

WAYBOUND

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CHAPTER ONE

The sky inside Lindon's repurposed pocket world was overcast by slowly swirling clouds of various colors. While the heart of the space had been stolen from Reigan Shen, much of its material had come from the Ninecloud Court, and their influence was clear in the churning rainbow vapor that shone brightly overhead.

The wind that stirred those clouds only began when Lindon stepped inside. While empty, the time in the pocket space had been slowed to a crawl. Almost frozen. It would have been too much of a waste to spend their limited time while no one was here to benefit.

With Lindon's appearance, time moved forward again.

Upon entering the space, Lindon first checked its spatial stability by extending his senses. The Void Icon told him that he was boarding a small vessel drifting in the middle of a sea of nonexistence, as though they'd stepped off a dock and onto a boat, but everything seemed stable.

It felt like it would hold, and in the meantime, they would pass weeks in a matter of hours. That level of time accel-

eration would strain the pocket world, and was an inefficient use of the materials, but economy didn't concern Lindon much.

It was worth burning a fortune for speed. It wasn't Lindon's fortune anyway.

Only once he was sure their shelter wouldn't capsize into the Void did Lindon turn his attention to the layout of the space itself. Beneath the sky of slowly mixing colors floated a rough island of pale stone maybe a mile across.

It reminded Lindon of the slabs of marble from which Reigan Shen had once built his Monarch platform at the Uncrowned King tournament. Which made sense, as he had stolen this island from Shen. Tunnels wound through the stone, containing several facilities and aura training rooms that Lindon dismissed after a single scan.

His would be better.

Yerin entered the pocket world at virtually the same time he did. She glanced into his arms, where Lindon held Mercy's unconscious body.

Since leaving the Akura clan, he hadn't let her out of his sight.

Orthos, Ziel, and Little Blue were supposed to follow only a fraction of a second later, but the world on their side looked almost frozen now that time was speeding up. They were all crammed into the hallway of *Windfall*, ready to enter as soon as they could.

They spilled through a few moments later, Orthos grumbling as he had to turn sideways and slide himself through the doorway. Lindon and Yerin had already walked away.

Yerin chewed on her lip and her worried eyes stayed on Mercy. "She's all shredded up."

[No, don't worry!] Dross encouraged her. [It's just severe

structural damage to the madra channels. She'll be fine in a few years.]

"But we have a plan," Lindon added. He activated the Soulforge, and a gateway appeared within the pocket world. It looked out onto another space, a rune-carved platform floating over a starry void. A dull silver altar sat in the middle of the platform, bright blue flames flickering merrily at its heart.

Lindon's void key strained under the pressure from the artifacts he'd stolen from the Monarchs. He floated them out in sealed containers, and the Soulforge trembled under the weight of their significance.

Fortunately, the Soulforge kept that power isolated from the rest of the space.

"The Monarchs had to work together to stabilize your spirit so you didn't have to face any consequences from advancing early," Lindon said to Yerin. He carefully floated Mercy over using wind aura, then rested her on the surface of the anvil at the heart of the Soulforge. "We're going to borrow their authority to do the same thing here."

[Technically not the *same* thing. And they didn't need *all* the Monarchs, just enough to cover a wide enough variety of authority. Which is good, because items don't hold authority as well as people do, and we were planning to save these for advancement—]

Lindon was about to interrupt, but Dross cut himself off.

[—I know you're about to stop me, so I'll just go ahead and stop myself.]

Yerin nodded to the items floating out of the various sealed containers under Lindon's aura control. "Wasn't that the point to all the looting we did? Have to fake our own half-price Monarch commands."

“We can only bend the rules so many times,” Lindon said. “What we use to heal her now, we can’t use to advance her later.”

Yerin folded her arms. “Let’s get to bending.”

“Of course.”

Lindon summoned the Monarch artifacts to himself. He slipped on a signet ring belonging to Reigan Shen, lifted a scepter belonging to an ancient Monarch whose name had been lost to time, and replaced his outer robe with a shoddy one that Northstrider had owned for years.

Also, from his soulspace, he brought a single blue-green leaf with an eye in the center.

The authority embedded in the objects had a specific purpose. The power struggled against Lindon as he tried to focus it, to bend it to his will.

Reigan Shen’s represented his wealth and his command over space, while Northstrider’s authority was much more physical. The scepter shone with the purity of a wandering monk, a sacred artist who gave up all worldly causes.

Lindon not only had to wrangle all that authority to one purpose but had to link it to his own authority. He found the Void Icon and focused his attention, trying to restore Mercy’s condition to before. To use Void authority for such a task, he had to think of it as reducing her wounds to nothing. To negate the specific events that had left her that way.

Though he was already wrestling with too much power, he needed more. Healing her wasn’t enough; he had to rebuild her foundation. He clasped Suriel’s marble in his left hand. It didn’t lend him any power, but its restorative aura could guide him.

Yerin eyed him up and down. “You look like a vagrant wanderer trying to dress up rich.”

[Don't worry,] Dross said. [I won't let it go to his head.]

A crown settled on Lindon's brow. It was the legacy of another ancient Monarch, and this one Lindon hadn't stolen; he'd found it in the labyrinth.

Lindon's mind and spirit trembled as he tried to juggle all the authority, but his voice was clear as he commanded Mercy: **"Be whole."**

The result wasn't as simple as Lindon had hoped.

Each source of authority tried to restore Mercy in a different way. Unlike a living person, the items were inflexible and bound to a specific purpose. They fought one another and resisted Lindon.

But his command touched something deeper, something that ran beneath reality. A force that reminded him of Suriel, and of the chambers at the very bottom of reality. That distant force echoed.

A spark of blue light flickered through Mercy, and Lindon fell to his knees.

He felt like he'd tumbled down a waterfall in less than a second. This was the force that held reality in place, the power that he'd only heard whispers of: The Way Between Worlds. The power of pure order.

It was too much to command such power directly. He had stretched himself.

But it worked.

Mercy sat up straight on the anvil at the heart of the Soulforge, gasping for air. Purple eyes shot here and there in obvious confusion, and her breaths were harsh.

Yerin stood over her in concern, hands on Mercy's shoulders. "Mercy. Oi. Look me in the eyes. Can you see straight?"

Clarity returned to Mercy's gaze. She looked from Yerin to Lindon, and Lindon saw the memory hit her. Then tears

welled up and she threw her arms around Yerin and began to sob.

The only phrase Lindon caught was “my mother.” He wasn’t sure the rest were even words. Yerin softened and held Mercy as she cried.

Lindon wanted to speak his own assurances, but the world was unsteady around him. The scepter in his left hand cracked and a fragment of cloth drifted down from Northstrider’s robe. All the items felt strained, with the notable exception of Emriss Silentborn’s leaf. That was ripe with healing authority, so it had channeled his commands easily.

[I did warn you this was a possibility,] Dross pointed out. [We’re not working with living Monarchs, are we?]

Lindon responded silently. *These aren’t simple constructs. They’re not supposed to be disposable.*

[They’re not *supposed* to be used by anyone other than their creators. Borrowing their authority even once was an achievement. We should celebrate! Woohoo, you did it! You’re not celebrating.]

Lindon was focused on the scepter. He could fix the physical damage to the item easily enough, but it was the symptom of a deeper problem. *In the worst case, we might need to use these four more times.*

[How do you feel about *once* more?]

Lindon cast his mind through other options. Emriss Silentborn would cooperate with them, and if it came to restoring spirits, there was likely no Monarch better. But bracing a spirit to speed through several advancement levels was harder, and it was too much to ask for more than one Monarch to help.

In theory, he could get new objects of power. There was plenty of the labyrinth he hadn’t explored yet, and he

could still use its transportation power to steal more from the Monarchs.

In practice, they didn't have the time for that.

[We haven't managed to open everything we stole yet,] Dross encouraged him. [I'm sure we'll get everyone up to standard in time.]

Even inside a pocket world that ran a hundred times faster, time was their limiting factor. But there were other possible solutions.

We'll continue as we are, Lindon thought. *I'll work on it.*

[Oh, good. I was worried *I* was going to have to work on it.]

You already have a job. Lindon felt Dross' mind flash with thoughts of twisting dreams and white halos before Dross sighed and agreed.

Mercy wiped the mess off her face with the backs of her black-gloved hands as she sniffled. She looked to Lindon. "Thanks. I don't know what I'd have..."

She trailed off. Lindon inclined his head to her. "We were never going to leave you behind," he said. "But I do regret that we had to fight your mother."

Mercy sagged back down against the altar. "You should ascend. She won't let you go anymore."

"She'd better ask us to let *her* go," Yerin muttered.

Lindon scanned Mercy's spirit, drawing her attention to her own condition. "You'll be able to ascend yourself soon."

She smiled sadly. "Yeah, I'm sure I will. I'll be right behind..." Mercy froze with her mouth open as she checked her spirit.

An instant later, the Book of Eternal Night manifested over her head. It was larger and brighter than ever before. More distinct. Its connection to her spirit had improved, thanks to her forcing open the seventh page.

Normally, that would be more burden than she could handle. Instead of an advantage, it would be a crippling weight that settled on her spirit.

But now, the authority of Monarchs had reinforced her soul. She was restored, rebalanced, grounded in reality.

“What?” she asked.

Yerin shrugged. “Sage thing.”

“Nothing I could do on my own,” Lindon said humbly. “I’m afraid I had to borrow from my predecessors.” While they spoke, he packed away the Monarch artifacts into their sealed containers and floated them back into his void key.

“Am...am I a Herald now?” Mercy asked in wonder.

Green horns poked around the Soulforge portal and Ziel peeked in. “That would be unfair.”

To Lindon, Ziel felt almost as steady as Mercy did. Especially compared to the wounded, unbalanced soul he’d possessed for most of the time Lindon had known him.

Not only was his spirit more stable than Lindon had ever felt it, but there was a curious depth to it that Lindon knew to be the first few wisps of vague authority.

Ziel had begun to resonate with an Icon, as Lindon had sensed before, though it was hard to tell which one.

“Not a Herald,” Yerin assured Mercy. “But Lindon’s not explaining it, so I’ll take a swing at it: the Book tore you up on the inside. He borrowed some Monarch tools to fix you, which left you more stable than ever.” She turned to Lindon. “How’d I do?”

“Exactly right.”

Dross manifested over Lindon’s shoulder. [He’s being generous. You missed a lot of nuance and effort. Mostly on my part.]

“Glad you made it,” Ziel said. His voice was flat as ever.

Mercy teared up again. “Thank you, Ziel! I just...I need some time to...”

She started crying again. Ziel coughed and slid slowly back out of sight.

Yerin took Mercy underground to the few half-finished caves that were the only shelter currently on the island. Lindon stayed behind with Ziel, Orthos, and Little Blue. They stood on bare marble, looking up into the color-swirling sky as a dry wind swept dust past them.

Little Blue whistled a question.

[That's the fun part!] Dross answered excitedly. [Now Lindon gets to create a world.]

Worry for Mercy had been eating at Lindon's thoughts, not to mention that he had just fought a Monarch.

But he *had* been looking forward to this.

Ziel eyed him skeptically. "Shouldn't you rest before you try something like this?"

Lindon adjusted his sleeves. "If I don't feel like I can handle it, I'll stop. Would you all open your void keys, please?"

Ziel shrugged and obeyed. A door opened in the air next to him. Orthos was next, and even Little Blue, though she only activated one that Orthos had carried for her.

Even through all the scripted containers and restrictions Lindon had placed, power radiated out of the keys. Space trembled gently, though Lindon was encouraged that the pocket world remained stable.

He didn't have a single void key big or strong enough to contain everything he'd stolen from the Monarchs.

That thought cheered him greatly.

Orthos faced his own void key. "Tell me where to start."

Lindon reached out with soulfire. In his Copper sight, wind aura was a strong, vivid green here.

With fingers of wind, Lindon seized a chest from Orthos' void key and brought it out. At the same time, his soul-

fire resonated with the yellow veins of earth aura beneath his feet.

Guided by vital aura, the marble on the edge of the island flowed up into another cave entrance. The cave continued beneath the surface, though it wasn't deep.

"I'll make our cycling room first, Orthos," Lindon said. "We don't have as much space as I'd like, but it will be big enough for the two of us."

Orthos watched Lindon use complex Ruler techniques effortlessly, even without a compatible Path, and snorted smoke. Lindon felt a spark of the turtle's jealousy and smiled slightly.

Before long, Orthos would be able to do this himself.

Orthos scanned around the marble ground, looking for something, so Lindon diverted a little earth aura to create some pebbles for him to snack on.

[It's rare for any sacred artist to be able to cycle with ultimate natural treasures,] Dross said. He manifested next to Lindon, looking proud. [Let's all thank the Monarchs for financing our operation.]

Little Blue applauded.

The first chest from Orthos' void key opened, and suddenly the temperature in the entire pocket world rose several degrees. Red-gold light spilled out, and all the fire aura Lindon could see strengthened visibly as he lifted out the Heaven's Torch.

It looked almost like a miniature, reddish sun, and manipulating it with wind caused the aura to become infected with heat. Gusts of flame blew away, and without Lindon's control, fires would have started all over the island.

He drifted the natural treasure into the cave and Ziel squared his shoulders. "I'll handle the containment script," he said, so Lindon stopped etching it into the surface.

“Oh, gratitude.”

Ziel stared at him. “You were doing it yourself, weren’t you?”

“I’d rather leave it to the expert.” In truth, Lindon was very practiced with the Blackflame containment script, but Ziel would save him some time. At least a minute or two.

Ziel trudged off, appearing even less eager than usual.

After the Heaven’s Torch came a heavily scripted tank. Lindon couldn’t manipulate this treasure directly, as even the incidental effects of aura exposure might cause a disaster. It resembled a fist-sized droplet of gray liquid, shifting under its own power.

Although *gray* wasn’t the perfect way to describe it. On closer inspection, neither was *liquid*.

It was a flickering, buzzing gray that looked like the world hadn’t made up its mind what color it should be. And it shifted and twitched in place like it was made of ten million tiny insects.

Little Blue shuddered back from it, while Orthos gave a gasp.

“Void Matter,” Lindon said. “The ultimate treasure of destruction aura.”

“I never thought I’d see it with my own eyes,” Orthos said.

“You can thank Reigan Shen.”

Lindon placed the tank containing the natural treasure inside the cave, close to the Heaven’s Torch. But not *too* close. He would have to rearrange them manually for perfect balance, but first he could at least get the treasures in the same room.

Lindon turned his attention to another location and began to raise a second cave entrance.

Into Yerin’s training room, Lindon placed a Blade Crystal,

a paper-thin jewel that he had to hold gingerly with aura. One of the forms of ultimate sword treasure, the Crystal was so sharp that it was better used for training than actual combat.

She would balance that out with the Heart's Gem she already possessed, so he moved on to Mercy's training room. That he filled with a drop of Abyssal Ink, which rejected all light. He had to wait until Ziel finished the containment script for that one first, or it would have darkened the entire pocket world.

Once that cave was hidden with a darkness so impenetrable it twisted the eye, Ziel stood up from where he had been etching script into the stone.

"I know you're about to surprise me," he said. "I don't even know why I'm saying anything. But if you couldn't find a force treasure, I don't blame—"

Lindon floated a box out of Little Blue's void key.

This one had been relatively easy to transport, compared to the others. He opened the box and delicately lifted a head-sized ball of what seemed to be bronze. "The Sovereign Drum. As you know, force treasures rarely form naturally. This one was made by sacred artists before the Dread War."

Ziel took it with precise care and carried it into the cycling room himself. Lindon was relieved. His own force control was rudimentary compared to Ziel's, and an accidental strike of the Sovereign Drum could release enough power to blow the island apart.

"The Monarchs must hate you," Ziel said.

"They do," Lindon replied.

Most of the island was taken up by a broad stone building Lindon built for sparring. He reinforced it with rare metals and powerful scripts, and he would continue reinforcing it over the coming days. Ideally, he would have an entire sep-

arate space for that, as the hall was very small considering the scale of Monarch techniques.

But he was confident he could get it to withstand Monarch-level power.

After that, he raised up a more attractive building and separated it into rooms. Orthos and Little Blue began carrying furniture inside; he had hated to take up valuable void key space with things that had no spiritual power, but they had to rest *somewhere*.

Finally, Lindon only had one stretch of the marble island left to work with. He raised pale stone into a long, narrow building with eight rooms, like a stable made to hold exactly eight horses.

Ziel walked up as though to begin working on another script, but hesitated. “Who is this for?”

“All of us,” Lindon said.

[If it works,] Dross put in. [And this one *really* might not.] He drifted away from Lindon, carrying a simple construct carefully. The construct shone strange colors, radiating the power of corrupted dreams.

It had been made from a piece of the Silent King’s halo.

Dross placed the construct into the center of the leftmost room and fled, reappearing over Lindon’s shoulder.

“You aren’t going to activate it?” Lindon asked.

[I’m looking forward to it, I really am. Oh, I can’t wait! But maybe you do it.]

“It won’t hurt you.”

[We don’t know *what* it will do.]

That might be true. Lindon was painfully ignorant of the forces he was about to invoke. But he needed to learn.

With a pulse of pure madra, Lindon activated the construct.

An illusion filled the room. It was the image of another cave, one made of dark blue-black stone. A hollow that had been carved into the very foundation of the labyrinth.

It was filled with flickering images. Lindon looked into it and saw a kind of mirror; himself as an Unsouled, himself with no Dreadgod arm dying of old age, his parents as children, Yerin fighting Malice with her sword-arms black instead of red.

Past, present, and future flickered in a headache-inducing collage. A symbol over the top of the cave resembled some kind of abstract animal head surrounding what Lindon *thought* was an eye.

This illusionary recreation was much weaker than the real thing, but it still radiated authority that felt related to dream aura, but deeper. As though it were greater than dreams.

Ziel winced and held up a hand. Lindon was feeling the same way.

“We put together my memory, Dross’ memory, and captured images with constructs. Even so, this is a poor rendition of the original. It is too profound for us to understand.”

“Probably for the best,” Ziel said. He tried to glimpse the cavern again and had to blink back tears. “If I have to study a tiger, I’d rather have a picture than the real thing.”

Next to Lindon, Orthos and Little Blue quivered.

“What *are* these?” Orthos asked.

[The Paths of Heaven,] Dross responded, and for once he sounded completely serious.

Lindon deactivated the construct, and everyone gave a sigh of relief. He had similar constructs prepared for all eight, and he prepared to embed them into the floor of the chambers. As he did, he kept glancing at the eighth.

Since the illusion construct wasn’t active, the eighth open-

ing only looked like an empty marble room, but this would be the dark one. The tunnel that had been added on later and filled with death.

Eithan's original creation. The height of his Path.

"We're going to join them soon," Lindon said, and he was speaking to himself as much as anyone. In his left hand, he rolled Suriel's marble.

"I never thought we would find ourselves fighting among Monarchs," Orthos said. "Much less so soon. Only yesterday, you were a Jade quaking beneath my footsteps."

Ziel sighed. "We're well-stocked, I'll say that for us. If we're going to do the impossible, at least we have the facilities for it."

Lindon looked over the island, now filled with marble buildings he'd grown, and felt a pleasant swell of pride. There was more to do, but this was a good start.

Orthos rumbled agreement. "We have everything we need."

"No, we don't!" Mercy's distant voice came drifting on the wind. They all turned, but she wasn't visible yet.

She shouted from within the tunnels. "Wait! Hold on! Almost there! There's more of this than I thou—Aha!" Mercy emerged triumphantly from underground, raising Suu to the sky.

Tears had dried on her cheeks, but she seemed like she had pulled herself together. At least for the moment.

Lindon's heart loosened as he saw her. He had worried that Malice's treatment might have left wounds that couldn't be so easily fixed.

She probably had, he knew. But Mercy was starting to heal.

"We're missing a name!" Mercy cried.

Lindon winced.

Yerin appeared next to him in a flash of white light. As soon as she did, she wrapped an arm around his waist, but spoke dryly to Mercy. “Thought we could skip that part this time.”

“No! We can’t live somewhere without a name!”

Orthos eyed Dross. “You’re not going to call this Death’s Midnight Cemetery, are you?”

[I told you to forget that! Forget it! Bring me those memories so that I can eat them!]

Yerin grabbed Dross before he could fly over to Orthos. “You’re not all death and skulls anymore, true? All right, then, show it to us. What’s your name?”

Dross glowered at Orthos for another second before drawing himself up and clearing his throat. [Ah, yes. As you know, I was born in the mighty world of Ghostwater. We should name this place after that one, right? Right. So, I present to you...]

He spread boneless arms wide. [Drosswater.]

Little Blue sounded like a strangled whistle.

Orthos choked.

Yerin openly laughed.

Even Mercy had been struck speechless.

“I told you they wouldn’t like it,” Lindon said.

[No, they just—you all don’t appreciate the subtle touches! ‘Dross’ is the part you throw away, right? Well, we are the ones who have been cast off, or *thrown away*, by the Monarchs! Set adrift! And from that *dross* we will forge our revolution!]

“It’s a bad name,” Ziel said.

Dross folded his arms. [You do better, then.]

Ziel responded immediately. “Training Chamber Number One.”

[Terrible!]

“I don’t see what’s wrong with it,” Lindon said. “It’s professional.”

Ziel pointed to him. Yerin laughed harder.

Mercy gave a pained smile. “Why don’t we think a little longer, all right? How about...The Room of Spirit and Time!”

“Eh,” Ziel said.

[I’m still concerned that we haven’t given Drosswater enough consideration.]

Yerin wiped a tear from her eye. “No water here, is there? Got our share of rock, though. And wind.”

“Wind for *Windfall*,” Orthos pointed out. “And wind for the Ashwind continent.”

“Ghostwind,” Lindon suggested. “Malice called me the Empty Ghost, and we can still honor Ghostwater.” He nodded to Dross.

[Hmmm...I like it, but now that I think of it, don’t you find that a little too grandiose? This pocket world is nowhere near as large or complete as Ghostwater, after all. The smallest of Northstrider’s halls could beat this place to death. If halls could fight.]

Mercy brightened. “Ghostwind Hall!”

“Don’t have a shiny history with places that have Hall in the name,” Yerin muttered. She squeezed Lindon. “You think it might scrape them the wrong way?”

Lindon considered. “I don’t think Northstrider would care, but the Sage of Red Faith would think we were mocking him.”

“Bright welcome to Ghostwind Hall, then,” Yerin said decisively. “Our home ‘til we can fight the world.”

Lindon surveyed the buildings. And the people standing next to him.

One way or the other, they were all going to leave Cradle together.

He tightened his arm around Yerin and repeated her words. “Until we can fight the world.”



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