

Ofae was a moon.

Well, Ofae was a lot of things, but a moon was the most commonly accepted form of it that existed. Anyone who could see the sky, could see Ofae's shattered core orbiting the planet, a stream of ice, rock, and a denser piece that still retained water.

This was where Nautipods came from before the god Ofae, made perhaps the single most devastating decision in a time before the ancients even flew through the skies of Eeridi, a planet in desperate need of inspiration. Long before any of the inhabitants of the Skire continent. Originally, the Nautipods were meant to welcome the people of Eeridi and journey into the farthest reaches of space together. The older and wiser of these people leading the young cosmonauts.

That was not what happened. That was not important now.

Nautipods were quite the odd looking creature. They took on two forms to survive, but the most common form for the Ofaean Nautipods to take was their pod form. Similar to a nautilus, they were tentacled creatures who had hard shells and hinged helms adorned with all manner of special fins, ruffled veils, and horns or spikes. A condensed version of all the little bits of Ofae's oceans that had formed around a pearl that served as their heart and soul. Intensely magical and tied to the moon in ways that not even they fully understood.

Each as unique and complex as the next.

They could take more solidified and articulated humanoid form as well, but land was in short supply on Ofae, so those forms were rare to see outside of the shallowest waters that had suitable coastlines. These forms were mostly used for travel to Eeridi. The creatures there had formed under very different circumstances.

The common element between them was having access to portal based magic.

The portal wasn't very large. Only enough space for a single Nautipod to swim through. It was made of a tempered magical ichor that bled into the water and made a swirling mass of bright colors and lights. The process of creating a portal on Ofae was difficult and unstable, but it was the only way to get to the Skire landmass without alerting the denizens of their presence. Their predecessors in the cosmos.

Many Nautipods born on the moon were hesitant to connect to Eeridi at all, citing fear and abandonment. Some didn't care one way or the other. Some wanted their possessions back. Some just wanted the missing chunks of Ofae to be returned to where they rightfully belonged and the Nautipods that had been transferred there in Ofae's sacrifice to come home.

No other Nautipod understood this more innately than Sloan, a Nautipod who had been hired to retrieve such pieces and people. She'd been to Eeridi a few times to retrieve pieces of Ofae back from thieves, but she'd never personally been to Skire. She had never heard anything good about it.

Now she had no choice. There was a Nautipod who had stolen a piece of Ofae for a Skirean resident, and it was her job to bring them back. The piece and the thief. She had accepted it without question because one did not question an order given by an elder. Especially not an elder who was on the verge of death.

The details didn't make all that much sense to her. Would it not be better to just kill and eat the thief and bring the magic back? It would have certainly been easier, but her instructions were simple.

The portal bubbled and roiled in the water, threatening to destabilize. With a rush of energy and a loud snapping sound, the waters swirled into a flat disk and the bright colors reformed into distinct shapes. Tall rectangular structures awash in light and surrounded by air. There was a dense smog choking the skyline. White masses of clouds covering what was likely a very large city. All of it was covered in a thin layer of grime.

It seemed so far away, and also so close. Too close. Too real.

Sloan, with her pair of long maroon tentacles pulled all the way into her shell and her helm just barely cracked to allow for easier navigation, shuddered as she approached the portal. She took care not to allow her trepidation to read in the eyes on the top of her helm, Those needed to remain unreadable.

“You have one year.”

That was all that was said to her, and she internalized that. One year to send back as much as she could. That seemed simple enough. By any means necessary. She could understand that as well.

In fact, she preferred it that way.

The physical travel was unimpressive. She swam through the portal, and landed on a small terrace, directly into an artificial pond. Sloan hadn't realized it at the time, but the film of grime was actually the glass wall of an enormous tank that was in desperate need of cleaning. The top of it was open, and she climbed over the edge of the “pond” to find a place to hide.

The first thing she noticed once out of the water was just how heavy the gravitational pull was. For whatever reason, the magical density of Skire was significantly more powerful than the rest of Eeridi. It made locomotion along the floor of the terrace difficult, and the weight of her massive spiked pauldrons gouged a line in the stone as she pulled herself to a more private place.

There was water everywhere, and it spilled over the edge of the terrace, much to the chagrin of those who got splashed. Almost immediately, Sloan liquified her insides and reformed into a more fitting form for traversal. She was quick thick around the middle, soft and malleable and adorned with a translucent draped fins around her shoulders and a thick fur cape around her waist.

Her tentacles became long tail like appendages, and her feet ended in sturdy gunmetal gray hooves with similarly white furry fetlocks. Her helm covered most of her face, hiding her rather sad looking eyes under metallic ram horns.

As soon as she finished forming, she stood and the owner of the terrace came out of their home, yelling about their pond and the stone and the water. A CCCat, though Sloan had never seen one so up close before.

She didn't bother to apologize. The CCCat was yelling at her, but she was listening for Ofae's magic. Once the CCCat got tired enough of being ignored, they waved a hand in front of her face and she sprang into action, elbowing the CCCat in the ribs and grappling it. The struggle was not nearly as intense as she had been expecting, as the CCCat folding easily under her might and gave up almost immediately.

“I'm looking for a Nautipod,” she said. Her voice was calm despite the CCCat's rising anxiety. “You are not in danger from me today. He goes by Bird-Helm. Grey and pale blue. Wings.”

The CCCat cried. It drooled from its gaping mouth and the words it spat out were almost total nonsense. Sloan heard nothing of use, and so she stood up, entered the home, left through the front door and went down to the street.

There was a commotion brewing on the sidewalk. People were looking up at the terrace and speculating. One particularly ornery looking CCCat was twitching and trembling, though they made no verbal sounds. For a moment, they locked onto Sloan, recognizing her even though she had never formerly known them.

She left, following the pull of Ofae's magic.