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Prologue

Elyse opened her eyes and found herself standing on the precipice of a steep cliffside. Whether ocean, abyss, or valley below her, she could not tell. Black clouds blanketed the sky, and she could just barely make them out drifting languidly in her direction. The air held a snappy chill and Elyse could see her breath crystallize and slowly dissipate as she struggled to make out what lay in the darkness before her.

She slowly relaxed her grip on Far Nollis, testing the conditions of the environment around her, and feeling no odd side effects, she let the friendly world slink back into the ethereal chaos in the back of her mind.

This world was well behaved.

She pulled the wayfinder from her belt, and determined that if her quarry were here, it *would* be within view from her vantage point.

If she could see a damn thing.

Glancing up at the overcast sky, she decided that those black clouds would likely let no more light through, if there was even a resident star bright enough to illuminate the planet’s surface.

She was just about to close her eyes to begin searching for Luxor Majoris, when the clouds parted just enough for a bright, rusty moon to bathe what turned out to be the desolate valley below in an eerie ruddy glow for just a moment. It was enough, however, to grant her vision of what lay in the dark expanse of that valley, far off in the distance.

Her heart skipped a beat, then began racing, sending icy adrenaline through her veins.

In the distance loomed the figure of a massive man, taller than a mountain, lean and sinewy, standing with arms outstretched as if undergoing a brutal crucifixion. Massive spikes penetrated every limb of its nude body, causing a thick dark liquid to dribble over its pale flesh. Where its head should have been there was only a writhing mass of dark smoke, blacker than pitch, broken only by the glow of two red beams where its eyes should have been and four thin horns curving in toward each other, forming a vicious pointed crown.

In quiet desperation, Elyse tried to let go of her grasp on this unknown world she’d awoken in, but the Demon standing before her had already trapped her in its realm. She felt the warmth her body held begin to leech away as the air grew icy around her, and she knew her chances of escaping this world had just diminished to almost nothing.

She tried to empty her mind and focus on the chaos in her subconscious, seeking Nox, an Alignment world contained in a universe in which light couldn’t interact with matter. She found it quickly and began forming the gesture with her hands and forearms that would allow her to pull the laws of physics from Nox through to whatever universe she was in, hopefully obscuring her from the Demon’s view, to buy her a few more precious moments. She might be able to send a warning to her sister, Ayva. But an involuntary shiver caused her icy fingers to spasm, breaking her concentration, and she felt her fingers lock up as they began to freeze over in earnest.

She knelt with a whimper, tears leaking from the sides of her shut eyes, crystallizing before they could fall halfway down her cheeks, and began to chant a final prayer to Ämalie, the eternal mother, that she be granted a swift death and find peace in the void. The Demon’s own cruel chant began to drill, almost lazily, through her psyche.

Despair tore at her attempts at maintaining this last moment of peace, as she knew the Demon would show her no mercy, no pity. It would break her and use her body as a vessel to sow as much destruction as it could in her homeworld before another channeler could destroy her body.

She almost laughed as she realized her family’s best hope was that a member of the Inquisition discovered her before she brought the entire town into ruin.

She whispered an apology to her sister, her guild, and the rest of her family, for the things the Demon would make her do, though she knew none of them would ever bear witness to her regret.

They would instead face intense shock as their beloved Elyse, the fourteen-year-old girl upon whom all their hopes rested, brought the blizzards of hell and the fires of heaven down upon them.

For what felt like hours, she knelt and chanted aloud through chattering teeth, then moved the chanting into her mind as her tongue froze over, feeling the Demon’s wicked presence grow stronger and more violent.

Her last sane thought was of her younger brother, who sometimes went out to explore in the city.

He might survive.

The demon’s cruel chant finally overwhelmed her, and she howled, crumpling in a heap as icy oblivion took her.

Chapter

1

Adyn hopped off the table to peer into his cittern case, his fingertips numb and his heart still racing in time to the raucous ditty he had just strummed, and not even the tiny pile of coppers and single Sterling Philip staring back at him could damper his mood.

“Thas’ a goodlad” Barty hiccupped as his massive hand enveloped Adyn’s shoulder. “Can alwaysss count on ye tuh,” *hiccup,* “tuh finish on a banger.”

He tossed another silver mark into the case, which came to rest right beside the first, and gave his best attempt at what Adyn figured was supposed to be a sly wink, blessing Adyn with another hearty slap on the shoulder. The wink looked more like a wince to Adyn, which he surely mirrored as the massive man almost dislocated his shoulder, but Adyn appreciated the old cobbler’s endearing stupor all the same.

He was sure the lady Bartholomew would be less than pleased to learn of her husband’s generous donation, but that was simply the way of things in Ahman.

Adyn had always been taught that in order to find good fortune, someone, somewhere in the world, had to suffer an equal misfortune. There was no give without take, nothing gained for nothing lost.

It was a sentiment repeated often in Ahman, a small town not a day’s ride by the Blood Road from the great city of Maravilla. A sentiment that would no doubt be frowned upon by the Holy King’s Inquisition, as it strayed dangerously close to pagan superstition.

There were many quirks about the Ahmani and their beliefs, too many discrepancies between their mannerisms and those of the Maravillanos, to be explained away by the class differences and geographic distance between them.

They spoke the same language in Maravilla, practiced the same religion, wore the same clothes, and used the same coins, but there were signs nevertheless, subtle though they were, that the citizens of Ahman had never quite fully come to live by the Holy King’s Code. Signs that Adyn, had he known what the next stage of his life would bring, would’ve payed far greater attention to.

Adyn made his way past the town’s buildings, which were now settling into their usual midnight repose, creaking as they twisted and turned, trying to find the most comfortable position to rest in.

Nyxi, the small, slightly green tinged moon, was out this week. She wouldn’t be joined by her older sister Nyxa for another week or so, but they would only share the sky for three days before Nyxi grew tired of her sister’s constant singing and slipped out of the sky for the next few weeks.

He made it home and strode past the lonely stable, then past the pigs, careful not to step in any of the filth which somehow always extended well past the confines of their wooden pen.

He made his way along the side of the old building, a sturdy two-story number built from burgundy *zumei* planks. Wooden homes, built upon cobblestone foundations with slanted thatched roofs in the Olde style, were the standard in Ahman. What made Bon’s home unique, however, were its two, mismatched chimneys. One was the usual cobblestone affair, hanging over the lonely hearth which never saw much use. The other was made of fortified brick, once a bright red, now a sooty black, protruding from Bon’s studio.

Adyn, however, wasn’t looking up at the chimneys. If he had been, he’d probably have levelled a nasty curse in the old man’s general direction and made his way to the front door.

He levelled a nasty curse anyway, though this one was directed at the pigs sleeping in their hut, as he slipped in the mud and barely caught himself on the fence. He carefully picked himself up and finished the trek to the less creaky door in the back, grateful that his cittern case hadn’t tumbled into the filth.

He was feeling quite kind-hearted as he made his way toward the back door. Bon would certainly be grateful that he slipped in without making a ruckus this time. Perhaps he’d even let Adyn push back the trek to Maravilla to next week if Adyn embellished his slip in the mud a bit. But damn it, the old man probably wouldn’t allow it, running low on materials as he was. And with traders from the city becoming more and more infrequent, Bon was forced to ask Adyn to make the trip.

By the Black God, Adyn hated taking the Blood Road.

He finally rounded the house, then creeped up the back porch, and carefully opened the less creaky door. Here, however, he discovered that his whole stealthy journey had been wholly unnecessary, as a blast of dry heat radiated from the inside of the home.

Past midnight, and the old fool was working his bellows.

“BON! WHAT THE HELL?” Adyn yelled, though he knew he’d get no response. He set his cittern case down gently on the kitchen table and strode toward the forge, shielding his face and bracing himself for the heat.

Inside, the old man was adding red-lead to the frit, the not-yet-fully-processed mixture of sand and other minerals which would be melted to create a robust crystal glass. The addition of lead to the frit was one of Bonwyll’s trade secrets, one which only a few master glassblowers knew.

However, the old man had retired decades ago, and only kept up the art as a hobby, giving his fantastic creations away as wedding gifts, or to people whose smiles he found particularly charming that day.

As he poured the mixture into the crucible, it hissed and started to glow almost immediately. Although Adyn knew much of glass blowing from his life with Bonwyll, he had no love for the art, and it had taken years for the old glassblower to get him anywhere near the bellows.

Adyn hated fire.

He knew it was a result of the inferno that took his home, though Bon insisted there was no way he could remember the blaze. He had only been three after all. Still, when Adyn gazed into the flame for too long, he swore he could remember... something. Bon ensured him it was a creation of his scarred mind, a ‘coping mechanism’, he called it, but how could he know? No, there was something there... something which haunted Adyn’s mind when he gazed into an open flame and opened himself to its horror… he heard the unmistakable sound… of someone crying.

Not the howling of a father dying in agony, or the wailing of a mother who would never see her children again, but a soft, gentle weeping. And there was something else... like a tune that kept slipping away before it could be fully realized, a vague shape dancing in his periphery that vanished he tried to turn his gaze toward it. He felt that if he could remember that… was it a person? A song? That… something… that memories of his family and of that night might return. He could almost feel it, almost hear it, dancing on the edges of his mind, just out of sight, too quiet to hear, if he could only–

“Adyn!”

Adyn snapped his attention away from the now glowing parison, the ball of molten glass which Bonwyll had rolled from the melted frit, and looked up at the old man himself, who was preparing his more delicate instruments. “Hand me that, would you?” he asked, pointing impatiently to the old iron punty on the work bench.

Adyn sighed, donned an apron and goggles, and got to work helping his stubborn adoptive father.

Chapter

2

“Naikila’s unholy green *koola*!” cursed Zo as ze kicked the hover speeder’s engine, which was now billowing a pungent green smoke that smelled of garlic and dung. Naturally, this was followed by another string of increasingly violent curses as other Tenglings, or “tengs” as they colloquially referred to each other, tried to walk by without catching Zo’s eye, shielding their children’s ear slits and giving zem dirty glances over their dark veils.

Zo couldn’t be bothered to notice the passersby. There were far greater troubles rustling zeir polished brown scales. In two months, Zo was expected to cross the Zaron Ocean which covered the great expanse between Du’Akar and Du’Aldin, where the testing would be proctored.

After all the resources zeir family, the whole neighborhood really, had pooled together to get Zo a tutor, today’s lesson hadn’t been anything like ze’d expected. Zo wasn’t sure that teng was fit to teach anyone. And yet all of Zo’s aspirations, indeed the future of zeir whole family, now rested upon zem passing one test.

Zo was a world-hopper.

Or, at least, ze might be. One day. Hopefully.

First, Zo had to be admitted into the grand University of Pharphesis. In order to do that, Zo would have to travel to Ol’kir’alkhai’s testing center, which was in Du’Aldin, the wealthiest country on the planet, about a thousand miles away. This tutor was just *odd,* though. And the trip would certainly be expensive. Zo sighed, thinking back on zeir parents’ conversation from that morning.

“So, what’s the damage?” Oza asked, as ze tore zeir *toroti*, a bland flatbread made from a type of reconstituted insect flour, in half.

“Don’t know. They don’t have a website,” said Ixen, as ze heated more *toroti* on the stovetop.

“Of course they didn’t have a website. Did you call them?” said Oza. While Ol’kir’alkhai did technically have a world-wide Internet, it was relatively new, and only the planet’s developed nations had regular access. Zo’s homeland, Du’Akar, named after its capital city not 15 miles away from zeir home, was still in the process of developing. Or as Zo so lovingly put it that morning, in response to Ixen’s question:

“I’m sure ze did, but who would answer? What else would you expect from this shithole city? I bet if they actually answered every call from every desperate lowlife who wanted to leave this god forsaken hell, they wouldn’t have time to blink the sand out of their eyes in between calls.”

Oza rasped a low, throaty chuckle, but Ixen glared back at zem from over zeir veil.

“This land is fertile. It has housed you, me, my watcher, grandwatcher, and zeir grandwatcher, going back thousands of years. Just because we don’t have all this new…technology doesn’t mean we can’t find things to love about our home, things to be grateful for,” Ixen said heatedly.

“Yeah, and that’s why you spent a whole hour this morning trying to find a way to get me the six hells out of here,” said Zo under zeir breath.

Iko, one of Zo’s clutchmates, choked on zeir *toroti*, as ze tried to stifle a laugh*.*

Ixen’s scales flared in outrage, ignoring the hissing flatbreads which were now clearly burning a foot away from zem.

Malik, another of Zo’s clutchmates, frowned at the burning breads, as ze hadn’t gotten zeirs yet.

“I spent a whole hour so *lovingly* trying to get you ‘the six hells out of here’ because you are my child and I want the best for you! You have something special, Zo. A wonderful gift from Naikila! You have so much to offer your people!”

Zo looked away from zeir watcher’s impassioned speech, tired of hearing this same line repeated to zem for the thousandth time. *So much to offer your people*. It made Zo feel sick to zeir stomach.

“Ixen,” said Oza, giving zeir mate a significant look. “It’s fine. We’ll go down to the docks tomorrow and see what they say.”

Ixen’s scales began to settle, and ze gave zeir mate a nod. But Zo could see worry in zeir eyes. Ze knew they wouldn’t want to talk about it in front of zem, but both parents were worried about the trip across the Zaron. News of other friends and family travelling had been all but non-existent in recent years, which likely meant the price of the ferry had increased significantly. Ixen and Oza ran a lucrative business scavenging, trading, fixing, and selling Alignment tech, but with twenty-two children, zinc was still tight.

Many of their children had already moved out and started their own families, but there were still twelve living in their burrow. Carved into the sandstone by creatures that no longer roamed the civilized areas of Du’Akar, the networks of burrows around the outskirts of the city were almost all populated by teng families. Zo knew zeir family had a particularly large and spacious burrow, but with so many living at home, it never felt that way.

And of course, all twelve of them were expected to work, contributing to the family business. Zo, among with a few of zeir siblings, was a parts scavenger. Ze spent much of zeir time rummaging through junkyards and trying to find good deals at the southern bazaar in the city.

Today, however, Zo wouldn’t be scavenging anything. Today was zeir first day of tutoring. Which meant Zo would be going into the city to meet Mozin, whom the family had hired to instruct zem. Mozin, of course, was not a world-hopper. None lived in Du’Akar that Zo knew of. Mozin was a history teacher from the city who focused on Alignment history, and thus probably knew more about the Alignment and world-hopping than anyone else in Du’Akar. And today, Zo would be meeting zem.

Zo finished eating zeir *toroti,* and nervously ran to zeir room to grab watch, veil, and loin cloth, pinching Nali, Zo’s third and last clutchmate, who flailed an arm around, annoyed at being awoken. “Breakfast is burnt!” said Zo cheerily in response to an impressive curse Nali had levelled at zem.

With zeir belongings in hand, ze crawled out into the backyard to scrub zeir skin and scales in the rough sand.

Zo liked being clean, and today would certainly be no exception. After lazily scouring zemself clean of any dust and grime, and taking care to polish each of zeir brown scales so that they gleamed in the red sun, Zo donned veil, loin cloth, and wrist watch.

One hour to go. Zo felt like zeir stomach was going to boil over, even though ze hadn’t eaten much. Ze nervously made zeir way back inside, through the burrow, and out the front to where zeir speeder was parked.

The street was busy with tengs getting ready to go about their days. Many wore jewels, a few had loincloths or veils with dyed patterns, but most were dressed simply, like Zo. Their scales ranged from pale, sandy white, to onyx black, with every shade of brown in between.

Zo ignored them all, unable to focus on anything but the jittering electricity ze felt racing through zeir scales.

Ze tapped zeir watch against the speeder’s dash, which lit up immediately, flicked the ignition, and frowned as the engine crackled loudly but didn’t start. Ze turned the ignition again, carefully this time, and mercifully, it started. Zo was doubtful that the engine had much life left in it. It was already old when Zo had found it in the junkyard, and Zo was surprised the speeder had fired up on the first try after ze’d first cleaned and installed the old engine.

There was traffic heading into the city, of course, but nothing unusually heavy. Although the great expanse of sand between Zo’s suburb and the city was almost empty, hover speeders like Zo’s couldn’t navigate it. They were made from Alignment tech that worked by pulling through some laws of physics from two other Alignment universes. One had much weaker gravity than was found on Ol’kir’alkhai – that was Gravitum A – the other, everyone knew about: Electrum. Arguably one of the most important worlds in the Alignment, Electrum’s laws supplied all Alignment tech with an effectively endless supply of energy.

A ‘highway’ had been lain under the sand when the city was planned, made of perpetually magnetized iron which had the dual purpose of keeping away sand beetles and providing the means for speeders and other hovercrafts to use it for travel.

The speeders, from their combination of near weightlessness and electric charge, could zip over the highways with only air resistance to slow them down. Well, air resistance, and the throng of hundreds of other stubborn tengs trying to get into the city at the same time.

There were vehicles, of course, that could cross the open sand, like the ferry that would hopefully take Zo across the Zaron in two months’ time. But they weren’t Alignment tech, and personal vehicles that could let one bypass the traffic were quite expensive to own and maintain, requiring more mundane means of operation. Only the rich could afford such luxuries.

Zo hoped that zeir knowledge of Alignment tech learned over years of scavenging would impress Mozin. Still, sitting in traffic made Zo’s scales itch.

By the time Zo finally made it to the address ze had been given, zeir nerves felt frayed and ze felt like zeir scales were going to shake themselves right off.

Buildings in the city were mostly skyscrapers that were constructed of steel frames with concrete walls covered in plaster coatings.

Zo looked down at zeir watch, making sure ze had the right address.

2E4A Oceanview Ave, Apt 8F

Zo found the apartment’s number in a small screen at the building’s entrance, and rang for room 8F.

Nothing.

Zo rang again.

Nothing.

Zo was about to call the number the tutor had given Oza when the door opened with a loud buzz. Ze stepped into the dirty lobby, which held an empty desk ze figured may have once been a porter’s work station, and made zeir way to the elevator.

OUT OF ORDER

Sighing, Zo made zeir way to the ‘up’ staircase, which like all teng staircases, was only about one span tall, requiring Zo to stoop down on all fours to begin the climb.

It was a comfortable position, but an unrefined one, as anyone travelling behind zem would have a clear view of zeir nether region. Nudity wasn’t taboo, as tengs had no odd protruding bits, but Zo still hoped ze didn’t meet anyone on the way back down. The only commonly accepted places for nudity were home or the beach. Anywhere else was considered impolite, if not slightly unhygienic.

Zo climbed the eight flights, trying to enjoy the exercise and ignore the odd noises ze heard coming from rooms near the various stairway entrances. Mostly yelling, loud music, and other sounds that made Zo’s scales lie flat in embarrassment.

Finally, ze made it to the eighth floor and exited the stairway, standing back up on zeir hind legs. There was a blonde teng with horribly dirty scales who looked unconscious as ze lay in the hallway, veil askew.

Nervously, Zo walked by zem, a strong smell of ether permeating the air. Zo held zeir breath and skirted past the teng, who twitched and ruffled zeir scales, but otherwise seemed completely out of it.

Finally, Zo made it to apartment 8F at the end of the hall. Ze raised a brown paw, ready to knock on the door, when a stooped teng with age-bleached scales yanked it open, wearing an expression that made zem look like ze’d just bit into a particularly sour *zupa* fruit.

“You Zo?” the teng asked in a gruff voice.

“Uhh, yeah. I’m looking for Mozin. Do you know if zey’re…are you…zem?”

“Naikila’s *koola*,” muttered Mozin, employing Zo’s favorite curse, ze noted. “So you’re the lucky teng who’s gonna save this planet from economic collapse.”

“Uh, I’m just here for –”

“I know what you’re here for, *ti*,” ze said, using the term for a teng youth, which Zo felt was a bit patronizing. Ze was sixteen years old after all, well into zeir adult years. Though, perhaps it *was* fair, the old teng looked well over a hundred. Maybe nearing a hundred and fifty, ze thought, as ze got a better look at those bone-white scales.

“Sit down,” ze said, gesturing into a room with furnishings that astonished Zo.

Every wall of the room was lined with bookshelves that were full of dusty tomes and manuscripts. Some Zo recognized from zeir schooling, limited though it was. *Elementary Mathematics for Students. A Complete History of Du’Akar, from 1300 B.A. to the Present Day.*

There were also several, hundreds perhaps, that Zo had never heard of. *Advanced Theories on Gravitation. Introduction to Decryptonomy*. Zo had no idea what ‘decryptonomy’ was.

“I said sit!” said Mozin, gesturing to a steel table with a red light-orb sitting upon it.

Zo sat at the table, crossing zeir legs beneath it. Mozin did the same, opposite zem.

“Now tell me what you know about the alignment.”

Zo was dumbstruck by the demand.

“Well, the Alignment is a federation made up of representatives from several worlds–” Zo began, but Mozin cut zem off.

“No, no, not the organization. The alignment itself, the cosmological event,” ze said impatiently.

This was one of the confusing things about the alignment. It was both the name of the physical and, some thought, spiritual alignment of several universes as well as the name of the representative government made up of individuals from planets *within* said alignment. In *Xutili* text, this was easy enough to sort out. One could simply add the crossbar over the first character in the word, which denoted it as a proper noun, when referring to the organization, and omit the crossbar when referring to the physical alignment of universes.

But when spoken aloud, context was all one had to go by.

“Well, the alignment is an ongoing cosmological event in which thousands of universes with differing laws of physics are constantly coming into a sort of physical alignment with each–”

Mozin interrupted zem again. “What kind of physical alignment, how does it work?”

Zo was caught off guard by this question. “I…well I don’t really know. Does anyone?”

“Not really,” Mozin mused, as ze dug a long claw into zeir ear slit, much to Zo’s disgust, “maybe some of the older Pharphesians know something about it. Not that they’ll ever share that knowledge. But as far as the general populace knows, it’s something which has simply been happening for tens of thousands of years and nobody knows the how or why of it. But there *are* some theories, which we will get to eventually. Continue.”

This ‘lesson’ was not going at all how Zo had anticipated. Zo was expecting for there to be some kind of introductions, maybe followed by a series of pre-set lectures. But perhaps those would come later.

“Well, as you said, these universes are aligning with each other, usually centered on a particular planet within that universe. And there are often species on these aligned worlds with members that can interact with the alignment in special ways.”

“Like you,” Mozin said simply.

“Yes,” said Zo, zeir scales pulling close in embarrassment.

“Don’t be embarrassed, *ti*! This is a rare gift!”

Zo braced zemself, getting ready to hear those words.

*Think of what you can do for your people.*

“Think about what kind of awesome adventures you’ll get to go on! The sights you’ll see, the friends you’ll make!” Mozin seemed genuinely excited as ze spoke.

Zo perked up at this, zeir scales relaxing a bit.

“Alright, while we’re on the subject, what do you know about what you can do? Or rather, what you’ll be able to do once you’ve mastered your abilities?”

“Well, I’m…*I will be*…a world hopper. I’ll be able to teleport at will to other worlds in the alignment. I’ll also be a law bender, able to draw the laws of physics from other universes into my own, to affect reality in otherwise impossible ways,” said Zo, zeir confidence growing as ze said it all aloud. It had been a few weeks since ze’d first shown the signs, but ze hadn’t actually *said* these things aloud yet. It was exhilarating.

And terrifying.

“And how are these two abilities related?” Mozin asked.

Zo stumbled at this.

“Umm…related?” Ze had no idea what the old teng meant, though as ze thought about it, it made sense that they would be related. There was no such thing as a teng that could world hop but not law bend, or vice versa.

Mozin sighed. “And this, *ti*, is where we shall begin. Once we get to actual channeling. Before we get to any of that, however, we need you to become intimately acquainted with some basic physics.” As ze said this, ze stood up and walked over to one set of shelves, gesturing for Zo to follow.

Ze began pulling down massive books with extremely daunting titles from the shelves and holding them out to the side, presumably expecting Zo to take them. Zo obliged, but the growing stack of tomes quickly threatened to overwhelm zeir slender arms. Zo wondered how ze was expected to get these all down the stairs.

Among the books was *Advanced Theories of Gravitation*, and Zo felt zeir stomach begin to bubble and froth once more.

The teng finally turned around to regard Zo.

“I want you to read the introductions, and first chapters, of each of these books. Don’t worry, you won’t be reading these cover to cover.” Zo sent a quick prayer of thanks to Naikila, the great watcher of the stars. “But you will need to understand the gist of what these books are saying. Most important of all is this one.” Ze gestured to the book on top of the pile, a smaller, leather-bound tome simply called *The Laws That Bind Us*.

“This one I *do* want you to read cover to cover, and I want you to read it first, then do as I said for the rest. After you finish, go back and read this one again. I expect you to understand the basics of what this book is trying to explain by next week. I *will* have questions to ask you about it, and if you don’t answer them correctly, you’d *better* have an excellent excuse for your ignorance. Simply being lazy does not count. Now, that’s enough teaching for today.”

Zo was flabbergasted by this comment, as by zeir reckoning, the old teng hadn’t taught zem a damn thing yet. The white-scaled teng, however, was already pushing Zo to the door with surprising strength for zeir age.

“Wait, what are we doing next week? Will I be able to start channeling by then?” Zo asked over the tall stack of books as Mozin finally pushed zem out the door.

The old teng simply laughed at this, a low rasping hiss, and slammed the door shut.

Zo glanced down the hallway, trying to ignore the teng still sprawled near the stairwell, and began to worry in earnest about how ze was going to get this great stack of tomes down those stairs.

At that moment, the door suddenly opened once more behind zem, causing Zo to jump and almost drop the books.

“The elevator works, by the way, sign’s just there to keep crazies from coming up here. And mind Erex on your way out,” said Mozin, nodding to the passed-out teng, “looks like ze’s having a nice nap,” and ze slammed the door shut again.

Zo glanced at Erex, then back at the door that had just slammed shut, and wondered what ‘crazies’ Mozin could possibly have been referring to.

**FIGURE OUT WHERE TO PUT THIS ~~~~~~ |**

**V**

“Four-THOUSAND combs?” Ixen hissed. “Who do you think you are to demand such an outrageous price? And a MONTH in advanced! *Bazdin!* When I made this trip as a hatchling with my grandbearer, ze paid four-HUNDRED combs for the BOTH of us!”

At this point, Oza stepped in, placing an onyx scaled paw in a calming gesture on zeir mate’s golden forearm. “We apologize,” said Oza, as Ixen began to hiss and splutter in indignation, but Oza gave Ixen a reproachful look. “But why is the price so steep? Surely you can’t expect many to pay a small fortune for simple passage across the sea, and in summer no less.”

The stubborn dockteng at the platform fluttered zeir neck scales in annoyance and turned from Ixen to Oza, who was still doing zeir best to keep zeir mate calm. “In case you haven’t noticed, zinc isn’t worth what it once was. You say your grandbearer paid four-hundreds combs for each of–” but ze was interrupted by Ixen’s outraged, “FOR BOTH OF US!” Oza glanced worriedly at zeir mate, who seemed ready to pounce at the dockteng.

“Fine, fine, four-hundred combs for the *both* of you. That was what, seventy years ago?”

Ixen glared silently over zeir veil at the dockteng in response. Clearly, zeir guess was not far off.

“Well, since Alloisis joined the Alignment, the price of zinc has been dropping steadily,” ze said slowly, as if explaining this to a child, “and with times as hard as they were to begin with…”

The pair didn’t need to hear the rest.

Zo’s family knew the unfortunate consequence of Alloisis’ arrival all too well. Their planet, Ol’kir’alkhai, or Olkira as it was commonly referred to, had little to offer the Alignment. Coming from a universe with banal laws of physics, and home to a civilization relatively primitive by Alignment standards, the citizens of Olkira had come to rely upon their meager contribution of zinc to generate interest from the Principal Worlds.

As a world-hopper-in-training, some of Zo’s lessons involved studying zeir planet’s history and position in the Alignment’s vast economic and political landscapes.

It wasn’t good.

With the addition of Alloisis to the Alignment not two decades past, the Principal Worlds were rushing to try bringing the new planet into their exclusive coalition. Zo wasn’t clear on the details of what this entailed exactly, but ze suspected there was more to it than the Principal Worlds simply agreeing to bring Alloisis into their fold.

Their goal was clear, however. Give the Alloisians the technology necessary for them to conquer and colonize their resident galaxy, so that they may, in return, supply the Alignment with a vast new source of rare metals.

This was possible, as Mozin explained, because the universe that Alloisis resided in was bound not only by stronger gravity, like the laws found in Gravitum B, but also had a more powerful strong-force. This allowed for stars to undergo higher levels of fusion than those in most universes, and speed through their life cycles at an incredible rate. The result was a universe teeming with planets, and even stars, which were incredibly rich in several heavy metals.

Every Tengling knew some version of this story, as the results were becoming impossible to ignore, but few understood the gravity of the situation as well as Zo did. And it was for this reason, that Zo decided to interject.

“You’re right, of course,” ze said, the interruption drawing surprised looks from both zeir parents, as well as the dockteng, who all appeared to have forgotten ze was there.

“We’re sorry to bother you, friend,” and ze nodded once before turning and striding efficiently back to the car.

Ixen reached zem first.

“Zo’ti,” said Ixen. “Why did–”

“There’s no point arguing with zem,” Zo cut in. “Neither of you want to admit how bad things are. Mozin says–”

“I don’t care what Mozin says,” Ixen snapped. “I’m almost regretting hiring that teng to teach you. Of all the tutors on this planet, we got stuck with that sour old coot.”

“Ze’s not as bad as you say, *waka*,” said Zo, using the common word for “watcher”, one of the two parental figures that all Tenglings had, the other being the “bearer,” or *bara*. “Ze just knows too much for zeir own good. It’s easy to be overwhelmed when you know as much as ze does.”

“Yes,” Ixen said, “and I’m sure it has nothing to do with the fact that ze was the cheapest tutor we could find on short notice.”

“Besides,” said Zo, pretending to ignore the comment, “ze *is* actually teaching me useful information. If I’m going to pass the test, I’ll have to know how this all fits together.”

Ixen glanced at Zo, zeir eyes narrowing in confusion. “And how are you planning on getting to the test, then? Are you forgetting the entire reason we drove down to this wasteland?”

Zo pondered the question in silence as ze gazed out over the shifting dunes of the Zaron.

Chapter

3

Adyn felt sweat soaking through his torn linen shirt as he sprinted through the vibrant red and blue foliage, bizarre plants he could never have imagined covering great boulders laced with veins of bright metals Adyn didn’t know. The air was moist and thick, yet somehow unsatisfying. No matter how hard he breathed, he felt like his lungs ached for more, and as he ran, it felt as if he was charging through air that was too thick, almost a liquid.

Hearing the thrashing coming from behind, he threw himself over a log and tumbled onto the spiky foliage on the other side.

The great tentacled beast that had been chasing him came flying overhead, it’s bulbous segmented appendages a writhing mass of hatred. It turned on the spot, several of its arms reaching out to reorient its body so that the mass of filmy red eyes could all turn on him.

*It’s just a dream. It’s just a dream.*

Though repeating the fact didn’t seem to change the very real sense of dread he felt in his stomach as the beast clicked its beak and descended upon him. He felt that razor sharp beak clip through the back of his neck–

Adyn awoke with a start, tumbling from his pallet onto the hard, wooden floor. He was fine, however, as his head had broken the fall.

“Y’alright up there?” he heard Bon call from below a moment later.

“Yeah!” said Adyn, picking himself up from the unyielding hard-wood and crossing to open the window to feel the fresh morning air’s rejuvenating embrace.

Adyn had been plagued with odd night terrors for weeks now. This last one felt so real, and he could vividly remember the feel of that creature’s beak clipping into his spine. He felt the back of his neck, sweaty, but gratefully unbeaked, and shuddered.

“Ya better hurry up if ya want to make it to Hary’s ‘fore he closes for the night,” Bon called. “I know, Bon!”

He snatched up the small branch he’d taken from the old pine a few days ago and tore off the last handful of needles it had to offer. He tossed the remains of the branch out the window and began chewing the needles vigorously as he crossed the room toward his wash basin. Tossing his sweaty under-garments in the corner, he quickly washed what needed washing, threw on fresh clothes, and spat the chewed up needles out the window before slamming it shut and trotting down the stairs.

Bon glanced up at Adyn. “Oats are cold.”

“You know I don’t like ‘em hot,” said Adyn cheerily, pouring in a bit of honey and giving it a good mixing before digging in.

“So, you have the list?” Bon asked, looking doubtfully at Adyn as he shoveled oats down his gullet.

“Yes, yes,” he said between bites of the mash. Bon idly wondered how the boy managed it all without choking. “Three barrels of white sand, one of soda, and a scoop each of red, green, blue, yellow, and violet oxides.”

“Medium grain,” Bon reminded. “Yes, yes, always medium grain,” said Adyn.

“And a cart to haul it back in, obviously. I’m tired of loaning that piece of shit from old Jak every time we need to resupply. His unearned sense of superiority over owning that stupid cart… Do you have everything you need for the road? I figure Tullymar will have plenty of food and pipe-flower for the journey, but I want you to be prepared, just in case. I wouldn’t be surprised if that boy forgets to bring water, like some fool boys I know…”

Adyn looked up, surprised. “Did you ask Tul to come?”

Bon chuckled, shaking his head. “No, but call it a hunch. If he doesn’t join you, I’ll give my next crystal bouquet to Arta Wynden.” At this, Adyn *did* choke on his oats, and it took him a moment to not die, then another to regain his composure. Arta was a saucy seventy-year-old widow from town who was never very subtle when it came to insinuating what she would do with Bon if given the chance.

Adyn couldn’t help but grin after he recovered from the oats that had tried to flee down his windpipe. “Well, poor Arta’s gonna have to make do without you for a bit longer. I told Tul about the trip two weeks past and he’s been badgering me about it ever since, as if I can just drop everything and go like…” he trailed off, realizing what he was going to say.

“Like he can?” Bon finished. “You know it’s not his fault his mother is who she is.”

“I know,” Adyn said quickly

Tul’s mother, Tullymar II, was the presiding High Priest and effective Governor of Ahman, appointed by the Holy King’s order. Although Ahman was by no means a large province, as one of the Holy King’s principal citizens, Tullymar II’s word was treated as law so long as it didn’t contradict the Holy King’s Code.

Which of course, it never did.

Tullymar II was generally agreed to be a fine woman. She was quite friendly and got along surprisingly well with the common folk in town, considering her status.

Her soldiers, however, were absolute cunts.

As Adyn bade Bon farewell, he began the mile or so walk to Tullymar’s manor. Bonwyll hadn’t kept horses for years, but it wasn’t for his lack of wealth. In fact, although he never discussed these matters with Adyn, he was sure the old man had a neat fortune stashed away from his years as a master craftsman in the city.

And the truth was, the horses would’ve certainly been more of a burden than they were worth. Although Adyn would need a horse to get materials from the city, the governor had an enormous stock of fine animals and frequently loaned them to her citizens, often free of charge.

She took her duties as High Priest quite seriously and considered caring to the needs of her people one of her most sacred responsibilities. During the grand harvest, she would loan out all but her most prized beasts to help the lowlier of the farmers harvest their crop and bring it to market.

And although Tullymar and Bonwyll didn’t get along too well personally, the governor didn’t see why it should keep her from helping Bon maintain his craft. Indeed, as Adyn neared the manor, he could see some of Bon’s gorgeous wind chimes fluttering near the entrance to the grounds, their impossible patterns glittering as they gently swayed in the autumn breeze.

One of Tullymar’s soldiers, Mitch, if Adyn’s memory served him right, was standing at the gate on guard duty in the usual black and white livery. He was about to inquire what business Adyn had at his Lord’s manor, when Tul’s head, engulfed by a mop of curly brown hair, popped out of a third story window.

“YES!” he called out, “It’s time, my friend! Time to go out and discover what this great green world holds for us!” He beamed, and as he yanked his head back inside, Adyn could hear him call out, “Be right down!”

The guard made no attempt to hide his sigh.

Within moments, Tul was out the door, still beaming as he belted his sword to his waist and pulled on a rich indigo cloak. He called out, “Come!” and he gestured for Adyn to follow him around the manor to the fields in back as if Adyn were another of his mother’s servants.

Adyn obliged, however, as he knew Tul meant no harm by it. It was just the way he was. And the two began to stride toward the three-thousand-acre farm where Tullymar kept her stock.

The High Priest kept over a thousand horses at any given time and employed over a third of the entire province of Ahman in some form or another. And although Tullymar II loved the beasts, there was a good reason she, along with several other High Priests, raised the animals. The Holy Kingdom of Ixpánta had by far the largest cavalry in the known world. And it had to, if the King’s Eternal Conquest was to continue unimpeded.

As Tul led Adyn towards his own personal stock, he called out for his two finest destriers to be saddled. As a man and woman rushed out to prepare the horses, Tul pulled Adyn aside with a sly grin and showed him what was in the money pouch at his waist. Expecting to find a respectable heap of gold, Adyn was impressed when he instead found a fine-looking bunch of green and purple pipe-flower.

Adyn grinned back mischievously and knew the ride to Maravílla had just gone from an arduous chore to a miniature vacation.

“Do you have enough for the trip,” called a low feminine voice from behind, and Tul paled as he whipped around to find his mother, High Priest Tullymar II, stepping out through a salon in the back of the manor.

Realizing his mother couldn’t have seen what he had been showing Adyn, Tul instantly composed himself and, without skipping a beat, replied, “Perhaps we could do with a few more crowns. I’ve heard food and board is at a premium in the city these days.”

The High Priest sighed and shook her head as she handed a small handful of gold coins to her son from somewhere in her white-trimmed black robes.

“Are you sure you don’t want an escort?” Tullymar started. “I hear of more trouble on the Blood Road from practically every other missive I receive from the city.”

“Mother, you know I can handle myself and Adyn if a few brigands make the mistake of accosting us,” he said, patting the sword at his side. And Adyn knew it wasn’t just fanciful boasting.

Although Tul was a bit of a goof and enjoyed rebelling against his mother, Adyn knew that the years of mounted combat training his mother forced upon him must have left some impression. Even the extensive instructions on courtly behavior and politicking weren’t completely lost on him. Though he chose to ignore them often.

“Besides,” Tul continued, “You know those missives always exaggerate. Scribe Halyn loves to embellish everything.” He mimicked the contents of what must have been her last missive in a childishly lofty voice, “*The crops were devastated by fyrebeetles in Mansig. Without any aid the province will be bereft of order by moon’s end.* Well, I heard from Jak at the pub last week that he had just met a trader from Mansig and…”

He cut off abruptly as his mother’s eyebrows came down in a dark frown, and he realized his mistake.

“I – I mean,” Tul stuttered, attempting to backtrack, “as I was *passing by* the pub. Old Jak was just outside, having a smoke and…”

He trailed off as his mother raised her hand to her brow, clutching her forehead as if dealing with a massive headache. Which Adyn figured she very well might be.

“Truly, mother,” he continued bravely, though Adyn thought his friend should just leave it alone. “It was as I was coming back from the tailor just last week. You remember, I had gone to be fitted for–”

“Enough,” Tullymar whispered.

“But–” Tul tried to finish.

“I said ENOUGH!” she exclaimed, causing the grooms to look up at the High Priest with worried frowns. They finished tightening the last straps and hastily tapped their brows and hearts with a murmured, “From order, life,” then scurried off, clearly hoping to avoid witnessing any part of what was to come.

The High Priest had regained her composure, however. “We will discuss your sins when you return from Maravílla. I don’t wish to delay young Adyn any further, and I’m sure he’s eager to be off.” She flashed a warm smile at Adyn, who bowed politely.

The smile vanished as she turned back toward the manor and barked, “Josophell, Aronin!” Two soldiers trotted over from their posts to stand at attention before her. “My son and his companion are journeying into Maravílla for the weekend. By the Blood Road. They are delayed and will be leaving promptly. I want you two on your mounts and after them as soon as the morning shift ends. I expect you to catch up to them by midday. You will protect them with your lives, should they encounter any trouble along the way.”

Tul looked as if he wanted to argue, but blessedly, he kept his mouth shut. The two guards, splendid in their ebony-accented steel plates, nodded grimly and touched their sword hilts, then their hearts, in a traditional Otuist salute.

“From life, war,” they intoned in unison, speaking the first mantra of the White God’s creed.

“From death, growth,” the High Priest replied, speaking the first mantra of the Black God’s creed.

Tullymar II gave her son one last warning glare, then strode back to her manor. With that, the soldiers left to finish their patrol.

Tul glanced apologetically at Adyn, who merely shrugged, and the two made their way to their destriers in silence.

Chapter

4

Tul glanced over at Adyn, trying to catch his eye, as they trotted their mounts down the Olde Road. The dirt path was all that remained of grand highway which had wound from the southern border of Anhikal, the country which had been annexed by the Ixpántan Empire over a century ago, through the province of Ahman, which had kept its archaic name, before lazily curving eastward toward the ancient city of Khanin, which had been razed to make room for Maravílla.

Now however, with the advent of Imperial rule, the Olde Road had fallen into disrepair, as the arrow-straight Blood Road had been extended through the new territory, slicing through great swaths of the Olde Road, leaving those pieces to be reclaimed by the Black God.

Tul finally got Adyn’s attention and raised an eyebrow at him with a questioning grin. His friend rolled his eyes and nodded, grinning back at him, and the two pulled to the side of the road.

Tul began to pull two wooden pipes from his cloak, when to his surprise, he noticed Adyn already had his own in hand. A fantastic glass piece with swirls of brightly colored crystal twisting together in a way that made each one impossible to follow. Obviously, Bon’s creation. He made a mental note to ask Bon what it would take to get one of those for himself.

But he didn’t hesitate to put his spare wooden bowl away and pull the musky pouch from his belt to begin packing his bowl. He then tossed it to Adyn, who caught it lithely and began the same ritual.

Having packed their bowls, Tul produced a steel striker, which he used to light both their pipes, before tucking it away.

He took a quick puff, then grabbed his waterskin, preparing to proffer it to Adyn.

Right on cue, Adyn began coughing, as he wasn’t as used to the harsh smoke, and Tul offered the skin to Adyn, who grinned in between coughs and took it gratefully.

“Am I so predictable,” said Tul, nodding toward Adyn’s pipe.

“The day you stop smo–smoking is the day I work up the courage to ask Marella to come with me to Khin’s Hill,” Adyn said between coughs. Khin’s Hill was the premier location for young lovers to steal a few private moments away from disapproving eyes.

“Oh, come on now,” said Tul. “I actually might quit smoking someday, while you and Marella…” he trailed off jokingly and received a lighthearted elbow in the ribs for it.

Marella was a girl two years Adyn’s junior with whom he’d been besotted since her family had moved in from the city a few years back.

Personally, Tul didn’t see what the big deal was. Sure, she wasn’t too bad to look at, if you were fond of the wide eyes and light skin shared by all true-blooded Ixpántanos – he himself was mixed – but her once noble family had been driven to leave the city due to bankruptcy. He couldn’t figure out what Adyn saw in her. Maybe it had to do with her voice. Adyn was a musician, and he was probably looking for a partner to perform with.

Feeling content, his minds warm and fuzzy, the two tapped out their spent bowls and continued onward down the withered remains of the Olde Road.

By midday, they had made it to the Blood Road. A stretch of unbroken, unerring, solid black rock, it was smooth as granite, though it was certainly neither granite nor any other mineral Tul knew of. The stone could not be broken by conventional means, whole companies of cavalry travelling by it without leaving a single scuff mark upon the smooth surface.

The means by which the road was created were unknown to him, and it was a secret that likely not even his mother knew. However, if one looked deeply enough into the glossy dark surface, on a very bright day, one could make out the faintest tinge of color. It was not truly black, but a deep, deep red, and it was this subtle ruby hue that gave the Blood Road its ominous name.

Before they crossed the threshold onto the road, they broke for lunch. Finding some flattish boulders to rest upon, Tul unwrapped a small pile of fluffy, well-seasoned flatbreads from his provisions, while Adyn supplied a pair of smoked pork sausages. They wolfed down the meal contentedly, Tul sharing his friend’s penchant for waging quick and decisive wars against his meals.

The flatbreads slaughtered and sausages thoroughly routed, Tul prepared to remount, but Adyn caught his sleeve.

“Forgetting something?” his friend asked with a raised eyebrow.

“What the guards?” said Tul, “Mother said they’ll catch up with us. Though, come to think of it, I’m shocked they haven’t yet. What do you think–”

But he cut off as he noticed Adyn holding out the charm he’d pulled out from under his shirt. Dangling from a leather cord, it was a simple piece of painted steel, only an inch across, in the shape of two hollow triangles, one black, one white, fused at one corner so that they pointed inward, toward each other.

Tul sighed but obliged his friend. They each went down on one knee before the Blood Road, and Adyn began the ancient Otuist *duosancta*, a prayer which required two people to properly recite.

“Let the Black God reign!” proclaimed Adyn.

“From life, war,” said Tul, touching heart, then sword hilt.

“From death, growth,” Adyn responded, touching hilt, then earth.

“From war, order.” Hilt, then brow.

“From growth, chaos.” Earth, then heart.

“From order, life.” Brow, then heart.

“From chaos, death.” Heart, then Hilt.

“Let the White God reign,” Tul finished.

The two stood solemnly, then mounted their destriers, and crossed the threshold onto the Blood Road.

As they crossed, Tul felt like his body was being stretched, as if the universe was tugging him backward, attempting to pull him from his mount. It was over in an instant, however, and the two began trotting down the smooth, dark surface of the Blood Road.

The sun was getting low in the sky, and Tul could tell Adyn was getting extremely anxious. “They should’ve caught up by now,” his friend muttered for the eleventh time.

“I’m telling you, she must have called them off. She was just making a show for the servants, pretending she has some control over me. Does it all the time,” he assured his friend. “Come on, let’s have one more bowl before we get to the city.”

Adyn agreed, though by the way he kept looking back down the road after they finished, Tul was fairly certain it had only made his friend more anxious. They were getting ready to mount up for the last time that night, when they both paused at the sound of a distant gallop.

“About time,” Tul exclaimed, turning around. He was shocked it had taken this long for his mother’s soldiers to arrive. His shock was overshadowed however, by confusion, as he noted the odd scene before him.

Instead of two mounted knights, what they saw was a single horse, with a slumped figure astride it.

“Mount,” said Tul, feeling his stomach drop, though as he turned to do so, he saw Adyn was already climbing into his saddle. They trotted forward toward the black courser, which was tittering nervously, and finally got a good look at the rider. It was indeed Josophell, one of the guards her mother had sent, though he looked oddly stiff in his slumped posture. Once he was close enough, Tul began to suspect why. A thin layer of frost seemed to have condensed on the man.

“Shit,” Tul hissed, pulling closer. He heard Adyn empty his stomach, and almost did the same. “Josophell,” he tried to say, though nothing came out. He pulled up closer, the training he’d scoffed at for years tumbling around in his mind, and felt at the man’s neck, checking for a pulse.

He knew it was hopeless, but checked anyway. Rock hard.

The man was frozen solid.

“From death, growth,” Tul whispered to the icy corpse.

“Is he…” Adyn asked shakily, wiping the sick from his chin.

“Ice. Demon’s work” he said, regaining his composure as his thoughts ordered themselves. “We need to leave. Now. The city’s not far. Whoever did this probably won’t risk getting too close to the gates.”

Adyn nodded, though he looked as if he might be sick again. They galloped onward, and Josophell’s mount, clearly relieved to be among other beasts he recognized, followed closely behind them.

Night had fallen by the time they neared the gates, and Tul could make out guards pointing and exchanging quick words, one of them yelling to another who ran into the guard tower to find a superior, who appeared by the time they neared.

The soldiers approached cautiously, hands on hilts, as Tul neared. Before the commanding officer, whom Tul had identified immediately, could say a word, Tul pulled up his left sleeve, displaying the tattoo of the same dual-triangular symbol hanging around Adyn’s neck, and spoke imperiously:

“My name is Tullymar the Third, son of High Priest Tullymar the Second. This is Adyn, son of none. Our two guards were accosted some time not long ago on the Blood Road by a sorcerer, perhaps more than one. We are unsure of exactly when or where. One, Aronin, son of Arnold, is unaccounted for. The other, Josophell, son of none, dead before you. By the authority of High Priest Tullymar the Second, I conscript your guard into her service, that you might bring whoever dared break the King’s Code to justice.”

With one smooth motion, he drew his sword and levelled it at the commanding officer. Without hesitation, the officer dropped to one knee and drew his thumb across the blade’s edge, intoning, “From war, order,” and smeared the blood across his brow.

The other soldiers knelt and repeated the refrain, touching their sword hilts, then brows. They righted themselves quickly, then trotted to the nearby stable to acquire mounts.

At this, Tul noticed Adyn, who had been watching the affair with wide eyes.

Adyn stared back at Tul, who was filled with a determination Adyn had never before seen in his friend. Gone was the lighthearted, mildly arrogant joker he’d always known. In his place stood an ordained priest of Ixpánta, thirsting to run down the heretics who dared insult his High Priest and challenge his faith with their witchcraft.

The soldiers gathered their arms stoically, ready for their hunt, for the greatest crime against their King had been committed this night.

Someone, likely still walking free under the shroud of darkness, had performed magic within the borders of Ixpánta, which meant they were possessed by a Demon.

There was no greater offense against the King’s Code, which was a simple document. It stated the following:

Any citizen who suspects that they or someone they know has been possessed by a Demon is to inform the King’s Inquisition immediately.

Any citizen who suspects that they or someone they know has been possessed by a Demon and does not inform the King’s Inquisition immediately is to be hung.

Any citizen found engaging in Demonic worship is to be burned.

So naturally, nobody in the Empire, possibly aside from those who could perform it themselves, knew a damn thing about magic. The citizens of the Empire would probably not believe it existed at all, if not for the tales of sudden disappearances of friends and family who had been unfortunate enough to draw an Inquisitor’s attention, and extremely rare occurrences like what had happened tonight.

One soldier, an ensign no older than Adyn, proffered a torch to Tul, who took it without a word. Adyn shivered and looked away from the flame. Another soldier brought Tul a spare leather jerkin and chain vest, which he donned just as silently, pulling off his cloak to make room for the armor. Tul trotted over to Adyn and handed him the bundled cloak, which by the smell of it, also contained his pipe and flower.

“Get inside the city friend, there’s no reason to involve you in this. Without plate, I’ll make a point not to get involved in any close combat. The men should be able to handle whoever did this.” Though Adyn could tell by his friend’s grimace that he wasn’t entirely confident in those words, with Demon spawn out in the darkness.

But Tul turned to survey the ranks that were forming swiftly before him, all mounted in ebony armor, the white trim gleaming by their torchlight.

The whispers of overlapping prayers blended in cool air.

Adyn, who had virtually no training with the slightly curved sword belted to his waist, could hardly argue with his friend’s advice. The unsharpened blade was a religious artifact, not something he’d ever intended to use in battle.

His training had been with the cittern, and it would be a poor tool for war.

As he prepared to make his way to the front of the group, Tul turned toward Adyn a last time. “I’ll find you at Marra’s inn tomorrow. I know I don’t have to warn you not to take the Blood Road back alone. Ensign!” he turned to bark at the same man who had given him the torch. The man froze, then turned in a brisk motion, almost tripping. “If I do not return by the morrow after next, ensure that my man Adyn has an escort ready to return him safely to Ahman. He will be transporting important goods that are of principal importance to the province.” At this, he gave Adyn a quick wink, and Adyn was relieved to see some sign of his old friend.

The ensign nodded and began to say, “From order, life…” but Tul had already turned and started galloping back down the road, the small company following closely behind him.

“Can I…get you anything, sir?” asked the ensign, looking up at Adyn with uncertainty in his eyes. He clearly had no idea who Adyn was, but had assumed, based on his proximity to Tul, that he might be another man of high rank. Adyn shook his head. “No, I’m fine,” he said.

Although it felt like several hours, he realized it must have only been about an hour since they had stopped by the road to smoke that last time.

Now conscious of the smell that was probably emanating from the rich cloak he held, he turned his mount away from the ensign, and made his way into the city. He tossed everything but the cloak into the first alleyway he found.

Chapter

5

Zo sat cross-legged under the great red sun, basking in its warmth, attempting to clear zeir mind of all distractions. Feeling an itch, ze raised the scales on zeir lower back and scratched it with a clawed paw, before returning to the meditation.

Mozin sat across from zem, idly scrolling through zeir mobile, utterly bored. Ze rasped a chuckle at something on the small glowing screen, and Zo twitched at the noise, annoyed.

“Tell me what you feel,” said Mozin for the seventh time without looking up from zeir mobile.

“I feel like I might fall asleep if I have to sit here much longer. How long is this supposed to take?”

“It will take as long as it takes,” ze said simply.

Zo wanted to slap the mobile from zeir hands. Fluttering zeir still itchy scales, ze returned to trying to clear zeir mind.

It was Zo’s first lesson after Mozin had told zem ze thought Zo might be ready to try consciously sensing the alignment. Zo had touched the alignment several times while sleeping, but never intentionally. Such touches were considered dangerous, and even if Zo wasn’t accepted into the university, ze had an obligation to learn to control this ability, lest ze wander into a Demonic world by mistake.

This subject had dominated Zo’s lessons for the last couple weeks. Everyone knew about Demons. There were enough stories about what happened to those who strayed into Demonic realms to remain ignorant of them. Mostly stories from off-world, of course. Olkira didn’t have enough channelers to make the stories common knowledge.

Demons, while extremely dangerous if encountered, were not so great a threat to a trained and well-intentioned world-hopper, and Zo had learned that any encounters with them were extremely rare among the established Alignment worlds, and usually dealt with without much fuss. A channeler with malicious intent, however, was another story. Demons were always looking for those who might accept their control willingly.

But before Zo had to worry about Demons, ze had to first learn how to sense the damn alignment. It was different for everyone. For some, it manifested as sounds, others as feelings, or tastes, or words, or motions. Different sentient species had different affinities for the sense, and as there were hundreds of species who sensed their universes in different ways, instruction on how to sense the alignment was generally vague.

So as Zo meditated and tried to clear zeir mind, ze didn’t even really know what ze was looking for. Or hearing for… Tasting for? Zo sighed again, scratching at zeir scales.

Then ze froze.

“No way,” ze said.

“What was that?” asked Mozin, still sounding bored.

Zo ignored zem and focused on the sensation coming from zeir scales. Yes, there was a tingling there. An electricity. Zo felt zeir excitement begin to well up.

All tengs could sense electrical signals through zeir scales. It was an evolutionary adaptation that had formed in order to help them sense the *khansas*, the great armored beetles that roamed the sand oceans, whose iron-rich carapaces would become magnetically charged as they crawled deep under the oceans to their lairs near the planet’s mantle, only coming back up to the oceans to feed.

Neither sound, nor sight, it was simply another sense, another way of responding to the world around them. But it was closest to sound.

The sensation wasn’t actually coming from zeir scales, Zo realized. Ze felt it in zeir mind as if remembering a feeling that had just been there. Like ze was hearing a song continuing to play in zeir head after it had ended, or closing zeir eyes and picturing a landscape ze was just gazing at before ze’d entered a tunnel.

It was an echo of sorts.

Zo focused on the sensation in zeir mind, which was quiet at first, but as ze centered on it, it got louder. But it was chaotic. Indecipherable. As if tens of thousands of different sized *khansas* were crawling in every direction, miles away, some weakly charged, some strongly charged. It was impossible to sort out.

“I found it,” Zo said simply.

Ze heard Mozin sit up sharply. “Already? Impossible.”

But ze was sure.

“I feel it in my scales. Like thousands of *khansas* skittering around me.” Zo tugged zeir scales close and released them quickly, the Tengling equivalent of a shiver.

Mozin laughed at this, and Zo turned to zem, eyes wide with confusion.

“Well, that’s a new one. Granted I’ve only met a few other tengs with the ability, but that is a new one. Well shit, I expected this to take weeks. I don’t have the next lesson planned. I guess… well, why don’t you try continuing to meditate on those *khansas* and see if you can pick out a single one from the noise.”

Zo slouched, realizing just how daunting a task that was. How could somebody pick out a single sound from that chaos?

“The day’s lesson was almost done anyway, mind if I head out early? Itze wants me to cook tonight, and I told zem I would.” Itze was Mozin’s mate, bearer to four of zeir children and watcher to seven. A relatively small family by teng standards.

“What if I can single out one of the worlds?” asked Zo. Mozin stopped and turned to Zo. “You probably won’t be able to do that for a while… But if today is any guide, it might take less time than I thought. How about this? If you’re able to isolate a world from the alignment, I want you to see if you can push and pull on it. Only very gently, mind you. Do NOT try to push OR pull too hard. Just see if you can distinguish the difference.”

“And how am I supposed to do that?” said Zo.

“Not sure, it’s not like I can do it myself. But every channeler I’ve met has described it as pushing and pulling. So that’s all I have to offer you. Anyway, see you around, Zo’ti.”

Zo had no idea what this was supposed to feel like. Ze’d heard of this concept several times while studying. Pushing and pulling were what allowed channelers to channel and to world-hop. The concept, from an abstract point of view, was simple enough to grasp.

If you isolated a world from the alignment and pulled on it, you could pull through the laws of physics from that world into yours. By pulling on laws from different worlds, and combining them, you could accomplish incredible feats. This is what was known as channeling.

If you instead isolated a world, then pushed on it lightly, you could begin to sense it. Push harder, and you could project yourself into that world as a kind of spectre, unable to physically interact with that world. The harder you pushed, the more solid you became, and if you could trick your mind into believing it was truly in the new world, and pushed hard enough, you could puncture reality and push your body completely through into the new world. At least, that’s what Zo read in zeir text on the subject, which had been translated to *Xutili* decades ago. The text was outdated, and a handful of worlds had entered the alignment since it was written. One was Alloisis, of course. Another ze’d read about was ruled by scaleless rodent-like bipedal beings, but it turned out to be of relatively little interest to the Alignment.

But as Zo sat and closed zeir eyes, hearing Mozin leave and fire up zeir hover speeder, ze focused back in on that phantom tingling in zeir scales. That impossible swirling chaos of sensation. How could one separate a single thread from that lace, a single brush stroke from that masterpiece? Zo sighed, and began to probe at the ball of sensation, seeing if ze could make any sense of the vortex.

Chapter

6

Zo felt the low thrum of an entire universe vibrating through zeir scales. Ze didn’t know yet which universe this was. But it was there, amidst the chaos of the alignment.

Ze’d done it. And it had only taken a week. Though, that was largely due to luck.

Mozin was watching zem intently from thirty paces away, ready to bolt if things got dangerous.

Today was the day.

They’d driven out to an empty lot so that could practice zeir first bit of projection while awake.

Zo sat in zeir meditation pose, eyes closed, and examined the world, felt it pulsing, and felt like ze somehow contained the entire vastness of it in zeir mind. Like ze could extinguish it in an instant if ze wished. Which was, of course, *pakk* shit. But it was a powerful feeling nonetheless.

Gently, Zo somehow grasped the world ze had isolated, and *pushed* on it.

It had all started that very same morning.

Ze had dreamt ze was in a hot, moist cave system. The humidity had slicked zeir scales over uncomfortably, and Zo felt the moisture mix with the oils on zeir skin and produce an unpleasant smell.

Zo was a particularly clean teng, taking great pleasure in scrubbing zeir skin and scales and polishing the latter with high quality lacquer. Even when ze was out scavenging for parts, getting oil stains on zeir veil and loin cloth, Zo worked hard to keep zeir skin and scales clean. Some tengs saw the makeup as flashy, tacky, or a plea for attention, but Zo thought it made zem look good, and ze liked it.

Zo fluttered zeir neck scales, feeling uncomfortable, but cautiously sat down on the slick floor and began to meditate.

Yes, ze could feel it. Ze felt *two* worlds quite clearly, in fact.

One was a loud, close thrum, extremely familiar. An old friend. That was Ol’kir’alkhai. Zo realized the world was tugging at zem, like it wanted Zo to awaken and return. Holding onto it was a natural reflex, and there was no reason for Zo to let go. It was likely the only thing keeping this projection alive, as the differing laws of physics of this world might tear Zo apart or melt zem or crush zem or any other number of uncomfortable things. Then Zo would awaken to a nasty shock.

The other world was more subtle, but clearly distinguishable from the chaos of the rest. It was the signature emanating from whatever world ze was on, whatever universe ze was *in* at that moment. Or at least, whatever world ze was projecting into. Dream-walking, it was called.

Ze could feel the rhythm, the dance of this world in zeir scales, and knew that even if ze let go of it, ze could find it again within the chaos.

Confident in that belief, Zo pushed the sound of this world back into the recesses of zeir mind, toward the chaos of the alignment, and awoke to find zemself laying in zeir warm cubby full of soft sand, the sound of zeir siblings’ quiet breathing as they slept nearby a calming presence. Zo basked in the warm knowledge that ze was once again surrounded by the smooth warm sandstone of zeir family home, and by tengs ze could trust, zeir skin and scales nice and clean.

Sure that ze wouldn’t be able to sleep again, however, Zo quietly grabbed zeir watch from the shelf near the cubby, and made zeir way to the dresser in the middle of the room ze shared with three other siblings.

Iko, Nali, and Zamik were Zo’s clutchmates, born at the same time as ze was. Oza was their bearer, who bore their fertilized eggs for three months until they were ready to be lain, while Ixen was their watcher, who guarded the clutch for the three months it took for them to be ready to hatch. Both of them had been there when the four had hatched, of course, though none of them could remember that day very well.

Although eight other siblings also shared Ixen as watcher and Oza as bearer, while the other ten had the reverse relation, that didn’t really matter in teng society. *Bara* and *waka* were just convenient ways of distinguishing one’s own parents. To ten of Zo’s twenty-one siblings, Ixen was *bara* and Oza was *waka*. That was simply the way of things.

Zo thought ze could imagine how it might feel to be a part of an asexual species, like the Pharphesians. At first thought, it seemed like it might be lonely, but they probably had their own forms of intimacy unrelated to mating, and could involve any number of people. Perhaps to them, Tengling families seemed lonely.

But trying to imagine being a part of a sexually dimorphic or trimorphic species like those scaleless rodent people ze’d read about stymied zem. Zo learned that oftentimes they mated with members of the same sex anyway, which made sense to zem. But to only be able to produce offspring with half of them? Bizarre.

Careful not to wake zeir clutchmates, Zo slowly slid open the top drawer of the dresser and pulled out a clean loin cloth and veil. Donning both quickly, ze crawled from the room out of the system of burrows where zeir family, Ixen, Oza, and twenty-two siblings, lived and stepped into the moons’ light, stretching in the brisk, dry air.

Four moons were out now, though Zo only knew the name one of them. Ze was never interested in astronomy, and with seventeen moons, Zo couldn’t be bothered to learn which was which. And with the discovery of zeir world-hopping potential, the stars held even less interest to zem. Who needed space when there was a great multitude of entire *universes* resting in the back of your mind?

Zo knew this was still a bit of an ignorant view, as there were several planets in the alignment that resided in universes with complex intragalactic civilizations, and even a few intergalactic ones. Zo’s own galaxy almost certainly held other sentient species. How could it not? But with nothing of interest to the Alignment here, who would waste their time and resources to bother scouting out Olkira’s resident galaxy?

Standing on the roof of the sandstone structure that was the entrance to zeir home, Zo could see the city in the distance, its bright lights obscuring most of the stars above. Other sandstone homes flanked zeir own to the left and right, as well as across the street. The street was empty save for an occasional speeder zipping down the street.

“Kinda cold, don’t you think?”

Zo pulled zeir scales close in surprise, before turning and seeing Iko climbing out to join zem. Ze relaxed zeir scales as Iko came up to sit beside zem and snuggled close. Zo wrapped zeir arm around zeir sibling, who ze loved dearly. “Did I wake you up?” Zo asked.

“No”, ze said with a yawn. “I always wake up at midnight and climb up on the roof like a psychopath.”

Zo glanced down at Iko, who grinned mischievously. Zo opened zeir eyes wide, noticing for the first time that Iko’s mouth was exposed. “Woah! Where’s your veil? You’re out in public!”

“You’re right, everyone’s staring at me!” Iko said as ze jokingly looked around in every direction with wide eyes.

Zo rolled zeir eyes at zeir bold sibling. Iko *was* a bit eccentric at times. But they were siblings, and naturally saw each other nude frequently. It was common practice for tengs to remove loincloth and veil when they got home. They had no odd protruding reproductive organs like some other alignment species, but it was still considered impolite to display one’s orifices. Unless one was at the beach, of course.

“So what *are* you doing up here?” asked Iko. “Any luck with your dream walking?

“Actually yeah,” said Zo.

“Wait, really?” said Iko, pulling away from Zo and looking excited.

“Yeah, I think I got my first world down. I don’t know much about it other than it was dark and made my skin feel wet and smelly.” Iko frowned at that. Ze shared Zo’s appreciation of good hygiene.

“But I was able to fully untwine it from the sound of the other worlds. I could do it right now if I wanted.”

At this, Iko’s eyes widened and ze pulled back even further. Zo gave a raspy chuckle. “Don’t worry, I won’t. I’m just saying I think I could.”

“Woah… did you already tell Mozin?”

“I sent zem a text, though I don’t think ze’ll see it ‘til ze wakes up. I’m sure ze’ll want to come down and see what we can do with it… I think it’s Alloisis. Mozin said the worlds that joined the alignment more recently should be easier to decrypt. And even though ze said Alloisis is largely covered in jungle, their civilizations are supposedly mostly confined to underground cave systems just below the surface. And since I was underground when I projected there, naturally I awoke in the place closest to where I was on Olkira. Which, I figure, would be one of the underground cave systems.”

Iko’s eyes widened upon hearing this explanation. “Alloisis… shit… Well just don’t go blowing up the house or anything… But shit, that’s awesome Zo.” Iko gave a weak smile, but zeir eyes looked wistful, and Zo felt guilty. They had both grown up reading stories of epic teng world hoppers like Bini the Unifier or Kiku and zeir deadly Irudian acolytes.

When the family learned of Zo’s potential, there was great celebrating. Hell, the whole neighborhood wouldn’t stop throwing feasts for zem until someone complained to the city watch. And then the members of the city watch that came to halt the festivities had asked for Zo’s autograph. The whole thing was extremely embarrassing.

It was for that reason that Zo tried to keep a low profile. Ze didn’t want to get everyone’s hopes up in case ze didn’t get into the university. So Zo continued zeir life regularly, helping support zeir family business of tech repair by scavenging parts from the junkyards and sniffing out good deals at the bazaar.

Meanwhile, Zo’s other clutchmates had to deal with the knowledge that this incredible gift had passed them up. Their dreams were normal. As normal as any dreams could be, at least. Iko seemed to take it the hardest, as ze’d always clung onto the old stories even more intently than Zo had.

“You know,” said Zo. “If I become a master world-hopper, I’ll be able to bring others with me to some of these worlds. We’ll be able to go on all sorts of adventures, as long as you’re willing to stay within my power’s range. I’m not sure what that is yet, but it should let us hang out comfortably without exploding or anything. And on other worlds like ours, you won’t even have to stay close! As long as you can make your way back to me, I can hop us back!”

Iko’s true smile returned, and ze snuggled in close to zeir sibling again. “Thanks, Zo.”

Together they sat up on the roof and gazed out at the city as the great red sun began to rise in the east.

Chapter

7

Zo found zemself sitting on a lush growth of an odd blue fungus. A bizarre cacophony of hoots and squeals filled the air. When Zo looked up, ze felt an overwhelming sense of awe.

Zo had never *seen* so much color. There were plants, of course, on Ol’kir’alkhai. Some with beautiful flowers and bright colors. Wealthy tengs wore veils and loincloths dyed with extracts from those plants, and those that couldn’t afford such clothes often wore jewels of ruby and sapphire instead. But nothing Zo had ever seen could prepare zem for this.

It didn’t seem possible that this could be the same planet ze’d dreamt of that night. The slimy rocks and utter darkness had been replaced with iridescent flowers, pulsing fungi and other moving, swaying, wriggling things Zo had no name for. Zo struggled to make out the source of any of the yips and shrill chimes of the fauna above, but could see none. They must be too well hidden, or too high up. Could this be the same place ze’d visited in zeir dreams?

Then the stink of wet oily skin filled zeir nostrils.

Yeah. This was the same place.

Zo looked around for other signs that this was Alloisis, as ze suspected, and noticed that there was a faint burning now coming from Zo’s chest. The air on Alloisis wasn’t very rich with oxygen. Only 9%. It was mostly nitrogen and carbon dioxide. Zo would have to take it slow here.

Cautiously, ze unfolded zeir legs and began to crawl close to the ground on all fours, looking for a break in the dense vegetation.

There it was. What Zo had taken for a great pillar of flora was actually a dense covering of moss and vines that had covered a large boulder of dark stone. Upon closer inspection, Zo could immediately make out thin veins of silvery and coppery metals lacing the rock.

This was Alloisis, alright. Looking around, Zo marveled at it, the magnitude of the riches here coming into focus. Each of those large mounds of vegetation must contain some of that ore-rich stone. And the cave systems underground? Zo made a note to turn up the brightness on zeir watch next time ze was down there and see if the walls were as rich with ore as these surface rocks.

Zo took stock. Ze could feel the plants beneath zem and the humidity was interacting with zeir skin. That meant Zo was here fairly strongly. Odd, as Zo didn’t feel like ze’d *pushed* particularly hard. Zo closed zeir eyes and focused on the rhythm in zeir scales that were the two planets, Olkira, and Alloisis. Gently, Zo released the pressure on Alloisis just a bit. Immediately, the cacophony of exotic beasts hidden in the canopy above became muffled, as if heard behind a thick layer of sand. The air became dry, the aching in zeir lungs and the stink of wet skin vanished.

Awesome.

Zo reached out to touch a plant, a red vine two inches thick, and could immediately tell it felt more rigid. That was odd. Shouldn’t it feel *less* solid since ze was less ‘there’?

Zo pushed hard on the vine, and realized ze couldn’t move it. Like it was made of metal. It all made sense now. Since Zo’s projection was weaker, it could barely exert force upon the environment.

Ze picked out a small blue leaf from the vegetation, leaned close, and blew on it. Nothing. Ze reached out and tried to flick it with a single well-trimmed claw. Nothing, not even a sound when zeir claw made contact.

This was bizarre.

Zo, confident that there was no immediate danger, stood up onto zeir hind legs. Crawling was perfectly comfortable, and felt safer, but standing was proper, and Zo was no beast.

It was so fascinating to see this world, which seemed completely untouched by civilization. Zo knew there was a sentient species on this planet, but much of the surface was uncharted, as aqueous acidic oceans separated the land masses. This planet’s signature hadn’t been decrypted yet, so only world-hoppers could get here.

Excited, Zo realized that if ze could world-hop here, and bring the right tools along, ze could probably extract enough ore to pay for passage across the Zaron ocean.

But ze also realized there were two major hurdles before that could happen. First, ze knew, was the fact that world-hopping and stealing resources from another Alignment world was a major offense. If ze was discovered by Alignment officials, ze shuddered to think what they would do with zem. Especially stealing from a world under the scrutiny that Alloisis held. If Alloisis’ signature could be cracked, it would join the coalition of Principal Worlds for sure.

Secondly, Zo had no idea if zeir body could survive coming here in the flesh without maintaining a firm grasp on the laws from Ol’kir’alkhai. Given that that strength of the nuclear strong force was slightly different, Zo wasn’t sure what would happen if ze let go.

There was only one way to find out.

Zo sat down and assumed a meditative pose. Emptying zeir mind, zey focused on the two worlds currently isolated in zeir mind. Zo felt their rhythms and pulses sending phantom signals through their scales, and wanted to scratch, but knew it wouldn’t help.

Ol’kir’alkhai was present, tugging back at Zo. Like it wanted to pull zem back where ze belonged. Zo pushed back the world back gently, and immediately felt an odd dissociation.

Not a good sign. Sighing, Zo pushed harder –

Ze awoke with a gasp, sitting cross-legged on the sandy dunes of the Zaron ocean. Mozin had predictably gotten bored and was surfing on zeir mobile. When ze saw Zo standing up looking around in wide eyed confusion, Mozin tucked zeir mobile into zeir tech sleeve and rushed up to zem.

“So, how was it? Did you see the other world?”  
Zo was surprised at Mozin’s excitement. But ze supposed even someone who’d studied Alignment history and world-hopping probably didn’t get the opportunity to tutor a new teng often. Zo hadn’t asked how many tengs ze’d tutored before.

“Yeah, it *was* Alloisis after all. By Sinestra, Mozin, there was just so much *life* there.”

Mozin gazed dreamily out at the dunes. Seeing that look in zeir eyes made Zo realize that Mozin might have been like Iko at one point in zeir life, day dreaming about the alignment and world-hopping in zeir youth. Something must have drawn zem to study it, after all. Why had Zo never considered that before?

“So what happened? Bored of it already? Did something attack you?” Ze seemed excited at the idea.

“No, I… I kind of tried to let go of Olkira and see how my body would react.”

Mozin winced. “I assume it was…unpleasant?”

“Actually, it didn’t really feel like anything. At first I let go just a little bit, and everything became kind of foggy.”

Zo heard Mozin mutter and caught something that sounded like, “…neural dispersion...”

Ze continued, “Then I tried to push it away completely and woke up instantly.”

Mozin nodded. “Yeah, your projection probably died instantly. If something causes you to completely dissociate or stop your brain from functioning it’ll just spit you back out into your waking body. Keep that in mind, there can be odd effects on the mind if the dissociation goes awry. I don’t have to remind you about Tinx…”

Tinx was a teng world hopper who was famous for recklessly jumping from world to world, stealing priceless artifacts and natural riches before jumping away.

Then one day, ze ended up projecting into a Demon’s world by mistake. The Demon caught zem, but only partly, so zeir consciousness was stuck between two worlds. Eventually, ze was able to snap out of the Demon’s world, but it broke something in zeir mind, like part of zem had been left in the Demon’s world when ze hopped out. Ze had died in Volslyng, an Alignment asylum for the criminally insane, less than a year later.

“No, you don’t. Sooo…what’s next? Am I ready to start law bending yet?”

Zo was eager to try bringing alternate laws of physics into zeir own world. This is what was usually referred to as ‘channeling’ or ‘magic,’ depending on who was speaking, and was one of the flashier and more practical, in Zo’s mind, applications of zeir abilities.

“From where, Alloisis?” said Mozin, a look of horror growing in zeir eyes. “Are you fucking crazy? Didn’t you just say your projection instantly disintegrated when you let go of Olkira’s laws? What do you think will happen if you try to drag laws from Alloisis into our world? That nuggets of zinc and cadmium will start crystallizing in the sand in front of you? You’d probably blow everything within ten paces into the void. Hell, you might cause all that matter to go critical and nuke everything for miles. Wouldn’t that be a nice surprise for Mizn? And your family! What do you think they’d…”

Ze kept ranting, but at the mention of Mizn’s name, Zo’s mind immediately began to wander.

Mizn was a young onyx-scaled teng who ran the mech stand in the bazaar and whom Zo had a major crush on. Zeir scales were rough and worn, zeir claws usually harboring a caked layer of electric blue mech grease, both signs of years of hard labor and poor personal care. But ze had such strong arms and a high, gentle voice that contrasted so nicely with that excellent physique. And the way zeir hips swayed back and forth when ze walked back to rummage behind the counter.

Zo’s scales fluttered as ze day-dreamt about taking Mizn down to the beach and finding a nice secluded burrow–

Mozin’s open pawed slap sent Zo reeling.

“ARE YOU EVEN LISTENING TO ME, FOOL?” Mozin’s scales were fully elevated and ze looked ready to pounce.

“Yes! Yes, sorry, yes! You’re right, you’re right.” Zo rubbed the side of zeir head, feeling ashamed, zeir scales tugged tightly against zeir body.

Mozin sighed. “Just… just don’t think of trying to channel yet, okay?” ze said, zeir scales relaxing back to a mollified position.

“For now, just work on your projections into Alloisis. Don’t try to pull their laws into ours and do NOT try to hop there, understand?”

Zo nodded.

“Alright. You look exhausted. Let’s get back to the city. We should be able to make it back before dusk… I’ll buy us some dinner.” Zo could tell Mozin was feeling bad about swiping at zem. But Zo knew ze probably deserved it. What ze was trying to learn was extremely dangerous for an unpracticed channeler. Hell, even experienced channelers took great care when handling dangerous laws.

They hopped onto their speeders, and as ze climbed on, Zo noticed the entrance to a burrow not far from where they had been practicing. As they sped off, Zo’s mind wandered back to that burrow and what ze might do down there if ze could entice Mizn to crawl into that hole with zem for a day...

Chapter

8