

PROJECT ATLAS

The touch of the sun warmed the frozen ground, frosted with a thin dusting of snow. Nestled on a plateau above, between a horseshoe of mountains, the thatch roofs of a dozen buildings cloistered together like a herd of sheep, hemmed in by a spiked palisade. Puffs of smoke wafted the smells of this morning's catch through their chimneys, permeating the countryside with welcome scents of an ending fast.

Riba shrugged the sack on her shoulder. The market should already be open and, if she was lucky enough, she could find someone to pawn her salvage despite her unwelcome sight. Not anyone would buy her wares, but hopeful an Outsider would be there, one of the traders or adventures who come from beyond the mountains. Often, they were willing to barter with her, Exile or not, while the villagers remained distanced and reluctant. From the hunters she crossed on the Path, she had caught wind of one in these parts. A young woman with a brown braid. She travelled light, so probably not a trader, and that made her hopes soar.

She pulled close her deerskin and began her descent to the village. Spring had replaced winter, but its chill still clung to world. The wilderness collectively yawned, creatures slowly exiting their long hibernation as the warmth of the sun grew stronger. The crunch underfoot sent a few creatures, bold enough to brave the receding chill, skittering away to their hidey-holes. Soon, lean times would be bountiful.

The trees thinned, revealing the village, now fully awake from its restful night, the gate perched open as a dappling of comers and goers filtered through. The tributary of Riba's mountain path merged into a wider, packed earthen road as she neared the tribal statues guarding the village's single entrance. A riot of voices clamored over the normal choruses of market day, a pair of burly men shoving a woman out onto the road.

"Begone, Outsider! We want nothing to do with the machine magic!"

The woman scrambled to her feet, pushing a thick braid of hair back over her shoulder, "So what now? You're going to toss me out and keep all my wares?"

One of the men sneered and tossed her knapsack onto the road, its open flap scattering its contents across a wide swath of the entrance

"Thank you very much," the young woman grumbled sarcastically, dusting herself off, slinging her sack onto one arm and picking up the scattered contents like a crow gathering everything that shines.

"What are you looking at Exile?" the tallest man snapped.

Riba held out her empty hands placatingly and stooped to pick up a round metal ball, too regular to be natural, and offered it to the woman.

"Ah, someone still friendly after that show? Surprising," hardly sparing her a glance, the woman snatched the ball, tucked it in her pack, and paused, "Sorry, I should be thankful."

"It's not the first time I've seen you get in a tussle with authorities, Pel," Riba shrugged.

The woman paused again, a grin spreading across her face as she registered who stood before her.

Riba beamed back and the two shared a bear-hug, "I had hoped the rumors were about you. It's been so long! What trouble have you gotten yourself into this time?"

"Ha, I wasn't intending trouble for once," Pel said, walking off along the road, "Just bringing around the normal bits and baubles I find in my travels—some supplies that are hard to find hereabouts. I came across this a couple of days ago, just up the mountains in some of the Old World ruins. Left it out on the table with my other goods, as per the usual, and, of course, some kid's curiosity got the best of them while I was haggling with their mother. Tricky little thing activated."

Pel held out a sharp triangle, like that of an arrowhead, just small enough to fit snugly in the palm of her hand. She squeezed it lightly and a blue holographic dome shot outward around the two.

"What is it?" Riba asked, entranced by the sparkling translucent web of the dome.

A mother gathered her two children and redirected them away from Pel and Riba, casting nasty glares at them all the while as if they had activated the Second Coming.

Pel caught a glance and snorted, “They believe it’s a fragment of the god that destroyed the world.”

“But you don’t think so?” Riba asked, hearing the well-hidden hint of derision in her friend’s voice.

“Bah. I don’t know what it is! But if it is a World-Destroyer, I probably wouldn’t be here.”

Pel halted, swiveling in place. A pair of incomprehensible markings glowed in the bottom corner of their view, where the glowing half-dome terminated in midair. With each arc of the rotation, the markings switched until Pel rotated back to where she had started and the first marking reappeared.

“Fascinating,” Pel rubbed her chin, continuing to spin. As their field of view rotated towards the direction Pel had indicated earlier, a faint line of blue superimposed upon the fixtures of the grassy plateau. Nowhere else displayed such ghostly markings and as she passed over them, they disappeared beneath her feet.

“A path to something, perhaps?” Riba suggested.

“Want to follow it?” Pel asked.

“I have a feeling you are going to, no matter what I answer.”

Pel grinned and winked, “You know me too well.”

Riba sighed, “Well, have at it then. What better things do I have to do?”

The dome augmented the countryside with its glowing path, leading them between a set of squat hills, a patch of decaying ruins crumbling on its tops. They passed near where Pel had found the strange device, a mound of flora reclaiming the sharp edges of machined metal, before turning sharply uphill. The glow brought them to an outcropping gaping in the side of the mountain, propped up by a nearly sheer cliff of rock. The glow passed into the darkness of a cave, the brightness of the midday sun accentuating the blackness within.

Riba shot Pel a glance, but the Outsider hardly hesitated, stepping into the cavern with a confidence brought on by pure fascination. As Pel disappeared into the darkness, Riba fell in behind her and kindled a torch to life. The fire set the cave walls ablaze, its stone marred with dilapidated depictions of alien creatures and fixtures interspersed with similar markings to that of the holographic dome. Pel ran a hand along the wall, her fingers passing gently over the ancient artwork. The desolation of such a place, abandoned yet isolated from the world, preserved a past not of glory, but of fracture.

“All this time, this has been sitting here, hoping to be discovered. Its story waiting to be told like we all hope each of our stories to be,” Riba gaped. She felt shrunken, so small, like an ant about to be swept away in the great flood of time.

Pel moved deeper into the cave, kneeling in front of a strangely orthogonal area. With a swipe of her hand, she removed a thick layer of dust, a gleam of an obsidian sheet contrasting the yellowed dirt caked on its surface. A faint gleam gathered beneath the flat face of obsidian in an ethereal dance, its light escaping the cracks and playing on the rough ceiling of the cave. The hypnotic dance intensified, the gleam settling into its etched surface. The obsidian rumbled, gathering the light back within itself and went quiet.

Pel brushed off more of the surface, revealing the same strange markings as the walls and the hologram, but the light remained dark. The cave, quiet.

“There’s got to be something more to it,” Pel said, feeling around its corners, gently pushing in on its side.

Tick. Shoof.

Light, too strong to directly look at, spiked through the box in a hundred directions, its panels shifting, shaking the ground with a thunderous roar.

“Pel, what did you do?” Riba shouted.

The ground quaked, a shower of dirt and rock shaking loose from above, plunging the cave into a thick haze that swallowed all light.

“Elizabet, where are we at with the transfer?”

A man in a stiff gray suit, with speckling of graying hair to match, hunched over a silvery console. Sweat gleamed along his brow as he grasped the edge hard, his knuckles whitened. His eyes bore into the evolving streams of data projected above the console, his boyish features indicating he was younger than his hair would suggest. His lip twitched up a corner of a patchy, unkempt beard that had been growing for days without much consideration.

The comm-link patched through crisply, “Almost there, just need a few more minutes.”

“We don’t have that kind of time,” Hayes answered, “They’re converging on Vault 15 already. Your position will be compromised in five. Doors will be sealed in six.”

“Then I have enough time to finish the upload.”

“Elizabet, this is not the time for heroics,” Hayes pleaded, “I want that data as much as you do, but a few minutes is not worth the cost should ATLAS be lost. End the transfer and load it on the jet.”

“Respectfully, sir, a few minutes is the equivalent of the Library of Alexandria. You, of all people, know that.”

“Elizabet, as your father, I beg you. Please. End the transfer.”

“I will in thirty more seconds.”

The console creaked as Hayes clasped the console’s edge in a vice grip.

“Sir! We have incoming!” a similarly uniformed man flicked a radar up onto the holographic console, one red dot converging on a green marker and multiplying into two. Then six. Then dozens.

“Elizabet! Get out, now!”

“Three...two...”

“Elizabet...”

“One...Transfer completed. Undocking.”

The sound spiked over comms before the automatic filtering of background noise kicked in, an engine roaring to life. Latches scraped on the other end and the engines went quiet, the frantic tap of buttons and switches heard over the silence.

“Take off in three. Two. One.”

The bone rattling roar of the engines echoed from the comms.

“Contact! I have contact!” Elizabet shouted, “Conducting evasive maneuver...”

An explosion. Static crackled through the comms.

“Elizabet! Elizabet...” Hayes’ voice choked off.

“Elizabet, do you read? Over,” the other man began, pausing for a measured count before repeating, “Elizabet, do you read? Over.”

Nothing.

The call repeated. Seconds passed. Then minutes.

Silence cast its sterile grip over the room.

“Sir, the doors. The air is becoming unviable. We need to seal them. She was the last one.”

Hayes stared at the console, the radar a flood of red dots burying the unmoving green one.

“Sir?”

He stood, slowly releasing his grip, tears streaming down his cheeks. He had failed.

It should have been done days ago, but he had to tweak the code.

It had to be perfect, an ark for precious cargo. Elizabet had asked him if it was necessary before ATLAS had been secured with them in the Vault.

He convinced her it was. The change corrupted the last three days of transfers.

Now it was lost.

His life’s work.

ATLAS. Gone.

So was his daughter.

He nodded, unable to mouth the words. The other man placed a hand on his shoulder and reached down to the console, moving a digital slider.

The doors slid shut with nary but a stir.

~*~

The explosion rattled the back panels of the jet. Already, the alarms complained. Elizabet cursed.

Swinging the plane around, she lowered herself into the crevasses of the mountains. She could outmaneuver the machines any day, but the swarm rapidly cut down her options, sheer numbers slashing her odds of escape. She had to land immediately, although that too was a death sentence.

She forced the plane down, digging a trough where a plateau of dirt and grime met the base of the mountains. The rocks ground against the underbelly of metal and she cringed, praying the plating would hold. A squeal rendered from the aluminum as the nose of her aircraft impacted a cliff of rock, its looming giant face blotting out the patchy sun above. With every ounce of strength, she fought back to her senses and flipped a lever to disengage ATLAS. Clambering from the cockpit, she launched herself to the ground and wobbled, both of her legs smarting. Time was short, the luxury to examine her injuries sparse. Already, she could feel the choke of polluted air.

A clasp had bent around ATLAS, refusing to release the box.

She yanked free a splintered tree limb from the path of devastation her plane had towed in the landscape and slammed it into the bracket as hard as she dared. The impact rattled the plane, a branch shaped dent forming in its aluminum shell. A second stroke bent the bracket outwards and ATLAS tumbled free.

With a flourish, a holographic dome appeared. She swiped through a series of commands and the engines sputtered back to life, the jet of flame searing the dead ground. The heat of the jet would cloak her heat signature for a time, but she had to move quickly. Flicking a setting on her holographic monitor, she set it to survey the surroundings, but there wasn't much in the way of suitable shelter. Only an outcropping a good three stories above her. The dome already calculated her options, an optimal path highlighted on its interface. The triangle at her ear sparked with a sudden crackled of feedback and she grimaced, throwing it off as the pain spiked. Her fingers came away red.

"Bloody thing," she cursed with a cough. The air was getting thicker.

She lugged ATLAS onto her shoulder. Up the crag it was.

The path would have been easy enough for a moderately fit person to climb were it not for the cube lashed to her back. The change in her center of gravity threatened to plummet her to an unsavory demise more than once, but she made it to the cave, its black mouth gaping, ready to swallow her.

No scanner to analyze the hollow, she pushed forward. The walls pressed in around her until she could no longer turn around with ATLAS strapped to her back.

Here would have to do.

Shrugging ATLAS carefully off her shoulders, she gingerly stepped over the precious cube. The floor sloped gently upwards a few feet ahead, the walls just wide enough to slip in ATLAS. She pressed the cube into the niche until the walls held it like two giant hands, gently but firmly securing it. A snug fit.

Elizabet stepped back from her work, satisfied. The cave held an archaic air, devoid of any breezes, free from the contaminants on its doorstep. No rain. No sunlight. A tomb to preserve the collective works of an entire world. It would be as good as any for preserving ATLAS.

Tapping a panel, ATLAS awakened, a thin line of bright light peeking through the crevasses in the armor of the cube.

"Status?"

"ALL SYSTEMS NOMINAL. RECORDING IN PROGRESS," a hollowed, mechanical voice reported from the box. The words flashed in bold letters hanging in the empty air.

"Thank the heavens," Elizabet coughed, a short-lived relief. She dug around in her pocket, pulling forth a tactical knife, its hefty tang gleaming its danger and utility. Turning to the wall, she began to scrape, gouging deep cuts in the porous stone.

"Some people used to say," she began, continuing to etch the stone, "when the end comes, art would be the first to go, but that couldn't be farther from the truth."

The stone took form beneath the weight of her blade, a crude representation etched in its surface.

“We fight to our last breath to preserve it, because art endures in each and every one of us—as hope to endure the suffering of mortality. As the foundation that makes us, us.”

She stepped back from her mosaic.

“The ATLAS houses all the records of human history and culture we could gather. I can only hope one day it may be discovered, but even if not, the endeavor to preserve it was a worthy one.”

She wheezed, following the cave wall unsteadily.

~*~

The mouth of the cave yawned behind Elizabet’s hologram. Riba stood next to the hologram and studied her tear-stained face as the woman bent down and nestled herself against a boulder. Elizabet turned her gaze up to the sky, “I should very much like to see the stars, once and for all.”

She breathed out and her features relaxed like the placid waters of a spring.

The projection faded. A tree perched over the boulder, a carpet of moss and flowers cushioning its exposed web of roots, the only fixture of green among the packed rocky entrance of the cave.