

ADVENTURES
OF KAE

Past Echoes

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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

- Andara Lepidoris**, *Associate Scientist (dracona, female dragon)*
- Aoichi Amitis**, *Security Chief (dracona, male dragon)*
- Concord Manzell**, *Personal Protection Officer (dracona, male dragon)*
- Kaejaris Lepidoris**, *Esoterica Student (dracona, male dragon)*
- Kessia Lepidoris**, *Lady of Lepidoris Mansion (dracona, female dragon)*
- Kolmere**, *Physical Education Teacher (dracona, female dragon)*
- Malachite Lepidoris**, *Chief Operating Officer (dracona, male dragon)*
- Peruna Carider**, *Rally Attendee (dracona, female dragon)*
- Ruunar Carider**, *Mechanic (dracona, male dragon)*
- Signarona Perantia**, *Personal Secretary (dracona, female dragon)*
- Wyman**, *History Teacher (chilopoda, female centipede)*
- Xicen Altos**, *School Student (squamata, female lizard)*
- Xien Altos**, *School Student (squamata, male lizard)*

CHAPTER 1

Kaejaris

If this journey goes on any longer, I think I'm going to fall asleep, Kae thought to himself as he watched the world go by. The white-haired dragon was situated at the rear end of a bus, lounging across three adjacent seats in the most nonchalant manner. Kae didn't care. Save for himself, the driver, and a couple other passengers, the bus was quite empty. From time to time however, he shuffled uncomfortably. The seats were marginally comfortable, their soft fabric marred by the interior chair which they enveloped. The only good thing about them, Kae felt, was their colourful abstract design that was intended to appease the senses. The styling was not too dissimilar to that of the pattern on Kae's white bomber jacket which featured a decidedly jazzier variant of the aesthetic.

Kae's jacket was unzipped, revealing a low-cut shirt that clung tightly to his slim but well defined torso. Equally tight were his denim jeans which were so close-fitting that every curve and crevice of his limbs were discernible. Upon his feet he wore a pair of white boots with a standard open-toe design and, partially obscuring his yellow eyes, were an expensive brand of shutter glasses featuring a metallic finish.

In spite of his position at the far end of the vehicle, Kae could see the driver's apparent disapproval in the rear view mirror. He suspected that it was due in no small part to the fact that his foot was resting all-too casually on one of the seats. Considering that his foot nor his boot were unhygienic, Kae chose to ignore the sentiment and returned his attention to the window.

The transport was taking Kae and the other two passengers through Alachra's sprawling countryside. They were passing through a small stretch of trees, under the cover of which they could see brilliant green plains lit by the sun's fierce glare. Scattered across the plains, in numerous groups, was a herd of cows. They were either sitting, basking in the sun's light, or standing while helping themselves to the nutrients which the grass provided. Kae almost envied them. It was a simple life. Yet, in spite of the complicated constructs comprising sentient society, he wouldn't have it any other way.

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As the minutes passed, Kae began to grow tired again. Slowly but surely, his eyelids began to droop until they covered his eyes completely.

Kae was juddered back into consciousness when the transport made an abrupt stop at its next destination. Foot shunted from the seat it was resting on, the mint-scaled dragon rose to his feet and took a quick glance outside. They'd arrived at a housing estate just outside the town centre. Kae's destination was a little further afar but it was as close as he was going to get by bus. It was time to disembark.

The driver passed an uncertain glance at Kae as he departed the bus. As it transpired, he was the only passenger to leave. Moments later, the bus was on its way again and Kae was left alone in the peaceful suburban estate. There wasn't a soul around. All he could hear were the sounds of chirping avians and the wind's gentle breeze. It was almost liberating, reminding Kae of his longstanding desire to one day explore the world's myriad lands.

As if ingesting the day's pleasant aura, Kae took a deep breath before setting off down the road that would take him out of the housing estate. His pace was brisk and energetic, personifying the merriment in his heart.

Once out from the estate, Kae followed the road up a relatively steep hill. A cluster of trees at either side of the road shielded him from the sun's rays. When he reached the top of the hill, the locale was more or less the same. The road rounded off to the right some distance from Kae's current position and he anticipated that it would take him around a minute or so to reach the incline. As he drew nearer, he became aware of a road sign on the corner indicating that there was a private road. Clearly, judging by the two vehicles that passed him, it was not the right-facing road. Instead, it referred to a secondary route which was blocked off by a wooden gate. When he was within reading distance, Kae could see that the road sign made reference to a "Jolly Court" comprising houses number four, five, and six. It was a premium estate, Kae knew, and it was precisely where he was headed.

Once reaching the gate, Kae glanced sheepishly about himself. It wasn't usual that individuals passed through here on foot. If he was seen, he could be mistaken for an intruder and he didn't want to get into a needless affair regarding his innocent visit. Satisfied that there was no one around, Kae propelled himself over the wooden gate with athletic ease before resuming his journey.

The cluster of trees partially blocking out the sunlight continued some distance up the private road but it wasn't far. Kae was mere feet away from a large clearing which contained the three houses indicated by the road sign. When he emerged, he stopped to get his bearings. It had been a while since his last visit here and, for some reason, he always had trouble remembering which

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of the three houses was the right one. Each of them were identical-looking modern builds which lacked the charm and homeliness of their counterparts in the neighbouring estate. Kae was certain that the house on the far right was the one he was seeking. Well, there was only one way to find out.

As he made his way towards house number six, Kae took the time to admire the tall pine trees which surrounded the entire clearing. It was an incredibly pretty sight, reminding Kae of his walks through the expansive Lepidoris Forest a few miles away.

Like his own home, it wasn't possible to signify one's presence from the front door, short of vaulting over the walls which enclosed the front garden. Instead, the alarm bell's button was located beside the house's gate. When he was near enough, Kae pressed the button and waited patiently for his call to be answered. Around half a minute later, the front door of the house opened and out came a white-scaled dragon with blue hair. Ruunar Carider. As the grinning reptile made his way over, Kae noted that his best friend was wearing a one-piece leather suit.

"I see you're all ready to go!" Kae shouted, remarking on his friend's motorcycle gear.

"Course I am!" said Ruunar who proceeded to press a button located on the inner wall which activated a mechanism that allowed the metal gate to slide open.

It was a simple process but one which Kae never failed to be impressed by. "I wish we had one of these at home. Our gate weighs a tonne," he said. When he was able to pass the threshold, Kae advanced and gave his friend a half-embrace. "Did you get enough sleep?"

Nodding, Ruunar pressed the inner button again and the gate started to close. "Too much. I just need to make a few checks and we'll be good to go."

"Don't let me detain you!"

Chuckling, Ruunar led Kaejaris into his home. They entered into a wide and spacious hall that provided access to almost every other room in the building. The centrepiece of the hall were two sets of limestone staircases on either side of the room which led up onto a bridge connecting two opposite-facing walkways; certainly not the sort of craftsmanship one would find in an average home.

Kae had bought this house for Ruunar a few years ago. In spite of his family's wealth, the purchase of such a structure did create a noticeable dent in Kae's funds, much to the chagrin of his parents who disapproved of his apparent carelessness. Kae saw things differently however. After all, what was money for if not to be used? Ruunar was like a brother to him. They'd known each other most of their lives and Ruunar's rapport with Kae's stepfather was to be admired. The two bonded over their shared love of motorcycles. In fact, it

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was that very affinity which was the main reason why Kae felt so compelled to give his friend this remarkable gift. Ruunar was a professional mechanic who specialised in the repair, maintenance, and modification of motorcycles old and new. Ruunar had so much wanted a home in which to house his growing collection of vintage bikes, many of which were customised by him to function with all the proficiency of their modern counterparts. It did Kae's heart good to see Ruunar so elated by his kindness. He'd never forgotten the mixture of shock and delight on his face. It was simply priceless.

Ruunar released a contented sigh. "I still can't believe this mine," he said, glancing about the hall.

Kae smiled. "I know it's far too big a home for just one person but you have rather unique needs."

The white dragon turned to face him, his blue eyes tender and appreciative. "You should come and live here with me. I still haven't decked out one of the bedrooms yet."

Taken aback by the suggestion, Kae chuckled awkwardly for a moment, then said "I think I'd miss Izure's cooking. If there's one thing to be said about him is that he always makes a good meal, even if he is out of touch with the modern way of life."

Izure Dexxen was the butler in the service of Kae's mother who worked and lived at Lepidoris Manor, Kae's current abode.

Ruunar turned away for a moment, trying to stifle his bemusement. "Who says I'll be cooking for you? I think you've been living in that big house for way too long."

"You know what I mean," Kae laughed. "Anyway, I'm not sure if I could... Maybe I've grown complacent," he shrugged. "Are you lonely here?"

His friend did not hesitate to give him an answer. "Not often. I'm too focused on my work." He paused. "Still, it'd be nice to have some company sometimes, you know?"

Kae thought for a moment. It wasn't a decision he could make lightly. "I'll tell you what; how about I stay over the weekend and see how it suits me?"

"It's up to you; you don't have to," Ruunar said quickly, trying to appear casual.

He wants me to stay with him, thought Kae.

"It's no scales off my snout," Kae said. "I'd be delighted to stay."

"You're lucky I happen to have a double bed, otherwise you'd be sleeping on the couch."

"Oh, we're sleeping together?" Kae asked, unable to stop himself from blushing at the prospect.

"Yeah, I guess," Ruunar said, a nervous chuckle escaping his throat.

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“We’ll cross that bridge when it comes to it,” Kae said, wishing to change the subject. “You’d better perform those final checks.”

Ruunar frowned. “Final checks?”

Kae rolled his eyes. His friend’s mind was clearly elsewhere. “The bike! You’re taking part in a rally today, remember?”

“Oh yeah, are you ready?”

“I was ready as soon as I walked through the front door.”

“Alright, follow me,” Ruunar said, gesturing towards a door on the eastern side of the hall.

Kae was led into a large garage. Amongst the impressive collection of motorcycles that Ruunar was currently performing maintenance on was a sleek emerald green automotive. Gleaming brighter than any of its counterparts, the bike had clearly received a great deal of attention prior to Kae’s arrival. Under the artificial lights, it appeared quite perfect.

Ruunar went over to rest his elbow on the bike’s seat. “She’s looking mighty fine, no?”

“You’ve done a marvellous job,” Kae said, smiling at his handiwork. “What are you going to be checking for?”

Glancing at the clock on the wall, Ruunar replied “I was hoping to take it for a quick test drive. Last thing I want is to make a fool of myself when everybody’s watching.”

“Sound thinking.”

Ruunar grinned suddenly. “Hey, you remember that teaching assistant? What was her name... Was it Miss Gwanja?”

Kae frowned in confusion. “Where is this coming from? One minute we’re talking about bikes and the next you’re recalling old acquaintances.”

“I literally just thought of it,” his friend laughed. “Am I right?”

Kae pondered the question for a moment. He hadn’t given the woman any thought whatsoever since he left school all those years ago. Fortunately, Ruunar’s own recollection was enough to give him the answer he needed. “I think it was Gwanji?”

“That’s it!”

“What about her then?” Kae asked. He was curious to know what this was leading up to.

“She was strict as anything,” Ruunar said rather ominously. “When we had all those fights, she’d take it out on us as if we started it. She *knew* we were normally well behaved; she even had a go at us in one ICT lesson because we were apparently using an inappropriate website to help us in our research. It was only Worldwide Encyclopedia.”

That fact, for some reason or another, had been completely wiped from Kae’s memory. It was like dusting off a forgotten memento. It opened

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Kae's eyes to the bigger picture, casting his mind back to those formative days. In particular, a certain individual which cast a terrible shadow over that turbulent period of his life...

Thirteen year-old Kaejaris took a peek past the threshold of the mathematics classroom. He was the last person to leave and he hoped desperately that one of his fellow students was well on their way to leaving the building. Sooner or later, another teacher would come into the room and Kae didn't want to face the embarrassment of being caught there because he was too afraid to leave.

Gently pushing the door open, Kae started to make his way out. The door was halfway ajar when it was thrust completely open by a ferocious green-scaled hand.

The hand of... Malachite!

Kae's cousin bared his neat set of fanged teeth, grinning with masochistic intent. His other hand came down hard on Kae's chest, shoving him back into the classroom. Passing the threshold, Malachite closed the door behind him and said "You weren't thinking of leaving without engaging in a little extra curricular activity, were you?"

Malachite was a skinny-looking youth. His adolescent features were crowned by a short mop of vivid green hair; the fringe of which almost covered one of his distinctive heterochromatic eyes. The dark colours of his school uniform surprisingly did not clash with his colourful appearance, instead providing an effective contrast.

In response to Malachite's question, Kae tried his best to appear defiant, though the result was less than inspiring. "I'm not afraid of you," he practically mumbled.

Malachite's grin broadened. "Sit down," he said, pointing at one of the desks.

Kae hesitated for a moment. His mind was racing. There was little chance of escaping, short of jumping through the closed windows. Reluctantly, he took his place at the nearest table.

Crossing over to the teacher's desk, Malachite grabbed a green marker pen. "Today, we're going to be learning about the arcane forces."

Kae's eyes bore into the desk before him. He couldn't so much as look at Malachite. Unfortunately, this relatively recent bout of bullying was occurring with increasing frequency. Why was he being targeted like this? Kae didn't understand it—he just wanted Malachite to leave him alone. If this was truly the way his cousin felt about him then it was no wonder that they'd never been introduced until recently.

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Malachite tapped the lidded pen against the classroom's whiteboard with an urgency that was bordering on irritation. "Dumbass, pay attention!"

Kae could feel his hand clenching into a fist. Oh, how he despised the contempt that his cousin had for him. Kae wasn't a violent person but there was only so much he was willing to take. One day, Malachite was going to get a taste of his fists, of that he was certain.

After insulting Kae, Malachite removed the lid from the marker pen and drawn an imperfect circle on the whiteboard. Inside it, he created several crude shapes. "Can you tell me what that is?" he said, whirling around to face his cousin.

In spite of the primitive nature of the drawing, Kae recognised the shape immediately. "Materius," he said miserably.

"Our humble world!" said Malachite, raising his arms in an exaggerated display of showmanship. Turning back to the whiteboard, he started drawing another larger circle which enveloped Materius.

Uncertain he'd get another chance, Kae bolted to his feet and made a quick dash for the door whilst his cousin's back was turned.

"Hey!" Malachite shouted.

Before Kae could even grasp the door handle, his cousin's arms were already around him. "Get off!" he cried.

Malachite's unrelenting hold was too strong for Kae to resist! He found himself being dragged towards another desk. Quite aggressively, Kae was pushed onto the top of the table, his legs dangling a couple of feet from the floor. Tried as he might to fight back, Malachite had him pinned down!

"*You're* not leaving until this lesson is over!" his cousin hissed, his words dripping with venomous intent.

"What do you want from me?!" Kae begged.

At this, Malachite's cruel expression softened but his grip on Kae's arms did not waver. "I guess I've never had the chance to explain it to you. Maybe I can make you see the error of your ways."

"Anything to make you leave me alone!"

Releasing his hold on Kaejaris, Malachite recovered the pen he'd dropped during the struggle and went back over to the whiteboard to finish drawing the outer circle. "Alright, listen. You know what this is?"

Kaejaris was in no mood for games. He just wanted his cousin to explain himself and be done with it. "No," he said wearily, getting up from the desk. "What is it?"

"It's the... Esoteric frequency. That's where the magic is. It's like oxygen; it's invisible and people like your mother can sort of tap into it and use it."

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“I’m fully aware of this. What’re you trying to say?”

“I didn’t know you didn’t know,” Malachite snapped. “What I’m saying is that it’s a natural force of... Nature. What makes it *unnatural* is people like your wretched mother who use magic to interfere with society.”

Kae threw his arms up in dismissal. “I’ve heard enough. Save your breath for someone who’ll listen.”

“No!” his cousin insisted. “I bet she didn’t tell you this: Did you know that magic was used in the war?”

“Which war?” Kae asked pedantically.

“The last one before we were born!” Malachite said, raising his voice. “Bimas used hundreds of people who could use magic to make a beam that could blow up whole towns.”

Kae had heard this conspiracy before. As far as he knew, it had never been confirmed. “Then why haven’t they taught us about this in history lessons?” he countered.

“Because they don’t want us to know! Why do you think magic was banned after the war?”

For the first time, Malachite had made a very good point. It made sense and yet, Kaejaris was unwilling to believe that everything he was being told was true. “I don’t believe it,” he replied.

By now, Malachite’s exasperation had reached a fever pitch. “I don’t care what you think! Magic is too dangerous and should stay in its own frequency where it belongs! Tell that to your mother!”

“Shut up!” hissed Kae. Shoving Malachite aside, he started towards the door.

Malachite made no attempt to stop him. “I tried to settle this nicely,” he breathed, hoping that his cousin would stop and face him. Kae did not, instead disappearing around the corner.

“This isn’t over!!”

CHAPTER 2

Malachite

It was such a strange feeling to assume the position of one's father, particularly when that father had occupied this chair for the past three decades.

Metaphorically speaking of course. Malachite did not imagine that Jevin, his father and the CEO of the Lepidoris Technologies Corporation, had endured thirty years of service without replacing his office chair!

Regardless, this alien responsibility penetrated Malachite's mind like a firestorm. His prior occupation had been managerial but even that paled in comparison to the position that he was now being prepared for; to inherit his father's role as the corporation's chief executive officer, magnifying the level of responsibility tenfold!

Arm resting on his father's desk, Malachite tapped his fingers in nervous apprehension, his long nails creating a distinctive rhythmic beat upon the table's wood surface. The sound seemed to irritate the man standing beside him. Concord Manzell. When Malachite turned to face the purple-scaled dragon, his friend's brow was furrowed in irritation.

"Stop it," he growled.

Although Malachite complied, he gave his friend a wry look. "Now, is that any way to speak to your superior?"

Concord was, at this moment in time, Malachite's personal protection officer; his bodyguard. It was a position that had attracted a great deal of criticism from his father and other executives who argued that it was entirely unnecessary. However, Malachite's insistence won out, and Concord's role in the corporation was assured. He was glad of it. Concord's strong personality kept Malachite alert and level-headed in times of difficulty.

Unfolding his arms from his broad chest, Concord said "Just you remember: you're not CEO yet. The authority of that chair isn't yours to command."

"You're forgetting that I'm the chief operating officer," Malachite replied, raising a finger pointedly at him. "That still puts me above *you*."

Concord released a guttural chuckle at this. "It means nothing and you know it. You're just a trainee with a glorified title. It's required by law that

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your daddy's gotta call you something and that something happens to be COO. It's the one that makes the most sense after all."

Malachite frowned. "Did you just make all that up? I think you're being pedantic, Concord."

Smiling enigmatically, the purple dragon's arms refolded over his chest. "Maybe, maybe not. You decide."

Ignoring the remark, Malachite turned away and rest his elbows on the desk. Cupping his jaw into his open hands, he released a sigh. "I wish they'd hurry up so we can get this over with. I'm a nervous wreck."

"Snap out of it, can'tcha? There's gonna be a fire drill—so what? Get over it."

"You don't have the responsibility," Malachite said defeatedly. "All you need to do is listen and do as you're told." He then chuckled, recalling his friend's adverse personality. "On second thought, maybe even *that* is too much for you to handle."

If it'd been anyone else, Concord would have taken offence to that remark. As it was, he simply snorted and told Malachite to "grow a set of balls".

"You remember what you got to do?" Concord asked when Malachite remained silent.

The CEO-to-be sank back into the chair. "When the alarm goes off..."

Malachite's words trailed off as the sound of a blaring siren filled the office. He bolted immediately to his feet, face contorted in panic. Frantically, he glanced about the desk, trying to remember what his father had told him.

"Get the phone!" Concord barked over the sound of the alarm.

Malachite quickly grabbed the futuristic-looking telephone on his father's desk and began dialling the appropriate number. No sooner had he put the receiver to his ear was his call answered by Aoichi Amitis, the corporation's security chief. It was he, under Jevin's instructions, who had activated the siren on Malachite's floor in order to give him the signal in which to initiate the start of the operation.

"This is the Security Centre, how may I assist you?"

"Aoichi, place the building under full alert!"

The security chief did not argue. "Got it."

Without another word, Malachite replaced the phone then turned to Concord. "Now I've got to... Supervise the evacuation!"

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Concord nodded eagerly, taking Malachite by the shoulder. “Right, let’s go!”

Aoichi’s voice came over the building’s loudspeaker system as the pair made their way out of the spacious office.

“Attention; this is the security chief speaking. A fire has broken out on floor ninety nine. All employees are advised to relinquish their duties at once and leave immediately. Stay close and follow your assigned supervisors to the nearest lifts. From there you will leave the building and go to the assembly point outside. Good luck.”

Immediately after departing the CEO’s office, Malachite and Concord were greeted by an unusual hive of activity. They’d never seen the adjacent corridors so crowded. Executives and other employees were marching in silent unison. They were congregating in the central corridor, making a beeline for the lifts at the opposite side of the floor.

“It would appear as if my services are not required,” Malachite shrugged, noting how well rehearsed the crowds were.

A mischievous smile was forming on Concord’s face. “I beg to differ,” he said before stepping forward to address the crowd of LTC employees. “What do you think this is; the annual Gratus Parade?!” he shouted. “You heard the security chief. There’s a fire! Run like your lives depend on it—shift your asses!!”

Well aware of Concord’s aggressive temperament, the employees began moving more speedily. They knew, and Concord knew that if they ignored his demand, he would only bully them into heeding his words.

Malachite laughed aloud. He couldn’t help it. It was precisely moments like this that he treasured Concord’s presence at his side. Without it, his time at the corporation would not be nearly as much fun.

“Excellent call,” he said.

“Better join the flock.”

Malachite and Concord quickly entered the crowd with the latter resuming his efforts to shepherd the employees towards the lifts.

“Everyone, remain calm and considerate! Enter the lift one at a time; there will be no jumping the queue!” Malachite added, trying to be useful. His own efforts however were easily overshadowed by Concord’s almost continuous verbal onslaught.

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The corridor widened out into the reception area where the CEO's personal secretary, Signarona Perantia, was waiting. Judging by the expression on her face, she hadn't been expecting such disorder to be exhibited by the departing employees.

"What *is* going on here?" she demanded angrily.

The crowd came to an abrupt halt, prompting Concord to force his way to the front of the group with Malachite following at his heels.

Concord's response was scathing. "What does it look like, sweetheart? There's a fire breaking out; or are you deaf as well as blind?"

The dragoness's eyes widened in disbelief. In all her years of service, she had never been the butt of such rudeness. She was nearly speechless. "...I'll have you reported for insubordination," she said rather suddenly.

"And I'll have *you* reported for deliberately blocking our only exit—lives are at stake!"

Malachite stepped forward. "I do apologise for my friend's behaviour, Miss Perantia, but we *are* taking the drill quite seriously. If you would be so kind as to lower your guard then we can all begin filing into the lifts."

Malachite's courtesy paid off. Signarona nodded silently, though she was clearly still deeply offended by Concord's behaviour.

As Malachite was the most senior drill supervisor present, he and Concord were the last to leave after all the other employees had made their descent to the ground floor. Given the fact that there were nearly one hundred people working on the ninety ninth floor, it was an incredibly long process and the lifts were relatively small. It left Malachite wondering why his father hadn't arranged for the installation of a staircase in the building. He approved of the tower's design thirty years ago. To Malachite, it seemed like such a strange oversight. Perhaps one day, when he was CEO, he would see about rectifying that.

"Now it's our turn," Concord said after the left-hand lift returned to their position.

Quickly, the pair headed inside and, seconds later, they were making their own descent to the ground floor. It would take around a minute to reach the bottom.

Concord's arm came down across Malachite's shoulders. Chuckling, he said "That's the most fun I've had since joining up."

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“That doesn’t sound too hard,” Malachite said, smiling. “I did warn you that it might not be too much fun here.”

There was, for a brief second, a glimmer of regret in those yellow eyes. Shrugging it off, Concord simply emitted another chuckle. “I couldn’t let you come here all by yourself, could I? I’ll always be behind you,” he said, squeezing his friend tight for a moment.

Sentimentality didn’t come easy to Concord, Malachite knew. It did his heart good to feel so valued. Raising his hand to Concord’s, Malachite gave it a few appreciative pats before saying “You and I should get out of here one of these days. It’s been a long while since we’ve had some fun together.”

Concord sighed. “Agreed. A walk in Lepidoris Forest doesn’t sound like a bad idea. You know, just the two of us.”

Malachite was most enthused by the idea. “Yes! We can spend the weekend at the mansion. I just hope that my mother won’t mind you coming over to stay for a couple days.”

“She can hardly refuse.”

The aforementioned “mansion” was Malachite’s ancestral home. His family, the Lepidoris’s, had dwelled there for centuries. They were one of the few aristocratic families still remaining in Regia.

It’d been several years since Malachite lived in the mansion. Sometimes he missed the quiet countryside. His occupations in the capital city however had necessitated the need to take up more practical accommodation for getting to and from his places of work.

Regardless, Malachite’s memories of Lepidoris Mansion were numerous and not all of them were pleasant. Kessia, his very own mother, dominated all thoughts he had of that place. She’d done a terrible thing in leading him astray throughout his childhood. It was understood and accepted now, but that still didn’t make it right...

At the end of his bed, fifteen year-old Malachite held in his hands an average-sized hardback book. Entirely text-laden, it was showing considerable signs of ageing. Pages were yellowing and the dust-jacket was torn and creased. The book was titled ‘Life Without Arcane Intervention: A New Dawn’, published when Malachite was but a child. It was written by none other than his own mother, Kessia Lepidoris. She was a proud rhabdophobic and had no qualms about using her own name on the cover. This, in Malachite’s hands,

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was his personal copy. It had been used thoroughly over the course of his childhood and beyond. For him, there was no greater publication. It was the source from which he derived all that was holy and true. The overarching message was simple: To utilise magic was to defile nature's grand design. Malachite believed it wholeheartedly. Each and every word of this book was written by his mother. How could he believe otherwise?

Malachite had made a poor job of making clear his case to Kaejaris at school earlier. Currently, he was pouring over his mother's book in an attempt to better rehearse his act. It was while he was reading that a new possibility came to mind: Why not simply bring the book into school and hand it to Kaejaris?

Malachite felt that it was worth trying. He'd go to war with his cousin over it if he had to and this book was his last-ditch attempt to make Kaejaris see the error of his ways. No one would be able to explain it better than his mother. If Kaejaris couldn't or wouldn't see that then he was beyond all hope.

Closing the book, Malachite glanced about his bed chamber, wondering what to do next. Rising to his full height, the affluent dragon crossed over to a chest of drawers upon which his backpack was laying. Unzipping it, he placed the book inside, ready for tomorrow's encounter. There was a knock on his door while he was zipping his bag back up. "Come in!" Malachite called.

The door promptly opened and in stepped his sister, Andara, who closed the door behind her.

Malachite visibly jolted upon sighting her.

"What's the matter?" she asked innocently.

"Sorry, I thought it was our cousin. You look so much like him," Malachite said, chuckling nervously.

Indeed, everything from Andara's facial structure to the specific hue of her scales bore a striking resemblance to Kaejaris's own.

Andara rolled her eyes. "You've got poor Kae on the brain! I wish you'd leave him alone... I think he's sweet."

"He's an infidel!" Malachite insisted. "And come tomorrow, he's going to see what a blasphemer his mother really is."

Andara sighed. "I don't like it when you get like this. I keep telling you: it isn't right!"

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“I’ve always made an exception in your case. Don’t make me change my mind,” Malachite said darkly.

Andara wasn’t going to back down. “You can believe what you want but it doesn’t mean you have to ram it down everybody’s throats!”

“I’m warning you,” Malachite told her firmly.

Andara’s arms bolted up in quick surrender. “Alright!” she snapped. “I didn’t come here to argue with you.”

“Then why did you come here?”

“Mrs. High and Mighty wants a word with you.”

Malachite frowned. “What?”

“Mother!” she clarified.

Malachite was unamused by his sister’s flippancy. “Don’t mock me,” he said, shaking his head at her.

Andara shrugged, half-smiling as her brother brushed past to get to the door.

“I take it you’ll be wanting to leave,” he said after opening the door. He held it open for her as she made her way out into the outside corridor. Without another word, she went on her way.

“Andara!” he suddenly called after her. “I’m sorry.”

His sister stopped and turned, surprised that he’d bothered to apologise. “So am I,” she said solemnly. With that, she headed off again, disappearing into her own bed chamber partway down the corridor.

Passing the seemingly endless row of portraits displaying generations of his forebears, Malachite reached the antechamber at the far end of the corridor. Inside, he descended the staircase. When he was at ground level, Malachite departed the chamber and entered into the cathedral-like main hall. He’d grown used to the sight over the course of his life and yet, it never failed to instil within him a sense of awe-inspired wonder. Malachite could not begin to imagine the amount of time it must have taken to build the main hall, let alone the entire mansion. In the modern era, such workmanship was unmatched.

Starting across the main hall, Malachite made his way over to the western wing of the house and a pair of double doors which led into the living room. Raising a fist, he knocked it gently against the ornate surface which prompted a response from his mother.

“Come in!” she called from within.

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Gripping the golden handles, Malachite pushed the doors open and stepped inside.

The living room was long and rectangular, affording space for large social gatherings which the Lepidoris's hosted from time to time. Kessia frequently held parties to celebrate the release of her latest books, whereas Malachite's father liked to use them to engage with his colleagues on a social level.

"Malachite!" Kessia called from one of the couches at the far end. "Come and join me," she added, patting the armrest.

Closing the doors behind him, Malachite made his way across the soft burgundy carpet before taking a seat on the couch opposite his mother. "What did you want to see me about?" he asked.

"I didn't want to talk about it the car—Andara, you know," his mother admitted sheepishly before taking a sip of an alcoholic beverage in a small cocktail glass.

Kessia was an exceedingly beautiful reptilian. Ever since Malachite could remember, she had a penchant for the golden years of cinema and its glamorous female stars which she often tried to replicate. Kessia's petite features were complimented by eyeliner and makeup which made her appear almost ghoulish whilst her old fashioned hairstyle was tied into a neat bun.

Malachite smiled thinly at his mother, responding "I know. We had a little disagreement upstairs."

Kessia sighed. "The silly girl never did listen to me. She won't change."

"I try not to judge her but it's difficult sometimes."

"Andara has too much of her father in her, I'm afraid. He does not care much for world affairs unless it concerns his corporation."

"So what did you want to tell me?" Malachite asked again, taking care not to sound too pushy.

"Ah yes," Kessia said thoughtfully. "How much of his mother does Kaejaris have in him?"

"Too much. She has him on a tight leash. He won't hear anything against magic." Malachite paused for effect, hoping to impress upon his mother the significance of his intentions. "But I have a plan."

Kessia's brow widened, her interest piqued. "Go on, I'm all ears."

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Malachite leaned forwards in his seat. “When I go to school tomorrow, I’m going to give Kaejaris your book.”

“Life Without Arcane Intervention?” she said, sounding a little more disturbed than Malachite had hoped. “I gave that book to you when you were a child!”

“I can get another!” he argued, not feeling particularly attached to that specific copy.

Placing her cocktail glass down on the coffee table in front of them, Kessia got to her feet and said “If you must take *any* copy of that book, take another. I have some in storage downstairs.”

Malachite shrugged. “If it’ll make you happier.”

It didn’t matter to him which copy of the book he took with him to school so as long as it ended up in Kaejaris’s possession.

“Tell me, how do you intend on getting the book into his hands?” Kessia asked while strolling over to the windows.

“I thought I’d…”

“Give to him?” his mother finished, glancing at him from across the room “I hope not. You and I both know that he will refuse.”

“What do you suggest then?”

His mother chuckled in amusement. “My dear boy, the answer is obvious. All you have to do is find his bag and place the book inside. Simple.”

She made it sound simple, Malachite thought, but he knew that it was anything but.

“How do you expect me to get close enough to put it in without being seen?”

“He takes physical education classes, does he not? Go and put the book into his bag while he’s busy playing sports.”

“But we’re not in the same class—we’re not even in the same year!” Malachite insisted. He couldn’t see how it was going to work.

“Oh, use your intelligence, Malachite,” Kessia sighed impatiently. “Find out when he’s doing it and find a reason to excuse yourself from your own class. All you need is a few minutes.”

“I suppose,” Malachite said unsurely. He still wasn’t altogether convinced.

Turning away from the window, Kessia motioned Malachite towards her. “Come on, come here.”

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Doing as he was told, Malachite rose up from the couch and went over to stand with his mother.

Smiling tenderly at him, Kessia took him by the shoulders and asked “What is more important? Your comfort or the cleansing of this world?”

Malachite rolled his eyes. “Kaejaris’s mother is just one person! We can’t stop every remaining magic user from doing what they’re doing.”

“No,” Kessia agreed. “But we *can* influence that which we find. We are not activists, Malachite. It is enough that we try to prevent blasphemy if and when we find it. Am I understood?”

After a moment’s hesitation, Malachite nodded resolutely. He felt prepared now to tackle tomorrow’s responsibility. He *had* to do it. It was more important than anything else.

His mother patted him on the head. “That’s my boy,” she said, recoiling. “I shan’t be a moment. I’ll fetch you another copy of that book.”

Kessia left the room, leaving Malachite alone to contemplate her words. He turned, glancing out through the window at the magnificent grounds surrounding the house.

It won’t be long now, he mused.

Soon, Kaejaris will learn the truth...

CHAPTER 3

Ruunar

Last lap!

Ruunar tightened his grip on the handlebars, twisting the accelerator towards him as he sped his motorcycle across the finishing line. He caught a fleeting glimpse of Kaejaris and his sister Peruna who were standing behind the advertising boards flanking this area of the racetrack. He was unable to acknowledge their encouraging cheers however; he was travelling in the region of one hundred miles per hour. Any loss of concentration at this speed could be *fatal*.

There were eight participants in the rally, six of which were behind Ruunar. He was in third place and well on his way to attaining the penultimate position.

Ruunar didn't care about winning or losing. He was simply here to have a good time and enjoy the company of friends and kindred spirits. It did not mean that he wouldn't try his best however. He'd been driving like his life depended on it, fuelled completely by his own adrenaline and unwavering focus. This, he would embrace until the very end.

The Alachra Rally was situated on the outskirts of the town. The track itself was relatively small, taking the racers through a series of closed off roads around the green countryside. This was the second time Ruunar had attended the rally. His first, earlier in the year, saw him finishing in fifth place; though the competition had been stiffer on that occasion.

Ruunar could tell that the racer in front of him, a hymenoptera called Bael, was beginning to falter. He was breaking frequently; each and every incline presenting itself as a potential danger—which it *was*—but a confident biker would have no difficulty in navigating even the most sinuous roads. He'd managed well up until this point or else he wouldn't have remained in second place for the majority of the race. Ruunar imagined that the competitive hymenopteran had been focusing *too* hard.

That was where he and Bael differed.

Before long, Ruunar found himself overtaking the hymenoptera. Competitive he may be but at least Bael was a good sportsman. As Ruunar

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passed, the dark arthropod gave him a quick thumbs up before returning his hand to the accelerator.

Second place!

Ruunar tried not to allow himself to become carried away by the fact. It was exciting, yes, but it wasn't the be all and end all. He *had* to keep his mind on the race.

Past a cluster of trees, Ruunar braced himself once again as the road took him down a steep dip. No sooner had the ground straightened out did it curve upwards again, taking Ruunar up an equally steep hill that led into the cover of yet another group of trees. At the far end, he caught a glimpse of the racer out in front disappearing around an incline. Unless *something* hindered them, their victory was all but assured because, at this distance, there was little possibility of Ruunar being able to catch up with them.

Within seconds, he rounded the incline himself, swerving smoothly around the corner as the trees dispersed. The warmth of the afternoon sun hit Ruunar immediately as he passed into a winding narrow road that took him past a number of newly cut hayfields. Even under the cover of his biker's helmet, Ruunar could smell that pleasant fresh odour.

Navigating this twisty road was the most difficult part of the track. As with the previous laps, Ruunar manoeuvred through it with impressive precision; every swerve impeccably timed.

At this stage in the proceedings, Ruunar's concentration had reached an intensity such that it was beginning to make him sweat! He wanted so much for the race to end so that he could get out of his biker's leathers.

Not long to go now.

Beyond the fields, the road straightened out, bringing the racers through a small village where a number of civilians had gathered to watch the event, many of them cheering and waving as the bikers sped past.

After the village, the racetrack continued on a relatively straight trajectory before reaching another incline which led up another hill. That would take them back around to the finishing line and then the race would be over.

The racer in first place, a reptilian by the name of 'Fastlight Fraya', was already speeding up the hill. It was only a matter of seconds now before she achieved victory.

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As Ruunar was making his own way up the hill, he could hear the sound of a single blaring horn indicating that Fraya had passed the finishing line. It was over; for her at least.

Moments later, Ruunar himself passed over the finishing line, upon which he skidded his motorcycle to an abrupt halt. The momentum shunted him forwards a touch before his posterior fell back onto the seat. Ruunar tore his helmet off and released a deep exhale. It was done!

Well and truly relieved, Ruunar began to disembark as the other racers skidded to a halt around him. Once back on his feet, he could do no more than lean against the motorcycle for support. The twelve-lap race had taken more out of him than he'd anticipated.

Once all eight participants had passed the finishing line, the throngs of onlookers were permitted access to the track by the rally's security. Among them, Kaejaris and Peruna hurriedly made their way over to Ruunar's position.

His lilac-haired sister was delighted. "Second place!" she effectively squealed.

Kaejaris was pleased for him as well. With a toothy grin, he gave Ruunar a few congratulatory pats on the back. "Well done, Ruunar; I knew you had it in you!"

In response, Ruunar released a few awkward chuckles. It was just about as much as he could muster at the moment.

"You okay?" Kae asked, noticing his friend's lack of engagement.

Before answering, Ruunar nodded then released a deep sigh. "Yeah, I'm alright—just let me catch my breath a minute."

"Who knew biking could be so exhausting," said the blue-scaled Peruna, fixing her brother with an affectionate look.

"Hey, better luck next time!" called the voice of Fastlight Fraya.

Disregarding his fatigue for a moment, Ruunar inclined his head backwards toward the source of the voice. Fraya was standing a few feet away. Around her were a large portion of the attendees, all gathered to witness the awarding of the Alachra Rally gold medal.

Ruunar was unsure how best to respond to Fraya's remark. Her voice betrayed no obvious signs that it was competitive banter *or* friendly blabber.

Smiling politely, he gave the winner of the race a casual nod of acknowledgement before calling back "Just doing my best!"

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“You did good!” she replied, dispelling any notion Ruunar had that she was rubbing her victory in his face. She even gave him a thumbs up.

“That’s Fastlight Fraya. She’s won the past several rallies or so I’ve heard,” Ruunar said, turning back to Kaejaris and Peruna.

“With a name like that, she should be a physicist,” said Kae.

Ruunar exchanged a blank glance with Peruna. What was Kae talking about?

The mint-scaled dragon arched a brow at the pair of them, a touch dubious that they did not understand the reference. “You know, speed of light.”

“Oh!” Peruna exclaimed in sudden understanding. “Sorry, my head’s a jumble today,” she laughed.

Straightening himself, Ruunar glanced around. “I wonder when I’m going to get my medal?”

Kae’s eyes lit up at this. “You’re getting a medal?”

Ruunar nodded. “Yeah, I came second.”

“I think they’re over there,” said Peruna, pointing to a table behind the advertisement boards. Sure enough, three small boxes lay on its surface. They were open, revealing three gleaming objects contained within.

“Better wait until they’re ready to present them—don’t want to appear arrogant, do we?” said Kae.

“What’s so arrogant about asking after the medals?” Peruna asked.

Giving the matter some thought for a moment, Kae simply shrugged and said “Nothing. I just think we should be patient.”

Before long, members of the rally’s organisation team collected the medals from the table and began presenting them to the first three racers to pass the finish line.

Ruunar watched as Bael received his bronze medal which was placed carefully around his exoskeletal neck. He was pleased for the arthropod. They weren’t friends by any means but Bael had always been polite and considerate with him whenever they’d met. Ruunar respected that.

Following Bael’s reward, another organiser came bearing Ruunar’s silver medal.

“Congratulations on finishing second place, Mr. Carider,” said the reptilian as she placed the medal around his neck.

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“Thank you,” Ruunar replied gratefully as the organiser turned away. He was beaming from horn to horn. He couldn’t help it. It’d been many years since he’d been rewarded for a job well done. It was immensely satisfying.

Ruunar passed a glance at Kae and suddenly, he was struck by an imprecise memory of their youth. For a moment he saw his friend not as the attractive reptilian he’d matured into but as the somewhat puny draconian he once was during their time together at Alachra’s community college. It was the way Kae had styled his hair... It was so very reminiscent of his younger days.

The mere sight of it spawned all manner of new memories in Ruunar’s mind. He was drawn immediately to the former image of Malachite, Kae’s cousin. And Concord. Oh, he couldn’t forget Concord.

That bastard...

“Kae!” the teenage Ruunar cried.

He’d kicked the yellow-green football in his friend’s direction. The ball skidded across the grass towards him. He halted suddenly, turning to face Ruunar and the hurtling ball. In an instant, all colour seemed to drain from Kae’s face as he prepared to take on the responsibility of possessing the object of the game.

To Ruunar’s relief, Kae stopped the ball easily with the sole of his foot and was about to start dribbling it towards the opposing team’s goal when a player belonging to said team performed an aggressive tackle on the helpless dragon. For a brief second, Kae was launched off of his feet and into the air before tumbling unceremoniously onto the ground and flat on his back.

Ruunar was furious. Xien Altos, the perpetrator—and fellow classmate—had always been nothing less than a model student; a pleasant kid who couldn’t do any wrong. What on Materius had possessed him to inflict such a hideous tackle upon poor Kaejaris? One thing was for certain; Ruunar wasn’t going to allow this to go unnoticed, even if their teacher was.

Xien was still on the ground with Kaejaris when Ruunar rushed over. He took the green-scaled reptilian by the shirt, pulling at him frantically in an attempt to intimidate the young fool.

“What was that about?!” Ruunar was shouting at him.

“Get off, Ruunar—it was an accident!!” cried the dark-haired lizard. His ice-blue eyes were wide in terror. He’d seen Ruunar when he was angry

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with bullies and he did not like being on the receiving end of his condemnation.

Ruunar wasn't prepared to let it slide. "You did it on purpose!!" he hissed.

"Ruunar, stop that!" came the voice of Ms. Kolmere, their PE teacher. Relinquishing her duties as referee, the middle-aged reptilian dashed towards the squabbling pair and immediately separated them.

"He hurt Kae!" Ruunar insisted desperately.

"I'm alright," said Kae who was still on the ground. He was visibly shaken, more so by Ruunar's heavy-handed approach to the situation than from Xien's attack.

Ms. Kolmere turned to face the tackler. She gave Xien a cold stare before producing a blank red card from her tracksuit pocket which she held aloft in front of the youngster's face. "Off!"

Xien was crushed by her decision. "It was an accident, Miss!" he pleaded.

"That may be as such but that doesn't change the rules of the game. Now get off the pitch and do some exercises. I won't have you standing idle while your classmates are running around."

Silently, Xien walked away.

"As for you, Mr. Carider, I want you to go back to the locker room and get dressed. You will report to the principal's office immediately.

Ruunar's mouth opened. He wanted to argue the point but he stopped himself before a single syllable left his lips. He knew that there was no use in trying to justify his actions. Ms. Kolmere was not known for her reasonability. It was better to accept the situation and face the consequences.

Before leaving, Ruunar offered his hand to Kae. His friend accepted the gesture, allowing Ruunar to pull him to his feet.

"Thanks," he said.

Without acknowledging his friend's gratitude, Ruunar departed the pitch as instructed and made his way into a small hut where the locker room was situated. No sooner had he entered the structure were his eyes drawn to somebody that he did not expect to find there. The individual—a student—was bending over one of the benches, reaching into what appeared to be Kae's backpack!

"Malachite!" Ruunar gasped. "What the hell are you doing?!"

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Kae's cousin gasped as well, bolting upright at the sound of Ruunar's voice. He was nearly speechless. "I..." he started, unsure how to explain the situation.

Ruunar marched over to him. "What are you doing in Kae's bag?!"

Malachite backed away as Ruunar searched the unzipped bag. Inside, he discovered an unfamiliar item. Pulling it out, he gave the offending object a closer examination. "What in the blue hell is this?!"

"It's mine!" Malachite replied quickly.

"Then why's it in Kae's bag?"

Malachite remained relatively tight-lipped about the matter. "I... Wanted Kae to have it."

Ruunar passed a disdainful glance at the contents on the book. The fact that it was written by Kessia Lepidoris, Malachite's mother, told him everything he needed to know.

"So you could poison his mind?" Ruunar retorted. "It won't work and you know it!"

The very notion that his bright idea was doomed to failure seemed to upset Malachite. "Shut up—you don't know anything!"

Baring his teeth at the slightly older dragon, Ruunar said "You can take this crap and put it where the sun doesn't shine!" With that, Ruunar aggressively tossed the book at him.

Reaching out instinctively, Kae's cousin failed to catch the publication and it fell carelessly to the locker room floor.

Ruunar watched as Malachite's anxiety shifted to that of unbridled rage. He'd never seen him like this before. The expression now covering his face gave Ruunar the chills, doubly so when a terrible hiss escaped the zealot's throat.

"Concord!" Malachite screamed into the air.

Ruunar stared open-mouthed at Kae's cousin. He hadn't the foggiest idea what was transpiring. Who or *what* was Concord?

That question was about to be answered.

The sound of footsteps prompted Ruunar to whirl around and he found himself face to face with another dragon who was standing in the opening which led to the showers.

Clearly, *this* was Concord.

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Short dark hair crowned his unruly features; his yellow eyes gleaming in anticipation.

“You called?” said the purple dragon, glancing in Malachite’s direction.

Although Ruunar did not know him personally, he recalled seeing Concord around the school on occasion. Even at a distance, he’d always seemed intimidating somehow. At *this* distance, Ruunar really did not wish to tangle with him if he could help it.

“What’s going on?” Ruunar demanded to nobody in particular

Ignoring the question, Malachite pointed ferociously at Ruunar. “Get him!” he shouted.

With a sadistic smile, the somewhat brawny dragon advanced on the outnumbered Ruunar.

Without averting his gaze from the newcomer, Ruunar started backing away, his mind racing as he considered his limited options. A few steps further back and he felt a pair of hands come into contact with his shoulder blades. Courtesy of Malachite, Ruunar was shunted forwards, directly into the arms of Concord who immediately ensnared him in a vice-like grip. His hands were clutched firmly around Ruunar’s neck!

Concord released a guttural chuckle. He was enjoying this. “You like that?!” he said through gritted teeth.

Ruunar squirmed, trying to escape, but Malachite’s friend was unbelievably strong! Unable to tear his arms away, Ruunar drove a foot into Concord’s calf which caused the purple dragon to recoil, enough that Ruunar was able to slide out of his grip and escape!

Without hesitation, he darted towards the hut doors. Thrusting them open, Ruunar made a beeline for the football pitch. He would tell Ms. Kolmere what happened; assuming she would listen.

Glancing back, Ruunar saw Malachite and Concord at the hut doors. Already, they were high-tailing it away from the building.

There goes my evidence, Ruunar thought bitterly.

He didn’t want to face Ms. Kolmere again but it was the only thing he could do. If he made his way back now, those two bullies would probably notice and try to corner him again. It wasn’t worth the trouble.

Little did Ruunar know that this minor scuffle was *only* the beginning. Things were going to escalate *and* fast...

CHAPTER 4

Concord

Malachite's parents glanced at Concord as if he'd just committed the most heinous act. Their sheer and utter contempt of him—*him*, Malachite's brutish friend, was on full display. The lord and lady of Lepidoris Mansion weren't the only ones discontented by his presence however. Malachite's sister Andara had her lips pressed against her cupped hands which muffled the deep sigh escaping her throat. As for Malachite himself—well, he could do nothing but sit there and blush with barely concealed embarrassment. Concord had really shown him up this time.

Malachite's father Jevin, the yellow-scaled CEO of LTC, raised a finger pointedly at him. "You should watch your tongue," he said as if scolding a misbehaving pet.

Kessia gave a stern nod of agreement. "Yes," she said, turning from her husband to their ill-mannered guest. "I'd take it kindly if you didn't bring *that* up. It is ancient history and has no bearing whatsoever on the present."

Concord smirked. He relished their strong reactions. It amused him to no end that mere words were enough to get their scales. "You sure?" he asked Malachite's mother.

Before an answer could be given, Jevin bolted up from his seat at the dining table. "I won't stand for any more impertinence!" he said angrily before turning to his son. "Malachite, kindly ask your friend to keep his mouth shut or he will be ejected from this house!"

No one spoke for a good few seconds as Malachite's father resumed his seat.

Concord found his friend glaring at him. In response, he gave Malachite a look of expectation which prompted him into speaking.

Only one word escaped Malachite's lips.

"Concord..." he uttered warningly.

Smirking one last time, Concord finally lowered his guard. He had no intention of being ejected from the Lepidoris's estate, not while there was still food on the table. Without another retort, he resumed his meal. A moment later, the Lepidoris's followed suit.

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“Now you’re seeing sense,” remarked a still irritated Jevin.

Ignoring those final parting words, Concord stuffed a piece of a rather delicious chicken fillet into his maw and took the time to ponder the Lepidoris’s reactions. He’d offended them with his recollections of he and Malachite’s adolescence; in particular, their mutual hatred of the arcane arts. Times had changed considerably since then. It was a period of the Lepidoris’s lives that was looked upon with shame and resentment. Malachite’s father had been away from home far too often to keep an eye on the heretical activities of his wife who had long filled Malachite’s mind with false ideals. It was all water under the bridge now... Yet Concord couldn’t help but feel disappointed that Malachite and his mother had taken the noble route to redemption. Where was the fun in that?

“I hear you’re going to make up with Kaejaris and Aunt Madge,” said Andara, trying to steer the conversation away from their past, if only somewhat.

She’d been addressing her brother who responded with an uneasy nod of the head. “That’s right. We have to hope they’ll accept my invitation.”

Ah, the wretched peace offering, thought Concord. The first time Malachite told him about it, Concord had told him that he was mad to even consider it. Kaejaris was their enemy... Or at least he had been during their school days. Malachite’s cousin had disappeared from their lives once they left Alachra’s community college. Although Concord would never have admitted it, he did quite miss Kaejaris. He was such a perfect target; Concord’s memories of him were fond. Things hadn’t been quite the same without him. If Malachite did intend to reconcile with their old enemy then Concord would ensure that he made the most of their reunion. The notion of meeting Kaejaris again filled him with glee. Perhaps Malachite’s peace offering wasn’t such a bad idea after all.

Jevin appeared to notice his wife shuffling uneasily at the mention of her sister. He tenderly placed his hand atop hers and said “I’m sure everything will be alright, my dear—don’t fret.” He smiled then gave her hand a few reassuring pats.

“I’ll get the invitation recorded tomorrow,” continued Malachite. He passed a glance at Concord. “I’m going to have my *best* man delivering it personally to Kaejaris and his mother.”

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Andara was incredulous. “Not him, surely?” she said, pointing at Concord with a fork in her hand.

Kessia released a laboured sigh. “I wouldn’t trust Concord to deliver a baby, let alone your correspondence.”

Malachite’s father was frowning. “Why don’t you simply pay them a personal visit?”

Malachite shook his head. “I feel it’s important to show them what they’re letting themselves in for if they come to us.” There was a twinkle in Malachite’s eyes. Whatever he and his father had planned for the other side of the family, it was clearly of great significance. “We’re going to request their assistance at the Esoterica Facility as you know. That way we can kill two birds with one stone.”

Kessia rolled her eyes. “I do wish you wouldn’t put it like *that*. They’re *family*—not an inconvenience!”

“Could’ve fooled me!” Concord blurted out thoughtlessly.

Jevin’s eyes bore into the purple dragon. He was fuming.

Before anyone could speak, Concord sheepishly cleared his throat. “Sorry,” he said before quickly tucking back into his meal.

“Get out!” shouted Malachite’s father.

Dammit! Me and my big mouth.

Concord stared at him for a moment, hoping that he would change his mind. He hadn’t finished his meal yet!

But the lord of Lepidoris Mansion would not reconsider his words. He pointed commandingly at the dining room doors and repeated his request. “Out!”

Concord sighed in irritation. It was not in his nature to relent in the face of authority but he did not wish to make an exhibition of himself for Malachite’s sake... And his own. If he pushed his antagonism *too* far, he didn’t doubt that he’d be kissing this weekend break goodbye.

Heeding Jevin’s words, Concord rose from his seat and departed the dining room. After closing the ornate doors behind him, he marched through the outer corridor, past the open archway and into the main hall. Slowing his pace to a stroll, Concord decided that he would wait here for Malachite to finish eating... Whenever that would be.

Although he was no great lover of art, even Concord couldn’t help but appreciate the grandiosity that was the main hall of Lepidoris Mansion. As

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magnificent as it was, the overriding feeling in Concord's mind was one of insignificance. It made him feel small. He didn't like that.

Around five minutes later, Concord could hear the distinctive clip-clop of Malachite's footwear on the mansion's stone flooring. He glanced back where he'd come from and, sure enough, his old friend was making his way towards him. Judging by the troubled expression on his face, what he was about to say would be nothing less than a scathing criticism.

"Concord!" Malachite shouted from across the hall. "Do you *have* to embarrass me like that?! I got an earful of abuse from my father after you left."

That all-too frequent smirk reappeared on Concord's face. He did so enjoy being the centre of attention, especially when it was at the detriment of everybody else.

"Can't you behave for five minutes?" Malachite added when he was a few feet away from Concord.

A light chuckle escaped Concord's throat. "You've got gravy on your jacket," he said, pointing at his friend's blazer. As Malachite glanced downwards, he was greeted by the whip of Concord's index finger smacking against the front of his snout.

"Ow!"

Concord's dirty chuckle became all the more guttural at his friend's outright gullibility. "You idiot!" he laughed.

Malachite however was unamused. "If you don't start acting your age, I'll toss you out of here myself!"

Concord simply stood there grinning. "You know, Mal, you take everything way too seriously. You gotta learn to chill out; take things as they come."

"Maybe," Malachite said coyly. "But I'd rather you exercise a little consideration on the family estate."

"Sure," Concord replied casually. He wasn't listening; nor did he want to. There was nothing that Malachite said which hadn't crossed his mind already. He knew what he was doing.

"Why are you loitering out here anyway?"

"I'm waiting for you."

Malachite cocked a brow at him. "Oh?"

Concord gave him the merest glimmer of a suggestive glance. "The walk... Remember?"

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It took at least a few seconds for Malachite to figure out what Concord was referring to. When he did, he was evasive at best. “Now?” he retorted. “I’m hardly dressed for trekking.”

“Then *get* dressed!” Concord replied bemusedly. “You don’t have a prior engagement, do ya?”

“I was rather hoping to talk to my mother about the forthcoming meeting with Kaejaris and Aunt Madge.”

Concord knew when his friend was making excuses. “What’s there to talk about? She’ll be here when we get back—what’re you afraid of?”

Malachite was no stranger to the audacity of Concord’s questions; yet he could not conceal his surprise on this occasion. “What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean. I can see right through ya.”

The green-haired dragon passed an awkward glance in the general direction of the dining room. “No one wants you here, Concord—you do realise that?”

Concord laughed louder than ever. If that wasn’t stating the obvious, he didn’t know what was. “Yeah, I know. Groovy, isn’t it?”

Malachite stared open-mouthed at his friend for a moment. “What I’m trying to say is that they don’t want me to be alone with you. I know we’re always together at work but that’s different. This is—if you’ll pardon the exaggeration—my parents’ domain, and they don’t want you in it.”

Still smiling, Concord folded his arms over his chest. “Why did they agree to let me come then?”

Malachite shrugged. Even he didn’t know the answer to that. “I suppose they wanted to give you the benefit of the doubt.”

“I told you they could hardly refuse.”

“Now that you’re here, they’re seeing first-hand what a terrible mistake they’ve made.”

“You think it’s terrible?” Concord asked, his brow furrowed.

“No... I’m glad you’re here. It’s been too long since we’ve entertained you.”

“Entertainment is the right word,” Concord said, his smile returning. “But I’m not nearly entertained enough. I want to see the sights.”

“Never figured you for a sentimental man, Concord.”

“You know what I mean.”

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“I do,” said Malachite. “I suppose it’ll keep you out of their hairs for a while, if anything.”

“Couldn’t have figured it better myself.”

“Alright, I’ll go and get ready!” Malachite started towards the western wing of the mansion. “If you see the family, don’t tell them what you’re up to!” He added before entering the antechamber containing the staircase.

“Gotcha!” Concord acknowledged. Just to make sure that Malachite’s family *didn’t* catch him loitering in the main hall, he started towards the entrance. The ornate doors were the most impressive in the entire structure, second only to the doors of the curious throne room located upstairs. No key was required here. Instead, there were a series of hinge-based locks situated near the top and bottom of both doors, equalling four locks in total. Short of using a battering ram, the mansion doors were as safe as Fort Wren; Wren being a famous security establishment on the continent of Stariotica.

Even the glass windows found throughout Lepidoris Mansion boasted toughened glass, making it highly unlikely that any would-be intruder was going to find an alternative way into the building.

Sighing, Concord began unlocking the entrance doors. He found it to be an inconvenience, particularly given that any one of Malachite’s family or the mansion staff could catch him fiddling with the doors at any moment. As it transpired however, no one disturbed him and, moments later, he passed the threshold. As he closed the doors shut behind him, the inability to lock the doors from outside was immediately obvious; though he supposed that it was the responsibility of the mansion’s staff to secure the building in the absence of their employers.

Stepping away, Concord turned his attention to the grounds. The clearing in which the mansion was nestled was enormous, dwarfed by the gargantuan Lepidoris Forest which surrounded it. It was a breathtaking view and a perfect picture of the Regian countryside.

When Concord heard the doors shifting open, he whirled around to see Malachite stepping out, newly dressed in clothing that was considerably more casual. It felt strange to Concord; seeing his friend dressed in such a manner. Usually, Malachite’s garments would make even a peacock blush with envy. But here, all the pomp and circumstance had filtered away, revealing Malachite in his rawest state; pure and simple. Indeed, the lack of any

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distracting garments accentuated the presence of his handsome features; in particular his heterochromatic eyes.

In a rare display of affection, Concord smiled warmly at his old friend. “Hey, who’s a pretty boy then?” he joked.

Malachite blushed almost immediately. In an attempt to conceal his flustered countenance, he turned on his heel to close the doors. He was tediously slow about it, closing one door after the other with awkward deliberation instead of both at the same time. It achieved little save for delaying the inevitable. He was still blushing when he turned around to face Concord again.

“I really don’t know what’s so pretty about what I’m wearing,” he said, running his fingers through his lengthy green hair. “I find it boring. Still, it’s practical.”

Never one to shy away from telling others how it is, Concord made an admission. “Makes me notice your face more,” he chuckled.

“Please don’t tease me like this,” Malachite replied, though the smile on his face said otherwise.

”Nah, I mean it reminds me of how things used to be... When we were kids.”

Malachite’s brow furrowed. He wasn’t entirely sure what Concord was getting at.

Once again, Concord extended his hand in invitation. “Come on, let me take you on a little trip down memory lane...”

“Are they coming?” Malachite asked in mounting apprehension.

The young Concord dashed across the classroom and pressed himself against the wall directly next to the door. After a moment’s auditory observation, he gave his friend a frantic nod of the head. “Yeah!” he called back.

Malachite motioned him back over; a request which Concord took more than a few seconds to acknowledge. He waited a little longer; he wanted to make sure that the incoming footsteps belonged to the intended targets. The answer presented itself almost immediately. Once that pair of distinct vocal cords had been identified, Concord rushed back over to Malachite’s side.

“It’s them!” he hissed into his friend’s ear.

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Then they waited. With bated breath, they waited for their enemies to come through that door. Speaking of; it'd been left ajar for very good reason. Atop the door was a blue bucket which, on account of its weighty contents, had been placed carefully into position. Any movement—the *slightest* movement—would topple it from that position.

Concord and Malachite stared open-mouthed at the entrance; they awaited the inevitable arrival in unblinking anticipation. Any second now.

Three...

Two...

One...

It all happened so fast.

A white-scaled hand came into contact with the marginally open door and, pushing it even further ajar... The blue bucket, unable to remain in place, toppled!

It couldn't have transpired any more perfectly. The bucket rotated so precisely that its contents—five gallons of water—was deposited onto both individuals. If that wasn't hilarious enough, the bucket's trajectory was such that was deposited completely over one of the individuals' heads!

Concord and Malachite howled with laughter as the initial panic enveloped Kaejaris and Ruunar, their enemies.

Ruunar, the one with the bucket over his head, tore the offending object off his person and tossed it aggressively onto the classroom floor. It bounced but a few times before lying still by the teacher's desk.

"You'll pay for that one, you bastards!" Ruunar hissed angrily before rushing the bullies.

"Ruunar!" cried Kae to no avail.

Whereas Malachite made a dash for the underside of a table, Concord stood his ground as the furious Ruunar rushed towards him.

He laughed again—and was still laughing—when Ruunar clamped his claws around Concord's throat!

"When... Will... You... Leave... Us... ALONE?!!"

Completely unintimidated by the white dragon's aggression, Concord simply shunted Ruunar's arms aside with a swift swipe of his own arms before delivering his knee fiercely into the dragon's nether regions.

Ruunar cried out, clutching at the impacted area in searing pain.

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Concord smirked with sadistic pleasure. He cherished the opportunity to witness Ruunar's discomfort. Not to put too fine a point on it; it made his day!

As a parting gift, Concord clenched his fists. He was on the brink of the delivering a stiff uppercut when—to his utter surprise—Ruunar caught the fist with one hand and, utilising his free hand, punched the tip of Concord's snout!

Recoiling, Concord stepped involuntarily into the open window behind him and, before he could react further, Ruunar rushed him once again! This time, he was unable to react in time and the inevitable impact sent him careening through the open window! He was launched off of his feet and, backside-first, passed the threshold; into the open air.

Thankfully, the history classroom was at ground level, and Concord simply fell onto the grass outside, albeit with a violent thud. By the time he was able to get to his feet, Ruunar had already sealed the window!

Concord snorted with amusement. Did he really think that closing the window was going to stop him?

The purple dragon bolted away, around the side of the building, and was about to re-enter when...

"Concord!" called a voice from behind him.

Mightily irritated, Concord felt compelled to turn around. He came face to face with Mrs. Wyman, their history teacher.

"Why are you running around the side of the building and *why* is your uniform in that state?"

Concord shrugged. "Just playing around."

"Then kindly do it in the proper place—and get yourself cleaned up," she said before brushing past him to enter the building.

As she departed, Concord began to consider exactly where she was headed. It didn't take a rocket scientist to realise that the *history* teacher would be heading to the *history* classroom. Undoubtedly, she would see the mess on her classroom carpet which he and Malachite had just created. Concord didn't want to stick around to see her reaction and he hoped that Malachite wouldn't be either. As for Kaejaris and Ruunar... She *might* just catch them there and assume *they* were responsible!

That would be the icing on the cake, Concord thought. If only he had some way of finding out. Before he could consider what to do, he caught a

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glimpse of a fast-moving object at the corner of his eye. Inclining his head towards it, he caught sight of Kaejaris and Ruunar rushing out of the other side of the building followed closely by a pursuing Malachite!

It would appear that victory wouldn't be so sweet after all. It didn't matter. Concord knew that the future would be ripe with opportunities; the abuse plentiful! If Kaejaris and Ruunar thought that they'd seen the last of him, they hadn't seen *anything* yet!

To Concord's surprise, Malachite gave up chasing the pair and began making his way over to him.

"What are you doing?!" demanded Concord. "You let them get away!"

"I think we've done enough for one day," breathed Malachite, somewhat drained from the exertion. "Let them stew for a bit."

"Hmm... Alright," Concord grumbled.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I was about to come back in the building but Mrs. Wyman caught me."

"Did she see what happened?" Malachite asked ominously.

Concord shook his head. "Nah, she only saw me running around the building." He paused, imagining her reaction at that very moment. "Bet she's seen the mess though," he chuckled.

"We'd better get out of here before she gets suspicious."

"Agreed," said Concord, patting his friend on the shoulder before leading the way from L Block.

Malachite had to jog to keep up with him. "Where to now?" he asked.

"There's still ten minutes before PE."

"Let's get a bite to eat at the canteen—I haven't eaten yet."

For a short while, the pair made their way around the school in silence until Concord raised the subject of their departure.

"You got things fixed when we get out of this cruddy dump?"

Malachite nodded. "Yes, I'm going to use my allowance to set up my own club. I can't wait."

"Neither can I," said Concord. "At last we'll be able to live our lives on our own terms completely. Just a few more weeks and we can kiss Kaejaris, Ruunar, and this place, goodbye."

His friend grimaced. "I'm not sure I like the idea of kissing my own cousin."

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Concord rolled his eyes. “Ha-ha, very funny,” he replied. In spite of Malachite’s straight-faced response, he knew that his friend was jesting.

Malachite quickly changed the subject. “Are you sure you want in with me?” he asked.

Before Concord could respond, they passed siblings Xien and Xicen, Kaejaris’s classmates. Although the pair had not caused Concord any real trouble, their entire aura irritated him; in particular their general disposition. The pair were far too pleasant and nice for Concord to exercise *any* semblance of mercy.

As he and Malachite passed Xien and Xicen, Concord gave them a brief but effective display of intimidation. His feigned lunge caused the former to jolt suddenly whilst the latter simply returned a baleful stare.

“You’d better watch it; Kaejaris might recruit them if you’re not careful,” Malachite said while Concord was laughing to himself.

“Are you *kidding*?” Concord said incredulously. “That little pipsqueak and his moronic sister can’t hold a candle to me in a fight.”

“Don’t be too sure. I’ve seen that Xicen coming to her brother’s aid. Very feisty, that one. She reminds me of Ruunar in that way.”

Concord was in no mood to hear Malachite’s concerns. “Whatever! Anyway, what were we saying... Oh yeah, why are you asking me? Don’t you want me in with you?”

“Of course!” said Malachite. “I just wanted to make sure. It’s a big decision to make.”

“Can’t think of anywhere I’d rather be,” he said, suddenly halting.

Malachite stopped as well; gave Concord a questionable glance as he wondered what he was going to say next.

Concord put a hand to his friend’s shoulder and said “Your brains and my brawn; we make a good team. I won’t be the one to break it.”

Malachite appeared touched by the tribute. “Thanks, Concord. That means a lot.”

“Yeah,” Concord replied wistfully. “We’re gonna show the world who’s boss, you and me.”

“And if Kaejaris shows his face again, we’ll kick his ass to the curve where it belongs!”

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“Won’t be long now,” Concord said. “Whaddya say we start planning Kaejaris’s going-away present? I mean we gotta leave him *something* to remember us by!”

“I think I have just the idea,” sniggered Malachite.

The pair set off, content in their schemes and their future; their dreams all but assured. And so it was for a time. Fate however had other plans in store for Concord, Malachite, Ruunar, and Kaejaris. One day, one year; their paths would cross once again and under entirely different circumstances. Would they let sleeping dogs lie and put their difficult past to rest once and for all? Only time would tell.

BOOKS IN THIS SERIES

Adventures of Kae

Amidst a world inhabited by man-sized bugs and reptiles exists the dragon, Kaejaris; or just plain old Kae as he is otherwise known. Despite the blood of the aristocracy coursing through his veins, Kae is beginning to look beyond the horizon; beyond the gates of his affluent abode.

There lies adventure.

What sets Kaejaris apart from others is his aptitude for channelling the esoteric forces. His home-world, Materius, harbours a unique frequency, bursting full of arcane power. Few can tap into and realise this extraordinary magic and, in this day and age, even fewer can utilise it to its fullest potential. Kaejaris is one of the few who can. But, as technology advances, there are those in the world who have begun to turn to the arcane as an alternative source of energy. It is a precious and rare commodity. Dangerous even, in the wrong hands.

Mechanised Esoterica

For decades, the utilisation of magic has become a lost art. Wartime tragedies begot the abolishing of such practices, driving users of the arcane into a swift and indelible decline. Although it has been legalised in the decades since, it is still deeply vilified by narrow-minded members of society.

Today, there are very few veterans left in the world and, without the training facilities available to nurture fledgling users, many of them choose to wither away in obscurity.

Majoragon Lepidoris did not choose such a fate. Recently, she has taken on the controversial task of offering her services to those with the desire to learn. Among her modest ensemble of students is her son, Kaejaris. He shows great promise and, by all accounts, is well versed in the arcane arts.

However, the Lepidoris's mastery of the esoteric has not gone unnoticed. Soon, Kaejaris will find himself confronted by a pair of familiar faces who seek his assistance in matters of great scientific importance.

Will this seemingly innocent venture mean salvation for the arcane arts, or renewed damnation?