Prologue

Elyse awoke and found herself standing at the precipice of a steep cliffside. Whether ocean, valley, or endless abyss below her, she could not say. Black clouds blanketed the sky, and she could just barely make out that they were drifting languidly in her direction. The air held a snappy chill and Elyse could see her breath crystallize and slowly dissipate before her.

At least *this* planet had an atmosphere.

Just as she’d done in training, she ever so slowly relaxed her mental grip on Far Nollis, testing the conditions of the environment around her as it became more and more *real*. Feeling no odd side effects, she finally let her home world of Far Nollis slink into the ethereal chaos in the back of her mind. She shuddered as the tether to her home world snapped and she allowed herself to fully *be* in this new world.

It seemed well behaved.

She took a deep breath of the alien air, which seemed perfectly breathable aside from a faint tinge of sulfur, and pulled the Wayfinder from her belt. It only took a cursory glance at the device for her to determine that if her quarry were here, she should be able to see it from her vantage point, no more than a league or two in the distance.

Or she *would* if the clouds weren’t blanketing the landscape before her.

Studying the overcast sky, she decided that those black clouds were not likely to let more light through, even if there were a resident star bright enough to illuminate the planet’s surface.

Clearly, this world was another dead end.

She waited anyway for a few minutes, pacing around the cliff edge and straining her eyes to make out anything in the darkness. She was just about to close her eyes to begin searching for Luxor Majoris, where the others would be waiting for her, when the clouds parted just enough for a bright, rusty moon to reveal what turned out to be a desolate valley far below. By the light of the ruddy glow, she could finally see what lay in the dark expanse of the valley below her, far off in the distance.

For an instant, her mind refused to accept what she had just seen bathing in the moon’s red glow.

Her imminent death.

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, black blood leaking from the wounds onto pale flesh. Where its head should have been there was only a writhing mass of dark smoke, blacker than pitch, broken only by four long, thin horns stabbing out from the darkness and curving in toward each other, forming a vicious pointed crown.

In quiet desperation, Elyse tried to focus on the chaos in her mind to pick out the elusive strands that symbolized her home world, but the Demon standing before her had already trapped her in its realm. She felt the warmth within her body begin to quickly leech away as the air grew icy around her, and she knew any chances she may have had of escaping this world had just diminished to nothing.

She abandoned her attempts at selecting a safe world from the chaos and flailed out in any direction, hoping to grab hold of any nearby world. Any place would be better than here. Miraculously, she felt her consciousness wrap around the strands of another world, even one familiar to her—Nox, an Alignment world contained in a universe in which light could not interact with matter. Her weak grasp on the world turned into a death grip, and she 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. A weak defense, but she would try anything. If she could only buy herself a few more precious moments, she may be able to send a warning to her sister, Ayva. But the icy air finally got to her, and an involuntary shiver caused her cold fingers to spasm in the middle of her calling, breaking her concentration and allowing the shadowy strands of Nox to drift back into the chaos in the back of her mind. She felt her fingers lock up as they began to freeze over in earnest.

She fell to her knees 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 answered hers as it began to drill, almost lazily, through her psyche, like a worm burrowing through a rotten apple.

Panic and existential dread, the knowledge of her certain death only moments away clawed at her attempts at maintaining this last moment of peace. 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 that her family’s best hope of survival was if a member of the Inquisition found her and ended her before she destroyed her whole world.

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, returned to Far Nollis and unleashed the blizzards of hell and the fires of heaven down upon them. Their only solace would be the knowledge that she would not be present for the destruction. The Demon would have crushed her soul into oblivion long before taking complete control of her body and her amateurish connection to the alignment. An untrained mind like hers, such a porous vessel, could not hold two consciousnesses for long.

For what felt like hours, yet passed in minutes, she knelt and tried to chant her last prayers through chattering teeth, the chanting shifting into her mind as her tongue was frozen solid.

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 into a heap on the cliff top as icy oblivion took her.