

UNSTOPPABLE



STORYBOOK

Kai

"And if you come right this way to the next part of our tour, you'll see a map of the known galaxy. There are many planets that orbit our star, but only three that humanity has inhabited: Virenos, Mithras, and Ceres II—which is where we are now, of course.

"We inherited Virenos from the Viren, with whom we had a wonderful working relationship for centuries. The Viren found a more sustainable star system that was better suited to the needs of their species, so they *buggered* off. Get it? Because they're giant insects? Was that insensitive? Okay, moving on. Though we are grateful for the gift, humans have had considerable issues living on the planet. The Virenian ecosystem is much harsher than that here on Ceres II, but the monarchy is working to relieve that.

"Next we have Mithras, which was destroyed in the War of Hemlock. Mithras, our planet of origin, was once lush with green, blue, and purple forests. Unfortunately, over the past couple hundred years, humanity has split into two warring factions: the Celestial Council that governs our planet here and the Silver family that rules Virenos. That war on Mithras took a toll on the land. If you ever get a chance to visit the planet, which I do not recommend, you might encounter junkers who work tirelessly to recycle the planet's garbage.

"Finally, Ceres II, our new home. What a wonderful and diverse planet! Even though we have settled only ten percent of this vast globe, humanity is thriving here, as you can see. And from our past mistakes, we have learned to never again take advantage of our homeworld. Peace is what we strive for!

"And that's the end of our tour through the Museum of Human Space Travel! If you enjoyed the tour today, please consider making a donation at the front desk."

The tour guide waves goodbye to the children and elderly folk they were just lecturing before heading to lunch. Kai watches the group of children chaotically scatter, as a teacher tries to wrangle them back together. They press their fingers against the cold clasps of their black jacket, hiding the Silver family crest against the lapel of their shirt beneath. They run their hand through their dark hair, playing with the gray streak that lightning-bolts through the black, and wonder what else is in store at this museum.



Kai walks through the pristine black-and-white-and-gray halls of an exhibit, immersing themselves in the holograms of historical figures. It's well curated, with several different spaces that share perspectives from each of the three planets. But Kai can't shake the feeling that this place isn't telling its visitors everything.

They wander alone into an auditorium where a giant globe is suspended high above the floor. Gentle music, designed to calm any attendees who saunter through, begins to play on a soundtrack. A projector shines an image of Ceres II onto the globe. The moving picture, an evolving record of human colonization, shows the immigration from Mithras to Ceres II and how humans terraformed the planet into its current state.



Kai remembers learning in school about the war between humans and the Viren and, later on, the War of Hemlock on Mithras. The Viren wanted nothing to do with humans, and humans ceaselessly pressured the Viren into trade, which caused several misunderstandings that spilled over into war. A peace deal was struck years later, instigated by the Celestial Council, but many were convinced that it was really about something else—the resources on Virenos. Over the years, the people

had grown distrustful of those in power, believing they were only looking out for their own interests. The poisoning of a government official sparked the War of Hemlock that split the colonies into two factions.

Mithras couldn't handle the devastation of warfare, and soon the planet's surface crumbled into green dust. The Celestial Council moved its headquarters to Ceres II, building the cities into what they are now, while the Silver family brokered a deal with the Viren that allowed them to take over a small section of Virenos. The Viren had discovered that their planet of origin was becoming uninhabitable for their species, so they left for another star system. While the dangerous, territorial Virenian wildlife prevents humans from truly thriving there, the Silver family wasn't going to turn down the offer. A few Viren communities stayed behind to help them get acquainted with the new planet, and they now work as advisors to the monarchy.

What is left of Mithras is junkyards and garbage, an entire planet of waste and debris. But some folks still choose to live there, earning a decent wage as "junkers." The junkers celebrate their independence from the Celestial Council and the Silver family. Though a small group, compared to the populations of Ceres II

and Virenos, they've developed their own society and are paid well by both of the warring factions to rid their respective planets of trash. In this galaxy, people will do anything for credits.

Kai leaves the auditorium feeling relaxed. The soundscapes and dim lighting brought their heart to a slower pace, but now they have to get back to their job. They step out of the museum and into the city filth—a stark contrast from the delusions of utopia presented in the exhibits that they so wish were true. The streets are drenched in neon light from moving billboards that showcase products for purchase to make one better, faster, stronger, more beautiful. The people below the signs peddle their wares as they shield themselves from the toxic pollution that leaks from vehicles and motorcycles. These sights and smells are still new to Kai, despite the almost two Ceresan weeks they've already spent here in search of their sibling.



Roux is the rightful heir to the Silver family throne, but she ran away, leaving her responsibilities behind. Kai always thought she was reckless. When they were growing up, Roux was the one more willing to take risks, getting into trouble with teachers and stealing back her confiscated compads, before moving on to steal bigger things like motorcycles. Kai always had to cover her back. That's what their parents expected of them. Kai trained with fighters of the court, learning to combat even the toughest beasts with melee weapons and lasers. They were raised to be caretaker of the next in line.

When Kai reached their eighteenth birthday, a power awakened inside them. They discovered that they could harness energy from within to bend reality to their will. Luckily, this made their babysitting job a lot easier, but of course they had to tell Roux. Excited for Kai's new abilities, she convinced them to wreak all kinds of havoc, pranking the royal guards and sneaking off to Ceres II. But adulthood brought Roux's fun to a halt. As the pair grew older, Roux finally had to take on her royal duties of leading the people. Kai knew better than anyone that she did not want the role, but the alternative was leaving the throne to their cousin, who wanted to spread the Silver family's rule to Ceres II, which could lead to more war—something no one in this galaxy needs.

Tracking down Roux is what led Kai to this city planet. They reach into their pocket and take out the crumpled bit of paper with Roux's last message: "Don't look for me. I mean it." Kai grumbles quietly and folds the scrap back into their jacket. Back when they were teens, they would often sneak off to the

museum together, but Roux's not here today. Kai heaves a deep sigh and meanders through the food stalls down the street, taking in the smells of Virenian deer meat, both synthetic and imported, as the heat from the grills wafts against their face. The calls of "*fresh astral rat!*" and "*faux bison steak!*" beckon from the vendors, who wave their spatulas and put on a performance as they cut and dice various blue and pink vegetables. When the first human colonies settled here, the toughest part was learning how to cook with local ingredients while still using recipes passed down from the days when Mithras was at its peak. It took some time, but it seems the chefs here have figured it out.

Kai remembers sitting with Roux at an outdoor noodle-roll bar, where the noodles were made from purple grain and the liquor fermented from satin fruit, throwing their heads back in laughter as Roux recounted tales of how they had thwarted yet another royal guard with a childish prank. Kai strolls back to the same bar, eyeing the guests who are seated behind the counter. The sign says "STEAMED"—an obvious indication of how everything is cooked there.



Kai snaps out of their reverie when they recognize someone wearing Roux's old violet raincoat. It even has the same tear that she made when they went camping together in the Virenian Everglades! The wearer, noticing Kai, leaves their seat and darts through the crowd of diners walking among the food stalls. Kai chases after them, weaving around one corner after another, before finally arriving in an alleyway filled to the brim with sewage fog. A dead end. The suspicious figure steps toward Kai, carrying a sickle charged with an electric spark. Taking a breath, Kai imagines that the sickle is no longer there. They wave a hand in the air and knock the blade to the ground without effort.

"I'm not going to hurt you. I just want to know where you got that jacket." Kai levels their hands, attempting to defuse the situation.

The figure, a man, steps forward into the light. He lifts a brown scarf off his face, one reminiscent of the Mithran junkers' style, revealing hair streaked with reds and purples. His eyes are a striking amber. He is dressed like a city dweller, in tight-fitting jeans and durable boots. Roux's jacket does fit him quite well. The man unzips the jacket and empties the pockets. A gold amulet shaped like a beetle, with several sharp tendrils decorated on the outside of its shell, falls out. He places the necklace in the pocket of his jeans and tosses the jacket to Kai.

"Are you a junker?" Kai asks, pointing at the man's scarf.

He nods. "Yeah, used to be."

"Is that how you got this jacket?" Kai holds their breath, hoping that he would say no. The last thing they need is a dead-end clue.

"Nah. Someone claiming to be Roux Silver gave it to me. She looked a lot like her, to be honest."

"It was her." Kai shakes their head.

The man raises an eyebrow. "Guess I met a real celebrity then. Why are you looking for her?"

"I'm her sibling. She needs to come back and take the throne."

The man's face softens into a smile. "Wow, I've now met two members of the Silver family! I've never seen you on the news, though. I'd be happy to help...for a price."

Kai nods. "Name your price."

The man sticks out a hand to seal the deal with a shake. "I'm Zephyr, by the way."



Zephyr



Like most of the inhabitants of Mithras, Zephyr was a junker. A damn good one. He made the faction a lot of credits by bartering with representatives from Virenos and Ceres II. He was well respected and well liked among his community. Unfortunately, being liked wasn't enough to pay for his aunt's medication for a Viren disease, considering how small the Viren population is and how little the humans are doing to help them. His aunt could always travel to the new Viren star system, but she said that she wouldn't dare to leave her home. Zephyr never met his human parents, and Aunt Oreda had been his legal guardian for most of his life. In turn, he wanted to be there for her. So he concocted a plan to steal a relic valuable enough to pay for the necessary medication.

Having lived on Mithras for so long, Zephyr was used to the storms and the harsh climate. He fought off the wildlife of the planet, protecting other junkers. But there was one other thing that had helped him. On his eighteenth birthday, a power awakened inside him. He discovered that he could harness energy from within to bend reality to his will. He took advantage of this ability to steal an old Viren brooch, speckled with jewels and shaped to look like the face of a Viren celebrity. His aunt told him that to the Viren it was just old junk, hardly worth a few credits, but to humans it was worth thousands—probably because they find it strange and exotic.

During work on a regular day, Zephyr went to the junkers' private collection of artifacts, all waiting to be sold to the Celestial Council, and pocketed the brooch. He ran straight home and gave the jewelry to his aunt, but he was caught a week later, after a fellow junker saw security footage of the theft. Zephyr was about to be taken into custody by the Mithran authorities when he escaped the planet and fled to Ceres II.

It's been almost five years since then, and he now lives under an assumed name, Zephyr, doing contract work. Sometimes, ironically, he even works as a bounty hunter. One of his first jobs as a contractor was pest control, dealing with an infestation of the "faceless"—blood-red millipede creatures with several human-like arms and hands that attach themselves to dark crevices. They typically live among rocky

landscapes, but they had somehow made it into the city. Three of them were found consuming Celestial Council workers, their bodies wrapped around the victims, squeezing acid onto them. Zephyr still shudders when he remembers the day he stumbled across one of the faceless, its proboscis-like tendril sucking the melted flesh of a disintegrated worker. But life on Mithras had taught him how to fight, and he defeated the creature in a matter of minutes.

That job paid him poorly for risking his life, but Zephyr continues to find work, and he sends any extra credits back home to Aunt Oreda. He occasionally calls her to check in, using an encrypted line, but she misses him sorely. She constantly worries that he's not eating well and not taking care of himself, despite his endless reassurances. He lives in a tiny shoebox of an apartment, but compared to housing on Mithras, it's luxurious.

"So this is how Ceresans live, huh?" Kai smooths their hands over a tablecloth on the combination dining room-living room table.

"I'm from Mithras," Zephyr grumbles.

"Mithran. My apologies." Kai spots a small framed picture of Zephyr as a child with an older figure. "Who's this?"

"That's me and my aunt." Zephyr opens the fridge and pulls out a beer labeled "HOWLER." He offers one to Kai, but they raise a hand to decline.

"Are you part Viren?"

Zephyr sets the bottle down on the table and sits on an uncomfortable-looking metal chair. "No, nothing like that. I guess my real parents abandoned me, and Aunt Oreda took me in after her family left for the new Viren star system. Or passed away. She's alone now. These jobs I do? I do it all for her."

"That's very noble of you." Kai purses their lips, reminded of their own duties to the Silver family.

"Yeah, well, it gets me into trouble sometimes," Zephyr giggles. He focuses his attention on the bottlecap of his beer. Narrowing his eyes, he flings the cap off the glass bottle without touching it, then looks up at Kai.



"You have the power within, too." Kai smirks. "Why didn't you fight back in the alleyway?" Zephyr shrugs. "I figured that you're not after me for the job I'm on right now." He lifts the gold amulet out of his jeans pocket and places it delicately on the table, motioning for Kai to inspect it. "Do you know anything about this?"

Kai lightly touches one of the legs of the amulet. They think back to what their Viren art teachers had said in the past. They recall learning about a symbol like this that was used to banish a fabled creature, but it was rarely ever placed on jewelry or clothing.

"I think it's meant to ward off a monster. Are you working for some kind of art historian?"

Zephyr laughs. "No. I was hired to steal this from the Order. They're a political group vying to take over the Celestial Council. But they're...a little weird. The word 'cult' comes to mind. They have a thing for the Viren and their culture. And this?" He picks up the amulet with one hand, letting the light glimmer against the gold. "They think this thing will unlock some kind of ancient Viren god that can grant them immortality. Aunt Oreda's never heard of it."

"I've never heard of it either." Kai shakes their head. "What does this have to do with my sister?"

Zephyr sets down his beer and gives a sigh. "I think she's joined the Order."

Frustrated, but not surprised, Kai rubs their hands against their face, trying their best to stay calm.

"You know this for sure?"



"I met her at the soup bar around the corner from where we just were. I was minding my own business, trying to get ready for the next gig, but she seemed...almost elated? That's why I didn't believe she was Roux Silver. When she gave me her jacket, she said she was upgrading to new robes. Mentioned something about uniting all three planets, bringing life back to Mithras, worshipping a vengeful god that could do all of the above—"

"Okay, I get it," Kai interrupts. "So where is she now?" "I think she's on Mithras. They have some kind of event happening there, and that's why I have this

thing. They need this amulet to do...whatever it is they do. But my employers are paying me a fair sum to retrieve this for them instead.”

“Let me guess, the Celestial Council hired you.”

“Bingo.”

“...But, if I pay you more, we can use it to get to the event on Mithras?”

“You’re catching on.” Zephyr smiles, feeling proud of himself. “The tricky thing is that I’m not exactly welcome on Mithras. If they find me, they’ll throw me in jail; it was a small misdemeanor that got blown out of proportion. If the Silver family can guarantee my safety and grant me and my Aunt Oreda political asylum on Virenos, then we have a deal.”

Kai sits back in their chair. Their upper lip curls with enjoyment at Zephyr’s tactical thinking. “The Silver family will pay you and can relocate you—on the condition that you help me take Roux back to Virenos.”

“All right then! It’s settled.” Zephyr stands up from his chair and grabs his commpad. His fingers dance along the surface of the screen before reaching a call tone.

“Who are you calling?”

Zephyr smiles. “Family.”



Monsters of Mithras



The public transport ship descends onto the platform on Mithras, spreading dust across the concrete. A passenger vessel like this can hold up to two hundred travelers and makes trips between the planets daily. As they exit the Interplanetary Public Transportation hub, hot sand whips into Kai's face.

Zephyr pulls the scarf up over his mouth and hands Kai a pair of goggles. "You'll need these."

As the two get acquainted with the heat, a customs officer asks to see their galactic passports. Kai hands the officer their passport and shows their comppad with a barcode on the screen. "I'm here on Silver family business, and this is my hire."

The officer's eyes widen behind his goggles. "Yes, absolutely! I'll be out of your hair in a second, Your Majesty." He quickly scans the barcode, before hurriedly rushing away to greet the next passengers in line.

"Are people always this terrified of your family?" Zephyr chuckles. "Because I could really get used to this level of service."

Before Kai can respond, a Viren teenager, standing six feet tall, rushes over to greet Zephyr in a hushed female voice. "Is that...is that you, Z?"

"The one and only!" Zephyr puffs his chest out and the teen engulfs him with a hug, causing the bones in his spine to crack audibly. "Hey, Julida? Buddy?"

"Oh! Sorry, Z." Julida lets go of her human companion and guides the two down to her eight-wheeled vehicle. "Come on, let's get to the bunker before the howler gets here. You can tell me everything, too! Are you on secret business? Aunt Oreda says you're gonna get yourself into trouble."

"Not true. Our friend Kai here is going to help us out." Zephyr gives Kai a wink as the Mithran Gale vehicle barrels full force down a sandy road, headed toward a small group of homes made out of shipping containers. Only a few yards away, junkers push trolleys labeled "VIRENOS" onto conveyor belts, pouring

and separating trash into various recycling and compacting zones. This is the junk that the other planets have decided to abandon to the people here. Kai stares out the window, wondering how much their family pays the residents of Mithras to make it no longer their problem.

Zephyr nudges Kai, then points out a couple of humans with masks that look like mantis heads. “See them? PVC idiots.” The masked humans try to steal scrap metal from one of the trolleys, but fall into the bin.

“PVC?” Kai asks. “Like the plastic?”

“No, the Pro-Viren Coalition,” Julida corrects them. “They’re humans who want equal rights for the Viren, which is great...except they’re mostly incompetent and they refuse to work with VirenThink.”

“And they steal important stuff without knowing what to do with it after,” Zephyr chimes in.

“Like the time they stole a lot of Viren medicine from the Celestial Council and tried to replicate it to give it away,” Julida continues. “Obviously, a great cause and all. But they ended up evaporating all of the samples. Anyway, that’s how Z and I met, through volunteering at VirenThink. You might have heard of us? We—well, my predecessors—helped unionize the Viren who work for the Silver family.”



“I’ve heard of you, yes,” Kai replies, with a hint of admiration in their voice.

“Kai is one of the Silver family,” Zephyr points out.

“Oh, right, forgot about that. You just don’t have that same royal air as the rest of them, y’know? Anyway, we have a vast network of folks who can probably help you track down your sister.”

As soon as Julida parks the vehicle, a junker runs up to the group from the large expanse of green desert. They scream something barely audible, frantically waving their arms. Their face is completely covered by a respiratory mask, their eyes shaded with goggles similar to the ones Kai and Zephyr are wearing.

But when they finally get close enough to be heard, it's too late—several beaks, shaped like a ring of spinning razors, emerge from beneath the jade sand. Three pairs of feathered wings spread from either side of the creature as it sweeps the victim into its sharp mouth and disintegrates them in an instant. "Spriiiiiite! It's a sprite! We need to get inside right now!" Zephyr screams, pushing Julida forward in an attempt to protect her.

Kai places a hand on Zephyr's shoulder. "Get her to safety. I'll fend it off." Before Zephyr can object, Kai turns and runs toward the flying creature. They pull their sword from its sheath, and it crackles with blue energy. Recognizing an opponent, the sprite lifts its wings into the air and its large, knife-like beaks rotate more slowly, as if to prepare for battle.



Kai jumps with the sword raised above their head and releases a cry as the blade lands against a wing. Clipped, the sprite stumbles mid-flight, squawking at its adversary in frustration. Its beaks spin faster and faster, now barreling toward Kai at full speed. But Kai lifts themselves with the power within, feeling the sand push them clear of danger. They dodge fast enough for their sword to release a wave of blue energy that crackles at the beast's wings. Feathers fall from the sprite, cut by the sparks.

In one last breath of defiance, the sprite, flying only a few feet off the ground, spits its tongue of metal and bone at Kai, attempting to pierce them. Kai dances out of the way and swings their blade down at the appendage, cutting it cleanly out of the creature's mouth. The sprite howls into the air, like some distorted siren, as Kai hides behind a large green boulder. Taking advantage of this distraction, Kai takes a metal syringe from their pocket and stabs themselves in the leg with it. Their blood burns like fire briefly, and they gasp for air as the adrenaline screams through their veins.

Within seconds, they feel a surge of energy. Kai climbs atop the boulder and throws their blade directly into the maw of the beast. The sword jams the spinning beaked wheels, causing the sprite to pause momentarily. It chokes, taken aback, before spitting the sword out. Kai grabs the handle and swings it above their head for another round of blows, but just then a whirlwind of green sand sweeps in and the creature disappears into the tornado. Shapes of wolves made of dirt scream and bark from the swirling storm.

Kai scrambles to their feet and makes a run for the shipping-container homes. A door opens, revealing Zephyr on the other side. "There's no way you can beat that howler! Just let those two fight it out. Get inside now!"

Kai quickly stumbles through the metal door and Zephyr locks it from the inside. Catching their breath, they hiss a quick "thank you." The adrenaline trickles out with their sweat and drips in beads onto the floor. Their heartbeat slows down, calming to a regular rate.

"Thanks for taking care of that sprite—though I guess it was actually the howler that took care of it. Come on, I can already smell Aunt Oreda's cooking."

Zephyr guides Kai down a long, dark hallway, lit only by small metal sconces. Eventually, they reach a kitchen with a table in the center, where Julida is already setting the food. Before Zephyr introduces his new friend, he sits down and slurps a large helping of flat Ceresan noodles, then douses the spiciness with a glass of water. Julida hunches over, picking up her fried violet peapods with a tarsus and munching them gleefully between her mandibles.



An elderly looking Viren wearing an apron sighs by the kitchen counter. "These two never seem to get full. You must be Kai. I'm Aunt Oreda." Drawing on their knowledge of Viren customs, Kai tilts their head down, looking at the floor. Aunt Oreda tickles their hair with her antennae. "So polite, too! Look at how respectful your friend is!"

"Auntie O, you raised us to be howlers," Zephyr teases.

"Sure, blame it all on me." Aunt Oreda waves a tarsus sarcastically before turning back to Kai. "So I hear you're looking for your sister?"

Kai nods. "Roux Silver. We believe she may have joined the Order."

"The Order is hosting an event here on Mithras, but they needed this." Zephyr reveals the necklace, and Aunt Oreda delicately plucks it out of his hands.

"Z, this is not what you described to me over the commpad," Aunt Oreda pulls the amulet closer to her large eyes. Using two of her other arms, she taps the sides of the beetle, opening its wings and swinging them up toward the top of the amulet to form the shape of another creature. "This is a harbinger."
"A what now?" Zephyr wipes the remainder of the spicy sauce from his face with a napkin.

"It's a monster. A demon. I've only heard about it in stories, but it is said to bring a fate much worse than death upon those it devours."

"What's worse than death?"

"When it eats, the animals and the people that it consumes become imprints of memories. Essentially, they live on as ghosts in this monster's belly, forever suffering."

Kai feels a chill run down their spine. "You think maybe the Order worships this thing, believing they can gain immortality that way?"

Aunt Oreda shrugs. "If I know one thing about the Order, it's that they don't listen to the Viren. Things get lost in translation. The harbinger is hidden inside the beetle to prevent it from ever escaping. You see the wings? They represent the planet's crust. That's why beetles are so often used as a symbol of protection."

Zephyr chimes in. "And the event they're hosting tomorrow will awaken this monster."

Kai gives Zephyr a knowing look. "We need to find Roux right away."



Disrupting the Order

After Zephyr's insistence that Julida stay behind to take care of things with Aunt Oreda and VirenThink, Julida offers her vehicle for the trip to the Order's headquarters. Kai pulls up the directions on their compad as they climb into the front passenger seat, and Zephyr waves a quick goodbye to his family before starting the Mithran Gale. With a slow rumble, the vehicle sputters and shifts into gear.

The drive across the pale green desert is quiet. Without any idea of what they are about to encounter, their minds race as quickly as the vehicle's wheels turn. Only an hour passes before they arrive at a large steel-gray building. It has no windows and seemingly no doors. When they park some distance away, Zephyr assures Kai that they'll be let into the premises. "We have what they want."

As the two approach the building, a robotic voice chimes, "Who are you here to see?"

"We have something that was stolen from the Order. We'd like to give it back," Kai responds.

A few moments of silence pass, leaving the two anxiously waiting, before a door slides open to reveal a set of stairs that lead deep into the belly of Mithras. The cool air inside contrasts with the exterior temperature as Kai and Zephyr descend. A vocalized hum gets louder and lower until they finally reach the source. A group of robed chanters harmonize around a sigil embossed on the floor—just like the symbol on the amulet. Gold trinkets and artifacts are littered all around the chamber.

Getting closer to the scene prompts the humming to stop suddenly, and the figures all look up at the two newcomers at once. Zephyr, attempting to break the tension, chirps, "Uh, hey everyone. My colleague here and I are just coming to—"

"Kai? What the hell are you doing here?" demands Roux. "I told you not to look for me."

Just as Kai is about to stutter a response, the amulet glows, glimmering like the other items around the sigil, when the floor erupts and a mass of pale tentacles sprouts from underneath. These stalks grab at the robed figures and the golden artifacts, pulling them down into the center of Mithras. Screams crescendo and the chaos knocks Roux back. Kai and Zephyr instinctively jump into action, dodging the pale petioles that sweep across the room.



Amidst the confusion, several members of the Order attempt to scramble up the stairs and out of the chamber, only to be met by teenage Viren carrying electrified swords. Julida leads the charge toward the monster, yelling at Kai and Zephyr, "Did someone call for backup?"

Zephyr screams back, "You have to get out of here! It's too dangerous!"

In response, Julida stabs a tentacle and looks over at her foster brother. "You didn't think I'd leave you two to have all the fun by yourselves, did ya?"

Zephyr groans and charges up his sickle to attack. Kai pulls out their dark-green lasergun, the kind forged especially for the royal family, with the Silver coat of arms imprinted on the side. They press the trigger, releasing light that pierces the squid-like creature's white flesh and causes it to shriek. A black ink leaks from the holes, and the tar left behind sparkles with a starry glitter. It has a consistency that sticks to the bottom of Zephyr's shoe when it trickles to where he is standing.

"Aw, come on. These were a gift," Zephyr complains with a shoe half in the strange blood. As he places a finger on the bottom of his shoe, pulling at the string of ick, he feels strangely faint. His breath quickens and his heart races. Something isn't right. A flash of memory takes him back to the night he saw the faceless consume screaming workers.

A gigantic eyeball fills the hole in the center of the room, and the harbinger seems to recognize who its attackers are. As if in retaliation, a pale tentacle squeezes through the opening and pours into the space, reaching for Kai and knocking them against a pillar.

"Argh!" Kai feels something tear—the muscles in their leg refusing to cooperate, preventing them from getting back up.



Trying to shake the foggy feeling, Zephyr slides his sickle across the skin of the creature, which sears it and causes it to recoil. Crawling over to his friend, he takes out a small vial of red liquid XtraHeal for Kai and a portable Eaze inhaler for himself. Kai downs the vial in a gulp and, within seconds, feels the tissue in their ligaments knit itself back together. With a few deep breaths from the blue inhaler, Zephyr feels the cloudiness escape his mind.

"Thanks for that. You okay?" Kai asks, getting themselves up.

"Yeah, but don't touch the blood. There's something weird about it," Zephyr explains. "Come on, let's stop this thing."

Kai fires several rounds that pierce the cephalopod, as Zephyr dances around the laser beams, landing blow after blow with his sickle. Galactic ooze is wallpapered across the chamber, and the Viren youth attempt to cut the creature while the robed humans huddle in shock.

As the star-filled blood spews across the walls, Zephyr slices at the eyeball, and the creature releases a booming roar. A wave of confusion washes over Kai and Zephyr, and with it the realization that they can hear the panic in the harbinger's mind.

"Wait...maybe we can talk to it?" Zephyr wonders aloud, placing a hand on Kai before they can shoot again. Kai nods and calms their thoughts. With each breath in, they breathe out a message to the harbinger:



Leave now. You're losing.

Zephyr feels the irritation in the creature's mind linger. With one last spit of black ink, it squeezes back out through the hole in the floor. The VirenThink kids high-five one another, cheering their victory.

Roux, unimpressed, lifts herself up and marches toward Kai. "We could've handled it," she scoffs.

"Thought you'd appreciate me fending off a planet killer, but sure," Kai retorts with a tinge of sarcasm in their voice.

"I swear, we're just here to help," Zephyr responds in Kai's defense, intending to quell any volatility between the siblings.

"You need to get back to Virenos right away. Our dear cousin, Serra, is threatening to take over the throne in your absence. She's going to declare war on Ceres II."



Roux pauses to formulate an answer. "The Order will bring peace. If I stay with them, we'll be able to stop the war from happening."

"Roux, I love you, but didn't you see what just happened?" Kai waves an arm broadly at the wreckage—robed officials help one another up, while others perform first aid.

"And it ate all the gold," Zephyr whimpers.

Roux folds her arms and huffs. "Okay, I see your point. But what makes you think I'd be able to lead Virenos?"

"Anyone is better than Serra." Kai shrugs. "Come on, let's go home."

Vacation on Virenos

Kai takes a deep breath of Virenian air and lets out an *ahh* while Roux rolls her eyes. The two siblings and their contractor step off the Interplanetary Public Transportation ship and onto the metal platform of the hub, where they are greeted by green lawns and palm trees. Sandy beaches and small bodies of water dazzle from a few miles away. Zephyr is amazed by the cool climate and warm starlight beaming against his skin. It's understandable why most Viren left—or were forced out, according to Aunt Oreda—and abandoned the planet to its current inhabitants. This place truly is much better suited for humans.

Kai nudges Roux. "Hey, cover your face so you don't get swarmed by the press or fans or, even worse, haters of the monarchy."

Roux places a pair of starglasses over her eyes and grabs Zephyr's scarf before he can rebuke. Once she swings the fabric over her face, she looks almost like a regular junker, visiting Virenos on vacation.

"Not a bad look," Kai giggles, as a disgruntled Zephyr raises an arm to call a Virecab. The siblings pour into the back of the car, and Zephyr takes the passenger seat. The driver greets the three with a wave while noisy music comes from her handheld player.

"You all here from Mithras? You got that look about you! Hard-working junkers—gotta respect that! Hope you all have a great time here on Virenos," the cab driver yells over the sound of clashing synthesizers.

The three remain quiet when the cab screeches to a halt to let a Virenian deer walk across the street. Its tall, slender body is metallic, reflecting light like an oil slick. Its faceless head turns toward the cab, crystalline antlers shimmering. It halts for a few seconds, seeming confused, before darting off into a forested area.

"Faceless," Zephyr whispers. He feels himself start to sweat, reminded of the faceless monsters he saw consume innocents on Ceres II. Kai, noticing their companion's distress, touches him on the shoulder, which returns him to the moment.



"You okay?" Kai asks. Zephyr responds affirmatively with a wordless touch of their hand.

"Ugh. These deer keep getting within the city limits. Not the brightest creatures either." The cab driver lets her foot off the brake. "But quite delicious."

The car continues down the street, passing a row of bright-green palm trees. From the back seat, Kai instructs the driver to take a left and a right and another left down a long, winding road, far away from the central area of Virenos, until they arrive at a wide mansion of lavender marble. A metal fence, with the Silver family crest on the gate, spans the entirety of the complex.

"Here on official business, huh?" the driver presses.

"Something like that." Kai opens the car door and speaks into a small metal intercom at the side of the gate. "Hey, it's Kai. I'm back with Roux."

Just as they finish, the gates swing wide to allow the vehicle onto a stone path that leads up to the mansion. Zephyr gazes out the window, amazed by all the creatures that live on the premises, seemingly as pets. A many-eyed green furball as big as Zephyr himself dangles from a palm tree by one of its vine-like appendages, and a small mammal no taller than a bottle of Howler beer purrs and rubs its pastel-blue body against a gardener.



The green creature, noticing the cab, swings itself through the trees and makes its way to the vehicle. The driver and Zephyr yelp loudly as they stare into the hundreds of eyes, poked against iridescent fur, all staring back and blinking in unison. So loud is the blinking that everyone in the vehicle can hear the synchronized boops.

"I-is that a spider?" the cab driver stutters, terrified to make any sudden moves. Kai and Roux both give a big sigh and exit the cab to greet their pet.

"Dot, come on! Stop trying to scare everyone who comes by." Roux wraps her arms around the fuzzy green mess of eyes and fur, greeting the creature with a warm hug. It purrs in response, and its

vines relax, dropping to the ground. It loses its frightening demeanor to look more like a deflated balloon. *How could anything that seems so incompetent and domesticated be scary?* Zephyr thinks to himself.

After a few rubs of what appears to be Dot's belly, Roux pulls her scarf down to reveal her face, then goes back over to the cab driver and gives her a healthy tip. "Sorry about all of that. Here, this should be more than enough to cover the cost of the trip and a bit more. You know, for putting up with us."

"Roux Silver? Your Majesty, welcome back!" cries the cab driver, stunned by everything that has taken place in the last thirty minutes. "Say, can I get a picture with you?"

Kai and Zephyr step aside, leaving Roux to take care of her celebrity business. Zephyr gazes into Kai's eyes with a deep gratitude. "Hey, thanks for calming me down back there."

"It was nothing. But I sensed something in you. When we were dealing with the harbinger, you didn't use the power within. There's a reason why you don't use it, isn't there?"

Zephyr's eyes dart to the left and he feels a sense of shame before relaxing to tell the truth. "Yeah. One of my first jobs on Ceres II was handling a faceless infestation. I used the power within, but when I tried to communicate with them, all I could hear was one word: *'EAT.'* They overwhelmed me. It got so bad that I...I almost joined them. I stopped myself and I fought them off, but I've been scared to use it ever since."

Kai notices his amber eyes swirl with sorrow. They reach an arm around Zephyr. "Well, since you're sticking around Virenos, maybe we can train that power so it doesn't happen again? We can train together."



Zephyr nods, a smile spreading over his face, but the pair is interrupted by Roux's yelling. "When you two lovebirds are done, I'm ready to get to my throne."

A New Home

Months have passed. Zephyr and his aunt moved to Virenos, and they no longer worry about her medical bills. Aunt Oreda seems content, having found a community of elderly Viren who also retired on Virenos, ready to make the planet their home again. She lives in her own apartment now, with a guest room for when Julida comes to visit, though Julida prefers to stay on Mithras so she can keep up with VirenThink affairs. Kai and Zephyr have become quite close since finding Roux—even moving into Kai’s place together in the center of the city.

It’s a weekday morning when Kai wakes up to the smells of brewed Ceresan coffee. Zephyr is just cracking a synthetic egg into a pan over the stove, sizzling the runny yolk before pouring himself a ground-tea beverage. Kai pecks him on the cheek and steals a slice of toast from the platter. They’ve both made Virenos their home now, despite the pressure Kai still feels to look after Roux. Today, though, Roux can’t get into too much trouble. At the very least, she won’t be able to get herself into any physical danger, being stuck in the palace quarters for her duties before the big announcement.



Kai turns the main commpad on to show the daily news, while the small blue creature they took from the royal grounds, known as a “cat,” rubs his tail across their leg. The cat mews at Zephyr, knowing that he is owed his morning breakfast.

“All right, all right,” Zephyr grumbles as he scoops a mixture of synthesized protein and high-quality Virenian deer meat into the creature’s bowl. “I swear he eats better than us.”

“Vesper deserves only the best.” Kai chuckles and makes kissy sounds at the cat. On the screen, Roux is nearing the end of her speech, which prompts Zephyr to hush Kai and turn up the volume so they can both hear her properly.

“I’m pleased to be taking on the responsibilities of the throne. I spent a lot of time away, meeting new people, expanding my knowledge of the three planets. And there’s one thing I’ve learned: That together we are stronger. Together we are better.”

In the middle of the speech, a call from Julida rings through on the commpad. Zephyr rolls his eyes, thinking that Julida is calling with another exciting report about her Ceresan vacation. Before Zephyr can tell Kai to ignore the call, they press “accept,” but it’s a panicked Julida on the other end of the line.

“You have to pack your stuff and leave right away. Get Aunt Oreda. You need to leave Virenos.” The connection has traces of static, and there is screaming in the background.

“Julida, slow down. What’s going on?” Zephyr motions for Kai to grab their essentials bag while he tries to calm his foster sister.

“Aren’t you watching the news? The Order has taken over the Celestial Council, and they’re threatening to release another harbinger over Ceres II!”

Screams outside the apartment windows interrupt the call, and beams of light criss-cross through the streets below. Kai, who already has their bags ready to go, turns up the volume on the commpad to hear what Roux is saying.

“And together, with the help of the Order, we will work to unify the planets, so that we all speak the same language, use the same currency, and invoke the same deities that the Viren once looked to.”

Several robed members of the Order step onto the stage, wielding laserguns stamped with the insignia of the Silver family. Kai sees their parents being escorted away, along with the rest of their family. The confused, angry, and scared looks on their faces cause a pit of dread to form in Kai’s stomach.

“I’ll call you back, Julida. Meet us on Mithras and stay safe.” Zephyr hangs up and presses his palms against Kai’s shoulders. “We can fight through this. We’ve done it before.”

Kai nods. “We have to stop the Order. I have to stop my sister.”

