

Eldritch Fragment — Amon-Gorloth: The Shape That Refuses Silence

The sun over the Western Desert had chosen a point in the sky and refused to move.

Ace noticed it first—not as a sight, but as a feeling in the jaw, where clenched time gathers. She stood on the aluminum gantry of Station G-47 and lifted a hand to shade her eyes, though the light did not change. Heat rose from the flats in steady panes, not waves. Even the wind felt arranged.

“Static dunes,” she said.

Mai checked the field recorder the way some people check their pulse. Its LCD threw numbers that meant nothing together and everything apart. “Temporal resonance: zero-point-zero-zero-zero,” she read. “That’s not a value. That’s a verdict.”

Ace smiled with half her mouth. “Gives us something to argue with.”

“We came to study, not to argue,” Mai said, and then softened. “Okay. Maybe a little arguing.”

They walked out from the station with the desert crunching under their boots like slow glass. Every footfall left a crisp mark that did not blur or crumble; the outline held as if the sand had been waiting all its life to be stepped on properly. Ace felt the familiar green thrum behind her sternum, the quiet that made other people uneasy and made her feel like water finds riverbeds. Mai carried the rune-marked disruptor, muzzle blanked, the weapon’s thin silver line pulsing with her breath.

A string of survey poles marked a path the previous team had set before their messages went thin. The poles stood too straight. Shadows peeled from them like black ribbons at one precise angle, no matter where you stood.

“The sun hasn’t moved in fifty-three minutes,” Mai said, checking her watch, and then again, because the second hand had stopped between ticks. “Correction. It doesn’t move when I look.”

Ace walked ahead, scanning with her other senses, the ones she never named. Sometimes the silence inside her opened like a door. Sometimes the door had another door. If she could step through both, she might come out clean, uncut by the world’s chatter. Today the corridor felt crowded—not with voices, but with a single idea repeated beyond reason.

They found the line after an hour by distance and five minutes by feeling. It cut across the desert like a metal rule laid on a map: a dead straight strip of darker sand, a meter wide, a kilometer long, running away to horizon and beyond.

“That shouldn’t be,” Mai whispered, and then, because she could not help herself, “But it is.”

Ace knelt and touched the strip. The sand was colder and finer, like powdered stone. It gathered under her glove in edges, as if every grain wanted a facet. “When a thing wants to be a thing,” she said, “it gets stubborn.”

Mai traced the strip with the hand that wasn’t holding the weapon. “This leads somewhere. Or it makes somewhere happen where it ends.”

They followed the unyielding path into a basin of weathered rock the color of dried blood. There, set into the far wall, stood a gate. Bronze, or something that remembered bronze. The lintel carried an alphabet that didn’t hold still. It almost solved itself while you watched: curves finding lines, lines finding angles, angles closing the last open mouth.

The door stood ajar. To pass through it, you had to want your shape.

Ace took a breath. The green behind her ribs flashed once—not a warning, not consent. Something older. “Ready?” she asked.

Mai nodded, and some of the silver in her eyes seemed to turn to sound. “Stay with me.”

“Always.”

They slipped under the lintel and entered the Temple of Gz-Eh.

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Inside, the air remembered music, but not the notes. The corridor’s walls showed reliefs that were neither figures nor flowers, but a deliberate confusion between the two—a geometry that kept reaching for a face and withdrawing before it could be seen. Every twenty paces a torch sconce stood unlit and perfectly, perfectly aligned with the next.

“Mai,” Ace said, quietly. “Listen.”

A footfall from ten seconds ago answered from behind them; a footfall they hadn’t taken yet answered from ahead. Time made a precise, faint echo—an outline of a sound. The present walked between parentheses.

Mai lifted the recorder. The display gave her the same verdict in a different suit: zero upon zero, lenses with no glass. She looked away, then back. Numbers arranged themselves into a perfect cascade and then, in the very moment they satisfied her, became meaningless. “It’s not just still,” she said. “It’s converging.”

“Towards what?”

“A limit. A definition.”

“And if we reach it?” Ace asked.

“Then we don’t reach anything else.”

They came to a broader hall, with pillars like bundled reeds carved from stone, rising into a high ceiling without seam or mortar. At the center of the floor a rosette was inlaid in darker material, sixteen-pointed, points nested within points, the pattern precise to a hair’s breadth. The rosette was too perfect to be ancient and too patient to be new.

Ace crouched by the nearest pillar. It had tiny incisions at its base, no wider than a fingernail, as if someone had tried to scratch away the pattern and found the pattern underneath was more of the same. “Somebody didn’t like the answer they got,” she said.

Mai stood on the rosette’s edge without stepping in. Her gaze tracked the way each petal bowed towards the next. “This is what a mind looks like when it believes nothing should move,” she said.

“It looks familiar,” Ace admitted. “On the days I forget why I breathe.”

“Don’t forget today,” Mai said.

Ace smiled with all her mouth this time. "Then keep talking."

"I intend to," Mai said, and the weapon at her hip pulsed once, matching the tiny flicker of nerves at her wrist. Her discipline had the shape of a ritual; her ritual had the shape of love.

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The inner sanctum had no door because nothing here believed in thresholds. You were either inside or not the way a word was either spelled or not. It opened into a wide chamber whose geometry meant to tell a story about certainty. Columns rose and resolved into smaller columns and those into smaller ones, the way a hand might unfold and discover five more hands where each finger should be. The frieze above vowed symmetry and then fulfilled it, line for line, as if someone had put up a sky made from a theorem. Even the dust that had no right to lie on the floor had arranged itself like snow in a diagram of wind.

There was no statue, no idol, no visible body. There was a place where one should be. A deepening in the center of thought. A negative so complete it could be mistaken for presence.

Ace felt her breath shorten and lengthen at the same time. The green in her chest steadied, a candle in a room that refused drafts. She heard a sentence she had not heard and would continue to hear.

Form is peace.

"So that's the pitch," she said.

Mai's eyes sharpened. "Or the doctrine. Or the excuse."

Ace stepped forward to the circle at the center of the floor, not because she wanted to stand in it but because some things can only be understood from their belly. Mai moved with her, half a pace to the side, field recorder useless and unmatched to her attention now. A tremor went through the floor as if a giant's finger had pressed down lightly on the temple from outside. Then the pillars' shadows rotated—once, a perfect fraction—and stopped.

Something took a shape.

It was not a thing taking a body. It was a structure taking a conclusion.

Ace saw herself first: not as she was, but as a statue of herself in a museum nobody would visit twice. The stone was dark and fine-grained. Her eyes were lines that said: this woman knows herself very well; this woman will continue to know herself in exactly this way forever. The swords at her back were carved fire that never burned down. Her throat held a pulse that never varied.

Mai made a bare, involuntary sound. Her shape had arisen beside Ace's—stainless instruments, gleaming, arranged in a laboratory with no windows. Beakers and lenses and thin plates of unknown material lay placed at distances that obeyed a reason she had once believed in with her whole soul and no longer did. Numbers rippled across a wall in perfect agreement with themselves. Nothing failed. Nothing surprised.

The doctrine addressed them in a voice that did not travel but arrived, whole, inside the bone. It was not persuasion. It was gravity.

Form is peace.

Ace reached, wanting to touch the statue's cheek to convince herself it was just a trick, and stopped an inch short. The green behind her breastbone hummed with a meaning she could not quite catch, like the inaudible part of a song that still makes you cry. She had knelt like this once before—another place, another god, another problem with edges—and come away knowing there are silences that heal and silences that kill.

"Mai," she said, not taking her eyes from the stone. "If I choose this, I will never change again."

Mai's hand brushed Ace's sleeve. "If you choose this, you will never be asked to. That's the trap."

The doctrine spoke again in a thought that felt like it came from their own mouths: All your trouble ends when you stop moving.

Mai lifted the disruptor, thumbed off its safeties, and fired a thin line of light straight into the center of the circle. The beam reached the floor and stayed, a hairline of brightness suspended in air, not proceeding, not fading, a plucked string held in the fingers of an indifferent god.

Mai stared at it, and a laugh escaped her—soft, shocked, almost joyful. "It took my weapon and made it a ruler."

"Peace," the voice repeated. Not a word. A proposition.

Ace closed her eyes. The statue closed its eyes with her, because that was part of the proposition. She imagined all the work done: the bruises that never faded, the cuts that always became scars, the habits of sleep won and lost, the days she could not find a place to put her hands. She imagined—and behind all imagining, she felt the quiet.

The quiet said: Do not mistake me for stillness.

"Not today," Ace said to nobody, to herself, to the shape that wanted her.

She breathed into the low hum inside her chest until it dropped further, a tone beyond tones that did not vibrate but accepted. She did not resist the doctrine. She stopped asking it to move her. She let it pass exactly through her as salt passes through clean water.

Silence isn't emptiness, she thought. It's trust.

The statue flickered, not like an image failing but like a certainty tasting oxygen for the first time. A hairline crack ran from the statue's ear to its jaw and then stopped, not because something prevented it but because it did not know how to continue.

Mai saw Ace standing with her eyes closed and the unbroken line of light from her weapon frozen between her and the circle. She realized, with the kind of clarity that burns, that every instrument in the world had at some point made her forget the face of the person she held. She looked away from the beam and let her hand fall to her side. The weapon powered down. The line remained, and then, without audience, it did not.

"Not every pattern is meant to be measured," Mai said.

In answer, a small earthquake of disapproval rolled through the stone. The room boiled in the only way a diagram can boil: all at once, without temperature. The pillars' recursion stumbled and tried to proceed and stumbled again. Overhead, the ceiling—if that's what a world without thresholds calls the thing above—gradually leaned down. The doctrine had decided that if it could not include them by

charm, it would include them by compression.

Ace opened her eyes and found Mai's. "Walk," she said.

"Out?"

"Through."

They stepped forward into the center, into the conclusion's heart. The circle lifted under their boots as if to carry them, and then refused its own generosity. The statue of Ace changed weight imperceptibly, enough for a shallow crust of marble dust to gather along its lip and fall in a sound like a decision being reconsidered. Mai's laboratory dimmed one lumen from every surface, a concession that a perfect brightness had ceased to matter.

The doctrine tried one last sentence. It made them hear it in their own voices, perfectly matched.

If you do not choose your shape, the world chooses it for you.

"Then let it keep choosing," Ace said. "And keep choosing again."

"Let us move," Mai said, and if her words were a prayer then it was a prayer to no one who needed prayers.

The temple flexed like a muscle around a wound. For a second the rosette at their feet reversed its spin, petals unwinding, points turning dull. The perfect edge of the straight corridor they had walked in on hesitated. The air remembered that notes can coincide without agreeing. The world, having reached a limit, admitted it had another.

They were through before the room had the chance to remember it could close.

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Outside, the bronze that would not tarnish had taken on a thumbprint of shadow. The sky let the sun move one fingerwidth down its immovable arc. Rock threw back heat in the graceful failure of evening. The straight line across the desert loosened somewhere along its mile; a traveler would still think it straight until they tried to write it into law.

They walked until the station appeared as a stuttering outline on the horizon, as if looking at it through a breath they hadn't taken yet. When they stopped, it was because stopping felt like something they chose, not something imposed.

Ace sat on a low stone and worked dust from the seam of her glove with her fingernail. The green in her chest had gone quiet the way a river goes quiet in a long reach—movement too even to be seen.

"Is it gone?" Mai asked, looking back. The temple's mouth was a dark comma in the face of the hill. Commas mean a breath, not an end.

"No," Ace said. "Sleeping. Or thinking about what to make of us."

Mai sank beside her, leaning shoulder to shoulder until heat and heartbeat settled into a rhythm that had never needed a metronome. "It wanted us to be finished," she said.

Ace tilted her head back, watching a thin net of stars appear without deciding to. "Maybe that's the closest thing to mercy a god can imagine," she said. "A finished thing doesn't hurt."

Mai's smile held no victory in it. "Finished things don't laugh, either."

"Or kiss," Ace said, and then put the word in her pocket for later like people do with stones they mean to skip.

They let the desert speak. It had a low voice; it carried a rumor of glass. In that voice were the traces of other fools and other saints, all of them surprising the sand by refusing to hold still in it.

After a while, Mai said, "The recorder—when I stopped looking at it, it stopped lying to me."

"Instrument humility," Ace said. "A new field."

"We can publish in the Journal of Things That Refuse to End."

"Peer-reviewed by ghosts," Ace said, and felt Mai's laugh before she heard it.

A small wind found them and worried at nothing in particular. The station's antenna twitched like a cat's ear, finally sure of a sound it could admit. The sun edged down another fingerwidth as if it had been practicing for this all day.

Mai stood and dusted the seat of her pants with steady hands. "We should log what we can. And we should not try to name what we can't."

Ace rose and let the quiet put its hand on her shoulder. The weight was kind, the way a friend leans on you for balance because you are both happy and a little tired. "We'll write: encountered a proposition. Declined it politely."

Mai glanced again at the hill. A shape moved—no, arranged itself—along the ridge above the bronze door, the suggestion of an angle too exact to be weather. Not a threat; a reminder.

"We didn't kill it," she said.

"We don't do that," Ace said. "We keep things company until they stop insisting on our shape."

Mai nodded. "And if it refuses to stop?"

"Then we out-last it," Ace said. "Or out-move it. Same difference."

They walked together, not because the path required it but because they always had. The desert, given the gift of a little asymmetry, began to remember how to make small mistakes: a dune slumped slightly instead of perfectly, a lizard's track wandered. The day divided itself into before and after without breaking anything. The temple behind them practiced patience; the night ahead practiced doubt.

At the station, Ace paused in the shadow of the door and touched her throat where the statue's pulse had been cut into the stone. There was a pulse there still, and it varied. It varied all over the place like a map of places she would go.

Mai set the recorder on the table and did not turn it on. She reached for Ace's hand instead and found it. Their fingers had learned each other's grammar long before the temple, but the lesson took better now: holding was not a way to keep; it was a way to travel together.

"Stillness is overrated," Mai said.

"Tell that to a god," Ace answered, because jokes are one of the slight, necessary disrespect we pay to ideas that want our knees.

"I just did," Mai said, and kissed her cheek, precisely, like the end of a sentence you intend to keep writing.

The station hummed awake in small, human noises—fans, relays, the kettle's first sigh. Beyond the walls, the desert un-decided itself by slow degrees. The bronze door in the hill kept its angle, its inscription working unsuccessfully for a name that would be enough. The name would never finish. Names worth keeping don't.

They poured water into cups and watched the steam disintegrate at a rate no instrument could dignify. The radio picked up the far, delayed reports of the world: gulls speaking nonsense to piers, trains thinking they were long enough, lights finding windows. Nothing asked their permission to move and nothing asked to be forgiven when it didn't.

"Do you hear that?" Mai asked, and there was nothing in the air that anyone else would have called a sound.

Ace listened. The green within her did not flare or dim. It agreed. "Yes," she said, smiling into her cup. "Everything. Still happening."

They slept in shifts, because the desert had once ordered them not to, and people do not forget the first laws they break. When Ace closed her eyes the last time before dawn, she dreamed of pillars learning to stand at different distances from each other, of rosettes allowing themselves an extra petal, of statues cracking where laughter needs a crack to get out. When Mai opened her eyes into the early light, she checked the sky and found a sun exactly where it didn't have to be.

The day moved.

Somewhere beneath a hill of patient stone, a proposition rehearsed itself and waited for the next travelers to try it on. If they were lucky, those travelers would bring a joke and a friend and a willingness to let beams of light end when they ended.

Ace woke, stretched, and, without looking, found Mai's hand again. The kettle clicked off. The radio told a story about a city very far away where a streetlamp had flickered twice for no reason at all. They dressed and went outside into a morning that would be the same only once.

On the ridge, a brief shimmer—not mirage, not promise—traced a line and failed to hold it. The failure pleased the earth. It might even have pleased a god that had mistaken peace for a perfect edge.

"Ready?" Mai asked.

Ace drew a breath that changed her. "Always," she said, and they set off, leaving footprints that blurred at the edges as they should, as they must, because anything worth walking away from deserves to live as a story, not a diagram. —

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