

The Trees Between

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The initial jerk from the primary wave had been stronger than anticipated and sent Miraiha careening into a sapling for support. The shock made her heart skip a beat, but feeling the force in this world was a promising sign.

“Did it work?” Miraiha wondered aloud.

“Felt like it,” Trent said inside her head.

She jumped at his voice. Miraiha didn’t realize she had sent her thoughts through the grove’s communications channel. A communion of people and link-trees, she had relayed her feelings to everything. She scolded herself. A leader voicing doubts in a time of crisis was never good. She wrung her hands and suddenly realized how cold her fingers were.

“Rosela,” Miraiha said, willing authority back into her tone. “Check the outer ring for seismic recordings.”

“On it.”

“Leaves still online?” Miraiha sent the query through New Gaia, the artificial reality that absorbed the seismic energy, and to the others in the grove’s network. This was the first true field test of seismic disaster mitigation, and she wasn’t sure how well the auxiliary systems would hold.

She crossed her fingers. Seismologists had forecast the superquake for decades. The last event flattened sixty percent of the city and took two hundred thousand lives, and yet the city did nothing more than implement stricter building codes. She imagined the quake’s tendrils thrusting through water and soil, uprooting everything, bent on destroying their homes once and for all. Thinking about failure wrung her gut like a wet cloth.

Status reports from each of the seven hundred ash trees linked to their individual hosts trickled into *Yggdrasil*, Miraiha’s vessel, and therefore into her consciousness. All canopies continued recycling run-off gases from the city and nearby farms and pumping sulfur into the atmosphere. Although an important system, its simplicity contrasted with the technological complexities of the grove’s primary functions: to absorb and redirect seismic energy into an alternate reality.

Trent opened a private channel between him and Miraiha. “Listen, Miraiha, don’t worry so much. If Cradle’s canopies can survive the typhoons we’ve been getting, they can survive this.”

“Quakes can do damage where you least expect it.”

Trent sighed. “Yes, we understand that. That day never fades.” Miraiha didn’t want to remember. “That’s why I’m here. We’re not risking our lives blindly. We fought alongside you for years. We believe in this. And we believe in you. You need to, too.”

Miraiha considered his words. The three of them together, she, Trent, and Rosela, had realized they could never prevent a fault from slipping but could always be more prepared. The government had been skeptical, but multi-functionality was the key to securing land and funding: atmospheric treatments via leaves, combined with a sprawling root system, a lattice that hindered liquefaction and held both soil and solid rock together. She had spearheaded the sowing of Sisters’ Cradle, the first grove, just north of the reclaimed island peninsula and encapsulating the city. When they had engineered the link-trees, she didn’t doubt their effectiveness. Why did she now?

“You’re right,” Miraiha sighed. “I need to refocus. *Yggdrasil*—Cradle—depends on me. Thanks for the reminder.”

“We all depend on you, but don’t forget this relationship is mutual.” His voice was an early sunrise, light and promising. Miraiha could picture his gentle smile. “I’m always here to pass tea if you need me, Mirai.”

Miraiha chuckled. During their endless nights in study rooms as students, they’d pass around a pot of tea—but only when someone hit a mental wall or looked about to fall asleep. She recalled one exhausting night when Trent had kept passing to her as a joke, and their fingers lingered on the handle longer than usual.

“Great news,” Rosela announced, voice teeming with elation. Miraiha’s pensiveness fell away and she thanked Trent for his support. “No seismic activity registered at any points beyond the grove. Complete mitigation.”

“Excellent,” Miraiha said with a smile. “We might just pull this off.”

“Roger that.”

With the communication channels quieted, Miraiha relaxed.

Deep in meditation within *Yggdrasil*’s pod, she re-centered herself. Sisters’ Cradle had been successful in redirecting the ground’s innate power into New Gaia. This time, the seismic waves had met resistance, a resistance

led by the sacred union of Miraiha and her link-tree. The waves reared back in disgust before being sucked away into other channels where damage was minimized. Despite being weakened from drought, the grove was proving its worth, proving that meaningful bonds within and between worlds could still be formed.

No longer would roadways fall atop one another, crushing civilians stuck in the wrong place at the wrong time. The ground wouldn't swallow buildings or topple them like dominos. This time, her family would be safe—everyone's families would be safe. The city would breathe easy, not gasp for air laden with dust and embers and tears.

Miraiha looked out over the sun-kissed hills that rolled into grasslands and verdurous mountains, which parted just enough to flash the shimmering sea beyond, and walked down to the damp sand trimming the stream. The landscape she had spent months programming, all the while aware of its eminent destruction. Once the seismic energy was absorbed by the link-trees, her code's functions would transform it to pass through the channels connecting to New Gaia. There, the energy would be released. A tinge of guilt crawled through her insides. She questioned why she would destroy the one world she could explore free of hoverchairs or robotic appendages that made her skin itch. A world untouched by pollution with a horizon unbroken by cityscapes. New Gaia was as much Cradle's world as it was hers, and it was soon to be ravaged by the natural disasters her primary world could no longer endure. She hoped the grove understood and that their bond of trust wouldn't waver.

Yet nature denied direct dissolution of its wild forces, and there was no other choice but to channel the raw seismic energy into New Gaia. Energy required space to run free as nature intended; New Gaia could provide.

Stream water lapped at Miraiha's toes. The cool sensation was one she could only feel here. She caught herself and shunted the emotions aside to brace her body and mind for the secondary and subsequent surface waves. She willed her comrades to do the same. Seismology studies taught her that the most violent and destructive components of the quake had yet to come.

The secondary seismic wave sheared the rock, twisted the grove's roots, strained them. The shaking threatened to tear Miraiha from her trance, but she sank deeper into *Yggdrasil* and fought back the dread rumbling in her core. Her focus was imperative to transferring the energy to New Gaia. If she faltered, the connection could break. And she wasn't certain the others could

keep the alternate world spinning without her. She had designed it, had a flawless synchronicity with it that her companions envied.

The surface waves swung the planet's crust side-to-side. Miraiha was thrown off balance and a full step into the stream. Cold water splashed up her thighs. Pebbles jittered across the ground as it moaned, cracked, and ruptured before her eyes. The image was replaced with memories of splitting cement and screeching metal. Memories of being pinned beneath fallen ceiling and unable to reach—

She supported herself against a boulder protruding from the bank and tried to regain a crystalline state of being. The spiritual, physical, and emotional draw made her veins magma. The same sensation consumed Cradle's root system.

Within the vastness of her consciousness, a connection severed—a tree snapped, its host crushed by the shearing forces. Despite being only one of hundreds, the loss was a knee to the gut. The network in that region flickered, but Rosela and Trent bridged the gap.

“How did—” Miraiha started, impressed at their reflexes. “Never mind. Is the connection stable?”

“Trying to keep it that way,” said Trent. Each word was a standalone pulse.

“Could use an extra link in kyu-twelve fourteen-eff,” Rosela said, voice strained.

Amid the continuous tremors, trees both north and south of the endangered quadrant offered their support. In the primary world, roots shot toward each other, coiling into thick braids and spinning nets to catch the propagating waves. Miraiha would have stretched *Yggdrasil* as well, but being the heart of the grove mandated her focus remain where it was.

Brief moments of stillness allowed the link-trees and their partners to catch their breath and reconnect. Rolling waves threw ground both horizontal and vertical. Yet despite their intensity, the grove met them with a peaceful calm. Rather than stifle it, Sisters' Cradle acknowledged and channeled the planet's stress and anger. It was a practice in acceptance long overdue.

As the final currents subsided, Miraiha sat on the grass in a semi-circle of violet flowers. She reached out to both worlds. Her lips parted in exultation. She offered understanding and oneness.

“Peace, harmony, serenity, I pledge,” the words came in ceremonial drumbeats, a mantra. “With all my being, everything I was, am, and will be, I

swear to do whatever necessary to reverse the damage wreaked by my ancestors. Again together, we will thrive. A single harmonious spirit.”

Her energy graced New Gaia’s clouds and soothed its open wounds. It oozed from *Yggdrasil*’s roots and canopy, seeped into soil and air far beyond. She could feel the grove’s collective soul beat within her. Others were with her, shared her promise. She repeated the words over and over.

“Peace, harmony, serenity, I pledge. . . .”

§

Something twitched at the edge of Miraiha’s mind. A slight tapping. She recognized the movement as outside New Gaia, but let it float by, labeling it inconsequential. While awaiting the aftershocks, she wondered whether their efforts had been enough to keep their city and people alive. The tapping continued, exploding into a loud knocking she could no longer ignore.

Sitting in the pod in the center of her link-tree, Miraiha’s eyes shot open. The purple blossoms, whispering stream, luscious mountains, and broken ground—vanished. They were replaced by fibrous walls coated in sleek link-conductivity film. The xylem and phloem carrying nutrients for the tree’s biological components wrapped around the pod like arteries circling a heart. They tangled with thick electrical cables. An array of orange holo-images spanned before her, showing data from the grove and the seismic recordings from all stations and drones in the region that Rosela had forwarded to her.

Another thud sounded behind her. Drenched in sweat that curled her dark hair and stung her eyes, she turned toward the sound. *Yggdrasil* didn’t like visitors. Communion with a link-tree was sacred; one tree, one person. Balance was key. She twisted a fleshy growth on the floor and the hatch unlocked.

“This had better be important,” Miraiha growled, but fatigue tainted the command of her voice.

“Fire,” Miraiha’s aunt, Nell, said. Exasperation cross-hatched her face. “There’s a fire encroaching. Couldn’t reach you on normal channels. Came as fast as I could. Evacuation’s been issued for the whole area. You can’t stay here.”

“A fire? Did we fail?”

“Against the quake? No. The city stands strong as ever. For now.” She wiped at her brow. “Fire’s coming from the hills.”

Miraiha shook her head. “I can’t abandon Sisters’ Cradle. There’ll be aftershocks. We must mitigate them.”

“The whole grove will burn down.”

Miraiha met her aunt’s gaze. Distress glazed her eyes. She knew what she was thinking, what she was remembering. Miraiha wet her lips. “This fire, did the quake start it? Did a remote power line break?”

“We don’t know what sparked it, could have been anything in this drought—but it doesn’t matter. We have to evacuate.”

“I can’t do that,” Miraiha said, returning her attention to the data in front of her. “This is my place. I won’t let *Yggdrasil* burn. I can’t let the city fall. You said yourself that it still stands. How do you expect us to just pack up and leave now? The grove cannot stand on its own.”

“How much more do you want to lose, Mirai?”

Her heart lodged between her ribs. Flashes of her sister’s lifeless body being pulled from rubble burned into her head. She could hear her father’s panicked shouts for everyone to take cover. The phantom limb pain she thought she had long since overcome returned. She looked down at where her legs should be.

Nell swallowed. “You’re all I have left.”

The ground trembled. Miraiha separated a sliver of her consciousness from her whole and let it seep into the tree. A minor tremor for now, but that didn’t mean larger ones weren’t on the way.

“This grove is all we have left,” Miraiha said, her voice a sharp breeze. “Sisters’ Cradle is our key to salvation. We ravaged too much. Without making amends, we will be wiped away. A mass cleansing we’ve already witnessed the beginnings of. The Red Ring eruptions, the Tallis islands being swallowed by the boiling sea. If we prove Cradle’s worth here, we can plant groves across the globe.”

“Do you still think we can reverse all this?”

“Have to try.”

“If the fire doesn’t change course—”

“Then it doesn’t change course,” Miraiha said.

“But—”

“Please, leave now while you can. I will be fine.”

“How can you say that? These trees will burn, just like all the others.”

“That remains to be seen.” Miraiha sighed. “Please, Aunt, go. The grove calls me. I must concentrate.”

“Mirai, please.”

Miraiha lifted a hand and started to settle herself back into the grove. She could already see New Gaia’s mountains forming inside her mind.

“I don’t want to drag you out of here.”

“Then don’t. I’m needed here.”

Nell’s hand gripped Miraiha’s shoulder. The physical contact turned the mountains to haze and brought her back to the pod just as Nell started to haul her up under her armpits.

“Let go—” Anger erupted from Miraiha. She flailed, cursing and baring her teeth. Her livid rage cared little of her aunt’s good intentions.

“Mirai, please.”

But Miraiha’s heart was too choked by Nell’s imposition to hear the plea. Too overwhelmed with indignation to want to hear it.

Yggdrasil called to her, alarmed at her unannounced disconnection and sensing her pain. The tree’s serenity seeped into her, reminded her where she was, what she had left to do. It promised her roots and reach beyond her physical body.

Miraiha ceased her struggle and fused her consciousness back into the tree. She pulled a cord from the pod’s wall, molding it into an extension of her will. At Miraiha’s command, the cord took Nell by the ankle and yanked hard. Nell released Miraiha, and threw her arms out to catch herself. She blinked, mouth agape. A second cable removed itself from the wall and joined the first in dragging the woman out of the pod. Nell’s face contorted, she mouthed something, but Miraiha wasn’t listening.

“I’ll meet you at the dome.” Miraiha sealed the hatch.

§

“Everything all right over there?” As soon as Miraiha’s feet touched grass again, Rosela’s voice encompassed her.

“We have a problem,” Miraiha broadcast to the entire grove. She assessed the network’s stability following the roaring of another aftershock. New Gaia bellowed as it swallowed.

“Severity?”

Miraiha filled them in to the threat.

There was no swearing or angry muttering, only silent acceptance. They had gambled once with testing Sisters’ Cradle against a superquake, and now she asked them to do it again. Holding the planet’s crust together was what the trees had been designed for, not playing with fire.

Miraiha stared out over the splintered landscape. The ground was warped like crumpled paper, but aside from some uprooted trees, the world was still beautiful. It was transformed, fissured, but still the world she had generated. The low sun dipped the sky in pink and red; it was a sunset that no longer existed in the primary reality. This was the type of world they fought to restore.

Miraiha traveled through Cradle’s surface-level roots in search of the fire. Even for sensors that didn’t have such perception in their original design, she could feel the radiating heat. The fire was still far to the east, but in this drought, fire spread fast. She established a link to satellite imagery and ran ETA calculations.

“Priority remains on nullifying aftershocks,” Miraiha said. “I’m sending the fire’s estimated time of arrival and projected path. Data will be updated as I receive it.”

Trent materialized on a mound of soil before her. His narrow face and cool eyes regarded her.

“This is my private place, Trent.” Miraiha forced down a flash of irritation. “We agreed to respect each other’s abodes.”

“And I do,” he said. “I wanted to speak with you.”

“The grove connects us as well as we can ever be.”

He looked guilty. “Guess I’m still sometimes a sucker for seeing is believing.”

“Fine,” Miraiha sighed, trying to hide the beginnings of a smile. “But I’m speaking to everyone.”

Trent sat and ran his fingers through the grass. She was pretty certain he was taller here than he was in primary reality. He had never peeked into her space before, but it didn’t bother her as much as she expected it to. Classmates for years before becoming colleagues, he understood her better than anyone. If his intuition told him to manifest here, she trusted it was for good reason.

“Preliminary assessment—combined with information from an outside

source—indicates that our efforts against the quake were successful.” Miraiha paced as she spoke into the air, as if the clouds carried her voice to the others positioned in their own sanctuaries. “But we must remain vigilant. If this fire indeed threatens Cradle, we will meet it just as we did this quake.”

Concern came from a distant link-tree. “But Cradle was not designed—”

“We will adapt,” Miraiha said with resolution, despite still grasping for a tangible plan. “If we are firm in our intention, we can do it.”

Another voice tried to argue but Miraiha cut it short as well. There was no time to entertain doubt.

“Everyone, look around you,” Miraiha said. “We just transferred a quake from one world to another. How many lives did we save? How many hundreds of thousands—if not millions—more will we save with future iterations of this project? Right now, we have two goals: to protect our city and to keep Cradle safe.”

“Safe against a wildfire?” The skepticism came from many.

“Yes, I understand the concern,” Miraiha said, crossing her arms. “But if the fire-fighting forces could not contain and redirect it, we’re the city’s last defense. It is not a matter of trying but of doing.” She took a steadying breath and collected her thoughts. A solution began to emerge. “Everyone, stretch roots toward the surface and calibrate pores to ex-seventeen-point-five-five-nine. We’ll see if we can attack hotspots. And reprogram solar drains to absorb the fire’s heat, but seal all moisture pores. In this drought, we can’t afford to lose any water.”

“And of course the new irrigation system isn’t online until next week,” Rosela said. Her voice creaked with nerves.

“Poor timing, yes. But there’s nothing we can do about it now. We must use what we have. If we simultaneously pull from the roots and solar drains, our focus should be sufficient to channel the fire’s energy into New Gaia. Just like we did with the quake.”

Trent nodded to himself. “Perhaps you are right. Energy is energy.”

“This year is the driest in recorded history. This fire would not threaten us had we not set the stage. We must share in the responsibility.”

The grove agreed. It wasn’t a subject of debate.

“Remember, we are all one,” she said. “As one, we pledged to save this planet. If we abandon our promise now, we leave Cradle and our city to burn to ash. We shielded our city from disaster once; there is no reason we cannot do it again. Cradle is strong. New Gaia is strong. We are strong. As one, we

can do this.”

Murmurs of agreement rippled through the grove.

Miraiha addressed Trent alone. “Now’s not quite the time for words, Trent, but if you have them, speak quick.”

“You answered my main question.” He crossed his legs and cupped his hands in his lap. “Not that I’m complaining, but does it not bother you to destroy this world just to save our immediate one?”

“I thought it would,” Miraiha said, sitting next to him. “But I realize these natural events only add texture to the landscape. It’s a part of nature. Perhaps when the collective becomes one with nature again, we can embrace these changes for what they are without fearing extinction. Perhaps more groves like Cradle will help us realize this.”

“It would be unnatural for us to live indefinitely.”

“It would,” she said as she rolled a blade of grass between her fingers. “But perhaps we can live in harmony until that time.”

“I hope we will be around to see it,” Trent said.

“Further motivation to push for change.”

A mild tremor shook the ground.

“Guess that’s our cue,” Trent said, pressing his palms to the dirt and splaying his fingers. He smiled at Miraiha. “Tea in Blay Gardens once this is all done?”

He disappeared before she could respond, but not before color flushed her cheeks. Amid chaos, he thought of tea. A warm cup did sound nice. And Blay Gardens had a reputation of steeping to perfection. For a second, she wondered whether he intended them to share a pot, then settled into concentration. The air smelled like sweet chamomile, and it pulled a smile from her lips.

§

The next aftershock was aggressive. The planet was a wild beast, shaking to rid itself of the people on its back. Miraiha remained seated to avoid losing her balance, had to keep at bay the inkling fear of another tree snapping free. Knowing what to feel for, she found strain in three quadrants. Fatigue was beginning to settle in.

She sent private commands to the neighboring trees, urged them to offer whatever assistance they could. The ground continued to roar, but Sisters' Cradle stood tall in defiance. The stress in the quadrants dissipated, and Miraiha breathed easy. The subsequent aftershocks disturbed little more than sand.

Another hour passed before flames frisked the first leaves. Regardless of the time they had to prepare for the encounter, the fire snatched and devoured the first line of trees. It was too quick. They fought with desperate vigor, but the fire and its intense heat brought flickers of doubt as it encroached. Doubt that bled into the link-trees and their hosts like poison, evoking fear from the core of ego. Many succumbed to terror and despair. All burned with their vessels. The rest of the grove felt their panic, their dying thoughts, heard unbridled screams of pain. Their strength hadn't been enough. Urgent requests for reassessment rang out through New Gaia, which, despite multiple spikes in surface temperature, saw no fire of its own. Grief conspired with the thought of having condemned the entire grove and the city it swore to protect to their deaths, sending Miraiha's heart and stomach into turmoil. She choked trying to swallow rising bile.

Miraiha couldn't understand what had gone wrong. They had done well against the quake. They knew exactly when, and where, to focus on the fire. She ran through the possibility that it came down to mechanical design: the fact that trees burned. She asked *Yggdrasil* for insight, but it had none to offer. Its branches drooped in apology.

"Miraiha." Rosela and Trent's voices hung in the air.

"I know," Miraiha said. "I'm thinking."

"Synchronicity was too low," Trent said. "They were distracted—eight nearly disconnected. Should we reallocate resources to the front?"

Miraiha ran the rough calculations. "Yes, let's try that."

"Sending protocol then."

Those who weren't on the front line allocated sixty-five percent of their resources to those who were. Miraiha commandeered the system. Flames shivered in protest. New Gaia saw sparks. Temperature climbed, then crashed as the hosts jerked in response to the ignition of leaves and branches. The wind tossed embers high into canopies, raining fire from above. Without the hosts' dedication, the support from the rest of the grove failed. Trees, and all within them, roasted, burst open like chestnuts.

Miraiha slipped into the space of one of the endangered hosts. She

couldn't help him, but she could gain insight into what was going wrong. His pod was a chamber of smoke and body odor that brought tears to her eyes. From here, she could feel beyond the tree's exterior. What she saw choked her. The sheer audacity of fire taller than the trees themselves, and the knowledge that trees fell to flame, broke the hosts. The image coaxed thoughts of mortality. Screamed for them.

She returned to the stream in New Gaia. Unless substantially weakened, it would take them all. She dipped her hands into the water, relished in its coolness, as she searched for solutions. They needed an army of water or sand bombers. Barriers to keep the fire from eating the trees before they could transfer its energy. She splashed the stream water into her face, settled her attention to count each path of water that drained down her chin. They dripped into her hands and pooled.

She smiled at the small ocean in her hands as its water soaked into her skin. The water was as much energy as everything. New Gaia would still save them.

§

It was a curious sight from outside. Flames bent backwards, twisting away from the very matter they craved. Torrents of water rushed from invisible pores, beat back the flames and soaked the ground. Oxygen voids shrunk the tallest of flames back below the canopies. Everything moved in concert.

Miraiha stood on a cliff overlooking the ocean. Before her, the visual of churning water helped her focus. Behind her, grasslands spontaneously combusted. The heat at her back was reassurance she no longer needed. Cradle's collective felt all. Controlled all activity.

Canopy leaves were reprogrammed to suck oxygen into New Gaia; moisture pores were reopened and New Gaia's oceans fell like sweat from the trees; and the excess water pounding into the soil was reabsorbed and cycled back up to drench the flames again. The drained fire could now be harnessed and pulled towards New Gaia's empty terrain.

Miraiha's legs wobbled where she stood. Redirecting bursts of seismic energy had been a challenge. Moving seas was another. Her exhaustion from the primary reality manifesting here as well was not a good sign.

But as oxygen fell in one world and grew in the other, the fire learned where it could survive and began to escort itself to New Gaia. Trent alerted her to the shift, herself too preoccupied to notice. That was one burden alleviated. Her legs ceased shaking, but she still dropped to the ground. For the remainder of the exercise, she sat cross-legged, sea foam spraying in her face and hair, cast high by swirling tides.

The threat to the grove was extinguished. Cries of rejoicing rang through New Gaia's sky like bird songs.

"Of course Cradle and New Gaia's connection is omnidirectional," Miraiha mumbled to herself. "Everything is . . . so delusional to have not thought of it sooner."

"Don't be so harsh on yourself," Rosela said.

Miraiha cursed. Had she broadcast her thoughts again?

"At least you realized it. We were all distracted and too focused on removing, not adding."

"We can't get everything right the first time," Trent said.

Miraiha sighed and nodded.

While others retired for well-deserved rest, Miraiha lingered. New Gaia's land blazed lavishing reds and oranges, and painted the sky with smoke that twisted the final moments of sunset somehow more beautiful. Here, only land was ravaged. She wondered what would have befallen the city had Sisters' Cradle not existed. But it wasn't something she wanted to imagine. There was no point to such musings anyway, not when they had succeeded.

This was the first step to restoring harmony. The next—she smiled—was tea.