

# RELIC WORLDS

LANCASTER JAMES

AND THE SECRET OF  
THE PADRONE KEY  
Part 2

JEFF MCARTHUR

***RELIC WORLDS;***

***LANCASTER JAMES  
AND THE SEARCH  
FOR THE PROMISED WORLD***

**PART 2**

'Relic Worlds: Lancaster James and the Search for the Promised World'  
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Yera

Akiba

Kamika

# CHAPTER SIX

## ***GALACTIC EVENTS***

News of the break-in and the ensuing blackout and fight in FadyeUponChevas in the Kamika System reached Baroness CerilisetaNavarus; or Empress, as she preferred to be called. Though the two titles were interchangeable, there were volumes spoken in the choice of word when one referred to her. Those who honored her position as legitimate referred to her reverently, or fearfully, as Her Royal Empress. Those who saw her overthrow of her father's galactic kingdom as an illegitimate coup grudgingly labeled her a baroness, and a temporary one at that.

Her sovereignty stretched over nearly 30 systems with more than a dozen corporations under her banner. This included Valentino, which she was unhappy had been the subject of a multi-tiered attack. It had happened almost 20 hours ago now, and there was still a lot of confusion as to what had transpired. Someone got away with a great deal of money and information; then nearly the entire city lost power, and a fight broke out in a hotel tower. Little was known of this struggle because afterward most of the witnesses had been murdered with a poison gas spread throughout the building, which was locked down for that purpose. The attackers had gotten away before Valentino's corporate army or the Navarus Baron forces could get there. Only one small company garrison had responded to the call, and most of those soldiers disappeared when they assaulted the building. They had not even been gassed like the rest of the people; their bodies were simply never found.

Ceriliseta wanted answers, and she wanted them quickly. She had little time for these side problems; she was busy consolidating power over her father's former holdings. They needed to recognize her authority, and the various executives and shareholders needed to alter their practices to her bidding. The Navarus Empire needed to once again be profitable after her father Galek had run things into the ground.

As such, she had investigative organizations both from within her empire and from independent contractors and consultants searching for information; a hefty bonus promised to whomever could provide her information, and an even bigger bonus to those who could bring to justice the perpetrators.

One of these consultants had requested an audience with "Her Majesty." He had been certain to include that moniker and had written a lot more flowery language uncommon to mercenaries, so Ceriliseta had granted the request, if, for no other reason, than to see who it was.

The well-dressed man introduced himself as Nikos Kazakis, a "renowned and successful archaeologist in Her Majesty's service." He stood perfectly straight and tall with his hands held behind his back and his chin high, as though he was of royal bearing as well. His voice was confident as he explained that he knew why the spies had entered the building. "The city of Fadye was built upon the ruins of an ancient city once controlled by an alien race known as the Milak Shivar," he told her. Ceriliseta already looked bored, and Nikos tried to switch to a part of the topic that would interest her. "On top of getting away with a great deal of money and trade secrets, they also located another Milak Shivar world where they once built weaponry of enormous interest."

Ceriliseta, decked out in full facial artistic make-up, layered robes of red and orange, and her sun-golden crown, declared, "Alien relics were the hobby of my father. I have no interest in such trinkets."

"These relics may be of some interest, Your Highness. The Milak Shivar evolved to be warriors. The artifacts they left..."

"I will not waste my time and resources on treasure hunts, Mr. Kazakis," Ceriliseta said with finality. "I am interested, however, in dispensing justice on the perpetrators. You say they went to this other world?"

"Almost certainly, Your Highness."

"How did you acquire this information?"

"My associate," he said, and on cue a woman with half yellow hair from the roots and green hair at the ends stepped forward. Though confident, even cocky, this woman did not know how to carry herself in this kind of environment. "This is Jude. She prefers to bypass the formality of a last name. And..."

"She is a homeless mercenary," Ceriliseta said bluntly.

"A skilled network jockey," Nikos cut in before egos of the two women could collide. He was certain that the multitude of security checks had not found every cybernetic alteration on Jude, and he knew they were outgunned in a location such as this, so Nikos wished to use his best weapon, diplomacy. "While the spies were digging into your files and the infiltrators were preparing the blackout, she was in there scrying what everyone was doing."

Ceriliseta turned to one of her top aids and said, "We need to get better security on our computer networks."

"The point is, Madam, I know who broke in and where he is hithering off to."

"Who?" Ceriliseta asked.

Nikos at last removed his hands from behind his back, revealing that he was holding a beaten up brown leather hat. He tossed it to the ground before Ceriliseta's feet, and a guard stepped forward to protect her. Nikos could not have brought in a bomb, their outer guards would have found it, but the Empress was not to be touched by dust, or anything unclean.

She eyed Nikos angrily and suspiciously. He explained that it belonged to one of the best xeno-historians in the galaxy. "He and his small partner are crafty, and when they want something, they'll dig into whatever organization they need to to satisfy their obsessions with this... junk." Nikos had to swallow slightly to say the last word. Knowing how important the finds were, and how much corporate empires could profit from them, it was hard to lie about them. But he also wanted to get through to Baroness Navarus. She was clearly listening now, so he continued, "After they caused the mess at your property, my associate found that among everything else they transferred, they stole information on the system of Haedus-Sadatoni. The data suggested that on one of the planets are the remains of an alien ruin. I am certain they went there."

"And you are certain they are the perpetrators."

"Without a doubt."

"Then you have a company of soldiers to take with you to this system as well as a propaganda team. You are to make sure the guilty parties are not dead until the cameras are on them. And then they are to suffer painfully enough that everyone who watches will learn their lesson. Do I make myself clear?"

"Very, Your Highness," Nikos said. He had not expected this level of aggression, but he understood it right away. She was needing to prove her power, and ruthlessness was the only

language that many people understood, especially those who would seek to overthrow her. She had chosen these perpetrators to be an example. She would never capture everyone involved in the fight; Nikos knew she was aware of this. But if a couple of them paid publicly, fewer problems would appear elsewhere.

Nikos' biggest problem would come with his associate, Jude. She had worked with Little Jack in the past, and they had an ongoing friendship-rivalry. She would probably be less enthusiastic about his tortured demise, but Nikos thought there might be ways around this. There might even be ways around the messiness of violence altogether. He wasn't interested in securing his employer's position, nor assisting the power of any individual organization. He understood better than anyone the power, and thus the profit, of alien artifacts. The amount he could make from killing two rivals was a pittance compared to what he could make selling Milak Shivar technology to the various factions.

But he needed the backing of an army to help guard against the Dark Ones, or whoever it was who blacked out the city. He could also use his military escort to help him transport relics off the planet. He would just need excuses as to why he was countermanding the orders of their empress.

\* \* \*

Nikos had come too late to the Navarus Barony. Ceriliseta's father, Galek, had been an avid collector of alien artifacts, though he did not understand their full importance. Galek was now sitting in a cell within the bowels of one of the Navarus towers. He had few entertainments, so meal time came as a welcome break from the monotony of his day. It was brought to him by his former bodyguard, Bela, who had betrayed him when the coup occurred. Taking food to his former master was Bela's way of paying his penance for his part in the betrayal.

For a long time, Galek had said nothing when food arrived, and Bela did not press him. When he began refusing to eat, Bela had guards force feed him and said nothing to Ceriliseta. He had joined her cause because he agreed that Galek was running the barony into the ground, but he had not wanted his former boss to die.

It had been a year now, and only recently had Galek begun speaking, making small talk, and asking about the events past his walls. Bela answered with short answers, providing basic information. He was relieved that Galek did not ask about his own fate, for Bela did not know the answer to that, but he would protect him should Ceriliseta go too far and order him executed.

She had ordered his wife, her mother, to be returned to the planet from which she had been plucked in an arranged marriage 22 years earlier. Galek reacted little to the news as he had hardly seen his wife in the last few years before his confinement. She had done her duty by bearing two children and raising both of them. The son had died in a corporate war, and the daughter had grown up to overthrow the kingdom. His wife had been living her own life in a different location when the coup occurred, and she never came to visit him in prison. He could barely even remember her face.

There was one important implication from her returning to her original home; the marriage had linked Navarus with the Goddard Barony and had guaranteed peace between the factions. Now that she was sent home the connection was broken, and Navarus had holdings that Goddard wanted. Galek had had trouble keeping them from committing a hostile takeover even while married to Diedreme. Now she was sent home in disgrace because their culture considered any failed marriage to be a personal shame.

This one thought caused Galek's mind to start racing through the other pieces of the puzzle. As he bit down on his meal, he considered other political elements like pawns on a chess board. At last he asked Bela about a few specific star systems, the corporations that owned them, and the businesses that lived there. As Bela told him what had switched hands and who owned different properties and companies, Galek nodded, as though not surprised. He was visualizing a map, and his questions were mere confirmations to what he saw that Cerilisetia likely did not.

"You're going to be moved on soon," Galek said at last, his questions giving way to a conclusion. "At least one barony and probably more. I thought it would happen sooner, when there was blood in the water and they would credit she was weak. But you didn't let them know there had been a coup, did you?" He eyed Bela with a sense of pride and gave a wry smile that Bela did not reciprocate. He simply stood at an emotionless attention. Galek nodded, knowing he was right. "They ciphered it out a couple months later," he said, "when Nos Corp bought out five companies and took over the Sirius system. You remember telling me that? That was the first one you registered worth mentioning because I had friends there. Yes. But that was just the beginning. Someone's been buying shares in several businesses and slowly worming their way into our holdings. They're setting themselves up for an attack."

Galek nodded to himself, confirming his hypothesis to himself. Bela waited a moment, then at last asked, "Who?"

Galek snapped his head to him as if yanked out of a daze. He smiled and said, "That would be giving away the surprise." He then turned away from his former confidante and ate as he evidently played out what was coming in his head. Bela, unnerved by the partial revelation, stepped away from the cell and returned to his other duties.

\* \* \*

In truth, Galek Navarus did not know who would be coming for them. He had only partial bits and pieces of information, and he knew that whoever it was would be more clandestine than to reveal themselves through purchases. They would be craftier than that, working behind the scenes and manipulating others to do their bidding so their pieces would be in place and ready to strike from a direction no one expected.

Had Galek been privy to more information, he might have figured out that it was Ivar Cordova, who was at this moment readying a meeting with two other barons he hoped to convince of the wisdom of his plan.

The conference room was far too large for the size of the meeting. It was intended for an entire senate of shareholders, or at least a gathering of investors. The holo-table in the center stretched a fair five yards in diameter with a couple dozen chairs tucked into the sides. Surrounding the table, rows of seats marched up the stadium style floor until they reached the round, outer wall where doors opened up to aisles of steps that all led back to the center table where Ivar Cordova was to meet with two men like himself, corporate barons who, in comparison to most people, were enormously powerful, but in their own eyes, retained far too little supremacy and wealth.

Gideon Chow of the Risi Barony, the last to arrive, opened the door quickly and peeked inside, his eyes wide, as if watching for a trap. He had a dozen or so guards behind him, weapons raised and ready for a fight.

He found two men at the table below, Ivar Cordova, who had summoned him, and Abdalla Azizi, sitting at the opposite end of the large table devouring some form of meat so

quickly one would think he had been a starving child eating for the first time in months.

Ivar stood and looked at Gideon welcomingly for a moment, but his expression changed very quickly when he noticed the armed men behind his guest. "I thought I made it clear that there are to be no weapons and no body guards, assistants, or..."

"How do I know you are on the til?" Gideon asked accusingly.

Ivar held out his arms, insulted at the implication. He stood nearly seven feet tall, and his arms, fully outstretched, appeared like wings of a great bird. "If you do not trust me, then why did you travel all this distance?"

Gideon peered around the private amphitheater with his large eyes which bulged out of his face like a bull dog. His hanging jowls helped complete the appearance. He was certain there must be some sort of trap, but he couldn't find it. His searching gaze settled on his rival, Abdalla intensely chewing away at a platter filled with exotic fruits and various textured meats.

He heard Ivar's arms flap down to his sides, disappointed and annoyed. At last Gideon nodded and looked over at his guards. He gestured with his head for them to wait, and he entered, closing the door behind him, but testing the knob as he did to make sure it was unlocked. The long-faced man stepped cautiously down the stairs, his eyes never leaving Ivar.

"Mr. Azizi has been enjoying the curo, the yozu, and the... What type of meat is that?"

"Hades if I know," Abdalla said, his mouth barely leaving the ribs.

"Eating's not your usual 60, Azizi," Ivar said.

"Just that good," Abdalla answered.

"So speaks a real fan," Ivar said, looking at Gideon, who was still eyeing him suspiciously as he found a space equidistant from the other two and sat down. "There are a trill of vegetables, too. Here, try some."

He spun a section of the table which sat about a foot in from the edge. The ring of food slid around, like a lazy Susan, passing the vegetables to Gideon.

Gideon didn't touch it. He merely looked over at Ivar and spoke. "What did you call us here for?"

"You get right to the sift, don't you?"

"I'm busy."

Abdalla chuckled.

"Bubby," Ivar said, smiling knowingly. "None of us is busy. Not one of us at this table is anywhere in the sector as busy as we should be."

Gideon grunted and pretended to clear his throat.

"And besides, I'm a little insulted. You of all people should coget the types of meats. Aren't you a hunter?"

Gideon looked at a platter about five feet from reaching him. "Is that boamao?"

"It *was*boamao. Now it's a delicacy."

"That's illegal on most planets."

"Including this one. I'm sure they're sending guards at this moment." Ivar downed half his wine.

"I already ate a loaf," Abdalla said.

"Your butt is going to be dragging when you leave," Ivar said, pointing at him. Abdalla chuckled.

"Why aren't you eating anything?" Gideon asked suspiciously.

Ivar put down his glass with a thunk; then held up his plate. Half his food had been eaten. He picked up a handful of bread, and stuck it in his mouth.

"If you had gotten here on time, you would have seen him tabering down as fast as me," Abdalla said.

"I ate on the way," Gideon said, sitting back in his chair.

"Fes, your loss," Ivar said, swallowing his food. He wiped his mouth, swallowed some more, and began to talk. "Okay, you're both probably gorgeously curious why I would call you so urgently and so secretly."

"I never go anywhere without my escort," Gideon declared.

"Neither do I," Abdalla said, eyeing him as he shrugged.

"This table is grand enough for each of us to bring an entire platoon," Gideon said. "Why not let us bring them?"

"I chose this room from all my conference spaces because... Fes, let's face it, I have a loud voice."

Gideon smiled at that, chuckling.

Ivar smiled as well. He was getting through. He stood and held out his hands. "I admit it. I like to talk. And sometimes I can't help myself. My voice carries. And I don't want nearby ears to hear what I'm going to tell you."

Both Gideon and Abdalla shifted a little uneasily.

"Gents!" Ivar pronounced as he picked up the remote control for the table. He held up his head proudly as he pressed a button. Nothing happened. He looked surprised down at the remote, pressed it again. Nothing. He shook it, pointed it directly at the table and pushed the button. Nothing.

Abdalla and Gideon looked over at each other.

Ivar shifted his head and saw where he should be pointing the remote, at a central node in the middle of the table. "Ah," he said, pointed the remote correctly as he pressed a button. Lights lit up throughout the table, and a holographic star map appeared with twinkling dots.

"You see before you a map of the second quadrant." He pressed a button and a little more than a dozen stars changed to blue. "These blue stars represent-"

"What blue stars?" Abdalla asked.

"They're right along the fringe," Ivar said.

"I think I see a couple that are purple," Gideon added.

"They're blue. Look, right along the edge."

"Where are the purple ones? I don't see any colors," Abdalla asked.

"Wait, I guess that wasn't purple. Just something behind it."

"Gentlemen, look at the blue ones along the side." Both men were squinting. "Hold on," Ivar said, frustrated, and he searched out another remote. With it, he dimmed the overhead lights.

All at once he heard both men exclaim, "Ohh!"

"You see the blue stars," Ivar said.

"Yes," Gideon responded.

"These are stars?" Abdalla asked.

"What else would they be?" Ivar asked.

"They're not planets, then."

"No."

"The blue ones are my planets," Gideon said.

"Yes."

"You said they were stars," Abdalla said.

"They're star systems," Ivar retorted. "The blue ones are stars that Mr. Chow controls."

"But this one over here is my star system," Abdalla exclaimed. "That's..."

"Vinithra," Ivar said, pressing another button on the remote, this time pointed at the correct place. A couple dozen stars lit up red, including Vinithra, which shown half blue and half red. "These are Mr. Azizi's interests," Ivar said.

Abdalla smiled.

"And here are mine." Ivar pressed another button and about 30 other stars lit up green. Some were the same stars as the blue and red ones. "We share some planets, where we have traded and done business together in peace."

"You aren't on that planet," Gideon exclaimed, pointing at one of them.

"Yes I am. Now..."

"I've seen the specs on that system. That belongs to Blithe."

"I have a paper products company there. It's small." Gideon sat back and crossed his arms. "We have one major competitor," Ivar said. "One opponent whose interests outweigh all of us." He turned off the colors of their corporations and turned on a large cluster of yellow stars.

The other two men's eyes furrowed, trying to distinguish to whose corporation he was referring. At length, Abdalla's face lit up. "That's..."

"Navarus," Ivar said.

Gideon's jowls seemed to lengthen. "What do you want with them?"

"Trouble," Ivar answered with a wicked smile.

"They're bigger than all of us," Gideon said.

"Not put together." Ivar turned on the red stars, then the blue ones as he continued, "Compared to each one of us, they're mammoth. Though weakened by treachery, they can still make carn of us and acquire our territories. But..." Ivar turned on the lights that represented his own territories. "When combined, our assets far outweigh her. We have more territories, and better positioning."

"What do you mean, better positioning?" Gideon asked. "We're all on different sides. They're practically in the middle of all of us."

"That's why I chose you two." Again, Abdalla and Gideon looked lost. Ivar pressed another button. Arrows stuck out from each of their territories and pushed into Navarus space. "They may chance to defend against one, but not three. We come from all angles and acquire what we want."

Ivar was mesmerized by his own presentation. The other two looked at each other. Abdalla had stopped eating. His mouth now hung low.

Ivar sensed their fear, and tried to seem like he was ignoring it while also answering to it. "We strike at their industrial centers first so their counter-strike will be weaker."

Gideon pulled himself together enough to speak first. "We will take heavy losses in such an expensive assault."

"But think of how much you'll gain. Your empire... Wait. Hold on." Ivar realized how far apart they were, and that he was almost shouting to them. He hopped up on the table and strode through the holographic lights until he reached Gideon's side of the table. He waved Abdalla over, who scooted about half way. Ivar crouched down to be eye level with them. His face, lit up from below by the Holo-projector, added to his dramatic appearance. "None of us got to where we are by accepting our fates. We made our own. Wouldn't you agree?"

Abdalla nodded, then Gideon hesitantly agreed. He was about to speak when Ivar

interrupted him. "I have led a campaign to tear down the worth of Navarus stock interests. Their finances are in ruin. Their military is scattered. Their companies are on the barm of rebellion. If we strike now, we can divide up their empire among us. If we wait..." He looked around them, pausing to add to the dramatic effect. They hung on his silence. "If we wait, we're giving in to the fate someone else magged for us. And I, for one, don't want to accept that. Do you?"

Abdalla shook his head. Gideon still wasn't convinced. "I remember a woman named LuellaDa'chin who took on the Navarus Corporation. Galek crushed her financially and militarily, divided up her assets, and took over all of her interests. Everything she built was gone by the time he settled on her. He had her family banished to a secret planet that had wild animals and no city. They would have to live out their lives kuroing for food and clinging on to life. He even left hidden cameras so Luella could watch them. He let her live long enough to see each of them die one by one. If his daughter is more ruthless than him, I don't want to image what terrors she would come up with."

"That's one of the saddest stories I have ever heard," Ivar said. It was unclear if he was in earnest, or being sarcastic. He turned to Abdalla. "Isn't that the saddest thing you ever heard?"

"It makes me want to take down Navarus even more," Abdalla said. "I want to find Galek and put him on that planet and watch the beasts eat his heart."

Ivar smiled. This was easier than he expected.

"If they catch you first, they'll do you worse," Gideon warned.

"They won't," Ivar said, turning to him. "They're too scattered. They're divided, scathed, and incapable of putting up a strong defense. Don't you want vengeance for your friend?"

"I don't get vengeance."

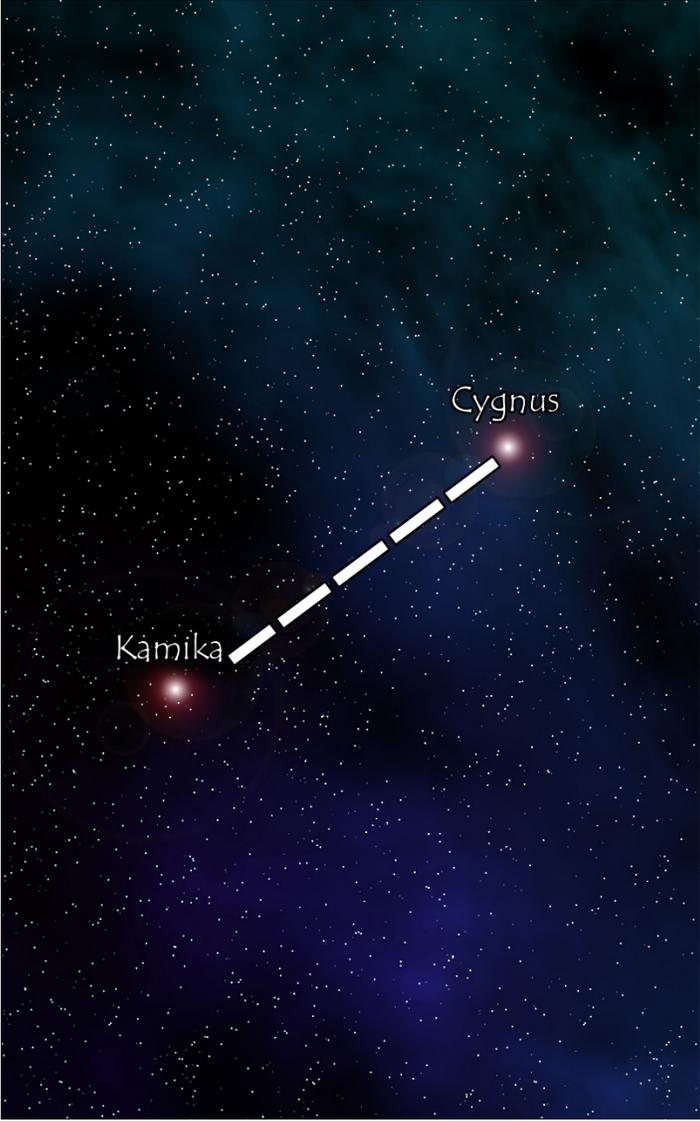
"That's right. I read your quote. You were quite famous for it. Do you remember what it was, Abdalla?"

"I believe it was, 'I don't get even, I get rich.'"

Gideon nodded.

"Those are words to live by," Ivar said, leaning down to Gideon, his eyes directly locked with him. The yellow stars wiped slowly across his face. "And this will make you a *very* rich man."

Gideon stared back at him, his jaw locked in place, his will fading. He knew Ivar was right, and he hated to admit it.



# CHAPTER SEVEN

## *THE EYES OF TLOKU*

Lancaster sat back with one foot against the wall as he waited for the Nuker to run its course. It was on the crisping cycle now, heating the interior crusts to give them the solid textures that were missing in older Nukers, and their predecessor microwave ovens.

Lancaster took pride in his cooking, though he rarely practiced his talent. Whenever he reached a destination, he satisfied himself with the local fare nature provided that he recognized enough to trust, or on hardened rations he brought along. Even at home, whatever planet home happened to be at any given moment, he rarely took time to nuke, but rather purchased packaged clone food and ate while he studied his next quarry. But when he was between planets, taking time to organize the food and program the Nuker so that the finished product came out satisfying and delicious helped him to ignore the claustrophobic feelings of isolation and boredom.

He also relished in the fact that he had a test subject in Little Jack, and he could serve him whatever he made first and see the result before taking a chance on it himself. It was not as though any of his food would be poisonous, but his experiments, especially when he was testing out how the alien civilizations he was tracking might have eaten, could get a bit extreme. So if Little Jack gave a strange look, or took a quick trip to the bathroom, Lancaster knew to start over and try again.

This day he was creating a layered filling loaf; a long bun with hardened bread in the center with a vegetable paste around it, surrounded by a layer of another type of toasted bread, surrounded by a pasta cream, wrapped in a final layer of soft bread. It was a common enough type of food made unique by the mixtures that went into the middle layer of toasted bread and parts of the pasta cream; recipes which Lancaster thought he remembered from a grandparent, but couldn't recall which one.

He watched the bright glow of light stream from the window on the Nuker as the radiating gold-brown bread rose ever so slowly. The luminosity faded for a moment as a shadow moved across the window, then passed and the bright ray of light resumed its effulgence.

Lancaster's head jolted, not as much from alarm as from confusion. The Nuker was large, but only insofar as it could hold someone as small as Little Jack, and even then he would have to duck his head. This shape that passed the window looked to be standing erect.

In a flash Lancaster dropped his leg from the wall and stood up, hurrying to the window and peeking inside. There, along the side wall of the interior of the Nuker, was the shadow of a creature. It stood on two legs followed by a tail, which bore spikes that trailed up its spine. Its arms turned at tight angles at three points with sharp claws at the end. The head was oval with a triangular chin, and though it was a shadow, it wore a face in darker black through which Lancaster could make out an expression of sheer hatred.

Then, out of the darkness in the middle of its head, two hot red orbs began to glow. Lancaster wanted to run, but the eyes had captured his, and he was locked in place. The deeper blackness grinned at his helplessness, and he fell deeper into its eyes. Inside one of them he could see two more orbs, these orange red and glowing with the intensity of the sun. It became

painful for him to look at them.

After blinking a few times, Lancaster became aware that the brightness was all around him now. It was the heat, and the light from above. He was inside the Nuker, and the beast was outside. It stared in mockingly, one eye larger than the other. It leaned down and its hands became smoking hooves; the spikes on its back growing into giant thorns.

But there would be little for it to attack. Lancaster's legs were melting like wax, and he was becoming one with the bottom of the Nuker, sinking helplessly.

A rough shake of the ship woke him up a second before the Nuker dinged. His loaf was ready.

Lancaster had fallen asleep thinking over the information he had taken from Verick's files. The lost city had been the one they were in, but he and Teo had gone somewhere else. Where? And, perhaps more importantly, why? The second question would likely lead to the answer of the first, so he had transferred files that appeared to be further research into the Milak Shivar that Verick was doing to Little Jack's data drive. Lancaster had not looked closely at them at the time; they were being rushed out of the building, but as soon as he and Little Jack left off Carres and Eddie to go their own way, Lancaster had started in on it.

Lancaster had expected exact names of planets that he could start checking off the list, but he had no such luck. Verick had instead become obsessed with their mythology, recounting every god or sub-god that made up their stories and mythology. Like Lancaster, Verick had been baffled that a star faring race as expansive as the Milak Shivar would continue to hold onto their religious beliefs, but Verick theorized that it was part and parcel with their culture of conquest and war. Their mythological fervor gave them the strength and morale to risk their lives en masse so that their civilization could expand.

Verick had focused a lot of attention on a demi-god best translated as Tloku. This being had reportedly been a Milak Shivar until it gained immortality through its accomplishments. He had lived in the early days of the culture, perhaps even before the two races had intermingled, and was ordained a god a hundred thousand years or more after his death, becoming one with the sky, as they said.

All this was intriguing; Verick's work was far beyond anything Lancaster had discovered. But it still said nothing about where they went, except a light theory Lancaster had about the two men possibly going to Tloku's home world. Some translated Milak Shivar writing had added confusion to the mix as well, though it possibly shed some light on the subject. It read, "Inside the pair of eyes of the more powerful eye; closest to the outer..." and then Verick's notation read "best guess, 'corona.'"

It read like a riddle and many translations appeared cryptic like this. By the time the language went through the filters of meaning and the basic method of speech, it had changed so much that even a name could appear to have a hidden meaning.

Lancaster had fallen asleep trying to decode the riddle while also making dinner. Thoughts of Tloku had crept into his dream and haunted him, but provided no answers. Lancaster would have to serve the food he had made with few answers on where they would be going.

Little Jack had jumped into spectrum drive a couple times and landed them in the upper atmosphere of a gas giant. The multiple spectrum jumps had been to shake anyone who might be following. The trip into the gas giant was both to hide from anyone who might still have been able to follow them, (he was still unsure of the dark cultists' skills), and to partially refuel. Certain gas giants contained particles that could be transferred into fuel if a pilot had the right

modules. Such a process damaged the engines over time, and could even cause mishaps, but Little Jack was wary of any public port at the moment, and this lull provided Lancaster with the time he needed to figure out where they would be going next.

The ship shuttered occasionally as the atmosphere shifted and distant storms rippled by. Lancaster steadied himself as he carried the loaf into the cockpit. Little Jack had already pulled the tray out of the console where he usually ate. He had smelled it coming, and was ready for a meal. He didn't notice the discouraged look on Lancaster's face, only the perfect brownness of the crust as it lowered down...

Then it fell, dropped from a foot above its destination. The loaf clanged, bounced, and almost flew off the tray before it was grabbed by Little Jack, who looked angrily up at his clumsy companion. Lancaster didn't notice what he had done. He was stumbling back, his eyes caught in space. It looked for a moment like he had seen something outside, but Little Jack knew his expressions all too well, and this was a eureka moment for Lancaster.

It had all fallen into place for him. Tloku was a god. A demi-god, but still a god. Most cultures that had gods named their celestial bodies after them, and the Milak Shivar was no exception. They had, in fact, continued to name celestial bodies after mythological figures as they expanded to different planets. Regions of space had one name from one planet, then another name from the point of view of another planet. It was likely that Tloku was the name of a constellation on one of these planets.

Without hesitation, Lancaster sat down at his console and began searching his own records for Tloku in relation to Milak Shivar constellations. After a few moments it came up. It was a name given to a group of stars off the southern hemisphere of a Milak Shivar planet, known to humans as Feynman. He had data on the placement of the stars and the shape they were supposed to represent, (the two were rarely the same in any culture,) but he did not know what those stars were on an overhead map.

"Little Jack," he said excitedly, "throw up the holographic map. Second quadrant, uh, Sector..."

Little Jack was still juggling the hot bread and its plate, placing it so it didn't fall onto the floor or burn his hands too badly while the ship jostled violently. "Wait a tic. You're going to burn my lap and ruin my dinner!" He slowly got himself and the loaf situated and brought up the holographic image of glowing dots that represented stars floating in front of the cockpit window. Lancaster gave him the coordinates and Little Jack zoomed in to the star. From there Lancaster was able to use his own console to twist the image around, shifting the stars in the background. He plugged in the shape of the stars he was searching for, and the computer tried to find a match. Lines appeared, forming part of the shape, but always some of the stars were off. One section seemed promising, connecting half the points, and the others were just off, so Lancaster tried to make them fit by shifting the view back and forth. But it was to no avail.

Finding nothing, he was beginning to wonder if the constellation had been viewed from a different star system. Going through all the Milak Shivar planets, which existed throughout the first and second quadrants, and part of the fourth, would take hours, perhaps days. That was time they had, but not patience from the point of view of Little Jack.

Then it struck Lancaster. The constellation would have been viewed by its authors more than a hundred million years ago. Some of the stars would have shifted position in that time. The computer system in Odin's Revenge was not programmed for that deep of analysis. However, its navigation computer was set to compensate for adjustments in space and time. Stars which appeared in one part of the sky today were actually in that spot many years ago. The

navigation computer's job was to analyze where that star would have moved to so one did not come out of spectrum drive in the wrong location.

Lancaster asked Little Jack if the computer could be programmed to believe the stars in the constellation were 150 million light years away, and thus give them a reading on each one as to where they would be today.

Little Jack did not often give much of an expression, and he did not give one now, as such. But his stillness, especially after being so animated about the loaf, spoke volumes. He ran through his head what Lancaster was saying, then said, "Let's try."

Lancaster put up the combination of stars that had been close to connecting, and one by one they ran each star through the navigation computer, taking each step to find out where that star might be. The computer continuously beeped its objections, telling them that maps and sensors detected the planets to be nowhere near 150 million light years from the source of the search, so they had to override it each time.

As Little Jack got the readings, Lancaster wrote them down, making a map in his notebook, which he compared to the constellation map he had gotten from Verick's office. Slowly but surely, like a connect-the-dots puzzle, it came together. But now the question became to which of the stars in the constellation did Verick and Teo go?

Lancaster's best lead was in the riddle. "Inside the pair of eyes of the more powerful eye; closest to the outer 'corona.'" He compared the drawing of the constellation to the image he had of the god Tloku. Though the stars did not connect with every part of the god's body, it did share some of its features, most prominently its eyes. Lancaster singled them out quickly, but the pair of eyes of the more powerful... Then he figured it out.

Just as in his nightmare, Tloku had one large eye and one smaller eye. One hundred and fifty million years ago, the star on the right had been a giant. It had lost energy over time and shrunk, but a careful observer could still spot that it was slightly larger than the other. This was a star system humans now referred to as Cygnus.

This further explained the next part of the riddle, "the eye within the eye." Cygnus was a binary system, so it had two stars. The primary one, which had once been a giant, was still the larger of the two. The secondary star was a dwarf with only a couple of worlds.

It appeared as little more than a white marble in the distance when they emerged from spectrum space near the larger star. Lancaster had guessed this to be the more likely of the two to have a habitable planet, and with six orbiting worlds, it seemed he had guessed correctly.

Which of the six planets was the correct one was answered through the final part of Verick's notes. Lancaster had first thought "closest to the outer corona" had been a statement relating to the eyes, but now he understood it to mean the planet closest to the star's corona, which was an odd way to just say the nearest planet to the star, but translations could be confounding sometimes.

And so Lancaster directed Little Jack to Cygnas A-1, a small planet so far off of every chart it had no name beyond its alpha-numeric designation. It shone as a bright dot in the darkness, like a tiny star. As they came near they could see why this was; the whole planet was blanketed in cloud cover which reflected its star's light. Its surface, along with all its secrets, was hidden beneath layers of mist.

This made it all the more difficult for Lancaster to determine where they should land. Odin's Revenge's scanners indicated that the atmosphere was breathable and the pressure and gravity were optimal for humans, but they could not detect where land ended and sea began, or what parts might be covered in mountains that may be treacherous to fly in, or where swamps

that Milak Shivar typically lived might likely inhabit. All they could do was take a guess and maneuver once they dipped below the clouds.

But then they received a break they did not expect. A light blinked on the communication panel closer to Lancaster. Confused, he switched over to receive the signal and found that it was a beacon that was blinking every few seconds from a specific point on the surface of the planet. He told Little Jack and sent the beacon's information over to the location sensors. Little Jack locked the navigation controls onto the spot, and began his descent to the planet.

The re-entry flames subsided about the same time that they submerged into the haze of the vapor. White and gray puffs billowed past them as fingers of transparent film crawled over the canopy. Light from the star dimmed and the grays darkened to ebony as they lowered deeper into the brume sea. Lit by the dim glow of the control panel, Lancaster and Little Jack watched closely, the former out the window in search of something new, the latter at the instruments to detect what was ahead.

They both found something at the same time. Little Jack located an obstacle blip ahead; some sort of thin structure or mountain peak stretched far into the sky. Lancaster spotted it as a veil of mist parted revealing a silver framework, the top of which was just visible at the tip of the temporary clearing. They both gathered as much information as they could about it before it was re-enveloped in the shifting fog. Little Jack directed the ship toward the object and carefully brought them up to it until they could see the silver metal again.

Lancaster recognized the shape and type of metal; it was the same as he had seen inside the structure of the Valentino building in Fadye, what he suspected to be of Milak Shivar make and design. This theory was confirmed as they flew up close and more of the structure faded into view. Little Jack circled around it and began to descend in a corkscrew manner around the alien tower. The webbed metal of the building got thicker and crisscrossed in tighter patterns as it descended. A bulge formed that forced Little Jack to widen his orbit. Lancaster suddenly remembered upward pointed spikes that often emerged from the bases of these bulges, which he warned Little Jack about just before one stabbed out of the fog. After avoiding several of these obstacles, Little Jack got them on a course to follow the tower safely downward.

They emerged from the cloud line quite suddenly and were presented with a majestic view of rolling green hills of grass and trees freckled with flowers and brush. In the distance these gave way to jagged rocks that held back a roaring ocean that was constantly clawing at the emerald floor.

Mighty silver towers like the one they were circling emerged from the ground all around them, each about a kilometer from the next. They all stretched up into the cloud cover where they disappeared from view. Inside the tower they were near, Lancaster could see buildings, pillars, and graded streets that wound their way up the superstructure. The interlacing metal frames that served as the shell for these communities now began to take on patterns, each unique on their various floors. Some seemed to Lancaster to be faces, others bodies, and still others were either too obscure for his recollection, or they were esoteric forms that took no definitive shape.

As the base of the tower came into view, and the source of the beacon came closer, it hit home to Lancaster that he was about to meet Mika's present husband. The tips of his fingers went numb and it felt as though the air had escaped his lungs. He only became more nervous as Little Jack lowered them to a hill a half a kilometer from the tower, and the whizzing of the landing gear sounded below them.

Lancaster tried to send a response to the beacon, both electronic and verbal. There was

no answer. They didn't know what that meant. There were a large number of possibilities; too many to bother speculating. A likely one, or perhaps just the hopeful one, was that the two explorers had set it up as a waypoint, and their next destination would be left at their campsite. But was that the best option? Lancaster couldn't decide. His emotions wavered on his hopes for the fate of Teo. He at last had to resign himself to the fact that he had no power over it, so wishing for death or life would do no good anyway. The truth would be whatever it was with or without his desires.

Despite his reservations, Lancaster was out of the ship first. Little Jack was scanning the surrounding area for various dangers such as animal life, poison gases, or shifting weather. The air was breathable and the temperature currently warm with just a little bit of a chill, so Lancaster stepped out in his usual hat and jacket. The ground around them was almost too perfect; dappled with violet flowers and soft green grass. Before him, the land dropped into a short valley before rising again and giving way to the enormous silver tower; the frame of which covered several buildings that could just be spotted within its inner shadow. A few smaller towers sat just outside it as though standing guard. These had bulges with blades sticking out the sides just as the large one did, but in a more miniaturized form.

Lancaster's mind now did one of its common exercises that it often would when studying a site. Using what he knew about the ancient civilization he combined his knowledge with what he was currently witnessing, and through them created in his mind's eye what it might have looked like once upon a time when the alien species existed. He saw their three bladed ships slicing through the air, and a rocket launching from the valley on its way to space; only it would have emerged from the mud and liquid of the swamp, not the soft earth beneath his feet. In his imagination, Lancaster saw the lights of the buildings flicker on, and the thousands of Milak Shivar forms milling about inside; like a family celebrating a holiday together inside their home. But that was more than a hundred million years ago, and the sound of Little Jack stepping up behind Lancaster snapped him out of his vision.

"Are you doing your thing again?" Little Jack asked, recognizing the distant look in Lancaster's eyes.

Shaken at being caught romanticizing, Lancaster said, "Let's go," and they strolled into the valley toward the source of the beacon.

Little Jack kept a close eye on his hand scanner which was directing them toward the signal inside the silver tower. As they reached the bottom of their hill they began to notice more within the tower's shrouded shadow. Details on the inner building began to be visible, including the coral stone of their architecture; but what really stood out were canvas and wood materials that were clearly not part of the original framework. There was a human camp inside this mega-structure, and the signal was coming from within it. Lancaster pulled out his HUD Binoculars and investigated what was in sight, but he was only able to confirm that it was a human camp, and likely one built by fellow scientists judging from the way several tables were set up with shelves and drawers to study specimens.

They were nevertheless careful on their approach. The campers could be frightened and trigger happy when they heard intruders on what was supposed to be an empty planet, or someone else could have taken over the camp that would be less friendly to begin with; so they moved slowly and kept their eyes wide open, Little Jack with both hands near his guns.

As their heads rose up over the crest of the hill and the entire camp came into full view, both men stopped and searched for any sign of life. When they saw there was nothing, they continued.

The campsite consisted of a combination of tents and tables spread over two sections of the ancient alien ruins. A partial wall separated the living quarters of the camp from the work area, the latter of which had come into sight first. Here, the tables and seats were separated by mechanical and electrical instruments used for analyzing their data, protecting their site, and scanning the local environment. Most of it was offline, the power having run out. Not a good sign that they would find anyone here; no one alive, at any rate. There was no sign of damage, so it could not have been attacked. Most likely it was just abandoned.

The beacon was the only instrument still on. A four foot tall device placed between a pair of research stations, it had its own power supply from which it drew so little energy it would continue to operate for several more years. Lancaster studied it and found that it had also been the communications system. The campers had found a way to tap into the Milak Shivar's sensors array at the top of one of their towers to be able to send out signals. From here they had sent information, some of it data and images, to Verick's personal records back home. And from here Teo had sent his final transmission to Mika. The makeshift nature of their communication, along with the mixing of technologies and the difficulties with sending a signal from this planet would explain why so much of the voice signal was garbled while the data got through mostly intact.

There would be a lot of information and communications to go through, but first Lancaster believed it would be important to get a good lay of the land. He continued to go over the desks, checking through drawers and shelves searching for some clue of where the campers were searching.

Little Jack was still on the lookout for the campers themselves, or the invaders. There was no sign of a struggle, but that didn't mean someone wasn't there that would do them harm out of fear or being protective. He wandered near the wall which separated the two sections of the camp. Sitting on a table right next to the entrance was a Photvid of a man and a woman. He knew the woman; it was Mika. He did not know the man. He would be the new husband. Little Jack quietly placed the Photvid face down. Lancaster didn't need the distraction.

Lancaster, meanwhile, located a file full of information that would be important. Verick had made a map of the surrounding area with one tower highlighted and a handscrawled note which read "Temple of Haniz" and after it a single word: "Idol?"

Little Jack then continued on into the second section; the living quarters. There were the usual amenities: a couple beds, some desks and personal items. But the first thing that caught his attention was the corpse. The body was hunched over one of the beds, as though trying to climb on, but not quite making it. The clothes were in tatters and most of the skin and organs were decomposed. It was little more than a skeleton. No identifiable marks revealed who this was, but Little Jack assumed it was Teo.

He called in Lancaster, who made the same assumption as soon as he saw the remains. His mind was immediately filled with mixed emotions. He felt a terrible relief, and was angry with himself for feeling anything but sadness. Mostly, he was curious. There were no immediate signs of mangling by any animal, yet he had clearly died unexpectedly, evidenced by the fact that he had not even been able to make it onto the bed. Lancaster stepped closer to the body, leaning down to investigate any clues that might remain. A flurry of insects crawled all over, some eating away at what remained.

Lancaster studied the face. He was searching for clues, but deep down he was also staring for personal reasons. How would he tell Mika? Should he even be the one to tell her? Little Jack would have no tact about it. But...

Lancaster felt a painful sting at the side of his neck. He swatted the bug instantly, but he could feel the lump already swelling. He cursed under his breath and leaned back away from the body, studying it from more than a meter away. As he felt around the pockets of his jacket for a device that might aid him in identifying what happened, a strange odor filled his nostrils. It was separate from the smell of the decomposed body. While it was pungent like burnt rotting food, most of its smell had dissolved into the air before they had arrived. This smell, while sweeter, was sharper and more immediate, as though it was spraying into the air at this very moment.

Little Jack noticed it a few seconds later, and started searching for its source. Lancaster left it to him, and pulled out a Dendrochrone, a device that helped identify the age of an object. Of course, it was intended to measure geological structures in the millions of years, but it might be useful...

Lancaster felt another small bite; this one much less painful, but noticeable. He swatted the bug, and felt a few more under his hand. Then a few more landed on his hand and started biting it. He waved them away, but still others diverted around it and landed on and around his neck. He felt dozens of tiny pricks all at the same time, collectively like a tingling sensation across the right side of his neck. They began landing on other parts of his face and body. Lancaster even saw a small cloud forming around him and trailing off toward the body. The insects were abandoning it for him.

Lancaster stepped away from the bed, swinging his arm wildly, trying to ward off the growing swarm. The few he hit were simply replaced by more that were now clouding his vision and covering his body.

Little Jack rushed to him, swiping his hand across his neck and anywhere on his body the insects were landing. Lancaster was beginning to yelp short bursts of agony. When he tumbled backward, crashing into walls, Little Jack knew it was serious. Lancaster pulled at his jacket, trying to get at the ones crawling underneath. Little Jack swatted him hard, trying to kill as many bugs as he could, but it seemed they came back triple whatever he squashed. He then noticed a large cluster of bugs clumped over Lancaster's neck, resembling a hive. Those near Lancaster's skin took bites before moving on; those on the top kept moving until they could find an exposed spot.

The swarm was now all over Lancaster's face. He was moaning in pain, but he forced his eyes to stay open as he felt around his torso. Little Jack finally realized that he was not trying to take his jacket off, but trying to find something in it. He had a ton of small pockets all over it, and he seemed to be trying to locate something. Little Jack eyed where his hands were and deduced that the pocket he wanted was near them. He opened a pocket near one of the hands and started to reach in, but Lancaster shook his head. Little Jack moved his hand to the next pocket, and Lancaster shook his head. His own hands were still reaching for something, but they were shaking so badly it was hard to tell where they were going. Small fissures were forming in the skin. The bugs were eating their way inside.

Little Jack tried another pocket, and Lancaster nodded. Little Jack pulled out a small spray canister, and very quickly deduced what it was meant to do. He sprayed it all over Lancaster's jacket, covering over as many bugs as he could. As the spray went across them, the bugs fell, but more covered over the gaps, like water filling into a hole. He tried spraying faster, frantically even as he could see larger fissures of red forming across Lancaster's body. Everywhere he sprayed, the insects fell, but more took their place. It was an ever-losing battle.

Lancaster was trying to say something, but he could only make gasping noises. Every time he opened his mouth, bugs were flying in and biting the inside. So he resorted to giving

hand gestures. He pointed at the lump on his neck. It was the point of the original bite. Little Jack shook the spray can and gave a strong, sustained spray directly into it. The hive immediately broke apart, the insects flying every which way, revealing the swollen, red bulge underneath. Little Jack pressed the nozzle into the gap and sprayed hard, covering the wound in the foam of the spray before any more creatures could land on it.

Some of the insects tried. The swarm attempted to reform around it, but they were repulsed by an invisible shield. Bugs from all over Lancaster's body abandoned their posts and made their way to the hive on his neck, but as each of them got close, they reflected away, and soon the gray mass around him dissipated.

Little Jack sprayed the repellent all over Lancaster's body to make certain until every inch of him was covered in repellent. As he did this, Lancaster nearly fell to the ground. His hand grasped Little Jack's shoulder as a crutch to keep him from going all the way over. He wavered, barely able to stand. Exposed red wounds were separated by black and blue bruises and rashes. He also felt weak from the toxin that had been inserted into his body by the... was it the queen? Lancaster did not know, and he did not envy the entomologist who would study them.

"A wheal abrader," came a voice as though answering Lancaster's inner query. The words resonated through the chambers as footsteps neared them. Little Jack kept one arm holding up his partner as his other hand remained ready near his pistol. The sound took form visually as a man in a light colored, sharp suit stepped through the doorway. It was Nikos Kazakis, cleaned up, as usual, and obviously letting someone else do all the dirty work for him as there wasn't a speck of dirt on him from the site. He continued, almost tauntingly, "Those insects can be real pests. Deadly even. Just ask him." He pointed at the corpse hanging over the bed.

Little Jack drew Munin and pointed it with a straight arm directly at Nikos. He waited only for a reason not to shoot.

He got one a moment later. Around 15 to 20 armed soldiers marched in from several sides. But it was only one person that made Little Jack think twice. A woman with half yellow hair and half green wearing a toga skirt and boots with tiny spikes on the end. Her hand was at her pistol strapped to her bare leg. Little Jack knew she didn't need it out; she could draw and kill most people before they could pull the trigger.

Nikos wore a disappointed expression, as if Lancaster and Little Jack should have predicted something like this. "Now, now," he said. "If you were to kill me, Mr. Jack, you'll never know the identity of our friend there." He motioned again to the corpse.

"Not... Teo?" Lancaster forced out.

Nikos smiled at Lancaster and mocked, "Disappointed, are we?" Lancaster looked away ashamed, and Nikos continued, "No. I am afraid *that* is his late partner Verick. Teothrustered on from here searching for the Idol of Haniz so he could return it to its temple. He obviously didn't find it. But he survived. Teo was sending messages back to Verick, who was passing on much of the information to his private memory banks back home. He also passed on the message to Dr. Sinovi. Teo's wife, I mean," Nikos said, eyeing Lancaster with another emotional jab.

Nikos then nodded to Jude and said, "My associate helped me break into Verick's private files; not the ones you vized, but the ones that were actually well hidden. And we found their trail... and what they were hunting for."

"Why are you so interested?" Lancaster asked more frustrated than anything.

"Because the more advanced corporate barons know the value of a good relic," Nikos

answered very simply.

Lancaster released himself from Little Jack's grasp and hobbled toward Nikos. Jude pulled her pistol from her holster, and the soldiers lifted their rifles. Nikos waved for them to hold their fire; Lancaster was too weak to do anything, and he knew it. But if Nikos was going to kill him, Lancaster was going to speak up first. "You're nothing but a looter," Lancaster said, and he hobbled on past, out of the camp site and into the alien ruins.

A few of the soldiers began to follow, and Nikos waved them back, following his nemesis. "Lancaster, if I wanted to kill you, you wouldn't have seen us coming. But there is no rational why we can't work together."

Lancaster eyed him with derision and continued on further into another chamber. Nikos did not try to stop him, but instead grew quieter, more private in his tone, even checking over his shoulder to make sure the soldiers could not hear what he had to say. "CEOs and corporate barons are beginning to recognize the importance of ancient artifacts; the power they possess. The value within them. They are aprending what they can do with them to grow their own interests. Once a few of them have that edge, the others will follow." He at last grasped Lancaster's jacket at the shoulder and virtually pled with him through his eyes. "Don't you see, Lancaster? We are at the center of what is soon to be a massive demand. The richest executives in the galaxy will be paying top electro for the very things you and I locate with ease."

"All so they can grow more powerful," Lancaster muttered.

"Yes!" Nikos responded, a glow in his eyes. "And the more powerful they become, the richer we become."

"What happens to the balance of power once you've given everything over to one corporate empire?" Lancaster asked.

"That's the art of it," Nikos said, barely able to contain his excitement. "We go to their competitors who have been left out of the relic race and we sell to them. We'll obviously have a contract with the first not to sell their item to anyone else, so we'll have to sell a different artifact, but with your skills at locating alien artifacts, and my cunning in dealing with corporate leadership, there will be a tril to sell, and plenty of buyers." He then got right into Lancaster's face, his own under the rim of his hat as he said in a hushed yet urgent tone, "We will be kings of this unimaginable profit center."

Nearly nose to nose, the two men were silent for a time. Then Lancaster chuckled. Scoffing, he turned his back on Nikos and hobbled away, holding the wall as he did.

"They were on the path to the Constellation Crest," Nikos said. The words caused Lancaster to stop faster than a wall. "It was in the signals Verick was sending back. Teo knew that Mika and you theorized its existence, and wanted to find it."

"But that's a Sigueran artifact," Lancaster said, not completely unconvinced. "This is a..."

"A Milak Shivar ruin. I know. But I would bet my plastic that you can ferret just how this search changed from one of that civilization to the greatest discovery in all of xeno-archaeology."

Lancaster's brow furrowed in confusion and concentration. He didn't want to play games with this man, but he was confounded by what he was suggesting. "The Constellation Crest is a map," he said.

"Yes," Nikos hissed with excitement. "The padrone map of the Siguerans."

"It also serves as a key," Lancaster said.

"*The* key, Mr. James," Nikos said, stepping closer, his body ready to explode with excited

energy. “The master key that unlocks their most important locations; turns on and off their power sources.”

“And that includes the civilizations they conquered and built upon,” Lancaster continued, almost to himself.

“Leading one to every secret of every alien civilization in this arm of the galaxy, if not further,” Nikos said, urging Lancaster on.

“This includes the Milak Shivar.”

“With whom they were at war.”

“The Milak Shivar learned of this item,” Lancaster said, his head rising with interest.

Nikos smiled with an enormous grin. “We are not the only civilization to be interested in what other species had built.”

“With that map they could have found every Sigueran stronghold and wiped them out.”

“But instead the Siguerans wiped them out first.”

“That war lasted for centuries,” Lancaster said, coming to a different realization.

“During which thousands of weapons were developed. Weapons far beyond anything humans have even imagined. Many of which are still out there, buried, unnoticed by the unwatchful eyes of others. But not you,” Nikos said, at last revealing his purpose, or at least his reason for not killing Lancaster right away.

Lancaster finally leveled his head at Nikos. “You want to be a war profiteer.”

“Just a profiteer,” Nikos said. “War happens to be the most efficient method of maximizing it.”

Lancaster’s eyes wandered again, picturing the horrific weapons he had seen, and the ones still out there. “Millions will die,” he said. “Billions of aliens already have.”

“She’s never going to love you again,” Nikos said out of the blue.

That snapped Lancaster’s attention back onto Nikos. “What?”

“It doesn’t matter how noble you are. You could save the whole galaxy, you will still never mean as much to her as you once did.”

“What does that have to do with anyth...”

“Her husband... is still out there. And whenever he returns from wherever he jondered off to, she will fall right back into his arms. It’s pointless for you to try to win her back.”

Lancaster did not argue. He did not want to give Nikos anything to feed off of, even though he was off base from what Lancaster was really thinking.

“But this, Lancaster, this opportunity is what will make you wealthy and powerful beyond anything you can image. You will be the envy of every scientist alive, and any who come after. Some say the victors write the history books. It’s not. It’s the powerful. The wealthy. The ones behind the scenes that chose the victors. You will scribe the history of the future rather than studying the one already written in the past... Or don’t. And die here with your partner to become part of this forgotten ruin. It’s really up to you.”

Lancaster hesitated. It was one thing for him to sacrifice his own life for his ideals, but to bring Little Jack down with him would not be fair. He weighed his options, and his time was quickly running out.

Then a shout from one of the soldiers near the entrance to the ruin caught their attention. There were more corporate soldiers than Lancaster had seen. They were probably all over. But the sound in this man’s voice was unnerving. He was shouting louder than necessary that ships were landing.

Nikos hurried to him, and before he got even halfway he could see the black vessels

settling onto the ground just outside. “You were supposed to alert us when they neared orbit...” Nikos started.

He was interrupted by another soldier at a sensors station placed next to the lookout who spoke quickly. “They were invisible to visual and sensors...”

Another lookout shouted, “They’re debarking prepared for combat!”

Lancaster stepped up next to his archrival, looking out at the intruders. “I know these gents,” he said.

Nikos looked over at him confused.

“Dark Agents.”

It was one of the only times Nikos wore an expression of fear. He knew who they were, but had never run across them personally. And if they sneaked by the Navarus ships in orbit, they were living up to their reputation. “Defensive positions!” he ordered, his attention suddenly entirely on the new threat. “Use the cover.”

The squads guarding Little Jack hurried out of the room toward the entrance of the tower. Jude’s attention was distracted momentarily, and Little Jack took advantage, pulling Hugin from its holster while firing Munin. Jude shot the blast out of the air from Munin and fired back quickly. Little Jack revealed Hugin and fired her shot out of the air, surprising Jude. Assessing the situation in an instant, Jude used her bionic legs to jump out of harm’s way, further up the tower as Little Jack fired after her with both guns blazing.

Lancaster hurried back to Little Jack, and, with everyone distracted, they hurried deeper into the ruins in the cradle of the tower.

Nikos kept his own head down, using the intelligence gathered by the lookouts to learn the progress of the enemy. They had very effective shields, and camouflage that made them difficult to pinpoint even while moving. His soldiers, meanwhile, were going down one by one, despite the heavy cover, and they were hitting few of their opponents, even though they were out in the open.

Nikos calculated very quickly that there was little chance of winning the battle, and he searched for alternatives. One landed quite nearly on his lap as Jude dropped down next to him. She said nothing, but watched to see what he would do.

Nikos straightened up confidently, as though the chaos of battle was not directly behind his back. “You didn’t abandon me,” he said, almost as if a question.

“You’re still profitable,” she responded.

Nikos nodded slightly. He then calmly looked behind him, as though there was a noisy, distracting program happening. He then turned back to Jude and said, “I believe it’s time for us to moze.”

Jude held out her hand. Nikos took it, then held onto the rest of her. She pushed off the ground with her bionic legs, and they shot high up into the tower toward the ship where they had landed. The corporate soldiers would slow the Dark Agents long enough for Nikos and Jude to make good their escape. There was nothing more for them here.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

### *THE PILLAR OF KNOWLEDGE*

With the area cleared and secured, Alpha 25 strode up the steps into the alien ruins with his bodyguards. The Milak Shivar towers stretched for several kilometers, and despite the ever-present cloud cover, the planet's atmosphere made it attractive to explorers and surveyors who would travel here in droves when they learned it existed. The fact that a corporate army had landed here made it all the more dangerous, and they had even had with them a propaganda team, the kind of people Dark Agents despised the most. Others were soon to follow. The site would have to be demolished to be certain.

He stopped when he heard muffled moaning from near his feet around the bend to the right. He looked around the corner and found a soldier still clinging to life, biting his lip in an attempt to not draw attention to himself. Tears welled up in his eyes as he realized he had been spotted by the Dark Agent chief himself. He was unarmed, but it was not the young man's weapon that concerned Alpha 25. It was the use of his lips; and in the absence of them, his hands would be used to tell others about these alien cities and artifacts. That would be far more dangerous than any weapon a man could carry.

So Alpha 25 pressed the button on his ring, dropping the monowhip from its holster. The boy opened his mouth and pled for his life, promising not to tell anyone of this place. Alpha 25 did not listen to the exact words. He twisted his wrist one way, then flicked it down at the soldier. The monowhip sliced through the young man's helmet, and took off half his head. It was all for the greater good.

Alpha 25 looked up to see what agent seemed the most concerned. He spotted one with her jaw dropped slightly open. She quickly turned her head, but he could sense her motive and was certain she was the one who had tried to spare the soldier's life. All agents knew better, even the young zetas, of which she was one. His monocle told him she was Zeta 305.

He spooled the monowhip back into its ring and ordered, "Seize Zeta 305." Several Gammas grabbed the young agent without hesitation and brought her to their boss. He could hear her breath shivering; her fear was palpable. But she had nothing to be afraid of. His face, however, told a different story. "You know that we take no prisoners if they are witnesses to the danger." The danger he was speaking of was the alien ruins. Anything of alien origin was danger, and no one other than Dark Agents was supposed to see them and live. She did not protest, nor did she deny her guilt. Alphas had their way of knowing; and it wouldn't matter even if they were wrong. There was no defense against their word. "Take her to reprogramming," Alpha 25 said, and the Gammas took her away from the site.

None of this was important, however, in comparison to the task at hand. Alpha 25 needed to find out whose ship was parked on the neighboring hill. Decorated with the bust of a god on the front and a mythological stained glass window in the back, it had too much originality to be a military vessel. A squad of gammas and a delta were standing guard over it to make sure its pilot wouldn't sneak on and take off. Its occupants needed to be located and disposed of; there could be no witnesses left alive.

There were numerous chambers to go through on each level of the tall tower, and it had many levels, so it would take a long time. But they had to do it to make certain the pilot of the lone ship did not escape. Alpha 25 supposed the soldier he had killed might have known, and he could have questioned the boy, but that was a mistake he would not admit to; not to his subordinates, in any case.

Right now Alpha 25 wanted to go through the information left in this camp. It did not appear to be a military one. It looked like one that might belong to a scientist. Was it someone who worked with the corporate army? This mystery was growing, so Alpha 25 set up two teams. The larger one would do the sweep floor by floor, and a small, skilled squad would go through the camp with him.

They quickly came upon the shriveled remains of a body laying half on and half off a bed. Alpha 25 ordered a DNA test to be done to see if the person was part of any database. This could be the owner of the ship.

But before he gave the order, a voice rang out from one of the nearby ramp paths that wound its way up the tower. "You're here to destroy these ruins. The artifacts, too. Everything that once belonged to the Milak Shivar."

Every Dark Agent weapon was leveled at the confident striding figure in the wide brimmed hat and jacket stepping out of the dark toward them. He appeared fearless, unflinching; the very opposite from the reaction they were used to from people who ran afoul of their cult. Alpha 25 stepped out of the camp to meet the stranger and hear what he had to say personally before ordering his demise. The leader's thumb remained close to the monowhip ring, however, ready to use it at a moment's notice.

As the stranger stepped into the light where his face could be seen, Alpha 25 recognized him as the man they had been chasing at FadyeUponChevas. He had outmaneuvered them and destroyed some of their Zebnid robots. Now they had him trapped and could finish what they had started. But the fact that this man was approaching them rather than continuing to hide was disconcerting.

Alpha 25 stepped out to where he could be seen, too, and where it was clear he was the one this man should treat with. "The alien assets are not for human eyes."

"For all my life I would have argued with you," the man responded. "Up until a few minutes ago. I think I witnessed the reason for your beliefs. Human greed isn't a good mix with technology they can't control. They're not ready for it. Chances be they never will."

"Who are you?" Alpha 25 asked, a bit taken aback by someone explaining the Dark Agent conviction without prompting or brainwashing.

"Name's Lancaster James. And I used to be against everything you stand for. I registered that alien artifacts were to be preserved and studied. That people should learn about what they were capable of. But now I realize they'll only use it to kill one another off, to make our species as extinct as the ones before us. They'll use them for short term gains either financially or militarily; all while making everyone in between suffer. I may not be on with everything you do. But I'm on board with ridding the universe of the things that can only hurt our species."

It was killing Lancaster's spirit to say all of this, but he was clearly in earnest. He was a defeated man who was turning on his own life's work. His anguish was palpable.

"Then you comprehend why we must kill you," Alpha 25 said sympathetically, yet sternly.

A flurry of shots rang out from the dark; some landing at Alpha 25's feet, the rest drawing a line in front of the other Dark Agents as a warning. Despite all of them looking for the source of the shots, none could see where their source was.

“That will be my partner Little Jack,” Lancaster said, unflinching. “I wouldn’t talk of anyone here being killed anymore; he tends to get a bit touchy. Besides, I’m the last person you want to rub.”

“Oh?” Alpha 25 enquired.

“Yeah. Because I know how to find the Constellation Crest.”

Alpha 25 looked blankly at Lancaster, who realized the Dark Agent leader had no idea what he was talking about.

“You want to destroy artifacts. The Constellation Crest will lead you to more than you’ll ever find on your own. It’s the master map to end all maps. The Siguerans used it to hunt down other alien races. Now you can use it to sweep up what they left behind. And I’ll…” Lancaster hesitated. He hated himself for doing this, but after what he learned from Nikos, this was the best thing for humanity. “I’ll lead you to it if I can find it.”

“You said you know where it is,” Alpha 25 said.

“No, I said I can find it. And I could use your help.”

Alpha 25 studied Lancaster carefully. He even closed the eye that was outside the monocle to concentrate thoroughly through the analyzing lens. He could not fathom a scientist going against his very nature. Then again, what did Alpha 25 have to lose? He had plenty of followers to watch over this man and his partner; and he didn’t believe a scientist would have the resources to set a trap that could be effective against them. So he decided to take this calculated risk. “Very well,” Alpha 25 said. “Show me.”

Lancaster pulled back the flap of his jacket and reached into a pack he had slung over his shoulder. Some of the Dark Agents tightened the grips on their weapons and aimed carefully. Lancaster heard them, and slowly brought out what he had inside. It was a statuette made of pure gold in the shape of a fierce reptile wrapped around a throwing star. The Idol of Haniz.

It took Lancaster a couple hours to locate the correct tower, and then the right building within the tower. Though he followed Verick’s map, it was rough and lacked important details. Alpha 25 suspected Lancaster was buying time, and ordered extra guards around his ship. They spotted Lancaster’s partner occasionally stalking from higher points of the spires, or through the tall grass between structures. That encouraged Alpha 25 to give him a little more time.

Lancaster was painfully aware that he was bypassing a plethora of priceless relics stacked in every floor of these giant monoliths. But the one for which he was hunting was more important than all of them combined. Verick and Teo had clearly been close to locating where the Milak Shivar temple was that would in turn give the whereabouts of the Constellation Crest. Teo had disappeared searching for what Lancaster now had, and Lancaster could continue the search where they left off if he could just find the right building.

At last he stopped before a short, octagonal building on the first floor of a tower where he said in almost a gasp, “The Temple of Haniz.” He approached it slowly, carefully, his eyes ever vigilant for traps. He had no knowledge of any that should be on this building, but he wanted to be sure.

The Dark Agents kept their distance, watching what happened to the anthropologist before they dared to come near. They waited until he had opened the double doors, then walked down the few steps into the darkness before they approached.

Alpha 25 arrived first. His monocle adjusted to a more sensitive reading to make certain it could see Lancaster. The anthropologist was nearing the center with a device in his hand scanning the building, which was one large room. The floor dipped downward until it reached a

round center. Ramp aisles stretched down to the stage at the bottom from every entry. They were separated by floor space dotted with bumps which once served as floor seats facing the central stage. The walls, which Lancaster was currently facing his device toward, were textured in scaly designs with transparent beams rising up toward the ceiling next to every aisle. The foot falls upon the aisles clicked with a shallow resonance, as though they were made of a very solid plastic; something that should not have survived the elements over millions of years; but then again, few structures ever should have. The stubborn alloys manufactured by many of these alien races had made the Dark Agent practices of destroying them very difficult.

Lancaster slowly reached the center, having determined it was safe. There, he focused on a pedestal standing in the very center of the stage. It was empty, though there was clearly a space upon the top to place an object approximately a half a meter long, with latches to hold it in place. Lancaster pulled out the Idol of Haniz and observed that it was the perfect size. "Stand back," he said, his voice reverberating through the room. The Dark Agents gladly followed his order, all but Alpha 25, who stood his ground.

Lancaster studied the altar closely, considering, and making sure he saw no reason to suspect something he didn't want to happen. At last, he cautiously laid the idol down on top of the pedestal.

The inner workings of the idol began to glow immediately, and the latches on the altar grasped onto it. As soon as the two pieces connected with a satisfying click, the light grew brighter and the pedestal rose higher. A green-blue beam shot from the top and hit the highest most point of the ceiling. A loud roar emanated from there, causing the Dark Agents to back away; all except Alpha 25 who did not take his eyes off of the anthropologist. He would do what Lancaster did, and he would share in his fate.

The Dark Agents stopped when the roaring dropped through the beams to the doorways. The doors slammed shut, trapping them inside, and the rumbling continued past them, through the floors, down the aisles toward the center.

Their leader did not flinch. His eyes continued to remain on Lancaster, who heeded no one, not even the alpha. His eyes followed the sounds as they rushed through the room on every side, building toward the middle stage.

Then a pale emerald glow appeared in the beams starting at the top and following the paths of the roaring sounds to the floor, where the lights then lit up the paths in the floor toward the stage. These paths were transparent, and the sounds were revealed to be rushing water moving toward the center.

Both the light and the liquid filled the stage beneath Lancaster, swirling and bubbling as it settled. It filled into carved designs in the pedestal, providing it with neon artwork.

Alpha 25 couldn't help but take a look around at the wonder of it all. It was indeed impressive, but he forced himself to look back at the anthropologist, to see what he was doing now.

Lancaster had pulled out his notebook again and paged through to a passage. His lips moved quickly as he read silently to himself. Then he steadied himself as though about to give a sermon, and he began to shout in what sounded like satanic tongues. They were the words of the Milak Shivar, and when spoken with human lips, they sounded odd to say the least. A person's mouth and specifically their tongue were neither the right shape nor size to sound right. But after a couple attempts, Lancaster got the sounds correct enough to give the idol a command it followed.

The water below them swirled and changed shape. Some of it drained, and dirt rose up

into it to fill large portions. Alpha 25 stepped forward to take a look, and soon it became clear that a planetary map was forming. It was rough, but one could make out hills and ravines, and even several other terrain pieces by the basic shapes forming. Looking close, Alpha 25 could figure out where they were. There was even a ripple in the water at that very point.

He looked up at the anthropologist expecting him to be studying the same spot; but he wasn't. Lancaster was nearby looking at the ocean portion of the map. He could just see more ripples at his feet. "This is where we want to go," Lancaster said.

"That's in the ocean," Alpha 25 said.

"Yes," Lancaster responded. "They'll keep their greatest secrets where most other races won't want to go."

A few hours passed before they were on their way to the point where Lancaster was directing them. They had needed to have a submersible shuttle brought down to the planet. Most crews would not have a submersible craft with them; not even corporate armies or navies. One would typically have to be flown in from headquarters. But the Dark Agents were prepared to hunt down alien ruins wherever they might be; overland, under land inside a volcano, up in the clouds; anywhere.

Lancaster was banking on that, and he was not disappointed. Their submersible shuttle carried a dozen people comfortably... by Dark Agent standards. The lighting was predictably dim and the décor was gothic, but the cushions in the chairs were plush. Lancaster was placed in the front next to the pilot from where he could navigate with the sensors.

Little Jack didn't allow himself to get comfortable. They were deep within the fold of the enemy, and he was ever-vigilant. He did not allow them to take his guns, and threatened to take down as many of them as he could before he would be shot down.

Just one look at the craftsmanship of Little Jack's weapons convinced Alpha 25 not to test the small man. If these two wanted to pick a fight, they would already have done so from the safety of cover. And so he allowed them on board as they were, and let Lancaster guide them.

Ahead of them they could see only ocean while they skimmed twenty meters above it. The deep blue-green waves swirled chaotically. They blurred together on an infinite blanket that reached unbroken to the horizon.

But Lancaster was hardly noticing the scenery. He was watching the underwater sensors carefully for specific signs. Alpha 25 had his screen switched to the same visuals, but he had no idea what he was searching for. They had been out there close to an hour and Lancaster's expression had not changed from the hopeful, studious focus on his screen. It was a vast ocean, and the search could take a lot of time; but Alpha 25 wasn't sure Lancaster really knew what area to search. If he was planning to carpet the entire ocean, this would take years that would be better spent elsewhere.

The passing time seemed endless with the quiet tension in the shuttle. Lancaster barely noticed with his attention so focused on the search, but Alpha 25 began considering how long he would let this go on before calling it. They could not waste their fuel forever and there were other jobs to do, including dismantling the real city they had already witnessed.

Lancaster at last pulled his face away from the monitor, his eyes squinting with pain. He had been carefully studying every meter of ground that the sensors were picking up; freezing some images and pulling them up on the 3D analyzer. There was nothing that was certain enough to warrant a submersible landing; especially since this crew would probably give him one chance before leaving him behind in a watery grave. The readings themselves were unusual.

They seemed unfocused and rough. He wasn't sure he was even getting a proper reading of the ground.

Lancaster gave himself a few moments of time to look out the window to rest his eyes from the constant bombardment of a monitor. He knew he didn't have a lot of time, but he needed a short break...

Then something caught his eye on the water; something he would have missed watching the monitors. A circle of white foam gathered on the surface. It was at least 50 meters in diameter, and it was too perfectly round to be natural.

Lancaster went back to his sensors and investigated the anomaly. It was formed through a constant stream of bubbles rising from some source far down in the ocean. The sensors could not reach their source as they were being blocked by a thick cloud of mud and debris which were hiding the base of the ocean.

Lancaster again yanked his head out of the monitor, but this time it was so fast that a couple of the Dark Agents pulled their guns. "There!" Lancaster shouted, pointing at the disk of foam.

Alpha 25 calmly leaned up from his chair and looked, then sat back down. "That's not a city," he said.

"No, but it's a sign!"

Alpha 25 again leaned out of his chair and looked. "How is that a sign?"

"I don't register that's natural. If we follow that flow of bubbles down, I gather we'll find their lost city." Lancaster spoke with such conviction, even the gravest skeptic would at least consider his theory.

Alpha 25 was sold, and he nodded to the pilot, who drifted them down toward the ocean. The course was set, and a series of lines that led into the water appeared on the screen before them. The shuttle slowed as it came closer, dipping its nose toward the waves. "Affix yourselves!" Alpha 25 called to the rest of the agents, and they attached their harnesses around them.

Little Jack grabbed at one harness with one hand while trying to keep hold of a pistol in the other. It was hardly budging, so he switched hands with the gun and pulled at the other. It slightly moved, but it was clear he would need to use both hands at the same time, which he did not want to do.

"Mr. James," Alpha 25 said.

Lancaster peeled his eyes away from the screen to see everyone secured by large shoulder harnesses, save for his partner who was readjusting his weapons with one hand as he tugged at the restraints with the other. He was a couple rows back, but Lancaster knew he wouldn't let go of those weapons. So he stumbled back like a drunkard trying to keep his feet and pressed the harness down on Little Jack, who nodded in return and grasped both his pistols.

Lancaster hopped back into his own seat just as the ship was dipping down toward the ocean. Alpha 25 looked over at him curiously, indifferently wondering if the man would get himself secured, or crash into the front window on impact and break his neck.

Lancaster yanked the padded bars down over himself and locked them into place just before the ship sliced into the sea. Though it maintained a great deal of speed, there was a jolt that knocked the occupants into their harnesses. The shuttle now shook for a time as it readjusted to the thick water and currents. Several large clunks and wheezing noises made Lancaster nervous, but he saw none of the agents reacting, and not even Little Jack. He concluded that it must be the shuttle itself switching modes from ship to submarine.

At last the vessel settled, and they were traveling swiftly through green-blue tides that swirled like winds carrying schools of exotic fish and algae vertically and horizontally across their view. Some scurried away from the new intruder, others looked curiously on, and still others ignored it altogether.

The nebulous colors faded to darkness and the pilot flipped a switch, bringing up the lights which formed a dome of white in front of the ship. Lancaster found the column of creamy bubbles beside them and pointed it out to the pilot. The shuttle shifted course and began to spiral down the giant, flowing pole.

“You have a great deal of faith in your instincts, Lancaster James,” Alpha 25 said in a tone of voice Lancaster recognized as meaning more than it was saying. He was warning him that this better be correct. Lancaster merely nodded in reply.

They spun downward until the darkness overtook them. The lights reflected back at them, and they knew they were covered in a muddy cloud. This was the false bottom Lancaster had been scanning from above; but the depth sensors claimed there was still close to 400 meters left to go. The pilot looked at Alpha 25, and Alpha 25 looked at Lancaster. Lancaster turned impatiently back at them with questioning eyes wondering what the delay was, and Alpha 25 ordered the pilot onward. They thrust forward and were devoured into the swirling dark mist.

The pilot kept the rising mist of air bubbles to their right and he corkscrewed downward. Lancaster kept his eyes on the sensor screen willing it to change into the ruins for which he was searching. The sensors were predictably garbled by the murky water.

Then he saw it; the 3D rendering of an angled wall with a sharp edge either fallen off with time and elements or constructed that way. It was reaching for the sky, and curved toward them as though grasping for the shuttle. Lancaster marveled at this for only a moment before he realized it was not far off and getting closer. “Down!”

“What?” The pilot asked.

Little Jack knew immediately what Lancaster was saying and he recognized the urgency in his voice, so he shouted quickly, “Turn down now!”

The pilot looked at Alpha 25 for orders, and Lancaster, knowing there was no time, reached his hand over and pressed the steering column forward, lurching the whole ship down. It was just in time as a giant slab of coral appeared out of the blackness just then and sliced right above them. Lancaster leaned back over to his own chair, looking at the monitor. He saw more coral barriers rising out of the depths. They had just entered a labyrinth of broken building parts, but they could not yet see them out the front window.

“Duck to the right!” Lancaster shouted. The pilot hardly understood what Lancaster meant, but he saw Lancaster instinctively drop down as though dodging low and to the right, so he steered the ship the same way. A moment later a large, arching beam appeared above and to the left, and the pilot had avoided it just in time.

Lancaster now said something else, but his voice was so strained the pilot couldn't make it out. However, he looked over to see Lancaster raising up in his seat with his neck stretched. The pilot took that to mean something was coming up low beneath them. He pulled up, and, seeing out of the corner of his goggles that Lancaster was leaning to the left, he turned to the left. Lancaster's relieved sigh told him he was safe for the moment.

Everyone could see when they were nearing the bottom when a new cloud of mud and rocks flew up from beneath them and swirled around the shuttle. The whirl of landing gear sounded beneath them, and soon after, the ship shuddered as it settled onto the ground.

Lancaster couldn't be less interested. He was studying the monitor, getting as good a

reading of the surrounding area as he could. He knew they were in the cradle of underwater ruins, and he wanted to see as much as he could. Lancaster stretched the sensors as far as they would go, getting a reading on every piece of debris around the ship to paint a picture of their surroundings. All he could gather was that there were the remains of some buildings on one side of the ship, and the column of bubbles was emerging from a wide pedestal on the other side.

Alpha 25 ordered everyone into their atmosphere suits. The harnesses came off, and thick outfits with helmets lowered from the ceiling. Little Jack recognized them as gear to wear in any unbreathable environment, including space, underwater, gaseous, etc. The big problem he was aware of as everyone was dressing around him was that he was certain the suit above him would be too big. That, and he would have to put his guns down yet again while trying to get into one.

Lancaster energetically got into his, then removed his hat and fastened on his helmet. He looked over at Little Jack and saw he wasn't getting into his. Lancaster gave his usual confused expression, and Little Jack pointed at the size of the suit by pointing his pistol at it, thus providing both explanations in one.

Lancaster noticed the pilot wasn't getting into an environment suit either, and he asked, "Can my partner wait back here? I don't register you have a suit that fits him."

Alpha 25 glanced back in annoyance. He was again concerned that the little man could shoot the pilot and steal the ship. But if he did he'd be shot out of the air as soon as he emerged from the ocean, and he and his agents would simply order another one. Besides, they had Lancaster, so his partner wasn't likely to do anything. "He can stay," Alpha 25 said conclusively.

The explorers had to go out in teams of five as the airlock was only designed for three at a time, and only two extras could be squeezed in. It was just as well, as it gave the agents time to scout around the ship before bringing out their main force. They had no weapons that would work underwater, so they were helpless if a large, hungry animal was using the ruins as its nest.

Lancaster went in the last wave along with Alpha 25. His limbs were visibly shaking by the time he left the ship, so anxious was he to get out to see the ancient city. Waiting in the airlock, however, Lancaster's elation was dashed. Standing face to face with Alpha 25, almost pressed into the Dark Agent commander, he looked into his only uncovered eye. It was solid with determination, dead of passion. This man's task was to destroy the remains of this once proud civilization. And Lancaster was there to help him. His body went numb and lost all energy. Water filled the airlock, the pressure equalized, and the agents left the ship; Lancaster shuffling behind.

The flurry of upturned mud and debris from the ship landing had settled by this time, and there was a dim glow emanating from the shuttle submarine that faded rapidly as it reached the ruins. The light fell onto barnacle covered walls with seaweed clinging on against the tide's will as though for dear life. Shelters of crustaceans huddled in nooks, some hiding in the shadows beyond the influence of the ship's luminescence. Lancaster could make out the outline of the shadowed remains of once illustrious coral buildings; the empty eye sockets of their windows, the slack jaws of their doorways. They were like ghostly visages in this flowing undersea world.

Opposite the ruins sat a wide, round pedestal out of which the pillar of bubbles was flowing. The illumination from the shuttle barely reached the edge of this ever-flowing shaft, so Lancaster removed the light from his helmet, which ran on its own detachable battery power, and tossed it into the middle of the frothy pillar. The result was a translucent glow that shimmered in the effervescence. It caught the attention of all the Dark Agents, who gathered around Lancaster and gawked at his creation.

Alpha 25 was less impressed. He stepped up next to Lancaster and said, "I surm you won't have a light to explore the ruins."

"This is all we need," Lancaster said, gesturing to the giant bubble machine before them. "It's called the Pillar of Knowledge. It's the first time I've actually seen one in person."

"What does it do?"

Lancaster's eyes closed in annoyance. He felt like scolding the man by saying that if he spent more time learning about alien relics rather than destroying them, he just might comprehend their purposes. But Lancaster said nothing, realizing that he had little right to criticize others for what he was beginning to take part in doing. Instead, he set about learning what it did. Lancaster stuck a leg into the frothy white pillar, and stepped inside.

Alpha 25 watched Lancaster enter with a privately surprised fear. He did not want to go inside this thing, but he couldn't let Lancaster out of his sight. Still suspicious of his motivations, Alpha 25 needed to know what he was doing. So, after hesitating a moment and watching the anthropologist's shadow moving inside the white wall, the Dark Agent chief followed the anthropologist.

He was lost for a little while. The whole world turned into a frothy sea of bubbles. It was a warm sensation as the million tiny beads that came from deep in the planet hit him along every part of the base of his body, crawled up his sides, then leaped off the top to continue their long journey far above to the surface. Every direction he turned looked the same; it was disorienting, and frightful. Dark Agents were supposed to show no fear; they caused it. But at the heart of it, Alpha 25 was feeling what they all secretly felt, a terror of the unknown.

After stumbling around for what felt like eons, Alpha 25 found the shadow of Lancaster in the middle of the glowing pillar. He was standing perfectly still, his head bent over, as though contemplating something. "What are you doing, Lancaster James?" Alpha 25 asked.

Lancaster's head moved slightly, though not at the man asking him the question. He was looking at another part of the floor. He bent down, almost kneeling, and reached his hand at one of the spouts.

He had noticed immediately that there were distinct rings of spouts in the pedestal from which the bubbles were emerging. The largest ones were on the outside, and the smallest one was in the center. This seemed counterintuitive, and he realized there must be a reason. He had confirmed right away that this was not a natural phenomenon by the simple fact that the spouts were laid out in their circles so exactly, each of them the same distance from one another within their rings, and the same distance from the next ring inward. Now he needed to understand what they did.

He might have guessed that it was a decoration, but he had learned about the Pillar of Knowledge from other Milak Shivar ruins, and he knew that it was supposed to be a great source of information. But how the thing worked, he had no idea. He considered the possibility that each hole represented a letter in their alphabet, but there were too many holes for that.

He now cleared some debris away from one of the spouts, revealing a flatter, white surface beneath. It was just as the legends foretold. But none of the legends came with an instruction manual. He cleared away a bit more debris, and a lightly carved symbol in the stonework revealed itself. It was a Milak Shivar design, though it definitely wasn't a letter. Lancaster cleared away the debris from a few more spouts and found symbols carved right next to them. This was certainly a start.

Lancaster then stood and considered a hunch. He had learned to at least trust his instincts enough to give certain theories a try. Both Mika and Little Jack warned him against taking this

concept too far, but neither of them was here, so he felt he had no limitations. He purposely stepped on one of the holes close to the center. Thousands of hot bubbles lashed against his boot trying to escape, but he pressed his foot harder to seal them in. Nothing happened.

He stepped off the hole and onto another one. Again, the warm sensation pressed against his foot, and he had an urge to step off, but he kept it there despite the pressure on the sole of his boot.

The spout he had stepped on first spat out the bubbles that had been pressing against Lancaster, but then it stopped. Nothing emerged from it for a moment. Then, a single large bubble expanded out of the hole, blowing up like a balloon into a discernible shape. After it formed an entire Milak Shivar symbol, it rose slowly upward. Lancaster and Alpha 25 watched in amazement, both with differing levels of fear and joy. Lancaster was smiling from ear to ear behind his mask.

The large bubble stopped when it reached a height just above the two men's heads. It hovered there for a time, turning slightly, but in a controlled fashion, not at the whim of the ocean currents, but just enough for every part of the symbol to be revealed to any onlooker inside the pillar. It then popped into a hundred tiny bubbles which all raced up toward the ocean surface.

Lancaster heard the Dark Agent leader gasp with a, "Huh."

"Never vided anything like that, huh?" Lancaster asked.

"I have witnessed many things, Lancaster James," Alpha 25 said. "Been the only set of eyes to behold potent artifacts and majestic cities before we leveled them; but have never beheld such a wondrous device in operation."

"Let's try another one then," Lancaster said, his voice audibly escaping from a grin. He stepped on the same hole first, then leaped onto two others in succession. The first hole froze a moment, then slowly spat out another character, this one a little more complex than the last. After it popped, Lancaster tried again, this time starting from a different hole that was also near the center. He then jumped onto two more holes, making certain each footfall landed with sufficient time to have an effect before he stepped off of them.

This time two of the holes stopped spouting their streams of bubbles for a longer amount of time. Then they slowly began ejecting designs. Air bubbles about the size of men's arms filled out and took shape into several forms. They linked together, then rose up and connected with the bubbles from the opposite spout. Each of the two sources continued building with their bubbles until they formed all the pieces and they came together into one complete shape between them, approximately a meter wide. It looked like an animal of some sort; an insect whose features resembled a mosquito with delicate wings.

Alpha 25 was in awe of the detail. He twisted his head underneath, studying the perfect curves and lines. The design even had eyes, hundreds of them clumped together on its small face. He reached out to it, wanting to feel the rough ridges on its belly. Then it popped, the thousand tiny pieces racing skyward, and the Dark Agent leader watched them go.

"You want to try one?" Lancaster asked.

"Yes!" Alpha 25 responded with more excitement than he had intended.

"Wait for my signal."

"Wilco."

Lancaster stepped on one of the holes further out this time, and he carefully looked over the others. He chose a couple not far from Alpha 25 and told him to cover them with his feet on his signal. Alpha 25 obediently stood by them and waited for his cue.

Lancaster jumped onto one hole, then another, then a third, each one closer to the Dark Agent, then Lancaster made way and said, "Now!"

He hadn't needed to give a signal. Alpha 25 saw it was his time and he energetically leaped onto the two holes and held his footing firmly. All three holes Lancaster had jumped across froze, then spouted out pieces of a design, each piece of which connected and held in place awaiting more pieces. The entire process took a half a minute before each section connected into one full design.

The other Dark Agents began to gather at the edge of the fountain, mesmerized by what they were witnessing through the veil of flowing, silver beads. Lancaster called to them to stop, then warned them it would break the program. They did not heed him, and the agents stepped onto the first layer of spouts.

The design exploded and its pieces fluttered into the sky. Alpha 25 looked like a child whose balloon had just burst, and he turned on his soldiers with rage. "Do as the scientist says!" he shouted angrily, and the agents stepped back as though the sound wave of his voice had pushed them.

Lancaster was convinced that it was time to move on to learning what they could from this structure, so he said, "Let's ferret the pattern that we need."

"Sounds wise," Alpha 25 said, cooling himself down. Then he asked, "How do we start?"

It was a fair question; one Lancaster did not know how to answer. He knew the information should be inside the Pillar of Knowledge, and he had found it without considering the fact that he wasn't certain how to get information from it. He froze in place, contemplating the answer. Alpha 25 watched Lancaster with growing impatience as the anthropologist rocked slightly, the bubbles all around him shoving his body like their toy, first one way, then another. Then his head jerked up clearly with inspiration.

"Little Jack," he called.

"Yeah," Little Jack responded.

"I need you to get back up to the surface. Check the data transmissions at..."

"Whoa," said Alpha 25 stepping threateningly toward Lancaster. "You're not taking the shuttle anywhere..."

Little Jack interrupted, "Remember, we're someone's guest at the moment."

Unfazed, Lancaster turned to Alpha 25 and said energetically, "You have to let him check the transmissions. I register the code we need is among those signals."

Alpha 25 stared at Lancaster intimidatingly for a moment before responding. "We can set up the network to have the information pinged down here."

As Alpha 25 called up to the agents on the surface back near the camp, Lancaster was stricken with the realization that this was an organization, and that everything could be done more efficiently, though each step would be done without as much personal care. It was a reminder to him of what he was up against whenever he was working alone versus the resources of a corporation, or even a well-funded opposing expedition.

The agents on the surface tapped into the databank of Teo and Verick's system and sent the requested information down to the shuttle. This was the organization that had so badly frightened Little Jack and Carres with their hacking skills, so a task like this was simple.

"What am I looking for?" Little Jack asked.

"Images," Lancaster said. "Do they have monitors to what we're seeing in these suits?"

The pilot flipped a monitor to the camera on Lancaster's suit. "Of course they do," Little

Jack said. “Chances be they have one in your childhood home. Want to visit the monster under your bed?”

“Look for symbols that match these,” Lancaster said, and he knelt down to one of the spouts. His hand cleared away some debris to reveal one of the symbols. Then he moved to the next one and cleared away some debris, then the next, and the next. “Are you magging these?” Lancaster asked.

“We see them,” Little Jack responded. “But we don’t recognize any yet.”

Lancaster continued clearing away debris until they found one that matched Little Jack’s records. He then found another a little further along, then another. Little Jack then gave him the order in which the symbols appeared in the databanks, and Lancaster, looking over the layout in the fountain, nodded. He saw how they could be stepped on in order.

However, they were further away from one another than he had hoped. Worse, the symbols were clumped together in groups of two, three, and sometimes even four and five. Lancaster believed that meant they’d have to be stepped on together. As disheartening as this was, it also made sense. The Milak Shivar had long tails they often used as a third leg. They also often used their hands as additional legs or as fins underwater. They could cover up more spouts this way. They were also taller, making their strides and the distances they could cover beyond what Lancaster or any of the Dark Agents could do. “I’ll need your help again,” Lancaster told Alpha 25.

“What is it?” the Dark Agent commander asked.

“Little Jack, I need you to tell me the first series of symbols that are clumped together.”

“Delta 12,” Alpha 25 said annoyed.

“I’m on it,” the pilot responded, and the first clump of symbols appeared on the faceplates of their masks. There were three of them.

Again, Lancaster was impressed, and a little scared, by what these cultists could do. “Okay,” Lancaster said. “I’ll start with the first two.” He stepped over to where the pattern began and found two of the symbols. They were spread apart far enough that his legs would be widely split, but the third one was further behind him, so he left that for the Dark Agent commander who stepped up to the spout. “You ready?” Lancaster asked. Alpha 25 said he was, and they stepped on the three symbols together.

As before, they felt the bubbles trying to escape below their feet, but this time they stopped. At the same time, all the spouts in the fountain skipped a beat, creating a gap in the white column before the stream of bubbles resumed again.

“Okay, send us the next one,” Lancaster requested.

This one was easier. It was only two symbols clumped next to one another. “All right,” Lancaster said. “You step off and I’ll jump onto these.”

Alpha 25 removed his foot and stood between spouts. The point Lancaster needed to jump to was more than two meters away, a difficult leap, though he did have the benefit of being underwater. Plus, he just needed to avoid other spouts. He could land between them if necessary; he just had to do this quickly before it reset itself.

Lancaster bent his knees, then kicked off, flying as far as he could toward his destination. The toes of one foot stretched out and covered one of the spouts, but the other leg was going wild. He pressed his one foot tight against the ground and reeled in the other, locating the hole and shoving his floating foot down onto it. A few moments after it was solidly down, the pressure under his feet ceased, then all the bubbles stopped for a moment, then they resumed. They were acknowledging the entry.

“Okay, next one,” Lancaster said.

The next series had four symbols. Two of them weren't far; Lancaster could see where they were, but Alpha 25 had to go searching for a couple of them. Neither was close to one another by human standards, though a Milak Shivar would have had little trouble.

“You take the two near one another; I'll take the other two...” Lancaster started to say.

“I've got this,” Alpha 25 interrupted, and he stepped on one and lay down to reach the other. As he was doing this, Lancaster hurried to the other two and stepped on them. Once they were all covered, the pressure ceased, a break in the fountain followed, then they resumed a few seconds later.

There were two more patterns to do, and Little Jack chuckled over the next one. “This will be fun to watch.” He sent the symbol images; there were five of them, and Lancaster and Alpha 25 located their spots on the platform. They were all jumbled together near the center of the bubble fountain. It would be an elaborate game of Twister. Lancaster took in a deep breath.

Alpha 25 reacted differently, saying, “Forget this,” and he walked away.

Lancaster called after him, saying, “We'll get nowhere if we don't finish this!” But it was hopeless; the Dark Agent commander left the circle of the pillar. Luckily, he had not stepped on any of the spouts; that would have reset the pattern they had been working on, but without another person...

Lancaster tried anyway, standing over a couple of the spouts, looking down and trying to figure out which of his own limbs could go where, and perhaps he could use his helmet to block one...

Then Alpha 25 broke through the barrier again, and with him were two other agents. “Oh,” Lancaster exclaimed. “I hadn't thought of that.”

It was close quarters, but the four of them blocked the holes together. There was a break in the fountain, then it all resumed. The last one was only two symbols, so Lancaster had the agents stand back while he leaped onto the final two spouts.

The pressure diminished, then disappeared. This was followed by a deep rumbling below the ground that stopped as quickly as it started. After that, all the spouts turned off. But this time they did not resume. The pillar of foam rose slowly into the darkness above them like a curtain lifting.

All was silent. The platform on which they stood was empty and dead. Lancaster and Alpha 25 stepped toward the center as the other Dark Agents stepped toward the edge. Everyone was waiting for something to happen, but for a long while, nothing did.

Then a bright glow faded up from beneath. The holes in the ground each released a pale green beam pointing skyward that became brighter and more diffused as the light below the ground came closer. The Dark Agents on the edges stepped off the platform while Lancaster and Alpha 25 remained in the center, watching the show around them.

Effervescent blobs slowly emerged from the holes as though crawling out of the abyss. They formed perfect globes with pale green glowing centers. These rose slowly, waiting for their tiny cousins that were still molding out of the spouts.

Both Lancaster and Alpha 25 leaned in close to one of the larger spheres, studying their fascinating anatomies. The chemical inside appeared to spread from a core at the very center, from which the light also emitted.

The smaller balls, now released from their holes in the platform, scurried up to the larger ones and orbited them; their circling lights playing havoc with the soothing glow the larger ones had created.

Alpha 25 touched the large bubble he was studying. It was firmer than the smaller bubbles had been, even giving way as he squeezed it gently. But when he pressed too hard with his fingers, it exploded. The green gas emerged in every direction, some of it landing on the Dark Agent commander. He felt a burning sensation through his gloves, and some of it began to eat through like acid. The glowing core shot upward, released from its bonds, disappearing into the darkness above. Alpha 25 barely noticed, as he was making sure the acid on his environment suit did not seep through. It would be as dangerous as if it had happened in space. Luckily, the acid stopped just short of his finger. The smaller bubbles stumbled chaotically, having lost their host, and after a short time trying to find it, they gave up, dimmed, and tumbled upward into the darkness.

Lancaster did not notice what was happening with Alpha 25. He was focused entirely on the glowing globes; taking in their beauty while also trying to discern their meaning. The lights in the large spheres shone with enough brightness they lit up everything around them. The smaller ones had only dim glows inside that even seemed gratuitous. Most of their illumination came from the luminosity of their larger siblings around which they orbited.

All the globes were now hovering in place. No more bubbles were forming out of the ground, and none were rising. Some were hovering low to the ground, others were so high they were nearly out of sight.

Then, on some invisible and silent cue, they all went dark save for one. It hovered eight feet off the ground not far from Lancaster. He walked up beneath it, looking straight up into the bottom of the sphere. There, the perfect smoothness of the bubble was broken up by swirling stretch marks. Untrained eyes might disregard the blemish as residual from forming out of the hole. But Lancaster knew better. He hadn't seen any others with this shape, and this globe had reason for remaining lit while the others went dim. Besides, he recognized the swirling design. It was the Constellation Crest. He looked at the sole globule circling it, and noticed that it was unique as well. The bubble had ridges, texture; a rough surface that looked like one could hold it. But Lancaster knew better than to try. He just got as good a look of it as he could, and made sure the suit's camera was also recording everything.

Soon, all the rest of the globes turned on again, brighter than before. This time they were not a pale green, but a hot white. They built in intensity until everyone had to cover their eyes, then, all at once, they extinguished, and each one popped, turning into hundreds of tiny bubbles, and they raced into the darkness above.

Lancaster and Alpha 25 watched them leave with wonder at what they had just beheld. Before they could entirely catch their breaths, the platform turned on again, and the white mist of the pillar enveloped them on its way to reaching toward the surface of the ocean.

Lancaster James and Alpha 25 both found their ways to the edge of the pillar, emerging through the frothy veil, to the small crowd of black environmental suited agents awaiting them. Before anyone could speak, Alpha 25's head jolted at the sight of something behind the agents. "Scatter!" he ordered.

The agents who obeyed on command jumped out of the way. A couple faithless minions did not react in time, and they were swept up by a rapidly moving sea creature which wasn't even slowed by their bodies being swallowed into its mouth. Its body knocked anyone who was nearby aside and its tail swiveled the water chaotically, the shockwave of which knocked everyone back.

"Get in the ship!" Alpha 25 shouted, and everyone started making their way to the shuttle. In their heavy suits and in the ocean depths they skipped with every step, trying to cover

as much ground with each hop. It resembled children playing, but the faces under their masks were filled with terror.

The huge creature swooped in out of the darkness again, taking a pair of agents that were near one another before disappearing in the muck beyond. The Dark Agents were helpless to fight back; they had no weapons that fired underwater. All they could do was run into the airlock.

The pilot was revving up the engine, and once the airlock was filled, he shut the door. It wasn't even half the agents, but there wasn't room enough to get them all in at once. He drained the water from the airlock and matched the pressure as quickly as he could so he could open the inner door while the remaining agents banged at the outer hatch.

Lancaster was three quarters of the way to the shuttle, hopping as far as he could with every step. He saw the mud race forward from behind him, a sure sign that the water was pressing forward from that direction, and he knew it was the monster bearing down on him. He pressed his foot into the ground and pushed off to the left very suddenly. The beast shot by and crashed into the Dark Agents at the shuttle door, smashing one into the hull while devouring another. Their screams were deafening in Lancaster's ears.

The pilot was panicking now. He was about to open the inner door too early and Little Jack grabbed his hand and said calmly, "If you flood the whole compartment, we won't be able to take off." He gave it a moment, then flipped open the door himself. "Get them all inside!" he ordered, and the delta leaped from his seat and ran to the back, yanking each of the Dark Agents inside.

Just before the door was clear, Little Jack started closing them. The people still blocking the entry pulled in their limbs and the hatch sealed.

Alpha 25 was just outside now, shoving the limbs of the dead aside, and trying to regain order to his soldiers. "Get this door open!" he ordered. A moment later, it was, and the agents began climbing in before the hatch had come all the way down.

Lancaster, who had stumbled as he fell to the side, now got to his feet and skipped toward the shuttle again. By the time he got close, the door was closing. "Wait!" Lancaster shouted, but it fell on deaf ears.

Except for Little Jack's. But he also saw the sea beast emerging from the darkness again. Its only easy target was Lancaster, and it was bearing directly down on him. There was no time to override the airlock and let Lancaster in. Instead, he turned on the engine and took off...

...straight into the animal's side. It tumbled into the ground, its mouth wide open and snapping. Lancaster saw that he had just about been snatched up, and he could see that the beast would recover again before Little Jack could mount another charge. So he turned toward the ruins and skipped into them, diving inside with his last leap.

The sea creature did get up first and followed its prey into the broken walls. However, Lancaster had tossed his helmet light into the Pillar of Knowledge earlier, and he was a dark target now. He used this to his advantage, maneuvering around the backs of walls while the beast hunted on the other side.

Lancaster peeked up over one of the walls to see the shuttle struggling to regain composure. He heard Alpha 25 order the pilot to take off, and Little Jack's response was that the commander would be waiting in the airlock until his friend was back on board.

Realizing Little Jack was flying now, Lancaster hopped out from the ruins in front of the shuttle submarine waving his hands. It was a risk exposing himself to the monster, but he wanted Little Jack to find him soon, before the Dark Agents ganged up against him.

His partner saw him, and the shuttle hurried in his direction. The monster saw him, too, but it had to take some time maneuvering around the walls of the ruins to attack.

“Don’t land,” Lancaster said. “I’ll catch you on the pass!”

The shuttle slowed as it came near him, and Lancaster leaped into the air. Doing this deep underwater with the similarity to very low gravity was much easier than doing it on land. Everything went in slow motion, and Lancaster had some time to find the small opening in the air lock and get his fingers inside.

Suddenly, the ship rocked as the monster head-butted the bottom of it. Everyone inside was knocked from their seats. Those in the airlock tumbled around in the water as though in a washing machine. Lancaster flopped around like a rag doll outside, barely keeping his grip on the doorway.

The monster drifted off, momentarily dazed by its own attack. Little Jack opened the outer hatch and Lancaster crawled inside. He could sense the annoyance of Alpha 25 and the other Dark Agents behind their masks. “I’m in,” Lancaster said, and the hatch closed again.

He heard Little Jack respond, “Hang on.”

Lancaster responded, “That can’t be good,” and a split second later they were spinning in the airlock again, knocking against every wall with nothing with which to steady themselves.

Little Jack was dodging through the ruins. The creature had regained its composure, and Little Jack knew they could not outrun it in the open ocean, especially when going up. This was the beast’s territory.

But Little Jack could possibly outmaneuver it until he found a way to make a break for it. This meant twisting around walls and under high roofs and bridges of the submerged city. He realized it was a pity Lancaster was not seeing these ruins that they were racing through, because Little Jack could only consider what was valuable to him in their escape.

He remembered Lancaster saying something about the Milak Shivar having either very tall or very short buildings. So far he was seeing the remains of short ones; and perhaps that’s all that was left, but he kept his eyes peeled for the remains of a larger one.

The Dark Agent pilot managed to struggle his way to the cockpit where he confronted Little Jack.

“Can you do this?” Little Jack asked, gesturing toward the front. The pilot looked out at the dizzying underwater scenery racing by and all the near misses. All he could do was hold on, keep from throwing up, and shake his head no.

“Then harness yourself until I get us out of here,” Little Jack concluded, sweeping across an ancient intersection as the monster swept down the opposite road, its jaws barely missing. Delta 12 did as Little Jack ordered.

Then Little Jack located what he was hoping to find: the remains of a tall building. Its roof was leaning one side on the ground, the other on its wall like a drunken man dangling off his friend. Though the building had once been giant, it had clearly fallen apart, and was only partially up due to some fragile elements.

Little Jack got in front of the creature again. He turned on all the shuttle’s lights to their brightest and revved the engine, as though teasing it. Delta 12 looked over at Little Jack in alarm. Little Jack let loose a slight smile, and just as the beast started at them, he pressed forward at top speed. The monster was gaining, and Little Jack was heading straight for a wall. It appeared as though Little Jack was committing suicide. Delta 12 was visibly squirming in his seat, and he started to say something, but Little Jack shut him down by shouting, “Quiet in the cockpit!”

Little Jack was focusing heavily on his task, though one could hardly tell looking at him. Behind his frosted over glasses, he appeared as calm as if he was taking a stroll.

The beast was right behind him, ready to knock into the shuttle and send it spiraling into rocky ruins where it could be cracked open and the tasty insides enjoyed.

Little Jack ducked the shuttle under the ceiling piece that was leaning over, then pulled up, knocking lightly against the fragile wall. It crumbled, lightly at first, but then more and more of it shook loose. As the beast ducked under the ceiling and raced forward, it displaced water and spread out its powerful wake in every direction. This shook the wall some more, and was its last straw. Under all its pressure, the remaining structure of the tall building, which had stood for tens of millions of years, collapsed. With it, the large ceiling also came down. It had been perfectly timed, the beast was directly under it when the supporting wall was taken out, but everything moved slowly this deep under water. Little Jack watched helplessly as the huge roof went down in slow motion, and the beast's head avoided being crushed.

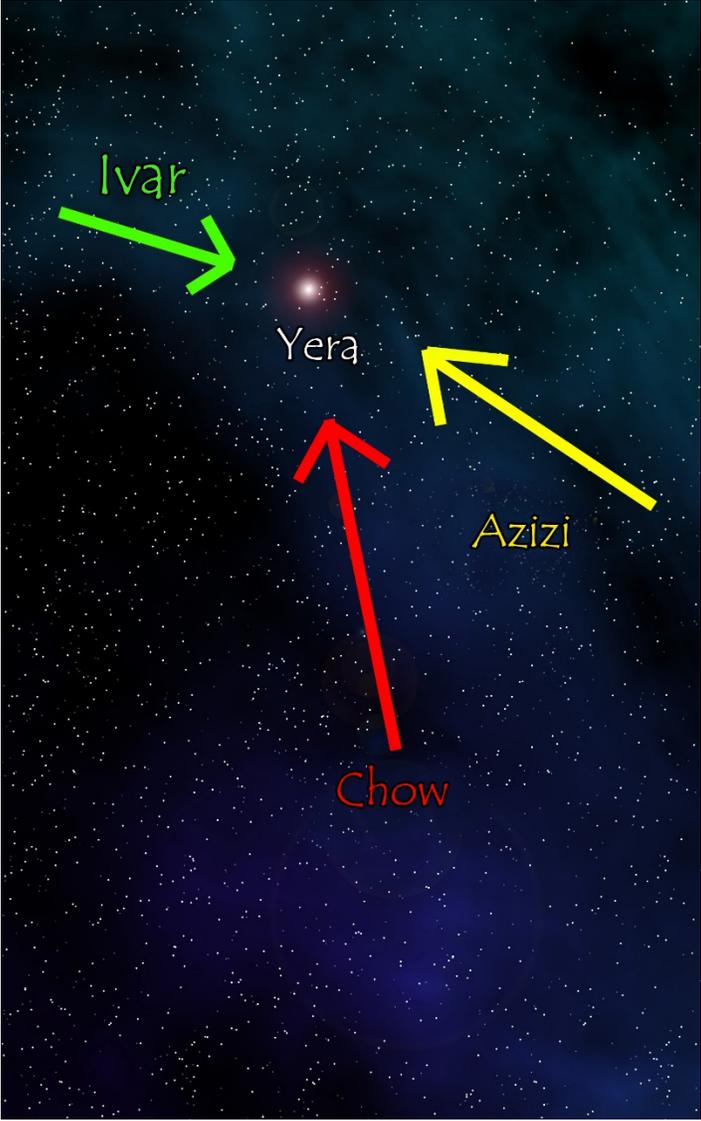
But it had a long body, and just before its rear cleared the building, the ceiling finally collapsed on its tail, pinching it just enough to stall it. The animal tugged at its body, trying to continue the pursuit, but it was stuck, and it had to stop to turn around, grab onto another building, and pull with enough leverage to get free.

In that amount of time, the shuttle was able to point itself skyward and make a break for the stars.

As they emerged from the ocean, Lancaster glanced out the window to see the majestic towers of the Milak Shivar. He marveled at their winding metalwork, the strength of their architecture, and the ambition of constructing into the clouds. The sun glinted off the silver metal, skipping from one beam to the next, highlighting the perfection of these ancient structures.

Then one explosion was followed by another, then another. They echoed in each of the spires, which bowed over like weeping giants. The mighty beams curled in on themselves, and mouths of smoke rose from the ground, devouring them. The sound of the blasts reached the ship a few moments later followed by the moaning of the metal grinding as the towers fell. They sounded like deep voices crying one last time before being laid to rest forever. More bright flashes from within the smoke denoted further detonations and the superstructures crashing to the ground.

The Dark Agents' work fulfilled.



# CHAPTER NINE

## ***EXPLOITING WEAKNESSES***

Ceriliseta's three enemies were crowding in on all sides. She had the strength and resources to take on two of them and perhaps even take advantage of the situation and conquer their territories. But the invasions left her forces too thin, or with some front uncovered. Added to the difficulties was the fact that space strategy was very different from land strategy. Space had three dimensions from which to work, and there was no shortage of stars. No matter how much someone guards one star system, enemy ships can always slip by the next star one over, above, or below. And even if every system was guarded thoroughly, warships could always hurry through the gap between stars. As such, tactics in the stars are in constant motion.

Used to life on a planet's surface, Ceriliseta had seen the lines along their borders as solid, and had ordered her navies to hold their positions as though along a connected trench line. When enemy fleets appeared beyond the borders, it took her by surprise, and she was frustrated that these holes kept appearing like sprung leaks.

Her officers tried to educate her in the ways of naval warfare, but every time they did, she detected their haughty arrogance. Whether it was paranoia or a valid observation, Ceriliseta had been in meetings between these officers and her father, and she had seen the way they spoke with him. None had ever shown such disrespect to him. So she rarely took their council and spat out orders without regard to their opinions or their safety. A few of her best admirals were killed in action, and Ceriliseta was only interested in the number of ships that were lost in these actions.

She could not ignore the reality, however, that if this kept up, her enemies would soon have all their territories and they would make it to the home world of Navarus, their headquarters world named after Ceriliseta's family. The three corporate barons that had turned against them, Cordova, Chow, and Azizi had all moved simultaneously. They had used their surprise attacks to go after many of the most important Navarus manufacturing plants. Though several had been reconquered, the damage done would take too long to repair before the swiftly moving fleets won their war.

Ceriliseta had not been surprised by Ivar Cordova. He had always been a serpent hiding behind a smile. He only needed to believe someone was weak to try to take advantage of them. He had probably worked over AbdallaAzizi with his charm, thus winning over the Parabur Corporate Barony that Azizi had inherited. But Gideon Chow had legitimately surprised Ceriliseta. He had been an ally of her father's, and though she had overthrown her father, Chow seemed satisfied with the change, at least from a political point of view. At any rate, the Empress had trouble seeing Chow ally with anyone considering how paranoid he was of everyone and everything. She had tried to open diplomatic channels directly with the corporate baron, but none of his people had responded.

She had, however, expected the Godard Barony, whom she had returned her mother to in disgrace, to join her enemies. Much to her surprise, they stayed put and did not take advantage of several opportunities that were opened to them. On the map, it appeared that Cordova had also been expecting the Godards to move as he left the systems closer to their barony alone. But

to everyone's surprise, the former Navarus ally remained neutral.

The thought had occurred to Ceriliseta that she could go to her father and offer him a seat on the Board of Directors if he'd help turn the war around. He was respected as a great strategist and very pragmatic at diplomatic relations, turning one enemy against another. But her pride said no, and he would most likely refuse anyway. They would both be so concerned about the other betraying them that nothing would actually get done. She was all alone on this.

It was in the midst of this turmoil that Nikos was admitted to the royal chambers to speak with her Highness. She was in a hurry, so she asked him to brief her on the situation of his mission quickly. "I need to reach one of your worlds, Your Highness. Remo of Zenobia."

"We have lost that to the forces of the Parabur Barony," Ceriliseta responded.

"I realize that. This is why I've come to you to ask for a commando team that can insert us onto the planet's surface..."

"You still have your last team to answer for, Nikos Kazakis." Ceriliseta was raising her voice with impatience. "They are more sorely needed now than ever, and you have lost them to a mysterious faction."

Nikos noticed that several of the guards' hands were slowly drifting closer to their weapons. Jude, who stood with Nikos and was sharing in his fate, noticed this, too. Her own weapons having been confiscated, she looked onto the guards that were readying themselves. "The other army ambushed us, milady," Nikos explained. "Your soldiers were as surprised as I. And I only survived by their bravery and insistence that I retreat to report what passed. But their sacrifice does not need to be in vain. I have tracked the troublemakers you seek to Remo, a world that was within your empire..."

"And will be again," Ceriliseta said with robotic certainty.

"But by that time they might be gone. If I can strass there with a commando team, we can bring justice to them together."

"They are now the problem of AbdallaAzizi. I have far more pressing matters than to chase criminals. Your employment with us is hereby terminated, Mr. Kazakis."

The baroness had dismissed them with her voice, and the guards were beginning to step forward, but Nikos was not done. On top of the fact that the guards may take them out and execute them without warning, this was an opportunity that everyone would miss out on if he did not act. Rather than leaving, he blurted, "One squad is *nothing* in comparison to the opportunities you are passing by if you would only open your eyes! Why can't you vis that, you foolish little girl!"

Ceriliseta's eyes grew large and it appeared as though she had only not spoken because of the shock of his impudence.

Nikos took advantage of the initiative and began striding fearlessly toward her. All ten guards in the room lifted their weapons and fired. Jude was too surprised by this sudden turn of events to do anything.

Every shot came to within a foot of Nikos and dissipated. With each strike, the guards could see the residual energy of a personal shield around Nikos. He did not slow his pace, and he was marching directly up the steps toward the throne in which Ceriliseta was squirming. She was wishing her right-hand man Bela was there, but she had not considered this meeting important enough to recall him from coordinating fleets. Nikos and his partner had been thoroughly checked for weapons and disarmed. No known weapon could have gotten past that.

One guard called for reinforcements while another pulled a hand cannon from his back that was intended for armored probes that had managed to make it into the palace. As he aimed

it on Nikos, he saw the man press a button on his belt. It was the last thing the soldier saw as the ordinance exploded inside his weapon, blowing the man into a million tiny red pieces.

Horror covered Ceriliseta's wide, blue eyes. She felt tears in them, a sensation she had not had since she was a baby. Was this death?

Nikos came to within a meter of her. There was not an ounce of fear in his eyes; and in fact, they helped calm Ceriliseta. "I ought to spank you," Nikos said. "Clearly the nannies who raised you did not do that enough."

A new squad of guards burst into the room. The surviving guards now had their weapons on Jude since she would evidently be the easier target. Ceriliseta raised a hand for everyone to stay where they were. If Nikos wanted to do something to her, he'd already be doing it.

Nikos removed from his belt the round, metallic device that had the button he had pressed to ignite the ammunition in the guard's weapon. He placed it gently onto the armrest of Ceriliseta's throne. "This was built from parts found at the weapons factory we went to. Where your guards died bravely. Consider it the first of many gifts," he said. "Your father saved their value, but he was not visionary enough to utilize them. And there are thousands, tens of thousands of these relics with powers you can't even image. With them, you'll not just defend yourself... You'll conquer. You'll thrive. You will be unstoppable."

Ceriliseta was now sitting up, shifting the device in her hand to study every side. She then looked at Nikos with her piercing, determined eyes and asked, "What is at Remo of Zenobia?"

"The master key to all of it," Nikos said. "A map known as the Constellation Crest. It will lead you to the most powerful alien artifacts in the universe. You can forget all research into technological advancements of your own. This will leap you thousands of years into the future."

Ceriliseta stared at the device again and asked, "And all you want is a commando squad?"

"Now it's a full platoon. With missile boat support," he answered.

Her eyes shot at him. They did not speak contempt; but rather respect. He was speaking her language. "You shall have an army," she said.

\* \* \*

It was the first time Ceriliseta had walked the long, sterile corridor of the maximum security prison inside the deep bowels of the Home Office Tower. Her father's cell was quite a distance from the lift, and she passed many empty cells along the way. This had been her doing. Not wanting to deal with the issue of the most dangerous dissidents, Ceriliseta had simply had many of them executed. She had thought little of it at the time, and did not second guess her decision even now. They had no future, and were unlikely to ever see the outdoors again. There was no point in keeping them alive. However, seeing the long line of empty cells and knowing it was because of her gave Ceriliseta chills she did her best to hide from her personal guard and Bela, who would now escort her everywhere after her encounter with Nikos Kazakis.

They crossed through the last of many security doors and approached Galek's cell. She stood back while Bela and her body guards punched in the code and opened the door.

Galek saw only the first couple employees and Bela. He sat on the edge of his bunk and awaited whatever they had come to tell him. But when they gave the clear sign and his daughter marched through the doorway, Galek rose to his feet. His initial shock was soon replaced with a realization that this was a sign of his doom. She was coming to see him before his execution.

He sighed with resignation, realizing this was bound to happen sometime soon.

“D4K9U,” Ceriliseta blurted accusingly.

Galek was taken aback. The first words he heard from his daughter in more than a year, and it was a series of numbers and letters. Had everyone started speaking some strange language he was unaware of, he wondered.

“What does that numeric designation mean to you?” she asked bluntly.

“W... What are you talking about?” he asked, baffled.

“That was an alpha-numeric designation you gave to one of your relics,” she snapped coldly. “I want to know what it does, and how to make it operate.”

Galek rolled his eyes. A moment before he had assumed he was about to be killed. Now he was being quizzed by the woman who had put him there in the first place about items she never cared a thing about. And he was somehow supposed to remember the designation; all of this while she was offering no deal, nor any incentive to help. He eyed them silently with suspicion; this couldn't be all that Ceriliseta was planning.

“I now comprehend their power,” Ceriliseta said. “But they're useless when they're locked away. To use all the resources you did to find them only to retro them in a secured chamber is a waste. I will make all that expenditure profitable.”

Galek stared at his daughter through stony eyes waiting for her to say something that was not self-serving. She never was good at negotiating.

Ceriliseta paused only briefly before continuing, “Bela and I had to search with a team of researchers for several hours before we located anything in your stockpile that viewed even spotly useful. And even this is only half a machine. You should have done a better job of categorizing everything. That's another improvement we'll be making.”

She paused again to the dead silence. Bela shifted uncomfortably. She was accomplishing nothing except exercising her anger; and he could do nothing but watch her release her frustrations on her father.

Ceriliseta signaled to one of her servants who stepped forward and held up a hand platform. A decorative ship part appeared floating over the flat surface. Exotic markings covered the piece's sides. “We finally turfed this. I ran it by our R&D department and aprended that it was most definitely a ship part. It harnesses the power of wormholes. However, it doesn't work. It would take years for our developers to figure out how to make it work, and we don't have that much time. We think there are missing pieces, but we don't know how to find them. We want you to show us where they are at, or how to make this operate.”

Galek continued to stare at his daughter in silence. He didn't appear to be listening to her. His eyes and silence were beginning to unnerve Ceriliseta, and she didn't look directly at his face. She took a step backward toward the door, ready to leave rather than buckle to him emotionally. She said, “We are willing to assign you to a position as an employee in research and development with a focus on your t...” she almost said toys, the patronizing term she had used to describe his relics in the past when trying to convince him they were not worth his time. She altered her tone and said, “You can work full time with these artifacts to help us aprend what they do.” Ceriliseta now pushed her eyes directly toward her father and bore a plastic grin as sincerely as she could.

Galek had indeed been thinking back to when Ceriliseta was a child, trying to figure out where he and her mother had gone wrong; realizing a few key moments when he could have made better decisions with her. But he was also listening. It had been a talent of his when he was in charge of the barony; to listen to one person while considering other actions. It was the

reason Cerilisetra thought he was distracted. She didn't understand that when she saw him giving orders to locate ancient alien artifacts or doing research on them, he was also working on three other issues in his mind that would get resolved soon after. She didn't realize that sometimes putting his mind on these relics actually helped him resolve other problems rather than distracted him from them.

He had now determined his response, but he gave her a few more moments of uncertainty before speaking. When he did, he spoke in their Navarus family language, a mixture between the ancient Earth languages of Spanish, German, and a few others along with some family slang that came from the regions in which their ancestors had lived. *"I remember when I spoke with the professor that had the other piece to that artifact. I offered him more electros than he had ever seen in his life. He wanted to visit with me personally first. I obliged him, and he asked about my interest. I told him that I was holding the other piece to it, and together, this artifact, the... Nam Fareway I believe he called it, could be very powerful. Separately, they were mere collectibles, but together, as you have discovered..."* He paused, looking at his daughter, realizing he had inadvertently stumbled upon the tragedy of their lives. He had underestimated her strength. Together, they could have built the Navarus Barony into the most powerful corporate barony in the galaxy. But he had taken her for granted and she had greedily stolen his throne.

Then Galek continued, *"They were mighty. After explaining my logic, the man refused the offer. I offered more. He refused again. I offered an emperor's treasure; property, companies, a moon even. A populated moon that would be his. The only thing I didn't do was ask him why. He at last told me anyway. He said that he saw in me a good man. I didn't see what that had to do with anything, but he continued to explain that he believed that I was correct in my belief that the Nam Fareway was indeed powerful. Too powerful. That when something that powerful came together, it would by nature corrupt the person who owns it. He claimed that no matter how good of a person the owner is, their soul would not survive the damage that such a powerful item would do. I had no idea what he was talking about and we never spoke again. But now I understand what he was saying."* He looked Cerilisetra straight in the face. *"I could not see it in myself, but I can see what that power is doing to you. My Tesoro."*

The last was his pet name for Cerilisetra; the name he had called her so many times as a child. It meant treasure. This got the cynical woman's attention, and she scoffed at it. "Where is that man now?" she demanded.

It was as if the tone of voice itself had a shockwave powerful enough to push Galek away from her. He stepped to his bunk and sat down.

Cerilisetra barked at him, "If you wish to be employed and out of this cell, you must tell me who the professor is and where we can find him."

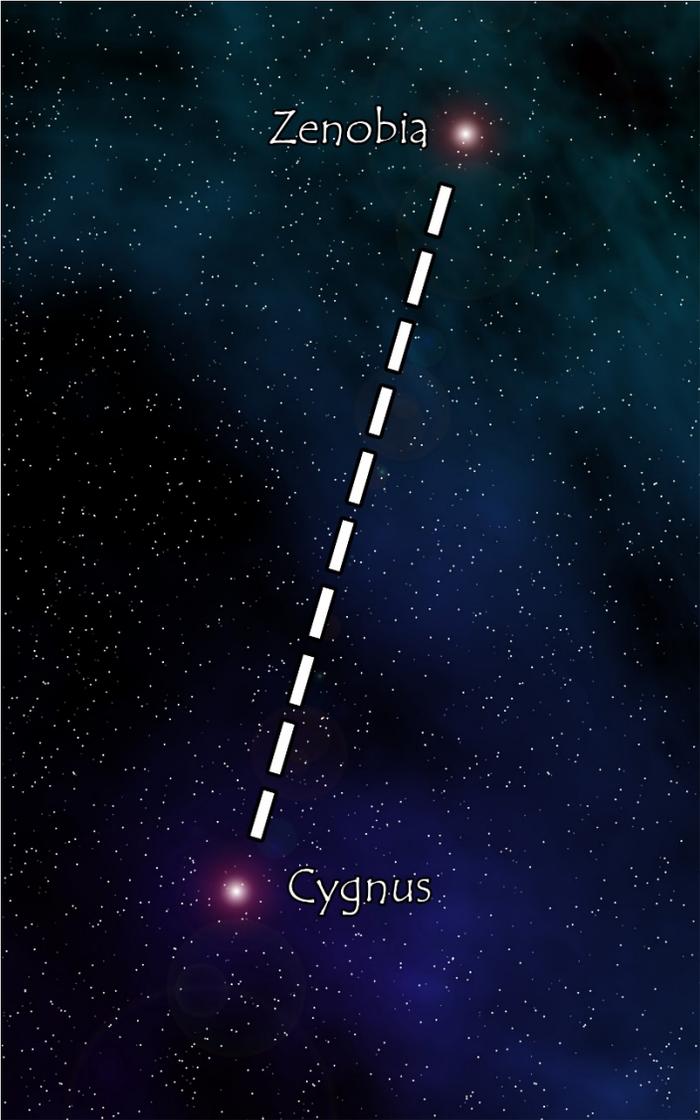
Galek said nothing. He made himself comfortable in his bunk and resigned himself to his cell.

Her face flushed red behind her layers of colored makeup, Cerilisetra stormed out of the cell and returned down the corridor. Bela followed quickly after, and the orderlies secured the cell behind them.

As soon as Bela had caught up with Cerilisetra, she ordered, "Have a team scour through my father's messages. Find the professor he was speaking of and go to him personally to extract the item. Then take both pieces directly to R&D."

"Yes, ma'am," Bela replied, his usual bland expression across his face as though he had heard nothing; even though he had just been facing his former master in the presence of his

present one; even though he had understood everything that was said in the Navarus language and understood what the professor had meant; even though he no longer saw things as plainly as he had before when he betrayed one master for the other.



# CHAPTER TEN

## *THE CONSTELLATION CREST*

Soon after leaving Cygnus A-1, Lancaster got to work searching for the world displayed in the Milak Shivar air bubble map. He uploaded the footage from his environment suit's camera into the computer where he had Verick's star map information. Alpha 25 had wanted him to do it in their computer, but Lancaster had insisted they use the computer in Little Jack's ship, which the Dark Agents had in their shuttle bay. He and Little Jack had set up the programming to more easily compare patterns so multiple sources of information could locate what they were searching for. This was all the more necessary because of Lancaster's vantage point below the bubbles and the shakiness that resulted in the camera being on his head.

Despite these and other difficulties, the navigation computer inside Odin's Revenge was able to calculate which star from Verick's maps was being displayed in the air bubble map. It was Zenobia. Analyzing the data on the system, it was pretty clear that the planet Remo was the world for which they were searching. It was the only one in the system with a breathable atmosphere, and although some species could live in climates different from humans, the only other worlds were much too far away from the habitable zone of the Siguerans, the civilization that possessed the Constellation Crest.

The problem now would be getting to that world. A large scale war had broken out in that part of the known galaxy between four corporate baronies. Their borders were constantly shifting, and what was one barony's world one day was the other barony's world the next. A traveler could get caught in the crossfire, or be on a planet when it switched hands and be declared an enemy. The best course of action would be to use the Dark Agents' incredible skill at subterfuge and sneak onto the world to get it, then get out without any corporation being the wiser.

Even once they got to the planet, they needed an exact location. Alpha 25 suggested the South Pole since the symbol had appeared on the bottom of the bubble. Lancaster was less optimistic about that being a sign. "They would have been magging the symbol like we were, from below," Lancaster said. "So it's better chances to be just a demarcation of what planet it's on."

Having Lancaster's thoughts interrupted by a Dark Agent actually worked in their favor. It reminded Little Jack of the resources they had that he and Lancaster weren't used to having. "I'll bet my plastic you have some of the best monitoring equipment in the galaxy," Little Jack said.

Alpha 25 grinned with pride out of one side of his mouth. "We do."

"Whenever a corporation takes over a world, they do an inventory. The Parabur Barony just recently took Remo. The company that's consolidating the gains will report to the corporation, and they will send a full report to Parabur headquarters. We need to get ourselves between those two turfs to intercept their transmission. We'll then know where this Crest thing is."

Alpha 25 wasted no time. He turned Little Jack's suggestion into orders and had the ship

moving to a point between the Parabur main office and Remo. Little Jack monitored their progress from his cockpit. He saw several points where he would hide; an asteroid belt, a hazy nebula... but the Dark Agent vessel used none of them. Instead it flew out into the open. It did not come within visual range of the planet, and was, in fact, at the edge of the system. But the ship was equipped with such powerful scanning jammers that it confidently sat in the open without fear of detection. Little Jack nonetheless privately searched for a way to launch off this ship and get away if needed.

They had to wait a little over a day, but true to form, the Daphne Corporation sent an inventory report to the Parabur corporate empire's main office. They did not know the name of the Constellation Crest, so Dark Agent operatives had to scour through the information to find the description. It was Lancaster, looking over someone's shoulder, who found it. He had been searching for this specific artifact for years, and he knew everything there was to know.

The Constellation Crest had been overlooked for the first couple hours by the Dark Agents because it was not listed among the items. Instead, it was listed with the storage spaces along with shelves, safes, and crates. The Constellation Crest, this all powerful secret in the galaxy that could open up knowledge of millions of years of ancient species, was being used as a table in a storage locker. It had been noted as a shelf of interest because of the precious metals in it, and the company was suggesting melting it down for its resources.

Lancaster at first nearly panicked at the news. Then he remembered that they were there to do the same sort of thing. It was better that it be destroyed than be used to locate the sorts of weapons the Siguerans developed to wipe out entire civilizations.

And Nikos might be there now trying to take it for that very reason. Lancaster had worried that he might have absconded with it already until he saw the inventory report. But that could change if that greedy looter got there before they could. He told Alpha 25 they needed to move, and the Dark Agent efficiency was set in motion. Every department on the bridge ran sweeps for space ship activity going in and out of the system, and ground agents were ordered to their landing craft.

One of the bridge attendants warned her captain of a reason to be quick. Baron AbdallaAzizi was on his way to the planet and he would have a large escort of barony soldiers with him. Alpha 25 told his squads that their mission was to get out of there before the baron arrived.

The need for stealth posed a problem for Little Jack. He did not want to leave Odin's Revenge on the Dark Agent ship, but he couldn't take it on this mission. It did not have the stealth capabilities that the Dark Agents had, and would give away everyone's position if he tried to land with them. Lancaster solved the problem for him. "I'm going to be surrounded by these commandoes," Lancaster said. "I don't think you're needed on this one."

"None of those commandoes are likely to be your back eyes," Little Jack warned.

"No," Lancaster agreed. Then he moved in closer to Little Jack and lowered his voice. "But what's more likely than us getting attacked is them turning on me or leaving my shaft behind. I may need you to come hypo me out of there."

Little Jack saw the logic in that and nodded. He took one more look at his partner... just in case; then slipped into his own ship discretely.

Alpha 25 didn't notice Little Jack's absence until they were on one of the shuttles readying for departure. Normally, an important detail like this didn't pass him by, but he had been in a hurry and he had assumed both of their guests would want to come; so when he saw Lancaster he assumed his partner was with him. "Why isn't he here?" Alpha 25 asked

incredulously.

“Doing some ship repairs,” Lancaster explained. “We don’t want to take up any more of your time when we return.”

Alpha 25 gave no response. He did not like leaving an element behind like this, especially when his own clumsiness led to the mistake. But the Aphod had a large crew and there were few places to move unnoticed. So he didn’t fear what the small man could do on board. Besides, he once again had his partner and could use him as collateral if anything went wrong.

Additionally, Alpha 25 had to stifle any reaction to Lancaster’s statement that they’d leave upon his return. Neither of them would be going anywhere. They had seen far too much; not only over the past few days, but over their lifetimes. They could not be allowed to spread the disease of alien knowledge. It was the Dark Agents’ duty to dispose of them.

But first, there was the mission. The three shuttles shot at the planet like missiles. No surrounding vessels were reacting to them, as though they were ghosts. Their thin frames sliced into the atmospheres and were each enveloped in their own re-entry flames as they raced toward the ground and across the sky of Remo. The long flames and the resulting smoke tails were soon dispensed with, and they were gliding quietly toward their destination. Lancaster could now see how they had been able to sneak up on the corporate army. Their stealth technology was second to none. The only thing he couldn’t understand was how such an underground cult could develop such extraordinary technologies.

Their stealth systems were also aided by the fact that it was night time on the side of the planet where they were landing, making visuals on their black ships more difficult. It also helped that the Parabur soldiers were watching for an entire army, not a small band of commandoes in a handful of ships. All of these factors contributed to the Dark Agent shuttles making it safely to a landing zone only a kilometer away from the outer buildings. They had detected several soldiers nearby, but in monitoring their behaviors, it seemed none of them had noticed the landing crafts, and were continuing about their business.

Alpha 25 ordered everyone to their feet, and with snapping discipline, they all rose in unison. As soon as the door was down in the back, Alpha 25 silently pointed the way, and they all hurried out, guns drawn, ducking behind cover as they went and joining the teams from the other two shuttles. Alpha 25 looked over at Lancaster expectantly, and Lancaster followed everyone out, keeping his head low and finding cover himself.

There was little need for such clandestine motions at first; no one was nearby to see them or they would have heard the shuttles landing. But it did not take them long to weave through the sparse plant life and rocks and close the distance to the nearest buildings. They were about 300 yards from it when they all stopped in unison.

Lancaster hunkered down and watched. They were reacting to some sort of communication, but no one was speaking. Lancaster deduced that their goggles probably served as a silent communication system in addition to being a HUD display and providing enhanced vision. Not having a pair of the goggles himself, Lancaster was forced to just follow along and stop when they did. All he had was his replacement hat which he had taken from his hat rack closet on Odin’s Revenge.

They had almost made it to the back of the first building when Alpha 25 placed his hand on Lancaster and pressed him downward. They were close to something, he could tell in Alpha 25’s expression. Though Lancaster was used to performing daring missions with Little Jack, this was far more unsettling, having to rely on a group of people he still feared more than trusted.

The agents had stalled because of some soldiers who were spotted loitering in the street between the outer buildings and the one the Dark Agents were trying to reach. It was hard to tell whether the soldiers were on patrol or just wandering. They bore corporate army insignias, specifically that of Lankril Corp, a division of the Parabur Barony. But they looked as undisciplined as a street gang, chatting with each other, no one on the lookout, and moving erratically. They evidently didn't expect to run across anyone here.

Despite how simple the soldiers were making it to overcome them, Alpha 25 was not going to take any chances. It would be too easy to alert the entire town to their presence, so there was no room for error. He pulled out an octagonal, handheld device and clicked it on with his thumb. He then slid it across the street and waited. The agents around him prepared to pounce.

Across the street, not far from the octagonal device, Alpha 25 appeared; or rather, a copy of him. The real one was still waiting to spring an ambush along with his minions. The new version of him was walking away from the device. Obviously, it's a hologram, Lancaster thought, but he was amazed by how far away from its projector the façade was able to go.

It was wandering for a while as the corporate soldiers were so incompetent they didn't notice it for nearly a minute. By then, the projection had gone to the building and was leaning up against it. The soldiers took no chances. They were clearly shaken up and fearful. Their guns were drawn and any of them might fire on accident. One of them approached the hologram with its binders ready. Another stepped up to grab the projection. Lancaster was expecting the Dark Agents to spring before the soldiers touched it because once they did, they would learn it was a counterfeit.

But the Dark Agents did not spring yet, and the soldiers did not learn it was a hologram; not because of their incompetence, but because it was solid when they touched it. The image was not a hologram, but had a real shape and texture like a living person. Lancaster's jaw dropped. He had never seen any kind of projection system like it. This cult was far more powerful than he had imagined.

Once the soldiers were fully involved with taking down the fake Alpha 25, the Dark Agents moved in. They quietly got around the soldiers, their guns drawn at their backs. They were all in place by the time one of the soldiers noticed one of the agents. Another tried to pull up his gun and fire, but was shot down by one of the agents' blasts. It was quieter than most pistols, but still had enough of a crack to it to send an echo down the streets. They didn't have much time, so they hurried their prisoners around the corner where they disarmed them and two agents remained to stand guard.

Lancaster lagged behind, leaning down and taking a look at the projection device. Alpha 25 was in such a rush making sure the soldiers were kept quiet and under control that he didn't notice that he had left it behind. After taking a brief look over the small machine, Lancaster determined that it required further study, so he pocketed it and joined the others.

Alpha 25 was now onto the next matter at hand, getting everyone into the building with the Constellation Crest. He checked the nearby streets using several visual spectrums to make sure no one was coming. The coast seemed clear. In unison, the Dark Agents began scurrying down the street, leaving two behind to watch the prisoners around some trees and boulders just outside of town. Again, no one needed to give orders; they simply followed the instructions in their goggles.

Lancaster was pretty sure he heard muffled gunfire behind where the prisoners were being watched. It was likely the fate of the soldiers, though Lancaster hoped it was the result of one of them trying to escape. He was still hoping in denial that he had not fallen in with a group

of psychopaths.

When they reached the building, one of the agents rushed forward with a metal kit he was carrying. He efficiently, yet neatly laid it onto the sidewalk and opened the kit up. Inside were a handle, a chamber, and several barrels. She clicked the handle and chamber together, then chose one of the barrels and twisted it on. Moving with quick efficiency, she pointed the weapon at the door and fired into it near the latch mechanism. A laser stream emerged and sliced into the metal. As she moved her hand over it, the laser cut smoothly through until she had made a full semicircle, and freed the majority of the door. The moment it was ready another agent pushed it open and they all poured inside.

The agents spread out through the room. The first wave secured it, confirming no hostiles were inside. The second wave took note of the furniture and objects. There was a wide mixture of items, most of them with little value. This was a storage facility.

Lancaster was one of the last people to step through the door, but he was the first to see what they had come for. His body froze, and his legs moved with deliberate attention to each step. This was what he had been searching for for years; the Constellation Crest.

It seemed so anticlimactic. It was just sitting near a corner of the room along with card tables and under shelves that were holding other items deemed more valuable. The artifact only caught Lancaster's attention because of the golden and silvery glow that reflected off its surface onto the boxes haphazardly resting on top of it. He had imagined this moment many times, and it had always played out with a certain climactic flair. He figured it would be revealed in the middle of some majestic temple; uncovered by an elaborate building-sized puzzle; the wind howling like distant, long-lost voices protesting its discovery. But it was just sitting there in a pile of human junk partially illuminated by a florescent light that buzzed ever so quietly while shuffling feet of men and women who wanted to destroy everything it stood for resounded across the cement floors. Though Lancaster was glad it was intact and not stored in some high security vault he couldn't reach, he was rather insulted at the disrespect shown to this most valuable of artifacts.

To add insult to injury, Lancaster spotted a sticker slapped to one side with a bar code. It was the value this item held to the corporate overlords who owned it. First it belonged to the Navarus Barony, now to Parabur; they were all the same.

Lancaster stood before it, looking in awe. He could see through the breaks in the boxes some of the markings of the Constellation Crest; the silver gems, the smooth, ruby red crystals, the golden surface, and the tiny hieroglyphs etched so lightly they looked like scratches.

Alpha 25 stepped up next to him so casually his voice startled Lancaster when he began speaking. "You knew this thing the moment you came near it. You could sense its presence, like it was calling to you."

Lancaster, typically cynical and pragmatic, could not help but nod at what the man who would usually be his enemy was saying. He reached out his hand and hovered it above the relic's sleek surface. He laid it down reverently and felt the years behind it coarse through the goose bumps of his body. His fingers tensed, as though shaking the artifact's hand, and his eyes felt tears welling inside them. He only wished Mika could be here to see it.

"Clear this off," Alpha 25 said with an urgency as though to free a person from being trapped. The agents snapped to his side and they lifted the boxes, crates, and other debris off the Constellation Crest. Lancaster just stood and watched in amazement as each piece of the puzzle revealed itself from below.

Spirals of sparkling silver jewels emerged from a large, dim red domed crystal in the

center. Lightly engraved swirls were embossed upon the golden surface, like winds emerging from the middle. The outer rim bubbled up, engraved with dim symbols nearly invisible to untrained eyes. Smooth, round gemstones emerged from the golden surface as though escaping from an underground prison, looking skyward like eyes seeking the heavens. This was indeed the legendary Constellation Crest.

It was the most beautiful thing Lancaster had ever laid eyes on. He held out his hand and as soon as it drifted over the outer rim, he felt vibrations wavering through his skin, his muscles, his bones. It crawled through his body and in a moment he could hear a purring, echoing hum that resounded as though it was a baritone choir in a cathedral. Lancaster laid his hand down on the smooth golden surface, and the reverberations got stronger until he could make out individual voices; as though they were speaking to him across the void of millions of years.

Lancaster ran his fingers across the edge until they bumped over the hieroglyphs. At each one, a voice in the choir rose in pitch and volume, now loud enough for the entire room to hear. The Dark Agents dropped their solemn pretenses and looked around in awe, as though they could see the sounds reverberating all around them. Lancaster sensed this, and knew it was time to get serious.

He found the symbol that would turn the ancient machine on and ran his finger gently across it. A chorister of voices arose from the Constellation Crest and floated like spirits up above them. There it swirled through the room, the chords mixing and overlapping, moaning like wayward wraiths and caroling like reveling banshees. As his hand waved across the other hieroglyphs the pale, reflected golden light intensified; and new sounds floated out of the yellow-orange light that scampered across the ceiling and fell into the ears of the gathered flock.

Its captive audience stood spellbound, and Lancaster thought if they were impressed by this, just wait until they got a load of what was next. He had researched this device so intensely that he did not need his usual notes to aid him. Scanning his eyes across its surface, Lancaster knew exactly what to do. He tapped a few hieroglyphs, then laid his hand down on one of the bulbous gems. It began to glow brighter red. He then placed his other hand onto another one, then pressed lightly down with both. The gems faded into violet, as though filled with an unnatural gas. Above the table, the golden glow slowly gave birth to a white haze, out of which spat dozens of small globules and colorful floating effervescent sheets that sparkled with shimmering lights. The silver crystals at the center of the Constellation Crest were now blazing with light which they projected about the room. Some forms faded out of view and back into it, their phantom forms sometimes at the edge of sight. This was where it faded into the infrared or ultraviolet, spectrums the Siguerans could see, but humans could not.

Lancaster stepped away from the device and toward some of the projections. His eyes searched for one in particular, then he reached his hand up and grabbed it. He held there for a moment, then pulled his fingers apart in an unnatural fashion for a human, but a very natural one for a Sigueran with longer talons and larger hands. The holographic star exploded into a list of symbols; a cacophony of confusion for most people, but for Lancaster, a clear set of information. He closed that, then opened another, then returned to the Constellation Crest and continued to run his hand across various symbols and crystals along the outer edge of the artifact.

“What is this thing?” one of the Dark Agents asked, breaking protocol in his entrancement.

“It’s the master key,” Lancaster said. “The map at the center of all things Sigueran. Everything you want to find, where to find it, and how to get it. All here.” The hologram above them changed; first to a list of symbols, then the whole room turned into a forest, then changed

back into a storage facility and above them was a map of a solar system, then another star map appeared. “The Siguerans kept tabs on every race throughout this spiral of the galaxy,” Lancaster continued. “It was all recorded here. Every secret of every civilization both star faring and planet-bound. It was also made to analyze the data. When this device was abandoned and rediscovered millions of years later, it had predicted several species that had come later. It had measured where life would evolve. The Siguerans used it to squash life everywhere in this part of the galaxy.”

“Then why are humans here?” Alpha 25 asked Lancaster. It was a question Lancaster had never thought to ponder himself, and his face twisted into a perplexed expression. Then he said, “I guess the Constellation Crest missed us.”

One of the betas noticed a series of lines connecting certain stars and asked about them.

Lancaster brightened, ecstatic to see something else he had theorized. “That will be a power relay path. Notice how it begins at a star, makes its way to open space, but if you scry closely you can vaguely see a dim dot.”

“I see it in ultraviolet,” one of the gammas said. The others clearly switched their vision because Lancaster saw several smiles cross their faces.

“Okay,” Lancaster continued. “Since you can see in ultraviolet, you can probably scry the line cross from there to there.”

“The line’s in vacuum ultraviolet,” a different gamma said, and they all grinned again, clearly finding it.

Lancaster could not see the line, but he saw where it picked up again. The first gamma told him, “It actually cuts over there, then jonders into another wormhole and destoes over there.” The other Dark Agents all nodded in unison.

“Okay, so it comes out over here,” Lancaster said, pointing at where the line emerged. “It then goes into this system, and not to the star, but to the planet. That was their power distribution. And this device...” Lancaster pressed a few more hieroglyphs, then reached into the center and tapped one of the silver crystals. The glow of the line intensified. “...can relay that power. From here we can manipulate the power on these worlds; bring life back to long-lost cities. Open doors to understanding of life in the universe, and answer great questions in the ga...” Lancaster froze when he turned to face Alpha 25. The Dark Agent leader was not giving any expression that unnerved Lancaster. It was just seeing the man’s face again that reminded Lancaster why they were here. It was to destroy the Constellation Crest. And though such a task seemed unspeakable; if this was picked up by the wrong hands, it could spell doom for every living thing in the known galaxy and beyond.

So Lancaster James took in a deep breath, turned and soaked in one last look at the Constellation Crest before wiping his hand across it and turning it off, then stepped away from it, turning his face the other direction so he couldn’t see what they were about to do. A moment later, the efficient workers had their orders and he heard them begin their work around the artifact. Lancaster felt numb. He had brought them to bring destruction on this perfect thing of beauty. He had to remind himself that they were in a corporate warehouse where the barony could learn its secrets at any time. And the destruction it could wreak...

Lancaster suddenly thought of Mika; the fact that she had not gotten to see this, and never would. He should at least get some Snapfishes if not some holo-photos of it. He turned around to find that the feet shuffling he heard was not the Dark Agents preparing to destroy the Crest, but rather them preparing to box it up in a crate. “What are you doing?” Lancaster asked offended.

“We are taking it with us,” Alpha 25 said plainly.

“You’re supposed to destroy it,” Lancaster responded, not believing the words that were coming out of his own mouth. “This is what you do.”

Alpha 25 did not answer. Instead, with his one exposed eye, he gave Lancaster a look one gives a child when they are being naïve.

All at once Lancaster realized he was indeed being naïve. The ships didn’t land on the planet unnoticed because of some technology the Dark Agents had developed. It got past every sensor of two corporate armies because they had alien technology, probably Estral, which they adapted to their ships. The solid hologram device Alpha 25 had wasn’t something they had built. It was alien technology; probably Raginor. Everything they used that Lancaster had wondered how an underground cult could have developed and manufactured was probably from alien technology.

“You don’t destroy alien technology to keep it from falling into the wrong hands,” Lancaster accused. “You pretend if it’s useful to you, and only destroy it if it’s not.”

“We protect the public from themselves as a parent would protect its young,” Alpha 25 said stepping up to Lancaster. “And these tools give us the means by which to discipline them when they get out of conduct. This... The Constellation Crest provides us with every tool imaginable to protect humanity.”

“They’re not your children,” Lancaster insisted.

“But they need to be led,” Alpha 25 answered.

Lancaster was done listening and done talking. He reached over to the holster of one of the Dark Agents and grabbed his gun. He pointed it at the Constellation Crest and forced himself to fire. The shot landed solidly, but the metal only slightly dented. He fired two more times heedless of all the other agents who were pulling out their pistols.

Suddenly the gun snapped in half with a bright flash. Alpha 25’s right hand was extended, pointed toward the destroyed weapon. Lancaster saw the ring and deduced that it was the weapon very quickly. Most likely it was another alien discovery. Lancaster had nothing to fight against that, so he pulled away as the Dark Agent leader swung again. There was a whiff of air and a light snap just in front of Lancaster, who had jumped back away from his assailant.

Lancaster’s back fell into a line of Dark Agents. They shoved him toward their commander, whose clenched hand was swinging at him. Lancaster ducked underneath and tumbled past him, the whir of the whip lashing just above. Lancaster ran around a stack of crates to come at the door from another direction, but he found his way blocked by more agents. They were everywhere now, an eerie silence among them. No one cheered. No one laughed maniacally. They just crowded in, their circle getting smaller and smaller, and Lancaster was trapped among them with Alpha 25 readying his whip again.

“You have served your purpose, Mr. James,” Alpha 25 said. And as he threw his whip, Lancaster ran. He managed to dodge the whip by a narrow margin; he felt the back of his jacket slice open. He then stumbled right into several agents who grabbed his arms and pulled him down to his knees. Struggling, Lancaster tried to get back up, but was held close to the floor. Soon he couldn’t even look around. His hat was removed and someone was holding his head by his hair. Every time he pulled it was painful; and he felt more hands grab his waist, his legs, his head; the latter of which was being pulled tight. As Alpha 25 stepped up, Lancaster knew why. He could see the cuts the monowhip was carving into the floor as the feet stepped up to him. Alpha 25 was going to behead him.

“Humanity is in chaos, Mr. James. Every corporate baron believes he or she can do

whatever they wish. Their subjects have no loyalty, following whatever entity pays the most. It might as well be anarchy. They require parenting. Someone to show them the light out of the darkness. The artifacts this device will lead me to will do just that. Thank you for your service, Mr. James.” With that Alpha 25 raised his hand to bring down the whip and remove Lancaster’s head...

But the door busted open and a platoon of corporate soldiers flooded in. The décor on their heavy armor denoted they were barony soldiers, the most elite of military men and women. They raced in with their rifles perfectly aligned and moving as though on gyros, not bouncing with their bearers’ movements. Each had a Dark Agent in their sites with their fingers ready to fire. They shot a couple just to let the rest know they meant business, and none resisted.

Alpha 25’s monowhip hand was already in the air. He reeled the whip into the ring while he raised the other as well.