**Climax:**

The plan is to detonate the planet of Electrum, which would simultaneously destroy most Alignment technology and ‘push’ away all the other worlds for long enough that the Demons could reforge the barriers between the worlds while the connection between them was weakened.

In order to do this, Vylith offers herself as a sacrifice, using her own body as a focal point to contain the collective strength of the Demons and make the star go supernova. The gang agrees and says their sad goodbyes. Some last kind of scuffle occurs, and it appears Vylith will be unable to complete the task. Elyse steps in and performs Vylith’s role. The star is destroyed, and Elyse is presumed dead as her body is incinerated.

**Epilogue:**

The Demons send the warning out to every world that the alignment will be closing, that free transport will be provided to any who need to leave their current dwelling (aided by the technology found on the Demon homeworld).

The gang asks Narzha what she is going to do, and she tells them she is going to try to rebuild her people and heal the minds of the Cruel Ones. They ask if she ever plans on rebuilding the alignment. Narzha responds that she will leave behind threads to watch each planet and see how it progresses. If she believes a civilization reaches a state of advancement with a peaceful and sustainable society, they may once more be reopened to the alignment, but it will be long before any of the worlds are ready for such an undertaking if ever.

Narzha asks the gang where they want to go before the alignment closes. For a moment they all look toward each other unsure, then by an unspoken agreement, they nod. As one, they turn back to Narzha and she nods as if this is expected, and they hold hands and teleport away.

**Epilogue**

Standing at the base of the great statue of Bini the Unifier, Zo, Adyn, M-Jenn, and Vylith knelt to pay their respects to the great Tengu for the last time. As they knelt, Zo and M-Jenn tried to ignore the wretched sights of parents arguing, children weeping, and the occasional wanderer stumbling through the chaos with a haunted, empty gaze.

The alignment would be closing in less than [24 HOURS].

Eventually, they stood, one by one. Vylith began to weep quietly, and Zo put their arm around her as M-Jenn patted her shoulder. Vylith seemed to actually appreciate the physical contact for once.

Adyn just stared up at the University.

“I’ve never seen it so dark,” he said.

It was true. The usually bright, emerald skycity looked hollow without the eerie glow of Electrum’s connection lighting up the buildings and skyways.

“Emergency power,” Zo said. “It should only last about three more hours if I had to guess. Less, probably, with the [TELEPORTERS] draining the backup reserves so quickly.”

All around them, the city was a kicked-over anthill. People were vacating the university in droves, each [TELEPORTER] flashing in rapid succession as the current inhabitants of Pharphesus hurried to make their final preparations before the Scattering. Those who left would never set foot upon this world again.

Adyn suddenly became aware of a familiar presence hovering behind him and turned around. The others quickly followed suit.

Dressed in the simple robe she wore when Adyn first met her, Narzha stood above them, the corner of her mouth turned up in a melancholy smile.

It was time.

Narzha reached down to wipe a tear from Vylith’s cheek.

Vylith slapped away the hand and, to the others’ horror, spat at the Demon. The spittle, of course, evaporated before it came anywhere near the Demon, but before it could, Vylith was already winding up.

“You could have *stopped* her, you evil witch!” Vylith shouted. Even the aggravated passersby took notice of the vicious tirade.

“We could have figured out another way! I could’ve…I could’ve…” she trailed off, and broke down in tears once more.

Narzha waited for her to finish before responding.

“She lives,” she said simply.

Each reacted differently to the softly spoken words. Adyn stiffened. M-Jenn gasped. Zo’s scales fluttered slowly in confusion.

“You lie,” Vylith hissed, her grieved expression turning to a scowl. “I saw her…” She was going to say, “burn,” but the word choked in her throat as she thought it. “…die,” she finished weakly.

“Her body died, yes,” Narzha said. “But her soul lives on.”

Adyn saw the coals beginning to glow in Vylith’s ruby eyes, but suspected he understood what Narzha was trying to tell say. It was something he had spoken of with Narzha before, but he never thought that it might actually work. And never did he consider that it might work with Elyse and…*him*.

Before Vylith drew the power from her last whisps of connection to the alignment down in full force upon Narzha, Adyn quickly intervened.

“[NAME OF DEMON]?” he asked.

Narzha nodded her head.

The fury in Vylith’s eyes faltered as she looked back and forth between Adyn and the Demon.

Suddenly, Zo understood, too, and they gasped.

“He *gave her his body*?” they asked in astonishment.

Realization dawned on M-Jenn’s face and Vylith’s expression turned from anger to joy as she processed Zo’s words.

Narzha held Vylith’s gaze and said, “Elyse’s bond to [NAME OF DEMON] was stronger than she let on. I knew [NAME OF DEMON] before he turned. We were…friends…once. I always suspected that he was not as far gone as the others. Like my bond with Adyn, [NAME OF DEMON]’s bond with Elyse was powerful enough that he could see through her eyes and feel what she felt. Even if he never spoke to her, I think his bond with her began to restore his sense of…self. Slowly. When he saw you fall, Vylith, I have little doubt that he knew what Elyse would do. And he was prepared.”

A score of conflicting emotions raced through Vylith as she digested the words. The rest all knew what this news meant. They hadn’t yet formally decided which universe they would ultimately settle in, but they were expected to stick together. But if Elyse lived….

“Where is she now?” Vylith asked.

“She is currently asleep, inhabiting [DEMON NAME]s body on [DEMON HOMEWORLD]. However, without [DEMON NAME]s spirit inhabiting the body, the flesh will soon wither away. It will take some…time…to regrow her body from the samples of DNA we collected from her remains,” Narzha said. The way she said *time*  made it clear what she meant. It wouldn’t be complete by the time the Scattering was over.

With a motherly warmth that Adyn was surprised to feel from the Demon, Narzha placed a hand on Vylith’s shoulder. “I have spoken with the other Demons, and in honor of the sacrifice the two of you were willing to make for us, we have agreed to let you come to [DEMON HOMEWORLD] if you wish to stay with her. Know that she will be cared for regardless. If you choose instead to stay wi-”

“I’ll go,” Vylith blurted out. She turned to her friends, and Adyn was surprised to realize she actually looked *embarrassed*. She quickly composed herself, but they all understood. Even had the two women not been in love, an offer to join the Demon homeworld and likely ascend to some sort of godhood was not passed up lightly.

A thought suddenly occurred to Adyn, and he was trying to figure out how to ask the Demon if there were some way she could take all of them. But she could still hear his thoughts, and with an eyebrow slightly raised, she subtly shook her head at him.

*Oh, well*, he thought.

“I’M SO HAPPY FOR YOU TWO” M-Jenn wailed, throwing herself on Vylith, who nearly staggered under the Gynoid’s steely mass.

Zo calmly stepped over and wrapped their arms around the pair, saying nothing, though Narzha thought she could read sadness in the shimmer of Zo’s scales.

Vylith tolerated the embrace for a few moments before giving each an awkward smile as extricated herself from the pair and stepped up to Adyn. He looked up at her sheepishly.

“You going to be okay without us?” she said. “Your sister won’t be happy when she learns I left you three to fend for yourselves.”

“Eh, I think I managed alright without you two well enough,” he said, trying to muster an air of confidence.

She raised an eyebrow at him.

“Plus, I have these two to look after,” he said, nodding toward Zo and M-Jenn.

This time she raised both eyebrows at him.

He sighed. “Or…they can look after me.”

She nodded. “That’s more like it,” she said, patting his cheek fondly.

Vylith approached Narzha and locked eyes with each of them one last time, as if trying to commit their faces to memory, then turned to Narzha. “I’m ready,” was all she said.

Narzha said nothing, but closed her eyes. Spacetime warped around Vylith’s core, and her image twisted inward as she was teleported to the Demon homeworld.

In a flash, she was gone, leaving only Zo, Adyn, and M-Jenn standing between the great statue of Bini and the Demon Narzha.

“Will we ever see her again?” asked Zo.

“I doubt it, little one,” said Narzha. “I will leave the faintest threads to the alignment worlds so that I and the surviving members of my species may watch your progress. Perhaps one day we will consider undoing the shields between the worlds, but if so, it will not be soon. Only if a world demonstrates the ability to advance beyond strife and inequity would we even consider taking such actions. I do not know that any worlds have the potential to reach this point in your lifetime.”

Instead of deflating, however, Zo seemed bolstered by this response, their scales set stiff in grim determination.

“Is there anything else you all need before I send you off?” Narzha asked. “This is your last opportunity to retrieve anything you might need from offworld.”

“We took care of that already,” Zo said with a sly smile. They really were getting better at those human expressions. And for the first time, Narzha noticed that Zo’s pack was faintly glowing. Not with the characteristic emerald of Electrum tech, but...*Clever Tengu,* she thought. If Zo carried what she thought they did, she may just meet them again one day after all.

“I take it,” Narzha said with a small chuckle, “that you know, then, where you wish to go?”

She knew, of course, where Adyn wanted to go—wherever the other two went. And based on what Zo was likely carrying, she had a feeling they all knew where that would be.

The three looked to each other and, sure enough, nodded toward each other in unspoken agreement. Adyn grabbed Zo’s left paw, and M-Jenn grabbed Zo’s right paw.

“Then goodbye, little ones,” Narzha said.

A bubble of spacetime formed near Zo’s core and expanded outward to encompass the three, and in a flash, they were gone.

<>

Iko sighed as they lay down after a long day in the shop and closed their eyes. [ZO’S MOM] and [ZO’S DAD] were scrambling to sell off their Alignment-tech for scrap and buy up as much Old-World tech as possible with the announcement that the alignment would be closing.

*The Scattering.*

It would hit the shop hard at first, but they had a fair amount of Old-World tech in storage, and with the extreme demand for replacement vehicles, Iko knew the shop would likely make it out ahead after all was said and done.

And that was good for Iko, since it was once again their place of employment.

The mine was closing. No use mining resources when every single one of your buyers was, for all intents and purposes, dead to you.

The thought gave Iko a pang of grief, and their scales fluttered mournfully.

They didn’t know if Zo was alive or dead and likely never would know. The fact that Zo didn’t even try to send a message through the [INTERPLANETARY INTERNET] was a bad sign.

*Did Zo do all this?*

It was hard to imagine that their meek, gentle Zo could’ve played any role in the greatest event in alignment history since its initial formation.

Iko thought back to the last time they saw each other. [INSERT REMINISCENCE ABOUT THAT TIME]

Iko hoped that, wherever Zo was, they were alive and happy. Zo deserved it. Iko just wished they could’ve said goodbye one last—

A sudden *flash* lit the tiny burrow.

And Iko’s eyes shot open.