

Chapter 1: Me, At the Start

Elliot

Elliot had never considered himself less than human. At one point, the concept hadn't existed in his people's vocabulary, an unknown philosophy, but maybe that had been the point. Maybe the Lutovish had kept it from them.

They'd always presided over Ibis, his people's continent in the middle of a vast sea. For the most part, they stayed out of his people's business, or at least, they did in Elliot's home nation of Flosari. Sometimes, if one concentrated very hard, one could even forget they existed.

Except for the trackers in the hands of all children of Ibis. Except if one worked near them every day.

Beside Elliot, the room's beacon flashed pastel green, indicating an incoming arrival, and he tripped over himself to clear space, snatching up his bucket as he did. In his haste, sudsy water soaked his trousers, leaving its cloth clinging to his legs, and as soon as he'd reached a safe distance, he spun in place, raking his eyes across the floor for-

There. Where their newest guests would soon stand lay a patch of marbled stone that was shinier and decidedly *damp*er than the rest. Hell. They'd kill him.

No. He couldn't think like that. This was simply another puzzle to solve, and Elliot was good at doing that.

Stripping off his tunic, he wadded it into a ball, tossing it on top of the puddle. As it settled, soaking up the potential tripping hazard, the beacon's blinking stopped, and four people appeared from thin air around it.

As always, the Lutovish baffled Elliot. They always wore the brightest and flashiest of clothing, and it was nearly always made of a stretchy material, never to be found in Ibis. If that weren't strange enough, they seemed to favor the most abnormal of hair and eye colors, sometimes going into the yellow or pink range. These oddities, along with their abnormally tall heights, made the Lutovish appear alien to him. Alien and terrifying.

One of the four, the man with his foot entangled in Elliot's tunic, leaned over to retrieve that bundle of fabric, holding it between two fingers.

"*What's this?*" he asked.

Clenching his hands behind his back, Elliot stood motionless, hoping he appeared as invisible as he felt. Unfortunately, it seemed he wasn't. Another person in the group, a woman, inclined her head in his direction.

"I suspect it belongs to that one," she said.

Striding to Elliot, the man with his tunic lifted it higher, clearing his throat.

"Is this yours?" he asked, loud and slow.

Elliot had no clue why they talked like that after arriving. Sure, translators usually weren't inserted until a Lutovish had passed through a beacon, but they had to have learned at least some of Ibis' tongue before making the journey here. In the past, enough newly arrived guests had approached Elliot with questions or demands to make it so. Where their lessons lacking in some way?

"In my haste to make room for you, I spilled my water," he said. "I thought it better to dirty my clothing than allow our honored guests to slip. My apologies for the inconvenience."

After a heavy pause, the three people around the beacon broke into laughter with the woman among them tittering into her hand. Meanwhile the man in front of Elliot glanced back at them.

"What do you think?" he called. *"It certainly talks pretty enough."*

"Oh, leave it be, Varian," the woman said. *"We have better things to do."*

Pursing his lips, Varian examined Elliot, and he returned the other man's gaze as placidly as he could. After a moment, Varian slapped Elliot's wet tunic to his chest.

"Be more careful, *bakava*," he said.

Bakava. The one word in all his time spent puzzling out the Lutovish tongue that Elliot had yet to decipher. From the tone of voice used to deliver it, he took it to be an insult of some kind, but he'd never learned what it actually meant.

Clutching his tunic, he bowed.

"Of course, honored guest."

Elliot stayed frozen in place until their chattered voices faded from arrivals, four new visitors on their way to greater Ibis. He only straightened once silence had fallen again, soon wringing his shirt over the bucket.

That had gone better than he'd expected, but then, Elliot had always held luck's favor. How else could he, someone from a family with little means, have swung a job in the Travel Center, a position that people throughout Flosa would commit murder to gain? Here, he could study his life's greatest puzzle to his heart's content, keeping himself in check. Here, he could have all the silence and solitude that he wanted. Except for when guests arrived, of course.

Even with that, luck had seen fit to bless him. During most arrivals, the Lutovish had ignored Elliot, which wasn't the norm. He'd heard horror stories from the other cleaners, those unlucky enough to greet rowdy guests, but he'd never experienced that displeasure for himself.

Eventually, luck would get bored with him. He'd accepted this fact. It was the way of things, after all, but until she left him for another, Elliot would take full advantage of her blessing.

With his tunic as dry as he could get it, he pulled it over his head and hurried to the beacon. No further arrivals would take place for a good five minutes, as the machine needed time to cool down. Or at least, that was what he'd always assumed stopped arrivals. Either way, he had several uninterrupted minutes to examine what had become the object of his obsession for the last five years.

Three tiers of metal tubes comprised the beacon with a cylinder in its center serving as their support. A hollow globe hovered, unattached, a meter above this with mist billowing inside of it. The mist's color shifted according to which process the beacon was about to run: green for arrivals, white for cooldown, blue for warmup, and red for error. Again, all as Elliot had assumed.

While the other colors were common, he'd only seen the beacon turn red once before, a shift that had occurred while the mist had been flashing green. Seconds after it had started, several Lutovish had sprinted into the chamber. One of them had pushed Elliot outside while the rest had gathered around the beacon. He guessed that what had followed hadn't been good. Flosari had experienced an unusually troubled week after the incident, after all.

This beacon wasn't the only one in the Travel Center. A few others populated one half of the building while departures occupied the second half. Those beacons were identical to the ones in arrivals save for the handles that formed a ring around their top tier. When an honored guest finished their business in Ibis, they only needed to touch a handle to be transported elsewhere. To Lutov, he presumed.

In his time as a cleaner, Elliot had deciphered some of the beacon's mechanisms. He knew the central cylinder was what completed the device's work. Following guests' arrivals, he'd burned himself on it enough to establish that fact. Work produced heat, right?

The tubes probably conducted a cooling material of some sort, but Elliot hadn't been able to confirm this hypothesis. His belief was based on the Lutovish script running down each tube's length

Once translated, it said 'Caution. Do not open except for in an emergency. Contents are cold and may cause severe burns.'

Or at least, that was what Elliot thought it said. Except when it came to processes, he'd never been great at reading script, even those that were in his own tongue. His interpretation of the Lutovish warning could be wrong. Parts of the message confused him no matter how many phrase variations he tried. What could be cold enough to burn someone? The destructive part of him wanted to crack a tube open and find out.

So, his two discoveries: what made the beacons function and what kept them from melting through the floor. Pathetic for five years of study; he knew, but it was what he had, and he knew he could figure out the rest. He just needed time.

Time he didn't have now.

The beacon flashed green again, and Elliot hurried back to his bucket and mop. He wouldn't learn anything about the beacon if he didn't get his job done too.

Of all the Lutovish who supervised the cleaners, Finiuc was the worst. He was smug, his work attitude was atrocious, and when on duty, he made the cleaners' lives miserable, always finding the smallest of excuses to dock their rations. He was having an especially good time with Elliot today.

"A complaint was filed against you," he said. "I should make you leave here with nothing today."

Then, do it, was what Elliot wanted to say.

"Please, I have brothers who aren't old enough to earn rations," was what he said instead. "Would you let four boys starve?"

Elliot knew he would, odious man that he was, but his supervisors would frown on any sign of malnourishment in such valuable resources. Finiuc hated him, though, and because of that, the bastard might risk a slap on the wrist, just to see him suffer.

Rising from behind his counter, Finiuc marched toward an office in the corner, the one claimed by the Travel Center's supervisor. Shouting soon emerged from it, followed in short order by the current supervisor, Dract, marching toward Elliot with Finiuc trailing him.

"A recent arrival complained about your work," Dract huffed once he'd reached Elliot. "Tell me why Eighth Stratus Finiuc shouldn't dock your rations."

And of course, he refused to look at Elliot, fixing his eyes on a point above his head, but that was fine. It made it easier for Elliot to speak.

"I did my work. Yes, I made a mistake while doing it, but I also tried to correct it to the best of my abilities," he said. "Also, if I don't receive rations today, my siblings won't eat tonight, and they've done a lot of that lately."

His first reason would never sway Dract. The Lutovish didn't care if the children of Ibis faithfully complied with their demands. All they wanted was their games, and for those, they needed healthy youths. Like Elliot's brothers.

"You didn't tell me it talks pretty, Finiuc," Dract said. *"I wonder how smart it thinks it is."*

Smart enough to learn the Lutovish tongue as soon as he'd gotten this job.

"*It's too clever for its own good, sir,*" Finiuc said. "*Look at its eyes.*"

Dract deigned to lower his gaze, and meeting them, Elliot tried to dim the spark that blazed in him. After a moment, Dract lifted a wire from behind the counter.

"Tracker," he said.

Elliot offered the man the back of his hand, refusing to look at the socket in it. Inserting a wire into it, Dract bent down to a display, flicking his eyes back and forth as he read.

"Elliot Lockhart, age: twenty-four. Worked with us ten years, ever since the proper age was attained. Little to no blemishes on record. Mother and father alive, four younger brothers and one older sister. That's quite the family you have."

"Mom and dad have always striven to please," Elliot said.

Grunting, Dract turned to Finiuc.

"*Too valuable to let starve,*" he said. "*Give it its food.*"

Finiuc's face fell.

"Yes, sir."

While Dract returned to his office, Finiuc slammed his fingers on his display, yanking the wire out of Elliot once the rations transfer had completed.

"Get out of here," he grumbled.

Elliot should do as the bastard had said and be grateful that today, things had worked out in his favor. Really, he should, but something in him just *refused* to let things lie. So, he pasted an insincere smile on and asked.

"Shouldn't you search me first? I wouldn't want to get you in trouble if I missed something while replacing my gear."

Like he'd ever actually do that, but the question made Finiuc grind his teeth together so hard that Elliot could hear them faintly screeching, a sound that gave him no small amount of joy. Striding to the other side of the counter, Finiuc patted Elliot down. He wouldn't find anything, and Elliot thought the man knew it, but he couldn't help poking the bear, no matter how much trouble it might get him in.

Once he was finished, Finiuc swept a hand toward the exit.

"Get. out. of. here."

"I will," Elliot said. "Have a pleasant evening."

As he passed Finiuc, Elliot tripped, falling into the man to keep from toppling, and Finiuc shoved him away, frantically swiping at every place Elliot had touched him.

"My apologies," Elliot said. "So clumsy, me. Do you need-?"

When he reached for Finiuc, the other man growled, taking a step back.

"Leave!"

"Yes, of course," Elliot said. "Apologies again."

He raced toward freedom. Once the sun was kissing his skin, he retrieved the device he'd palmed from Finiuc's pocket, giving it a once over. Another one of those fancy, glowing board games the Lutovish loved. He'd learn nothing new from it, having long ago figured out its inner workings, but he could use its parts. Pocketing it, he focused on the city around him.

Sometimes, it felt like Elliot lived in two worlds. The one where he worked, a Lutovish paradise, was all clean-cut lines, smoothed stone, and artificial creation. Flosa, where he spent his evening hours, was muck, crudely crafted homes, and wear.

But it was filled with the children of Ibis. People who greeted him as he walked down dirt streets, who spoke Ibis' tongue, who went about their business with a cheery attitude and none of the disgruntlement found in the Lutovish. Elliot didn't know which world he enjoyed more.

Home for him was a two-story building left standing regardless of its rickety appearance. No other structures stood near it despite Flosa's packed state, a circumstance that had always mystified Elliot. In the middle of a city overflowing with tens of thousands, how had his family received the privilege of empty space on all sides? Did his family carry a communicable disease that he somehow didn't know about?

As he stepped inside, he eased the front door closed, wincing as he listened to the resulting silence. He managed two steps toward the stairs before a cry rose from further inside.

"Elliot!"

Groaning, Elliot braced himself as four little boys raced from out of the house's depths to barrel into him.

"Did you see any strange people today?"

"Who was at security?"

"Did you make anyone mad?"

His annoying brothers. How he loved them.

"Ok!" someone new called. "Let's give El his space. You know how he is when he gets home."

Cathrine glided into the foyer with her arms outstretched. Claspings his shoulders, Elliot's sister kissed his cheek while the boys scattered, off to whatever game had been distracting them before he'd arrived.

"Thank you," he sighed.

"You should spend more time with them if you don't want them pestering you," Cathrine said. "They adore their older brother."

"I want to do things with them," Elliot said, "but they're so..."

"Rowdy? Rambunctious? Loud?" Cathrine said. "So were you a few years ago."

"Then, I grew up."

"And would you wish that curse on them?"

Cathrine arched an eyebrow, and Elliot scowled, an expression that always made her chuckle.

"Go play with your toys. We'll have dinner once mom and dad have come home," she said before hesitating. "Can we eat tonight?"

Which made Elliot wince. He hated how often circumstances, whether those under his control or not, had forced his family into hungry nights.

"I earned enough rations for it, yes," he said.

"Wonderful. I'll run by the market, then," Cathrine said. "See? You're an amazing brother."

Humming, she strolled into the kitchen. Cathrine had never ceased to amaze Elliot. Even raised in a chaotic household like theirs, she'd somehow grown into a giving soul, a decent human being who took up the slack for their parents without prompting. Elliot didn't know how she managed the boys without losing her mind.

Pounding up the stairs, Elliot bypassed the room he shared with Oran and Lucas, the eldest of his brothers. A ladder at the end of the hall led into the house's crawlspace, and in that confined storage room lay his thinking corner. He'd piled junk into organized stacks around the back of the crawlspace, creating a barrier between it and the rest of the world, and there, he solved puzzles.

That was all Lutovish tech was to him: a conundrum waiting to be pulled apart and assembled again.

Once he was settled, Elliot tossed his stolen board game device onto a heap of tech awaiting disassembly. He'd tackle that growing mound soon enough. For now, his most recent project was stealing his attention.

Lifting his modified remote, he waved it over his tracker, hoping to see a change, but no. Its display didn't show him his bio, and his tracker stayed dun with no white light to signal that he'd gained access to it. He must have messed with something vital while tweaking the remote before work this morning. Grabbing his tools, Elliot ripped it apart again.

He'd been so proud of getting his hands on one of these. The Lutovish guarded their remotes more zealously than any other tech, preferring to use wires for tracker access when possible. The first time he'd seen one had been when a woman had used it to stop a fight months ago, and after that, he'd been consumed by the idea of them. All of his free time had gone into devising a plan to get one for himself, and he'd accomplished his goal.

Four months ago. He'd spent so much time fiddling with this device and its processes, and still, it refused to yield its secrets to him.

But that was fine. The impossible puzzles were the most rewarding ones to solve.

Elliot had opened the remote and gotten halfway through relabeling its innards when Cathrine's voice floated into the crawlspace.

"Dinner time!"

"I'll be right there," he called.

Setting the remote down, he glanced over the contents of his thinking space. He needed to find a better way to conceal his hard-won bounty. If the Lutovish ever found this in his home, they'd kill everyone he loved before burning the house down around them, and Elliot hated imposing a risk like that on his family.

Much as he might like to abandon his puzzles, though, he knew he couldn't. He'd tried that once before. It had made him...

Suffice it to say that his family had insisted that he return to them, even with how much danger these Lutovish devices imposed on them. What he'd become had been... so much worse.

When Elliot strode into the kitchen, mom and dad were sitting at the table while Cathrine flitted between the fire and a spread meal. With every trip, she deposited another bowl of whatever masterful concoction she'd created today.

"El," mom said, "how was your day?"

Dad lifted his head to squint at Elliot through drooping eyes. Worked to the bone again, huh?

"Fine," Elliot said. "I got my rations, which is all that matters."

"So, we can eat tonight?" a boyish voice asked.

Tiny bodies raced to the table, dodging around Elliot.

"Yes, Martin, you can eat," he said.

When he ruffled his younger brother's hair, Martin swatted his hand while ducking out of reach. Cathrine plunked a final bowl on the table before spreading her arms.

"And all the Lockhart family blessed their eldest son, Elliot, for their sustenance on this, the night of plenty," she said.

Snatching a bread crust off of the table, Elliot tossed it at her.

"Please, Cat," he said. "You'll make me blush."

"I'm sure," Cathrine said.

She took an exaggerated bite out of the crust Elliot had thrown while eyeing the rest of the family.

"What are we waiting for?" she asked. "Let's eat!"

As Elliot slid into his spot between the boys, his family members dug into their dinners while cheerful chatter and appreciative murmurs filled the air. Having nothing to contribute to the conversation, he spooned stew into his mouth, watching them instead.

Much as his brothers might irritate him, much as his parents were necessarily absent, much as his sister could be overbearing at times, Elliot loved these people. He couldn't express what bound them to one another. It wasn't simply the fact that they were family. Elliot knew plenty of other families who squabbled and hated each other for their differences. Perhaps it was because his worked as a unit to survive. They strove for the betterment of not one but all of them. He was sure there was more to it than that, but their conjoined fight against life's hurdles was what had kept him from trying his luck in another nation.

"So, El," dad said, "what sort of guests came through the beacon today?"

In other words, should they soon expect unpleasant surprises anytime soon?

"It was mostly scientists," Elliot said. "Fewer tourists than last week. Not to worry. I think we're ok for now."

"Good," dad said. "That's good-"

A blaring whine cut him off, making everyone wince as they muffled their tracker-laden hands. After a few seconds, that unpleasant noise went quiet, and a smothered voice rose from eight spots around the table. A Lutovish voice.

"Flosari has declared war on Escad. A draft is in effect," she said. "All those called to fight are to assemble at their assigned barracks by end of day tomorrow. The chosen color is... yellow."

As everyone's tracker fell silent, a glow pierced through the skin covering them, and the family braced. As each member lifted their hand, another knot untied in Elliot's gut. Blue, green, purple. Once they were finished, he'd seen every color but the one he'd dreaded, and with his elbows on the table, he buried his face in his palms.

"Oh, thank *avan*," he said into them.

Given the silence, his family didn't seem to share his relief, but he couldn't blame them. The Lutovish and their damn war games had ruined another perfectly good meal.

"Elliot," mom breathed.

Her tone raised Elliot's hackles. Why had it done that?

Peering over his fingers, he met her tear-filled eyes. What-?

"Your tracker," Cathrine unsteadily said.

Oh, no.

Elliot's hands were shaking as he flipped them over. From beneath his skin, a steady yellow blazed up at him.

It seemed luck had abandoned him.

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