

1: Opportunity

The Relic looms out of the murk before me, a spire of flat planes and sharp angles. This far below the surface of the lake, with the water clouded by silt and grass, even I have trouble seeing further than a dozen yards away. Movement dances around me, fish and dirt stirred by each stroke of my broad tail. I can feel life in the currents, the signs left behind by the flight of prey, even if I can't quite track them. The gloom makes the familiar a touch eerie.

Still, I enjoy the silence. There's peace in the pressure of the water above me, the still air in my lungs, the strength in my tail. The lake is the embrace of my mother, her warmth, her scales.

Here, alone, I belong.

Here alone, I belong.

I circle the spire, running a hand over the smooth not-quite-stone surface. The Relic of Jura Lake, just a mile from Creta University, is one of the best-studied in the world. Generations of researchers have descended in submarines and diving suits to photograph it, scrape samples, measure and observe its impenetrable blackness. Just three feet at its widest, it ends fifteen feet from the lake's surface. To our best estimates, it's stood at the bottom of this lake for more than two thousand years.

I must be the first of those researchers to touch the spire with my bare scales. After all, none before me were mosai.

I swim another tight spiral up and down the length of the Relic, startling a cloud of minnows. I grin at them, momentarily tempted to buck the rules of the lake and chase the childhood pleasure of a fresh kill.

I shake off the whim and allow the Relic to claim me once more. Despite our physical understanding of it—its dimensions, its age, the precise chemical makeup of its construction—it might as well be a natural formation for all that we know about its creators. The Prior vanished, as far as we can tell, a thousand or more years before any saur thought beyond their next meal. How they constructed their great Relics, what technology they wielded, what they looked like—all remain mysteries.

We believe they ruled the planet, while saurs today are confined to our scant handful of half-civilized islands. We believe they had knowledge we didn't, things that we were not

Awakened knowing and haven't learned since. We can't understand their writing, have found a mere few buildings and statues to attest to their presence, have nothing of their image.

We know nothing.

I run a finger over the tip of the spire and flick my tongue out to taste blood in the water. It's still as sharp as a needle.

Relics.

Order.

Water.

Three of my favorite things.

It's funny, in a way. I normally avoid uncertainty. But with Relics—I can only savor the mystery.

I would sigh if it wouldn't drown me.

It's time to rise. I flip vertical and ascend the last dozen feet to the surface, exploding into the air with a splash of joy. The sunlight catches on every drop of water as they roll off my hands, each orb crystalline in the early afternoon air. The heat of a late summer day hits the blue-black feathers on my head as though I've been set ablaze. I feel the water stream off them, rolling down my scales to return to the lake.

A mile distant, Creta university rises. A dozen hollowed out trees the size of buildings, their branches long bare from saurian habitation, tower above stone spheres filled with classrooms and dormitories. I can see the specks of jewel-bright students going about their day, roving between dorms, a few quetz gliding between suspended platforms high off the ground. I smile for a moment, lost in this unbelievable world. My parents would be so proud. My parents *are* so proud.

My stomach falls out of me. What am I *doing*?

Useless, useless, useless, the little chorus in my head chants. Spending my afternoon in the lake instead of pounding away at my latest paper? *Useless!*

I pull my limbs close to me and begin to race back to shore, covering the mile in just five minutes. I've forgotten some of the training my mother drilled into me, here in Jura's easy waters; still, I've kept my speed. No self-respecting Claws-born mosai would be a slow swimmer.

I come ashore on the university's so-called worst beach. It has no sand, but that's alright; I like the fluffy grass that keeps my feet clean, and I can glide over the sharp stones that make it so hard for others to step out far enough to swim. I pull myself out of the water and stumble onto the land, the lake streaming from my loose trousers.

My best friend, Pomme, a raptor with silver-grey feathers, has lain herself on a towel to soak in the sun. Her eyes are slightly glazed as she stares at a tablet before her. She looks up and grins at the sight of me.

“What? You didn't catch us lunch?”

“I'm not supposed to eat the fish in there. Besides, they're too slow to be any fun.”

I lumber over to her, my short legs and heavy tail making my movements less than graceful. I can be fast on land—on all fours. How very un-Awoken of me. I pick up my own towel, folded neatly beside hers, and dry myself off, then sweep it out and plop down to the ground next to her. I take special care to ensure my feet are clean before replacing my shoes; no one likes to carry dirt with them, least of all me.

“The offer stands, you know. Raptors aren't bad swimmers,” I say.

“No thanks. If I had wanted to swim, I would have done it back home.”

“It's a lot better to learn here than in the ocean. Nothing will eat you in this lake.”

“Still a no from me. You swim, I run, we all have our things, yeah?”

“Yeah,” I grin at her, lying back on my towel and reaching for my backpack. My short arms don't quite match my ambition, so Pomme pulls it over to me. I open it and withdraw my tablet. I don't want to go back to my dark office, not when I could work beside the lake.

“Well, since you didn't get me lunch, I'm going to go grab some. You want your usual?”

“Yes, please,” I say softly.

Pomme grins at me and lopes away gracefully, her powerful legs driving her in long strides. I always enjoy watching her move, her tail lithe and whiplike, her feathers gleaming in the sun.

When she has disappeared into one of the nearby dormitories with a kitchen, I turn to my tablet. It opens with a graze of my finger to my most recent project, a comparison of glyph patterns from pre-Awakening Relics in the southern and western isles. It's the beginning of my dissertation; my study is in pre-Awakening history with a focus on Prior language and

architecture. I wish the Relic in Jura had a bit of their language. It would be nice to have some close at hand.

I've been fascinated by the Relics since I was just a child, swimming in the bay of my hometown. There's a great statue, another Relic, hidden in a nook of the bay, the angular writing at the base still as well-preserved as the Jura spire. I stumbled upon it when I was just five years old, and I fell in love at once with the clean elegance of the mysterious words. Unfortunately, those words remain largely a mystery, apart from a few phrases we suspect may be dates of some uninterpretable lost years. Much of the remaining language is on statue bases and the entrances to rooms, clearly names and nouns we can never guess at. Still, those of us committed to the study believe that there may be something to be gained from the words or works of the ancients, whoever—or whatever—they were.

I scroll through my carefully rendered digitization of a dozen of the clearest passages from the best dig sites in the world. It represents the vast majority of what we know about the Prior, which amounts to not much. My contribution to the study is to note a certain repetition of glyphs which appears in rooms in the west more often than in the far south, which I have developed several hypotheses for. For example, that there may be different dialects, as we have for our language, or it may be that the Relics in the west and south were part of different types of community, perhaps informed by the slightly hotter southern climate that warms the shallow seas in which I was raised.

I tweak a word in my introduction and sigh.

I need a meeting with my advisor more than anything, but Kinn has been so busy these past few weeks—with what, I have no idea. He refuses to answer my messages, and even his assistant Hobin, whom I've always gotten on well with, might as well be a ghost. I've been tempted to just show up at his office, but I know he's rarely there and I don't want to interrupt a meeting. Making a fool of myself in front of one—if not two—preeminent historians is the last thing my career needs.

Pomme pops back into my vision, making me jump to my feet in fright. She laughs and hands me a metal box.

“Lunch is served,” she says. “You good?”

“You know me,” I say, taking the food. “I'm basically a cricket, jumpy as fuck. What did you get?”

Pomme opens her own box and settles onto her towel, pulling out a paper-wrapped mess of roast meat and glistening sauces.

“I have no idea, but it looks amazing,” she says, jaws snapping a large bite. I smile, not meeting her eyes, and dig in my bag for the utensils I carry with me. I find them and open my own tin delicately: cubed fish and egg salad, topped with a tiny bit of pickled seaweed. My favorite. I’ve eaten it every day since I arrived here: first the pickles, then the egg, then the fish. How it should be.

I find it hard to eat around others, sometimes. They watch me. My patterns. If I eat around them too often, they notice, make comments. Pomme has long since given up on me; her lack of interest is more comforting than anything in the world.

“How’s your work going?” I ask, chewing slowly. I don’t care what anyone says—it is a good lunch.

“Good. I’ve finally got all the bots to swarm to the light without hitting each other—in the sims, that is. I’ll be trying it in the lab once my co-author finishes building the stupid things.”

We patter back and forth about robots and distributed pattern-formation systems until we’ve both finished our meals and reluctantly return to our work. I only stare at the screen for a few moments, however, before the sun goes black.

Once more I jump to my feet, only to see Jenner land roughly in front of me as his wings cease to block the light. The quetz student is about two feet taller than me—despite the size of our non-Awakened origins, mosai are quite small—and disconcertingly expressionless, his beak making mouth motions difficult. Still, I know him to be nice enough. He’s the only other history doctorate here at Creta, two years younger than me and still deep in classes.

“Hi, Jenner,” I say, backing away a pace to look him in the eye.

“Hey, Sumina,” he says, sitting on his haunches to free his hands. “Kinn wants to see you right now, if you’re not in dire need of being elsewhere.”

My heart skips a beat. I’m instantly running through every message I’ve ever sent him; did I come off too strong? Is he going to rescind being my primary advisor, pass me off to one of the junior faculty?

Instead of expressing any of this panic, I simply nod.

“Thanks, Jenner. I’ll head over right away. How are you?”

“Good, busy with classes, you know. Statistics is hard. How are you?”

“Good,” I say, not knowing what else to give him. My feeble offering falls flat; seas, social interactions make me nervous. “I suppose I’ll head up to Kinn. Is he in his office?”

“Yup. And in a good mood, too,” Jenner says. I can’t tell if he’s glaring at me—the beak reveals nothing.

“That’s good. I’ll see you around?”

“Yup,” Jenner says. “Good skies!” His voice lifts in the second before he launches himself back into the air, a breath of real emotion that reminds me of a satisfying dive. I smile as his shadow retreats to the main university.

“You gonna go?” Pomme asks.

“Of course! I’ve been trying to talk to him for ages. And maybe he’ll have something for me—I heard there was a potential site in the west that might have some salvageable shots.”

“Well, I’m getting too warm, so I’ll come with.”

“Are you—”

“Yes, I’m sure,” Pomme says, rolling her eyes as she anticipates my nervous question. I know I slow her down; we may be the same height, but I’m all torso and tail, while her graceful legs are built to eat ground like I eat mussels. Still, she always chooses to walk with me, though I know sometimes it grates on her.

We head back to the main campus together, me picking my way carefully over the rocky path that she traverses with ease.

“What do you think he wants?” Pomme asks, hopping a little in place. I resist the urge to drop to all fours just to keep pace with her. It’s alright. Running like that only makes me want to wash my hands.

“Not a clue. I hope he’ll have some new photos for me,” I half-sigh, unable to keep the want from my voice.

We say our goodbyes at the foot of the Kism Tree, the building that houses the social science departments. Pomme heads to her office in the technology building, a massive globe of stone a short walk away, while I step through the tree’s massive doors and begin to climb. I don’t hate stairs as much as flat land; with the incline at my back, I can release some of the struggle of holding my tail off the ground. Going down them is a nightmare, of course—one that I try to avoid as much as I can. Unfortunately, the ancient tree building’s elevator is constantly out of service.

Kinn's office is on the fifth floor, and I'm grateful to the strength of my lungs and heart as I reach it. I travel down a short corridor and stop before a dark wood door, upon which is pinned a small comic. The desk beside the office door is empty, implying that Hobin is elsewhere. I take a deep breath, looking for the millionth time at the comic. In it, a young sauro tries his hand at flying with the quetz, then swimming with the mosai, then running with the raptors and other theros, clearly failing at all his attempted vocations. Finally, the character is shown pulling fruit down from a tree for another, smaller saur.

It is captioned: "Find your niche."

I knock.

"Come in!" It's Hobin's voice that answers. I open the door gently.

The dark hallway is pierced at once by white light, the massive abstract curvature of the office's window precisely angled to catch the slowly falling sun. The room is tall and stately, leather and wood and keepsakes from a hundred adventures racing each other over bookcases and side tables. They speak of Kinn's history of fieldwork, a history that first drew me to him as an advisor. The air is full of the scent of warmth and paper, an intoxicating mix. One of Kinn's prized ichthyornis is sitting in a delicate aluminum cage, preening itself.

Hobin has perched himself on Kinn's desk, elegant troodon legs crossed, his brilliant gold-orange plumage caught in the light. He's wearing dark grey pants and a loose matching shawl, large eyes wide with joy. I don't like men, but if I did, well—Hobin would be first on that list. First on anyone's list, according to Pomme.

Kinn is as unlike Hobin as it is possible for a saur to be. He's cera, massive frill and horns making his already large frame seem even larger. He's grinning, fingers together, looking at me like I'm a particularly juicy piece of fruit.

"Sumina! Come in, have a seat," Kinn says, waving me toward one of the chairs sitting before his desk. I settle in, tucking my tail into the chair's too thin tail-gap with care, my heart hammering in my ribcage. "Don't look so nervous! I have great news. Oh, and we missed you at the get-together last Friday."

"I was busy that night," I lie, smiling through my nerves.

I was having a panic attack, actually, and cleaning my apartment until every surface shone. I hadn't even known that Kinn would be there.

"That's a pity. Well, regardless, you'll be missing the next one! And so will I!"

“I...will?”

“Well, I assume so. Here’s the news: a search team has discovered a Relic in one of the far northern islands! It appears to be a full building, partially submerged, but in good shape.”

My heart leaps. I can’t help standing up, hands clasped before my chest.

“That’s wonderful!” I say, grinning. “Do we have pictures?”

“Not a one,” Kinn replies, meeting me smile for smile. “At least, not yet. You and I are going to be taking them!”

My grin turns to an open-mouthed gape. Conscious of my fangs—some saurs find open mosai mouths disconcerting, like extended raptor claws—I snap it shut.

“You want me to come with you? On field work?”

“I do! You published the first speculation on Prior dialects last year—you’re the world’s foremost expert on Prior writing, Sumina! I absolutely must have you at my side.”

“Not Professor Raine, or—”

“No, Raine is much more concerned with early Awakened history, and Lonie is obsessed with his pet theory about religious iconography, and everyone else does *modern* history,” Kinn smiles. “No, my—dear, it’s you! Got to be. So, what do you say?”

I meet his forest eyes, then glance at Hobin, who nods encouragingly. Weeks on the water with saurs I don’t know—

But a real, live Relic, right before me.

“Of course, I’ll go,” I say, before my anxiety can stop me. “When do we leave?”

Kinn grins wider.

“Wonderful! Wonderful. We must move with all haste, to be sure the site is secure—we have tickets on a train from the university station in three days. I trust that’ll be enough time for you to pack and make arrangements?”

“Of—of course,” I stammer, feeling as though my chest is in a vice grip.

“Truly spectacular. With a northern site—the first northern site—why, I imagine your dissertation will be a real hit.”

Hobin holds something out, and I take it. I look down to find that it’s a cup of tea.

Kinn takes his own cup from Hobin and raises it to the sky.

“To new discoveries!”

I raise my cup. A dribble over the side scalds me, but I barely notice.

2: The Sacred Art of Abandoning All Comfort

I return to my apartment in a daze, cracking my knee on the door sharply enough to make me jump, slamming my hand in the process. Teeth bared, I try not to swear too loudly.

Safely inside, I let out a deep breath. My apartment in the graduate dorms is about the size of Kinn's office, but it's home: a bed, a desk, a fridge, a clean little bathroom. Everything a saur could ask for.

Precious as I am about my things, I don't own much. It just ends up being more to clean and more to worry about. It's best to limit that to the essentials. Besides, my computer and my tablet and my phone are all I really need—I spend my free time in the lake or reading or writing bad poems; low-material hobbies, fortunately.

That same austerity means packing will be a breeze. A backpack for my technology and a small suitcase for replacement pants. Maybe a shirt or two in case it gets cold in the evenings. It shouldn't be too hard.

I set my backpack down and flop onto my bed, trying not to scream.

My hand wanders to my phone, lying beside me.

I have Pomme as a pinned contact. She picks up at once.

“Su? What's up? What did he say?”

I pick up a pillow and scream into it.

Pomme's laughter, tinny through the speakers of my phone, fills the silence left when my mouth clicks shut.

“Su?”

“I'm going on a dig,” I say, voice a little hoarse.

“Really? That's amazing!”

“I know,” I moan. “I'm terrified.”

“Aww, Su, you'll be fine! You always are. You're you!”

“Yeah,” I say, smiling. “That's what I'm worried about.”

“How long is it?”

“Three weeks, including travel. We're taking one of the aluminum boats—now *that* I'm looking forward to. I've missed the ocean *so much*.”

“There you go! Water and Relics—your favorite things! Just focus on that.”

I cackle.

“Yeah, you’re right. Seas, you’re so well-adjusted, Pomme. Where do you get it?”

“Brain chemistry, my friend.”

“Ah, I should have guessed.” We laugh together for a moment; I feel some of my tension ease.

“When do you go?”

“In three days. We’ll be back just in time for the new quarter—Kinn is teaching.”

There’s silence on the other end of the line.

“You’re joking.”

“Nope.”

“But you need a proposal—funding—Governor’s council approval!”

“Written, secured, and given. A small team to investigate and confirm the report of the first Relic discovered in the north.”

More silence, then a low whistling.

“He really didn’t give you any notice, did he?”

“Nope. I have no idea how long he’s known, but it obviously can’t have been spur of the moment. He had to do all the things you said, after all. And I read the proposal. It’s not short, even if it says basically nothing.”

“He doesn’t know you at all,” Pomme laughs. “He should have warned you if there was even a chance that he wanted you there.”

“That’s not true,” I say, tail twitching nervously. “He’s the best advisor I’ve ever had. He’s just busy and bad at time management.”

“Okay,” Pomme says. I ignore the generous helping of skepticism in her voice. “Anyway. Are you gonna be alright?”

“I’ll be on the ocean for a week—and another on the way back. Anything is worth that.”

“I’m proud of you,” Pomme says. “You *so* deserve this, Su. You are the best of the best at that weird language stuff. I can’t wait to watch you get a professorship on this.”

“Yeah,” I sigh. “Thanks, Pomme.”

“Lunch tomorrow?”

“You bet. Night,” I say, smiling.

“Night, Su.”

I hang up and return to life with reluctance. I prod at my paper until the sun begins to set in earnest—it remains dead, no matter how much I try to resuscitate it—and give in to a fitful relaxation. The evening passes in a blur. I read something; a book that runs through my brain like a sieve. My mind is on the waves and on the saurs I'll be sharing them with. What will Kinn think? He's never seen me outside of a professional context.

It's just a month. I can pretend to be normal for twenty-odd days, right?

Right?

Before I sleep, I check my locked door, running my fingers over the deadbolt in prayer until I begin to strip the scales from my flesh.

I wake up.

The shadow is dense, the night moonless; even the stars are obscured by clouds. It is not morning. I sense it in my mildew-filled head: it cannot be morning. I feel rather than see my blanket on the floor and my pillows hurled to the side, interpreting the sensations of my neck unsupported and my skin open to the cool air.

Despite the evidence of my body's former motion, I cannot move.

Panic sets in.

I strain at my unresponsive limbs, gasping and drawing no breath. Everything is heavy and yet I cannot even try to lift it.

Will I choke? What is happening to me?

Something moves in the corner of my eye.

There's someone in here with me.

I am going to die here.

I want to scream but I cannot draw breath, I cannot move my mouth, I cannot even turn my eyes to look at the thing—

It is coming nearer.

I try again to move my arms, to defend myself. No matter how hard my mind strains, my muscles remain relaxed. Frustration and terror boil inside me, burning my lungs that cannot seem to draw air.

I'm trying,
I'm trying,
and nothing is working—
my best effort is meaningless—
I am *weak*.

It is coming nearer.

I recognize it, in the shadow, I swear I can see a face, arms, motion,
clicking,
clicking—

I draw breath, and it fades into the night.

I sit bolt upright, once more in control of my body, and stare at the space where it was.
I'm shivering though the night is warm, drawing heavy oxygen into my mouth as if I have just run several miles. I wrap my arms around myself and curl my tail over my feet, burying my head in my knees with my eyes still peeled for any sign of motion.

My sleep paralysis hasn't reared its ugly head since I was back home, doing anything I could to get into college, to get out. Knowing what the experience was doesn't vanish the anxiety, and the terror rushes in my veins still. Shakily, I pull myself out of bed—still checking every corner—and head to the bathroom.

I check my shower, just to be sure.

I check the locked door once again, feel the deadbolt in position.

By the time I drag myself back to bed, my breathing has slowed. I need sleep, I know it—still, it is a long time coming.

In my dreams, I hear it:

Click.

Click.

Click.

The day of the trip arrives, grey and damp.

I have my suitcase in one hand, my backpack over my shoulder, and my phone and wallet in either pocket. I shut and lock the door to my apartment and turn away.

I turn back, grab the doorhandle, jangle it around. It is locked.

I turn away.

Is it locked, though?

I pull out my phone, hit record, and jangle the handle once more. It must be locked; I have it on video.

With a deep breath, I turn away. One month. It's not that long.

I meet Kinn and Hobin, each with their own similar suitcases, at the entrance to Kism. I wave, surprised to see Hobin with luggage.

"Hello, Professor! Hi, Hobin—are you coming with us?"

"I am indeed," Hobin says with a wink as we begin to walk.

The university is connected by solar train to Pangoa, the largest city in the world and the center of the islands, housing some three hundred thousand people—more than half of the saur population. Compared to my hometown of a few thousand, it still dazzles me. Nestled in a beautiful, sheltered cove of Lauris Island, it's about an hours' train ride from Creta, the path of the locomotive a straight shot down the mountains.

"Will we be late?" I ask, looking nervously at the clouds. Trains always run slow on overcast days.

"It doesn't matter; the ship will wait for us," Kinn says. "We're its reason for being there, after all."

"We'll be meeting our guards and the original discoverer at the port," Hobin adds.

"Guards?"

"Don't look so nervous," Kinn laughs. "Just for the local fauna. The Relic is on a wild island; there are some confirmed microraptors. But no need to worry about getting gobbled by a tyrannosaur. The island's too small for that."

I swallow roughly and nod. Hobin pats my shoulder.

Hobin and Kinn strike up a conversation about a book they read together—something about a wizard, right up my alley—as I stare at the sky, eyes fixed on the roiling clouds. I'm struck by the urge to listen to music, but I don't want to be rude, so instead I listen vaguely as Kinn compliments the author's prose.

“What book was it?” I ask at a lull. The pair fall silent at once, exchanging pained glances.

Even with people I’ve known for years, I find a way to make it awkward.

“Our train should be boarding now, let’s hurry,” Hobin says, waving at the station now just ahead of us.

I can’t help but smile a little at the sleek silver snake of the train, its roof lined with solar cells. It’s a small train, largely for cargo coming to the university from the city, with only a few cars for passengers. My first time riding a train was my first visit to Creta, back in my undergraduate years. It feels like a lifetime ago, now.

We settle into the passenger car nearest the head of the train, sitting in one of the empty booths and slotting our luggage into place above us. I check the door twice, jiggling it to make sure that it’s in place. Fortunately, neither Kinn nor Hobin seem to notice my concern.

“Did the discoverer go inside the Relic?” I ask, a shiver of anticipation running through me.

“No,” Kinn says. “We’ll be the very first.”

I can see his eyes gleaming with excitement. Hobin is staring up at him as though Kinn is lit up from within, an expression that makes me want to look away. I could have sworn Kinn was married to a woman, another Cera. I saw them together in undergrad at a couple of school functions.

“We’ll certainly have to send a more thorough team in after us, once we confirm that the site is there and worth the week of travel. But until then—it’s all ours. This is really the opportunity of a lifetime. I’m hopeful,” Kinn says, lowering his voice, “that we’ll get something really good. Some hint of Prior technology, how they managed to move and place the stones they did.”

“What makes you think that?” I ask.

“Two reasons. One, the explorer that found it said this is the biggest Relic she’s ever seen. And two, this is the first we’ve ever found in the north—I just have a good feeling about that. It must be something different.”

I nod solemnly and fall silent, turning over the problem in my mind. At worst, I’ll be able to further investigate my theory about regional dialects. There’s bound to be some scrap of

writing in a Relic as big as this one is supposed to be. At best—we might actually find one of Kinn’s fantasies. And I might get a mention, or even a co-authorship, if I play my cards right.

I stare out the window, gritting my teeth as the train clicks and rolls into motion. For that authorship, I suppose I need to get Kinn to like me. I think he does—I hope he does—but it’s always hard to tell. If it isn’t Pomme or one of my parents, I think they hate me the moment they stop talking to me. I know it’s irrational—if I knew why I thought that I would have fixed whatever I was doing long ago.

Kinn said he wanted a language specialist. Well, I can be one.

I pull my tablet from my bag and start cropping images, comparing known sequences, making two columns: sequences distinctive to and repeated in southern sites and in western sites. I frown at them, willing a flash of inspiration to come.

“What are you up to?” Hobin asks, laying an elegant claw on my tablet.

“I’m comparing my dialects. I want to be sure I can recognize either at a glance—it might help to draw me to distinctive patterns in the northern site.”

“Can I take a look?”

I nod, spinning the tablet around for him to see. He stares at the glyphs for a long moment, then laughs.

“Well, I’m impressed that you can see anything in this at all. They just look like squares to me. But—can I take a look a few more times before we arrive? If I can be of use, I’d love to try. Maybe I can spot something you miss.”

“Certainly,” I say, taking the tablet back. Kinn smiles indulgently at both of us.

“See, that’s why I wanted to take you both—such hard workers. You’re indispensable.”

Hobin frowns at this, but I can’t help but smile.

“Thank you,” I say.

We lapse into silence, and after a few more minutes staring at my glyphs, I turn my attention to the scenery rolling past. We’ve come down out of the mountains into the thick forest surrounding Pangoa, trading in the clouds for brilliant sun, shafts of light dyed green by the plants around us. The trees, not quite so large as the specially bred specimens whose hollowed corpses house parts of Creta, are still massive. I doubt that I could wrap my body around many of them. Conifers make up much of the canopy, but shocks of white flowers dot the undergrowth like stars. Thick trunks drip with lichen and shelter ferns; occasionally, I catch a hint of motion, a

fleeting reminder of the fauna that still calls Lauris home. We wiped out the larger beasts on the main islands—our own un-Awakened ancestors—long ago, with bows and harpoons and the strength of cooperation, but many smaller creatures remain. I’ve never seen a real tyrannosaur, nor a sauropod outside of a farm, but away from the central islands they are said to be as common as beetles.

We saurs live in a bubble, each year expanding a little further into the unknown. The island we are going to is at the very edge of the explored world.

I wonder if I might step too carelessly and fall.

I can’t bring myself to feel too much fear at the prospect of massive predators. I’ve shared the sea with such beasts before, even if I’ve never met one on land. No, I know what a tyrannosaur looks like, what it sounds like, how to evade one: by jumping into the nearest body of water. The prickle in my neck, the itch in my feathers—the unease is the unknown itself, going beyond where my family and friends can reach me. I sometimes want to live alone, but I certainly don’t want to die that way.

The train hitches a little as it eases into Pangoa. We pass the first sign of habitation, the vast expanses of farms that keep the city and Creta fed. The necks of kept sauropods arch into the distance above rolling fields of palms and cycads, looking like tree trunks stripped by their own teeth. Sauropod meat is expensive—it takes decades to rear one to full size. I’ve never had a taste for it anyway. I prefer fish. Sauropods come just a little too close to home.

We glide on into the city proper, slipping below ground into a broad tunnel. The windows flick to black, and I turn back to my fellow passengers, lifting my arms above my head to shake out their stiffness.

“Shall we?” Hobin asks, as the train squeals to a stop in the station. I nod, standing and taking my luggage from the rack above. I clutch tightly to my backpack as we move from the near-empty train car to the melee of saur bodies outside, the heat of life hitting me like the ground after a fall. Every species is represented: immense sauros, standing nearly twice my height; theros with feathered crests flashing mouths full of teeth; cera like Kinn, their frills and often adorned with elaborate fabric-and-feather sculptures; and raptors and troodon scurrying around between the larger saurs, making up for their small stature with vibrant color and speed. I even spot someone who might be part mosai, though we are a bit rarer—much like the quetz. With limited crossbreeding, smaller population sizes are inevitable.

Hobin grabs my hand. I squeeze it; he winks at me and squeezes back.

I decide that he is, officially, my friend.

“Onward!” Kinn shouts, forging a path through the crowd. They part easily for the massive cera, and Hobin and I scurry along in his wake, grinning nervously at each other.

I admit that my deep breath after reaching open air is not just a reflection of the heat of the subway.

We spill out onto the broad street and join a far less dense crowd flowing away from the central station. No matter how many times I come to the city, it still manages to awe me, with its wide avenues centered with trees and buildings even larger than those at Creta. We pass one of my favorites—a delicate stack of glass domes—and I grin. Pomme and I have some excellent photos of us in that building after hours, having discovered one of the side doors unlocked. It’s a beautiful vantage from which to watch the city lights.

A breeze heavy with the scent of salt hits me, and I jump into the air, jerking Hobin’s hand as I do. I drop it, fingers shaking.

“Excited for the Relic?” Hobin asks.

“The ocean,” I breathe, saying it with more reverence than I intended.

“You’re mosai, Sumina, right?” Kinn asks, looking around at us.

“Three-quarters, yes.”

“Wonderful! I think it’s always good luck to have someone who’s a decent swimmer on a boat.”

Something bothers me about that, but I brush it aside.

“You must be so thrilled,” Hobin says. “Jura Lake can’t be enough for you.”

“Not nearly,” I nod, smiling. “I hope I get to swim a little.”

“We’ll see,” Kinn frowns. “I’d like to be off at once if the rest of our crew are there.”

“Of course,” I say, swallowing my disappointment. It’s not as though I had really expected to have a chance to swim. To simply be near to the ocean is a pleasure.

We crest a hill and the port of Pangoa comes into view, a forest of masts and a sea of wooden and aluminum decks. Massive piers, wider than the road on which we stand, are filled with saurs loading and unloading cargo. I know enough to guess at some of it; metals, quartz and other minerals from the eastern mines, and specialty woods and plants from the north. From the

south—my home—pearls and coral and massive vats of seaweed-derived chemicals, as well as the spoils of mosai hunts—shark teeth, nautilus shells, sea turtles kept on ice.

Beyond the ships stretches the cove, and beyond that, the dark, endless sea.

For the first time in three days, I don't feel like throwing up on the spot.