

BOOK ONE OF THE DOMINIONS

RAINY MAGIC,  
WINDY ROADS

Lena Abram

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RAINY MAGIC, WINDY ROADS

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# CHAPTER 1

LILA lit the sun and increased the number of water molecules in the atmosphere. Then she raised the temperature and moved the warm air masses to mix them with cooler ones. When tall grass swayed heavily against the black sky, she muttered under her breath and adjusted the speed of the wind. If she let it rave here, it would soon become a tornado, and that was something she would rather avoid. It'd taken her two years to learn to stabilize this small ecosystem.

Lila was immensely proud of her DIY wastewater treatment plant. She'd come up with the idea of building it after one of the readers of her blog had asked her in the comments if she could share some tips, like smart ways of packing a backpack or useful travel accessories. There were many similar articles on the web, but she enjoyed reading them too. Even though she already knew most tips other travelers shared, she discovered something worth putting into practice almost every time. Duct tape, for example.

With duct tape, one could patch a hole in a backpack or seal shoes on a rainy day, and she wouldn't have thought about it if not for the other blogger's post. Other readers also had taken the subject up, so she'd decided to write about it in her next blog post.

A few days later, she'd published her own list of travel tips, which included packing a clothesline with clips and a lunchbox with a thermos inside, but she couldn't stop thinking about travel needs. She remembered all those situations when she'd had to choose between carrying a heavy backpack and taking a smaller bottle of water with hope that she could buy another one later (and then she could not), or when she'd dived into her bag only to discover she'd left something at home. Or when she'd wanted nothing but to take a shower, and it turned out the bathroom in a low-budget hotel needed more cleaning care than she. At times like this, she dreamed about teleportation. If she could teleport, she could go home anytime she wanted. Unfortunately, teleportation belonged to the realm of dreams.

Creation magic, however, did not.

At the time, Lila had already had a private dimension. It'd been a small space that had been formed when she'd ripped apart a fragment of reality, and transmuting the particles of interdimensional matter into air, she'd hollowed out something resembling a room. It'd been her training ground, a secret place where she could have experimented with her newfound powers. The only things there had been lightcrystals on the wall, an inflatable chair, and a blue carpet she'd put on the floor because she'd felt uncomfortable seeing cavernous blackness under her feet. When she'd come up with an idea to turn that dimension into a mobile magical cupboard, the problem had been this: a magic dominion, which was her microworld essentially, had to be attached to a particular place; otherwise, it could get lost in spacetime. Back then, the Doorway had been anchored in her closet. Because traveling with a closet hadn't been an option, she'd needed another solution. She'd needed to glue the Doorway to a portable item.

She'd chosen a silver locket with a tiny map engraved on the front. She'd received it from her father, and she'd liked it so much

that she'd worn it almost every day. It'd been a perfect fit for her plan.

She'd made the Doorway as small as a pinpoint, peeled it off the closet, and put it in the locket. Then she'd started searching the internet for information on how to build a sewage system.

She'd come across an article about natural wastewater treatment which occurred in the soil with the help of specific microorganisms and plants. In other words, a sewage plant could look like a garden. Lila had been impressed, though she'd had a lot to learn. The assembly diagram presented on the site hadn't seemed complicated, but the author of the article hadn't assumed that someone would want to terraform a magic dominion.

Ultimately, Lila had extended her dominion with two rooms, studied the soil types and their chemical composition, collected the samples, analyzed the assembly diagram, gathered the necessary items, and, once again, she'd gotten to magic. In a few months, the black floor of the biggest room had been replaced by several feet of soil, and in the middle of the false sky had appeared a large transparent lightcrystal. Lila called it the sun, though its light didn't stimulate plant growth—the light violet crystals placed on the black metal poles did. Around the garden, right next to the smooth black walls, ran a stone path, and under the shelter in the corner stood a white container of considerable size, inside which the microorganisms did the magic of nature. In case something broke down, Lila had left the container and the pipes above the ground. As for the plants, she'd chosen grasses for the sake of simplicity. After toiling away many hours on her dominion, which resulted in many tears shed over assembly diagrams and the mere sight of hardware stores, nightmares about chemistry, and headaches from doing magic intensively, she'd eventually succeeded. She had a mobile store with a bathroom. She'd never regretted the effort she put into its creation.

When Lila finished stabilizing the climate in the garden, she touched violet lightcrystals with magic and made their molecules vibrate. One by one, they started emitting light. She got out of the hammock, which she'd hung up in the corner on the hooks carved

out of interdimensional matter, and moved toward the exit. She climbed three steps nearby the white container and used magic once more, this time to turn off the lightcrystal which was hanging on the ceiling like a star in the night sky. When the garden got flooded with the violet lamplight, she turned around and walked down the corridor to the main room. On the way, she passed the pipes coming out of the doorless bathroom. For this room, she'd also decided to keep it simple and bought equipment that worked without electricity and running water, like a camping shower or a flush toilet with a container she could pour water into. If she couldn't bring the water from the outside world, she could always use creation magic. She could transform the interdimensional matter into the water the same way she'd created a bathtub as a part of the exercise. It'd taken her a couple of weeks to finish it, but she really appreciated the financial side of this project. She saved some money, after all.

The main room was bigger than at the beginning. The armchair still stood on the blue carpet, but now there was a rack and four wooden chests by the walls. Inside the first one, there were spare clothes, and inside the other ones were food with a long shelf life, tools, and things like a tent, a sleeping bag, or a spare backpack. On the shelves of the rack, Lila kept the items she wanted to have at hand without having to dig through the trunks. A medical kit, a roll of duct tape, scissors, a notebook, pens, a flashlight, batteries, small lightcrystals, a sewing kit, a clothesline, a box with SIM cards from different countries, and so on. If she didn't need her laptop or camera, she left them here too.

In the corner, next to the Doorway, there were multiple bottles of water and a cooler. On the opposite side stood a coat hanger and a shoe rack. In the other corners, Lila usually kept souvenirs. They were empty now because she'd recently packed all the gifts and sent them by mail.

Lila crossed the room, turning off all the lightcrystals on the walls except the one closest to the Doorway that was now so small that it could be found only by someone who knew what to look for. Lila enlarged it until it was wide enough to pass through and

stepped back into her hotel room in Fukuoka. She shrunk the Doorway again, took the locket lying on the edge of the bed, snapped it shut, and latched it around her neck. After that, she leaned over the bed and drew the curtain, letting the daylight in.

The room she'd rented was small but clean and bright. There was only a narrow bed, a tiny desk, and a chair, but everything looked new including the carpet and the paint on the walls. Plus, the room was on the sixth floor and the city view wasn't bad. Considering that the price was just a bit more expensive than accommodation in a hostel, this hotel was a gem. It never ceased to amaze her how much one could increase the level of traveling comfort, even with a tight budget, if only one had enough patience and planned things ahead. Of course, there were places where great deals could be found without planning, but in the case of more expensive countries like Japan, she avoided counting on luck.

Lila glanced at the clock showing ten minutes to eleven. She had only two things planned for today: work and a dinner with acquaintances who had offered to show her around this weekend. After many days of sightseeing, she gladly welcomed the day when there was no need to go further than the other side of the street, and the only reason for doing that was the food. It was good to take a break from traveling sometimes. Waking up without an alarm clock was also a nice change.

Lila sat down at the desk and turned on her laptop. She removed a memory card from her camera and connected it to the computer. Waiting for the photos to be copied onto the disk, she ate a rice ball bought in a nearby convenience store, contemplating unintelligible writing on a label of the green tea bottle. Flipping through her travel notebook, she selected photos she could post on her blog. Once she created an outline of the article, she started writing.

A few hours later, she entered her blog admin panel address and didn't recognize the website. After a moment she recalled Dominika saying something about transferring data to a new platform.

Dominika was Lila's best friend. When Lila had come up with

the idea of starting a blog, Nika had offered her help. Lila had accepted it gratefully, though she'd known she wouldn't avoid all technical issues.

Lila entered her login and password and waited for the page to reload. Clicking here and there to get familiar with the new system, she frowned more and more with each passing moment. Creating a new post differed significantly from what she was used to, and the number of available options was far greater. Sometimes she wasn't sure what to click. Some field names looked suspicious like they were programming terms. And that empty table...

Lila opened a new tab in the browser and entered her blog address. She noticed at once that there weren't any articles on the site. She glanced at the clock, calculated the time difference between Japan and Poland, and grabbed the phone. Nika picked up on the third ring.

"Yo," she said cheerfully.

"Hey, Nika." Lila was trying to keep calm. "I saw the new CMS."

"And how do you like it?" Nika asked, bursting with enthusiasm. "Cool, isn't it?"

"The posts are gone," Lila blurted out. "Have you not transferred the data? Did you make a backup?"

"What? I did..." Nika was typing quickly on her keyboard. After a short break, she did more typing. "Oh."

Lila didn't like that interjection.

"Dear customer, a technical problem occurred," Nika communicated politely. "Thank you for your patience. We will address this issue as soon as possible. Immediately, even. We apologize for the inconvenience. Thank you for staying with us. We will call you back once the problem is solved. Instantly, in the same minute. Good-bye... I mean, until later. Sooner rather than later—"

Before her friend hung up, Lila exclaimed, "Wait! This CMS is strange!"

"I've sent you a link to a manual," Nika said in a friendly tone. "Have you read it?"

"Wait a minute." Lila opened an unread e-mail in her inbox,



clicked on the mentioned link, and skimmed the manual. "It's so long... You said it was similar but way cooler. What was actually wrong with the previous system?"

There was a hint of aggression in Nika's voice. "Everything."

"It was you who chose that technology."

"I was young and inexperienced. I followed the trends. I believed the majority knew better. But no more. Now I know that things could be simpler. And done faster."

"It was simple and fast. Now it is strange. Can't we go back to the previous CMS?"

"No. More. Programming. In. That. Thing," Nika drawled. Then she added more calmly, "Fear of data loss clouds your judgment. If you put your heart into it, you'll like it."

"So, shouldn't I be afraid of data loss?" Lila asked hopefully.

"Of course not. It's just a stupid error I'll fix in a moment. But if you tell me to delve into the code of that, that..." Nika was looking for the right word. Eventually, she decided not to be crude. "...that thing, you'll put my sanity at risk. Are you ready to take responsibility for that?"

Lila sighed. "Do you promise the new one is really cool?"

"I swear," Nika said eagerly. "If you have a problem with something, just let me know. I'll make a tutorial video for you."

Suddenly, Lila heard a computer notification sound over the phone. And another one. And a few more.

"What's up?" Nika muttered.

Lila heard her typing. And then, suddenly, it was quiet.

"Lila, check the news," Nika said with a strange tension in her voice. "I'll call you later, ok? Check the latest news!"

Lila wanted to ask what kind of news she was supposed to check because there were a lot of websites and TV stations, but her friend hung up. Eventually, she entered the address of the portal on which she usually read news from Poland. As it turned out later, she could have visited any news website in the world.

Atlantis really existed.

And it had its own internet.

Initially, Lila thought it was some kind of joke. A hacker attack or fake news gaining momentum. But then, she saw a video which was sent to almost every TV station in the world and the satellite photos confirming its authenticity.

In the video appeared a man who introduced himself as Isai Azara, a member of the Council, the highest authority in the magic dominion of At'alan. He had dusky skin, green eyes, and gray slicked-back hair. He was probably over forty, but Lila wouldn't bet on it because his square face with the short beard seemed neither young nor old, although certainly was handsome. He was wearing a black shirt with a subtle tapered pattern on the front, embroidered with dark turquoise thread. The same color had also been used to create ornate embroidery covering the ends of his sleeves. The man was sitting with both hands on the table as if he wanted to show that he had nothing to hide.

"Because you've never had occasion to hear the At'alani language, if I were speaking it, you might consider this video a joke or be doubtful about the translation attached to it in the form of subtitles, so to minimize a risk of misunderstanding, I will be using English today."

After such an introduction, Lila could not be uninterested. Indeed, the man's accent indicated that English wasn't his mother tongue, but he spoke with calm and confidence.

"At'alan is the name of an island that existed on the Atlantic Ocean a long time ago. We do not know its exact location, but our scholars are convinced that the catastrophe which ended its existence is related to tectonic movements."

That explained why everyone was talking about Atlantis.

"Some of that island's inhabitants survived. Before their home was swallowed up by the ocean, they had moved to the magic dominion that was also named At'alan. One of the reasons we don't know the exact location of the First Island is that the new dominion was and still is, a moving dominion."

Lila couldn't take her eyes off the computer screen. There was

nothing surprising about a dominion that could change its location. What was surprising was that this man suggested he came from the dominion that had existed... how long? Thousands of years? No dominion in history had lasted for such a period of time.

“Those people resolved to hide their existence and isolate themselves from the rest of the world. Their descendants, however, decided not to isolate the island completely. They chose from among themselves those who were supposed to leave the island in order to come back later to tell what they saw. For many centuries that was the way the At’alanis had been observing a changing world.”

More and more questions were popping up in Lila’s head. Why had those people decided to isolate themselves? How had they succeeded in hiding for such a long time? Where had the chosen ones gone after leaving their island? And why was this man explaining all this?

Isai Azara answered only one of her questions.

“We are descendants of those people. We’ve continued their lifestyle, even though it has become difficult due to technological change. Being observers, not participants of history, was a part of our identity. The reason we decided to reveal our presence is that our Protector has died childless and there is no creator among the hundred thousand population of At’alan.”

Lila leaned back. She was starting to understand what the man was driving at.

Creators were mages capable of using creation magic. Creation magic, like enchantment magic, wasn’t something one could just learn. It was a gift and a very rare one. In fact, it was rarer even than enchanting. When Lila last checked, there had been thirty-two creators in the world. Registered ones, of course. Lila didn’t doubt there were more mages like her who hid their magic for various reasons. Creation magic was also the only type of magic whose effects could last after the mage’s death. There was a condition, though. A descendant of the mage had to ritually bind their magic with the creator’s work. In that way, it could last even a few generations until the last mage’s descendant died, could not use magic,

or simply refused to be a Protector. When such a situation occurred, it was certain that soon the magic would destabilize, and the creator's work would disappear. In the case of residential dominion, for its residents it meant losing their home. Or their country.

It was the same problem historical rulers had contended with. Not having a descendant meant the end of the dynasty's rule, and sometimes even the end of the state. It was why today creators didn't create residential dominions but utility ones like stores, roads, or prisons. It was taken into account such projects might not last longer than one or two generations. The only inhabited dominions were the ones created in the past, like the several-hundred-years-old Biringan City in the Philippines or Vineta, an island on the Baltic Sea created as a shelter in the last century. The difference between those dominions and At'alan was that their inhabitants considered that someday they might face the necessity to move. They maintained relationships with other communities and developed evacuation plans with local authorities. They were a part of modern society. The At'alanis were not.

"Throughout all these years we've been very lucky," said Isai Azara. "We've been blessed with many Protectors. When they were gone, there was always someone among us with creator's power, ready to build us a new home. Today's At'alan is the fourth dominion we have lived in."

Lila wondered how good the At'alanis were at magic if in all known history no one had noticed their three destabilized dominions.

"Our last Protector passed away three months ago. After many talks with residents, the Council of At'alan has decided to reveal the existence of the island. We would like to establish diplomatic relations with other countries. We won't survive without your help."

Lila was impressed by this simple statement of sad facts.

"We have some knowledge of the current political and economic situation of individual countries, and we know modern technological solutions—we have our own internet network and a hydroelectric power station. We put a high value on education. There are many talented engineers, doctors, and scholars on

At'alan. We respect human rights. Peace is one of the most cherished values in our culture. And we agree with the provisions in the International Code of Magic."

*It should make things easier*, Lila thought.

"We've learned a lot from you. It often required illegal border crossing, but we are ready to answer for that. We hope, however, you would not treat us like thieves. We don't come empty-handed. We managed to modify and improve some of your solutions. We've sent some materials from our library to universities and research institutes."

Lila smiled at the thought of what must be happening now at those institutions.

"As I already mentioned, the population of At'alan is one hundred thousand. One possible way for us to survive is through assimilation. We would like to ask the countries open for immigration to write to the e-mail address we've sent to government officials. We reckon with the prospect of living in diaspora."

That guy really wasn't beating about the bush. Nevertheless, the proposed solution seemed reasonable.

"The second way is to buy land."

Lila froze with her hand halfway to the bottle standing next to the computer. Did the At'alanis want to buy a piece of country?

"The island has an area of approximately ten thousand square kilometers. If any country can sell that much of its territory, we encourage sending offers to the e-mail address mentioned earlier. Due to endemic fauna and flora, we prefer a temperate climate. However, what we care most about is the survival of the nation, so we believe that we will be able to adapt to different conditions."

They really wanted to buy a piece of country.

"We don't have money," Isai Azara said bluntly. "We propose barter trade. Some of the endemic plants I mentioned have properties we describe as 'spatiotemporal.' We are positive their value is high."

Lila stared at the man on the screen. Revealing one revelation after another, he kept speaking calmly and to the point. Joking at that moment would be out of place, but the term 'spatiotemporal'

sounded as if those plants had a lot in common with sci-fi books.

“This is the first of two videos we’ve planned. In the second video, we will show you what At’alan looks like. Also, I will tell you more about spatiotemporal plants. The purpose of this video is to indicate our presence and ask for help. We hope that the second video will help you get to know us better. We will send it to TV stations in three days at twelve UTC. At the bottom of the screen, we give the coordinates of our island. We’ve taken off our masking spells so your satellites will be able to locate us, but please respect our privacy and do not send TV helicopters. We are planning to open the island to visitors—we will present the terms of cooperation in the next video. If representatives of other countries have any questions, please send them by e-mail. We will try to answer them in the next video as well. Thank you for your attention. *Akaena*.”

A replay button appeared on the screen.

“Wow,” Lila said.



## CHAPTER 2

LILA really was trying to do it right. She positioned the chopsticks just as Kenta showed her, placed them on both sides of the *nigirizushi*, and lifted them up. A small rice ball fell on the plate with a quiet smack and a *shiitake* mushroom hung dolefully at the end of the chopsticks.

“Apparently, the materials they sent to research institutes relate to chemistry,” Kenta said. Using chopsticks, he rolled the *nigirizushi* on its side and grabbed it so that the one stick was touching the rice and the other the fish.

They were sitting in the sushi restaurant opposite the hotel where Lila was staying. It was one of those large modern premises where one could hide in a corner and avoid making the chef sad by what one did with the food prepared by them. Lila had met Kenta in Tokyo through a company employing meteomages where she’d gone to ask about some additional jobs that would not exceed the scope of her visa. He’d been there on business, though he usually

worked in the Fukuoka branch. He was interested in her work as a blogger because he also dreamed of traveling. When he'd found out that Lila was planning to visit Fukuoka, he'd offered his help. Although in the company there had been no offers for her, she was glad she'd gone there. Today they were supposed to agree on the plans for the next two days, but the topic of the At'alanis dominated the conversation.

"I heard they relate to computer science," Mayumi said. "My brother wants to establish a startup."

Mayumi was Kenta's fiancée. Her shoulder-length evenly cut hair and dark-rimmed glasses made her look like a serious teacher. To Lila's surprise, this impression wasn't wrong because the young woman worked in a language school. She was an interesting contrast to Kenta, who changed his regular suit to a loose sweatshirt right after work.

"Again?" Kenta asked. "I thought he likes his new job."

"He does," Mayumi replied. She reached for a beer mug and took a sip. "He just got excited at the thought of being a pioneer."

Lila carefully stuck the mushroom onto a rice ball. "I'm curious about their magic," she said. "Their masking spells have to be super advanced if they managed to hide for so many years." Imitating Kenta, she turned the *nigiri* on its side and tried to pick it up. She succeeded but squeezed too hard and damaged the rice ball slightly with the stick. She put her left hand under the ball in case it should fall off and slowly put the *nigiri* into her mouth.

"And I'm curious how many years they hid," Mayumi said. "According to Plato's chronology, it will be twelve thousand years."

Lila almost choked. She chewed as quickly as possible, washed it down with beer, and exclaimed, "Younger Dryas!"

Mayumi and Kenta looked at her with polite interest.

"The last period of the Ice Age," Lila explained in an enthusiastic tone. "Fourteen thousand years ago glaciation ended. But after two thousand years, the climate started to cool once again. It lasted more than a thousand years. This period is called the Younger Dryas. It is recognized as the end of the Ice Age."

"Ice Age," Kenta repeated. And suddenly he was also flooded



with enthusiasm. "Mammoths, saber-toothed tigers, and so on?"

Lila nodded.

"Do you think..." Kenta started and stopped. Then, he finished sadly, "Ah, no. They didn't have cameras."

The women laughed.

"They could see them," Mayumi cheered him. "If they already could write then, maybe there are some records from that time."

Lila and Kenta stared at her in bewilderment.

"Notes from the Ice Age," Lila said tasting every word spoken.

"Archaeologists will be thrilled," Kenta commented.

Lila took a long sip of beer. "I can understand them. If they traveled, they witnessed..." she was looking for the right word.

"Everything," Kenta finished.

"It depends on when and where they traveled," Mayumi remarked.

"Maybe fantasy books will turn out to be true," her fiancé gushed. "Maybe they even wrote them themselves, hiding behind pseudonyms. Or they have infiltrated national governments and important international organizations, and that video is just a distraction so they can..."

"Take over the world?" Mayumi prompted.

Kenta grinned.

Lila tried so hard that the stick fell out of her hand. She grabbed it before it rolled off her plate.

"By the way," Kenta started again, "I wonder if someone will sell them land."

"Probably not in Asia," Mayumi said. "Land is at a premium here."

"I think this may be a problem for many countries," Lila chimed in. "Ten thousand square kilometers is quite a big area. It would not be possible without the displacement of the population, and people are usually reluctant to leave their homes."

"They'll probably incline to the dispersion and assimilation of the Atlanteans."

"They could try to sell areas like deserts," Kenta said, "but that would be rude."

“Besides, that guy mentioned that they preferred a temperate climate,” Lila added.

“Due to endemic species,” Kenta said with emphasis on the last two words.

“What can spatiotemporal plants do?” Lila mused. “You eat them and you travel in time or what?”

Kenta chuckled.

“They wouldn’t be offering drugs as currency, would they?” Mayumi asked, amused.

“Maybe they would,” her fiancé said. “If, for example, the plants would have healing properties when prepared properly.”

Lila understood his reasoning. “There is such a thing as medical marijuana,” she said, “but nobody described it as a ‘spatiotemporal plant.’” When a Japanese couple looked at her with amusement, she added, “Almost nobody.”

“Maybe it’s a rejuvenation treatment.” Kenta was getting into that theory. “Maybe this drug rejuvenates the cells so that you can live forever. Maybe,” he seemed delighted, “they are the same Atlanteans who left the first Atlantis.”

“It sounds like something taken from a comic book,” Mayumi commented.

“Atlantis too,” Kenta remarked, quite sober even though they had started drinking alcohol an hour ago. “And yet it exists.”

\* \* \*

They sat in the restaurant for two more hours. Mayumi got drunk imperceptibly and Kenta had to take her home. One moment she was talking about a book she’d read, and the next she burst into tears and told Kenta that he should buy this drug from the Atlanteans and live forever or at least until she died, because she didn’t want to live alone, and she would be alone in about twenty-five years, as she figured, and that meant soon. Then, she calculated the date of Lila’s death—in twenty-three years—and felt sorry for her too, and told Kenta to buy two bottles of the drug. By the time they left, Mayumi was already planning a career as a wonder plant breeder and saving all the mages in the world.

They agreed that Kenta and Mayumi would pick up Lila at nine in the morning. Lila enjoyed their company, though they witnessed how she dropped *nigiri* into a bowl of soy sauce, one *maki* on her lap and another one so that it rolled all the way to Mayumi's plate. As always, she ended up eating the rest of the meal with her hands. It was one of the first pieces of information she'd looked for after she tried to eat with chopsticks for the first time: she was interested in whether it was possible to eat sushi and other Asian meals with something other than chopsticks and not offend the hosts. It was possible—with your hands. Lila eagerly took advantage of this opportunity, though she made regular attempts to continue her studies. Just in case, she always had a set of cutlery with her.

After returning to the apartment, Lila packed up for tomorrow's trip, and then she collapsed on the bed half-conscious. She was glad that she didn't have to go turn off the lightcrystals in her pocket dimension; she'd carefully calculated the power she had to use to make particles of the crystals vibrate only for a few hours.

Promptly at nine o'clock, Kenta parked the car at the agreed spot. Mayumi waved at Lila from the back seat and invited her to sit in the front, then apologized for the temporary indisposition and went back to napping. Kenta greeted Lila with a cheerful smile and asked if she had motion sickness. When she denied it, he asked her to read aloud the extracts about Atlantis found on the internet. Lila, as curious as him, pulled out her phone and began to work her way through dozens of posts like *Mysteries of History*, *Aliens on Earth*, *Secrets of Magic*, *Witnesses of Prehistory*, *Atlantic Weed*...

Kenta chuckled when Lila gave him a meaningful look.

...*Why Time Traveling Is a Bad Idea*, *Masters of Dimensions*, *Handsome or Not*, *World Conquest Plan*, *Landless Nations*, *War or Peace*...

"The author wonders what the Atlanteans will do if the world refuses to help them," Lila explained.

"They'll fight with the entire world?" Kenta didn't hide his skepticism. "Hundred thousand versus seven billion?"

"Very epic," Lila said and read the rest of the article. "Or they'll

take a creator captive.”

“Like mafia?” Kenta asked doubtfully. “Risking being locked in airless dimension?”

“People are tipping Canada, Australia, and Russia as potential land sellers. They have a large area and low population density,” said Lila after a while. “Uninhabited islands were also mentioned. The problem is that they are usually uninhabited for a reason.”

“Nobody proposed Antarctica?”

“Somebody did.”

After an hour they arrived at their destination. Aoishi, a small town whose biggest attraction until recently was only a picturesque location among the forested mountains, had become famous two years ago, after the death of one of its inhabitants. In addition to being a famous painter, Shun Matsumoto had also been a famous creator. One might be tempted to say that he was a famous painter because he was a famous creator, but this didn’t detract from his talent. That the creators attracted attention by their very existence wasn’t his fault and his works were widely recognized. He wasn’t one of those celebrities who used fame in one area to make money in another they didn’t necessarily have a knack for. Besides, being a creator had a significant impact on his work: creation magic was the main theme of his paintings. These two fields—painting and magic—were an integral part of his life. However, it wasn’t him who made people hear about Aoishi but his garden. Matsumoto, like most of the registered creators, created public utility dominions. There were times when for security reasons creators who didn’t have children, or whose children couldn’t or didn’t want to become Protectors, were asked to shut down all dimensions they had created. This was also the case with Matsumoto when he was diagnosed with leukemia. The warehouses he’d created several years earlier were emptied, and the road built of interdimensional matter was put out of service. Matsumoto had shut down his dominions in turn, but he’d put off the removal of the private one. When he died, the black garden that appeared in many of his paintings became a lordless dominion and his home was taken over by the state as a protected area.

At the high gate leading to the Matsumoto's residence, there were danger signs and information boards listing all the rules that visitors should follow. Even though the inscriptions were also in English, the guard looked at Lila and said emphatically, "Please do not use magic and stick to the marked route."

Lila nodded politely and took the information leaflet offered by the man.

The front garden looked a bit neglected. Plants could grow as they pleased, but if some of them withered, they were removed, and nothing was planted in their place. The image of the residence was saved by cherry trees, now in full bloom, which surrounded the garden and created a picturesque landscape. Matsumoto's house was built in a traditional Japanese style, including wavy tiles and sliding doors, but the building was surrounded by barriers, so to find out what it looked like inside, Lila had to consult the leaflet. For some time, the house had been open to visitors who could admire Matsumoto's paintings on display and compare them to their direct inspiration, the back garden, but it had all ended when the first signs of Fading were noticed.

Following the marked path, they walked to the back of the residence. While the front garden seemed neglected, the one in the back was simply ruined. Overturned stone lanterns, boulders, and the remains of red bridges and gazebos lay on the ground. They all had once stood on a smooth surface of interdimensional matter, but as the flat dimension created by Matsumoto had begun to merge, they'd shifted and fallen over. They were supposed to stay there until the last of the Rips was gone.

The first Rip was several feet from the marked path they stood on. According to the leaflet, the black spot on the ground was seven feet long and eight inches wide. The more Lila stared at it, the more uneasy she felt. The fact that she dealt with interdimensional matter on a daily basis didn't ease that feeling. She'd spent enough time in her dominion to get used to being in the darkness of another dimension, but looking at the non-reflective blackness in the daylight of the outside world was something different. She couldn't resist the impression that she was looking at a door to another world.

Not to another dimension to which the transparent Doorways led, but to some mythical land. Hell, for example.

“Nothing comes out of there, right?” she joked, feeling shivers down her spine even though it was a warm spring day.

“No,” Mayumi said. “But it looks like it could.”

Rips were remnants of dominions, but of a different kind from Lila’s little dominion. She had created a separate dimension that was connected to the Earth with a small Doorway, but it wasn’t on its surface. In fact, Lila had no idea where exactly in the universe her dimension was. All she knew was how to get there. It was like reaching into a bottomless pocket—you knew where the pocket was, but it was impossible to estimate its actual size from the outside. This type of dominion was called an isolated dominion. An open dominion, like the one they were now looking at, was something like a rip in reality. As if someone had scratched off the paint to reveal the canvas. The problem with those kinds of dominions was that when they died, they left a hole in the matter that was a complete wasteland. The breach diminished over time until the earth dimension finally merged, but it took several years. The bigger the dominion, the longer it took to disappear. Compared to large dominions like Vineta, which floated on the water on that kind of interdimensional platform, Matsumoto’s garden was small, and after two years only a few small Rips remained. In the old photos, this place looked like a garden suspended in space.

Lila took out her camera and started taking pictures. Black Rips of various shapes and sizes gave the feeling of being on the brink of a mythical land grow. Something was about to happen.

Of course, nothing happened. A lot of scientific experimentation, including drills and spells, had been done, and this strange black material didn’t react. It didn’t crumble, didn’t scratch, didn’t make any sounds. It wasn’t visible on infrared scanners, it didn’t emit any radiation, and even to the eyes of mages its structure was impenetrable. Lila checked it personally. The danger the information boards cautioned against probably regarded the fact that if one tried to influence the Rip magically or physically, one could get hurt, as was the case with the members of the sect who believed

that everything involved in creating new dimensions was unclean and who had tried to cleanse this area several months ago.

Regardless, this place was a mystery. Even for a creator. Lila knew that even if she tried, she couldn't reach the Rip with her sixth sense. She could shape interdimensional matter inside her dominion as she pleased, but this fragment was inaccessible for her.

Though she usually admired the wonders of nature and the mysteries of the universe, that day in Aoishi she felt uneasy. When Kenta started mentioning all the fictional monsters in books and comics that came from alien dimensions, this feeling intensified. It was one thing to read such stories in the privacy of your home or on a loud bus, and another to listen to them while standing next to something that looked like a way out of hell. She felt a little silly to let herself be carried away by a child's fear but consoled herself that on the way back, Mayumi looked over her shoulder as often as she did.

\* \* \*

Lila was buzzing around the room. In one moment, she was looking at the map on the computer screen, in the another, she was packing a backpack, then she was flicking through her notebook again trying to choose a plan for today and checking the available public transportation on the phone in the meantime. Finally, somewhat frustrated, she picked up her backpack and left the hotel with the intention of getting on the first train that would come. Usually, she acted in a more coordinated way, booking tickets in advance and following a carefully crafted plan, but there were days when it just had to be done differently.

On the way, she walked into the store and bought a sandwich to eat somewhere nice. Ten minutes later, when she was almost at the station, she found she didn't really want to go anywhere. Over the past month, she'd seen so many Japanese monuments, temples, museums, and national parks that she didn't feel the need to see more. She passed the station and walked on, watching skyscrapers, passing cars, shop windows, and busy people. Over time, she began to turn into less frequented streets and quiet housing estates. When

she was hungry enough that she no longer cared about a nice view, she sat down on a bench in a small park with an empty playground. After the outdoor breakfast, she wandered aimlessly for several more hours. She ate dinner in a random restaurant. After the first spoon of curry rice, she realized that this place had in fact been her day's destination. She thanked the cook and the heavens above, and then she headed back. She was going to go on foot, but when she came across a spell-fueled rickshaw, she felt the urge to go for a ride.

Twelve o'clock UTC was nine in the evening in Japan, so after returning from a walk, Lila still had time to work on another blog article, but it didn't go very well. She often found herself looking at the clock and counting down the time left to the video broadcast. When the idea of checking what people had written on forums and on social media crossed her mind, there was no longer any question of further work.

At eight o'clock she couldn't stand it anymore and called Nika. Her friend answered almost immediately, and her smiling face appeared in the communicator window. She wore a dark hoodie, and her fair hair was pulled back into a bun on top of her head. She would look like a tomboy, if not for her full lips. She didn't emphasize them in any way, though Lila many times urged her to do so. Once Lila had even bought her lipstick as a gift. Nika had thanked her and assured her she would definitely use it someday, then she'd put it in the drawer and forgotten about it.

"Do you know they gave people a two-hour break from work to watch the news?" Nika asked, skipping both the greeting and the fact that Lila had called half an hour earlier than agreed.

"I've just read," said Lila, amused. "I don't think it would be possible here."

They spent the next hour exchanging news and links. When the clock read eight fifty-five, they both entered the website of the selected station and fell silent in shock.

"Server crashed!" Nika howled and begun to type on her keyboard so furiously that Lila wondered why the keys didn't fly into the air. "Ok, I got it."



Lila saw the notification icon and entered the link from her friend. She waited for the page to load and clicked the play button. It was nine o'clock. Lila's heart was beating almost as fast as if she was taking part in some kind of marathon, but the screen didn't show Isai Azara, only the TV presenter asking for a moment of patience. The stations had gotten the video on time, but it took a while to put it on their servers. The women howled with annoyance.

After a nervous fifteen minutes, a figure now known to the whole world finally appeared before their eyes.

"*Akihaula*," Isai Azara started. "Welcome."

"Hi, hello, welcome," Nika said. And added, "Hurry up!"

Azara smiled. "As promised, it won't be me who will be playing the main role in this video but At'alan and its residents."

A panorama of the city appeared on the screen.

"Geometrically," Nika said.

"Fabulously," Lila said.

Both were right. The buildings were shaped like cubes, spheres, and even...

"Pyramid," Lila rejoiced.

"With windows," Nika added when the camera zoomed in on the step pyramid.

Indeed, each level of the building was surrounded by a loggia and in its shaded recesses one could see windows and doors.

The camera moved across buildings decorated with geometric patterns.

Seeing the tower with clearly separated floors, Lila asked, "Is it a pagoda?"

"It's Alangai," Isai Azara spoke up. "The largest city on the island and the seat of major institutions. More than half of the At'alan inhabitants live here."

"They're all gray-headed," Lila observed. People walking along the street had hair of various shades of gray: from almost white to dark gray turning into black. "And they have geometric patterns on their clothes."

"There are no cars," Nika remarked.

“And no electrics.”

“There’s a lot of plants instead.”

“Something is flying over there.”

“It’s a flying carpet, I think.”

“What are they eating? Are these potato pancakes?”

“I guess. Look, they play soccer!”

“Not far from Alangai is the town of Tuaraz, which houses the university, library, and museum,” Isai Azara informed viewers.

On the screen appeared a stone gate wedged between two huge rocks, followed by subsequent shots showing multistory buildings carved in stone, linked often by bridges.

“A stone city.” Lila was fascinated.

“Lightcrystals,” Nika noted when the camera showed the interior of a huge cave filled with glazed shelves.

Lila almost touched the screen with her nose. “There are some papyri over there. And stone stelae. I think it’s a museum.”

“Historians are just getting spasms.”

Isai Azara briefly presented the next locations: stone towns, a hospital, a power plant, laboratories, even forest villages in the crowns of giant trees. Inside one of the wooden houses, which was dominated by wicker furniture, the white-haired owner of the apartment made a gesture toward the camera: she grasped her wrists, crossing her arms at belly level.

“This gesture means a greeting,” Azara explained. “The At’alanis use *askar neshe*, a gesture language, in their daily communication.”

“Really?” Lila got interested, but the man said nothing more. “He’s rather reticent today.”

“Maybe it’s supposed to be an intro,” Nika guessed. “They bait the hook. The world will save them because everyone will be dying of curiosity.”

“Perhaps,” Azara chimed in, “you are interested in why people live in trees and caves.”

“Well, actually, once you verbalized this thought, indeed,” Nika replied.

“One of the reasons is our friends who like causing confusion

sometimes.”

A giant brown bird resembling a pissed-off eagle appeared on the screen. It was sitting on a stone bridge as if on a perch, occupying a third of its length. If the bird spread its wings, it would cover the entire bridge.

“This is a *raharorakija*,” Azara introduced the bird. “Once known as roc.”

“What?” Nika asked, suddenly excited. “Does he mean *that* roc? Ruk, rokh, or whatever? That mythological bird? But they wrote that this legend was based on a flightless bird!”

“Maybe they were wrong,” Lila said, staring into the bird’s orange eyes.

Then the camera showed a hairy elephant.

“And this is *hagarak*. A mammoth.”

“Mammoth!” Lila screamed. “Nika, it’s a mammoth! From the Ice Age!”

“Holy...” Nika was speechless.

The mammoth stood chewing leaves. Indeed, he resembled a mammoth from the Ice Age, though his coat was much shorter than shown in the visualizations. And flaming red.

“Did they dye it?” Lila pondered.

“No, they didn’t... Probably. But the manufacturers of hair dyes will probably get inspired.”

After a while, the image of an animal was replaced by long thin sticks tied into bundles lying on the ground.

“These are twigs of one of the spatiotemporal plants called *roz*,” Azara continued. “We use them to weave baskets which are bigger inside than outside.”

“He’ll give me a heart attack,” Nika said. “Can’t he take longer breaks between all that news?”

On the screen, a little boy was reaching into a light brown wicker basket and pulling wooden blocks out of it. Eventually, he piled them taller than the basket, but he continued to pick up more.

“But how is it possible?” Lila asked. “That basket has an extra dimension in the middle, or what?”

Nika didn't know much about magic but read a lot of fantasy books. "Something like that, I guess."

The scene changed. This time it was a carpentry workshop, inside which a fair-haired man was making a chest out of black boards.

They heard Azara's voice. "Other things one can create using spatiotemporal plants are mailboxes..."

The screen was now divided into two parts. On the left side, by a black wall cabinet, stood a woman in a red dress with a yellow comb in her hand. On the right side, on a chest of drawers in some other room, there was a similar cabinet, also wide open. The woman on the left put the comb inside her cabinet and closed the door. A girl in a blue dress came to the cabinet on the right and took out a yellow comb. When the woman in the red dress opened the cabinet again, it was empty.

The scene changed again. Both sides of the screen showed red-brown wooden gates, but one was in Alangai and the other in Tuaraz, which could be told from the characteristic buildings that had appeared earlier in the video. The man in the blue shirt entered the gate on the left and exited the gate on the right.

"...and teleports," Azara finished.

There was silence.

Then, Lila and Nika spoke simultaneously.

"Fuck!"

\* \* \*

Isai Azara reappeared on the screen.

"That was the first part of the recording," he said. "In the second part, I will rise to the issues that piqued your curiosity. Let me start with endemic species."

Lila's ears pricked up.

"The animals you saw on the video represent the population of about eighty mammoths and thirty rocs. As can be deduced from the numbers, they are endangered species. We tried to keep them alive, but now they will also need your help."

"I'm sure someone will take the mammoths," Nika comment-

ed, “but the rocs need to work on their facial expressions.”

Lila giggled.

“As for spatiotemporal plants,” Azara continued, “because they are our only currency at the moment, we will not reveal any more information about them. We intend to make them, at least temporarily, the basis of our new economy. We won’t be selling seeds, only wood, end products, and intermediate goods.”

“Reasonably,” Nika’s voice came over the loudspeaker again. “But if half of the world places an order, they’ll fall behind schedule quickly.”

“And the resources aren’t endless,” Lila added. “Besides, it takes time for something to grow.”

“Priority will be given to the countries that cooperate with us,” Azara announced. “For this, we will use the current resources of the island. For the next batch, one will have to wait at least a few years.”

“He’s heard you,” Nika muttered.

“There were also questions about the history of At’alan, the historical sources in our possession, and the reasons of the At’alanis’ isolation. I think that researchers of history and different cultures understand that these are questions that cannot be answered in minutes. Therefore, on behalf of the At’alani nation, I would like to invite them to the island.”

“That sounds interesting,” Nika said as if in the last hour nothing had sounded interesting.

“I could talk about the history and culture of At’alan for hours and even have more recordings created, but it would still be a one-sided report. You would look at us through the prism of what we think about ourselves. We want to give you the opportunity to form your own opinion. That is why we invite historians, ethnologists, and anthropologists, but also biologists, chemists, doctors, veterinarians, zoologists, botanists, journalists, and diplomats to see At’alan with their own eyes. Due to the fragile ecosystem and the fact that the inhabitants of At’alan also need time to get used to the situation, we will welcome twenty guests per week, including ten diplomats. The proposed length of stay is five days. Unfortunately,

we do not have an airport, but we can provide a helipad and a harbor for small yachts.”

The screen showed the mentioned helipad, and then the harbor. Both were in a bay surrounded by cliffs. Then, the camera returned to Isai Azara, and at the bottom of the screen appeared a caption.

“If you are interested, please contact us using the e-mail address shown below. Government agencies can propose their candidates via the e-mail given to them a few days ago. In the message, please write a few sentences about yourself, your interests, and expectations regarding your stay on At’alan—it will help us prepare a sightseeing program adequate to individual needs. In response, we will send you the designated date of stay and useful information.”

The man fell silent for a moment.

“We understand that you may have concerns. We do as well. We prepared the text of a non-aggression pact. Only citizens of those countries that sign the pact will be invited to the island. We promise we will treat the safety of the visitors very seriously.”

Another short break.

“Thank you for your attention. We believe that we’ll be able to reach an agreement. *Akaena*.”

Lila pressed the stop button. Then she was just staring ahead with unseeing eyes.

Nika’s voice broke her out of her thoughts.

“What do you say, Lila? Are you going or not?”



## CHAPTER 3

“I’M neither a scientist nor a diplomat,” Lila said, amused, maximizing a communicator app window.

Nika grinned. “Journalists are invited too.”

“I am not a journalist.”

“You write travel articles. It’s journalism.”

“Without credentials.”

Nika raised an eyebrow. “Really? Since when do you care about such things?”

Lila smiled slightly. “I don’t.”

“So what are you waiting for?!”

“For the government’s decision, perhaps?” Lila laughed.

“You don’t need to wait for the government’s decision to send an e-mail,” Nika remarked and grinned again. “I’m sure the Atlanteans will appreciate that you were the first person who replied to their invitation. As soon as Poland arranges formalities, you’ll be able to go.”

"Of course." Lila nodded. Then she furrowed her eyebrows in suspicion. "Why are you persuading me so eagerly?"

"You are my window to the world," Nika said theatrically. "You go where I don't go, and you report all interesting things to me."

"I didn't know I'm your employee." Lila leaned toward the monitor. "Where is my pay?"

"I settle accounts with you spiritually. I add every report to your list of good deeds so that you can go to heaven."

"And why do you need a report from Atlantis?"

Nika gave her a shocked look. "You still ask?!"

"Most of those who'll go there probably will also publish some info," Lila remarked.

"But they won't bring me a basket!"

"Ha! So that's what you're after!"

"Well, I can't tell you to steal a teleport."

"So I'm supposed to steal that basket?!"

"I don't think they just sell it to you. They're going to trade them for a new country." Nika scratched her head. "At least bring me a roc feather! It must be lying somewhere so one can take it."

"Dominika!"

"What?" the programmer asked with a mischievous smile. "Lila, come on! It's just one e-mail! There isn't any harm, is there? Wait..." The smile faded from her face. "You don't want to go to Atlantis?!"

"I haven't had time to reflect on what I found out about it today." Lila gave her friend a meaningful look. "No country released an official statement yet. Nobody even knows what At'alan's international status is. At the moment it's not a tourist destination. We know nothing about them! It's like—"

"A journey to unknown lands," Nika broke in, her tone conspiratorial. "Lila, you could be a pioneer."

Lila didn't change her expression, but the corners of her mouth quivered.

"A discoverer," Nika tempted. "True adventurer."

Lila burst out laughing. "If you put it that way..."

"Drop them a line that you're a traveling girl with a popular



blog...” When Lila raised an eyebrow, Nika corrected herself, “A quite popular blog. And that you can bring them *oscypek*. Just don’t forget to put a link in your message.” After a moment’s thought, she added, “You can blame me. Or write that your mother told you to quiz them on astronomy.”

“Hello, I’m Lila Tanew and I have a test for you.” Lila laughed, holding her stomach.

“Exactly.” Nika giggled. “Now, write.”

“But... Right now?”

“Yes, right now. According to my plan, you have to be first or you have no chance.”

“Now you are demotivating me?!”

“Lila, it’s cool to be spontaneous, but the clock is ticking, and the competition never sleeps!”

Accompanied by Nika’s useless hints, Lila eventually composed a message in which she introduced herself largely using the text from the “About me” section on her blog. She didn’t forget to put a link to it because Nika reminded her about it seventeen times.

“What are my expectations?” Lila was wondering aloud. “I don’t conduct research or have a specific theme in mind. I want to go there to do what?”

Nika shrugged. “To bring Atlantis closer to Polish readers.”

“And that’s it?” Lila thought for a moment. “OK, fine.”

Nika chanted, “Send! Send! Send!”

Lila clicked the send button.

Then, she panicked.

“Oh my God, I sent it! Why did you persuade me to send it?! It’s an international affair! When they read my e-mail, I’ll become their national joke! Can’t you hack them somehow and delete that message?”

“You were outraged that I wanted to take a bird feather lying on the ground, and now you want to hack somebody’s mailbox?!”

“You wanted to steal a magic basket! With my hands!”

“You want that basket too, but you just don’t say it out loud!”

“Yes! I want that basket! So what?!”

“Then go there,” Nika said, “and get it.”