

The Sect of Strand claims that four strings of silk, each with the width of a single whisker, maintain the Chrome Hive airborne. Their length would take two months' journey for a spider to climb from one end to the other.

The School of the Spindle retorts that an even taller pillar of chrome lies under our home, bearing our weight without flinching for the last hundred years.

Few know the truth. Those who do learned it by falling from our walkways, only to join the corpses in the Plastic Sea soon after. Their knowledge, which could put an end to the century-old dispute, is forever lost in the tainted wastes below.

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"Anubis!"

My legs stiffen, and my jaw lets go of a tiny white rabbit. The wounded animal scampers away into the brushes.

"Cease your games. The Unification is a day of worship, not amusement."

Upon the Risen's command, my surroundings dissolve into colored pixels. I do not budge, eyes still locked on my prey. The creature's virtual projection suffers the same fate, and the voice finally catches my attention.

"I have a sermon to deliver. I suggest you hurry up."

I turn around, and meet an open palm. My gaze climbs the wrinkled skin and silken crimson robes until Mother Emilia's blue eyes appear; weapons specialized for instilling discipline. I obey her command, unwilling to endure her death stare any longer. My ears perk up at the resonating sound of my claws hitting the Hunting Room's chrome flooring.

Mother and I pass through the doorstep, pursuing our walk under the archways of metal decorating the Cocoon's hallways. The radiant tubes on the ceiling, now rendered obsolete, extinguish themselves one by one before our passage. The Risen's ability to walk upright without falling over still puzzles me, but my faith in the Four Strands has taught me that some things are beyond my understanding.

We leave our personal apartments and pass the doors to the Common Area. More and more Risen, with their respective Acolytes, begin to walk behind us, turning our initially small pilgrimage group into a menagerie featuring hundreds of animalkind delegates, their Mothers and Fathers following suit. Mammals, reptiles, avians, amphibians, and even invertebrates squirm, slither, prowl and flutter in harmony, all bearing the priceless gift of sapience.

"And once all shall be Unified, the Four Strands will release their weight at last. The souls of the Acolytes, immersed in the Nectar Pool, will be spared. The Apostates will fall alongside the Hive, and drown in the Sea of Plastic, for nothing else holds the world aloft. Praise be to the Risen!"

In response to Emilia's prayer, a thunderous uproar shakes the crowd. Horses stomp the ground, swans ruffle their wings, and cicadas sing in unison. I join the choir with a howl, repeating within my mind: "Praise be to the Risen for delivering us from the murkiness of non-sapience!"

Mothers and Fathers all fall to their knees, and place their hands together. Many fail to maintain this position for more than a few seconds, and use their fingers to wipe away teary eyes.

Emilia observes our spectacle in silence, and takes off her frown to address the crowd one of her infrequent smiles.

"Onwards, friends! Let us show the Forge-dwellers what true redemption looks like!"

Our procession begins its pilgrimage, and enters the Silkroot Garden. The radiance of the Sun replaces the artificial lighting. I bask in its rays, feeling warmth against my fur, and express my gratitude for this sensation by wagging my tail left and right. The white tendrils of silkroot plants twist and turn in their attempt to collect daylight. Some unruly stems manage to arch out of the chrome lattice on which we tread, forcing Mother Emilia, and the rest of her Risen kin, to ensure every step does not place their feet in the plants' grasp. Acolytes such as I, on the other hand, traverse the treacherous vines of the Garden with ease.

"Look around you, Sages of the Four Strands! Gain a first taste of the Unification's glory! Silkroot is the flawless fusion of vegetal patience with animal tenacity; a crop to surpass all others! Feel the fuzzyness of the leaves between your fingers, which shield your bodies from the cold of the night! Touch the rigidity of the stems with your claws, from which we build ladders and bridges! Taste the bark at its center with your tongue, and dispel hunger for seven days!"

I cannot suppress a soft growl as the bitter aroma of silkroot emerges from my memory. I will not miss the husky, rough texture accompanying its loathsome sourness.

We pass by the last branches of the Garden, only to press onwards beyond the frontiers of the Cocoon: ground never treaded by an Acolyte. I run past a ram with a broken horn, and a cage filled with butterflies, held by an elderly male Risen, to meet Emilia at the front of the group. Panting, I breathe with my tongue out, while Mother gently strokes the fur behind my ears. She opens her mouth to address another sermon to the crowd, but a buzzing sound coming from above interrupts her. I raise my head to investigate.

Up in the air, swarms of tiny dragonfly-like creatures fly in synchrony. Metal beams of chrome trail their path, wrapped in delicate yet sturdy silken strands produced from the insects' abdomens. Sunrays pour out by the hundreds, reflecting on shining metal and glistening shells. Chitin and mineral constellations ignite the sky in a dazzling lightshow.

One by one, each chrome pole enters the hands of Risen wrapped in thick climbing ropes woven from silkroot fibers. The abyss of the Plastic Sea far below waits eagerly for a cable to snap, and to claim another soul in its murky waters. In an elegant gesture, no doubt repeated innumerable times today, the workers sever each strand of silk with chrome-forged

scissors. They grasp the metal beams within their palm, push it against several others of its kind, and bind them together with a high-temperature welder. I count at least fifty pairs of hands, stuck in a dance of shining blades and blazing flames, progressively constructing a repeating pattern of triangles, arranged in a dome-like shape.

“Brave Artisans of Silk, look how the Forge-dwellers shamelessly use our technology! Look how fortunate they are to be held airborne by our indestructible harnesses! Observe how our silkfly drones serve them so zealously! And for what, you ask? Hear me out! They believe that their so-called Spindle will soon float away from the Plastic Sea, and suffocate us all in the skies far above. They build this dome to prevent this fairytale from happening, as if a divine force could be opposed so easily! If the Spindle existed, not even the greatest silkroot net could withstand its strength! This is why we march to the Nectar Pool, for we know it is pointless to revolt against the fate of the Four Strands.”

My fur stands on end before the structure. It resembles those found in the Primate Playground, where Risen children and simian Acolytes wrapped their fingers around tangled matrices of metal, cheering one another as they raced for the summit. I would watch their climb, look down at my paws, then growl in disappointment, as I realized how unfit my physiology was for these types of games.

With each passing minute, the grid of metal expands further upwards, slowly forming a protective shell around a cylindrical chrome pillar of incredible proportions. I sense my nose twitch, excited by a distinctive odor lingering in the air: reeking of sweat's pungent smell, yet bearing a touch of pleasant sweetness. Little room remains for doubt: unbridled excitement consumes our Risen Mothers and Fathers, and the Nectar Pool draws near.

Joyful smiles replace the normally apathetic countenances of the gorillas. Invertebrates begin jutting their heads out of their protective terrariums, exposing their frail bodies to the wind's unyielding gusts, only for a chance to glance at our pilgrimage's final destination for just a few precious seconds. A single blast of air would mean certain death in the toxic black waters far below.

An explosive tension builds up in my legs. Unable to contain my eagerness any longer, I release all pressure at once, propelling my body forward in an elegant leap. Blinded with anticipation, I dash across the final tiles separating us from the arched entrance to the colossal pillar, and rush inside at top speed.

The gate slams shut behind me.

“Jackal! Do you think yourself privileged because you are my acolyte? Know that we are all equal before the Four Strands!”

I yelp out a high-pitched note upon hearing Emilia's muffled screeches behind the transparent door. I rush back to the entrance, and scratch furiously the glass with my claws, not even leaving a dent.

“Calm down. It's just a malfunction of the door control system. I'll just need to get it to open back up, and you'll be joining your friends in no time.”

I jump, and place my entire body against the gate, trembling. I growl, trying to hide my fear, but my flattened ears show my terror. A young female Risen approaches me, clothed in a strange brown apron, with plates of chrome covering her shoulders, clearly meant for decoration over protection. She approaches me with her hands raised in a defensive stance, and extends an arm to touch my fur.

I then recognize the fabric she wears. Leather. I snap my jaws at her fingers, but she retracts her hand at the last second, her eyes widened with surprise.

"It's the first time I see one of your kind. The 'pinnacle of Cocoon-dweller ingenuity', as the Elder Smiths called it. You can understand everything I say? That's kind of creepy."

She backs away, keeping her gaze focused on my body. I would pounce on her the moment she blinked.

"I've never killed an animal. These leather aprons were made from the pelts of the Apostates; beasts who refused to receive the gift of sapience. A crate, carried by silklflies, once dropped hundreds of corpses on the Forge's docks, and we crafted clothing from them. We eat and sleep in silkroot, just like you. Have you been to the Hunting Room? We built it for your kind, at Emilia's request. Despite our differences, our collaboration is necessary for our survival. Do you understand? Relax, and let me open this door."

Hearing the familiar name of my favorite activity, I allow panic to leave my body, and walk around the Risen, granting her access to the door control panel. She advances towards it, eyeing me with distrust. I respond to her cold gaze with a menacing growl, before focusing my attention towards the room itself.

Hexagonal cells filled with colored, viscous honey-like substances cover the walls, arranged as to leave not a single region exposed. Alternating between pale blue and warm yellow, the inside of the Nectar Pool reflects infinitely the sunlight passing through the glass roof far above, each chamber still remaining large enough to welcome an adult horse within. A twisted system of silkroot ladders and chrome catwalks grant access to the upper alcoves at the price of an exhausting climb.

"Pretty, isn't it? The Unification of Silk and Chrome Given Form - the Nectar Pool. An answer to the Hundred-Year-Old Question. To be fair, it was about time. While I can't deny you Cocoon-dwellers are quite ingenious when it comes to living things, your beliefs are just ridiculous. Four millimeter-wide strings holding millions of tons for a hundred years? Couldn't your people find anything that made just a little more sense?"

I strike a claw against the chrome floor, and draw it across its surface, producing a grating sound.

"Could you stop that? I'm trying to concentrate here."

An odor floats in the air, which I've only had the pleasure of smelling once in my life.

I remember the day Father Theodore died. His Acolyte, a cougar, wanted to taste, just once, *real flesh*, and not that pale imitation from the Hunting Room. The Risen lost himself in prayers to the Four Strands as he backed away from his beloved friend turned foe. I watched from afar when the feline pounced on his Risen caretaker on the narrow catwalk, sending them both screaming into the abyss below. For days after this incident, I couldn't resist walking up to the place where they had fallen, and *breathing in* the delightful aroma of Risen terror, still lingering in the air.

I mentally follow the scent to its origin, and tune into the accelerating rhythm of the Forge-dweller's heart.

The beating amplifies, until it becomes deafening. The entire room pulsates every single time blood flows in the Risen's arteries. My heart decides to join this primal dance, matching the rapid tempo. My lungs struggle with gasps of cold air.

My prey notices my change of attitude, and stops tinkering with the electronic circuits. She reaches in a frontal pocket, and pulls out a screwdriver. Its metallic section, no longer than a rabbit's ear, doesn't intimidate me in the slightest.

"Some believe in the Strands, some in the Spindle - but I believe in the Pool. It's about separating your faith from your identity. Unified, we become more *human*. You know what that word means, right?"

Heat builds up in my legs. Warmth spreads across my body, transforming my muscles into springs primed for action. It's a familiar feeling - but this time, I do not aim for a gate. I aim for a throat.

The Risen female, realizing the ineffectiveness of her weapon, opts for a different strategy. She brings the tool behind her back, and struggles to jam it between two broken wires.

"I care about you, jackal. I care about all of us, and not some inanimate piece of metal or string. If you're going to pounce on me, don't do it in the name of the Four Strands, but rather in your own name."

In the depths of my frenzied mind, a distant memory emerges. "*There once lived an immortal judge, in a land of sands and temples, who separated the righteous from the unworthy. You now bear its name, fit for a true Agent of the Strands.*"

The rage in my body finds a worthy opponent. Emilia's calm voice wrestles with fury from a distant era, with Risen blood at stake. A primal howl battles against a plea for tranquility. I do not know who to root for.

"*None are safe from the Calling. It preys on us all; yes, even the Risen. Only Unified do we stand a chance against its maddening influence.*"

This time, Emilia's voice does not echo in my skull, but rather on the walls of the Nectar Pool itself.

*“Be at peace, Forge-dweller, for I banish the fear within your heart. Be at peace, Anubis, for I have given you the strength to drive away the Calling’s impulses.”*

Mother’s prayer strikes a finishing blow to the beast possessing my body, and I fall to the floor, sapped of energy. Only my eyes remain capable of motion.

Her eyes closed, and her hands raised to her heart, Emilia steps through the open gate. Sparks flicker inside the electronic circuit, as protest against the unusual connector jammed inside. The rest of the group follows her lead in absolute silence. All Risen, including the Forge-dweller, imitate her stance, while all Acolytes lower their gazes to the ground. She stops before my fallen body.

Mother kneels to the floor, extends her arms in an inviting embrace, and wraps them around my neck. I feel a tear run down my back, and disappear in a forest of fur.