

A Failed Summoning

Deep breath in.

Hold.

Deep breath out.

A memory floats to the surface, a glint through a case, through a cracked lid (had it been cracked before?), through a gap (there had been a gap right?) in a pile that had fallen in the ruins she was exploring. She went in looking for answers mostly - the wanderer's palace had been explored, but it was from the same old city that had pieces floating nearby. Why hadn't it ascended? Could it float too? She had been younger, and confident she could find answers. All she had found was how brittle ruins were, when she gently applied a pickaxe to an interesting looking monument (why had it interested her?).

Deep breath in, gathering her aether in with her breath.

Hold, feel the aether filling her chest as her breath fills her lungs.

Deep breath out, the aether subsiding but still greater than when she began.

The glint had been a small crystal, with a symbol she vaguely remembered but not well enough to name and sides faceted in ways she would only later realize were deliberate, the outer geometry a hint to the incredible matrix of channels and curves and angles that formed the interior of the stone. A younger, bolder explorer had become a scholar in an instant as she touched it and felt a tug, not even hesitating to allow her aether to be pulled in, pushing more clumsily after it and being awed by the tiny hint she could perceive of her aether flowing through old, quiet channels that split and curved and merged and pooled and swirled in a raging torrent, in slow pulses, in infinitesimal threads and wires and finally coming out to build the corporeal aether that called into the lifestream, begging an ancient being to come forth again, to fill the aetherial vessel coming into being. And Sparks had answered, had slipped seamlessly into the newest iteration of her body to help another mortal after all the years. Had placed glowing eyes full of wisdom and unfathomable age in a featureless glowing face, sculpted her form into the featureless vessel the crystal constructed. And at the end of it all, she looked out and saw a young girl almost quivering with excitement, swaying with the exhaustion of almost depleting her entire aether reserve to provide as much as was necessary, no reservations strong enough to hold her back from the desperate need to know what was happening.

Deep breath in and in and *in*, pulling aether from her chest, through her arms, pooling and gathering in her hands until it almost overflowed, until the energy was so intense that her scales itched, that her skin pebbled and her veins glowed.

Hold. Feeling the aether, remembering and picturing her mentor, her friend, her partner, her supporter in all things, the delicacy and deft familiarity to her raw power and delighted unstoppable charge towards new knowledge and creations, the missing light in the corner of her mind.

Deep breath out and *push*, filling the crystal just as she had before. As she had a hundred, a thousand, a thousand thousand times since the accidental awakening. The vessel, no longer blank and featureless, every line and mote and curve and angle carved deep into Aly's unconscious mind through countless hours, days, through years. All that time of what she hadn't realized at the time was not just her aether reserves but a small part of her corporeal aether and even her anima, her soul itself, running through the stone into her partner. She pushed gently but with every bit of certainty she had, the magic beginning to form the body as it reached out to bring Sparks into it and then -

It stopped.

The magic twisted and collapsed as Aly's aether flowing through empty channels ran into walls that hadn't been there. That couldn't be there. The scale was far, far too small for Aly to detect but a presence there at all was more violation than could be grasped. It was finding a stranger not in your home, not even in your thoughts but in your veins, in the most inner places where air gathered for your blood to pull through your body, where your organs drew nutrition and aether from food, in the lenses that turned meaningless light into your perception of the world. And as she kept her aether pressed against it, trying to move it, to budge it, it did budge. The wrong way. She felt herself pushed back and her already present panic almost exploded, almost drew on old, *old* instincts to drive out this intruder that dared to threaten everything she held dear with every bit of force she could bring to bear.

Deep breath in. Hold her own panic at bay and remember what could happen. What *would* happen, if these infinitesimal channels were somehow damaged.

Hold. Let the aether drain. Let her hope of Sparks's return drain with it. Do what must be done.

Breathe out.

Sob.

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