

The Garden



By Adam Smith

The Garden

Part 1:

"He looked me right in the eyes, his spear hovering in front of my face," the soldier told Serevena as he recounted the raid. "He was naked, with long hair and dirty all over, but his eyes didn't look like an animal's. Then another came out of the bushes ready to kill me, but the first guy held him back, and they both backed away into the bush and disappeared." The stories of raids by the Regressed had been increasing with every exploratory mission, the deeper they went into their territory, the more brazen the raids. This was the first time in a long time any of the Regressed had been seen though, typically they stayed out of sight, and the only sign of their raid was the failure of exploration vehicles.

Serevena asked the soldier a few more questions, but it was clear the Regressed were acting in a humane manner, strategic even, not just doing random acts of sabotage against an incursion into their territory. This was starting to erode the notion that the Regressed were savages, little better than animals. Serevena finished her report and went to the Minister's office to apprise him of the situation.

The Minister of Resources was one of twelve Ministers to run the Haven. Candidates for Minister were selected by merit and their history of devotion to the city and its inhabitants, the Enlightened, who then voted for their preferred Minister. The Ministers' building, called the Needle, was the tallest in the center of the city so it could be easily accessed by all; however, ironically a person needed high clearance to enter the building. Being a security expert Serevena had level 4 clearance, second highest, and she marvelled at the view of the city as she travelled up the elevator.

The Minister was his usual brusk self, all business and no pleasantries. "Serevena, what did the soldier have to say?"

"Sir, the Regressed spared his life. The soldier stumbled on him as he was spying the results of their sabotage from the cover of some foliage, and it seems a second Regressed was about to end the soldier but the first one held him back and they retreated. It seems they are far more calculating than we give them credit for," Serevena replied.

"These meddlesome cavemen need to evolve or get out of the way of progress," the Minister snorted, "we need to mine that ground if we're going to fuel the Haven into the next few decades. I don't understand how they even have the capacity to stymie us time and again."

"Sir, the Regressed keep deftly dismantling and disabling our equipment through simple means, often just the right placement of a rock or log, or digging hidden pits, or nighttime raids where they disconnect wires and cables and plug exhaust holes in the various machines, breaking them down upon starting. I don't mean to sound impressed, but some of their sabotage has been quite ingenious, not merely random destruction but targeted dismantling."

"Don't be enamoured with their supposed ingenuity, any ape has the wherewithal to throw a spanner in the works. We need a solution, and as we can't seem to find them with any of our scopes or drones we need more information. Serevena, you are tasked with finding out more about them, what makes them

tick, and especially where they reside. There are huge swaths of nearly impenetrable jungle outside the Haven in the Garden, we can't keep spending energy, resources, materials, and manpower just to get nowhere. We need a strategy to deal with their mischief once and for all. Dismissed."

Serevena left to report to her direct superior, the Minister of Security. Serevena was well-liked and respected, not just for being a loyal and capable security officer who was precise and objective, but because her empathy allowed her to better read the minds of those she needed to understand in order to do her job. She was very good at putting herself in others' shoes to understand what made them tick. When there was a spate of destroyed property in the schools, she figured out it was a disgruntled student picked on by fellow classmates. When there was a series of random assaults with the same MO that could not be pieced together by any security footage, she deduced it must be a coordinated group and looked into the social networks of known anti-social persons, finally uncovering the ring leader who was commanding but not participating in the assaults.

She even understood the pathology of the Ministers, and accepted that it took powerful, driven, and hard-minded men to make the tough decisions to run a city the size and complexity of the Haven. She knew they had psychopathic tendencies, but that such a personality was suited to leading. She saw straight to the heart of people and understood they each had a different place in the system for it to be as harmonious as possible.

Serevena crossed through the eye of the Needle, where all the Ministers' offices were, a ring around the top of the tower. The only office higher up was the Chancellor's, who was appointed by the Ministers after their election. Although for over 20 years, regardless of whom were elected Ministers, the Chancellor remained the same. Perhaps it was for continuity in the eyes of the Enlightened, as the Chancellor seemed to be more of a figurehead, appearing exclusively for ceremonial purposes and public announcements of great import. Serevena couldn't even remember the last time she saw him in person, as for years he was only seen in recordings.

Serevena arrived at the Minister of Security's office and gave her report. He pondered her information for a moment, then said, "we need to be proactive, not reactive. We keep making incursions and waiting to see what the Regressed may or may not do. We must lay a trap, draw them out, and wait for them to respond." Serevena replied, "Sir, if we deviate from our usual behaviour it might alert them to the ruse, we should pretend it's business as usual, move our equipment into place, and then await a raid and observe." The Minister agreed and gave her authorization to set it up.

Serevena left the Needle feeling an odd mixture of curiosity and perturbation. The more she learned about the Regressed the more she questioned their assumptions about them. Just over 400 years ago, when the Schism happened, the Regressed chose to reject science and medicine and technology and returned to a life of hunting and gathering in the jungle. Somewhere along the way they seemed to have lost the power of speech. Now it appeared they lived little better than animals, foraging naked in the wild and having absolutely no technology or structures they could detect. This is why they were referred to as "The Regressed."

The Enlightened on the other hand had embraced technology, mastering their control over human biology and all but eliminating sickness and ailments of all kinds. Through medical advances and genetic engineering, dying of illness was a thing of the past, and people lived well past 100 years. It took a lot of care and maintenance, and diligent wearing of protective gear, but such unnecessary suffering was no longer part of the human condition.

The Haven was a marvel of human ingenuity. Within walls 100 feet high the city provided everything an Enlightened person needed, from food to healthcare to housing and every kind of entertainment imaginable. People were so long-lived and education so highly regarded that most people were a little bit expert in almost every subject, especially biology, and most spoke more than one language, even ones no longer in use. Most labour was automated, and the Enlightened spent most of their time in leisure activities. Fashion and consumerism were favourite pastimes, and economic growth and profits were goals many strived for.

The Haven used to be powered by a fusion reactor combined with a network of solar and wind power. But about a hundred years ago they discovered a highly refractive crystal, a new material that formed out of the ashes out of the Old World, which was able to concentrate photons they could then convert into electricity. When shaped into tubes this crystal was a nearly lossless fibre optic cable, capable of carrying highly concentrated photons across great distances. Simply being exposed to light they made for very efficient power generation.

The exterior of the main power facility was awesome to behold, a complex patterned structure of transparent glittering tubes gathering and transmitting power, and was a favourite sight for a romantic stroll or a children's science field trip. The artful network of crystalline transformers lay beneath the Needle, as if the Needle were emerging from a geometric arrangement of silver and glass hay. When the light hit it just right the refraction was gorgeous. However, the crystal was delicate and in short supply, and acquiring it was the primary reason for their ongoing incursions into the territory of the Regressed.

On her way home Serevena stopped for her twice daily test and booster. Conquering nature required shielding oneself from its dangers, and after centuries of protecting themselves the Enlightened had to wear full body suits with their own air filter and take regular immune boosters to maintain a perfect state of health. With a total lack of exposure to pathogens from birth their immune systems never developed on their own, and so required constant support. But it was a necessary and happily accepted trade-off for never getting sick and living a long and full life. Despite such advances however, their birth rate lowered year after year. Pregnancies were few and far between and many did not make it to full term.

Centuries sheltered from sickness and genetic defects left the Enlightened very svelte, slim, and tall. The average height was 6'2 and the average weight 70kg and men and women were nearly equal in physical stature and proportion. Often it was difficult to tell one gender from another, and as many Enlightened were non-binary it was considered the height of rudeness to ask. Their culture was very politically correct and inclusive to a fault, which led to people being somewhat staid, stiff, and distant,

lest they inadvertently offend someone. Due to a lack of sun exposure they were also incredibly pale-skinned, many with skin so fair it was noticeably translucent. Being overweight was unheard of, and exercise was a way of life. Sports and training in various physical disciplines was almost a religion, resulting in the average Enlightened being physically skilled in many forms of martial arts and gymnastics. Being of supreme health and fitness was highly valued and doggedly pursued, becoming a status symbol and form of competition.

Serevena arrived at her home, where she still lived with her parents. Despite being a respected security officer, at 44 she still could not afford to live in her own place. While there was little to no crime in the Haven, as rules and laws were unquestioningly adhered to with pride and people lived long and illness-free and never starved, still there was social stratification. There was an unlimited amount of virtual entertainment, one could plug in to virtual reality and experience just about anything they wanted within the limits of the technology (you had sight, touch, and sound just fine, but taste and smells still lacked), but if one wanted to do things in the real world one needed money. The families of Ministers had access to facilities and activities Serevena had only ever heard second-hand stories about, like physical competitions between the fittest athletes in chambers so sterile they competed with their suits off.

In the Haven people never unmasked or took their suits off unless it was with their bubble. Even though everyone was tested and boosted twice daily, there were still bacteria unique to individuals that might cause a bad reaction in another person never exposed to it before. When two people chose to be sexual partners they had to go through a two week dual quarantine, isolating together in a sterile chamber to ensure they could get accustomed to each other's germs. If all went well they could be together, but from that point forward they were a new bubble, and could no longer unmask with their previous bubble without going through a group quarantine.

"I'm home," Serevena called out as she entered the apartment.

"My favourite daughter!" her father quipped, an old joke for an only child. Her parents were both over one hundred, and still sharp-minded despite starting to bow under their own weight. Her father was a full 3 inches shorter than his peak adult height.

"How was your day?" her mother asked.

"More stories of the raids of the Regressed, this time they spared a soldier they had dead to rights. One was primed to kill, but the other made him back off. I'm tasked with arranging a plan to catch them in a raid," she replied.

"Does that mean you have to leave Haven?" her father asked.

"Well of course dad, how else to lay a trap? Although I'm wary of provoking them, they are showing too many signs of planning and forethought we didn't think possible."

Her mother shuddered, "I don't know why anyone would choose to live in the wild like that, rejecting all the benefits of civilization and technology." Her father mused in response, "I dunno, living without suits

and masks and daily boosters has an appeal of sorts. I sometimes fantasize about just walking out the door one day, feeling the sun and breeze directly on my skin instead of just through a window or from a fan."

"Perish the thought!" her mother retorted with horror on her face. Serevena got changed and sat down to dinner with them. Her mother started in on the usual romantic inquiries.

"So, how are things with... what's his name again? That fellow from the theatre." Serevena rolled her eyes, "We're not talking anymore, he was just so typical, knows a lot about everything but it all comes from books, he has no real world experience, he's just so sheltered."

Her father said, "What can you expect? Most people have never left Haven, they can't all be security experts gallivanting all over the Garden." Serevena didn't respond. They finished their dinner, watched a movie together, and went to bed.

After a couple weeks the plan was set. They would move their exploratory vehicles into position, mostly bulldozer and auger-type machines for penetrating the jungle and taking core samples in search of deposits, and then lie in wait for the usual nighttime raid. Except the raid never came. Day after day and night after night they sat there waiting, with infrared cameras capturing every angle of every vehicle and yet nothing happened. Perhaps this section of jungle was not inhabited?

The team looked to Serevena as she was running the show. With no other option she told them to proceed with their incursion. The moment they started their massive vehicles there was a loud cracking sound. Then another and another, all around them. The leaves rustled as massive trees started falling with precision directly onto the vehicles. Drivers fled as their vehicles were crushed. Serevena was close to one of the lead vehicles and the tree that hit it then bounced off the crushed roof of the vehicle in her direction. She barely had time to react when she was tackled out of the way. She looked up to see a rugged hairy face staring back at her. One of the Regressed had saved her. She stared back in wonder and startled gratitude, but he quickly melted back into the jungle. Serevena sat on the forest floor shocked and stunned.

Back at Haven Serevena recounted her tale to the entire council of Ministers. She knew from experience to keep her report unemotional and to the point, sticking to the facts in a neutral tone with an expressionless face. However she couldn't help sprinkling into her report some of her surprise at the unexpected cunning of the Regressed in this particular foray. The precision and timing with which they felled the trees really did impress her, but she managed to disguise her being impressed more as being curious how such primitive people managed such a feat.

After her report the Minister of Science inquired, "In light of this latest development, how do you suggest we proceed?" Before she could respond the Minister of Defense interjected, "We need to send an armed force into the jungle to wipe them out, or failing that, at the minimum teach them the consequences of their actions so they never attempt such an assault again. Force must be met with force."

"But we have no idea where they are or what their numbers are," the Minister of Information countered, "We cannot risk people or resources without some kind of recon to gather intelligence. Our forces might be slaughtered, and it might incur some other kind of reaction we are unprepared for. For all our sensors and drones we still don't have any reliable information on what we're up against." At that remark the council simultaneously turned towards Serevena.

"Sirs, it's true we do not know much about them," Serevena responded, "and what we do know is augmented by new and unexpected behaviour. My recommendation is a small scale reconnaissance, deep into the jungle and quiet as possible, in order to get at least one glimpse of the Regressed in their native setting. Their raids suggest not just intelligent coordination, but a sophistication and difficulty implying potentially formidable numbers and resources. We cannot safely proceed without having some idea of where they exist, what their numbers are, and most importantly, how they evade detection." Serevena stopped talking and the Ministers all stared at her expectantly. The Minister of Security spoke up, "Well, you are tasked with this problem, what do you suggest to solve it?"

Serevena didn't hesitate in her response, "Sirs, there is no other person in Haven that has the insights and skills I do, I recommend authorizing me for a solo stealth mission, to gather intel and discover the whereabouts of the Regressed. I will take supplies for a two week mission, reporting back twice daily via text message." The Ministers agreed unanimously and Serevena left the chamber having to stifle her excitement over the prospect. Finally she would have answers about this mysterious people.

Serevena spent a few days preparing and gathering her supplies. While she knew the general geography and flora and fauna of the Garden, the density of the jungle made it impossible to know precisely what lay in store, so she took every possible eventuality into consideration. Once she had done all her due diligence, she embraced her nervous parents and left Haven into the jungle of the Garden.

The Garden was a large patch of vegetation surrounded by a barren land of harsh scrubs and deserts. After the Schism of society 400 years ago the excesses of civilization had caused massive climactic disruption for the first century that followed. Many places became uninhabitable, plagued with storms and floods, or droughts and searing heat. The land that became the Garden was in a large depression on the continent, and was one of the few places where vegetation continued to flourish and building permanent structures was possible. The Enlightened gathered as much modern technology as they could and settled into a small city that eventually evolved into Haven. There were enough resources in and around the growing city that they were able to build it into the technological wonder it was today. For the first two centuries there were occasional skirmishes with the Regressed, but over time the Regressed receded farther into the increasing density of the jungle and the Enlightened left them to their own devices. Until now, when the need for new crystals to power Haven forced them into the jungle.

Serevena wore a camouflage suit designed for hard terrain, which had a self-cleaning air filter so she didn't need to bring spare filters. She had food concentrates to last the whole two weeks and then some, and equipment for detecting and recording anything she came across. Being fit and slender and highly trained she could traverse the jungle undetected, making sure to cover her tracks and stay out of

sight. For the first couple days she saw no signs of human life, as she slept in the hollows of trees, avoided dangerous animals, and stayed on high alert the whole time. Her adrenaline was high, not because of the potential danger, but rather because of the excitement of finally learning some more about the Regressed. She really had no idea what to expect, nor where it was she should go, so she more or less made a beeline straight east from the Haven.

After a few more days she was starting to lose hope. There was simply no sign of the Regressed, not a track, not a camp, not a soul. But she hadn't reached the limit of her supplies yet and travelled on. Finally, after 6 days of travel she saw a human footprint. She froze, realizing she must now be at her most careful. She took out a thermal scope and scanned the area. Through some bushes she caught sight of what might be people. With the utmost care and caution she crept forward, staying behind trees as she slowly made her way towards the heat signatures.

There was a small clearing ahead, and in it, two Regressed standing together. She was close enough she didn't need any of her scopes to observe them. She watched as they signalled to each other with hand gestures. They could communicate! Serevena was floored, this was an unexpected development. The Regressed were more advanced than they thought, which explained much of their behaviour. She reached into her pack to grab her camera to record some of this when she heard a slight rustle behind her. She turned just in time to see a spear come crashing down on her head and she lost consciousness.

Part 2:

He looked the soldier right in the eyes, his spear hovering in front of his face. Otadamon did his best to keep their raids clandestine, but the soldier accidentally stumbled on him as he watched from the bushes. The soldier was covered from head to toe, with strange devices hanging from every available strap, and a mask and goggles. Otadamon's cousin came out of the bushes, ready to strike the soldier. Otadamon held him back, and they both backed away into the bush and disappeared. The incursions by the Caged had been increasing in frequency, penetrating deeper into the jungle, requiring more raids to stop their machines. This was the first time in a long time any of the Sovereign had been seen though, typically they stayed out of sight, the only sign of their raid was the failure of exploration vehicles.

Otadamon signed to his angry cousin to move along, it was clear he wanted to strike the Caged, but they were not going to lower themselves to such oppressive behaviour, they stuck to their strategies of stealthy sabotage when their territory was threatened. The Sovereign were not savages like the Caged, living in chains and enclosed like trapped animals. Otadamon met up with the rest of the raiding party as they travelled back to the Refuge and the Mothers.

The Council of Mothers made all final decisions for the Refuge. Becoming a Mother was a birthright passed down from generation to generation, guiding the Sovereign in their ways and passing judgment when required, but being a birthright meant no guarantee they were suited to their station. The Refuge was a large cavern beneath the jungle floor, a huge hollow in the earth that could hold all of the Sovereign for their rituals and events, with tunnels in every direction for each clan to freely enter. Otadamon always marveled at the beauty of its carved and painted walls as he traveled deeper toward the Chamber of Mothers.

The four Mothers awaited his arrival. They all stood except the Mother of the South who was pregnant and due any day with her firstborn. She wasn't just the Mother of Otadamon's clan, she was also his sister. She smiled at Otadamon, but being the youngest did not speak first.

The Mother of the North was her usual warm self, and signed "Otadamon my son, what news of the raid?"

"Mother, the raid was successful, but we were seen. A soldier of the Caged stumbled on me by accident; I didn't hear him over the machines breaking. My cousin came out ready to strike, but the soldier did not move or attempt aggression, and so we spared his life," Otadamon replied with his hands.

"These misguided souls need to wake up to nature or stop destroying it," the Mother of the East gestured lamentably, "we depend on the jungle to keep the Refuge alive for generations to come. I don't understand why they must keep destroying the jungle outside their walls."

"Mother, their machines seem to be for digging, I think they are looking for the crystal. I think it serves as fuel for their prison. We have found many ways to dismantle their machines, it's easy to put logs or rocks in their way or dig a hidden pit, but mostly just by plugging any holes it has or pulling out the

various strings connecting it. Their machines have many weaknesses, but they are wise to our tricks and are coming in larger force.”

“Don’t be afraid of their technology, it is their reliance on it that makes them weak. We will find new ways to cripple their machines, we need only keep a close eye on their movements. Otadamon, you are tasked with finding out more about them, what fuels their machines, and where they will intrude next. The jungle is deep and thick, but their machines get larger and larger with every summer that passes. We must keep ahead of their inventions with new interventions. Go with the gods.”

Otadamon left to join his clan and speak with the elders. Otadamon was well-liked and respected, not just for being a skilled hunter and ingenious saboteur, but his diplomacy enabled him to recruit loyal teams from all the clans. He was very good at empathizing with their struggles and uniting them in a common cause. When runoff from a cave was poisoning a river, he convinced near 100 men to help him redirect it. When the East Clan was clashing with the North Clan, accusing them of poaching their bird nests, he enlisted a team of hunters from both clans to observe the nests, taking turns day and nights for weeks, discovering that a species of tree lizard had become overpopulated and was decimating the birds’ nests.

He also understood how to influence the Council of Mothers, and accepted that sometimes they were not the most ideal decision-makers, and occasionally their decisions for the Refuge took some nudging in the right direction. He knew being born into their position meant they didn’t always have the experience and knowledge for their task, but their hearts were in the right place. He saw straight to the heart of people and understood they each had a different place in their clan for it to be as harmonious as possible.

Otadamon crossed through the Refuge towards the Chamber of the South, his clan. All of the various chambers were of equal size, except for the main chamber, which was large enough for all the clans to gather in one place. The Elders were like the chairmen of the Clans, each facilitating their clan’s form of decision-making, whether a consensus or a majority vote or otherwise, which they then conveyed to their head Mother when a decision affecting multiple clans was needed. The Head Mothers can only decide by consensus. Otherwise the clans of the Sovereign were autonomous from one another, and Otadamon couldn’t think of a time when they were unable to resolve a problem.

Otadamon arrived to his Elder and told him of the raid. He pondered the information for a moment, then signed, “we need to act first, not react second. The Caged keep invading and we wait for them to start plunging into the jungle before we disable their machines. We must know their path before they take it, to set up more devastating traps to destroy their machines beyond repair.” Otadamon signed back, “Elder, that kind of close observation might expose us too much, allowing them to discover the Refuge. We should scout what routes through the jungle seem viable and prepare multiple traps, and when they choose a route, we set the appropriate trap in motion.” The Elder agreed, and told him to recruit a team and start planning.

Otadamon left the chamber feeling an odd mixture of anxiety and anticipation. The more he learned about the Caged the more he wondered about their technology. Just over 400 summers ago, when the

Exodus happened, the Caged chose to reject nature and the gods and hid themselves behind walls. Somewhere along the way they started covering themselves with suits and masks everywhere they went. Now it appeared they lived little better than prisoners, never leaving their walls, and never knowing the feeling of the sun on their skin or the breeze in their hair. This is why they were referred to as "The Caged".

The Sovereign on the other hand had embraced nature, learning to live off the land, praising the gods for its beauty, and rejecting the aid of machines or technology as a crutch. Each member of a Clan was highly skilled and incredibly physically fit, capable of amazing feats of acrobatics as well as being well-versed in all the arts and creation of man-made beauty possible. It was a short life of constant toil and alertness hunting and gathering in the jungle, but they took the hardship with pride, and it gave them a deep connection to nature and constant sense of beauty and wonder.

The Refuge was a marvel of human ingenuity. Within the various chambers, a massive network sprawling beneath the jungle, it provided all the shelter they needed. People being short-lived meant that Elders, and the ability to pass down their knowledge, were highly valued members of society. There was no such thing as medicine, if you fell ill or became weak or vulnerable it meant the gods felt you were not meant for this world. Death was a celebration of returning to nature and becoming one with the gods. Every clan hunted and gathered for its people, a wealthy person was one with food to share. Outside of raiding parties, they did wear jewellery and clothes of their own making, and various ways to braid hair was a favourite pastime.

The Refuge was lit by the crystal which lined and pocketed all the chambers. Small holes to the surface provided just enough light that when it refracted through crystals that had been strategically placed, the chambers lit up very well. The main chamber of the Refuge was hollowed out from a massive deposit of the crystal, so the entire chamber, walls, ceiling, and floor, was made of the crystal. On a full moon enough light made it through the top that the entire chamber glowed ethereally, and many ceremonies and celebrations occurred during full moons for this reason.

The various chambers and tunnels led outward in each direction: North, East, South, and West, to each clan's hunting territory. These entrances made for easy access to the jungle to find food, but also made it easy to stay out of sight of the metal birds of the Caged. The walls of the tunnels were carved from floor to ceiling with the symbols and gods of each Clan, typically taking the form of the various animals they hunted in their part of the jungle. Strategically placed crystals lined all the walls to catch the light and project it deeper into the tunnels. They also incorporated the crystal into jewellery and ceremonial items.

On his way to his Clan's chamber Otadamon stopped at their gods' shrine and prayed. Praising the gods was how a person stayed in their favour, although Otadamon was never sure how true that was. He knew incredibly devout people who still succumbed to sickness, and no amount of praying seemed to help. Good diet and hygiene seemed more important to long life, and both were highly valued. Cleansing rituals were multiple times daily, no excuses. Many Sovereign also saw testing their physical limits as a way to know how they were favoured with the gods. The phrase "whatever doesn't kill you

makes you stronger” was practically gospel. This was an especially important attitude when it came to childbirth. The Sovereign were incredibly fertile people, many women having up to 8 babies in their lifetime, but without any medical interventions of any kind, that philosophy meant many deaths in childbirth and before adulthood.

Centuries of such a rough life and a disdain for the weak had made the Sovereign very stocky and muscular. The average height was 5’5” and the average weight 90kg, and men and women differed quite dramatically in build. While both were stocky and muscular, men were very broad-chested with thick shoulders and heavy jaws and brows, while women had tiny waists with large breasts and hips. While respecting women as life givers and living under matriarchal rule, ironically their culture was quite sexist, with very stereotypical attitudes about the role and abilities of men and women. While they were very physically affectionate and emotional, behaviour like homosexuality was seen as disrespecting the gifts of the gods, that to stray from the coupling of male and female was wrong. Being so physically fit many of their rituals and games involved physical competitions, and winning was a status symbol and a sign of favour with the gods.

Otadamon arrived at his Clan’s main chamber, where they all gathered at night to sleep. At 25 years old he had won many competitions and hunted many beasts, but had yet to sire a child. There were few disputes in the Refuge, clanspeople depended on each other too much, and there was an ingrained sense of egalitarianism, sharing, and fairness. At night they regaled one another with their tales, some from times of old passed down by Elders, sometimes new tales of hunts or raids. They ate dinner together daily, where the day’s food was distributed according to size and need: mothers and children first, hunters next, Elders last.

In the Refuge everyone was physically close. They slept together, ate together, hunted and gathered together, and a fellow clansperson was never far. Holding hands was considered a sign of solidarity, and greetings were always with kisses and hugs, regardless of gender. When a pair mated, there were side chambers to give them privacy, but there was no marriage, the whole clan raised the children as their own. Often a child wouldn’t even be sure who their father was, and mothers breast fed each others’ babies.

Otadamon rapped his spear on the floor in his familiar signal of greeting as he entered the chamber.

“My least favourite son,” his father signed, an old joke as his father had sired 8 boys. His father was 44, and still strong as ever despite his weathered skin and gray hair. His sagging skin drooped off his sinewy muscles.

“How was the raid?” his brother signed.

“We came face to face with a Caged soldier, our cousin was ready to strike, but we spared his life. The Mothers want me to get ready for another incursion,” he signed in reply.

“Does that mean you have to go near the Prison?” his father signed.

“Well of course father, how else to lay a trap? Although I’m wary of being seen again, they are on alert and we can’t afford them finding us.”

His brother shuddered, “I don’t know why anyone would want to live with their bodies always covered behind walls like that, rejecting the beauty of nature and the gods.” His father mused in response, “I suppose it’s very safe and comfortable, protected from peril. I sometimes fantasize what it would be like to not have to ward off predators and hunt every day, to have constant protection from the rain and the cold.”

“Gods be deaf!” his brother retorted with horror on his face. Otadamon washed himself in a basin and sat down to eat with them. His brother started in on the usual romantic inquiries.

“So, how are things with... what’s her name again? That hot girl from the North.” Otadamon rolled his eyes and replied, “We danced together at the festival, but she’s just so typical, wants to bear children, gather food, and braid hair.”

His father said, “What can you expect? Most women have never ventured far from the Refuge, they can’t help with raids or hunts all over the Garden.” Otadamon didn’t respond. They finished eating, hummed some songs together, and went to sleep.

After a couple weeks Otadamon had the lay of the land. He knew all the major routes that would allow for large machines to penetrate the jungle. His men picked strategic trees to fell, and cut them partway so they could finish the job when they knew where the trees needed to land. Then finally they saw which route the machines were coming from. They waited ready to fell the trees, but the machines stopped. Day after day and night after night they sat there waiting, with men taking shifts to watch at all hours, and yet nothing happened. Perhaps they were stuck?

The men looked to Otadamon as he was running the show. There was no other option but to wait. Then finally the machines started up and Otadamon gave the signal. Tree after tree had their final piece of trunk severed, swooshing down through the jungle with precision directly onto the vehicles. Drivers fled as their vehicles were crushed. One of the Caged was close to one of the lead vehicles and the tree that hit it then bounced off the crushed roof of the vehicle in their direction. Otadamon barely had time to react as he tackled them out of the way. He looked down to see a delicate pale face staring back at him. He had saved one of the Caged. They stared back in wonder and startled gratitude, but he quickly melted back into the jungle. Otadamon plunged through the brush, anxious and panicked.

Back at the Refuge Otadamon recounted his tale to the Council of Mothers. He knew from experience to give as rich detail as possible, and to include the look of gratitude on the face of the Caged he saved. He remarked on how the Caged had waited, clearly expecting another raid directly on the machines. But they felled the trees with precision and timing, and no one was hurt.

After his story the Mother of the East inquired, signing “After this result, what do you think we should do?” Before he could respond the Mother of the South interjected, “We must send them a gift, to make

peace and let them know we mean no harm. We have never before shown such force and nearly killed one of them, it's time to reach out."

"But we have no idea how they will react," the Mother of the West countered, "We cannot risk being seen and tracked back to the Refuge. We cannot know if they recognize we are trying not to hurt them." At that remark the council simultaneously turned towards Otadamon.

"Mothers, it's true we do not know how they will react," Otadamon signed, "despite their gratitude at having their lives spared we cannot assume they grasp that intention. I suggest we find every possible route out of the city and set up observation of everything that moves in or out. It's possible at some point we will see a Caged that looks approachable, that we might be able to engage and make clear we want peace. From their suits it seems they are not all soldiers, and twice now we have proven our desire not to kill. We must find a way to safely approach them without making them nervous." Otadamon stopped talking and the Mothers all stared at him expectantly. The Mother of the North signed, "Well, you are to solve this problem, what is your plan?"

Otadamon didn't hesitate in his response, "Mothers, there is no other person in the Refuge that has the experience and skills I do, I ask permission to go alone, to gather information and see if there are ever opportunities to approach the Caged without raising alarms or scaring them. I will travel to the Prison for half a moon and return to let you know what I've seen." The Mothers all nodded and rapped their crystal-topped spears and Otadamon left the main chamber, having to stifle his nervousness as he went. He was unsure of his prospects and worried the Caged would not be welcoming.

Otadamon grabbed his spear and sling and headed out immediately. He knew the geography of the jungle better than anyone, every path used by boars and deer, every fallen tree spanning a river. He slept in branches of trees and hollows of their roots as he made his way easily through the lush jungle of the Garden.

The Garden was a large patch of vegetation surrounded by a barren land of harsh scrubs and deserts. After the Exodus 400 years ago the excesses of civilization had caused massive climactic disruption for the first century that followed. Many places became uninhabitable, plagued with storms and floods, or droughts and searing heat. The land that became the Garden was in a large depression on the continent, and was one of the few places where vegetation continued to flourish and living off the land was possible. The Sovereign abandoned all technology and medicine, and started using their own version of sign language so no audio sensors ever detected them, and retained their savage image to deceive and lull the Caged into complacency. There were enough plants and animals for them to survive and over time dig the tunnels and chambers that became the Refuge. For the first two centuries there were occasional skirmishes with the Caged, but over time the Sovereign receded farther into the increasing density of the jungle and the Caged left them to their own devices. Until now, when their big digging machines came deeper into the jungle.

Otadamon wore nothing, not even a loin cloth, so should he be spotted he would appear little more than an animal. He foraged and hunted for small game when needed, but mostly ate random food as he came across it in his path. Being an experienced hunter and raider he could traverse the jungle

undetected, making sure to never leave tracks and stay out of sight. He was constantly on guard, watching the skies for metal birds, and looking for any sign of machines. He was wary of meeting a Caged face-to-face, he wasn't sure how they would react to his look. He headed straight towards the Prison and was soon scoping it out.

After a few days of scouting the walls and locating entrances, a lone person came out. He couldn't be sure but he had a strange feeling it was the person he saved from the tree. He followed them stealthily through the jungle, watching as they made a poor attempt at covering their tracks, waiting to see what they were up to all alone. After a time they were nearing the western tunnels of the Refuge, and then the Caged stopped when they saw two Sovereign signing to each other.

Otadamon snuck up behind the Caged, not sure what they were going to do next. The two Sovereign weren't aware of their presence, and the Caged didn't seem to be doing anything other than observing. Then they reached into their bag and started pulling out a small machine. Otadamon had no idea what this machine was capable of, but he had to ensure no harm came to the Sovereign. He crept forward and the Caged turned just in time to see his spear come crashing down on their head.

Part 3:

Serevena wakened to Otadamon staring her down. They were in a cave, and all her belongings were gone, as well as her boots, all that was left was her clothes. He watched her with a neutral if slightly curious expression. She stared back with quiet defiance, then asked, "Where am I?" Otadamon signed to her. Neither understood the other. Serevena now realized the Regressed's hidden use of sign language is how they managed to avoid detection and fool the Enlightened into believing they were merely savages. Otadamon wondered what kind of risk he was taking revealing the deepest secrets of the Sovereign to a Caged.

They peered silently at one another for a while. Neither had ever been in such prolonged proximity with the other's kind before. Otadamon had been watching her since he brought her to the cave. The moment he lifted her unconscious body he knew she was female; despite her height and broad shoulders she was undeniably a woman. She looked to have very alluring eyes, and he had resisted the urge to remove her mask to see her face, worried she may need it to breathe. Her suit was like nothing he had ever seen, covered in so many mechanical details and layers, and all the same flat colour and texture. He took from her only the equipment that easily detached and didn't look like a weapon, although he was worried he wouldn't know a high tech weapon if he saw one.

Serevena kept her wary glare on Otadamon. He clearly wasn't going to just kill her, but it was impossible to know what he did intend. As she held his gaze she became more confident he wasn't going to hurt her. She assessed his stature, about 5 inches shorter than her but at least 20kg heavier, very sinewy and developed musculature, heavy bone structure, and quite hairy. His hair was wild, hanging in front of his face and obscuring him, but when she ignored that the finer details came into view. There were intricate braids throughout his hair, he had a dyed loin cloth, a stunning bone necklace, and finely carved wooden bracelets. He was putting up a façade to test her. She relaxed and looked away. Otadamon was satisfied she wouldn't be trouble, and possibly was just as curious about him as he was about her.

Otadamon gave her some food, and left her in the cave. After he'd been gone for a while Serevena ventured out to get the lay of the land. No wonder she wasn't tied up or caged, she was high up on a mountainside with nothing but raw jungle below; without her boots or her gear she wasn't going anywhere. She explored as best she could, but there wasn't much to learn, and other than the angle of the sun she had no idea where exactly she was, Haven was not visible from this vantage.

Otadamon came and went over the next few days as they struggled to communicate with each other. It was clear Otadamon wanted to know more about her and had not been threatening in any way, but the frustration of their lack of communication was getting to both of them. Serevena tried to get him to talk verbally, and while he could make a variety of noises, it was clear he hadn't developed finer control over his tongue and lips to make clear speech.

Likewise with Otadamon's hand signs. While he could convey certain simple nouns, like pointing at a tree and then making the sign for it, the more nuanced words needed for deeper communication, like verbs and adjectives, did not convey easily. Eventually Serevena tried writing something, and that

excited Otadamon. He tried writing too, but using an alphabet unlike anything Serevena had ever seen. Otadamon knew they'd struck on something, so he left her some supplies and was gone for a few days.

Upon Otadamon's return, a revelation, he was holding a very rudimentary book. It was made from natural materials and was very worn and delicate looking. He gave it to Serevena, but it baffled her. The letters all followed in a long string, no breaks, and no discernible pattern that might relate to her language. But it was a start. She began by writing out each different character she saw. Otadamon picked up on what she was doing, stopped her, and in the dust and dirt of the floor wrote out all the different characters. Lo and behold, there are 26 of them. Could this be the Latin alphabet in code? Serevena fell asleep excited with the possibilities.

The next day Serevena started writing out the Latin characters next to the Caged's alphabet and trying to apply it to words in the book, but it wasn't working, everything was still nonsense and jumbled. However she still saw patterns in the book that seemed to imply English words. She started looking at instances where there are two of the same character in a row and tried to project words onto it. Then she realized she can now compare Otadamon's signs to the words. She pointed at a tree and then asks him to spell it. He does, but the double characters representing the e's come first. Then an epiphany. They spell their words backwards and their alphabet is in reverse order! Serevena decoded the book and started writing to Otadamon.

Finally they could communicate. Serevena wrote, "I am Serevena, from Haven." Otadamon responded, "I am Otadamon, from the Refuge."

"I have come to learn about your people," she said.

"I want to understand what your people want with our land," he replied.

"I was in the jungle to observe your people and discover how you are so good at preventing us from going deeper into your territory."

"We must defend our territory; we hide from your people so you can never use your machines against us."

"I regret that we misunderstand each other," Serevena lamented, "I come in peace, to understand who you are."

"My concern is that knowing who we are may lead to finding a weakness," Otadamon countered.

"I cannot deny my people want resources on your land, but now that I know you are not savages, perhaps there is a way to share. We can help each other. We have many things to make your life easier."

Otadamon sneered and scribbled, "Like we want to be trapped as you are, hiding behind masks and walls."

Serevena paused, realizing how the Enlightened must look to them on the outside, "You are right to find us frightening, you do not know what is behind our walls. But I promise you, we are not slaves, we live very long lives free of hardship or disease."

"How can you be free," Otadamon retorted, "when you must live constantly separated from nature? Do you ever feel the breeze in your hair, the sun on your skin? The rush of fresh air in your lungs when running through the jungle? We may not live long but we are happy!"

"I do not doubt it, but would that happiness not be even greater if you could hold it longer? Technology allows us to bend nature, to explore nature at its core, and to find new ways to live in harmony with all that nature provides."

"Nature does not provide technology, humans do, and we have destroyed so much with it. We remember the time before the Exodus. It does not bring you harmony with nature, it's a barrier to nature and a rejection of the gods. That is why the Sovereign reject technology and all the evil it encourages."

"I must ask a question," Serevena responded. Otadamon nodded and she continued scrawling in the dirt, "Are humans part of nature?"

"Of course!" Otadamon's face implied before he wrote the words.

"Then anything humans do is also part of nature, it could not have happened if humans did not naturally occur. Technology is just an extension of nature, and just like nature, it can both create and destroy."

"But humans have created materials not found in nature, materials that could not form without human intervention."

"Yes, and those materials, do they exist in this world and follow the laws of nature?"

Otadamon paused, then scrawled, "Yes."

"If they exist in nature then the gods allow for their existence, therefore they must be natural, else they could not exist at all."

Otadamon stared at Serevena, stumped. He almost started to write a few times, but stopped short every time. He shrugged his shoulders and nodded, wiped away the writing, and they both went to sleep.

As they sat down to lunch the following afternoon, Serevena observed Otadamon limping. She thought she noticed the day before, clearly he was able to cover it up, however now it was too painful. She made gestures to let her look at his foot, but he tried to shrug it off. He scribbled, "An injury is a test of the gods, if they deemed me worthy of survival I will do so without intervention. We do not interfere with the will of the gods, it is considered sacrilege." Serevena wouldn't take no for an answer, pelting him with withering verbal admonitions whose tone did not require comprehension of words to

understand, and came close to shoving him down. Reluctantly he sat and let her evaluate his foot. He had a splinter in his heel and it was getting infected.

She pleaded with him for her belongings, for her bag, as there are tools in there. She drew her bag in the dirt on the floor, and then pointed to his foot. He begrudgingly retrieved her bag from where he stashed her stuff farther up the mountain, and she pulled out a small pen-like object and some tweezers. She turned it one way and it was a laser scalpel, and she made a small incision to remove the splinter with the tweezers. Then she flipped it the other way and it was a laser cauterizer, and she sealed up the wound. Otadamon was impressed.

Later Otadamon discussed with Serevena her potential meeting with the clans and the Council of Mothers. However there was an obstacle, she wouldn't be able to use writing, and he couldn't translate her speech with signs because learning the nuanced sounds of her words was difficult, his brain was too old to retrain to distinguish syllables well. Serevena was perplexed as Otadamon diligently wrote the explanation in the dirt, "It is considered disrespectful to use writing for anything other than reproducing the holy book. These words were handed down by the gods, to use them in any other way is to subvert the word of the gods. In order to not risk losing these holy words, we do not write anything other than the holy book. This is also to prevent anyone from accidentally leaving written communication where it could be found by the Caged..." Otadamon stumbled on the last word, as it seemed improper to refer to Serevena that way anymore. Likewise the "Regressed" was equally inapt now.

Serevena smiled and wrote, "Well I guess I'll have to learn more signs then!" Over the next few days Serevena read the entire holy book and practised signs with Otadamon. The book was more or less a bible to them, not just relating their history, but also how to live, how to stay safe, and why the people inside the walls are not to be trusted. She learned of their history after the Schism, which they call the Exodus, and every event and ritual they hold was outlined in detail, from the precise time and date down to the hour, to every piece of décor and role of each participant. She tried to sign out the words as she read them, while Otadamon would stomp his foot every time she got one wrong, and then correct her when she looked up. He was impressed, she was a quick study.

As Serevena was learning fast, and Otadamon's foot was fully healed and trust had been built, the time had come. Otadamon was confident Serevena was ready to meet the Clans and the Council of Mothers. The next morning they set off down the mountainside and into the jungle.

Eventually they reached a tunnel to the Refuge. Serevena was amazed, finally understanding why their drones and sensors could never pick up any sign of the people outside the walls. News of Otadamon's arrival spread fast, and people were clamouring to see this captured Caged. They gave Serevena quite cutting glares and made demon signs at her as they travelled to the main chamber. Serevena was impressed by the wall carvings, but even more so observing their use of the crystal to light the tunnels. She was completely awestruck by the time they arrived in the main chamber, where the entire crystalline surface glows. The Mothers were all there, surrounded by hundreds of clanspeople.

Otadamon introduced her, "Mothers, this is Serevena of the people behind the walls. I caught her spying on some of our people and captured her for questioning. After many days of communication I

believe she does not mean us harm, and that she is genuinely trying to find a peaceful resolution between our peoples.”

The Mother of the North signed first, “Why does a Caged trespass on these lands?”

Serevena, still struggling with remembering all the signs, replied haltingly, “I come... in peace. My people need... fuel... for our machines. We did not know... that your people...” She paused, unsure how not to sound insulting. She thought, “We did not know that you could speak? Weren’t animals? Are not savages without any culture?” Nothing sounded right. She changed tack, “... we did not know where your people are or how many, we did not know we were trespassing.”

The Mother of the East signed, “Was our repeatedly dismantling your machines not message enough? We do not trespass into your walls, we leave you alone, we do not kill your soldiers. And yet you keep moving into our lands with your destructive machines. What is it that you want?”

Serevena was having trouble following all the signs but she grasped enough. She pointed all around at the crystal walls, and signed, “We need this crystal to... fuel our machines.”

The Mother of the West rapped her staff on the floor, “And why should the Sovereign care if the Caged can’t power their machines?”

Serevena started to sign, “Because our machines can help you, we have machines that...” but she couldn’t remember the sign for “heal.” She looked helplessly at Otadamon, pointing at his previously injured foot. But in a culture that values tough love and believe what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger, Otadamon wasn’t about to admit in front of the clans and Council she used technology to heal him. Not yet at least, they needed to tread carefully. But before Otadamon could jump in with some kind of explanation, Serevena started writing “heal” in the dust on the floor. The people erupted in chest slaps and floor stomps.

The Mother of the South signed, “This witch spies on us, tries to tempt us with technology, and now has written the sacred text in the dirt of the floor! She has no respect for us, she is here to trick us so we can be rooted out and eliminated. Clansmen, take her belongings away and put her in the animal cage. She should feel right at home.” Otadamon watched in horror as they dragged Serevena away. She looked back at him in panic, he signed to relax and wait for him.

The Mother of the North rapped her staff for silence, and then addressed Otadamon, “You have been taken by this witch, clearly your judgement is impaired. You will go back to your clan and ponder how you will deal with bringing this intruder to witness our life.”

Otadamon pleaded, his hands outstretched, “I swear to you, I have not been fooled. We spent many days and nights together, she thought we were little more than animals, and the more she learned the more she wanted to understand. She feels we can learn from each other, help each other, find peace for both sides.”

“There is nothing to be learned from the Caged,” the Mother of the South chimed in, “they have turned their backs on nature and the gods.”

“But,” Otadamon protested, “have we not turned our backs on all that nature makes possible? We take what nature gives and mould it to our liking, whether it be a hunter’s spear or a gatherer’s basket. We make jewellery and clothes, and we harness the crystal. Is that really so different from technology?”

Everyone stared at Otadamon. Some with anger and resentment, some with shock and disdain. Had their greatest clansmen gone to the dark side? Otadamon made a sign of respect, and exited the chamber. He spent the next few days avoiding people, unsure how to broach the topic again.

After a few lonely nights in her cell, Serevena picked up on a commotion, which is rare considering these people do not vocalize. She heard a woman’s screams of pain echoing through the tunnels and people milling about. Suddenly Otadamon materialized and explained. One of the Council is pregnant, his sister the Mother of the South, and it’s not going well. Otadamon had her gear in tow, and released her from the cage and brought her to the pregnant mother. Their presence is not welcomed.

“Traitor!” a clanswoman signed furiously while stomping, “see what happens when we bring technology in our presence, it infects our people with radiation!” Clanspeople bristled at this, seeming ready to toss Otadamon and Serevena out of the room. But then the Mother of the South let out a shriek and blood started flowing from between her legs. People signed frantically while making a wall between the Mother and Otadamon and Serevena. Otadamon yelled at the top of his lungs and everyone stopped in surprise.

“Hear me people!” he signed with ferocity, “She can help, she has tools for this, let her help the Mother. And I swear, should any harm come to my sister from this aid, I will kill the Caged and sacrifice myself to the Clans!” There was a shuffling of hands, then everyone turned to the Mother of the South, who was so shocked by Otadamon’s verbal exclamation even she was able to pay attention to his signs through the pain of labour. She looked at the other Mothers for approval. They scowled, but Otadamon was well-respected and they were unsure how he might react, so they relented. They nodded at Serevena.

Serevena made a small incision in the vagina to widen it, the baby was delivered by one of the clan, then she cauterized the wound and the Mother passed out. The baby was out and the bleeding had stopped. Serevena stood up, covered in blood, and smiled proudly. The clanspeople stood in silence, staring warily at Serevena and her healing rod. Serevena suddenly felt very self-conscious, she had expected some kind of gratitude but only saw suspicion.

As she left the chamber with Otadamon she signed, “Aren’t they glad I saved your sister?”

He replied, “I apologize, my people do not trust technology, and they believe only the gods determine if someone is fit to live or die. If you are alive it is because the gods desire it so, there is a pride in that. When you die you return to the loving embrace of the gods. You have interfered with the natural order, and it shakes their beliefs.” He looked down in dismay, unsure how to justify his culture, and not sure he wanted to. The look in his face caused her to feel deeply for him, and she held his hand and put her

arm around him. He stopped and saw the emotion in her face. He touched her mask, and then pulled her close and hugged her. Neither of them had really had much affection from anyone for a long time, and they stood there silently embracing for a few minutes. Otadamon took her to a small side chamber and slept by the entrance to guard her in case any clansperson decided to take it upon themselves to give the gods a sacrifice of this Caged.

The next day Serevena wanted to address the council and figure out her return to Haven, but Otadamon told her one of their biggest rituals is coming up, the Moon of Reconciliation. Serevena recalled the story from the holy book. According to their somewhat mythological history, in the early days of clashes with Haven, the people outside the walls tried to reconcile with the people inside the walls. According to the legend, both peoples let a representative meet with the other side. These diplomats went into the jungle alone for a few days to discuss all their grievances without their people being able to hear, so they could be fully honest without offending anyone.

But disaster struck while they were negotiating. A venomous snake had bitten the diplomat of the Refuge. The diplomat from Haven risked his life, removing the snake from the other man and getting himself bit in the process. For days they watched each other grow ill, helping each other, and slowly both regained their health. They had shared the venom of the snake and survived, together.

They emerged united, and ready to bring their peoples into peace with each other. But the rulers of Haven didn't want peace, they wanted power. Suddenly their diplomat disappeared, and the people of the Refuge no longer had a line of communication. The people of Haven gave them an ultimatum and a deadline, written on leaflets dropped from the sky all around the jungle, to surrender by the next full moon or be destroyed.

The diplomat of the Refuge explained how strong the snake bond was, and that the gods were going to show them the way. If they met another diplomat from behind the wall and they could survive the venom too, then the people outside the walls were no stronger than those within the walls and they must accept they are one people and stop fighting. But, if the diplomat could not survive the venom, the gods were showing their unworthiness and they must not relent.

The next full moon came, and the people outside the walls gathered in the darkness. The soldiers of Haven were in formation in front of the wide gate into the city, and lined the walls around it. The diplomat of the Refuge stepped forward with a finely woven basket. The new representative of Haven had no such gesture on hand, confident of their surrender. They approached each other, and then the diplomat of the Refuge knelt with the basket held out before him. The representative from Haven opened the basket and barely had time to shriek before the snake bit him. He collapsed on the floor, dead within seconds. That's all the sign the people outside the walls needed. They immediately started attacking the soldiers, who responded in kind. After a bloody night of battling both peoples spent the next three hundred years doing their best to ignore each other.

However, now that event had become a rite of passage ritual for the people of the Refuge. Every full moon every clansperson who had reached 15 summers was bitten by the same kind of venomous snake on the Moon of Reconciliation. If you survived you were cemented as part of the clan, if you died, the

gods deemed you unworthy of the clans. Serevena was a bit horrified to learn the ritual wasn't just a story, that people actually voluntarily offered themselves with pride for this dose of venom straight from a snake, but Otadamon assured her almost no one ever died. She guessed that many generations of this ritual had led to a natural resistance to the venom.

As the clanspeople prepared for the ritual and subsequent feast, Otadamon took Serevena outside. The full moon was beaming strongly. Otadamon pulled out a shard of crystal that had precisely cut facets on one side, and a perfectly polished oval surface on the other.

"This is a ritual crystal," Otadamon explained, "when the light of the full moon hits it at just the right angle it creates a powerful beam of light. Only at the right hour of the full moon will it have this effect." Otadamon knelt down and showed her how rotating the crystal just right started to concentrate the light refracting through it.

"It's beautiful," Serevena signed in wonder. He handed it to Serevena so she could try. She got the beam somewhat focused, then put her other hand in the path of the beam. It immediately got warm and Otadamon stopped her.

"When the moon is at its peak the beam can light a fire. You can tell by how warm it is the hour is almost near." Serevena was amazed that these simple people, living in caverns under the ground, had found their own way to harness the power of the crystal. Otadamon pulled out a leather band and tied it around the crystal. Then he stood up and put the necklace over Serevena's head. She looked up in surprise.

"I want you to have it," he signed, "A gift from my people to yours. A symbol of our mutual trust." Serevena signed a gracious thank you. They sat and watched the stars peek through the canopy of the jungle. Serevena looked glowingly up at Otadamon. He looked at her with longing in his eyes. Serevena unhooked her mask. Otadamon stopped her, worry in his eyes. She smiled, brushed his hand aside, and removed her mask. They kissed passionately but briefly, then Serevena put her mask back on and they held each other as the full moon crossed the sky. "It is time," Otadamon signed, and they headed into the tunnels.

The Refuge had been ingeniously crafted to catch both moonlight and sunlight. Crystal shafts had been placed strategically on the surface so that when light hit the crystal at a precise time the main chamber would light up a certain way. When the full moon hit its peak the main chamber started to glow brightly and the teens approached the basket. Serevena winced every time as another teen stepped forward to receive their bite, whereas the clanspeople cheered. One person got a little woozy, but they all survived and bounced with enthusiasm afterwards.

"Your people really pride themselves on their physical strength," Serevena signed.

"Of course," Otadamon replied, "how else does one know if the gods favour them? If you are meant for this earth the gods will protect you, if you perish it means you did not have the protection of the gods and must accept you are a lesser being unworthy of life."

“That’s pretty harsh, especially considering how much you all support each other. You share food, you teach each other how to make each other clothing and weapons, the mothers even share the duty of breast feeding. Does that not show that it’s not the gods protecting you but each other?”

“I suppose,” Otadamon paused for a moment as he pondered. “But we didn’t become as strong as we are without pushing ourselves to the limit and accepting that the weaker deserve their fate.”

“What about the Mother I saved? Did she deserve her fate?”

“It was the firstborn of my only sister, who is becoming a wise mother, it would have been a great loss. When a Mother dies without having a daughter it creates an imbalance in that Clan. The process for choosing a new Mother can be... contentious and divisive. This kept the peace at a crucial time.”

“You see,” Serevena exclaimed with her hands, “YOU made that choice, to save your sister, to protect the clans, the gods had nothing to do with it. If saving a life can help not just the person being saved, but an entire people, does that not justify using technology to save the life?”

“There is merit to your words, but this was an exceptional circumstance. Our women usually have 5-8 babies before they lose fertility, and usually about half survive to adulthood. Our women pride themselves on their babies; there are many rituals that keep them fertile. If we kept saving mothers and babies with your technology, we will come to depend on it, we will not be able to do it on our own.”

“5-8 babies!” Serevena exclaimed, “We have problems having babies, most women are lucky if they have two. We live very long, but it is very difficult to have a natural conception and pretty much impossible to have a natural birth. I suppose you have a point, we have become dependent on our technology and we are weaker for it. But there must be a middle ground, it can’t be a binary choice between a harsh life in the jungle or a sheltered life trapped behind the walls.”

Otadamon smiled at her. Serevena smiled back. Never could she have imagined finding companionship in the jungle with a person outside the walls. There was something missing in her existence. Otadamon found her equally intriguing and pleasant, and enjoyed that she didn’t seem to follow the behaviour of her gender.

There was a large bonfire blazing away in the center of the main chamber, and soon music started. It was the most amazing mix of human percussion, from slapping thighs to beating chests to clapping hands. It was both in sync to a rhythm while being completely organic and independent. Different melodies seemed to move in waves across the people. When the dancing began, Otadamon pulled Serevena up and they began to move together. They moved and twirled around each other with the other bodies until suddenly there was a loud rapping of spears on the floor and the music and dancing stopped.

The Mother of the North signed, “There is one more for the gods to deem worthy!” Otadamon looked confused. Serevena nudged him and gave him a questioning look. “This is not usual,” he signed.

The Mother continued, "Through the venom of the snake the gods determine if we are worthy to live in the Refuge. We know the love of the gods by their gift of life. But yesterday the gods were denied, the love of the gods is in doubt for one of our people. The Mother of the South was to find out if the gods deemed her worthy to live through childbirth, but their will was denied by the Caged from inside the walls. We cannot allow one of our people, especially a Mother, to live in the Refuge if we do not know if the gods favour her. The Mother of the South must take the ritual of Reconciliation!"

There was a murmur of shuffling hands and Otadamon stepped forward and signed, "This is not right! My sister passed that test many moons ago, she is worthy, that's why she is here. Her firstborn is worthy, that's why she was born!"

"The Mother of the South has been tainted by technology, the only way to know if the gods still favour her is with the ritual." The Mother of the North was not going to budge, and the clanspeople were all nodding in agreement.

"But she is weak from the birth," Otadamon continued in desperation, "Can it not wait until the next moon?"

"No, if the gods desire her to live, if they still have love for her, she will survive." Otadamon couldn't believe the madness he was hearing. His sister being saved should have been cause for celebration, instead it was reason to poison her. His gaze landed on his sister across the room. He looked at her with pain, but she stood and handed her baby to the nearest woman. She walked to the center of the room and the basket with the snake was brought forward. The snake struck her and she gasped. She stood firm for a moment, and then collapsed. Otadamon rushed forward. She was breathing, but weakly. He carried her to the pile of furs she was nursing on and laid her down. She seemed to be sleeping for the moment.

Otadamon looked around the room in fury. The people nearest him backed away a little, knowing how dangerous a hunter and how skilled a fighter he was. He was about to admit that he too had been healed, but then he heard a small clap. He turned and his sister was conscious. She raised her hand in triumph and the room erupted in cheers. Otadamon hugged his sister as she smiled weakly, albeit in satisfaction. The gods still loved her. Otadamon was done with this feast and beckoned Serevena with his eyes as he proceeded towards the tunnel to the South. She followed him and this time they slept in each other's arms.

The next day there was another council meeting. They agreed to send Otadamon with Serevena to the walled city. As a show of faith, Serevena tried to give them a video communicator, so they can keep in touch, but the Council stubbornly refused her technology. They departed on their journey, promising to return together to negotiate a truce.

Part 4:

After a few days travel Otadamon and Serevena neared the city. Serevena turned on her communicator for the first time since she left.

"This is EN-274 checking in, do you read?" Serevena said, anxious about the response after a month-long absence.

"Roger EN-274, we read you, what's your status?" the operator responded.

"I have returned, I am with one of the... Regressed. I made successful contact, we request entry to Haven."

"Hold position EN-274, contacting MIN-576." That was the code for the Minister of Defence. Serevena was sure her return was causing a stir. Otadamon looked wary, but there seemed no reason to be alarmed just yet.

They came out into the clearing leading to the gates. Almost immediately after stepping out of the jungle the gate opened and a platoon of soldiers streamed out. Their weapons were down, but they were clearly on guard should anything happen. Serevena raised her arm in salute.

"Soldiers, we come in peace, I have brought one of the people from outside the walls to negotiate with us. They are not savages, they have language, we need to see the Ministers." The soldiers didn't move, and made it clear neither Serevena nor Otadamon should advance farther. Soon the Minister of Defence came out with his personal guard.

"Serevena," he began, "We assumed the worst. You quite literally dropped off the face of the earth, no communications. We were able to track you for a while, but then for a few days you completely disappeared. And now you return with one of them. What precisely is your intention?"

"Sir, there is so much to tell you. They are not savages, not at all, that was part of their ruse to hide from us. They have language, culture, and they too use the crystal in their refuge. I've seen a hollowed cavern of crystal so big it could power the Haven for centuries. Most importantly, I have gained their trust and they are open to negotiation."

The Minister gazed expressionless at Otadamon, then smiled, "Well then it sounds like a celebration is in order!" He spoke into his communicator, "All is good, Serevena has returned unharmed and with a guest from beyond the wall. Let's roll out the red carpet and show our guest the wonders of our city."

Serevena breathed a sigh of relief and smiled at Otadamon. He was still unsure of what it all meant, especially this Minister and his ability to change from stern to charming in mere seconds, but if she was reassuring him he felt safe. They entered the gate of the walled city, surrounded loosely by a contingent of guards.

Otadamon was stunned. The Refuge and its carvings and ethereal glow from the crystals had a gentle beauty and character, but the architecture of the city was unlike anything he had ever seen. He had

only ever seen the outer walls, which were completely non-descript and grey, a hard-edged block leaning back into the sky, but these buildings were unreal. The swooping curves, the smooth shining surfaces, the polished metals and artificial materials, it was all so clean and graceful. He could not help cranking his neck to peer upwards, until he almost ran into a light pole.

“Careful,” Serevena signed, “there are many distractions here.” Otadamon looked up from her hands and caught sight of his first video screen in the window of a bar. His jaw dropped and his eyes widened. He looked at Serevena, his eyes asking permission to venture nearer. She brought him over to the window for a closer look.

While Otadamon was enthralled with the flashy images of a commercial for shampoo on the screen, the residents gathered around him at a distance. They too were enthralled... by Otadamon. Seeing a Regressed that close, and to see his loin cloth, his braids, his décor, was not something they ever expected to see. They were smiling and curious as they gawked, milling about and whispering. The guards stayed close, but weren’t about to start controlling the growing crowd. Serevena took the opportunity to introduce Otadamon. She tapped his shoulder to turn him from the screen. He finally took notice of all the onlookers and stiffened with thinly veiled self-consciousness.

“Residents of Haven,” Serevena began, “this is Otadamon, one of the clanspeople from beyond the walls. His people are peaceful and intelligent, they stayed hidden for all these centuries out of fear of us. Once we broke the language barrier, and they learned to trust me, they wish to negotiate a peace with us so both parties can benefit. They treated me with respect and kept me well; let’s show them being civilized isn’t just living in a city!” She raised her voice towards the end and raised her arms in cheer, and the crowd erupted in a cheer as well. Suddenly Otadamon was surrounded and people were greeting him, shaking his hands, and taking photos, while children flocked to him just to touch him.

As they walked through the city and the news spread a festive atmosphere grew. It seemed everyone was eager to impress their new guest. Restaurants came out with samples of food and drink, performers paraded their skills in the street, when they passed sports fields the athletes put on a little show, and children of all ages trailed their procession. When they came into view of the Needle Otadamon audibly gasped.

“I never knew such miracles could exist,” he signed to Serevena.

“You haven’t seen anything yet, there is so much to show you,” she replied.

By the time they reach the base of the Needle the whole city was buzzing and people lined the streets. They had become a two person parade. Serevena was enthused at the response, but was starting to feel odd. There was a strange sensation in her body and she was starting to feel a throbbing in her head. Otadamon found being stared at by a bunch of masked faces a touch disconcerting, but their energy was clearly positive and exciting, so he was disarmed. He pointed to the network of crystal cables around the Needle.

"Yes," Serevena signed, "that's how we use the crystal, it conducts power to the city. That's why we need more." Otadamon nodded, amazed at the intricacy of the web of light it created.

They traveled to the eye of the Needle where all the Ministers were waiting. Serevena and Otadamon entered the council chamber together and strode to the middle of the room.

"Sirs, I present to you Otadamon of the Refuge, Clan of the South, of the people beyond the walls," Serevena proclaimed. "He is here to start negotiations for his peoples." She turned to Otadamon and signed, "These are the Ministers, like the Council of Mothers they make the decisions for our people."

"Serevena," the Minister of Defence began, "are we to understand he is a mute?"

"No sir, he can hear, and make noises, but his people do not speak language, they use signs. They also have a written language I have decoded. I have learned to communicate with them these last few weeks."

"So can he understand us?" the Minister of Agriculture asked.

"No sir, because his speech is underdeveloped we primarily communicated first through writing and then through signs."

"What does this Regressed have to offer us?" asked the Minister of Resources.

Serevena turned to Otadamon and waved him to start. He began signing while Serevena translated.

"Good men, I have come to discuss the futures of our peoples in the hope we can come to a mutually beneficial agreement. You desire the crystal that powers your city, we desire to not be in conflict with your people. We dismantled your machines strictly as a defensive measure, we do not wish you harm. Now that we know why you were invading our territory we believe there can be negotiation. If you are willing not to destroy the jungle that sustains us we are willing to share some of our crystals."

"Then there is much to discuss," the Minister of Resources replied, "but for now, we must sterilize you both and ensure no contamination to the city. Please allow our doctors to examine you both."

Serevena and Otadamon allowed themselves to be escorted out of the chamber and to the medical complex.

Serevena had started sweating, but felt cold. She had never felt this way before. Otadamon could tell something was wrong. She stumbled and he grabbed her. The guards tried to intervene but the look on his face made them back away. Otadamon signalled to pick up the pace and they all rushed to the complex.

Doctors immediately put them in rooms separated by a glass wall. They could see each other, but the rooms were sealed. Otadamon did his best to stay calm in this strange city, with the woman he was quite fond of and his only line of communication starting to lose consciousness. He signed to her asking what was wrong. She weakly signed back to listen to the doctors and let them use their technology to save her. They took off her suit and mask, put her on an IV, and took blood. Otadamon was alarmed,

but Serevena signed to him this was normal, and he should let them do the same. This was nothing compared to getting bit by a snake she signed with a smile.

Otadamon allowed them to take his blood, and then sat anxiously waiting to see what would happen to Serevena. She was breathing heavy with sweat streaming down her face, but was still conscious. Moments later one of the doctors entered her room.

“Miss Serevena, I’m afraid you’ve been infected with a virus and some foreign bacteria.” Serevena tried to sign this to Otadamon, then realized she was pretty sure they didn’t have a word for virus or bacteria. She signed that she was unwell. The doctor continued, “Obviously you’ve been gone for weeks, the bacteria was likely from the food you were served, but did you remove your mask at any time?”

Serevena paused, remembering the kiss. “Yes, I had to briefly remove my mask to gain their trust, to show them I am in fact human,” she lied. She wasn’t sure she trusted the Ministers with the whole truth, she was not yet sure of their intentions. They had expected a reconnaissance mission that would give them strategic information, in particular a location of the people beyond the walls, not for her to bring one back to negotiate.

“Well we must keep you isolated until we know more, we are testing the blood of the Regressed as we speak.” With that the doctor left the room, looking a touch nervous. Preventing sickness was easy with the right protocols in place all one’s life, but treating a sickness was new for them.

Serevena signed to Otadamon that she was sick and they were going to treat her. She needed to rest and told him to be patient and watch her as she slept. Otadamon lay back on his bed with his head turned toward her. The bed was soft but not comfortable to him. He was accustomed to lying on a cavern floor sidled up against his fellow clansmen, being alone in a bed was strange. A doctor came into his room excited, wanting to take more blood. Otadamon was wary, but he had no choice but to trust Serevena and cooperate. The doctor took a full pint of blood and departed.

About an hour passed while Serevena moaned and slept fitfully. Otadamon watched her like a hawk. Eventually the doctors came in and injected something into her IV. Then they came into his room and explained something to him, but he had no idea what they were saying. They did look hopeful though, which he took as a good sign. Serevena seemed to rest better, and eventually Otadamon slept too.

When Serevena awoke she felt much improved. Otadamon was still in the room on the other side of the glass, but he was unconscious and hooked up to many machines and tubes. The doctors came in when she roused from her bed.

“Serevena,” the head doctor began, “you would not believe what happened. We were able to separate the antibodies in the Regressed’s blood and it worked, you now have his immunities, and the antibodies were so plentiful and concentrated we were able to give you a large enough dose to immediately begin recovering!”

Serevena was relieved, and said, “Well I’m glad for that, thank you doctors for your swift work isolating the antibodies. What is happening over there?” she pointed at Otadamon.

"We are doing more tests, his blood is invaluable. We are going to try and synthesize his antibodies." Serevena wanted to ask more, but was afraid of showing concern for Otadamon. It was clear these doctors still saw the Regressed as little more than animals.

"When can I leave quarantine?" she asked.

"Just let us run a couple more tests, if all goes well the Chancellor would like to see you."

Serevena tried hard to hide her surprise. She had never seen the Chancellor in the flesh, and now she was being summoned. She lay back in bed and let the doctors finish their tests. Apparently the antibodies worked so well her virus and bacteria were undetectable. She got a clean bill of health, put back on her mask and suit, and went on her way to the Needle. A guard was waiting outside her door to escort her, another unusual occurrence.

Serevena reached the Needle, nervous but steeling herself. The guard travelled with her to the top, and flanked her as she entered the Chancellor's chamber. The Chancellor was waiting, calm behind a large desk that looked more like an altar. Was she to be a sacrifice?

"Come in my dear Serevena," the Chancellor crooned, "let me look at you." Serevena came closer and bowed.

"You have accomplished more than we could ever hope," the Chancellor continued, "not only have you made contact with the Regressed, and discovered they know where to find the crystal, but also you have inadvertently freed our people from our bondage."

"My lord," Serevena responded, unsure of what his last remark meant, "I am honoured to serve Haven and to have the privilege to meet you. I apologize for bringing sickness into our city."

"No my dear," he said with a gleam in his eyes, "it was all necessary, now we know the Regressed are a more valuable resource than the crystal." Serevena didn't like where this was going, but kept her face emotionless, waiting for him to continue. He continued, "The doctors have found such an abundance of antibodies in his blood, and your recovery was so quick and complete, that we believe these antibodies can free us from the need to wear masks and suits. I'm sure I don't need to explain what centuries isolated and avoiding sickness has done to weaken our immune systems. With an injection of these antibodies we can be freed from our need to protect ourselves from the outside air and each other."

"Yes my lord," Serevena replied, "they are powerful and robust. They have an attitude that the only protection necessary is from the gods, they do not believe in medical intervention of any kind, and so only the worthy survive as the gods deem fit."

"Such an archaic and delusional attitude," the Chancellor mused, "it's no wonder they prance around naked and dirty. But living like animals has ensured only the strongest have survived, and that is what will benefit our people."

Serevena bit her tongue, fighting the urge to tell the Chancellor what warm and creative and ingenious people they were, but she realized the only way she was getting out of this room a free woman was to play along. "How will we take advantage my lord? They are proud and distrustful, I'm not sure we will be able to convince them to willingly share their resources, never mind lining up to donate their blood."

"That is where you come in my dear," he said with a devious glint in his eyes, "I am told you can communicate with them. We must lure them to Haven and then attack with tranquilizers and stun weapons to capture as many as we can. We kill two birds with one stone, they will be out of the way of gathering the crystal, and we will have enough supply of their antibodies to strengthen most if not all of Haven." He peered at Serevena keenly, waiting to gauge her reaction. She played along without missing a beat.

"An efficient plan my lord, however luring them may be more difficult than we would hope. If I return with Otadamon he may not say what we need to win their trust to get them here."

"Then go alone."

"If I return without him they will definitely not trust me. He is one of their champions."

"What about a message, I was told they have written language. We can write it as if from the Regressed man, tell his people that a truce has been negotiated and we desire to open our doors to them, offer food and shelter in exchange for the crystal. Offer them healing and technology. The alternative is for you to show us where they reside so we can wipe them out, but that will cost precious Enlightened lives. We know from where your tracker cut out and then cut in again where you must have entered and exited their lair, but that's only a small part of how to defeat them."

Serevena wasn't sure what to do. If she resisted this plan, if she refused to go along, it would result in a capture of the people of the Refuge and very likely her imprisonment for life. But how could she lull the Chancellor and Ministers into complacency while warning the Sovereign? In a flash of brilliance it came to her. The Moon of Reconciliation.

"There may be a way to convince them to come, there is a celebration that is very important to them and is part of our shared history. According to their mythology, in the early days of clashes between our peoples they almost reconciled with us, there were two men who almost negotiated a truce. They still honour that day with a feast, to commemorate the peace that never came to be, in the hopes it will one day come to them." Serevena was surprised how easily lying through her teeth came to her. "If we mention that in our message, and deliver the message in leaflets from the sky as we once did, we may convince them that time has come."

"Hmm," the Chancellor mused, "I recall such an event in our history. We tried to make peace, but they killed one of our men with a venomous snake. A very bloody battle started because of it. I don't understand how this will make them come peacefully when once upon a time they proved their desire for battle?"

Serevena altered the myth just so, "My lord, they are a very religious and superstitious people, they believe that if our man survived the venom of the snake it would show the gods favoured the Enlightened and they would lay down their arms. But their losses in the battle convinced them the snake cannot be trusted, that their failure meant the gods did not favour their fight, and ever since they celebrate the chance to reconcile by killing a snake on the full moon. If we offer the chance to reconcile again I am certain they will come in good faith. They will come with a snake in a basket to be slaughtered, and this act will seal our alliance." Serevena kicked up her performance a notch and looked eagerly at the Chancellor, "You are correct my lord, this is the chance to free ourselves. This unexpected opportunity will make our people strong again, able to be one with technology and nature, able to free ourselves from the confinement of our masks and suits and never again be dependent on medical technology to survive. The Regressed simply cannot compare to our superior existence, nor should such savages stand in the way of our progress." Serevena worried for a moment she was pouring it on too thick.

The Chancellor grinned with malice, "Excellent my dear," he said as he touched her arm. It was all she could do not to cringe in revulsion. "Work with the defence communications team," he continued, "devise the leaflet and let us prepare for their arrival at the next full moon. And if they don't come, we'll send them the man's head and see if that raises their ire enough to attack us." Serevena smiled and bowed and then exited the Needle. The guards didn't escort her this time.

Serevena's heart was racing, she never imagined this happening and her mind was spinning. How could she possibly go along with her own plan? If the people of the Refuge showed up it would just result in another bloody battle, both sides would lose. But either she made it a fair fight, or she allowed the people of the Refuge to be ambushed by the people of the Haven. It was then she suddenly realized she had yet to contact her parents since her return.

Serevena rushed home and entered their living unit. But instead of welcoming her, her parents were surprised and ran into another room and sealed the door.

"Serevena," her dad spoke through an intercom, "we heard you were back and you got infected!"

"We're glad you're safe," her mother added, "we just don't want to get sick."

"I was cleared by the doctors," Serevena explained, "the man I came with, Otadamon, he was able to donate his antibodies and now I'm protected from the outside. I could even take my mask off outdoors if I wanted."

"NO!" both her parents exclaimed. "We're sorry Serevena," her father said with dismay, "we are so happy you're back, but you're no longer in our bubble, you've been exposed, we can't take the chance." Tears were streaming down her mother's face. Serevena started to cry too.

"But, but, you're my parents," Serevena sobbed, "I live with you, you are my bubble."

"I know, but it's all changed now," her father said, "We can still spend time together, we just have to wear our suits and go places other than the apartment, we can't be maskless around you anymore."

“Where will I live?” Serevena cried.

“My love,” her mother said, “we will always be here for you, we just can’t share your bubble anymore, the risk is too great at our age. Even after a proper quarantine there could be germs and viruses inside you that will kill us. Please understand, we don’t want this.”

Serevena was beyond crestfallen. She touched the door dividing them and said goodbye. She left the apartment despondent and conflicted. This was all because she kissed Otadamon. But even now she did not regret it, in fact, remembering it only strengthened her resolve. It was time to take action.

Serevena returned to the medical complex where Otadamon was being held. But upon trying to get back to their room, she found her security access did not work. She hid her worry behind a mask of angry frustration and verbally accosted the administrator.

“Why does my access not work?” she asked angrily, “I have level 4 clearance.”

“Apologies,” the administrator replied, “but due to the value of the subject he has been placed under level 5.”

Serevena knew there was no point to arguing, she was well versed in the security protocols, she had helped develop many of them. She had to find a way to release Otadamon. She changed tack and decided to focus on the leaflet. She went to the defence building and found the communication team.

It didn’t take her long to craft a message that would hopefully entice them:

Sovereign People of the Refuge. I have met the people inside the walls and they have agreed the time for reconciliation is at hand. Meet us at the gate in the wall on the next Moon of Reconciliation, and may the gods unite us.

Otadamon of the Clan of the South.

The communication team passed the message up the chain of Ministers for approval, and once received the printing started. Thousands of leaflets were to be dropped by drones across the jungle east of Haven. Serevena was nervous, this was all happening so fast, but if she took her time it would look suspicious. The leaflets were to be dropped by the next day, leaving a week and a half until the next full moon.

Serevena quarantined herself for the duration, firstly to avoid contact that would result in questions she didn’t want to answer, but also to plot how to get Otadamon free. There was no way to sneak or scam her way into the secure section of the medical complex. Everything was locked tight with magnetic bolts and access was only through authorized key cards. Then it struck her, the locks were all electro-magnetic, they relied on electricity to stay shut. If she could find a way to shut down the power she could sneak in and free Otadamon. But that was easier said than done.

Serevena pondered a few different plans. Physically cutting the power required tools and access to panels that she would not have. She could try and build a small EMP, but there was no guarantee it

would work on the scale she needed. Frustrated, she paced her new apartment for days playing out scenarios in her head. Her apartment faced west and it was sunset. She stared out the window, feeling the heat of the sun on her body. But a spot in the center of her chest was getting uncomfortably hot. She looked down and saw the crystal necklace Otadamon had given her. The crystal! It could concentrate light, even moonlight, to a point so focused it was not far off from a laser. What would happen if such a beam were refracted into the nest of fibre optic cables from the power generator at the base of the Needle? Could it cause a mass disruption, perhaps even overload the system?

Serevena spent the day experimenting with the crystal. In the process she nearly started a fire in her apartment. Turned at the right angle, with the largest angular plane perpendicular to a source of light, the beam that emitted from the other side was incredibly powerful. Sunlight nearly burned a hole in her carpet and started a small fire mere seconds after getting the angle right. Even her light bulbs at night could be made to make a beam that would start to burn her hand after a half minute. Then she tested moonlight. But the moon was still waxing gibbous, and while it made a strong beam, it wasn't clear if it would be enough to disrupt the network on a full moon. She recalled it was strong enough to light a fire, but for only a brief moment at the very peak of the full moon. Well, it was the only option she had at the moment, so she prepared herself for the rest of the plan.

While she didn't have clearance to enter the level 5 sections of the medical complex, her level 4 clearance still allowed her to view their schematics. She spent her last day before the full moon studying her route, mentally walking herself through the space, as she'd have to do it in the dark. Any use of a flashlight would alert someone to what she was doing and likely get her caught. Her hope was that the total blackout she hoped for would drive everyone outdoors. Such an event was unheard of, the power grid was so sound there had never been anything like a blackout in Haven history.

The night of the full moon came. Serevena was nervous, not just because her plan to rescue Otadamon might fail, but because she had no idea what the fate of her people, the people of the Refuge, might be when the battle inevitably broke out. Her people's weapons were all electrically powered, and after losing their charge they'd have no way to repower. At the same time though she had trouble feeling sympathy for them, as they were deceiving the people beyond the walls in order to capture them to use them for their own immunity. And as much as the people beyond the walls were more warm and honest than her people, they were irrational and harsh and beyond misguided. She felt a mild contempt for both peoples, but also knew while their respective cultural attitudes and ideology were pervasive, those sentiments were not as rabidly adhered to by all their members.

Serevena put such thoughts out of her head. All that mattered was getting Otadamon free, they could deal with the repercussions after that. She geared up, put on her mask and suit, and gripped the crystal tight in her hand. Alone on the elevator she peered at it in her palm. What irony such a thing of beauty and power was the reason for such discord and destruction.

The moon shone brightly in the clear sky. A good sign, it meant whatever power could be concentrated from the moon beams would be as strong as possible. She made her way towards the Needle. There was a slightly festive and anticipatory atmosphere in Haven. People had been informed there was going

to be a meeting with the people beyond the walls tonight, but information was kept sparse. The “Enlightened” were completely ignorant of the coming offensive or the reasons behind it. Who knows if the leaflets even worked, the people of the Refuge may have seen it as a trick and refused to play along. All Serevena knew was that if they did come, they would be prepared for both an actual reconciliation and a battle, depending on the result of the snake bite. And if they didn’t come, her and Otadamon would find a way outside the walls and return to the Refuge.

The network of the power cables glowed beautifully at night. Serevena took a moment to soak in the view, knowing it would likely be for the last time. She looked up at the moon, then angled the crystal to see how concentrated the beam was. Still not quite at the peak. Couples walked hand in gloved hand, smiling at each other through masks. It was almost time. Serevena took her mask off and breathed deeply of the night air. How good it felt to breathe truly fresh air for the first time, it rejuvenated her and steeled her nerves. She angled the crystal between the sky and the glowing crystal cables and rotated it slowly towards the moon. The beam was narrowing, getting whiter and hotter. Then in a flash it was almost sizzling the air around her. Someone not far from her gasped as the beam hit the network of cables and started refracting all around. Serevena held the crystal steady and watched the cables begin to glow brighter, with uneven pulses building throughout each line. The pulses hit faster and brighter and an audible hum began to fill the air. Then, in an instant, there was a cascade of zapping noises emanating from the center of the network and all the power went out. The city was plunged into darkness, with only the moon to light their way.

People began to scream. Someone tried to point at Serevena, but she was already off on her way. Adrenaline kicked in and she went into automatic mode, just following her route as planned and not thinking of anything else. Everywhere she went people were scared and freaking out, flooding into the streets to escape the darkness of their homes. She ducked in and out of the shadows of building after building until she reached the medical complex. As hoped, it was all but abandoned and the doors were easily unbolted. She followed the mental map in her head and soon found the room Otadamon was in. She burst into the room, but it was in the center of the building and had no windows, she suddenly realized she wouldn’t be able to see him to unhook him from any machines or restraints.

She groped her way to his bed, thankfully he was still in it and breathing heavily. She felt along his arms and carefully peeled off medical tape and pulled out tubes and needles. He was heavily sedated, a detail she had failed to consider. He was far too heavy for her to move, so she waited. She took her canteen and trickled some water into his mouth. He stirred, a good sign. She patiently waited, talking to him softly with reassurance, hoping he would not be too startled upon waking. Then he moaned. She caressed him soothingly, nervous about him coming to consciousness in total darkness. Then he started up abruptly, nearly knocking her over. She was trying to talk him down, but he was confused and angry. He gripped her arms tightly, she was starting to think he might injure her in his panic. So she kissed him.

Otadamon immediately stopped moving, and then kissed her back. She pulled back, spoke in soothing tones, then drew letters on his chest, “Escape. Follow me.” Otadamon needed no further hint, he held her hand and let her lead him out.

When they exited the complex there was chaos everywhere. The two peoples were fighting fiercely. The people beyond the walls had their spears and clubs, but the people inside the walls had armed themselves with any and all household items once they saw their city being invaded. Bottles were thrown, furniture tossed into makeshift barricades, and all manner of metal brandished as weapons. People were even throwing appliances out of smashed windows. Serevena took Otadamon aside in a dark alley and signed, "After your blood healed me they wanted to trap your people, to use them for their strong healing power. I fooled my people into thinking I agreed, and we sent a message to your people to meet at the gates of the city for a Moon of Reconciliation. Then I used the crystal to free you."

Otadamon signed back, "Thank you, I knew I could trust you. But this is madness, now your people may never recover their city, my people will not stop until they kill them all or are killed themselves."

Serevena began to cry, "I know, but I didn't know what else to do. They were going to go into the jungle to capture your people and use them for medicine, they had a good idea where the Refuge was and would eventually find it. I had to give your people a fighting chance, and more importantly, I had to get you free."

A tear rolled down Otadamon's face and he kissed her gently. "So what do we do now?" he asked.

"We leave the city and go back to the Refuge, I can no longer live with my people and their ways."

Otadamon shook his head slowly and signed, "I also do not desire to return to my people, I am tired of their stubborn refusal to change, to learn."

"Well then whose people do we live with?" Serevena signed with sadness.

"You are my people now," Otadamon responded, "I desire to be with none other than you."

Serevena smiled through her tears. "Then we go, together," she signed and grabbed his hand as she stood.

They avoided the melee and made their way to the gates. As they snuck out they saw a lone suited lifeless body lying on the ground in front of a finely woven basket. A snake was coiled contentedly inside the basket. They left the gates, quickly crossed the clearing, and slipped into the dark jungle.

The next day the trees started to thin and they could see a vast empty expanse of land before them. Otadamon took Serevena's hand and they exited the Garden together.

By Adam Smith, 21st Century