

AETHER TORRENT #26
"ABAOAQU'S PREY"

Written by

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FADE IN:

EXT. ASPH HOTEL - NIGHT

A sign reading "Asph Hotel Guests ONLY" hangs on a tall barbed-wire chain-link fence. A large section of fence near the sign has fallen down. Its edges are melted.

KLAUSER walks through the gap. Glances around. Blinks.

Nobody's around. The moon is full and bright. Klauser GWARKS inquisitively.

INT. THE WELL - NIGHT

The swirling black face-shapes of ABAOAQU twist up and around the 9' wide, nine-storey-tall water column in the massive subterranean dome.

The faces multiply to the ceiling and the water-covered walls. Moving like oil, they twist and slither between human-face caricatures and cephalopods squashed under glass.

TORI, AVANI, CIRBUS, NAUR, and TARASSAS look up and around, watching the faces. Avani still clings to Tori's arm.

AVANI

Lord forgive me, but I begin to
doubt there is a treasure here.

KARRUN's gaze follows the black mass too.

KARRUN

This creature would be priceless
if it were tame. Such power.

TAT walks out from behind Abaoaqu's water column.

TAT

Depth unsounded, infinite
detail, as distant as the sea,
and beyond all desire. My
peerless abomination.

The black mass reaches into the tentacles and the tentacles coil around the nine massive columns supporting the roof.

ADDANC flattens himself against the wall of his column as a tentacle coils harmlessly in front of its doorway. Avani's bag lies inside on the floor.

Tat lifts his hands to the ceiling, beholding the writing, MOANING faces inside the water column and elsewhere.

TAT (CONT'D)

From animal to monster in only
two generations. Only one name
is fit for it: *Abaoaqu!*

Cirrus's pose seems to be guarding Naur from it.

CIRRUS

That's not a monster. I am!

Cirrus THRUSTS out her hand --

A small portion of Abaoaqu's water column BURSTS out from an AIR BOMB and re-forms instantly. Abaoaqu MOANS. Nothing else.

Tat LAUGHS, going off-kilter again.

TAT

You think you can harm it?! I
barely escaped him alive!
Abaoaqu is pure Water magic!

NAUR

Then why did you kick me toward
it?! Water magic opposes Fire!

TAT

Exactly! But now that he's
awake, he can handle a meal like
you *without* choking!

Avani releases Tori's arm and slowly walks backwards.

AVANI

Choking... Tori, I have an idea.
Keep it distracted!

TORI

Are you crazy?!

Avani RUNS up the parabolic floor.

AVANI

Perhaps a little!

Karrun draws her sword.

KARRUN

Everyone who *isn't* utterly mad,
prepare to strike as one!

TORI

Damn it Mom I don't need you.

Cirrus forms a tight air distortion in her hands, heat
SHIMMERS around Naur's, and Tarassas grips his hammers.

CIRRUS

Let her help. I'll kick her ass
if she tries anything funny.

KARRUN

Says the one I myself kicked.

Tori clenches her left hand over the fist holding her knife.

TORI

Shut up, Mom! Get ready!

Abaoaqu's tentacles wrap tighter around the nine non-water
columns as Avani approaches the blocked doorway. The walls
swirl with its MOANING faces.

AVANI

Mister Addanc, I know you're in
there!

Addanc remains flattened to the wall.

ADDANC

Am not!

Avani shouts, muffled, through the translucent tentacle.

AVANI

Listen! I need the cane-sword.

Tori and company look up as Abaoaqu's faces in the water column continue to flow into each other.

TORI

Blast it apart on three!

Addanc lifts Rin's cane sword, sheathed.

Avani sticks her arm into the tentacle. It yields like water.

AVANI

Yes, that! Pass it through!

Black grease in the water coils around her arm.

TORI (O.S.)

One! Two!

Avani tries to pull free. Can't. She SHRIEKS.

Tori, Cirrus, and Naur turn at the sound.

TORI (CONT'D)

Avani?!

The inky stuff pulls Avani into the tentacle.

Six curved black tentacles wriggle out of the water column.

Karrun hasn't turned. She raises her sword.

The tentacles SHOOT out straight at high speed with a LIQUID HISS. The next several actions come at us fast:

A tentacle STRIKES Karrun square in the face with the force of a fire hose. It splits like water and engulfs her body.

Cirrus and Naur turn. Two more tentacles STRIKE and spread around them from the head down.

Tarassas SWINGS a fire-trailing hammer at a fourth black tentacle, which splits and engulfs his head from two sides.

Tat's LAUGHTER cuts off with a SQUELCH as a fifth hits him in the mouth.

Addanc backpedals and flattens against the wall again. A black tentacle strikes out from the watery door-blocking one and ENGULFS his face.

Tori DUCKS the sixth water-column tentacle and madly SLASHES through the one engulfing Cirrus. She cuts through it twice to no effect, turns her head at the sound of a LIQUID HISS --

TORI'S P.O.V.:

A seventh tentacle SHOOTS at us --

Tori shuts her eyes --

The tentacle impact does something impossible. As it hits her face, gray mist EXPLODES from the point of impact, enveloping all we see and muffling into silence all we hear.

EXT. NASHTE - WATERFRONT - NIGHT

Klauser dips his beak in the water and drinks. He bends for another drink, but stops before touching the water.

Deep below, far deeper than a waterfront should go, the water churns like a thing alive.

EXT. TORI'S CASE - MISTY AREA - DAY

A white title on a black field reads: "IN TORI'S CASE."

The gray steam/mist billows everywhere, throughout the whole universe as far as we're concerned. It settles, revealing a featureless sky white as white can be --

And Tori, still clamping her eyes shut. She opens them.

The mist settles to Tori's waist level, occasionally curling up in little steamy fractals. She squeezes her knife as if to prove it's really there and sheathes it.

TORI (V.O.)

Okay. I'm still physical, so I still exist. Wherever this is.

Tori crouches and waves at the steam. It doesn't dissipate so much as part, revealing a black surface under her feet.

The surface has as great a depth as can be implied in 2-D animation. It isn't so much a floor as the roof of the universe, the Hubble Ultra Deep Field under glass.

Tori blinks rapidly and stands back up. The mist moves back into place.

TORI (CONT'D)

Avani? Cirrus? Naur?

Tat rises from the mist, perfectly calm. Tori turns, curling some mist around her.

TAT

Oh, they're around too. It's different from last time.

TORI

What do you mean last time?
Where are we? What happened?

TAT

Abaoaqu has absorbed you. That is the where and what.

Tori takes a moment to register that.

TORI

So... we're dead?

Tat gestures at the empty sky. Tori looks up at it.

TAT

No. Abaoaqu is only showing you what you expected death to be: the border of an empty sky and an infinite void of life, with access to all factual knowledge.

TORI

Oh. Then where're all the books?

Thousands of big bookshelves suddenly SPRING UP from the mist with a quick yet loud collective RATTLE of jostled books.

Tori covers her heart and PANTS briefly from shock. She is the hub of all the shelves.

TAT

He will provide all knowledge,
because you expected someone to.
What would you like to know?

Tori takes a book and glances at the cover. We can just make out the title "*At the Hills of Hallucination.*"

TORI

First off, how is Abaoaqu doing
all this?

TAT

Mental illusion via Water magic.
The water-horse monsters known
as kelpies have a similar skill.

QUICK FLASHBACK:

Back in episode 3, Tori BLUSHES at the sight of a naked redheaded young man under the waterfall.

Tori shelves the book, BLUSHING after her first four words.

TORI

Yeah, yeah, that proves... uh,
anyway, why is it showing
illusions if it already ate me?

The books behind Tat are all puns on Stephen King novels: *Gloom, Transport, Pronoun, Reflection, Situate*, etc.

TAT

Abaoaqu is dead, and desires to
live, so he devours the "will to
live." Your friend Avani would
call it the "soul." But a will
that clings to life is inedible.

Tori stares in dawning realization. Our viewing angle slowly shifts clockwise on her as she grows more afraid.

TAT (O.S.) (CONT'D)

To break that will, that *soul*,
Abaoaqu shows his prey whatever
end they expected, be it
glorious or fearful.

TORI

So if they accept what they see
as actual death...

TAT

(thin smile)

Abaoaqu shall digest them. Four
parts, separate but equal, to
give balance, *life*, to his one
almighty will. He is what he is.
And now he shall live.

Tori makes an effort to steel her expression behind her fear.

TORI

Here's a tip. You sound stupid
when you speak in third person.

Tat smiles wider and tilts his head.

TORI (CONT'D)

If Tat escaped you before, my
friends and I will too. Tell me
where they are.

Tat's eyes GLOW solid dark blue and dark smoky tendrils curl
out from them. His voice takes on a strange AQUEOUS ECHO.

TAT

You use your expectation well.
Unlike Tatzelwurm. He expected
nothing at all, and received it.

Tori gulps.

TAT (CONT'D)

If you dare to face Abaoaqu,
here lies the path.

Watery tentacles suddenly BURST from Tat's body as messily as the show's rating allows.

Tori JUMPS back and WHIPS OUT her knife in the same motion.

"Tat" falls back and SLITHERS away on the tentacles. The mist parts for him and his trail leaves a glassy blue path.

Tori PANTS for breath, wide-eyed.

Tat snakes around the bookshelves and dips down into the dark universe. The path follows his course.

Tori calms down. She sheathes her knife.

She walks the winding path.

EXT. KARRUN'S CASE - ICY LAND - DAY

A white title on a black field reads: "IN KARRUN'S CASE."

Light sparkles off vast icy mountains near a dark blue sea. Karrun stands on the icy shore.

Her breathing comes out in clouds. She appears perfectly comfortable in the cold.

KARRUN (V.O.)

I am home. I must be dead. But
if I am, yet I retain my form...

Karrun waves her hand once.

All the ice melts instantly, SURGING down as a great FLOOD.

Karrun CHUCKLES as a prelude to ROARING LAUGHTER. A pillar of ice RISES under her, lifting her skyward.

The flood ROARS down to the shore.

Karrun SWEEPS her hands theatrically and the flood SURGES up and around her. (ref: Disney's *Fantasia*.)

Karrun draws and SLASHES her sword in the same motion.

The mountain range, and all water on it, BLASTS away and SPLASHES catastrophically into the sea, leaving only an immense flat surface of rock.

Karrun looks ecstatic. She sheathes her sword, holds her arms out and floats in midair, tail dangling.

KARRUN (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I knew it. Like my power and authority, my will and my being exist beyond my body. Life bound me, but now I am free!

Still in midair, Karrun crosses her legs and grips her knees.

KARRUN (CONT'D)

I control, therefore I am!

As Karrun floats with her back to us, the flat surface SHATTERS and RUMBLES and a great construct rises --

It's the octagonal city-state, East Granbridge. From outer walls to inner Citadel, it's a perfect carbon copy.

Karrun LAUGHS TRIUMPHANTLY.

EXT. THE CORE - NIGHT

A sphere of wriggling dark blue tentacles floats in the universe Tori saw. The only sound is a deep, slow HEARTBEAT.

The faces, and only the faces, of Addanc, Karrun, Tarassas, Naur, Cirrus, Avani, and Tori stick out of the core. All look asleep. Tat's face is conspicuously absent.

Tori's face twitches as if sleeping restlessly. Karrun's face, however, sinks into the core.

INT. ADDANC'S CASE - DUNGEON PRISON - DAY

A white title on a black field reads: "IN ADDANC'S CASE."

Addanc sits alone on a thin bed in a barred prison cell in a gray stone dungeon, forehead in his hands.

ADDANC (V.O.)

I knew it. Life's the only freedom we got. Now I'm dead. I'll never beat her now.

Karrun strides up to Addanc's cell.

Addanc lowers his hands, abysmally depressed.

Karrun takes hold of two bars of the cell, RIPS the whole door off and THROWS it down the stone dungeon hall.

KARRUN

Rise and shine, Addanc. I have a use for you.

ADDANC

(rises reluctantly)
Yes, Ma'am. Whatever you say.

Karrun smiles predatorily. She has an awful lot of teeth.

EXT. TARASSAS'S CASE - CITY WALLS - DAY

A white title on a black field reads: "IN TARASSAS'S CASE."

Tarassas looks up, up, up at the walls of East Granbridge.

He smiles, rubs his hands and takes out his hammers.

TARASSAS (V.O.)

I knew it. Life and death are parallel-*lel*, which means a new world on the other side. New civilizations to exam-amine! Oh, I can't *wait* to start!

EXT. THE CORE - NIGHT

Addanc's face slips under the tentacles of the Core.

Tarassas's face sinks in too.

Cirrus and Naur's faces twitch as if sleeping restlessly.

EXT. CIRRUS'S CASE - ROCK TOWER FOREST - DAY

A white title on a black field reads: "IN CIRRUS'S CASE."

Soft wind BLOWS through a misty expanse of jagged rock formations overgrown with greenery.

Cirrus (wind tiger), perched on a tower-like rock, BREATHES DEEPLY and JUMPS off.

She flies in loops and twists over the rocky green scenery.

CIRRUS (V.O.)

I knew it. Gods might exist, but we only live once, and then we go where we deserve. There's so much space to fly, this must be Heaven. Which means...

LAKE OF FIRE

A volcano looms over the misty rock-strewn forest.

Its interior is a suspiciously smooth-walled cylindrical pit with a pool of lava at the bottom.

LEVANTER (human), alone in the pit, SCREAMS and FLAILS in the lava, burning and healing and burning again.

Cirrus perches on the edge of the mountain, listening in dark satisfaction to the WAILING wafting up from below. An EARLY-TEENAGE MALE VOICE is heard after she completes her thought.

CIRRUS (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Ahh, my ex in eternal torment. I couldn't ask for more.

AUSTER (V.O.)

You know that's a lie, Mother.

Cirrus stiffens and her eyes go wide as possible.

She turns her head.

Two young wind tigers sit on the mountainside. The male, AUSTER, is smaller than the female, MARIN. Marin moves subtly so we can tell which one she is. She sounds 18, tops.

MARIN (V.O.)

Been a while, Mama. 'Sup?

EXT. NAUR'S CASE - ROCK TOWER FOREST - DAY

A white title on a black field reads: "IN NAUR'S CASE, ALSO."

Naur walks through the trees between the towering rocks. STEAM curls up from him. Unseen birds SING serenely.

NAUR (V.O.)

I knew it. Heaven is quiet. No
hatred. No pain.

(examines hand)

Even my fire feels colder.

A ROBIN flutters onto Naur's hand and TWEET-SINGS sweetly.

Naur smiles warmly, but the smile fades as he thinks.

NAUR (V.O.) (CONT'D)

But it feels... lonely.

The robin flies up and past Naur's head. Naur watches it go.

LAKE OF FIRE

Cirrus trembles.

CIRRUS (V.O.)

Auster... Marin...!

Cirrus LEAPS at her cubs and TACKLES them to the ground,
hugging and nuzzling and licking their faces. Her front wind
tiger limbs are well suited for hugging.

CIRRUS (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Ohhh, my little cubs! I missed
you both so much! I was so, so
worried--

Auster KICKS Cirrus off, assisted by an AIR BLAST.

Cirrus does a backflip and lands on her feet.

CIRRUS (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Auster! What's gotten into you?

AUSTER (V.O.)

You abandoned us, Mother.

CIRRUS (V.O.)

(thunderstruck)

But I, I searched everywhere for
you, for years!

Auster and Marin stalk around their mother.

AUSTER (V.O.)

But you never came. So we came,
to say goodbye. Forever.

MARIN (V.O.)

We hate you, Mama. We always did
like Daddy best.

CIRRUS (V.O.)

(small, sad voice)
I knew it.

Auster and Marin JUMP up and hover over the pit. Cirrus hurries to the rim.

CIRRUS (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Wait! At least tell me. If
you're here, who killed you? Was
it Levanter? Was it *Nankil'slas*?

AUSTER (V.O.)

No, Mother. It was you.

Auster and Marin FLY away. Cirrus watches them go until she can't anymore. She throws her head back and releases the most heart-rending, animalistic CRY she can manage.

Her legs give out and she COLLAPSES, SOBBING. Her chin lays on the edge of the pit.

Down in the lava, Levanter WAILS AND MOANS.

Cirrus's sobbing tapers off.

She stares deep into the pit.

She stands shakily, her face full of sad grim determination.

Naur SPRINTS up the mountainside, trailing FIRE AND STEAM.

His green eyes cry fine red sand.

NAUR

Cirrus! No!

Cirrus turns her head in time to see Naur TACKLE her sideways, knocking her from the edge --

Both of them ROLL and BOUNCE down the slope until Cirrus KICKS off with a TWIST --

And FLIES away from the mountain with Naur clinging to her.

NAUR (CONT'D)

Please. I had enough sadness in life, I do not want more in death. All I want is... love.

Cirrus's falling tears dry as she flies.

CIRRUS (V.O.)

Me too, kiddo. Me too.

Cirrus flies up and away, as if into the sun.

EXT. THE CORE - NIGHT

Cirrus and Naur's faces sink into the Core.

The only ones remaining are Tori and Avani. Both "sleep" restlessly.

EXT. AVANI'S CASE - SACRED GROUND TEMPLE - NIGHT

A white title on a black field reads: "IN AVANI'S CASE."

Between a river and a lush grove lies an elaborate stone sanctuary inside two concentric rectangles. Four tiled paths make the Hindu-like temple complex resemble a crosshairs.

Avani beholds the impressive sight from one of the paths in the green, well-tended grounds. She SIGHS.

AVANI (V.O.)

My old temple. So be it.

Avani walks the tiled path to the massive stone sanctuary. A full moon provides plenty of light.

AVANI (CONT'D)

Om... Teizen...

Avani's path extends over a square pool in which pink lotuses float. Avani's REFLECTION walks alongside her. After a few steps, her reflection stands still and crosses its arms.

AVANI (CONT'D)

Great One of the Four Elements,
giver of food, knower of the
field, supporter of the world...

AVANI'S REFLECTION

God of blasphemers...

Avani herself stops. Looks back at her reflection.

Avani's Reflection sneers at Avani and rotates out of the water as if she were a spoke on a wheel.

AVANI'S REFLECTION (CONT'D)

You look shocked! Surely you
know your magic-worship is a
perversion of the ancient ways.
You'll never get a good husband
if you cling to it.

AVANI

I have my gods. I don't need
one. I pity you, Mother, for
lingering just to scold me.

Avani's Reflection quickly grows older, fatter, sterner. Her clothes morph into a sari and her hair ties into a braid. A red *bindi* dot and a small nose ring complete AVANI'S MOTHER.

AVANI'S MOTHER

Do not dare talk back to me like
that, Avani!

Avani stands firm as her mother, late 30s and an inch taller than her, strides up. She has a noticeable Indian accent.

AVANI'S MOTHER (CONT'D)

You think *I* am one to be pitied?
What do you expect awaits you?

Avani looks at the sanctuary.

AVANI

At the end of my path wait those
whom the gods ordained I would
meet. If our friendship was true
-- and it was -- we will all
remain together on rebirth.

AVANI'S MOTHER

You arrogant girl. Our rebirth
is determined only by our
actions. You have taken lives!

AVANI

Only in self-defense. Teizen is
merciful, he allows for that!

AVANI'S MOTHER

What of it? Your gods are false.
My gods are true.

AVANI

(angry lip-quiver)

In Elementism I feel the love of
great, holy minds at work in the
world, just like you do. They
are there for me. Tori is proof.

Avani's Mother smiles and tilts her head like "Tat" did.

AVANI'S MOTHER

But under your strata of faith,
you hide a grain of fear. What
if Tori hates you for thinking
your gods sent her?

Avani's hands shake as they rise. She grabs her head, shuts
her eyes, visibly strains to block out the fear.

AVANI'S MOTHER (O.S.)

Hatred from one is from both.
What will you do if your gods
hate you?

Avani SCREAMS.

EXT. THE CORE - NIGHT

Avani's face cringes and weeps, clearly in agony.

Tori, her whole self, gapes in horror.

Tori stands at the end of a glassy dark-blue sidewalk. The Core hovers in space above and just beyond the path.

Tat suddenly appears on the path behind Tori, normal as ever.

TAT

If you enter his Core, you will
accept your death.

TORI

They're worth it. So, Squiddy,
how do I save them?

Tat's eyes glow dark blue again.

The tentacles around Tori's face in the Core extend out. The face opens its solid dark-blue eyes and speaks in Tori's voice with an AQUEOUS ECHO.

TORI-FACE

You're smart. Find your own way.

The tentacles encircle Tori, SNATCH her off the path --

And pull her into the Core with her Core-face.

EXT. CIRRUS & NAUR'S CASES - CLIFF - DAY

Naur, still steaming, rests against Cirrus (wind tiger) on a high cliff overlooking more towering rock formations. Naur wears a crown of strung flowers. The robin perches on Cirrus.

Naur looks at his hand. Gray-on-white skin creeps down from his fingertips, replacing his usual red.

NAUR

Cirrus! Look! This must be my
true color.

Cirrus lifts her head and sniffs Naur's hand. Naur SNIFFLES and rubs some red sand out of his eyes.

NAUR (CONT'D)

Tori was right. I did get the best part of the treasure.

CIRRUS (V.O.)

I'm glad for you. But I wonder where the girls are. It's like half the family's missing.

The robin flutters off Cirrus to the ground.

NAUR

I know. It is strange. Longing feels worse than loneliness.

The robin speaks in a HORRIFIC ABYSSAL ECHO.

ROBIN

Loneliness. Loneliness.

Cirrus and Naur look at the little bird with equal shock.

As the robin speaks, it tilts its head further and further until its tiny little neck SNAPS, whereupon its eyes GLOW.

ROBIN (CONT'D)

The desire of life... will end...

The ground suddenly ERUPTS with black tentacles which SNATCH Cirrus and Naur and pull them quickly underground.

EXT. AVANI'S CASE - SACRED GROUND TEMPLE - NIGHT

Avani kneels on the tiled path, CRYING her heart out.

A mass of watery tentacles rises from the water on one side of the path and gently deposits Tori on the dry tiles.

Avani sees her. GASPS.

AVANI

Tori. Tori!

Tori braces herself as RUNNING FOOTSTEPS approach before Avani TACKLE-HUGS Tori with all her might. Tori flinches.

TORI

Avani, ribs, knife, ow!

Another tentacle mass rises from the other side of the path and deposits Cirrus and Naur on it.

Avani releases Tori and giddily clasps her hands below her chin. Tori cringes slightly and holds her ribs.

AVANI

Cirrus! Naur! I knew everyone
would be here. I just knew it!

Avani's Mother's eyes glow dark blue. Her voice ECHOES deep.

AVANI'S MOTHER

So did he.

An EARTHQUAKE hits the temple.

The rectangular temple complex quickly CRUMBLES into a GLOWING SAND MANDALA, a circle inside a square inside a larger circle, all between the river and grove.

Complex patterns arise in the mandala. The circle becomes a swirling gray fractal spiral. All the patterns are blue, white, red, and green, bordered here and there by gray.

The ground continues SHAKING into multicolored sand. Avani's Mother has vanished.

TORI

Avani, listen, we're not dead!

AVANI

(serene smile)
Not for much longer.

Greasy black tentacles rise from curls in the spiral.

Avani looks calm. Tori doesn't.

The tentacles STRIKE --

Two COLLIDE like ink with Tori and Avani's heads.

Two more SPLASH-STRIKE Cirrus and Naur's faces.

The tentacles envelop all four of them, lift them up and pull them into the center of the mandala.

EXT. THE CORE - NIGHT

Avani's face sinks into the Core.

The Core's heartbeat increases tempo. Two eyes appear in the core. They have W-shaped pupils.

EXT. NASHTE - HILLSIDE - NIGHT

Klauser pokes the dirt with his beak and pulls out a worm.

TAUNTING WALL RUINS

The monolith-wall's fluorescent glow shuts off entirely.

All around the ruins, nine watery tentacles BURST UP in a ring formation, throwing out soil and white platforms from only eight of them -- the ninth is already wide open.

HILLSIDE

Klauser looks up at the nine rising, wriggling tentacles.

His eyes dart to the worm in his beak. He drops it fast.

EXT. THE CORE - NIGHT

A new face emerges from the Core. It's the face of a cuttlefish, a bundle of tentacles fixed to the W-pupil eyes. It speaks in an ABYSSAL ECHO we've heard elsewhere:

ABAOAQU

Life.

INT. THE CORE - AETHER VIEW - NIGHT

Against a backdrop of black nothingness, empty gray-outlined silhouette tentacles THROB with a slow pulse. Blue, green, white, and red swirls course inside them like blood cells.

Four tentacles suck the swirls from the silhouettes of Tori, Avani, Cirrus, and Naur, positioned East, North, West, and South, respectively. Unlike in all other "aether views," their silhouettes have expressible faces.

TORI

Where are we?

Everyone's silhouettes are free to move their limbs, but the tentacles hold their relative compass positions very still. The swirls in all four of them slowly and steadily deplete.

AVANI

I don't know. This isn't right.

Cirrus's silhouette goes from wind tiger to human. The rate of her swirl loss does not change.

CIRRUS

It's all my fault. I couldn't protect any of you.

NAUR

If anyone is at fault, it is me. If not for that disc of mine, we would not have come.

AVANI

No, it's my fault, I yearned too much to see where my path led.

TORI

Stuff it, all of you, I took us on this treasure hunt. Only me. I'm so sorry. All you guys...

Tiny dark-blue swirls well up in Tori's silhouette-eyes. She scratches the base of her ponytail.

TORI (CONT'D)

Ah, crap, this is embarrassing.. you're my museum. My group of rare treasures that makes life worth the trouble.

Tori looks around to those she speaks of.

TORI (CONT'D)

Cirrus, you're badass. Naur, you're adorable. And Avani...

Tori reaches up to Avani with dark blue swirls falling from her eyes. She cracks a smile.

TORI (CONT'D)

I'm so glad I stole you. You're my favorite treasure.

Avani weeps green swirls. Bites her lip.

She reaches down.

Cirrus reaches down to Naur.

CIRRUS

(choked up)

Gimme your hand, Naur. C'mon.

Naur silently reaches up to Cirrus, weeping red swirls.

EXT. THE CORE - NIGHT

The spherical core elongates into a fat torso under Abaoaqu's cuttlefish face. Pulpy, fetal arms and legs begin to form.

EXT. TAUNTING WALL RUINS - NIGHT

The nine tentacles coil together in the air. They press and merge wobbily like long drops of mercury. Inky grease rises into the merged section and squirms like something alive.

INT. THE CORE - AETHER VIEW - NIGHT

Tori's right overhand and Avani's left underhand reach to each other.

So do Cirrus's overhand left and Naur's underhand right.

Tori and Avani's fingertips overlap, touch, bend, and curl intimately into each other's grasp.

Tiny swirls, blue from Tori and green from Avani, curl around their fingers, reach the point of fingertip contact --

And, seen very close up, MERGE into brown.

Cirrus clutches Naur's whole hand like a mother holding a child's. Her white swirls and his red MERGE into yellow.

Tori and Avani's locked hands GLOW a rich, swirly, golden brown like polished wood, much to their visible surprise.

Cirrus and Naur's GLOW a sharp, bright, piercing yellow like electricity. They also look surprised.

EXT. THE CORE - NIGHT

Abaoaqu's torso and limbs take a more defined shape: a fat, hunched, wingless Cthulhu with wriggling dark blue "skin."

Brown and yellow sparks flare in his pupils. The pupils widen and he makes a CONFUSED GRUNT.

INT. THE CORE - AETHER VIEW - NIGHT

Golden brown swirls spread through Tori and Avani's arms.

AVANI

I know this. It's Flora magic.

Bright yellow swirls spread through Cirrus and Naur's arms.

NAUR

And this is Lightning!

TORI

I get it. Guys, focus yourselves into this stuff!

AVANI

You mean surrender our souls?

TORI

(grim chuckle)
Hey, beats being eaten.

Tori tightens her grip. Avani reluctantly squeezes back.

Cirrus looks down at Naur. He nods. She squeezes his hand.

Tori and Avani's silhouettes GLOW golden brown.

Cirrus and Naur's silhouettes GLOW bright yellow.

Tree roots full of brown swirls BURST from Tori and Avani.

Lightning bolts packed with yellow swirls STRIKE from Cirrus and Naur.

The roots and the bolts PIERCE the gray-packed tentacles.

The tentacles slacken. Gold-brown and bright yellow swirls flow down their lengths.

EXT. THE CORE - NIGHT

Abaoaqu holds his cuttlefish head with still-forming fingers.

His pupils FLASH with bright, true-gold swirls. He GROANS.

INT. KARRUN'S CASE - JACUZZI - NIGHT

Karrun reclines in her Jacuzzi, nude, smiling blissfully.

Addanc, likely nude but visibly only shirtless with bruises on his arms, covers his eyes and SNIFFLES about three feet away from her in the water.

KARRUN

Quit crying, Somer and Rofun
never did.

Addanc lowers his hands. He has a black eye.

ADDANC

They weren't human!

The water suddenly ERUPTS with gold tentacles which GRAB both Karrun and Addanc and pull them under before they can resist.

WATER DISTRICT STREET

Tarassas examines a channel of water elsewhere in the city. The water ERUPTS with gold tentacles which GRAB him and pull him under.

EXT. TAUNTING WALL RUINS - NIGHT

The amorphous figure inside the amorphous tentacle-union CHURNS VIOLENTLY and WAILS like nothing in nature.

INT. THE CORE - AETHER VIEW - NIGHT

The brown glow from Tori and Avani and the yellow glow from Cirrus and Naur meet in the middle of their compass formation and churn into a shining, true-gold spiral.

AVANI

No, what have we done? We're making chaos!

TORI

It's *real* life. An unbalanced mess of everything at once. Not separate little pieces.

AVANI

But how, how can I *live* in that?

TORI

You just do. And if it gets to be too much, I'm here for you.

Avani GASPS shortly.

Cirrus and Naur exchange smiles.

CIRRUS

Ready, kiddo?

NAUR

With you all, I accept it.

Cirrus and Naur's smiling silhouettes fade into the gold.

Tori's silhouette smiles.

TORI

Ready, Skirt?

Avani's silhouette wipes her eyes.

AVANI

Yes, Tori... I believe in you.

The girls fade into the gold.

The golden center SHOOTS a beam of swirling light --

EXT. THE CORE - NIGHT

Abaoaqu's pupils GLOW gold. He shuts them tight and holds his head, but gold light leaks out. His face-feelers writhe.

ABAOAQU

It hurts...

Abaoaqu's eyeballs BURST with gold light.

EXT. TAUNTING WALL RUINS - NIGHT

The writhing thing in the water CRACKS like lava, gold bleeding through the black. It WAILS.

EXT. THE CORE - NIGHT

Abaoaqu's component tentacles separate. Gold light floods out between the cracks.

ABAOAQU (CONT'D)

It hurts...!

EXT. TAUNTING WALL RUINS - NIGHT

The object in the water EXPLODES into light. The tentacle mass expands spherically with the shockwave --

SPLASHING clear water all over the ruins.

Tarassas, Addanc, Karrun, Naur, Cirrus, Avani, and Tori DROP to the wet ground in front of the wall like sacks of produce.

A tiny fleshy object flies out on a high arc.

EXT. NASHTE - HILLSIDE - NIGHT

A perfectly ordinary cuttlefish, no bigger than a human hand, SPLATS wetly on the ground and BOUNCES once. It wriggles feebly.

Klauser looms over it. Tilts his head.

The absolutely helpless cuttlefish has dark blue eyes.

Klauser snaps up the wriggling cuttlefish, juggles it down his beak and swallows it.

EXT. TAUNTING WALL RUINS - NIGHT

Tori, Avani, Cirrus (human, clothed) and Naur awaken. Tori sits up fast. Cirrus helps Naur up; he looks weak, but is still completely his usual red color.

TORI

We're alive. We're alive!

AVANI

Not only us, Tori.

Karrun, Addanc, and Tarassas lie nearby. They groggily rise. Both Karrun and Addanc are clothed yet damp.

KARRUN

Curse it all. I live. Addanc!

ADDANC

(jumps up, backs away)
Fetch your own sword you
moistened bint, I'm out of here!

Addanc points at Tori.

ADDANC (CONT'D)

This isn't over, Torrent! I'll
outperform you yet!

Addanc RUNS AWAY into the night.

Karrun, amazingly, does nothing.

KARRUN

Hmph. I've had better. If ever
he becomes trouble, I'll just
have him killed.

Tarassas adjusts his hat.

TARASSAS

Sounds like a confession to me!
Come along quietly, and... uh...

Karrun has three feet of height on him.

KARRUN

You fail to understand my
influence. I can make you and
anyone you speak to disappear.

Tarassas gulps.

Tori draws her knife. Avani reaches at her.

AVANI

Tori, don't!

TORI

He's with us, Mom. What're you
gonna do about it?

Karrun smirks.

KARRUN

Turn my back, of course.

Tori gapes.

KARRUN (CONT'D)

All of you might never know just
how well you served me tonight.
And you did it while free. Who
knows what else I might gain by
letting you roam?

TORI

You saltwater bitch.

Karrun, very gently, lays her hand on her sword hilt.

KARRUN

Shall I kill them instead, Tori
dear?

Tori glares at Karrun.

Avani touches Tori on the shoulder. Tori reluctantly sheathes
her knife.

Karrun turns her back, but Tori stops her with a word.

TORI

Mom. Why exactly did you adopt me? Seriously?

KARRUN

(deliberate pause)

If I bore my own children, they would seek to supplant me.

Karrun walks away, hands confidently stuck in her pockets.

KARRUN (CONT'D)

You, however, are a successor I can trust. However powerful you become, I can always defeat you.

Tori glares.

TORI

I hate you.

Karrun looks back with just a hint of genuine sadness.

KARRUN

I know.

Karrun walks behind a broken tower stump and is seen no more.

INT. NEWSREEL THEATER - DAY

Somewhere in the world, a black-and-white newsreel FLICKERS onto the big screen of a 1920s-era theater. Dramatic music SWELLS for the title card: "EAST RAGLOA REFUSES COMMENT -- INVOLVEMENT IN DJITTOR??"

The same NEWSREEL NARRATOR from episode 19 speaks as an airborne camera pans across the Taunting Wall Ruins. (Roll credits from here on out, as unobtrusively as possible.)

NEWSREEL NARRATOR (V.O.)

One week has now passed since the bizarre events in Djittor. However, East Ragloa has yet to respond to allegations--

Two silhouette photos are both stamped "TOP SECRET," but the outlines suggest they are Karrun and Rin.

NEWSREEL NARRATOR (V.O.) (CONT'D)

--from two Federal vessel
contractors that its Air Force
was behind it all!

SERIES OF SHOTS:

One by one, Tat (raving mad), Addanc, and Tori speak silently to the camera in the ruins, on a street corner, and in the Nashte Square. When Tori speaks, Avani leans into frame and tugs her away by the arm, nervously glancing at the camera.

NEWSREEL NARRATOR (V.O.) (CONT'D)

We are thus left to speculate as
rumors continue to fly about a
strange monster, three L-M
agents slain in the line of
duty, and a beautiful female
elementalist defeating the
Prince of the Imperial Dragons.

INT. AIRSHIP - DAY

Tarassas fans himself with his hat in a plush seat.

TARASSAS

My save-avings won't last if war
breaks out. Renting this airship
under Rin's nose took five
figures.

Tori, Avani, Cirrus, Naur, and Tarassas sit in a spacious, comfortable section of an airship, all wearing new clothes. The walls are subtly curved.

TARASSAS (CONT'D)

Then there's the wardrobe, the
food, the dire kiwi transport..
maybe if we hocked one of the
weapons or that Von Luthier...

Tori and Avani sit a couple rows behind the others. Tori looks out a window. Avani sits pensively.

NAUR (O.S.)

(sigh)

I *did* offer to manage the funds.

Avani twice reaches for, and withdraws from, Tori's hand lying on an armrest. Tori SNATCHES her hand on the third --

TARASSAS (O.S.)

That's not a job for kids.

CIRRUS (O.S.)

He *did* offer. And in this family we act polite!

TARASSAS (O.S.)

Uwagh!

And kisses it.

Avani BLUSHES as hard as she can. Her eyes dart up.

Cirrus, grinning, effortlessly holds a comically STRUGGLING Tarassas in a headlock. Naur covers his mouth to hide, ineffectively, a smile.

CIRRUS

You gonna let him? Huh?

Tori releases Avani's hand, smirking. Sounds of STRUGGLE continue off-screen.

Avani's blush shrinks to something more modestly embarrassed. Her eyes dart shyly from her hand to Tori and back again.

They hold hands like they did in the Core, with curling fingertips.

EXT. AIRSHIP - DAY

The airship, shaped like a sea turtle, flies over the ocean.

Away.

FADE OUT