

CHAPTER 2: You are grounded grounded grounded grou



“Honestly, I can’t BELIEVE the level of irresponsibility you two showed down there. First you pick the lock on a shed that you were told NOT to enter, *then* you disturb a very clearly dangerous seal and take the magic badges holding it in place, and now look at what’s happened! You released a crapton of Aerumna on the world below!”



Atlas and Janet can’t help but stare in disbelief at who exactly is lecturing them to hell and back, still sitting on the airship floor.



For one, they’re...floating a couple inches off the ground. Secondly, they’re semi-transparent, illuminated by a faint blue glow.



...Janet raises her hand.



They're about to lecture more, but the politeness makes them pause.

"...Yes?"



"Are you a ghost?" Blink blink.



"...Yes, I'm a ghost. Though, that's more of an oversimplification of what I am than anything."



"An oversimplification? And, um. What did you mean by magic badges? Aerumna...? You're using a lot of words we don't know."



"It's an oversimplification because I'm *actually* a soul tethered to this plane without an associated body. Ghosts aren't real! Robin just—"



“Wait, Robin? Robin Cordoli?” That’s their uncle...!



“That’s correct.”

Out of an adjacent door steps a tall person in a hooded robe, hands in their pockets.



They pull down their hood.

“Atlas, Janet. It’s nice to see you both, though I wish the circumstances could be better.”



Atlas stands from the floor, stumbling over to Robin.

“Uncle, I—I haven’t seen you in ages! What happened to you? Why haven’t you come back, why—”



"Atlas, *calm down.*" Robin stops Atlas in place with both hands on their shoulders. "I know both of you have a lot of questions, but I need to answer them in an order that will make the most sense."



They steel themselves with a nod, backing up to stand beside Janet again.



Janet stands as well, brushing off her pants.

"I don't know what order's going to make sense, but I hope it explains this airship, too..."



"Just *listen!* For two seconds!"



"All of this began 40-some years ago, when Daniel and I found a book that we shouldn't have."



“I’ve been blind in one eye since I was born. I managed just fine, and your grandmother helped accommodate me in more ways than I could have ever asked for. But when we found that book, it talked about ways to cure people—cure *me*—that I’d never seen before.



“Even though I thought it’d never bothered me, reading that book woke something up in me. Suddenly, I was desperate to be cured, all because I knew it was possible.”



“Was it blood magic or something?”



“Janet...!”



“It’s fine, Atlas.” They shake their head. “She’s right. Yes, it was blood magic.”



"I still don't know *why* that book was in our house..."



"Why it was there doesn't matter anymore. What matters is that I tried something I shouldn't have, using my own blood, and it had consequences. More than I could have ever imagined."



"That substance you saw in the waterways under the shed—that was a substance called **Aerumna**. As far as I know, it's born from intense negative emotion fusing with magic. I've only seen it take the form of that black tar, which is what happens when it fuses with blood."



"So... you created that stuff down there, then?"



"If you created it, then surely there's a way to kill it, right?"



“That’s what I’ve been trying to figure out. The best I had were those badges.”



“What are these, anyhow? You said they’re magic badges...?” Atlas pulls the pearly white badge out of their pocket, looking it over...



“I still have the orange one, too!” Janet pulls the orange badge out of her pocket as well.



“You two need to take really good care of those! They’re incredibly powerful sources of sun and moon magic!”



“There’s two primary forms of magic: sun and moon. Each is sourced and powered by their respective celestial body. The only thing I’ve seen ward off Aerumna is their combined forces.”



“So it was...really bad that we took them, huh...” Atlas shrinks back a little.



Robin is silent for a moment.

“...I can’t fault you two for being curious. But yes, it was very bad.”



“Why don’t we go back down there and stop it, then? If we can use these badges to stop it, then we should do that as soon as possible!”



“It’s not that simple! Just because you *have them* doesn’t mean you know how to use them!”



“Can’t you two do anything about it, then!? You’ve been gone for ages, surely you can—!”



“Janet, I’m *dead* and Robin’s already partially corrupted! Don’t you think we would have already done something if we could!?”



“Daniel.”



...They fall silent.



“How do we learn to use them, then...?”



“The good news is that the locals should already know how to deal with Aerumna. It won’t be *good*, but Aerumna only moves towards strong negative emotion. Otherwise, it’s stationary.”



“So there’s just gonna be a big goopy mess in Atlas’s backyard until we know how these things work...?”



“Essentially, yes.”



“What’s the bad news, then?”



“The bad news is that I can’t teach you the magic you need. We’re going to have to find people who can.”



“How are we going to do that?! I didn’t even think magic was *real* ten minutes ago!”



“Why don’t you two take a look outside?” They gesture to the nearest window.



Atlas and Janet do exactly that...

...and are shown an entire world beyond their wildest dreams down below. From where they are in the sky, they can see dozens of towns, forests, ruins... and to the east, a vast desert with just the same.



“There really *was* something out there, all this time...!”



“I can’t believe it! All this time, this is what was surrounding us!” She’s trying to peek around the window to see more without falling over.



“The first place we’re going is the Oracle Desert. They were made by the same goddess who created sun magic, so there should be someone there who can teach you how to use that sun badge.”



“Shouldn’t we introduce them to the rest of the crew first?”



“Hey, that’s right! You didn’t even tell us how you got ahold of this airship.”



“We were picked up the same way you were, but there was no one onboard.”



“Like... a ghost ship...?”



“Not a ghost ship! The ship was piloting itself! We still don’t know how it works, but we picked up some people along the way while trying to figure out what to do about the Aerumna in Setune.”



“They should be in the lounge. I’m surprised none of them have been eavesdropping...” They walk off to the lounge, expecting the others to follow.



And that they do.



There’s quite a colorful crew in the lounge. Mostly adults, two ~~supposed~~ babies.



“...This looks less like a ship’s crew and more like a ragtag gang of orphans.”



“That’s because we are!” Helpful.



“Everyone, this is my nibling Atlas and their friend Janet.” They gesture to the two. “They’re holding onto the magic badges until they learn how to use them, and then we’re heading back to Setune to deal with the Aerumna there. In the meantime, please introduce yourselves.”



“I’m Citopixe, and that’s my brother Nianory! I eat magic and nie makes maps.”



“It’s a pleasure to meet you both.” Nianory dips his head respectfully. “I am a mapmaker, as Citopixe says. I serve as the ship’s navigator on the off chance that the autopilot fails.”



“...I’m Rem.” Rem glances away from where she’s sitting on the ground. “I’m a dancer and a moon shapeshifter.”



“That means she can take on the abilities of things she bonds with! Like breathing underwater after makin’ pals with a fish!”



She nods!



“I’m Cornet!” Cornet waves from where she’s sitting next to Rem. “I’m ten!”



“She’s not actually ten. She’s a polymorph, which means she can turn into whatever she likes!”



“And I wanna be ten!”



“What’s the difference between a shapeshifter and a polymorph?”



“A moon shapeshifter can only take on the abilities of things they bond with, and a sun shapeshifter is limited to one form that they can switch back and forth between! Polymorphs can do whatever they want.”



“I have a feeling that there’s a *lot* of things we don’t know about...” Sigh.



“Don’t feel too bad. Daniel and I had to learn this all from scratch ourselves, too.”



“You can’t see Setune from outside, so none of us even knew it was there!”



“You can’t...?”

Sure enough, when Atlas looks outside, there’s nothing that looks even close to Setune in the direction that they came from.



“It seems that there’s a strong barrier of illusion magic protecting your town from being detected.” The final unIntroduced person close the book they were reading and sets it in their lap. “The only way to access it is from above, and even then, one has to know that it’s there.”



“This is Lariat. They’re half of a reincarnation of Requiem, the first Erkhoun created by their goddess. All Erkhoun reincarnate with their memories intact, but since Lariat is only half of her, they were born with her magic ability, whereas their twin received her memories.”



"A...reincarnation of a goddess..." Holy shit.



"So there's...two goddesses, then? One for the sun, who made oracles, and one for the moon, who I assume made Erkhoun..." They're trying very hard to keep up.



"You're on the right track, but there's actually two more!"



"The four goddesses are Ichorite, goddess of the sun and the elements, who created the Oracles, Etherite, goddess of the moon and the metaphysical, who created Erkhoun such as myself, Malice, goddess of emotion and the earth, who created polymorphs, and Seroh-Edici, goddess of logic and history, who has no people of her own."



"Don't those categories overlap?" Head tilt.



“They share them! They’re sisters, after all.” Smile smile.



“The earth and the elements could also be taken to mean different things. Malice created crystals, which are used to contain and control magic. Your badges, for example, are actually crystals that contain a significant amount of magic, allowing the users to wield impressive skills with very little practice.”



“How come we can’t have someone who already knows how to use magic use them, then? I’m sure they’d be a lot more powerful in someone else’s hands...”



“If you’d like to have someone else clean up your mess, be my guest.”



“Not what I meant...!”



“You’re right, though. The reason I’m having you two learn how to use those badges is because I’m treating it as a primer for interacting with the world outside of Setune. Magic is a very important part of the cultures across the globe, so if you want to explore, you’ll have to learn about it.”



“That should be easy-peasy!” Janet claps her hands together. “So we’re going to the Oracle Desert so I can learn about sun magic, right?”



“That’s right. In the meantime, Atlas can learn about moon magic from Lariat. By the time we get to the desert and find someone who can teach you sun magic, Atlas should have a basic knowledge of moon magic.”



“Isn’t that putting a lot of weight on my shoulders...?” They aren’t sure they can learn an entire type of magic in such a short amount of time...



“Remember, we don’t need you to be a master. We just need you to know the basics, and the basics aren’t as difficult as they might sound.”



“If you’re sure...” They still seem uncertain, glancing towards Lariat.



“I will teach you to the best of my ability.” Lariat nods politely. “If you have any difficulty keeping up, I can slow down for you.”



“I can help too.” Rem stands and walks over to Atlas. “I mostly use dance magic, but I know how moon magic works, since it’s a part of how I shapeshift.”



“Oh. Thank you, Rem.” Everyone’s so kind...



“I think... I can figure this out.”



“...Will Atlas be able to come with me and learn about sun magic, too?” She seems hesitant all of the sudden.



“If all goes well, whoever teaches you sun magic will accompany us on the ship, so you can learn each other’s magic type as well.” They nod.



“That should be fine, then!” Back to chipper! “I’m ready to start learning, then!”



“Good. Thank you.” Another nod. “In the meantime, if you’d like to get familiar with the rest of the airship, be my guest. The dorms are down the right hall from here.”



“How many are there? Janet and I can always share a room, if need be.”



“Not necessary! This ship’s powered by super strong illusion magic, so once someone’s officially onboard and here to stay, a new dorm pops up, just for them!”



“They won’t just suddenly disappear and leave us to fall out of the air, will they?”



“Not that kind of illusion! Illusion magic is the magic of the gods, the ability to make something out of nothing! Those rooms are as real as you or me!”



“Woah... That’s actually pretty amazing!” They’re assuming it’s absolutely non-euclidean, but this *is* a pretty huge airship...



“Isn’t it? So please, feel free to make yourselves comfortable first and foremost.”



“We will! Thank you!”

END CHAPTER 2