Chapter 1

Alaro was home. Yes, she was literally in her room, sitting inside a circle of gears—a perfect circle mind you—with pulleys, wrenches, screws, and every other necessity of childhood. But a house and a home were all too often, barely correlated. No, she was home in the sanctuary: the sanctuary of *invention*.

Invention was painted logic, and mathematics, physics, and science were her primary colors. She rotated around the circle, selecting and placing various parts as her inventing canvas called for them. She paused to tighten a copper gear with a delicate wrench. It wasn't fully tightened, which, by her metrics, bordered on intellectual malpractice. Many were the same tools she'd used since she was five, though at seventeen, they felt almost childish in her hand. But they still functioned. That was what mattered. The room smelled of copper shavings and warm dust—comforting, if not strictly safe. Here, nothing asked her to smile, to soften, to explain because the equations didn't care. They just worked, or they didn't. For her, invention was instinctual, like breathing or walking for anyone else.

Certainly more instinctual than that dreaded E word, emotion. Alaro wasn't naive enough to think sentimentless logic was superior—true logic accounted for emotion as a variable—but she filed it mentally under "external concerns." Anytime *she felt* something that didn't make sense to her, she just thought it away, and poof! It was gone. Like a good book after a weekend. Occasionally, the feeling would return a day later in the form of a headache or a sleepless night. But headaches could be managed. Feelings, not so much.

Her mother had instilled in her the gifts of kindness and empathy, but in truth, she never needed to—simple logic could have told her those things were worthy aspirations. When her mother then inquired as to why Alaro struggled to feel those emotions toward herself. Wasn't it obvious? She was too occupied for emotion.

Attempting to improve the world was a busy job and a thankless one at that. Not that she needed the thanks. Logically it wouldn't change the invention.

And oh, the invention!

She stood up, marveling at her Echo Chamber, a circular, floor-mounted device. Polished copper rings spun in nested gyroscopic layers. In the center floated a suspended teardrop of Chrystaline Chronite, shimmering with spectral rainbow elegance. Her mother had managed to snag one from the royal treasury. Alaro still didn't know why or how she managed to visit The Crown Royal Palace.

Alaro came up with the idea when she discovered one could amplify their connection to their future self by echoing it across time, literally borrowing from their future selves better connection to their future self. The simple effect—always needed to explain it simply—stronger Chronobonding. Her mind spun with the ramifications: A world where Objectmancers could

bond more food for the city, where Knowledgemancers could skyrocket scientific progress, where Healthbonders could heal with half the time and resources.

She always got excited when inventing, so she sat down on her bed and took a deep breath, a stray wire brushing her ankle. She frowned, adjusted it three degrees clockwise, then nodded like she'd just righted the moral axis of the universe.

The Echo Chamber would need testing first. People would already be skeptical of a seventeen year old inventor—she needed to ensure it was rock solid before showcasing. Honestly, up to that point, everything had been theoretical. She hadn't even turned it on yet. Some remarked it strange for such a logical mind to mix technology and magic. Alaro thought it was obvious magic was simply another form of science, just with different principles.

The mixing of magic and technology had always appealed to her as the most elegant solution to the world's problems. Someone else could ascertain the psychological and social solutions. As far as Alaro could tell, there were no scientific principles underlying those endeavors. Apart from confusion, of course.

A smile came to her face as she thought about showing her mother the device. Then, just as fast, it vanished thinking about showing her father the device, if there was one at least. She distracted herself by reaching over and tightening a bolt with a practiced flick of the wrist—one click too tight, as always. Precision was a comfort, even when she overdid it.

Ouch, why was her hand beginning to act up again? She looked at her old scar, a relic from an ill-timed wrench slip a few weeks prior. It had healed well enough, all things considered. She was a Healthbonder, just not a particularly proficient one. The third rule of Chronobonding—self-knowledge influences the strength of future alignment—was, unfortunately, not in her favor. Her self-understanding was... inconsistent. But it hardly mattered. Whenever self-knowledge got in the way, she did what she always did: thought it away.

It remained a mystery to her why she had been born with the skill, Chronobonding was a genetic ability passed on from the very first Chronobonder Aldric Kanarchi 200 years ago during The Bondfall. Others could learn to Chronobond, but it was always easier with blood relation. She'd mentioned the mystery to her mother once and her eyes had gone wide in that particular way that suggested certain topics were, if not forbidden, then at least ill-advised.

So, she marked her Healthbonding as another extreme example of her innate talent, alongside her proclivity for inventing. Her hard work wasn't her doing of course—it was simply an extension of being born with such gifts and pride was a cancer which had taken too many of history's great inventors. Not her.

She wiped a smudge of grease off her thumb with the corner of her vest, then paused, inspecting the residue like it might contain a theorem. It didn't. But it was symmetrical, which was something.

Her stomach grumbled; she felt nauseous? And oh no, was her head spinning? She'd only been inventing for an hour. She looked outside her window through gritted teeth and saw the sun high in the sky. Welp. Looks like she had spent the whole night and morning inventing without realizing it. Again. Hunger! That's what it was. Hunger and thirst. Annoying, persistent, and unfortunately non-negotiable.

If Alaro had spent even a second longer in her room, she would have noticed the lamp behind her flickering. If she had spent another few seconds in the room, she would have realized it was speaking Morse Code. If she had read that Morse Code, perhaps everything would have been different.

Instead, Alaro turned around and began walking to the kitchen, but outside her room, a plate on the floor stopped her. One slice of plain bread, without the crust. A single slice of cold cheese. And a tiny shake of salt. Bless her mother. To anyone else, it would be a travesty to the palate, but for Alaro, it was a sensationless delicacy. She had to save the novelty for inventing. Some acquaintances—Alaro didn't have any friends—had remarked she should eat more vegetables, so she added a single piece of broccoli every day. Okay, at least once a week.

Friends. Those would be agreeable. It was making them, which was hard. Yup, hard; Alaro didn't have a witticism for that. Some words didn't need refinement. Some were already painfully precise.

Of course, she always told others to make them, good for mental health and all, but that advice didn't have to work for her. She just thought away the need to have them, and poof! Didn't need friends no more.

And of course—she'd done it again, lost in thought. The "sandwich" remained untouched on the plate, downgraded now to ambient-temperature starch. She grabbed one piece of bread and softly nibbled it as she walked over to her mother's room. It wasn't cold anymore, but that was acceptable. Besides, it was early. She could surprise her mother by being awake before noon.

When she got there, the door was slightly open, and no one was inside. Alaro had never been in the room without her mother before; it was always locked. An insatiable curiosity gap possessed her and she forgot to even think why it would be open in the first place. She got those gaps a lot. One time, she had been reading, and—no, no daydreams; there was an empty room to search. She took one last nibble of her bread, looked left and right, saw nothing, and crept into the room.

Gears, wrenches, and other Chronoscience materials lined the room and just like Alaro’s, they were organized in neat little piles. Astaria Lunari—it felt strange to call her that—she was revered as a great Chronoscientist alongside Veralah Cavka and Serekas Velcrin, and she had personally homeschooled Alaro while growing up. She still felt a surge of pride, perhaps the only she allowed herself to feel, remembering when her mother said Alaro had surpassed her abilities a few months ago.

An Invention Honor Crown sat on her desk, ringed in bronze gears and glinting with Azul Chronite. It was given as an honor every year during The Festival of Innovations to the inventor with the greatest invention. There would be another one in a week—perhaps she could show her Echo Chamber then. She remembered her mother's confused expression when she came home with the crown a few years back. They both didn't do it for the recognition. But well, it had cute *tiny* little gears. Oh so tiny. Alaro brushed her right hand against them.

And that's when she noticed an opened letter on her mother's desk. She shouldn't, but the curiosity gap was now a gravitational singularity, and well, she was across the event horizon.

My Dearest Astaria,

It was good to see you a few months ago. I wish it was more often. Forgive the bluntness—I suppose I've grown too used to conversation with columns and courtiers, neither of which reply with much feeling. The chambers have grown stale in your absence, and I dare say your arrival returned a certain… vitality to the gears of the court.

I must confess—hearing you speak of Alaro was the most refreshing moment I've had in weeks. You always were a brilliant mind, but I believe you've outdone even yourself. That girl, no, that woman, is becoming something extraordinary. I imagine you're too humble to take credit for it. Still, I shall do it for you.

I hope you'll forgive me the thought, but it would please me greatly to visit. Fear not, I'll bring no entourage, no silly scroll-bearing dignitaries. Just me, and perhaps a bottle of that absurdly good Erendalfi wine you once laughed at for being too spicy. As for Alaro, we could tell her I'm just trying to get to know my nobles better.

It fills me with no small joy knowing she's in your hands. I only wish... Forgive me. I trespass.

I'll see you tomorrow,

Your Crown Admirer—

Alaro jolted around as she heard the door behind her creek open. She nonchalantly took a bite of her lukewarm bread and pretended to fidget with the Invention Honor Crown before turning around.

First came the normal things—habits of perception. Her mother wore a tan buttoned vest and the silver pocket watch they both favored. They were unusual garments for a noblewoman, but she'd always tailored the world, just slightly, to make Alaro feel less like the anomaly. Same reason she dyed a strand of her hair gold. Alaro's own had always been entirely white—unnervingly so—with a single gold thread.

Then came the irregularities. Her mother was clutching the left side of her torso, fingers slick with blood. Her hair had the wild geometry of a thornbush, and she leaned to the left—creased like a book left open too long on the ground.

"I'm sorry this is so sudden Alaro," her mother said through bated breath. "But we need to pack our things." She stumbled into the room, trying to put her gear into a pile, but Alaro had to catch her before she fell onto the ground.

"Mother?!"

"Crown emissaries… Children of Cerith.. Attacked them… Crown Prince Joro captured. And the rumors, Alaro. Of me, you—" Her words were getting more and more slurred by the minute. Alaro was a Healthbonder, but she didn't have any Chronite on her for the Chronodebt, and this was a severe wound. Her mother needed help now.

Astaria put more and more weight on Alaro's arms—she had clearly used all her energy even to get here. It pained her greatly to see her mother in this state. Her mother, the single person who had raised Alaro since birth putting up with her intricacies, and strangeness, and everything that made Alaro, well Alaro. Suddenly, like a candlelight flicking on for a bit of midnight inventing, an idea came forward. It was a bad idea, a horrible idea, but logically, there were no other options.

The Echo Chambers test run would be a little earlier than expected.

Healthbonding worked better when you were aligned with your future self, and the better aligned you were, the less of a Chronobdebt you accrued. Therefore, theoretically, the Echo Chamber could push her focus enough to bond more powerfully and without a huge Chronodebt. Alaro dragged her mother over to her room. It was embarrassingly tough. Turns out a diet of plain bread and cold cheese didn't set one up for fitness success. She set Astaria gently on the floor and flicked the on switch to the device.

The Echo Frame whirred to life with a whisper, then a whirr. The gyroscopic rings began to spin in opposing directions, each rotation humming a different harmonic frequency. Copper shivered. The suspended Chrystaline Chronite teardrop pulsed, then flared—first violet, then sea-glass green, then a blinding rainbow so intense it bleached the shadows from the room. She gritted her teeth and focused on her mother—her injuries, her breathing, the faintest echo of her heartbeat.

Suffice it to say, she normally liked to do extensive testing on one of her inventions before using it. Well, what's the worst that could happen? Death. Death was the worst that could happen. With a deep breath, she stepped onto the platform.

Power surged through her like never before, with it an awareness of her body she had never tasted. Her hunger became agonizing. The sleepless night felt like a week. Her emotions, anxiety, stampeded like angry clouds in her head.

With that awareness, connecting with her future self was like finding a gear among a set of screws. She did it so easily that she almost laughed. Her mother's side healed before her eyes in mere seconds, and with only a minor Chronodebt.

The device was working. In fact, it was working *too* well. She'd calibrated it to sync with a singular future projection—hers, preferably the most stable one. But instead, her mind jolted sideways. Not just forward. Not just backward. Outward. She wasn't connecting with a future self—she was connecting with all of them, every divergent possibility she might become, could have become, never became. And then beyond even that—into the long thread of Chronobonders themselves, spiraling back through centuries, through time scars and forgotten lineages, all the way to the origin of Chronobonding itself.

To Aldric Kanarchi.

Alaro saw him in her mind. He stood by a giant crater on top of Mount Kanarch. Mountain wind pelted against her cheeks making her feel as if she was almost there. Smoldering steam emanated from a crater in front of them both. Hot, green, glowing rock.

Chronite.

Aldric Kanarchi kneeled down and picked up a piece, seemingly immune to the heat emanating off it. He wore The Primes characteristic white uniform, golden cape trailing behind in the air.

Alaro had read about this in books. The Bondfall. The day a mysterious meteor smashed into Mount Karnach, blessing the city of Kronspire with Chronobonding and Chronite and marking the day Chrono's disappeared. The city had magically been protected by some unknown green forceshield. And afterward, The Prime himself, was the first to touch the Chronite and start the genetic Chronobonding line.

The moment Aldric raised the Chronite overhead, the sky stilled. No birds. No breeze. The crowd below went quiet, then gasped as his body began to ripple with radiant green lines—etching themselves up his arms, across his chest, into his eyes. Time bent around him like a formula pushed beyond its domain and his whole body seemed to ripple across ages between young, middle, and old versions of Aldric. A verberating noise emanated off of him and the stones themselves became his chorus as it beat through them before coming to a crescendo and collapsing back in on itself.

Alaro covered her ears. When she looked back at Aldric he was back to his normal aged self and glowing a radiant green, his eyes turned jade stars. And then, he turned and looked Alaro straight in the eyes. She blinked and waited for him to look away. But he just kept staring. What unsettled her most was the unmistakable flicker of surprise. As if he hadn't just seen her, but *recognized* her.

"Who are you?" He said in a thundering, deep voice.

Alaro gulped. She needed to get back before they started asking questions she couldn't answer and she screwed up, well, time itself? Then she realized she had no idea what getting back would even entail. She desperately tried to connect with her current self, but she was spread across the Timeline like cheese on bread.

Aldric began to move. Toward her. Well, this was suboptimal. Alaro panicked. Or rather, she *began* to panic, tried to suppress it, then calculated—regrettably—that panic might be the only available strategy.

She scrambled—mentally, emotionally, temporally—grasping at any version of herself she could anchor to. A future self, a past one, even a hypothetical. It didn't matter. She just needed an exit *point*. The pressure built like collapsing architecture, and then—Snap.

She landed hard in her body. The Echo Chamber whirred beside her, rings slowing, the Chronite dimming to a dull flicker. She was back in her room. At least, it *looked* like her room.

Chapter 2

The structure, the trappings, and the various architectural elements were all in the same places. But, the space itself was occupied with unfamiliar objects and decorations.

The messy blanket of mechanical components and tools that normally covered the room were nowhere to be seen. The desk was placed suboptimally by the window, allowing the user to be distracted by movement below, swapped with the bed that was now laden with soft, luxurious sheets and a *frankly* unnecessary quantity of stuffed animals.

Though obviously it couldn't have been her, there was clearly a chronomechanic living here. The walls were laden with schematics in an overwhelming mosaic of color, and the desks had well organized bins stacked high on the adjoining wall.

Before should inspect the room any further, a knock sounded gently on the old metal door to her room.

"Alaro? My dear, your dinner is ready."

'My dear?' Who on amicia could possibly be calling her that?