

## The Elementals

A thought appears.

The last intelligible string of words his mind is able to form.

His grasp on the question, *Where am I?* weakens by the second until he can no longer conceive of coherent language in any meaningful way. Like waking from a dream, there forms an emptiness in his mind of where something used to be. Some place. Some idea or feeling.

His mind fumbles with the last bits of fleeting imagery and sensations escaping his consciousness. The smell of cold steel, the taste of copper, a profound sense of fear and loss, all slipping from his mind. Underneath these seemingly recent and hostile fading thoughts is something familiar to him. He can't see it directly but can feel an immense warmth. Like the fire at high noon in the sky above him, but within the recesses of his dissipating memory. As he opens his eyes and stares into the burning sun, an inarticulate feeling of hope and comfort washes over him. He closes his eyes again and watches as the bleached spot of light on the back of his eyelids takes shape into what feels to him to be the manifestation of love itself. Intangible makings of hair and eyes, lips and cheeks, a neckline and shoulders, dancing around each other as he tries desperately to put the pieces together in his mind. He knew this form, he felt it. It was right there. If only he could calm his thoughts and concentrate...

A shrieking howl nearby shatters the partially formed picture into dust. The last vestiges of longing and curiosity instantly obliterated.

His eyes snap open. The sun which had comforted him a mere moment ago now filled him with a deep and all-consuming rage. The arm he raises to block the blinding light is covered in dark blue, coarse hair. His hands unnaturally muscular, his fingers elongated, each tipped with curved razor-sharp talons.

A heavy vibration emanates from within his chest. A primal growl, uncontrollable and forcing its way out of his body. He rises and stands in the dirt surrounding him. His legs and feet similar to his arms and hands, but leaner and more angular like that of a feline. His nails dig into the ground beneath him easily as he steadies himself in the impossible heat. Like a wolf calling desperately to its lunar lover, the growl within turns howl without as he projects his inhuman wail into the sky. All around him in close proximity he hears screams of the same nature. Impossible sounds and screeching that could only have come from the depths of a demonic opera. All overlapping and penetrating his mind, driving him to madness.

He looks around frantically, too confused to make sense of his surroundings, but too full of adrenaline and anger to care. Twisted horns curve out of his skull and spine like a mutated dinosaur. Footlong fangs protrude from a mouth of daggers. He slices tongue on teeth as blood and acidic saliva drip onto the hard dirt below. Eyes red and glistening with the kind of panic-stricken desperation you could only see in a mother looking for a lost child.

In the distance, two figures charge each other. Each its own horrific amalgamation of animalistic savagery. Jurassic abominations ripping each other out of their own skeletons. One's head is eventually torn from its body while the remaining beast shreds the corpse into tatters.

A sudden static fills the air. A roaring which shakes the ground underneath. All around, in a vast circle surrounding the area and reaching to the clouds, are innumerable screaming creatures. They're all too distant to make out individually, but it's clear they are here to observe, to bear witness.

High above the center of the circle is an immense projection, a kind of hologram woven through a thin fog drifting gently overhead giving it an illusory weight and solidity. It's an enlarged close-up of the previous fight, a replay of the carnage. The victor's face turned upward, its horrific death cry piercing the air again. The crowd continues to roar.

From behind, the sounds of running. As he snaps his head around backwards, a snarling monstrosity jumps into the air, its mouth open and just as sharp as his own. Its claws are poised and are ready to rain death upon him.

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A small drone glides lazily over the spectacle below, watching from far above the fog. Merely a petite orb, one red eye on its exterior capable of swiveling around the surface of the orb at will and pointing itself in any direction it chooses. Its current direction being directly downward, penetrating the haze and holograms. It watches in silence, as do hundreds of others spread out randomly in the surrounding air.

Beyond the eyes of the drones, far out on the chilly side of the atmosphere, is a super-structure the size of a mountain. It's shaped like a melted pile of skyscrapers, its angles and protrusions seemingly endless. Spires shoot upward far from its center. Windows speckle the surface towards the tips in clusters like freckled white light. Its immensity hangs there, rotating imperceptibly and watching the planet below like an overbearing parent.

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The scene captured by the drone is projected in the center of a round white table. Sitting around this table are shadowed figures sitting equidistant from each other. Each strapped to the chair in which they sit, a single blue light affixed to the side of their head, similar to the eyes of the drones. All with metal guards covering their mouths. All as immobile as statues.

In the background, hovering around the seated figures, stand robed beings watching the scene playing out in the center of the table. The same violence projected into the foggy air of the

arena below now plays out in front of these silent spectators. The headless beast again falling to its knees as its executioner roars into the sky.

As this occurs, the blue light attached to one of the sitting figures turns red. Its light casting a deep glow across the face of the young man whose head its attached to. A hatch beneath the man's chair opens with a *hiss-clunk*. The figure disappears, the hatch closes again, and silence resumes, but only to be broken by the mild chuckle of one of the robed overseers.

"Impressive," the amused being sarcastically says. It is dressed in a kind of fabric that seems to be in continual motion. Dark blue robes that cascade and swirl around the curvature of its body like living water. Its head and body seem fairly humanoid, but its skin has a similar appearance as its dress, slight ripples flowing over its face and neck outlining its alien bone structure. It stands watching the center of the table.

Another creature, adorning muddy robes of forest green stands behind the now vacant seat at the table, the fabric it wears the color and texture of soil and moss. It stares down at the empty space with a grimace. Its skin is dusty like dirty rock, cracked and sprouting grass and other random greenery. It scoffs in frustration and turns away, leaving behind a cloud of dirt and debris flaking off of him as he does so. He walks towards the bay windows on the other side of the room and watches as the young man who had been seated at the table now floats away from the super structure in which they reside. The man's limbs bent at undignified angles and frozen stiff, like a floating snapshot of someone who had recently taken a swan dive off of a very tall building. His body destined to roam the infinity of space forever. The mossy creature frustratingly purses his lips at the sight, the rocky skin around his mouth cracking even more.

"Next time, friend," the smirking humanoid says. "You might make it one full minute."

"Oh, shut it. Yours is barely moving," the creature responds.

"Mine has only just awoken."

"Yes," said the creature. "And it looks like he's next."

They both look back to the viewing panel at the center of the table. One of the other mutations is running towards the hairy blue beast who is still stumbling around as if confused. The mutation jumps through the air in a savage display of superhuman athleticism and spreads its claws.

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On the ground, the blue beast is pummeled into the ground in a cloud of fur, teeth, and claws. The mutation tearing at his flesh looks agile and slick with an unsettling dampness. It doesn't have hair, but a spotted skin like that of a tree frog. The beast holds back the mutation's slashing hands and can see his own reflection in the shiny handful of different sized eyeballs that bubble out of the top of its head, two of them bloody and closed, the rest of them open wide and

focused. He only catches the jarring sight of his own nightmarish face for a second before the mutation's sword-like tail stabs him through his leg.

The beast cries in agony which immediately turns into red hot anger. He lets go of one of the mutation's hands and grabs the tail sticking through his leg and start to pull. The mutation starts to claw at the beast's face a few times, leaving sickening bloody gashes, before there's a disgusting *rip* of flesh being torn from flesh. The mutation shrieks as its own tail is plunged into its stomach and pulled upward into its chest. They both fall to the ground, the beast on top twisting the spear-tipped tail deeper into the mutation's chest with a disturbing gurgle. The mutation's cries are so loud and intense that one of its eyeballs bursts into black sludge. The beast opens his jaws exposing row after row of teeth and lets out a triumphant and unholy roar before sinking those rows of razors into the face of the mutation. Its many eyes spurting black blood as the beast bites down. He rips the face and half the skull of the mutation off of its body and flings it into the air. Its claws slash and tear at the beast's body a few more times and then go limp. One of the larger claws still sticks deep in the beast's side.

The beast stands and looks around him. He can see other creatures fighting each other not far off. Some similar-looking to himself, some combinations of other fierce animals, others entirely alien, with features and appendages never before seen on Earth. All of them tearing each other apart.

A shadow swoops overhead. The beast barely has time to look up before large talons sink into his arm and pull him from the ground. He cries out as he tries to free his bleeding arm. The winged creature looks like a kind of furry crocodile fit with the wings of a bat. A flying science experiment. The noise it emanates from its throat sounds like crunching bone, a kind of popping dry static.

The mutation's claw is still stuck in the beast's side. As the beast is pulled higher into the air, the mutation hangs from him, dripping black tar blood onto the ground below, its claw slowly ripping down through the beast's flesh as they rise over the expanse of carnage.

As they become eye-level with the fog above the arena, the beast sees a projected image of the same face he saw in the bugged eyes of his previous opponent. Watching himself roaring and biting through the face of that slimy monster, he stares into the projection, hypnotized. He forgets the pain of the mutation hanging from his side or the monster carrying him away and, for a moment, can only make out another foreign-sounding thought, *what am I?* The crowd below screams with delight.

They rise higher, over the holograms, enough to see past the massive arena and to the vast arid desert that stretches out in all directions. The joy of the crowd fades and the beast looks up to winged demon flying him into the sunlight. He puts his battered hand up to shield his eyes. Sunrays peak through his fingers. There, in a moment of calm, far beyond the ensuing chaos below, an image materializes in the beast's mind. A woman, lying asleep on a messy bed. Warm, amber sunlight streaks her face and supple body. A gentle breeze billows the curtains of a window. Never has a living being looked more at peace.

The beast doesn't understand this thought. His confusion again brings him back to the present moment, brings him back to pain. He grabs the claw digging into his side and with a howl of agony rips it from his body. Still holding the arm of the black mutation, he kicks at its hanging body, eventually getting a grip on its shoulder. Using both of his feet, he pushes down, tearing the mutation's arm from its body which falls away through the fog below. The beast takes the remaining claw and starts slicing at the winged monster's leg which still grips his own arm. It screeches and begins to slash at him with its one free set of talons. It lands a deep cut over the beast's eye, nearly blinding him. Before it can strike again, the beast makes a final slice to the creature's leg, snapping it from its body. The creature screams and flies lopsided for a moment, trying to regain its aerial composure as it flaps away.

The beast tumbles through the air towards the arena. The after-image of the sleeping woman still impressing on his thoughts. The noise of the crowd growing once again.

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Aboard the super-structure, the mossy creature smirks as he watches the beast falling to his death on the projection.

"You underestimate my design skills, friend," the humanoid calmly speaks.

They both watch through the eyes of the circling drones as the beast flails his way through the air. Far down on the ground, the handful of remaining savage contenders continue to tear each other apart.

One by one, they kill each other off. With every death, the green light on the head of the corresponding seated man goes red. With every red light, another hatch opens, and another corpse cast into the ether until there are only two men left.

Looking out the window of the super-structure, into the distant light of the planet's home star, one could see a sprinkling of bodies like a breadcrumb trail leading away from the structure and off into parts unknown. Soulless shells littering a cosmic coastline, forgotten by the tide.

All but one monster on the ground remains. A hulking formation of molten rock, dripping a kind of boiling red lava from its arms and face from various wounds. It stands in an abominable graveyard of its own making. Each surrounding corpse a smoking pile of half-charred failure. It stares upwards at the divebombing ball of blue fur, spewing a mess of volcanic slew as it roars in anticipation for its final kill.

Blood streaks behind the beast as it pummels through the air. A blue comet with a red tail heading straight into the mouth of a screaming volcano. The beast can see his fate approaching as the monster on the ground awaits the crash landing.

In a flash, they meet each other with the force of an angry warhead. Red rock and liquid fire explode in all directions, a cloud of blue fur at the center of the smoke and flame. A charred

body lay in the middle of the fiery mess. The beast, one horn broken, one eye sliced and swelled shut, claws mangled and rib cage still dripping blood, large patches of fur singed off on various parts of its burnt body, opens his eyes.

*What's happening to me?*

The single thought pierces his mind and is gone like drive-by déjà vu. He coughs up a few lungfuls of blood as he rolls to his side and looks at his surroundings. He's dazed and can't remember what just happened as he looks around at the smoking boulders and sizzling red puddles. There was pain, and fear. He remembers flying, and the brightness of the sun. Wind blowing past his face. And... a woman. He remembers a woman was there, he could see her face. Where did she go?

Confusion creeps back into the beast's mind as he lay in agony.

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"This is absolute treachery!" screams a voice from the corner of the control room.  
"Disgraceful!"

The blue light on the head of one of the two remaining seated men goes red, his lifeless body dropping through the floor and joining his abandoned brothers on their eternal journey through the cosmos.

One man still sits at the table. Eyes closed and immobile. His blue light turns green.

The humanoid stands with its arms each tucked within the sleeves of his rippling robes, the flowing nature of his appearance giving the impression of hovering above the ground. Not taking its eyes off of the projection, he addresses the outcry.

"Problem?"

On the opposite side of the room, once quietly seated in the shadows, now sparks a mass of fiery rock similar to the extinguished monster in the arena. What was just a calm and cold body of boulder expands and blazes intensely as it stands and makes its objection.

"I demand analysis! The agreed upon terms were clearly broken!" the volcanic titan slams a flaming fist onto the table, immediately melting the spot it hits, lava dripping its way onto and through the floor.

"I assure you they were not. And watch the upholstery, would you?" the humanoid smugly says. "Or I'll have to calm you down myself."

"Despicable scourge! You used off-world elements to make your beast and you know it! 'Statute 3.3: No substances, natural or otherwise, may be used in the creation of one's entry other than those found *within* the atmosphere of the host planet.' An obvious violation!"

The angry cinder stomps its way towards the hovering humanoid, its footprints trailing pockets of fire. It stands with its molten mug so close that the watery skin of the humanoid's face starts to simmer.

"Would you like me to show you the list of elements I used to create him or are you just going to stand there and boil yourself to death?" the humanoid asks.

"Absurd!" yells the steaming monster, "No combination of elements amassed from this world alone could have survived a fall like that. Especially straight through the greatest bio-volcanic engineering this world has ever seen! He should have been incinerated instantaneously!"

"Well, I'm sorry you can't wrap your hot head around simple tweaks in chemistry, or you might understand how it's entirely possible to create a living being that's quite indestructible. Well...nearly." the humanoid says, looking at the projected image of his creation still laying in the middle of the arena barely holding onto life. "I'm sure I'll work out the kinks before our next bout."

"I spent all year perfecting that clone. My greatest achievement to date! Do you have any idea how hard it is to replicate my exact atomical substructure using elements only compiled from *this* planet? I'll be a pile of smoking ash before I let a smug trickster like you cheat your way into winning more territory for the aquatic," the molten boulder snarls and glows red hot in the eyes. "Your people will govern this entire planet if we continue to allow this foolishness!"

"Oh, please. If you weren't willing to lose territory then you wouldn't be gambling in the first place, you flaming fool. So, what now? Are you saying you'd like to revisit the original terms? Or are you just being a sore loser who needs to be put in check again?"

As the humanoid says this it pulls its hand out and raises it in front of the rock's face. A swirling cloud of water and spiked ice forms and grows within its blue palm. Red cracks split across the skin of the volcanic rock's face and burn bright as it fumes with anger.

"Are you two done measuring your egos?" the mossy creature asks, observing the pissing match from over by the window. "You know you have no chance of injuring him, or has your brain melted along with our table?"

"I think it's best you listen to our dirty friend." says the humanoid, "This isn't the time for another science lesson."

The fiery monster growls and burns so hot that even its outer rocky shell glows red with heat. "AARRGGHH!!" it roars with anger, clenching its fists and blasting an intense white hot eruption through its skull and up to the ceiling, splattering melted bits of itself everywhere, the majority of it falling right back down on top of its head and body, dousing itself in its own living lava.

The grassy creature quickly pats its head and shoulders and legs where a few burning pieces landed, trying to put out the tiny flames that sprouted. The humanoid stands unmoving as the molten bits of rock splatter him and sizzle out. Each melted piece solidifying as its absorbed

into the surface his watery form and floating downward through his body and falling to the ground as pebbles under his feet.

“Scoundrel!” the fiery monstrosity yells, “Wait until the council hear of this. You’ll pay for your lies.”

“If you really think the air delegacy is going to concern themselves with petty land quarrels, then you’ve truly melted your mind. Why would they return to govern the ground when they have the entirety of the sky as their domain and left the rest of us bickering over terra scraps like children?”

“Says the one who controls seventy percent of the surface and still cheats his way into stealing what’s left!”

“Oh, come off it, you walking tantrum. Like there’s anything better to do down here but gamble anyways. Our people all agreed to the stipulations of these savage games and must suffer the consequences in the event of a loss. Simple as that.”

The cinder huffs and reluctantly stomps away in heated frustration, filling the room with a lingering smoke.

“Ahem. Might I now direct our attention back to more important matters?” the dirty creature asks, “It seems our beloved patrons share the same sympathies as our angry friend. They appear to be rioting.”

“What? Show me.” the humanoid says. The creature enlarges the projection to better show the crowd of onlookers, a mixture of fire, water, and earth beings filling the seats. They’re all fighting with each other and starting to climb the barrier into the arena. The blue beast still lay half dead surrounded by corpses and burning rock. Innumerable audience members pour into the arena and charge the center towards the beast.

“They must not believe the fight was fair either.” the creature says.

“Then they’re all more intelligent than we’ve given them credit for!” the volcanic monster yells from the other side of the room.

“Fools!” says the humanoid, “Doesn’t anyone recognize genius when it’s staring them in the face! Get him out of there.”

“The transfer could damage the body even further.”

“The crowd will tear it apart if we don’t! Do it!”

“Of course.” replies the creature, meekly.

He presses various small buttons under the projector. The body of the beast glows on the hologram. In the arena, the crowd is growing closer and closer to the dying mess of bloody blue fur, ready to finish the job themselves. The riled up audience members dive onto the vanishing form but hit solid ground as they dog pile each other. The beast’s body fades into a soft yellow haze and disappears.

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Samuel peaks into his bedroom. He's watching quietly as his wife sleeps, careful not to wake her. The amber sunlight streaks across their tangled blankets and gently warms the delicate body that is resting atop them. Never has a creature looked more at peace, Samuel thinks to himself. The embodiment of all that is right in this world.

An overwhelming rumble of thunder shakes the house. Samuel runs outside. Dark clouds plume throughout the once clear sky. A little girl playing on a swing set stops her joyful swaying and looks upwards at the spectacle.

The soft but concerned voice of his tired wife cuts through his panic from behind.

"Samuel..."

An immense black structure lowers itself slowly through the darkened clouds, its length spanning several miles and casting the entire surrounding area in shadow.

"Cynthia, come inside," he calls to his daughter. The little girl runs into the arms of her mother. Samuel catches a glimpse of his wife's nervous eyes as she takes their daughter inside.

He looks around at the neighboring acres and can make out at least three similar spots of black looming in the distance, each as massive. Strong winds begin to pick up quickly. Samuel watches as the swing set which once held his smiling daughter begins to dance alone with her memory.

His eyes return upward. A large hatch opens in the middle of its undercarriage revealing a brilliant white light.

The entire scene melts into nothing.

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"Melody!" Samuel calls out through a mass of bodies. Terrified screaming people surround him, squeezed together so tightly that he can barely breathe, let alone move. It's nearly pitch-black. With each difficult step to balance himself he can feel the bodies of the unfortunate souls who have already slipped through under his feet.

"Melody!" he calls again in vain. He can hardly hear his own voice through the hysteria.

*Where did she go?* He just saw her, he was sure of it.

Through the wails and sobs in the haystack of strangers, a needle pricks through.

“Samuel!”

Samuel turns his head and glimpses his petite wife clawing her way to him under arms of the panicking horde. Her hand reaching for his, but unable grab hold. She starts to get pulled under.

“No!”

Just then loud clank reverberates through the large room, shocking the mass into a moment of silence. A door opens above a platform halfway up the wall nearby and three strange beings enter. One looks like a ball of dirty green fur, one a large body of hot coal, and one slender and shimmering with blue skin, almost in the shape of a man.

The screams of the sardines once again gain volume. Thousands of petrified innocents, staring up at the faces of their undoing.

“Melody! Where’s Cynthia?” Samuel calls to his wife through the static. She looks back at him with a trembling dread in her eyes.

A loud hiss of wind permeates the room. It gets stronger by the second, pulling the countless people forward like sentient grass with its intensity.

Samuel can’t breathe. He looks at Melody as she clutches her throat. The entire room is silent. People all gasping and turning red. The wind continues until it focuses itself into five miniature cyclones and positions themselves in front of the three beings, hovering in the air just in front of the platform. Their swirling forms take the shape of something resembling bodies with heads, arms, and legs. A voice, like a whisper directly into the ear, speaks.

“...Silence...” it says. “...the weakest of you...will perish...the rest...remain...”

Sam watches as hundreds of people go limp all around him. His throat is on fire. He knows that he has maybe thirty more seconds before he blacks out. People everywhere are convulsing and stop moving. Melody clutches him on the verge of passing out when suddenly they both gasp for breath. Countless bodies slump to the floor. The only sounds are coughing and crying.

Melody is silent and catches her breath. She gains her composure for a moment and turns to the elemental beings watching over the scene. She inhales deeply and screams, “WHERE ARE OUR CHILDREN?!”

In a flash she feels like slow motion, the blue humanoid raises his hand and shoots from it a thin stream of liquid. It travels directly at Melody and pierces her forehead. Blood and water pop through the back of her skull, splattering Sam’s face. He stands in shock as more people scream around him.

“Melody?” His voice trembling as her body falls to the floor. “Melody! You bastard! I’ll kill y- ”

His voice is again taken from him as his oxygen disappears. He falls to his knees on top of the bodies surrounding him. He hears a whisper in his ear again.

“...Silence...”

He reaches out at his oppressors and collapses into blackness.

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Years have passed. Samuel sits in his dark and clammy cell. A life consisting of raw meat and solitude has left his mind all but gone. He waits to be taken away to a fate unknown as have the other men in the adjoining cells. One by one they've disappeared, all never to return.

A single thought plays in his mind.

Melody...Cynthia...*Could his daughter still be out there? Still be alive?*

His thoughts are interrupted by a calm voice suddenly outside of his cell.

“Come,” it says. The blue humanoid, Melody's killer, stands silently on the other side of the metal bars. Samuel looks up deliriously, his eyes widen.

“You...you're the one-”

The humanoid reaches through the bars and grabs Samuel's arm. A sub-zero chill shoots through his body, leaving him incapacitated and shivering violently. His cell opens and the humanoid enters, pulling out a small syringe-like device filled with a shimmering liquid. He sticks it into Samuel's neck and squeezes.

He feels himself being dragged from his cell as his mind slips away.

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Samuel sits strapped to a chair. A strange piece of metal is attached to the side of his head and his mouth is covered and closed tight with a large steel guard. He blinks and tries to make out his surroundings. He sits at an expansive table with several other men who are restrained in the same way. His eyes dart back and forth at the passive, almost sedated men.

“These games are getting quite repetitive, don't you agree?” says a raspy voice from behind Samuel.

“Funny you say that, being the one who continues to lose,” answers the calm tone of the watery humanoid. “At this rate, your people won't have an island to stand on.”

“Am I wrong to assume you wouldn’t allow these silly games to start an actual war between the elements?”

“If you’re willing to risk the territory and well-being of your people, I’m ready for mine to rule this retched world.”

“Your people *do* already control the majority of the planet. What’s a few hundred miles of terra? Another trophy?”

“Are we ready?” says the humanoid, “The crowd is getting restless.”

The raspy voice of the green creature sighs. “Nearly there. Just syncing them up.”

Samuel sits frozen and confused. He starts to panic and tries in vain to break free from his restraints. Wide-eyed and shaking, Samuel’s thoughts feel like they’re being ripped out of his mind.

The humanoid leans over and looks at Samuel, inspecting him up and down. Samuel stares at the blue eyes looking straight through him like an animal.

“Initiated,” says the creature.

The metal on the side of Samuel’s head heats up. Tunnel vision overwhelms him as he falls into the endless expanse of his subconscious and disappears.

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“Did it work?” asks the humanoid. “Why isn’t he back yet?”

“I have him, give me a moment.” replies the green creature.

“Hurry up, will you!” says the humanoid, impatiently.

“Yes, yes. I told you I have him. Ready the holding station.”

On the far side of the room there is a wall lined with large containment cells, similar looking to clear coffins twice the size needed for the largest of Earth animals. The humanoid presses a few spots on the side of one of them, closing the immense case and sealing it. After a few moments the blue beast, now nearly purple from the amount of blood in its fur, slowly materializes within the box. It’s enormous arms and legs held up by various hooks and pegs inside. Slack-jawed and soulless, it hangs there like an empty mascot uniform.

The humanoid inspects his creation from outside the glass, slowly looking over each injury. “Very good.” it says, talking to itself. “It held together quite nicely.”

“I must agree. It’s quite an accomplishment,” says the green creature, now standing next to the humanoid.

“Quite a conspiracy, more like it!” yells the angry volcano from across the room.

“Oh, enough fuming, you boiling boulder. You lost, time to move on,” the creature says. “Your adversary has done something quite remarkable. There’s no telling what kind of life we can create with this sort of bio-fusion. That is, if you don’t still plan on taking over *every* piece of territory on the planet?”

“Plan on killing us all, are you? My people will revolt!” says the hot rock.

“It still needs perfecting,” the humanoid says, ignoring him, “but once I work out the precise formula, perhaps, *perhaps*, I will share some of the recipe with a select few.” The humanoid looks over at the steaming slag and smirks. “A *select* few.” The fiery coal grumbles and stews in annoyance. “For the time being, we’ll leave it in stasis, it needs to regenerate.”

The humanoid slides its finger across the glass quickly, making a few exact patterns. The lights inside the glass dim and a white gas hisses into the chamber, filling it slowly. As gas laps over the beast’s body, its injuries begin to heal themselves in a sluggish manner.

“Well, congratulations, I suppose. More territory to the victor. I look forward to what’s in store for next year,” the creature says. “As for right now, I believe we have another matter to attend to.”

“Which is?” asks the humanoid.

The creature gestures towards Samuel, still sitting at the table.

“Ah, of course. Let’s bring him back then.”

Both the creature and humanoid return to Samuel to disconnect him. Samuel’s eyes move frantically behind his eyelids, as one’s does when dreaming.

“Do you see that?” asks the humanoid.

“I do.” replies the creature.

“Is that normal?”

“I don’t believe so. He should still be completely unconscious.” A look of concern crosses the creature’s dusty face.

“All according to plan, I presume?” the living cinder inquires sarcastically.

They ignore his chuckling. Samuel’s face starts to twitch. His eyelids slightly open but his eyes are rolled back into his head. His whole head starts to shake, drool forming at his mouth. His body begins to convulse violently, still confined by the straps attached to his chair.

“What is this? What’s happening to him?” asks the humanoid.

The creature shakes his head, staring at the seizing man, “I’m not entirely sure. Human minds have never had a problem with reintegration before.”

“Surely it’s the man’s genetics and not ‘The Great One’s’ magic formula,” mocks the hot rock.

“Quiet!” yells the humanoid, “Wake him up, damnit! I need his mind for analysis.”

“We might lose him regardless.” says the creature.

“Move!”

The humanoid shoves him aside with a hard burst of icy water, muddying the creature’s dirty face and soaking his grassy robes. From the center of the table the humanoid brings up a control panel and punches in a sequence on the complex keypad.

Samuel stops shaking and goes limp. His eyes open but lifeless, spittle foaming and hanging from his lip. The now sopping wet creature gains his composure and squishes his way back to the table, leaving behind muddy footprints.

“That was quite unnecessary. Is he dead?”

“I don’t know,” the humanoid says, staring closely at Samuel’s unmoving face.

Samuel’s face hangs off his skull like loose rubber. Then, as if that rubber were pulled and snapped back, the man instantly gasps so loudly that he startles all three of the elemental beings, the wet creature slipping backwards in his own mud. Samuel flails in his chair, choking and trying to catch his breath.

“What happened?? Where am I?” yells Samuel.

“My God,” says the creature. “I can’t believe he’s even capable of speech.”

The humanoid walks over to Samuel to try and calm him with lies. “Don’t worry, human. Everything is okay. We’re going to take you back to your home now.”

“My home? You all destroyed my home! You killed my wife!”

Samuel’s mind races faster than he’s ever felt it operate. The creature looks at the humanoid suspiciously.

“Excuse me, but how does he remember these things? His memories should have been wiped with the first transfer.”

“My thoughts exactly!” says the cinder.

The humanoid looks defensive. “How should I know? You both saw what he looked like. It must have been an error in the return sequence.”

“I programmed those sequences myself, there are no errors,” says the creature.

“What did you do to me?” yells Samuel, “What did you inject me with?”

“What’s that, human?” asks the creature, “An injection?”

“He’s clearly out of his mind,” says the humanoid.

“I knew it!” says the cinder, starting to heat up. “You enhanced him! Admit it!”

The humanoid steps back as the creature and molten rock turn on him.

“I did no such thing! Back away from me!”

As the humanoid gets ready to fight his way through his elemental peers, Samuel starts to loudly cough and choke. The three beings turn to look at him and watch as Samuel’s eyes glaze over and he lets out a final breath. The light on his head turns red as his body dies and the airlock under his chair releases him into space. The humanoid sighs in bittersweet relief.

“Well, I guess that’s that,” he says.

“Over my smoldering shell! You rigged yourself to win and now we have proof!” says the boulder.

“What proof? His body is gone. You have no claim against me.”

“Then how exactly do you explain this?” asks the creature. He’s staring at the case containing the massive beast. Its body is healed, and its head is starting to shake. Its eyes flutter open.

“You arrogant fool,” says the burning rock.

The creature looks seriously concerned.

“How strong of a neural enhancer did you use?”

“But I... I didn’t...”

“How strong?!”

The humanoid looks up anxiously at the awakening beast and back to his accusers.

“Damnit, fine! I gave him a *small* mixture of molecular binders and cortex plasticity from an outer system trading post. It was barely an enhancement! It wasn’t supposed to link them so permanently.”

“Just make the mind stronger and keep the body from falling apart. You really are quite loathsome,” the creature says in disgust.

“When my people find out about this, there will be riots!” yells the flaming boulder.

Samuel again awakens. This time in a horrifyingly familiar state. Once again in the body of the beast, he can see the three elemental beings on the other side of his glass containment. He no longer feels the excruciating wounds he had before. Rather, an all-consuming strength fills him to his core. He takes the same razor claws he used before to fight for his life and smashes through the glass container. He steps out breathing heavily and stares down at three worried elementals, towering over them at twice their size.

“Where...is...my...daughter?” Samuel’s beastly form asks in a gruff and gravelly tone.

“Your what?” says the creature.

Samuel takes his massive arm and swings it at the grassy creature, his enormous clawed hand knocking him straight through the window and into space. The air in the room starts to get sucked out intensely and starts pulling them all towards the open hole.

The molten rock blasts as much volcanic rock as he can towards the rim of the gap in an attempt to stop the suction. The humanoid fires icy water on top of the lava and hardens it, covering it in a thick layer of ice and sealing the hole. They regain their composure and turn to the beast ready to fight.

“We can help you!” the humanoid says in an attempt to reason with the rabid monster. “If you’ll just take a moment to settle yourself. I’m sure we can- ”

Samuel ignores reasoning and lunges towards the humanoid, fangs ready to devour. The humanoid jumps out of the way just in time and the beast falls and slides into the wall creating a massive dent.

“Do you see where your arrogance has gotten us? Defending our very lives!” yells the fiery rock.

Samuel gets up and sets his feet against the wall, he shoves his weight off of it and launches himself towards the fighting fire. A wave of lava pours from the volcano’s hands at the oncoming beast, but it has too much momentum and tackles the burning mass. Blue fur scorching and catching fire, they tumble in a mess of magma and blood. Samuel mightily hooked hands grab ahold of the volcanic body, gripping it like a toddler and raising it above his head. The humanoid tries to fire another icy blast at the raging beast, but Samuel blocks the stream with the body of the struggling coal.

“Aaargh!” the rock screams at its body hisses and steams and freezes over, its core fire extinguished. The beast throws the lifeless frozen chunk at the humanoid. It hits the wall next to him and explodes in a pile of ice and ash.

“I’ll ask you again,” Samuel says, poised for another kill, “Where is my daughter?”

The humanoid looks nervous. He’s depleted much of his energy and doesn’t know if he can summon the strength for another attack.

“The children were taken years ago, to the resource mines. It’s on the opposite side of the planet.”

Samuel steps towards the talking drop of water.

“Show me.”

The humanoid runs to the control panel and brings up the coordinates for an isolated area on the map.

“I can take you there, but you’ll need my help,” says the humanoid.

Samuel slowly opens his mouth, revealing his multiple layers of needle-like fangs.

“Do it.”

The humanoid enters the coordinates and engages the controls. The massive ship lurches and slowly turns towards the far reaches of Earth.

“See? On our way. Now, if you’ll just- ”

Samuel hand splashes through the watery neck of the humanoid and finds a grip on the single solid piece of bone-like matter inside. He lifts the aquatic being into the air by the slick throat and slams him onto the ground, water splashing everywhere. The humanoid’s dripping eyes turn a fierce icy blue he desperately turns his head and body colder and colder. Samuel’s arms strains to hold on as he howls in freezing pain. The humanoid raises his hand to attack with another blast but can’t muster the strength to conjure enough of his element. He instead holds onto Samuel’s large arm to expedite the frost. With every second the humanoid freezes himself more, until the beast’s arm becomes one large hunk of ice. The humanoid stops grappling as his eyes fade from brilliant blue to a frozen grey. His grasping arms now solid ice like a struggling statue.

Samuel’s arm is fused into the neck of the humanoid. He gathers his strength and howls. With immense force, he jerks his body to the side, shattering his frozen arm off of the humanoid’s dead body. He falls backwards, once again lying in agony in the body of a foreign experiment. Once a man, Samuel can hardly remember his human body. He’s become so overwhelmed with the heightened senses of this new shell that it now seems like another dream to have once been a man.

He stands up and walks over to lean against a door with a small window on it. Looking inside, he can see an expansive room. Lining the walls of the room are large glass cases lit from the inside, similar to the one he woke up in. Each case holds its own monstrosity. Each unique in its own way. Mutations and ferocious amalgams of all shapes and sizes reside lifelessly inside each container. All empty shells waiting for a resident.

Samuel knew there were other men on this ship. Countless cages holding restless souls. Samuel knew what he had to do.

He stumbled into an open hallway towards the cellblocks and their desperate inhabitants. It was time they were given the chance to regain their freedom.

Samuel would find his daughter. And hopefully, with an army of walking nightmares at his side, they would take their planet back.

