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.