



## *The Great Drift: Part Three*

By Maia Jacomus

As Luka stared at the final words of the day's travel log entry, she became aware of her eyes squinting. Looking up to the window, she was amazed by the bright glow which painted all the trees in a shade of blue. She hastily opened the route map to read:

*Sunray is the one area in the Stretch where direct sunlight is free to shine. During the day, the view is intensely bright and colorful. During the night, the stars—and sometimes the moon—can be seen in the sky.*

Abandoning her room immediately, she ran up the stairs to the deck just as Enzo was ringing the bell. A shiver of excitement ran up her spine as she turned her head upwards toward the sky, not even hearing as all the other passengers stampeded up the stairs—she could see the sky. The sky itself was no great amazement; like everything else in the landscape of the Stretch, it was a dark, muted color. What captured her were the stars—they were brighter than candle flames, and there were hundreds of them that she could see even in that small canopy clearing. She was determined to count them all and record the number in her travel log, but it was an impossible feat—she would either forget which she had counted already, or would become distracted by one star that was gleaming in different colors, and so would lose count.

Gradually, the passengers and captain turned in to sleep, but Luka laid herself on the deck, waiting for the moon to appear.

“I miss this.”

Turning her head, Luka saw Lani Ouranos sitting on the deck, staring upwards. She had not even heard her approach.

“Do you like living in the Stretch?”

Luka simply nodded.

“It's a little too dark and suffocating for me.”

She finally found her voice. “I don't like the autumn floods.”

“I guess living here all your life, you're used to it.”

“If...if you don't like it here, then...why are you here?”

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“Well, I wasn’t disinherited because of my narcotics addiction, if that’s what you’re thinking.” Her tone was bitter, but ended with a slightly amused chuckle. “Have you ever heard of the seiznip plant?”

“Yes. They grow all over. They bloom the biggest flowers of any other Stretch plant, really pretty purple flowers.”

“There’s a reason why they’re so big. They’re actually native to the Sea of Grass, but over the past four years or so, they’ve migrated into the Stretch.”

“Flowers don’t migrate; animals do.”

“And people.”

“That’s true...we’re migrating right now.”

“Almost everyone in the Sea of Grass migrates all their lives.”

“And you migrated into the Stretch.”

“...Yeah, I did. I’d like to go back home, though...soon, maybe.” For the first time, Lani turned to look at her. “Luka, right?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve seen you before, in Lagun, in that one house.”

“You were...using your telekinesis.”

“No, I wasn’t, I was...” Her brow furrowed, and she shook her head as she rose to her feet. “Forget it. You should get some sleep. Sunrise is more worthwhile than the moon.” She descended the stairs with much less stealth than she had scaled them, fuming all the way back to her cabin.



Luka took Lani’s advice, and went directly to bed in order to wake early enough for the sunrise. While normally her own biological clock would rouse her, that morning, she was awakened by light, brighter and whiter than she had even seen the prior night. Rurik, whose face was in his pillow, was not moving. Luka jumped down from her bunk, grabbed her brother’s shoulders, and pulled him up to see the light.

“Good gods!” he growled, clutching his pillow to his face. “What’re you doing to me?!”

“It’s sunrise—you don’t want to miss sunrise in Sunray!”





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“I’d like to miss *you*, for a change.”

“Aw, you don’t mean that.” She shoved him back onto the bed with a *thud*. “While you’re busy sleeping through life, I’m going to go out and see it.”

“You do that. I’m going to see the inside of my eyelids.”

As Luka stepped out of the cabin, she smirked and slammed the door shut behind her.

The only others to join her on the deck were Yakim and Darya. They explained how the others either wanted to sleep in, or had no desire to have their eyes burned out of their sockets. Admittedly, the latter comment made Luka a little nervous as she reached up and grasped onto the hatch. She pushed it open slowly. At once the light flooded her vision completely, her eyes were blinking and tearing so fiercely that it became a battle to see anything at all. Her steps onto the deck were small and cautious, unsure of how far she was from stepping out into the water. After a few minutes of blinking and rubbing her eyes, she was finally able to more openly squint at her surroundings. Once she saw past the white light, she was completely taken aback by the vivid colors—the greens and browns of the plants, the yellow of the vine blooms. The most fantastic was the blue heron that had contented itself with floating atop the water.

Just as she thought she was thoroughly amazed, Luka turned to look at Yakim and Darya—it was like looking at them for the first time in her life. While the usual dullness of the Stretch made everyone’s skin look pale grey, in the sunlight, their skin took on a faint tint of pale pink. And the shine that gleamed on the top of their heads looked like highly polished crowns. She looked down at her own pink paleness and was awe-struck by the brilliance of her white feather clothing—it was both blinding and divinely beautiful. She could not keep herself from smiling.

“Isn’t this amazing? This is so amazing!” she crowed.

“We’re going back inside,” Yakim remarked as he and Darya shaded their eyes with their hands and made their way to the hatch.

“You’re going down already?”

“It’s wonderful, yes,” Darya agreed, “but I don’t think my eyes can take it anymore.”

“I’m starting to get a headache,” Yakim said. Now they mentioned it, Luka could feel a dull ache in her temples. But she knew there was one thing yet she had to see before she descended back into the comfortable darkness. Shading her eyes, she slowly tilted her head upwards until her view broke free of the canopy.



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She was never before aware such magnificent colors existed. The once-black sky was now a myriad of bold hues—red, pink, orange, yellow, and even the emergence of blue. It was pure ecstasy for a full five seconds, then it began to hurt too much. She shut her eyes and massaged them as she descended down through the hatch. When she opened her eyes again, things were darker than ever they were before; she could barely see anything at all.

“H-hello?” She began to panic. “Is anyone there? *Hello?*”

“It’s okay, Luka,” Darya’s voice assured her. “We were blind at first, too, but it goes away after a bit.”

“Your eyes just need to readjust,” Yakim’s voice added.

“Thank the gods!”

The boat suddenly gave a lurch, and all knew that Enzo was once again cranking the waterwheel to propel *The Heron* on its way. Luka returned to her cabin, and while she waited for her sight to clear again, she laid down in bed with her eyes shut, relating every detail of what she had seen to Rurik, who listened noncommittally as he tried to fall asleep again. By the time her words had run out, both of them had drifted off to sleep again.



Luka woke suddenly a mere hour later, as if just realizing she had unintentionally fallen asleep. She was disappointed to see that the boat was clear of Sunray, but was immensely relieved to have her eyesight refreshed. Hanging her head upside-down, she peered down at her brother, who suddenly twitched his arm with a light snore. *Why he ever felt the need to move, I’ll never know. The scenery’s the same everywhere for him—dreamscape.*

Feeling idle in the close surroundings of her cabin, Luka went up to the deck to stroll from bow to stern and enjoy the fresh air. As she made the turn toward the stern, she noticed that Lani was speaking to Enzo as he briskly cranked the waterwheel. In spite of her usually courteous nature, she ducked into the shadow cast by the captain’s cabin to eavesdrop.

“I’m surprised I haven’t been seeing many,” Lani told him.

Enzo pointed to her, drew his finger across his neck, then shrugged.

“Yes, but I really don’t think I’m wrong this time. What use could they possibly have for candlesticks or vases?”



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He shrugged, scooped his hand to his mouth, then twirled his finger.

Lani laughed. “Doubtful. But that would be quite a thing to see.”

He merely smiled and quirked an eyebrow. He then noticed Luka and tilted his head in her direction, causing Lani to notice her.

“How did you like Sunray?” Lani asked.

Luka, ashamed of being caught, slowly emerged from the shadow and nodded slightly.

“Nice. It was really nice. Bright.”

Lani chuckled. “Right.”

She wondered if it would be an appropriate time to ask Lani some questions, but both Enzo and Lani standing together created too much intimidation for her to break through. She instead flickered a smile and departed toward the hatch.

Enzo looked to Lani and exaggerated his head tilt.

“No,” Lani whispered. “If someone calls me crazy, possessed, or stoned one more time...”

He tapped his forehead, then his heart.

“She’s only eighteen. Why would she understand better than anyone else?”

He merely raised his eyebrows.

Lani sighed. “Fine, okay. Anything to get you to stop nagging me.” She then raised her voice: “Luka, could you come here and talk?”

Luka first stared at her retreat—the hatch—and contemplated an easy escape. But her curiosity got the best of her, so she crossed over to where Enzo and Lani stood. “Is it about the...how you’ve...?”

“Yeah...” Lani took a deep breath. “You know the seiznip plants? And how they bloom such large flowers? It’s because...” She paused, turning to Enzo. “I just can’t think of how to say it without making myself seem completely unhinged.”

Enzo’s expression was completely blank.

“Yessir...” Lani droned, then continued to Luka. “There’s a race, or...I guess more of a specie of being, somewhat like humans...that are born in the blooms of seiznips.”

“Oh!” Luka said, voicing her interest. “That does make...but I’ve never seen any other humanoid beings in the Stretch.”

Lani smiled wryly. “That’s because seizkin are invisible.”



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Luka's mouth dropped slightly, and recalling Lani's aforementioned concerns, she tried not to look as doubtful as she felt. "I...see..."

"Of course you do," Lani murmured mordantly. "See, the reason is because Stretch of Shadow is so dark. Seizkin are dark, also. So whenever a seizkin is in the shade of a tree, or in shadow, or wandering around at night, they can't be seen at all by the human eye. And since the Stretch is so dark, seizkin like living here so that they can do what they please and be protected from enemies."

"O-kay..." Luka's brow furrowed. "So you mean that you didn't steal anything; these invisible seizkin did."

"Yes, exactly."

"Um..." Luka folded her arms. "So...if they're invisible, then...then how do you know about them?"

"I saw one when I was twenty, on my parents' anniversary, in the shade of a tree. The bloom was opening, and the seizkin came out in a cloud of..." Lani took the small box from her pocket, and opened it to show her the pale yellow dust. "This isn't a narcotic. This is pollen from the seiznip bloom. The only way that anyone can see a seizkin in the darkness is to sniff this pollen."

Wary, Luka took the box to more closely examine its contents. She even smelled it. "Well...it doesn't smell quite like a narcotic. And I'm pretty sure there isn't any kind of narcotic this color. And..." Suddenly, an itch accumulated in her nose, and she sneezed, blowing some of the pollen into the air. She stifled her nose with her finger, handed the box back to Lani, and backed out of the cloud she had created. "It's definitely pollen."

Lani's face lit with hope. "Yes, pollen, exactly."

Luka paused for a moment to focus on herself—she felt no alteration of her physical, mental, or emotional state, with the exception of an itchy nose. "Well...I don't see any other reason for snorting pollen...unless you were masochistic, I suppose. Did you...see one on the trip, earlier?"

Lani nodded with a growing smile. "Saw it creeping down the corridor."

Luka sniffed, trying to clear her now-stuffy nose. "Could I see one now?"

"If one comes along." Thrilled to have a potential believer, Lani clapped her hands together. "I'll keep watch here at the stern, and you can watch at the bow. Maybe we'll see one



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before the pollen wears off; usually takes a half hour at best. What do you think?”

Luka smiled slightly. “Okay.” With that, she dashed to the bow to look out through the reeds and the trees.

Lani chuckled with her small triumph and also dedicated herself to looking out for the seizkin. However, out of the corner of her eye, Enzo was becoming increasingly distracting. “You can wipe that smug smirk off your face anytime, you know.”

He tugged on his ear, then slapped his chest, his shoulders shaking slightly with silent laughter.

“Someday, you’re going to be wrong, bud, and even if I’m direly affected by your misjudgment, I am going to laugh so hard, that not even you talking will get me to stop.”

With two fingers, he pointed to his own eyes, then hers, then his own again.

Scoffing, she fiercely rubbed his bald head with her furry gloves, then crossed to the portside to look out at the scenery.



Luka’s eyes felt glazed over as she stared out into the bleakness. She reasoned that if the seizkin were dark, that she would best notice one by movement, so if she stared in one direction, she would best notice any slight movements. But it was easily making her bored, tired, and impatient. However strange Lani Ouranos was, Luka could sense sincerity in her, and knowing what everyone else thought of the outsider, she wanted to believe her—but she could not believe her until the seizkin’s existence was undoubtedly confirmed.

Then she got an idea—the seizkin seemed to be thieves, so perhaps if she set out something for them to steal, one would come by. Granted, she knew it was ridiculous to entice a supposedly dangerous creature, but she was so acutely bored, that any little excitement would be a welcome retreat. Rooting through the bag she had packed, she found that she had very little that would be of interest to a thief. The best prospect she had was a stone keepsake box that was shaped like a turtle with totems engraved all over his shell. It had been given to her for her fifth birthday with a necklace inside—crafted with beads of multi-colored jade—which she was currently and always wearing. Taking the turtle box, she returned to the deck above, placed the box on the deck, then sat across the way on the starboard side.

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After staring into space for untold minutes, Luka saw a flicker of movement coming from atop a tree. While the dark figure was difficult to make out from a distance, she could plainly see a pair of tainted yellow eyes. It sprang from the branch, leaping onto the deck. Luka quickly looked to the stern and shouted for Lani. When she looked again to the bait in front of her, it was gone, with no seizkin or any other creature in sight. Lani arrived a moment later.

“What? You see one?” she asked, looking in all directions.

“It was in that tree,” Luka said, pointing, “then it jumped down here, but then I just...it’s gone! And it took my turtle!”

Lani hit her in the arm. “You gave it something to steal? Why did you do that?!”

“I wanted to see one, and I barely did, because it was gone so fast! You didn’t tell me they were fast!”

Yuli and Yakim raced up onto deck. “What’s going on? We can hear you yelling through the ceiling.”

Lani and Luka stood in awkward silence a moment. Luka spoke up: “We were trying to see...how well an echo could carry around here. Not too well, I guess...uh...sorry, we’ll be quieter now.”

Yuli and Yakim arched their eyebrows. “Okay...” Yuli said.

“Anyway,” Yakim said, “we were just thinking about asking everyone if they’d like to do a group swim when the captain takes his break.”

“Sure. Sounds good.”

After another somewhat awkward silence, Yuli and Yakim departed down the hatch. Luka sighed heavily.

“Any way I can get my turtle back?” she asked.

Lani sighed also. “Slim chance.”

“I got it from my parents.”

“Then you shouldn’t have used it as seizkin bait!” Lani paused to calm her frustration. “I came on this trip to find out more about the seizkin, to find out what they do with the stuff they steal. I guess there’s a chance we might find it again.”

“What do you mean, finding out why they steal? It’s pretty obvious why people steal.”

“Seizkin aren’t like humans; they live in the wild, like animals. Their lives are basic survival. And of all the times I’ve seen a seizkin, I’ve never seen one making use of the stuff





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they steal. They do steal food, of course, but keepsake boxes?” Lani could see that Luka was disappointed, so she patted her shoulder. “Thanks for giving me a chance. And if I’m able to prove the seizkin’s existence, I’ll be able to put a stop to their crime spree. Here, take one of these.” Sliding off her left glove, she handed it to her. “Wolf fur, lion fur, and bear fur. Took me forever, but I found out that wearing these three hides together allows you to touch a seizkin while it’s invisible. Keep this one with you, in case you need it.”

“Thanks.”

With that, Lani rose and headed for the hatch. “Well, I better get back to my cabin before the stampede comes for the group swim.”

“You don’t like swimming?”

“I love swimming. But I think I unnerve your friends.” She waved as she descended the hatch.

Luka remained on deck, searching for any sign of the seizkin who had stolen her turtle box, determined to do so until it was time for the swim.



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