

Burning Blue:
Boy Meets Honoi

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CHAPTER ONE

Trees of red leaves that towered nearly four hundred stories to touch the heavens were the gods of the lands. With massive grey-brown trunks, filled with huge crevices that hid small creatures, and branches that formed a broad cap, the yelm trees cast malicious shadows upon the forest, rejecting it in their own name and becoming monstrous plants that houses even smaller trees.

Joining the yelm trees were the ville trees; more disciples in the following of height. The ville trees were smaller, but none the less a blue-green leaved plant that had become independent from the forest below, with branches forming an elongated dome with a craggy, grey trunk.

Beneath their shadows, hundreds of stories down lurked the Yuxu forest. This verdant landscape of blue, green and yellow colored plants turned on each other in the starving shadow, climbing onto each other with crippling vines and onto the surface of the yelm and ville trees who alone basked in the great rays of sunlight from the orange-yellow sun in the vast blue.

Areas shown some mercy from the growing empire of the shadow of the colossal plants enjoyed their freedom of the sunlight. Beautiful flowers from palm-sized variants to one large enough to consume a grown man nestled quite comfortably. Trees like the le lams—blood-red leaves with brown trunks and branches growing around them, and the pomeg trees with their pink-toned leaves and pink, cocoon looking fruits as large as a man, constituted for most of the local trees in the lower forest.

Here in the early morning, the receding morning mist was evaporating, and lances of sunlight stabbed through the forest, making a show of tiny glowing particles dancing in them. The air stunk of rotting and living plant matter, wet soil and the faint trace of dead animals that had fallen victim to predators or time. Grazing animals stayed in the light between the ville and yelm trees, avoiding their shadows were even the plants had been corrupted to feed on flesh.

Yet, within this thick network of trees, bushes, twisting vines and the cry of animals that saturated the air, something out of place made a place for itself.

A lonely building no more than six stories with a domed top stood in amongst the surrounding sea of plants. The true color of the building was hard to determine, uncertainly amongst dark brown, grey or light brown, as the batter from the weather and the unfriendly neighborhood plants that protested against its presence here by throwing vines all over its surface disfigured its outer appearance. But the homeowners took great care in maintaining the colorful red and yellow windows that glowed with the sunlight that acknowledged their resilience.

The temple got some company from houses; like three huts cramped together with bluish colored roves, scattered at the front of the temple in a small clearing. Slicing through this little village was a brown peach and grey colored cobble stone path leading into the depths of the Yuxu forest.

There was an absence of activity from the people who lived in the Ixian community, as all of them were gathered in the first floor of the temple.

Here the circular room was laced with orange-brown tiles on the walls and larger ones on the floor. Some benches of burgundy colored wood were gathered in small groups near the walls, giving those who would be seated the view of the glorious golden statue of three humanoids standing in the center; one a woman and the other male, all with long ears, slanted eyes and wearing ornate robes.

From the windows red and yellow light casted a spotlights on a group of people in dark blue robes with yellow trim and a sheen of silk.

All these people had the purple skin known of the nycarman species in the solar system. Their skin had various shades based on their race and geographical residence. The Ixian people here in particular had dark purple skin, but were differentiated from each other by a work of creases all over their body like a human finger print.

Their golden and black hair were tied into ponytails or combed over the sides of their heads. Apart from their bright pink eyes that slanted to their noses and ear-shape, they had an eerie resemblance to human.

The Ixians with their thin lips and straight noses would be Caucasian—but such a word didn't exist here, so they identified their race as Uola.

Ixians young and old turned their backs to the statues of the holy trinity that created them, facing a peculiar figure that stood in a path leading through the door into the village.

The sight was a lovely young nycarman woman, close to six feet tall and medium built. The smooth lavender skin on her long face had a nice set of full lips and a small round nose.

What would be African for a human was Outo for her people.

Her radiant gold hair was tied into a rippling ponytail cascading down her lean back. A pink blouse of leaf-shaped materials hugged her skin, as did her dark green leather tights that hung just below her knees.

In a military erect posture, Lezura Hembim looked on expectantly and proudly at the men and women before her. With her little nose she smelt the mixture of emotions and expectations circulating in the air.

My big day! Lezura thought.

From the crowd three Nycarmans stepped forward. Two were men, and one a woman with her thick black hair combed over her head and a sharp nose. All were wrinkled with age.

The man with his gold hair combed over his head had a smile that seemed unrecoverable from his face, said in a subtle voice, "I never thought I would feel such a sense of loss from your departing, Lezura."

"Neither did I, Dunit," said Lezura. "But it is for an important reason."

"Well said, child," said the woman, Murbella, in a strong voice unsuitable for one so old.

"Fortunately Dunit is the only one here that has grown attached to you..."

Dunit grinned nervously and said to Murbella, "Murbella...you do not...have to make it sound like I am about to cry..."

"Have all your preparations been made, Lezura?" said the black-haired man.

"Yes I have, Telkit," said Lezura. "You know I never go anywhere unprepared."

Telkit smiled lightly. "That much is true..." he said.

"Now Lezura," said Murbella with a stern look in her eyes, "I hope you allowed our warnings to be riveted into your head overnight." Lezura nodded, but Murbella continued anyway; "This is not a simple messenger's task like what you have been sent on before. This mission involves direct interaction with the target. And we would all appreciate it if it were executed with as much of your skill as you can offer."

"Yes, Murbella," said Lezura without the bright smile that would otherwise annoy Murbella—especially her braces.

"We cannot be certain if the rumors of Earth are true," said Telkit, "but regardless that is where you will be sent."

"I have accepted this task and will not step down now or fail," said Lezura.

Dunit smiled brightly and said, "That is our girl—ouch!"

A nudge from Murbella in Dunit's ribs silenced him.

Murbella snapped her fingers, and from the crowd a young woman hurriedly emerged, timidly handing Murbella a small box of oak with four, triangular plates on the top in her hand.

She gave it to Lezura, who took it cautiously into her grasp.

"We will hand over Donnowarru to you, Lezura," said Murbella. "Call upon him to open the portal to Earth—"

“But do not try to talk with him much though,” said Dunit in a hushed voice as if the box could hear him, “you know he’s not very friendly—he punched poor old Telkit in the eye once.”

Telkit grimaced and looked away to hide his face. “Ugh...please do not remind me...”

Dunit said brightly, “But on a much happier note”—Dunit produced a silver compass from his sleeve with a single green structure in the black center—“you will finally get to hold this again!”

Lezura’s eyes literally gasped wider. She quickly reached for the compass, but Dunit took it away from her quickly.

“And please,” said Dunit, “Lezura my dear child, do not try to experiment with the key...”

Lezura blushed. “Of course...Dunit,” she said. “I would never!”

The wyassies gave Lezura a slight scowl.

Lezura raise her hand in defeat. “Honestly, I will not!” she said.

But they all knew what was really going to happen. Regardless, they trusted Lezura’s skills enough to deliver the key. Dunit handed it to her.

Lezura cupped the compass and marveled at the key inside; its elegant sword, the cracks of green light in its emerald surface and the striking red stripe along the middle.

She put the compass around her neck by its chain, and put the box in one of the pockets on her utility belt. She ran a hand across the other items on her belt and checked they were there.

“We are counting on you with this task, Lezura, all of us,” said Telkit.

Dunit scratched his chin thoughtfully and said, “I would say the fate of the world rest in your hands, but that would be a bit to clichéd...” Dunit dropped his hand and smiled. “So, I’ll just say good luck!”

Lezura placed a hand across her left breast and bowed slightly. “Of course...”

All the Ixians returned the same gesture.

Lezura strode out of the temple and into the warmth outside. The scent of the surround vegetation mixed with other naturally produced chemical grew in her nostrils. The first time Lezura took in such scents she found it repugnant, but after ten years outside of her usual comfort haven she got used to it.

She made her way through the silent village, towards a small path to east of the temple. She didn’t need to look; she just listened and heard the shuffling of feet as the Ixians filed out of the temple to watch her depart.

The path opened up in a small glade, where huge peach colored stones had been smoothed and packed to make a suitable flat and hard surface for Lezura’s Thwopter to rest on.

The flying vehicle was a glossy black. Lezura would have preferred it pink but the dealer she bought it from said he hadn’t couldn’t bother stealing that one as the police were chasing him.

It looked like an oval nut with half-crescent wings and an open interior with two seats in red cushioning, one behind the other.

Lezura checked the front seat—for the fifth time, waved away a mass of crazy bugs flying in her face. Even though she knew it highly unlikely for something to happen to the bag in the small amount of time she left it there to go and speak to the wyassies, she still gave the contents inside a quick going over.

Satisfied, Lezura sighed. “Okay, now...” she said to herself, and took the Sheikon-box from out of her utility belt and a knife.

Lezura made a long deep cut in the palm of her hand, curling her lip in discomfort. She put the knife back and drained the blood onto the box she put on the stone.

Lezura said the enchantment spell for the summoning;

*Grumpy wizard, sour as a lizard
Come out and serve me duly,
I shall kiss your rear and wash your hair,
So long as you perform your duty*

Lezura was definitely not going to perform the kiss your rear part, and hoped Donnowarru didn't demand it either—or else they would have to find a new Chevalier for the Rakai.

She waited for nearly thirty seconds for the blood to be absorbed into the box. But Lezura knew it shouldn't be taking so long.

Lezura sighed. I hate having to deal with this man... Why do you not come out already?

And wait Lezura did—for five minutes. Just as Lezura was about to lose her cool and strike a box with a dainty, manicured hand the box popped open.

Swirling blue light blasted from the wondrous depths of the box and spiraled into the sky.

Lezura's face took on an annoyed expressive. "But you have the time to be flashy...?" she said.

The light compressed, bulged and contorted like a demon was trying to escape the grasp of the divine and just light. Finally the supposed demon inside lost the fight and the blue energy compressed into the form of a male nycarman in shiny red garbs. He was large built, with a head of long coarse hair, the facial notations of a Uola nycarman, and floated on a bubbling cloud of honoi several meters off the ground.

The man, the Great Wizard Donnowarru, greeted this world with a hideous roar. Lezura's senses instantly picked up the threat and she rolled out the way in time as Donnowarru fired a blast of honoi into the rocky ground.

Lezura rolled into a crouch and shot at Donnowarru, "What the blast is wrong with you man?"

Donnowarru for the first time took in his surroundings; some blue and red bushes there with some colorful flowers in the mix, and tall trees watching it all from above. He spotted Lezura, scowled, and relaxed himself.

"My apologies woman," said Donnowarru without the tone of the actual truth. "I thought you were Dunit. That little prick has been playing tricks on me ever since I met him!"

Lezura cast a glance down at the people at the mouth of the path, and could have sworn she saw Dunit make a quick dash behind Murbella.

The last prank Dunit played on Donnowarru was opening him up from the box in one of the toilets—after he used it.

Lezura got up and said to Donnowarru, who scratched an itch she wondered if a spirit could possibly have, "You can punish Dunit when we return. Right now we have more important business to deal with." Lezura crossed her arms and raised an eyebrow. "That is providing you remember...?"

Donnowarru said, "Do not insult me Outo woman; I clearly remember what we are to do..."

Lezura studied the uncertainty on Donnowarru's face. He was a racist, and also a terrible liar. "You do?" said Lezura testily.

"Yes," said Donnowarru.

"Then what are you supposed to be doing now"—and Lezura made a mocking expression of awe—"O Great Wizard?"

The only thing Donnowarru hated more than people in general where people from other races, Outos, Lalue, and with the new addition of the new species on the world two hundred years ago, he had to rewrite that list now. And this sassy little Outo woman wasn't really the cup of tea of his morning.

"We are supposed to be fetching that Rakai again," Donnowarru said. He built up a strong flow of energy in his hands. "I still do not see why you all have to change trend with the Rakai. The first one was a nycarman—albeit a woman and a Lalue, and she got the job done. The second one was some worthless largaph that died before he even touched the God Titan! What makes you think some little flea from Earth can make a—"

Lezura glowered at Donnowarru and clenched her jaw. "That is enough out of you, O Great Wizard," she said. "Any more of that racist-sexist filth out of your toilet-of-a-mouth and you will see what I am capable of doing to a spirit even if they are already dead."

Donnowarru studied the face of Lezura, and could see some of the fierceness of her ancestral people brimming—the same people that took his life over eleven centuries ago.

He didn't doubt her.

He waved a hand at her and said, "Whatever, silly little girl."

Lezura smiled charmingly and dropped her hands. "Thank you so much."

Donnowarru mumbled and floated higher on his cloud. He savored the air and the majestic scenery around him while he could. The occasions were extremely rare when he got the chance to see his old world again. But now it was tainted with so many people of new species, and he frowned heavily like he smelt something rank.

"Get ready," said Donnowarru to Lezura.

And with that a surge of excitement rippled through Lezura. She hopped into the driver seat of the Thwopter, took the ignition key off her belt and started the engine. It steadily hummed to life, and the antigravity orbs generated a pulsing blue light that pushed the vehicle off the stones.

Donnowarru took in some deep breaths. He channeled pink-red energy, different from honoi, into his fingers until they shone. He felt the air like he was touching something corporeal, and with a smooth ripping motion tore open a vast portal off swirling purple, red and pink.

Lezura dropped on her electronic goggles over her eyes, smiling at the rift the wizard created.

Today, Lezura Hembim would be the first nycarman to enter the rift, legally, into another world.

There were those who had the technology left back after the establishment of the Prestige System to open rifts. A very, very few were successful in entering other worlds and coming back with a pinch of new information about life there. Others were unfortunate enough to have encountered the dimension reapers and get the extraterrestrial stuffing kicked out of them and their equipment confiscated.

Lezura was pleased to know she would keep her ribs.

"Stay close to me," said Donnowarru as he moved off on his cloud. He stopped, reconsidering. He said to Lezura, "You know what, not too close..."

Lezura gave a tired sigh. As soon as Donnowarru floated into the tunnel Lezura followed on her Thwopter, slowing down so she didn't go splat into the wizard. And the thought got her wondering what a ghost's insides looked like.

The portal closed behind them, imploding into a wink and out of sight.

In the tunnel Lezura felt no heat or cold, but the weightlessness of the place. The air was breathable, and with the many thoughts circulating in her head she concluded the dimensional tunnel must have been made by sentient beings to support them while they stayed inside here.

She made a note to herself to jot that down later.

It was some seconds with her tailing behind Donnowarru when she saw him abruptly stop.

She brought her Thwopter to a halt. She leaned forward in her seat and said, "Donnowarru is something wrong?"

"They are coming," said the wizard.

Lezura felt a snake of fear slither up her spine. She had been quite excited about seeing a reaper up close and speaking with it, and now that the opportunity had come she was embarrassed to feel that she was getting cold feet.

Get a hold of yourself, Lezura, she thought. You are going to be the Rakai's Chevalier for goodness sake! You cannot be falling apart now.

Seconds after Donnowarru had spoken five glittery pink lights appeared around the two of them. For a second they just floated there, but they exploded into five humanoid figures. Their bodies temporarily crackled with pink energy.

Lezura swallowed a nervous lump and studied the reapers with her eyes.

They wore close-fitting, silky purple uniform. They had pointed gold boots on their feet, and ornately designed silver armor on their chest, arms and shins. The shoulder pads were gold and

looked like the gaping mouth of a tortured creature. Over their heads they wore a hood which concealed any of their features. And as was with all the reapers, they wore a mask that hid all of their features behind a background of some special body; whether it is a sun, moon, the stars, a planet in the vastness of space or a nebula.

As the energy sparked off their bodies around the nycarmans Lezura studied the faces, wondering what a reaper really looked like; and her attention was drawn to a tall reaper with a lustrous red nebula on its face approaching them.

He had male proportions, and each casual step he took towards Donnowarru was on a pink tile he created under his feet using the strange purplish-pink energy that reapers possessed.

“Yesh shou, nomidi,” said the reaper in Naasi, the universal language of the solar system, and others.

As usual, as Lezura observed, Donnowarru replied with a loud grunt.

“Yesh shou, ir yuh,” said Lezura.

From there there was understanding between the aliens and the conversation went on without a hitch.

The reaper folded his arms and said to Donnowarru, “Geez, Donny, you really need to lighten up once in a while.”

Donnowarru’s placid expression dropped into a frown. “Could we just skip all the pleasantries and get to work, Terriak?” he said. “And stop blasted calling me Donny!”

“Wait!” said Lezura. “You two know each other?”

“Long story,” said the reaper. He gave Lezura his attention, “But I would really like it if you two would explain why you’re here—and why there’s a civilian with you, Donnowarru.”

“We are on a mission regarding the Rakai,” said Lezura promptly, after waiting patiently to speak with a reaper for so long. “Oh! Sorry—I forgot my manners. My name is Lezura Hembim.”

Donnowarru yawned loudly, intentionally to annoy Lezura.

Lezura ignored him and continued, “I am not sure if you know, but our planet underwent dramatic changes in the last ten years.”

“I know...” said Terriak with a slow nod, “the whole planetary revolution thing. But that’s none of our business. Reapers aren’t concerned with anything you aliens do unless it’s with the rift.”

“Well it does concern us,” said Lezura.

“Oh?” Terriak said.

At this point Donnowarru had gently floated to one side and crouched on his cloud with his head resting on his fists, quite happy to not have to talk to anyone.

Lezura felt the authority in Terriak’s voice, but it didn’t deter her from continuing. “Our people have need for the Rakai, from the planet Earth.”

Terriak shifted uncomfortably. He unfolded his arms and looked back at the other reapers, one of which had a big, blunt metallic implement in case the nycarmans tried to run, and sensed their alarm as well.

Terriak turned back to Lezura and said, “How do you know about Earth, and what business do you people have there?”

Lezura explained as calmly as she could. “A few years ago, a largaph by the name of Blinchi managed to open a rift into another world. He managed to elude the reapers for months, learning a few things about the planet Earth in the process.”

“I heard about that incident,” said a tall, shapely female reaper with a pattern of stars on her face, named Frost. “That largaph hid for two months on Earth in Los Angeles.” Something like a laugh escaped her throat. “They gave him a really nice beating when they found him, though...”

Lezura scowled at her. “Well that man just so happened to be a dear friend of ours. When he came back to us he told us of a race of people who had a very unique kind of honoi. My people considered their species a candidate for being the key-keeper.”

“Well sorry to burst your shiny little bubble missy, but that’s not happening,” said Terriak. “There’s no way we’re goanna let you go to Earth, cause all kind of hysteria with the people, and bring back one of them here. What makes you think the Rakai will even want to go with you?”

Lezura tightened her hand on the Thwopter's steering wheel. She had been thinking about that possibility herself. Why would another species far from their solar system fight for them? But she had to tuck that doubt to the corner of her mind. Surely the Rakai could be convinced to help.

“That is a risk we will willingly accept by going to Earth to find out,” she said. “I know what we are asking of you is going against the rules of the reapers, but you must also understand that the Rakai is a part of our people’s history, and also a religious figure in some small circles. That in itself is business of the nycarman people, which you cannot interfere in.”

Terriak cocked his head to one side wryly and folded his arms. “Then why not take a spaceship to Earth then...?” But Terriak knew why they couldn’t, but wanted to test this nycarman woman. Something about her seemed familiar—the whole confident demeanor like everyone else was stupid.

“You all know bloody well why we cannot leave the planet,” said Lezura testily. “The Prestige Kingdoms placed an armada around the planet that prevents non-prestige countries from going for help. That leaves them to harvest us and let the orderrans slowly eradicate us! And even if we could leave the planet we know not of where Earth is in the galaxy, and how long it could take to reach there!” Lezura’s tone changed to a more humble one, pleading. “Terriak, sir, please sympathize with us.” Lezura casted her intense glare over the others. “All of you. Innocent people are slowly dying under the system imposed on our planet. I have someone very important to me that I want to save.”

Terriak entertained the idea in his mind for a moment. A human Rakai... That would be quite the thing to see. Then he said to Lezura. “But young lady, there’s another catch. Humans currently have a serious condition that’s very, very dangerous to others. It’s not a disease, per se. But one that arises when humans use their honoi.”

“But I cannot go back empty handed,” said Lezura, “not when so many people have put their trust in me to come back with the Rakai!”

Terriak considered that for a moment. He gestured to the other reapers and they all moved to one side, huddled close as they deliberated amongst themselves—very soft whispers in fact, as they realize that two sharp-eared nycarmans were in the tunnel with them.

“Well, what do you think guys?” said Terriak.

“I do not think we should risk breaking the rules for just one little nycarman,” said the reaper with the weapon, Han.

“But you heard the poor girl,” said Frost. “Their planet is practically being used as some experimental facility. I heard what goes on Sangetsu. That Planet has been through two massive wars in just a little over two hundred years.”

“That’s their load of crap to scoop up,” said Han. “The living doesn’t know how easy they have it. They are free to do whatever they want, and waste it killing each other.” Han patted the club against his thigh lightly. “Sometimes I wish could just go on a planet and do a whacking spree...”

Han had in fact been such a man to do something in his past life, which ended up in his untimely death at age twenty two.

“But that’s no reason to let a planet suffer when there’s chance to save it,” said a male reaper named Eirg; quiet muscular build with a flaring yellow star on his face. “Even though I’m not too one hundred percent on letting these nycarmans go through the rift, I still think we should let this play out.”

“I think that decision is up to you, Terriak,” said the last reaper with a face of stars, Stennen. “You are from Earth, so I guess you have the right to whether or not you want to let them through. But just keep in mind that you will have to answer to the boss eventually. But personally, I say we should not.”

“Here’s what I think,” said Han; “we should let them through to Earth and find there R...Raki—”

“Rakai,” corrected Eirg.

“That blasted thing!” said Han. “And when they do, and they’re coming back”—Han dropped the weapon in his other hand—“we give them a good whacking!”

“Excuse me?” said Lezura’s voice.

Startled, Han looked to Lezura and saw him staring at her with shouldering eyes and folded arms. Han thought she heard him when he raised his voice, though his gesture with the club was self-explanatory enough.

“Nothing to worry about, dearest!” said Frost to her. She lowered her voice and said to Terriak, “So what is the plan Captain?”

“I say we send them back,” said Stennen firmly.

“Whack em—and send them back!” said Han—who was abruptly whacked in the head by Frost.

Frost said, “Captain, think about it for a moment: there are so many squads stationed around this planet, none of which would have even listened this long to the nycarmans. Is it coincidence that they just so happened to open the portal and find you; someone that one of them know? It is a sign. We should help them.”

“Actually,” said Stennen, “Donnowarru can find our portal because he knows Terriak.”

“Quiet, you,” Frost said.

Ultimately Terriak was faced with the proxy vote, for Frost and Eirg were for the mission of this nycarman woman, and Stennen, at least, was against it.

Han on the other hand seemed to just want to hit something. He was crept up close to Donnowarru. The wizard shot him a narrow glance out of the corner of his eye, and Han quickly retreated.

Terriak came to a decision. Once being human, he felt some kind of urge to allow a member of his species to become this Rakai the young woman was talking about. If Terriak played his cards right, and this Rakai to be, things could change for their people, including the little problem they had.

On the other hand it could fail, and his boss would have his hide.

But this woman named Lezura Hembim seemed responsible enough; probably she could retrieve the Rakai from Earth discreetly. And her last name rang a bell in his head.

Finally Terriak said to Lezura, “Okay, Miss Hembim. I’ll grant you passage to Earth—”

Lezura gaped and clasped her hands. “Wonderful!” she said.

Terriak flinched at the sight of the silvery braces with their pink inners. “Yes, it is. But let me lay down a few laws for you first. The human must have no desire to reproduce with any species either by natural means or genetic alteration.”

Natural reproduction with another species—impossible, thought Lezura. But then again, she knew nothings about humans.

“Second,” said Terriak, “the human must not donate blood in any form. This is to prevent the spread of any of the natural bacteria in the human’s body. And third; whether the human had completed the mission or not, I will be retrieving the human to be taken back to Earth, upon his or her death.

“And if the human survives?” said Lezura.

“Back to Earth,” said Terriak.

Lezura heard the grimness in Terriak’s voice and decided against arguing with him. “Understood,” she said.

“Glad we have an agreement,” said Terriak. Terriak opened his palm. In it the purple-pink energy crackled and frizzled until it materialized a small chip the size of a grown man’s thumb. “I assume you have a data-scroll of some sort?”

“I do, actually,” said Lezura.

“Then take this,” said Terriak. He handed the red chip over to her, watching her study it keenly.

“I assume this is a map of the planet Earth,” said Lezura more like a statement.

“Little smart-ass,” Han grumbled.

“Correct,” said Terriak, genuinely impressed. “Don’t think I’m doing you any favors, the sooner you know your way around the planet the faster you can find the Rakai and get off.”

Lezura pocketed the chip in one of the spaces on her belt.

“Oh, and one more thing,” said Terriak. He materialized a reddish-purple bracelet with some red crystals in the inner of it in both hands. He gave them to Lezura. “Put on one of them.”

Lezura put one in her lap and examined the other. It felt a little soft in her hand, and she sniffed it and smelt certain kinds of chemical compounds. As she slipped it over her and she felt the bracelet hug her skin. Before she could react it slipped into her flesh and disappeared.

“Amazing!” she said. “What is it called?”

Terriak said, “I can’t give you the name. But I can tell you it’s nanotechnology that suppresses the worldly energy you carry from your world into another. Slip one onto the Rakai when and if you manage to find him or her. Use an electrical charge on your arm to get it off. I’ll leave the camouflaging to you.”

Lezura understood that by camouflage Terriak meant changing her appearance to that of another species to blend into their environment. “Do not worry,” she said. “I have the necessary equipment.”

“Good,” Terriak said. He turned to a reaper. “Eirg, open it up.”

“Sure thing,” he said.

Eirg held out a white gloved hand and materialized a wonderful scythe. Its blade was lustrous silver that still glittered with energy, and the handle was thin with black shiny reptilian scales on the surface.

Eirg held the scythe purposefully and lifted it—he stopped and turned to Lezura. “I should warn you, though. I can’t plot the exact co-ordinance to the Rakai, because I don’t know who or where the Rakai is. I will try to steer it as far as possible from any water source though.” And Eirg remembered his first days as a reaper when he had opened a portal to another world, only to allow thousands of gallons of water flood over him along with a giant fish that nearly swallowed him.

“That is quite fine,” said Lezura modestly, “I do not know where exactly he is myself. But the key will tell me.”

Eirg nodded. He channeled his energy into the scythe’s blade like mercury rising in a tube, and as it glowed he slashed furiously in the air. He ripped open a portal that spread neatly into a massive circle. Warm, dry air blasted into the tunnel and over Lezura from a great blue sky.

Lezura thought back to the information Blinchi had given her: Earth’s atmosphere was breathable, with only fifteen percent less oxygen. In the case of the common micro-organisms on the planet, Blinchi had already collected samples of them and provide her with a useful vaccine against them; which Lezura had already taken. But he advised her to carry insect repellent for their mosquitos.

Eirg de-materialized his scythe and stepped aside. “There’s Earth.”

A smile sliced across Lezura’s face. Here now was her moment of glory.

Donnowarru stood on his cloud and floated next to the portal.

“Try not to cause any trouble, Donny,” said Terriak with a grin behind his mask.

“I told you to stop calling me that...” Donnowarru said.

Lezura lowered the goggles over her eyes again, feeling some dirt particles irritating them. “Thank you everyone,” she said. She and Donnowarru flew out of the portal.

Frost waved at them. “Good luck!” she said.

Once they were through Eirg snapped his fingers and the portal imploded.

“So you think the troubles on that world will end this time, Willy?” said Frost to Terriak, using his real name now that the civilians were gone.

Terriak shrugged. “I honestly can’t give an answer to that,” he said.

“Highly unlikely,” Stennen said.

Eirg said, “Well this was as much as we could do for them. The rest we will have to leave to them.”

Han scoffed at everyone. “Oh please! You’re sounding so melodramatic.” He dropped the club in his hand. “Everyone knows the best remedy for war is to beat the crap out of it!”

Lezura and Donnowarru ended up in galaxy of sand dunes and ridges, blanketed with a glow of soft gold light from the unrelenting sting of the sun above.

Lezura flew her Thwopter in a wide circle some thirty odd meters in the air, trying to get some grasp of her surroundings as quickly as she could before executing her plans. On the ground Donnowarru studied the environment with less interest. He merely looked around to see if there were any people.

Lezura settled the Thwopter in the sand. She felt the feet sink a few feet and was worried about it being swallowed by the ground. When she found it was steady enough she turned off the engine and rummaged through her bag, taking out the data-scroll and the chip from her belt.

Donnowarru saw a bronze colored lizard dive into the sand next to his feet. Officially bored he went over to Lezura to see what she was up to. He caught her just in time as she slipped the chip into a slit in the top of the white scroll.

Lezura unraveled the scroll at the slim bars at the edges. Instead of paper, a flat, flexible screen was revealed. It winked to life the moment it was turned on, and Lezura played her fingers over it gracefully until she found some files.

There were several planets on a black backdrop, each with the cartooned head of the native alien species. The new chip was registered and showed blue marble with the image of a smiling brown-skinned human male with a buzz-cut.

Lezura tapped the image of Earth once and it filled the screen. At the far corner of the screen Lezura saw the signal bar flickering at the fifth bar as it tried to maintain a connection with one of Earth’s satellites.

Luckily for her the land masses were given their nycarman name next to their English equivalent by Terriak. She saw the image of a human over a continent. Lezura touched the face and held down on it. It opened into a white page to show the cartooned faces of other alien species, some of whose faces were blanked out because Lezura wasn’t supposed to know about them.

She frowned. Terriak still wouldn’t let her know too much.

She found a female nycarman avatar and replaced the human one with it. It even had a gold-haired female like herself—though the ears were a bit exaggerated.

“Well...?” said Donnowarru impatiently.

“It would seem we are on the continent called Africa,” said Lezura as she studied the map behind her goggles. “More specifically we are in Egypt.” She touched the country and information about it sprouted on the screen in a list being held by a purple hand. “Its population is eighty million, seven hundred twenty thousand people. Capital; Cairo. Oh! Its landmarks are the great pyramids. Particularly the ones in Giza, labeled as—”

“Blah-blah-blah!” said Donnowarru. “Now get to the part where we find the Rakai. I cannot stand this heat. It is bad for my skin!”

Lezura glowered at Donnowarru. “But you are already dead, are you not?” she said.

“That does not stop the sun from being hot,” said Donnowarru, fanning the back of his neck.

“Fine...” Lezura said. She closed the map. She took out the compass with the key, and channeled some honoi into it to start a reaction. She thought: what next, is he going to complain about the sand?

Sand blew into Donnowarru’s eyes and he blinked harshly. He said, “And all this blasted sand. If it was living I would kill it.”

Honoi was the combination of mental and spiritual energy, most of which was produced from the brain. Along with the honoi Lezura sent her thoughts into the key. Okay, Fopi, pick your Rakai.

The key spat forth radiant green light that even Donnowarru was captivated by, for a second.

But it didn't just glow in rays. The light formed a kind of dome on top of the compass that tingled Lezura's nerves from ears to toe. Her ears swiveled with the touch of the light, and the dome expanded exponentially in the blink of eye and seemed to engulf the entire desert. It collapsed into a wave and washed over the land with a ghostly hiss. On a larger scale this wave spread to consume the entire planet Earth. The energy travelled through every single human being, searching for a strong heart and an unbendable will of steel. It electrified their senses into frenzy, plunging them into a vortex of colliding sensations.

The animals that were touched with the glorious essence went wild with hysteria. In days to come every single zoo will report animals going berserk, some even developing new abilities. And one in particular would be Nutty the talking the squirrel.

But this was not a wave of chaos. It was searching, and as soon as it had reached every single corner of the globe the wave died, as if being absorbed into the Earth, for it had found its Rakai.

In the months to follow, this worldwide phenomenon would be come to known as The Great Awe!

Back in Cairo Egypt, Lezura's ears relaxed and she dropped her attention on the key. The key was glowing like a hot iron, only green. It swiveled until it stop on a cardinal point.

"West," said Donnowarru.

"But that could either be over the next sand dune or on the other side of the planet," said Lezura.

"Regardless, we better get going," said Donnowarru.

Donnowarru transformed into a blue-tailed skink and slithered onto Lezura's lap.

Lezura shrieked, "Eeeeeek!"

"Quiet, woman," said the little skink, bobbing his head on Lezura's thigh in a display of strength. "I have to avoid detection from the eyes of wondering humans. I suggest you do the same."

Lezura quickly regained her composure, her ears lowering, and said, "I certainly will. But first I need to scan a human female."

Lezura flew over the sand dune, and didn't see anyone—not for miles. She took a long drink from her water bottle and followed her map to the nearest settlement.

I wonder what my Rakai will be like? Lezura thought. I hope it is a handsome man. And she giggled.

A mosquito bit her on her elbow.

"Eeeeeek!"

Ney York City; five months later:

But Lezura was in for a rude shock, for her Rakai in shining armor was seventeen year old Joey Jackson Sadowski—the most famous homeless hooligan living in the Bronx. Of course Joey Sadowski was not aware of that himself.

As far as he knew he was the everyday homeless teenager trying to make a living.

Years of living on the street had giving his natural peachy-white skin some discoloration from dirt to bruises, most of which were concealed beneath dirtier khaki trousers, and burgundy T-shirt with a picture of Nutty the talking squirrel, whose expression had taken on a human quality with her contemptuous frown. She was famous for her great intellect and her works of literature; such as "While in this Zoo" and "Tigers and Acorns: The biography of Nutty Squirrel". Over all of this he wore a crusty tan colored jacket with a few hidden arsenals, and it was enough to conceal the bat on his back except the handle.

Joey's head was a mess of brown hair like a wild bush. Heavy eyebrows were over bright brown eyes. His face was roundish like his nose, and his chin noticeably angular.

The only clean article of clothing on him was a pair of red and white converse he had mugged off some guy with his silver baseball bat.

The well-dressed guy had been making fun of Joey for his title as the number hooligan and his height, which Joey didn't take too lightly. After a few good whacks to the man's thigh Joey relieved him of his shoes and took off just as crowd of do-gooders were closing in.

His usual height of four-feet nine and three quarter inches for his age gave him many nick-names. But commonly he was known as the Four-foot Slugger.

He liked the Slugger part.

Today Joey had strolled out of his usual hideout; a ramshackle of a hut near Hudson River, to deal with some business.

It was five o' clock. The air was chilly and each breath he took saw it coming out in a misty blanket over his face. The sun tested the sky with a haze of orange light that sliced the taller buildings from the heart of Manhattan. Cold air rushed in off the misty river and gave him the usual morning embrace, but he had gotten use to such greetings.

He stuffed his hands in his pocket to warm them up for the job to come. But not before making sure his bat was firmly locked into the belt and cloth he had tied around his torso as his weapon's holster. Walking near some warehouses that rank of fish he spotted a homeless guy in a thick grey jacket and wearing some mittens to combat the cold. The man was as dirty as he was, but took the usual lifestyle of rummages through the garbage for breakfast.

"Up early again, Tommy?" Joey said to the man.

The man seemed confused for a moment when he heard the voice. He turned to look at Joey with his pale face streaked with dirt and his grey eyebrows just as bushy.

"Oi!" said Tommy in a feeble voice. "How ya doing there, Jacky?"

Joey frowned. "I keep telling my name's damn Joey, you ole coot."

Tommy nodded with a hum in his throat. "Nice to see yah too, John..."

Joey waved at Tommy to end the conversation. He wasn't really that big on manners, but living so close to the old man nearly three years now he thought it fit he showed him a little companionship.

Joey hailed some other guys like himself warming up near burning trashcan, before going onto West 86th Street. Though he was dirty and stunk like an old cloth Joey walked with confidence amongst the early morning rush of people. In fact, before Joey went to sleep last night the city looked just as crowded and noisy.

A concussion of smells from food to synthetic assaulted his nose. He sniffed it out and continued for the heart of Manhattan.

Joey saw a woman approaching him, quickly clutching her bag and stepping out of his way.

"Morning to you to miss..." Joey said dryly as he passed the woman.

Joey ignored the rest of the reactions of a few of the people; most of them were too busy to really give a crap about some homeless guy. Joey figured he was put in the same boat as the common pigeons, rats, cats and stray dogs in the city—a good thing when you were a criminal and wanted to cast attention away from yourself, but bad when the police got a hold on you.

And just as Joey thought about the boys in blue he managed to spot a squad car near a Chinese restaurant across the street.

The officers were posted against the hood of the car, carefully surveying the streets for any unlawful activity that might surface; which was usually a lot.

Joey was grateful for seeing the police. It reminded him that the cops would be on the prowl near his business location and he should keep his bushy head on his shoulders.

Today the young man was planning a heist. Usually something so ambitious wouldn't have been on his everyday agenda. Usually it was just robbing a dude here and there, stealing from the local restaurants to get a meal and pissing off the local cops when he could.

But five months ago, after The Great Awe, something clicked in Joey's head, telling him to step up in life a little. And since then, three months ago he had risk nearly getting shot after robbing a famous

actress who came to visit the Big Apple for the Holidays. He left with her diamond ring, her purse and a stinging left cheek after she managed to slap him.

He had quite the stash now; five thousand five hundred bucks. If he kept it up he could probably make enough money before the year ended to buy his way out of his situation. It was exhilarating, but he didn't plan on being the Four-foot Slugger for the rest of his life.

But first he had a meeting with his scrupulous business partner.

Joey reached an alley between two red-bricked apartment buildings. Concealed from the bright light of the billboards above him; one showing Nutty the talking squirrel and her champagne for president of the Zoo, were hidden by a makeshift clothes line buy some Haitian locals. There was also a dumpster and a few spaces for someone even more suspicious to squeeze in.

As Joey walked near one of these spaces he heard a voice.

"Hey, kid..."

Joey didn't have to guess who it was. He looked around to make sure they were alone. When Joey was near the corner, a tall man in a black jacket, grey trousers and a black cap stepped out. His hands were shoved in his pocket, and bright blue eyes shone against his pale face.

The man, known to Joey only as Swanson, had been the buyer of the priceless items Joey spent his time stealing. Joey heard somewhere that there was some rogue guy who went around buying illegal stuff to sell to the Irish Mob. Joey didn't really have the interest to confirm the mob part; he was only interested in the money the guy paid him.

"You got the goods?" said Swanson.

"You go my money?" Joey shot back instantly.

"You know, I hate playing these games with you kid," said Swanson, taking his hands out of his pocket.

Joey had already had a hand inside his own coat, not that his broken bottle could do much if Swanson took out a gun. But Joey relaxed when Swanson took out a cigarette and lit it.

He blew out a puff of smoke and said with a stern look at Joey, "Don't I always have your money?"

"So?" said Joey. "I still need to see it."

Swanson reached inside his jacket, taking out a fat wad of green. He saw the glint in Joey's eye, and said, "Your turn."

Joey slowly reached into his pocket and took out a sparkling diamond ring.

They both took each other's goods simultaneously. Joey counted the money while Swanson examined the diamond with a magnifying glass from his pocket.

Joey nodded after counting the money and said, "Well this is it; ten grand."

"This is the real deal too," said Swanson, pocketing the diamond and the magnifying glass.

Fifteen grand! Joey thought. I've got fifteen thousand five hundred dollars in my pocket just like that now. I wonder how much a PlayStation costs? Wait—I'll need a TV first, and my hut doesn't have electricity. Dammit! I'll just have to settle for some ice-cream then!

But Swanson's mind was on business. "So can you really pull it off?" he said.

Joey grinned smugly. "Off course I can!" he said. "You obviously don't know who you're taking to. I can get whatever I want done."

Swanson nodded, but Joey could see that the motion had a tinged of contradiction and mockery.

"What?" Joey said.

Swanson pulled out a poster from out of his coat and handed it to Joey.

How many stuff does this guy have under his coat? Joey thought. Does he have candy too? He looked at the poster in his hands, and his face twisted into a grimace.

"What the—"

There was a wanted poster for the Four-foot Slugger, with a sketch of him, poorly done like the man was drunk. The eyebrows were too bushy, his face was too big and his mouth was too wide. But it

was the words that turned off Joey: \$2000 reward for information leading to the arrest of the Four-foot Slugger. He is armed and dangerous, smelly, brown hair, and very short; differentiated from a midget by his baseball bat and loud voice.

Joey savagely tore the poster into shreds that trembled in the wind as they fell.

“I thought that the warrant for me was off already?” said Joey.

“I’m guessing they’re anticipating you stealing the painting today,” said Swanson. “Last week when you stole one of Nutty’s nuts when she was having her meeting in Central Park must have really gotten the cops worked up.”

“They’ll care about a damn talking squirrel than a kid,” said Joey glumly to himself.

“What?”

“Nothing,” said Joey sharply. “Now look, don’t worry about me getting the painting, just make sure that the information you gave me isn’t bogus.”

Swanson took another puff of his cigarette. “Don’t worry,” he said. “The transport crew always stops on 5th Avenue to have coffee and watch the girls doing their morning stretch in the park. Even if those idiots are transporting something important, they’ll make a stop there. Remember, today at twelve o’ clock.”

“I know, I’m not stupid you know,” said Joey.

“How much is one hundred twenty three divided by seven point four?” said Swanson, just to make sure.

“It’s your mother—that’s what it is?” said Joey before turning to leave.

When Joey was gone Swanson pulled out his cell phone and dialed a number. The phone rang with a song by the cast of High School Musical. It stopped.

“Hello?” said a husky voice.

“The kid’s goanna do it,” said Swanson. “I think he can pull it off.”

On the other end of the phone a huge man with short black hair and a black suit that stretched over his frame was smiling. Not because he got good news from Swanson, but because the billboard he was looking at was showing an ad for a kindergarten with some dancing aliens.

“Barney are you listening?” said Swanson.

Barney was snapped away from the cartoon. “Uh? W-what?” he said.

Swanson pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. I’m surrounded by idiots. He said, “Remember the plan Barney!”

“Oh yeah!” said Barney. “The painting...”

“Yeah, the painting, you dumbass,” said Swanson.

“Yeah, yeah I remember now Swanson,” said Barney, “you don’t have to shout in my ear.”

“Just make sure you and the guys are there when the kid takes it,” said Swanson. “Make sure he gets away from the police before you nab it from him.”

“What if he fights back,” said Barney.

“Make sure he doesn’t come back to find us,” said Swanson. “There isn’t any damn way I’m goanna be paying that kid a hundred grand for a pretty picture.”

Though the Sicilian art collector paying me two hundred grand for the painting is a really reasonable guy, thought Swanson.

CHAPTER TWO

Lezura spent five months in search of the Rakai, and her search finally landed her in Manhattan.

During the course of that time, Lezura had to sneak up on a woman in Cairo, drag her in a corner with the aid of Donnowarru, and copy the woman's appearance with her honoi and paste in on herself.

Now Lezura looked like a black haired human female with delicious chocolate colored skin. Her eyes were in a same beautiful brown, and though her ears were now rounded, she still had her acute hearing.

She had travelled across Egypt, half of Europe, across the Atlantic and ended up in the U.S. She learnt Arabic, Dutch, French and English, all within five months thanks to her great intellect. She had learnt enough of each country's history to properly integrate herself with the population—but that was not to say she didn't have her difficulties.

It wasn't easy travelling the world in alien vehicle without arousing some attention. Most difficult was to get fuel for her Thwopter. She spent some of her time doing some jobs in these countries; changing human races at time to match they society. But she found that the dark skin worked well with the sun, though not well when it came to employment.

When the money wasn't enough, she was forced to gathered kilos of algae and converts them to ethanol fuel for her Thwopter. The flight across the Atlantic was long and tedious, and even required the help of the wizard Donnowarru to carry her and the Thwopter when it ran out of fuel.

So now on this warm day, glowing with the essence of life from animal to plan, Lezura strolled through Central Park to where she had hidden her Thwopter.

She walked across the bow bridge, where the water at her sides sparkled in rippling light. She admired the beauty of the swans floating on the top, and watched some children give offerings of bread crumbs to the bird and the fishes.

The season was fall, triggering the leaves of the trees into their display of warm colors. Lezura passed the bridge and went along the path to a great cluster of bushes a few yards away. She saw a few human males giving her knowing winks and stares.

Wearing a silver silk dress with a white blouse beneath it and in black slippers, she was quite the looker, even with her prescription glasses. Normally a nycarman saw forty meters less than the average human, and had to compensate for it with the aid of lenses. But Lezura knew she would have stood out had she wore her electronic goggles, so she switched to these.

She carried a single-strap bag full of gasoline for her Thwopter. The acrilium battery in the machine could last for up to four years, but that energy could only be used for antigravity orbs.

Lezura walked pass a group of men dressed in kilts and playing bag pipes for passersby and those who stopped to listen. She headed right for a huge cluster of bushes that seemed too dense and tick for any right-minded minded person to venture into. They could walk a few metes into it as Lezura did now, but seeing the rest of the dense growth anyone would have turned back.

But Lezura didn't, because she knew that it was all an illusion. As she walked into it she felt ripples of low static against her skin. Not painful, but it made her ears flex irritatingly, and had she had body hair she would have gotten goose bumps.

She walked out of the illusion and into a small glade, large enough to house her Thwopter. Lezura still didn't underestimate the curiosity of the humans, so she attacked a Fizzer onto her Thwopter. It seemed that nothing was in the space, but closer inspection revealed that the air shimmered like heat.

Lezura took a remote from out of her bag and pressed a few buttons on it. The shimmering slowed until the air wobbled, slowly materializing the Thwopter.

She immediately proceeded to open the fuel port at the left of the front of the Thwopter and empty the gasoline cartons into it.

She noticed a daisy next to her foot, withered and abandoned while the others were strong and prideful like white light bulbs in the sun. Lezura touched the flower, a spark of pink energy appeared on her fingers, and the daisy stood up like a newly crowned knight.

“Where the hell have you been?” said a voice.

Lezura sighed and rolled her eyes. She put down the carton and looked behind her to see a raccoon approaching her. It rose on two feet, shimmered with blue energy. Its body contorted and bulged until it became Donnowarru.

Lezura liked Donnowarru more when he was a cute furry critter.

“I told you I was going to get some fuel, Donnowarru,” said Lezura.

Donnowarru didn’t look too happy for some reason. Well, he never really looked happy at all! But he seemed to be a little grumpier right now.

“Is something wrong?” said Lezura.

“I was just chased by those blasted furry monsters again!” said the wizard.

Lezura tried to stifle a laugh, but considering how rude Donnowarru always is to her she grinned at him. “I told you to avoid those animals,” said Lezura. “By the way, they are called squirrels.”

“I do not care what they are called,” said Donnowarru, “they are bloody monsters! Hurry up and go find the Rakai so I can get off this wretched planet!”

“Do not order me around like your house-girl,” said Lezura. “I have to make sure that everything is in order when I meet the Rakai.”

“You are speaking as if there might even a world to save when you get back,” said the wizard.

Lezura felt her gut wrench like a gronk gripped her. She had been trying to put that thought on the back burner of her mind, replacing it with wondrous things about Earth. She had spent five months here on Earth. Based on what Blinchi had recorded, Earth’s time was a little faster than on Sangetsu. But regardless, at least three months could have past back on her home world.

Each night Lezura wondered how far things could have gone; how far the Prestige System had stretched its tentacles of power in the sea of helpless people.

Would there even be anything to save when I get back? Lezura thought. Of course there is! I have to have faith. I have to be strong for her.

“I have faith that the Rakai will change the world,” said Lezura.

Donnowarru scoffed. The way he saw it, if the second Rakai Conner Wondonder could not stop the invasion, what chance did they have now that the other side had taken over. “You keep telling yourself that, little woman. The only reason I am even here to help you is because those damn wizards cast a squire’s spell on my soul. I have to help you regardless of how I feel.”

“That is fine with me,” said Lezura with a smile. She put the empty cartons in a disposable plastic bag. She got up and took the compass from around her neck and examined it. The key was glowing, wobbling unstably under some magnetic pull. “We have to go to the east now, on 5th Avenue.”

Lezura hid back the compass and searched her back for her valuables. She took out her utility belt, and removed her silk dress to expose her white blouse with the Yankee logo in red on the chest, and blue jeans.

She tied the utility belt around her waist, and dropped her blouse over it, though the things beneath it still bulged. She put on a tight bag-pack, that was actually her combat weapon compacted inside.

It wouldn’t be the best disguise, and she was sure that she would be getting some stares. But it was the best she could do on such short notice. She stepped from her Thwopter and activated the Fizzer. The Thwopter vibrated so fast that the molecules were impossible to see, and the Thwopter vanished into a shimmer.

She turned to Donnowarru, who had transformed into a lizard and leaped onto her shoulder.

“Time to go Rakai hunting,” said Lezura. Lezura considered how dehumanizing the term was. She stepped out of the bush and said, “Let’s go find the Rakai!”

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