

# Trauma Traveller

## *One*

Rain was steadily coming down, the manifold impacts on plastic bags, metal containers, and overhangs near doorways producing a discordant rhythm in the alleyway, though no one was there to hear it. The light from the vehicles and storefronts beyond the mouth of the alleyway was reflected warmly in the puddles that covered the ground, but the space between the mall and its neighbour building was unlit, except for where a small coffee shop spilled light out from within, staining a few puddles in its golden hue.

With no one to observe this part of the city, there wasn't anybody around to witness the moment when the air in the dark alleyway seemed to open up like a strangely-formed doorway that shone with the light of a different universe. Though one might imagine that such a clear manifestation of magic would carry with it a noticeable sound, it was unnoticeable thanks to the incessant rain.

As a kaleidoscope of colours flashed from inside the doorway, a shadow fell from within and touched the stone paving of the narrow street, before a questing boot pushed its way out and splashed down into a puddle. Then the other boot followed and carried with it the person who had caused the doorway to open.

One of the peculiarities of the magic that'd brought the Traveller here was that it only seemed to work when it was raining heavily, but fortunately this was not his first time using it, so, as he came out into the downpour, his hood was up. He wore a one-piece coat with a wide hood, which had been formed out of a single sheet of a massive black serpent's shed skin, the very same serpent that he had attained the magic to traverse realms from.

He looked down at the Shard of the Abyss Serpent in his hand, frowning at it. It was like a key, for it allowed him to make these doorways, but it was a key with a personality: a personality that seemed to utterly despise him.

After the doorways dissipated, he stored the shard into its designated pocket within his coat, before digging his hand into another pocket, searching for a small vial of oily crystal-clear fluid. As he looked

around, he noticed a lot of writing on the peculiar walls around him, not to mention the warm light that spilled out of the storefront of the nearby coffee shop.

While walking over to the warm light, he opened the glass stopper ever-so-slightly, and the oily crystal-clear liquid immediately became a thick gas that tried to escape the vial. Having utilised it many times before, he inhaled in the same moment it emerged from the tiny opening he had made, before slamming the stopper down and keeping too much from escaping.

The spirit he had harvested of the Nightmare Feeder, which had for decades afflicted a Genius in the past world he visited, contained the powerful ability to allow the Traveller to absorb knowledge and learn at an unthinkable rate, essentially allowing him to pick up a new language in just a few minutes.

As the inhaled gas buzzed around inside his lungs, slowly absorbing into his body, he eyed the vial in his hands. By his estimate, he only had enough of the Feeder's spirit left for two more uses, maybe three if he was really careful.

He looked at the strange book that stood in front of the store, next to a glass display case with strange representations of the shop's meals. It was unclear to him what exactly they were, but as he looked at the book, the pages of which were coated in a clear polymer to prevent rain from ruining the ink of the text, his inhaled spirit kicked in and he immediately began learning the meaning of the strange symbols written on the pages.

One of the side-effects of the Nightmare Feeder's spirit was that it made him talk backwards for the duration of its effect, not to mention a bunch of twelve-legged shadow creatures constantly crawled all over his surroundings, visible only to his eyes. He was luckily not put off by such hallucinations.

With the knowledge of the languages inscribed in the polymer-covered rainproof book, he grabbed hold of the doorhandle and pushed his way into the shop, wherein were seated maybe only a dozen patrons. He remarked how clean the floor and walls were, as well as the intense aromas of ground beans, similar to one of the drinks from the previous world he had been to, though here it was called 'coffee'.

A lady approached him as he entered and offered to take his coat, but he waved her off, saying he'd just like a table for one.

"Please follow me," said the lady, although it was clear that his words had been utterly incomprehensible to her, given her expression. Somehow, he always tried to speak during the effects of the Feeder's spirit, even though his words came out backwards.

He remarked that the people here seemed a lot kinder and more polite than those of the previous world, where he had been chased out of a village when his backwards speech had made them suspect him of being a witch come to eat their young.

When he took a seat by his proffered table, he pushed the wide hood of his coat back and let his shoulder-long shock-white hair flow freely. It tended to get very frizzy when even remotely damp, but he was glad that this time he had prepared for the rain adequately and thus avoided looking like a human broomstick.

After a moment, the lady returned with an identical book to the one he had seen out front, with pages similarly coated in the bizarre ‘plastic’, as it was called in this world.

He looked at it for a moment, then said, “*κῆριπ πνε ἰαε οἱ ἀῖσιρ I ἰαημ κωνκ ἰπρεῖα I.*”

“You are ready to order?” she asked, his speech still incomprehensible to her, though she guessed correctly, but, then again, it was obvious why he had entered.

He nodded, realising that gestures were the superior form of communication until the Feeder’s spirit wore off, fortunately he had already perfectly grasped the syntax of the dominant language of this world, so he perfectly understood the waitress’ words.

The lady took on an expression of intense concentration when she pulled out a pad and pen to write down his order, as though expecting him to make his order in the backwards speech as well. To save her a headache, he simply pointed to the options that had drawn his interest when he had studied the menu book out front.

With a sigh of relief, she repeated his order, “A house blend coffee with milk, a glass of orange juice, fluffy pancakes with syrup, a slice of chocolate tart, and the lemon meringue. Is that everything?”

He nodded eagerly.

“Understood. Would you like everything all at once?”

He nodded eagerly again, his white hair swishing about.

After returning to the kitchen, it was obvious that the waitress immediately began talking about him, as he overheard snatches of very confused guesses at what kind of illness he might be suffering from. He found it peculiar that he was treated with open politeness, but then rudely talked about when it was thought to be out of his earshot. Granted, it was still better than being chased by an angry mob who wanted to burn him to death.

The moment the inhaled spirit wore off, he instantly sneezed four times in a row, and all the roaming shadow creatures vanished from his vision alongside the strange backwards speech.

He looked around the coffee shop, wondering if he could gain anything from either its employees or its patrons, though everyone here seemed fairly content. But then, it was also quite a luxurious establishment he had found himself in, and, from his experience, there was less to be harvested from affluent people.

With a look down at a ring of white pearl on his thumb, he awoke the familiar that slumbered within. Before his eyes alone manifested a round ball of a soft pearl-white feathers, wherein sat two beady black eyes and a small beak.

*“Hoo-hoo Koios,”* greeted the pearl-white owl.

“And hoo-hoo to you,” he replied. “I need you to lend me your vision for a bit, Hoo.”

The ball of feathers hopped around on the table for a moment, looking at their surroundings for a bit, as well as the patrons and café employees.

*“Where the hoo-hoo are we?”*

“Who knows, *Helasspekalli* brought me here, but I have yet to figure out where *here* is in relation to Oblus,” he replied, referring the Abyss Serpent and the previous world.

*“Please tell me we’re never going back there, those hoo-humans were insane!”*

“We go where the Shard of Helasspekalli takes us. Anyway, lend me your vision, Hoo.”

*“There’s no need, Koios. No one hoo-here has any troubles.”*

“Not even a little bit?”

*“Did I hoo-hoo stutter!?”*

“No need to get offended, I just find it hard to believe.”

*“It’s what I’m seeing, kay? These hoo-humans are... happy.”* The last word left Hoo’s beak like a curse. The owl was the spirit of a Forest Deity that Koios had made his familiar many years back, before he found the Abyss Serpent and gained the ability to travel between worlds. Koios had, since birth, been blessed with the unique ability to travel into the dreams and nightmares of living creatures, learning over time to exorcise the pain and suffering buried deep within these mindscapes. He had also learnt that if he managed to capture the fleeing spirits of the tormentors who afflicted some living creatures, he could utilise them to wield a form of magic.

But the magic was bizarre even in its most basic forms, though some spirits, like the fragment of the Abyss Serpent, possessed immensely-powerful abilities. Unfortunately, learning what each spirit did was very much trial-and-error. However, his familiar Hoo wielded a powerful insight that allowed him, when borrowing its power, to see the sort of spirits that afflicted living beings, such that he could not only understand how to deal with them, but also what sort of power he might attain from capturing their spirits after exorcising them.

*“This is an eatery, right?”*

“Of a sort,” Koios replied vaguely, as he himself was uncertain.

*“Did you order anything for me? I’m hoo-hungry.”*

“Of course. I got you something called a ‘pancake’, as well as the juice of a fruit called an ‘orange’.”

Hoo looked at him sceptically, his beady little eyes full of doubt. *“Can you afford a place this hoo-hoo luxurious?”* he asked.

“I’m sure I’ll be fine. I still have eight gold chips left from Oblus.”

A few minutes later, the waitress returned with a tray from which she took the many plates and put them on his table. Although Hoo was invisible to the eyes of everyone else, he was still capable of interacting with the world, and, no sooner had the orange juice and pancake tower been set down on the table than the spirit owl immediately began eating it. Fortunately, the woman seemed not to notice as she placed the two plates of cakes and the coffee down afterwards.

“Please enjoy,” she told him.

“Thank you,” he replied and for a moment she looked shocked that he wasn’t speaking backwards, but then she hurried off to the entrance to greet a new pair of customers.

*“This is hoo-hoo delicious!”*

Koios took the ornate fork and stole a piece of the topmost pancake and swallowed it in one bite. It surprised him how tasty and sweet it was, but then he tried the two cakes and was utterly blown away.

“Maybe eight gold chips won’t be enough,” he mumbled between bites, before washing the delicious cake down with the scaldingly-hot bitter coffee.

## *Two*

Koios walked down a crowded street next to a busy road where the strange metal wagons of this world, referred to as ‘cars’ apparently, sped past. Hoo sat on his shoulder and was scanning the crowds for any noteworthy spirits.

He was borrowing the spirit owl’s vision and was searching the crowds as well, though the few spirits he noticed were all weak and useless in terms of the powers they might wield. The rain was still pouring down, but the sidewalk they were following was fortunately covered by a roof of sorts, which ran parallel to the road. On the other side of the road was another crowded sidewalk, and bordering both were many different shops and restaurants, though it seemed the majority of the shops were now closed.

*“The technology in this hoo-world seems very advanced. They really like their coloured lights.”*

Koios had to agree, as the lights of the wagons that sped by, not to mention the storefronts and lanterns that ran along the street, all were far more advanced than anything he had seen in any other world. Even Oblus with its steampower and piston engines was several centuries behind this ‘Earth’ as this world was referred to simplistically.

Alongside the advanced technology also seemed to be a common welfare system, as everyone around him seemed content and nourished, with a few people perhaps over-nourished and indulgent in their eating habits. Normally, he associated obesity with extreme affluence, but here there was no way for him to tell if such a hierarchical difference existed. After all, he had left the coffee shop after paying just one of his eight gold chips, though the common currency here seemed to be square plastic cards, metal coins, and strange paper with human faces printed on them.

*“How are you planning on making money hoo-here?”*

Koios had already agonised over it for a while, since he naturally became a sort of healer in the worlds he visited, since suffering was always plentiful, but that option seemed far less viable in this world, given that, as he looked around, he could not spot more than a handful of people with spirits afflicting them.

“I’ll find a way,” he told the owl.

*“And the mission? The same as always?”*

“Of course.”

Hoo sighed, something he was wont to do when the subject came up. “*Perhaps it is time to give up and move on.*”

“You know I can’t do that. We’ll find a spirit with the sort of power I need, sooner or later.”

After several hours of fruitless wandering around the vast marketplace, where naught but restaurants seemed open at this time of night, Koios found his way to place on the fringe of the marketplace that Hoo said showed promise. The sign above the wooden façade read ‘*Number One Fried Chicken*’.

“You’re not lying to me just to get more food, right?”

“*I see this as killing two birds with one stone.*”

Koios frowned. Hoo had a bottomless stomach, which, given his metaphysical nature, was perhaps not so unusual, though it always put a strain on his finances. Fortunately, he had found a currency exchange where he had been given a tight stack of paper money, with the number ‘10,000’ written on them. After looking at the prices of things and comparing it to the local currency in his hands, it was clear he had spent too much on the café, though that was just how things went when moving between worlds.

The owner of the cramped restaurant greeted him as he entered and he found a seat in front of the kitchen, which was open and visible to all patrons. The shop’s air smelled of grilled meat, charcoal smoke, and the acrid stench of a strange type of narcotic that many people in this world smoked, called ‘tobacco’ apparently. Unlike the sort of herbs people would smoke in Oblus, this one did not seem to affect people much, which was ultimately a good thing.

After sitting down, he was given a glass of water, wherein were perfectly-square ice-cubes. Koios had no idea how they obtained ice so perfectly sculpted, as it had been a luxury only the rich could afford in Oblus. He was also given a hot and damp towel, which he used to wipe his face and hands with.

“*That hoo-human,*” Hoo told him and passed his gift of spirit sight onto Koios. As a dim violet light swirled around in his eyes, he looked at the owner of the restaurant, who was tending a few machines and a grill to make the food for the patrons who crowded the shop.

It was by far the strongest spirit they had seen in this world thus far and it was one of the Formless types too, which indicated emotional turmoil.

Tormentors came in many different forms, but could usually be designated as Formless, Vague, and Distinct. The latter were themselves sentient beings, while the other two were early stages, but all three had the potential to be equally powerful, despite the fact that Distincts were often the strongest ones they encountered.

The spirits could be born from the inner turmoil of a living and thinking creature, from a curse cast intentionally, or a possession. Vagues and Distincts were the only two capable of possession, a curse could only create a Vague, and inner turmoil was always the cause of Formless spirits. If allowed to exist and feed on its host for long enough, a Formless could grow and take on a pseudo-sentience, like an insect or a swarm of insects, becoming a Vague. The transition from Vague to Distinct took far longer, and usually required the Vague to migrate between various hosts, or spread its essence and afflict multiple at once.

As mentioned, all three types could be equally powerful, but Koios found that he feared Formless ones the most, as they were unpredictable and this nature made them hard to figure out, whereas Distincts always had some sort of weakness or flaw. Vagues were by far the most common type of spirits he encountered, but they were generally the easiest to deal with as well, as they were not as clever as Distincts, but still had a pattern that could be observed and countered, unlike Formless. Granted, those Vagues born of curses were like complex puzzles that could become pretty dangerous if approached incautiously.

“It might be a dangerous one,” Koios whispered to his familiar.

“*But its possibilities are a boon, are they not?*”

He nodded slowly.

The sort of powers he could attain from capturing spirits after exorcising them were based on their nature, and given that Formless were yet undetermined, they therefore had the vastest possible powers, whereas Distincts always had just one, and Vagues were a mixed bag of a handful of options.

For the sort of power he had sought ever since his journey began, it was near-impossible to find a Distinct wielding it, so he tended to hunt mostly Vagues. But, a powerful Formless was like a lottery ticket that might reward him *anything*.

Koios nodded again. He had made his mind up.

“First we eat, then I’ll dive in.”

“*A hoo-human after my own heart!*” his familiar replied lovingly.



### *Three*

*“That was hoo-hoo amazing!”* remarked the spirit owl, after cleaning off the last rice grain from his fourth bowl.

Koios wasn't listening fully however, as he had already fallen into the concentrated pre-dive state. As he stood up from his stool to hand the owner/chef the money for their indulgent meal, he locked eyes with the man and triggered his birth-gift.

Time around him slowed to a halt, as his glowing eyes stared deeply into the owner's brown sullen ones. The Traveller's mind moved forward like an engulfing mist, slowly and cautiously at first, before condensing and travelling straight into those brown irises.

For a moment, his consciousness blacked out, but then Koios opened his inner eye and heard a voice yell loudly in his ears.

*DON'T DO IT!*

*COME BACK!*

*DON'T DO IT!*

*An overcast sky framed the late winter world, as a boy was running across the courtyard of a school.*

*Ahead were a crowd of people looking up at a lone figure standing on the lip of the rooftop.*

*DON'T DO IT!*

*The world skipped to a winter setting. The boy stood next to his grieving friend. Before them was a stone slab with a name inscribed into it. The boy felt powerless to help the person next to him. None of the flowers in the nearby graves were alive, they were all withered, withered like his friend's smile.*

*COME BACK!*

*There was so much blood, more than the boy had ever seen before. Someone nearby was throwing up, others were crying, while a few level-headed individuals were calling for someone to contact a doctor or a teacher or anyone mature enough to handle the situation.*

*DON'T DO IT!*

*The two boys were running along beside a field, laughing and having not a care in the world. School was out for summer and they were making the most of the free time they had, exploring nature and getting into trouble, just like all other boys their age.*

*COME BACK!*

*Who knew the human body contained so much blood? The boy looked down in horror at his friend and the way his body twisted in all kinds of different ways. His once-smiling face was still, with red leaking from the corner of his eyes and nose. The boy wanted to reach down and help him stand, but he knew his friend was dead.*

*DON'T DO IT!*

With a gasp, Koios wrenched himself free of the trauma before it could begin looping and pull him along for another go. He felt a clenching pain in his chest, as the sympathetic emotions welled into him. The Formless Tormentor sought any vessel it could find to absorb its overwhelming grief and sorrow, but he was well-practiced in this song and dance, so his guard was up.

Koios looked around at the scene, as the flickered and returned to the boy running across the courtyard.

“This is an old trauma,” he muttered, seeing the restaurant owner’s face mirrored in that of the young boy. “No wonder it is this strong.”

With a conscious pull, he moved himself to the part of the scene where the owner’s friend was standing on the rooftop, four stories above. Koios frowned, as he saw the swirling mass that occupied the boy’s face. Just like with dreams, the mind filled-in things that it didn’t contain the knowledge of

and trauma were no different. Normally though, the owner would have remembered the face of his friend, and thus it should have been filled in, even though Koios was witnessing a part of the trauma that the boy would not have seen.

The fact that a swirling mass was all that represented his face was a warning sign, as it meant that the object of the trauma was not the friend that the owner had lost. This complicated matters significantly.

With a conscious tug, Koios returned to where the boy was frozen mid-run towards his friend who was about to leap from the rooftop above. He looked into his face, a face that was in truth not much younger than his own.

Staring into the eyes of the young boy, he sent his mind deeper into the trauma, such that he could reach the parts that the conscious mind of the owner, which he would either not acknowledge or had simply forgotten.

*He sat in his room, watching through the window blinds as his friend left. He wished he could understand why he acted this way, because he dearly wished to be there for the boy he had known since kindergarten, but he had found himself unable to talk to him since that winter day. He was just a fourteen-year-old, so how was he supposed to comfort his grieving friend? It was better just to sit here in his room and wait for it to blow over.*

*DON'T LEAVE ME!*

*I'M SO SORRY!*

*Despite himself, he was glad when the class rearrangement moved him to a different class than his childhood friend. It made things so much easier when he did not have to look into those sad judging eyes. His friend didn't have anyone else, but that was understandable, when he was always so gloomy and unapproachable.*

*I'M A COWARD!*

*BUT DON'T LEAVE ME!*

*He stood before the grave. They had put it next to that of his mother. He would never visit it again after that day, for the guilt and shame was too much.*

With a grunt of effort, Koios once again pulled himself out of the scene as it began to loop. As he looked at his surroundings, they were all grainy and dark, like a poorly-lit photo. It was clear that the restaurant owner didn't want to acknowledge these memories, but they still remained despite his efforts, as such trauma always had a way of doing. Painful memories were full of hooks, and though you might not notice it, they always stayed attached to your subconscious.

With a flicker, the scene returned to the dark room, where the boy watched his friend through the blinds. Koios went over to the window and opened it, before leaning out and yelling:

*YOU'RE NOT ALONE!  
I JUST DON'T KNOW HOW TO HELP YOU!*

The whole world was swallowed up into a black void, as Koios' words had aggravated the Formless Tormentor by yelling the boy's thoughts out loud.

Koios was standing in a shadowy courtyard, surrounded by incredibly-tall school buildings, while countless doppelgangers of the friend were leaping to their death below, each impact producing a vile *crunch* and *splat*. The sound, as it repeated over-and-over, became like a hellish symphony and Koios had to focus not to be drawn into it.

Then the boy started screaming the saw word over and over. "*I KILLED YOU!*"

Koios looked around for the source, but his vision was full of the steadily-growing piles of broken bodies, all like discarded dolls whose strings of life had been cut.

With a concentrated effort, he imagined his will as a powerful wind in his mind's eye and cast it from his mind with a sweeping gesture, blowing all the bodies and impossibly-tall builds into dust.

Left behind was a single figure, kneeling and crying into his hands. Slowly, watching for any tricks of the Tormentor, he approached the boy and knelt down in front of him. He patted him on the head and said,

"You're not to blame. It wasn't your fault what happened."

The kneeling boy became a knot of twisting black roots and Koios quickly smashed it between both hands, keeping it from running away.

The scene switched and he was standing before the grave of the previous trauma-loop, holding the wriggling core of the trauma in-between his hands.

As he observed the familiar scene, he saw a tiny change, as the boy reach out and grabbed his friend's hand. It was a small gesture, but one which carried a powerful weight. After all, it often only takes a simple gesture to get a thousand words across.

*I hope you can forgive me.*

*I simply did not know how to help you.*

*I'm sorry I couldn't be a better friend.*

## *Four*

Koios let out a deep sigh as he returned to reality, his palms tightly pressed together. Deftly, curled his right hand around the Tormentor's core and pulled a foldable metal box from a coat pocket with his left, before mashing the captured spirit inside, before twisting it so that it became a locked makeshift prison.

As he looked up, the restaurant owner was still holding the money Koios had handed him, but he seemed lost in thought. A tear trailed down his left cheek, but he quickly wiped it away and returned to his job, replying loudly to a patron calling for beer refill.

Koios knew that the man would return to his friend's grave later that evening or maybe the following morning, for the guilt and shame that had kept him from going for all these many years was now eased slightly.

Although he could delve into and resolve the effects of a Tormentor, he was no magician. Koios could only help people gain an insight into their trauma and maybe give them a slight nudge in the right direction, but the solution ultimately lay within themselves.

*"Let's go see which shape this spirit takes,"* Hoo decided. The familiar could not accompany Koios into his trauma-dives, but he still seemed to be immensely fascinated with the spirits that he captured and brought out into reality.

Like with all spirits he extracted from within someone's mind, they could only become a tool for him by being bound to a real object. In the case of the Abyss Serpent, the object had been one of its scales it had given to Koios. As for the Nightmare Feeder, he had attempted to bond it to the oil of a fruit tree, which in Oblus was considered a spiritual remedy, but which had in reality been a poor vessel for the Feeder's spirit, as it was able to evaporate the oil and disperse itself into the air, allowing it to return to whatever metaphysical place the spirits originated from.

The object seemed to not have any impact on the power he could gain if the spirit was a Distinct, but from his many experiments and observations, the object seemed to decide the shape of a Vague or Formless' power took.

*“I still think you should hoo-have gone with that strange plastic box,”* Hoo remarked, looking at the item Koios had found before they came to the restaurant. To the people of this world, it was known as a ‘flashlight’, though it was missing its power-source that give it its light-casting properties.

“I think it has the best chance of giving me the kind of power that I seek,” he replied.

He was standing in an alleyway behind the restaurant and holding the discarded flashlight in his left hand, while fumbling for the lock of the metal box into which he had captured the Guilt Tormentor. As soon as he released the clasp, the knot of black roots immediately tried to take off into the sky, but Koios’ quick reflexes saw it get no further than half a metre. While it wriggled in his grip, he shoved it into the flashlight in his other hand, which produced a strange hollow *gong* sound, before the wriggling was imparted to the object itself, as though the Tormentor attempted to vibrate itself into obliteration.

With both his hands firmly on the flashlight, Koios pushed the switch into its ‘On’ position, and instantly the spirit stopped its shaking, as a strange light-brown or maybe murky-green glow pulsed from the plastic lens of the tool. As the glow fell upon the surroundings, it seemed to alter the world, showing Koios a fragment of a different time.

*“A Remembrance Light. It illuminates the past,”* Hoo stated, his insight making the function of the tool clear to him.

Koios shone it on the buildings and objects around them, watching as they either disappeared or became a different thing altogether. Only a few things, like the restaurant, seemed to remain the same, though under the glow of the Remembrance Light they became a prior version with less wear-and-tear.

“So it lets me selectively view the past?” Koios asked. He couldn’t help but be slightly disappointed with this outcome. It was close to the kind of power he sought, and yet still so far.

After a while of playing around with it, he turned off the flashlight, and asked his familiar, “Any other interesting spirits around here?”

*“I can sense a few, but I do not think you will find hoo-what you seek from them.”*

“I see... Well, we still have to wait for it to rain again, so I might as well check some of them out.”

*“The nearest one is across the river,”* Hoo guided him. They had nearly crossed it earlier, when the familiar had guided him to the restaurant. Koios had liked the view and was glad to return just for another look.

A cold late-winter breeze ruffled the wide hood of his coat, as he stood on the sidewalk of the bridge. Below was a sloped embankment on either side of a narrow river, and a few couples sat here and there, looking at each other or the stars in the sky. Unlike Oblus, you could see far more stars in this world, and people here weren't afraid to go out after dark, in fact the streets were still quite crowded at this late hour.

Following Hoo's directions, Koios crossed the bridge and followed the sidewalk parallel to the road for a while, before turning down a wide street where cars could not go. Here, the buildings were of a different time, seeming to predate the rest of the city by several centuries. The crowds here were especially dense and many seemed to be stopping to admire the world through strange hand-held metal tablets. He knew from the information he had absorbed when using the Feeder's spirit that these were called 'smartphones', but he was unsure what their purpose was and the more he saw people handling them, the less sure he became, strangely enough.

Paper lamps ran along the walls of the street, casting either white or red light onto the ground, according to the colour of their paper. Next to one such lamp stood a woman with black hair lifted up into a bun that was supported with some kind of hair ornament. She wore an interesting red dress which depicted flowers of many different types and her face was coated in a thick layer of white paint of a sort.

*"That's the one,"* Hoo suddenly alerted him. As Koios was granted his familiar's sight, the lady seemed to notice his attention and began to walk away from him.

Though he only had a brief glimpse before the crowd swallowed her up, he knew that a Distinct spirit was involved, though he could not tell its true nature without a longer look.

*"She's running away, you know."*

Koios took off running, pushing through the crowds to track down the lady. As Hoo guided him to his target, he moved down progressively-narrower alleys and side-streets, until eventually coming to a dead-end.

"Damn it, I lost her!"

*"Look up,"* Hoo said and he did. At the top of the two-and-a-half metre wall stood a red-furred fox. As he looked at it, still borrowing Hoo's sight, he knew that it was somehow the same essence as the woman he had been following. No sooner had their eyes met than it leapt over unto the other side of the wall.



Koios quickly began scrabbling up the smooth wall, and though it took a few minutes, he eventually dropped to the other side, resuming the hunt with Hoo's guidance.

Two or three hours of hunting in the dark and a handful of close calls, and now he stood before a temple, devoid of people within its compound, but his familiar ensured him that his quarry was within. Koios had realised something as he put together the brief encounters with the fox lady: she was a Benevolent spirit, similar to Hoo in many ways.

When Koios had first met Hoo, it had been in a forest near his village. Back then, the owl had been the guardian of a small but very ancient part of the forest and was tethered to reality, despite his body being entirely made of spirit energy, thanks to a shrine that had been built centuries prior. Koios had found the shrine after a lot of exploring and though it took nearly a month of daily visits, he eventually got Hoo to accept a contract of Familiarity. The Hoo who now followed Koios on his realm-spanning search was but a fragment of its true spirit, which still resided in that ancient part of the forest.

Though a lot of spirits took on the form of Tormentors, they could also exist as a neutral entity that subsisted on the ambient energy in the world, or as a Benevolent being that lived off of prayers and worship. Benevolents almost exclusively existed as Distincts, as the very act of worship gave them a name and purpose.

He had seen a few neutral spirits become Tormentors when the ambient energy was disrupted or lacking, but he was sure that, given enough time, a neutral spirit could also become a Benevolent if it was worshipped. Though Benevolents were pretty rare when compared to the abundance of Tormentors, but they had the ability to combat their corrupting influence.

If not for their rarity, Koios would have tried to find the power he sought through searching for them, as they were more likely to have the thing he sought, but, in his journey he had thus far encountered thousands of Tormentors, but only seven Benevolents, including Hoo and this fox lady.

After stumbling around within the dark temple grounds, following Hoo's directions, he came to a small shrine, where a wooden hut with an offering box and a rope attached to large bells stood before a partially visible interior, where gold-plated screens and idols were placed.

No sooner had Koios crossed the threshold demarcated by a wooden temple gate of red-lacquered wood than the fox appeared in front of the offering box. Its narrow amber eyes regarded him coolly as

he approached. It seemed it would retreat no further, as this was its shrine grounds. Then it moved its eyes to his shoulder, seemingly capable of perceiving Hoo.

*“I don’t like the hoo-way I’m being looked at...”*

As I sat down on the gravel, which was still damp from the rain earlier in the evening, the fox transformed before my eyes into the lady I’d seen.

*“Why did you follow me so persistently?”* she asked. As she spoke, I realised the red paint on her lips was drawn to make her mouth appear smaller.

*“Why did you run away when you saw me?”*

The lady sighed dramatically. *“I’m not used to being observed in such a manner. Most humans don’t see my true nature after all.”* She paused to sniff the air for a moment, then added, *“But you’re not from here, are you?”*

*“I’m what you might call a traveller,”* he answered vaguely.

*“I have not known someone able to travel between worlds before,”* she answered, clearly fascinated. *“And I see you have a way with Deities as well.”*

*“Deities?”* he asked, before realising what she meant. *“Oh, Hoo? He’s my familiar, but I don’t think there’s anything Divine about him.”*

*“I beg to differ!”* Hoo remarked proudly.

The lady nodded, backing him up.

*“I haven’t met a lot of Benevolent spirits like yourself before,”* Koios said. *“I would be interested in forming a familiar contract with you, if you would lend me your power.”*

The lady adjusted her seated posture slightly, before asking, *“And what would I gain in return? It sounds very one-sided to me.”*

*“A headache!”* Hoo immediately replied. Before Koios could protest however, he went on to add, *“But you would also be able to help people and the worlds they live in. Koios is a talented child when it comes to dispelling Tormenting spirits.”*

*“Tormenting spirits?”* she asked.

*“Spirits like the ones which afflict the minds of humans or other living thinking creatures. They are often the root cause of wars or great tragedies, but, as Hoo says, I have a natural ability to deal with them.”*

The fox lady seemed to think about it for a bit, but then she said, “*Very well, but in return I need you to help someone.*”

## *Five*

Koios was unsure why, but he experienced an intense feeling of apprehension as he wandered into the building, with many students of his age group all around him. He had never been good around kids his own age, but there was a mix of excitement within him, even though part of him also felt very out-of-place.

The spirits of Hoo and the fox lady ‘Kohaku’ were accompanying him, talking amongst themselves, while only Koios could see and hear them. Currently, they were debating their favourite types of foods, which he tried his best not to pay attention to, as he already had to hear about it constantly from the owl.

Kohaku had asked him to help a particular girl who was the same age as him, and had deemed entering this ‘high school’ as the best way for him to get in contact with her. The fox lady had somehow been able to arrange for him to stay with the family that tended the temple where her shrine lay, as well as setting up his sudden entry into the winter term of a second-year class.

Using her powers of transformation, Kohaku had altered his clothes to the uniform that all boys wore in this particular school: black trousers and a black tall-necked jacket with bronze buttons, not to mention black shoes to go along with the outfit. Even though he knew that his real clothes were still on his body, his eyes and senses were fooled into believing he was actually wearing the school uniform. It was a very bizarre sensation.

Koios had in the past possessed a Tormentor’s spirit which had a similar transformative property, but it had managed to escape from its teacup vessel and had been a good lesson for him in being more careful with the sort of objects he chose to confine spirits within.

After passing through the doors, he was greeted by a guy standing next to a bunch of lockers, where other students were putting their shoes and withdrawing some kind of slippers that seemed mandatory to wear indoors.

Many of the students eyed Koios curiously as they came in all around him. It had not taken him long to notice that he was the only person with white hair. The world he was from, Merriddia, had a vast selection of naturally occurring hair colours, while Earth seemed quite plain by comparison.

“You should have changed my hair as well,” he whispered to the fox hopping around in front of him.

*“Why? I think it looks nice.”*

Koios frowned. The point of a disguise was to fit in, but he was very much standing out. Granted, even with his hair thin and black like the people around him, his facial structure was too angular and rugged to fit in.

The guy by the lockers waved at him and said, “Hey! You’re the new transfer student, right?”

Koios walked up to him and said, “Nice to meet you. I might need some help fitting in, I think.”

He laughed in response. “Don’t worry!” he assured him kindly. “I’m Watanabe Kazuha, but you can just call me Kazuha.”

Koios almost reached out to clasp his arm in greeting, but then remembered that they didn’t do that in this world. It was hard to forget the mannerisms and gestures of previous worlds every time he moved between realms.

“My name’s Koios,” he replied. In the language of this world, his name came out like ‘Koiosu’.

“No family-name?”

Koios shrugged. “I suppose not.” For a bit, he had thought about adopting the family-name of the people who had let him stay with them at the temple, but he wasn’t planning on staying long, so it didn’t matter too much, he thought.

“Are you from outside Japan?” Kazuha asked.

“You could say that,” Koios replied vaguely.

“Ooh, mysterious, the girls love guys like that,” he said with a grin. His cheeks had charming dimples and his smiling brown eyes and tussled hairstyle gave him a very easy-going aura that Koios quite fancied. The children of Oblus had been distant-eyed and cold, so it was nice to feel welcome for once.

“You should put these on,” he then said, handing Koios a pair of slippers.

“Where should I put my shoes?”

“I don’t think they have a locker for you yet, so you can just put them in mine,” he replied, pointing to a locker with his name on it.

After putting his boots disguised as shoes into Kazuha's locker, Koios was given a brief tour of the school, though for the most part it was a simple enough layout for him to memorise. The main building had all the classrooms, with three different floors, one for each of the three grades. There were two wings, accessible through corridors from the second floor: one for things like special classes like cooking, science, and music; the other for clubs, of which Kazuha said there were quite a few, though Koios didn't bother remembering the many types that he listed. Behind the main building and between the wings was a courtyard, behind which was a big hall that served both for school assemblies and gym. There was also a pool, though it was unused at this time of year.

When the tour concluded, they stood before a classroom that a sign above the door said was '2-E'. There was a total of seven classes per grade and, according to Kazuha, most had over thirty students, with 2-E having thirty-eight. Forewarned that so many kids his age would be confined to such a small room, Koios was awaiting total pandemonium when Kazuha opened the door.

Though there was a bit of murmuring from the many seated students, it was very organised, which surprised Koios greatly. As one, everyone looked towards them as they came through the door.

"Thank you, Watanabe-san," said the teacher, then Koios' guide went to sit by an available desk near the back.

"Everyone," the teacher continued, instantly restoring control of the room, "This is our new transfer student, Koios." Then he turned to look at him and said, "Go up to the board and write your name, then introduce yourself briefly."

Koios nodded. After taking the chalk that lay in a metal tray below the blackboard, he began to write out his name, before pausing to look at the letters he had drawn: Oblus' Sigil Script.

After quickly erasing it, which elicited a bit of laughter from the seated students, he wrote out his name in simple letters of this world's alphabet.

"Don't you have a family-name?" someone asked.

Koios turned around to address them and said, "I don't have any parents, so I wasn't given a family-name."

A sudden awkward silence fell across the students, before the teacher came over, scratching his neck in obvious discomfort. "Erm... Koios-san, you can sit next to Imai-san in the back and borrow her textbooks for the lessons."

Koios nodded and found his seat. He realised belatedly that everyone besides him had a bag that they placed either under or next to their desks. It was just another thing to make him stand apart. He let out a sigh, maybe he should hurry up and just go to the next world. Hopefully rain wasn't so rare on Earth as it was on Oblus, so that he didn't need to stick around for months.

After sitting down next to the short-haired girl the teacher had referred to as Imai, she scooted her desk closer to his, before moving her textbook over onto the middle of where they met. No sooner did the teacher resume the lesson about some kind of language history and stories that was to Koios like the rambling of a madman, though it also reminded him of the Genius who he had extracted the Nightmare Feeder from.

"I'm Imai Rena," the girl whispered. Koios nodded in response, figuring that he ought to stay quiet like the rest of the diligent students.

"Your name, is it Greek?" she asked.

Koios turned to look at her, but when their eyes met she suddenly looked away. "Greek?" he asked, also in a whisper.

"You know, like the country?"

For a brief moment, he almost blurted out "This world has more than one country and language!?" but he managed to stop himself and simply replied, "I don't know."

Koios had spent too long on Oblus and now its peculiarities were tainting his perception of other worlds. After all, it was a unique world where all inhabitants spoke the same language and had the same culture and history. Merriddia had been a multi-cultural world with hundreds of nations and thousands of languages, but it was easy to forget that such worlds existed after living in Oblus for just a week, because it was so oppressively-uniform and quickly made your mind conform to that singular thinking.

While the lessons passed by at an agonisingly-slow pace, I had Kohaku point out the girl I was supposed to be helping, as I had been deliberately placed in the same class as her for the very purpose.

"*See the girl with the long hair and braid?*" The fox was sitting atop Koios' head, while Hoo was hopping around atop his desk.

"The one up front?" he whispered so only the familiars could hear.

*“It’s not a big Tormentor, but it seems hoo-hoo troublesome.”*

Unprompted, the spirit owl granted Koios his sight and as the classroom was washed over in the bizarre light, like the reflections of some unseen ocean, he immediately spotted the twisted aura of the girl. From the shape of it, it was clearly a Vague, and given its shape and texture, he had to agree with the owl. For it was like a dense cloud that leaned down onto the girl’s shoulder, like some overbearing wraith.

“It’s a Curseborn,” Koios stated.

*“A curse!?! Who would curse her!?! She’s such a sweet child!”* Kohaku complained.

Koios started biting the nail of his thumb, trying to figure out exactly what sort of curse could be the cause of the Vague. Some Curseborn could be dispelled by getting rid of the catalyst that kept it alive, while others were like pseudo-possession that had to be untangled from the victim’s mind. There were many other kinds too, no doubt, but he had very limited experience with curses and the last one he had encountered had nearly killed him.

*“I’m afraid we’ll have to stick around for a while for this,”* Hoo remarked.

Koios grumbled annoyed.