

As she gazed upon the ever-shifting mosaic of sunlight on the ocean floor, Sklaia entered a reverent trance.

She disconnected from her surroundings, discarding most of her senses and stemming the flow of her thoughts from a steady stream to a trickle. From droplets to nothing. Silence.

The only awareness Sklaia possessed - the only thing tying her to the realm of consciousness - was the sight of the Lumesits. The divine patterns of sunlight overlaid onto the sea floor were indescribably significant to her. As well they should be. In these twisting strands of illumination were the spirits of all living beings, and between the lines were the ideals of every object. The beauty here could not be rivaled by any other sight in existence, for it *was* the beauty of existence.

All of this was portrayed in an ever-changing work of art that was equal parts frantic and serene. And Sklaia, floating mindlessly underwater as part of her daily charge, observed it.

Minutes passed before Sklaia felt it was right to complete her observation, swimming upwards to resurface. Or were they hours? Attempting to judge the time that passed during the trance based purely off of one's mental clock was a futile endeavor; the brain would have been too inactive to take notice of anything but the Lumesits. The sun itself, however, answered the question of time. Its position had shifted by eight degrees, enough to indicate to Sklaia that she had spent roughly half an hour in the trance.

It was the same as it had been for the past year or so at this point. That was fine by Sklaia. Longer trances were a sign of a shift in fortunes to come, though they never indicated whether the changes would be positive or not. For that reason, many started to worry when their daily trances grew longer in duration, and Sklaia was no exception. There were those who were delighted to witness such signs, however. They believed that a shift in one's circumstances or fortune was an exciting prospect no matter if it might be negative. Despite the fact that both her overseer and her own brother subscribed to this philosophy, Sklaia struggled to understand it. If you were content with your circumstances, you had more to lose from a shift in fortunes than you had to gain. What could be exciting about that?

It was no matter. Sklaia had been given another ordinary day, and she intended to cherish it. After a slow and thorough exhale, she dipped back underwater and began to swim back towards her village.

She glided quickly through the considerable stretch of ocean between her and her destination, swimming with a grace more akin to that of a fish than a human. Many found it strange that she preferred to trance while miles out from the village, a distance that was absurd to the average Tinnets, but Sklaia looked forward to the swim more than any other part of her day. The minutes of quiet solitude spent traveling between locations, passing over coral and through schools of fish, were a rare luxury in her otherwise chaotic and cacophonous daily life, almost more precious to her than even the Lumesits.

A twinge of guilt flared within Sklaia. That thought was far from proper. The Lumesits themselves were the most precious concept to every Tinnets, and to even *think* otherwise was incredibly taboo. But to Sklaia, the reverence expected from her felt like more of an obligation than a natural response to the patterns, beautiful though they were. Did others think the same? How many were like her - suppressing heretical thoughts about the Lumesits in an attempt to force images of propriety within themselves and their culture? Moreover, if everyone just admitted to it, how might Tinnets society change? Sklaia liked to think people would get a good laugh in before moving on with their lives; they might even be inclined to relax more with a less serious view of the world. That wasn't what she truly thought would happen in such a scenario, however. Change was never that easy.

Sklaia had returned to her village now, weaving around the stems of the enormous lily pads that most of the structures rested on top of. She glided over to the stem that she knew belonged to her workpad and surfaced, deftly pulled herself onto the pad, and strode over to a bucket filled with a cloudy purple liquid. Unprocessed telrisite.

The bucket was made of a particularly watertight type of wood, but it functioned as well as any metal one that the more wasteful societies used. Yet inside the bucket was the true treasure. The telrisite, once processed, would be traded to the myriad of nations that relied on it for their societies to function, in turn bringing more wealth to the

already unfathomably affluent Tinnet people - wealth that never benefited Sklaia, nor any other Tinnet she had known. She bore no animosity towards this ostensibly unfair distribution, for her people rejected lavish lifestyles, believing opulent displays to be distractions from the natural beauty of the world. In *that*, she was of the same mind as her culture. Money was of little value to Tinnetsil; their real wealth came from their position as a keystone power that kept just about every independent nation relying on them in order to prosper. Sklaia almost believed that Tinnetsil would continue to export telrisite even should they stop being paid entirely, but the lack of this very scenario proved such speculation incorrect. If nothing else, it'd be a rather brazen announcement of their true power as a nation, a power that the Tinnet were very much content not to bring attention to.

Sklaia reached into a nearby basket full of long, dry leaves that looked quite similar to palm leaves. She dropped a handful into the bucket of telrisite, and as she grabbed the wooden stirring pole that lay next to her station, the reaction of the leaves with the liquid gave rise to a loud sizzling sound that gradually increased in volume. Once the sound had reached a roaring intensity, Sklaia lowered the pole into the mixture and began to stir with slow, repetitive, clockwise motions. Thus began the next hour of labor.

The gentle breeze that drifted around Sklaia comforted her, the salty ocean air invigorated her, and the metallic smell of the tub of telrisite kept her focused. Nearby, other workers sang quietly to themselves, a task that distracted their mind from their aching muscles after hours of labor, and Sklaia began to hum a tune of her own, improvising a melody that was both erratic and orderly. All was as it should be. All was well.

Sklaia let her humming stop as her mind drifted towards the topic it always seemed to ponder over eventually - the enigmatic liquid that sat within her bucket. Despite how central it was to both her work and the prosperity of her homeland, she understood frustratingly little of how it worked. Of course, so did just about everyone else in the world, but her job as a crystalliset gave her a unique opportunity to realize just how little she knew about it. After it was processed, the liquid would be poured into

various molds where it would sit for the next two days as it crystallized into a usable state. Once solidified, the crystals could be slowly attuned to by a veclarist over the course of weeks and then used as catalysts for veclarendy. All of this was common knowledge. But shouldn't Sklaia know more? Why was telrisite only usable as crystals? Why did attunement take so long? How did veclarists even attune to the crystals in the first place?

Sklaia paused her motions and stared intently at the contents of her bucket, focusing her mind on its secrets. Prying at them, straining against them, searching for them. Everything else seemed to fade away, for nothing around her could be as relevant to her as the telrisite and the mysteries that swirled within it, ever obscured even after the liquid itself had been unclouded. The telrisite was far too opaque for the Lumesits to manifest, but Sklaia felt that she saw them anyway. Twisting, shimmering, *pulling*.

A hand collided with her back, and Sklaia screamed. The Lumesits ripped themselves out of her mind as she spun to see Gikliit, her overseer, burst into laughter.

"Clouded Sorrows, girl!" Gikliit bellowed with his hearty voice, "You near as jumped in'o the First Sea!"

Sklaia felt herself relax as the world returned to her. Gikliit was an older fellow with a kind face and fatherly eyes. His skin was much lighter than the average Tinnets' - a characteristic from his mixed heritage, he claimed - and he was quite heavy for his short height. The man was instantly recognizable in the village due to his contrast from the dark skin and sleek builds of the general populace, and that, combined with his unusual speech patterns, eccentric mannerisms, and drab clothing, earned him a reputation for being *very* odd. He was, however, a gentle man with a paternal energy about him, and Sklaia couldn't help but feel at ease in his presence.

"Pologies for causing such a start, 'Klai." Gikliit continued. "Jus' noticed you were staring off and thought you might as use a reminder to get back to stirring." Gikliit paused, studying Sklaia's expression. "Somethin' got you troubled?"

Sklaia shook her head and forced a smile. "Nothing like that, O'Gik. I'm afraid I was just daydreaming." She felt a twinge of guilt at the lie, but it was far easier to explain

than what had actually happened. In truth, she really wasn't sure *what* had happened to her.

Gikliit raised an eyebrow. "*Daydreaming?* You sure?"

Sklaia fought the urge to shift her eyes to the ground as she nodded.

"Ha!" Gikliit exclaimed. "I'm as rubbing off on ya, seems. Never thought I'd see the day." There was a twinkle in his eyes. "Like as I do to hear that, we can't well as have you slack on the job, 'Klai. Bes' get back to it."

"On it, O'Gik," Sklaia said, turning to pick up her stirring pole.

"Oh, and 'Klai," Gikliit said as Sklaia stood back up, "I keep as tellin ya not'a call me 'O'Gik'. Save all that proper and formal talk for the other overseers. Gikliit as'll do. Or 'crazy ol' Giki', though no one seems as wants to stick with that one for some reason." Gikliit chuckled to himself, patted Sklaia on the shoulder, and walked to the edge of the lily pad to jump off and swim away.

Sklaia turned back towards where she had been stirring the telrisite. The sun had passed overhead now and was situated towards the direction of her workstation. Upon noticing this, Sklaia cursed to herself. She felt like she had only just begun her work for the day, but time had clearly slipped away from her. It would be night before she finished with the remaining buckets on her workpad.

Sighing loudly, Sklaia raised her stirring pole and lowered it into the telrisite. It sank into the liquid with surprising ease, displacing the normally quite viscous liquid in what felt like the blink of an eye. *Clouded Sorrows*, Sklaia thought, *I didn't realize I was still that tense*. Pushing the surprise from her mind, she moved to stir the liquid again.

And she was thrown backwards.

Sklaia hit the remarkably rigid surface of the lily pad and felt a jolt of pain as she rolled to a stop just before the edge. She groaned loudly as shouts of concern rang out from the workpads in her vicinity, and she could hear a distant curse from Gikliit. *What in the Lumic Soul was that*, she thought to herself as she planted a shaky hand on the ground in an attempt to rise. She felt like she had been tossed aside as easily as a child might discard a toy that they had grown bored of.

Splashes rang out around Sklaia from various directions as others left their workpads to swim to hers. Before Sklaia could recover, a frantic voice came from her left, urging her to sit back down and ‘don’t be stupid’. Hands guided her to the ground and helped her into a sitting position, and the voice spoke again.

“*Lumic Soul*, Sklaia! What Sorrows-damned lunacy was that?” swore Eiltisin, the crystalliset who worked on the pad directly to the south. “I mean really, what *was* that? I only glimpsed it, but it looked to me like you decided to start some impromptu backflip practice. Or maybe you decided you hadn’t wasted enough time already today and wanted to lie down for a nap in a particularly showy way. Perhaps you even-”

“That’s *enough*, Eil,” Gikliit commanded in a harsh tone from her right. The sternness in his voice was almost more unexpected than the fall she had just suffered.

Eiltisin drew in a sharp breath, apparently just as caught off guard as Sklaia was.

“Klai, girl, are you okay? Does anything hurt?” Gikliit asked in a comforting tone.

Sklaia tried to conjure up a response, but she had trouble forming her racing thoughts into spoken words. She simply sat in silence and nodded, turning her head to look around. Around her stood a crowd of the crystallisets who worked nearby, their expressions displaying no small amount of concern. Finally, she said, “I’m okay.”

“That’s what as matters most, ‘Klai,” Gikliit said. “Now can you tell us what happened?”

Sklaia shook her head. “I... don’t know. I felt as if my entire body had been pushed backward, like-” she stopped abruptly as a realization hit her. *Like a veclaric push*. She felt a shiver run through her body as the truth became clearer. *Someone had used veclarendy against her. But then... why did they stop there? Was it an attempt at intimidation? It had certainly worked, but why would a veclarist try anything of the sort to someone as unimportant as her?* The more Sklaia pondered the possible explanations, the more a glaring impossibility reared its ugly head. Something that went against everything she understood about veclarendy; or even against what *everyone* understood about veclarendy. And the Lumesits... it absolutely couldn’t be possible.

There was no chance that Sklaia had attuned to liquid telrisite, and in the span of mere hours to boot. There was no chance that such a minor northward displacement could result in a push that intense. There was *no chance* that the Lumesits wouldn't have warned her about her developing talent.

The Lumesits always foretold change. It was a natural law of the world, as reliable as the force of gravity itself. But if this law *itself* changed... How would anyone know?

Sklaia sat, dazed, on her workpad in the Sea of Tinnetsil. Around her, Eiltisin and a half dozen other crystallisets stood nervously, their emotions undoubtedly a mix of confusion and fear. Beside her, Gikliit muttered soothing words as he sat, his lowered head concealing a knowing smile and an eager twinkle in his eye. After all this time, change was coming. Gikliit could only pray that the plans were carried out without incident.

Of course, change was never that easy.