

Chapter 1

Life was more than a bit stressful.

It's difficult to say when it started being overwhelming. When work turned into being overworked, hanging out with friends became a social obligation. The cost of living got higher and higher, and it never felt like anything ever went anywhere.

It wasn't all bad. But it was hard to enjoy the good when the bad weighed so much. Covid turned the word on its head and nearly put my brother on the ground. Every day is a new problem, a new reason to be scared and stressed. More debt, less money, not enough work, too much work. Sacrificing more and more just to stay afloat. Just to keep from falling under the growing weight of responsibility. It wasn't all bad.

But it took a lot of work to focus on the good.

An average day started. Early in the morning, before most people would even consider waking up. The morning commute was longer than ever after moving, and I couldn't risk being late for work. My morning preparations were quick, a practiced ritual that had been trimmed down as short as possible. A pat down to make sure I had everything, and I was out of the apartment and on my way to the parking garage, two steps at a time.

The car started on the second try, so I pulled out of my parking spot, feeling like it was going to be a good day. I circled down the parking structure, checking both ways before pulling out into the street. I pull down the road, stopping at the first red light.

And suddenly, there was a soul-shaking impact. A flash of pain. A deep, draining ache. A creeping cold burning out into a numbness that slowly erased my connection to consciousness. I could feel my last moments of life as the tether between my mind and my body snapped, and before my brain could even work out what was happening, it was over.

I felt the life leaving me, the weight of it being pulled away from my body. When that was gone, the weight pulled away from my mind. It was like being freed from a thick layer of mud that had weighed me down for as long as I could remember.

For a while after that, there was nothing. Truly nothing. The pressure I had felt for the past twenty years of my life was gone. Obligations to family, friends, work, society, and myself fell to nothing.

The fact that I couldn't quite decide if dying was worth being finally free really tells how just how much of a relief it actually was.

I wasn't happy to be dead. There had been a lot I was looking forward to. I'd miss my niece's first birthday, miss my brother's wedding. I desperately hoped that one of my siblings would take in my cat. He would never make it on the streets. There were seasons of shows that weren't finished and books I had been meaning to read. But even through all that...

I was free. At peace. There was nothing left to worry about. Nothing tying me down or weighing on my mind.

Time passed. And continued to pass, though I didn't have anything to mark it by. Somewhere between a few seconds and decades went by before a familiar weight returned, and I opened my eyes.

I was standing in a dark space, dark enough that had I been looking at the far reaches, I might not have noticed I had opened my eyes at all. Fortunately, such a spot did not immediately appear, as the space around me was filled with galaxies, swaths of fantastically colored nebulae, and planetoids of every shape and size, some trailing asteroids, others surrounded by rings. Sparks of energy danced around them, shifting colors and shooting across the space between everything.

As I watched the spectacle around me, I realized what the returning familiar weight was. It was my body, reformed around me. I could feel the life in my body, feel my connection reforming and strengthening. I was alive. The feeling of life itself was familiar, the weight of it laying on me like a comfortable blanket on a night with a chill. It took me a few seconds to remember how to move and open my mouth to speak.

"What is... what is going on?" I asked, turning in a circle, scanning all around me.

"Deacon Roy. You have been chosen!"

A voice resonated through the space, louder than it needed to be, loud enough to hurt my new ears. It was coming from everywhere at once, vibrating my bones.

"Your life has been saved, so you may embark on a grand adventure!"

"What kind of adventure?" I asked, frowning slightly. "I'm not interested in being the butt of some prophecy."

"There is no prophecy. Your fate is your own." The voice responded after a long pause.
"Your adventure is what you make of it."

"No strings attached?" I asked, still looking around, trying to find the source of the voice, eventually settling for the closest large planetoid.

"Correct."

“Alright, I’m tentatively interested.”

The voice was silent for a long time, as if unsure how to handle my response.

“Your destination has been chosen from your own preferences, and you will be bestowed the powers common to heroes of that universe, so you may properly participate in the world at a scale fit for adventure.”

“Where am I going?” I asked, frowning now. “Because I’m not interested in going to some grimdark horror universe. If I wake up in Worm, I’m just going to chew a bullet.”

“What?” The voice asked, the first emotion, confusion, coming through. *“We have given you back your life and offer you an adventure. You would throw that away?”*

“To avoid getting tied up with grimdark bullshit? Abso-fucking-lutely,” I said confidently, though internally, I was surprised at just how serious I was. “Being dead gave me the first taste of *real* freedom and peace I’ve had since I was a toddler. Sure, not wanting to disappoint my parents and being worried about what my friends thought of me wasn’t exactly torture, but that was just the start. I was at peace for the first time in twenty-odd years. I’m *not* interested in trading that in for angst, suffering, and whatever fucked up shit that goes on in those kinds of places.”

This time the silence was somehow heavier, as if more of... whatever I was talking to, were now listening.

“We do not usually share the location.” They responded.

“That sounds like you’re willing to, you just haven’t before.”

“You... are being sent to a Star Wars variant universe, a combination of what you know as Legends and Cannon,” The voice answered after another silence. *“You will be given significant control over the Force-”*

“No thank you!” I said, cutting off the voice.

I was having a surprising amount of fun. I knew, logically, that I wouldn’t usually be this abrupt or rude in this kind of situation. In fact, I was pretty sure if this was happening to me without having died first, I would be having a gibbering existential crisis. That is if I didn’t slip into a coma from pure fear. But I *DIED*. What did I have to worry about? There wasn’t anyone I needed to impress, anyone I needed to keep safe, answer to, or anything. I didn’t even have any debt anymore. I could worry about who I left behind, but my family was close. They would be okay.

“The location is fine, that's not the problem. Star Wars is interesting, with lots of potential,” I continued, crossing my arms like I was unimpressed. “But I don't want anything to do with the Force.”

“*Why?*” The voice asked, the barest hints of curiosity leaking into its voice. “*The Force is a potent ability. We have bestowed it before.*”

“You have? And how did that turn out?” I asked. “Let me guess, they did one of three things. A, they underestimated the dark side and indulged in small pleasures or passions, slowly falling before eventually turning into a raging psychopathic monsters that destroyed the very things they loved. B, they rose above their instincts, became beacons of light and goodness, and in the process, forgot how to be human, losing sight of the people who suffered for the greater good. Or C, they manage to straddle the line of Grey Jedi, but in the process had to focus their entire being on walking a line so thin that if they fell on it, it would slice them in two?”

The silence stretched on for a while. When it spread out past the previous record, I shrugged and continued.

“The Force looks good on paper, but in practice? It is way too dangerous to use by normal people. I have no intention of becoming a pious, viceless beacon of good virtue, and I would prefer not to turn into a monster because of it. Sure, at its best, it's a pretty potent psi ability, but anything lower than that, and it's a cognitohazard waiting to brainwash you into a cookie-cutter light-side monk or a dark-side psycho. Since I assume you're not sending me to the happy, fun times Star Wars universe....”

The truth was, I had fond memories of playing Jedi with my brother, jumping around the living room, and swinging our toy lightsabers around. The Star Wars universe was one of the more awe-inspiring sci-fi universes, with a massive amount of lore to pull from. I would have probably taken it if they had made this offer to me as a kid or even as a young adult. But I was older and more cynical. The Force was the common vein running through most of the greatest villains in the Star Wars universe. Why would I want to be controlled by that?

“*We could... send you with nothing?*”

“That seems like a waste. Could I have something else?” I asked. “I get the sense you do this a lot. You must have something to use as a backup. Maybe some magic? Preferably a style that won't taint my soul, or enslave me to an eldritch deity.”

There was a long pause, the multiple presences I could feel turning away for a moment. It was odd and came through a sense I couldn't identify, but it was definitely there. After five minutes, a large book poofed into existence just above my eye-line. I barely had time to catch it, turning it over in my hands. It was bound in thick blue leather with a simple silver leaf border. A symbol, also inlaid with silver, as big as my splayed hand, marked the cover. It was a circle, with lines leading to its center, like spokes on a bicycle tire. Within the circle, over the spokes, was a

smaller circle with two spikes connected to the top. Overlaid all of that was a simplified eye, with two spikes coming from either side and a third pointing down.

"The College of Winterhold? From Skyrim?" I asked, looking back up to the same planet as before. "Are you giving me Elder Scrolls magic?"

"In a way, yes. There are infinite versions of Nirn throughout the multiverse. We are giving you one of the less potent, more limited versions. Still flexible, still powerful, but nowhere near the immense potency of the cannon lore." The voice explained, clearly building up steam. *"The grimoire you hold in your hands is bound to you now, and you can summon it at will. It will teach you the basics of how to utilize this version of Magicka, limited to spells you may or may not be familiar with, and by your own skill. As you progress in skill, so will the spells available for you to learn. Bending and changing those spells and perhaps even making your own will be up to you."*

"And what about being stuck in a Star Wars universe?" I asked. "I may know that caf is basically coffee, but you're sending me to a universe where the caf machine to make it is most likely more sophisticated than a Tesla."

Once again, the weight was taken away before suddenly focusing back on me after only a few seconds. It was abrupt enough that I unconsciously took a step back.

"In order to bestow knowledge, we must modify your mind. No current memories or emotions would be harmed, but we would be adding memories to your mind at a deep level. Would you consent to this?"

"As long as you're not changing anything?" I asked before shrugging. "Sure. I'd prefer the full package, though, something like all the knowledge that a decent mercenary would have."

"No. We are not allowed to tip the scales so far," The voice responded, this time immediately. *"We already push the boundaries with your new magical ability."*

"Fine. At least teach me how to do basic things. It's going to be a really short adventure if I get killed trying to open a door," I pointed out. "I wouldn't even be able to read the language!"

"Very well."

"And how to use a sword... and a bow!" I said before the entity talking to me could do anything. "You owe me for lying to you, and it's not like you would be giving me super soldier skills!"

"When did we lie?"

"You said my fate is my own, but I'm going to Star Wars, a place steeped in a universe-spanning, potentially intelligent psychic field. No one's fate in that universe is truly their own."

"...Fine"

I winced as a sharp headache wracked my brain the second after they spoke. Instinctively I dropped my grimoire to clutch my head, the pain digging deeper until it felt like a lump of hot iron rolling and expanding behind my eyes. It pulsed slowly and steadily with my heartbeat. When I finally opened my eyes, everything was blurry. It took a full minute of blinking and rubbing for my vision to finally clear. And I did not like what I saw.

I was by myself, standing in a dark, dingy room that was barely big enough to lie in. In front of me was a door, though I couldn't see any mechanism to activate it. A quick turn showed a seat in the corner behind me, though I quickly realized it wasn't a seat but a basic, bare-bones toilet. The less said about how dirty it was, the better.

The fact that I had a pair of high-tech manacles around my wrists confirmed it. I was in some sort of prison cell.

"I think I might have pissed them off," I mumbled to myself, referring to the entity that had just dropped me here. "So much for being free..."

I started examining the room for clues or a way to escape, stopping at one point to chuckle. I was imprisoned and shackled, like almost all heroes from the Elder Scrolls series. When I was done chuckling, I spent a few minutes contemplating how much dying might have affected me because while I was worried about being locked in a metal cell, I wasn't nearly as concerned as I probably should have been.

Eventually, I settled on accepting that it was unlikely that anyone could die and not change in some way before continuing to study the cell. When my in-depth search of the room turned up nothing, and a quick shoulder check on the metal doorway only resulted in a sore shoulder and a bruise, I gave up on immediately attempting to escape. Instead, I leaned against the wall furthest from the toilet and sank to the floor.

The subtle vibration I had noticed while I was inspecting my room became all the more noticeable, with more of my surface area pressed against the ground. It was constant, a low vibration that some part of my brain, probably the most recent addition, immediately identified as the feeling of a ship in hyperspace. So not only was I a prisoner, I was a prisoner in space.

I took a long deep breath, letting it out slowly. I had time to freak out later. Right now, I needed to focus.

“Summon it at will...” I mumbled, closing my eyes and focusing on the thought of the blue and silver book, my grimoire.

As much as I hated being stuck in a prison cell, it gave me something I needed. Until someone came to check on me, I had time. And I had every intention to use every second.