

## Introduction

The town was silent. Nothing moved. Even the winds were still. Buildings and houses stood empty, the roads devoid of activity. A tall, angular obelisk stood out in the center of it all, casting a long shadow. Jagged lines had been etched into a spiral upon its otherwise smooth surface. A young man darted between buildings. He kept moving from one structure to the next, never pausing for more than a moment. Two figures appeared in front of him, stopping him in his tracks. He stumbled and fell to the ground. Sobs resounded off the empty buildings. The two figures approached and stood on opposite sides of him. They gripped his head tightly and blinked out of sight.

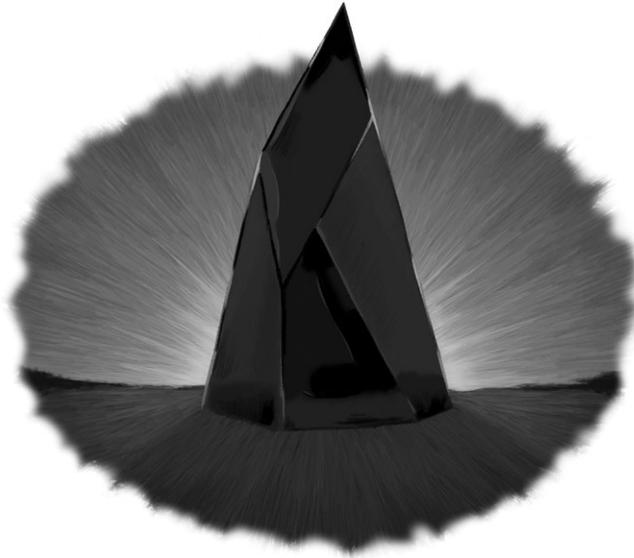


Darkness cascaded all around her. Water rippled across the surface of her home, her...*prison?* She couldn't remember how long she had been here, or more troublingly, who she was. Tired. So tired. She reached out to try and make contact with something, anything, but there was only emptiness. There used to be a way out of this place, once. If only she could remember...

A spark in the darkness. It was distant, faint, and it reminded her of something that had to be done. Something she had to do. *This way*, she called to it. *You must come*. If the spark noticed her calling out, there was no indication of it. She saw how tiny the spark was, how young. There had been others too, she remembered, much like this one. Why couldn't she see them now?

Something else moved in the darkness, something terrible. They too were drawn to the spark, but she knew they wouldn't be able to find it. At least not yet. *There is still time*, she thought. *You must come*, she pleaded. *Come, while there is still time...*

## Chapter 1- The Axe



The wooden shutters protecting the thin glass windows rattled as the wind blew with increasing ferocity outside. The floorboards creaked with an almost tangible sense of weariness. Noren glanced up from the corner he was sitting in, his back resting against the rickety wall. Old man Richards stood behind the counter, his eyes resting upon the entrance to the store. It was unlikely that they would see any visitors on a day like this. Richards gave a heavy sigh and turned around with a grimace.

“Best check the animals while there’s still a bit of daylight left. Gods know how long it’ll be before we get another rainy spell,” Richards said. He ran a hand through his hair and glanced at the door leading out to the stables. “It’d be good to give the animals their allotment of water for the day, same as yesterday,” he said, a tiredness in his voice. Noren knew that it meant the animals would continue to suffer from water deprivation.

“Three cycles and still no rain,” Richards continued.

Noren nodded and pulled himself from the floor and made his way toward the back entrance that led to the stables. The closed door greeted him, the wind pounding against the opposite side. He took a deep breath and put his hand on the door handle, pressing downward.

The latch came open and the wind blew sand inside as he pressed with all his weight against the door to force his way out. As soon as he made it through, he turned and closed the latch as quickly as he could. His eyes burned and his face stung as the wind blasted lifeless dust into his face. He made the short, familiar journey to the stables, which had been reinforced with large planks of shabby-looking wood that had been fastened together with ropes.

Before reaching the stables, he made a brief stop at the water tank and filled up a flask. The tank was a large ceramic container that Richards had constructed to collect and store water when it happened to rain. Noren remembered the stories about the original settlers of Old Steorra, and how they’d had either the wisdom or the luck to found the town on top of a vast network of subterranean water channels. Having sufficient drinking water hadn’t been an issue in the past, but all that had changed some generations ago. Now folks had to make do with the dwindling water in the wells and

whatever chanced to fall from the sky. They had to be certain to boil the water before drinking it, as everyone learned at a very early age, usually from traumatizing firsthand experience.

Noren slung the now mostly full flask over his shoulder and headed once again for the stables. He cracked open the stable door and slipped inside and waited briefly to give his eyes a chance to adjust to the darkness. From inside the doorway, he could make out the resting forms of the animals in their stalls. The only animal standing was Sap, a brown horse with black spots, very visibly nervous because of the storm outside. Noren made calming noises and approached the horse. He slowly ran his hands down its face and neck.

“Hey Sap, don’t let the storm outside scare you. The walls should be stronger after the work we did on them. Don’t worry, okay?”

Sap seemed calmer, but the rattling walls kept drawing her attention. Noren smiled, and emptied some of the contents of the flask into the horse’s water trough. He took note of the level of water in the other troughs, and a crease worked its way into his forehead. There just wasn’t enough water even to provide for the animals’ basic needs, and the effect it was having was evident in their withering frames. The dwindling rains and town wells that were drier by the month were not improving matters.

Noren emptied the remaining water into each trough as evenly as he could, and once again made his way outside. The winds had not let down, but at least they didn’t seem to be getting any worse. Covering his eyes with his arms, Noren made his way back toward the store.



Richards was very tired and the pain in his right leg was worse than usual. It wasn’t the usual stabbing pains that he had grown accustomed to. It was as if all the insides of his leg were twisting and inverting, even when he wasn’t trying to move it. Of course he did not show any of that to Gavin, who had wandered into the store not moments after he had sent Noren away.

“Evening, Gavin. What can I help you with today?” Richards asked.

Gavin set down a leather satchel that made a heavy clanking noise when it hit the counter. “My axe broke again. It couldn’t have happened at a worse time, I’d just gotten to Long’s forest and...”

Gavin emptied the contents of the satchel onto the surface of the counter. The oak shaft was intact, but true to his word, the edge of the axe was broken into a dozen dark brown fragments.

“If only iron wasn’t so damned rare,” he said, with an upset grunt. “This bronze is useless.”

Richards eyed the broken axe blade from behind the counter and did his best to conceal his amusement.

“Those must have been some pretty tough trees.”

Gavin scoffed and waved his hand dismissively. “It was my fool of a daughter. Damned if I bring her along on the next outing.”

Richards sifted through the remnants of the axe halfheartedly. “Well, the blade is in really bad shape, it doesn’t take my telling you that for you to know. We’ve no replacements, so we’re going to need some time to work out a new one for you. There’s no way around it.”

Gavin cursed under his breath. “I suppose I knew there wouldn’t be a quick fix for this. How long will it take?”

Richards kneaded his hands and gave the man a thoughtful look. “I’ll salvage what I can of the old. Give us a week and you can expect a new blade. The usual payment would be nice, if you have

any of your harder woods.”

Gavin muttered. “A week? What do you take me for?” He pounded his fists on the counter. “You’ll have this ready for me in two days, or don’t even bother with it.”

Richards opened his mouth to respond, but Gavin had already started for the door. He gave a wave and promptly exited the store, leaving Richards staring at the broken bits of metal scattered across the counter.



The wind outside still rattled the shutters, but had waned in strength. Noren sat in the back room, listening to the deep rumble that was Richards’s voice. It sounded like a customer was speaking with him, and he didn’t want to walk in on the exchange. He looked around the room, which was mostly just a place where they kept finished orders before returning them. A layer of sand covered everything. Multiple shelves lined the walls, and in the center was a tall, square worktable with plenty of space to accommodate a number of projects at a time. A simple cooking space was situated in the very back corner. The stove itself was made entirely out of ceramic with a hatch built into the middle of it for adding coal. Simple ceramic vents were located above the stove, leading outside.

During Richards’s time as a hired sword, he had worked extensively with metal shaping, so it was only natural that he handled most of the repair-related tasks. To that end, Richards had constructed a basic workshop out back that housed a smithing anvil, a furnace, and a large table for repair work. Procuring the anvil had been somewhat of a difficult feat. It was a slab of solid stone, pulled from the depths of the mountains of Kimin and transported to Old Steorra by a specialized trade caravan. It had taken Richards three years of savings to purchase, but it was the cornerstone of their trade, so it had been well worth the cost. Noren had always done his best to learn what he could to help the older man out and was a quick learner, which had helped him to develop a well-rounded knowledge of metal and repair work.

The sound of Richards’s pained breathing drew Noren out of his reverie. Richards came walking into the back room carrying a worn-looking burlap sack. Noren got to his feet and approached the older man.

“Ten guesses as to what Gavin’s brought us this time,” Richards said, dropping the satchel on top of the counter with a thud. “Gavin says it was Ayana that did this, but I think we know better.”

Noren glanced down at the shattered pieces of the axe. “This is what, the third time this season? I don’t get it. For someone who makes his living off of the woods...”

Richards rested his weight fully on the counter to take off the pressure on his leg. “I’m not sure where he got this thing. The metalwork is shoddy and the quality of the metal is even worse,” he said. “We’re going to have to melt down some more metal afore we can remake the blade. I think we have enough stone and fuel left, last I checked. A satchel of ore and fuel should do it.”

Noren did the calculations in his head, and nodded. “I’ll go start the fire and get the workshop ready.”

No sooner than he had finished speaking, a loud clanging sounded in the distance. It rang three times, but it took some time before the reverberation faded away.

“I didn’t realize it was so late,” he said.

Richards looked down at the broken pieces of the axe. “It’s going to be a long two days,” he said.

Noren reached down and gathered up the broken bits and swept them into the satchel then started for the door. Richards forced himself off the counter and followed Noren out, their paths diverging as the older man worked his way over to the shack that housed their crafting supplies. The next two days passed in a sleepless rush of activity as they turned chunks of ore into metal, and metal into blade.



Noren awoke to the dim glow of the early morning sun pouring through the window, and allowed himself a moment to relish the calmness that surrounded him. He could hear the chickens clucking in their stalls. Bare tree branches scratched lightly against the exterior of his room as a light wind found its way through cracks in the window frame, breezing past his skin. He kept his eyes closed and savored this peace, for however wearisome the rigors of daily life were, these moments belonged to him and him alone.

Over the years, he had grown accustomed to helping Richards with the heavy work of coaxing metal out of chunks of earth and the labor of bending and shaping metal to his will. Richards had lived the life of a mercenary in his younger years, and it wasn't until he had stumbled across Noren's tiny form wrapped in cloth, trapped in the remnants of a collapsed building, that he finally decided to leave his adventuring days behind him and pursue the kind of life he had always yearned for. Noren had never known his parents and Richards spoke very little of the day he found him, despite his questions. Still, Richards had never made him feel like he didn't belong. Noren knew that it was right of him to help out where he could, and he had come to love the daily routines of hard work.

He took one last deep breath before opening his eyes and swinging his legs over the side of the bed. It was not a large room, but there was enough space for a sturdy bed on which to sleep, and next to it a trunk in which he kept his few belongings: a heavy fur cloak for the colder season and a few books that Richards had procured during his travels to Umyer. A small closet was built into the wall where he stored items that he rarely used. Next to the doorway was a small table where he frequently sat and read. Tucked underneath one of the legs of the chair was a folded piece of cloth that kept it from wobbling. He didn't mind reading the same books over and over; he loved stories of Sterling Onin, the great artifact hunter, going on daring adventures to distant lands, always in search of more prized treasures, or stories about absconders who had devised clever means of attempting to dig to the bottom of monoliths, only to be stuck in a never-ending descent. These stories opened up his mind and sparked his imagination, freeing him to explore strange and distant places.

Noren enjoyed helping Richards with the shop. There had been a dearth of visitors as of late, which made work scarce, but whenever they were fortunate enough to have travelers passing through in need of their services, he was accustomed to working in the kitchen and preparing meals for the both of them. However, his responsibilities had grown in recent times, as it was becoming more difficult for Richards to complete even simple tasks. Although neither said a word about it, Noren could tell that the pain in the older man's leg was getting worse. What was there to gain by talking about it? Even Douvia, the person with the most knowledge in town about the workings of the body, couldn't figure out what the problem was. It was bothersome enough that his impairment was common knowledge amongst the town's residents. The last thing Richards wanted was to give anyone something more to talk about.

Noren stood up and clasped his hands together, then stretched his arms upward, forcing the

tiredness from his bones. Richards was sure to be finished with the forging of the axe, which meant that it would be ready to deliver. He opened his trunk and reached inside, grasping for the familiar cloak that would protect him from the chill of the day. As it was particularly cold for the time of year, he was happy that he had been able to buy the cloak off a trader in exchange for new wagon wheels the previous spring. Thankfully, they'd had sufficient materials, and Richards knew enough about wagons to properly construct the wheels.

Noren fastened the cloak about his body and headed out of his room. He walked past a door that led to the guest room and came to the top of the stairway leading down to the main level. Richards's room was at the opposite end of the hall and he could see that the door was closed, which meant that Richards must still be asleep. Tiptoeing quietly down the stairs, he entered the common room. Glowing embers were all that remained of the fire, and he could still feel heat emanating from the ashes. The room sported a great hearth that had been constructed out of large slabs of stone around a hollowed-out fire pit, and a chimney led straight up until it came close to the ceiling, then jutted out through the wall at an angle, leading outside.

Located close to the hearth was a sizable, rectangular wooden table with smoothed edges that had six smaller wooden chairs positioned around it. They didn't usually have guests, but the table was large enough to accommodate a good number of visitors. There wasn't any other furniture, so to speak, except for the heavy wooden counter that ran the length of the wall closest to the entrance.

Hung up next to the stairwell on the main wall opposite the entrance was an intricate, multicolored tapestry that Richards had acquired during his journeys to the eastern continent. It depicted a view of the ocean from one of the many cliffside dwellings that the coastal cities of Obyl were renowned for, and since his childhood, he had been mesmerized by the sparkling blue threads that made up the ocean. He had never seen an ocean before, but from listening to Richards talk about it and looking at the tapestry, he could almost imagine the sea breeze hitting his face as he stood on the coast.

Refocusing his attention to the far side of the room, he saw the leather satchel that contained Gavin's new axe lying on the counter, with a note from Richards pinned to it. He walked across the room and ducked behind the counter, peeking through the nearby entryway into the back room. Richards had left his smithing apron sprawled across the table. Turning his attention back to the counter, he reached down and unpinned the note from the satchel. The note read:

*Noren, was up late working on the Leiks's order. Please take this to Gavin first thing in the morning. Ask about the wood too.*

Noren scribbled a reply on the back of the note and placed it back on the countertop. Slinging the satchel over his shoulder, he took one final look around the common room before leaving the store, taking care to make certain that the lock on the door was secured.

The cold air stung his face as he stepped outside. A thin coat of frost blanketed the landscape, and the ground gave way, making a soft, crunching sound with every step he took. He looked across the hardened dirt road in front of Richards's place that led to the town's center. Richards had picked this spot because it wasn't that far from the town's center, but was far enough away to escape the commotion of the town. Initially, Richards had wanted to plant crops, but due to the lack of rain and appropriate weather, he started offering repair services instead. Richards had made several attempts to make use of the land, but eventually he'd given up.

Gavin had a shop in the center of town, but his home was slightly farther to the northeast. The town was the busiest at its center, with four roads intersecting in the middle and leading out to a road that circled the outskirts, connecting with buildings that were on the fringes. Noren figured that

he would be able to make the trip in roughly twenty minutes at a spry pace and still make it back to the shop before Richards awoke, but on a whim, he decided to take a detour through the center of town. It wouldn't add too much time to the trip, and truth be told, it felt wonderful to be working his legs.

He started down the road at a brisk pace, not caring about the weight of the satchel slung over his shoulder. The sun was peeking over the horizon and Noren felt its warm rays striking his face, a stark contrast to the cold winter air. After walking for a few minutes, he reached a fork in the road. If he went left, the path would lead him around the town and eventually take him to Gavin's home. Instead of doing that, he took a right turn, which would lead him straight through the town center.

As he approached the center square, familiar structures came into view. Most of the shops had been built around the town center to accommodate the needs of travelers passing through. Everyone always opened the shops, even if there wasn't much business, just in case travelers happened to show up. Most anything a traveler might need could be found here, ranging from accommodations and tools to baked goods and food for the road. The town hall was the largest building in the square, and he fondly recalled sitting in the dark toward the back of the hall, watching traveling performers sing and dance on a raised platform at the front of the room as the smell of sawdust mixed with moisture from the rain outside filled his nostrils. As rain had become so rare, the memory was a very special one for him.

The town hall also served as a place for council meetings during more mundane times. He had recently started to attend council meetings because Richards thought it would be important for him to see how the town functioned. The council made decisions that affected the manner in which trade was conducted with travelers, or how resource-acquisition priorities were set for meeting quota. People could also submit requests for work that needed to be done, whether it was for help with repairs around the house, or caring for someone who had fallen ill. Old Steorra was a small town, and the council played an important role in keeping the community strong.

Noren had mixed feelings about Gavin, but it was impressive that all of the buildings were made from hardwoods that Gavin and his team had harvested—or at least, the frames of the buildings were, as hardwood was difficult to come by. The walls were constructed from other woods that were either harvested or obtained from traders passing through, and the roofs were made of thatched twigs and long pieces of wood. As he walked closer, he saw that all the shops were still closed as it was so early in the morning. He could make out the central well, with large slabs of smooth stone stacked on top of each other to form a circular wall around the opening. Standing next to the well, still cloaked in shadows cast by the nearby buildings, was the dark obelisk that marked the very center of town.

Noren walked over to the well's edge and rested his arms on top of its stone surface and peered over the edge into the blackness. The low light made it impossible to see the bottom, but he could see a few of the white-colored stones that had been placed at even intervals to help show the depth of the well. He could feel a draught of dampness and warmth emanating from within, which reassured him that there was still some water left. The stone blocks were icy cold to the touch, which further reinforced the chill he felt throughout his body. Still resting against the well, he glanced over at the obelisk next to the well.

It was not very wide, but it was tall—a good couple meters taller than he was. It consisted of an unbroken piece of pitch-black stone that had five sides at the bottom and grew narrower toward the top, forming a slanted surface. Noren had always been fascinated by the marker, like other children, but he had quickly outgrown the amusement that came from trying to find ways to scuff its surface. Other children had tried their best to either burn, stab, scrape, or hack at the stone, but nothing ever

worked. Every town had such markers apparently, and although Noren had never ventured far, he had heard Richards speak of such things on different occasions.

Gilgen, the local Commonwealth Omnus, explained that the monolith was a gift from the gods, which was the reason why mortals weren't capable of harming it. During the midday chants, Gilgen recounted the old stories of the people who had dared to intrude into the realm of the gods, which always resulted in their doom. Sterling Onin was one such figure, the greatest of the relic hunters. He had invaded the Ark of the Elders in an attempt to rob it of its secrets, only to be captured and slowly devoured by the gods over the course of a millennium.

Noren never cared much for the stories of the Omnus. They always seemed to focus on the terrible things that happened to people who were just trying to help others out, or people who happened to get caught in larger-than-life events. As his mind wandered, his gaze drifted over to the town marker. The shadows cast by the nearby buildings were still strong, which had the effect of making the obelisk appear much darker than it was. Its surface was polished and unbroken. He blinked. Something moved and came to life within its depths; a pulsing glow shone out from inside, gaining intensity, then dimming again, before continuing in the same steady pattern. He rubbed his eyes and slowly took a few steps backward.

"Ho, who's there?"

Noren's heart leapt into his throat. He spun around to find a woman holding what looked like a basket full of bread in her hands, standing a few meters away. She came closer, and he could see that she was squinting in an effort to make him out.

"Ceressi!" he exclaimed. "It's only me, Noren."

His voice was shaky and his legs were trembling. The woman visibly relaxed and moved closer to him, then set her basket down on the ground.

"Oh, Noren! Good morning, lad. It's cold something fierce today." Ceressi shifted her weight from one foot to the other and stretched her arms. "Gods, you've grown. From afar I thought you might be Gavin, and I was preparing to give you a quite a mouthful. I've about had enough of his excuses as to why he hasn't fixed our granary door yet," she said.

Noren did his best to focus on the conversation. The light inside the monolith was clearly visible from where he stood.

"Oh, Gavin, you say? I'm actually heading over to see him right now. Would you like me to talk to him about your door?"

Ceressi made a puffing noise. She reached into her basket, grabbed a piece of bread, and waved it at Noren before giving it to him.

"If you're to talk to Gavin, best not to do it on an empty stomach. The old gods themselves know how long-winded the man gets."

Noren tried to conceal the shakiness of his hand as he reached out and took the bread from Ceressi. "Thanks. Now that you mention it, I haven't eaten yet."

Ceressi bent down and picked up her basket, and shifted it into a more comfortable carrying position. "Don't mention it. I'm going to go drop off the rest of these over at the Canavans's place while they're still fresh. They have travelers staying with them, and this morning's order is pretty large. Thankfully, we've still a lot of flour left over from the traders who passed through a couple cycles back."

She walked by him and turned around to face him once more. Ceressi was standing with a clear view of the marker and should have been able to see the glow. Noren waited for her reaction, but was met only by her words. "Take care, Noren. Stop by sometime. Rotha has been going on about

some new songs he'd like you to hear.”

She smiled, waved, and then continued on her way. He waited until she was out of sight, then turned back to face the monolith and cautiously approached it, placing the satchel containing Gavin's axe on the ground. As he moved closer, the glow increased in intensity. Noren found himself standing in front of the marker, and without knowing why, he reached out and placed his hand on the glowing surface. He gasped as a torrent of symbols appeared in the darkness directly in front of him, combined with a rush of shrill, chipping sounds that pierced the stillness of the morning. He closed his eyes and tried to fight the sensory onslaught, but the sounds did not fade. He withdrew his hands from the marker and opened his eyes. The symbols were gone, and he was surrounded by the still and quiet of the early morning.

He took a deep breath and stepped backward. There was something wrong with his legs. They felt weak, rubbery, and he felt a pronounced tingling sensation in his extremities. The ground spun beneath him. He fell to his hands and knees and fought to keep down the bile that was rising in his throat. Taking a deep breath, he tried to collect himself. Fragments and whispers of what he had just experienced echoed in his mind. His head was splitting, and it felt like it was full of heavy stones that threatened to pull him to the ground. Chills ran through his body, and at the same time, he felt beads of sweat running down his back. He kept his eyes fixated on tiny pebbles that lay before him, and gradually, his pulse returned to normal. He took a look up at the monolith and saw that the light continued to pulse within it.

A hunger to understand what was happening forced him to his feet. He faced the marker once more. A sudden gust of wind swept through the square, chilling him but also filling him with renewed energy. Shaken but determined, Noren braced himself and put his hands on the stone surface. Symbols materialized before him again, and he was surprised as some of the symbols had transformed into characters he could read.

But he still couldn't make sense of the sounds, which ranged from popping noises, much like pebbles splashing into a quiet stream, to harsh rasping noises mixed together with strangely soft and gentle cadences. Symbols continued to flash before him, and they changed more quickly than he could keep track of. Suddenly, he found that he could read all of the characters. No sooner than this happened, he heard a gentle voice in his head saying the word, “Greetings.”

“Who said that?” Noren asked, looking around at the deserted square.

“Pathway connections have been lost. Systems degradation at eighty-seven point six-five-three percent. Elapsed time since last maintenance cycle, twenty-two million, five hundred twenty-three thousand, eight hundred and forty-one point three years. Awaiting further input.”

“I don't understand,” Noren said.

Two transparent spheres appeared in midair, floating close to each other. Upon closer inspection, he saw that something was written inside each of them; one read Resources, and the other Control. The spheres were perfectly round and looked like still-molten glass. The sight of them was so mesmerizing that Noren reached out his free hand to try and touch one. As his hand neared the sphere labeled Resources, it seemed to grow slightly larger and shift a little closer to him. The moment he touched it, both spheres disappeared, only to be replaced by more spheres. This time, the labels read Medical, Nourishment, Seeds, Storage, and Tools.

Noren held his breath. He touched the sphere labeled Seeds and watched as all of the spheres faded away and were replaced by a small cube. Tiny seeds were dispensed from the cube and planted themselves in the ground. Within seconds, the seeds had grown into fully formed wheat. The wheat vanished, and different seeds came forth from the cube. These seeds grew into unfamiliar leafy

vegetables. The same pattern repeated, and this time trees formed. They had large green leaves sprouting from their centers and small, crescent-shaped fruits hanging from their branches.

“What’s happening?” Noren asked numbly.

The same voice from earlier responded, “You are viewing a nanocube that is capable of producing genetically engineered seeds of your specification.”

“I’m sorry, what?” Noren asked.

“Genetic engineering is the direct manipulation of biological organisms to bring about desirable changes and to prune away undesirable traits,” the voice intoned. “This device is the result of generations of careful engineering, and the seeds were created to thrive in even the harshest of environments with minimal human intervention.”

Noren felt sick to his stomach. It grew increasingly difficult to keep looking at the cube floating before him. As he gazed at it, he was consumed by an intense desire to know more about it, and to touch the seeds with his own fingers. He focused intently on the cube. Intense pain immediately tore through his head. An overwhelming dizziness came upon him, and the last thing he saw was the ground rushing up to embrace him.

## Interlude

The shimmering Eastern Sea stretched out into the distance far below. Ireka looked out the large glass window that acted as a barrier between his quarters and the elements. He was dressed in tapered white robes that fit loosely around his skin, and his eyes were a pale shade of blue. His skin was smooth and flawless, and coal-black hair flowed down to his shoulders. In the corner, in front of the glass window, was a large stone desk and a chair to match, each decorated in intricately carved vines. A brief, high-pitched tone filled the air, dissipating as quickly as it had sounded. Ireka turned in the direction that the sound had come from. A glowing area of light hovered above his desk, displaying geographical features. A small circle pulsed brightly within it.

He approached his desk and took a close look at the circle. He reached out and lightly touched it, which triggered another sound, this one slightly different from the previous one. The circle expanded to reveal a large region of plains. He let his finger linger atop the point of light. Two smaller, circular points of light came into being on the far reaches of the image. They were still very far away from the plains region, but slowly, they began moving toward the pulsing circle within it. He vacantly stared at the new points of light for some moments before wandering back to the window and continued impassively gazing out at the sea.