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Horizon Storms

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1

CELLI

Though blackened by flames, the surviving worldtrees on Theroc remained defiant in the aftermath of the nightmare that had befallen them. Skeletal branches twisted upward, frozen in agony, as if warding off an unexpected blow from the skies. Damaged bark had sloughed away like leprous scabs. Many of the trees had been mortally wounded. The forest itself was a morass of dead branches and half-fallen trees.

Celli, the youngest child of Mother Alexa and Father Idriss, could not look at the painful ruins without blinking back tears that came too readily to her large brown eyes. At eighteen, she was skinny, tomboyish, with a dusting of light freckles on her mocha skin. She had a shag of short, corkscrewy auburn hair that she cut only when it got in her way. Soot and ash scuffed her cropped, fitted top that left her midriff bare and her short flutter skirt that added splash of color. Normally, she had a bright smile beneath her upturned nose, but of late there had been few occasions to smile.

After the hydrogues had been driven back, it had taken all the remaining energy of the worldforest, a Herculean effort from the Therons, and the assistance of a delayed rescue fleet from the Earth Defense Forces, to bring the wildfires mostly under control.

Even so, whole continents lay wasted. Some patches still burned, and smoke rose into the blue sky like stains drawn by bloody fingers. Each day green priests and Theron laborers gathered at central meeting places to face the endless task of recovery.

Each day, Celli joined them. With each breath as she ran along, the sour stench of burned pulpy foliage caught in her throat, and she knew that she would find the smell of roasting meat and burning wood nauseating for the rest of her life.

When she arrived at what remained of the fungus-reef city, an enormous shelf mushroom that had coalesced over the centuries, she gazed up at it with a fresh

sense of shock. The host tree had been badly burned and the fungus-reef half destroyed, the carved-out pocket rooms unsuitable for habitation.

In a trampled clearing beneath the damaged fungus-reef, her parents -- though overwhelmed by the enormity of the task -- did their best to organize the weary, red-eyed workers. Idriss and Alexa had officially retired from their leadership role and made Celli's oldest brother, Reynald, their king. But he had been killed in the hydrogue attack. She remembered her last vision of him, standing defiantly atop the worldforest canopy as the hydrogues and faeros battled overhead. . . .

Today, though, as on every other day since the hydrogue attack, no one would stop to mourn, or dwell on thoughts of all those who had died. To pause right now in their labors, even out of pure grief, would have been too self-indulgent. There were countless trees and people that could yet be saved, if only there were hands enough to do the necessary work. That was why all Theron who were not too severely injured, returned without complaint to the tasks that must be done. Celli, like every other Theron, grieved while on the move.

Her brother was lost along with so many others, including three of Celli's close friends. Including her other brother Beneto, a green priest killed when the hydrogues attacked Corvus Landing. Every day, moment by moment, Celli worked to the point of exhaustion, trying to avoid the worst of the pain. She didn't dare think too long about Lica, Kari, Ren for fear that the grief might immobilize her.

Before the hydrogue attack, Celli and her friends had spent their days amusing themselves in the forest, never thinking much beyond the next day or two. She would practice treedancing moves, and Ren was particularly good at catching condorflies. Lica and Kari both liked the same boy, but he hadn't noticed either one. How they had all laughed and played together, never expecting anything to change. . . .

None of them had ever guessed that enemies might lie beyond the sky.

Celli, the baby of the family, was now the only one of her siblings left on Thero, since her sisters Sarein and Estarra both lived in the Whisper Palace on Earth. In the past, her sisters had often accused her of complaining too much; now, the worries and discomforts of her youth seemed petty and meaningless. For the first time in her life, Celli felt both a spark of independence and the weight of real responsibility. And she was determined to help her people get through this tragedy. The problem seemed impossibly large, but Celli lifted her chin and gritted her teeth.

Like Celli, the Theron survivors possessed a new determination that formed a tough veneer over their despair. The people had been unprepared for such a holocaust, but this desperate time had revealed an inner resolve, as they simultaneously shored up the worldforest and drew comfort from it.

"We are not alone. We care for the trees, and they care for us. We will never abandon each other. This is the source of our strength, and together we will all get through

this," Father Idriss had pronounced when, shortly after the attack, he had called the survivors together.

Now, support ladders and pulleys, makeshift ramps and walkways were erected against the main fungus-reef tree as crews salvaged what they could. Adults worked to clear debris and charred mushroom flesh from the lower levels, while cautious younger children crawled onto precarious perches, marking safe routes for the heavier adult workers. Celli remembered when she and Estarra had climbed to the top levels of the giant mushroom to harvest the tender whitish meat Beneto loved so well. . . .

Fortunately, since their initial attack here, the hydrogues had been preoccupied with a new conflict against the faeros and had not returned to crush the worldforest. But Celli took little heart from that. There was too much death and destruction around her.

From above, Celli heard a shout of surprise, then moans of grief. In one of the fungus-reef chambers, a child explorer had just found an asphyxiated woman. Others made their way across the hardened fringes to where they could drag the victim out. Celli had known the woman, a family friend who made fantastic treats from forest berries. Her heart sank, but her grief had no further to go; each fresh drop of cold tragedy ran like water off of an already-saturated cloak. Reynald, Beneto, Lica, Kari, Ren -- the names rolled through her conscience, one after another. She was terrified she might forget somebody -- and that didn't seem fair. They deserved to be remembered. Each one of them.

Not wanting to be at the base camp when the workers brought down the woman's body, Celli went to her grandparents. "I want to go where I'm needed most, Grandmother. Send me out."

"I know you're impatient, dear." Lia's watery eyes seemed extremely tired. "We're all trying to decide which work is most important."

Her grandfather scratched his seamed cheek. "Every day we've been doing triage for the forest."

Uthair and Lia were busily keeping track of scouting teams, scribing notes and keeping records that only they could decipher. Normally, the green priests could connect to the worldtrees to see the whole scope of the forest, but the magnitude of the destruction was so overwhelming, many of them could not sort through the visual information to make sense of it all.

The old couple spread out detailed satellite images taken by EDF ships, showing the extent of burned and frozen areas like a blight across the landscape. Reeling green priests had already shared this information with the trees through telink, but the forest already felt its enormous injuries, which made direct and clear communication difficult. Her grandmother pointed to an unmarked spot where hundreds of acres of broken and toppled trees lay flattened as if they had been no more than stalks of grain in the path of a hurricane. "No one has gone into this area yet."

"I'll go take a look." Celli was glad to have a useful assignment she could do by herself. She welcomed the responsibility. After all, she was now as old as Estarra had been when she'd married King Peter. Everyone on Theroc, down to the youngest child, was being forced to grow up too quickly.

She sprinted off, picking her way through the haunted forest. The fast blaze had scoured away the underbrush, but the hydrogues' icewave had been like dynamite, blasting trees into kindling, shattering them into tangles of fibrous pulp.

Celli moved lightly on graceful legs that were muscular from climbing, running, and dancing. She imagined she was practicing to be a treedancer again, a profession she'd aspired to for many years. She had trained diligently, seeing herself as half ballerina and half marathon runner.

As she ran, she encountered more human bodies -- broken statues killed by the hydrogues' icewave or horribly burned cadavers drawn into a mummified fetal position as muscles and sinews tightened in the heat. Far too many had died, both trees and humans.

But Celli forged on, her feet sending up puffs of ash. Each living tree she could report would be one little victory for Theroc. Each such triumph would gradually tip the scales against the despair the hydrogues had brought.

As she explored in slow, broad zigzags through the devastation, the surviving trees were few and far between, but she touched each one briefly, murmuring words of encouragement and hope. Scrambling on her hands and knees, Celli climbed through a tangle of toppled trees as wide as a house. Though the jagged branches scratched her, she pressed forward and reached an artificial clearing in which all the trees had been knocked down in a circular pattern, as if something huge had exploded there, leaving an open area at the center.

Celli caught her breath. In the middle of the circle of destruction, she saw a curved shell of smoke-blackened crystal and the shattered fragments of what had been an alien warglobe. Pyramid-shaped protrusions thrust like claws through the spherical edges.

A hydrogue ship.

She had seen these awful things before, though this warglobe was nothing more than a fractured shell, half of it strewn around the clearing. Celli couldn't help but clench her fists while her lips curled in an angry but triumphant snarl.

Thus far, the EDF -- for all their sophisticated weapons -- had achieved little success against the hydrogues' diamond armor. Celli was sure the Earth military would be interested in having a specimen of an enemy warship that they could analyze up close -- and she intended to give it to them, if there was any chance it might help in the fight.

Flushed with her discovery, Celli raced back toward the fungus-reef city, happy to have good news to share at last.

2

MAGE-IMPERATOR JORA'H

Mere days after his ascension, Mage-Imperator Jora'h went to watch the handlers prepare his father's corpulent body for its dazzling incineration.

He had never expected to become Mage-Imperator under such circumstances, but the Ildiran Empire was his to rule now. Jora'h wanted to make changes, to improve life for his people, to make amends to those who had suffered . . . but he was bound by obligations and commitments, forced to continue schemes he had not previously known about. He felt trapped in a web woven from myriad sticky strands -- unless he could find a way around them.

But first, before he could face those tangled responsibilities, Jora'h had to preside over the funeral of his poisoned father.

Attender kithmen carried his chrysalis chair into the chamber where the dead Mage-Imperator had been laid out for his final preparations. Jora'h sat silently in the spacious levitating throne, looking down at the slack features of his father. Resenting him.

Treacheries, schemes, lies -- how could he endure everything he knew? Jora'h was now the mind, soul, and figurehead of the Ildiran race. It was not appropriate for him to curse his father's memory, but that didn't stop him. . . .

The previous Mage-Imperator had killed himself, seeing his own death as the only way to force his son to inherit the cruel knowledge of the Empire's secrets. Jora'h was still reeling from the revelations. Much as he disliked what he had learned, he understood the rationale for those hateful deeds. He had never suspected the hidden danger to the Ildiran Empire or the slim, desperate hope of salvation, which could be achieved only if he continued the experiments on Dobro.

Jora'h was handsome, smooth featured, with golden hair bound back into a braid that would eventually grow long, like his father's. Over time, his classical features might change, too, as he evolved into his sedentary, supposedly benevolent role. His sheltered life as Prime Designate, had not prepared him to imagine the awful things that were happening where he couldn't see them. But now, through the thism, he knew everything. It was exactly as his father had intended, both a gift and a curse.

And now he was compelled to continue the same acts, when all he wanted was to see his beloved and imprisoned Nira again. If nothing else, he would free her. That, at least, he could do -- as soon as he finished the transition of leadership and found a way to leave the Prism Palace.

Now, exercising extreme care, gaunt handlers washed the former leader's heavy body, preparing it. Cyroc'h's ample flesh sagged on his bones like a rubbery fabric that would easily peel away from his skeleton.

Diminutive servants, gibbering with despair, pushed forward frenetically to assist, but they had no place here during this ceremony, and Jora'h sternly sent them away. Some of them would no doubt throw themselves from a turret of the Prism Palace in their grief and misery. But their misery could not compare to his own dismay at all he had learned. No one could help him decide how best to rule, or what to do at Dobro. . . .

"How long will it be?" he asked the handlers.

The stony-faced men looked up from their work. Their leader said in a grim voice, "For an event of such magnitude, Liege, this must be our best work. It is the most important duty we will ever perform."

"Of course." Jora'h continued to observe in silence.

Wearing armored gloves, the handlers reached into pots and withdrew handfuls of silvery-gray paste, which they spread thickly and lovingly over the dead Mage-Imperator. They made certain to cover every speck of exposed skin.

Even in the dimness of the preparation room, the paste simmered and began to smoke. The handlers increased their pace, but did not grow sloppy under Jora'h's watchful gaze. When the Mage-Imperator was completely slathered, they wrapped his body with an opaque cloth, then announced their readiness.

"To the roof," Jora'h said from his chrysalis chair. "And call all of the Designates."

The dead Mage-Imperator's sons, along with Jora'h's own children, assembled on the highest transparent platform atop the spherical domes of the Prism Palace. The dazzling light of multiple suns washed down on them.

As Jora'h waited in the bright sun, ready to fulfill his role in the ceremony, he scanned the faces of his brothers, the former Designates, who had come from splinter colonies around the Empire, regardless of the shortage of stardrive fuel. Jora'h's own group of sons -- the next generation of Designates -- stood grim and respectful beside their oldest noble brother, Thor'h, who was now the new Prime Designate. Pery'h, the Designate-in-waiting for the planet Hyrillka, stood next to his brother Daro'h, the Dobro Designate-in-waiting; others clustered in ranks next to their uncles, whom they would soon replace.

Their awareness that the Hyrillka Designate could not attend and still lay unconscious in the Prism Palace's infirmary cast a deeper pall over the ceremony. Though his bruises and contusions had healed, Rusa'h remained lost and unresponsive in a deep sub-thism sleep, probably having nightmares of the

hydrogue attack on his citadel palace on Hyrillka. It was doubtful the Designate would ever awaken, and his planet would soon need a new leader. Though not yet prepared, Pery'h would have to take his place without Rusa'h as his mentor. . . .

Handler kithmen delivered Cyroc'h's wrapped body to a raised platform and adjusted magnifiers and mirrors. Everything proceeded in somber silence. Silently respectful carriers brought the chrysalis chair adjacent to the indistinct form of Cyroc'h, still shrouded in its opaque cloth.

Jora'h lifted his gaze to his brothers and sons as he grasped the thick cloth with his left hand. "My father served as Mage-Imperator during a century of peace and also in recent times of crisis. His soul has already followed the threads of thism to the realm of the Lightsource. Now, here, his physical form will join the light as well."

In a single abrupt motion, Jora'h yanked away the cloth to expose the soft form of the dead Mage-Imperator. The intense light of seven suns pounded down, activating the shimmering metallic paste that covered the dead leader's skin. Piercing white flames instantly engulfed the smothered, sagging body. The photothermal paste did not burn the body so much as dissolve it, making the skin and muscle and fat dissociate into the air, glowing, sparkling. . . .

The fallen Mage-Imperator vanished in a cloud of writhing steam and smoke. The air cleared. All that remained were Cyroc'h's glowing bones, impregnated with bioluminescent compounds. His clean, empty skull was only a symbol of the great things that he had been . . . and the dreadful things he had done in the name of preserving the Ildiran Empire.

As Mage-Imperator, Jora'h's immediate obligation was to dispatch his Designates-in-waiting to seal the process of governmental transition. Then he could finally find a way to free Nira. He turned to his sons and his brothers. "And now the Empire must move on."