

## Prologue

Canvas tent flaps stirred from their rest as a light breeze parted the veil between worlds. From the streaks far above, life and time intertwined once more, coming together in a sudden flash of yellow and red brilliance to paint the sky with echoes of another change in the cycle. Since lifeforms could first cast their eyes skyward, simple beings had marveled at the dance of twinkling forms above them, spurring their minds to wonder at what the dance meant, or who had composed the music for the endless waltz which played out each night.

This world was like so many gathered near a shining ball of energy, full of life and change, some creatures carrying a true purpose while others a pure set of instinctual survival techniques honed over centuries of evolutionary steps. Its inhabitants, made of star matter, worked for many eons to appropriate the most of whichever thing the collective put importance on, most failing to see the true nature of what it meant to even draw breath.

Time and perspective gave life the opportunity to react slower, dilating the need for immediate reaction, a state of mind which stemmed the tide of irrational or under-educated ideas. For Vona, this was the path she'd chosen to walk during this world's current state, knowing many had come before it and, with proper care, many might come afterward.

Patience on the path was a lifelong pursuit, one she had not always adhered to.

A short stream of steam exited the, white ceramic port of the kettle near her feet, drawing each of Vona's extradimensional senses back to the present. Collecting her form into a suitable one for the arriving visitor, she stopped to smell the glowing, violet teabag packed with a mix of fragrant aromas. Its main component - *regulae* - took root far from here, but, much like her, had traveled through the ether to make the collection of hardened mass home. Subtle pleasures sustained her while the cycles passed from one to another, and the peace of knowing what would come to pass cradled her as she reached for the bright, white cup.

Countless cycles stood behind her, fraught with change and painful exile from her homeland. The rocks here told tales of what they'd seen come to pass, moving and reshaping the surface over time. Few could speak with the plants and mountains, but those who did knew the truth. Life had come back to this world, but never truly left its shores or inland reservations. Even creatures which walked the grounds around her tent had not always been here, leaving for a period time to return by means Vona did not know.

Humanity was no longer a steady current of one or even five lines, as it was when she'd arrived here. Like a budding field of Dymaxian flowers, each would grow their own color of petal, in hope their seed would take hold and flourish. As the cycles ticked by, humanity did their best to mete out an existence together, casting aside their differences to embrace the reality of this new Ninth World. Minor squabbles over facial features and love interests became second to the need for survival, but along with a reshaped world came reshaped beings.

Consciousness was no longer cloistered inside the grey matter of a series of species, with eons cultivating a multitude of fresh seeds into terrifying swaths of intelligent creatures. Medium and ecosystem were irrelevant to these evolved species, many thriving in places humanity could neither travel nor survive in. Even the word humanity was subjective, Vona thought, slipping the kettle from its metal burner base, as humans no longer held a dominant foothold on the path this world would take. Change was constant, and with events moving forward around her, action would be required.

Long, flowing robes pushed through the canvas veil, parting the silence with an ambient hum. Draped across a wide frame, the robes ran up to a metal cap, accented with dark, beveled glass in an oval shape where its face would have been. On two different occasions the strange Philethis had visited her, each time more interesting than the last. Vona wasn't sure what it wanted, assaulting her with a barrage of questions with no connective links she could ascertain. In all the stories she'd heard of them, the beings were never in one place long, choosing to blink out of existence after they had their answers.

Gliding forward, the oval window stared straight ahead, never acknowledging her presence.

"What was the substance you found under the rock one hundred and eighty two years ago near the coast?"

The voice was monotone and even, never varying in pitch or timbre, but still held an underlying inquisitive nature. Communication with one, as true interaction was never gained, remained on their terms. Vona had asked questions before, but the Philethis either hadn't known the answer or deemed her fit enough to hear it.

"The fossilized remains of a toad."

Vona could still see the broken halves of the rock, washed ashore after a storm had battered the coast near Kaparin. The long walk along the sandy beach had given her time to think after a tumultuous period in her life. Coming to this planetoid required a great expenditure of energy from her vessel, which was lost over the sky when she arrived. Beaten by the secret fires which protected the planet it, her formless spirit landed in the salty waters below, forcing her into hibernation while she healed. Time passed without markers in the dark depths, with no visitors to coax her back to consciousness. She'd snapped awake one moment and floated to shore, taking on the form of the first biological she'd seen, a long-snouted razorfish with yellow-flecked scales.

Once the surface world came into view, Vona grew the proper appendages and walked from the water to land, inspecting her new surroundings. Naked and alone, she stepped over a smooth rock, unearthing the fossil as her first find in the Ninth World. Much had changed since that day on the beach, and if her prior experience with the eccentric visitant was any gauge, the queries would only get stranger.

"What purpose do you play in the life cycle of this world," Vona asked, curious if she could glean something from its visit.

"The machine sleeps, but the key is ready. Prepare yourself."

Letting a long sigh pass through her lips, the wise woman of White Lake added to the list of sporadic statements she'd heard. There were so many factors in deciphering what it said, or what the Philethis meant by its answer. Vona picked up the long, white reed next to her cooling kettle, transcribing the words on yellowed parchment. Even with the catalogue memory she relied on, visualizing the words were sometimes not enough. Short strokes against the paper forced the black tetrahedra feather to dip and rise with each word she created, giving her tea time to steep.

"Why did you agree to send a seedling south twenty-two years ago?" the mechanized voice rattled out.

Settling the white reed down onto her black mat, Vona dragged her reflective fingertips across the red lines which marked her right hand. Her body was merely a vessel, a pod to deliver critical genetic data from her previous world to this one. She'd walked this section of the continent, pulling formless shapes from within, and planting them beneath the surface to grow. For many cycles her children flourished, learning and developing relationships with the humans who made the west their home. From the waters of the ocean she'd landed in to the far reaches of the Black Riage Mountains, they'd crafted the nine nation contingent called the Steadfast.

Each of her seeds found a place within a different community, amassing knowledge which she received through transmissions built into her body. As cycles passed on, the information came too quickly, with the seeds flourishing into families of their own. The data was overwhelming in size and scope; Vona struggled to remember everything they'd imparted to her. Sleep cycles became impossible, as words and images were sent in greater abundance. When she could no longer retain her own daily thoughts, she left the safety of her secret place and, with a despondent heart, terminated the nine seeds in order of appearance.

Her path afterwards led her east beyond the Riage, to live and exist in the outcast spaces of the Beyond, named solely for its difference to the area controlled by the Steadfast. Quiet contemplation wrapped around her body, forming a thick shield of isolation, as she trudged through the data left behind. Vona wept as only a mother could for what her children had given her, their gifts of memory stored away in the fiber of her being.

In those darkest days, beasts of unimaginable power roamed the lands, preying on the weak and weary. One night she was beset upon by a foul-smelling, flying reptile, with twin sets of wings holding aloft its large body. With her innate power over the lifetrain, Vona rent its flesh, pulling apart the massive red scales while the beast roared. Back and forth they fought, with no clear victor in sight. Each wound she made in the thick hide was healed seconds later, and Vona feared her long journey might be at an end.

In the dark of night, a light came from over the hill, spilling hope into her heart once again. Its bearer brought wisdom and cunning, fending the beast off long enough for Vona to recover. Her champion, gilded in bronze plates and unerring compassion, ferried her to safety without desire for a reward. Around the campfire that night, she promised him she would repay him with the one thing she could provide: knowledge.

“He saved me without a care for his own safety or need of reward. Selflessness is the highest form of charity.”

A low tone came from within the column of purple robes in front of her, the purple folded robes of her guest, signaling it was prepared to leave. Pulling the soft paper bag from her white cup, Vona placed it on the mat, staring down at the glowing, purple liquid as it swirled. Time was not the ultimate hunter those around her made it out to be, but it was the lone master she was forced to serve. Committing to her plans would be hard, yet rewarding, if only to see another seed bloom again.