

Of the Sky, Of the Sea, and of the Stones

Chapter 2 - Of the Sky

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“If only I could be so grossly incandescent”, I thought aloud as I peered up into the clear, cyan sky, which harboured a beautifully shining sun. For when I was in my adepthood, and my early twenties, I ventured towards the northwestern island of Carpalia, located just south of where the frigid Koivu sea chilled the world. As the ship that I had hired to transport me was approaching my destination, I had clamoured aboard the deck to witness a sight that I had only heard about in tales and books.

Dawn in the north was supposed to be something of a different experience than elsewhere. I did not understand how a sunrise could be different, but after that morning I knew. It was as if the north was closer to the sky, somehow, for everything could be seen with much more clarity.

When once the sun was just a yellow orb in the sky, from here I could see its true nature. Flaming arcs leaped from its surface, like serpents of golden magma. They writhed and thrashed before sinking back beneath the molten sea of the sun’s surface. I had no idea if those lengthy arcs were living creatures or simply phenomena created by the sun’s intense heat.

The sky itself also took upon different qualities as well. The wind did not simply blow in a single direction, but there were many, many tiny gusts of individual paths that weaved and wisped to and fro about the place. This made travel somewhat difficult, as the sails were nearly useless. Unless a particularly strong gust came along, they would do little to propel the ship. The cyan of the sky also shone, as if reflecting light from the sun like the sea.

I looked around on deck and found everyone to already be up and at their various tasks, despite it barely being past dawn. I could not blame them, as who would not want to be awake and witnessing such a gorgeous morning.

Then, from around the eastern side of the small island of Carpalia, came the sight of my true destination. For I had no business on Carpalia itself, as it was mostly barren and only of interest for particular volcanic samples, which currently interested me not.

I had come here on information telling of a rare floating city that had descended from the clouds. Majestic cities such as these were no myth, or fable, but have been documented multiple times by various people and cultures around the world. They were strange and rare to behold, but real.

Before me, gleamed a city of such shining splendor that tears had come to my eyes. Glowing, gold spires tipped with deep blues rose from a perfectly round dais of huge proportions. The dais itself was resting upon what seemed to be dark, roiling, storm clouds, which were hovering just above the surface of the sea. There were a few ships nearby, all seemingly anchored. As we passed them, heading towards the shining city, I saw that on their decks were their crews, all staring and pointing and discussing the strange city. No one had yet tried to approach it, for fear of the unknown often ruled the hearts of sailors, though many times for a good reason.



Fig 8. The city was so bright that I was hardly able to look at it without hurting my eyes

The seas of Okeanós are treacherous. And any accident on the waves could lead to disaster, for sometimes no help would be around for hundreds of kilometers. Though now, the ship that I had hired approached the shining city that rested upon an angry storm. As we neared, the sounds of thunder and wind were growing louder and louder. The height and scale of the city soon became apparent, as the top of the ship's mast didn't even reach the bottom of the dais resting upon the storm.

Just as I was thinking of how I could make my way into the city, a massive door slid open along the side of the titanic dais. Front this new opening unfurled a strange ramp made from a very thin, yet brightly reflective material. After being fully deployed, a liquid then began streaming downward from the opening in the dais. The

entire structure then moved rapidly before the path of the ship, which gave the captain and crew no time to react whatsoever.

Thankfully, though, this was not done with ill intent, as my transport ship sailed effortlessly up the subtle waterfall and into the opening of the dais. Beyond, all upon my hired ship were stunned by what we saw. For through the opening in the dais was a tremendous network of wide and narrow canals integrated with expansive and incredibly organized docks. It was a harbour the likes of which I had never seen before, and as I observed the expressions of the sailors beside me, I could tell that they felt the same.

I was overcome with innumerable questions then, but all thoughts stopped as I looked up, beyond the harbour at the towering spires beyond, and amongst the highest peaks I saw forms of true myth. Of creatures only whispered of in legends. For what I saw flying among the tallest towers could only be described as ancient and of unmistakable description. The children of Ziz, mother of The Sky and empress of light, wind, and storms.

As I gazed towards the highest peaks, I spied the far off forms of great sky serpents. Long and majestic, their many-coloured feathers left marks in the sky. I've read legends of these creatures, referred to in ancient texts in passing as 'The Children of Ziz'. Little information about them exists in written form, but from what I have read, these winged serpents were harbingers of madness and the might of The Sky. Where their mother was, I did not know but was grateful that she was not present. What I read of her gave me the impression that sighting her usually preludes to one's doom.

Reds that smeared away into faded, bizarre tints and violets that faded along into smeared, queer shades trailed behind them. I was transfixed by the sight, but soon my eyes began to burn. I tried to look away, I even remember turning my head, but my eyes were too strongly drawn upwards. From my peripherals, I could sense that the crew around me were in similar situations. Some began to moan in agony while others began to panic, cursing the serpents.

When the crew and I felt that our minds were at their breaking points, the sky serpents flew away, off into the north. As they retreated into the distance, I felt the pain leave my eyes. With relief, I closed them, savouring the sweet darkness of my eyelids for much longer than a moment before reopening them.

"What the fuck was that about?" I heard one sailor ask another.

"I dunno, Regi, but I don't like it! Them sky devils would have made us go mad!" Regi's comrade stated in response. "We should turn back and get out of this place! It's pretty, but I don't like it. There's too many strange things here."

At this, many of the crew nodded and agreed aloud. It was then that I had to speak up, indicating an issue with their idea, "And how would we turn back?" I asked before gesturing with a single hand towards the aft of the ship. Many sailors looked the same way, leaning over the railings to get a better look behind us.

"That waterfall thing. It's gone!" A different sailor exclaimed. He ran his hands through his bushy, brown hair, clearly stressed.

It was then that the captain spoke up, "Relax! Everyone, please relax." After getting everyone's attention from the upper deck, he whispered something to the helmsman before addressing the entire crew once more. "Lads and Lasses, we are in a strange, new place. That much is apparent to any with eyes. But panic would only prevent us from finding a solution. Besides, we did not come here to immediately turn back. We were hired by a scholar to take them to a floating city AND bring them back to the shores of Orosilla," the captain emphasized. He paused to gauge the expressions of the crew, who were all murmuring among themselves. "I'm fairly certain that no person upon this vessel is a coward. If you find that during recent happenings, that this has changed, please feel free to throw yourself overboard so that I don't have to deal with the likes of any yellow-bellied worms!"

"I ain't no yellow-bellied worm!" Regi's friend shouted in response, rousing the spirits of the crew.

"Yeah, you tell 'em, Carl!", Regi agreed amiably.

And with the crew's resolve restored, we began to navigate the strange, brilliant docks as best we could. As everyone began making observations and suggestions about what to do next, I internally thanked the captain for the clear mastery of his duties. Particularly, his attention to contracts made and his understanding of his crew's hearts and minds. I truly picked a worthy vessel and crew for this voyage.

Regi and Carl, being the two loudest members of the crew, made their ideas known. Though, the bushy-haired one who was stressed by our lack of retreat options, whose name was Jonas, debated them at nearly every word. The crew squabbled as they tried to interpret the geography and architecture of the strange surroundings.

While they debated, however, I stepped up to the frontmost part of the ship's prow, to peer ahead. There were quite a few other ships in the maze of docks and channels, though they were alien in most regards. Their hulls were in the shape of slender, oval bowls, and had no sails. At least, none that were unfurled, as I spied rolled-up sheets of some sort near the aft of each of these oval vessels. On their sides were many portholes, each accompanied by an oar, indicating that these ships were propelled by those who rode within.

Each silvery ship, seemingly all made from the same light gray metal, paused in each cell of the docks before someone on board called out with some signal. It sounded like they alternated between three main words. When someone cried out “Priory!” the way forward was opened. At “Dextera!” the rightmost channel opened. And at “Sinistra!” the leftmost way was cleared. I had no idea who, or what, was controlling the network of docks and blocks forming the harbour’s maze, but the verbal signals seemed to be the best way to navigate our ship.

I relayed my findings to the captain, who set the crew to the tasks of emulating the oval ships ahead of us. The captain assigned his first mate, a fearsome-looking woman named Karcharia, to do the verbal signalling. The captain, crew, and I saw an open looking area further into the docks. A few ships seemed to be anchored there, so we assumed that it would be fine for us to do the same.

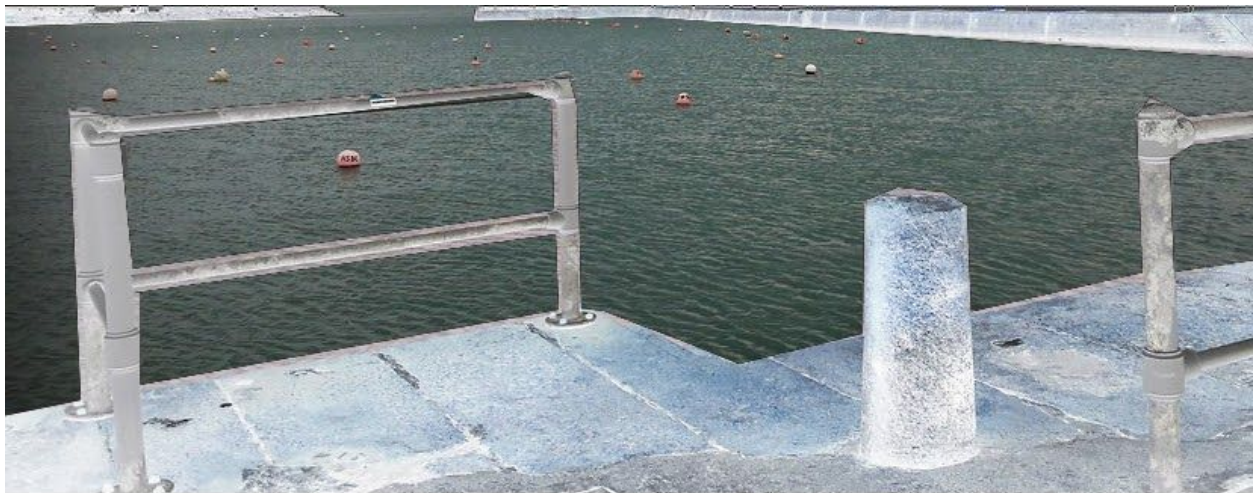


Figure 9. The bricks that paved the harbour were pale and seemed to glow slightly.

Utilizing the same method as the oval ships, we made our way to the docking area and dropped anchor. The crew then set up the gang-plank so that we could venture ashore and get a grasp of this wondrous city, where everything was clean and almost shone. But as they did so, a group blocked the way off the ship. People of light blue skin stood between us and the dock proper, though they did not look hostile, merely curious.

Then, one of them stepped forward, resting on the center of the gangplank. This individual was separated from the rest by the regal-looking toga about her body. It was pale in colour, but adorned with many odd ornamentations. By comparison, the others that grouped up behind her were quite plain.

She then spoke, and addressed the captain, crew, and I together, though she spoke in a language that I had never heard aloud before, save in lecture halls and literary recitals. She was speaking Koivan, a language long thought dead and only used for reading ancient texts, tomes, and scrolls. It took me a few moments to understand, as her tone and inflections were vastly different from the ways I heard

Koivan read aloud. Though, I finally grasped what she was saying after using much mental power.

Combined with the expression on her face, as well as that of those behind her, her words seemed to be a plea for assistance. Something seemed to be troubling them, but as I was mentally forming a response in Koivan, I felt a great tremor shake the ship. Though, I noticed that it was not only the ship that was shaking, for the entire city then hideously began to rumble.

The rumbling was so violent, that the cyan-skinned woman in the pale toga lost her balance. She tipped towards the side of the gangplank, over the water, though a nearby sailor lunged deftly to her rescue. The young sailor, tan of skin and wearing a red bandana, shot out an arm and grasped one of her flailing ones. He then yanked her back onto the gangplank, but due to the continuous shaking, they collapsed together into a heap upon the simple wooden bridge. The red-capped sailor, crawling, escorted the woman back to shore as the entire city quaked. The crowd on the docks, and the crew of the ship, went down on all four limbs as well.

As everyone was trying to brace themselves as best they could, I saw great destruction in the distance. One of the magnificent, shining towers had been broken near the base, somehow, and fell to the wide street leading to the docks. People along this road ran and screamed as a wall of debris was kicked up and buffeted the area. Though, thankfully, the worst of it did not reach us on the docks.

I, at that moment, somehow pondered upon what could cause such an upheaval, instead of thinking of my safety. Especially to a city so magnificent and suspended upon a storm. It was then that my question was answered, as something colossal rose from the sea. Up, a crimson shape ascended, until it towered above the hundred-meter minarets. Its form cast a huge shadow over the city. It angled its horrid face towards the center, where the docking bay was located, so that everyone present, including myself, could see its hideous visage.

It stared down at us with huge, almost completely black eyes. I gazed up in terror, but my subconscious, that of a scholar studying the world's fauna, peered closer and saw a ring of white around the void-like pits. All that was dark were these monster's pupils, immensely dilated, but they were still the eyes of an animal and not that of a monster from fiction. Though, this great eel's intent soon became clear as it opened its massive jaws.

From within extended what looked like a smaller, yet still massive, pink eel. As this eel stretched forth from the greater one's mouth, more appeared out of the crimson titan's throat. These pink eels then opened their jaws, from which issued forth thick, black sludge. This foul slime at first dripped from the pink, many-toothed, jaws, but soon increased in pressure. The dripping sludge turned into a waterfall of oily filth, before becoming full, powerful streams of viscous, black liquid. The many pink eels writhed about, aiming and twisting their slender bodies at

disgusting angles, spreading as much of the dark matter as they could upon the once spotless city.

Figure 10. A truly horrid maw



But then a great splashing was heard, though this came from the docking bay where our ship was located. The crew and I turned to the source of this new disturbance, terrified at what new horror could assault us.

What rose from the water on the opposite side of our ship from the dock was what appeared to be a huge, vertical, golden pipe. A large amount of water drained from the gleaming structure as it tipped sideways, angling its open end towards the monstrosity assailing the city. From deep in the pipe, I began to hear a whining, whirring sound that was gradually getting louder. I also began to see a white glow originating from the same source.

Behind me, on the dock, the crowd of cyan-skinned people began shouting. I turned, once more, and got a bit dizzy while doing so, but saw that they were all covering their ears and gesturing towards the golden pipe. Now quite light-headed, I spun around another time and realized the warning. The golden structure was not a pipe, but some sort of cannon. One that was about to be fired. Such a huge weapon from this distance would deafen us, or worse.

It was then that I relayed the warning to the crew as best as I could. For they were all hunched over, screaming, praying, and begging to be spared from the crimson eel's attack. "CANNON FIRE. CANNON FIRE." I screamed as loudly as I ever had in my life. "THE GOLDEN THING IS A CANNON, COVER YOUR EARS!" I shouted as I followed my own advice. The surrounding crew looked at me with fearful eyes before looking to the cannon with realization.

"DO AS HE SAYS! HIT THE DECK!" The captain commanded as he braced himself. Everyone hastily did so, and not a moment too soon. The sound and light of the cannon soon became unbearable, and I turned away, though this made me face the red horror above the towers. I hunkered down by a crate and prepared my senses for coming displeasure.

Suddenly, a tremendous wave rocked the entire ship. Over our heads, blasting straight through our mast, shot an incredibly hot beam of yellow light. Within less than a blink, this surge of energy struck the colossal red fiend in the mouth, causing

all of the pink eels within to shriek horribly. Even though my ears were covered, I heard their horrible screeching. In an immediate reaction, the crimson eel reared its head back and seemed to swallow all of the pink ones. Though, since black slime was still flowing, it spilled great, dark streaks along its stomach. A deep gurgling, like that of a hot spring, though infinitely louder, was heard. Black smoke then rose from the red eel's maw, though its visage was still pointed upwards.

Thankfully, though, it sank, back into the sea. Soon, it completely disappeared, leaving only copious amounts of a black, tar-like substance across much of the city.

Slowly, everyone rose to their feet, albeit warily. From the dock, the red-bandana-wearing sailor who had helped the regal woman waved at us. He, and a few of the blue-skinned people, placed a new gangplank to connect the ship once more to the dock. Many rushed over and began helping the crew. For when the cannon fired and shattered the mast, many pieces of debris fell, killing, injuring, and trapping much of the crew. I had avoided the danger due to being at the front of the ship. Those that were on the middle of the deck though, were not so lucky. Realizing the severity of the situation, I jumped to lend my hand to the rescuers. Though, in the back of my mind, I prayed that there would be no more surprises.

Myself, the available crew, and the cyan people all began moving debris and freeing those trapped underneath. There was much to clear, but the casualties were not as heavy as I had initially suspected. There were many injuries, though only a handful of deaths. The captain and Karcharia, his first mate, insisted on seeing to the dead themselves and instructed the others to tend to the wounded.



Figure 11. The mess that was the ship's rigging at this point.

Luckily, many of the cyan folk seemed to have medical knowledge and experience. The nicely robed woman, who I then noticed had dark blue crow's feet about her eyes, was giving instructions to the other cyan people in Koivan. My ears

took a few moments to adapt once more, but soon, my years of reading dull alchemic recipes and monologues of dead philosophers in this language began to pay off.

She was telling others to fetch bandages and other medical supplies. Soon, a group returned carrying such items and many began tending the wounds of the injured sailors. As they did so, the captain and first mate looked on suspiciously while going about their business. With a few quiet words to them, I eased their minds by translating some of what was being said by the cyan folk now flowing on and off the ship. They nodded in acknowledgment, though they still kept their eyes peeled. Suspicion is often a boon on the high seas.

The healing party, so to speak, and the organization of the battered ship took the rest of the day, though, thankfully, nothing else that could be considered catastrophic occurred.

After the excitement and work were mostly dealt with, I finally had time to approach the cyan people properly, and perform a proper introduction between them and the crew of my transport ship.

(The following dialogue was transcribed by a librarian from the floating city and depicts the conversation more accurately than my memory. I have left all of my...errors included. This is to depict the strain that can occur when conversing in a language other than your primary one. Also, I found it amusing.)

“Gratings, although we have known each other for the bitter part of a day by now, I would like to immolate myself and my companions. My game is Athos Angion, and I am a scholar from Orosilla,” I said in Koivan, to the best of my ability.

I could tell from the reactions of the cyan people that I must have misspoken in some way, or have a strange and humorous accent to them, as a few smiled and whispered to one another. Though, thankfully, I was still understandable.

“Greetings, Athos Angion of Orosilla,” the regal woman with crow’s feet replied politely, and a bit slower than she spoke to her kin, though not enough to come off as condescending. She was trying to be considerate. “I am Senexa, Grand Adviser to the city of Temptes Equit,” she continued. She looked like she was about to say more, but seemed to stop herself. Taking this as an indication for me to digest the information and respond, I did just that. Senexa was an important person here, so I decided that the best next step was to introduce her to the most important person on the ship, as well as the ship itself.

“It is a pleasure to cake your acquaintance,” I responded in my frail Koivan. I suddenly became very conscious of stutters, poorly chosen words, and mispronunciations, though I carried on, “Get me also introduce Captain Roac, of the vessel Bitterwind.”

Captain Roac stepped forward at the mention of his name and extended a hand out towards Senexa, intent on a handshake. Warily, seemingly not aware of what a handshake was, Senexa slowly extended one of her own hands and mimicked the captain, though she did not grasp his. She looked to me for approval, with an uncertain look upon her face. The captain chuckled heartily before smoothly wrapping one of his huge hands around her slender one and gently shook it up and down. "This is called a handshake," he said to me, but while making eye contact with Senexa.

I translated and explained that the captain was showing her a common form of greeting for our people. When she understood, she smiled, which pushed at the dark blue crow's feet at the corners of her eyes. "We...have much to discuss," She then said as she and the captain separated hands.

I then translated for the captain, who, like before, spoke to me while facing Senexa, "I agree, I also need to thank you and your people for tending to my injured lads and lasses."

And with that, most of the crew settled in and many of the cyan people left to aid in the clean-up of the city, as thick, black tar was still everywhere. The captain invited me, Senexa, and her small entourage of three 'Great Advisers' into his quarters to discuss matters over supper.

Senexa and her party agreed gladly, indicating that they were famished, though hilarity ensued when they saw what was on the menu.

As Captain Roac and Karcharia led the rest into the captain's quarters for supper, Senexa's companions introduced themselves. All three were young women, who, by Orossian standards, looked to be between twenty and thirty years old. The first wore a lilac toga adorned with pins in the shape of strange metallic instruments and introduced herself as Tibia, a Great Advisor in service to Senexa. The next to introduce herself was Vinea, who was garbed in a pale green robe which bore symbols of plants and trees. Lastly, the most vibrant one, clad in a crimson, knee-length toga that was more akin to dress, announced her presence.

"Greatest of the Great Advisors, at your service," she spoke boldly as she thrust her hand towards Roac, attempting to initiate a handshake, which surprised everyone in the room. Except for Karcharia, who simply continued to scowl. "My name is Voxia, and if you ever need anything taken care of while in Temptes Equit, I'm the one you should speak to," she winked, and I translated as best I could.

Chuckling at her boldness, Roac clasped her hand firmly, which made Voxia wince slightly, though she recovered almost instantly. "Upon my ship, lass, I am at YOUR service. Should you need anything, that is," Roac replied with a devilish grin that was equal parts intimidating and charismatic. Partially distracted by the charm, I converted the words into Koivan for our guests.

Senexa then cleared her throat, which immediately made the three younger city advisors stand straighter and drew their attention. “Thank you very much for inviting us to supper, Captain, we are most grateful,” Senexa spoke elegantly while tying her long, black hair up into a bun behind her head. She fixed it in place with one of the many pins from her toga. “We will try to be courteous guests...” she continued, but then diverted her gaze towards Voxia and paused, during which I translated for the Captain before she spoke again. “...who will not overstay our welcome or ask for any trouble.” The tone she finished with made the loquacious Voxia’s mouth tighten into a hard line.

The three younger women quietly tied their hair up as well, in response.

I deigned to translate this last bit but reluctantly spoke the words quietly to the captain, who simply smirked in response. Just then, I heard the door leading up from the galley open and turned to see the ship’s cook, a lopsided giant named Akbor, enter carrying a massive plate crowned with a veritable feast. He placed it with little grace upon the large, round table at the center of the room. It clattered and spread some yellowish liquid about the wooden surface, though most of the contents stayed in place. “Enjoy! But watch out for the razor clams, these ones are feisty!” shouted Akbor before returning below deck while licking at a few cuts on his tiny, left hand.



Figure 12. The captain’s quarters were refined, yet modest.

Roac and Karcharia pulled out the chairs and offered seats to everyone, before seating themselves. Though, I and the advisors all did so warily, as supper was fresh to the point of still being capable of locomotion. Just as Roac was about to speak, though, one of the razor clams that Akbor warned of got loose and made a break for it. It hopped towards Tibia, who let out a small shriek. Thinking quickly, though, Karcharia promptly slammed a fork into it with great force, pinning it to the table while sending small pieces of shell flying about the room.

The captain let out a sigh, which drew Karcharia's gaze. He simply shook his head from side-to-side in disapproval but said nothing. In an attempt to ease the situation, Karcharia seemed to attempt to smile at Tibia to assure her that all was fine, though since the first mate's teeth were all filed down to wicked points, it simply came off as frightening. Tibia smiled back weakly but had to cover her mouth in alarm as Karcharia then shoved the impaled clam, shell and all, into her jagged maw.

Scratching his forehead in annoyance, Roac handed plates and cutlery out to everyone before capturing all of the remaining razor clams. He placed them into a single, large bowl and then handed this to Karcharia, who accepted eagerly.

Thankfully, at this point, Senexa initiated the conversation, "Might I ask what is for dinner? I don't recognize this..." she began before trailing off, as she seemed to realize that she did not have a word for what was before us on the smorgasbord.

For upon the platter at the center of the table was the body of a meter-long, grilled cephalopod. Around its dark red form, its severed tentacles coiled in twisted rings. Among the fried corpse's limbs were various citrus fruits and small wooden bowls full of different sauces.

Squid such as these were only found in the open sea and was considered a delicacy on Orosilla, so I was eager to dig in. But, I noticed that Roac had not moved to take his share, he was simply staring calmly at the advisors. I took from this that he was waiting for them to begin eating first, out of courtesy, but the finely clothed women seemed, understandably, nervous about the food.

Taking it upon myself to assist in relieving this social awkwardness, I picked up my fork and skewered a nearby tentacle. I brought it to my plate and began cutting it into segments with my serrated knife. I then placed a morsel into my mouth and began chewing with relish. The texture was chewy, yet rough. It had a briny taste, though also that of the grill on which it was cooked. The seasoning was subtle, yet brought out the true flavours of the sea. Akbor was a strange fellow but was a savant at preparing anything that the crew provided him.

After consuming the first segment, I offered a few of the other pieces to the advisors of Temptes Equit. They each took a single morsel with their respective forks and exchanged glances with one another before the eyes of the three younger women rested upon Senexa. With the slightest of sighs, she placed the tentacle segment into her mouth and began chewing. Soon, her eyes widened slightly and a smile appeared at the corners of her mouth. She nodded to her subordinates, who all exhaled in relief before digging in.

The rest of the meal went on with veritably no tension whatsoever. Everyone began eating and conversing in a relaxed manner, which, I admit, was a bit

challenging for me. Eating while acting as translator and diplomat were tedious and odd, but not wholly unenjoyable.

After the main course, Karcharia brought up a bottle of wine from the captain's private reserve, at his request, and poured everyone a glass. Sated and at ease, I realized that this was when the real matters would be discussed. Matters of what we wished to know of Temptes Equit, and undeniably what the advisors wished to know of our reason for coming here. Especially during a time of such upheaval for the city.

"Shall we begin, or should they?" Captain Roac quietly asked his first mate. Loud enough that I could hear, but quiet enough that the advisors opposite of him could not. I doubted they would understand his words, but the captain seemed to think that they would be able to read his tone. Luckily, the ladies of Temptes Equit were chatting among themselves about the wine that the captain had offered to everyone.

"Our ship, but their city..." Karcharia growled. "Let's get the jump on them," she then added, licking the clam juice from the sides of her face with a dextrous tongue. She then leaned back in her chair and folded her thick arms.

"We're not here to take anything." the captain responded. "And remember that these people helped the lads and lasses injured by the...chaos from before."

"Yeah, in their bloody city, because of their own bloody cannon-thing," scowled the first mate. "If they hadn't helped, I would've made them pay..."

"With this kind of damage, we're not going anywhere any time soon. We need lumber. More than we have in storage. Also, I haven't seen a single tree since entering this place. We're going to need their help. Let's allow them to ask the first question," Roac concluded.

Karcharia did not seem pleased, as her lips coiled back briefly, revealing wicked teeth, not unlike that of a shark. Though, soon, she relaxed her expression and nodded, trusting the captain's judgment.

Coincidentally, at this time, Senexa and her advisors turned their attention to myself and the Bitterwind's leaders. While looking at the captain, the elder of cyan skin spoke to me, so that I could continue translating, "Thank you so much for the delicious meal and wonderful wine!"

"My pleasure, good food and drink are better with good company," Roac nodded.

"It may seem ungrateful to do so, but...would we be able to ask you a few questions? About your arrival in our city and your reason for being here? If, that is, it is not too rude!" Senexa replied.

Roac looked to me and inclined his head, indicating that I should answer this one. I cleared my throat gently, which made Senexa turn her face towards me. “I have hired the good captain and his crew to bring me here. I am researching the Sources of the world, and saw Temptes Equits’ landing in these waters as a rare chance to learn of the Sky.”

“I see,” the regal woman acknowledged. She then smiled, “We feared that you were pirates who had come to plunder the city! But, am relieved to learn of your scholarly intent! You see, all are allowed to enter Temptes Equit, as the way in is automated for convenience, though we rarely have visitors for reasons that I’m sure that you can glean. Our city’s defenses are geared towards larger threats, so we need to be extra cautious when dealing with potential smaller ones, such as greedy privateers.”



Figure 13. Roac’s complex gaze.

At this the captain and first mate exchanged smirks. I chuckled in response to Senexa, though it was a nervous one, for the crew of the Bitterwind was, in fact, actual pirates. I had hired them in place of a more...conventional transport vessel because no one else would agree to take me this far north and this close to a flying city. All were too afraid, but for some reason, Roac and his crew did not seem nearly as daunted. I sensed that Roac had his reasons for investigating the shining city, though I did not pry.

“Pirates? Us?” Roac balked before laughing loudly. The guests from Temptes Equit smiled at his laughter, thinking it to be cheerful, but as Karcharia’s barking laughter joined the captain’s, I realized that it was in mirth. Though, the advisors seemed none the wiser.

“Well, since we have no reason to fear your intentions, we would be happy to show you to a place where you could find all the information that you could ever desire about Temptes Equit, as well as much about the Sky. Our library is open to all! Though, unfortunately, you will not be able to take books beyond its property since you are not a citizen of this city. It is one of our laws. It is quite late in the evening now, though, but I can send some of my people to meet you upon the docks at sunrise to guide you there?” offered the elegant older lady.

“That would be wonderful!” I exclaimed happily and translated what she had said. But, as I did so, I then noticed Roac’s eyes shining with anticipation. I then chuckled again, reeling in my excitement before gesturing a hand towards the captain, who then spoke.

“Would it be possible to send a few more of your people? My ship needs repairs, and we lack the resources. I would like to see your market and purchase some supplies as well,” he inquired, though the tone he used made it seem as if his request was all but granted already.

“Of course!” Senexa replied. “That is a most reasonable request, as it is the city’s fault for damaging your vessel! I will send a voucher with my associates as well, so that you may purchase your repair supplies, as well as food and drink, at no cost to yourself!”

Both Roac and Karcharia smiled widely at this. “Free food and drink, you say...” Karcharia rumbled almost inaudibly while having to wipe small amounts of drool from the sides of her mouth.

Though, after these points were discussed, the conversation died down. Soon, Senexa, Tibia, Vinea, and Voxia left with a fond farewell and myself and the crew settled in for the night. We slept well, knowing that the following day would hold solutions and answers.

The crew and I awoke the next morning after a decent sleep. Most went about seeing what they could do to begin repairs on the ship, though as I dressed and joined most above deck, I saw the captain and first mate on the docks, already accompanied by two well-ornamented cyan people. As I approached, I saw that one was Vinea, the green-clad, nature-themed Great Advisor from last night. She greeted me with a warm smile and wave, in concert with subtle nods from Roac and Karcharia.

The other individual I did not know, though he wore a great many pins upon his lilac toga. Many were various forms of books, quills, pages, scrolls, and others representing literature in some way. They all glittered, seemingly kept in pristine condition. Though, as I admired them, I briefly noted one that looked to be feline, in the shape of a violet cat's head that shone with iridescence.

Vinea then spoke, introducing me to the stranger, though as she did so I took notice of the height difference. This new individual was a fair bit shorter than the other cyan folk, who were all relatively tall, again, by my standards from living on Orosilla, where people were roughly slightly taller than me. For I, if you have forgotten, am originally from Euryph, a small island in the southeast Peleca Sea: where people are squatter and darker. Though, I was still a few fingers taller than the polite-looking young man before me now.

“Good morning, Athos! I hope you slept well,” Vinea began, to which I nodded in acknowledgment with a smile. “Please, let me introduce you to Cais, Head Librarian of Temptes Equit's Central Library.”

“Pleasure to make your acquaintance”, the Head Librarian said with a polite half-bow, as I've seen many other city folks do. His wavy, waist-length navy blue hair was tied in a loose ponytail and shifted in a ripple as he nodded, like a silken waterfall. “I have been tasked to guide you in your search for knowledge within the Central Library. Please, allow me to guide you there personally,” Cais finished pleasantly. As he smiled, the simple ring in his lower lip glimmered silver in the morning sun.

“I would like nothing more!” I agreed happily. And from there, I and Cais left the docks together while Vinea led Captain Roac away in a different direction. She, being in charge of many of the city's agricultural aspects, including matters pertaining to lumber, was chosen to deliver the voucher to Roac, as well as see him to the markets. His main interest was in acquiring supplies to repair the Bitterwind, though there was a hungry glint in his eyes. Karcharia had the run of the ship, in the captain's absence. We agreed to meet back at the docks by dusk but then went our separate ways.

As Cais and I walked up the broadest of the city's white and gray paved stone roads, I noticed that there was little remaining of the black ooze which the titanic red eel spewed upon the city. All that was left were dark stains here and there, in crevices and nooks. Though, many people seemed to be sluggish or dizzy. Cais and I paid them little mind, as no one seemed to be terribly bothered, just groggy. Possibly from many staying up late into the night to aid in cleaning the city of the filth.

Upon our way, Cais engaged me in casual conversation, telling me of places that we passed by, such as the harbourfront, a small hedge-filled park, and a store that sold art supplies and writing equipment.

But when the Central Library came into view, I stopped in my tracks and gasped. It was tremendous! Probably close to ten times the size of the Bitterwind; which was a frigate-class vessel of usual proportions to house about three dozen sailors. The library dwarfed all buildings and structures around it, though it was separate from them, encircled by a heavily flowered garden that bloomed with red, yellow, and blue flowers. As we crossed through the garden, I inhaled deeply at the fresh and fragrant scent. I noticed that Cais, walking slightly ahead of me, was doing the same. The enjoyable moment was accompanied by a summer breeze that caressed the bushes and vines along the path's edges. The flowers seemed almost to be waving in greeting from the minor wind.

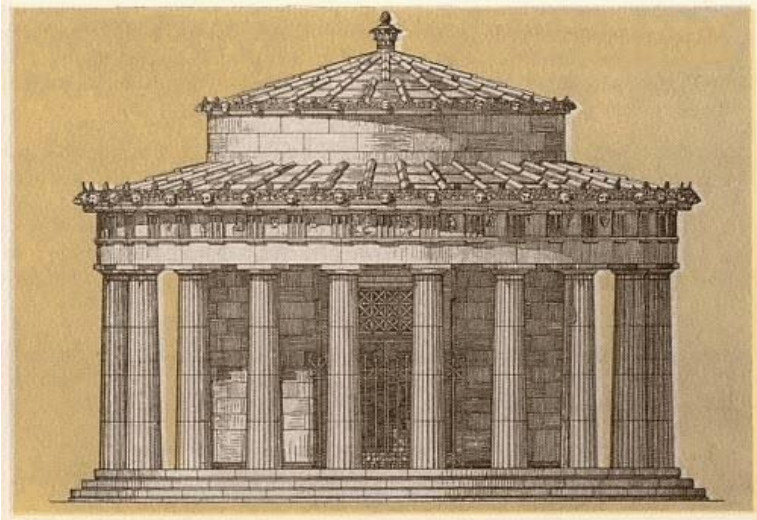


Figure 14. An architectural representation of the Central Library, though this does not do its beauty justice.

Just then, as the breeze passed, Cais paused and he angled his head slightly upwards, sniffing at something unseen. A smile then appeared on his visage as a few small, fuzzy creatures bound forth through the shrubbery and onto the path before us. There were then, in our path, three cats. Though, these felines were unlike any I had seen anywhere else in the world. Cats were common as pets, and in the wild, all over Okeanós. And they varied quite a lot, from island to island. Though, these before me then were of spectacular description.

The one on the left was as green as the grass in the garden, lightly reflecting the sun with a warming near-glow. Their fur was like blades of grass, and their paws and nose, and inner ears were dark brown, like soil.

The one on the right was orange and peppered with black spots all over their body. Each black spot seemed to quiver slightly. This one's eyes were as white and vertically irised as the others but seemed to burn with a subtle intensity.

The one in the center was vibrant purple whose fur shone with iridescence in the morning rays, casting rainbows about in subtle streaks as they stretched casually. Their face was remarkably similar to the pin depicting a feline head over Cais' heart.

Cais beckoned to them and they bound forward, rubbing their flanks and faces against his legs while purring happily. He then looked to me with an apologetic grimace before whispering something that I could not hear to the cats. They meowed together in a short chorus before bounding off, ahead of us towards the Central Library. As they ran off, a small gust blew by, shifting Cais river-like hair over his shoulder. Without much effort, he simply flicked his head to the side, flipping the wave of strands back to its proper place upon his back.

With great anticipation and curiosity, I follow the Head Librarian towards the mighty structure, whose massive columns seemed to hold up a gently-sloping, conical roof. Within the ring of pillars were white, stucco-covered walls that were adorned with magnificent doors of pale, almost white wood that had deep, ornate carvings in them. I noticed then that the words were simply in stylized Koivan, and read them aloud with relish upon gazing at the nearest one, “‘Thou who entereth’,” read the left, which flowed over to the right, “‘Open thine mind’”.

After reading aloud the words upon the grand doors before us, the Head Librarian gently pushed them open. They made way before us easily, as if much lighter than they should have been. And we passed the threshold, I poked at the leftmost door with an index finger and it slid open a bit further. “Wondrous...” I said quietly to myself, thinking of what my mentor would say of this fascinating architecture.

Though, as I turned my attention forward, I was greeted by a vision of knowledge the likes of which I had not seen since visiting the grand archives on Orosilla. Bookshelves twice as tall as I were arranged in huge, concentric circles with four main areas void of obstructions to be used as paths. At the center, where we were apparently headed, I spied a desk covered with stacks of papers, books, scrolls, and writing implements.

When we reached the center, I noticed then that this area was at the top of a radial slope. On all sides, the bookcases around us descended gradually before we could see over them. There must have been close to five hundred bookshelves if my estimates were correct.

“Welcome to the Central Library,” Cais smiled proudly as he gestured his hands at the surroundings. “Amongst the sea of shelves, there are quite a few desks to sit and read at. Writing supplies can also be requested at any given time. Usually, there is a cost associated with the supplies, but the Grand Advisor herself has offered to cover any expenses incurred while you are visiting the library.” The cyan-skinned man then paused, allowing me to process the information.

“Thank you, truly! This is wonderful. I cannot wait to get started,” I beamed happily, like a child surrounded by sweets. “I must prioritize my reading, even though I want to look at every single book in this library! Could you please show me to your section housing information about The Sources?” I then asked.

“Of course! My task would not be complete until I see you seated and with a book in your hands,” the librarian agreed. “One moment, though,” he then added as he retrieved some things from a drawer in the document buried desk. From within, he drew out a bottle of glue and a small loop of ribbon. “Please wear this,” he extended the white ribbon to me. “That is your access bracelet. It is a sign that you are authorized to be here. Please do not lose it, as security can be...unforgiving,” he then grimaced as he peered over my right shoulder.

As I put the access bracelet around my left wrist, I glanced in the same direction as Cais. On top of a bookshelf behind me, sat the orange cat with the many black spots and the stern glare. They then turned to the side, displaying their flank laden with vibrating circles. Just then, every black spot froze and then opened to reveal many eyes housing constricted, vertical slit pupils. They then shut quickly and their host lied down upon the wooden surface. The entire time their two head-bound eyes were gazing at me, judgingly. This must be the library’s security or at least one aspect of it.

“Please do not mind him, you are quite welcome here. Olhos is merely letting you know that he looks after the books. As do the other library staff,” Cais informed.

At the time of my being in the flying city of Temptes Equit, I was in my early twenties, though before this point I had visited MANY libraries across all of Orosilla and the nearby northeastern islands. This was the first time that I had encountered library staff that were not human. After subtly shaking the disbelief from my head, I nodded to acknowledge the Head Librarian’s words, though as I took notice of the glue bottle he was placing on the desk, I could not help but ask, “What’s the glue bottle for?”



“Nothing, right now. It’s empty,” Cais then sighed, “but that’s a problem for later,” he finished before guiding me down a different path than we arrived on.

Figure 15. Mao, one of the feline librarians.

We walked for a bit, before stepping away from the main path down a smaller one that appeared on the left. Soon, we were at a comfortable looking reading area. There were a few other people

here as well, most of which ignored us and continued their reading. Many were seated in soft-looking chairs, though there were four simple wooden tables at the center of the lounge. The only person seated here was completely surrounded by stacks of books and papers, consumed by their work, and was writing at a feverish pace, though almost inaudibly.

Cais silently gestured for me to have a seat anywhere that I liked; which I did upon a plush-looking beige armchair. The majestically maned one walked to a nearby shelf and returned with a thick book bound in a colour similar to his cyan skin.

I took it and looked upon the cover. In stylized Koivan, the text read: 'Theories of The Sky. Volume One. By Cretum Trina.' I had never heard of this author before, but that was probably because I knew next to nothing of these people's culture and history. "Thank you," I mouthed quietly at Cais.

He nodded before he leaned in close and whispered, "My pleasure, if you have any questions, please ask Mao." He then pointed to the table a little way in front of my seat, which upon now rested the violet, yet iridescent, cat that we encountered outside.

As I smiled at them both in assurance, the Head Librarian took his leave, heading back the way we had come, likely with important business to attend to. After watching him go, and noticing Mao leap silently onto a nearby, unoccupied chair, I turned my attention to the tome now in my hands. I was almost salivating at the thought of uncovering the secrets of The Sky, so I did not hesitate to open it and begin visually drinking in the profound words.

As I opened Theories of the Sky: Volume One, I was relieved to find that it was printed, and not hand-written. Stylized Koivan was beautiful to behold, but challenging for me to read, as this language varies quite a lot from Orosian, the language in which you are reading THIS book. Orosian and Koivan use the same alphabet and characters, for the most part, but Koivan undoubtedly came first. In fact, it was the model after which Orosian was created, if any records on such matters are to be believed. Furthermore, I should not have been surprised that the books on Temptes Equit would be printed, as it was a refined and wondrous city. A far cry from the decrepit, ancient scrolls, and books that I would have to carefully read with tweezers and gloves while holding my breath to avoid damaging them.

The forward, by Cretum Trina, the author, was simply fascinating. He went into his thoughts on why the following subject matter was important. He seemed to have felt the need to validate his findings. Such a forward was not uncommon in Orosian non-fiction books, as academia could be vicious and hypercritical. Sometimes, for little to no reason, and the sway of more established scholars could shift opinions easier than facts and logic. I then realized that this was a similar occurrence in the flying city, from Trina's words in the forward.

But after pontificating this supplementary notion, I delved into the first section: of the aethereal particles. My understanding of this concept, from learning of biology and physics on Orosilla, was that these particles originated from The Sky. They gave rise to air currents, lighting, thunder, and much more. Though, at this point, not much else was known. This was close to fifty years ago, after all. The first chapter of Theories of the Sky explored this concept in HEAVY detail. Most of which I shall spare you, as this is not a biology or physics book, but one of history meant to give perspective for the whole known world.

Aethereal particles, as it turns out, did NOT simply appear out of the heavens. Trina phrases their true origin as if it is common knowledge, but what I read here sent my mind reeling! Many scholars the world over, myself included, assumed that aethereal particles emerged from the sun by some unknown energetic process. But this is not completely true, though not far off. According to Trina, the sun is involved, but it is not the creator of these particles. For the true origin is found WITHIN the sun. Within the brightly burning sphere, there lies a spark. An object, or being, of pure creational energy (even Trina did not seem to know which, as such a thing defies quantification). One responsible for emitting particles for millions of years, long before man, beast, or even plant, existed. At least, not as we know them today.

This harkens back to an archaic poem that all scholars worth their words on Orosilla have memorized. This poem, known simply as “Sky, Sea, and Stone”, is the oldest (dated via particle degradation analysis) written record of ANYTHING scribed upon paper. The oldest record of ANY writing and one that speaks of the creation of all life, albeit in a cryptic way. Written by an unknown author thousands of years ago, it remains locked and securely guarded on Mount Oros. Only visible through a thick, air-tight glass container.

The sky roared
A streak fell from up high
Into the abyss it dropped and then returned to the sky, once more it soared
Life sparked from its departing, a new dawn was nigh
No longer was life in the depths moored

The waves lashed all and nothing
Around, it sent the creatures of the deep
Yet they thrived, vying for supremacy they never ceased the ruthless fighting
The debris that landed ashore spawned life and it began to creep
Fast they grew and joined the fray once they got moving

Sea and Stone raged endlessly
The Sky watched and judged from above
The three were linked; by space, by time, and by a force that echoed relentlessly
Between them, though, there was never shown any love
Except when some decided to act senselessly

*Figure 16. A depiction of the Sky, Sea, and Stone poem translated into Orosian.
Elador insisted on making it seem “authentic”, with the discolouration.
I debated the reasons for including this aspect but found that
it really does relay a sense of this work’s true age.*

After recalling the words of Sky, Sea, and Stone, I paused from reading and shut my eyes. Needing a break from all the new information, I took a few deep breaths and returned from the shores of being overwhelmed. With my eyes still closed, though, I felt a soft pressure upon my right arm. I unveiled my vision to the sight of Mao, the vibrant violet feline with two paws upon the crook of my elbow. In their mouth, they held a white ribbon, not unlike the one adorning my left wrist, but instead of a loop, it was a single, short length. A bookmark, I realized as I accepted it gladly.

Mao purred quietly, but happily. I had the urge to pet them but was not sure if it was appropriate. I extended my right hand to them, slowly. At first, they sniffed at my hand cautiously but did not recoil as it approached. I paused, midway, as out of the corner of my eyes I saw orange Olhos, return-watching. I proceeded with caution, but all was fine as Mao purred slightly louder at my stroking of their wondrously bizarre fur.

After a few pleasant moments of this, I returned my attention to Theories of the Sky. I gently laid the silken bookmark between the cover and first page before proceeding.

For the rest of the day, I poured over the first section, one-third of this substantial tome. All of ethereal particles; their properties in many units of measure that I could understand, and some that I could not. How, and why, they caused forces

like tornados, lighting, and even extreme sunlight. Apparently, according to a peculiarly phrased passage, it was due to “what was needed”.

According to Trina’s deductions (backed by a bizarre and alarming direct source, which will be discussed later), “what was needed” to create forces like lightning, typhoons, and scorching sun was the need for them. Who, or what, needed these things he did not mention, though he alluded to them being necessary for global regulation, such as for the temperature of the world’s surface, the amount of moisture in the air, the circulation of currents among the clouds, and more. Though, this hints at some sort of plan or at least the maintenance of one. This, in turn, implies conscious thought, which was a staggering notion. *Could this be the work of a sentient and sapient god?* I pondered, feeling a bit silly about harkening back to, what is considered on Orosilla, primitive thinking. As I looked up at my surroundings to rest my eyes, I almost scoffed at such a people and place being anywhere close to “primitive”. The library that I sat in then was wonderful in all ways a library should be, including being without pushy scholars and obnoxious staff. At least at the time of my visit.

As I continued my reading, I learned of some physical occurrences on such a minute scale that they seemed negligible. They appeared at such high frequency that their combined effect could not be ignored. As I ingested the many graphs and calculations Trina used to prove his claims, their logic could not be denied. Firstly, he explained how lightning is created.

Every force under the sun stems from this spark of life, henceforth to be known as “The Spark”, for convenience. Now, from The Spark comes aethereal particles, but as the aethereal particles propagate throughout The Sky across Okeanos, upon some a trigger, they shift. For lightning, a sudden surge is applied to the A. particles in exactly the right amount of force and precisely the correct direction to cause them to collide with one other in a successive chain. Think of a bunch of pebbles in a line, resting upon a smooth surface. The first pebble in the line gets shoved forward, into the second. And the second into the third, and so on.

When each A. particle connects in this sudden and precise manner, energy is imparted from one to the other. This energy, unleashed violently from life’s raw, untamed force, is what we call lightning.

At this point, I gasped. The mathematical equations of many experiments quantified in such a clear manner thoroughly convinced me of Trina’s proposal. My slight outburst drew a couple of stares from those around me, though they returned to their reading after noticing that nothing was amiss in their quiet haven.

I delved back into Trina’s dissection of the world and learned more about how forces are created. Typhoons, tornados, and hurricanes are apparently caused when Spark energy is stirred and swayed at nearly unpredictable angles, though with, somehow, recurring motion. Scorching sunlight, on the other hand, was caused by A.

particles being vibrated while occupying the same general area. The increased activity simply superheated everything. It was after this point that this part of the book, the first third, concluded. I checked the page number and was surprised that it read close to a thousand! I looked up at the many windows in the ceiling and saw skies of orange and red. Dusk was upon me and I remembered that I was to meet the Captain at the docks very soon.

As a reflex from being a tremendous bookworm, I instinctively tucked the silken bookmark gifted to me by Mao at the first page of Part 2 of Theories of the Sky: Volume One, and closed the book. I then gave the feline librarian beside me a gentle scratch behind the ears before hastily making my way back to Cais' desk, hoping to find the head librarian.



*Figure 17. One of the hallways of Temptes Equit's Central Library. Simply wondrous!
How I wish I could return...*

When I found his workspace, he was indeed sitting there, though now surrounded by fewer books and more empty bottles. When he saw me approaching, he put down the scroll that he was scrutinizing with a magnifying glass and greeted me, "How goes the studies, mister Athos?"

"Well!" I replied in Koivan, which was becoming better by the hour, I found. "I understand that I'm not allowed to borrow any books beyond these walls, but can you keep this one safe for me? I'm only about a third of my way through it, and I don't want this particular copy to escape me, for reasons a fellow scholar such as yourself probably understands."

Cais smiled empathetically, "Of course. I understand your desires in this regard quite well!" He then paused and a curious look appeared in his calm, yet pensive

eyes. “Though... did you say that you were already ONE-THIRD of your way through Theories of the Sky: Volume One?”

“Yes,” I nodded, not understanding his curiosity.

He looked down and chuckled, at first in a slightly defeated way, but then his usual positivity returned. “...It took me a week to read that far when I was in school,” he admitted with a mild grimace before laughing lightly.

“Oh, I see!” I returned with an easy smile. “My thirst for knowledge can cause me to become drunk on words, from time to time. Often, in a frenzy.”

“I wish everyone’s thirst was this great. Then we’d have scholars worthy enough to assist me properly. For now, the best I have to work with are Mao, Olhos, and Relva.” I then heard a meow from above, which felt directed at us, somehow. I looked up at the top of a nearby shelf and there sat ever-watchful Olhos. “I meant that in a good way!” Cais added quickly. With another meow in response, Olhos leaped away, to unknown library business. The head librarian then smiled at me before extending a hand outward, palm up, “I’ll keep this copy safe for you.”

I handed him the book, and when I did he peered at the white, silken bookmark’s end, which was keeping my place. He smiled and then tucked the tome into one of his desk’s many drawers. With a fond adieu, I told him that I could make my way back without issue, and proceeded to the docks while enjoying a beautifully vivid sunset. As I peered at the clouds, illuminated by reds, oranges, yellows, and pinks, I thought upon what I had read of The Sky, The Spark, and aethereal particles. The heavens before my eyes then were full of majestic colours, but, unlike previous sunsets, were now tinged with knowing. Even after I met up with Captain Roac upon the docks, and went to bed that night in the belly of the Bitterwind, thoughts as vivid as northern dusk twisted and turned within my mind. Encouraging a thirst greater than any I had ever had before. So much so, that the next morning, I was parched near to the point of madness.

As the thirst for knowledge plagued my drowsy mind, I knew I had to rouse myself from this stupor, lest it caused me to waste precious daylight. Though, upon making my way to the galley to grab something to eat, I was accosted and almost literally dragged up to the deck by Karcharia.

“Could whatever you want to discuss wait until I’ve had something to eat?” I complained, pulling my arm free from the muscular woman’s grasp. Though, it was clear she purposely released my arm, for the mighty first mate was not the kind of person whose grasp could be broken easily.

“No, too many people in the galley,” she whispered. In itself, this was highly unnatural, as Karcharia never whispered. Every thought she had and wanted to be heard was spoken loudly and proudly, to the point of being close to terrifying. Her

hushed tone put me on edge. She looked like she wanted to say more, but subtly gestured towards the bow, which held the least amount of sailors.

When we were clear of potentially prying ears, I inquired, “Is there something wrong?” I briefly looked at the mast’s splintered remains, worried that the Captain was unsuccessful in acquiring resources to repair the ship, despite the Grand Adviser’s promise.

“No,” she started, following my gaze towards the mast briefly, before looking back at me, “the captain’s made an order for some lumber, which should be arriving soon.” She then picked her pointed teeth to clear it of a piece of crab shell. After licking her fingers she continued, “things are not right in this city. Early this morning, just before dawn, our lookout spotted those rainbow sky serpents in the distance. The people of the flying city are acting weird too. Sluggish and clumsy. Like they’re all drunk.” Karcharia then stretched her arms above her head before resting them on a nearby railing and stared at the water of the docking bay. “More important than any of that is how the captain feels. He told me his senses are on edge like something was about to happen. And his gut is never wrong. I don’t want to spook the crew, so keep your mouth shut about this, got it?” She ended with a glare.

I flinched from her intensity and swallowed hard before nodding. “Did...the captain mention what was troubling him?” I cautiously probed.

“He says he feels like there’s a storm coming, but not an actual storm. Like the world is inhaling, or like the lull and dip in the sea before a crashing tidal wave appears,” Karcharia responded as she returned to gazing at the water. Her uncharacteristically poetic remark set me even more on edge than her whispering or her warning.

“I assume you’re telling me this because I’m about to head into the city soon,” I implied.

“Let me be straight with you, nerd, I don’t care about you OR your studies,” she growled. “But Captain Roac takes every job, contract, and mission very seriously. Like he’s bound to his word by some curse. Eternally loyal to the words he speaks and writes. And I to him. Therefore, I must do the same. Don’t get caught up in anything...troublesome. The moment the ship is repaired, I want the Bitterwind, and her crew, OUT of this queer place. Before any more sky serpents or sea monsters assault us. Read quickly, or whatever it is you do off-deck so that when the ship is ready we can be off without delay.” Without waiting for me to respond she glared at me once more, though this time with jagged teeth bared, to sink in her points in more ways than one. She then walked along the deck, barking commands at nearby sailors, paying me no more attention.

With a deep sigh and a growling stomach, I popped into the galley and grabbed a piece of bread smeared in savory sea anemone jam before making my way towards

the Central Library. Though, as I did so, I scrutinized those I passed, remembering Karcharia's words. The cyan-skinned folk of Temptes Equit did seem very sluggish. Many were slouching while walking or seated. Bags under many eyes indicated great sleeplessness in much of the population. Some even stumbled and fell while nothing was in their way.



Figure 18. One of Karcharia's many shark-themed tattoos

Hoping the oddness was not an actual cause for concern, I brushed off the feeling while walking up the lovely garden leading to the grand house of knowledge before me then. I planned to keep my eyes and ears peeled, but I thought that within the walls of the library I would surely be safer than those elsewhere. Though, as I thought this, a shadow appeared in the sky above. Racing across the skyline of Temptes Equit was a flash of dark wings, which almost careened into the ground near to a raised area boasting a draconic fountain a fair distance away from the Central Library's entrance. I paused and observed, as did all of the cyan folk in the area. Many gasped, and some began chatting fearfully.

Near the large fountain, which was twice as tall as I, was now an equally huge creature with leathery gray wings and ears like that of substantial, indented trowels. From their back dismounted a humanoid figure, though. One garbed in a robe made entirely of huge, multicoloured feathers that hurt the eyes to look at directly. Not unlike the integument of the children of Ziz, the rainbow sky serpents, which greeted us with their painful beauty when the Bitterwind entered the city not so long ago.

The figure in the dazzling robe stepped away from their flying mount, which was essentially a huge, dark grey bat. The brilliant man's face was not unlike that of the cyan folk, though was severe in expression, and light yellow in colouration. The rainbow feathers of his fully unclosing robe covered his entire body from the neck down. His clean-shaven head and face were like that of a golden bust, though without the luster of metal.

Around me, I noticed the cyan folk nearby began kneeling and chanting slowly, piously. They all turned towards the bright figure, whose presence now seemed to make the rest of the world darker, by comparison. Not wanting to stand out, I approached a nearby group of four and knelt next to them. As I did so, I tried to glean what they were chanting. I strained my ears and heard but a single string of syllables repeated over and over: “mahuizotl ilhuicatl”.

I had never heard anything in this tongue in my entire life. They were such foreign and strange syllables to my ears, but for some reason, they seemed to please the shining figure at the top of the steps leading to the fountain. The shape of a twisted knot of a sea serpent spewing water upwards loomed just behind him. With a content expression, they then addressed all of the people of Temptes Equit who were present.

“People of the city that rides upon a storm. Rise.” They said, to which the people obeyed. “I am Xiuh, a cleric of Ziz, and I am here to deliver a message from above.” At this, many of the cyan folk began chatting excitedly among themselves. The group next to me spoke in a revered tone about this rare and incredible occurrence. Xiuh then continued, “Ziz, her children, and her unending grandchildren, have seen your plight and have offered their aid. I come to herald their assistance. When they appear above to cleanse the city, do not be afraid!”

At this, many of the blue-skinned people around me began to clap and cheer. One man, far to my left, then spoke up, addressing the brilliantly robed Xiuh, “Thank you, oh great herald! I have been ill since that hideous crimson eel attacked, I cannot sleep, I have trouble breathing, and...” he then trailed off as he fell to his knees. The deep bags under his eyes were evidence of his words. Before he slumped over completely, two others caught him by the shoulders.

After seeing this, I could no longer deny the sickness that was seeming to spread through the city, undeniably caused by the foul, black bile the titanic eel had sprayed all over the city. Though now gone, the sinister ooze’s effects were apparent.

The kneeling man’s body then began to shudder and convulse, to the alarm of his comrades. His eyes rolled back into his head and dark red ichor began to leak from his nose and the corners of his mouth. His companions jumped back, fearful of his condition, and as they did so he fell flat onto his face.

I stole a peripheral glance at the cleric of Ziz and noted that his expression was the same, despite everyone else being shocked and fearful.

What followed next was a cause for true terror. The facedown man's spine then began to elongate. Each vertebra poked outwards like a needle until his entire back looked like a fine-toothed comb of thin, bony spikes. From the tips of the spikes then flowed reddish-pink goo until the entire man's body was covered. The large, reddish-pink mass of goo then solidified and changed to light pink. The same shade as the tongues of the monstrous crimson eel that vomited forth a dark tide.

The newly transformed creature then reared up, to reveal the form of a man-sized and slug-like being with only a wide, uneven mouth as a feature. People began to run and scream as the new tongue-beast began turning about, approaching cyan people hungrily. One person, an elderly crone paralyzed with fear, was caught by the fiend. It then proceeded to knock her over and gush fell slime from its mouth, covering her in a disgusting tar.



Figure 19. Xiuh as he left

Xiuh then apparently had seen enough. He got back onto his flying steed and took off, though, as he flew away, I saw the same neutral, yet pleasant, expression. Not one of enjoyment, but one of apathy.

I turned my attention back to the tongue-beast and saw that the woman who it had coated in its regurgitations was now shifting form as well. Noting that I was the only person left in the area, I proceeded to make myself scarce. Before the wretched things could turn their attention to me, I ran to the library and let myself in. I looked for a way to secure it and found the door bar nearby. I quickly put it in place, hopefully to prevent the entrance of the pink predators, and rushed to find the head librarian.

As I rushed down the wide hallway I came to Cais's desk soon enough, though out of breath. I saw the head librarian in counsel with his three assistants: Relva the green cat with fur like grass, Olhos the orange and black one with a stern gaze, and Maos, the iridescent violet feline that had given me a bookmark.

The head librarian nodded briefly at me before returning his attention to the very high-strung cats. They seemed to be communicating something very important to their leader. After a few more meows, Cais dismissed them with instructions, to

which they seemingly bounded off to follow. “Is everything well, mister Athos?” he then looked at me, his expression welcoming but gravely concerned.

“No sir, it is not!” I replied honestly, “monsters, pink...slug-like fiends that were once people. They are in the city and attacking and turning people into more...tongue-like abominations!” I stammered out in what was likely very poor Koivan. My mind was reeling from the horror of what I had just witnessed, though the cyan skinned man before me seemed to understand clearly.

“My assistants just gave me a similar, though more detailed, report. Come, let’s not waste any time. I’ve asked Relva, Olhos, and Maos to secure the building’s entrances and exits. We actually have recently updated emergency procedures and protocols, so everyone should know exactly what to do,” the navy-maned man assured me, though his hands, resting upon his desk, were clenched very tightly. He then stood up quickly before continuing, “there are things that I need to do as well, though I could use a hand.”

Understanding his meaning, I responded, “It would be my pleasure to assist you!”

And with that, we set off, but this time down a different path than the one he had taken me before. Through a smaller corridor than most, lined with shelves packed with folders and drawers for filing cabinets, we travelled until we reached a cramped stairwell that descended on the right and ascended on the left.

We took the left and rose until we reached an upper area that consisted solely of thin, yet railed, walkways of grey stone that ringed the circumference of the grand Central Library. This seemed to be a way to access, and observe, much of the surroundings. On one side we could see most of the library, and on the other, we could see directly out of the large, circular stained glass windows set into the domed roof.

“I want to do a lap of the library, to check all the ins and outs,” Cais stated before leading me around the upper walkway. “Please act as my second pair of eyes,” he asked, to which I nodded. I had no actual obligation to help, though the head librarian’s previous kindness and friendly demeanor simply made me want to assist him.



Figure 20. Depiction of a gorgeous stained glass window of the Central Library

As we proceeded, I decided to ask about the things I saw and heard outside, hoping that the scholar would have the knowledge to share. “Do you know what ‘ma-hoo-ee-zo-tal eel-hoo-ee-cat-tal’ means?” I queried, though probably butchering this strange language in the process.

The head librarian spared me a quizzical look before something seemed to click within his head. “Oh, you must mean ‘mahuizotl ilhuicatl’,” he responded before turning away and leading me onwards, though he continued speaking, “it means ‘honour the sky’ in Zizzian, the language of the Gods of Aether. It is only used in prayer and communication with clerics. You must have been around when Xiuh, the herald, arrived.”

I nodded, both in agreement with his statement and in an understanding of his translation. “The language of the gods...” I mused as we came to our first stop.

Cais looked out the round window at the paved stone pavilion beyond and grimaced at the sight. I followed his gaze and saw what was causing such a reaction. Below, three tongue-beasts had cornered a young woman against an ornate obelisk. She screamed as they began spewing black slime all over her. Shortly after, she fell to the ground and, in the same manner as the man and crone I had witnessed before, transformed into a tongue-beast. Together, the four pink fiends then undulated grotesquely away, likely in search of more victims to convert.

“There was a man...” I began while Cais observed the surroundings and checked the various areas of importance. “...He transformed like that, but he was the only

one...at first. He said that he fell ill from the black slime that drenched the city the other day, so that would indicate it took him two days to transform..."

"...But that woman, just now..." Cais continued my thought, catching on, "...she transformed right away. Does this mean that more of that vile tar means quicker...transformations?"

I shrugged in response. "That's as good a theory as any," I acknowledged as the blue-haired man led onwards around the ring. Without more information, there was little point in pontification, so we focused on securing the library from above.

Together, the head librarian and I checked all the entrances and exits from above. Cais even had me help him check the integrity of the cables holding up various signs that were dangling rigidly below certain parts of the walkway. They were immensely heavy, but thankfully we only needed to lift them enough to make them sway. When Cais saw that there was no apparent decay, we moved on, for all he cared to know was if they were in danger of falling.

After our lap, Cais was happy to note that nothing seemed to be amiss from above, though as he led me back to the library proper, he spoke, "I need to meet with my assistants once more, to confirm all is well on the ground floor." We passed through the same tightly-packed corridor from earlier and were once more at the head librarian's desk.

Upon it, peeking out from under a stack of papers, I spied a golden sun illustrated on the cover of some unknown book. It made me remember Xiuh the herald. "Mister Cais," I started, causing the librarian to turn to look at me as we stood by his desk, waiting for his assistants to return. "...The herald, Xiuh, is a cleric, correct?" to which Cais nodded. "Interesting," I continued, "clerics are meant to be religious leaders, though when Xiuh saw the plight of Temptes Equit's people, he seemed...unfazed. Apathetic, even."

"Unsurprising." The cyan skinned man frowned, "Gods are not always gracious."

"Do you mean to say that the Gods of the Sky are apathetic towards your people?" I asked the lilac-robed librarian.

"Not just my people, but everything that isn't their own kind or the Sky." He responded bluntly. Before he could continue, his three assistants returned. They gave their reports in a series of meows, which Cais seemed to understand as well as Koivan. I briefly marveled at his mastery of language. "Alright," he turned to me, expression content, "the ground floor is as secure as we can make it."

"Good news," I acknowledged, "But...what now?" I spared thoughts then for the crew of the Bitterwind, who were all likely aboard the docked ship in the harbour.

My worry must have been expressed on my face, as the scholar before I attempted to ease my mind.

“Fear not, the library’s doors and walls are quite sturdy. Although, Temptes Equit has not faced a threat like this in a long time...or possibly ever. I have never read anything of these pink, tongue-like monsters, or the titanic crimson eel that attacked recently. It feels like there is...more going on than we know,” Cais then leaned on his desk, relaxing. His feline assistants adjusted similarly. “Protocol dictates that in an emergency and escape from the building is impossible, or unwise, everyone within the library should gather to the most central reading area.” He then pulled out the copy of Theories of the Sky that I had been reading and handed it to me, “let us proceed there now.”

Accepting both the book and his suggestion, the five of us made our way to this reading area. When we arrived, there was a crowd of about twenty or so cyan-skinned scholars. When they saw the library’s staff, they all began aggressively asking questions.

“What’s going on?”

“Why are we locked in?”

“Why was there screaming coming from outside?”

The scared and confused scholars began approaching in the form of a pseudo-mob but halted when Olhos stepped forward, blocking their path to the head librarian and myself. Orange Olhos hissed before opening the eyes on his flanks. As each eye opened, another Olhos appeared. Soon, there were as many cats as scholars, all hissing ferociously.

Intimidated, the cyan readers backed off. The break in their stream of questions allowed everyone to calm down enough for Cais to begin relaying what was happening in the city. When he was done, the scholars looked even more scared and confused than before.

After discussing library protocol, everyone was advised to settle in with their preferred book and wait until the threat passes. The Gods of the Aether’s herald had promised that the city would be cleansed and that it would likely happen soon. Something about that made me uneasy, despite the situation being somewhat controlled within the Central Library.

The many Olhos clones merged with the original so that there were only three cats once more. They then cuddled together upon an unoccupied section of the floor near their leader, who had seated himself at a table and was preparing to get some writing done.



Figure 21. The three Central Library assistants napping together

I heeded Cais' advice and took a seat in a comfortable armchair and opened *Theories of the Sky* to where I had left off. The section about the physical properties of various Aether particles had ended and ahead was part two: A Discussion of The Sun.

As I read through the pages of the second section in *Theories of the Sky*, I was enraptured by not just quantifications of the bright, celestial orb, but of its origin as well. Numbers, graphs, and charts were woven in with prose that was more like a fictional tale that something most could conceive actually happening. Although it must be said, all theories of creation for Okeanós that I have heard are subject to the same disbelief.

But what Trina, the author, wrote changed how I saw the world (even more than in part one!). It would later do so for my colleagues on Orosilla, and much of the world, but not for many years after my time in *Temptes Equit*.

Thankfully, he started at the beginning of the chronology for his theory. That, before everything, there was only Chaos. A whirling maelstrom of darkness and light, twisting in and out, flailing limbs the size of many worlds about all of existence. Senselessly, without emotion, but propelled nonetheless by a will incomprehensible to all, even the 'Gods'. Incomprehensible facts, though they transpired via whatever a 'scorchingly desired memory from before time' is and then passed down from 'Aetherial Gods' to the clerics of The Sky.

Twirling madly, this Chaos of matter and energy did, until at some point, something happened. What this was did not have a description, but was only

mentioned as a catalyst. For it was the first instance of creation in the universe. Somethings must have collided in such a manner as to produce something else. This something else was sired by the Chaos but was the opposite in nature. Order appeared, but it could not be held together for long, as the writhing of Chaos tore it asunder and scattered its sparks around the vicious void. Sparks that retained the knowledge of this celestial separation from the whole are referred to as 'Order'. Again, this knowledge is mentioned by Trina to have been passed down from god to cleric and then from cleric to man.

One such Spark, but a mere fraction of Order, became the source for all we know upon Okeanós. While spinning and soaring through the many violent tendrils of Chaos, this particular Spark willed for it to stop; for the madness and rushing of void mixed with explosions of light to cease. So it forced the chaotic clouds around itself to shift into a pattern. It gave reason and rhythm to the matter and energy, previously untamed until the void and light coursed together, in harmony, at the weaving will of this Spark. Near the bottom of the page sharing this information, it is mentioned that there was a 'God' who had succumbed to a Chaos-stricken madness following the learning of these details. How they transferred the information, and what became of them, is not mentioned until the reference section, which I shall get to a bit later, as they warrant explanation as well.



Figure 22. A representation of the swirling Chaos, in all its mad might.

The lightened void became the air, for the abyssal particles were changed into aetherial particles. The dimmed explosions of light became fire and wreathed the Spark in an embrace that formed our sun.

At this point, Trina goes into experiments done on aetherial particles. Using a glass vessel vacuumed of all other matter, via a clever suction device which utilizes water, steam, and heat, he embedded a breath of air into the small container and subjected it to various stressors. Upon the most violent, which was smashing the glass vessel while spinning it with a tremendous amount of force via a machine designed for such a purpose, he observed the briefest indication of something he had never seen

before. Chaotic particles. After many experiments, he sorted the scant, yet hard-won, data and concluded that aetherial particles were once something else. Something that ONLY existed in the lack of order, which gave credibility to the maddened god's transferred archaic information.

He did a similar series of tests on fire and found that, under extremely chaotic stress, it briefly shifted to explosive light. He then points out that our sun, burning above, constantly does this as well in the form of solar flares and sunspots. The kind that has been observed by scholars on Orosilla for centuries, though never explained with anything more than wild theories with little credibility. Unlike Trina's, which had a huge wealth of undeniable data and sound reasoning.

Before reading on, about the more modern state of our sun and the Spark within, I had to rest my mind. Such a motherload of information all but forced me to break eye contact with the pages within my hands, lest my mind be equally sundered by some unfortunate Chaos, similar to that one maddened god.

I looked around and took a deep breath, letting my eyes rest on two scholars at a nearby table playing some sort of card game. One seemed to be quietly taunting the other, so I tuned my ears in an attempt to glean what she was saying, for my instincts told me this could be an amusing distraction.

The two scholars seated at a table not far in front of me were speaking quietly to one another. One wore a light yellow robe, while the other, the one doing the taunting, was wearing an orange toga.



Figure 23. The scholar's drowned drake

“You really think that sea turtle will stand a chance against my dragon?” The orange-clad woman scoffed, fanning herself with her hand of four cards.

“Offensively, no.” Admitted the opponent in an even voice, but they did not verbally elaborate. Instead, they placed one card from their hand of three, down onto the table. When the dragon card’s master saw what the yellow-robed scholar had played, her expression suddenly changed from one of confidence to one of dismay.

“What!?” She exclaimed somewhat loudly, which earned her glares and hushes from surrounding readers. Cowed, she continued more softly, “Since when have you had ‘The Tide Rises’? That’s a rare spell!”

“Since now, as far as you’re concerned, Pyra” smirked the spell-player. “My sea turtle floats up, unharmed, but your wingless drake drowns.”

Pyra reluctantly moves her dragon card from the middle of the table to a messy pile near her side. “You’ll pay for that, Xantho,” She scowls at her opponent. She redoubles her focus on her hand, causing the banter to die.

Smiling to myself, I consider learning this game if time allows. Though, with my research to conduct, as well as a monstrous pandemic, I sadly admitted to myself that delving into this fascinating card game of spells and dragons could wait. With a sigh, I turned my attention back to *Theories of the Sky*. I was at the end of the second part and was just about to read through the references and sources. I was glad that there were annotations located at the end of individual chapters and at the bottom of pages, for riffling back and forth through hundreds of large papyrus leaves would have been immensely tedious.

Most references mentioned works that seemed to be well known to the people of the flying city, though not to me. These were written of as if their contents should have been read before delving into *Theories of the Sky: Volume One*. I made small mental notes for a few, hoping to get a chance to read them at some point, though what I focused on more were the cryptic ones without mention of tomes, but instead pertained to spoken words, like from a speech, scribed down. My understanding of the cyan folks’ calendar was non-existent at this point, so the dates in the references made no sense to me until much later, but everything else was interpretable.

Firstly, I should talk of the maddened god I keep mentioning. Translated to Orosian, by my hand and mind, the citation read as follows:

Information spoken by Leviathan, maddened by secrets gained from Chaos. BWE (I later learned that this stands for ‘Before Writing Era’, but more on that later) 618’007.

I’ve already told you all I could glean from this reference on its own. In later chapters of this tome, Leviathan’s importance to Okeanós will become powerfully

apparent, but for now, simply remember that he is a god that learned too much and was consumed by knowing. He is seldom ever mentioned directly, in all accounts of him I could find in decades of research following my stay in Temptes Equit. Though, that, I believe, speaks more of people's ignorance and not of his importance to our world's creation.

Next, I shall mention a reference pertaining to a cleric of The Sky that I had encountered myself. Xiuh, the golden-skinned herald who had addressed the people near the fountain outside the Central Library, just prior to the appearance of the tongue-beasts, was cited:

Spoken to the people of Nuibes Pontema (another flying city, similar to Temptes Equit) by Xiuh the herald, cleric of The Sky. WE (stands for 'Writing Era') 34'375.

Years following, after reading more ancient books from all over Okeanós, I came to learn that the 'Writing Era' of the cyan folk started about 50'000 years before me reading Theories of the Sky. Give or take a few centuries.

I had learned, in Orossian history classes in my youth, that the world was only about 2000 years old. It took me a long time to realize the true past of Okeanós, and I am still fighting to correct the misinformation of yesteryear, and it is a quest I shall never retire from! But, I digress.

After I had read through the reference section of this part, I was eager for more information, but my eyes were beginning to burn from excessive reading. I looked up and saw through the windows above that the sky was getting dark. Dusk was upon us and many of the other scholars were starting to yawn and stretch. Cais, the head librarian, rose from his seat and began to address everyone within the large reading area. Apparently, we were all to spend the night here.

The head librarian rose with a flip of his majestic navy blue locks. At this cue, his feline assistants hopped onto the table next to him. They then began looking around attentively and stretching. "According to the protocol, we should all stay within the walls of the Central Library," he addressed the group of scholars. "There are likely still hideous fiends on the loose, though as we've discussed, Temptes Equit is expecting aid from the Children of Ziz." Cais paused before he continued in a colder tone, "According to Xiuh, herald of The Sky."

"I understand these emergency procedures, but where are we supposed to sleep?" One broad-nosed, bespeckled individual asked.

"Anywhere within this reading area. We should all continue to stay away from the windows and doors. I and my assistants will sleep in shifts, to keep an eye on the situation," the lilac-robed man replied.

“B-but...I can’t sleep without lying down!” Complained a nasally-voiced scholar from a table to the far left.

“Nonsense,” rejected one of their table neighbours, a deep-voiced lady with violet hair. “I’ve seen you fall asleep at your desk plenty of times in class, Melvin.” At this, there was a light chorus of laughter from most inhabitants of the reading area.

With the only complaint quelled, Cais bade everyone goodnight and looked to settle in at the same table he was working at earlier. Before he was able to, though, I sparked up a conversation. I desired to learn certain things before the vital questions slipped from my mind.

Olhos and Relva, the orange and green cats, curled up next to one another near a stack of Cais’ documents and books. Iridescently purple Maos seemed to be taking the first shift of the night watch. As Cais and I sat and spoke, we discussed the true name of citizens of this flying city and the calendar of the cyan folk, for these were two things I felt that I needed to fully quantify the information I was absorbing. Giving names and metrics to things are instrumental in learning, as it helps one to organize thoughts more efficiently.

‘Aethereans’, were the name of these folk, for their skin was a light blue due to the effect of aethereal particles being embedded into their bodies. Spending time among the clouds bonded them with the particles of The Sky. Which, among other things, resulted in the pigment in their skin and hair shifting.

I then queried about how long it would take for this change to happen, as the Aethereans were apparently once people who lived on Okeanós’ stone islands, like myself and my colleagues in Orosilla.

Before he answered, the head librarian insisted on giving me some context. These folk of flying cities, all of which soared around Okeanós, only periodically made contact with sea or stone. They were self-sufficient and were capable of producing and collecting all of their own resources, thanks to their many inventions and innovations. But only became so after receiving knowledge from above via the Children of Ziz and their humanoid clerics.

The blue-haired man threw many facts at me then, though I’ll relate them to you in as few numerical representations as possible, lest they overwhelm minds simply seeking lore and not mathematics.

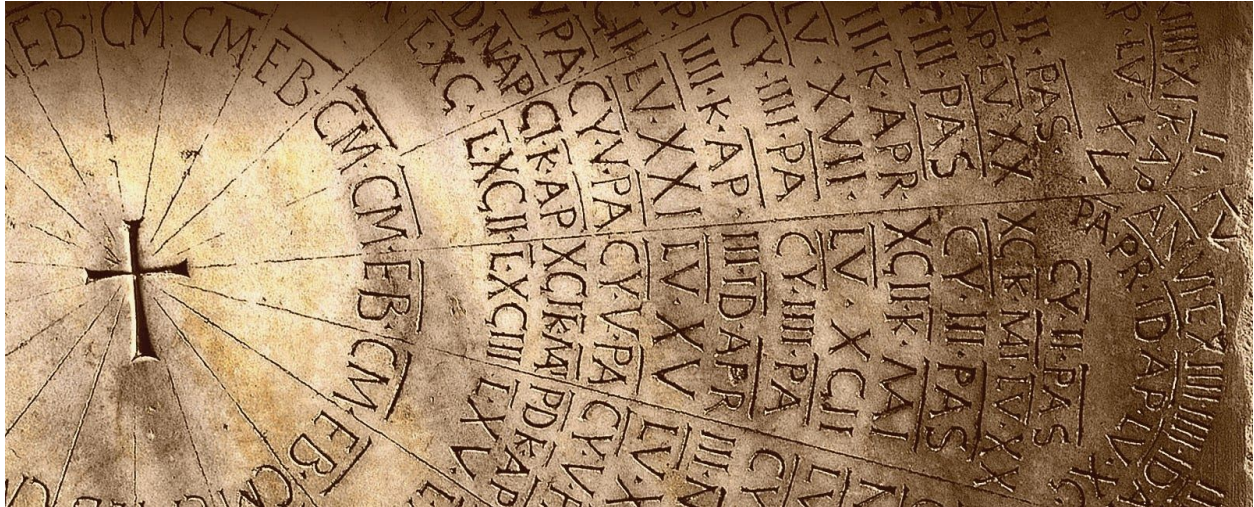


Figure 24. A stylized calendar of the Aetherians that I saw in Temples Equit

This information was passed down from Ziz to her children, then to the clerics, and finally to humans. Allegedly, the Spark of life for all Okeanos, wreathed in flames and called the sun, stilled the harsh void and explosions of Chaos in this region of the universe about 1'000'000 years ago. The sea, formed by remarkable events explained in the next chapter, came into existence about 500'000 years ago. And the stone of the world came about 250'000 years ago. At these numbers, I gasped, being staggered by the sheer amount of history of the globe, but continued to listen intently.

Humans showed up 100'000 years prior to modern-day but were not sophisticated enough to record information of any kind until 50'000 years ago. Aetherians, before being cyan-skinned, resided on the frigid islands of the Koivu sea, north of where Tempres Equit now hovered on the open waters of the world. This is why their concept of 'years' is the same length as those I am familiar with from my education on Orosilla. The early Aetherians were given great knowledge in exchange for serving the gods of the Aether and ascended on flying cities 40'000 years ago, leaving behind The Sea and The Stone.

The calendars of the Aetherians and Orossians(along with the rest of Okeanos) varied immensely, but years were still units comprising 100 days each.

After this explanation and the deluge of dates, Cais claimed he needed to go to sleep to be well-rested for his shift. I acknowledged his desire for rest and thanked him for sharing the information. With a smile, he turned his attention then to resting his head upon his workspace, nuzzling Relva's grass-like fur, which made her purr happily. Leaving the librarians to their well-earned slumber, I commandeered a comfortable looking armchair and shut my eyes as well, exhausted from an intense day.

Sometime around dawn, I awoke to screaming. I jumped up and looked around, greatly alarmed by all the shouting. Outside the windows, at the end of a corridor I

could see fire, and many other scholars had noticed as well. It was after realizing this that my ears tuned in to the words being shouted.

Cais was above the crowd of frantic, panicking scholars upon the upper walkway he and I had traversed the previous day. “Everyone, stay calm! Panic is the enemy! We need to organize and find a solution!” At this many of the bookish dwellers paused their yelling and turned to face him, desperate for someone to quell their fears. “The fires began just moments ago. While on watch I noticed some odd lights and ascended to the upper level to investigate from the ceiling windows. The flames are spreading throughout the city, but the path to the harbour seems-” but that was all he was able to get out before a loud knocking interrupted.

This central reading area had four wide corridors attached to it, each leading to a different entrance of the library. The unnaturally loud knocking was coming from the only one that I had used: the doors closest to the city path leading to the harbour. Swiftly, Olhos and Maos raced to the doors while Relva stood upon the banister of the upper area with Cais. They quickly looked through the small, mostly decorative, windows adjacent to the doors before removing the bar blocking the way. They did so with much stronger looking headbutts that one would imagine capable of such small felines. When they cleared the path, the doors swung open, and about half a dozen people entered, though they were not Aetherians, for their skins were various shades of brown. The cats, using their hidden power once more, shut the massive doors and barred them again.

As the group approached, tailed by Olhos and Maos, I recognized them as some of the crew of the Bitterwind. Leading them was the First Mate, Karcharia. Without halting to address me or anyone civilly, she grabbed me by the wrist and barked, “We’re leaving. Now.”

She then began to drag me away while another sailor explained. “Captain’s orders, Athos. The city is burning, but the crew was working overnight to repair the ship. Now that she’s all patched up, we’re getting out of this forsaken city. Rainbow serpents, those same painfully bright things we saw when we first came here, are raining fire down! We need to leave,” spoke Regi, his thick eyebrows quivering fearfully.

I nodded that I understood and then dug my sandalled heels into the soft carpet of the library floor. I also attempted to wrench my arm free from Karcharia’s grip, but to no avail. Her arm didn’t even budge at my struggling, though she scowled at me for my efforts. “The scholars and the librarians!” I shouted then, though she did not slow her pace. “We don’t have time to salvage many books, but there’s enough space on the Bitterwind for all those here. Please! I’ll take the blame and suffer the captain’s ire if it needs to be so.” The first mate’s momentum continued, though. “I’ll even increase payment for my passage back to Orosilla!” I screamed, at which she paused.

With a jagged frown, she brought her face very close to mine and responded, “Double payment. If you can’t cough up the coin when we bring you back home, you’ll pay with your life.”

“Deal!” I responded immediately, unconcerned with the future, as the dangers of the present immensely overwhelmed them in my mind.

“Change of plans, round up the nerds,” Karcharia grunted at the other sailors. “The captain will want that extra coin, and a few more pieces of cargo won’t be too much of a pain.”

“B-but-” started Carl, his long-fingered hands clutching his cleft-chinned face in bewilderment. Though before he could utter another word, Karcharia released my wrist and with the hand she was previously using to do so grabbed Carl by the collar.

“We’re TAKING this CARGO. NOW!” She commanded before shoving Carl away, which sent the crew running back towards the central reading area.



Figure 25. Our view of one of the city’s districts as we fled the Central Library

I followed them and when we reached the scholars I relayed the happenings up to Cais. Without needing any convincing, he, his feline assistants, and the other scholars followed the crew of the Bitterwind down the corridor and out of the library. The Aetherians grabbed as many books and possessions as they could carry as we all exited and raced through the city towards the harbour.

As the Aetherian scholars, the crew of the Bitterwind, and I raced along the path to the harbour, I noted why this way was not as consumed by the flames as elsewhere in the city. This wide, cobblestone walkway ran along a full canal. So full that it was overflowing, spilling torrents of briny, foamy water in here and there.

We continued to run along, though Karcharia soon began shouting orders, “We’re getting close to the lifeboat, get the cargo in place first! Those that cannot fit onto it will run the rest of the way.”

I was confused at first but then saw a lifeboat appear within view upon the constantly shifting canal. A wooden lifeboat, like a wide canoe, approached swiftly. One of the three upon it, a slim, tall sailor of long, fair hair, used a rope and a boarding hook, like a small anchor, to snare a nearby lamppost to halt their movement close to the path. “Welcome aboard!” Grinned the sailor holding the left oar, he then winked with the eye that was not covered by an eyepatch.

“Quickly now, lads and lasses!” Urged the third, who held the right oar. His high-pitch voice at odds with his rotund physique.

Tarrying not, myself and the Aetherian scholars piled onto the boat, which wobbled at the overcapacity. This lifeboat was meant for maybe fifteen people maximum but now held close to twenty. Some of the sailors who had joined Karcharia for the rescue mission to the library were able to squeeze on as well. Though, when I looked to see who was not able to make it on, I was surprised to see the First Mate herself still standing on the stone path. She was flanked by a crewmate on each side, both physically superior members from the Bitterwind. “Get the goods onto the ship,” Karcharia commanded, still referring to the scholars, and probably myself as well, as inanimate objects. “Me, Jogo, and Phole will continue on foot.”

“You sure, ma’am?” Offered the long, fair-haired one in a soft, yet resonant, voice.



Figure 26. A depiction of what the canal route would have looked like without engulfing flames surrounding it

The first mate scoffed before responding quickly, “Don’t worry Stella, we’ll probably beat you slug-fish back to the ship by a nautical mile.” Without waiting for a response, she and her two burly comrades began running once more along the canal path.

After this, Stella unhooked the boat and the two oarsmen began rowing us in the direction of the harbour. Against the current flowing inward from the docking

bay, it was slower going than expected, though we were safer upon the undulating lifeboat than elsewhere.

Looking at the winded oarsmen, some of the scholars decided to offer assistance, as the oars were long enough for three people to use each. The added strength made travelling quicker and less strenuous on those doing all the work.

The rest of us caught our breath before dismaying at the state of the city properly. "Everything... is in flames..." muttered one of the Aetherians, who then began to shed tears. One of her colleagues put a comforting arm around her.

"How has this happened?" Asked another. And as if on cue, a vibrant, serpentine form streaked by overhead. They were belching great gouts of flame, scorching the tops of a few buildings that were merely smoldering as opposed to being fully ignited.

"This...is the 'cleansing' the herald must have mentioned," spoke Cais with disgust. His three feline assistants were all huddled, mewling, quite close to him, as unhappy about their current situation as everyone else. "The gods must see us like a wound to be cauterized. Whatever seaborne illness swept through Temptes Equit must threaten them greatly. So much so that actual help would not be worth the effort, apparently," he ended bitterly.

"What about the city's Soul? Surely such energy, which was initially a gift from the gods, would be worth more to them?" Queried an Aetherian, who was adjusting his toga nervously.

"Energy does not die. Ziz, her children, and her unending grandchildren, probably have some way of reclaiming it, even if it sinks into the waves," the head librarian responded sagely.

As we continued to make our way towards the harbour, we all discussed what we would do, and the conclusion reached was that, upon my invitation, the scholars would follow me back to Orosilla, where I would help them start new lives. I assured them there would be great merit to their knowledge for the curious Orossians. With a plan for the future in mind, all that remained was to reach the island's shores via the Bitterwind. All that impeded us were a burning city, violent gods, and a salty tide.

We rowed along and observed a few more of Ziz's grandchildren scorching the tops of buildings, ensuring that everything would be razed. According to the Aetherian scholars, the control mechanisms that kept the city afloat would be safe from the flames. But, the fires would likely trap people underground in areas possibly infested with the disgusting pink beasts that were transforming the sky folk into more of their fell kin. The scholars lamented the plight of their people and their inability to aid them. The sailors from the Bitterwind assured them that getting out of the city was the wise thing to do, at which I vocally concurred. This seemed to ease the Aetherians

slightly, but the loss of their home and likely most of their people, their families, and friends, did cast deep shadows upon all of their faces.

Though, when we reached the harbour, our attentions were grabbed by a scene[was 'seen' in published version] of utmost intensity. Upon the docks, the crew of the Bitterwind was doing battle with multiple tongue-beasts. The slug-like flesh-coloured fiends were trying to spew black slime upon the sailors, but the brave corsairs had armed themselves with barrel lids and planks of wood with rope handles, fashioned into makeshift tower shields. As a few blocked the incoming deluge of tar-like regurgitation, others were attacking beasts from the flanks, hacking and slashing at them with all manner of blades.

Near the gangplank leading onto the ship, Karcharia, Jogo, and Phole were defending the way, having arrived at the scene before us as the first mate predicted. When the boat came to a stop, a group who seemed to be waiting for this exact moment, leaped from the Bitterwind and cleared a path for us. A few picked up the large, yet valuable, escape boat and we proceeded together to the ship, wary of the fighting going on around us. There were a few close calls where tongue-beasts almost drenched me or another of the scholars in foul goo, but we all eventually made it onto the ship unharmed, yet terrified.



Figure 27. A representation of the Bitterwind's brave crew as they prepared to battle the pink fiends

Once we were aboard and the lifeboat was collected the crew fighting on the docks retreated onto the boat as well. With precise direction, Captain Roac guided the crew into an escape from the city. The scholars were told to head below deck for

their safety, which they complied with gladly. But from below I could still hear some of the captain's commands.

“Forward! Left! Right!” I heard him shout on occasion, but was surprised to hear that he was saying these words in Koivan. I gauged that he must have retained much information about Temptes Equit and its people. He and the crew must have learned how to verbally activate the passageways effectively without the need of a translator.

We seemed to be navigating the docks much as we had upon entering the city a few days ago. Descending via one of the spout-like passages, we flowed down back into the ocean waters of Okeanós, upon the North Peleca sea. It was then that the sails were fully unfurled and we sped away from the city. Though as we did so we saw a familiar demon of the deep rise up from the cold water. The Great Red Eel had returned to finish what it began.

The colossal red eel, over a kilometer long, rose vertically to tower over the city much as it had before. Thankfully, it was facing the city and completely unconcerned with us. Though, from the back, I could see great burn scars rife with bubbled flesh that had cooled. A memento from Temptes Equit's defenses. I could not see its wicked eyes, but I sensed from the long, almost inaudibly low, hiss and the massive form's quivering, that the titanic serpentine beast was focused with utter rage upon the city before it.

From a porthole, I continued to stare behind the Bitterwind at the city riding a storm, hovering about a hundred meters from the sea. The whirling, grey clouds between the city's foundation and the surface of the water were as twisting and powerful as they seemed upon our entrance into the city. Though, there was a change in the surroundings. The Bitterwind seemed to come across a strong wind blowing in suddenly from an unexpected direction, which had nothing to do with the winds below Temptes Equit. They caused the whole ship to turn more east. This obstructed my view of the eel and the flying city. I could not contain my curiosity, and believing that it was safe to return above deck, I made my way up. A few Aetherians joined me as they, understandably, had an even greater desire to see what would happen. Though many, shaken and depressed by the ordeal, opted to stay below and mourn for a great loss. Myself and those that went above gathered near the back of the ship and leaned upon the railing, observing what happened next.

Some of Ziz's flying rainbow serpent offspring were redirecting their attention towards the red eel. They formed a squad in the air in the shape of an arrow and shot forth with fire and fury. The red giant hissed with rage so potent that it caused a shockwave to be sent through wind and waves. Undeterred, the many-winged dragons, each probably as long as our ship, began spewing flames down upon the

fiend from the deep. Returning fire, the eel spat black tar upwards at the squadron. The dark ooze, wet and vile, doused much of the flames as the sodden projectile hit multiple sky serpents. Some were knocked from the sky, falling into the sea or crashed into the razed remnants of Temptes Equit.



Figure 28. The maw of the colossal red eel as it rose

The great red beast then let out a series of rapid, staccato hisses and reared its head back. At first, I thought it was in victory but then saw that it must have been some sort of call.

Pink, slug-like masses, now hard to see from how far the Bitterwind was from the city, began jumping off the ramparts, into the sea. When they resurfaced, they were dark red; a shade matching that of the crimson eel they had somewhat originated from. Part of me was reviled, while the other was curious at the biological meaning of this abhorrent sight.

I then saw that the colossal eel was rearing back because it was lifting its other half from the abyss. The scholars and I gasped as the fiend wound its red limb back and proceeded to slam the side of the city. Even though the beast was mighty, I doubted that slamming itself against stone and metal walls would do much to shake the structure, let alone sink it.

Beside me, I heard Cais' gasp and exclaim that the eel was repeatedly hitting the same spot. The area closest to an external entrance to the Soul of the city; the energetic core that powers the storm it rides. One meant only for maintenance. Another scholar asked how the eel could know about this opening, hidden by a door matching the walls around it, to which the head librarian shrugged, uncertain. I hypothesized that maybe the tongue-beasts within the city had relayed information to it somehow, which queued up numerous other thoughts and theories, though the discussion was interrupted by a raucous noise.

The shattering of metal and stone echoed over the sea. The great, sea serpent then dove head-first into the massive, broken doorway. Then, slowly yet undeniably, the raging twister below the city began to calm. And Temptes Equit began to fall.

The Aetherians and I began to exclaim in shock at the disaster unfolding before us. Temptes Equit had been ravaged by flames but was soon to be overcome by the waters of Okeanós. Our shouting drew the attention of a few sailors, who looked towards the now distant city and joined our exclamations.

The great eel had pulled its head out of the broken entrance and now held a massive turquoise sphere in its jaws, which made the scholars shout about the city's Soul. This bright ball was coursing with clouds of blue and green energy, shrouding much of the red serpent's head. The colossal fiend seemed to be disoriented, as it wavered back and forth dizzily with the Soul in its grip.

As the crimson one undulated, the city began to descend into the waves. The mighty winds below the foundations were still present, though significantly weaker and dissipating more and more as seconds passed. As the first part of the city's bottom entered the ocean, the entire structure's balance shifted. The difference in resistance between air and water caused the city to tip to one side, like a capsized ship. With the momentum of thousands of tons, Temptes Equit tilted and crashed sideways into the waters of the North Peleca Sea, shattering many buildings and tossing a tremendous amount of debris into the currents, which sent up huge waves. With water now rushing into every nook and cranny, the once-flying city was towed under, never to see the sky again.

When the city was finally out of sight, I turned to observe the expressions of the Aetherians. Cais and the others all had immensely sad expressions and many had tears in their eyes. When the city was burning, there was a small chance that it could be rebuilt in the future, but now, after being sent into the abyss, there was no hope of recovery. Anyone and anything of value within Temptes Equit were now lost. I had no words that could soothe such grief, nor did any of the Bitterwind's sailors. Though, that didn't stop the corsairs from offering words of condolences to the cyan-skinned folk, who responded politely with gratitude but, understandably, could not bring themselves to speak any more than that after watching their home be destroyed.



Figure 29. Artist representation of what parts of this flying city must look like now

The destroyer, still clutching the vibrant gem that was the Soul of Temptes Equit, then seemed to regain its senses. It seemed to stare at where the city had sunk beneath the tide and contemplated for a short while. This did not last long and the red monster began to descend as well, though it was interrupted by a typhoon from the west.

Like before, another fierce gust came out of the west, propelling the Bitterwind east with great force, though this time we saw the cause. Descending from the clouds with a blinding radiance of many colours and a sky-splitting hiss like the shriek of the very air being sundered, came a child of Ziz. This being was much larger than the grandchildren of Ziz who burned the city, and even at a distance, it was obvious that it even dwarfed the kilometer-long crimson eel.

The colossal sky serpent dove straight for the one of the sea, the latter of which had their head still shrouded by the energetic haze of the city's Soul. The eel turned to face the threat but was too slow to react, likely impaired in vision enough not to recognize the full gravity of the approaching threat. Without any hint of mercy, the gargantuan winged beast erupted volcanic fury upon the red fiend below it. This fire was projected with such force that it blasted the eel backward while scorching it. From a distance, it was hard to see what was happening in full detail, but the parts of the eel that could be seen amidst the flames and waves seemed to be bubbling horribly as it thrashed in agony.

Having no choice, it retreated under the waves with its treasure, though the radiant glowing of the Soul made its position known. Undeterred, the child of Ziz unleashed a different attack. Halting its flame breath, it inhaled deeply as it circled the air about where the Soul could be seen. Before the turquoise light could disappear into the depths, however, the painfully iridescent rainbow serpent shot forth a beam of multi-coloured light that reminded me of Temptes Equit's defense cannons, although infinitely more powerful. The technicolour ray pierced the waves and illuminated the seas so brightly that we could see monstrous shadows silhouetted beneath the surface

The beam seemed to hit its mark as the serpentine form of the eel shuddered and grew limp. Its corpse then rose to the surface and we all saw then the damage that the child of Ziz's beam had caused. Parts of the great eel's body were missing, having been either shorn free or simply disintegrated and left parts of its skeleton exposed. There was a huge cloud of reddish-black blood now, dyeing the ocean around the area of battle with the colours of death.

With a mind-rending shriek of triumph, the many-coloured victor swooped down and tore the city's Soul from the jaws of the dead eel with its own of solid, red-orange flame teeth and then ascended. Having recovered the object of value, it rose back above the clouds to where the gods of aether resided.

The ship continued to sail east, towards Orosilla, though the scholars and I continued to stare out to sea. The Aetherians did so likely in mourning, lost in deep and sorrowful thoughts.

My gaze, however, was scanning all within sight for other strange and powerful creatures. I was deeply saddened about the tremendous loss of a whole flying city, but my mind could not rest in my visual search. I was so very paranoid about the potential destructive might of colossal beasts that could be lurking above and below that I could not rest for the remainder of the voyage.

The days following the escape from Temptes Equit were dreary for the scholars and stressful for me. The unfortunate crew of the Bitterwind had to deal with constant sobbing and my darts up and down deck (from seeing a wave and thinking it a sea monster, or some such paranoid delusion).

We reached Orosilla without further incident, thankfully. Everyone seemed to be happy to call the voyage to an end, though the scholars and sailors bade each other fond farewells, despite the depressing mood of late. As agreed upon, I paid Captain Roac double the initially agreed-upon amount due to my request to transport the Aetherians as well. The coin I lost then set me back financially for close to a year, but it was worth it to preserve lives and knowledge.

The Bitterwind had made landfall upon one of the banks of the small rivers on the north-western side of Orosilla. The docks nearby led into the island's bustling

capital Lofous, but I led the Aetherians around the city and to the north, towards Mount Oros. Even though crime and violence were not very high on the island, cities were packed with threats to foreigners. With blue skin and a variety of vibrant hair colours, the Aetherians would simply stand out too much. Also, ornaments of precious metals and now one-of-a-kind books would be too tempting for thieves.

The ascent up the mountain seemed to do them good. As we climbed higher and higher upon the well-worn trails, the altitude and thinness of the air seemed to remind them of what life above the clouds was like. On occasion, we took a break at one of the many comfortable resting spots along the way. Members of the GLRU were constantly making trips up and down the mountain, as one of the world's more important Chapters of the organization lied atop the peak. This Chapter was also my home, as a select few were permitted to reside within the building in order to focus on their studies with less disturbance. Having garnered great respect for my work involved with the discovery of a possible 4th Source via the cryptic sample from Agalloch, I had earned a spot in Mount Oros' residence and access to its world-class facilities.



Figure 30. Mount Oros' GLRU Chapter and its lovely view of the ocean

I was able to attain access to these residencies and facilities for the Aetherians upon our arrival, though not easily. At first, the loremasters in charge of the Chapter were shocked by my return with Cais, his vibrant cats, and the other cyan-skinned folk. It took a lot of explaining, but eventually everyone's mental books were flipped to the same page. The loremasters permitted the Aetherians to stay but only on the condition that they share their knowledge, books, and contribute to the organization via continuing whatever studies they were in the process of pursuing in *Temptes Equit* (or at least the Orosian equivalent).

As for myself, I was charged with seeing to the needs and the acclimatization of the scholars from the flying city. This took a great deal of my time away from my own studies, but I could not very well leave my blue friends to figure out the nuances of Orosian academia on their own. In the process, over years, I helped to integrate the Aetherians into the GLRU society, and to great effect. Everyone benefitted from the exchange of knowledge, which eventually changed the way all modern scholars across the world saw things.

Gaps in history were filled, unexplained phenomena were made plain, and understanding of Okeanós was colossally deepened. Though, of all the information shared, that of the nature of a flying city's Soul enraptured my mind the most.

During the integration of the Aetherians into the Global Lore Researchers Union, I ended up spending a lot of time with the cyan-skinned folk. Having been through great ordeals with them, our comradery felt natural and as if I had known them for far longer than a few weeks.

With the disastrous events that befell Temptes Equit fresh in our minds, discussion of all that happened was inevitable. The blue scholars needed to cope with their loss and conversation could greatly help in the healing of this kind of sorrow. It was through one such conversation that I learned the true nature of what a flying city's "Soul" actually was.

After a particularly long day of cataloging and classifying much of the books the Aetherians had brought with them from overseas, Cais, his cats, and I decided to have some tea while gazing at the sunset from one of my favourite spots upon the western patios of the Chapter's upper terraces. Before our eyes was the shimmering North Peleca Sea, the blue expanse where Temptes Equit had rested. Above it was a gradient sky of yellow, orange, and red. From where the horizon meets the water the sun could be seen glowing gold and fierce and as the light extended upwards it reddened until the aether above was a deep maroon giving way to coming night. Around us were many naturally growing plants that thrived upon mountains, such as curving, thin-trunked pine trees, numerous vines of pink, purple, and deep green, as well as unusually active flowers shaped like blue and white bells which opened and closed rhythmically as if breathing. Here Cais and I sat while we chatted and sipped our hot beverages. Olhos, Maos, and Relva were nearby, exploring the area's sights and smells, though we brought bowls of warm milk for them so that they could join us in sharing a drink.

As Cais stared out to the west, a shadow of remembrance crossed his cyan face while the sea breeze toyed with his long mane of wavy, navy locks. "Temptes Equit had a beautiful Soul..."

Sensing that he may have brought it up because he wanted to talk about it, I engaged him on the topic. Though, I will not deny that I greatly wished to know more.

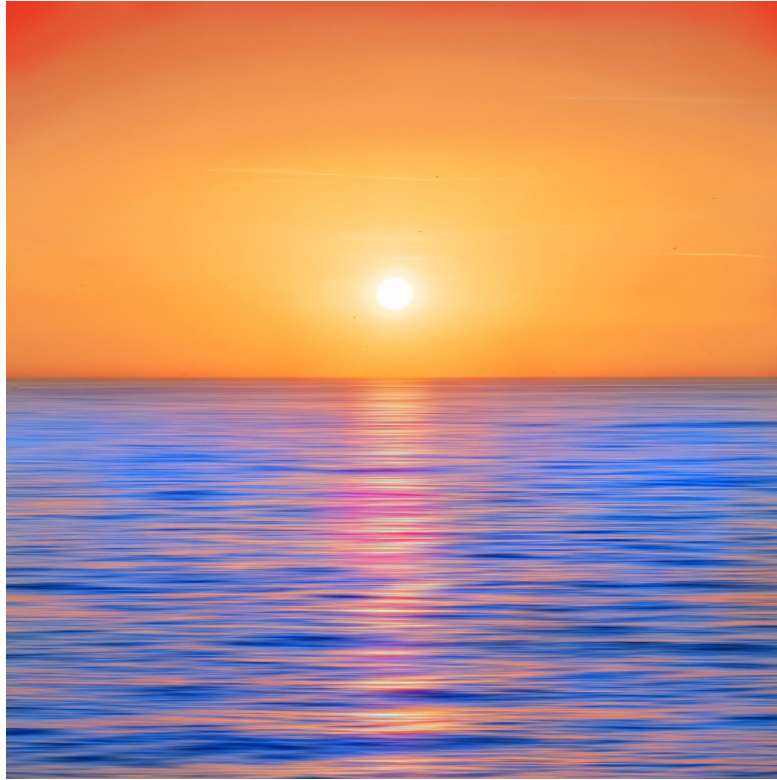


Figure 31. Representation of what the sunset looks like from the upper terraces

I had prodded on the matter in the past days, but the scholars could not spare the time to chat since there was much to be done in regards to setting them up within the GLRU. “What made the city’s Soul so beautiful?” I asked, “was it the colour, the power, or something else?”

He smiled sadly at me before sipping his tea. After a long drink, he replied, “Everything. It turned light and heat into harvestable energy for us, which allowed the city to stay afloat. It boosted the yield of our crops. It even purified our water. Without it, Temptes Equit would have never been created.”

I nodded understandingly. It made sense that a city’s Soul would be so revered by its people. “Where do the Souls for flying cities come from?” I queried. “Surely something of such magnificence must have an extraordinary origin.”

Cais was looking at Olhos in front of us, who was batting a blue and white bellflower playfully as it huffed and puffed. He smiled at his feline friend as he spoke, “Souls are a bit misleadingly named. They are actually the hearts of Children of Ziz, like the one that destroyed the huge crimson eel that attacked the city.”

I gasped, “Incredible! This raises so many questions. Firstly, how did your people come into possession of such an organ?”

“It was a gift. Long, long ago, when my people inhabited the cold islands in the sea your people call the ‘Koivu’, my ancestors prayed and worshipped Ziz and her children, believing them to be the creators of the world. They wished to get closer to the sky, to their gods, because they wished to be as radiant and as powerful. They would constantly offer themselves in servitude. They pledged to do anything the sky serpents wanted, though for a long time my people were ignored, for Ziz and her children wanted nothing from we tiny mortals.”

As he paused to take another drink, he raised his gaze to where the sky met the sea on the horizon, where gold met azure. Relva had hopped onto my lap and I began petting her. “You’ve already heard this and are bored, right?” I asked the grass-green feline as she stretched and then curled up sleepily upon me.

Cais, still focused on the horizon, continued, “Eventually, however, the Children of Ziz responded to my ancestors. They descended bearing massive turquoise orbs; great serpent hearts. They bestowed the power of these treasured organs in exchange for my people’s service in observing the sea from above. The Children have a hated foe who dwells deep in the oceans of the world and who is apparently waging a war against them. They even have a prophecy stating that he will one day attempt to quench the sun with the waters of Okeanós, though I have no idea if there is any credibility to this.”

“Fascinating, so your people were given these hearts, these Souls, in order to have greater power to serve the Children of Ziz,” I summarized for my own benefit.

“Precisely. Their foes of the abyss hid from their brilliance, therefore the gods of the Aether needed others to get closer and gather information while staying within the realm of the sky. There were five hearts given to my ancestors, all from Children of Ziz who had died somehow. It is never explained fully, but the former owners of these hearts ‘fell’ to either ‘sea’ or ‘void’, likely due to the fault of their great undersea enemy. We have observed and reported on many massive sea monsters for the gods of the Aether since our taking to the sky, though we have been attacked by these sea fiends whenever we draw too close to the oceans. It’s as if they have scouts all over the world..”

“Then why was Temptes Equit so close to the water?” I pondered, still stroking Relva’s soft fur while she purred happily.

“I don’t know. Most of the city has duties that have nothing to do with our primary calling of sea monster sighting, so only the selected few observers and the city’s leaders know the details. There were rumours that Temptes Equit was planning on testing a new weapon, but I can neither confirm nor deny this,” the librarian then sighed. Prior to this conversation, he and I had been going over the minutia required for sorting almost unsortable books into Mount Oros’ library and we were both a bit drained from the matter.

Seeing deep purple bags under his eyes, I decided to end the chat there, to which he was glad. We finished our tea, and the cats their milk, before the five of us retired to our respective quarters for the night.

As of writing this, it has been 50 years since the Aetherian scholars came to Orosilla. After their integration, they became a boon to not only the Mount Oros Chapter of the GLRU but to the entire organization spanning the known world. Shared knowledge benefits all, therefore great knowledge amounts to great benefit.

The first great change to the world took place a few years after the Aetherian calendar was discussed by the world's foremost scholars on time measurement. The currently used system was to count the days until 100 had passed and then start over. No one knows where this practice originates from, but it was a custom that was part of human culture since before people began recording history. It is one of those artifacts from a bygone time whose origin we'll likely never know.

The Aetherian calendar also worked on years of 100 days but was broken down into 5 months with 20 days each. It also had a historical record of when certain important global developments happened, including the creation of the Sky, Sea, and Stones. Thousands upon thousands of years of history referenced and organized into creating a system that could be useful. Because it was already so detailed, the GLRU decided to adopt the Aetherian calendar as the one to be used the world over.

The starting year for the Aetherian calendar is about 1'000'000 years ago, but everything in modern times is referred to by the amount of this timeline that humans have been able to keep track of major events, which was about 50'000 years ago. Expressed in written form, I would say that the year that the GLRU adopted the Aetherian calendar was the year 50'702.

Years following this change, people began documenting certain natural events happening on that same days every year. Migration patterns of animals became predictable, as did the flowering periods of many plants. Hunters and farmers alike benefitted the most from this information but many other industries found a use for this data as well.

Oceanic currents were able to be predicted as well, with the same ones appearing in the same places at the same time each year. Navigation around less explored places became easier and as a result, so did expeditions.

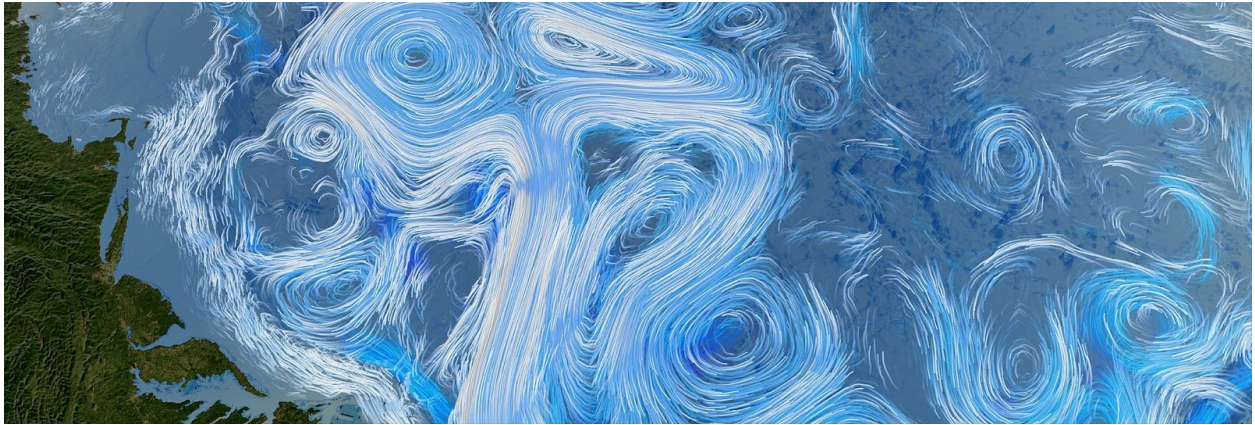


Figure 32. Artist exaggeration of what oceanic currents look like from above

40 years ago, 10 years after the calendar was adopted, I found my next great horde of information about the Sources. After returning to Mount Oros from my voyage to Temptes Equit, I decided not to return to Agalloch and investigate the chaotic 4th Source just yet. I needed more context about the Sea now that I knew how it was apparently at war with the sky. I traveled far and wide, but only found shreds of data and hints of legends long dead. That is until I sailed up to the frigid islands of the Koivu Sea to seek out possible remnants from the cyan-skinned folk's interaction with the Children of Ziz.

I had no desire to search these icy waters, as I abhor the cold, which is why it took me a decade to go there. But what I found shed a great deal of light onto the origin of the Sea and the maddened serpent god I had read referenced in *Theories of the Sky: Volume 1*. This fallen deity is the one who started the war between the Sky and Sea. One who is prophesied to quench the sun with the waters of the world.