

The ink dwindled.

Sloan knew it would happen at some point. The clients in 2M made it clear that she could keep the spiralizer as long as she refilled it herself, something that wasn't possible on Ofae. It required a special type of ink distilled from raw ichor. Skire—and the rest of Eeridi, honestly—had more raw ichor than any other observed celestial body in the solar system, and it had destroyed just about everything in its path.

She never meant to stick around for as long as she had, but that pretty pink crook, Opalhoof, promised that Caleb was here. “Here” was a bit subjective, though, and when it came to tracking down people, was also more an exercise in perseverance than anything else.

Caleb most certainly was “here”, in a massive building that towered over the fields of rubble in the wake of a recent shattering, miles above what used to be the ground. Clouds rolled through like sideways storms, sucking up all the heat and replacing it with a chill that sank to bone. Where before the world was hostile to Ofaean nautipods, now the air flowed easier into lungs adapted for thinner atmospheres.

Her target kept primarily to the grounds around the building, which was some sort of construction company, and only left to zip away and return. She couldn't tell exactly what he was doing, but knowing him, he was performing a task that utilized his divine blessing: flight.

He left infrequently, but always from the same floor, always during the day, and always wearing a black uniform. That made it easy to see him when he was airborne, but not much else. Sometimes he carried something, though he never returned with it. She guessed that he was ferrying something for the people inside the office, though she never thought of Caleb as capable of holding down a job, much less one that appeared to be based on a similar hierarchy as the Elders on Ofae.

The most Sloan gleaned was enough observations to do the math required to get within a floor or two of where she suspected Caleb to be most often. Time was running out, and her spiralizer's ink reserves were at a critical level. She understood the area well enough to teleport within the building, and even understood her own entanglements enough to keep potential resistance off her tail, but if she was going to do this, she only had one shot.

Risky.

During her observations, she found word of a teacher who could actually train her in the ways of spacial magic, and she considered deviating from her plan to gain something from this “Faceless Guide”, though she debated on the worth of such an endeavor.

He was difficult to find and actively avoided the responsibility of mentorship. While she surmised that his knowledge would be invaluable, the ink levels warned her against it.

But, she gathered, it would be worth it if the training allowed her access to unlimited short range teleportation. Then the spiralizer could be used to transport them back to Ofae. And if she couldn't get to Ofae, Caleb would be restrained in such a way as to not allow his escape.

Sloan waited, observing the UBF building fewer and fewer times until she heard that Faceless Guide was around again, apparently dragged into a proper office by a different mentor. However. Many of the official communication channels she monitored with a tiny radio sounded relieved that they had returned.

Only a handful of students would be accepted, however, and competition was fierce. However, not fierce enough, as when Sloan arrived at a treacherous looking office building in central Key, the halls were barren and the only workers still around sat in haphazard lines of desks shunted into hallways. They hunched over the desks, typing frantically into their desktops.

“You here for mentorship?” one of them asked.

“I expected more people,” Sloan replied coolly.

“He, uhm...” they trailed off, and their eyes glassed over. “He sent them away.”

“I fail to understand.”

“He sent them away,” they repeated. “If you can't make your way back on your own, we are not liable.”

“Let me speak to him.”

“If you say so, lady. But don't say I didn't warn you. He's a prick.”

The worker, a young looking human grabbed a ring of keys and trudged away from their desk, beckoning Sloan to follow. Sloan eyed the keys with the eyes on her helm. They narrowed suspiciously.

"What are the keys for?" Sloan asked, not managing to hide her suspicion. "You seem to use digital variants more often in my experience."

The worker gripped them tighter, suddenly possessive. "Look, lady, if you don't know what you're getting yourself into, then you're gonna die out there. These keys are for official personnel only. I'm gonna take you to Faceless and if he decides to teach you, that's your problem, okay?"

Identifiers, Sloan thought.

Faceless Guide's door stood at the end of an intersecting hallway, a folded abyss that seemed to curve around a black circle about three feet off the floor. Sloan studied it when the worker stopped a healthy distance away. Their legs trembled as they cupped their hands over their mouth.

"I have an applicant for you, Faceless!" they called, jingling their ring of keys.

The halo of reality reformed as the black circle shrank and disappeared with an audible tearing sound. Sloan's suspicion morphed into a powerful unease. Whether it was meant to be intimidating or not, Sloan recognized a powerful caster when she saw one.

The worker handed her a sheet of paper, an application. "If you wanna apply after your assessment, you're free to do so."

"Is my life really on the line?" Sloan asked.

"He *really* does not want to do this job," they explained. "So, yeah, I think it is."

Sloan turned her attention back to the door. It was almost as dark as the black circle that previously occupied that space. No, she thought, not occupied, that didn't feel right.

The worker didn't wait for her, scurrying off to go sit at their desk and continue their work.

She pushed open the door to a magnificent office, a perfectly circular room. Her unease intensified as she stepped inside, suddenly off balance for a moment. In her mind, the room tilted into place, and a wave nausea flooded through her. She held her hand up to her mouth.

Faceless Guide appeared before her with nary a whisper. An equally treacherous creature, that Faceless, he regarded Sloan with an orbital eye suspended on a wafer-thin filament totally disconnected from the neck. He was still, clearly, a CCCat, but he had no solid head with which to speak.

Instead, a vertical slit for a mouth pried open, a bright yellow stump of meat with a row of sharp orange teeth glistening under the subtle glow of stardust and galaxies. The lips flapped audibly before words formed.

"I don't see many of your lot," he said.

"I'm here for mentorship," Sloan replied.

"Why would you be here for anything else?"

Faceless turned and went to his desk. A platform covered in pillows and blankets served as his chair and he cast himself across it. His tail lay along the floor. It also glittered with constellations and rivers of primordial dust.

"Come to seek knowledge for selfish purposes I suspect," he bemoaned. "All you ever do is try to rule this place so you can make a mess for me to clean up. When the temptation for retracing your steps is too great to ignore. You all think you can do it better than me and then you fail. That is when you always say you're sorry.

"The only valid apology would be abandoning this fantasy and going back to what you understand. Fire and stone."

"Do not try to philosophize to me," Sloan said. "I am here to gain the skills necessary to do what I need to do and then leave. I do not care about Skire, or your ego."

"Those are the only ones who ever show up here," Faceless replied dismissively. "People who don't care about much of anything. Your lot need not apply. Begone."

Sloan narrowed her eyes. Nausea still plagued her, and it threatened to burst forth. "If you will not train me, then allow me to ask one question and I will figure out the rest for myself."

"And arrogant," Faceless hissed. "Think you understand this because you understand theories made up by equally arrogant fools."

"I am trying to capture a target that can fly at incredible speeds and then immediately transport it to a faraway place. How do I conserve the space between the target and the destination?"

"Figure it out for yourself since you're so smart."

Sloan grit her teeth as Faceless lifted a lazy hand and sent her away. She could not see the magic clearly, though the effects were instantaneous. Her whole body tensed as the air around her shuttered and she thought to

try to teleport away before Faceless could squeeze her, but it would have been pointless. She couldn't hide from Faceless if her life depended on it, and might have even made him more cruel.

Within the blink of an eye, she was gone, jettisoned out into a thick wilderness dense with tattered foliage that hung like limp corpses, dead weight not yet subsumed into the earth. Her hooves, normally an elegant ivory in color capped with lavender, sank into a sopping ta muck. Flies and mosquitos swarmed her, biting at her soft, dark flesh. A whorl of confusion rested on her shoulders and she bent over to finally vomit.

It mixed into the muck and attracted more flies to feast on the partially digested fish and bjts of clam shell. She wiped her mouth, no longer nauseous, but incredibly irritated. She pulled out the spiralizer.

It was a small device constructed of a super lightweight metal alloy that took up only a narrow slice of her finger. It was meant to be discreet, as it was an item only given to high ranking public officials so they could transport themselves out of harm's way. It had never been designed with Sloan's usage of it in mind, and the limits of its uses stared Sloan in the face.

She removed the ring as the muck crept up, totally engulfing her hooves and slurping at her fetlocks. The spiralizer unspooled a series of nearly microscopic gears and a stiff wire jutted out from a seam between the two halves of the device. Sloan pricked her finger on the wire and as distilled ichor flooded her body, her vision swam with the light of spacial magic. It faded quickly.

She held the spiralizer up with one hand, and used the corner of her index finger and thumb to create a rudimentary ruler. She measured the fading strand of spacial magic for as long as she could, and frowned as the muck licked up her calves. She collapsed the wire, reapplied the ring to her finger, and twisted it around until the ink inside coated the runes edged along the edge. She then drew a few interconnected lines, which resembled the unique wave shapes found on Ofae, and cast a teleportation spell.

The portal shuttered in warning, but her body did transport itself back to the office building, though she appeared in an unfamiliar wing, in a recently vacated room. A healthy deluge of muck followed along and

splashed out in sticky piles, still grasping at her with loving disgust, seemingly distraught that it had been denied a sacrifice.

She stomped out of the room and down the hallways until she ran into another worker, a different one from before. The worker, understandably, froze in fear.

“Where is Faceless Guide?” She snarled. She only just barely kept herself from hoisting the worker up by their shirt; they weren’t responsible for this.

“Uhm, the other wing,” they said. “I take it he sent you away.”

“Yes,” Sloan replied. “But I came back.”