

Chatravati

The warm breeze carried with it the scents of the plateau. It was an acrid smell; of sweat and decay, of gunpowder and poison and of the corpses that rotted in the sweltering heat beneath the thunder clouds. It had been said that some of the demons were constructing temples out of the carcasses--crafting enormous ziggurats of flesh and bone and face.

Chatravati Mayad wiped at his forehead with a strip of cloth and looked out across the wasteland. He could scarcely believe what he was seeing, despite already having been on the Old Earth for two weeks. His other life was beginning to seem hazy and indistinct, an unpleasant side-effect of time travel that they had been warned about.

Now, Chatravati fished for the card in his pocket and traced the familiar printed letters with his eyes. The Department had provided each member of Westcrest with just such a card and each one detailed a variety of facts about the lives they had left behind.

They had been instructed to read the cards regularly, lest they "lose synchronisation" with their future selves. Chatravati wasn't sure what that meant, but what he *did* know was that it provided some small comfort to grip the card—a talisman from a future that was yet to occur—and to try and remember.

Chatravati continued reading until somebody spoke his name. He turned and blinked as ash stung his eyes.

"Sophia," he said, smiling thinly. "I've been waiting for you."

"I gathered," she said. Chatravati returned the card to his pocket and they embraced.

"How was the council?" Chatravati asked as they linked hands and began to descend the hill.

"We have what is required," said Sophia, yet something of her tone and by the way that she held her lips told Chatravati that she wasn't telling him everything. Not yet.

"Good," he said, willing to let it pass for now. If she were hiding something, he knew there was a reason. No amount of prying would loosen her lips.

So they made idle chatter while they walked beneath the canopy of towering jungle palms. Together they worked to remember Genoa City, London and Bombay— because none of those cities existed yet and it was as though by simply speaking of them they were somehow *forcing* them into being. It was as though they were helping to create the future they would be born into; the future that they had left behind.

Not a single flower grew amidst the broad green leaves of the Old Earth jungles. The soil underfoot was soft and red, rising frequently as dust and coating everything that it came into contact with.

This was the manner in which the tents of the encampment had come to blend with the surrounding earth, providing the outpost with a type of camouflage that might have been useful were the camp not so crowded.

For even if the tents were difficult to make out against the red dirt, the assortment of creatures that milled about between them were certainly not. Humans represented only one small portion of the population and as Chatravati and Sophia made their way out of the jungle and down into the camp, Chatravati studied some of the camp's stranger denizens.

He spotted centaurs standing in chest-plates too heavy for even the strongest man to lift, strange, metallic Yjarj and even pale-skinned refugees from the Violet Empire; a civilization that had been decimated by a race of dark-skinned dwarfish creatures called the Draug.

"Heads up," chattered one tall, green creature as they entered the camp. "Nestafari transport passing in five, four..."

The rest of whatever the strange fellow had been saying was quickly drowned out by the roar of an engine. Chatravati threw himself to the ground in the shadow of the transport as it passed over the camp. Of all the things he had seen since they had travelled backwards in time, it was still the spaceships that he had the most trouble with.

Sophia helped him up, while the rest of the camp quickly resumed the conversations that had been interrupted by the flyover.

"You've seen vampires and sea monsters," Sophia said as she dusted dirt off his shoulders. "But are still cowed by the sight of a *spaceship*."

"Spaceships are *nothing like* vampires," said Chatravati through clenched teeth and they both laughed. They pressed through the crowd, seeking out the tent that they knew they would recognise by the forked black flag flapping before it. Emblazoned on the flag was the number 38.

It was dark inside the tent, the only light being cast by a lantern that sat on a low table at the centre of the room. Uncertain shadows flickered on the walls.

"Well if it ain't a couple o' Provers," said a voice as they entered.

"Marshall!" Cried Sophia and rushed across to him. As Marshall caught her his cowboy hat fell off the back of his head. "Woah, that's enough darlin'," he said and lowered her to the floor.

Chatravati crossed the tent after Sophia and firmly shook hands with Marshall. Marshall Jones was (by all accounts) a cowboy, as well as a member of Westcrest. “Welcome back,” Chatravati said, because Marshall had been away on a scouting expedition along the Rustblade Trail.

“Same to you,” said Josephine, who had been sitting in the shadows against the far wall of the tent. Marshall helped the old woman up and she stepped into the light, beaming. Josephine was the current leader of Westcrest and she was also a witch... although she told most people otherwise.

“The Provers are reunited,” said Josephine with a chuckle.

Although those that inhabited the camp came from a hugely diverse range of backgrounds, including both different times *and* dimensions, those that came from Earth’s direct future had earned themselves the dubious title of “Provers”.

The term implied that—by their very existence— the four members of Westcrest that currently occupied tent 38 actually *proved* that tomorrow’s ritual would succeed... and that the world would be saved. For Chatravati the term was an uncomfortable one and he only wished that he could share their levels of confidence.

“Oh, Sophia,” was the next thing that Josephine said and she crossed the room to embrace Chatravati’s lover. Chatravati and Marshall both witnessed the unusual exchange, but thought nothing of it. After all, there were far stranger sights to be had only a few steps away.

“The council’s preparations are complete,” Sophia told Josephine. “The nomads have agreed. It will be enough.”

“Then we have a chance,” said Josephine.

“Or we *will*, if we make it to tomorrow in one piece,” drawled Marshall, resting his hand on the butt of his revolver. “I’ll bet you dollars-to-pesos that Nergal bastard’s coming for us tonight. With *everything*.”

“Marshall’s right,” said Josephine. “A power as ancient as He will have already sensed change in the air.”

“No matter what, we will *not* let them prevent the Rapture,” said Sophia, for that was what they were calling the magical spell that they hoped would fix everything.

“Hallelujah,” whistled Marshall as he spun the chamber of his revolver and they all listened as it went *click-click-click-click-click* in the dimly-lit tent.

When the rest had lowered themselves to the padded mats on the floor to discuss the coming day, Chatravati excused himself by blurting out some poorly conceived excuse and started out across the camp.

“Hello, good sir, can I interest you in a lucky charm?” Asked an enterprising man standing behind a makeshift storefront. Chatravati was impressed that mercantilism could flourish, even here, with war raging all around them.

He ignored the man and pressed on, following a winding sawdust trail through the tents.

His journey took him past row upon row of metal cages. Most of the cages were empty, but some contained strange creatures that Chatravati had never seen before.

Brightly coloured feathers pressed up against the bars of one cage as Chatravati walked past and a variety of mewling cries and croaks issued from the others. What would happen to them all if tomorrow’s Rapture was successful, Chatravati wondered. Would the creatures simply perish here, with nobody to tend to them, or would the spell send them to their freedom as well?

How exactly the ritual was supposed to work remained a mystery. Only those who were directly involved with the incantation had been permitted to attend the regular councils where it had been planned. Sophia numbered among them, but she had not spoken much to Chatravati about the specifics of the thing... aside from insisting that it would succeed.

“You have *seen* the future,” Sophia had said to him. “You have *been there*. We cannot fail.”

But Chatravati knew that no victory ever came without a cost.

Chatravati passed by several large bales of hay and was almost crushed by the careless stomping of a young centaur.

“Ho!” Called another of the creatures, who looked much older (and angrier) than the one that had almost trodden on Chatravati. “You must be wary Thane, lest you unknowingly crush the little species.”

Chatravati, who was quite terrified of the equine creatures, smiled politely and bowed his head—unaware that his expression looked more like a grimace to the centaurs, who have rather different ways of seeing things than humans do.

After several more minutes of travelling through the camp—past more cages and wooden storage crates marked with strange symbols and men dressed in ornate armour who were sparring with one another—Chatravati finally reached his destination.

Hidden between two rows of large tents, tucked away from the rest of the camp was a narrow path that lead to an area containing no more than a dozen low, red tents. Before the opening to each tent there hung a tiny golden bell. Little more than halfway down the lane, Chatravati stopped to ring one.

The sound made by the bell was diminutive and barely audible over the howl of the wind and the sound of blades being sharpened and the incessant hoof-beats of the centaurs. Nonetheless a voice that rivalled the bell for its softness bade Chatravati to enter.

“Did you bring me a gift?” Asked the Enchanter as Chatravati stepped into the tent. She looked to be a young girl, no older than seven or eight years old. Her hair was blonde and it sparkled softly in defiance of the darkness all around her. This was one of the Enchanters, born at the beginning of time and gifted with the tools of creation.

Her name was Cynthia.

“I... I did, yes...” Chatravati stammered as he somehow managed to fumble in all of his pockets at once without finding anything. At last he found it, tucked away with the card that contained the details about his future life. He handed the girl three sheets of yellowed paper, folded together.

“Let me see,” said the girl and Chatravati lowered himself to the floor so that the two of them were face to face. His hands shook as he unfolded the sheets of paper and laid them out before her, one by one.

Each page was covered in intricate drawings of flowers. Chatravati had been shocked to discover that no flowers grew here on the Old Earth and soon after they had arrived he had set about sketching as many as he could remember.

Drawing plants was a talent that Chatravati had been cultivating for most of his life and the drawings were incredibly detailed. Not a line was out of place and each sketch brought to life a different type of flower down to the subtle speckling on the leaves or by the curling of the petals. Most of the flowers had also been coloured with gentle shades of paint.

“I couldn’t find the right pigment for this one,” said Chatravati, pointing at one flower. “It’s supposed to be blue...”

“I can see them,” whispered the Enchantress as her eyelids fluttered closed.

The tent suddenly felt smaller than it really was, as though it had suddenly contracted around them. The sensation reminded Chatravati of the *Folkvangar*, except *that* room made you feel like it was expanding rather than shrinking.

The scent of wildflowers flooded over Chatravati and it was too much. His eyes drifted closed and he could see only fields and fields of endless flowers. The flowers were rising all around him until he felt like he was drowning in them. And then, all at once, the sensation vanished and Chatravati was breathing in great ragged gasps.

Cynthia looked at him from across the table and smiled. “I will help you,” she said.

Chatravati need not have worried that Sophia would ask where he had been, for when he slid beneath the blanket she simply pressed her body tightly to his and whispered against his lips: “I love you.”

They held each other until the explosions began.

Chatravati would remember that sound for the rest of his life, for they seemed to him like the sound of centaur hoofs must have sounded to the ants.

Boom. Boom. Boom.

Chatravati and Sophia struggled out together from under the blanket. Josephine was already awake, sitting up in the darkness and smoking a pungent cigarette.

“Damn fools,” said Marshall, rubbing his eyes with his fists.

“We have to go,” said Sophia and together the four of them walked into Hell.

The sky was aflame. Clouds swirled in hues of orange and purple, like the brush strokes of a mad painter. Thin lines of green light cut across the sky: Nergal’s arrows, missile trails. The ground rumbled and waves of flame swept across the camp, carrying with them the screams of the burning.

“Let me at ‘em!” Said Marshall, curling his top lip and drawing one of his revolvers.

“No,” said Sophia. “We need to go to the ridge. We must begin the ritual.”

Most of the camp’s inhabitants were heading in the opposite direction to them, which made progress difficult. Chatravati cowered as chunks of flaming rock tumbled through the sky above them. Fire bloomed wherever the boulders struck the ground and each impact shook them to their knees.

They soon reached a clearing where a giant insectile demon was being circled by centaurs. One of them was the youngster, Thane, that had almost trampled Chatravati the previous day.

The centaurs struck at the beast repeatedly, but their lances could not pierce its chitinous armour. When Thane’s mentor tripped and tumbled sideways the giant insect impaled him against the ground with one hairy, bladed forearm.

“I’ve got this one,” said Marshall.

“Marshall, no!” Said Josephine, for the old lady knew that each member of Westcrest was instrumental to the success of the ritual—but it was too late. The cowboy rushed forward, pulling a length of rope from his overalls and using it to lasso the head of the demon.

“That rope won’t hold,” said Chatravati through gritted teeth.

Marshall yanked backwards on the rope, the muscles in his arms straining visibly as he dragged the creature down against the red dirt. Its legs, dripping blood and venom, punched grotesquely at the air but the centaur Thane dodged them all in order to drive his lance into the soft underbelly of the creature.

"Yjarj fibres," said Sophia. "Nergal himself would have a hard time breaking that rope,"

As strong as the rope was, it was now tangled uselessly beneath the carcass of the insect. Marshall let it drop from his hands and rejoined his friends.

"Everybody *down*," called a voice and they threw themselves to the ground. Dirt and rock and many more unpleasant substances showered down on them and for a moment Chatravati was certain that this was the end; not just for him, but for *everything*.

Then he was shouting Sophia's name, but his voice was swallowed by the wind. He couldn't see more than a few feet ahead through the swirling red dust, but Marshall stepped out of nowhere and gripped him tightly by the arm.

"I need to find Sophia," Chatravati cried as they lumbered through the dust, but the cowboy ignored him. Then, as abruptly as it had begun, the dust storm cleared and Chatravati could see and hear again.

"Magic protects this path, for now," said a familiar voice and Chatravati blinked through tears at the vision of Cynthia. Sophia and Josephine were already there, sitting together on a slab of grey rock.

Chatravati looked behind him but could see only a dancing wall of dust where the camp should have stood. Here on the path, he could not even hear the wind.

"Let's get along," said Marshall, offering Josephine his hand. Together the two of them started up the hill, leaving Chatravati and Sophia with the Enchanter. Cynthia smiled up at Chatravati.

"Come with me," Chatravati said to Sophia. "I have something to show you,"

The three of them took a different path to the ritual site than the others, stepping through layers of lush green foliage as they passed countless palms and ferns and stalks and fronds... but not a single flower.

Chatravati had expected Sophia to ask many questions while they walked, but she remained silent the entire time. When they finally stopped, beside a stream of sparkling turquoise water, Chatravati saw tears shining in her eyes.

"There's something you need to know," Sophia began.

"Not now," said Cynthia matter-of-factly, who had dropped to her knees beside the brook.

"This is the secret stream called *Atticus*, which flows into the lake at the sacred grove," said the enchanter as she ran her fingers through the brilliant water. "It is gifted with the power of the *Ever*, which is not *then-or-now*, nor *here-or-there*. This is how we will send Nergal far, far away."

Sophia looked into Chatravati's eyes and her bottom lip quivered.

"I have something for you," said Chatravati and at the same time Cynthia spoke an almost identical sentence in such a way as that their voices merged into one. Chatravati pulled Sophia against him and kissed her on the forehead. Sophia wrapped her arms around him and together they watched the girl as she linked her fingers together to form a cup with her hands.

The enchanter laughed as she swept her hands upwards, scattering droplets of water all across the jungle. And for every drop of water that touched the ground, a flower bloomed; each one based on the sketches that Chatravati had drawn.

Brilliant pink orchids exploded amongst the broad green jungle leaves and roses slithered out, complete with thorny stems. There were delicate jasmine flowers, tinged with orange and a chain of water lilies that appeared and floated down the stream. And also there, on the ground near their feet rested a single, sacred lotus.

Then Cynthia was gone, although neither of them had seen her leave. The air around Chatravati and Sophia was filled with flower petals that luminesced softly beneath the canopy of the jungle.

As they wrapped themselves in each other, with tears on their cheeks and flowers in their hair, Sophia finally told Chatravati that today was the last day that they would ever spend together.

"I don't understand," said Chatravati. "You don't have to do this! Surely there's some other way."

"I wasn't chosen," said Sophia, placing a hand on his shoulder. "I volunteered."

"Why would you volunteer for this insanity?" Chatravati boomed. "Why would you willingly sacrifice yourself?" He had seen it often in the country of his birth; men and women who were altogether too willing to die for a cause that was not their own.

"I won't die," said Sophia. "My consciousness will simply be absorbed into the spell. I will become one with it... *threaded* with the world. I have spent my whole life seeking answers, Chatravati. Now I will have them."

"Are you joking?"

"I will still be with you. Every day," said Sophia.

Chatravati reeled. Falling to the red dirt he stared incredulously at the flowers. Were these the same types that grew on the Earth today? Had he single-handedly contributed to the birth of these species simply by sketching them?

Maybe the entire future was a lie and he had simply made the flowers up. Was there really any such thing as a rose before he had drawn one and handed the picture to Cynthia on a piece of crumpled paper?

The ground suddenly felt unsteady beneath him. His hands felt as though they were drifting through the red dirt, as though it were all some part of a rapidly dissolving illusion. None of this was real. It couldn't be.

"Why did we even come here?" Chatravati said desperately. He clawed at his face with both hands, his mouth agape. "Marshall and myself have been left to our own devices while you and Josephine sneaked away to secret meetings. You *never* told us what was happening!"

Sophia glanced about and saw how the flowers shone around them, oblivious to the fact that Nergal's forces were ravaging the nearby camp. "Then I will tell you now," she said very seriously and the intensity in her dark eyes forced Chatravati to listen. "But I will have to make it quick."

"The ritual is complicated," said Sophia.

"It's so complicated," she continued, "That it's not even *finished* yet. The final component we need still won't be ready for... oh, I don't know, *four billion years*... give-or-take."

"In the 20th Century..." said Chatravati. Sophia tried to ignore the hurt in his eyes.

"That's why *you're* here," she said. "So that you understand how important this is. It's up to *you* to locate that missing component, to protect it and... one day, to bring it back here to finish what we start today."

"It's your duty to save the world, my love," she finished and then dropped to her knees to embrace him for the last time.

"I can't let you do this," he said to her through his tears.

"You *have* to," she whispered.

And they walked to the sacred grove together, arm in arm.

Of his brief time spent upon the Old Earth, it was the final moments that Chatravati had the most difficulty remembering, a side-effect of the time travel, he supposed. And a side-effect of the immense power-- the ripple in space and time that they had used to forge something powerful enough to defeat the demon Nergal.

A boy named Jeremy.