

## Chapter 1

Issac's laughter echoed through the valleys of Trode, a sound that had become increasingly familiar since his arrival. The land, with its gentle undulations, bestowed upon each secluded valley an enchanting, almost fae-like quality. With every new valley traversed, Issac was greeted by a kaleidoscope of marvels that captivated his senses. The riot of colors in this land was unparalleled; his catalog now boasted over 500 newly discovered wildflowers and two unprecedented species of trees.

Lucian, whose laughter carried a rougher timbre, couldn't help but join in. Yet, amidst their mirth, he sought a moment of gravity. "Locke," he interjected, still chuckling, "be serious for a moment. I've shared with you the tales of the floods."

Issac's smile lingered, a testament to the joy he found in every aspect of Trode. "Yes, I've listened to your stories, and I'll heed the words of your elders," he conceded, his eyes still alight with the day's discoveries. "But such concerns seem distant. Now, listen—truly listen! Have you heard the one about the monk and the three donkeys?"

That evening, the village hall was abuzz with the gathering of elders, and amidst them were Issac and Lucian. The air was thick, the kind of stuffiness that made Issac's skin crawl with restlessness. He couldn't help but let his mind wander beyond the hall's confining walls, longing for the freedom of the open night air. Suddenly, a quick kick to his foot jolted Issac back to reality. Issac's heart sank; he felt like a child caught red-handed, his hand deep in the cookie jar. His distraction had been noticed.

"I'm sorry, Honored one, I was lost in thought just there," Issac stammered, his cheeks flushing with embarrassment. The elder before them offered a smile of compassionate understanding.

"I was asking if you knew the full danger these floods bring. Not just to our village, but to all lands within a week's ride from here." Issac's expression, a mix of confusion and curiosity, prompted the elder to continue. The room fell into a hushed anticipation as the elder spoke of a great lake hidden deep in the mountains to the west, shaped by the hands of the old ones. According to legend, once a century, a great deluge would sweep away everything in its path, yet always with enough warning for the people to seek safety.

"But something has changed," the elder's voice grew somber. "The last flood was only 30 years ago, and now, reports say the lake is nearly full again. We need at least enough time to bring in the harvest." The air seemed to grow heavier with the weight of his words. "Lucian calls you Locke because he thinks you are a warlock." All eyes turned to Issac, the hint of expectation hanging unspoken between them. The elder's gaze was both hopeful and pleading. "I hope he is right, and you can help us."

As dawn crept through the windows, Issac stirred from his sleep, rising earlier than usual. Yet, upon entering the kitchen, he found Lucian already there, hunched over the table, his posture a blend of devotion and despair.

"Good morning, Luck," Issac greeted cheerily, trying to infuse some warmth into the cool morning air..

Lucian straightened up, a weary smile touching his lips as he replied, "And to you, Tea?" He nodded towards the earthenware pot on the stove, still warm. Issac poured himself a cup of tea, the rich aroma briefly filling the space between them, and took a seat opposite Lucian.

"Did you get any sleep?" Issac inquired, concern lacing his voice.

Lucian let out a sigh, heavy with exhaustion. "No, not a wink," he confessed. Silence hung between them for a moment before Lucian found the strength to continue. "I lay there next to June, soaking in her presence, fearing it might be for the last time. There's this gnawing dread within me that even if we manage to save the village, my life here... might still be at its end."

Issac watched him intently, his gaze steady and unwavering, seeing in Lucian not just a friend, but a brother forged quickly but strong as steel.

Lucian's voice broke the silence once more. "When the last flood came, we had little warning. My mother, sisters, and I were visiting my aunt. My father was out on the farm, likely missed the warning bells. His body... we never found it." A pause, filled with the weight of unshed tears. "There's a marker for him, but it's not the same. Now, I fear it's either me or—worse—June and Annabelle facing that fate. I need your help, Issac."

Issac's lips pressed into a thin line, his resolve firm. "I will do everything within my power to help you. I swear to you, brother." There was something in Issac's tone, a fierce determination mixed with a storm's ferocity, that Lucian had never heard before. Yet, it was this very tempest that seemed to wash away his fears, leaving a sense of calm in its wake.

Lifted by Issac's vow, Lucian pondered the bond they shared, strengthened not by blood but by an unspoken pact, a kinship that had silently grown between them.

Six weeks prior, a man had ambled onto Lucian's farm, immediately striking as a figure out of place amidst the rural simplicity. Tall and broad by any standard, he nevertheless seemed dwarfed by Lucian's own towering presence. His glasses, with their thin brass frames, held lenses of differing color and shape: over his left eye, a blue-tinted oval set at an intriguing angle, and over his right, a clear, perfectly circular lens that shimmered and sparkled under unknown conditions.

The stranger's attire was equally peculiar, ill-suited to the season and dyed in hues so rare that they marked him as someone of considerable wealth, perhaps a merchant. Hanging from his belt was a small black sheath containing a rod, about six inches long and two inches wide.

Lucian initially mistook it for an odd retractable baton, but was soon corrected when the man demonstrated its ability to emit a brilliant light at the press of a button.

Upon meeting June and Annabelle, the stranger, introduced as Issac, showed impeccable respect. His charm and easy manner had Annabelle smitten from the moment he stepped through their door, ostensibly just to ask for directions to the nearest town. Yet, by the time Lucian returned home in the late afternoon, Issac was still there, engaged in lively conversation and play.

Issac revealed himself as a wanderer, constantly moving from one place to another in pursuit of new landscapes to explore and document. While he professed a love for all aspects of nature, trees held a special fascination for him. This passion, coupled with his genuine mirth, won Lucian over almost as swiftly as Annabelle.

In a private moment, Lucian and June concurred that Issac's company was not just enjoyable but also enriching. Grateful for the unexpected warmth and hospitality, Issac decided to extend his stay. Over the ensuing weeks, he became a beloved figure in the community, lending his strength and spirit to aid Lucian and the neighbors with their work.

One particularly memorable afternoon, as Lucian, Issac, and several neighbors sought refuge from an unseasonal downpour, hoping for a break in the weather to return to their labor in the Jacobs' west field, Issac's attention was drawn to a broken clock. A relic of a bygone era, it sat neglected until Issac, with Brog Jacobs' blessing, took it upon himself to examine the timepiece. Moments after Brog resumed his seat, Issac announced with a triumphant flourish that the clock was fixed—and indeed, it was.

From that day forward, Lucian affectionately dubbed him "Locke," a moniker that seemed to capture both the mystique and the capability of their newfound friend and ally.

An hour after the morning had fully broken, June and Annabelle drifted into the kitchen, finding Lucian and Locke amidst the remnants of a jovial breakfast. The warmth of the room, filled with the lingering scents of the meal, set the stage for a tender farewell. After a series of heartfelt goodbyes to the girls, the two men shouldered their packs, stepping into the crisp morning air with a sense of purpose.

Their journey began with a walk into town, where a small gathering of villagers awaited them. From this assembly, they were furnished with two sturdy horses and the provisions necessary for their expedition. As they rode westward, the ease of their conversation allowed the day to unravel gently around them. By the time dusk painted the sky with strokes of orange and purple, they had chosen a clearing just off the road to set up camp.

As the fire crackled and night settled in, Lucian's earlier apprehensions resurfaced, casting a shadow over the camaraderie. With a voice tinged with hesitation, he turned to Issac, "Do you think we can really succeed? Do you truly have the power to stop this flood?"

Issac paused his preparations, meeting Lucian's gaze with a solemnity that belied his usual confidence. "I don't know," he admitted, his honesty stark against the backdrop of their isolated camp. "I'm not a magician, nor a warlock. But I do have a few tricks that might just suffice. All I know is that we have to try."

Lucian's heart sank slightly at the acknowledgment of uncertainty. "What tricks? You claim it's not magic, yet what you achieve seems nothing short of miraculous," he pressed, the undercurrent of doubt in his voice unmistakable.

Issac felt a tug of conflict within him. He was torn between the desire to confide in his friend and the fear of how his revelations might be received. In many places he'd visited, superstitions ran deep, and the unknown was often met with fear or hostility. Would Lucian see Sarah as a ghost, a demon, or think he was drugged? Issac didn't know.

After a moment's internal struggle, Issac reached a decision. He removed his glasses and offered them to Lucian. "Put these on, and don't be scared," he urged gently.

Lucian eyed the glasses with a mix of curiosity and apprehension, on the verge of voicing another question when Issac cut in, "Please, just trust me on this, my friend."

With a deep breath, Lucian acquiesced, the confusion in his eyes still clearly there.

The moment Lucian peered through the lenses, a woman's sweet voice whispered in his ear, startlingly clear, "Hello Lucian, it's nice to finally meet you." The surprise in Lucian's eyes was palpable as he whipped around to face Issac, a mix of shock and disbelief in his gaze.

"That's Sarah," Issac explained with a calming presence, taking back his glasses. "She exists within the glasses, a sort of machine woven into the fabric of the lenses. She can manipulate light passing through them to project information directly to the wearer, creating the illusion of audio communication."

Lucian's brow furrowed, skepticism etched into every line of his face. "Or it's a lying demon," he countered, the age-old fear of the unknown coloring his judgment.

Issac shook his head, a gentle smile softening his response. "Demons are the stuff of tales, Lucian. What's real are these lenses—Sarah is part of a technology far beyond our understanding, left by those who came before us. In the ruins where I found her, there were others like her, though none as intact. She's not magic; she's a remnant of the Old Ones' knowledge."

Sensing Lucian's continued hesitation, Issac pressed on, his voice imbued with conviction. "Sarah is benevolent. She's been instrumental in helping not just me but others as well. She's the 'magic' you've seen at work. If there's any hope of understanding and confronting the mystery of the lake, it's through her and the ancient wisdom she holds."

Gradually, the skepticism in Lucian's eyes gave way to a burgeoning hope. "She can truly assist us?" he asked, a newfound respect dawning within him. "I... I didn't realize. Please, could you tell her I apologize for my initial reaction?"

With a warm chuckle, Issac assured him, "She heard you, Lucian, and accepts your apology with grace."

Placing a reassuring hand on Lucian's shoulder, Issac's confidence was infectious. "Together, with Sarah's help, we're going to protect your people—our people."

As dawn's first light streaked across the sky, painting it in hues of orange and pink, Lucian and Issac resumed their journey, spirits buoyed despite the gravity of their quest. The camaraderie of the previous days lingered, though both men were noticeably more contemplative, perhaps weighed down by the anticipation of what lay ahead.

An hour into their travel, the road presented a decision: ahead, the main road stretched westward, its path as straight and true as the day it was laid down by the ancients, a testament to their engineering prowess. Veering off to the north, however, was a less imposing trail that ran parallel to the main road after a short divergence. Lucian paused at the fork, sharing with Issac the local lore. Many travelers, he explained, opted for this detour to avoid the old crossroads. Superstitions ran deep, with tales of malevolent spirits preying on unwary souls, stealing them away or worse.

Issac listened intently, his curiosity piqued by the blend of fear and folklore that seemed to permeate the region. Despite the warnings, they observed neither spirits nor any other travelers as they continued west, the mountains looming ever closer on the horizon.

By nightfall, they had made good time, camping just an hour's distance from the lake. The proximity to their destination lent a certain urgency to their preparations, the night passed with little of the previous evening's ease.

On the morning of the third day, they arrived at the reservoir, the early light reflecting off its surface with a brilliance that belied the danger lurking beneath. The vast body of water lay tranquil, a silent witness to the ages and secrets it held.

As they crested a hill, Lucian and Issac were greeted by their first breathtaking view of the lake. The expanse of water stretched before them, its surface shimmering under the morning sun. Lucian noticed Issac murmuring softly, likely consulting with Sarah for guidance. He turned his attention back to the lake, taking in the sight of its waters encroaching upon the land, a silent testament to the looming threat they faced.

The lake had risen significantly, its waters now lapping eagerly at the shores, climbing the sides of the surrounding peaks. Lucian observed small trees that appeared to be standing in the shallows, their trunks partially submerged. It was clear these trees, now wading like sentinels at

the water's edge, had taken root far from the lake's reach in the years following the last flood, a stark indicator of how swiftly the waters were rising.

After a moment of silent contemplation, Issac relayed information from Sarah. "She believes there's a hatch located on one of these peaks, possibly marked by those boulders," he explained, gesturing towards the far side of the lake. Lucian followed his gaze to see three large boulders positioned equidistant from each other on a plateau, the area around them conspicuously flat compared to the rugged terrain rimming the rest of the lake.

Their journey around the lake to reach the marked plateau took several hours, longer than they had anticipated. The ideal path along the shore was unfeasible; the lands that were not submerged were thick with mud, rendering their progress slow and laborious.

Arriving at the boulders just after the zenith of the sun, Lucian and Issac discovered that Sarah's guidance had once again proven accurate. The boulders encircled a hatch, obscured by layers of earth, with a portion of its handle peeking through the dirt. They paused briefly for a quick lunch before setting to work, clearing the hatch of its earthen shroud, only to find it firmly locked.

Lucian was about to resort to his hammer and chisel when Issac intervened with a cautionary hand. Muttering a quick consultation with Sarah, Issac retrieved the baton from its sheath. With a subtle manipulation, a small black metal rod dislodged from the baton's side, falling neatly into his palm. He applied the rod to the lock, twisting with precise movements. After an initial unsuccessful attempt, accompanied by a frustrated curse, Issac reset, twisted again, and was rewarded with a satisfying pop. The hatch swung open with ease under Issac's guidance.

As Lucian watched, the baton shimmered in Issac's hand, revealing a slot perfectly shaped for the rod. Issac reinserted the rod into the baton, and with another shimmer, the tool was whole once again. Pressing the button, Issac illuminated their way with the baton's brilliant light.

The successful entry seemed to buoy Issac's spirits, prompting him to venture a joke, the first since their journey began. "What has three fingers and straight teeth?" he asked, a playful twinkle in his eye.

Lucian, intrigued but puzzled, played along. "What?"

"A Gruteki merchant," Issac declared, bursting into laughter.

Lucian's bemused expression only fueled Issac's amusement further. Realizing the disconnect, Issac managed to explain between fits of laughter, "You don't know about the Gruteki. Their merchants are notorious, all considered thieves in jest, and, well..." His explanation dissolved into laughter once more.

The sight of Issac's unrestrained mirth was infectious. Despite not fully grasping the joke, Lucian found himself laughing along, drawn into the light-hearted moment by the sheer joy of his friend's laughter.

The hatch revealed a ladder descending 15 feet into darkness. With Issac's light leading the way, they descended into a passage that opened into a room constructed of blue metal, adorned with signage in an unrecognizable script. Through Issac's interactions with Sarah, the mysterious language was deciphered, guiding them to a large, dormant control room.

The heart of this room was dominated by banks of towering cabinets, standing like silent guardians in the gloom. Issac extinguished the light from his baton, placing it atop a central cabinet.

In the dimness, the baton transformed into a makeshift lantern. Four segments slid out for Issac to gently remove each one revealing the bright yellow light casting the room in a new, revealing glow.

Lucian watched, utterly fascinated, as Issac meticulously arranged the baton's segments into a larger square and a smaller rectangle. Murmuring softly to Sarah, Issac's gaze swept the room, eventually settling on a cabinet at the far end.

A moment of triumph was palpable as Issac exclaimed "Eureka!" and dove to open the targeted cabinet. Engrossed in his task, Issac was unaware of Lucian's approach until he turned abruptly, his call for assistance halting mid-sentence upon realizing Lucian's proximity. "The lantern," he concluded with a smile, regaining his composure.

Lucian, now holding the lantern, observed Issac deftly connect cables to ports on his devices, marveling at the seamless integration of ancient technology and Issac's modern ingenuity.

Issac, looking up from his work, informed Lucian, "Sarah estimates this will take at least an hour. I need to stay here, but you're welcome to step out for some fresh air if you'd like."

Lucian dismissed the offer with a wave of his hand. "I'm fine here. Besides, if you're just sitting with Sarah, maybe you should take the break."

Issac chuckled at the suggestion. "I'd still need to be here with Sarah. I rely on her too much to see properly without these lenses. But, since you're staying, let me ask you—why do the women of Frake islands have green hands?"

At this, Lucian let out a groan, settling next to his friend with a resigned smile. "You've told that one a hundred times."

An hour into their work, Issac was interrupted by Sarah's voice, a calm presence in his ear, delivering news that sparked a surge of hope. "I've identified the cause of the flooding, and it's within our power to rectify," she announced, presenting him with a detailed layout of the underground facility and the path they needed to follow. The solution lay in a small, obscure room where they could adjust the facility's drainage system, redirecting the water to gradually feed into several streams nearby.

With a renewed sense of purpose, Issac reassembled his baton, its end glowing brightly to guide their way through the labyrinthine depths of the facility. Their journey was punctuated by obstacles; doors that refused to yield were forcefully persuaded by Lucian's strength, and locks that guarded secrets yielded to Issac's skilled manipulation—and the occasional curse.

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Their trek culminated in the discovery of the pivotal room Sarah had pinpointed. Inside, Issac replicated his earlier actions with the lantern, illuminating the space to reveal a solitary cabinet. Once the necessary connections were made, he turned to Lucian, his face alight with the promise of success. "In just half an hour, we'll have secured the safety of your village," he assured him.

Lucian, however, was wreathed in skepticism, struggling to grasp the simplicity of their solution. "Are we certain? Have we verified the integrity of the channels, or the lake's capacity to withstand this adjustment without immediate overflow?"

Issac met Lucian's concern with a compassionate gaze, his faith in Sarah unwavering. "We can be certain because Sarah has confirmed it. She doesn't mislead. Her capabilities are beyond what we know, but trust me—she's extraordinary. Yet, I urge you to keep her existence between us. The world might not be ready to understand her, just as you might have doubted had you not witnessed her in action."

Lucian nodded, a mixture of awe and acceptance in his eyes. "I may not fully grasp it all, but you're right. Sarah is indeed remarkable."

That night, amidst the comfort of their makeshift camp, Lucian and Issac shared in the relief and camaraderie born from their successful venture. The dawn brought with it a persistent rain, cloaking the landscape in a veil of gray as the friends donned their wax cloth cloaks and set off once more. The rain's relentless drumming slowed their progress considerably, and by the time



the sun began its descent, still obscured by storm clouds, they found themselves on the western edge of the trail skirting the crossroads.

Lucian, eager to press on to the clearing they had camped in on their first night, noticed Issac's hesitation at the trail fork. "What's the matter? We won't find dry ground to camp on until we're past the north-south road."

Issac's gaze lingered on the trail around the crossroads, a conflict evident in his posture. "I think... we might consider taking the trail around," he suggested, though his tone lacked conviction.

"That's no good in this weather—the horses could get injured in the dark, navigating that muck. Are you worried about demons?" Lucian's question was half in jest, but Issac's silence and brief hesitation spoke volumes. Eventually, Issac steered his horse away from the trail, his decision made.

As they bypassed the trail, a lightning bolt cleaved the sky, its brilliance causing Issac to flinch. "Locke, that flash was miles away. The thunder's barely a whisper," Lucian remarked, trying to dispel his friend's unease.

Issac didn't reply but quickened his pace, a sense of urgency propelling him forward. Lucian, puzzled, followed suit. Approaching the crossroads, the storm intensified, rain lashing at them with newfound ferocity. Suddenly, Issac's horse bolted into a gallop. Lucian's mount hesitated, then followed, but Issac had vanished into the storm's veil.

"Issac, wait up!" Lucian shouted, but his voice was swallowed by the tempest. Chasing the ghostly figure of his friend, Lucian crossed the north-south road just as another lightning bolt struck alarmingly close, its glare blinding him, the expected thunderclap never reaching his ears.

When Lucian's vision cleared, he found himself lying on dry ground, the storm a mere memory. He rose, disoriented, under the glow of an unfamiliar green moon. Issac, along with any sign of the storm, was nowhere to be seen.