

# Forever Watching You

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Rain cascading through the streets in silver sheets, I could feel my thoughts kept at bay by the thunder rolling through the skies like distant drums of war. Wind rolling my hair between pale non-existent fingers before playfully tossing stray strands into my face. Above I could hear the waves of windswept leaves protesting at their treatment, while my eyes kept deceptively delicate feet at a carefully measured, gently hurried pace.

The goal of an experienced walker in the eternally rain-dusted streets of Burmecia, is not to save oneself from having their fur marred by the sprinkling shower of perfect diamonds from above. In these lively streets keeping from the drizzles steady gaze is almost an impossibility, no, the focus for those feet accustomed to these riverbed streets is to identify and prevent oneself from stepping in the more slippery, longer-lived, deeper puddles of the earth's tears.

On this occasion I had taken it upon myself to attempt to save my current attire from at least becoming completely enshrouded in the deluge of descending droplets. To accomplish this task my steps teetered on the brink of the gutters and mats of tree roots. Following this route, however precarious it may be, would mean by the time I got home my clothing would only be slightly damp.

I paused at an intersection of streets and let my breath out in a pale puff of mist which dissipated as it rose from view into the storm-laden skies. My eyes followed its meandering trails until I was left looking at brooding sky interrupted only by a steady stream of small slashes taking their leave of the heavens above. Gradually I let my gaze leave the dazzling kaleidoscope above and drift down to fall upon the large, solitary stone sentinel standing at the end of the intersecting roadway.

There she stood, noble and resolute as ever, staring out with blank stone eyes as if by determination alone she could keep any intruders from invading her Kingdom.

I couldn't help thinking that life must have been so much easier in the time which she was raised in. Stories tell of how she boldly embarked on a noble quest to recover her lost love, and upon a return to her homeland found a shattered land and a lover with an equally wounded memory. But this would not weaken her strong spirit, not our Kingdom's steadfast lady, no, she persevered and along with others from the far corners of Gaia succeeded in defeating the forces who had sought to poison and destroy our lovely world. I wonder, what must it have been like to be such a hero, to have so much depending a minuscule band of people.

Of course now if someone were to tell their parents they would simply be laughed at, such things are almost unheard of these days. Yet tales of the life she had seem so glamorous, whereas now things seem so dull, even lifeless. I do think that with the supposed stability of our recent times that we have somehow lost that small spark in live, or perhaps it is simply waiting for the right day to reappear and shock us out of our cushy lifestyles.

When I think about it, a reasonable amount of history transpired in that short span of time, reliance on steam-powered airships instead of mist came into fruition, allowing the exploration of the rest of Gaia, people learned how truly powerful Eidolons were, the capital cities of the three main Kingdoms on the Mist continent were severely damaged, Alexandria lost and gained a Queen, two new races, black mages and genomes were introduced to Gaia, and a score of other events which I'm sure my history teachers would be gob smacked at me forgetting.

That must have been a significant turning point in our world's history, before then we had mainly been concerned with defence and keeping an eye on our 'allies'. When victory was finally achieved, with so many major cities crumbling, an unspoken peace was agreed upon. In the rebuilding process any materials needed were freely exchanged to help repair the damage wrought. Of the three kingdoms our fair Burmecia was said to have needed the most attention, the main cause of distress

being the flooded streets, the puzzle of fixing and restoring our city to her former glory was a baffling one. Ironically, it was an Alexandrian who found the path to our final solution, and a magnificent solution it was.

Trees, trees which absorbed large amounts of moisture and were tall but not wide, sheltering the streets in their living halo of leaves. In a quote he explained that the idea had struck him while reclining within the newly rebuilt, if you could describe it as that, Cleyra settlement. He had witnessed the old stump that was the former protector hauled from the ground and a new seed buried in its place. Then, with the help of Summoners, an Eidolon merged with the seed only recently displayed to the world. Books tell of how the Eidolon stretched itself up high, gathering all its power, and from beneath its mighty feet, fresh shoots sprang to life, reaching high as the Eidolon while its form began to fade and the newly emerging tree to solidify in its place until they merged in an almost haunting visage as a live sculpture.

They said it had taken a lot of careful planning to actually make this plan of the Alexandrian's possible, and critics were all too eager to point out its flaws. But unbreakable determination led the people on, until the dream of Burmecia was restored. Pathways of trees ran down on either side of every street, on a slightly raised level beside this was the roadway for traffic on foot, on its side guttering which filtered down to the trees' meandering trails. Massive walls of stone stretched beneath the roadbeds keeping the surface from sustaining damage, into the old sewers which had now been filled in.

As I stand here in the fine mist of rain gazing upon possibly one of the most important figures in my nations history I cannot help but wonder what crushing blows befell her heart, to see her fine city reduced to rubble, its walls empty and broken, barren of life but for the ever-falling faint pitter patter of the sky's breath tumbling to the earth.

My attention was diverted as I felt harsh lashes of wind graze my cheek. Huffing at the gust in a mildly disgruntled manner I turned from my sea of thoughts and gently shook my head with an owlish blink bringing my senses back to the current world. An involuntary shudder sparked life in my legs once again as my body told me in no uncertain terms that it wanted to get home out of this downpour.

I was soon comfortably trotting along at a casual pace, the breeze had reluctantly restrained its touch to a soothing caress as it trailed careless fingers through the foliage above in shivering ripples. My hair aimlessly trailed behind me fluttering slightly with each step as I picked my way over the shadowy mosaic cast upon the street. Each step fashioned a series of diminutive clicks caused by impeccable bleached claws, at one point, I'm sure they had a useful purpose for my race, but now they were merely ornamentation, kept clean and untarnished. The faint taint of smoke trailed from toasty warm houses while my nose twisted in subtle dismay at this intrusion upon the clean fragrance of the early afternoon rainfall.

As I rounded the corner I felt a familiar pressure striving to force me back as it buffeted my clothes in a winding gale. Quickening my pace I sheltered my eyes from the temperamental air hastening around another bend and into a feather light sprinkling of gleaming beads. My eager eyes finally caught sight of the welcoming arms that greeted me as an old friend into familiar territory.

With the utmost care I heaved the battered portal open wincing slightly as it grated along the ground with several high-pitched keens of protest. An exasperated undertone whispered through my exhaled breath and caught on my lips as I lazily shoved the creaking guardians of timber back in their place. Meandering down the smooth cobbled path my claws soon found themselves gliding upon a smooth wooden surface as I had unconsciously wandered onto the porch barely noticing the absence of Burmecias comforting rain shroud.

Digging around in my pocket for a moment until my fingers slid around a cool ring of metal I swiftly fished out the cheerfully jingling array of keys and, upon selecting an oddly blue tinted one, proceeded to free the door from its restraints.

I paused. Turning back towards the rather gloom-encased scene I spied a small, sulking bundle of fur. My hand limply fell from the bundle of keys as an almost amused expression crossed face. With a resigned shake of my head and the hint of a thin smile touching the corners of my lips I dashed out into the blustering weather once more. I ducked under the low overhanging covering the bundle which acknowledged my presence with a rather bedraggled, croak of a meow. Skilfully scooping up the sorrowful ball of fluff, as I can assure you I have done this many times in the past, I cradled the weather-worn armload against my chest jutting my muzzle out so as to bear the brunt of the weather's furious lashes.

Arriving back at the entrance I darted into the dwelling collecting my keys then depositing them back in their place along the way and heard the door swing serenely shut with a satisfying thud. Blinking in astonishment I realised that I'd managed to drop the furry creature from my arms which had contributed to that thud. It effortlessly bounced onto the padded furniture with an air of superiority and began meticulously cleaning itself.

Dragging my feet across the bristled doormat I then dipped my feet in a petite stone basin to the side and use the hanging towel to dry them before stepping upon the sleek polished floor. After refilling the basin and flicking an annoying drop of rain water from the end of my muzzle I absently brushed a hand through my hair scattering the thin surface layer of droplets.

Reclining on the arm of a large chair I first slipped off one, then the other of the pair that are the rather unique footwear of Burmecians. Ignoring my creaking joints I reluctantly raised myself from the arm I slothfully rocked my weight onto my feet and traversed across the carefully woven mat leading me down a hallway until I reached my destination.

The room was softly lit in an elegant drapery of subdued colours cascading through the window in luxurious folds. Padding peacefully into the room I quietly folded my arms over the back of a chair resting in the afternoon's light and softly lowered my hand to trail along the perfectly curled and calmly sleeping form of one of those elegant felines. I let my eyes flutter over the surface of the scene before me, this window had a wonderful view of the city in all its beauty, I think it's what keeps so many inhabitants here.

Straightening I wistfully turned to leave the room, only to find several pin pricks touch upon my palm. Startled I whirled back around, only to see the twin apple green eyes that were moments before closed in perfect bliss now watching me intently, a light-hearted smirk played upon my features as I lightly stroked the paw between two fingers and stepped from the room.

Muffling a less than elegant yawn I drifted into my room and, quite gracelessly, collapsed upon my bed instantly pulling the covers from their neatly tucked positions to wrap them around myself and curl up in their warmth. My mind twisting in a maze of thoughts carelessly sauntered along the meandering paths of sleep.

I smiled warmly as I felt the sunlight's sweet breath upon my face. Opening my eyes I marvelled at the rich blue sky above with a careful lacing of feathery white clouds strewn about in a hazardous beauty. A deep inhale of breath delivered to me the scent of sun-warmed paths and pure earthen hills covered in lightly tanned corn-yellow grasses. My body felt as if it were overflowing with some unnamed joy as I laughed pleasantly in a wave of childlike innocence at the pure perfection that surrounded me.

Before I knew it my feet had begun running of their own accord as I also found my hand ensnared in another's, the wind dragging transparent fingers through my hair as I gulped the air into my lungs in ecstasy. My senses were heightened with an overwhelming clarity as I revelled in every sensation I would normally regard as everyday and mundane. I found I could almost touch the wind as it whisked through my fingers, almost see the warmth in the air surrounding me, again I laughed for the simple pleasure of expressing my feelings and I knew my companion was laughing with me.

We ran up the sloped path and around a corner, hidden by the basking trees and dried grasses until

upon reaching the edge of the trail we both collapsed together in a heap of giggling gaiety. Rolling onto my back I breathed heavily relishing in the euphoria that assaulted my senses, tears trickled down from the corners of my eyes drawing lines down my cheeks as I stared almost breathlessly at the exquisite sky above. Tips of the dried grass framed my vision swaying in the wind without a care in the world, it was almost hypnotising as I found it difficult to tear my vision from their sun-baked stalks until my companion lifted himself up breaking my concentration. Turning to face me he smiled, I swear I could lose myself in that smile, just admiring the way it appeared upon his face, seamlessly and without a flaw.

Raising myself I leaned forward to touch that radiant expression and found myself gathered up in arms flowing with the same lifeblood as the sun itself and covered in a divine layer of milky silk fur. He laughed in delight and the sound was melodious to my ears, as if an angel's whisper played through his lips. Leaning back I basked in the radiance of his perfection as we rolled across the grass together in a spiral of heavenly rapture.

My face almost ached from the insistent smile upon my face as we rolled to a halt and I let my eyes rest upon his resplendent sun-bathed form. Raising my hand to brush his ethereal face I paused as what at first had been a mere slight discomfort in my face turned to echoes of pain. Smile fading I instead brought my hand up to my own face and caught a glimpse of his immaculate visage distorting into a sly and spiteful smirk.

Gasping in shock more than anything at this sudden transformation I tried to pull back but found myself entangled lifeless granite arms. Turning my face back to his I winced and shrank back as his once angelic mask became a repulsive and twisted mockery of what it was. The world around us had gone silent, the sky clouded over, sun-touched grasses were now blackened and charred, my breath caught in my throat as a horrendous feeling or foreboding swept over my body.

Then, he laughed. It was the single most harrowing sound I have ever heard, seeming to scrape itself out of his throat in a molten coil of high and low pitches, both screeching and roaring at the same time. The pain swept any words from my mouth, I tried to cover my ears but, alas, my arms were safely secured to my sides, all I could do was tilt my head back and feel the hot tears coursing down the sides of my face in a torrent of agony.

The ceasing of this sound was even worse than hearing it, everything just vanished in, not even a flash. I can't remember when it happened, it just did, there was darkness and nothing more, no sound, no feeling, no smell, no taste, no sight. I remembered his face, with that gaping maw thrown open as the ghastly sound ripped through the landscape. An afterimage of this now dived at me striking terror into my being, but instead of the expected discord only a cacophony of murmured speech was spat at me and I threw my eyes open with a gasp as of one who had been holding their breath for a millennia.

With a heartfelt sigh of relief I let myself sink back into the comforting covers shifting my eyes about the slightly blurred monotone room with a remnant of suspicion until allowing myself to completely relax. Eyes absently roaming about the ceiling I patiently waited for my heart beat to slow from its frightening whirlwind pace to a more orderly one. Casually stretching my limbs with an irrepressible yawn which I barely managed to stifle I lethargically rolled over to one side and fumbled to find a flint and tinder on the small bed side table and light the simple candle standing in an admonishing silence. Concentrating my gaze on the small clock face sitting above the candle I knitted my brows together in an attempt to banish the blurring of sleep until I deciphered what the little numerals meant.

Turning back on my back I managed to hoist myself upright into a sitting position and blinked at the room in a sleep-laden stupor. After rather languidly gathering my hair and securing it in place I stood, rocked back on my heels, and ended up sitting right back where I started. A moment's contemplation was in order until with a second try I managed to actually stay standing up, straightening my crinkled clothing I bumped down the hall and into the kitchen. It only took me a

few minutes to have my cheeks stuffed with food I could barely swallow and a bag which I slung over my shoulder bursting with small snacks.

Moving back to the spot where I had discarded my footwear I vainly tried to brush the cat fur off but met with no success, it certainly looked like someone had found a comfortable place to sleep. Slipping my feet snugly back into the garments I opened the door partially, peered out to survey the weather, and slipped through the doorway silently closing it behind myself.

Once back in the comfortably familiar rain soaked land I trudged along, gradually making my way through the city streets, pausing here and there to take short cuts by leaping over carelessly placed buildings. At the last of these such buildings I paused seeing the warm glow of fire illuminating the area ahead of me, but as the chill wind chided me for standing in such an exposed location I hurried towards the inviting flames.

Dropping once again back to ground level I trotted along until I came to a large, circular area, Four basins of fire stood evenly spaced along the sides of the circle with coverings keeping them safe from the weathers temper. Along the sides of the circle numerous citizens were gathered sitting on cushions, blankets, or anything they happened to bring with them. The families tended to sit on the ground being that the little ones usually fell asleep during the ceremony and it would be somewhat difficult keeping a young one from slipping off the roof, while other, unburdened individuals favoured the better view which the surrounding rooftops gladly gave.

With a practised eye I swiftly found my spot and made my way through the crowds, then with one upward leap arrived at my chosen place. I'd always made a point of sitting here since I'd been able to jump to the roof tops. I'd scouted out this area once when I was young and deemed this to be the spot with the best possible view. Sure, it might be uncomfortable but I wasn't about to drag cushions and comforts with me up here, I'd tried that once before and had a nasty accident when I fell asleep and started sliding.

I could see the gathering crowd growing thicker as more people arrived, of course no one dared to cross the outer reaches of the circle. This was the eve of the new year, it was nearing midnight now so the ceremony would start soon. The continuous battle between day and night, an eternal cycle gliding through our days is what this ceremony symbolised, in it Burmecias best warriors, dressed in ceremonial, but still practical armour would fight a continuous battle until dawn. No blood or great harm to the opponent could be inflicted as the main point of this ceremony was to show the warriors' physical endurance. Each combatant has to fight until they drop of exhaustion, and then the next takes his or her place, as dawn touches the skies the combatant who remains standing, is the winner of the day's battle. I remembered the workings of the ceremony well for on one rare occasion when I was still under my parents caring protection one of the fighters had willingly answered questions about the event. I remember him explaining that one of the combatants represented the night or moon, and the other of the day or sun. He himself had been of the moon and had battled well.

As I sat in my perch I watched the participants begin to assemble, the delicate touch of raindrops brushed my skin like a feather as it fell in a steady drizzle. Those watching grew silent as the time to begin approached, one warrior stood on either side of a circle just lining the insides of the outer one. A large gong sounded at the feet of the massive statue of Freija Crescent, our greatest hero standing guard over her city, her shoulders being raised just above the tops of the surrounding buildings.

Both sides stepped into the inner circle, all eyes upon them as they held their blades ready, a second boom sounded from the gong and the figures both charged at each other instantly launching into a furious volley of both offensive and defensive manoeuvres. Red light cast upon them by the surrounding fires enhanced the scene painting a mixtures of reds and yellows upon their armour. Moving together as one the battle seemed like an intricate dance with swords weaving in and out in an exquisite array of gestures while the cool night atmosphere captured afterimages of the weapons'

skilful movements, making it seem as if they fought with a dozen swords at their disposal.

Each movement was entrancing, capturing one's eye in the hypnotic display of movements, both suits of armour built so as to conceal the wearers identity and even gender, they became the swords, senses on edge to predict the opponents movement and return with the allocated counter. I was always mesmerised by this event, just watching the two weaving their continuous web of gestures, I found it amazing that the Burmecian form could move in such harmony together wielding such a destructive implement yet exhibiting such graceful elegance.

As I sat and watched this enchanting contest of wills, only ever pausing long enough for one exhausted participant to be helped away and the next enter, I realised that the side of the sun hadn't changed its combatant for quite sometime, he or she was quite tall, and had entered after only the first couple of warriors had left, I could see the hint of dawn beginning to colour the night sky and wondered how much longer this one could hold out.

A shudder hit my spine as soon as I caught sight of the next champion of the moon, the way he walked, his posture, and I believe I can say his with some certainty, everything about him from what I could see made my mind scream out that I knew that man. My pulse quickened as I restlessly watched the two engage in combat, suddenly this felt like a life and death matter, it seemed important, threatening, I could just sense it from every minute movement made by the two.

Glancing at the pale light growing in the sky I felt myself growing frantic, my breath almost failed me as my ears told me there was something wrong, silence. Whipping my head back to the combatants I saw one, the moon doubled over in what must have been a harsh blow, the other stood above him, I swear if I could have seen that one's face it would hold a smirk. The sun raised his or her weapon and a chill swept through my body sending it to act of its own accord. I didn't think, I just jumped and as I landed all I could think of was saving my dear companion whom I forced out of the way with my landing. Cold steel dove hungrily into my chest and I let forth a gasp that became a choked splutter as my pierced lungs began filling with fluid. My hearing dulled until all I could hear was a distant buzzing commotion, arms, those arms, who had held me so close in my dream caught me now. I tried to take a deep breath, but my jaw only twitched and jerked as I spluttered out the bubbling blood curling up my throat. He took his helmet off, and I saw that face which I had never really seen in my dream, I had only known it was his face then, but now I could see in my last shred of life. No protest came from my mind as I found my head lulling back and the dawn cracked sky filled my vision, so beautiful I thought, if only I could capture this moment forever. I felt my last torn fragments of breath leave my rasping lungs as my body began to fall limp and as my head tilted back I glimpsed the lady Freija's lovely face, freshly touched by the morning sun peering down at me, a content smile lit my face as my vision receded into darkness and my senses left me.