Cassia hated the rain. She hated the way it hissed as it spattered against her hoodie, the constant subtle fizz of chemicals trying and failing to get through the teflon lining. Even out here she couldn’t get away from the influence of the city, it was as if it pervaded every last nook and cranny of this planet, worming its way into every corner of her life. There was a time when its vile touch had remained inside the walls, but these days that was a distant memory. Every scar in the land, every crater, it was impossible to miss. Most didn’t risk going outside the city walls, but Cassia liked it out here - it was quiet, away from others, and it meant she didn’t have to interact with anyone whilst working, something she didn’t like doing at the best of times. Her bag was full of broken tech, bits and pieces that she’d salvaged from the pockmarked ground. There had supposedly once been cities as far as the eye could see, endless streets and buildings, but nowadays there was nothing but radioactive gouges taken out of the earth, littered with the remains of what once was.

Cassia sighed as she approached the city, natural wolven grace allowing for easy navigation of the otherwise treacherous path. It didn’t look like much from the outside, sheer metal walls stretching upwards as far as the eye could see, a soul-crushing grey all the way up. She’d sometimes wondered if they would notice if the outside was painted a cheery colour like yellow or something - those in charge never really came out here after all, and she liked to imagine it wouldn’t be noticed for a long time if someone decided to spend a year or so doing it. Regardless there were plenty of old access doors near the bottom, huge clanking affairs that complained in screeching metal tones every time they were opened, and it was through one of these that she was able to get back into Border 14 with her haul. Calling Border 14 a town would be something of a stretch - it was little more than a collection of those with no place to call their own, more than a slum but only just. Everyone here was looking out for themselves, and that was the way Cassia preferred - she preferred solitary life, and not having to deal with other people was a benefit she valued highly. Still, that didn’t mean she could avoid contact completely: after all she had to make a living somehow, and there was only one dragon she knew that was willing to buy salvaged artifacts.

Algrax’s store was not much to look at from the outside, a dimly lit shack of rusting metal held together by string and prayers, but it did provide a roof to keep the rain out and more importantly it had a few old tools that Algrax himself could use for repair. He often bought old technology, spent some time repairing it and then tried to sell it off again with varying degrees of success. It was almost stereotypical for a dragon - instead of hoarding gold he hoarded technology, albeit in various states of repair. His size often varied depending on how much he was able to get from selling these, with good days being marked by his head bumping the ceiling. He was a nice round 6ft tall right now, which meant his last big sale was a few days ago. He was busy peering through a complex series of lenses when he heard the door open.

“Dawn?” He waited for an answer, and when none came he nodded. “Ahh, Cassia. Just leave it on the table please.” He didn’t look up as he heard the now familiar clunk of salvaged tech being dropped onto his table, waiting for Cassia to retreat back into the shadows near the back of the store. The wolf was notoriously shy, and he’d learned from experience to just be chill about her lack of interaction - she could hear everything, and just because there was no acknowledgement didn’t mean that she wasn’t agreeing. “Well, let’s see what we’ve got.” He wheeled his chair over to the table, emptying the bag and taking a look through. “Busted, busted… might be able to pull the servo out of this. This is a maybe, I’ll take it but no guarantees so it’ll be a lower price. Busted, mega busted - that thing’s been beaten up, good lord. 5 inches for everything.”

He waited a little bit, expecting some kind of rebuttal - 5 inches was not a lot for several usable pieces, and they both knew he was lowballing. That being said there were very few other places that would take these, and most of them were far enough away that it wasn’t worth the hassle of getting there.

“Deal.” An arm extended out of the darkness, and Algrax grasped it, feeling the familiar cold grasp as a few inches of his size was taken. The shape in the dark grew a little larger before the arm retreated.

“That’s the reason I like you Cassia, I never have to haggle. You make everything a lot easier.” He chuckled. “I’m here all day if you’re doing another quick run.” He didn’t wait for an answer as he returned to his workbench, and sure enough he heard the sound of the now empty bag being grabbed and his door opening and closing again.

It was still raining as Cassia made her way to the gate. There was a face mask built into her hoodie, and she pulled it over her face as she looked up at the city. She’d always hated the sight of it, nothing but steel and glass stretching high into the sky - they were obsessed with size, even those with enough to tower over the planet. Hell, a few had even eschewed the traditional compression rings and opted simply to wear their immense size, giants both in the industry and in the world too. You could see them occasionally striding between buildings, looming over everything. The wolf had never been a part of that life, you had to be born into it really and she was very far from being a part of one of those families. No, she had to make do with the scraps down here, where every inch was fought for and there was a real risk of shrinking out - the slang term for losing all of your mass. Nobody really knew if it was real, but supposedly consciousness needed a critical mass of size to work. Lose too much, and your mind would just stop working, rendering you little more than a glob of tiny particles, lost with all the rest. For those that had to use their size for sustenance in place of food it was a daily reminder, the end of the line. She’d never heard of anyone coming back from that size, and she certainly wasn’t keen on testing out whether the rumour was true.

Still, she had enough time for a run in the closer sections at least, and that was exactly what she was going to do. She pulled her hoodie tighter around her as gate 14 opened with the usual screech of rusted metal, admitting her to the wastelands beyond the walls. Her previous trip had been a long one, almost a day and half out in search of the rarer treasures where most others dared not tread, but she had no intention of being out here after dark with her supplies drained. Instead she took a shorter route just an hour or so away from the walls, to the ruins of a church she’d often visited. It was a dilapidated building but somehow, despite everything, there was some intact stained glass in there. Just a few pieces initially, but she’d slowly put those shards back together and painstakingly recreated it, just so she could have something nice to look at every now and then. She made her way there with nothing eventful happening on the way, but when she arrived she noticed something strange - there was someone else already there. Immediately she hid near the wall, trying her best not to be noticed as she sidled closer. This wasn’t some commonly visited spot near the outer wall: this was a secluded little section further out into the wastelands, and there was barely anyone willing to even go out this far, let alone find this spot. She was about to leave when she heard breathing, ragged and shallow. Whoever it was they were in bad shape, and as she peeked through a little hole in the brickwork she saw an old crocodile trailing blood along the ground. He had been shot with something, and while the wound was bandaged the blood had soaked through and was gently dripping on the stone. He collapsed into a half-broken pew, sighing loudly and wincing as his side hit the unforgiving wood.

Cassia knew she should go, she knew that being anywhere near him this far out was a bad idea. Hell, she didn’t go near other people at the best of times, and this was far from the best. But something in her head was telling her to go inside and talk to him, a part that didn’t often pipe up. Instinct, something she trusted just as much as her mind. And so she took a deep breath, readied the blade holstered near her back, and walked into the church.

“H-hello?” The crocodile heard her footsteps, looking around nervously - a fellow wastelander judging by the reaction it seemed. Cassia approached warily regardless, making sure that the exit was in sight at all times, ready to bolt on a moment’s notice. The pair of them met eyes, and somehow the crocodilian knew her in that instant, knew that she was ready to run rather than fight.

“Oh come now, I’m far from physically capable of fighting you right now.” He laughed, although the sound was interrupted by a pained wince and a noticeable ooze of blood from beneath his bandages. Cassia didn’t respond, she merely held her distance, simply waiting for him to do something. For a moment the silence held, nothing but the faint patter of rain on brickwork, a natural drumbeat of chaotic tempo. It gave her time to take in more of his appearance - the tell-tale signs of wet wiring, tech augments grafted to his bones, the now shattered visor that had once hovered over his right eye. He wasn’t one of the slum habitants, no this was someone from the city. Someone high up judging by the amount of tech he had on him and in him.

The crocodile meanwhile noticed what she was looking at and sighed. “Yeah, not what you were expecting I’m guessing. After all, it’s not like the city types to turn on each other. Guess when people are backed into a corner they’ll do all sorts of things.” He winced yet again as he pulled something out of his coat, placing it onto the pew. It looked like a crystal ball, the actual crystal a relatively dull black but with faint glimmers of light flickering through it. Cassia recognised it as one of the city computers, the newer models created as 3d structures engraved on crystal. This one looked ominously denser though, like there was something other than circuitry hiding in there. After a moment of hesitation she picked it up and it immediately lit up inside, some programming instantly using the touch connection to interface with her mind and broadcast what seemed to be a menu. It was an illusion, a technology induced hallucination that only she could see, but still the crocodile looked pleased at the result.

“Huh. They spent years in the lab trying to get it to work.” He smiled, leaning back in the pew and looking to the roof. “Fate has a funny way with these things. I would tell you the full story of that thing, but I don’t think I’d live to see the end of it. I will tell you that I stole it, that those who have possessed it have always used it for bad things, and that now it’s yours to do with as you will.”

“I…don’t want it.” Cassia could feel some huge conspiracy encroaching upon her, like she was touching the tip of an iceberg and feeling the weight behind it. She wanted to throw that orb as far as she could, never touch it again, but that was not an option. The last thing she wanted was to be thrust into the limelight though. “I’m going to sell it.”

“You know, I was hoping you’d….ngh….you’d say that. I don’t think….anyone that has….wanted…..” his head lolled back as the words died on his tongue, his eyes glazing over as they unfocused. Cassia was used to seeing death but this seemed almost peaceful, the end of an era. It wasn’t until he’d passed that Cassia realised she didn’t even know his name. The orb was still there, waiting patiently for command, and rather than put it in her bag and forget about it she figured she would at least understand what it was on the walk back to the city. It took her a little while to realise this thing seemed to generate size - it tallied up a colossal number, and then it would deduct from that number in order to grant her size. There was a limit and timer, presumably to restrict how much she could take and for how long. She didn’t know how or why it worked, only that this could potentially grow her to an unthinkable height if the total number was to be believed, and if she could get past the restrictions. Perhaps the old crocodile was right about fate working in funny ways - for anyone else this would have been a goldmine, but Cassia was perhaps the one wolf that wouldn’t just take this and run. She knew better than anyone that something like this would have people trying to kill you to get to it, and besides she wasn’t after some infinite size generator. She would sell it for enough to set herself up for life, and then she would wash her hands of it.

She hid it in her backpack before she got to the gate, making sure to look disappointed so that nobody would think she had anything on her. It worked long enough for her to get to Algrax’s place, where the dragon was as always still working on something.

“Huh, guess that last minute trip was fruitful then.” Algrax chuckled as Cassia approached, pulling her bag off her back as she did. It made a satisfying clunk as it hit the table, and he slid his chair over to get a better look. The moment the orb was removed from the bag his eyes widened and he did a double take. “Ohh woah woah, where the hell did you get this?”

Cassia didn’t respond, but she did step slightly out of the shadows upon hearing his reaction. He was not one to get excited over anything really, but what really caught her attention was the fact that he recognised it. “You know what it is?”

“I’ve heard the stories. Never believed most of them myself, but then again…” He picked it up, noting that it remained a dull black as he touched it. “Not working by the looks of it, but no doubt.” He leaned back in his chair, putting the sphere back on the table and addressing Cassia directly. “This is a Skeleton Engine. A long time ago a bunch of these all fitted into one big supercomputer, back when they were building the city. Over time they were lost or destroyed, but I guess some of them are still out there. Not sure how you found it, but truth be told I don’t care. I couldn’t fix this thing with all the gear in the world, nor am I even going to attempt to.” He rolled over to his desk, grabbing the phone there. “I’ll be honest I have nowhere near the funds to pay you for this thing, but I know some people who do. Let me make some calls and I’ll meet you in the morning. Until then keep it safe, tell nobody about it. Don’t be late.”

For a second Cassia let the silence hang, wondering if she should speak up. She knew full well that Algrax could have just lied to her, taken the Engine and told her it was worth very little. All manner of things that she wouldn’t have been surprised by, and yet he was now protecting her.

“Why?”

Algrax seemed almost surprised at the question. “Because if anyone deserves to get out from underneath the city’s thumb it’s you. Besides, I don’t think you realise how much this thing will sell for, it’s enough for several lifetimes of comfy living. I’m gonna negotiate myself a chunk for selling it if I can.” He grinned. “Trick of the trade, make sure everyone is cut in on the deal. People are a lot easier to read if you know what’s motivating them, and nothing motivates like size.”

Cassia simply nodded, stuffed the orb back into her bag and left, her mind churning away. She’d never fully trusted Algrax in the past, but right now it felt like he was the key to her freedom, giving her enough size to live out her life in the wastelands, away from everyone else. She could trust him long enough to get that far, she was sure. All that was left to do now was wait.

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Morning came like a sickness, slowly and grimly. Cassia wasn’t in a particularly good mood as she approached Algrax’s shack, her bag slung across her shoulder. All of this felt deeply unnatural - she’d never even heard of this contact. The fact that he even knew someone with enough money to set them both up for life was worrying, because her instincts were telling her it had to be someone from the city, and she trusted city-dwellers about as far as she could throw them. A part of her wanted to just take the size the Engine could loan and run, but after some testing last night she wasn’t able to get past the limiters, and even worse it seemed that those restrictions got more severe the more size she took, as if she was tapping into something forbidden. Every time she’d taken size it had inevitably been taken back, leaving her at exactly the point she’d started at minus whatever she used whilst larger - net zero overall. If she wanted enough size to retire, she’d need to play ball with whoever Algrax had found to buy it.

As she approached she could see fancy vehicles parked around the back of the shack, the chrome and metal a dead giveaway. Rather than reveal herself immediately she decided to scout it out a little bit first, to make sure she had a way out in case things went south. As she peered inside she could see Algrax talking with someone, winged but with fur and dressed in a long coat. A moth of some kind, and yet she was a good head taller than Algrax and currently talking sternly to him.

“You promised me punctuality, and yet now I am waiting despite your blustering promises. You could not afford a second of my time, and yet you deign to waste this much?”

“I’m sorry, but she should be here any minute now. Just be a little patient.”

“Tch, patience is not something I value. I knew this was too good to be true, you are simply lying to me, you wretched little cretin!”

As much as she wanted to run she couldn’t just abandon Algrax, and so she took a deep breath and pushed the door in.

“Ahh, finally. Did you just forget about this deal, or are you intentionally wasting my time?” Cassia didn’t grace her with a response, instead simply removing the backpack and reaching inside. “Not much of a talker I see, well I suppose that makes things easier. My name is Evelyn, and you dear have something I need. Place it there on the table, and I shall make you richer than you ever imagined.”

Cassia was about to pull the orb out when she noticed Algrax - the dragon was staring at her, and then looking up to the ceiling, to the walls, all around the shack. She realised that she’d seen several vehicles outside, and yet only one person in here - the rest were nowhere to be seen. Or perhaps they were right here, and she had walked into the middle of them. Her breath quickened as she slowly pulled the orb out, buying herself as much time as possible, stopping just as she pulled it out. Evelyn practically gasped as she saw it.

“My, it’s just as I imagined.” She pulled out a glowing cube, a personal account presumably filled to the brim with size judging by the glow. “On the table now, if you will.”

“Payment first.” Algrax leaned forwards, suddenly agitated. “Oh, and don’t lean cross my table. You damage it and we’re charging you double.”

Cassia tuned out the indignant response from the moth, reading between the lines. He said cross, not across. Double the payment. Double cross: he was telling her what was about to happen. She looked back up at them both, and then wordlessly began to put the orb back into the bag.

“Ugh, you miserable - enough! We do this now!” As she finished the sentence the walls practically exploded, various soldiers pushing through the flimsy stone with guns raised. Cassia was already prepared for it though, immediately grabbing the orb and pulling a huge chunk of size, not caring about the penalty in the heat of the moment. In the blink of an eye she was twice as tall as the house itself, energy charges sizzling harmlessly off her fur, and she used the size to give the ground a colossal kick, throwing up a huge cloud of dust and rubble. The momentary blindness was all she needed to shrink back down and sprint out, making her way for the nearest shack so as to break line of sight. Of course they were immediately spreading out to search for her, but instead of growing she reduced her size even further until she was inches tall, quietly slipping away under the cover of various rocks and bits of building strewn everywhere. Most likely they knew she was a wasteland runner and would predict she would flee there, and sure enough she saw a large contingent head towards the gate. The rest gathered back at the now ruined shack, and as Cassia tried to sneak away she noticed Algrax was lying in the ruins. Evelyn picked him up by the throat, holding him aloft with fury in her eyes.

“This is your doing, isn’t it? You should be thankful I don’t shrink you out right here and now!” She shook him for emphasis. “I’ll give you one last chance, tell me where she is.”

For a moment Cassia froze. Algrax would know, he’d known her practically all her life. They thought the same way.

“I…have no….idea….” He gasped for air as Evelyn dropped him to the ground, choking and coughing.

“I’d kill you for this, but you’re not even worth the paperwork. I’ll settle for taking everything else from you.” She gestured to the soldiers, who began systematically shooting every last bit of rubble they could find. Algrax could only watch as his life’s work evaporated before his eyes, and for the first time in a long time Cassia felt rage burning inside her. This was wrong, and as always it was the fault of the city. He had risked his life to warn her, and this was his reward - it wasn’t fair, and she knew it. Before her plan had simply been to not get caught, to escape, but now the fire of revenge had been lit. She knew exactly what the old dragon would have told her, where he would have suggested going. It was on the other side of the city, but long distances didn’t scare her - she lived with them, breathed them. She grew back to her normal size, checking the Engine as she did so - it was throwing up all kinds of warning signs, and the timer had been pushed up to a few days now. It would be useless for the first leg of her trip, but her destination was far enough that by the time she arrived it would once again be recharged and ready. At least that’s what she hoped as she pulled her hood over her head and began to walk.

The resistance was something of an old legend. A group of people fighting against the city, David vs Goliath if David was a paraplegic and Goliath had a rocket launcher. It was hard to believe such a thing could still exist, and yet the whispers told of a base on the east side of the city, several hundred miles away but reachable. She didn’t know what she was going to do exactly, but she knew that what had happened to Algrax was not going to happen to anyone else, not anymore. She didn’t plan on fighting herself mind you - her shyness practically forbade it - but surely there would be someone there that could make use of the Engine. The leader of the resistance, that was who she would find. With a goal in mind she set out, the backpack weighing heavily against her shoulders.

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The city had always been enormous, bolstered by the size that the inhabitants hoarded for themselves, and it had only grown larger over the years. At some point the walls had been put up to keep it from expanding outwards, but that just meant it expanded upwards instead - skyscrapers so tall you could see the tops piercing through the clouds, endless glass and steel stretching skywards as if to meet with the gods themselves. There were actually two walls, the inner and the outer barrier, and it was between these two that the resistance had supposedly holed up. Supposedly because nobody was really sure if they were real or not. Sure Cassia had heard the stories, but it was one thing to believe them, and another thing entirely to stake your future on them. She could feel the nerves like little wires up and down her arms, jitters that she struggled to keep under control, but she calmed herself with the thought that soon she’d be able to hand this thing off and retreat back into the shadows.

It was almost a week of walking before she found anything remotely promising, much of the time spent investigating absolutely everything she found on her journey. The orb had taken 3 days before allowing her to pull size out again, but the journey had been largely uneventful - she hadn’t needed the size, to the point where she’d almost forgotten it locked her out. She’d just checked it on a whim a while afterwards and saw it was ready once again. She also didn’t know what the base was supposed to look like, only that it wouldn’t be obvious and would probably be underground. The city guard didn’t come out here often but she couldn’t imagine a legitimate resistance acting in broad daylight, so she checked every nook and cranny, everything that could even be considered an entrance. What tipped her off in the end were the people nearby - most of the inhabitants of these outer sections were far from well-off, thin and sickly. Thus when she noticed a relatively muscular wolf casually chatting with someone she immediately smelled a rat, and decided to keep an eye on him. He didn’t direct her to an entrance exactly, but she noticed he was sticking to a certain area and rarely strayed further out, meaning chances were he was guarding something. After so long walking she wasn’t going to risk it being nothing, and so she played it slow, sticking around and watching closely. After a couple of days she saw him enter a building and another muscular wolf come out - a shift change perhaps, but either way she never saw the first wolf come back out again. The building in question was a shack like any other, but she was sure it was the entrance to something bigger. She waited until the new guard was preoccupied, and with one last furtive look over her shoulder she entered the shack.

She was expecting some kind of tunnel, but there was just an old wolf sitting at a table, casually shuffling some cards. He looked up as she entered, raising an eyebrow as he failed to recognise her - newcomers weren’t exactly common around these parts.

“Welcome traveller, can I interest you in a game?” The wolf shuffled the cards with an expertise born from years of practice, wizened fingers a blur as they flipped the cardboard to and fro.

“I…am here for the resistance.”

The shuffling stopped, and suddenly the air grew heavy and dangerous. The wolf looked at her in a new light, a mixture of cautiousness and intrigue.

“How direct. And what if I were to say no?”

Cassia bit her tongue. She knew this was a test, that she should just walk away, and yet after so long searching it was hard to do just that. She hitched her bag, turned around and began to walk towards the door.

“Alright, you can turn around.” The wolf grinned as she stopped and turned. “One thing I have to know though, word’s been spreading about some wastelander with a bounty on her head. Dunno what’s got them all worked up, but I figured they might end up here sooner or later.” He tilted his head. “Sound familiar?”  
  
“I wouldn’t know.” Cassia didn’t reveal anything as the wolf shrugged, reached below the table and pulled a lever, revealing a trapdoor in the floor.

“Boss’ll be waiting for ya, I wouldn’t keep him waiting.”

There was a ladder in the passage, and Cassia climbed down it with some trepidation, already regretting her decisions. Being closed in like this was not helping her nerves, and she pulled the bag closer to her chest as she descended. At the bottom was a small space and a cloakroom, and then a door leading into a much larger chamber. It seemed like one big hall, various smaller rooms offshooting here and there but all on the same level - too difficult to dig further down, she supposed. Right at the other end was a dragon in a tattered suit, the jacket full of holes and the tie singed off at the bottom. She felt very self-conscious as she crossed the room, made even more so when he turned towards her and raised an eyebrow.

“Not often I get visitors. You got a reason for being here?” His voice was gruff yet friendly, although it did little to set her mind at ease - the result of being around too many people at once. She didn’t speak, but instead gestured to one of the nearby rooms, one that thankfully had a door. The dragon nodded, addressing the people around him. “Would you excuse me for a few minutes? I’ll be right back.” He extricated himself out from the crowd, leading Cassia to the room and closing the door behind them once they were inside. It was cramped, little more than 2 chairs and a table, but that was fine by Cassia.

“Alright, what’s so important that it had to be behind closed doors? I don’t recognise you, which means you’ve figured out this place on your own, and that’s the only reason I’m entertaining you right now.”

As a response Cassia simply pulled her bag off her shoulder, reached in and pulled out the orb. The dragon’s eyes widened as she placed it on the table.

“It IS you. I heard stories of a bounty going up for someone with a Skeleton Engine, I just didn’t think they’d be walking through my door.” He reached for it but Cassia pulled it back, a small movement but the dragon got the message. “Fair enough, I haven’t even introduced myself yet. I’m Orzax, leader of the resistance.”

“Cassia.” The dragon waited for something else, letting the silence hang in the air for a little while, but Cassia didn’t break it. Eventually he just nodded, sitting back in his chair.

“A fine name. Tell me Cassia, you came all this way to present this to me, and yet you seem hesitant. I take it you’ve figured out what it does?”

“Somewhat.” She was reluctant to divulge any information, but judging by the dragon’s smile he was well-versed in the technology.

“Let me guess, you couldn’t get past the limiters. Anything you take just goes right back.” He chuckled. “Cards on the table, I know exactly how to get that size out. I’ve been looking for an Engine for years now, but while I was hunting I’ve collected every last piece of information I could get my hands on about them too. You give it to me, and I’ll make us both bigger than your wildest dreams. Sounds like a pretty good deal to me.”

It did sound like a good deal, but the truth was Cassia didn’t trust him, not yet. She’d known manipulators over the years, and the dragon reeked of the subtle art of people pleasing, tweaking his body language and his tone to try and sync them both up. Invisible to most, but to her they were giant red flags - he was a talker, and talkers always had their own agendas. She couldn’t let him know that though, and remaining silent was not an option - she didn’t want him figuring her out.

“And how do I know you’re not lying, that you won’t just lend me size that will go back once you’ve got it in your hands?”

For the first time Orzax looked a little annoyed. “Trust goes both ways, how do I know it’s real?” Cassia just looked at him after that comment, and he sighed. “Alright, what do you want?”

“Enough size to disappear.”

“Easy enough, if I may.” He reached forwards for the orb but Cassia pulled it back, causing him to sigh again. “Tell me, what do you want to do with this size?”

It was a question Cassia had thought about. At first she’d wanted to disappear, but then she remembered Algrax’s face as his store was destroyed, the pain in his eyes. She thought of poverty and luxury side by side, the whole dirty system, and it sickened her. She wanted it gone, that was why she’d come here in the first place, and it seemed that Orzax could tell as he looked at her.

“That’s my business.” She tried to stay neutral but it was too late - Orzax could see the rage in her eyes, a rage he’d seen all too often in those wanting to join his resistance.

“On the contrary, it’s *our* business now. After all, you’ve got a bounty on your head, and I don’t see any other buyers lining up. In fact I think they’d sooner put a plasma bolt through your chest. Besides, if you sell it to the city you know they’re only going to make things worse for everyone else. If you want your size, and more importantly if you want your justice, then I’m your only option.”

Cassia scowled. “What if I were to walk out of here right now, with your precious Engine in my bag?”

Orzax just leaned back and smiled, a greasy, condescending smirk born from the knowledge that he was in control now. “Door’s over there.” He gestured, waiting a couple of seconds just to make the point. Both of them knew she wasn’t going anywhere, and Cassia muttered a curse under her breath.

“Payment first.” she practically spat, hating that she was playing into his hands now.

“Well I’m a little short of life-changing amounts of size right now, especially since you’re not lending that Engine, but fortunately I can fix that. There’s a size storage facility on the outskirts of the city, guarded but not very well. Tag along and give us a hand, and I can have your payment by the end of the day.” He raised an eyebrow. “Or would you prefer to wait?”

Cassia felt like punching him in his smug face, but only because she’d been cornered into this. He held all the cards, he could demand whatever he wanted and if she wanted this purchase she’d have to play along. There was some satisfaction in knowing what the Engine would be used for, but it still felt like she had no choice, that Orzax was just forcing her into it.

“No. I’m not going into the city, not for you. If I have to wait then I will.” She knew it was futile, but she was damned if she just gave in without a fight.

“Come now, you’ve come all this way and you’re just going to falter right at the last step?” The dragon leaned forwards, his eyes locked on her. “If we fail it will be weeks before we can try again. Help us once, and in a few hours you’re rich, and we’ll never bother you again. You seem like the type that prefers solitude, hm?”

Once more Cassia found herself intensely disliking the dragon - she hated the feeling of being slowly manipulated into doing what he wanted, but she supposed when your enemy was this powerful you needed to be capable of stuff like this.

“I want to be at least planet-sized.”

“I’ll take that as a yes.” He held out his hand and after a beat Cassia shook it.

That was how she found herself entering a broken part of the inner wall with a group of other soldiers. She’d not brought any weapons save for the Engine, which after so long without real use was offering her plenty of options again. Not that she had any intention of fighting, that was what the soldiers were for. The facility they were targeting was on the outskirts of the city, nowhere near the main Spire but heavily guarded nonetheless. These facilities had been the target of several raids by now, meaning they had been assigned some more robust defensive measures. She was also surprised to see Orzax had come along as well - she hadn’t expected the commander to be on the front lines, but judging by the way he was constantly watching her she supposed it was to make sure she didn’t go rogue or anything like that. The prize was in his grasp now, and he wasn’t going to let it out of his sight.

There were a couple of guards at the facility doors, both of them quickly and quietly dispatched by the soldiers without much fuss. The door itself though posed more of a challenge, and they waited for a bit while the techie of the group battled with the lock encryption.

“Mmmmh, you know I think this might be a time when force is required.” Orzax muttered to Cassia in the back of the squad, nudging her with his elbow. “A bit of extra size and you’d be able to break down that door easily.”

God she hated the clear manipulation, trying to get her comfortable with using it, but considering they were sitting ducks out here she didn’t have much of a choice. She reached for the Engine, accessing it with that familiar ping across her brain and a slew of red lights due to the amount of size she was taking, and in the blink of an eye she was 20ft tall.

“Move.” The rest of the crew heeded the warning as she pulled back and punched the door square in the middle, crumpling the metal and sending it flying into the building. Immediately the empty gap was filled with a haze of gunfire, the guards inside clearly waiting for that moment to start firing back. The soldiers dispersed, and Cassia instinctively shrunk herself down before any shots could hit her. She still caught a few stray ones as she ducked out of sight, wincing as the lasers singed her fur. The rest of the crew were firing back, but she also noticed Orzax staying well out of the danger zone, simply watching from a distance as his men laid down their lives for him. Thankfully they were much better shots than those hired to guard this place, and it was only a short firefight before the defences were unconscious or dead and the soldiers were warily walking out from their hiding spots. Cassia shivered as she grew back up to her normal size, disconnecting from the Engine and shoving it back into her bag. Something about manipulating her size as easily as breathing felt…strange. Perhaps because she had never grown up with enough size to do such a thing, or perhaps it was specifically because of the Engine - she’d never felt like this when receiving payment after all.

Their prize was but a door away, an unlocked one this time, and they entered what looked like a server room. Rows upon rows of batteries, all hooked up to a terminal at the front. The soldiers stood to either side as Orzax approached it, quickly typing in a username and password to gain access. There was a hole next to the monitor, and the dragon placed his forearm into it before hitting enter. The room hummed as the batteries were drained, all that size pushed into Orzax’s body, the compression ring on his right hand growing hot from the power transfer. It took almost a minute for all the power to be taken out, and only when the room had grown dark did he finally remove his arm, flexing his fingers as he did so.

“Ahhh. Now then, that wasn’t so hard was it? Let us finish our deal.” He gestured at the soldiers, who began to file out of the room, but waited for them to leave before addressing Cassia. “Planet-sized if I remember correctly? This should be more than enough to get you there, with plenty left over too.” He held out his arm, that smile as always accompanied by a gaze that seemed to penetrate right through her.

“I….one question.” Cassia tilted her head. “What are you doing with the rest of it?”

The smile didn’t leave Orzax’s face. “Distributed evenly amongst the soldiers of course. They deserve their fair share.”

“Mmm, and yet none of them have compression rings. Most barely have enough size to function, and yet you said you raided one of these places recently?” She crossed her arms, for once her anger overriding her shyness. “Where is it?”

It was the first time she had seen Orzax falter, the smile dropping as he took a step back. “What I do and how I conduct myself is none of your business.”

“And you expect me to give you this thing? She pulled the Engine out of her bag, waving it for emphasis. “You market yourself as some resistance fighter, but you’re no better than them!”

“I’m fighting against them, and I need resources to do it. I need that Skeleton Engine.”

“All for yourself?” She gestured to the door the soldiers had gone through. “And I suppose they have to make do, for the good of the resistance. For the *cause*.” The last word dripped with sarcasm. Try as he might Orzax didn’t have a comeback for it - the mask had slipped, and he didn’t have a way to put it back on now.

“We had a deal, payment for the Engine.” He walked forward a couple of steps but stopped when Cassia stepped away, looking like she was about to bolt.

“I’m not giving a damn thing to you!”

“No, you’re not. You’re selling. And unless you want to go home empty-handed I suggest you take the offer. Much like my patience, it will not endure indefinitely.”

Wordlessly Cassia put the Engine back in her bag and turned her back. She had no idea how the hell she was going to sell it, but thanks to the anger now searing through her she knew it wouldn’t be going to this jerk, that was for damn sure. She was about to leave when she felt a hand on her shoulder.

“I’m not the bad guy here, trust me.”

Cassia didn’t say a word, she just waited. She let the rage simmer and boil, but she kept it down inside her, let it froth beneath the surface in a great lake of fury. It felt like her fur was burning - she couldn’t remember the last time she’d despised anyone this much. After a few seconds the hand was removed and she simply walked away. She could feel the dragon’s eyes on her back, and any other time it would have made her feel self-conscious. Only when she was out of sight did she find an alleyway and slide down the wall, gasping as the emotions caught up to her. She was fully aware that she was right in the middle of the city, next to a facility that probably had investigators coming down to check out the disturbance - this was no time to be crying, and yet she wanted to do nothing else. She pulled the Engine out from her backpack, and part of her just wanted to throw the damn thing into the alley. She’d been perfectly fine, carving out her life in the shadows, and just as she had feared it would this thing had dragged her into the light. But there was another part of her saying *pull yourself together, you can get through this.*

She pulled up her hood as she looked around - she had been in the city a few times before, not often but enough that she knew roughly where she was. She also knew that there was someone here she could go to, someone living in the nicer part of the city near the centre. Cutting her losses at this point would be just as hard as getting there, and at least this was someone she trusted - a high end tech dealer that Algrax had done some deals with in the past. She’d met him before, a badger with a gruff disposition but a kind heart. City dwellers coming to the outskirts was rare, and he’d made it very clear that while he benefited from this system he didn’t endorse it. It was Cassia’s only real choice right now, and despite being right in the heart of the city it was a risk she would have to take. The alternative was waiting back on the outskirts with a fake grin and fake promises after all - she shuddered at the thought. A quick check on her bag to make sure it was secure and an adjustment to her hood and mask so that her entire face was covered, and she started making her way towards the Spire.

The inner city was not somewhere that most saw - she’d never actually been to this part, only the outer edges where the architecture was less imposing and the streets slightly dirtier. Behind all the buildings the imposing tower of the Spire loomed, a glinting shard of metal piercing the heavens, adorned with various radio masts and transmitters. Supposedly the whole city had been built around it, spiralling out from the central shaft in layer after layer, and it showed in how the buildings were larger and grander the closer one got. The other feature was the complete lack of decoration - it was nothing but glass and metal, the two seamlessly switching between each other like grafted flesh, twin halves of a soulless whole. In the outskirts you could tell every building apart just by looking at it, read the thoughts and intents of the owners by how their home was put together. Here though, it was impossible - she would have been completely lost had it not been for the signs here and there. The people too were enormous: the average size was around 100ft, even the most average citizens striding between buildings like incarnated gods, the ground shaking from their presence. There was a range of sizes, some going down to around the 60ft mark, but even on them she could see compression rings, their size hidden but still there. Weirdly enough, despite denying her before the Engine allowed her to size up to 60ft as she walked through the city, not even penalising her for it. It was a little worrying that all of a sudden it was fine with such drastic changes, but perhaps getting closer to the city centre was unlocking parts of the code? She didn’t know for sure, but regardless she was grateful for the change allowing her to blend in more efficiently.

Slowly but surely she made her way to the central district, making sure to avoid anywhere with too many cameras. Any kind of public transport was out of the question, but that was fine - she was used to walking, and besides it gave her time to think about everything, about the people she’d met so far after being thrust into this mess. At first it had been simple enough, take the lucky find and sell it off, but in doing so she’d gotten those around her hurt. Algrax, who knew exactly what would happen if he tipped her off and still did it anyway, never deserved any of this. He’d paid the price, and for what? Who had she been benefitting? Orzax, the leader with only his own interests at heart and his own pockets as his priority, or Evelyn, the rich city buyer with no morals or ethics - she’d been a fool to think anyone that would buy it would be doing it for the good of everyone. If she sold it now she’d be just as bad as the soldiers that had destroyed Algrax’s place - all she had left was the device itself, something that Algrax had told her when he first saw it. Even before that, the dying crocodile - he’d known from the start, that anyone who wanted it would use it with bad intentions. That was why he was happy to hear her rejection, it confirmed she had the right mentality. Now she was in the centre of the city, a bounty on her head and no chance of selling the Engine even if she wanted to. There were two options: one was to run and hide, like she had always done. Like she was still about to do right now, run from the problems. The other was to take a risk, to see if this engine really could change things for the better. If anything she owed it to Algrax at the very least - she wasn’t going to let her tendency to run away take over this time.

Eventually she made it to a seemingly nondescript little building, relatively small compared to the towering monstrosities surrounding it. Cassia had only been given this address by Algrax long ago, but she’d memorised it just in case, something she was very grateful for now. Shrinking down she expected the Engine to penalise her, but to her surprise there was nothing, no timer. It worried her that it was becoming easier to use all this size, but she put it out of her mind for now. After a quick look around she knocked on the door, and after a few seconds it was answered by a large otter in a trench coat.

“Can I help you dear?” Her voice was surprisingly soft considering her size, but regardless Cassia was not one to trust immediately.

“You know Algrax.”

Upon hearing those words her face fell, and she looked around furtively. “Come in, in.” She hustled the wolf inside, leading her to the back room, and when Cassia removed her face mask and hood she looked even more worried.

“You know who I am?”

“Darling everyone does by now, you’ve got a bounty on your head.” She pulled out a phone, tapping away for a second before showing it, and sure enough there was her face with a sizable number underneath. “My name’s Ellen, and yes I’ve worked with Algrax in the past. He was my apprentice once, a long time ago.”

“Simple question, how much do you know about this?” Cassia put down her bag and pulled out the Engine, and upon seeing it Ellen gasped.

“Holy shit.” The expletive sounded odd coming from her mouth, like a razor blade in a flower bed. “The stories were true, you have it.” She looked around, a note of worry coming into her face. “Look, you can’t stay here. There’s no cameras in here but I don’t have any appointments and they’re monitoring every inch of the street. In about 5 minutes there’s going to be officers breaking down my door, and I will be forced to cooperate with them. So ask me what you need to and make it fast, because we don’t have time for chit chat.”

“Do you know what this thing actually does? So far it’s modified size but I don’t know how or why.”

Ellen sighed at that, leaning back. “To cut a very long story short, size isn’t owned by anyone in particular. Imagine we live on a waterfall, and at the top there’s a dam. Some people live on the dam and enjoy all the water, others live near the bottom and die of thirst. The Engines are the control modules for the dam, they allow the flow to increase or decrease. Only once that dam was built the ones at the top didn’t want anyone else getting any water, so they destroyed as many of the controls as they could; you’re probably holding the last one still in existence. The Spire is that dam, and instead of water it’s controlling size.”

“How much?”

“In theory all size within this galaxy, plus one light year every year. Stuff gets a bit messy when you have to deal with relativity, but given enough time you could definitely do it. At minimum, when connected to the main system it could alter the size of every living creature on this planet. You’d need access to the primary console though, at the top of the Spire. The Engines are essentially the keys to the system, and the keyhole would be that console. Once you’re in though, well it’s endless power. You could be a god, in charge of everything.”

Cassia sighed. “I’ve got something more…destructive in mind. What would happen if that dam was destroyed?”

“Completely?” She took a moment to think. “Size is essentially energy, and energy follows entropy. Without something holding it in place I suppose it would spread equally. Everyone grows or shrinks to an overall average.” She shook her head. “That’s a guess though, you’d have to be using the system itself to know for sure, and nobody has done that since the other Engines were destroyed. Plus back then there were 5 keys, but now with only one left it might need another conduit, a way to force control in the absence of the rest of the system.”

“A full reset.” She said it with such conviction that she even shocked herself. It was a simple idea, but it condensed a whole mess of complicated feelings into one concise objective. She was determined to make it happen no matter the price.

“I have to tell you though, this is at the top of the Spire - getting close is almost impossible. It would be by force the whole way up, right to -” Ellen was interrupted by a smashing sound, her eyes widening as she heard the unmistakable chatter of police radios coordinating. “No more time, there’s a back door over there. Go go go!” Ellen ushered Cassia into the back room, where sure enough there was a door leading out of the building. She pushed through it just as Ellen was bombarded by police, but as soon as she stepped out she realised she was in trouble - the whole street was surrounded, and it was only sheer luck that she hadn’t been immediately spotted. There was no way around them anymore, and so she engaged the Engine and started running directly towards them. They noticed and quickly started fumbling for weapons, but she didn’t give them a chance to draw them, dashing between both and using a quick burst of size to knock them both aside, dashing to the nearest corner before they had a chance to recover. She had her mask and hood up the whole time, but at this point she wasn’t even sure stealth was going to work - they would pull the cameras from the street and update the picture, and then any kind of disguise would be pointless. The Spire was not far from here though, and although she’d been through a lot today she still had enough gas to run it. And run she did, not a full sprint but rather a fast jog, avoiding the streets and sticking to the shadows where possible. She lowered her size as well, making sure her profile was relatively small so as to draw even less attention.

It was a gauntlet on the way to the Spire - halfway there the police presence seemed to double, and while she did her best to avoid any form of contact stealth grew impossible the closer she got. Walking in the street was basically suicide, but the Spire was at the centre of a large plaza, so one way or another she’d be seen. She stayed as low as she could, but when she got to the plaza itself she was shocked to see it was actually completely empty. Perhaps they didn’t think that guarding it was necessary considering how central it was, or maybe they thought she would be escaping the city rather than going deeper into it - whatever the reason she was relieved to see it. She looked around, took a few deep breaths, and then started sprinting across the plaza.

She got about halfway across before she heard sirens, and she could just tell they were for her. The main entrance to the Spire was a large set of double doors, heavily reinforced but also massive - the top was almost 200ft above the ground, an entranceway made for giants with reinforcing to match. The steel alone was inches thick, the whole entrance reinforced with what looked like girders. She knew it would ask for a retinal scan, so there was no point even trying to break the lock - even if she could it would take too long and she’d be hauled away. So she connected with the Engine, and this time she took more size than she’d ever used before, enough to swell her up to almost 120ft tall. It flashed plenty of warnings at her as she did, but she ignored them - if this worked then she wouldn’t need it anymore. Most of the size went to her muscle density as well, physics adjusting her body composition so that she wouldn’t collapse in on herself, and she got an annoying sense of vertigo as she shot up. If she hadn’t been noticed before she certainly had now, and so she didn’t waste any time - with a quick look around she dropped her shoulder and charged into the door.

The sound was cataclysmic, a great smash that echoed through the lobby as she blasted through the metal, the door crumpling around her shoulder as she sent it flying into the opposite wall, sparks cascading everywhere as the steel scraped along the floor. The Spire wasn’t designed with the public in mind, meaning while there was nobody to get hit by almost 30,000 tons of flying metal, it did end up smashing into a desk of computers and scaring the living hell out of all the guards walking in the main lobby. The surprise only lasted a second though before they saw the colossal wolf in the lobby and started firing.

Cassia pushed the size back out of herself as she dived for the nearest bit of cover, a desk with a steel front that immediately began pinging as lasers ricocheted off it. Everything in here was enormous, and even after shrinking down to 50ft she realised she easily fit behind the desks. Any other time she would have laughed in wonder at this building for giants, but the laser fire searing the air above her head put a stop to that. She was pinned down, but thinking quickly and looking around she noticed a fire lever. Praying she was right she pulled it, and sure enough instead of water the air was instantly filled with a thick suppressant foam. It wasn’t a perfect smokescreen considering she could barely see anything as well, but she knew what she was aiming for: the elevator right at the back of the room, hopefully the one that would take her to the top. She had no choice but to trust Ellen’s information and hope the otter wasn’t going to get her killed.

She could feel the lasers zipping past her as she dashed through the foam, like bees in fog buzzing past her ears here and there. There was a sensation like someone laid a hot poker on her arm as one just glanced her side, the fur sizzling as the intense heat cauterised the wound as soon as it opened, but aside from a wince she didn’t slow down even a bit. Most of the guards were aiming for the far side of the room, meaning that by the time she actually got to the elevator the gunfire was behind her and she was able to enter it without a fuss. Her heart dropped though as she saw it needed some sort of key to access the top floor - the guards must have them, and by now her makeshift smokescreen was starting to clear so there was no way she was going to be able to snag an unguarded copy. With no other ideas she pulled the Engine out of her bag, intending to see if she could get enough size to break into the lift shaft, but as she did she noticed it was trying to connect with the systems around her - it had been created here, it only made sense that the systems would respond to the presence of the control unit for the most important machine in the building. A quick nudge and it easily connected, dormant systems waking from the appropriate digital handshake. She could almost feel the code racing as deep subroutines were activated, the lift doors closing and the buttons lighting up it started moving. Legend had it that the Spire was so tall it connected with a geosynchronous satellite at the top, making this quite literally a space elevator. It sounded terrifying, like being in a sports car with no windows or controls of any kind, but despite the insane speed it travelled at she had already been through much scarier things so far today. A speedy box was the least of her worries considering the shootout she’d just made it through.

Cassia didn’t really know what to expect when she reached the top after a couple minutes of eventually sickening ascension - it was supposedly the machine that had built everything, so she was expecting some grand, futuristic technology, glowing cables and freon being vented everywhere. And yes, there was certainly some of that, namely the ventilation system keeping everything at a pretty frigid temperature. But the machine itself was oddly out of place compared to the rest of the room, an ancient pile of wires with various circular slots dotted around a central shaft going into the roof. As she walked out she noticed the gravity was lower than it should have been, each step causing her to float a little bit as gravity tried and failed to pluck at her limbs. Looking up Cassia couldn’t see where the machine ended, but she could see the rusted metal of that shaft going all the way up, various much newer wires connected to it here and there. It was like finding an abacus in the middle of a computer lab, and then finding out that the abacus was what controlled all the computers - it just seemed weird to her. There was nobody around as she approached, but the computer lit up as she walked over, something sliding out. It was a keyboard, but alongside it was a cable with a syringe at the end. The absolute last thing she wanted to do was to jam that thing into her arm, but as she waited she heard the elevator close doors and leave to get to the bottom floor - she had maybe 4 minutes before they were bursting through that door, so there was no time to be squeamish. She pulled the cable closer and inserted it, feeling the now familiar connection to the machine being established in her brain. It was awaiting input, and as she took the Engine out of her bag one last time she felt apprehensive. The system asked for insertion, and with time on her mind she slotted the device into the hole above her. Immediately the system lit up even further, new cables alighting with an ominous blue glow as the whole floor started to shake. She felt the machine offer her the command position, and with the elevator already on the way back up she took it.

And then she was nowhere. The room had gone, the world had gone - she was floating in empty black space, nothing but pitch black. The darkness was interrupted with code, lines of it all floating in front of her, and suddenly she could understand it. It was what Ellen had told her, the flow of size and power. Except she’d underestimated what the otter had really meant - this wasn’t just all the size of the planet, but a sort of fundamental force, a way of reshaping reality itself. The system calculated one colossal wave function, and allowed it to be measured at precisely the right point, any point she chose - what happened after was regular physics, and presumably there would be consequences to shoving an entire galaxy worth of strength into a single being, but what she could do with this was quite literally anything. This was the power of a god, of a literal deity brought down to mortal hands and made manifest, and she… she didn’t want it. It was strange to realise that when there was nobody else around, but she realised the thought of being the ruler of everything just filled her with unease. She wasn’t cut out for leadership, no she would rather be forgotten. Let others take the mantle while she hid in their shadow, that was what she wanted. Not that it was possible now the machine was linked to her consciousness.

“There’s gotta be something in here.” She muttered under her breath as she searched through the menus, and eventually she was rewarded: right at the bottom level, a self-destruct command. An end to all of this. She felt like the moment should have been more dramatic, some rising score of music and dramatic lighting, but it was just her and a simple yes/no input, a virtual button in her head.

She pressed it.

Instantly power began rushing into her body, more size than she’d ever believed possible. Panic overtook her as warnings began flashing, the system throwing messages at her as she exploded in size, well past city-sized, well past planet sized. She could feel the energy radiating off her, existence withering at her supercharged touch as her body struggled to contain everything.

“No no no! No stop!” She frantically flicked through the menu, trying desperately to stop the process as she ascended past the solar system, but it kept flashing the same warning at her - Error 31: Command Majority. It took her a precious couple of seconds to figure out what that meant, in which time she blew past a couple more solar systems. To control the size of a galaxy meant half of it had to be split amongst all remaining key holders - with only her left that meant she was going to be the largest single being in this galaxy, whether she wanted it or not. The command would execute, the machine would be destroyed, and she would be left at a size too large to even comprehend. She almost laughed at the irony - she’d always wanted to be alone, and now she was getting her wish in a twisted way, forced into the role of lonely god, far too powerful to be amongst mere mortals. As she saw the galaxy recede she felt new powers in her, ways of controlling energy that she hadn’t even realised, the power to create as much as destroy.

And then it stopped. Cassia found herself floating in the darkness, the size of an entire galaxy at her fingertips. It looked so fragile from here - she could have vapourised it with a click of her fingers, hell she could do the same just by being near it judging by how the stars and planets near her were slowly melting away. It was a sobering thought considering the effort she’d put into fixing it, but it also made her next decision easier. Leaving it all behind was safer for everyone, and so she did. She ventured into the darkness, leaving behind her planet - and her galaxy - grateful for her help, and a life that felt like it belonged to someone else. In a way it did, for this was the end of Cassia the scavenger and the beginning of Cassia the deity, a god in the one place she’d always wanted to be.

Alone.