

## INTRODUCTION

Two months had past—directing time into the first of December. Within that time, Soren Cutrone, Asuka Akioto, Mia Vossler, and Damonico Damirror gradually learned how to cope with the newly acquired Gem of Life of New Earth—granting them with adaptation to the eight worlds in the Unison galaxy without the need for a vaccine. Still, the group of four hadn't fully utilized the ability; they felt shocked, and a bit fearful of their occurrence and revealed importance. Even though they accepted their journey and obligation to the galaxy, they wanted to erase the awareness—at least for a short while. The four found it tedious to hang out as a group, especially with their demanding schedules. For the last two months they returned to their “normal” lives.

For Soren, balancing out his work life as the director of the Vivacity Alliance, on top of school and working as a double agent for the nefarious Queen Malzeria Nieve, left him little to no free time. Though he wanted to move forward from his deceased life on Earth, he still found it emotionally arduous to bury his forty-six-year-old identity and life. After celebrating his seventeenth birthday on the twenty-second of September—for the second time—his new life became even more real. His passing birthday increased his determination to help take down the growing Vigore Alliance, led by Malzeria and Divordok Damirror, Grand Superior of the Infernity Abyss.

Damonico, superior and heir to the throne, hated the idea of devoting any of his free time towards the journey of four; his days were already consumed by working for Wretched Forces under Captain Nelek Gorciano. He could barely tolerate juggling work and attending two schools—Unison Grand on planet New Earth and Elmonsra Academy for Demonitry on planet Wretched Hollows. His life was divided by two worlds. All he desired was spending time with the love of his life, Haylia Debarato—and, of course, his Wretched clan. Damonico's hell-bent on seizing power

and control, taking the commander position for Wretched Forces with Haylia by his side—nothing else matters.

Princess Asuka continued to hang out with Mia; she also regularly spent time with Soren at school. Her new job as a Wretched Forces agent deemed toilsome. However, she was quickly learning their customs. She kept her distance from Damonico at work, but tentatively watched him. She also kept her eyes peeled for the reasoning behind her urge to work under King Mirroe. Her job did well at hindering her desires for partying and drugs, but it didn't prevent it. Asuka dabbled in the occasional all-nighter party scene with Kysa Rysonyte and illegal racing with the best of Okulis Orbitorium.

Lady Mia of Kandy Kingdom was perhaps dealing with everything the worst out of the group. Mia's anxiety of her artificial sophistication consumed her every thought. Comfort only buddied her when she was working for Malzeria Nieve in the Vigore Alliance, for she was able to freely express and learn how to control her cyborg powers. Whereas, in her everyday life, she hid her enhancements, especially when around Asuka, Soren, Damonico, and her boyfriend, Shadow.

No sign of the group's odyssey had made itself present—that is, until the winter solstice approached.

## CHAPTER 1: REKINDLING THE INEVITABLE

Soren, Asuka, Mia, and Damonico reunited at a popular restaurant, Jumble Joint, on Unison Grand's campus. In festivity of the upcoming Arcticon annual holiday—Crescent Joviality—the ever-changing restaurant's appearance duplicated a common Arcticon design and cuisine for the month of December.

"I feel like it's been forever since the four of us have been together," Princess Asuka said.

"I agree," Mia said with her soft, mellifluous voice.

Soren nodded. "Indeed, this assemblage was long overdue."

Damonico crossed his strong arms. He let out a heavy sigh, rolling his eyes.

"Well, now that we've all had time to assess the denouement of our connection," Soren said, "it is imperative we combine our intellectuality in order to formulate a scheduling panacea to ensure we are ready for our approaching journey."

Although Soren appeared as a seventeen-year-old, his exceptional intellect gave way to the true forty-six-year-old polymath within.

"Come again?" Asuka asked. "Speak normal, computer." She giggled.

Soren chuckled. "A solution for our schedule differences, so we can meet more frequently in order to strengthen our bond."

"Everything's been going great without us being together so far," Damonico said. "It'll probably be counterproductive." He glared at Mia and Asuka. "Some of us are stronger than others." His tone sounded pompous, as usual.

"Keep tellin' yourself that," Asuka said. "You're just mad because you know we're all equal and you've made it up in your mind that you're some sort of *god*."

Soren could tell Damonico was about to snap, fueling the fire of altercation. As Damonico opened his mouth to speak, Soren intervened. "I think we can all agree that this unexpected impediment has caused a great deal of discombobulation in our consciousness, but we were given this gift as a foundation to the plethora of power we will attain from the eight remaining Gems of Life."

Damonico's face lowered, his angry arched eyebrows darkening his deep-set right red and left green eye. He was so sick of being around Asuka and her overweening nature, while Mia's craven and timorous temperament hauled him into kill mode. Soren was the only one Damonico respected out of the three. Regardless, he couldn't bear thinking about yet another forced journey together, but it had to be done. "All right." He snarled, looking off. "What's good for you guys?"

Mia rubbed her arm, her eyes cowering. She'd been around Damonico enough—she knew when his buttons were pressed. *Why's he so mad? Is it really that torturous for him to be around us?* "Um ... weekends aren't really that great for me, but—"

"How about right now?" Asuka said with sass, locking her eyes on Damonico.

"I mean ... I do have a couple hours before I have to catch a bullet shuttle back to my parents'," Mia said. "Does that work for you guys?" She looked over at Soren and Damonico.

"I guess," Damonico said.

"Yes, it's quintessential to build our connection as soon as possible," Soren said.

"Great." Mia's plump lips formed a half-smile. "What did you have in mind, Asuka?"

"Hey, gorgeous!" Princess Naela Henningsworth of Arcticon exclaimed.

Princess Nikki Rich of New Earth strode beside her with wide eyes. "Oh, Asuka, Mia, darlings! What are you all doing?" she asked.

Nikki and Naela were best friends, inseparable since birth. The duo always looked poised and polished—modeling the latest designer fashions.

"Hi, loves." Asuka got up, kissing each of the beautiful princesses on the cheek. "We were just about to leave this bad boy to go do something."

"Hey, guys." Mia waved at the two princesses. She was too shy to hug them.

"Oh, is the Friday fun about to begin?" Naela winked at Asuka.

Asuka inched closer to Naela. "I wish. Not with that brick in the wall." She motioned towards Damonico.

"Garcon!" Nikki snapped at the host about to seat the pair. "Kindly bring the usual drinks to our table while we converse with our royal compadres." Nikki had a theatrical tone to her voice that drew the attention of those around her.

"Yes, of course, Your Highness." The host bowed and rushed to fulfill Nikki's orders.

Nikki looked across the way. "And, hello, Soren ... *Damonico*." She glowered at him. Nikki's pouty, red lips popped her hazel eye color.

Damonico got up and walked over to Nikki. "Oh, what a pleasure it is to see you again," he said snidely. He looked over at Naela. "How do you manage to hang out with this one?"

"Ugh!" Nikki said. "Well I never. Your discourteousness is out of control."

Naela giggled. "Easy, Nik. He's just messin' with you." Naela batted her benevolent brown eyes at the striking Wretched heartthrob. Naela's wavy charcoal hair faded from dark at the top to light at the tips, complementing her mulatto skin. She wore black lipstick, amplifying her full lips.

Damonico snickered at Nikki's vibrant behavior. Although she pierced his eardrums, he still needed to comply with his boss's orders of being as genial as possible. He glanced at Nikki's red attire. *I need to try and accept this obnoxious girl. I mean ... she does kinda look like a Wretched girl.* "I was only kidding. I feel like we got off on the wrong side." He forced out a hand.

"Well, that's more like it." She perched her hand for him to kiss.

Damonico grunted. He grabbed Nikki's hand and shook it. "Not in your lifetime, sweetie."

Agitated, Nikki flipped her silky brown hair. "Anyways," she turned her attention back to Asuka and Mia, "have you all gotten your crescent jewels yet?"

"Not yet!" Asuka said. "I really need to." She pondered and turned towards Mia and Soren. "Hey, how about we go get our crescent jewels ... on Arcticon!"

"You better hurry; a month is barely enough time for your jewel to evolve!" Nikki exclaimed, attracting the attention of surrounding tables.

"Yeah, Nik and I got ours last week." Naela checked a message on her invisible viro shield. "Well, great seeing you guys," she smiled, "but I'm runnin' on empty and need to go order before I make an appearance for LAS."

"Agreed. Ta-ta for now, lovelies!" Nikki held her chin high, sauntering off with Naela.

"Well that was an experience," Damonico said.

Soren cleared his throat. "Anyways, where shall we go to attain these crescent jewels, Miss Akioto?"

"I know the perfect place! It's the number one spot. Located in Arctic National, of course. Let's head off campus and open a portal, pronto!" Asuka said, striding forth.

Damonico dreaded the idea of buying a crescent jewel. The Crescent Joviality holiday was the complete opposite of his beliefs and his world's annual holiday, Moonnight, but he wasn't about to halt the group's attempt at reunification. *There's no way I'm buying one of those. But I'll let them think what they want.*

The group proceeded across campus to Unison Grand's bullet shuttle station (more properly referred to as a global teleport). They observed faculty and fellow students decorating the campus with Crescent Joviality cheer. Flashing banners and signs were sure to light up the night—dancing with sayings like: *"Have a Jovi Joviality!" "Crescent is here!" "Happy Crescent Joviality!"* More decorations were assembled throughout the open, grassy campus, adding an artful touch. Everything seemed so much better during this time of year—everyone exuded positivity.

The group of four maneuvered through the crowds of students and boarded a shuttle. Students around loaded their weekend baggage overhead. The shuttle's sophisticated sensory system secured safety harnesses over each passenger and locked all overhead compartments.

"Compartments secured," an artificial voice spoke through the overhead speakers. "Next stop, Luxien Towers, New Earth's capital city. Estimated arrival ten seconds."

By utilizing gravitational force, bullet shuttles journey by frictionless tracks in underground tunnels, permitting travel anywhere in the world to take minutes—even seconds—depending on the destination. Each underground track uses powerful magnets, consenting magnetic levitation to eliminate friction. The angles of the tracks regulate the speed rates, which can travel as fast as twenty thousand miles per hour.

"Destination reached. Welcome to Luxien Towers, New Earth's capital city," the artificial voice said as the harnesses, overhead compartments, and doors unlocked.

"Let's go!" Asuka bolted with the others into the bustling city of gold towers.

Digital ads displayed across the glossy high-rise windows. The clubs, restaurants, and shops showed videos of their internal guests enjoying themselves. The group of four went into a dark, desolated alley. They needed to make sure no one saw them generate a portal—a gift very few possess—reserved only for beings of high power.

Normally, a being would have to go to a universal teleport to board a special travelcraft, which travels by portal at a finite speed of one hundred eight-six thousand miles per second from one universal teleport to the next.

Traveling to different worlds is a luxury due to the expense, and also the difficulty of acquiring the proper adaptation vaccine beforehand for the body to adjust properly to the new atmosphere. Luckily for Soren, Asuka, Damonico, and Mia, the gift of adaptation from New Earth's Gem of Life, given by the sun god Vitalus, allowed their bodies to automatically adjust between different worlds' atmospheres without the need for a vaccine.

Damonico's purple impression veil on his index finger, decorated by black diamonds and designs of red stones, generated a swirling portal of light blue and white.

The group went through the portal and arrived on Arcticon—the largest world in the Unison galaxy best known for its year-round ice and snow. The group felt a warmth bloom within them, spreading out to tingle their toes and fingertips, as their bodies adjusted to the new ecosystem. They stood in an alleyway of frosted bricks.

Asuka shivered, rubbing her arms. "It's so chilly. I should've brought a heavier jacket! Let's go into the city!" She grabbed Mia's hand and bounced out into the open area of Arctic National.

"Wow." Damonico snickered. He put his hands in his stylish, fur-lined jacket—its color matching his blood-red hair. "Ready, Cutrone?" He arched his eyebrow.

"Indeed."

Arctic National, the most luxurious city on Arcticon, was fit for the wealthy. Each building seemed to have a wintry effect—ice feathers embellished the windows, while crystal and frosted stones made up the walls. Pitched roofs and arched doorways made it a city of mini ice castles. The city alone looked breathtaking, but during the month of December it really shined. It was already decorated for Arcticon's annual holiday, dazzling with lit-up walkways, signs, and decorations. The city's main Inclusivision, big enough to match the sun, showed music videos of renowned singers performing specialty Crescent Joviality tunes.

"So, this Crescent Joviality is an Arcticon holiday to which the other seven worlds celebrate as well?" Soren asked the group.

"Yes, it's the biggest winter holiday in the Unison galaxy," Mia said in a hush tone.

"It's beyond!" Asuka exclaimed over her shoulder.

Soren nodded and looked over at Damonico. "And what are your thoughts, Mr. Damirror? Do even the noctrens of Wretched Hollows embrace this holiday?"

“Definitely not. But ... Arcticon is one of our most favored worlds. We like the cold weather—it reminds us of Wretched. And the sports are prime.”

As they sauntered towards their destination, the fellow glacians noticed the nobility in the group of four. Most of the civilians belonged to the upper class so they respected Princess Asuka, Lady Amelia, and Damonico, superior and heir to the throne. They merely gossiped with blithe and some took captures from a distance.

Soren noticed how the glacians looked fairly different from earthlings. Their hair colors predominantly ranged from hues of blue, white, and silver. Although Arcticon hosted all ethnicities, their skin tones all seemed to grace a flushed complexion along their cheeks and noses—it looked natural and attractive. Everyone dressed in furs and fashionable winter attire.

Damonico nudged Soren’s arm. He motioned his head towards a group of young female models entering a department store. “Yeah?” He eyed him.

Soren glanced at the girls. Normally thoughts of his deceased wife would block his ability to see other women in a romantic light, yet for some reason he thought of Savorah this time—the princess of Wretched Hollows. Ever since their first encounter when she helped break him free from Wretched Forces, she seemed to unexpectedly consume his mind. “Yes, they’re nice-looking young ladies. Perhaps *you* should go say hi.” He smirked.

Damonico chuckled. “Not me, bud. They’re not my type.” Damonico couldn’t think of being with any other girl other than Haylia—she was far too perfect to him to even compare with another.

“We’re here!” Mia said, unable to conceal her excitement. Being on Arcticon made her feel so refreshed and happy—opposite of how she felt back at her so-called home.

They stood in front of the crystal-exterior store, Joziah’s Jewels.

Asuka locked arms with Mia and shoved through the doors, a permanent smile upon their faces. Soren and Damonico followed behind, amused from the girls’ youthful enthusiasm.

A man dressed in a tailored suit stood in the entryway. His black, trimmed beard and thick charcoal hair matched his outfit. His round cheeks and husky stomach made him welcoming. His features reminded Soren of an Arab person back on Earth.

“Welcome to Joziah’s Jewels!” the man said. “I’m Joziah.” He held out a gentle hand and greeted each of the ladies. “What can I help such nobility with today?” He smiled with a bow.

“Hello,” Mia said. “We’re looking to buy some crescent jewels.” She tried to hold back jumping up and down.

“Ahh ... perfect! You’ve come to the right and best place!” He opened the door with one hand, swaying his other to let them into the store. “Right this way. I’ll have my best associates help you with your selections.”

“Thank you!” Asuka said, hurrying into the store with Mia.

“Thank you, sir,” Soren said, shaking the owner’s hand as he passed him.

Damonico gave Joziah a head nod as he strode through the doorway, his hands in his pockets.

“Enjoy!” Joziah said.

Rows of crescent jewels circled the oval room from the bottom all the way to the top. The windowed ceiling gave way to the pure white sun, shining down to make the thousands of clear crescent jewels luster brighter than diamonds. The tiny jewels varied in all shapes imaginable. The four gaped at the magnificence.

“This is quite remarkable,” Soren said. “How could we possibly choose from all these?”

The voice of an animated associate swayed Damonico and Soren’s attention towards the girls.

“Oh. My. Gods. Princess Asuka Akioto and Lady Amelia Vossler!” a male associate hollered. He rushed over to them and gasped. He held out his hands. “Hi.” He grinned widely. “I’m Ira. Can I just say what a pleasure it is to meet you lovely ladies?”

The young, flamboyant worker was slender and dressed in feminine attire. Ira’s eyeshadow and lip balm matched his tight, pink button-down and boots. His silver pompadour hair completed his manicured look.

Mia and Asuka giggled from his likable character.

“Why, thank you, Ira!” Asuka said, hip bumping him. “Great to meet you.” She shook his hand.

“Yeah, thank you,” Mia said, shaking his hand. “It’s so nice to meet you. Will you be helping us with our crescent jewels?”

“Of course! Right this way!” Ira sashayed downstairs to the lower level of the store, the girls trailing.

“So, I guess our connection was just broken,” Damonico said with sarcasm. “They just left without us. I guess we should just ... go.”

“No, Mr. Damirror,” Soren said, shaking his head like a father figure. “Perhaps we should follow.”

“Excuse me,” the sweet voice of a woman said. “My boss informed me that you needed assistance selecting your crescent jewels. Please, allow me to assist you. My name’s Prishel.”

Prishel looked in her mid-thirties. She wore a sophisticated, cream-colored women’s suit. She styled her light-blue hair in a trendy bob. Her smiling face looked frozen.

“Why, thank you,” Soren said. “Your service would be much appreciated.”

“Fantastic! Allow me to show you to the selection level.” Prishel led them downstairs to a counter where Mia and Asuka were.

“Shrieks!” Ira said, playfully covering his mouth. “Are you guys together?”

Mia chuckled. “Yes, we all came to pick out our crescent jewels.”

“Well shiver my shoulders and acclaim me the luckiest glacialian ever! Not only do I get to assist you girls, but also a superior and heir.” Ira walked over to Damonico, jolting out his hand. “Such a honor, Your Royalness.”

Damonico chuckled and shook his hand. “Thanks, man.”

“And who’s this dapper young man fit to hang out with the three of you?” Ira asked, his hands on his hips.

Asuka skipped over to Soren’s side and grabbed his arm. “Soren Cutrone.” She rested her head on his shoulder. “He’s the best!”

“Uhm. Shrieks! Are you two an item?” Ira asked.

Soren cleared his throat, taken aback by Ira’s false assumptions. “Miss Akioto and I are just good friends. I am lucky to be associated with all three of these prestigious beings.”

“Well, obvi!” Ira winked. “So, let’s get your jewels picked out guys.”

“I can see you’ve got this under control,” Prishel said, giggling. “Let me know if you need anything.”

“Thanks, precious!” Ira turned towards the group. “So, I assume you’ve all gone through the process of picking out your crescent jewels?”

“I think all of us except Soren,” Mia said.

Damonico kept quiet.

“No way, this is your first? Oh! We are gonna have *so* much fun!”

Soren chuckled. “What exactly is the process of one selecting a crescent jewel?”

Ira swirled around and grabbed a thick square pad; he held it before Soren. “Just place your hands on the palm pad. It reads the inner spirit and selects a custom jewel that’s best for you!”

Soren rubbed his smooth, angular chin. “Fascinating.” He did as instructed. The texture of the palm pad resembled a memory-foam pillow. The pad morphed to create a perfect mold of Soren’s hands.

“All righty, that should do it!” Ira said.

Soren removed his hands and watched as the imprints of his hands glowed like the northern lights. Like magic, a jewel on a shelf about five rows up flushed with the same colors. The high-tech shelves formed a metal hand that grabbed the jewel and gently placed it in Soren’s hands. It was the shape of a marquise diamond and about the size of a tea light candle.

Asuka and Mia went through the same process. Asuka got a pear-shaped jewel and Mia, a heart.

“All rightttt, you’re next, Mr. Heir!” Ira said.

“Oh, no,” Damonico said, holding up his hand. “I won’t be getting one.”

“What?” Asuka said, her face knotting.

“But, Damonico—” Mia said.

“Miss Vossler,” Soren said. He knew from Damonico’s volatile character that the girls would be of no help convincing him. “Let me take care of it.” He placed his hand on Damonico’s back, directing him away from the group. “Damonico, I understand and admire your adherence towards your world’s dogmata and customs; nonetheless, it is vital that you cooperate. We have yet to gain the acuity behind our connected destinies and how our approaching odyssey will aid us in our future obligations.”

“This has nothing to do with our Gems of Life quest,” Damonico said, irritated. “You don’t understand. This is going against my religion and everything I stand for. I’m already donating my time to you guys. How much more do I need to give up?”

“With all due respect, I must advise you to recollect the words of our divine mentors. It’s crucial that we build our bond or all those we care for will suffer.”

Damonico appeared pensive. After hearing Soren's last sentence, his puffed chest deflated, while his heart slumped. He thought about Haylia and the other few he cared for. He recollected Haylia's words back in September, telling him that she knew he was special and that he should build a connection with Soren, Asuka, and Mia. He knew she was right—and Soren. He released a heavy sigh. "Fine," he said behind clenched teeth. He strutted over to Ira and pressed his hands on the mat.

"Back in action!" Ira said, wiggling as he clapped his hands.

After reading Damonico's palm, the metal hand collected an octagon-shaped crescent jewel and placed it in his hands. Damonico felt like he was holding onto an infectious disease—he couldn't believe he actually complied. It felt so wrong. Betrayal struck his heart and soul.

"Now, before you go," Ira said, "I must *insist* you take a group cap for your VMs. Trust me. You'll want to savor this moment forever!" He waved his hand in the air and snapped his fingers.

The four chuckled as they grouped together, holding up their shining crescent jewels.

"I'll take it with my viro," Asuka said. She tapped her canary diamond earring, transforming into her Okulis virocator. It projected a holographic mirror in front of them. She expanded it to fit all four of them and snapped a few shots.

"Ugh, you guys are hot enough to melt Arcticon!" Ira said, fanning his face.

Asuka laughed. "Ira, you get in here too!"

"Shrieks! A zillion-times yesss!" Ira bounced in front of the group and bent over, resting his hands on his thighs.

Asuka snapped the capture and posted in on her Virtual Museum social media account.

"Thanks so much, guys! I'll be sure to repost it on my VM during my break." Ira beamed. "I'll have Prishel ring up your totals on the impression register over here."

The group followed and individually scanned their impression veils on the impression register; it connected to their virtual vaults and paid the necessary digits owed.

The group thanked Ira, Prishel and Joziah as they exited the store.