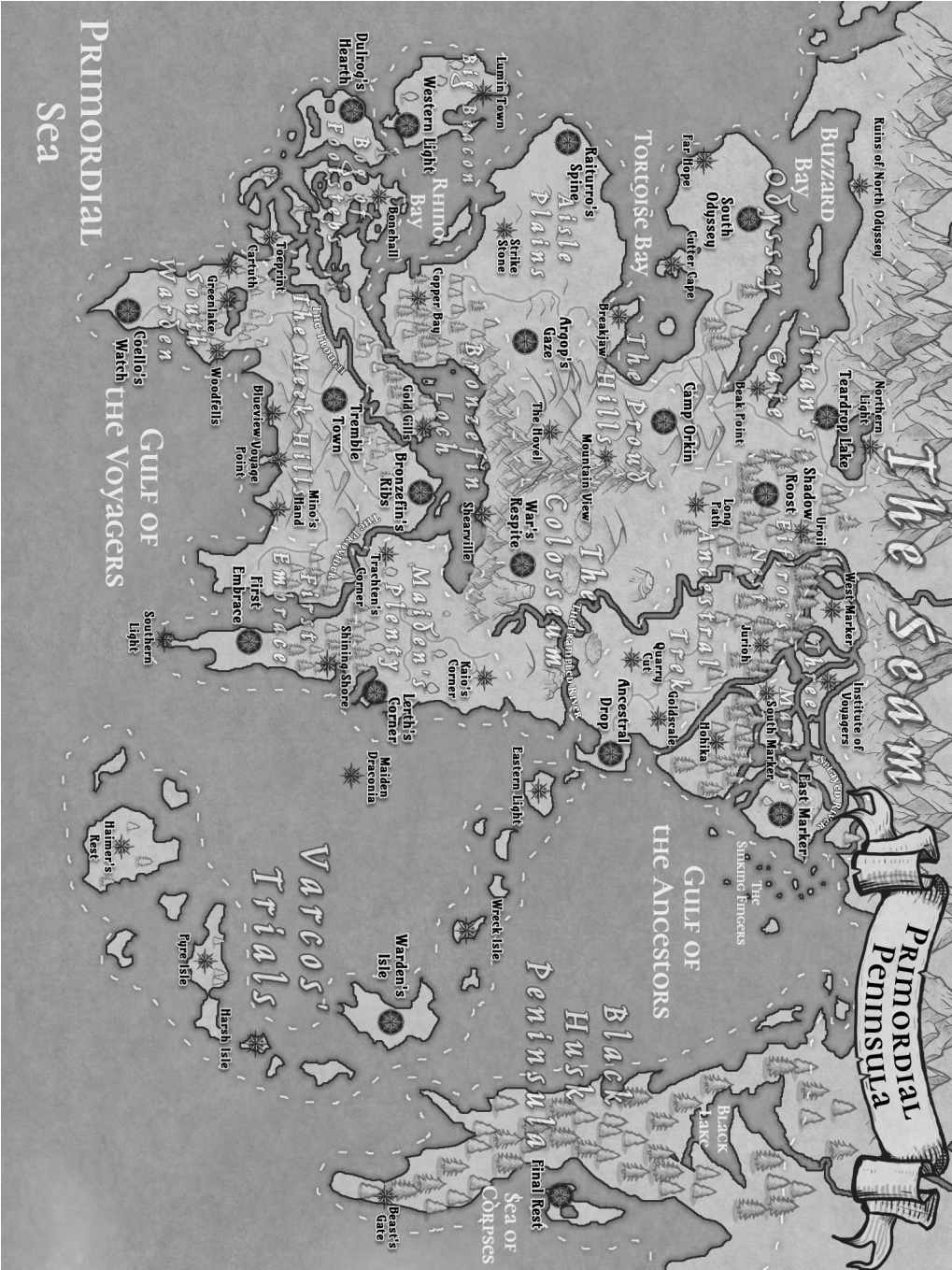


Primordial Peninsula

..... Book I

Warden of The Shore

Ted Agriogianis



..... Luminous Arkin

Prologue

The earthquakes had not subsided by the time Arkin awoke on the fifth day. Maybe it was just his imagination, but the trembles seemed to be getting worse. The intervals remained the same however; once every fifteen seconds.

It was one of these impacts that pulled the young guide's eyes open. He held his stare on the pale cream ceiling above him, watching as clouds of dust were disturbed with every quake. Thin rays of light from the early morning sun streamed in from the hazy windows. There were two, both located close to the ceiling on one of the four walls, though there wasn't much in the room to illuminate. Arkin could hear a few birds chirping in the distance, but otherwise, there was no noise save for the consistent disturbance caused by the quakes. For fifteen seconds at a time, the world was still and quiet.

The novice guide sat up from his modest bed and turned to his side, tossing the blanket from his stout frame and dangling his short legs off the side. Once his feet were on the ground, there could no longer be any doubt. *The trembles are getting worse.* He gazed at his feet, the loose white material of his bed robes fluttering around them as the room jumped up and down. He held his arms out to balance himself, swaying side to side. *I'm just disoriented is all, the room isn't actually moving.*

Once he was stable enough to stand unassisted, Arkin crossed the cold tiled floor of his chamber, the impact of his feet echoing sharply around the bare living space. Arkin had begun to keep a count in his

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head over the course of the week. *Twenty-four steps. I can make twenty-four steps before the creature could make one.* Luminous Seraf had been quick to sort out an updated calculation once the trembles began, comparing footstep intervals and body mass. Using data from other creatures, big and small alike, he attempted to predict the size of the source. Arkin didn't like to dwell on the number the elder guide announced to the rest of the institute.

Luminous Arkin reached the vanity that stood opposite his bed. On it was a simple assortment of creams and fragrances, arranged in wooden bowls and dusty glass bottles, all positioned haphazardly around a porcelain washbasin and a jug of water. The only other accessories present were a polished straight razor, a damp cloth, and a wooden comb. *My earthly possessions.* Arkin splashed water into his hand and threw it onto his face. When the excess drained away, he stared ahead into the mirror in front of him. It was minuscule and crudely made, his face barely visible in the dark glass, and a thin crack was forming across its surface. *Hopefully Luminous Marwin has been working on perfecting his mirror making techniques these past few years.*

Arkin took note of his neckline, no longer as taut as the day he arrived at the institute. His eye sockets had begun to darken and sag as well. He was getting older, living out his adulthood in a stuffy series of halls, offices, and libraries.

Arkin grabbed a handful of the thick black whiskers that were creeping along his square chin. He always had to shave twice a day, and as the years added up, it seemed harder to control his facial hair. The guides of the institute needed to stay clean shaven, however, so he kept his razor sharp. The quakes didn't make the task any easier, and he was running out of bandages. With a dab of ointment and a careful touch, the task was complete and Arkin moved on to combing his hair. The hair on his head was thick and black, always kept in a long ponytail. *They may take my beard, but I will keep locks where it counts.* It didn't matter much, as he was required to wear the necessary garb of a Guide of the Light. His hair was seldom seen in its entirety.

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Arkin crossed the room once again to a tall wardrobe, the last of the room's three pieces of furniture. Inside were seven outfits, all identical. Seven yellow robes hung from a rod, swaying as yet another tremble shook the institute. Seven headdresses sat folded on an upper shelf. On the floor of the wardrobe sat an ornate wrought-iron lantern, of which there was only one.

The guide lazily stepped out of his bed robes and changed into his uniform. When he was finished, he stood back from the small mirror and beheld himself. Arkin was almost short enough to fit completely within the view of the mirror from across the room. However, the details remained impossible to read. He saw a man standing before him, wearing yellow robes trimmed with a forest green around the tail and cuffs. A green banner hung around his neck, two tails draping down to his stomach and displaying the image of a lighthouse on each. On his head, a limp green headdress drooped over his ears and neck, the intricate layers of fabric making the whole accessory resemble a dead eagle. *Slightly more dead than the men that roamed these halls.* Golden sun rays flared out from the forehead in a half circle, all protruding from the sculpt of an alien creature's pointed face.

It would have been the most ostentatious aspect of the outfit, had it not been for the lantern. The simple iron frame was covered at every corner by golden filigree, and accented by golden eyes and smooth spikes protruding from the top, his own personal distinctions. Inside were three tall candles, staggered across the height of the lantern, the wax an expensive recipe designed to burn longer and brighter.

Arkin took the small candle he kept by his bed and lit it with a flint. Slowly, he brought the flame to the wicks of the holier candles and set them ablaze. He watched himself in the mirror as he performed the final task of his morning routine, yet he felt wholly disconnected from the man he saw before him. The guide felt as though he was simply mimicking the image in the glass, the image of an older man, one who belonged in this strange place and had no qualms concerning the strange rituals that took up most of his day. With the mirror shaking on its moorings with every tremble, the face

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in the glass was impossible to make out at such a distance. *Surely that can't be me.*

The novice guide exited his chamber to face the rest of the building he called home. Right outside his door was a courtyard built in the exact center of the institute. Walkways circled the open area, with ornately carved wooden pillars placed every few feet separating outside from inside. There were dozens of doors around the courtyard, all living quarters for the guides, yet Arkin knew that most of them were unoccupied. In the courtyard stood a tall, ancient tree. Its trunk twisted in three different directions before exploding at the top into a jungle of gnarled branches and patchy leaves. The bark was mostly grey, with a few patches of brown mixed in. At its base, a small assortment of flowers populated the grassy ground, though they were shrouded in a thin layer of morning mist that streamed in from atop the interior walls.

The other guides seemed to barely notice the impacts, walking about the halls of the institute without so much as a flinch as the ground shook beneath them. Most were older than Arkin, desensitized to such abnormal happenings, and perhaps less afraid of collapsing ceilings and split floors. Most wore similar garb to his, yet others wore green robes with yellow accents, with a much smaller lantern affixed to their belts. They were missionaries, most either set for travel to far off cities and towns, or just returning from lengthy stays. *Sometimes I think they are intentionally trying to confuse me with these color choices.*

Fewer still were the beacons, the elite of the guides, who dressed in royal blue with orange accents. They carried their lanterns on their back, four foot tall monstrosities of complex ironwork and gold inlays. The massive structures housed over a dozen candles, all of which had to be maintained throughout the day. *How do they do it; carting around such great burdens?* The task seemed even more monumental as most of the men distinguished enough to earn the title of beacon were elderly, hunched over in their advancing age before the iron instrument was ever placed on their backs. The venerable men ended up with the height of a young girl, and heads jutting forward like a bird of prey.

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Arkin strode through the halls of the institute, following the same path he followed every morning, left then right, then two lefts, and finally up a flight of stairs. The walls of the structure raced by him as he hurried to his destination, the gilded frames of the hundreds of portraits that lined the halls standing stark against the deep blue paint that covered every surface. Arkin rarely stopped to examine the paintings themselves. *Old men. Old, dead men is all.* His shoes echoed loudly against the hardwood floor, traveling around every corner and bouncing off the high ceiling. Occasionally, Arkin would look up to see the massive chandeliers that lined every stretch of the institute as they raced by above him. Arkin had nearly gone mad trying to count all the candles on each of the chandeliers. *Yet the servants climb up there and light every one of them before the sun sets in the evening.*

The final flight of stairs transformed at the top into a spiral pattern of steps that snaked up a wide tower. Once at the top, Arkin could see seven of his fellow guides gathered around the perimeter of the tower's highest floor. They were all facing inwards, yet the second the novice's head breached the stairway exit, they swiveled toward the exterior. *Late as usual. Only because I value the benefits of sleep and patience.*

Arkin found his way to the empty slot in the midst of the ring of guides and held his lantern aloft. The head of the tower was open at all eight sides with massive arched windows. There was no glass, nor a railing, only the open air between him and the angled roof of the institute below. The other guides followed suit as well, except they stepped right up to the edge of the tower, their toes dangling off the lip, holding their lantern far out into the morning air. The novice guide preferred to hang back a couple feet and perform the ritual at a safe distance. Without a single word of instruction, the men at the perimeter of the tower began to chant in droning harmony.

*Luminous are those who light the path of weary travelers.
Luminous are those who accept the mantle of guide, leading men
and women to places unknown. Luminous are those who stand as
beacons of light in lands of darkness and solitude. We shall
await. We stand vigil. We stand on the edge of humanity, looking
inward, looking outward. Our minds are open; our minds are*

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enlightened; so as to pass the world's knowledge unto you in a time of great confusion. Whenst thou arrive on our shores, we shall await. A first embrace, an anchor within the sea of giants, a friend for the road ahead. Dots of light at the feet of the colossi, trekking forward endlessly into the high wilderness. North, south, east, west. It is you we watch for. You most of all. We shall await. We shall await. We shall await.

The novice guide had remembered the words well enough, but they still felt queer leaving his lips. *Awaiting what? No one has arrived on our shores for centuries.* Yet wait they did after the words were said. The guides were required to wait for an hour, lighting the way with their lanterns, as promised.

Arkin had joined the institute in pursuit of knowledge, yet now he found himself promising to aid imaginary visitors in exploring the peninsula. He believed that the men of the Institute of Voyagers would be less pious than those of the Lights, but he was mistaken. The constant rituals and prayers left limited time for him to crack open one of the ancient tomes found in the institute's many libraries.

Still, the knowledge that Arkin had found had been worth the effort. The guides of the institute had been recording their findings for hundreds of years, and for those who didn't bother to write their great deeds down, Arkin was able to convince them to regale their tales in person. They told of brave journeys north, and ships captained along the far coasts. There were detailed descriptions of every primordial on the peninsula, as well as those lost to time, and those found far beyond the cliffs of the Seam. This information could never be shared outside of the institute, but as a guide, Arkin could drink right from the source. *The occasional chants and mandatory meditation is a small price to pay for limitless information.*

The quakes had certainly sobered Arkin. A price comes with being the most knowledgeable men in the realm. *I'm bound to encounter something truly unknown.* Something was coming down from the mountains, slowly but surely. Back in the south, Arkin would have heard tales and rumors about the creature, which eventually would have turned into facts. He would have been treated to vivid descriptions of the colossus, and morbid accounts of the beast kicking

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over grand cities. Whether he believed it or not, the story would be hundreds of miles away, none of his concern. Now, something was coming straight for them, from the unreachable wilds beyond the Seam, meaning Arkin and his fellow guides would be the first to lay eyes on something completely unforeseen.

From his western perch in the tower, Arkin had a grand view of the Cleaved Mountain. The name was no exaggeration. The southern face of the mountain was a few degrees short of being flat. It would have been considered a plateau, if the rest of the peak wasn't tall and sheer. The division was harsh, marked by a vertical cliffside of pale stone. As he gazed at the mountain, it wasn't hard to imagine a massive titan ramming his fist through the rock, swiping the southern face into the wilderness at its feet. Arkin could see a few large spires of stone poking through the trees at the base of the peak. He could imagine the great boulders flying through the air, straight at him as he stood in his tall tower. *Stories seem so fantastical until their marks stand before you.*

To the southwest, the thousand branches of the Splayed River stretched across the land, its waters glistening in the morning light. Several small villages dotted the hundreds of islands, often consisting of a few small buildings and a barn. Many of the islands were dedicated to crop fields and cattle enclosures. There was no shortage of space and fertile land on the numerous banks of the forked river. If this area wasn't so far north, and subject to chills, fog, and terrifying omens, perhaps more people would have migrated here.

Three islands took up a consequential portion of the foothills. Only one was visible from Arkin's perch. Similar to its two siblings, West Marker was a high hill, sparse of trees, yet abundant in tall grass. As large as they were, the Three Markers were unpopulated, though it was no mystery as to why.

Standing at the peak of the hill was a massive pole, carved of some great tree over a thousand feet tall, and plunged into the hard stone as if it was sand. The shaft was crudely detailed in rings and bevels, as if crafted by a wood carver short a hand. However, the wood carver would have had to have been five hundred feet tall to perform such a monumental task. The head of the marker branched outward

haphazardly in every direction, like the mast of a great ship crafted by a drunk builder with an affinity for crows nests. Hanging from the nest of branches appeared to be white stones of various shapes and sizes. From this distance they seemed only the size of horses, swaying in the wind like pebbles. But Arkin had ventured to the base of the marker, and seen them in detail. They weren't the size of horses, more like entire castle keeps and fishing vessels. And they weren't stones, they were bones. Robust skulls, stout limb bones, and thin ribs all hung from the masts, all alien in form and texture. *I have no desire to go back there, so I fault no one for refusing to build a house at the base of any of the markers.*

From the tower of the institute, a building that stood on a high hill of its own, Arkin could see far off into the land beyond. The western edge of the Splayed River was encircled by the sheer peaks of the Hooked Ridge, yet the southern edge was wide open. On a clear day, sometimes he could see far across to the tall trees of Eiflroc's Nest. Today was not a clear day, however, so the morning mist surrounded the whole river in a dense cloud.

Arkin was thankful for his western post. His brothers at the eastern side of the tower must have gotten bored of their post. Looking out at the sea always made the novice guide queasy. Black Husk Peninsula was too far to see, so the Gulf of Man appeared endless. The thrill of seeing the mountains of the Seam disappear into the horizon wore off quickly, and the stones of the Sinking Fingers jutting from the sea never moved as the stories led Arkin to believe. He preferred the quaint towns and rustling trees of the west.

Whatever enjoyment Arkin normally had at his post was absent recently, ever since the trembling started. Now he felt nauseous, as the quivering of the institute was even more apparent at this height. The guide was thankful when the bells of the north tower chimed, signaling the end of their vigil.

Arkin descended the stairs with his fellow guides, yet paused at the bottom as the rest dispersed around the institute. He was granted a few hours to himself before the mid-day vigil, yet as he watched the halls vibrate before him, Arkin knew he couldn't stomach a book at

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that moment. *This cannot be ignored any longer.* Resolved, he set off for the north wing of the institute.

It seemed Arkin wasn't the only one who had the same idea. Radiant Jerl's office door was ajar when the novice guide arrived, and inside he could hear the voices of dozens of men. He could not see the old beacon when he pushed the door open, as he was surrounded by taller guides arguing amongst themselves around his desk. Many men held books in place of their lanterns. A collection of the devices sat in the corner of the office. Arkin had forgotten the guides were human, just like him. It had been a while since he had seen any emotions or rapid movement from the old men.

Arkin found his place among the men, their conversations becoming clearer as he settled into the sea of bodies. They were all talking about the earthquakes, yet that's where the similarities ended. Some were fearful, others curious, some overjoyed. A few of the younger men wanted to assemble a scouting party to meet the creature in the mountain pass. However a new division erupted when some wanted to study it from safely behind a stray rock, and others wanted to stand before it, preaching and praising. The oldest men, patient as always, shied away from such talk of scouts and missions, stating that the creature would be at the institute soon enough.

Jerl was hunched over his desk, holding his hands before him as he meekly tried to quell the voices of his guides, stuttering along the way. "Brothers. Lights of the institute. Please be-be silent." He was the oldest member of the institute, his face sagging as if it was ready to slough right off his skull. Deep purple bags hung under his blue eyes, and his jowls hung so low his jawline was rectangular. Drooping nearly as low was his long and bulbous nose, veiny and covered in warts.

"Silent?" challenged one of the guides. "Perhaps your senses have left you, Radiant Jerl, but the earth is moving. Things have not been silent in days."

Jerl sat still for a moment before letting loose a quiet chuckle. *Perhaps his body needed to prepare for such a monumental task.* "I'm sorry, I guess I must have been mis-mistaken."

A murmur of confusion swept the crowd.

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"I was under the impression you all lived on this rock we, we call home. I believe the common people call it the Primordial Peninsula. I wonder why it was named such. Oh yes, my memories haven't failed me completely. It is called that be-because colossal primordials roam the land, as plentiful and as common as the clouds in the sky. Yet it seems that a new one entering our borders has caused somewhat of a-a-a hullabaloo."

The rest of the guides shuffled nervously, many sharing shamed glances amongst their colleagues.

Jerl continued his rant. "You lot act like you've never felt the powerful wi-wind as a primordial swiped its foot past you, or had the sun blotted out as one of the creatures mo-moseyed through like a summer storm. The only thing different about the primordial approaching us at this mo-moment is that we have never seen it before. A moment like this, the arrival of a new soul, has most likely occurred hundreds of times over the course of this land's ancient hi-history. Humans have only lived on this peninsula for two centuries, a small speck on the incomprehensible timespan that built this strange place into what it is now. So, bro-brothers. Let's be civil, and ba-bask in the fact that we are fortunate enough to stand witness to such a monumental event. The arrival of a new primordial, a new face, a new friend, or a new f-foe."

"What if it walks straight over the institute, Radiant Jerl?" Arkin asked, finally breaking his silence. "Centuries of knowledge and study, gone in an instant."

"Well," the old man responded with a raspy chuckle laced into the words. "I suppose we can't say we weren't given fair warning. Whatever its goal may be, it is our duty as guides and beacons to welcome it. Do you think we say the words in reference to only humans?"

Jerl held his arms outward and closed his eyes. "Wanderer from the north. Though we are but visitors to this land ourselves, we welcome you to our home. You will have your guides, I swear it. May your journey be fruitful and safe."

As both him and the rest of the guides fell silent, Arkin was able to at once feel the shift; small, but impossible to ignore. It can't be.

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Night hasn't even fallen yet. Why would it be happening so quickly, unless... As Arkin and the other guides had been standing in Jerl's office, a period of only about ten minutes, the quakes had gotten worse. They were no longer trembles, they were deep impacts that rattled his brain and vibrated his teeth with every step.

Whatever quiet Jerl had created was gone once the other guides had the same realization. The frantic exclamations and nervous pacing returned at once. If Radiant Jerl noticed as well, he didn't betray it.

Arkin's nausea had gotten worse as well, joined now by a splitting headache. The novice guide quietly slipped through the crowd and exited Jerl's office. Once again he found himself standing aimless in the hallway, watching the chandeliers shake with every tremble. *Maybe today I'll go back to sleep. Maybe tomorrow things will be okay.* Although, after a few seconds, he realized he had only one place to go.

He made his way towards the western wing of the institute, and once again he was not alone in his decision. One by one, men in cloaks of every color joined him in the trek, eventually forming another crowd, yet this time everyone's mouth was shut tight. They funneled through the thin hallways like a yellow and green river, speckled by blue and gold. Soon enough, the quakes had gotten so violent, some guides lost their balance and fell to their knees. Their colleagues were kind enough to help them up, yet no words were exchanged.

At the end of the final hallway, Arkin and the other guides streamed out of the tall double doors that led to the exterior of the institute. They fanned out across the green hill and looked towards the Cleaved Mountain. The foot steps were so loud there could be no doubt the creature they belonged to was right on top of them. They would see it from that hill, so all they had to do was wait, just as Jerl said.

The mountain looked even larger from the ground, even though Arkin still stood on a high hill. It resembled a colossal stone throne facing the lands to the south. Perhaps some primordial hundreds of thousands of years in the past sat on the mountain and ruled its

smaller brethren. *Maybe this new primordial has come to take the seat.* At first, Arkin imagined the massive creature sitting on the crude throne, which almost got a chuckle out of the novice guide. However, that image was soon replaced by one much more terrifying. Arkin imagined the primordial bursting through the mountain, once again sending massive chunks of stone into the air. He imagined the institute and all his fellow guides being crushed under a rainfall of house-sized boulders.

Instead there was just a hand.

The hand was massive, larger than the wall of the institute that faced the side of the hill, yet it appeared silently over the crest of a smaller mountain next to the large cleaved one. Each grey finger was covered in dark scales and ended in a distinct point. Those fingers gripped the rock face, cracking the stone under the immense force of the creature's grip. A few seconds later, the sounds reached Arkin's ears, as if the Earth was about to split open. Soon another hand appeared, latching on the mountain to the right of the first. *Is it two hundred feet away from the first, or one thousand? It's so hard to say.*

Two quakes rocked the earth after both hands found their perch. Arkin realized it was the feet of the primordial bracing against the mountain. The mountain groaned its heavy sigh as the hands gripped tighter.

The upper body of the colossus thrust up suddenly from behind the eastern face of the mountain, as if a new, darker mountain had grown suddenly from the first. The creature's ribcage was slender, grey skin pulled taut against the rows and rows of curved bone, more ribs than a human would number. The creature's sternum protruded outward like a hood over its abdomen, which was so slender Arkin wondered how it supported the primordial at all. Massive dark scales flared upward from the creature's torso towards the shoulders, creating what resembled a frilled collar accenting the creature's neck and arms. Its arms were similarly slender and scaly, with countless slivers of muscles flexing and stretching as the primordial found its footing on the mountain side.

The colossus vaulted over the peaks as if it were emerging from a massive bush. It flung its legs over sideways, its thin waist swiveling

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with ease. As the legs descended to the hills at the foot of the mountain, Arkin realized with dread there were four of them. *I don't think Luminous Seraf accounted for that.* The legs hit the ground, and the earth spun four times. Half of the guides standing on the hill fell over, many shrieking as they went down. Arkin somehow held his footing, though he nearly bit his tongue clean off. *Damn you Arkin,* he cursed himself as he tasted the blood in his mouth. *Keep your mouth shut next time.* However Arkin knew that there probably would never be a next time. That was the worst of the tremors. The creature had arrived.

The primordial regained its posture as Arkin helped an older guide to his feet. Seraf had stated with certainty the new primordial would be around six hundred feet tall. It must have been twice that height. The top of the creature reached half way to the peak of the mountain it had just descended from. Its head swiveled around, silently surveying the land. The creature's skull was just as slender as its body, complete with a pointed jawline, though it did not appear to have a mouth. Its face was covered in large, smooth scales, like armor around its chin and mouth. The primordial's forehead was dominated by a singular crest, complete with spikes and curves flaring upward. *Like my headdress. Maybe it will think I'm its mother.* The crest acted as a hood over the creature's eyes. *If it had any at all.* The location of the eye sockets was completely shrouded in darkness.

From behind the crest, thick black hair flowed in every direction, covering the creature's shoulders and upper back. Arkin had seen primordial hair before, felt it even. Each strand was almost as thick as his wrist, and coarse to the touch. The flowing mane on the new colossus was probably as thick and as deadly as a jungle. The creature eventually rested its shrouded eyes on the guides standing on the hill. It keeps its gaze for several minutes, most likely seeing humans for the very first time. Arkin was aware primordials had no known sexual characteristics, yet he would be a fool to deny this one was feminine. Its shoulders were arched backwards elegantly, and its neck was tall and smooth. *It is almost... beautiful.*

When the primordial was done surveying the curious sight of a hundred old men with wide eyes on a hill, it began walking forward.

Arkin barely took notice of the trembling earth, remaining fixated on the creature's limbs as it moved. Each of the four legs was fully armored and ended in a sharp point, just like its fingers. They dug into the earth with every step, leaving a trail of ditches several yards deep. They were dotted with angular scales that extended above the knee, each limb having a unique crown of spikes at their highest point. They were connected to the armored waist with thinner, unarmored thighs, spanning horizontally like grey bridges of flesh. Each appendage twisted and swiveled from the lower torso like some strange machine pushing the creature across the foothills with ease.

As the primordial walked past the institute, Arkin noticed it had two additional arms as well. *Or is it only one.* Two biceps protruded from the creature's abdomen, yet the forearms came together in front of its chest, connected by a solid and bulbous bundle of scales that either covered its hands, or *was* its hands. *Is this thing... praying? No, the extra appendages serve some evolutionary purpose we cannot comprehend yet.* Perhaps it was a weapon, the perfect tool for bludgeoning its prey.

The primordial was heading due south, looking straight ahead as it strode over the hundred isles of the Splayed River. Soon it became clear the creature was heading straight for a small village a couple miles away from the institute. A horn blew from the settlement, and the screams of its inhabitants were carried to Arkin by the wind. He could see the little dots that were the people of the village running in between their homes gathering their belongings, some already dashing far from the settlement with whatever they could carry. The primordial was going to trample through the village, destroying most of the homes in the process. It probably didn't want to, but the creature was going somewhere, and those people happened to be right under its feet. *Thankfully they have time to evacuate. Their lives are worth nothing to that thing.*

Arkin heard the sounds of galloping only a few seconds before three guides on horseback rushed past him. Their green cloaks trailed behind them as they raced down the hill towards the primordial, holding their lanterns aloft. He realized his fellow guides had already elected a team to follow the new arrival. *I suppose officially they are to*

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guide the giant creature, yet it appears it is not in any need of their service. The trio shrunk in size as they neared the feet of the primordial, and some of the men behind Arkin began to return towards the doors of the institute.

A fellow guide touched Arkin on the shoulder, yet he did not turn. His eyes would not leave the primordials back as it moved farther and farther away.

“We must confer, Luminous Arkin,” he said after a few seconds. Arkin realized it was Luminous Farkle, the man who had shown him around the institute such a short time ago. “The new primordial needs a name, and word needs to be spread throughout the peninsula.”

Arkin breathed in and out heavily. He still did not look towards his friend. “What’s the point, Farkle? Our names never stick to the beasts. The people it nearly tramples over with name it themselves. And that is the name it will be known by. They’ll fear it, follow it, try to kill it, or maybe even worship it. What did Jerl say? A once in a lifetime opportunity, is it? Let me stay for a bit, please.”

Farkle lingered for a bit before heading towards the building. Many remained to observe the primordial, yellow and blue robes perched on the hill unmoving as the tremors shrunk in intensity. However, they all turned and left, one by one, within the hour. By the time the creature was beyond the Three Markers, Arkin was the only guide that remained on the hill.

She’s not stopping, he thought. She’s not going to stop until she reaches her destination. She just got here. Where is she in such a rush to get to?”

..... Part I

The Sea Storm

..... Enko Seascraper
Chapter 1

C*lack Clack Clack Clack*

The rhythmic rapping of the olive green window shutter was stifled as Miss Wailborne tightened the rope with a firm tug of her wrist, the loose skin of her forearms jiggling in response. At once, the screaming wind outside was silenced, reduced to a low, dull roar below the incessant plops of rain hitting every surface on and around the structure. She bundled up the remaining length of rope and looped it around an iron cross-bar bolted to the moldy wooden walls of her ancient home. Her skeletal fingers moved deftly, displaying decades of experience with such techniques. The end product of the elderly woman's work surely had its own name, coined by sailors hundreds of years ago, yet Enko never took the time to study such practical areas of expertise. The knot may have only been holding back a shutter, but Enko knew it was strong enough to hold back an ox.

With the menial task complete, Miss Wailborne straightened her back and hurried across her living room, brushing past Enko, who was still standing firmly in the spot she had left him. Enko's mouth shot open in tandem with his raised hand, pointer finger extended towards the ceiling as if he was trying to gain the attention of a schoolteacher for assistance. Whatever word that was about to escape his lips was lost as the elderly fisherwoman was already well ahead of

him, tending to the pot of soup she had placed in the fire pit hours before.

When she lifted up the lid, Enko saw a bright orange liquid peering over the lip of the cauldron, spewing fat, pale bubbles that burst into a haze of steam a dozen times a second. Miss Wailborne gazed down at her dinner for a few moments before picking up a cutting board from beside the flames, on which she had previously chopped up a colorful assortment of ingredients; potatoes, celery, garlic, corn, and others Enko could not say he recognized. *Wailborne certainly knows how to treat herself. How does the old woman come by all these decadent ingredients.* The old woman swept the food into the pot with the flat of a knife in a single swift motion. Miss Wailborne let out a sigh of satisfaction before removing a wooden spoon from a wall hook and gently stirring her dinner.

Her hair resembled a lion's mane, the creatures Enko had seen as a kid in the pages of the ancient encyclopedias kept in the town's repository. Her locks flared out from every corner of her small head, forming a single flowing mass of grey extending well below the base of her lengthy neck. From the back, her head appeared to be far too bulbous to sit atop her slight frame. She was thin as a rail, yet she carried herself with immense confidence, her back straight despite her advancing age. Her eyes seemed to wander, hardly making contact with Enko's since he had entered her home. She wore a leather jerkin around a loose fitting white shirt, billowing out around her elbows. Her pants and boots were similar to Enko's, large and weathered from years of sea spray.

Enko gazed uncomfortably at the silhouette of the old woman as she stood against the flames of her fire pit. *Maybe she has already forgotten me.* He shifted weight a couple times, occasionally opening his mouth in an attempt to urge Wailborne along, shutting it again before any further pathetic pleading could escape his lips.

Rainwater still trickled down his thick leather trench-coat, making Enko as slick and shiny as a seal. The coat hung open, exposing his sweat-stained undershirt, pools of dark grey growing around the middle of his chest and his armpits. Some spare drops rested within the folds of his trousers, occasionally traveling down the thicker

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fabric into his oversized leather boots, sparing the old woman's lavish yet tattered rug. His thinning black hair and long goatee were still dry, protected by his hood before Miss Wailborne asked him to remove it as a courtesy when he entered. The leather cover now rested across Enko's forearm.

His gaze shifted to the front door, a large piece of crudely carved tree bark shaking on its hinges as the window shutter had. Enko wondered if Miss Wailborne had cut down the great tree herself. *I know better than to disbelieve it outright.* Behind it he knew was a small caravan of carriages and riders, shuddering in the harsh wind as it grew ever stronger. They were wetter than Enko, and growing wetter still. *They are all waiting for me, I need to move things along.*

"Miss Wailborne," Enko said firmly, yet politely. "This soup is taking a bit more than a couple minutes to finish cooking. Perhaps you should take it off the fire and we can go on our way."

"Can't rush perfection, child," replied the old woman, her speech rasped and slowly delivered. "Every ingredient needs t' patiently simmer t' infuse the marrowtail with flavor. No one wants bland fish soup." She paused. "On second thought, I reckon some members o' the council wouldn't know marrow tail from a block o' driftwood!" She laughed heartily at that.

The aroma of the stew was intoxicating, enveloping the small house like a warm hug, however Enko was too anxious to enjoy the scent. He thought of his wife, Cova, and the cakes they baked together at the end of every week. The smell of the stew was savory, the cake sweet, yet it still made him yearn for her. She was most likely already safe and sheltered, but it still hurt leaving her to journey through the storm all by herself.

Minutes of silence followed, and the old woman barely moved an inch. *This woman is far too arrogant to make the right decision.* He approached Miss Wailborne with renewed confidence. "With all due respect, Miss, the flavor of the marrowtail is not what you should be concerned about. You can't stay here. The mother of all hurricanes is about to strike the shore and you are dithering over a pot of soup. Please, you should come with me now."

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Miss Wailborne paused her stirring. Her nonchalant expression remained unchanged. Enko hoped for a moment she had finally heard his pleas. However, she quickly returned to the task before her. "Coello will protect us," she said matter-of-factly.

"What?"

"Coello will protect us. As he has for half a dozen generations."

Enko inhaled deeply. "What, pray tell, is Coello supposed to do? This is the weather we're talking about, Miss. Don't you realize that? Coello can't smite the wind."

"I know a storm when I see one, make no mistake. You haven't a clue what Coello is capable of, Seascraper," countered Wailborne. "He is our protector, our warden, our god. We'll all see in due time what gifts Coello will give t' us."

"Well now is not the time. Now this old house has become a deathtrap. Miss Wailborne, with all due respect, I know you must be stubborn in your old age, but—"

Miss Wailborne shot Enko a look that could shatter mountains, stopping him dead in his tracks. *This tiny woman was once a ship captain, I am a fool to talk down to her.* He fumbled over his words as her steely gaze held firm. He clamped his mouth shut and awaited a scolding.

"Me cats," she responded after several excruciating seconds. "They have t' come too."

"Your cats?" Just as he said it Enko felt a small mass rub against his boot, drawing his gaze downward before his brain could put two and two together. Its fur, a motley collection of brown, white, and black spots, was matted across its whole surface. Its legs were stout, protruding only slightly from its overweight body. The creature's eyes were an ugly, pale orange, and prominently bulged from its skull. The cat peered upward at Enko silently, its bottom teeth protruding from its flat face in a curious frown.

"There ye are, Gill," cooed Wailborne. She grabbed several small wooden bowls stacked beside the pot and rapidly filled them with a spoonful of soup each. She placed them gingerly on the ground and tapped each of them with the spoon, creating a melody from the

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sound of wood upon wood. “Flipper! Dorsal! Fin!” she shouted across the house.

Immediately, three identical black cats bounded out from the assorted knick knacks and furniture crowding the old woman’s house. It was as if the shadows cast by the fire had begun dancing before Enko’s eyes. They converged on the bowls and happily lapped up the soup in a cacophony of tongue clicks and saliva. The only difference Enko could discern from the hungry cats was their eye color. One had orange eyes, the other yellow, and the last green.

“Gill’s the oldest one,” explained Miss Wailborne. “The others are from the same litter, born from me beautiful little Abyss, Coello bless her soul. I’m afraid they’re all petrified of rain and lightning. You’ll have t’ carry ‘em.”

“Carry?” Enko was regretting stopping at this house more and more each minute, but Miss Wailborne needed to get to safety. He had gotten farther than he expected to, so he was prepared to go along with the song and dance as long as he could. *What if one of them squirms away and runs off. I’m not fast enough to chase cats. I never was.*

He went to the front door and opened it a crack, just so he could stick his face and one of his arms into the wet and windy air. Outside , the fuzzy silhouettes of three men stood in front of the caravan he had led throughout the city, parked in the middle of the empty cobblestone street. They were waiting patiently for Enko, arms pulled close to their torsos and shivering in the harsh wind. *Damn myself, I’ve been sitting in this warm house for nearly fifteen minutes while my companions are freezing.* Enko motioned the men inside and one by one they filed into the warm glow of Miss Wailborne’s living room.

“Wonderful!” the old woman exclaimed with satisfaction at the sight of the men. “You boys get t’ work. I’ll pack up the soup fer the road.” She immediately threw a lid onto the pot and secured it with several strings. She pulled a pair of rags from another overhead wall hook and lifted the cauldron with the slightest of effort. “It’ll finish simmerin’ on the road.”

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“The old crone wants to take the cats,” whispered Enko to his companions. “Try to grab them so we can finally get going.”

“You cannot be serious,” said Haimer, Enko’s son. “Father, they’re just some ratty old cats. This hurricane could hit any minute.”

He stood tall in the doorway, much slimmer than Enko had ever been. Unlike his father, Haimer neglected to wear a hood as he stood out in the rain, so his long black hair was pressed flat against his angular head, the water streaming down his blue shawl onto the floor. Thankfully his goatee was not as long as Enko’s, otherwise it too would be dripping a steady stream onto the old woman’s rug. He most likely believed he would be inside a carriage during Enko’s mission, and didn’t bother to dress appropriately.

“Do you really think Miss Wailborne won’t be okay here? I don’t imagine a hurricane could put an end to that tempest.”

The twins, Arbok and Bolgan, had already begun stomping through the house after the cats. They wore heavy tunics and even heavier boots, matching their immense size. Arbok wore a leather cap, his blonde hair spilling out in two slick tendrils reaching down to his chest before ending in large braids. Bolgan’s head was shaved bald, a light stubble forming around his square cranium. Both of the brothers had deep blue eyes, and both had large flat noses framing their stern faces.

The brutes looked strange weaving in between each other and the tiny Miss Wailborne as she prepared her soup for the trip. The three black cats scattered as soon as they saw the imposing men approach. Old Gill circled around Arbok before surrendering at his feet, licking his chops. The man scooped the cat up and cuddled him with a big ugly smile on his face.

“Haimer,” continued Enko. “You know Miss Wailborne. She’s as stubborn as a plank. But I will not have her blood on my hands. She may have her head below the tides but she is a respected figure in this town. If she wants her cats then she shall have her cats. We have to get everyone to the safe haven.”

Before Haimer could object further, Miss Wailborne appeared in front of him with the pot of soup held aloft. “Well don’t ye look like a dashin’ young man. Be a dear and bring this soup t’ the caravan. I’m

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sure everyone is starvin'. Storms make every man a beggar." She shoved the pot into Haimer's arms. He reluctantly grabbed the handles, lurching under the weight before slowly regaining his balance. *That ought to teach you some humility.*

"Safe haven?" asked the old woman. "Where exactly are ye taking everyone, Seascraper?"

"I am..." started Enko. "We are taking everyone to the Eastern Scar."

Wailborne's eyes grew wide, one eyebrow raised in suspicion. "That is a seaside cave. Have ye gone mad, Seascraper? Do ye mean to drown all of Coello's Watch?"

Haimer shook his head. "The Dockraisers have been working in the Scar for almost three months now. They've built a drainage system, and shields to keep water out of the cave. Right now the Scar is the safest place in all of Coello's Watch. It's the only fortress the town has."

It seems my son CAN listen occasionally.

Arbok and Bolgan returned to the pair, keenly listening to the plan Enko had relayed to his son. It was the first they had heard of the work done to the Eastern Scar as well. Arbok continued to cradle Gill, and Bolgan held two of the black cats in either arm, all seeming quite docile. Enko could not tell which of the cats they were.

Miss Wailborne did not seem convinced. "And how's it that I have not 'eard of the Dock Raiser's work 'fore now?"

Enko continued the explanation. "Trinoh told me of the construction in confidence. He didn't want the Council of the Watch finding out about it, for fear they would declare it a waste of resources. But this is exactly the situation they were building for. Hopefully the Council will think differently once the storm passes."

Miss Wailborne tapped her feet for a moment, her chin raised in suspicion, seemingly ready to protest further. However, she instead quickly scooped up her last cat, which had been hiding underneath a wooden chair next to her.

"Come, Dorsal. Let's not keep the nice men waitin' any longer." She thrust the cat into Enko's arms and gathered the last of her belongings, namely several layers of clothing to brave the harsh

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weather. "I'm still not sure 'bout this so-called safe haven, but if it means stickin' it to those dusty old councilmen, I'm all in."

Enko peered down at the cat, its angular face and orange eyes peering back with great curiosity. *Black as night. I think you would do well in the cave. Plenty of places for you to hide.* Enko opened the door and motioned everyone through.

"Careful not to spill the soup, son," he told Haimar as he exited. "I'm sure everyone is starving."

The four men and one old woman dashed across the cobblestones to the caravan. The rain was coming down even harder than when Enko entered Miss Wailborne's house, with large bursts of water shooting upward as the massive drops collided with stone and wood that made up most of Coello's Watch. Most of the lights from the surrounding houses and street lanterns were extinguished, so the members of the caravan were only visible through the sparse moonlight poking through the dense clouds, their slick clothes glistening like a school of fish lost on the land.

Several men, bundled up in heavy clothing and shawls waited for Enko's return on horseback, their faces near completely covered save for their eyes. Between them, over twenty carriages and covered wagon were parked on the street, housing nearly every man, woman, and child in Coello's Watch. Mothers cradled their children, the elderly huddled together for warmth, and the men bickered impatiently as Enko returned. The men let Miss Wailborne's cats loose in one of the carriages before helping the old woman up the tall steps. Arbok grabbed the soup and both twins joined her inside.

"There's still a few more houses we need to stop by," Enko yelled to his son through the roaring wind. Haimar nodded in agreement, his long hair swirling around his damp face, which betrayed his discomfort with the situation. He looked as though he would run off to the warm and dry interior of the carriages the second he was given the opportunity. *One day. One day he will not balk his duty to his fellow citizens.*

The pair hung their heads and ran to the front of the caravan where their horses were waiting. Enko occasionally stopped to check on the members of the caravan and make sure their supplies were

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secured. He also did not forget to give everyone nods of encouragement before they departed. *It is my responsibility to round everyone up. I'm going to be as kind a host as I can. They need to trust me like their own father.*

The pair mounted their steeds began trotting forward. Enko whistled to the men behind him, and slowly the caravan started to follow. They had to move at a crawl to ensure they would not lose those trailing far behind. The dark and empty houses hung over the street like faces, the black windows peering down at Enko in unmoving curiosity. They passed by the docks at the southernmost point in the town, sparse of ships save for four galleys anchored on the far side of the harbor. White waves crashed over the seaweed-stained wood and dockside houses, the sound of equipment swaying and colliding with each other filling the air. Many ships would be destroyed in this storm, but thankfully none would crash onto the streets of Coello's Watch.

High above the cliffs of the town, a singular tower shone bright, light piercing the numerous small windows that snaked up its round base. The top of the tower had but one large window facing the sea, partially obscured by wood planks nailed across the glass. Enko was concerned to see the window not properly boarded up, yet the Precipice Tower was the most secure building in the watch, so he held faith in its survival. *If only it was large enough to fit all of the town's citizens.*

Enko stopped the caravan in front of a house not far from the docks. The windows were as dark as one's they had passed before, and the interior just as silent.

"What are you doing, father?" Haimer questioned. "There isn't a soul in this house. They probably joined the caravan already."

"You must learn to look with more than your eyes, boy. Mr. Shorestrider works fifteen hours a day. And Mrs. Cliffdiver has seven children, with seven mouths to feed and fourteen hands to cause mischief. When he gets home and the kids are asleep, they are not long to follow. And something as droll as a hurricane is not nearly enough to wake the couple."

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Enko strode to the house and knocked loudly on the door. A few moments passed until one of the windows lit up from the flame of a single candle. Enko heard a few muffled complaints as Mr. Shorestrider and Miss Cliffdiver woke from their slumber.

Enko turned to his son with a smirk on his face, but before he could lecture him further, a deep, booming roar invaded his senses. It rang out several times, shaking the windows of every house on the street. It shifted pitch and frequency each time, forming a slow and eerie melody that cut through the sound of harsh wind and cacophonous rain. Enko and Haimer knew exactly where to look.

They turned their gaze upward to the open sky above the street. They looked past the wooden roofs of the fishing town's houses, past the great green cliffs that loomed over the Watch like mountains, and past the wooden houses and towers that rested on those cliffs.

A pale form dominated the sky, its scales shimmering as its muscles undulated with every motion. The moonlight struck the crown of spikes protruding from the massive being's head, gleaming against the smooth bone as if it were silver. Below it, bright red pupils cut through the darkness, swimming erratically in a sea of black. The being straightened its back, its head rearing backwards, before lurching forward once again, the columns of flesh that formed its mouth flaring out to let free another booming roar from the depths of its throat. The creature's bony torso pulsated as the roar continued to grow in volume. Once it was finished, the colossus unplanted its enormous, lanky arm from the earth and straightened it out in front of it, fresh mud falling from its fingers like rain. It was so long, Enko had to turn his head to see where the hand ended up. One of its spindly fingers unfurled, pointing past the southernmost point of the town, where its eyes remained fixed. *It has no eyebrows, and a mouth wholly unlike any human's, yet it looks afraid.*

Enko turned to his son. "I think Coello wants us to make haste. The storm is almost here."