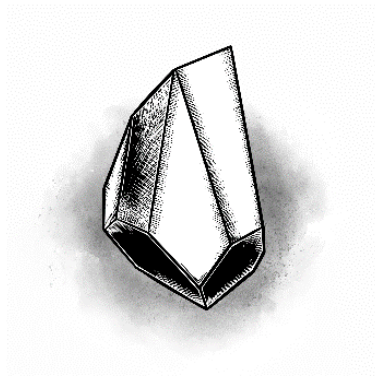


PROLOGUE



A coordinated collision of worlds. That's what the auspex's mysterious employer had engineered at the Black Mesa Research Facility, less than twenty-four hours ago. His employer had offered the facility's curious scientists a crystal from another world, knowing they would rush to exploit its exotic properties. Rush they did, inadvertently opening a gateway to another dimension. Laced between an infinitude of worlds, it was said that whoever controlled this dimension – *Xen* – controlled all the worlds. Before they could comprehend the scale of their error, the scientists found themselves at war with *Xen*'s presumed inhabitants. Consequently, the scientists' own government gave the order to silence all witnesses to the incident and sent a military death squad into the fray. It was only the beginning. Soon their entire world would be thrust into a terrible conflict being waged across the stars.

For the auspex's employer, everything was proceeding as planned – until a second crystal had crossed over into the facility. He had been happy for one crystal's power to be unleashed, but it would not do for it to happen twice. Awakened from the stasis in which he resided between assignments, the auspex was dispatched to ensure the stray crystal was destroyed before it could fall into the wrong hands.

Any hands.

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Pulsating with the light of another world, the orange crystal protruded from the upper corner of the empty missile silo, ensnared in a spread of viscous xenotheric fungi. It would take some time to pull it free, and time was not something the auspex possessed. Not anymore. His preternatural ability to perceive it had been broken, and it came to him now only in fractured images of pasts and futures both realized and unrealized. His separation from that ability had been long. His exile would be eternal. Time, he believed, existed only to betray him now. But the auspex was a cunning warrior, alert to time's machinations. Or he liked to believe he was.

On a more practical note, time was indeed running out. Gunfire reverberated through the tunnels below, as at least two of the parties seeking to claim the crystal clashed.

Peering out from an opening along the silo's circular shaft, the auspex calculated that if he could tear away enough of the fungi then the crystal would fall and shatter on the concrete below. Should it contain even half of the properties he suspected, that implosion could prove fatal.

As if reading his thoughts, his handler, the Apothecary, spoke to him through a nano device implanted in the left side of his skull. "The fall will do it," came her strange, sing-song voice from the nowhere place in which he roamed. "But don't worry; I'll zap you out of there before you can be caught in the blast radius. Although, I will regret it very slightly. I am curious as to the immediate effects that energy will have on living tissue. To say nothing of what it may do to one's

consciousness. Of course, to share my excitement you would need to possess a trifle more scientific curiosity. But only blood and fire motivate you now, do they not?"

The auspex declined, as usual, to indulge the Apothecary, and began moving at a pace back down the maintenance corridor, hoping to find a better opening from which to reach the fungi. The present level had originally led onto one of the inner catwalks circling the silo, but the fungi had aggressively eaten away at its supports. A lone catwalk panel on the level above prevented a clear shot at the crystal; he hoped it would provide a suitable vantage point once he reached it.

Despite the Apothecary's characteristic playfulness, the auspex detected a tension in her voice. She was afraid. Not for the auspex's safety, he was sure of that, and nor for the success of the mission at hand. But fear over the swelling chaos. It was a nudge. A much larger nudge than either of them had experienced before, and they had seen some nudges in their time. Even precipitated a couple. Some might say the present nudge was too large, but it would not come from the lips of those whose actions carried consequence, for it was they who had wrought it.

The time had finally come to curtail the course of fate. Soon the enemy in the clouds would see the flare and follow it to this new world – what the Apothecary had called 'Earth'.

Good, the auspex thought. He did not know to what end his mysterious employer moved and nor did he care. It could only lead the auspex to that which stalked his dreams, or it to him. Whichever came first. The fallout from this incident was intended to echo across the continuum, and the auspex knew it had awoken the writer from its poisoned slumber deep within the black clouds. It would be coming and the auspex would be waiting. That was the deal. That had *always* been the deal between he and his employer. He had entrusted his vengeance to a snake, but given the auspex had been falling to his death when the deal was

proffered, his options had been slim. Now he was bound to an arcane set of rules until such a time he no longer proved useful to his employer's schemes. Rules that could not be broken. Only his death would relinquish their hold.

"You must go faster," the Apothecary warned. "I see multiple hostiles rising towards your position. The first of the human factions has been slain. Only the victor and.. Well, you know what, remain."

The auspex glanced down at his feet as she spoke, hooves clattering up sheets of grated metal. The truth of the Apothecary's words lay in the bloody carcasses clogging the lower stairwell. He hoped his antagonists were wasting time pursuing the now non-existent inner catwalks, but they would understand their folly the instant they penetrated the silo proper. The auspex's window, already narrow, would soon close.

A distressed message from one of the dead soldiers' radios echoed up the stairwell. "Freeman has reached the launch centre! Repeat: Gordon Freeman has reached the satellite launch centre!"

Something in the name "Freeman" played with the auspex's memory. It might have done more than that if not for his exile, but as it was the remembrance faded as quickly as it came. But the Apothecary knew. She was monitoring Freeman's progress closely. A bumbler, certainly. But had Freeman potential? Yes, she judged. *Limitless*.

A burst of green energy erupted in the air before him when the auspex arrived at the level two maintenance corridor, barring passage to the second opening. It arced chaotically outwards from the epicentre then suddenly replaced by a lithe, graceful creature, brown in colour, with four orange-red eyes, the largest of which sat above a snout bearing a row of sharp teeth. And from its stomach there came a vestigial third arm. It was a perfect mirror of

the auspex himself, except for an emerald slave collar fastened to its neck, and similar shackles upon its wrists.

The auspex wore his servitude less plainly, coming to believe he occupied a superior position to those he once called kin. The presence of one of his own, so degraded and pitiful, struck keenly. The sight of it turned his stomach. Long had it been since the vortigaunt race had known the sanctity and enlightenment of its own civilization. To the auspex it was gone, never to return. He had contempt for the few strays who kept the old traditions alive in the dark corners of the many worlds.

If the vortigaunt was surprised by the auspex's presence, it did not show it. With a flick of its wrists, it ignited a flurry of green energy in its hands. In another instant it would channel that energy into a beam of lightning. The auspex was prepared for this, pressing the palms of his two largest hands together and conjuring a green blaze of his own. He rapidly drew the palms apart, creating an energy shield in the space between them that absorbed the shock of the enemy's beam. His body jolted from the impact, but his recovery was swift. Dropping the shield, he leapt forward, springing between the walls until he was close enough to strike the vortigaunt with a heavy blow from his hoof. The enemy fell, dark yellow shooting from its mouth and nose as its face cracked against the concrete. The auspex was on top before it could rise, seizing its head and battering it against the ground for a second time. Life left the vortigaunt as its skull split.

Reaching down, the auspex tried to tear the emerald slave collar from the dead vortigaunt's neck, but it remained tightly fixed.

"There isn't time for sentimentality, auspex," warned the Apothecary.

He ignored her. Gripping the collar tightly and raising the body from the ground, the auspex felt a distant but malevolent intelligence coursing through the gleaming emerald

metal. From clutching hard at the collar he drew that intelligence's gaze upon him, glimpsing a gigantic entity with a scarred, bulbous cranium pitted by black eyes. The auspex imagined one of the only two things he knew the monster would fear, sending it through the collar and along the tangled vines the intelligence used to constrict its subjects. Before the intelligence could respond with a force capable of inflicting significant psychic damage, the auspex broke the collar against the wall, where the hated thing splintered. The vortigaunt's corpse flopped to the ground.

The Apothecary, ever curious, wanted to ask the auspex about the collar, but she knew better than to try. He was rarely inclined to give a direct answer as to the colour of the sky, let alone verbalise the sensation of servitude she suspected arose from that collar. Chains fascinated her; she had worn them in the first stages of her existence, on Riz'Nälesh, but had only been made aware of them the instant they were removed. She had evolved since then – morphed into a complex and formidable entity who even now was only at the beginning of her life-cycle – but the abrasions caused by the chains would never heal. In that, she and the auspex were one, and she kept that knowledge close to her many hearts.

Now at the end of the corridor, the auspex took a tentative step onto what was left of the catwalk. It groaned under the pressure, the plating pressing into a mass of fungi, emitting an unpleasant squelch. He was still too far from the silo's hatch to reach the tendrils holding the crystal aloft. He'd have to lash it with lightning from where he stood.

Then came the bullets, *clink-clink-clinking* off the pipes running the length of the wall. With no cover, the auspex turned and fired a volley of lightning from his fingertips; it swirled in eddies through the air towards the attackers. There came a cry followed by a pause in the gunfire.

The auspex crouched low. Through the fading particles of energy, he saw a group of heavily armed mercenaries in black jumpsuits taking up position at the corridor's entrance,

rubbishing the auspex's plan to break at the fungi from his present position – the price of peering into the collar. One of the commandos, a tall and muscular figure, began issuing what seemed like orders, but in a different language to the one the auspex had heard from every other human he had encountered.

Knowing the second round of gunfire was about to commence, the auspex moved a little way back into the corridor and turned: he aimed to make a running jump at the fungi. Machine-gun fire rang out. As apt a starting klaxon as any he ran, taking wide strides, and jumped. His feet landed on the wavering metal panel, which broke off as he used it to launch himself across the pit, arms grasping for the fungi. The auspex took hold of one of the tendrils, its gelatinous skin causing him to slide near enough to its end. Squeezing tightly, he swung towards the wall, managing to wedge a foot on a dense mound of pulsating goop. Then he began to climb. The crystal shone several feet above.

Small stalks with glowing orbs for heads retreated from his presence as he passed, and the auspex realised he was clambering over a mass of something very much alive. Its odour was vile, but he had smelled worse.

"This is just the beginning," the Apothecary said. "It won't take long for the infestation to spread. You wouldn't *believe* where this specimen comes from. I'd request a sample, but—". A spray of bullets pocked the polyp-like growth next to the auspex's head. He flinched. "Oh, I'm sorry. Is this a bad time?"

A glint of orange light drew his sight to the crystal, now just inches above. That'd be why the attack had stopped short of gutting him – the commandos were afraid of damaging the crystal. Bullets wouldn't have made a scratch, but the auspex was grateful for their ignorance. He began tearing away at the web of fungi coating it, eliciting a cry from the mercenary leader's strange tongue. It was too late; the crystal wavered, its pointed tip

tapering downward. That was all the auspex needed to see. He wrapped his slender fingers around the nose of the crystal and pulled, hard. It slid through the lubricated funnel he had made and fell, twirling as it descended the shaft. The mercenary leader cried out, holding a futile, grasping hand over the pit as his prize careened past him.

The crystal ruptured on the concrete below, unleashing streams of volatile energy that crashed against the silo and gave out a terrible, prolonged cry, as if giant sheets of glass were being grated against one another. The ensuing shockwave sent a tremor through the silo, loosening the auspex's grip on the vine. Then he fell, tracing the trajectory of the now shattered crystal towards its final convulsions at the bottom of the pit. But the auspex had no fear. He could already feel himself shifting between planes, having ceased to exist in that universe even as his sight retained its image. Somewhere in space and time, a silo was coming undone.

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But that was not here. The flashes of scorched orange energy subsided into a familiar inky blackness where total silence reigned, where no thought was permitted, and not a fraction of time was at liberty to pass.

Then came the delicate cry of a child. A human child, to be sure, but the auspex would recognise that soft tone of innocence no matter the world. And with that thought – the simple knowledge that thought was even possible – he realised he was not where he had expected to be after all.

Slowly, he turned towards the cry. A few feet ahead his eyes came upon a little girl, alone in the dark save for a spectral figure standing vigil over her. Child and spectre were framed against a small window; beyond, the sky was ablaze in a tumult of colour. The auspex

did not recognise the spectral figure from its particulars, for it had taken the form of one from this world. He knew an altogether different shape, although he couldn't say if that had been any closer to the essence of the spectre than that in which it now resided.

But he knew his employer was here. Here in this timeless prison over which his employer alone wielded any control. Knew him from the luminous blue-green eyes that seemed to dissolve the veneer of flesh. Those eyes now flashed in the direction of the auspex, a cryptic smile spread beneath them. The auspex wondered if there existed a future in which he would be free of that smile forever. How he wished, and how childish that wish made him feel. What a ludicrous thing, he thought, to afflict a being more than three centuries old who ought to know better than to wish for a freedom long dead.

Instead he wished for the child to turn and run, but she did not yet know to be afraid. Her hand playfully pulled at the blue trouser leg of the man who was not a man, provoking the auspex's instincts to snatch her away. After all, he was one of the few beings capable of resisting his employer's power, but he wouldn't be able to do it alone; alone was all he was now.

The smile, which hinted that it knew the nature of its agent's thoughts, turned away from the auspex and to the child. And as the spectre's pale hand reached out to meet hers, the scene blinked away.

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A sudden change in air temperature sent a chill through the auspex, the ground beneath his feet now cold and hard. He shifted slightly, grinding sand and dust. All around him was a desert that stretched to the horizon in every direction. The red light of dawn ran along the eastern edge, the night's cold soon to be chased from the land. A distant rumbling drew the

auspex's attention south – a rocket was rising through the sky towards the fading stars. He remembered the frantic transmission on the stairwell and surmised the soldiers had failed to prevent the so-called "Freeman" they had so feared from launching the satellite. The auspex watched until it vanished into the ether and the column of smoke dissipated.

For the last time, the Apothecary spoke. "I must be going now. I am needed elsewhere. As for you, I cannot say. I am to simply leave you here. But given what comes next, I trust that's exactly what you wanted. Goodbye, auspex. It is unlikely we will meet again. I shall...miss you. If only very slightly."

Silence filled the space that connected them between dimensions.

As he could not envision a future free of his employer's long shadow, the auspex doubted he would be so fortunate as to never hear the Apothecary again. Would he miss her? He had never been conscious of his own mind long enough to find out, at least in the time he had known her. It seemed unlikely that longing could blossom now, but the auspex had experienced many strange things over the centuries and expected stranger still. So, with his gaze fixed on the sky of this new world, he started in the opposite direction to the rocket's origin. Beyond the veils the crystal had shredded, the enemy in the clouds was already on the move.

It was only a matter of time.

SUBJECT: Auspex

STATUS: Abeyant

CURRENT LOCATION: Earth [Crucible]