but if you’re bad at actual conversation, I’m afraid I’ll have to teach you.”

“I just have nothing to say.”

Ulraj grinned at him. “Of course you do. There’s not a person alive that wouldn’t have commentary on your position. Now, I’ll tell you what I’ve noticed - you tighten up every time someone mentions your fancy title. Why’s that?”

“I’m surprised you noticed.”

Ulraj tapped the smooth protrusion on his face. “It’s in the nose,” he said, indicating his shark sense. Well, if that was it, it could hardly be helped that he noticed; all the same, Francis forced himself to relax.

“...I think this whole thing is stupid,” he finally admitted, practically muttering under his breath.

“Go on,” Ulraj prompted.

“I am possibly...the worst candidate for Sharur to have chosen,” Francis continued.

“How so?”

“I don’t have any great love for humanity,” Francis mumbled. “I don’t really care much for Zak, either. This whole ordeal is greatly inconveniencing to me. And that’s the nicest way to phrase it.”

Ulraj let a silence hang between them for a moment, before finally nodding and closing his eyes.

“I see,” he said. “Do you want for me to agree with you?”

The question made Francis pause. “I...don’t understand what you mean.”
“Do you want sympathy?” Ulraj asked. “Or do you want me to disagree with you? Or maybe you want me to scold you? For what reason do you harbor those feelings?”

“What the...you were the one who asked me!”

“Yes,” Ulraj said. “But you were the one who decided to answer honestly, which Zak has told me you almost never do. Would you feel better about this quest if someone took your side and agreed that the whole thing is ridiculous and that you should never have been chosen?”

“...I...” Francis stammered. He wanted to fall silent, say nothing more, and yet something inside him was starved. His heart suddenly felt paper-thin and dry, like it would crumble at the slightest touch.

“...Is...that an option?” He asked.

“Sure it is,” Ulraj said. “For what it’s worth, as someone whose religion was just validated, I have no idea what quirk of fate decided to make you responsible for the future of your kind. It’s really befuddling, isn’t it? You’d think one of Zak’s parents would have been a better fit, or even Zak himself, though I suppose being Kur disqualifies him.”

“Y...yes! This is the kind of stupid job I’d expect that family to tackle. I can’t believe I’ve been stuck with it.”

“Oh? You agree?” Ulraj raised his eyebrow. “What makes them more suitable?”

“They...” He frowned. “...I don’t know.”

“Of course you know,” Ulraj said.

“You’re really quite meddlesome, aren’t you?”

“I am not only a king of my peoples,” he said, placing a hand over his chest, “but of all peoples.”

Francis sighed. “...The Saturday family is made up of good people. There, I said it. They are essentially kindhearted, empathetic, compassionate humans with a great love for each other and a respect for the world they live in. So noble,” he sneered. “So brave. They’re like knights out of a fairy tale. They’re anomalies that shouldn’t exist. Saving humanity should be left up to sparkly unicorns like that.”

“And what about you?”

“I...”

He bit his lip.

This would normally be where he boasted of his Peoples’ values - their cunning, their wit, their intellect and rationality. Efficiency and perfectionism. Their unity, their purpose, their drive.

But the words wouldn’t come out; they felt hollow and ugly in his throat and caught there with their jagged angles.

“I’m a failed product,” he said instead, the only words that felt true. “That’s the only reason I’m on this stupid journey in the first place.”

Ulraj, to give credit where it was due, did not pity him or sympathize, but instead simply nodded, his eyes closed.
“Well, be that as it may, I personally don’t think you’re so ill-fitting a choice.”

Francis gave a hollow laugh. “Whose side are you on?”

“What isn’t it rather hypocritical of you to be asking that?” Ulraj gave a cheeky grin. “No, but seriously, Francis. You may be an unexpected choice, but I think that perhaps that, in its own way, makes you suitable.”

“You’re contradicting yourself with those ‘empty words’ again, highness,” Francis said, dryly.

“Perhaps,” Ulraj admitted. “All I mean to say is that I think you cut a rather dashing figure with Sharur.”

“Empty words again.”

“No, not empty,” Ulraj said, smiling. “After all, who better to stand against Zak than you? You two already hate each other.”

“...That’s true.”

“So it’s fate,” Ulraj said, pleased. “You know, the Gilgamesh epic is also told in our society. In the first story, Gilgamesh is stated to be a brutal, uncompromising, and terrible king. To oppose him, the gods fashioned a direct equal and opposite named Enkidu, and placed him in the wild. When the two fought, they nearly levelled the city, but as soon as the fight was over, and they acknowledged each others’ strength, they became inseparable friends.”

“If that happens,” Francis said, “I will drive Sharur through my own heart.”

“Well, it’s just a story,” Ulraj said, eyes twinkling. “So don’t lose hope just yet.”

They stopped for supplies in Japan, the first major landmass as they travelled east through the Pacific. Their first landfall was Tokyo, so Francis could hit up an ATM, and their next was the mountains outside of Tokyo - a hot springs district - at Zak's insistence.

Between Zak’s bicolor hair and Francis’s...look, they made for an odd-looking duo and were gawked at by passerby as they walked down the street. But Francis had to hand it to the customer service; once they flashed the appropriate currency, the staff was all smiles wherever they went.

Still, he thought, wasn't Zak taking things a little too casually? They were walking through a tourist-y street with stalls on both sides hawking their wares - food and souvenirs, desperately trying to catch the boys’ attention, with Zak stopping at every other one to browse, five containers of snacks under one arm.

He glanced over to see Francis's displeased expression.

“Hey sourpuss,” he said, “what's wrong?”

Francis scowled. “Well, for one thing, we're on a time limit. For another, the fate of the world hangs in the balance.”

Zak grinned. “Oh, is that all? For a moment there I thought maybe you'd had some bad takoyaki.”
“I feel like you're not taking this seriously.”

Zak's expression dropped. He sighed, kicked the ground. “Look, I am taking this seriously. That's why I'm seriously trying to relax. It’s not gonna be long before we get to China and who knows what kind of crazy stuff we're gonna find there. If you keep stretching yourself thin, you're just gonna fray and snap when things get serious. So you relax too, dude.”

Francis's scowl deepened. “You don't need to worry about me.”

“It's hard not to,” Zak said. “I mean - come on, we're at one of the hottest - no pun intended - vacation spots in Japan, for locals and tourists alike, and you're just standing there grouching. Live a little.”

He shoved a small plastic carton of dango in Francis's hands. “Try some.”

“No thanks.” He tried to give it back.

“Look, either you eat this or you eat some of the pickled and dried stuff I like and I know this is the more tourist-friendly option. Try some.”

The threat of being forced to eat some of the things he'd seen Zak ingest during the trip so far was quite effective, and Francis reluctantly opened the box. The glutinous rice dumplings sparkled up at him, and he glared down at them, wary, giving them a sniff before putting them in his mouth.

“...It's got a weird texture.”

“Yep.”

He frowned. “The nutritional value of this must be exceedingly poor.”

“Well, yeah,” Zak laughed, “I mean, the cardinal rule of junk food that the better it tastes, the worse it is for you.”

Francis looked out to the side. “I see.”

“Don’t tell me you’ve never had junk food before.”

“It literally has ‘junk’ in the name. What do you think?”

“Okay, wow. If I didn’t think your People were evil monsters before…”

“We aren’t - you have no idea what we are, what we do. You’ve got no right to make moral judgements - “

Zak held up his free arm. “Whoa, dude, chill. It was a joke!”

“...Not a very funny one.”

“Listen,” Zak said, “I know if you guys didn’t do good work, you’d never have made it into the scientists. I just don’t think that it’s worth the price of a teenager not being allowed to eat junk food. You’re never gonna be physically able to bounce back from it the same way ever again, you know? Once you hit twenty, that’s it.”

Francis sniffed and turned away. “You’ve matured a bit since you were twelve.”

Zak snickered. “You say that like it’s a bad thing.”
He walked on ahead, enjoying himself as he shopped and haggled and laughed with the storekeepers, and Francis lagged behind. The dango, as far as he knew, were essentially round packets of empty carbohydrates, but somehow he couldn’t stop eating them. Something about the texture, the sweetness…

Had Epsilon ever had these, he wondered? Had any Epsilon that had ever come before him ever tasted dango being sold on a tourist’s merchant street? And, if they did, would they have liked it, too? Somehow, the perennially disappointed Epsilon in his memories felt like he’d have gagged on the squishy rice. It was hard to imagine him enjoying anything at all.

And with that thought Francis realized that, against all his better instincts, he might have been enjoying himself.

“...Zak,” Francis called out, hesitation clear in his voice.

“Mm?” Zak asked, mouth full of takoyaki.

“...Nevermind. Forget I said anything.”

Janaral was a traditionalist. That was to say, he cared deeply about the customs of the past. That was to say, he took pride in the naga’s place as the hands and fangs of Kur.

What were the naga? A proud race. A powerful race. Strength and cunning were the virtues they valued most. Other sapient species called them “dishonorable” and “cowardly.” And yes, that was true. Their tactics were often lowly; “a fair contest” existed in their vocabulary solely so they could mock those races that believed in one.

But so, too, were they often called “victorious.” And that was a naga’s own sense of honor.

His loyalty to the queen was unquestioned. After all, she had become queen through wit and guile, fang and claw. She was queen for a reason, the cleverest and strongest of them all.

But for the same reasons, his loyalty to Kur were infinitely more.

How long had it been - decades, centuries, eons? - since he’d felt the burn of his master’s fire? In the human boy’s eyes had been the might, the grandeur, of the Kur of old. Janaral would never forget being a whelp only Ithaskar’s size, the first time he’d ever tested his nerves against the burning, inexorable weight of his master’s magic, how great and beautiful its scales had been, how its eyes flashed with fire, how its fangs dripped with poison, how its mere presence choked the breath out of his lungs. The human boy Kur had reincarnated as had never managed to so much as tickle his belly scales; how far a cry he was from being anything the naga believed in. Neither had the yeti, for all his grandstanding, but at least the yeti had been swayed toward the correct path.

And yet, the yeti had lost. The yeti had lost, and now the Serpent had settled itself around human Kur’s shoulders.

It was for those two reasons - that the yeti had proven itself a failure, and that the human had proven his heritance - that Janaral, for the first time in his life, began to doubt the current queen, as she welcomed her guest with all the venom in her fangs replaced with honey.
“Ah, the masterful V.V. Argost,” she addressed him, graciously dipping her head. It was as though she had forgotten the earlier humiliation entirely; not a trace of it remained.

They were ordered to feast him. To flatter him. This ought to be the work of servants and slaves - setting the table without taking a bite - how it wounded the pride for the royal guard to have fallen so low!

Itihaskar had tried to help, but Janaral had ripped the plates from her hands.

“<Know your place,>” he hissed. “<How much shame would we suffer if Itihaskar were to dirty her claws? Go, take your place in the dining hall; be silent, solemn, and grave, and live up to your name!>”

With those words, she’d scrambled away.

In due time, Janaral took his place at his queen’s side, standing proud and at attention. At the banquet table sat V.V. Argost and his two companions and nothing else, and on one of the verandas peeking out from near the ceiling was Itihaskar, doing her best to keep still, but unable to stop the frenetic, anxious twitching of her tail.

Itihaskar’s usual spot was opposite his own, to one side of the queen, but as things were right now, Janaral did not blame her for remaining out of sight. After all, she now had a legitimate claim to the throne, should she somehow best Rani Nagi in combat or cunning, and it was quite likely that Rani Nagi would attempt to end that meager threat right then and there if Itihaskar ever entered within arm’s reach.

Rani Nagi and the yeti traded honeyed words back and forth, sealing the terms of their mutual cooperation over delicious, dripping red raw meat. It stirred unrest in Janaral to hear her whisper to the yeti so sweetly as she did. Did they not have a master already? While the human boy had been - human, he was nothing. But all had seen the Serpent of old descend upon his shoulders; that was Kur, that was power, that was whom the naga served.

Janaral expected his queen would turn to him to discuss how they would offer the yeti’s head to their true master once the banquet was over, but she never did. Instead she ordered Janaral accompany the yeti and his entourage to the guest chambers, a sign of sincere flattery, as Janaral was so high a rank. This, too, ought to be the job of servants or slaves, or perhaps Itihaskar if Itihaskar were not so shamefully unimpressive.

“Your quarters, my master,” he said, bowing as he opened the door. Despite his misgivings, he would not act so outwardly treasonous as to openly go against his queen and her dictum that the yeti be treated with the highest respect.

“Ah, how delightfully rustic,” the yeti said, in a mocking tone. “I trust you do not mind if my manservant is to fetch some...creature comforts from our vehicle? I am prone to homesickness, you see.”

“I will call Valashahis,” Janaral said. “He will escort you.”

The yeti pulled a face, made sure Janaral could see his displeasure, but Janaral did not budge. As polite as he must be, the last time Kur was left unguarded in these chambers, the flute of Gilgamesh had disappeared from their charge. Such an unforgivable mistake could not be repeated; thus, the yeti and his attendants were to be themselves attended to at all times.

Furthermore, the veiled insult did not escape Janaral’s notice, but it was not so big a dishonor that
it would be prudent to acknowledge it.

“Fine,” the yeti finally said. “Well, I suppose this is the royal treatment, after all. Now then, Janaral, was it?”

“Yes, master.”

“You may leave us. We have had a long journey, and would like a chance to rest.”

Janaral bowed and closed the door behind him, lingering at the entrance for a while as he considered his next course of action. Firstly, he needed to organize a rotation so that two guards stood outside the yeti’s chambers at all times. A flash of red and black caught his eye; he just barely saw the tail of Itihaskar slip behind the rock.

So she had come to watch, hm? The fact that she was capable of hiding her presence up until now was an insignificant detail when she was nothing but a whelp, but as a candidate for queen, unlikely as she was to actually win, Janaral found that she occupied his thoughts a fair bit as well.

So after he set the guard rotation for the yeti, he decided to make good on his promise to her and determine who was to work in the library with her. Immediately, he was once more met with resistance from the other members of the guard.

“You do not seriously mean to flatter her in such a way,” his second-in-command said, incredulous.

“It is not flattery,” Janaral replied, firmly. “Rather, it would be shameful of us if we were to be unable to meet Itihaskar’s request. Have we truly fallen so low?”

The guard exchanged glances, each one clearly thinking the same thing Janaral did deep inside - that Itihaskar did not truly deserve her title, that she had only avoided death by the mercy of the current queen. Rather than the venerable Itihaskar, she was a waste. A waste of time, a waste of space, and, most importantly, a waste of effort.

So they all kept silent, unwilling to volunteer, and Janaral could not blame them. Surely, if he did not have the duties of the Janaral, the responsibility to keep the prestige and internal order of the naga society, he would be agreeing outwardly with their silence.

But the Itihaskar, especially the Itihaskar acknowledged by Kur itself, could not be treated so rudely. Itihaskar was a venerated position for a reason, and that pride could not be smirched just because the current fill-in was no good.

So Janaral sneered and banged his spear against the ground, the chamber echoing with the sound and snapping the well-trained guard to attention.

“You who have complaints,” he snarled. “Voice them now, or let me cut out the tongues you clearly do not need.”

The guard gave each other nervous glances, before the blue Valashahis stepped forward, the most reckless of them. He stared Janaral dead in the eyes.

“Do this, Janaral, and Rani Nagi may believe you have joined Itihaskar’s faction,” he said.

At that, Janaral openly hissed.

“And you, Valashahis? Do you think the same of me?”
He hesitated, unwilling to so brazenly express his opinion to his commanding officer, but eventually, he answered.

“<Yes.>” His eyes were sharp. “<I believe you may be attached to her out of sentimentality. The naga, as we are now, are weak. We need a strong, single leader. We cannot afford split factions.>”

“<Factions!>” Janaral hissed, drawing up to his full height. “<Kur has given Itihaskar its blessing and you speak of factions!>”

How incredulous an accusation! Here Janaral had been thinking how to protect the pride of the naga before the discerning eye of Kur, and yet these miserable soldiers were talking about petty mortal schemes for the throne. Ridiculous! What did they think they were?

Valashahis flinched, drawing back, as Janaral’s fury was set upon them.

“<You listen, Valashahis,>” Janaral said, eyes cold, voice colder. “<We are the naga. We are the chosen children of Kur. We are greater than all others. If even we fail to heed the voice of our master, then what claim shall we have to superiority over anything that crawls, swims, or flies?>”

Janaral’s tail lashed against the stone with a scraping sound. The rest of the guard shrank back, thoroughly stung by the lecture. It was when he saw their hanging heads that his fury abated; when he next spoke, his voice had become calm once more, resolute.

“<I see that you have now remembered our pride, and who gave it to us.>”

He turned to leave, his head held high.

“<For now, I will be granting Itihaskar’s request myself. For you who have forced the Janaral to save the Valashahis’s dignity, reflect upon your shortcomings!>”

And with his voice echoing around the chamber, he exited, feeling as though he was finally carrying out his great master’s will for the first time since he’d awoken from the great slumber of thousands of years ago.
It had been hours since they’d seen a human settlement. There was a road here, albeit an ill-maintained one, the foliage having almost reclaimed the compacted dirt that marked it. To conserve fuel, since who knew where the next location with gas might be, they were trundling along in land vehicle mode for this last stretch, the sun climbing in the east.

Zak and Francis, at the last hotel, had mapped out this next huaca on their devices. There was nothing of interest for miles and miles besides farmland and other excavation digs, so Zak’s guess that Yu the Great’s tomb was this next site seemed to be right on the money.

“You said they abandoned the excavation effort?” Francis asked, from the pilot seat. “Should we expect to find it empty, then?”
Zak shook his head no. “I mean, it’s a hugely culturally-important site if it is actually Yu the Great’s tomb. I’m sure there’s still a few people there, which is why this road is here at all.”

“Mm,” Francis said, grimacing. “How annoying.”

“Well, don’t get sulky just yet,” Zak grinned. “My parents’ names are super influential in these circles, and I’ve been playing around in ancient dig sites since I was born. I’m pretty sure I can get us in.”

“Or we can turn the van invisible and idle it in stealth mode,” Francis said, dryly.

Zak thought about it, determined not to let Francis’s remark get to him. That was his resolution this time around - Francis was, he reminded himself, on their side. He’d gone and grabbed the first huaca all by himself, without Zak’s prodding, and for some reason Ulraj seemed to like him - which, like, Zak didn’t understand at all, but whatever. He could make an effort to let bygones be bygones...and, at least, he’d gotten used to Francis’s endless barbs by now. Francis didn’t seem to be able to help himself.

“Well, I guess there’s no harm in rolling stealth first, and then persuade if it goes wrong,” Zak said, with a shrug. Francis pursed his lips, a little miffed at being agreed with so readily by his hated arch-nemesis, and that reaction was satisfying in its own way. Zak smiled with all the benevolence of an angel.

“Don’t give me that look,” Francis grumbled. “It’s creepy.”

“Why, whatever could you possibly mean, Francis?” Zak asked, mimicking his accent. “Are we not pals? Compatriots? Chums of the highest degree?”

Francis rolled his eyes, and then, to Zak’s surprise, he adopted a mock-American accent in return. “Sure we are, Zakster! Why, you’re my bestest friend in the whole diddly-dang world!”

Zak was so shocked that he could only stare for a few seconds, before bursting into laughter. “Was that an actual sense of humor that you just did?” he asked, incredulous.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“It was! You were funny! On purpose! You were intentionally funny!”

“I’ve been funny this whole time,” Francis said, dully. “It’s just that my normal jokes seem to be too sophisticated for your animal mind.” A pause, and then, “it’s good you were so entertained by me stooping to your level. As they say beneath the clouds, I’ve ‘still got it’.”

“Sure you do,” Zak said, still grinning too hard to be bothered. He was about to add more on, but they turned a corner and the dig site came into view.

Zak had been to many before, and they all had a tendency to blend together, but this one really did look abandoned. The heavy machinery poked out from behind large mounds of dirt that already had plants sprouting on them, the lack of tracks free of greenery a dead giveaway to how long it had been since they were used. There were a few small cabins set up, which indicated that the current crew were basically living here - normally, they’d stay offsite and commute over, or else they’d have set up temporary lodging, like tents. While it was evident this place was lived-in - some of the trucks near the entrance had clear tire-tracks in the mud, and smoke was rising from some of the cabins - it was also obvious that the number of staff was exceedingly small.
Francis parked the ATV next to a row of white vans, punching a few buttons to make the outside of his vehicle match better. This close to the other vans and trucks that were clearly seeing use, the conspicuously fresh tire tracks wouldn’t draw any attention. He seemed especially worried about that, going in and out of the vehicle several times, until the outside was indistinguishable from the others lined up. Zak thought it was kind of weird how picky he was being, but it would also be pretty bad if their van got towed while they were gone, so he mostly kept silent as Francis worked, taking a look around the dig.

The actual site was clearly marked with pickets and white ribbons (or at least they’d been white when they had first been laid down) and was relatively well-maintained, aside from the overgrowth of plant life. In standard fashion, the dig itself descended in clearly-marked geometric steppes, each one tagged with labels in Chinese for where objects of interest had been removed from the site.

When Francis joined him, the two began to make their way down, one level at a time, the yellow dirt staining their pants and sleeves. At the bottom of the excavation, they reached the entrance to a dark tunnel. Zak turned on his commpad’s flashlight; Francis turned on the one mounted on his goggles.

Along the walls had been installed hooks for lanterns, which Zak and Francis didn’t need, and wooden support beams, propping up the ceiling. The cavern was tall enough that Sharur, again strapped to Francis’s back, didn’t come close to scratching the top. Very faintly, they could make out vehicle tracks near the edges of the pathway on either side, though they’d been trampled over near the middle by human feet. This didn’t seem to be an original part of the tomb structure; rather, it seemed like it was a pathway down to it, the tunnel sloping in a gentle incline.

Finally, at the end, they reached a giant set of double-doors. At least, it had once clearly been where a set of giant double-doors once sat, the only evidence left being the corroded metal hinges and some archeologist tags indicating their serial number. All that lied beyond was darkness.

Zak looked over at Francis.

“You ready?” he asked.

“Do you even have to ask?”

“Guess not.”

They stepped through into the tomb’s antechamber. It was spacious, even though their lights weren’t strong enough to fully penetrate the darkness - they could tell from the reverberation of their footsteps. Unlike the pristine, circular ruins of Challenger Deep, this place was set up in a square shape and was in poor condition. More wooden support beams held up the ceiling in places where it had once collapsed and sent dirt flooding the chamber. Anywhere that the original stonework had survived had had large sections removed, white archeological tags in their place. They moved through the chamber, careful to watch their step, until they reached a set of massive bronze double-doors at the north end that were cordoned off by rope, a big “do not enter” sign in Chinese plastered on it.

“This is it,” Zak said. “From here on, we need to start looking out for traps. This one is a tomb, and it does want us to stay out.”

Francis nodded. “We won’t be...cursed, or anything, will we?”

“Well...who knows,” Zak said, cheekily, climbing over the rope and placing both hands on one of the doors. Throwing all his weight into it, he pushed, and the metal screamed as he forced the door
open, so loud that he worried it might alert the archeologists outside.

They slipped in and closed the door behind them. The hallway that greeted their eyes was somehow even worse-maintained than the chamber before it, and about halfway down, the white tags disappeared entirely.

Then they were truly alone.

So they walked forward. Carefully, slowly, one step at a time. The hallway wasn’t overly-long; it was only maybe the distance from the left side of the airship to the right, but their slow pace made it take double, triple the time it normally would.

They were about two-thirds of the way down when they heard the door screech open behind them, Chinese voices shouting out into the hallway, asking if anyone was there. When they saw each others’ light, the people at the entrance began to approach, and Zak and Francis shared only a glance before booking it in the opposite direction. Thankfully, there were no traps after all, or they’d managed to avoid them, but at the end of the hallway, they found another obstacle.

Yet another set of double-doors loomed over them, this time smooth and completely immobile, no matter how hard they threw themselves at it.

“Is this the end of the line?” Francis panted, his feet digging into the dirt.

Zak only grunted in reply. This set of doors, unlike the last one, hadn’t come with a “do not enter” sign on it - and now they knew why. It didn’t seem like they could get in even if they tried.

It was at that moment that, struggling against the immovable doors, the metal tip of Sharur tapped against the brass. To Zak, who had his head pressed up against the surface, it sounded almost like a bell - a big, bronze bell like at a Buddhist temple - had resonated through the chamber within. Zak paused, wondering if he’d imagined the sound, when suddenly - smoothly - the doors slid open, sending both of the boys tumbling into the room.

Behind them, the door slid closed once more. Before them, the room flickered to life, bathing them in a bright white light. It was such a drastic change in brightness that Zak could only squint against it, while Francis slapped his hands to his eyes and muttered something about his damn night-vision mode.

But before Zak could make fun of his misfortune, in their heads resounded a female voice, and for a moment Zak panicked as he thought the lemuri ans had caught up with them again - except, no, this telepathic voice was different. Neither young nor old, soft nor sharp, the only emotion in it a polite courtesy, it sounded almost...mechanical. It sounded like the voice programmed into a GPS.

“Welcome back, Gilgamesh,” the voice said. “It has been five thousand and eighty-eight lunar years, one-hundred and four days since your last visit. It is somewhat unexpected for you to still be alive, so I may assume you to be Gilgamesh’s heir instead. Is this assumption correct?”

Zak and Francis shared a wide-eyed look.

“...Correct,” Francis answered her.

“I see,” the voice said. “In that case, please enter and take a seat. There is much that we have to discuss.”

“Who are you?” Zak asked, not taking another step until this telepathic being explained itself.
“I am called Auntie Kithera,” she answered. “I am the unfinished product of Yu the Great. Because we are speaking telepathically, the information can be conveyed to you in your mother tongue.”

His mind was flooded with information. Auntie Kithera was a man-made being, crystallized out of Yu the Great’s research and experimentation. As he absorbed it all, the information condensed into words. They had a term for what she was.

“I am an existence known as an ‘artificial intelligence,’" she told him.

“Holy shit,” Zak breathed. Francis, too shocked to speak, silently concurred.

“Yes, holy shit indeed,” the computer agreed. “That tends to be the response I receive most often. Please, enter. We have much to discuss.”
Patterned, square stone tile stretched from one end of the room to the other. Cut into the spaces between were little grooves filled with a shiny, silvery substance, which Zak had initially thought was solid and steel until he took a step and saw it ripple underfoot. Francis, following his sightline, furrowed his brow, kneeling down to inspect it. Hurriedly, he stood up again, shaking his gloved hand like it'd been burned.

"Liquid mercury," he said, in a clipped tone. Zak's eyebrows shot up.

"All of it?"

A scowl. "The temperature is not high enough for it to be gallium, and there are limited options for a liquid metal."

Zak faltered for a moment. If it really was mercury, then it was poisonous, especially with prolonged exposure. He shivered a little, grabbing his sides. "Let's get this over with fast."

"For once, we're in agreement."

"Which sucks."

"Not as much as it's going to if you don't stop expressing the same sentiments I have," Francis groused.

The chamber was square, with the southern entrance on one side and an identical set of metal double-doors to the north. The east and west walls were lit up by bright white beams of light set into the wall, which were connected by mercury circuits on the floor and ceiling. As the river flowed, it shimmered against the dark stone and the pale light.

Some force was keeping the mercury entrenched in its circuits, which even defied gravity, stretching up the walls. As they approached the center of the room, Zak noticed that the patterns in the stone tile began to carve out characters, pictographs. A far more ancient form of language than even ancient Chinese; he marvelled at it, wishing with a pang that his mom was here to see this.

These inscribed tiles formed concentric rings around a circular well in the middle of the room. It was filled to the brim with silvered mercury, spinning in a counter-clockwise motion as the mercury circuits both fed into the pool and drew from it.

As the two of them approached, the surface rippled and began to form a human shape - an oblong head, a round body. Startled, Zak and Francis both took a half-step back, ready in case it decided to attack, when suddenly it trembled, the lights dimmed, and the mercury splashed unceremoniously back into the well.

"...Eh?" Auntie Kithera's voice resounded in their heads. "Hm, hm? Something happened and the initialization of a body was unsuccessful?"

"What are you?" Francis asked, his hand curling around Sharur.

"Hm? It is just as I have said, Heir to Gilgamesh. I am an artificial intelligence."
"As if I can believe that," Francis scoffed.

"I do not understand. Why can't you believe that?"

"Because this tomb predates the invention of indoor plumbing?" Francis said, crossing his arms. "Because it has remained untouched, undocumented, and undiscovered for millenia? Because fully sentient artificial intelligences should not yet exist?"

There was a long, ticking silence. Zak nudged Francis.

"I think you might have logic'd it out of existence."

"Good."

But Auntie Kithera did chime in again, still in that pleasant, courteous tone.

"Such is the case, whether or not you can believe in it, Heir to Gilgamesh," Auntie Kithera finally said, the words smoothly entering their minds. "That I exist may be a miracle; if that is so, then your reality is that you are witnessing a miracle. That which begets miracles is magic, and it is magic that has brought you here."

"Magic," Francis spat, scowling.

"Yes," Auntie Kithera said. "My lord spent his twilight years studying the magic of the Lemurians. I am the culmination of his work - his last will and testament - a miracle that he has bottled with his own two hands."

That shut Francis up, though Zak, too, had to admit to being shaken by the testimonial. So he hadn't been wrong about the impression that Auntie Kithera's telepathy resembled the lemurians. For a moment, he panicked at the thought that they were connected even more deeply than that. At the same time, he had to remind himself, there was no indication of there being a link. Auntie Kithera was on the side of the Heir to Gilgamesh. So was Zak. As much as it pained him to say so.

Eventually, it was Francis who spoke again. He opted to completely ignore everything else that was said up until this point, cutting straight to the chase. Probably, Zak thought, because he had no rebuttal to Auntie Kithera's words.

"We're here for the huaca."

"Yes," Auntie Kithera said. "Leading you to it is one of my duties, as designated by my lord several thousand years ago. However, I cannot do so."

Every movie cliche of AI going rogue flashed through Zak's head as he tensed, and Francis, surprisingly enough, did the same.

"Why not?" Zak asked, fearing the worst.

"I don't remember."

They all shared a moment of silence.

"The connection to the main memory banks is damaged," Auntie Kithera explained. "The connection to the elevator is severed. I am unable to interfere with the main chamber any more than maintaining the base operations."

She paused, almost as if she was searching for the right words. They could feel her pensive silence
ticking in their heads.

"...Eh, this is pretty bad, isn't it?"

Zak could feel Francis's frustration. It was palpable.

"Then will we need to brute force our way down to the huaca?" he asked.

"I would prefer that you not. There should be self-repair functions. That they have become defunct is strange. There must be an active blockage of the circuits. Hm? Then doesn't that mean if you get rid of the blockage, the self-repair functions will fix everything as-is? Yes, what a wonderful solution. Heir to Gilgamesh, please assist me in repairing the main functions."

"Do I have a choice?" Francis sighed.

"No."

The doors to the north exit slid open, a blinding white light spilling into the room. Zak and Francis shared a glance.

Zak shrugged toward the door. "Looks like we -"

"Don't say a word," Francis interrupted. "Let's just get the next horrible ordeal over with."

"Aw, come on. It might not be horrible. It might be fun!"

The glare Francis sent him could have put a basilisk to shame.

...I had held hopes,” Francis lamented, after they stepped through the door. “Hopes, upon hearing the words ‘artificial intelligence,’ that this would be even slightly - even a modicum - less utterly bullshit than Atlantis.”

Before them stretched out a verdant valley. On all sides it was surrounded by mountains that rose out of the mist like floating islands, reaching into the sky. From their peaks fell great waterfalls that disappeared into the fogs below. Overhead was the sun, at its midday point, and surrounding them was a refreshing breeze, carrying on it the scent of spring. Birds were chirping in the trees, which were in full bloom, laden with heavy flowers; in front of them wound a path down the mountain, bordered by a handrail made of old wood and rope worn smooth by rain.

It was almost enough to make them forget that they were underground.

“Whoa,” Zak said.

“Don’t give me ‘whoa,’ Francis grumbled. “Unfortunately, you’re the expert on fairy tale nonsense. What is all this?”

Zak reached out to touch one of the trees that framed the doorway, feeling the texture of one of its flowers between his forefinger and thumb. His brow furrowed.

“...It’s fake,” he said at last.
“Yes, I assumed so the moment I felt a spring breeze in a dead man's cave. What is this?”

Zak grasped the branch tighter. It was laden with full, heavy jasmine blooms, and as he shook it up and down, scattering the perfumed petals all over, he took note of the weight of the feeling. Everything, from the texture of the bark, to the sound of rustling leaves, to the floral scent drifting down over them, was indistinguishable from reality.

“Considering everything we've seen until now? If I had to guess, it's VR. Full-dive VR, too.” Some giddy excitement was creeping into his voice. "Yu the Great was into some awesome stuff, huh?"

"That can't be possible.” Francis shook his head, disbelieving. But that was also what he had said about Auntie Kithera, and both of them could see the defeat in the stoop of his shoulders.

The door they had come from stood in the middle of the path, out-of-place in the mountain scenery. It looked like the forested hill continued on behind the door, but when Zak went to inspect the air to either side, he found that his hands were blocked by a smooth repelling force where the stone tile should be.

"An invisible wall," he said, giddily.

Francis gave him a deadpan stare. "Is an invisible wall really worth that much excitement?"

Zak shook his head. "You just don't get it, man. It's an invisible wall! The only things better than this would be if we found money by cutting grass, or if an NPC came up to us and said - "

"YUUUUUUU!

A booming cry echoed through the mountains, the trees shivering with the force of it. The voice was loud and inhuman, as if it were the thunderous crashing of high tide or a rockslide rolling down a sheer cliff. Zak and Francis shared only a glance before running in the voice's direction, Sharur and Claw in hand. The air around them shook with the monstrous shrieks, which overlapped each other in fury, in pain. Zak could feel that pain lapping at his mind, found himself wincing along with it.

"YUUUUUUUU!

They came crashing out of the forest into a clearing, emerging behind several soldiers in ancient, primitive armor.

Before them was coiled a monster.

Nine jaws lined with rows and rows of sharp, needle-like fangs, each one dripping with a noxious, silvery poison that scorched and corroded everything it fell upon; eighteen wild, slitted eyes. Thousands of glittering green scales, flecked with venomous red and violet, on one thick, writhing, serpentine body covered in scars and lacerations. Each of its nine necks coiled around each other, all sprouting from the same fat base. It was a serpent with nine furious heads, all snapping and snarling into the air.

It seemed to be in bad shape, clearly injured and enraged, but so was the small squad of warriors it was fighting. When its heads struck, they were fought back by primitive swords and polearms. But even as Zak and Francis watched, those were quickly corroding away from whatever venom was leaking from its jaws. The squad leader was a man in shiny bronze plating, red mantle flapping with his movements, his hair decorated by tattered pheasant feathers, desperately trying to defend himself from the onslaught, his sword locked in a parry with one of the great beast's maws. At his feet was an injured companion, who was desperately trying to crawl out of the way as his leader
protected him. Preoccupied as they were, they didn't notice a second serpent's head reaching for the leader's blind spot.

Since Francis looked like he was planning to wait and see, Zak leapt headlong into the fray, smacking the second head away with a swing of the Claw right as the squad leader managed to fend off the first. He cast Zak a surprised look, but quickly determined that he didn't have the luxury of questioning the help he was receiving.

"Thank you," he managed, as he regained his footing. Francis caught up to them, just in time for the monster to get its bearings, sizing up the newest combatants.

A growl rumbled from its nine heads as it pulled back a ways. Since it was already injured, it seemed to be seriously weighing the option of retreat now that reinforcements had arrived.

The rest of this simulation felt...artificial, but Zak only noticed that because the monster in front of him felt *real* in comparison. It gave him the same warm, tingly feeling that a cryptid always did, in the tips of his fingers and the base of his skull, but, remembering the Serpent's warning, he kept himself from reaching across the connection.

"Mind telling us what *that* is?" Francis asked, interrupting Zak's thoughts. The squad leader grimaced.

"That is Xiangliu, the scourge of the Xia kingdom."

Zak, too, had dropped into a fighting stance. "Why is it attacking?"

The squad leader shook his head. "I do not know. I do not even know how it stands before me. I killed it once already, long ago…"

*Killed*. The word sent a shiver down his spine. He looked over the leader again, with fresh eyes. He was dressed exceedingly well, given the crude condition of the rest of the squad's armor. Animal motifs decorated his breastplate and arm guards - although they were half-corroded by Xiangliu's poison - and the hilt of his sword had gold inlays. Furthermore, his hair had also been decorated with small gold beads of gold and jade.

This must be him, then. Yu the Great.

"YUUUUU!" The monster bellowed again. It charged at them, eyes flashing, aiming for the squadron leader.

"Oh no you don't," Zak muttered, his Claw grappling around one of the heads and pulling it into another. Francis worked more silently, his spear's anti-snake ward searing Xiangliu wherever it made contact. Dashing between them, in the opening they'd created, Yu's sword flashed and tore at Xiangliu, cutting it right below the junction of its nine heads, and all nine recoiled and screamed in pain as Xiangliu's poisonous, silver-flecked black blood splattered across the field.

The pain Xiangliu was in rippled across Zak's mind and he grimaced. He knew this was a fight, but - it was very rare that his mother ever used anything but the flat of her blade to knock cryptids around; seeing Xiangliu get slashed sickened him to his stomach. As the king geared up to pursue Xiangliu's retreat, Zak grabbed his mantle and held him back.

"Hey, wait" he said, frantically. "It seems really upset at you. Did you do something to it that we should know about?"

"He *did* mention killing it once before, Zak," Francis said, dryly. Zak narrowed his eyes, but
decided to ignore him for now - while that deep and dark something in him was bubbling away, at least.

"Why did it start attacking you in the first place?" he asked, roughly.

Yu seemed taken aback. "Why…? It is a monster that kills indiscriminately. You see what its poison can do."

"It's not a monster, it's an animal." Zak scowled. "They don't just attack out of nowhere. It doesn't look hungry, so...I dunno, did you encroach on its territory, maybe? Start building a settlement somewhere?"

Yu's eyes flicked from Zak to Francis and back again. He seemed genuinely baffled at the question, an expression Zak had seen countless times before. How many times had their family needed to flaunt their authority in order to keep cryptids and animals safe from people who just didn't notice they were causing harm? Too many to count.

"Esteemed sir, I do not know what to say," Yu said. "Yes, we first learned of Xiangliu when it attacked a newly-established village. Surely you are not defending it?"

"He surely is," Francis sighed, stepping in. "Zak, for all we know, that Xiangliu is a simulation, just like everything else. So - "

"It's not," Zak said, his bright eyes landing on Francis. "You probably won't even believe me. I can - sense it. That's the real Xiangliu."

Francis scoffed. "You can sense it, you say…"

Why did Francis have to be like this about everything? What was even wrong with him?

Zak opened his mouth to retort, but something caught his eye. Francis followed his sightline and found himself staring, too. The grass and wildflowers Xiangliu's blood had landed on flickered and disappeared, replaced by the square stone tile that had made up Auntie Kithera's chamber. It looked like the world had glitched out, revealing a circuit board beneath of canals emptied of their mercury. It actually seemed as though Xiangliu's blood was absorbing the shimmering metal.

Yu suddenly gave a cry of pain and crumpled to his knees. His soldiers did the same, all of them clutching their heads. Zak and Francis were immediately on the defensive, but they were unaffected. What was going on?

Gasping for breath, Yu crawled forward to the bloody patch, furiously scrubbing it away with his mantle. His fingers burned as they made contact with Xiangliu's poisonous blood, but he paid it no heed. When he finished, he left behind empty canals, which gradually refilled with liquid mercury, closing the circuits. Once all the connections had been re-established, the grass of the clearing once more flickered into view.

Okay. Okay, he got it. He now understood what the nature of the "blockage" Auntie Kithera had mentioned was. How long had Xiangliu been down here? The more it ran amok, the more it fought, the more blood was spilled, the greater the damage to the systems. And if Xiangliu was a cryptid, and Yu had killed it before, then it was likely reincarnating.

Reincarnating, fighting in Yu's tomb, being killed, its blood staining the circuitry and shorting it out. The more they fought, the worse things would be.

"We need to dispose of that snake," Francis decided, coming to the same conclusions Zak had, but
reaching a radically different solution. Xiangliu's nine heads hissed at him, but didn't attack. Its injuries were still weeping blood, staining the grasslands with little flecks of stone tile. Francis half-turned back toward Yu.

"You said you slew it before. How did you do it?"

"It has only one heart, under the red scale on its chest," Yu said, pointing. "I was aiming there, but missed."

"I see. Then, I'll distract it, and you can go in for the kill."

Zak almost couldn't believe his ears. He ran forward without thinking, positioning himself between Xiangliu and the humans. The irritation on Francis's face was clear to see.

"We don't kill cryptids," Zak said with a grimace. He clutched the Claw tightly between his hands, ready to use it if he needed to. "It dying is the reason you guys are in this mess. We should relocate it on our way out, and just focus on getting past it for now."

"I really do not have the time to educate you on why that's a terrible gamble," Francis said with a clipped tone. He was falling out of his professional voice, frustration leaking through. "We need to make sure it can't destroy the elevator while we're down there, or we may be trapped underground."

"Fine," Zak snapped back. "Then we can relocate it first, and then go get the huaca."

Francis's eye twitched. "We are on a time limit, Zak. I am begging you; if you've inherited any brain cells at all from those genius parents of yours, use them."

Zak scowled. "A time limit isn't worth a life, Francis."

"And how many lives are at stake if we fail, hm? Do you have the capacity to think even five minutes past your current situation?"

"We save what we can reach. " Zak brandished his Claw. "I'm not moving an inch. You'll have to get past me."

Yu tried to interject in a small voice, but the two were getting too heated to notice. Was Francis seriously advocating for them to jump straight to murder? Didn't he see what its blood could do? This place was already so damaged that any more could be catastrophic. They had no way of knowing for sure. But one look at Francis's countenance was all Zak needed to know that Francis thought Zak was the one being unreasonable.

"I cannot fathom how the apple has fallen so far from the tree," Francis sneered. "That two genii could give birth to that."

"I can't believe how close your apple fell, or maybe I can, " Zak shot back. "You really look up to daddy Epsilon, huh? Only ever thinking about what's good for you."

Francis snarled. Zak had struck a nerve. Good.

"Don't you dare."

"Treat others the way you want to be treated," Zak sneered.

Yu tried to interject between the two, but right now, Zak and Francis were having a spat, and very
little was capable of coming between that. Each one of them took a menacing step toward the other, close enough for Zak to see the wrinkle in Francis's brow.

Francis raised Sharur. "A stitch in time saves nine."

Zak raised the Claw. "Don't count your eggs before they hatch."

Francis growled. "It's don't count all your chickens before they hatch."

"But which came first?" Zak challenged. He knew at this point that he'd stopped making sense, but he also knew that even that pissed Francis off. Indeed, Francis was livid at that last remark, trembling in impotent rage.

"Familiarity," he spat, "breeds contempt."

"Those who live in glass houses - "

Zak never got to finish his idiom. A glittering green tail wrapped itself around his stomach, cutting him off mid-sentence, squeezing the breath out of his body, yanking him high up into the air. He was out of reach by the time Francis could even react, and Xiangliu made a mad dash for the other side of the clearing, disappearing into the foliage with a speed no human could hope to follow.

"Francis - " Zak called out to him.

Francis swore, running after the flashing green scales. But he just wasn't fast enough to keep up with a monster, and soon he found himself lagging behind.

"Get back here, Zak! I'm not finished with you!"

That was the last Zak could hear from him, as he was swept away by Xiangliu deep, deep into the simulated mountainside.

Right now, it would not pay to dwell on the chain of mistakes that got them here. The chain of failures, because once again, Francis had failed. He knew Zak wouldn't react well to killing Xiangliu - he knew it, because Zak was predictable, he acted in such consistent patterns that it boggled the mind how poorly things went whenever Zak was involved. He knew it, but he couldn’t keep his mouth shut.

To him, it had been nothing more than a poison-spitting monster. If it was the ecosystem Zak was worried about, then wasn't it actually more dangerous to release Xiangliu outside? (Though, admittedly, that was not Francis's area of expertise.) Moreover, the tomb had self-repair functions, as Auntie Kithera had said, and it was likely only Xiangliu's presence that kept the blockages continuous. In his mind, the only safe option, that didn't waste time, was to get rid of it. Evidently, Zak didn't feel the same.

But thinking about it wouldn’t get them any closer to solving the problem. He needed to clean up the mess he’d made. That was the entire point of this journey, the reason he'd left his People in the first place. He couldn't afford to lose sight of that.

So Francis accepted Yu's hospitality when it was offered, following the fighting squad back to their
base camp, a small, ravaged, abandoned village. There, he watched as doctors began to attend him, bringing with them a rainbow of powders and elixirs, which aimed to draw out the poison from his body. This must be the so-called "self-repair functionalities," as they slowly drew out Xiangliu's thick black blood into a stone basin. They hardly paid Francis a glance, focused on their work. In time, Yu’s complexion began to return.

The king gave a shuddering breath, before finally turning to his guest, giving an apologetic smile. "I am sorry that we are receiving you in this state," he said, with a small incline of his head.

"Not at all," Francis said, stiffly, wishing they could get on with it. "Tell me what it is that I can do."

Yu sighed, shaking his head slowly. The prognosis was not good, apparently.

"To follow Xiangliu is suicide," Yu said. "It makes its nest in a bed of poison that we cannot approach, and it is too much for you to fight alone."

Zak could be dead as they spoke, but Francis had to swallow that apprehension. There was not enough time or space to worry about his well-being, only to forge ahead.

"So you will have to wait for Xiangliu to come to you?"

Yu grimaced. "Unfortunately, yes."

"Is there nothing else we can do in the interim?" While he was well-trained in sitting quietly and waiting, he couldn't help but feel as though there must be some way to improve their forces or defenses. He hated wasting time. Hated feeling useless. "For example, re-connecting the elevator, or - "

Yu suddenly jumped to his feet, eyes wide. "Yes! Something that you can do - wielder of Sharur, with that, you can...you can...the memory banks can be..."

He trailed off, falling back onto his cushion, clutching his head.

"I...I cannot remember. I cannot remember. I cannot..."

Auntie Kithera had had a similar problem. She had mentioned something about access to her memory banks also being disrupted, hadn't she? If Xiangliu was stationed near the elevator, then with any luck, the memory banks were free of its presence. That was all just conjecture, however. He needed more information.

Auntie Kithera was a computer, and Yu was akin to a program or interface. If that was the case, then Francis could subvert it. The information was clearly still there, even if it was inaccessible. He may be able to access it through a roundabout path.

He narrowed his eyes. "What isSharur, your highness?"

Yu still looked dazed, but he answered the question. "The great spear of Gilgamesh. At his request, I enchanted it with a ward against snakes. And I also..."

He furrowed his brow, then gave Francis a helpless look. "I've forgotten so many things.”

“‘It is alright,'” Francis assured him. “For now, any information you can provide is useful. What is the damage to the memory banks?”
"They have flooded from the rainwater that comes in through the breach Xiangliu created in the eastern wall."

“What can Sharur do about flooding?”

Yu blinked. “Nothing. Nothing at all. Sharur was only warded against snakes.”

Francis paused. Yu didn’t seem to notice - or wasn’t capable of noticing - the slight contradiction he had made. “And I also…” what, exactly?

He scowled, remembering Auntie Kithera's words. Whether he believed it or not, whether he liked it or not, he was witness to a miracle. What was another miracle on top of that?

So if indeed Yu's information indicated that there may be some way to use Sharur to fix the flooded server room, then there was no point sitting around debating on the irrationality of it. He stood, prompting Yu to glance up at him with a quizzical expression. Francis's hands were clenched resolutely at his sides.

"Take me to the memory banks," he said.

Yu led Francis toward the simulated East, through the ruined village, across the withering fields, and into an overgrown thicket covered in thorns. Their walk was solemn and silent, both of them bearing a great weight on their backs, the pace slow for Yu's still-poisoned body.

In the darkness of the forest and the setting sun, Yu suddenly came to a stop, and turned to Francis with serious eyes.

"Esteemed sir," he began, paused, and then continued. "This is as far as I can guide you. Xiangliu's poison has seeped deeply into the forest beyond this point."

Francis nodded. "I appreciate the assistance," he said, courteously. Empty stock phrases were second nature to him. They seemed to have the opposite of the intended effect here, as instead of being put ease, Yu wrinkled his brow.

And then he reached out. Francis's first instinct was to jerk away, but his second reaction was to wait and see. And so, unobstructed, Yu's hand came to rest on his head.

It was a difficult gesture to comprehend. Yu's expression was complicated, while Francis maintained a polite non-emotion.

"What's this?"

Yu closed his eyes and sighed through his nose, gave Francis's hair a ruffle and dropped his arm. "I have a son. He'd be about your age...a little younger. I haven't visited him in many years."

Misplaced feelings? Projection? Already Francis's brain was filing away this information, the way he'd been taught to. A potential weakness to exploit - that was how he'd categorize it.

"Is that so?"

"Yes." Yu seemed wistful, lost in thought. "This entire time, however, you have borne yourself
with the tempered countenance of a court official. While it is supremely impressive that you're able to project so much dignity...you are still young."

Francis waited for the words to follow that he'd heard before - that he was incompetent as a result, under-trained, rash and irresponsible. But they never came.

"It would not be wrong for you to be afraid," Yu said, gently. "The destiny placed upon you is very heavy. No one would condemn you for hesitating or doubting yourself."

...Those words were somehow irritating beyond belief. They scratched at something inside himself that was unacceptably raw.

"There is no merit in hesitation or self-doubt," Francis said, coldly.

Yu gave a small laugh. "Of course there is. Through them, we learn about ourselves."

"A friend of mine is also a king," Francis said. "And he informed me that your station's expertise lies in empty words."

"Did he, now?" Yu said, drawing amusement from Francis's displeasure. "Well, then let me impart some kingly words of my own. There is no yin without yang, no yang without yin. Empty words are full; full words are empty. They are both, simultaneously."

"Is that so," Francis muttered.

Yu laughed again. "Indeed, that's a much better expression than before. Have you shaken off your worries somewhat, esteemed sir?"

"In that I'm irritated now, yes."

"Excellent." Yu reached up again, this time firmly ruffling Francis's hair. "Be on your way, then. I do not know what trials lie before you, but I shall be waiting for your return."
The yeti, Argost, was currently staying in the guest chambers, waited on hand and foot by Valashahis. This was the first Muca had ever seen of him, physically. During the exciting war two years ago, she'd been made to tend the living quarters until the army's triumphant return. There had been no such triumphant return, however, just angry Valashahis and an angrier queen, and she'd gotten much practice at keeping herself small and hidden since then.

Certainly, she could see why the yeti appealed to the other naga. After all, she was a naga too, and the desire to serve under a powerful master boiled in her blood. Such was their nature. And the yeti carried himself with power and grace and nobility - a far cry from Zak, who was unsure, perpetually casual, and friendly to others. So she could not, in the end, condemn her kind for following what seemed to be the better choice.
But she did not like it.

There'd been much to think about, regarding their trip to the first huaca. Muca supposed, more than anything, what had made the most impression on her had been Zak's ability to draw others to himself. The task they were undertaking...it was no overstatement to say that the fate of the world was at stake. Kur was such an existence, after all.

But she never thought there would come a day where she and a kumari could stand as equals, on the same side of a debate. She was sure that the kumari felt the same way, in the glances he stole at her with a troubled expression, as they'd bickered over the nuances of translating the ruins of Challenger Deep.

And there, too, was the human of the group, Francis. Indeed, he embodied everything about humans that the naga found distasteful. His smell was acrid and artificial - like plastic, like oil, like chemicals and steel. He worked only for his own agendas, with a human shortsightedness and a human selfishness. And he held no respect whatsoever for Kur or Kur's place in the world.

And yet, he, too, was standing beside Kur, beside the kumari, beside a naga. That was the kind of world Zak was able to build, even in the few days since he had embarked on his own. Yes, nothing else - not the grandeur of the Serpent, not the betrayal of Dayaaluta, none of it - had impressed her more than the fact that she and a kumari and a human had all been fighting as comrades.

In her mind, there were three Kurs. There was the yeti, there was the Serpent, and there was Zak. The last two were not necessarily distinct, but for now, it was easier for her to think of them in that way.

Zak was adamant on being rid of his abilities, but sometimes Muca thought about what kind of Kur he'd make if he did not. Their trip to Dayaaluta's temple had been illuminating, in that regard. She saw it for herself, the world Zak would want. The world that Dayaaluta wanted.

Now she was back in their underground home. Before her were the broken, scattered remains of their ancient library, the movements of the earth having collapsed some of the cavern walls and knocked several of the tablets off their shelves. Through her efforts, during the four years after they'd awoken from their hibernation, most of the broken tablets had been restored...but had also been stacked into neat piles next to their fallen shelves, next to the collapsing walls. She could stick shattered stone back together, but she simply lacked the strength to repair the broken foundations. This had been as much as she could do.

So far, none of the Valashahis had shown up to help, so she assumed that the yeti's return had been used as an excuse to claim that her request had slipped everyone's mind. Well...that was fine. She had been working alone this whole time.

Kur had told her that she had a job to do. Indeed, the library was in a sorry state. Furthermore, there was a large section of tablets missing - not very important ones, and she was ashamed to admit she hadn't even realized they were gone until three years of work had passed - though she assumed they must be buried under the rubble somewhere, if she could dig for it.

So that was all there was left to do, then. She squared her shoulders and sucked in a deep breath and pushed against one of the fallen shelves with all of her might.

Yes, Muca! Go, Muca! With the strength Kur has bestowed upon you! She cheered for herself in her head. It didn't work, but this was the only option she had.

Until, suddenly, the shelf began to budge. When it slotted itself back into place, upright, Muca
looked down at her twiggy arms, wondering if she was about to shed into a version of herself with incredible muscles, as she had always dreamed she would.

That was, until a shadow loomed over her, and she instinctively curled in on herself. "<J-Janaral>," she said, only just barely remembering to give him a small bow rather than a full one. "<Ah, to, um, to what do I owe the - I'm sorry I didn't notice you, I was - >"

"<Enough>," he snapped at her, clearly displeased with something about her bearing. He turned and pushed the next leaning shelf back into place, effortlessly, with an arm that could snap Muca in half. "<A soldier from the Valashahis was requested to help with library repairs. And so one has come.>"

His eyes glanced down at her and narrowed. "<Unless the honorable Itihaskar wishes to imply that we are not able to properly fulfill our duties.>

She wilted. "<N-no, nothing like that ->

"<Itihaskar>," Janaral hissed at her, and she snapped to attention. "<We have run tardy, and, furthermore, the Janaral himself has come to assist you. Why do you think this is? Speak in a way that is worthy of your station.>

Her tail was tapping frantically against the stone floor, and she was painfully aware of this, but had no way to stop it. Under the Janaral's cold gaze, she felt like if she answered wrong, her insides may not be so safe inside her body much longer.

"<I...If I may be so rude, it is because the other Valashahis refused the position, and did not think of me as worthy of their time. Therefore, the leader, who has the most responsibility, was forced to come, himself.>

His eyes narrowed further, but he turned to continue pushing shelves back into place. "<So you understand your position, then>," he said, coolly. "<Then, what do you think of that?>"

"<That I am deeply sorry for ->

"<No!>" he roared, turning on her. "<How long will you bleat and bray, Itihaskar? Did you not love your teacher, the Itihaskar before you? Do you not hold your position in high regard?>"

She didn't know how to answer questions like that, her claws digging into her scales. Janaral saw her cowering form and snorted with disdain, before resuming his duty.

"<You ought to be angry at the disrespect>," he said. "<Your promotion came from the queen herself. Then it was vouched for by Kur. There are none who could dispute your right to the dignity an Itihaskar should wield.>"

Her miserable little voice leaked out before she could stop it. "<Do you mean for me to die?>"

He narrowed his eyes at her again, waiting for her to continue. Ah. A mistake, she'd made a mistake. But there was no taking it back now.

"<Rani Nagi has seen me - no, Itihaskar - as an eyesore since her time as Valashahis>," Muca said. "<I only live now because I have made myself scarce and grovelled at her feet. Even more so now that Kur has designated me a candidate for the throne. I am here because Kur wills me to be here, but do you think that, as I am, she will tolerate it if I puff out my chest?>" Her voice grew more and more frantic as she continued. "<I will die, Janaral! My arms are weak. My jaws are weak. My
venom is weak. I hatched too early, I have a boy's stature, my tail rattles when I speak, and I was nearly swept away in last year's monsoon; to put it simply, I am a weakling! How is it, do you think, that a weakling such as myself managed to live as long as I have! Is not the only reason Rani Nagi leaves me alive because I have rolled over onto my back for her every time she approaches? Do not look down upon my bleating and braying! It is the reason I am alive to bleat another day! It has been the reason all this time!>

Near the end, she was only airing out her grievances. It was only after she had finished her rant that she realized what a fantastic mistake she had made. Janaral, with an unfathomable expression, had risen to his full height.

"<Is that so, Itihaskar?>" he asked.

Well, it was a nice life. "<That's so, Janaral.>"

"<I see>," he said. He slithered a little closer. "<There is something I must confess to you, Itihaskar. Rani Nagi, our queen, has asked me to dispose of you. Even though you have yet to be officially sponsored, as you said, you are an eyesore. Not only to our Queen, but to all naga.>"

She backed up as he approached, until her head hit one of the stone cavern walls and she could retreat no more.

"<I...I see.>"

"<Then.>" Janaral said, raising his claws. "<Roll on your back for me, Itihaskar. I shall make this quick if you do.>"
Zak was thrown onto the cold stone floor, nearly cracking his head against the wall. He groaned and pushed himself onto his elbows, and then into a sitting position, rubbing his hand against the new bruises on his back, desperately trying to regain his bearings from the wild swaying of Xiangliu’s escort.

He froze when he felt the rancid breath of Xiangliu hovering over him, scarcely daring to move. It sniffed him, and gave a displeased huff, before backing away. Zak peeked up to watch it retreat to the far corner of its territory, a patch of stone chamber that had been so blackened by dried blood and spit that the mercury circuits no longer ran through. The whole area was dim, lit only by the false setting sun through the leaves of the forest several feet in front of him, where the stone abruptly gave way to mountainside scenery.
One of Xiangliu's heads was keeping an eye in him, staring in his direction as if daring him to see what would happen if he tried to escape. The other nine were curled up in on themselves, licking at its own wounds. The major injury Yu had left was in an awkward spot, too close to the junction for any of its nine heads to reach. The creature was clearly in a great deal of pain, snuffling and hissing as it tended itself, and the sight of it made Zak's heart ache.

It hadn't killed him, after all, even if he'd be a good meal. And it was intelligent enough to recognize Yu as an enemy. Did it perhaps understand the concept of hostages? Or was it too hurt to try and swallow him?

For now, Zak staggered to his feet. The head watching him perked up in alarm, warily following his actions as he tested his perimeter. It was only as he got near the edge of its territory that Xiangliu did anything, hissing and throwing Zak backwards with a sweep of its tail. But it didn't make a move beyond that, once more sinking into its own coils, licking its own wounds.

Okay. Okay, he could work with this.

As long as he wasn't dead, he could work with this. He took a few deep breaths the way his father had taught him to, slowly organizing a list of priorities in his mind.

First, where exactly was he? Xiangliu had traveled in a relatively straight line, and now they were next to one of the walls of the chamber. When he glanced back at the wall, he found a set of metal double-doors that he'd overlooked before. On the ground in front of it were stone tiles also inscribed with those ancient pictographs that had surrounded Auntie Kithera's well. He could feel Xiangliu's wary eyes on his back as he inspected the designs, but seeing as the door was well within the borders of the poisoned area, Xiangliu did little more than watch.

Zak kneeled down to get a better look. Modern Chinese, his mother had taught him, had descended from a language that used illustrations to encapsulate concepts, much like Sumerian had. While Sumerian had eventually evolved an alphabet, Chinese retained its pictographic roots, making Chinese class one of Zak's least favorites for all the rote memorization it had required.

The first documented Chinese was what had been carved into oracle bones from about 1300 BCE, but since those symbols were already extremely stylized, they suggested that Chinese had already gone through a lot of undocumented development up until that point. What he was looking at here was from even before that, and the anthropologist sensibilities that his mom had instilled him with were filling him with a giddiness unsuited to his current situation.

Breathe, Zak. You can geek out later. What do these pictographs say?

He traced the ground with his fingers. The most prominent images depicted...the sun, the earth, and a person deep below the crust.

The elevator. The damaged elevator. That was where he was. And even now, Xiangliu's blood was staining the ground, blocking the circuits. Zak glanced at it and met its wary, watery eyes.

Inside his mind, he felt the Serpent sigh. It startled him, because Kur had been silent ever since it took control at Challenger Deep. But when he probed back, he felt nothing at all. There was no response, only a sense of...waiting and seeing, waiting and seeing what he would do.

Zak bit his lip, and made up his mind. He rummaged around in his backpack until he found the first-aid kit, hoping the rubber gloves that came with it would be enough against Xiangliu's poisonous blood. Then he turned to the great snake, the kit under one arm, and reached out to it.
Kur's warm power suffused through his whole body. This was a risk, Zak knew, after Kur's last warning, but it was one he had to take. Xiangliu would probably never accept a stranger tending its wounds otherwise. At first Zak was worried that, like the Akkorokamui, which had separate nervous systems in each tentacle, Xiangliu would similarly be hard to influence. But since Xiangliu only seemed to have one consciousness, despite its nine heads - or possibly because he'd learned the trick to it the last time the Serpent had taken the reins, as scary a thought as that was - he found the connection was almost immediate.

In fact, if anything surprised him, it was how quickly and deeply the bond was established. It was almost like connecting with Fisk or Zon or Komodo - like Xiangliu recognized him. Welcomed him. Normally, wild cryptids put up a resistance to the unfamiliar invasion. There was none of that, here.

Through their connection, Zak could feel the biting pain of Xiangliu's injuries. He bit his own lip, staggering a little as the information flowed through, before righting himself on his feet.

"Hey, buddy," he murmured. "It's okay, it's okay. I'm here to help you out, alright? I've got medicine and stitches. We're going to get you patched up."

Xiangliu stared at him, and then uncurled and relaxed its body. Its scales went scraping against the stone floor as it stretched itself out. Zak approached carefully to investigate, kneeling down; at its thickest, Xiangliu's body came up to his waist. Xiangliu's blood, like its breath, was rancid and foul, but honestly, Zak had worked with stinkier. For example, Komodo after Komodo got into the trash, or wet Fiskerton.

Most of its wounds were shallow cuts, and Xiangliu's thick, viscous black blood had already congealed. These smaller injuries still clearly stung when Zak put pressure on them, but they were not a problem. The problem was the big, weeping gash right below Xiangliu's nine necks.

"Nasty," Zak breathed. It was nasty, all of it. No creature deserved this kind of retaliation just for a territorial dispute. And Xiangliu was even there first; how was it fair that it was the one who needed to be killed and cleared away?

So, fumbling and nervous, Zak got to work disinfecting the wound. He didn't know how necessary it was to do so, considering that Xiangliu's blood was naturally toxic, but his parents had drilled in the proper protocol at least, and he had no reason not to follow it.

The alcohol stung; Zak could feel it through the connection, even if Xiangliu's nine heads hadn't hissed at him when he swabbed along the gash. Somehow, he couldn't feel afraid of this monster, no matter how much it threatened him. He could feel that it was planning to cooperate with him...that it trusted him.

Despite the length of the wound, it wasn't particularly deep. All he'd really need to do was bandage it. Using his power, and murmuring words of comfort, he got Xiangliu to lift its body so he could get the gauze around its neck. It took some finagling, as Xiangliu's body was so wide he couldn't reach all the way across, but by hooking the bandages on Xiangliu's spines, he'd managed somehow. These were special-made by his dad for their family's use on wild animals - in time, the gauze would loosen and degrade on its own, allowing for treatment and immediate release.

Having its wound tended to seemed to bring Xiangliu some relief, and it tentatively stretched its body out, acclimatizing to its current comfortable range of motion. When it was done, Xiangliu gave a satisfied huff. Surprising Zak, he was pushed forward by Xiangliu's tail curling around him, brought face to face with the great monster. Then it dropped one if its massive heads into his lap, while several others coiled around him.
Hesitantly, Zak gave its ridged, scaled head a pet. To his surprise, Xiangliu leaned into the gesture. He couldn't help but find it kind of cute - like petting Zon.

"Hey, you're actually kind of a sweetheart, aren't you?"

Maybe he was the only one who could say that about a nine-headed dragon. But even poisonous things were usually keystones in their environment, and oftentimes the ugly creatures were the most important.

In the end, Xiangliu was not the village-ravaging monster the stories said it was. It was the injured animal curling up around someone who had helped it.

It was...nice. It made him feel like his old self. This, he'd known since long ago, was what he wanted to be doing. He'd meant what he'd said to Francis: they saved what was in front of them.

He patted Xiangliu one last time, before slowly pushing his way out of its coils.

"Sorry, but I have to get back to where Francis is."

Xiangliu made a sound like groaning. "BIEE…"

Zak grinned. "Yeah, I know, I hate his guts too. But we're in this mess together...I gotta tell him you're cool now, right?"

One of the heads forced its way under his arm, clearly unhappy to see him leave. "YUU…"

Then, suddenly, its tail curled around him again, lifting him into the air. Xiangliu had suddenly become enraged, its body thrashing wildly from side-to-side.

"YUUUUUU!!"

"Whoa!" Zak yelled, flailing. "What's gotten into you?!"

"YUUUUUUUUU!!"

Desperate, Zak reached out with his powers again. This time, he felt the Serpent open its eyes.

*Who deserves to be punished? Tell me, Xiangliu.*

Zak felt a dam open in his mind. His connection had always been two-way, but now it was inviting Xiangliu in. Hatred and fury seeped into his brain, then flooded it, coloring him with a thousand bitter experiences.

Yu's face had been seared into Xiangliu's mind like a brand, ever since that day thousands of years ago when a sword had first been plunged into its heart. By the time Xiangliu had awakened, a new king sat on China's throne. But it didn't understand that humans died and stayed dead. After all, Xiangliu had returned, so Yu must still be alive in the world as well, in hiding. Searching for a revenge to settle the score, Xiangliu began hunting for Yu.

Yu's scent lead it to Yu's tomb. And here, blasphemy of all blasphemies, it found an ugly masquerade wearing its rival's face. Taunting it. As if saying that it was not worthy of Yu's time. And so they fought, and fought, and fought. No matter how many times Xiangliu crushed this false Yu between its jaws, there was a new one by the end of the day. No matter how many times Xiangliu raged and tore at this imaginary world, that terrible farce returned. How many times had it called out Yu's name? That coward, that infidel, that treacherous and foul - how many times had
Xiangliu lost its life down here? How much more bitter did its vengeance have to grow?

Zak grimaced, his heart aching in tandem with Xiangliu's own. This was all a misunderstanding, he wanted to scream. There was no point to revenge anymore. Yu had been dead all this time. There was no one to take revenge on.

So he forced his own power back to Xiangliu, but the fire didn't come. It didn't come.

And then, breathing away the turmoil, a great and sorrowful sigh, magnanimous and gentle and sad and kind.

Ahhh, my child…

Zak blinked, and then he was falling. Desperately, he fought against the encroaching blackness, which threatened to pull him below the sea. Arms shackled, legs bound, a thousand razor teeth closed shut around him, he could only watch as the Serpent breathed into his body with its orange flame.

He watched the Serpent calm the dragon. He was in his body, but it was not his body.

Like smoothing the surface of a raging sea, Kur washed over Xiangliu's rage. The Serpent was placed gently back on the ground. It approached Xiangliu, its arms outstretched, as Xiangliu roared, as it opened its jaws, as it nestled itself in Kur's embrace.

"It was hard, wasn't it?"

Drip, drip.

One by one, the nine heads began to weep. Great, fat tears rolled out of its eyes, splashed against the floor. Zak was stunned - snakes didn't cry. They weren't supposed to be able to cry.

"There, there."

And then Zak was sitting in a blinding gold desert, the wind whistling through his hair as it raised and levied the dunes around him.

Here he was again, in the belly of the beast. Here he was, like Kur had promised.

"Liar," the Serpent said. Zak whipped around to find the source of the voice, but all he could see in any direction was sand and sky.

"What do you mean, liar?" Zak clenched his fists. "Answer me!"

A hand, scorching-hot, wrapped itself around Zak's throat. He clawed at it, trying to pry himself free, but to no avail. Kur's grip was crushing, searing, and it pressed Zak back against its body. He couldn't even turn around to look - with its other hand, the Serpent grabbed at his cheeks, kept his eyes turned away. Around them flapped the black fabric of the Serpent's suit jacket, like wings in the wind.

"Your order to Xiangliu was for it to leave."

"Yeah! Because - "

"Quiet," the Serpent hissed, cutting off his words with a squeeze of his throat. "You, listen. I say this again and again. You cannot lie to me."
It leaned in. Zak could feel its furnace breath coiling around his shoulders. From below the sand, lava began to rise - white-hot, it melted him, it hurt, it melted him down. His feet, his ankles, his knees. And all the while the Serpent continued to speak, all the while, Zak couldn't breathe, couldn't breathe, for the burning hand against his throat.

"You wish to order Xiangliu to forget the grudge against the selfish man who slew it?" The lava was at his hips.

"You wish to order Xiangliu to discard the thousands of years it has spent calling his enemy's name?" Now it was at the bottom of his ribcage, which fluttered as he gasped for what little air he could pull from between the Serpent's fingers.

"You wish to order Xiangliu to turn its back on justice, on retribution, on remuneration?" Its voice was cold and pitiless. The lava rose to Zak's throat, to his chin, to his mouth, where he sucked it in by the lungful as he gasped for air, as it burned him open from the inside out.

"Liar."

A heavy weight settled itself around his shoulders, and then he was speaking. The words, which fell out of his own mouth, which rang with his own voice, both were and were not his own. Under his fingers were Xiangliu's scales. And in his mind he could feel Xiangliu there, heaving great tears of sorrow, of exhaustion, of fury.

"This is our order," the Serpent murmured, reaching out towards the nine-headed beast.

"Yu is dead. He has been dead all this time. But do not fret, Xiangliu, for we have brought to you his successor." Zak felt himself break out into a smile. In his heart, he could feel the absolute justice in his decree. This was, yes, his order, too. These were his true feelings.

"The Heir to Humanity will bear humanity's sins." Only vaguely could Zak even hear his own words, for the fire rushing through his veins.

"Xiangliu! Your justice be had. For the crime of killing the venerable you, for the blasphemy of killing me, master of the venerable you: go forth and bare your fangs. Do not rest until the debt has been paid with human blood!"
Chapter End Notes

warnings for: blood, hurting animals, environmentalism
"<Itihaskar!>" Janaral roared, crashing through bookshelves as he pursued her through the library. "<Is running and hiding all that you plan to do?>"

"<Even if it wasn't, I would not tell you so!>" Muca shouted back, peeking her head out from between two collapsed shelves and immediately pulling it back in when Janaral took a swipe at her with his claws. Oh ho ho. She was dead. She was so dead.

When the Janaral had first attacked, she'd somehow managed to twist or writhe out of the way, and continued to do so as he sped after her. In these ruins, full of little Muca-sized tunnels she'd dug out for herself so she could get to fallen tablets, her strongholds were well-fortified - but there was only one exit into the rest of the Naga tunnels, and Janaral was guarding it fiercely.

"<Coward! Come out and die in a way befitting of your title!>"

"<Ha! Or perhaps I could simply hide in the library, subsisting on rats, until you, honorable Janaral, are to keel over from starva->"

With a hiss, Janaral swung his mighty tail and crushed the shelf she'd been hiding under, leaving her body entirely exposed, like a tubeworm without its shell.

"<Yipe.>"

She turned to flee and he grabbed her by the tail, hoisting her into the air. "<Then perhaps I should eat you, to stave off my hunger?>"

So saying, he jabbed at her with the spear in his other hand, her little body just barely managing to twist out of the way. Scrabbling for any purchase, her two hands latched onto the shaft of the spear, Janaral trying to tug it out of her grasp while spitting venom. As she jerked toward his body, their skulls crashed together, clumsy and ungainly, but the shock of it weakened his grip enough for Muca to wriggle out. She dropped to the floor and immediately dove into another Muca-shaped hole.

Janaral growled in frustration as Muca hid and tried to will her racing heart to slow. Her reprieve would not last long if he decided to start smashing the shelves again. Think, Muca, think! But her claws dug into the stone in frustration, instead. Her only asset was that she had a mind and heart for history, for stories of the past.

Of the...past...

Ah...she glanced over once more at Janaral's rippling upper-body strength. Maybe she had an idea.

It was - a sacrifice, to be sure. Her heart ached and her scales crawled to think of what it was that she must do. These stone tablets, how long had they kept her company when no one else would?

But they were eggshells now - something that had protected her, nurtured her, and were fated to be consumed so that she may live.

She took a deep breath in and darted out into the open, Janaral immediately turning on her with a
soldier's reflexes. She booked it onto a bookshelf leaning at a 45° angle against the others, into unwieldy territory, Janaral's spear hot on her tail-tip, but he couldn't fit his shoulders into the crawlspace even as his head reached in to snap at her with envenomed fangs. Muca swallowed thickly and then - with all the courage she had to muster - she roared at him.

"<Grass-eater!>" she shouted, drudging up from her memory every nasty thing her bullies used to call her. "<Fangless, tail-tied, sap-sipping, skin-scaled ->"

"<You have a death wish, Itihaskar!>"

"<Eat hawk-shit and choke!>" She screamed, voice breaking. Janaral hissed in fury, his clawed hands slamming against the shelves to either side. They strained and groaned against the pressure, against Janaral's strength. Beneath her coils, Muca could feel the stone beginning to fall...to fall, and then it did. With a terrifying boom, Janaral toppled the shelf that Muca's was leaning on, and then it fell on the one next to it, and so on, and so on...eled that her idea had worked, she forgot for a moment that Janaral was still very much there and still very much upset with her. He grabbed her by the neck, as if she were a common viper, and hoisted her up from the ground.

He reared back to plunge his spear into her heart. "<Last honors, Itihaskar?>"

She gurgled in his grasp, then looked up at the ceiling, where cracks were beginning to form.

Long ago, her teacher had described to her how ingeniously the library had been designed, such that the stone shelves held the ceiling up, kept the tons and tons of flowing river at bay. Without them, the entire room was in danger of collapse.

She had gotten the idea from Challenger Deep.

The first drop of water landing on Janaral's head made him turn his head up. He soon realized what it was that Muca had goaded him into doing, and his grip loosened enough for Muca to wriggle out, to drop to the ground.

She fled into one of her hidey-holes, where Janaral could not follow, and took a deep, deep breath in, shrinking into her coils and covering her ears. Outside, the stone ceiling gave one last creak and groan, before giving way with a boom that rattled her bones. She was slammed against the wall at the very end of her hiding-place, and everything was plunged into riverbed sediment and cold, murky water.

When at last the flooding had ceased, when the dirt had settled, Muca began to scrabble her way out from the rubble. She tried not to worry about the possibility of her entryway being blocked off by immovable stone, impenetrable rock, because if that were to have happened, she really would be dead.

But Kur must have been smiling upon her that day - every obstacle in her way was still small enough for her to move with her meager strength. Eventually, she broke the surface, crawling atop one of the downed shelves into the air bubble created by an ancient magic woven into the cavern-carving from long ago - one which stymied floods so that the whole of their living quarters would not fill with water after a single breach. Overhead, the river flowed on, sediment already beginning to collect along the upstream side of the air bubble.

All around her was destruction and rubble, sticking out in odd, jagged angles. The only shelves to have survived were near the very edges of the cave; the tablets, which she had so painstakingly put back together, were likely once more smashed beyond recognition.
But she was alive. As long as there was that, they could re-carve a million tablets. She knew all of them by heart.

She turned to leave for the exit, when suddenly a hand shot out of the water and grabbed her by the tail. Her claws scrabbled against the stone shelf as she tried in vain to keep herself from being hoisted once more into the air, as Janaral reared out of the flood, water cascading down his hide, scales dented, fury in his eyes. Clasped in his other hand was a broken spear, which he glanced at and tossed aside, which splashed and sank into the murky waters.

"<You, Itihaskar,>" he hissed at her, "<are a frog-brained, suicidal slug-sucking eggwart - >"

She shrank, waiting for the killing blow, but it did not come. Instead, he set her back down on the stone, brushing off her shoulder with the back of one hand.

"< - But I suppose there is still naga in you yet.>"

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Human.

Heed my words.

I am the serpent that encircles the world. I am the string of destiny. I am the spectre of death. I am the tide of fate. I am the march of time. I am the beginning and the end.

And what are you?

You are an errant spark in a forest fire. You are a flake in a blizzard. You are a ripple in the tide of a flash flood. You are almost nothing at all.

Liar. Weak-willed. Half-hearted. It is for these reasons that you will not survive my poison thrumming in your veins.

Zak clutched his head, stumbled through the simulated undergrowth. It flickered in and out of view. Behind the glare of his own blazing power, its artifice was revealed. Like if he reached out he could mold the setting himself - he saw the way the magic thrummed through the mercury and falsified itself into branches and leaves. It warped beneath his feet.

"Get out of my head."

You cannot defy what you are. No creature can deny its own nature. You cannot lie to me.

"Leave me alone!"

Alone?

He felt it laugh at him.

Alone? Liar. You do not want to be alone. Do not say that you forgot. You were alone, without me, and how was it then? To gaze into the eyes of our brethren and see a stranger gazing back.

Zak bit his lip. He did remember it. The headaches, the damp blurring of reality, the scrabbling hollowness inside himself when he was searching for something that was no longer there.
I and my judgement are absolute. If you wish to defy me, then bring to bear at least that much resolve.

With those words it finally left him, pulling back the fire that was scorching him alive, leaving him to crumple onto the ground, in the rut left by Xiangliu's body. Zak took a few deep, shuddering breaths, trying to recoup some of the feeling in his legs. His hands clenched against the dirt.

Resolve. Was that what he lacked?

He grit his teeth and pushed himself up on wobbly legs. He had to get to Francis. He had to stop Xiangliu. He didn't have the time right now to worry about some deadline six or seven weeks away. He could only do what he could do. Could only reach what he could reach.

After he’d continued down the path a ways, Francis was once more met with a metal set of double-doors, this one set in the base of an enormous tree, framed by mossy, gnarled roots and rustling leaves. He paused once he was in front of it, took in a long breath, and tapped the surface of the metal with the speartip of Sharur. There was a sound like a big brass bell, before the doors slid smoothly open.

Out of the entrance came a powerful stench. Francis found himself wincing on instinct, despite all his training to maintain a stoic façade. He sighed, squared his shoulders, and walked inside, reaching up with one hand to turn on the flashlight on his goggles. Right behind the doorway was a flight of stone stairs criss-crossed with inert, empty mercury circuits. Francis’s footsteps echoed as he carefully made his way down.

He stopped when he heard a splash, and felt water beneath his feet. The ripples sent by this disturbance caught the light of his flashlight, breaking against the only items in this square chamber.

From floor to ceiling stretched five pillars in an arc, equidistant from the other. Running up all their sides was a delicate latticework of inscriptions, which joined into grooves cut into the ceiling and floor - presumably, where the mercury was meant to flow.

The stone wall behind them had crumbled and collapsed, and only blackness lay beyond. About one and a half feet deep, the floor had been completely flooded. It was difficult to tell in the low light, but the water seemed...murky, and was clearly the source of that rancid stench. Presumably, Xiangliu’s blood had mixed into it, causing the chamber's current shorted condition.

Francis scowled. He didn't have the faintest idea where to even begin with clearing away this mess. What was a spear supposed to do against a room full of water?

No. There wasn't any point in being stubborn right now. And besides, no one else was here to witness it. Sharur was, by all accounts, a magic spear. There probably was something it could do...he hoped.

Francis held it out in front of himself, trying to ignore how silly he felt. No reaction from the spear - it remained inert in his hands, as if mocking him.

Epsilon would probably have a fit if he heard that Francis was seriously considering that he might need to utter some magic words to get this stupid thing to work.
"Erm...open sesame?"

He wanted to slap himself. Instead he grasped it with his other hand, too.

"Ugh...by the power of Gilgamesh...I invoke you...?"

Still nothing, aside from his own mounting shame.

"Come on, you stupid thing - "

He was cut short by an enormous boom from the top of the stairs, the force of which nearly startled him into the rancid water. A second later, there was another boom, and then another, until finally the doors were wrenched open with an unbearable shriek. The beam of Francis's flashlight landed on glittering green scales, on nine sets of venomous slit eyes, all narrowed in seething, unbridled hate.

Xiangliu.

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Xiangliu roared its approach, its eyes gleaming in Francis's headlamp. He took a step down and cursed as he felt water rush into his shoes, gritting his teeth as he readied Sharur.

His only warning that Xiangliu was about to strike was the narrowing of its eighteen gleaming eyes.

Compared to their earlier fight, its movements were duller. That was probably Francis's only saving grace in this engagement, but either way he was in dire straits - the water rose up to his knees as he was pushed further and further back, and Xiangliu had the higher ground, raining down nine attacks at a time.

He cursed again, internally. Where the hell was Zak? In this chamber, he was burdened by the dark, the isolation, the corner he was being backed into, and the water - the water up to his mid-thigh. It caught his clothes and dragged them down, making all Francis's movements slow and ungainly.

Every time he parried one of Xiangliu's blows, Sharur flashed, lighting up the room with odd, jagged angles. So far, Xiangliu had yet to land a substantial hit - although even one would be deadly, if its saliva was as toxic as the rest of it. But even without the advantage of poison, this was a 9-on-1 match, and however you sliced it, Francis was the one with losing odds.

Was he going to die down here? Francis grit his teeth. Not without a fight.

So the next time Xiangliu's center head took a swipe at him, he blocked it lengthwise with Sharur, then spun the spear around to try and jab it from the bottom with the pointed end. But - crucially - he forgot about the water, which slowed his movements as the speartip entered, and by the time it had breached the surface on the upswing, it was moving far too slowly to hit. Francis whiffed, the tip of the spear just barely clearing Xiangliu's chin…

...But the jet of water that followed Sharur's arc did not.

With the force of a sucker punch, a stream of water slammed into the bottom of Xiangliu's jaw,
throwing its head backwards with a force strong enough to stagger its main body. Francis's eyes widened behind his goggles as he tried to comprehend what just happened, before tightening his grip.

He wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth. Once more, he submerged the tip of Sharur into the water, and then jabbed in Xiangliu's direction like he was trying to flick the monster with the splash. Once more a large column of water streamed into the air, slaming itself against Xiangliu's unprepared heads, drenching it.

The impact left something to be desired - the force was blunt and weak, little stronger than the power in his own inferior human arms, but it was *something* - a distraction, a ranged attack, his mind was already racing with the possibilities. It was - a way out.

"Francis!"

Zak's voice resounded through the room. The one beam of light from the doorway at the top of the stairs was suddenly interrupted by his silhouette, his arms braced against the sides.

Zak was alive, too.

Francis tried to ignore the relief that his arrival brought. This was strictly business, he reminded himself.

"Having a spot of trouble," he called back, fending off another blow. "Anytime you want to hop in..."

He didn't need to tell Zak twice. Immediately, Zak had thrown himself onto Xiangliu's body, wrestling with one of the heads. Xiangliu hissed and roared and tried to buck him, giving Francis the opportunity he was looking for.

"Close your eyes and hold your breath," he warned. He didn't check to see if Zak had heeded him before he launched a stream of water at the base of Xiangliu's nine necks. Between Zak throwing it off-balance and the well-timed hit, Xiangliu was rendered momentarily stunned, long enough for Francis to slip through its coils, splashing toward the stairs, scrabbling up on all fours. The moment Zak had noticed that he was running, he leapt off Xiangliu's back and followed after him.

At the top of the stairs, because of the slick stone and the water still dragging at his coattails, Francis felt his footing give way. But before he hit the ground, Zak's arms were there to catch him, and together they broke out into the artificial light of the waning moon. Behind them, they could hear Xiangliu's roar, and it spurred them to keep running, Francis taking the lead back to Yu's settlement. As the patterned stone gave way to foliage, they met a panicked Yu in the forest. He took one look at them and then pushed them forward.

"Go, to the settlement," he urged. "I will buy us time."

Francis nodded, crashing through the underbrush, but at his side, Zak began to falter. He was casting nervous glances back the way they came, his legs slowing as his expression crumpled. Although the forest obstructed their view, they could still hear Xiangliu's roars, and soon after, the clang of sword against scale.

"...Wait," Zak said, slowing and then stopping dead in his tracks. And then, the idiot tried to run back.

"What are you doing?" Francis asked, hardly able to believe his eyes. He changed direction to chase after Zak, reaching for his sleeve. "Are you insane?"
Finally, his hand caught Zak's bony wrist, and he yanked backward with all his strength. Zak nearly went crashing into the forest, casting Francis a crazed look. His hair was wild, his eyes bright, and there was a terror in his expression.

"We can't let them fight," Zak said, clenching his fists and trying to yank himself free. "Xiangliu's injured. It's going to get itself killed."

"You are insane! That monster tried to kill us. Twice!"

"I'm not crazy!" Zak spat out at him. "Xiangliu isn't a monster!"

With his free arm, Zak unhooked the Claw from his belt and sent it flying at Francis's chest. Francis went flying backwards, forced to let go. Zak gave him a rueful glance as he turned to run back for the snake.

Just enough time for Francis to get back on his feet and launch himself at the orange blur, tackling him to the ground.

"We need to run away," Francis growled.

"Then run!" Zak tried to kick him off. "I can handle Xiangliu myself!"

One of his flailing feet found a foothold against Francis's side. With as much force as he could muster, Zak kicked Francis away, scrabbling to his own feet. This time, he didn't look back. He stumbled blindly through the undergrowth, more practiced in rough terrain than Francis was, as Francis cursed and followed behind him. Much as it pained him, he wasn't about to let Zak face the damn thing alone.

But they didn't make it.

The forest around them - the breeze, the sound of rustling leaves and chirping crickets - froze in mid-thought.

"No," Zak breathed, grasping the situation faster than Francis could.

The green leaves, silvery-blue in the moonlight, began to blacken and wither away. Before their very eyes, they watched the trees shrivel and die, shed their withered dresses into the sick, stuffy air. Zak, too, had grown pale. He looked ill, his fingers digging into his thighs. Slowly - hesitantly, Francis caught up to him, reaching for Sharur, as the artificial world around them cracked and crumbled away at the seams.

Finally, the world wavered, unable to maintain its shape, the soft moonlight vanishing into the frigid cavern darkness. In the circuitry at their feet, Francis could see the silvery veins slowly turning a corroded, ugly black.

"We were too late," Zak said in a broken, hoarse whisper, as the room began to darken with the dying of the false sun.

Before them, in the direction of the memory banks, they could see Xiangliu's massive, crumpled body, torn white bandages stained with black, a growing pool of blood seeping into the ground.

Two hands wrapped themselves around Francis's collar, yanking him forward. He stared into livid orange eyes.

"I told you!" Zak shouted, with a palpable, impotent rage, his fingers trembling and his breath hot.
"I told you - I told you…"

What was Francis supposed to say to that? ...Indeed, what was there even left to say?

Zak had told him. But he'd refused to listen.

After what felt like ages of Zak holding him still like that - for so long that the fading light became no light at all, and Francis's night vision automatically kicked in - Zak finally let go, leaving Francis to stumble backwards on uneven limbs.

"I...I'm sorry," Francis said, his voice weak and unconvincing even to his own ears.

Zak gave an ugly snort. "For what?"

They'd had this exchange when they'd first met. Francis's hadn't had an answer for him then, either. They did need to get rid of Xiangliu. Everything else - the forest, Yu the Great, and the settlement - was a simulation, a fake. There were no great losses, objectively, but…

...This time, maybe, he actually did feel sorry. Something, at least, was bubbling itself up out of his stomach, driving him to clench his hands so hard that only the thick leather of his gloves kept his fingernails from digging into his skin.

He turned and looked away, taking in and letting out a practiced breath. Every step felt like dragging legs filled with lead, but he forced himself to walk forward, past Zak hunched over Xiangliu's corpse, past the empty doorway, back into the flooded memory vault.

They could not change the past. There was only - doing what he could do, doing what could be done. Xiangliu's blood was water-soluble, and Sharur could apparently control water. With it, he could scrub clean a path from what little simulation remained to the elevator door.

Zak clearly didn't want to talk right now. ...No, that was an excuse. He was the one that couldn't talk to Zak right now. He needed to... do something. This should be a victory, right? He got his way, didn't he? Wasn't this the outcome he had wanted?

It was, objectively. It was, so why did it feel so...
Francis worked all through the night, or at least he only rested in the time after Zak had fallen asleep, collapsed over Xiangliu's body, and before he'd woken up, crusted over with dried black blood. There he stayed for the rest of the day - it wasn't like he could do anything to help Francis out, even if he wanted to, and...this, this was his fault. The least he could do was keep a vigil.

Zak's hand traced the rigid scales of one of Xiangliu's heads, the one that had thrust itself into his lap with gratitude only a day before. At some point, Francis had hovered over him, a question or snide remark on his lips, but ultimately he'd turned away without saying anything. That was good; Zak doubted he could talk to Francis without his words turning into a litany of abuses.

Things should not have ended in this way. Without being able to explain, without a chance to save
anything. Only the fact that Francis was there, and that Zak would rather die than let him see, kept him from openly crying over those nine motionless heads - not just for the loss of Xiangliu, but for his own powerlessness, as he was yanked around again and again.

Things were not meant to turn out this way.

*How unsightly.*

Zak froze, then clenched his fist.

"This happened because of you, and that's all you have to say?"

That got a laugh out of the Serpent, cold and pitiless. What was even the use of engaging with it? But Zak was desperate for someone - *anyone* to blame.

*Will you kill the Heir of Humanity yourself?*

Zak grit his teeth. "You *know* my answer to that."

*Then you are useless to Xiangliu. Your grief is nothing but self-satisfaction.*

"Shut up. Shut up!"

"I didn't say anything yet," Francis muttered behind him, and Zak spun wildly around.

"Francis, you - I wasn't talking to you." He averted his eyes, trying to keep the sound of his jackrabbiting heart out of his voice. "What do you want?"

"I'm as finished as I...can be," Francis said, with a stiff gesture toward the pool of blood around Xiangliu's body he couldn't do anything about. He seemed unsure of how to talk to Zak, his voice quieter and less biting than usual. "I thought...you might appreciate some warning."

When Zak peeked around Francis, indeed, the forest had been restored. He hadn't noticed - it was like one side of the room was alive, and one side was empty and cold.

"Yeah, yeah, I just, um..." Zak scrabbled to his feet, ignoring the stiffness of his legs. "Are you going to the huaca now? The elevator's...?"

"Fixed, yes. I..." Francis faltered. "I was hoping to clear out the memory banks, but they'll take some time to reboot. Because I don't want to be blindsided again, if possible..."

He looked like he was going to say something, and then changed his mind, pressing his lips into a thin line. An extended silence hung over them, before finally Francis spoke up again.

"So I'm going, then. Before any other unexpected delays occur." A business-like proposition was all he could give, even after everything that had happened. Zak let out a bitter snort.

"Fine," he said.

"Good," Francis answered.

He turned and left, his gait silent and even as always, leaving Zak behind.
Francis was exhausted, having spent more than 24 hours laboring to clean the tomb. He was, in mild terms, quite familiar now with Sharur's magic functions. To carry water through the air from the flooded memory banks to the furthest reaches of the corrosion, it took an intense amount of focus and concentration. Nothing else he'd done with his People had been quite so draining...and draining was good. Draining was a distraction from the uneasy, unfamiliar feelings that still bubbled up in his chest. Draining was a distraction from how uncomfortable the elevator was, as he was trapped in a small room, leaning on Sharur for support, as he fell smoothly down into the depths of the earth.

He stank. Francis was still soggy and drenched, Xiangliu's blood tacky at the bottom of his shoes. Maybe he'd stink forever. In the smooth metal double-doors, he could see that he looked as exhausted as he felt. He didn't want to speak another word for a million years.

Normally he'd be yearning for his sterile, clean room on board the space station, for his showering bay and scentless shampoo, for the comforting 45° tilt of his rest pod. But for some reason, those were not the images that came to mind. Quietly, Francis remembered the bright, busy streets of Japan. The tatami floors of the inn they were staying at. The uncomfortable, too-hot bath in open air. The sticky taste of dango lingering on his teeth and tongue.

After an eternity, the elevator slowed to a smooth stop and opened its doors. It led out into a hallway, lined with bright white lights, a set of metal doors at the other end.

"Ah," Auntie Kithera suddenly resounded in his head. "You've arrived."

Francis said nothing, just a nod of acknowledgement. Auntie Kithera did not continue, either, and so the only sound that echoed through the hall was that of his heavy footfalls and Sharur's metal cap against stone tile.

When he got to the door, it slid open automatically, ushering him into a small, square chamber. Like Auntie Kithera's room above, there was a circular pool of mercury in the exact center. Around it, like with the memory banks, were five pillars carved with mercury circuits. If the huaca was anywhere, it would be here.

So Francis approached, and as he did so, the surface of the mercury pool rippled, then pulled itself up and backwards, forming a head, then hair, then robes, hands...before him stood the figure of a woman, features cast in silvery metal, waiting patiently for him to draw close.

"I seem to be fully operational now," she said, bowing her head to him. "For that, I give you my thanks."

"I don't need them." Indeed, when he thought about the price...

"Needed or not, you shall have them. Heir to humanity, why is there no triumph on your expression?"

Francis snorted. "Why would there be? If you're done with the stupid questions, let's just get this over with."

Auntie Kithera studied him, lips pursed. Then she ducked her head, her eyes hidden behind silver lashes.

"The huaca serves as my power source. When you are finished, I will be running on reserve power, and will be unable to communicate with you or run complex simulations of thought and reason. As
such, before I enter hibernation, would you like to speak with my lord one last time? It will not be within your lifetime for the huaca to recover its strength."

Francis's grip tightened. "The impact is that large?"

"Vaunted guest, Kur is the meeting point of all the magic of this world. To seal it away is a grave feat…"

Francis looked down. He was so, so tired. He wanted to get this over with. But there was only one answer when presented with such a question, wasn't there?

"I'd like to speak with Yu."

Auntie Kithera bowed to him and stepped to the side. Where she had been standing, the mercury shimmered, and trembled, and then formed the projection of a wizened old man, a beard stretching down to his knees, his eyes sad under his silk fineries. His robes were emerald-green and crimson-red and gold, shimmering in the bright white light.

"So it was killed, then? Xiangliu."

Francis's grip tightened, as if he could feel the phantom impact, as if he'd delivered the killing blow. "Yes."

Yu gave a deep, sorrowful sigh.

"In life, I had slain it once as well," he said, finally. "And then, when the floods came and washed away its body, its poison seeped into the fields, into the paddies, and there was famine in my lands for several years."

That only served to make Francis feel even more wretched than before. But without paying heed to him, Yu continued.

"When Gilgamesh came to my lands to seek my assistance in fighting Kur, I was the only one amongst his council that begged him not to slay the creature. It would have been enough to subdue it or turn it away. Eventually, I was ousted from his court for saying so."

It was ridiculous how these stories from millenia ago were so prescient, so relevant now. Humanity had never advanced, not even a single step. "Were you right?"

"Who can know for sure?" He was not looking at Francis, staring at a point far, far away. "Evidently, we seemed to seem to have survived without worry...so perhaps my concerns were unnecessary. Regardless...several years later, Gilgamesh returned to me, to ask me for my assistance."

His wizened old eyes, milky with cataracts, turned to look at Francis.

"That boy with you...that's Kur, isn't it?"

"I can neither confirm nor deny it."

"Do you know why it is that the Serpent takes on a human guise?"

"No," Francis said.

Yu sighed through his nose and stroked his beard, his wrinkled, calloused hands threading through the silver strands.
"I cannot offer you an opinion. The land of the living belongs to the living...but I wonder...exactly what was Gilgamesh planning, when he commissioned me to enchant Sharur as he did? I feel now - or rather, felt on my deathbed, when this record of me was made - that he must have expected Kur's return."

Francis remembered Ulraj's words, the doubt that he, too, had cast upon Gilgamesh's motivations. Why was Kur now human, a shape that seemed in so many ways inferior to the massive serpent it used to be?

"Are you saying that Gilgamesh was intending to control Kur when Kur returned?"

"No," Yu said, solemnly. "Nothing so concrete or damning as that."

"Then what?"

"I am saying...if anything, then to be doubtful, to be skeptical, to be inquisitive, and to be careful. Heir to humanity...in a way, all of the living are heirs. They have inherited our mistakes. Francis..."

That was the first time that this tomb had called him by name. He stiffened involuntarily, reacting to the direct address. But, unexpectedly, it was Yu who lowered his head - so low that his beard brushed the surface of the mercury pool.

"...I am sorry," he said. "I am sorry for placing such a large burden on your shoulders. Truly."

Francis didn't know what to say. Out of anything he was expecting, he wasn't expecting this. Sorry? What was Yu sorry for? What would apologizing even achieve? It left him at such a loss that eventually Yu straightened up again on his own, once more levying Francis with his heavy gaze.

"Do you have any more questions for me?"

Francis dropped his gaze, looking over the mercury pool, the circuitry of the floor, the bright white lights, the impossibility of it all.

In the end, the magic spear in his hands had saved him from Xiangliu. Had cleared the floodwaters. Even now, it was warm in his hands, as if eager, as if spurring him on. He couldn't doubt it, now, that it was something alive and dazzling and incomprehensible he had become embroiled in. Something that no amount of training could have ever prepared him for.

"How did you do all this?" he asked, finally. "All this...magic."

"I stole," Yu answered. "In our struggle against Kur, we were joined by a race called the lemurians. And they accomplished wondrous things - things I sought to emulate. Even so, I am only capable of half what they were...and yet it is all so impossibly transient."

"No, I meant..." Francis trailed off. He didn't really know what he meant. There were no files, no maps, no mission briefings here. There was nothing but his own two feet, two hands, two eyes and ears, his own limited scope.

Yu smiled at him, gentle, amused. "My child, do you need to know how a fire works in order to light one?"

"No," Francis answered. "But that's scientific. It's a combustion reaction. Magic isn't - "

"Perhaps magic is. Perhaps we humans lack what is needed to see it, to observe it, to quantify it.
But does that mean that it does not exist?"

Francis had no answer to that. After a long pause, Yu once more reached out his hand, once more placing it on Francis's head.

"Young one, the world is infinitely vast and unknowable. It is as freeing as it is fearsome. It is fine for you to feel as you do, however that may be."

Then, slowly, his attention turned to somewhere above. He furrowed his brow.

"Francis," he asked, gravely. "Were you born a twin?"

Francis felt his stomach drop. "No," he said, dreading Yu's next words.

"Then why...is there a second 'you' fast approaching from above?"

Epsilon.

It could only be Epsilon.

"...My child, your expression - "

Francis could feel his blood pressure rising. It was all he could do to keep his voice steady, to keep his hands from wavering as he stepped forward and raised Sharur.

"I need to go," he said.

"Child, wait - "

But unable to stop his own forward momentum, Sharur was plunged into the shimmering pool. The mercury shuddered; Yu's figure fizzled and then cut out. The lights dimmed and flickered erratically, as Francis watched the shock of fur change from black to white, as he watched the dented metal snap back into place.

The lights gave one last flash and then cut out entirely, plunging Francis into pitch black. Then, slowly, they came back to life, less than half as bright as before.

And only then did Francis realize that he had made an error in judgement, and closed off a potential resource. Was it the sleep deprivation? The angry, uncomfortable feelings clawing at his heart? Without Auntie Kithera on their side, he and Zak were as good as sitting ducks.

He'd panicked.

Such unforgivable behavior was what got him into this mess. His People didn't panic. His People...were on their way.

They were on their way. Francis lingered only a second longer before turning on his heel and making a beeline for the elevator.

The false world around him flickered and disappeared, leaving Zak in a terrifying momentary blackness. If not for the feel of Xiangliu's scales beneath his hands, he would have worried he'd
been swallowed up again by the Serpent - even so, it was still enough to send his heart pounding in his ears. He was nothing but grateful when the grass, the trees, the sunlight returned, although dimmer and drained compared to before. The hum of magic, which had been so omnipresent, felt quiet and subdued. Emptied.

Moments later, Zak heard frantic footsteps crashing through the fake forest. Zak rose to his feet as Francis stumbled his way out to the dead zone near Xiangliu's body, but before he could say anything, Francis had grabbed him by the wrist and yanked him to his feet, pulling him toward the exit.

"We need to go," Francis said, briskly. "And we need to go now."

He was more frazzled than Zak had ever seen him. It was obvious that something was wrong, for even Francis to be freaking out. That was all that kept him from shaking himself out of Francis's grip as he stumbled along behind him. "Whoa! Hey, what the heck is going on?"

Francis's expression tightened. Now that Zak had a proper look at him, he was haggard, run completely ragged. Had he gotten any sleep at all within the past 24 hours? Zak was still angry, still full of desperate anxiety, but for something to have put Francis in such a state of shock...

"Epsilon is coming," Francis said by way of explanation. His words were terse. "We need to leave before he gets here or else it's all over."

Zak blanched, but Francis paid him no heed. He just continued to drive them toward the exit, Zak jogging in order to keep up with Francis's hurried pace.

Epsilon was coming? This was a bad thing, right? Super, super bad. Zak had fewer friendly memories of Epsilon than he did Francis - an impressive feat. The man had the same slimy, slithery quality that he hated so much in Francis, with an added air of untouchability - a man above the clouds. Knowing Francis's situation, it was hard not to think of Epsilon as Francis's final form.

Come to think of it, it was odd that neither hide nor hair of Epsilon had been seen up until now. Zak had been so caught up in his own woes - Kur and the naga and the Serpent - that he'd barely given any thought to Francis's situation. If Zak was nervous about his arrival, then clearly, Francis was terrified.

"Do you have a plan?" Zak asked.

"Run away. Fast."

"But what if he gets here before we can get to the car?"

Francis shook his head. "Then, nothing. We're just doomed, I suppose."

Zak reached out to grab Francis's wrist with his free hand, tugging himself out of the other boy's grip. When Francis gave much less resistance than normal, his body weirdly limp, Zak pulled him to a stop, turning him around so they were facing each other. Francis averted his gaze, staring down at the ground, his shoulders stiff and rigid despite how easily he allowed Zak to maneuver him.

"You're panicking," Zak said.

"I'm not."

"Yes, you are."
Francis scowled and turned away. "If Epsilon is coming, he's bringing an entourage. What can we
do against that?"

"Hey, I don't know if you remember, but I outsmarted you and him and his entourage before."

Francis shook himself out of Zak's grip. "It's different this time. We're trapped. Sitting ducks. And
now we're just wasting time - "

Zak grabbed Francis again. "Breathe," he ordered. There must be something else - something
sleep-deprived, panicking Francis couldn't see with his tunnelling vision. He looked back and saw
Xiangliu's body. He looked around and saw the false greenery.

"Does he know that I'm here?" Zak asked.

"He can probably assume."

Damn. Zak sank into thought. He knew almost nothing about the People, besides that they were
smarmy, independent, and well-informed. But wait - he had one of them right here, didn't he?

"Is there anything Epsilon doesn't know about?"

"Of course not! He - "

Francis stopped mid-sentence.

"He...doesn't..."

He trailed off, as if saying the answer aloud was physically painful, but Zak wouldn't have any of
that. "What doesn't he know?"


Zak offered Francis a big, cocky grin, trying to assure the both of them of their fighting chance.

"Then we're real lucky that you've got a magic expert on your side."

Francis stiffened, pulling a scowl. "I'd hardly call you an expert."

There was the Francis he knew, who was now turning away as he thought.

"I have an actual plan," he said, "if you care for that sort of thing."

"I'm all ears," Zak answered.

"Okay, not for nothing, Francis, but this isn't actually that much of a plan."

A bead of sweat rolled down Francis's neck as the two of them sprinted toward the row of parked
cars, Sharur's speartip dragging a line in the dirt behind them.

"Zak," Francis said through gritted teeth, "I would be so, so so so, so grateful if you could shut up."

There were three layers of excavation and several feet of open ground between them and the ATV.
That it was still parked in its original position meant that the People had not discovered it, which had been the first of Francis's concerns. But they had definitely found Francis, or else otherwise knew that he would be coming here.

Before them, three round shadows appeared on the ground. Soon after, three robot pods fell from the sky, sending huge clouds of dust flying into the air. Zak glanced down at the ground behind them, at the slow trickle of mercury in the groove Sharur had left behind. Then he glanced back as the center robot rose to its full height, standing between them and their escape.

"Francis," Epsilon said, his usual even tone colored with outright anger. Beside him, Zak could see Francis flinch, dropping his gaze to the ground.

When Francis didn't respond, Epsilon began again. "This is as far as this madness goes. Surrender yourself and come home, immediately."

"Let me explain - "

"We are not interested in your excuses," Epsilon cut him off, and Zak in that moment felt his own grip on the Claw tighten. There was a contempt in Epsilon's voice - Epsilon spoke to Francis the way Francis spoke to him. Next to him, Francis was wilting, every word cutting deep.

Zak scowled. He stepped forward, since it was his turn on stage.

"Hey, don't talk to your kid like that," Zak snapped. "I mean, what kind of dad are you?"

"Our family matters are none of your concern," Epsilon said, brusquely.

"Of course they're my concern!" Zak said, raising the pitch of his voice. "If you do it right in front of me, that makes it my problem! I mean - do you even realize how you two come across? Everyone can tell something's fishy from a mile away!"

Francis had predicted that Epsilon would be irritated by Zak in the same way that he was. His task to Zak, therefore, had been to be as irritating - that was to say, as Zak-like - as was humanly possible. And that was good, because Zak had a lot of things to say, and a lot of negative feelings toward Francis that he was eager to displace.

"I mean, look at this guy! He's never had junk food before! That's illegal, isn't it? Like, that's child abuse. And you're all so prissy, like I've never seen him take off his gloves, and he's always whining about germs and sanitation, and - you know, now that I think about it, I've never seen him use the restroom. What's up with that?"

"Zak," Francis said, clearly bothered, "I know I asked you to do this, but…"

"No, let me finish." He turned back to Epsilon. "Hey, chrome-dome, can you hear me?"

"..Unfortunately," came the irritated response.

"And your fashion sense sucks! What's with those dumb goggles? Who even makes that much green eyewear? And how come everyone's coordinated like you're all part of a band? I repeat: what's up with that?"

This was good! This felt good.

"Also, why is Francis dressed up like you? What, you couldn't afford to get him new clothes? Seriously - "
"Enough!" Epsilon shouted, stepping forward. "Francis, make your decision. Either you come home willingly, or we take you back by force!"

"Now," Francis breathed, the signal Zak was waiting for. The two of them jumped back.

Sharur's speartip, submerged in the shiny silver metal, flared to life with a bright white flash. While Zak had been running his mouth, Francis had been channeling Sharur's power to draw a messy mercury circle in the dirt around the robots. As the both of them cleared the boundary, two lines of white light were zooming down the right and left. They met on the other side, completing the circuit, and a hard-light projection sprung to life.

Trees with branches like grabbing hands surrounded the robot pods, emerging from nowhere. Their bark was silver, their leaves white, and their long, spindly branches wrapped and entwined themselves around reaching robot arms, rooting them to the ground. Zak stopped to watch, the sizzle of magic like bright white sparks in the corners of his vision. It felt like - no, it didn't "feel." He was watching a miracle. He was watching a great and prodigious talent.

But Francis didn't have the patience for miracles, grabbing Zak by the arm and yanking him toward the ATV.

"It worked!" Zak breathed, as he matched Francis’s stride. Francis, too, seemed shaken up, although that could have just been the fact that he'd confronted Epsilon and gotten away with it.

"I didn't think it would," he admitted

"That makes two of us," Zak said, checking over his shoulder. "How long do you think it'll hold them?"

"Long enough."

They both cleared the last of the archeology steppes, breaking out into a dead sprint across the open ground. The distance between them and the rows of parked vehicles dropped from several feet, to only a few, to so close they could see the light on the fake license plate. They were close - so close - so of course everything went wrong.

Epsilon dropped out of the sky, landing between them and the vehicle, his green coat flapping in the breeze. Behind him, an abandoned parachute drifted toward the ground, crumpling like all their hopes. He must have launched himself out of the pod when he’d realized what had happened. The two of them could barely skid to a stop in time to avoid running straight into his massive, looming figure.

"Interesting party trick," he said, brushing the dust from his shoulder. His disaffected demeanor was back in place, as if he’d never been irritated at all. "Unfortunately, that's as far as you go."

The two immediately dropped into battle stances, the Claw and Sharur aimed directly at him.

But he wasn't concerned with them. Instead, he turned toward their getaway vehicle. It was Francis who first realized what it was he was planning to do. With a strangled cry, he rushed in Epsilon’s direction, making a desperate grab for Epsilon’s arm, but with a fast, practiced movement, Epsilon whip-kicked Francis in the stomach. Francis went skidding backwards, falling to his knees, leaning on Sharur for support while gasping for breath. Zak rushed to Francis’s side, but Francis swatted him away. "No, he - “

Whatever it was Francis was trying to warn him about, Zak couldn’t make it out between Francis’s winded gasps. Christ, how hard had Epsilon kicked him? Zak knew Francis was wearing body
armor, but to have injured him this badly - it must have been enough to break ribs on a normal person.

When Zak looked up, Epsilon had placed some strange, circular device against the side of the van. A bright flash of electricity later, and Epsilon just as easily removed it, tucking it back into his jacket with a smug, satisfied grin.

"What did you do?" Zak asked.

"Well, Francis? What did I just do?" Epsilon asked in a mocking tone, turning to his clone. Francis turned away, still breathing heavily while clutching his stomach, bitterness coloring his voice.

"You drained the battery," he said. "We're grounded."

"Oh, good, so you do remember." It was said with that self-satisfaction Zak hated so much in his younger counterpart. "I was worried you'd spent so long away from the field that you'd forgotten what our basic equipment was. Yes, indeed, Zak Saturday. As you've seen, I'm afraid this joyride has come to an end. You - "

"God," Zak interrupted, "do you guys ever shut up?"

Then he rushed him. Francis's head snapped up as Zak ran past, a dumb expression on his face. As expected, Epsilon parried his blow with ease, but all Zak really wanted was to get his attention. He jumped back to avoid Epsilon's grab, landing back at Francis's side.

"Are you seriously gonna get that guy boss you around like this?" Zak asked. "He's a jerk."

"What are we supposed to do? He shorted the battery!"

"Are you kidding me?" Zak asked, grabbing him by the arm and rousing him to his feet. "You just summoned trees out of mercury, and you're telling me he shorted out a battery and that's why we can't go anywhere?"

"I - you - " Francis's expression hardened, his lips pressed into a thin line. He shook himself out of Zak's grasp.

"You, buy me some time."

Zak grinned. "That's what I like to hear."

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"This is a futile endeavor, Francis," Epsilon called in a sing-song voice. His voice dropped into a testy impatience. "Did spending so much time with the Saturday boy kill what little brainpower you had left?"

"Quite possibly," Francis said, stepping behind Zak. "I'm rather confident that this is the stupidest thing I've ever done."

"Wow, hey, I'm right here."

Saying so, Zak launched himself back in Epsilon's direction, while Francis, ignoring the dull pain in his abdomen, ignoring the tight squeeze of his heart every time Epsilon pointed a jeer in his
direction, made a beeline for the back doors of the ATV.

They were so close - *so close*. They couldn’t afford to give up, not here, not like this, not now!

Zak sounded like he was getting his ass kicked. That was fine - so long as he wasn’t *caught*. If nothing else, he was slippery and full of energy. He would last long enough...probably. Normally, Francis would never bet on odds that long, but right now “probably” and “maybe” and “might” were the best that he had, and he could not afford to fail.

He flung the doors open and clambered inside, rooting around the supplies in the back until he found what he was looking for - Zak’s solar-powered stun gun, which had been left haphazardly looped around a hook in the storage area. With Sharur’s speartip, Francis pried open the smooth, metal casing, to get to the wiring underneath.

Thank god Solomon Saturday was as neat and orderly an engineer as Zak was a haphazard mess of a human being. Everything inside the blaster was not only beautifully efficient, but well-organized and easy to understand. Easy, especially, to pull apart. It wasn’t long before Francis had removed the solar panel and internal battery, inelegantly disconnecting the unnecessary wires.

The ATV shook as something thunked hard against its side, and Francis scrambled to his feet.

“Zak! Status report!” he shouted, as he scrambled over the pilot’s seat to pop the hood open with the internal switch. He heard a muffled curse from outside, then Zak’s confirmation that he was (miraculously) still in fighting condition, and Francis breathed a sigh of relief. So he was as stupidly indestructible as ever, huh? For once, Francis was glad that his skull was as thick as it was. A natural-bred helmet.

Now for the hard part. As fast as he could, Francis jumped back out of the vehicle, not bothering to close the backdoors behind him. He took quick stock of the situation.

Zak was in poor shape, but still standing on both feet, nothing obviously broken. The other members of his People were still clambering out of the hard-light illusion he’d made - too far away to be of any help to Epsilon, so long as Francis moved fast enough. And Epsilon, of course, was as effortless and perfect as ever, as calm and composed as ever, not even the slightest sign of exertion on his face even after the time he’d been fending off Zak’s rabid attacks.

“All that stood between them was Epsilon, who had noticed the hood popping open, and was now guarding it with feet planted in a wide stance. He cracked his knuckles, and then his neck.

“I tire of this child’s play,” he said, smoothly. “You know you have no chance of victory, Francis. I’ll admit that you’ve exceeded expectations up until now, but you know as well as I that it would take nothing less than a miracle for you to win against me.”

A...miracle, was it?

Yes, Francis thought he could provide just that.

Nothing had happened in the past twenty-four hours that wasn’t either insane, unthinkable, or miraculous. As he lowered himself into a fighting stance, and he felt Zak do the same, for the first time, facing Epsilon down didn’t make him want to shrink away.
Together, he and Zak launched themselves at Epsilon. And then, as Epsilon prepared for their joint attack, Francis peeled off from Zak’s advance, using Sharur as a pole to vault himself onto the roof of the ATV. He landed with a loud clatter, the vehicle shaking under his weight, and ran to the front. Epsilon, predictably, had fended Zak off and was there to receive him, but that was fine - because Epsilon did not know what cards Francis held up his sleeves, because Epsilon had entered this fight underestimating him - and it was funny, because it was also Epsilon who had taught him never to do that.

Francis was prepared. Epsilon wasn’t.

He tapped the battery against Sharur and threw it skyward. It spun around in the sunlight, Epsilon tracking it with his eyes. In that moment of distraction, Zak tackled him to the ground.

“Move!” Francis shouted, and jumped.

Epsilon had kicked him earlier. Francis returned the favor, landing with both feet onto Epsilon’s armored stomach. He jumped off, quickly, before Epsilon could grab him (because Epsilon, even winded, was their perfect agent, was perfectly trained). Then, raising Sharur in the air, he pulled the battery back toward his own hand.

He shoved it toward Zak. “Can you jumpstart the car?”

Zak, dazed, took a second to register, but he caught on quickly enough. “Yeah - yeah.”

“Good. The backdoors are open - close them behind you.”

And he ran back toward the front door, as Zak pried the hood open, connecting wires as fast as he could. The moment the ATV registered a new power source hooked in, Francis turned the ignition. The vehicle roared to life beneath him, the display panels lighting up with their myriad colors, and Francis’s hands found the comfortable grip of the steering wheel; his feet found the steady feel of the gas.

He threw the ATV in reverse, the wheels whining as he made a sharp, 180° turn. He waited just long enough for Zak to grapple himself in and slam the doors shut before jamming his foot down on the gas, his own body jerking against the seat, and Zak behind him banging against the doors, openly cursing.

They crashed through overgrown grass, through underbrush, building up speed. And then - with mere inches of clearance, with a hair’s breadth of forgiveness, they were airborne, over the trees, over the hills, towards the setting sun.

In the rearview display, he could see Epsilon rising to his feet, his green goggles no doubt filming their escape. Francis shut his eyes, shut his feelings, shut away everything except for what he needed to do next.

He pressed the invisibility toggle, charted a course for the autopilot, and they were gone.

His head was ringing. His body was sticky with sweat and still filthy with grime. His hands were shaking, and he had to forcibly pry his fingers off the steering wheel where they’d locked into place. His muscles were simultaneously too-tense and strung-out; his body felt like it would fall apart at the slightest touch.

He must have blacked out at some point. How long did he sit there, in that sorry state? By the time he was once more conscious of his own body, the sky was dark, and Zak had dragged himself into the passenger seat, his own body looking bruised and scuffed and worse for wear.
“Hey,” Zak said, offering him a weak smile. “We made it.”

Francis let out a long breath, letting his head fall against his headrest.

“...Yes, I suppose we did.”

They both sat there for a long time, only the sound of the engine rumbling, of their ragged breaths.

“So...” Zak asked, breaking the silence. “Why is Epsilon...you know, after you?”

“I don’t want to talk about that.”

Zak pulled himself up, weakly punching Francis in the arm. “C’mon, don’t be like that. We saved each others’ asses back there, didn’t we?”

Francis turned away. “I said, I don’t want to talk about that.”

“Francis - “

“Zak, there is no camaraderie between us. I’d have thought that our irreconcilable views in Yu’s tomb would have made that clear. Don’t tell me you already forgot what transpired down there?”

Those words were intended to be a slap in the face, and from the wince Zak gave, it seemed they’d hit their target. If Zak actually did shut up, that’d be the real miracle. Of course, it was not to be, but Zak’s next words surprised him.

“...Sorry.”

“You’re the second person to have said that to me today,” Francis mumbled, too quiet for Zak to hear. It was incomprehensible both times. He turned back to Zak. “For what?”

“I...” he looked down. “I don’t want to talk about it, either, I guess.”

“Yes, well...I suppose that makes two of us.”

Another lengthy, heavy silence hung in the air between them.

“Hey, what’s our next huaca?” Zak asked.

“Someplace in Turkey,” Francis said, exasperation leaking into his words. “I don’t know. Someplace in Turkey.”

“I’ve...got a friend I can call, I think.”

“Sure, sure, yes, do that,” Francis said. “Zak, can you please leave me alone? I...I need to rest.”

“Right, yeah,” Zak mumbled. “I’ll, uh, give you some space.”

Saying so, he crawled out of the passenger seat and walked toward the back of the van, commpad in hand. With another long sigh, Francis once more reclined back in his seat, forcefully willing his muscles to relax, even as the knot in his heart grew tighter.

Why was it that Epsilon was after him? It really didn’t take a genius to figure it out. If Zak thought about it for even a millisecond, he’d probably understand. Francis wouldn’t be going on this stupid sojourn if he’d had any other choice, after all.
He just didn’t have any other choice.

He just...did not, ever, not once, in his entire life, have a choice.

That was all. That was all…

The Hive.

That wasn’t what he called his home, but it was what the other Scientists called it. He got it - his name had “bee” in it, and when it opened up into all its individual satellite dishes, he supposed it could look like a honeycomb hive, but he didn’t get it.
To him, it was just home. *Sanctum sanctorum.* Empty, sterilized, devoid of all life besides the cultures being studied in the biolab and Beeman himself.

...Or that was how it was supposed to be.

“The security systems in place here are state of the art,” he said, hanging up his coat while narrowing his eyes at his unexpected “guest.” The mercenary shrugged, leaning nonchalantly against the table in the room with his arms crossed over his chest.

“I know,” was all he offered.

“They’d better still be in working condition,” Beeman said. “I’d rather not have to explain that cost to the governments funding me.”

“They’ll be fine once they’re back up in thirty minutes,” he said, pushing off the table to stand his full height. “More importantly, we need to talk.”

“No, we don’t,” Beeman said. “I paid for your time and fired you. Open and shut, if you ask me.”

“That’s exactly the problem,” the mercenary said. “What are you planning, *doctor*?”

Annoying.

He entertained the idea of simply ignoring the redhead, but if this man - this volatile and unstable man - got past the security, then it was entirely likely he could get rid of Beeman here and now without leaving a trace. Better to just answer him and send him on his way.

“I figured out what ‘contingency’ means,” Beeman said. “I don’t like the implications, so I’m pulling the plug. Well? Is that good enough for you? Or do you need me to write a letter of recommendation while I’m at it?”

The mercenary growled and stepped forward, grabbing Beeman by the front of his shirt. “Do you ever take anything seriously?”

“Sure,” Beeman said. He’d come prepared this time. “For one thing, my safety.”

He pulled a taser out of his pocket and jammed the business end against the mercenary's ribcage, the man yelling out in pain and collapsing. Beeman shuffled a few paces back and followed with his force blaster off his hip. Before he could shoot to restrain, however, the mercenary had already recovered enough to use his crouch to pounce on him, grabbing him by both his wrists and sending them both stumbling into the wall.

“That stung,” the mercenary growled.

“You’re a tenacious musclebag, I’ll give you that,” Beeman muttered.

He turned the taser around in his hand and jammed it down at the mercenary's wrist. They both felt the shock, but Beeman was expecting it, and broke free as the mercenary recoiled from the pain. An opening just big enough to shoot his blaster, pinning the mercenary to the opposite wall with a blue plasma beam of pure kinetic force.

He glared at him. Beeman glared back.

“Give me one good reason I shouldn’t just turn you over to the highest bidder,” Beeman spat. “I do my research, tough guy. I know there’s a cash advance on you, alive or dead.”
“Miniman was right,” the mercenary said. “You make a terrible good guy.”

"Correction," Beeman said, stepping evenly forward. "I'm the best that our species ever had. Why? Because I don't miss the moon for the stars. Because I don't risk the lives of seven billion people for a thirteen-year-old!"

"You're the worst kind of lowlife," the mercenary said, lip curling in disgust. "You don't - "

Beeman felt the stinging pain of the slap before he’d even really registered what he’d done. The sound rang out through the empty room, bouncing off the high ceiling. It hurt his own hand more than it hurt the mercenary, but that was fine, because it got him to shut up. Beeman hated that people only ever shut up to listen to him when he resorted to methods like this. He hated it.

"You're not his only uncle." It came out louder, rawer than he meant it to. But he had to say it, even if no one believed him - no, precisely because no one believed him. Beeman had always, always believed in hard truths, in painful facts. They were all he had.

"You weren't even - there, not when he was born, not when his parents got married - you were never a part of his life. You don't know a damn thing!"

The words he wanted were eloquent and intelligent and correct and true. The words he had were ugly and charged and felt like they were scratching him open from the inside out.

"Are you prepared for what happens if seven billion deaths are on your shoulders? Can you live with yourself if we get stuck with the worst case scenario?"

The mercenary probably said something in protest, but Beeman couldn't hear him for the blood rushing in his ears.

"Because I can't. I can't. I can't live with myself knowing that I could have prevented a catastrophe and didn't. And your family...is always getting in the damn way!"

It made him so angry. It made him so angry. It made him so, so angry.

"You want to know what I said when we first found that damn rock? 'Blast it into the sun.'"

Doc had told him they’d found something in the desert of Iraq. Something they’d lost to a madman, a maniac. In his hands it could spell catastrophe. In anyone’s hands it could spell catastrophe, Beeman had argued, but Doc’s wife had all but begged him to consider the possibility that they would need the pieces someday. And then Doc had taken her side, and now look where they’d ended up.

"Guess who didn't listen to me. Guess who didn't strap the damn thing to a rocket and never have to worry about it again." His whole body trembled. “Do you think I like the fact that Skunk Stripe is a threat to us all? Do you think I like the fact that I have to put him in cryostasis for the good of our species? For Chrissakes, I helped raise him! And that's more than you can say..."

His hand holding the blaster shook, but he kept the beam steady. Because, after all, he was a man with principles. Even if everyone around him went crazy, even if the world turned upside-down, even if all his friends abandoned him - he had ethics. He had priorities. He had lines he could not cross.

"I'm going to fix this," Beeman said. "You'll see, you'll all see. I'll have the Kur out of him within the decade. Sooner, if the others deign to help. And then, hey presto, everything will be back to normal. Everyone can go home; it'll be over. And we will all be fine. "
The mercenary looked at him with disbelief. "You...you seriously think you’re doing the right thing," he breathed, like it was some grand revelation.

Why was everyone around him so blind, so ignorant? Of course he was doing the right thing; he’d only ever - only ever! - done the right thing. At the cost of everything else, he’d done the right thing. Always. That was the only way he knew how to live.

Beeman switched his taser from “stun” to “incapacitate” by hooking the switch with his teeth.

“I can’t have you meddling. So say night night, Cock-A-Doodle. Sweet dreams.”
Things die in this chapter. Also, Epsilon warning (warning for Epsilon).
"You don't have to do this," the mercenary said. He was sitting in a cage Beeman had created using the data left by the revolving beast, finally tired of trying to break free. He could try all he liked, honestly - Beeman doubted any *terran* lifeform could escape its confines. "If you care about Zak - you don't have to do this."

"Sorry, I don't remember appointing a preschool dropout to the council of deciding-humanity's-fate," Beeman replied.

"God, do you talk like that to everyone?"

Beeman glared. The mercenary put his hands up. "Dumb question, right. Look, at least tell me what made you freak, alright? You said you figured out what 'contingency' meant."

Explain to the idiot time again.

Beeman set down his tools and took a deep breath. He picked a large chunk of amber off his workbench, holding it up in the sterile white light.

"This is the sap of the wollemi pine," he said. "It's what the hairballs want to use to trap Kur. And it's got properties unlike anything I've ever seen. You can't smash it, cut it, burn it, or melt it. It's self-healing to an insane degree. Short of annihilating it with a nuclear blast, there's no way to crack it open."

He set it back on the table and picked up two small cups, one silver, one gold.

"Aqua regia," he said, holding up the silver cup. He repeated the motion with the gold. "Azoth. Either one of these was considered a myth by alchemists in the 1800s. And if you mix them together…"

But he wasn't stupid enough to give a demonstration - not after he'd already seen with his own eyes what the mixture could do.

Carefully, he set the two acids down and rolled his workbench to the side, revealing a second, identical one behind it. That, he kicked over with a bang, so that the mercenary could see the hole that had burned clean through one end to the other, the stainless steel corroded and melted into itself.

"It's called alkahest. The universal solvent. It's been theorized and written off in the same breath.
Forget analyzing it; it's so potent it melted a skylight in my cellar ceiling." He put his foot up on the fallen workbench and leaned over it and the hole in the ground. "What do you think happened when I chucked a piece of this tree sap into the stuff?"

"You're saying Zak sent you the recipe in case the lemurians catch him?"

"If you were any slower, you'd be at zero Kelvin."

Beeman righted his fallen workbench and dragged the first one back into place.

"What I'm saying is that Hedgehair never sent us a damn thing. And maybe he doesn't exist anymore. Because this stuff, alkahest?" Beeman tapped the table. "It's practically magic. Are you telling me that your kid figured out what we've had a Scientist working on for years?"

The mercenary narrowed his eyes. "You guys need to get over yourselves. What if he did?"

"Then I'd still worry he got replaced by someone else," Beeman said. Because Doc's kid, whom Beeman had known since before he was even born, was not the kind of person to have discovered alkahest, and was certainly not the kind of person to come up with such a contingency.

The whole thing smelled of snake.

The mercenary gazed at him with big, owlish eyes. Beeman didn't know what he was thinking and didn't care. Eventually, it was the mercenary who broke the silence.

"You know, Zak used to tell me about how you were his babysitter."

"On and off," Beeman said. "Anytime his usual couldn't show."

"He said you were boring."

Beeman rolled his eyes. "Well, I never said the kid had any taste."

The mercenary sighed and leaned back against the bars. "Would you believe me if I said I was on your side?"

"Believe you, sure," Beeman said. It was the right side to be on, anyway. "Let you out? No."

"Damn. Worth a shot." He sighed. There was another long patch of silence as Beeman set to work again, scratching furiously against a paper with a number two pencil, leaving deep black gouges in the college rule.

"What are you planning to do with me?" The mercenary finally asked "Turn me in for the bounty? Sell me off to someone with a grudge?"

"I'm going to take you to the Monkey Men," Beeman said, curtly.

The mercenary gave an unimpressed snort. "Right."

"And then they're probably going to put you in the cage next to Doc and his girlfriend."

The mercenary narrowed his eyes. "Uh-huh."

"And whatever happens after that," Beeman said, "will not be my problem anymore."
The drive from northeast China to Denizli, Turkey took them nearly a week. Even if their car could somehow hold enough fuel to fly them the whole way there, it still would have been a trip of more than a day. As things were, their vehicle was not made for long-term air travel. Since Francis didn't want to sacrifice a safe journey for speed, they found themselves grounded for most of the trip, over the mountains of western China, through the valleys of Afghanistan, across the plateaus of Iran.

Their conversations were slim and surface-level when they happened. Every now and again Zak would offer a tidbit about the local fauna, recount a family story about exploring the local wilderness or taking a trip into a town of whatever country they were currently in. Sometimes he'd trail off halfway through. Often, the silence that settled over them was so thick it was suffocating. But it wasn't as though Francis had anything to offer in response - all the stories he had of gallivanting around the world were classified. He could tell Zak, but then he'd have to kill him. The most he could do, when the ticking silence grew unbearable even for himself, was make useless small talk. It was that or listen to Zak's music, a fate worse than death. At least in Zak's current subdued state, talking to him didn't make Francis want to claw his own ears out.

During a stretch of desert, Francis had remarked that he'd have been surprised if there were other living creatures out there - what scrub he could see was withered and dry, the grasses were a weedy yellow, and barring the mountains in the far distance, that terrain stretched out in every direction. In response, Zak rattled off a litany of animals that had somehow adapted to such a harsh climate. Gazelles and ground jays, lizards and snakes, wolves and foxes, and animals whose names Francis had never even heard of before. What was an onager? What was a bustard? Surely Zak was making things up.

"Why do they live out here?" Francis asked. It was an honest question, but Zak stared at him like he was an alien.

"What do you mean, 'why'?"

Funny, he didn't think it was unreasonable. "This place is clearly one of the least hospitable terrains on the planet. Why would anything want to live out here?"

"Because...for the animals that live here, it's home," Zak answered, bewilderment in his tone. "The animals here probably look at the places you'd like to live and think the same thing."

Francis let out a defeated sigh. "That's a little hard to believe, I suppose. And so many of them, too. Couldn't they fill the same ecological niches with fewer?"

Zak gaped at him a few seconds longer, then turned to look out the window. "You really need to go outside more often," he said, although with less venom than he usually did.

"It's unnecessary for me to do so, so I never did," Francis said. Zak's reply was a derisive snort. He shook his head.

"It's not 'unnecessary,' your People are just wrong," he said.

Francis frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Hey, do these windows roll down?"

Dodging the question, huh. Francis would pursue if he didn't have eggshells of his own to tread.
"It's a hundred degrees outside, Zak."

"So that's a yes?" Zak reached for the console display. "I'm gonna press random buttons 'til I find it, if you don't open it for me."

Hurriedly, Francis swatted his hand away and tapped on the window control. It rolled smoothly down, the sound of the wind roaring in Francis's ears.

"Awesome," Zak shouted, above the noise. "Now do yours!"

"I don't want to," Francis muttered.

"What? I can't hear you!"

*Maybe if you hadn't rolled the window down -*

"I don't want to!" Francis shouted back. "It's unnecessary!"

"It's entirely necessary!" Zak said, flinging his whole arm outside. "It's the best thing about a desert road trip!"

Grumbling, Francis obliged, his hair immediately flown up and around in the breeze. He had to admit that it being hot outside didn't matter so much when the car was moving at a brisk 80MPH, and the breeze in his face was so wild as a result. Dully, he thought that maybe this was the secret to Zak's perpetually unkempt appearance.

"Okay," Zak said, "now stick your arm out, like I'm doing."

Francis did, telling himself it was because Zak wouldn't shut up unless he obeyed.

"Great, now imagine your arm's a bird wing, and your fingers are feathers. You're a bird, Francis! You're a bustard!"

Every day with Zak was a new depth of stupidity plundered. Still, if only so he could ridicule Zak's practices, he decided to humor him for this exercise. He was a bird, was he? He stretched his hand out flat, palm down, and felt the lift of the air as he tilted it up and down. A bird.

Something in his heart soared. He immediately withdrew his hand and shut the windows, Zak pulling his arm back inside with a surprised yelp. "Hey!"

"Stupid," Francis said.

"Geeze. Even if you don't want to do it, let me have a window open at least!"

Francis hesitated, then sighed, deciding he'd rather oblige than risk Zak intentionally annoying him. This time, Zak leaned his whole upper body out, eyes closed, hair flapping in the wind.

"...Zak," Francis called, after a lengthy silence. "Do birds really live out here?"

"Yeah," Zak called back, ducking briefly inside. His hair stuck out in every which way, the white intermingling with the black. He waited to see if Francis would ask him anything else, but when nothing came, he shrugged and returned to the open window.

And yet, as they sped on ever westward, Francis kept his eyes to the sky. At one point, against the backdrop of the setting sun, a big, fat bird flapped across the ground in front of them. Zak pointed to it, excitedly.
"There," he said. "That's a bustard right there."

"It's huge," Francis breathed.

"Yeah. The heaviest flying bird in the world."

Was it really?

This world...it was far more vast than he could have ever imagined.

"It somewhat resembles you," Francis said.

"Hey!"

"Miranda," Cheechoo said, quietly. "Do you ever get the feeling that something's...wrong?"

She stiffened at the question, furrowing her brow. "Whatever do you mean, Paul?"

He scratched the back of his neck, trying to put into words the unease at the pit of his stomach. "It's just...you know, locking up Doc and Drew, chasing down their kid. Every now and again I get a funny feeling about it, don't you?"

"It's necessary," Miranda said, with a slightly dazed expression. "You know as well as I do what's at stake, Paul."

He did - he was overwhelmingly conscious of the abject, objective terror the idea of Kur's return planted within him. He was anxious about it to the point of wanting to rush outside and scream.

The trouble was...Paul was not a man prone to anxiety. He prided himself on being the most relaxed and laid-back among their number. Was Zak really so terrifying a threat that he should be panicking? Without even asking for Zak's side of the story?

But before he could press Miranda any further, he was interrupted by Phylos, the chief of the lemurians, whose wizened voice resounded in their heads.

<The Serpent has come to roost,> he said. <Please, we implore you to help.>

Paul blinked. Right, he was here to help the lemurians. What had he just been talking about?

They met Arthur at his ship, docked next to the lemurian's eagles. He narrowed his eyes when he saw Paul's dazed expression, then turned away and said no more.

Zak and Francis stood in the shadows under the eave of a building in the city square, watched over by the rooster sculpture at the center of town. It looked down at them from its perch on its pedestal, feathers bright and glossy in the midday sun. They had stayed the night in a cheap motel. Having learned their lesson in San Francisco, they'd checked out as soon as it was bright outside.
Francis hated being so public while they were being hunted down, and Zak seemed similarly uncomfortable, but their guide had insisted on "the big chicken" for their meeting place, so they could do nothing but shift on their feet, glancing into the sky, worried they’d see a wheeling eagle at any time.

"So you are Francis?"

An unexpected voice from out of nowhere. Francis snapped around to find a girl his age standing uncomfortably close behind him. Where had she come from? He hadn't heard her approach - extremely alarming. His hand almost reached for Sharur, stayed only because she seemed, in every regard, to be a normal human being. She was wearing a dark blue headscarf and completely civilian clothes - a cloth jacket, a long skirt with a rain print on it. Her eyes were a strikingly pale green, and they were currently lilted upwards in amusement, as she rifled through a wallet.

*His* wallet.

"Five different credit cards," the girl whistled, as Francis made a desperate swipe for his stuff. She danced lightly out of his grasp, and he began to chase her as she checked the rest of the cards. She held the wallet high in the air, and because she was taller than he was by several inches, this proved *unfortunately* effective at making it difficult to recover.

"And four different IDs! You are an extremely suspicious individual!" she sang, bouncing just ahead of him, waving the wallet just out of reach.

There was some quip Francis wanted to make about her clearly being the more suspicious between them, given that she was a thief, but he was interrupted by Zak laughing and stepping in.

"C'mon, Wadi, he doesn't have enough of a sense of humor for you to keep teasing him like that," Zak said, and she pouted at him.

"You never let me have my fun, Zak Saturday." She tossed the wallet back at Francis, and he was less elegant than he'd have liked to be as he fumbled catching it out of the air.

"Zak," Francis said, with a sinking feeling in his stomach, "please don't tell me…"

Zak smiled. "Francis, this is Wadi. She's been backpacking around Europe for the past year. And Wadi, this is Francis."

"Yes, Zak Saturday has told me many things about you, Francis," Wadi said, grabbing his hand and shaking it. "And I must say that you are much cuter in person than in Zak's stories."

Francis did not have an adequate reply to that. He stood there dumbly and let her shake his hand, only to realize too late that she was now holding his wrist-mounted remote control, inspecting it in the morning light.

"Oh? I thought it was a watch, but what is this strange device?"

He swiped it out of her hand and reaffixed it to his wrist. "*Stop* that."

Zak patted him sympathetically, even as he laughed under his breath. "Wadi's a reclamer. She tracks down stolen items and returns them."

"For a price," she added. "But I am willing to give a discount to friends…" she grinned at him. "...And cute boys."
Francis really didn't know how to respond to that. Zak rolled his eyes and gave Francis a light elbow to jolt him out of his daze.

"She doesn't mean it," Zak said. "Wadi's just a big flirt. How many broken hearts is it now? Five?"

"Seven," Wadi answered, flippantly.

"Not counting Ulraj?"

Wadi gave a huff, crossing her arms. "Not counting Ulraj."

"Wait," Francis cut in. "The implication of that question just now was that you and Ulraj…"

Wadi's scowl deepened, but Zak answered him with barely-disguised amusement. "Okay, Francis, get this. A year ago, Wadi and Ulraj started dating - "

"As I recall, you did not know either, Zak Saturday!"

" - And it turned out," Zak continued, ignoring her, "that Kumari don't have a distinction between 'good friends' and 'dating partner.' Ulraj thought he was dating both of us at the same time, and had been dating both of us for the past six months!"

Wadi covered her face with her hands. "I am filled with a deep well of regrets."

Francis realized he was gaping and quickly snapped his jaw shut. Still, he couldn't help the tone of bewilderment that slipped into his voice. And perhaps a slight note of apprehension.

"Zak, er... he doesn't... think that he and I…"

"Huh?" it took Zak a moment to comprehend what Francis was asking, but once he did, he almost couldn't hold back his laughter in time. "Oh, oh man. No, don't worry about that. After I explained what human dating was like, he asked to break up with me."

"The fish-people apparently do not have such concepts of exclusivity," Wadi added, with a note of bitterness.

"Yeah, since they spawn like fish do and raise their kids communally," Zak finished. "So you're safe, Francis. You are not dating Ulraj."

"Oh, thank god." His relief was immeasurable. "Well, in any case, we've done it. We've had the stupidest possible conversation."

He turned to the sky, then to leave. "If you'll recall, Zak, we're currently being manhunted. Can we go someplace more private to talk?"

"Oh, so not only is he cute, but he is sassy," Wadi laughed. "Yes, yes. I have a place in mind."

"Is it just your hotel room?" Zak asked.

"It is just my hotel room," Wadi answered.
"Tea!" Wadi announced, setting down two hotel mugs filled with the Rize that had come with her room. She had insisted that they prepare tea before beginning their talk, and when Francis had pressured her to quit with the frivolities, she'd loudly protested that it was the culture of her people, was he to disrespect the ancient traditions of the Hassi, and Francis was so vividly reminded of Zak at his most annoying that he decided to drop the subject. Clearly, it wasn't a serious issue for her either way, but she seemed to enjoy being a contrarian. It would have been more trouble to fight with her than to simply acquiesce and wait. Maybe she'd get bored of him if he stopped giving a response.
"Ah, impeccable overpriced hotel tea bags," Zak said, like an aristocrat. "Yes, truly our discussion can begin in earnest now."

"Well, first we have to introduce ourselves, do we not?" Wadi asked, glancing over in Francis's direction. "And get to know each other and become close friends."

"Zak already did introductions." Francis said it as curtly as possible. "Miss...Wadi, I don't mean to rush you, but we are on a time limit - "

"Yes, yes, as you have said," Wadi responded. "But that is all the more reason I must know about you! Our time together is going to be so short, and yet you are Zak's new best friend, and I, as his senior friend, simply must make sure that you are a good fit for him."

"We are not friends," Francia said.

"You couldn't find a worse fit if you tried," Zak said at the same time. They glared at each other while Wadi grinned.

What did Francis know about Wadi? Admittedly, not much. The Hassi were relatively unimportant - although they were tasked with the heavy burden of guarding the world's water source, they were nomadic, secretive, and reclusive, so they rarely ever warranted more than a passing mention in his People’s files. The only reason Francis remembered them at all was because of their prominence in the case of the salinization of the world's water four years ago - they had not been significant before or since.

So to sum up what he knew, it was that the Hassi were a nomadic desert people, and Wadi was their sheikh's only child.

"So I will go first," Wadi said, clapping to break the silence. "My name is Wadi. Currently, I amdefying my family name, so I will not give it. My father is very angry with me, but since he has no choice but to forgive me, I do not feel too badly about it."

She said it so proudly that Francis was impressed by how brazen she was. It did strike him as odd that Wadi was so far from home, alone, at her age. But because the same could be said of him and Zak, he'd refrained from commenting.

"Why does he have no choice?" Francis asked, attempting to keep the focus on her and away from himself.

She smiled that inscrutable smile. "Because I am not so easy to replace," she said. "Even if he was to have another child, would they be as smart or resourceful or pretty as I am?"

Somehow, that answer stung, although he was careful to keep it out of his expression. Even as he did so, Zak - who must have learned to recognize his deliberate expressionlessness - jumped in to change the topic.

"Wadi's family is really strict," Zak said.

"It is not as though I do not want to be sheikah," Wadi said. "But before I am tied down by such a position, I want to see the world! My father did not approve."

Zak laughed. "You know he still gives us video calls telling us to make Doyle stop giving you jobs?"

"Yes, he calls me regularly to tell me to stop taking them." She shrugged. "He is just worried for
my safety, I think. Well! Enough about me. Zak, it is your turn."

"Oh, I'm doing this too?" He laughed and gave a wave. "Hi everyone, I'm Zak Saturday. My parents are the world's leading cryptozoologists. When I grow up I want to be just like them!"

Wadi nodded, sagely. "Did you forget about Kur? I feel as though that is extremely relevant."

Zak blanched, and some of the bitter feeling in Francis's throat was soothed by the sight. "I, uh. Well, yeah, I guess I'm also Kur. Technically."

"And what is Kur?"

He dropped his gaze to the floor, clearly uncomfortable with this line of questioning. As nice as it was to see him put in his place, Francis slowly began to dread his turn.

"Kur is a...a snake cryptid," Zak mumbled. "It can influence and control any other cryptid on the planet, and it's extremely hostile to humans. It's what we're here to fix."

Wadi nodded, unfazed, as if Zak was telling a story about a birthmark instead of an ancient, evil deity. "And you are its reincarnation?"

"Yeah."

"Well, that is highly interesting." She grinned, then turned her eyes on Francis. Here it was.

"Your turn."

"There's nothing much to say." He tried to keep it brusque and quick and get it over with. "My name is Francis. I don't have a family name as there is no need for that in my society. By completely random happenstance, I was chosen as a magic spear's owner, and now I'm here."

She gazed at him through suspicious, narrowed eyes, looking him up and down.

"What are your strengths and weaknesses?" she finally asked, and once more Francis was surprised by her brutal directness.

"I - what?"

"What are you good at? Zak and I have known each other for many years and are quite familiar with each other, but you and I have only been friends for two hours."

Oh, so she was asking for what he could tactically bring to the table. Okay. He could answer that.

"I'm combat-trained, technologically savvy, experienced with negotiations and acting - "

"No, no. What are you proud of?"

Francis couldn't answer that.

Because anything he could do, Epsilon could do better. And the Epsilon before that, and before that...

Wadi narrowed her eyes again, then changed the subject. "Well, then. What sort of music do you enjoy?"

"Uh - "
"Math rock," Zak answered for her. "Ugh, it's terrible. We're always fighting over the car radio, and then we usually end up turning the whole thing off."

Francis scowled. "Just because my music is too complex for your tastes - "

"Mhm, math rock, I see," Wadi interrupted. "And Francis, do you have any hobbies?"

"Well, I - "

"Of course he doesn't," Zak interrupted again.

"Of course I do!" Francis snapped, and Zak seemed genuinely surprised.

"Really?"

"Enrichment activities are necessary for development," Francis grumbled.

"That is the least human way I've ever heard someone say 'everyone needs a hobby'."

Wadi cut in again. "Well, now you must tell us, Francis."

He scowled even deeper. Wadi was Zak's friend, alright; he'd been thoroughly caught in her trap.

"...Origami."

Zak's eyebrows nearly left his skull. "You do origami?"

"Yes, I do origami," Francis said, a snippy tone leaking into his voice despite himself. "It is an art form dating back hundreds of years that requires precision, focus, tight control - "

Zak put his hands up. "No, I'm not dising origami, origami is cool! I just...didn't think you'd...have hobbies."

"I, well..." he forced himself to calm down. "I didn't mention it."

"Can you give us a demonstration?" Wadi asked, excitement clear in her eyes. "Oh, I have some paper in my bag. You must show us."

Before he could even respond, it was being shoved into his hands. The paper itself was green xerox, with arabic scrawled all over it, some sort of leaflet for a local event. Francis sighed and tried to ignore the embarrassment of both their eyes on him.

With practiced, careful movements, he finished one of the most basic, iconic folds. He brusquely handed the paper crane back to Wadi, unable to meet her gaze.

"Here," he said. "It's more difficult with gloves on. So if it's not perfect - "

"It's wonderful!" Wadi said, beaming. Zak asked to see and she passed it to him. He handled it like it was a delicate painting.

"Dude, Francis, this is the most perfectly-folded crane I've ever seen. " He sounded genuinely amazed, playing with the wings and tail. "I couldn't do this. I mean, I tried to make a thousand once, and Fisk was better at it than I was."

"A thousand?" Francis asked.
Zak nodded, handing the crane back to Wadi. "Yeah, it's a legend in Japan that says if you fold a thousand, you get a wish. Fisk and I never made it to a thousand, but we tried."

"More of that magic nonsense."

Wadi carefully placed the paper bird on her nightstand, posing it so it was mid-flight, patting its head before she turned back to the group.

"Well!" she said. "I feel as though we are now close enough that we can properly begin."

"Finally," Francis muttered.

Wadi pulled a map from out of her bag and spread it between them. "I have researched the location you showed me, Zak Saturday, and I believe I know where this huaca of yours is supposed to be."

She pointed to a spot near the small city of Pamukkale. "And I must say, you certainly know how to choose your tourist destinations."

"The Ploutonion?" Francis asked, reading what was written on the map.

But Zak's expression, compared to his, was grim.

"The Gate to Hell."

The Ploutonion at Hierapolis, Zak explained, the way that his parents liked to do mission briefings whenever they went anywhere new, got its name because it was considered sacred to Pluto, the underworld god. It got its other name, the Gate to Hell, because the cavern was so deadly, owing to invisible toxic fumes, that it was thought to be the entrance to the underworld.

Wadi produced a pamphlet.

"Parts of the complex are open to tourists!" she said, cheerfully. "So it should not be difficult to slip into the cavern itself while no one is looking. Although the poison is still an issue."

"Why are none of these locations easy?" Francis griped. "Why could they not be Stonehenge or the Empire State building? Why must they always be sunken cities or lost tombs or passages to Hell?"

"Hey, in Gilgamesh's time, Challenger Deep was like the kumari Empire State," Zak pointed out. "And the only reason we had trouble at Yu's tomb is because it was damaged."

"But this place has always been filled with toxic fumes?" Francis asked.

"Well..." He had him there. "Yeah."

"According to the pamphlet," Wadi said, "ancient priests used to crawl from air pocket to air pocket and return alive. So maybe it was not so bad."

Francis sighed. "I will never understand optimists," he grumbled. "Alright. So we have a cavern filled with poison. That would not be an issue if we had oxygen tanks, but we do not."

"We don't?"
Francis shook his head. "The ATV was made for in-atmosphere travel. It's equipped with artificial
gills, but not oxygen." Okay, Zak supposed that that made sense. "Currently, we are also being
hunted down by the lemurians and the Scientists - "

"And your People," Zak interjected.

"And an evil snake god split personality," Francis sniped back. "Do I just about have the lay of the
land?"

Wadi nodded, and Zak heaved a sigh. If Wadi wasn't here, he'd probably be more freaked out, but
Wadi's expression was thoughtful and composed. She saw things closer to the ground than he did -
had always been more cunning and pragmatic. If she seemed to think they had a chance, they
probably did.

"It doesn't look so good for us," Zak admitted. "What do you think, Wadi?"

"Oxygen tanks…" she mused aloud. “Do you know who I think might have some?"

She looked up from the map with a devious grin on her face. "The Scientists. And, how lucky we
are, if they are coming to you!"

Zak lit up immediately. "Wadi... heist?"

"Heist!" she confirmed.

"I don't think this is a good idea," Francis cut in, always the rain on their parade. "We're out-
numbered, out-matched, and sorely lacking intelligence and resources. What can three children
hope to achieve by infiltrating enemy territory?"

"Four!" cried someone in the room.

Zak startled, along with everyone else, searching for the source of that phantom voice. But he
didn't have to wait long - from the ceiling dropped a long black snake, coiling in between them on
the hotel floor. Wadi screamed and backed away, and Francis stiffened in his spot.

Its scales were mottled with a subtle striped patterning, and Zak recognized it as Vipera barani, the
Turkish viper. What was one of these doing inside their hotel room?

The snake reared up, opening its mouth…

"Hello, Zak and Heir to Humanity. I am Muca, Mucalinda! Behold the fruits of my training!"

Dead silence in the room. Wadi was the one to break it.

"Zak Saturday is that snake speaking?"

"Were you always able to do this?" Zak asked, leaning forward. “This...talking through snakes thing?"

"Of course not!" Muca said, her bright voice comical when contrasted with the expressionless
snake it was coming from. "Who would have taught this useless whelp such a sacred art? Who
would have squandered their time? Until now!"

"What changed?"

"Ah, it is largely squabbly politics," Muca said, the snake tapping its tail excitedly, a sure tell that
this was Muca if it hadn’t been confirmed before. “You see, with Kur’s endorsement, my title has changed; I am still Ithaskar as we have no other replacements, but lately Janaral - the leader of our royal guard - has taken to calling me Rajkumari Nagi.”

Zak’s eyes widened and Francis stiffened. Wadi, who did not know Hindi, was wildly throwing glances between the three of them.

“You’re joking,” Francis mumbled.

“How could I be joking?” Muca laughed. “After all, there are no other candidates! They are all dead! Leaving me, and only me, with the title of Rajkumari Nagi - princess!”

“Zak,” Wadi piped up. “You have still yet to explain the talking snake! I do not mean to rush you, but please do so immediately!”

Right, right! Wadi would have no idea - Zak had mentioned Muca in passing, but she was a naga, and Wadi had never seen one in person, nor was she familiar with their usual tricks.

“Wadi, this is Muca, the naga who was helping us out earlier,” he said, quickly. “One of their powers is talking through snakes.”

“Yes, alright, I gathered that,” Wadi said, nodding furiously. “However, I have thought of something. What happens when she stops talking through it? Will we then simply have a poisonous snake in the room with us?”

Ah, good point.

“Oh, that is a good question,” Muca said blithely, the snake turning to face an empty wall. “Janaral, they are asking what happens when I pass control, if the serpent will not simply bite them.”

There was an awkward, silent pause, and then the snake flinched as if struck on the head, Muca giving a small yelp of pain, before it stiffened and rose to its full height, giving Zak a deep bow.

“Janaral greets his master, the great and inexorable Kur,” it said, in a male naga’s gravelly voice. “Our control over serpents is not so pitiful that this servant will attack when we are not directly speaking through it. Kur may rest at ease.”

Oh boy. Zak could only nod, trying his best to keep up with the serpent revolving door. “Uh-huh.”

“Janaral also apologizes for Rajkumari Nagi’s incompetence,” he said, accompanied by another deep bow, so low the snake’s snout touched the floor. “Although she is the Rajkumari that Kur has chosen, she has been lacking in education until now, and there is much for her to learn in both skill and etiquette.”

“It’s, uh,” Zak’s eyes darted around the room. Wadi was still trying to process what was happening, so she wasn’t even looking at him, while Francis just offered him a helpless, deadpan shrug.

“It’s fine. So sayeth Kur.”

“Regardless, Janaral apologizes. He will continue to oversee Rajkumari Nagi’s education, for so long as Kur allows.”

“Um...yes. That sounds good to me.”
The snake gave another bow, and then fell limp to the ground. A few seconds later, it shook his head, before popping back up, tail tapping against the ground.

“So there Kur has it. We humbly pledge our services!”

Zak took a deep breath and let it out. Well, as harrowing as that experience was, it was always a good thing to have people on their side. With the odds stacked against them the way that they were, even a single person helping them out was a massive step up.

Evidently, Francis thought so, too. As Zak leaned forward to ask Muca more about how her newfound power worked, he could hear Francis muttering under his breath.

“We have gone from completely doomed to almost certainly doomed,” he said.

For the duration of the trip, Zak and Francis had slept in separate areas (or at least separate shifts) whenever they could. It was expensive to book two rooms at a time, so usually what happened was that Francis would take the car while Zak took the hotel, and they'd meet up in the lobby. However, the car didn't have such amenities as a bathroom or even a sink, and Francis was about as prissy as Zak had imagined he'd be, so there'd usually be an uncomfortable, awkward stretch of time in the evening where Zak would be eating takeout and watching TV while Francis locked himself in the bathroom and they both tried very hard to pretend the other didn't exist.

But today, things were several times more awkward than usual. To be honest, up until today, he hadn't really thought of Francis as fully human. Wait, no, considering Francis's personal suite of issues, that sounded pretty terrible. What he meant was that he hadn't really given any thought to, like, what Francis enjoyed, or what Francis cared about, or whether or not Francis got lonely.

Well, considering how often them trying to have a normal conversation ended in a fight, there was probably a good reason for that. Francis responded to any attempts to connect on a human level with intentionally-aimed barbs in Zak's direction, and Zak fell for them every time.

But he couldn't get the fact that Francis had a hobby out of his head. Even as Francis emerged with a puff of steam, already clad in his omnipresent green trench coat, hair completely dry, Zak continued to stare. It was enough that Francis himself turned to glare at him, as he adjusted the sleeves on his coat.

"What?" he snapped.

"I guess I was thinking that I've never seen you eat before," Zak said, "aside from that one time in Japan. What do you usually get for dinner?"

Francis huffed and turned away. "What a useless line of questioning," he mumbled. Zak felt his temper flare at the dismissal, but he forced himself to swallow it and keep his cool.

"Hey, I'm just curious."

"My People have eliminated the need for elaborate mealtimes," Francis said, curtly. "We eat just enough to maintain our digestive systems, and the rest of the time, we subsist on nutrient pills."

What, really? Zak couldn't help the feeling of pity that welled up inside him at Francis saying so.
Francis himself seemed put off.

"What's that expression. I don't like that expression."

"So you mean that instead of eating with me, you've just been taking pills when you leave?" Zak asked.

"What did you think I was doing?" Francis snapped.

“To be honest…I actually thought you were just refusing to eat commoner food, like some sort of prince," Zak said, sheepishly. "I didn't think you weren't eating at all."

"It's unnecessary."

There was that word again. "You keep saying that. Now I'm not even sure your People know what 'necessary' means."

"In what way," Francis asked, exasperation leaking into his tone, "is eating a meal - one that, mind you, usually isn't corrected for proper nutrition - anything but a colossal waste of time?"

"Ours," Zak answered, simply. "Because, I don't know if you know this, Francis, but every culture has food rituals. It's not even really about the nutrition. It's just a human experience thing - like going outside, or singing along to the radio, or - having a hobby."

He was expecting Francis to have some sort of biting comeback to that, but none came. Instead, Francis cast his eyes to the side, his voice uncharacteristically subdued.

"Ulraj told me something similar," he mumbled.

"Really?" That was news to Zak. "What'd he say?"

"That...if souls didn't exist, no one would ever eat."

"Huh," Zak said. He wondered when that would have ever come up. Regardless, it was an angle. "He's right, though."

"Souls aren't scientific."

"Neither's magic." Zak held out his carton of hakka. "I mean, you've already got a hobby. And the portions from this takeout place are huge. At least try some?"

Francis hesitated. He really looked like he was going to refuse, but as reluctant as he was, he ended up approaching. Kind of like a proud tomcat lured in by the prospect of food. Tonight was full of surprises, huh? Zak cracked open the wrapping on a fork for him, and Francis accepted, clumsily turning it around in his hands.

"What, er, what food is this?" Francis asked. He poked cautiously at the meal with the pointy end.

"Hakka. It's a fusion of Middle East and Chinese - "

"No, I mean, the contents…"

"Oh." Zak shrugged. "Chicken, onions, I can't really tell. It's good, though."

Francis scowled, but regardless brought a forkful to his mouth. He gave it some thoughtful chewing, swallowing with a look of discomfort.
"How is it?" Zak asked, expectantly.

"...It's spicy," Francis answered. And it wasn't, actually; this much didn't even qualify as more than a kick. But Francis - though he tried to hide it - was genuinely panting a little, and Zak just barely, just barely managed to keep himself from poking fun at him.

Then Francis went back for more. Zak tried not to stare, instead lowering his gaze to watch his own chopsticks sift through his portion.

This was really unbearably awkward, and he regretted inviting Francis over now, as the only sounds that filled the room were chewing and swallowing mixed with the soap opera Zak had absentmindedly been watching on TV. But if he said something, he worried that Francis, like a skittish stray cat, might bolt out of sight - and as much as he hated feeling sympathy for Francis, he thought it was only a good thing if Francis were to...like, live life. Eat good food, at the very least.

To his surprise, it was actually Francis who broke the silence first, stiff and awkward and unsure of his own words.

"About my hobby, I, erm..." he pursed his lips and hesitated before continuing. "I was given a list of...the original's. Hobbies, I mean. I got to pick from that."

There were actually a lot of things Zak wanted to reply to that with, though they mostly boiled down to a nervous "what the hell?" But he managed to swallow that instinctual response, giving Francis a bland "oh, really?" instead.

"They...experimented with...cutting enrichment activities out of the schedule," Francis continued. "It didn't go so well."

"Yeah, I'd have guessed it wouldn't."

"It went catastrophically poorly, actually."

"I mean...yeah."

"This is all extremely classified, alright?" Francis said, hurriedly. "Not a word of this to anyone."

Zak mimed locking his lips and throwing away the key.

"He died," Francis said. They didn’t say another word to each other all night.

- And I never saw him again."

Muca - or the snake she was inhabiting, anyway - tapped her tail in appreciation as she laughed. It sounded a little like applause.

"What a thrilling story that was!" she said. "The romances of monogamous species are spectacular indeed!"

"Thank you, thank you," Wadi laughed. If they weren't currently in the middle of a stakeout, crouched atop the roof of the hotel, watching the sky, she'd have stood up to give a bow. Once she'd gotten over her initial shock, Muca was actually quite easy to get along with. She was chatty
and knowledgeable and curious, and Wadi enjoyed regaling her with tales from her travels.

"Do you have any stories to tell?" Wadi asked.

"Not romantic ones, no," Muca said. "Naga have no romance! It does not help us raise our hatchlings, who are expected to hunt alone by their third season, and only our queen is allowed to lay eggs besides."

Wadi nodded. That made sense, she supposed, and it wasn’t a huge leap for her to go from the kumari’s lack of exclusivity to the naga having no romance whatsoever. Ah, she told the mental image of her father, you see? This was why she had gone so far to see the world before adult responsibilities tied her down to her family's desert. There were uncountable things to discover in the outside world - some bitter, some sweet, and some simply interesting, like this.

The snake flicked its tongue out. "We have a saying: the passing of a title is a serpent shedding its skin. If a hatchling dies, it can be replaced. Rajkumari Nagi come and go, but there is always Rajkumari Nagi."

"That seems awfully cruel," Wadi said with a frown. "To not have any individuality, or life, outside your job."

"Oh, you jest! Of course we do. We say, 'who I am in the river is different than who I am in the sea.' A naga that is not two-faced does not live long."

Wadi frowned. "So are you, or are you not, individuals? I am no good with flowery language, you see. I am from the desert."

"Well, what we are is what we are, I suppose," Muca said. If she had arms, she’d surely be shrugging. "Perhaps if I phrase it like this: I call you Wadi when we are friends, and I call you Cori when we are business, or I am distancing myself from you, or I am betraying you. Yes?"

Wadi snorted. "Yes, I see. Do you like naga society?"

"Well, perhaps not," Muca mused, "although that is only because I am weak. However, I would have risen to a high position based on my merits anyway. You should have seen Janaral’s face when he learned I had memorized every tablet in the library!" Muca’s tail rapped against the ceiling in boast. "I suppose that is the benefit of having no romantic or familial bonds? It is almost unthinkable for a naga to have a position without having earned it themselves. The strong are rewarded."

"Strong?" Wadi asked, glancing over at the snake. "But you said yourself that you are weak."

"A word that do not translate well. There is strong, as in physical strength, and then there is strong, as in…" Muca tapped her tail against the roof, thinking about it. "...Strong as in skilled, competent, suited for the task. An all-encompassing virtue. Physical strength, wisdom, cunning, knowledge...such traits."

"Is caring for others not a strength?"

"Not under our current Rani Nagi, no," Muca said. "But that has been different before, and that may be different again."

"When you are queen?"

Muca laughed. "Ah, I will likely be ripped apart before that ever happens!"
Wadi also smiled, because Muca had a good, infectious humor about heavy topics, the same way she did. "Well, I think I would be sad if that were to happen. So please survive, Muca."

"You humans and your softheartedness," Muca said, cheerfully. "I thank you for the sentiment. I have known you only briefly, but wish that you survive in the same way."

Wadi had spent her entire childhood in the desert, travelling with her family from one hidden, secret oasis to the next, occasionally entering a dusty town to barter for supplies. It was only her friendship with Zak that had let her see the verdant jungles, the frigid taigas, the sprawling cities that dotted the rest of the world.

"I will be queen one day as well," she said, bringing the binoculars to her eyes. "And I am happy to do so. It is a great honor to guard the methuselah tree."

"So you, too, are Rajkumari?"

"Yes," Wadi said, "even though sometimes I do not want to be one." She sighed. "I wonder how much of this freedom I will be able to keep. If there is not some way to reconcile it with my future duties."

"Troubling indeed," Muca agreed with her. "We who are bound by magic are much more closely bound to our natures. There are rules governing our existence. In that sense, I think you are much freer than I."

Wadi grumbled, since that didn't help. Unaware, Muca continued.

"We say, however, that the river may flow toward the sea, but it is wide, it is deep, and the banks are soft and have changed before. Although it is more succinct in our language."

"And what does that mean?"

"I will not give away our kind's secrets so easily," Muca said. "There is no sense if you do not interpret it yourself!"

Wadi laughed. "Only now you draw the line?"

A black shape cutting through the stars caught her eye, and she reached for her walkie-talkie.

"Hm, Francis? Hello?"

"I thought we agreed on codenames," came his irritable reply. Truly he was the most funny of Zak's friends.

Wadi smiled. "I think our friends, the Scientists, have entered town."

"Do you see any eagles?"

"None yet..." She felt something nudge her hand, and when she put the binoculars down, Muca's tail was gesturing wildly toward the sky. She had to squint to make it out, but there, indeed, was the silhouette of an eagle, wings outstretched, gliding against the stars.

"Wah," Muca said, "it is such an odd feeling to be seeing a garuda and not fleeing for my life. This power of proxy serpents is excellent!"

"Wadi," Francis cut in, impatiently dropping the codenames as well.
"Yes, we see an eagle," she replied.

Silence on the other end. Then, briskly, "I have visual confirmation. Follow their landing. We're moving on to phase two."

"Is Zak awake now?" Wadi asked, already gathering her stuff, Muca slung casually around her neck. "Say good morning to him from me!"

"Must I…?"

"And a very good morning to you, too, Francis," Wadi said, putting on a flirty voice. She lashed her yo-yo onto a flagpole and took a running leap. "Mwah! I will let you know when we are in position."

Francis's response was lost in the rushing wind.

The plan was very simple. Phase one was Wadi and Muca watching for the Scientists, since they'd be overlooked even if they were spotted, unlike him and Zak. Phase two was reconnaissance, conducted largely by Muca, for the same reason. And phase three was distraction: Zak and Francis would lure out the Scientists and lemurians, while Muca got the attention of anyone at left at Beeman's ship, and Wadi recovered the SCBA. If they couldn't meet up for whatever reason, they'd meet up again at Pamukkale.

See, simple. The problem being that, while simple, there were a million breakable parts. If he and Zak got caught - if Muca couldn't figure out what she was looking for - if Wadi couldn't get away - Francis tried not to think about it. Normally, he'd have plans in place for every contingency, but...normally, he'd have more resources at his disposal than a Zak who refused to use his powers, a thief, and a talking snake.

Speaking of Zak, something had been up with him ever since Yu's tomb. When Francis suggested the possibility of a cryptid distraction like they used in San Francisco, Zak had violently objected. Eventually, Francis and Wadi had weaseled out of him that the reason lay with the Serpent...and it'd render the whole quest a moot point if Kur were to take over halfway through. So as things stood, Zak was, for all intents and purposes, depowered - and while this was frustrating to an insane degree, it, too, was relegated to the pile of "things Francis was resolutely not thinking about right now."

Basically, they were FUBAR, and Francis was running on sheer denial.

He dropped his head against the steering wheel with a heavy sigh. "Maybe I should have just let Epsilon catch me."

"You don't mean that," Zak said, slapping his own cheeks to rouse himself. "C'mon - we're well-rested, and Wadi's the best thief I know."

"It's not Wadi I'm worried about."

Regardless, Francis turned the engine off, and the two of them climbed out of the car. Francis pulled his hood down until it nearly covered his eyes while Zak did the same next to him - they were both wearing civilian clothes, hoping to put some distance between themselves and their
getaway vehicle, lure Miranda and Deadbolt into a fight on the ground. If they could just take out that robot, they could probably stealth out of the garuda's grasp.

And this was where the first thing went wrong. Right as they rounded the corner from where they parked, they bumped right into Paul Cheechoo.

Francis wanted to slap himself. Zak actually did.

"Zak - " Cheechoo called, but they had already bolted in the other direction. Of all the rotten luck…

As they ran, Francis grabbed the walkie-talkie around his waist, flicking it on. At this point in time, she ought to be hiding.

"Wadi, do you copy?"

The voice that radioed back was not hers.

"If it isn't Emobangs," Beeman drawled at him from the other side. The reaction Francis had to his smug monotone was visceral and instinctive, as was Zak’s next to him. "What a surprise. And Stickyfingers here was just trying to convince me she was working alone."

This time, Francis really did smack himself. Zak lunged for the walkie-talkie and Francis let him take it. He grasped at it, white-knuckled, just barely keeping himself from shouting into the mouthpiece. "What'd you do to her, Beeman?"

"Relax," he said, in his usual calm tone. "She's pushed against a wall by about one-fifty pounds of pure kinetic force. You can come pick her up if you'd like."

This mission was falling apart at the seams. Francis clutched his forehead, wondering if there was any possible way to salvage it. Zak grit his teeth. "And what'd you do to Doyle?"

"I'm not taking questions at this time," Beeman said, disaffected. As always, his words were tinged with smug. It was impressive how well that was conveyed through the crackling radio. "You mind handing me over to your buddy? I can see you're not in the negotiating mood."

Zak looked like he wanted to punch something, but he didn't resist when Francis reached for the device. Francis took a deep breath to prepare himself, and then, in his best business voice, "this is Francis."

"I've got a cryogenic pod with Porcuperm's name on it." Beeman cut right to the chase, possibly his only redeeming quality. "It's a better deal than the Fuzzballs are willing to give him. And let's be reasonable - you don't have a lot of options."

Francis put on his game face, dragging Zak into an alleyway so their bouncing footsteps wouldn't ruin his negotiation voice.

"We have our own solution to the Kur crisis," Francis said, curtly. "One with much better odds than either of you."

"Everyone and their kidnapped mom's got a solution," Beeman countered. "It's not some mumbo-jumbo magic nonsense, is it? I thought Daddy Cueball raised you better than that."

Francis pursed his lips. The truth was, he'd always hated dealing with Beeman. He was the Scientist that ended up butting heads most often with their People, and so Francis had spent an
inordinate amount of time trapped in a room with him before. He always seemed to know the exact worst thing to say, which was made even worse by the fact that he was so often correct.

If Francis hadn't been chosen by Sharur - if he hadn't seen with his own eyes and felt with his own hands what it was he was dealing with - then the one decrying his solution as "nonsense" would be Francis himself. Unfortunately, returning home empty-handed was, at this point, a far more catastrophic loss than returning home with Sharur. Francis couldn't accept any other solutions.

"We aren't taking your deal." Zak actually seemed surprised at that. No doubt he thought Francis was doing something altruistic. It hurt to see how earnest he was.

But Beeman didn't seem to care. His reply was nonchalant and immediate.

"Thought you might say that. Guess I'll just pick him up from Robomancer once she brings you in. Sending her your location now. Stay put, alright?"

Francis stared down at the mouthpiece. "There's no way you had enough time to trace our location. Two-way radios are incredibly hard to - "

"Sure, if you're not a genius," Beeman interrupted. "See you soo - ack!"

With a shout of pain, the line cut out. Dead silence followed - Beeman didn't pick up again. Francis stared at the mouthpiece a second longer before chucking it as far away as he could down the alley, cursing at it with all his heart.

"Well, this is just fantastic," he muttered.

"He screamed there at the end," Zak piped up, nervously. "Maybe Wadi got out somehow."

"We can only hope," Francis sighed, running a hand through his hair. "Let's get going, before Grey -"

"Wait," Cheechoo called, having finally caught up with them. He was entirely out of breath, doubled over at the waist. "Wait, wait. Hold on. I just want to talk."

"Is this another ploy to waste our time?" Francis asked. Beside him, Zak dropped into a hesitant battle stance, and Francis considered doing the same. Cheechoo was, however, a noncombatant, and it was - uncouth, Francis supposed, to do more than shove past him.

"No," Cheechoo answered. "Well, that might be a side effect. I can't run anymore, sorry." He forced himself to straighten up, although he was still leaning against the brick wall. "Something weird's going on," he told them. "The lemurians have got us under some kind of influence. I feel like I can only think clearly when I'm away from them. Do you guys know what's going on?"

Zak and Francis shared a nervous glance. Francis rifled through the mental file he had on Paul Cheechoo. The man was a gentle and friendly. He kept his head down. He was rated as highly trustworthy and poor at lying. And he wasn't a Saturday, meaning he wasn't about to deviate too wildly from that profile.

Zak seemed to reach the same conclusion, since he was the one who answered. "The lemurian's telepathy is charisma," Zak said. "It makes you think you're thinking their thoughts. What have they been telling you?"

"Some really unflattering stuff, I gotta say," he said, in a jovial, half-apologetic tone. "They've got my stomach all in knots imagining what Kur can do. I guess that's rich coming from me, huh?"
Ultimately, it had been a unanimous vote in favor of Beeman's cryostasis plan. Zak looked away.

"Look," Cheechoo continued, "as awkward as this is for me to say, I'm not cool with a permanent solution like the lemurians have - when I'm thinking straight, anyway. You guys told Beeman you had a fix of your own. Does it have anything to do with that big spear strapped to your back?"

Cheechoo was still a Scientist, so it wasn't unexpected for him to have put two and two together. Francis gave a stiff nod. "This is Gilgamesh's spear. It can seal Kur's powers away once it's fully charged. There are five...charging sites. One nearby."

"So that's why you two have been taking such a weird route," he mused to himself. "Normally, I'd say you can't trust something that's not scientifically grounded...but we're dealing with magic tree sap and cryptid armies, so *similia similibus curantur*, I guess. What can I do to help?"

Zak piped up before Francis could. "Can you get my parents out of wherever they're being held?"

Cheechoo shook his head. "I'd love to, but I don't trust my brain not to turn to mush if I go back there. Beeman's the only one who can get to them on account of that metal plate in his head."

"That's fine," Francis interrupted, before Zak could continue with irrelevant questions. "If you meet us at Pamukkale, we could use your assistance in mapping out a cave."

"You had me at cave," Cheechoo grinned. "I'll go catch a cab. Miranda's gonna be here soon, sounds like - I'd just be in your way if I stuck around. And hers, too."

He pushed himself off the wall and started jogging away. "Take care of yourselves! Don't get caught!"

Zak pulled closer to Francis, muttering under his breath. "Are you sure we can trust him?"

"Well, it's in his file."

Zak rolled his eyes and Francis snorted. The people who were the problem never realized they were the problem, huh. It was only Zak that had such a habit of defying his file, whenever he wasn't directly playing into it by being the most predictable creature on the planet.

But they didn't have time to worry about that. Francis turned back down the alleyway.

"For now, we should assume Wadi is completing her mission. We should focus on completing ours."

Lure Grey and Deadbolt into a fight, and then bolt for their getaway vehicle once they got the chance. Zak clapped him on the shoulder, something Francis really wished he'd stop doing.

"You ready?" Zak asked.

"Not at all."

"That’s the spirit."

It didn't take long for Grey to show up after that, hovering down in front of them on Deadbolt's back. She had a strange, dazed expression in her eyes, Francis noted, something he'd never been close enough to observe before. If the lemurian's charisma worked such that their thoughts felt like one's own, then the Scientists were easy pickings. Each one was used to being the top of their field, used to trusting their own instincts - and each one was therefore similarly easy to beguile.
"This is your last chance to come back quietly," Grey announced, even as all four of them readied for battle.

"You don't want to do this," Zak called at her.

"You know what you are," Grey answered. "You know what it is you can do, and why we need to stop it."

"Right, well, worth a shot," Zak mumbled, with the kind of casual apathy that could only have come from being intimately familiar with this situation. "Sorry, not sorry, Dr. Grey."

And with that, he charged her, swiping in her direction with the Claw’s telescoping shaft. Not to be outdone, Francis also leapt into the fray, Sharur at his side.

Fighting in an alleyway had been Zak’s idea, born out of experience. First of all, in a wide-open space, the chance of the garuda swooping was non-negligible - but second, it severely limited Grey’s options. Her portal gun could only shoot in so many directions this way, and while it made it harder for Zak and Francis to dodge, she could hardly separate them without flanking herself.

Actually, Francis had thought Zak was being needlessly cocky when he was describing how easy it was to take care of Grey. Shortly after their fight began, he came to realize Zak’s confidence was not misplaced.

“See,” Zak said, as they huddled behind a dumpster to avoid a hail of Deadbolt’s exploding bullets. “Dr. Grey’s the easy part.”

“Why does her robotic assistant even have combat functionalities?” Francis groaned. “Don’t answer that. It’s because her hobby is robot destruction derbies.”

“It is?” Zak smacked his own forehead. “So that’s why…”

A pink portal opened in front of them, with Francis reacting faster than Zak did and dragging him out of the way of Deadbolt’s teleported bulletstorm. He dashed toward Deadbolt, deflecting one, two punches with Sharur, and then jumped back. He raised the speartip into the air, and swung it to the side. Mirroring this action, Deadbolt raised the fist Francis had previously deflected, and punched himself in the head, sending it spinning.

“Neat,” Zak said.

“This is a comically stacked fight in our favor,” Francis deadpanned, making Deadbolt punch himself again and again while Grey flailed wildly trying to stop him. “Do you think we’ve just about wasted enough time?”

Zak pulled his commpad out of his pocket to check. “It’s been about ten minutes...I’d say give it another five?”

“Five it is,” Francis said, slamming Sharur down. Grey just barely dodged out of the way of Deadbolt punching the spot she was standing, and Francis tsked. Even though he had some level of control over Deadbolt’s arm, its movements were still too slow to be useful for punching anything it wasn’t attached to.

“We might want to change location, though,” Zak said, backing up. “Since if reinforcements come…”

At that moment, reinforcements did come. Landing on the ground between him and Deadbolt with
a boom, breaking his connection with Deadbolt’s arm, was a mass of blue fur. Ah, Professor Mizuki had arrived. This was Francis’s second time seeing him in person, and he was always impressed by how enormous he actually was. Picking a fight with him was not ideal. Francis, also, began to back away.

But it seemed he wasn’t concerned with them, not even turning to look.

“Miranda,” he said, in the strange raspy tone his body afforded him. “We need to go back.”

“What? Why?”

“We must go to the hospital. Arthur was bitten by a snake!”

Francis and Zak glanced at each other, and then turned to dash down the alleyway.

Behind them, they could hear Grey’s shrill voice rising in disbelief.

“He got bitten by a what?”

Francis had been skeptical of Muca’s usefulness up until now. He was sorry he ever doubted her. But in the elation of slipping away, he and Zak had let their guard down. As they ran across the wide-open lot, it was Zak who noticed first that something was up, his brow furrowing, his pace slowing down. This prompted Francis to check behind him, and good thing he did.

An enormous eagle, its wings shining silvery-blue in the waning moon, its body blocking out the heavens, was swooping toward them at breakneck speed. Francis grabbed Zak's arm, breaking him out of his gawk, dragging him forward. They were still so far away from the van, and there was nowhere on this wide expanse of concrete for them to hide. They could only hope to outrun it.

Stupid! How did he overlook something so obvious?

And then - a banshee scream. An earsplitting, inhuman noise, so startling that even Francis had to glance up to see what the source could even be. It was so dark that he couldn't get a good look - but a small, fluttering bird was launching itself at the garuda's head, and the eagle, in response, had broken its swoop, its giant, plumed wings beating at the air.

"A screech owl?" He heard Zak breathe next to him. They didn't stop to watch, making a beeline for the van. Francis wasted no time in turning it on, engaging the invisibility, and speeding the hell away. In the rearview mirror, he could see the enormous black eagle already flapping back into the sky. The little bird that had attacked it was nowhere to be found.

"I have no idea what the hell just happened," Francis muttered. "But I won't question it."

"Yeah, sounds good to me," Zak said, leaning back in his seat.

"Wow, Kur was almost Garuda food!" The sound of Muca's voice behind them startled them so much that the vehicle swerved. They both whipped around.

Wadi gave them a wry grin and a cutesy wave, Muca curled around her neck. At her feet were three SCBA units, branded in Beeman's signature grey-blue.

"First of all," Wadi said. "I would like to say that that Beeman fellow? Very unpleasant! He also had a thermal radar, which is the only reason he was able to find me."

Francis turned back toward the road while Zak broke into an enormous grin. "Sure, whatever you
"And second," Wadi continued, "I did not tell Muca to bite him."

Zak laughed. "So it really was Muca, huh?"

"Yes!" Muca answered. "This is an excellent power!"

"Alright," Zak said, "so, don't do that again, because my reputation is already low enough, but nice job, Muca."

"Yes," Francis added, despite himself. "Job well done, naga."

To Zak's surprised expression, Francis could only offer a shrug.

"I don't much care for Beeman, either."
Chapter End Notes

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End Notes
Footnotes, I'll be going over all the animals, random trivia factoids, and obscure references to the original show's continuity (sure, maybe *i* obsess over every little detail of the show and know practically everything about it, but I'm not expecting you guys to), so be sure to check them out!

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