

There are certain places where I'll never be.

And certain sights that I'll never see.

Places of majesty and places of wonder, beholding sights of grandeur and splendor.

The splendor of stars, of distant worlds, within arm's reach and talon's grasp.

These foreign sights, and foreign sounds, are beholden by eyes more alien than foreign.

Aboard ships of white, gray, and blue, traversing the void to frontiers far and new.

They know not loss, or love, or hate, for they only know wonder for wonder's sake.

Wandering to places that I'll never be.

And wondering for sights that I'll never see.

Princess Lita

On The Nature of Dreams

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Aetheron, The Grand Seat of the Inner Flock, Star Spire Castle. Many years before the Nexian Reformations.

Princess Lita

The dreams were intensifying.

And there was nothing I could do to stop them, nothing, except for removing myself from the project which promises to revolutionize the arcane.

The visions had become sharper.

The sounds had become crisper.

And yet I was no closer to determining the subjects of my dreams.

For the sharper the visions became, the less I knew of what I saw. And the crisper the sounds were, the less I understood what anything meant.

As with the elimination of ambiguity, came the arrival of explicit certainty. Which meant that the only thing that improved with clarity, was the certainty of my ignorance.

Because as the subject of my visions became clear, there remained no more room for conjecture or inference. For what could I infer from an object of crystal clarity, when what I saw was incomparable to what I knew? What could I determine from sounds of crisp fidelity, when what I heard was completely foreign?

The only certainty I could draw from the object of my visions, the transfixion of my dreams, was that they all were of a time, a place, and a subject far removed from the confines of reality.

In fact, it was nothing short of unreality, if such a thing even existed.

But perhaps I was being too brash.

Perhaps I simply need to collect my notes.

Perhaps what is needed is a reassessment of my vision journal, and an interpretation from someone that had yet to have heard of my experiences.

Someone I still trusted, and someone who I still had confidence in.

Someone who, ironically, stood at the forefront of the opposition to the trajectory of the movement I elected to endorse.

Someone who over 30 years ago, ignited a spark which has become the unending inferno of passion that is my drive for Arcanist Revivalism.

Proctor Lekta, of the Empiraclist ilk.

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Aetheron, Aereoton City, Inner Flock Ring, En Route to the Palace of Learning. Dawn.

Princess Lita

Flying was always an exciting affair. Lifting above the clouds on the power of one's own wings was never once an exercise in boredom. Exhilaration however soon gave way to ceaseless ponderings, as the cruising portion of flight was prone to do in the otherwise unoccupied mind. This was true for all Avilan, regardless of their class or station.

Today, those ponderings came in the form of a certain conversation I had with a local representative not a few seasons prior. As the particularly clear vistas on this bright and sunny

day, prompted my eyes to lock onto the vast plots of brown and black on the outskirts of the city, interrupting an otherwise untouched ocean of green.

Planting season. I thought to myself, as the aforementioned representative's words quickly entered my mind.

"Greatness was always a stone's throw away. In the past, this stone was proudly carried aloft by the gifted flock. In the present, it remains property of both the arcane and the empirical. In the future, well... only time will tell."

That was what Flock-master Farmer See-yah had chosen to be his parting words on my Royal visit.

Words that were... as Nurse Rolikta would say, were *fighting words*.

But I didn't necessarily see it that way. I wasn't the type to hold these sorts of things against those who at the end of the day knew no better than the beasts of the land that they raised and tilled.

Because Farmer See-Yah was of the landed flock.

Which meant he simply didn't mean what he said. He couldn't. Because he lacked the *scope and vision* of those with the capacity for flight.

Not to mention the capacity for the arcane.

Such a concept could likewise be applied to the empiricalists, as whilst they had the capacity for flight, and thus the physical ability to see the *scope and vision* of the land... they still lacked that same *scope and vision* when it came to the world *beyond* the physical.

And thus, as with Farmer See-Yah, I couldn't hold their dissident opinions in any regard, or any contempt.

For they simply did not know any better.

The same line of thinking, however, was startlingly true for *me* as well. As my visions would indicate that there was yet *another* layer above me. One that was *above* the capacities of the flighted flock, *above* the capacities of the *gifted* flock... and thus, above the capacities for me even as an arcanist to understand.

This was why this trip was imperative.

This was why I had to attend this *fair* or *festival* or whatever the empiricalists called this event today.

Because I needed answers, and I needed to gain an audience with the only empiricist I still trusted.

For the rest of the Empiricists at this point were either against me, or apathetically indifferent to my plights.

The political situation had deteriorated since my childhood.

With the vague assertion of *the status quo* slowly coming apart at the seams.

The emergence of unprecedented political opponents, from the *Neuvo-Empirical Order*, to the *Representative Council of the Flightless* was threatening to destroy the world I knew. As they selfishly threatened to upend centuries of peace and stability for the sake of some ambiguous assertions of a so-called 'brighter future'.

This was why I had increased my efforts in moving forward with my father's work, his great projects, and his breakthroughs in revitalizing the strength and power of the arcane.

This was also why I rarely left the inner sanctum, rarely ever entering the playhouses of the empiricists, these so-called *laboratories*, as they self-purported to be.

On the rare occasion I visited, I came only to pay lip service to their efforts for the sake of the truce between the empiricist creed and the arcanist truths. I only maintained the smiles, the polite visage, and the continued decorum of polite society for the sake of maintaining the cohesion that was our *established order*.

A sharp, shrill, carefully practiced series of screeches suddenly pulled me from my cruising-flight thoughts. A series of long, throaty, powerful screeches soon followed, beckoning my attention and signaling the end of our cruise.

I could see more than a thousand eyes looking up at those sounds, many of them looking up in deference and respect, a few in fear and dread.

As only those of the cliffside flock were allowed to join the ranks of the Royal Guard, their symphonic calls, mimicking the deep bass of drums and the sharp buzzing of brass, became synonymous with the arrival of a member of the Royal Family.

A wide berth of space was quickly formed at one of the palace's many open gardens, as several guardsman took first-landing, positioning themselves and their weapons stoically across the lawn, their pose and positions resembling the statues that towered over them.

Several of my closest guards landed on either side of me, as a small group remained airborne, crossbows and bows alike at the ready.

A small procession of musicians quickly flew forward from the hidden service corridors of the palace, as they quickly assembled in front of us, and without missing a single beat, began playing the Royal call.

It was good to see that even in troubling times, that decorum was still maintained.

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Aetheron, Aereoton City, Inner Flock Ring, Palace of Learning. Noon.

Princess Lita

There was *one* thing I had to admit about this place.

It truly did live up to the term *palace*.

For across its hundreds of acres of crown-bestowed territory lay not a tower of whitewall stone, or beestrome wood, but instead... a large atrium of glass. Glass which covered the space of an entire servant's wing, before jutting up at its core in an awe-inspiring spire of crystal.

However, I would be remiss if I were to refer to it by the commoners' tongue. For they understood not what they saw from the middle or outer rings. To them, there was no other descriptor for this spectacular structure than *crystal*.

But like the rest of the structure, this inspiring achievement crafted by Avilan hands, was in fact constructed of the same temperamental *glass* as the rest of the structure.

Glass which might have been readily available within the ranks of the inner flock, but was *still* considered to be something of a luxury, if not an outright display of wealth.

All of this contributed to the impressiveness of the structure, as what it lacked in size and scale, it made up for in a display of opulence...

As impressive as it was however, I knew well what it stood for. For it wasn't a mere display of opulence for opulence's sakes. In fact, that wasn't truly the point the empiricalists wished to express.

No.

This structure was built as a direct challenge to Arcanist supremacy. Its towering height matching the height of the Spire of the Arcane to within a feather's width. Its method of construction widely purported to be of purely empiricalist-means, without a single step of the process having been overseen or assisted by arcanist hands.

It was a political statement.

One that resonated with those that had eyes to see, and minds to think.

And given Farmer See-Yah's statements, it was clear you didn't need much of a mind at all to think with to understand the meaning behind this stunt.

For actions, truly did, speak louder than words or manifestos.

I made an effort to walk briskly towards its entrance, not once taking the time to gawk, stare, or in any way indicate my admiration for its construction. My guards understood this rule well, as they stared forwards with little in the way of emotion in their faces, their eyes ignoring all save for those that stood in our path.

Yet as I passed underneath those massive arches of wrought-iron and steel, witnessing the intricate faceting of various cuts of glass interlaced to form gemstone-like facsimiles... I couldn't help but to wonder where this future may lead us.

Which frightened me to no end.

For if a *Princess* of the Court, an Arcanist of the Inner Sanctum, a Grand Master of the Spire is capable of feeling such awe in the face of this so-called progress... then what hope existed for anyone else to resist its captivating allure?

This thought however, simply reminded me of my quest. My efforts to finally breach the void between spaces, to touch that which promises boundless streams of energy, the likes of which would surely rekindle the Arcanist power.

I took a small breath, glancing straight towards a small gathering of empiricalist Grand Masters, or, as they now ascribe themselves to be... the Senior Scholars.

What madness could lead to the disavowment of age-old traditions, in favor of meaningless vapid terms befitting of a common scribe. I couldn't help but to think, as I stood tall and confident in front of the *Lead Scholar*.

The man was a hawk, of three-toned coloration, denoting him as one of the inner flock by birth. His clothes were colorful, yet still decidedly muted in appearance. For instead of the flowy robes befitting of a man of his age, requiring retainers and attendants to hold, he instead wore a form-fitting outfit more akin to the work attire of a squire. "Princess Lita." The man spoke respectfully, bowing deeply, as did the rest of his gaggle of followers.

I counted the seconds as they straightened up, before I responded with a bow of my own, but not before allowing the ceremonial five seconds to elapse as befitting of the disparity between our stations.

“*Grand Master Velkata*.” I responded, making certain to use the *correct* titles here, so as to reinforce the natural order of things.

The man seemed none too bothered by it. At least, for now, as he simply nodded once in response. Perhaps not wishing to start a scene in the middle of a public space.

“To what do I owe this gracious visitation?” He continued politely.

“I hear that you have a *festival* of sorts going on?” I inquired rhetorically, to which the man gestured to the grand atrium we currently found ourselves in, bordered on all sides by various halls leading to rooms actually covered by brick, stone, and mortar.

“Indeed we do, Princess Lita.”

The *palace of learning* was, after all, meant to be a *practical* place for learning. The fragile main structure wouldn’t have been suitable for the experiments the empiricalists conduct nowadays.

“I presume you wish for a guided tour? Or perhaps a personal perusal per royal discretion?” The man dug further.

“I do not see why I cannot do both.” I offered, taking the man momentarily by surprise, as I quickly made sure to wrangle my talons tight around this otherwise benign conversation. “It would be a splendid affair if I could have the counsel of your Grand Masters, and yourself, Grand Master Velkata, as I peruse and browse the various... *curiosities* you have on display.”

Every conversation, every interaction, carried with it political implications. And with public events such as these, with eyes of the Middle Flock’s ranks gathered all round, it was important to play my role in this unending theater of politics.

Velkata understood this well as he nodded deeply, before gesturing to my guards. “Princess Lita, with all due respect and with the greatest deference to the rights and privileges of the crown... I must humbly request that any members of the armed wings remain outside of this center of learning.”

A small standoff would’ve nominally ensued. However, given the current state of affairs, I relented on this one point.

The empiricalists had shown deference to the sanctity of the house when visiting the Spire. It was only fair that I showed the same respect now.

An equivalence was promptly reached as I gestured for my guards to leave.

After which, I began leading the way to whichever room struck my fancy.

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**Aetheron, Aereoton City, Inner Flock Ring, Palace of Learning. Festival of Innovation.
Afternoon.**

Princess Lita

The first several rooms were quite... tame, all things considering. There were advancements made in the realm of *glassware*, more specifically, in regards to *magnification*. It seemed to be a silly curiosity for now, with postulations bordering on the preposterous of seeing a world smaller than that of an insect's. However, I *did* see the practical uses for it for the expansion of the benign empiricist field of taxonomy.

Not all empiricist fields of study were inherently *harmful* towards the *established order* after all. In fact, most were benign enough that I paid them no mind.

However, as we progressed through the rooms, it was clear we were getting closer and closer yet to the fields that *were* in direct contest with the arcane.

Or, to put it more bluntly, in direct *competition* and *contempt* for the capabilities and capacities of the arcane.

The first of these was... admittedly... a decidedly dull affair.

As all there was within this expansive room crowded by middling and inner flock alike was a small array of benign looking powders. A few of which emitted a distinctly foul odor that prompted me to shield myself from its offensive properties.

The demonstration went by rather dryly in its initial stages, with it matching almost every other room we've been to thus far.

First, the Master of the Room bowed in polite greetings towards myself, then the Grand Masters.

Secondly, they would recite a speech regarding the specialty of their chosen field of study, a brief history of their history within the empiricist ranks, before finally leading into the specifics of their chosen demonstration for the day.

Thirdly, they would march onto the stage, which consisted of a depression into the Earth, allowing the room both exceptional viewing angles as well as protection for whatever hazards might manifest as a result of the demonstrations.

This particular demonstration was apparently so dangerous that it required a *cage* to be built around the viewing area. A cage that was thusly covered by another layer of particularly thick glass, prompting an assistant to quickly replace the empiricalist Master's narration, giving voice to the man who was otherwise isolated in the confines of his stage.

The assistant was vibrant enough to listen to. In fact, she was a far cry from her master's dry and bland manner of delivering information.

It didn't take long for me to comprehend what was being spoken, as well as what was being shown, as the powders in question were taken into the demonstration 'chamber'.

Each powder was apparently of benign origin, though the specifics of each were not yet revealed to us.

What *was* revealed to us was the manner of their final preparation, as when mixed together in appropriate ratios, they were supposed to generate some sort of *explosive energy*. Akin to the capabilities of arcanists who specialize in the rapid and controlled release of arcane energies.

Whilst the assistant proclaimed great potentials for this 'development' in the realm of mining, construction, and many such civic projects, it was clear what they were implying.

Anything with such destructive potential could, and *would* be redirected for the purposes of war.

Though I doubted any of this bluster would come true.

Despite that however, I couldn't help but to be unnervingly transfixed on the happenings within the *demonstration chamber*. As powder after powder was mixed to form a blackened sooty mess, before finally being laid out in a large open container.

The whole room watched on, as the master quickly produced a firestarter, and *flicked*.

A brilliant flash of white and orange light enveloped the chamber in a matter of seconds, followed by a loud *whoosh* only tempered by the glass enclosure.

Soon after, smoke enveloped the enclosed room, as murmurs of confusion and concern echoed throughout.

It took a few seconds, but eventually, the Master managed to re-emerge through a hidden door; now covered in this black-sooty dust that enveloped him from head to toe. Only his eyes were spared as he removed his goggles, revealing a perfect outline that was almost comical in nature.

Though as the smoke cleared out through unseen vents, the reality of the experiment quickly became clear to me.

The supposed miracle dust was... still there, but changed, it had singed, but what's more, it had left a clear mark on the otherwise pristine containers it was placed in prior.

"This was only a proof of concept I am afraid." The man continued, as the room roared up in confused murmurs. "This *quick-burn powder* is capable of so... so much more. At this point I am still in the process of refining its properties. But as you can see by..." he pointed at himself. "Myself..." before pointing back at the chamber. "And the chamber before you, this powder burns rapidly, quickly, and dare I say it... *violently*." Those last words were purposefully made to be threatening in nature. Not overtly, but there was a distinct enough change in tone that I knew what the man was playing at. "I dare not say what futures I have planned for this new discovery. But suffice it to say..." He paused, before turning towards me and the gaggle of Grand Masters. "This may yet be another step to accomplishing a certain level of... *parity* with our Arcanist *colleagues*."

The whole room now erupted in uproarious hoots and hollers, prompting me to become one of the first to leave that particular demonstration chamber without much in the way of a response.

The man had promised something to rival the greatest of arcane *explosions*.

But all I saw was a powder that burned quickly.

...

And yet, I knew that wasn't normal.

Yesterday, that powder never existed.

Today, I learned it did.

And tomorrow?

Who knew what was in store for tomorrow.

I eventually made my way down the hall to the next room, one that was decidedly far less thunderous.

I just hoped the rest of the rooms followed that pattern.

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Aetheron, Aereoton City, Inner Flock Ring, Palace of Learning. Festival of Innovation. Dusk.

Princess Lita

The rest of the rooms *did* indeed follow that pattern. Save for one that promised the gift of *limited flight* to the flightless flock.

All they produced was a set of ridiculous, comical facsimiles of what they claimed to be *gliding wings*.

The canvas tore within the first attempt at setting up the demonstration.

That particular room promised so much.

Yet delivered nothing.

A fitting conclusion to an otherwise confusing and over-promised *festival*.

I'd wanted to part ways with the group of Grand Masters soon afterwards. However, I was bound by Royal duty and obligation to at least remain until the festivities were over.

The demonstrations were only *part* of the festival after all.

So after tolerating speech after grating speech, standing still and rigid as was befitting of a presiding Royal, I eventually entered the final phase of the whole affair.

A banquet.

One that took practically the entire night, and one that had ended just shy of midnight.

And I was *reminded* of the fact that it was midnight not because of my arcanist timepieces or sensibilities... but by the constant *tick tick cuckoo!* of the clockwork *toys* that decorated the halls.

It was after the end of the festivities that I could finally start addressing the very reason I even bothered attending these charades.

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Aetheron, Aereoton City, Inner Flock Ring, Royal Patronage Residential District, Proctor Lekta's Tower. Late Evening.

Princess Lita

As I made my way across the palace towards what looked to be a rather unassuming tower, one with a familiar looking telescope looking out from one of its windows.

I'd ordered my guard to remain in guarded flight prior to landing on the tower's balcony, as a familiar, now-elderly, but still-kindly face greeted me without even so much as a customary bow or curtsy.

"Lita." The elderly Avilan spoke, her chirps now worn, but her eyes never once losing that fire I'd known them for.

"Proctor Lekta." I responded, betraying ceremony and decorum by dipping my head down in respect. "It has been... far too long, Proctor." I spoke with an exasperated sigh.

"So it has." She nodded slowly. "So it has."

With a few practiced motions, the elderly woman moved to a tea set, one that she was intent on preparing herself, which prompted me to stand by and watch.

Normally, giving a Royal this silent treatment would be inconceivable.

But this was different.

This was just how things were between us.

"So, I'm certain this isn't just another lovely visit. Otherwise, you would've arrived at a far more *appropriate* time. It isn't like you to attend one of our festivals, just so that you can find a plausible excuse for visiting me."

I knew exactly what she was referring to. With the increasing political tensions, having the major faces of two diametrically opposed political factions meeting without at least *some* form of plausible reasoning was difficult.

"You are once again correct in your assertions, Proctor Lekta." I nodded politely, graciously accepting the teacup she offered as we both sat on a small ledge, immediately next to the telescope that had seemingly gone through yet another refurbishment. "For you see, this is about my visions."

The elderly Avilan narrowed her eyes, urging me to continue.

"They're getting more intense, the contents within becoming clearer, both in sight and sound. The haziness and uncertainty are both gone, replaced by images that undeniably show..." I paused, struggling to find the words to describe those indescribable scenes. "... well... I have no words to explain them. That's part of the reason why I'm here."

Instead of a wise stately response however, I received a forehead full of parchment, as a rolled up scroll was slapped playfully across my head. "Haven't I taught you anything?" She accosted in a way that only a caring teacher could. "Use your words, girl! Now come on! Let's hear it!"

I couldn't help but to break a small smile at that, the whole scene bringing me back to simpler, better times, despite it violating every rule of decorum there was. "Shapes. I saw shapes that made no sense. Long rods of pure white, like an axle on a carriage, with wheels, attached to the rod via spokes. But it wasn't oriented like a wheel and axle, instead, it was directed with one of the rod's ends pointed forward, and the other pointed backwards." I paused, squinting my eyes as I attempted to recall every minor detail, before grabbing my vision book, opening the pages to the rudimentary sketches and drawings I'd made.

"Sounds like you just saw some poor carriage repair shop's lost wheel and axle Lita-"

"No! No. Just, look here-" I interjected, pointing towards another page, with a drawing of a window, looking into a room with foreign objects I simply couldn't sketch out. "It's not the shape itself that's the issue. It's the scale of it, Proctor Lekta. See this room? This was roughly the size of an entire Royal Suite, servant's quarters included! Now focus on that window." I spoke intently, before flipping the page to reveal yet another angle of the wheel. This time however, I'd managed to include the window from the prior page, represented by a small rectangle that was barely visible given its minuscule presence when upon that impossibly large wheel.

All semblance of humor from the Proctor's face drained upon seeing that image, as she wordlessly urged me to continue.

"But what makes matters worse is that these shapes I saw, this... *structure* if you could even call it that, wasn't a fantastical structure set atop some great plains. Or a sprawling building stretching for miles along a coastline. This structure... was simply suspended, held aloft by unknown forces through unknown means within an endless sea of stars." I explained emphatically, and with a vigor that took the elderly Avilan by surprise. "So tell me, Proctor. What is the meaning behind these visions? What exactly am I seeing?" I all but implored the woman. A woman who had up to this point been capable of providing answers to practically every question I had.

Yet now, for the first time, that face of calm and wizened assuredness had given way to confusion and indecision. A face I never wanted to see from a teacher-figure. A face that meant that I was now well and truly alone in my quest for answers.

"I... I can't answer that, Lita." The Proctor finally responded.

But her choice of words didn't sit right with me.

"Can't? Don't you mean you don't know the answer to my questions, Proctor?"

“No, it’s... it’s not that I don’t have an answer.” The empiricist admitted. “It’s that the answer simply isn’t compatible with reality.”

My eyes went wide at that as the Proctor stood up towards her telescope, before pointing towards the night sky.

“You know what’s up there, don’t you?”

“The sky, and the stars.” I shrugged listlessly.

“There are... a great many theories as to what lies beyond the highest cloud, Lita. Some say the heavens are a great tapestry, with holes pierced through to allow light from a bright void to shine through. Whilst others would say that the heavens themselves are... *empty*. A void that suspends stars and planets alike in its dark embrace. The fact of the matter is, we simply do not have the answers to that in our present time. But your visions, if true, would indicate that the answer may be the latter, and that perhaps there exists *something*, some great leviathan floating amongst the void of the heavens.”

“A leviathan, or a... *ship*, Proctor Lekta?” I offered, prompting the woman to once more turn towards me with a piercing, questioning gaze.

“You saw more than just shapes?”

I nodded apprehensively. “Yes. I... I saw creatures, wingless and featherless analogues of our own kind. They inhabited these rooms, these spaces within this structure. So if your claim of the void is true, then-”

“-then it is possible that the leviathan you saw wasn’t a beast of the heavens. But a ship traversing the voids. A *voidship*.”

A long pause punctuated that revelation, as we both sat for the longest time, long enough that the dawn had begun to arise.

“With that being said... your *arcane initiative*, does it have anything to do with these *creatures*? Were *these* the beings you wished to initiate contact with?” Proctor Lekta inquired, prompting me to turn once again towards the fading night sky, before sighing audibly.

“No. These visions were a side effect of our actual goals. I... can’t tell you who or what we plan to contact, Proctor. But suffice it to say, I am still as certain as I was all those years ago.” I let out a sigh, taking a moment to reorient myself as I now balanced both personal and professional interests within a single conversation. “Our initiative has unlocked a means of acquiring *more* arcane. And with all due respect to your empiricists, Proctor Lekta, we *will* bring about a resurgence in the arcane arts.”