

I met my guest in the foyer, although the room was far too large and grand to deserve such a basic name. The ceiling was high and vaulted, with sparks and glimmers of light dancing in the shadows; the floor was a delicate mosaic of colored tiles and gemstones. An abstract geometric pattern, although there were hints of stars in the pattern.

"Sorry I'm late," she said, taking off her coat and boots. Invisible hands helped her, pulling the clothing off and whisking it away; more invisible servants took her hat and socks, provided a pair of comfortable slippers instead.

A wasteful extravagance, but I could afford it. This was *my* world, after all. Or one of them, at least. One of my favorites, even.

"Not to worry," I said. I'd known when she was coming, of course. Little, if anything, could surprise me here.

"Thanks for inviting me," she said, walking over and offering me her hand. Her skin was too pale, with strangely greenish veins showing through, and I could feel a hint of scales when I brushed my lips against her hand; her irises were a pale violet more suitable to gemstones than eyes, and faintly luminescent in the darkness of the foyer.

At least she looked human this time, broadly speaking. It always disturbed me a little when she started messing about with the basic structure of her body. People weren't supposed to have wings and tails, let alone some of the *really* strange things she'd added in the past.

"How have you been?" I asked.

She shrugged. "Nothing particularly exciting. You?"

"Losing wars," I said cheerfully. "As usual. Shall we?"

She nodded, and I walked through the foyer, leading her on by the hand. The foyer was vast, but a slight folding of space let us cross it in two steps. One step took us from the bottom of the grand staircase to the top, and another crossed the fifty feet to the other end of a long corridor. The elaborate mosaics and paintings, the gold and jewels passed us in a blur as we walked through the empty halls.

Had I been alone I could have brought myself to where I was going in a single step. But extravagant manipulations of space could have unfortunate effects on other people, and I wasn't entirely sure how it would interact with whatever alterations she'd made to her physiology most recently. It couldn't *hurt* her, of course, but it would have been impolite.

"I would have been here sooner," she said. "But I'd forgotten that you made it so I could only open a portal here from a specific location on Earth. How did you even do that, anyway? That isn't normal for the Otherside."

"We aren't on the Otherside," I said, relaxing my hold on the fabric of space so that we could walk up the last set of stairs at a normal pace. "Not exactly. This domain is...think of it as occupying the

unused space between their domains. I'm using their framework to maintain the basic structure, and it has a very slight connection to their system, but it isn't actually a part of it."

"You can do that?" She laughed. "Of course you can. Never mind."

I smiled, and opened the door at the top of the stairs, letting her go through first. I followed her out onto the roof, closing the door behind myself. It didn't make a sound.

The roof wasn't stone, wasn't even *material* in any meaningful sense, but it had been designed to resemble black marble. It extended around us for a mile in every direction, uniform and featureless. I hadn't put much effort into it. The focus here was on the sky, and the field of stars I had arranged there.

I took her hand again and, with a few steps and a twisting of space, brought us to the edge of the roof. A small table and two chairs stood on nothing fifty feet further on, the sole and solitary feature that could be seen. I stepped off the edge of the roof and she followed me without hesitation, trusting that we wouldn't fall though there was nothing there to hold us up.

The nothing held us up, exactly as the stone had. My world, my rules; if I said that physical objects didn't necessarily have to impede light, that they didn't have to interact with light at all, the world wasn't going to argue with me.

We walked out to the table, and I pulled her chair out for her. "What a gentleman," she said with an impish smile, sitting and letting me push the chair in again.

"I try," I said seriously, sitting across from her. Then I reached out to the world, the fundamental rules that determined how the world functioned, and I gave them a twist.

The manor behind us, the building as big as a city, faded out of sight the same as the bridge leading out here. We were left floating in a field of stars, surrounded on all sides by the void of space. The stars blazed in every color of the rainbow, brighter than they ever could on Earth.

"Oh, my," my companion murmured. "This is quite nice." I noticed her eyes adjusting, the color and shape changing slightly to let her more fully appreciate the view. I imagined she would be giving herself a more panoramic vision, and the capacity to experience more of the spectrum.

"It's the Horsehead Nebula," I said. "Seen from the vicinity of Rigel. I took a trip out to look at it a few years back. Would you care for some wine?"

"If it isn't too much trouble," she said, leaning back until her chair was standing on two legs and her face was directed straight downward. A human neck couldn't have bent so far, but she'd left that sort of limitation behind a long, long time ago.

I pulled a quick trick involving folded space and suddenly had a small wineglass in either hand. They were filled with a pale golden wine; like my companion's eyes, the liquid was ever so slightly luminous, though I wouldn't have known if I weren't seeing it in the dark.

"Nice one," she said, taking one of the glasses. "You could make a killing as a bartender."

"I poured them earlier," I admitted. "If you want a refill we'll have to pour it like usual." I took a sip, just enough to moisten my tongue, and the flavor exploded in my mouth, sweet and tart and utterly magnificent. "My last bottle from Atlantis," I commented, setting the glass on the table. "I see the years haven't hurt it."

She raised an eyebrow. "You're going all out, I see," she said, taking a similarly minimal sip of the wine.

"It's a special event," I said. "I finished my first universe last week. Not reliant on their framework, not a part of their Otherside network at all. It's a wholly independent, self-contained system, only accessible through this intermediary."

She was silent for a moment. "That's amazing," she said at last. "It's self-sustaining, I assume?"

"Absolutely. It won't last forever without maintenance—entropy is still a concern—but it's at least as stable as any of their domains."

"Amazing," she said again.

"I thought you might want to know," I commented, taking another tiny sip. "Since in the past you've said your reasoning for not joining me was that we didn't have anything to put in place after we won. With this development, we *do*."

"I'll have to think about it. And I'd want to see this universe of yours before I make any commitments. Not that I don't trust you, but I'd have to see it with my own eyes."

"Of course. Honestly, I was going to ask you to take a look at it. I think you might have some very valuable input for me. You are, after all, an expert."

She smiled and nodded, acknowledging the compliment. "Have you told your mole about this?"

"I advise you not to call him that to his face," I said mildly. "And no, nor will I. Given that the entire reason he agreed to help me was that he doesn't think there's going to *be* an 'after,' telling him I'm experimenting with creating independent universes doesn't seem like the best move."

"That's a fair point," she said, toying with her glass. After a moment of silence, she said, "Do you ever worry that we're playing god?"

I blinked. "Now that's a loaded question," I said. "What brought this on?"

She shrugged, an extremely fluid gesture. "It seems a natural extension of the topic. And it's a question I've been pondering quite a bit recently."

I nodded. "I think I see. Tell me, how many times have you died now?"

"For real? Five."

"Five," I mused. "You know, most messiahs only claim one. Five seems a little extravagant."

She shifted in her chair, a little uncomfortably. "It's not a huge deal," she said. "Lots of us have died a few times now."

"Some of us haven't died at all," I reminded her. "You and Dreamer, Arbiter, Walker. The rest of us haven't really *died* even once. Besides which, you're missing my point. You've died five times and none of them has stuck yet. You've created new life forms. I control space and, to a lesser extent, time. I built an entirely new universe from scratch. At some point, don't you think you're answering your own question?"

"What do you mean?"

"You asked me whether we're playing god. I don't think so. At some point along the way, I'd have to say we stopped playing."