

RELIC WORLDS

LANCASTER JAMES

AND THE SECRET OF
THE PADRONE KEY
Part 3

JEFF MCARTHUR

RELIC WORLDS;

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

PART 3

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



Zenobia



CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE AXIAL MACHINATION

Lancaster knew he was being taken somewhere important by the length of the elevator ride. The importance of a corporate office was always directly proportionate to the level it was on in the building. Judging by the length of the ride in relation to the size of the building, Lancaster assumed they were near, if not at, the top.

As soon as the elevator doors opened, he knew he had underestimated the person's importance. The carpet and furniture were so plush they looked like an ocean-liner would sink inside them. The room glowed with a yellow hue from the pure gold pillars and lining on the walls. The ceiling was painted with real oils in dramatizations of events, mostly heroic, of whatever corporate baron ordered it. But what most convinced Lancaster that this was the top most of upper floors was the sheer size. It appeared that the entire floor was one large room divided only by sectioned areas walled off by opulent, yet temporary portable walls. Windows in every direction looked out over the lights of the city of Vesuvius.

There was a moment where Lancaster wondered if this was a bordello. Beautiful women wearing little clothing and pasted smiles, yet empty eyes lounged and meandered past. A small handful of men in similar lack of attire milled about as well. A bar stretched across one end next to a series of tables filled with food. A series of low cushion chair-recliners surrounded both. Some of these were filled with consumers of the vices. Whether they were employees being rewarded, executives of other businesses being wooed, or outside customers being served, Lancaster did not know.

What he noticed first and foremost was the round table approximately five meters directly in front of him. It was pure gold with silver crystals and red jewels. The Constellation Crest. There were glasses of booze and plates of food on it!

A voice arose from further back in the room. A corner office was camouflaged on one side. Though decorated with many of the luxuries of the rest of the giant room, this one section also hosted a finely crafted and expensively ornamented desk, computer and holograph terminals, cabinets disguised as classic statues, several moveable chairs including one that resembled a throne, and a few files left out. The man rising from the nicest chair was portly, yet spritely. A large grin formed across his baby-fat face and it said, "Lancaster James. How peach of you to join us!"

"I wasn't aware I had a choice," Lancaster responded.

The baron did not respond, and indeed, looked like he wouldn't know what to say, as he hurriedly waddled toward Lancaster. There was a childishness about his gait, like he was hurrying to candy that had just been promised to him. "My name is Abdalla Azizi," he said, his arms spread wide. "And you are our guest, Mr. Lancaster James. Explorer, adventurer, anthropologist."

"Really just the last part," Lancaster answered. Abdalla had reached him now and

Lancaster could hear every labored breath coming out of his mouth.

Abdalla bowed slightly, then straightened and waited. The smile was still wide across his face, though it grew an impatient uncertainty after several seconds of silence. Lancaster felt one of the guards' arms with the weapon in its hand nudge his back. Finally getting it, Lancaster bowed slightly back. He started to straighten, but he felt that same hand nudge against his back. He was supposed to go lower. So he did; bending almost to a ninety degree angle. When he came back, he saw that Baron Azizi was smiling comfortably again.

"Let me gander around my office," Baron Azizi said, and he led Lancaster through the room. He pointed out many of the features Lancaster had already seen, explaining what he knew about each one, especially its expense. They had just conquered the planet, and the office had belonged to someone else; but his redecorating crew had hurried in as soon as the city was secure and the original employees of the building were sacked. Then the room could be made fit for his tastes.

Lancaster barely noticed any of it. His eyes kept returning to the golden table near the center of the room. He found the dents he had caused with the laser pistol. He felt ashamed both for trying and for failing. He hoped Baron Azizi did not understand its power or importance.

"I see you're admiring my new table," the baron said.

"Yes," Lancaster said, his voice quick and raised in pitch. He tried to restrain it. "It's as much a piece of art as the statues and the paintings."

The baron strolled over to the subject of their conversation, meaning Lancaster too had to go; though he wanted the attention drawn away from it. "Ever since last night when we captured it and you arrived as a guest, I've had appraisers scrying over it..." Two waiters arrived, one on each side of Lancaster. One had food and one had alcohol. "Ah, have something," Baron Azizi said.

"Um," Lancaster hesitated. He was wary of consuming anything from someone of whom he was suspicious, but he had hardly eaten since being captured, so he could not resist the meat pie and chips, though he refused the drink.

"We have some of the rarest libations here. A hundred year old Kookaris. Bottles of wine taken from Earth before its abandonment. Or, more to your taste, something whose name I cannot pronounce, but it's a bottle left over from the... Chiotho, I believe..."

"Chiotho Tongba?" Lancaster asked, amazed.

"He'll have some of that," Baron Azizi told the employee who left them.

"How did you get it?" Lancaster asked. He had heard rumors that an ancient alien distillery was discovered, and that the drink, when run through a process, was still edible. It was the one alien relic that could be consumed, and was one of the rarest artifacts in all of xeno-archaeology, made all the more rare every time it was utilized.

"I thought you'd be interested," Baron Azizi said. "We acquired it in a trade with the Takeko Barony. I was playing hard to get, you see, not giving into a trade. I knew that the empire's baron wanted the trade to go through badly enough, so I insisted on their adding something else to the stockpile. He included the Chiotho Tona, and I accepted."

"And he had gotten it..." Lancaster led.

"The discovery of one of his corporations. Some of them send appraisal teams with scientists on board ahead of their wreckers and deforesters to check for valuable items before they clear the way for company buildings. Ever since this slight edge in trade has been discovered, this has become more and more the practice. Let's sit so you can eat your pie."

Baron Azizi led them to the Constellation Crest where they sat at chairs around it.

Lancaster hesitated, then placed his plate down on the artifact, hoping that would de-emphasize its value to the baron. “Do you have many of these artifacts?” Lancaster asked before taking a large bite into his first meal in many hours.

“We have only begun. We are hiring knowledgeable archaeologists.” The baron’s voice got high at the end, his eyebrows raising.

“I’m an anthropologist,” Lancaster said.

“Is there a difference?” the baron asked.

“I study the civilizations. Archaeologists study the items.”

“But you study them through the things since that’s all that remains of these civilizations.”

Lancaster nodded and took another bite, hoping to avoid the topic.

“Like this table,” Baron Azizi said. “What can you tell me about it?”

Lancaster shrugged his shoulders and tried to seem cool about it. “It’s a valuable artifact. Chances be you can make billions just on the gold if you melt it down.”

“I’m anxious to know what it can do while still in one piece,” Baron Azizi said, and he touched a power button. The entire room turned into a giant, mysterious tomb with vast chambers of gorgeous alien architecture and passageways that disappeared into darkness. Abdalla rubbed his hand against some of the hieroglyphs, and they were transplanted to a rainforest surrounded by stone ruins and metal archways wrapped around trees disappearing into the endless canopy above. There was no sign of the room anymore. The illusion seemed to go on forever. The baron tapped a couple more buttons he had been instructed would work and the landscape was replaced by dramatic nebulae of red and blue with globes of worlds drifting by. One could simply walk up to any of them and touch these worlds like they were as tall as gods.

The baron turned it off and everyone in the room burst into applause, some genuine, some to be noticed. Lancaster, the one man who had been searching for this for years, was the only one silent. He was, in fact, looking away, frightened.

Abdalla Azizi went on the offensive. “Some of my best soldiers found those mercenaries trying to box this up. They were handling it very gently, like it had an important meaning. Like it was worth something.” The Chiotho Tongba was placed onto the table, a couple feet away from him. The baron said, “I’d bet my plastic you know why they were handling it with such care.”

Lancaster took in a deep breath. “I can’t tell you,” he said.

Azizi leaned back, chuckling, then outright laughing.

Lancaster began to take another bite from his meat pie and the plate and fork were removed from him. A hand knocked against the back of his head and some of the meat flew from his mouth.

Baron Abdalla stopped laughing and said in a very serious tone, “I really must insist, Mr. James.”

“It’s...” Lancaster hesitated to speak. He was right back where he had been the night before, handing over a far too dangerous item to a dangerous organization. But at least this time he had the upper hand in knowledge. He held out his hand gesturing and said, “It’s a very nice table.”

Lancaster’s skill at bluffing was not very good, but it seemed he had fooled the corporate baron as Azizi began laughing even harder than he had before. It was so jolly the entire room began laughing with him. Those who had not heard what was said joined in, and soon the whole room was a part of the conformity. Lancaster nevertheless laughed with them, relieved that he

had apparently pulled a fast one. He reached over and grabbed the Chiotho Tongba and began studying it with his eyes and nose.

Before he saw what was happening, the cup was yanked from Lancaster's hand and thrown across the table. His hand was grabbed by a much larger hand which squeezed between each finger. Lancaster felt his palm crunch beneath the weight. Then another large guard grabbed his fingers despite Lancaster's please of no. He pulled the pinky back until a loud snap could be heard throughout the room, and Lancaster's scream of pain called over it. Some of the people in the room squirmed, but no one did a thing.

"I noticed that you're right handed, so I ordered them to start with your useless hand. You can still save the rest of your fingers. But if you don't give me what I want, I'll have them snapped one by one... Then I'll remove that right arm entirely." Abdalla Azizi then cracked his finger, a sound that made Lancaster wince. On cue the two goons pulled away from Lancaster and two women leaned down over Lancaster from each side. They rubbed a soothing lotion on his hurt hand that began numbing the pain immediately. Their warm bodies pressed against his, as though with a promise. One of them turned his eyes to hers, a mere inches away. He could smell her sweet perfume, her soft breath. "You can have pure joy or pure pain, Lancaster James," the baron warned. "But there is no in between. I want to know what this table does."

Lancaster heard the baron as he stared into the woman's eyes. His were pleading, wanting to be anywhere but here. Hers were seductive, telling him it would all be okay; as long as he cooperated. But the longer he locked eyes with her, the more he saw the truth. Her emotions were as professional as any employee; no different from the goons who broke his finger. Her actions were all mechanical, practiced, and soulless. Deep in the woman's mind, she was likely thinking of when she would get off work, or if she would ever escape from this indentured servitude. There was no joy here, only suffering. He could only choose between giving his life for science, or for the pretense of life.

Lancaster turned to face his oppressor, Baron Abdalla Azizi, ready to make a stand and tell him to go to Hades. But as he turned he saw the baron was looking away at one of his employees who was whispering into his ear, apparently making a report. Azizi's wide eyes said that it was alarming news.

As soon as they were done speaking privately, Baron Azizi announced, "Everyone out except military executives! Now! Guards, regress him to his room!" With the last sentence Azizi pointed at Lancaster as he stood and began bounding toward his office. "I don't care if the elevator is over capacity; I want you all out now!"

Something out the window explained what was disturbing the corporate baron. Lancaster spotted streaks of flames rolling across the sky, most likely debris burning in the atmosphere; the surest sign of a starship battle happening in orbit. They were under attack.

A few dots, most likely landing craft, appeared lowering toward the ground, and Lancaster followed them until they disappeared behind Baron Azizi's head. He looked at Lancaster and said, "We'll talk more later." Then he disappeared behind his desk. The guards grabbed Lancaster and pulled him into the already overcrowded elevator.

Alpha 25 sat upright in his cell. It was important to always remain dignified in the face of one's enemies. It was especially important now with his own followers visibly demoralized, seeming to accept their fates in a corporate prison. They lounged where they were, some on the floor, their shoulders slouched in discouragement. Their eyes, visible now because their goggles were confiscated, looked out in a thousand yard stare. They believed they were finished.

Alpha 25 could easily have gotten them out if he still had his monowhip, but his ring had been confiscated along with everything else. It was unlikely that their captors understood what the ring did, but the captives had been stripped of all accessories.

The cell doors had only one slit through which to look, and a person could only see through it if they were next to the door. Otherwise, they saw only passing shadows. The room Alpha 25 was in was brightly lit, enough that they could see the sanitized walls, floor, single sink and toilet for the eight men in the room. The women were in another room nearby. Alpha 25 was not used to seeing things without the aid of his monocle, and he hated the natural appearance of everything.

Then the shadows at the slit began moving erratically. Something was happening. Alpha 25 stood up and stepped to the middle of the room, prepared for whatever opened the door.

There stood two corporate guards with their guns drawn, pointing into the cell. Alpha 25 stood tall, his head held high. If he was to die today, he would die with dignity. His apparent bravery encouraged his men, who stood up next to him.

The fore guard lowered his pistol and made a hand gesture, twisting his fingers with efficiency only garnered by practice. He made three signals, all of them revealing the Dark Agent secret hand sign. He was one of them; and by his hand gesture, it appeared he was a gamma.

Alpha 25 gave a counter sign, revealing he was an alpha. The guard gave him the secret salute, a hand gesture that placed his hand at one side of his chest, and showing that he and his associate were at Alpha 25's disposal. The other guard reached around the corner and picked something up from the ground. It was their pile of goggles. She handed them to one of the prisoners, who then dispensed them to everyone else, including Alpha 25, who took in a deep breath of relief as he put his monocle on and saw the world the way he believed it was meant to be seen.

The practice of burying agents into organizations had paid off. It was a process that took years of preparation and incredible dedication and patience on the part of the operatives. They had to serve their duties without any assurance that they would ever even be needed; living false lives until they saw local Dark Agents in need. And then they would move into action, sometimes returning to their manufactured lives afterward, sometimes not. These operatives would be coming with Alpha 25 and his agents where they would be greatly rewarded for their service.

Looking outside the door, Alpha 25 saw that the other guards were properly disposed of and the way out was clear. The undercover operatives had done their jobs admirably. He was even more impressed when the one who had opened their door held out his hand. Resting in his palm was Alpha 25's ring.

The moment the shuttle landed, Nikos was shouting for the door to open and was hurrying the soldiers out. Though he was not officially their commander, Nikos had been given special authority by Empress Cerilseta Navarus herself. He was in charge of this operation, and would be held accountable for its success or failure.

As such, he wanted to be on the ground with the soldiers seeing every aspect of it through personally. He had made the grand plan with the admirals and the generals. Nikos was not so foolhardy to believe he would know more about planetary strategy than them. Once the fighting began, he left the big picture in their capable hands, but he made sure to have a powerful enough force to land in the most likely region to find the Constellation Crest. Navarus records had

something very much like it stored in a warehouse, but if the Parabur Barony discovered it, the artifact might have gone to their R&D department, or even into the hands of the baron himself.

Before the battle, Nikos had created several specialized scout teams who were trained in what to search for, and where to look. When the ship landed, they were the second team to emerge, preceded only by the squad of soldiers securing the perimeter of the landing shuttle, and the drone skirmishers that orbited the perimeter. The scouts activated their jet packs and flew off in their assigned directions. Scouts from the next shuttle back did the same, and the next, and the next. Nikos had brought five landing craft total, four of which carried the scout teams that would go and find what Nikos wanted. They all had redundancies in case any of the ships went down, but since everyone had landed intact, the skies became filled with these scouts.

Nikos had an open link to the commanders of each of these units. The standard non-scout soldiers would hold their positions near the shuttles until the scouts had the location of the artifact; then they were all to converge on those coordinates in force. Other transports were landing nearby with orders for the soldiers to take strategic objectives, thus freeing Nikos' platoon to prepare for its surgical strike.

He also had his ace in the shuttle with them. Jude emerged, her hair now back to red with orange and yellow layers. She stood out by more than her head and her stride; her attire was much the way it would be if she was going out dancing. She wore her toga top that wrapped around her chest and revealed the barbed wire rose tattoo that wrapped around one side of her torso; and her skirt that rose up on one hip to reveal her gun holster wrapped around one leg. She much preferred the freedom of movement over the safety of armor. And whenever that wasn't enough, she had her full complement of cybernetic implants to rely on.

Now Nikos was siccing her on the town. Jude's orders were to cause chaos within the interior lines of the Parabur Barony soldiers; to wreak havoc with hit and run strikes, and to keep her eyes open for any artifact that may be of some use to them, or perhaps to the corporate empire for which they were working... if she and Nikos felt like reporting it.

Jude had little in the way of a challenge. Her bionic legs sprung her to ledges several stories up, grasping onto the walls with the iron and magnetic claws that doubled as fingernails. She fired down on her prey with pinpoint accuracy, using the targeting systems in one eye while she sought more targets with the scopes in her other. When an enemy managed to spot her, she popped smoke out of the fingernails of her left hand while continuing to fire out of her right, all the while remaining on target with her color-coded targeting sensor out of both eyes. Just for fun, and to give her some sort of challenge, she pounced down on the backs of some soldiers, breaking one neck, taking out a couple more with shots from her pistol, then flipping behind another to knock him out with one punch.

Her enemy up to this point consisted of company garrison soldiers to defend the planet. They were little better than militia, not even worth integrating into the victorious army when they won, so few prisoners were being taken as the Navarus forces marched steadily through the town.

The story became quite different when they neared the financial district. This was where the corporate elite and the barony soldiers were holed up, and would make their stand. Jude smiled as she took cover while the Navarus soldiers took positions for a firefight. She used her eye sensors to find a way around, and she began moving along the sides of the buildings to get into the enemy's flank.

The guards were hurrying Lancaster back to the prison. They could all hear the battle

heating up, and they needed the prisoner secure. More importantly, they needed to get into cover before soldiers and laser blasts were filling the roads.

They found the facilities quiet. The other guards were not at their posts, and they could see that the door to the cell block was wide open. One of the guards approached the desk and found four of the five who had been on duty; their still, dead bodies stacked neatly in a pile like firewood. He showed the others. One of them hurried to the door to the cell block and peeked in. "All the cells are open," he told them.

They reacted by running to look into the cell block. All the prisoners were gone. Lancaster took the opportunity of their distraction to find a weapon lying beside all the bodies. It was a stun pistol, which was even better than a laser as it was a little more likely to get through armor.

Outside they heard an explosion. One of them ran to the window to look out. He saw a couple supply vehicles pointed toward the battle. One was engulfed in flames, and the other exploded before his eyes. A moment before, a laser blast had come from the left, and the guard looked in time to see a lone, orange-headed woman hopping along the sides of buildings onto rooftops, and then out of sight.

One of the guards remembered Lancaster and went to get him. "We need to secure the prisoner then fortify..."

As the guard leaned down to grab him, Lancaster fired the stun gun directly into his chest. The man shook, then fell over. The one at the window looked around to see what was happening, and Lancaster shot him before he knew what was happening. The third rushed through the door, and Lancaster turned and took him down before he could react. He sighed with relief, then got to work. He located the storage locker where the prisoners' possessions were kept. Everything that belonged to the Dark Agents was gone. Not a big surprise, but at least he could confirm what had happened. He grabbed his jacket and his utility belt, the two things he would need the most. Out of his jacket he pulled his Talki and tried to reach Little Jack. There was no response. He had to hope that his partner was just lying low with radio silence, because the alternative was too horrible to imagine.

He would have to take care of himself for the time being, so Lancaster stole one of the laser carbines the guards had in their armory. And last, but certainly not least, Lancaster found his hat, and placed it back on his head.

The escaped Dark Agents had taken a different path toward the Chief Executive Building. Not that they knew that Lancaster was being taken returned to the prison via the main road, but they didn't want to run into anyone who might question or recognize them, despite the fact that they were wearing Parabur guard uniforms. They needed to get into the building, so they had again removed their goggles and tried to look like corporate barony soldiers.

Their mole got them through the outer and inner rim of guards, then provided clearance to use the elevator. Here Alpha 25 might have had a small problem. Though he had gotten enough clearance to get past officers during a battle, he had not infiltrated deep enough to have unfettered access to the Chief Executive Suite at the top of the building.

His new partner did, however, understand the electronics well enough to get inside and force the elevator to bypass security measures and let them get to where they wanted to go. She also disabled all cameras and override systems so no one would stop them or see them as they put their goggles back on, and Alpha 25 placed his cyber eye patch where it belonged.

The moment the doors parted on the top floor, the Dark Agents opened fire. They had

already located all energy weapons that had heat signatures through the elevator doors, and they instantly identified all enemies the moment they could see the room. The fight was not long. No one in the Chief Executive Suite was expecting this attack. They had been coordinating military efforts at transmitters or watching the battle through the windows. No one had noticed that one of the elevators was going rogue and had lost camera signal.

Only Abdalla and a handful of others were still alive after a few seconds of gunplay. The Parabur baron was hiding in his office sectional; the others were hiding behind random pieces of furniture. None of these had weapons; they were advisors and a couple of the entertainers Abdalla had wanted to keep nearby as they boosted his morale.

Alpha 25 strolled up to the Constellation Crest and stroked his hand across its surface. Abdalla watched from hiding, relieved that he seemed to have succeeded in avoiding capture. This hope was quickly dashed, however, as a large hand grabbed the collar of his suit and yanked him up. He was half dragged, half stumbled to the golden table that Alpha 25 was standing beside. There, he groveled for his life.

Alpha 25 remained calm, and his serene presence soothed Abdalla, who quit blubbering long enough for Alpha 25 to ask, "Did you see it? What this can do?"

"Yes," Abdalla Azizi answered. "It's beautiful. Worthy in line of a thousand worlds. You can have it. I'll trade it for you if you call off your army."

Alpha 25 now looked at him, his expression confused. "You possess nothing with which to negotiate. Besides, they're with someone else." With that, Alpha 25 flicked his wrist, and Baron Azizi's head was removed cleanly from its body.

The handful of advisors and entertainers yelped with fear, then regretted having caught the man's attention as he stepped up to them. "Did he show anything to you?" the one eyed man asked.

They were shivering. One of the entertainers thought quickly and said, "No sir."

Alpha 25 looked at her with a patronizing warning in his eye. "Do not lie to me," he said.

His gaze was more than she could handle. She shivered as though the temperature had dropped below freezing. She could not move her lips to speak. One of the advisors placed his hand on her and said to the Dark Agent leader with as much diplomacy as his years of education could muster, "Sir, we are mere employees. He did not show us top secret information."

Alpha 25 stared into the man's eyes to read whether or not he was lying, and to what degree. The man's face, though trained, revealed what had happened as surely as though it was a history book. Alpha 25's face softened. "You are trying to protect your co-workers." The man shook his head and said no, but Alpha 25 placed an understanding hand on the man's shoulder. "It's very noble of you," he said. The advisor silenced and relaxed. He believed he saw mercy in Alpha 25's eyes, and that they would be spared.

He was wrong. Alpha 25 stood, then swung his arm swiftly down in a diagonal. The whip sliced swiftly through the advisor and the entertainer, tearing them both in half, their remains mingling together on the floor.

The other prisoners screamed in horror. "Cleanse this floor," Alpha 25 said calmly. Then he turned back toward the Constellation Crest. "And prepare this for transportation."

The "cleansing" of the remaining Parabur employees and the boxing up of the artifact were done with the Dark Agents' typical efficiency, and they were on their way in no time.

Twenty or thirty voices were overlapping in a cacophony of noise over the receivers inside Nikos' command center. He sat back with his legs up on the desk and his eyes closed. He

tried to wear a mask of serenity, but the shouting voices from every part of the battlefield gave him a headache.

The military commanders were choreographing the movements, so Nikos did not need to answer back. He did not even need to have all of these signals coming from so many areas of the fight. The scouts he had sent out were sending back only occasional responses and those were typically confirming that an area was cleared without locating the artifact they had been ordered to find. But Nikos had all of these communications open so that if anyone found anything he recognized as a clue, he would know about it.

The effort paid off. A pair of voices was speaking back and forth about something. They were calm and unrushed, clearly not in the battle. One of them said something about moving an object from the warehouse just before the battle. Nikos shouted to his orderlies to turn everything down except the two communications he was trying to hear. He rose to listen closer, and the other voices dropped out several at a time until there were only the two Nikos was trying to hear.

One of them was telling about a prisoner they had interrogated. He was being uncooperative, revealing nothing about the defenses in the Financial District and instead saying they had been moving some things into the Chief Executive Suite not long before the battle, including a golden table.

Nikos cut into the conversation and asked the communication officer to describe the table. She told Nikos that he had said it was all gold and had silver crystals in a couple patterns, and some other rocks spread around it.

“And it’s in the Chief Executive Building,” Nikos said urgently.

“According to the employee we captured, yes,” the communication officer said.

Nikos cut off all the communications coming in and signaled to the surgical force of which he had taken direct charge, “All units, converge on the Chief Executive Building. Repeat, converge on the Chief Executive Building. Get into assault positions and wait for my order to move in.”

Nikos strapped on his gear, including a helmet with all the communication equipment he’d need to lead the forces, and he hurried toward the convergence point.

They reached the Financial District to find it congested with battle. Though it was night, the constant bright flashes of shots and explosions illuminated the area like it was day. The enemy lines were formed along a main street with the Navarus forces in buildings on one side and the Parabus forces on the other. In some select buildings the enemy forces were intermingled, sometimes floor by floor, sometimes room by room. Artillery strikes from both sides had reduced some buildings to rubble, and large fields of debris made for chaotic defensive works from which to shoot. And above, streams of white wake revealed jet-pack wearing soldiers dogfighting for air superiority, or firing into the windows of skyscrapers.

Nikos found one of the soldiers with a vertical Navarus flag sticking out of the lump in the back of his armor. The flag denoted either a ranking officer in charge of that section of the battle, or an information specialist, such as a communications officer. Either way, this person would have the answers Nikos needed. He asked if an assault had been made on the Chief Executive Building yet.

“We tried!” the officer shouted over the din of battle. “We’re facing barony forces now, not just corporate armies, so they’re putting up a strong resistance! Both of our assaults were beaten back with heavy losses! We’re piking our way in on the flanking buildings to make a pincer move on it!”

Nikos did not want to have to wait. Every minute was time that the enemy could get the Constellation Crest out if they knew its value; or, far worse, it could be destroyed. He asked the soldier where the enemy strongpoints were. The officer pointed out the situation so Nikos could see. They had fortifications built up along the lower levels of the building that were resisting the heavy weapons, and they had skirmishers hidden among the rubble along the road that were taking pot shots and foiling any advance. They also had heavy weapons on higher floors bearing down on them, and indirect fire coming from rooftops.

Nikos calmly looked over the situation, then called one of his assistants back at his headquarters. "Ms. Fleur, be so kind as to bring me the case marked X-1331." She acknowledged, so Nikos sat down with his back to a wall, facing away from the danger. The officer he was speaking to went back to the fight, and was soon after shot down. Someone dragged him away to the medical facilities as he screamed in horror and pain, calling on his mother. Nikos felt pity for those who had this misguided sense of duty. They threw away their only lives for someone else's cause; someone who wouldn't give a damn about what they wanted.

He said nothing of his thoughts to the assistant the Navarus Barony had assigned to him as she brought him the case he requested. Instead he thanked her, and in the cover of the room, he opened the case. There were four pieces inside. He took out two of them and began snapping them together. He then took the third piece and snapped it on the end. They formed a sort of handheld heavy weapon, like a rocket launcher, but with no rocket. There was only a metal grill on one end. The last piece was a pair of aluminum glasses with no lenses. When Nikos put them on his face, they covered his eyes. He still seemed to see, just past the immediate room.

His assistant watched him in confusion as he studied the enemy's wall, his head scanning from right to left, then looking up. His head searched in that direction for a while. Then, seemingly satisfied with what he was seeing, he lifted the weapon and pointed it at the wall. The assistant pulled back, afraid he was going to fire into it. But he didn't. He pulled a trigger, but nothing happened. He then moved the device slowly across the wall, as though painting it with some invisible spray.

There didn't appear to be any discernible effect until he got halfway across. Outside, toward the right, in the direction Nikos had started, a yellow burst of light arose all along the enemy works. Voices began screaming, and flames belled out of the holes. Along the rubble in the road Ms. Fleur could see more graphically what was happening. Bodies engulfed in flames arose from behind their cover. They looked like angry demons from the abyss as they lifted their flailing arms and tumbled away. Some were shot down by their enemies, others were left to roam in agony until they fell helplessly over boulders and slowly turned to ash.

This might have been attributable to something else, but the trend continued all along the path Nikos had swept. The Parabur defenses literally melted away, their occupants helpless to do anything. Their heavy weapons began firing rapidly everywhere along the Navarus lines in a panic. Nikos pointed his device toward one of the large guns and held it there. For a moment, nothing happened. But the gun began to slow, then stopped. And then it exploded in a giant fireball, bringing down a large section of the building it was on and crashing onto the street below.

While the rubble was still falling, Nikos calmly took off the glasses and began disassembling the weapon. He then told his smiling assistant, "Take this back to headquarters. Do not tell anyone about it, nor let anyone else lay eyes on it. I have more weapons like this, so you know not to ever cross me. Do you comprehend, Ms. Fleur."

“Are you hiring?” Ms. Fleur asked.

Nikos stalled a moment, then smiled broadly, the storied lines across his face all creasing. He winked at her, placed the pieces back in the crate, and closed it up. She obediently took the crate, and Nikos stepped confidently out onto the street where he walked across the ashes of his fallen foes and into the building.

Nikos signaled his platoon and they moved in rapidly. Other units moved in as well, and as they fought their way through the floors to the defensive works, Nikos’ band located the stairs and prepared to move up. “That is a very long climb,” Nikos said.

“It’s the only way,” one of the officers said. “The power to the building’s standard systems is out. And even if it was on, they could do something to the power...”

While the officer was explaining the situation, Nikos pulled a square device with an arched back from his pocket. It had bumps on top like dull spikes, dotted with several lights. With his other hand, Nikos pulled out another pair of glasses which he placed over his face as he studied the wall. As the officer trailed off, Nikos evidently found what he was searching for as he replaced the glasses, then stuck the device to the wall. He flicked one of the spikes, and the lights danced in several patterns before stopping on one of them.

“Bingo,” Nikos said. “Now, unless they have made contact with the Orhaap or have some of their technologies, they won’t be able to interfere with us.” He strode to the elevator and pressed a button. The light turned on, a cheerful ding sounded, and the doors slid open with the lights on inside. Nikos stepped back and gestured inside. “Ladies and gentlemen,” he said. “If you’d please.”

Hesitantly, the soldiers followed his orders, and a squad crammed into the elevator. Nikos squeezed in as well. He didn’t want anyone else beating him to his goal.

The soldiers were poised and at the ready when the doors slid open to the Chief Executive Suite. They had expected a firefight; one in which they were in a compromised position. But there was no resistance. In fact, there were no people. It was clean and empty.

Nikos knew there was something being covered up, however. He could smell the cleaning solutions and the air freshener. Both had been applied liberally, and recently. This was not the sort of odor a corporate baron would want in his or her office.

The soldiers fanned out into the room, their weapons always at the ready. Sparse calls of “Clear!” resounded from various parts of the room.

Nikos wasn’t concerned about that right now. He was focused on the most curious part of the room. Four table legs stood near the middle of the room holding up nothing. It was as though someone had left before finishing the job; which was possible. The Parabur Barony had only recently captured this city and would logically be redecorating. But so much of the room was in perfect shape; completed, decorated.

A few of the soldiers found a pair of bodies that were chopped in half wrapped in table sheets and neatly stored behind a divider. Another soldier found several more bodies, all neatly wrapped up and stored in another section carved out of the room with elaborately decorated portable dividers. Yet another soldier located where the blood had been primarily eradicated, but there were still trace amounts. Someone was not only ruthless; they were anal about cleanliness afterward.

Nikos wasn’t so concerned about that at the moment. He was investigating the table legs. They were well crafted out of expensive alloys. This was little surprise since everything in the room was decadent. But this table, he suspected, was special. Its placement, its décor, its uniqueness; it all told him something.

The squad's sergeant located Abdalla Azizi wrapped up in linen and laying under his desk. Nikos concluded that whoever had done this had taken the sheets from the food and drink tables, which were devoid of linen, and had wrapped the bodies in them. What he couldn't understand was why anyone would bother. This certainly hadn't been the Navarus Barony or any of their corporations.

Nikos was pretty certain he knew who it was, and he had run into them recently. He also concluded that Lancaster James must have brought them here. And now they had the Constellation Crest.

Lancaster was moving as far away from the sounds of battle as he could. Every time he heard laser fire or an explosion, he hurried down a block in the opposite direction. There were still civilians in this city, and he was coming across handfuls of them as they sought refuge. He felt like joining them, but he feared the battle was still going to roll in this direction, and he needed to find a way to signal Little Jack. Last he knew, his partner was still on the Dark Agents' mother ship. He should be safe; the last time Lancaster saw him he was still inside Odin's Revenge and wasn't about to let anyone in. But the Dark Agents were crafty, and Lancaster was nervous about what they might have up their sleeves.

For now, Lancaster simply needed space to think, so he kept moving. He couldn't get far enough. He kept seeing signs of the battle. Presently, he passed the crumpled body of a scout wearing a jet pack. By the markings, it appeared to be a Navarus soldier. It had probably been shot down from a long distance away and come crashing down here, but Lancaster couldn't be too certain.

He then saw a convoy of vehicles pass by ahead of him. He at first assumed they were military, and they were making maneuvers, but then he noticed that they were civilian by nature. Someone was evacuating more efficiently than most civilians.

Then Lancaster saw why. In one of the central vehicles he got a good look at an occupant in the backseat. It was a bald man wearing a mechanical eye patch. Upon seeing this, Lancaster realized that everyone else was wearing goggles and dressed in black. The Dark Agents.

Lancaster took one step to pursue when the last car passed by. He realized that he wasn't going to be able to catch up; not on foot. Thinking quickly, he turned back to the body and the jet pack. He had only tried flying in one of these contraptions once, and was not very good at it. But he had to try. The Dark Agents more than likely had the Constellation Crest in one of those cars, and he needed to get it from them.

Lancaster hurried back to the jet pack. He yanked it off one arm of the scout, then the other. The dead weight made the work difficult and agonizingly slow. He was painfully aware that every second took that all-powerful artifact further and further away. He needed to catch up with it.

At last the arm fell free and Lancaster shoved his own limbs through the straps. His left hand ached with the broken finger every time he moved his hand; and every time he bumped it, the sharp pain shot all the way up his arm. He strapped the device around his chest and waist, and he took a moment to reacquaint himself with the controls. There wasn't much time, so he got the gist and fired up the thrusters.

Alpha 25 looked past the line of Magnocars to the edge of the last headlight. He was waiting anxiously for it to stop rolling over buildings and spread out into the open wilderness of the country. The shuttle was just a kilometer past the edge of town, and there were no military

objectives out there. He was convinced that once they reached the country, they were home free.

That was when bright flashes rained down from the sky and landed in front of the lead car. The shots may have missed, but the driver of the first car panicked and twisted the Magnocar so that it blocked traffic. The next car in line T-boned the first, and the remaining four braked hard to avoid a pileup.

They had to think fast. The shooter was likely still above them and would be sending another volley any moment. There was plenty of room on the sidewalks to go around, but Magnocars did not work independently of the road. Unlike wheeled vehicles which could drive wherever their wheels took them, Magnocars hovered over the streets that were built specifically for them. They were faster than wheeled vehicles, but were useless when it came to cross country.

The car wreck ahead covered the entire street. That meant they needed a new route fast, and no one knew this city. Alpha 25 pointed at the last road they had passed and ordered them there. It took them half a minute to get the cars turned around in the cramped quarters. The time was further extended as the agents from the car crash gave up on their own vehicles and loaded into the ones still operating. This weighed down the cars and made them visibly slower, causing Alpha 25 to kick one or two out of his own vehicle, wasting more time.

Luck smiled upon them as the next couple blasts did not land anywhere near their vehicles. Alpha 25 wondered if they were perhaps random indirect fire shots.

Lancaster was struggling as he tried to juggle the responsibilities of operating the jet pack in mid-air, and firing the laser carbine with the other; a difficult job that was made even harder with the pain of his broken finger on his left hand. His first shot had at least come somewhat close to its mark, and had the unexpected result of causing the first two cars to crash. But the kickback had caused him to arch over backward and launch diagonally into the air. By the time he got himself straightened up, he assumed he didn't have long before the cars disappeared from view. So he fired as quickly as he could, sending out several shots. They all went wild, knocking into buildings, houses, apartments, the street and the sidewalk; seemingly everywhere but onto his targets.

Realizing he was accomplishing nothing, Lancaster held his fire and straightened himself out. By that time, the cars below had finally gotten themselves turned around and started down a different street. Lancaster quickly assessed the cars since there would be two left behind and four trying to escape. The two that were stopped were unlikely to have the Constellation Crest for two reasons. One, they were both smaller than the others and were less likely to be used for storing anything. And more importantly, the other cars were leaving them behind. He doubted the Dark Agents would abandon this extremely valuable artifact, so he chased after the four that were now hurrying down another street.

When they came into view, he determined which one was the most likely candidate to be carrying his target. One of the cars had a cab in the front for two passengers, and a flat, enclosed back. It was a vehicle made for weekend trips for two where the back could be used to store camping necessities, or other recreation needs. It was the perfect storage for the Constellation Crest.

As Lancaster finished his deduction, laser fire shot into the air toward him. The Dark Agents knew where he was and they were leaning out the windows, trying to shoot him down. Lancaster saw some of them getting close, so he tried to dodge. As he did, he overcompensated and felt his body yanked off to one side. He tried to pull the other direction, but

overcompensated again and was yanked the other direction. The happy accident of all this was that the erratic maneuvering made it all the harder for the Dark Agents to hit him.

Once Lancaster got himself steadied enough, he took a couple shots, and was happy to see that one of them made some of the agents flinch back into their cars. But there were four of the vehicles with several minions firing out of each of them, so one of the shots came close again, and Lancaster found himself shooting off at a 90 degree angle, his shots hitting buildings that the cars weren't even driving past.

The cars had their own problem now. Up to this point, they had had the entire street to themselves. But presently they came upon a group of vehicles coming the other way. Many of the agents wondered why they would be on the road at all, and Alpha 25 deduced that they were likely escaping the battle. All that mattered, though, was that they avoid hitting anyone head on. The Dark Agent drivers zigzagged and dodged, one of the cars scraping against the side of an oncoming vehicle. Another hit the curb and was bounced back into the road, smacking the back of a car. The civilian spun out, but the agent managed to keep his car on the magnetic road.

They lost track of the jet pack flyer momentarily, and hoped they had lost him. Then a bright flash from the sky came down, not on them, but on a traffic light post. It crashed down in front of them, causing the convoy to once again turn to dodge it. More prepared this time, none of them ran into the debris, and they continued on unabated.

From above, Lancaster could see where they were headed. He had inadvertently directed them toward downtown, right where the most severe fighting was happening. This would work against both of them, and may hand the Constellation Crest over to the Navarus Barony, which would be even worse. Lancaster fired a warning shot ahead of them in hopes that it would cause the convoy to veer in another direction. They only reacted by firing back. The Dark Agents would not be redirected.

The buildings all around them marched higher and higher into the sky, each block taller than the last until they were in a canyon of concrete and iron. Lancaster took advantage of the opportunity and flew behind some buildings, gaining occasional cover before popping out to take pot shots at the convoy. He was getting the hang of using the two devices together, but his time was limited. His left hand was aching beyond what he could handle, and soon he would have to choose between operating the jet pack and firing the gun.

One of the Dark Agent shots came close, causing Lancaster to react by overcompensating to the right... directly into the window of a building. His momentum took him into and through a wall that crumbled around him. He thought quickly, recalling that he had been near the corner of the building he had just run into. So he punched the thrusters into high gear and thrust in a new direction, crashing through another wall and out a different window.

Below, the Dark Agents were coming upon their first signs of the battle. Charred hulks of military vehicles smoldered, some still aflame. Occasional bodies lay in unnatural repose, their last agonized moments frozen in their eyes. Alpha 25 ordered them to push on as quickly as they could, and to find a way out of town. They had gone to great effort to get away from this fight. They didn't want to drive right back into it.

As they slalomed through the carnage, Lancaster appeared behind the convoy. He took a shot, hitting the back car, but causing little damage other than a hole in the roof and a swerve to the Magnocar. The Dark Agents inside looked through the hole and fired back up at him. The

rest were too focused on what they saw ahead to concern themselves with Lancaster at the moment.

The lead vehicle had turned around a blind corner and stumbled right into the loud chaos of a battle. Explosions rocked the street, rubble flew every which way, laser shots crisscrossed and artillery shells rained down on the men and women taking cover in windows and ruins. In the air, drones of both sides were dogfighting for air superiority, both trying to get the upper hand so they could go on to exterminating the enemy humans below.

The Dark Agents saw little choice, being chased from above, and Lancaster saw little choice since the Dark Agents were running from him, so the convoy and the man in the jetpack increased speed and hurried through the danger zone.

Lancaster tried to slip past the drones without attracting attention, but some of them from both sides registered him as an enemy since they did not recognize his signature. Some even stopped fighting each other to chase after Lancaster. He maneuvered erratically, purposely overcompensating to juke unpredictably and throw off the drones.

On the street, the Magnocars twisted around the carnage, racing through the gambit and trying not to get hit. The agents held their fire, trying not to attract the attention of either side. No one was paying much attention to them, but neither was trying to avoid them. As such, one of the heavy weapons hit the second to last car in the line, blowing it up. The car just behind it swerved, but connected with the vehicle's back. The driver swung further around, managed to disconnect from the destroyed vehicle, and kept up with the convoy.

The Magnocars, now going over mostly rubble in the street, were slowing. The interference between the vehicles and the magnetic road was bringing them to all but a standstill. Alpha 25 ordered his driver to go full speed and ram the car in front of them.

"That has the relic in..." the driver started to say.

But Alpha 25 interrupted him, "Ram it!"

The driver did as Alpha 25 ordered and they crashed into the back of the flat-backed car. It worked. The front vehicle launched past the debris and got through the tunnel of battle. So did Alpha 25's car, and the last one.

Lancaster's sides were aching after being yanked one way, then the other. He found himself heading back toward the swarming dogfight again, and he didn't fight it. Launching straight through, the pursuing drones found their enemies again, and they all returned to firing at one another.

Lancaster grinned lightly, believing he had made it out. But when he tried to turn to continue his pursuit, he found the controls unresponsive. The jet pack had been hit. It wasn't destroyed, but its power was weak. He found himself tumbling down toward one of the buildings, directly at a window with a soldier in it. He didn't know which side the soldier was on; it didn't matter. He was going to land on him and likely kill both of them with the speed he was going.

Thinking quickly, Lancaster turned the machine off, then restarted it. The soldier looked up to see this man in a jetpack hurtling down toward him. He lifted his rifle, about to fire. The jetpack restarted, and just a couple meters away from the soldier, the thrust kicked in and Lancaster zipped away.

He was low to the ground now, close enough that he had to slalom through the large boulders. The Dark Agents were ahead of him, dodging debris and looking for a way out of the battle. Unfortunately, they were only getting further in. Now the road was pocked with craters that had to be dodged since the magnetic road was breached. Chunks of road composite scraped

the car bottoms, and they were constantly smashing through metallic hulks of destroyed vehicles. And on each side, a constant stream of soldiers fired back and forth from a multitude of levels.

Lancaster spotted a volley of shots that were about to come his way, and he ducked below them. He overcompensated again, and his right arm and body scraped the ground at this incredible speed. It tore his clothes and burned his skin, and he rose up very suddenly in pain.

Ahead of the Dark Agents, a large, mechanical foot stepped out of the side street directly in front of them. A rider sat atop the mechanical beast in a half-enclosed canopy. He turned the machine's head toward the building across from them and fired its myriad rockets. The rounds exploded all over the building's surface, sending debris, bodies, and flame pouring onto the street below.

The Dark Agent drivers hit the accelerators, hurrying out of the way. The lead one dodged around the front of the walker as boulders crashed around them, and the second dodged behind it, knocking against the walker's legs as it went. The third tried going in front, accelerating as fast as it could, but to no avail. The wall came down on top of it, crushing the car and everyone inside.

The blast exploded right next to Lancaster, and he was forced to weave and corkscrew through the propelled cement. The heat burned his skin and singed his hair, and he tried to stay on the opposite side of the street as much as possible, gaining altitude to get out of the path of the tumbling wall.

He emerged from the smoke relieved, and searching for his target. But then a rogue boulder found him. He felt a heavy punch to his back, and heard a loud crack. He wasn't sure if it was the sound of the jetpack snapping or his bones breaking or both. All he knew for certain was that his breath was knocked out of him and he was going down again. This time, the jetpack was unresponsive to everything. It was dead.

Lancaster felt like he was losing consciousness. Somewhere in the distance beneath him, he sensed that people were shooting at him again. The Dark Agents. They had gotten out of the battle and could concentrate on their pursuer once again. Lancaster shook off his lethargy and assessed the situation. He was going down right into his enemies. Lancaster remembered that he had his utility belt back, and he grabbed his grappling hook. He fired it into the side of a building and shifted his weight to one side, dodging the laser blasts that fired at him. His left hand burned with pain, and he tried to hold most of his weight with only his right hand, which strained the muscles of the right arm.

The Dark Agents turned a sharp corner, and Lancaster swung around it, his centripetal force pulling him outward until he was about to hit the building on the opposite side. He pushed out his legs and ran against the wall sideways. He felt pieces of brick and stone biting into his pants as the laser blasts chipped away at them.

Ahead, Lancaster could see another pocket of the battle. He also saw a second floor balcony at the end of the building he was on. His finger was pressing the button that reeled out the wire on the grappling hook, allowing him to keep going, but it would be running out soon, so his thumb pressed the button that released the grapple from what it was holding onto and reeled it in. He had enough momentum now, and he dove at the balcony. He hit it at full speed and rolled over several times until he hit the opposite end with a crashing thud. He wasn't sure, but it felt and sounded like he had knocked over some furniture on the way as well. The jet pack had luckily broken his fall and protected his back from twisting too far.

Lancaster got up slowly this time, removing the jet pack straps as he went. It felt like his entire body was now one big bruise. But Lancaster had to see where the Dark Agents were

going. He lifted up over the railing and looked down. Fortune was on his side as the Dark Agents had turned away from the fighting ahead of them, and were driving along the base of his building.

Peering ahead of them, he saw that they would have to make another left turn ahead, so he dashed across the balcony, looked over to make sure he had the timing right, and leaped off in time to land on the hood of the back vehicle. It was only a one story jump, but his knees felt every foot of the fall. He tried not to think about it, as he peered into the car and saw Alpha 25 shouting at his agents from the backseat. He turned to see the Magnocar with the flat back ahead.

Lancaster crouched to jump on it, and the vehicle raced away. He wasn't sure his knees could have handled the jump anyway, so he fired the grappling hook into the back of the lead car and then reeled himself in toward it.

By now, the agents from behind were leaning out their windows and firing at Lancaster. His body bumped against the ground while he twisted, trying to dodge the shots. He was aided as the driver swerved, trying to shake him, but giving him some much needed jolts away from the incoming fire. The driver cut a sharp corner, and Lancaster flew over the sidewalk, knocking against the wall, as well as some sidewalk accoutrements, one of which swiped off his hat.

The sacrifice was not in vain, nor was the added pain it was causing Lancaster. The debris he knocked over flew into the street and into the car behind him, causing the driver to swerve and lose ground. The front car was still increasing in speed, and so the added space between them made it harder for the gunmen to hit their target.

Lancaster at last reeled into the back of the car. He had just enough time to climb up and over before the back car would catch back up, but that was easier said than done. With one hand screaming in agony and other bones likely broken throughout his body, Lancaster was struggling just to move.

He attached the grapple to his belt so he'd remain connected to the car, then he pulled a pellet out of one of his many pockets. He peeked over the back of the car very briefly to get the layout. In that very brief moment, the passenger got a shot off at him, barely missing. Lancaster ducked, then tossed the pellet onto the back window. It stuck like gum.

By this point, the car behind them had caught back up, and the passengers were out the window again, ready to fire.

The pellet exploded in a cloud of smoke. The entire back of the car, and everything for a hundred feet behind it, was covered in gray. Several wild shots were fired, but stopped quickly when they realized, or were told, that they might destroy the other car or, even worse, the artifact.

Lancaster pulled himself onto the back of the Magnocar with his good hand. He could see the shape of the passenger with the gun searching for him. He was only a couple meters away, so Lancaster had to move quickly. He pulled another device from his utility belt; one normally used to send out high frequency sound waves in the jungle, but that had a nasty side effect when used in the city. He turned it on and directed it toward the front of the car. He heard the windows shatter, and then the Dark Agents screaming. His idea had worked; their goggles had shattered into their eyes.

Lancaster scurried up the flat back surface until he arrived at the cab. There, he reached around to the passenger door with his good hand and opened it. He grabbed the passenger's collar and yanked him out. The car was swerving now, and Lancaster held on with his left arm curled around the back window frame. When the car turned right, he swung inside. He reached

past the driver who, upon feeling his body reaching over, lunged at Lancaster. Lancaster leaned backward and kicked him out.

The car had slowed now, and the one behind him was catching up. The smoke was dissipating with the loss of the back window, so the passengers were opening fire again. Lancaster gunned the Magnocar, and he shot off down the street at high speed. The Dark Agent car increased speed as well and the chase was on.

Lancaster came upon several parked supply vehicles from one of the armies. He wasn't bothering to look at the logos anymore. He just curved around them as fast as he could go. Behind him, the Dark Agent car did an impressive job of also weaving through the obstacles. Lancaster cut sharply onto another road, then another. The Dark Agents kept pace, making the curves and remaining on his tail.

Lancaster was debating his next move when he came upon the ruins of a battlefield. The armies were gone, but the rubble remained. Boulders and debris littered the road. They did not block his passage, but they forced him to slow down. Behind him, two of the agents had climbed onto their hood, and Alpha 25 was climbing onto it behind them. They came within a meter of Lancaster's car as he was maneuvering around a large wall fragment and they leaped onto the back. Lancaster continued driving slow and steady. He found a clear path and got onto it but remained easy going.

Alpha 25 also jumped onto the car, and his two goons leaned down to see the driver with their guns drawn. That was when Lancaster gunned the Magnocar. One of the gammas flew off the back right away. Alpha 25 and the other minion lowered their centers of gravity and stayed on. Lancaster swerved to the right, and they held. The minion readied his pistol. Lancaster swerved the other direction, and the last gamma tumbled backward off the left side of the car.

Only Alpha 25 remained. He raised up his hand, his thumb against the ring. He was bringing out the monowhip.

Lancaster tried swerving some more, even turning down a new street, shifting very quickly as he turned. It was to no avail. The Dark Agent chief held firm. He raised his hand and brought it down. Lancaster saw it through the rear view mirror and barely reacted in time as it sliced down through the roof and through part of the driver's seat. Lancaster tried to swerve again, was again unsuccessful. Alpha 25 this time sliced diagonally through from high left to low right. Lancaster ducked under the blow, cramming into a corner of the car's cab. He was running out of places to hide, and Alpha 25 knew it.

The Dark Agent chief now had the rat hiding in its corner. He sent down a succession of blows which cut through the roof, the chair, the dashboard, anything that got in its way. Lancaster had no choice but to lower down further and further until he had no more room to shrink. Alpha 25 extended the line, enough to cut through the entire cab from the roof. His feet were steadier now; the car had slowed as he pushed Lancaster away from his driving functions. He raised his hand to begin one final blow that would cut all the way down to finish off his prey.

Lancaster was on the floor now. He knew he had nowhere else to go. But then he noticed the foot pedals. Swerving had done nothing to shake Alpha 25; but if they were to be forced to stop very suddenly and unnaturally... Having no idea what was ahead of them, Lancaster shoved his elbow into the accelerator. They shot forward at lightning speed.

Alpha 25 stumbled slightly, but not enough to cut himself on his own monowhip, and definitely not enough to throw him from the car. He readied himself yet again, but he was stalled by the sound of the horn from the car he had left. The driver was still behind them and had spotted something in the road. Alpha 25 looked up just in time to see the wreckage of a car they

were about to barrel into. He reeled in the monowhip and leaped from the car just before it careened into the parked vehicle.

Lancaster didn't know what he hit. He heard a loud crash and felt his body jostled left and right; then, after a short blankness, he felt everything flying through the air, like they were in a spin cycle in a zero G atmosphere. Then he went unconscious for a longer period of time.

When he slowly came to again, he was lying unnaturally on the road, outside the car. Searching groggily around him, he could see that he was not on the road he had been traveling, but a side alley. He wondered briefly how many times he had bounced around before finally coming to a stop. He wondered also how many bones were broken, and where he might be bleeding internally. He felt like a rag doll, unable to move. His head was swimming as well. He could just make out what was happening around him. The car was at the crossroads with another street. It had been crushed in many places, including the back, which was caved in like a can. But the storage area took a round shape around its contents, the Constellation Crest.

Alpha 25 was standing next to it searching around the vehicle. He was half hunched over, but did not look anywhere near as bad as Lancaster felt. The other Dark Agent car pulled up behind Alpha 25, and the driver jumped out and began helping in the search. Alpha 25 told the driver to stop looking for the anthropologist and help him pry open the trunk.

As they worked at peeling one piece of metal from another, Lancaster forced one arm to get in front of his body. He anchored the elbow into the ground and pulled himself forward. Then he forced the other arm forward and anchored its elbow in the same way, pulling himself slowly forward. In this fashion he intended to pull himself up to the Dark Agents and take the Constellation Crest from them. He didn't know how he would do this, but he was bound and determined.

A boot stepped in front of Lancaster's face, blocking his path. He followed it up to a skirt, then a toga shirt, then a head covered in orange and red hair. Jude.

"Where's the artifact, Lancaster?" she asked, her pistol pointed right into his face.

Lancaster sighed because laughing would hurt too much. "I'm really tired of that question," he said.

Jude stepped on his hand, the left one; right on the broken finger. He cringed in pain, but he sucked down a scream. He didn't want the Dark Agents to hear them. She gestured with her gun again to remind Lancaster that she had it.

Lancaster had half a mind to tell her, but he had already reasoned that the crest would be in worse hands with Nikos than with the Dark Agents, which was already a terrible proposition. "You know he's going to betray you," Lancaster told her.

"Betrayal's the natural order of humanity," she responded.

"I thought you hated being part of a corporate system."

"Stop changing the subject," she said, again reminding him that she had the gun.

"I'm on topic," Lancaster said, straightening up a little. "What do you think he's doing with these relics? He's working with the corporations to make them more powerful. So they can control everyone's lives..."

"I'm going to start shooting limbs off if you don't start talking right now," she said.

"Well, you're going to want to start with the right hand because the left one's already been pretty mangled..."

Jude kicked him across the face with the steel end of her boot and he fell back, the bruise already starting to form.

He was breathing hard now; his body near hyperventilating. But he had grown a certain

fearlessness that comes with the feeling of complete hopelessness. “You’ll never be free with him. He might make you rich, but you’ll never be free. It’ll always be his show and you’ll just be his puppet...”

She kicked him in the chest and he keeled forward. Her gun snapped to the top of his head. “Last chance to be valuable to me,” she said.

“It’s behind you,” he said between coughs.

“Nice third grade trick,” she mocked. “Remember who you’re talking to. Now where is it?”

He looked up at her, past the barrel of the gun now connected to his forehead. “It’s behind you.”

“You’re going to make me kill you, aren’t you?” she said.

“Just look,” Lancaster said. “I’m not as fast as you when I’m in one piece.”

Jude knew what he was saying was true. She was fast enough to get over here to cut Lancaster off when she heard reports of him smashing through the city. She could certainly pull the trigger if she felt him so much as twitch. She twisted her head back and then forward again. Lancaster could see the moment it all registered with her as her eyes jumped awake, and she looked back again, this time removing the pistol from Lancaster’s forehead. “Shaz!” she exclaimed.

The Constellation Crest was loaded into the backseat of the car that was still working, and Alpha 25 was climbing into the passenger seat. Jude had just enough time to aim her gun when the car zipped away, disappearing behind the wall just as Jude got off her first shot. She sprang toward them with her bionic legs, leaping 10 feet with every stride.

Despite her speed, Lancaster was pretty certain she would not catch them; and they were nearly impossible to trace. But at least it got everyone off him for the time being, so he rose to his feet, his body hunched over, unable to stand upright, and he stumbled into the darkness. With every step he could feel his bones creaking; it felt like they would all give way any moment and he would dissolve into a massless goo. Every muscle seemed like it was swelling out of his skin, which felt brittle and frail.

He soon reached a town square. He could hear thunderclaps of battle in one direction, and spotted the glow of it over the rooftops in a couple directions. People were dying every second out there; many more were wounded; far worse than him, though he couldn’t imagine anything worse.

Lancaster stalled a moment, determining where to go next. He could pull out his Illuminator to see his choices, but he couldn’t bend his arms to feel inside his jacket pockets.

Then a ship appeared above him. It had come up low over the tops of some buildings and now it hovered over the middle of the town square. Lancaster could at last see the exits to other roads, but he could run no more. He looked up at the shadow of the ship’s belly and said, “Fine, you win! Do whatever you’re going to do, but get it over quickly!”

The ship lowered over him, and soon the glow of the thrusters was bouncing off the metallic street and illuminating the ship itself. It was Odin’s Revenge.

Once he had landed, Little Jack lowered the ramp and stepped down to see his nearly dead partner. “I can’t leave you alone for one mission,” Little Jack said.

“How’d you find me?” Lancaster asked near tears.

“I got your signal when you called. I couldn’t answer because I had just blasted my way out of that ship. Nice friends you got there.” Little Jack signaled for Lancaster to come in, and he did, forcing each and every step. As they slowly made their way to the cockpit, Little Jack

explained that he had located a place on the planet to hide until he got Lancaster's signal. But once he did, he could not answer back without being located by the Dark Agents who were searching for him. Lancaster had left the Talki on, which provided Little Jack with his coordinates. He just needed to catch up with him.

As they started to take off, Lancaster said, "I think their shuttle is out in this direction."

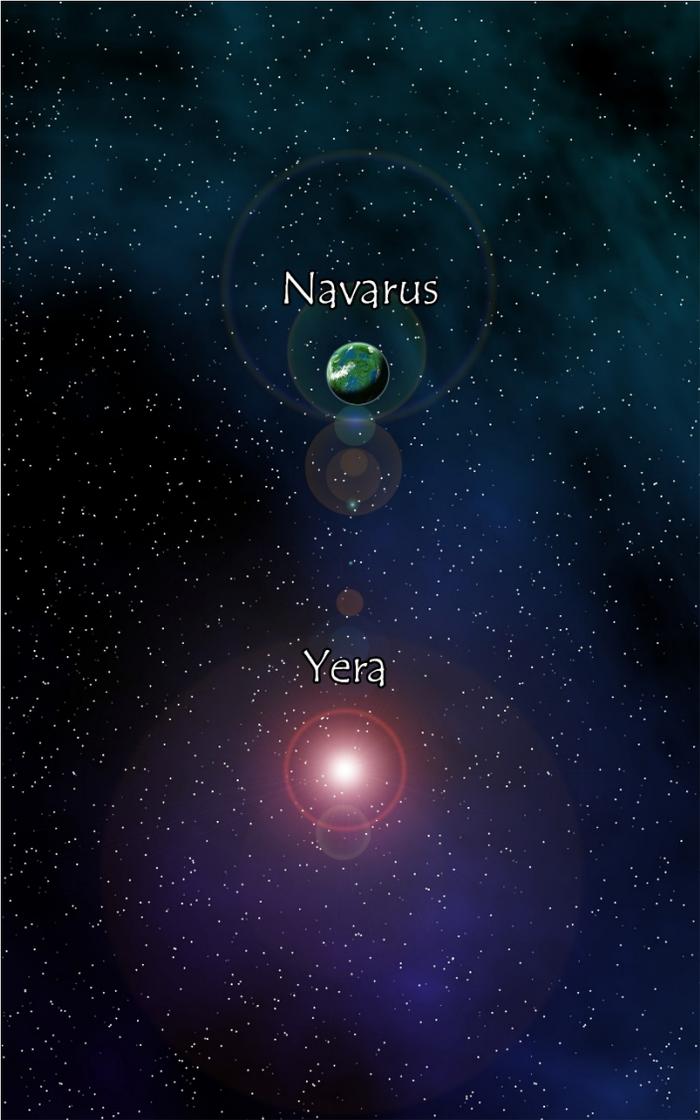
Little Jack turned his frosted over glasses toward his partner with the sort of expression one gives an addict.

"We can't let them have the Crest, Jack," Lancaster said, answering Little Jack's look.

"They already have it," Little Jack said. "If we vis a signal that denotes their ship, it's a decoy that will lead us to be destroyed. And I don't know if you've noticed, but there's a war going on. One that they can fly straight through without being seen and we can't."

"Just buzz over that edge of town as we leave," Lancaster said.

Little Jack was unable to fly straight up into orbit anyway as the Navarus ships were all there. His best chance was to launch out of the atmosphere from a different angle. So he humored his partner by flying out in the direction that the Dark Agents and he had come into town. They flew in low enough to see as much as they could both visually and with their sensors. They spotted Jude returning back into town, and they found the one remaining car the Dark Agents had been using, now abandoned about a kilometer out of town near a clearing in a small wood. The Dark Ones gotten away.



CHAPTER TWELVE

THE BATTLE OF NAVARUS

Emerging from spectrum drive was always the most dangerous part of space flight, except for perhaps entering spectrum drive. In both instances, ships were at their most vulnerable. Every molecule vibrated with a resonance that made it sensitive. It was part of the transition from one dimension to the next, and any interference could scatter them to the vacuums of space. A single laser blast could potentially destroy an entire capital ship.

It was for this reason that invasion fleets typically came out of spectrum drive further from their target planets. But Ivar Cordova believed he could chance it. Navarus forces had invaded Parabur space and left themselves wide open. He had a clear shot directly to their heart; into the Yera system, right to the home world of the Navarus, which they had named after themselves. He was gambling on the notion that they had spread their fleet out to the far reaches of the quadrant fighting three fronts, and that there was little left to defend the home world. Ivar assumed that his forces would take a few casualties, but it was a small price to pay for total victory.

He was taking the extra risk of coming out close to the planet because he wanted this entire invasion to be finished before any enemy fleets could be recalled. This was a surprise attack, and he didn't want it spoiled by too long of travel through the Yera star system.

As his mighty vessel, the Intrepid, pulled out of the veil of the space rip, he saw very plainly that his risk had paid off. All of his ships had emerged successfully, and the planet sat helpless before them. As the scanners came online and reports came in, he learned that it had been better than even his wildest dreams. Not only were their defenses low, the Navarus had no ships whatsoever to defend their home world. All they had were their defense satellites which worked better as support weapons. They would easily be swept aside by unmanned drones; and once they were gone, they could simply bombard from space until the self-proclaimed empress pleaded enough.

It went as simply as he imagined. Standing in the center of his pristine ivory bridge, the huge view screen at the front showed him what he wanted to see. Yellow sparks winked in and out of existence in front of the planet until they all died down and the orbit seemed just a little cleaner. So he ordered his whole fleet forward, and told the bombers to get within striking range.

He had come to see this; and to accept Ceriliseta Navarus' surrender. Baron Cordova would typically leave this sort of task to a military commander, or at most a corporate admiral. But today was special, and he wanted to make sure nothing went wrong. He had boarded his top dreadnaught; a long ship covered in pure bronze. It had a thick belly and a thin exoskeleton upon which sat laser and missile weapons. The core wielded some of the best defensive capabilities ever created by mankind. Shield projectors, chaff, and anti-missile racks lined the inner hull at the gaps in the outer hull. Sensor arrays marched up its spine like vertebrae up to its neck where a small, lit rise denoted the bridge. Not much further forward at the front, the

figurehead of a triumphant angel led the way.

The other vessels were plated in bright reflective materials as well. Though blindingly obvious to see, they did not suffer a disadvantage on the battlefield. The reflexivity confused sensors, which were more important than sight in capital ship space combat, and besides, they wanted to attract attention. Each was armed so thoroughly with first strike weapons that they typically took down their opponents before the enemy got off a shot.

The bombers were the one exception. Their flat fronts were pocked with missile racks prepared to flatten whole cities if desired. Though slower to fire, when their ordinance found their mark, the target was obliterated.

These now lined up along the side of the planet bearing down on their targets. The other vessels took positions at their flanks, prepared for any counter attack that might be attempted. The whole movement was done in a matter of minutes without a single casualty being taken.

The captain of the *Intrepid* was suspicious. She pointed out that this had been a bit too easy of a takeover of a capital world.

Ivar was incredulous. Still standing in front of the large screen rather than utilizing his admiral's chair, he said, "Appreciate a gift when it is given you, Captain Ginja. I like to remember the old saying by that conqueror Napoleon that went, 'never interrupt your opponent when he is making a mistake.'"

"I remember another one that said something about beware of Greeks bearing gifts," the captain said.

Baron Cordova did not respond to her. He instead turned to the communications officer and asked, "Is there anything from her highness yet?"

"Nothing, sir. Should I send out a threat?"

"Simply send her an image of our sensor readings showing our positions and make it clear this is the last warning."

The message was sent, but still there was no answer. This was the one thing that unnerved Baron Cordova. He had expected Ceriliseta to be prideful; but this level of silence made no sense. She should at least be trying to stall him while coming up with a response. Was she simply suicidal? Had she evacuated herself and her staff off the planet? If so, why hadn't someone else taken over and begun pleading for their lives?

But the momentum had built up already, and Baron Cordova had to take action, or lose the faith of his fleet. He ordered his missile boats to prepare to fire.

That's when the sensors operations lit up with sounds and images. Baron Cordova and Captain Ginja both looked over at them instantly, their heads nearly snapping out of joint with the speed. The operators did not explain, and even when prompted, they reported an inability by themselves or even their computers to figure out what the sensors were picking up, but it was behind them.

"Where behind us?" Captain Ginja asked.

The sensors commander stammered, then said, "Everywhere behind us."

The front screen switched to the rear view of the ship. Space was a veritable tidal wave of activity. Electrically charged clouds were swirling, their centers filled with a wavering film, like viewing something underwater where the light is refracted. Inside, there was little more than darkness, and the matter was sensed more than seen. There were at least a dozen of them, probably more, all lined up behind the Cordova vessels.

Baron Cordova ordered all the ships of the fleet to turn around, even the bombers. As he was still giving the order, bows of large ships emerged from the holes, their gaudy figureheads of

large, fierce animals jumping out of their manes leading the way. The rest of each ship was covered in abundant décor. Weapon mounts were covered in artistic designs that stretched out over the sensors and other ship functions. Even the thrusters were rimmed with rich architecture. This was the Navarus fleet, as confirmed by the ships' electric signatures, and their corporate sigils visible on their hulls.

The obvious thought was that they were coming out of spectrum drive, but a second considering this ruled out that possibility. The rips in space were too accurate; they had opened at the perfect distance behind the Cordova ships to bring the vessels in at point blank range without running into them. The gateways themselves did not have the brightly colored hues of the plank from spectrum drives. And most disturbingly, the ships coming out of these gateways were not moving slow, the way vessels looked when they were emerging from spectrum drive. One of the Cordova ships took a pot shot in any case, and it was ineffective, proving to everyone that they were dealing with something else entirely.

The emerging fleet opened fire all at once, sending a wave of energy and missiles into the Cordova ships, and tearing a quarter of them to shreds. Ivar's craft was hit as well, though its myriad defensive systems held it together enough for him to order a return fire. None of the ships of his line were prepared for a full volley, so they all had to fire at will, causing their salvo to be split and uneven, like a sprinkle of rain that can't turn into a full shower. The lack of coordination meant the shots landed randomly and caused little discernible damage. However, they outnumbered the Navarus ships, and once they could turn full broadsides, they should have enough firepower to vanquish their foes.

Just before they could get into position, more holes appeared, much like the last ones, only this time they were in front of the Navarus ships. Several of the Cordova vessels fired into these voids, and their blasts fizzled into the ether. The Navarus ships, though concealed behind the haze, were just visible as shadows. Ivar could see them thrust forward, as though on a collision course for his fleet, but then they were swallowed up inside the holes, which subsequently disappeared.

Before the holes vanished however; in fact, before the Navarus ships had even fully entered them, other holes appeared behind the Cordova fleet, now between it and the planet. Sensors were confused for a moment as the Navarus crafts appeared in these new holes before they vanished through the first ones. A moment later they emerged, and another volley ripped through another quarter of the Cordova fleet. Now the debris of the destroyed ships was smashing into the ones still operating, causing damage and wreaking havoc with the sensors.

Baron Cordova's vessel was again hit. Again it withstood the blows, though it was being chipped away piece by piece. Their fleet was still slightly larger than the Navarus ones, so he ordered most of them to come about to their maximum firepower. He also ordered his more maneuverable sloops to watch the flanks, and the remaining missile boats to turn on their rear and wait for something to appear.

This strategy did a little better against the enemy's maneuvers. Some of the Navarus vessels remained in limbo slightly longer than the rest, and they reappeared on the Cordova fleet's flank directly ahead of his maneuverable corvettes. The ships fired almost entirely simultaneously, and both sides took massive amounts of damage, even losing a few large warships.

The damage and casualties were being shouted out on the bridge of the Intrepid. Captain Ginja responded to matters on her own ship, and Baron Cordova responded to ships of the fleet. They were both standing above the seats of their communications officers trying to discern one

shouting voice from another and prioritize commands. Then the holes appeared again.

This time Ivar knew he did not have the time to see where they would emerge, so he ordered his fleet to “circle the wagons.” When he was met with confused expressions, he told them to form a circle so they would always have a broadside facing outward. Ginja nodded and called on all of the ships to follow her lead, and she began flying in a wide circle. The maneuver was awkward, and the other captains were visibly confused. Their ships milled about like a traffic jam trying to untie itself from its knotted existence.

The new holes appeared and the enemy vessels began to emerge... everywhere around them. There was no longer a front to face; in every direction there was an enemy bearing down on them. There even seemed to be more of them, despite having taken casualties.

Everyone was calling on Baron Cordova to tell them what to do. The channels were filled with noise and desperate chatter. He could think of nothing, so he told them to fire in every direction. They did; every vessel shooting independent of the next, trying to hit anything within range.

The Navarus ships were more coordinated. They fired together, and nearly every invading spacecraft was destroyed. The Intrepid was one of the few that remained, and to see it visually, one might not know it. Only the sensors could tell that power was still coursing through its veins.

Even the bridge was all but decimated. Sparks illuminated the smoke in bursts and chunks of the walls were scattered across the floor. Bodies, too, mingled with the debris, though which departments were now compromised as a result, one could not tell by first glance.

Captain Ginja asked Nikos for permission to retreat, but she got no response. Searching for him in the gloom, she could not find him. He had taken the opportunity in the confusion of the explosions to get off the bridge. It was time for her to lead a withdrawal. Ginja stumbled to her seat, fell into it, and called on all departments and every other ship to get out in any way they could.

It was the last order she gave. After the Intrepid blew apart in a mighty cloud, the few remaining battle craft tried to get away. They opened gateways into the brane with their spectrum drives, and as soon as the colorful space rips appeared in front of them, the Navarus ships took advantage of their vulnerable states and fired. The first shots to find them blew the cruisers to pieces.

By the time the battle was over, not a single Ivar ship remained, or got away.

Ceriliseta Navarus had been on board one of her ships to see it through in person. She was all too aware that if this plan failed; if the wormhole drives did not work; if they were unable to outmaneuver the enemy ships, if the fleet moved too slowly; if any of the long list of possibilities kept them from victory, it would be a much more painful and humiliating death down on the planet. They had to win; and she had to be there with them.

There had been a couple hiccups with the plan. They had been slow to react to the Cordova fleet when it first arrived and set off the planetary sensors. The crews were still getting used to this new light jumping engine, and everyone from the pilots to the engineers to even the communications officers were having to adjust to new machinery and ways to operate them. She did not want anyone going through the wormholes until every ship could go at one time; so they had waited until the slowest crew member could get everything right.

Their second potential disaster came when they emerged from the wormholes to find the Cordova ships protecting their flanks with smaller crafts. This had been the focus of the second

attack, and when it was partially foiled, Cerilisetia realized she had lost the benefit of surprise already, so it was time to perform the maneuver she had been training her captains to do ever since she learned they would have these drives. The results made her proud that she had made that call.

And now, with Ivar Cordova's main fleet destroyed, and Abdalla Azizi killed and his barony reeling, it was time for Cerilisetia to go on the offensive. At the moment, she was limited on the number of ships she could refit with the wormhole drives, so she used them very strategically at the points that would be most challenging, and where she knew she could win. The rest of her fleets fanned out throughout Cordova's and Azizi's territories. Entire corporations folded on the mere rumor that her ships were heading in their direction.

The Battle of Navarus took on a very ominous infamy. The difference in numbers between the two sides was often exaggerated, giving Cordova a far bigger fleet than he really had; but even when the story was truthful, the implications of what Navarus could now do were severe, to say the least. No one knew how she had developed these new drives, and there was nobody who was even close to developing anything like it. This one invention could make Ceilisetia invincible; and considering the fact that she had overthrown her own father, her ruthlessness knew no bounds.

Every corporation and barony shivered at what was to come. When she was finished with her three enemies, where would her eyes turn next? With the weapon they had seen and who knew what weapons were to come, combined with the power she would have with all those planets under her belt, she could very well conquer the entire known galaxy.

Cerilisetia was aware of these fears, and she preyed upon them, hiring propagandists to continue to exaggerate the numbers at the Battle of Navarus, and spreading rumors that all of her ships had this new drive, and other weapons were on their way. Galactic control was a strong possibility for her future, but for now she needed to concentrate on the rivals before her.

Cordova's corporations folded within two weeks, disregarding all protests by the barony shareholders and handing over all assets and control to Navarus. Cerilisetia swallowed the ones that were useful into her own corporations, then sold the remainder off to other empires for a tidy profit. She used these proceeds to bear down on the Parabur barony, conquering and purchasing Baron Azizi's former holdings.

Believing that Cerilisetia had had their monarch executed, the Azizi family banded together and refused to surrender or sell. They fought on, coordinating with the Risi Barony, run by Gideon Chow, whenever possible. Cerilisetia learned this and drove a wedge between them, conquering a string of systems between the two empires to make it difficult to travel between them.

Both the Azizi family and the Risi Barony called on anyone to help, especially the Goddard family barony, which had recently been humiliated by Empress Navarus when she sent home their princess. But their pleas were answered with silence. The Goddard family knew how the winds blew, and they knew how dangerous Cerilisetia could be. So they stood aside.

Soon, the Parabur Barony fell, and the Azizi family was made to either bow to Cerilisetia in front of their remaining subjects, or face execution. Some of them chose the latter, and she granted it.

At last she turned on the Risi Barony. Gideon Chow had sent messages requesting peace, and even granting certain properties and territories as a gift of good will. Cerilisetia had counter-offered a temporary truce, one just long enough for her to finish off her other rivals before turning on him.

Baron Chow did not take the bait. He turned to other barons and warned them that they needed to stand together or they would fall to Navarus one by one. No one took the offer. They all had R&D teams working on a countermeasure to the wormhole drives, and they wanted as much time as possible to get ready before she came after them.

By the time Empress Navarus was ready to take on Chow, he was still all alone, as he suspected everyone would be when she chose to go after them.

Bela finished filling Galek in on all of the latest news while Galek ate his meal. Their latest visits went mostly like this. Bela considered it his penance for having betrayed his former employer; for breaking his oath, which had always been his bond. For that he made himself face Galek every day as he brought him his meal.

Whenever Bela thought he was boring the old man, he stopped; but Galek always told him to keep going, so he did. All along, Galek would stare into the distance while slowly eating his food, listening, and saying nothing. He was clearly deep in thought, but not sharing any of his feelings. Instead he thanked Bela when he was finished eating and listening. Bela wanted to ask what he had concluded, but he knew that Galek Navarus's thoughts were not for any traitor.

Today, though, Galek spoke just as Bela was preparing to leave. He said, "Competition is what always kept me in line. It's what keeps everyone in check. It's the great balancing power. Without it..." Galek was looking at the back wall now, as though some movie was playing there that Bela could not see. "I was not as good to you as you deserved, Bela."

"You were always fair to me, Don Senior..."

"If that were true, I wouldn't be in here," Galek said, as though shushing Bela. "I have much to answer for. I did not wise it until I saw myself in my daughter. You've shown me that, Bela. I cannot blame her for anything for which I would not blame myself. She is me unrestrained; what I would be if I possessed the will; though I never dared to see it. And now nothing will halt her from controlling everything. I should be proud, but I fear too much for the human race."

Bela watched him with his stoic face that was hiding a frightened and ashamed child. He took the dishes and walked away.

* * *

Nikos had set up headquarters in Azizi's office suite. The bodies were still being removed and the bloody carpet and furniture were being replaced, but Nikos liked the view and the luxury of it all, so he put up with the disturbing inconveniences.

He barely noticed them anyway. His mind was heavily occupied with how to locate and capture the Constellation Crest. The whole point of capturing this planet was to get the artifact, and it slipped from his grasp just as he arrived. He needed it recovered soon, before Ceriliset began questioning his value and why she trusted him with an army to begin with.

Jude was in the office with him. She noticed the morbid remains more than he did, and was more affected by them, but she was concerned about the failure to recover the Crest as well. She had chased the Dark Agents' vehicle down the street, straining her bionics to their limits to catch up, but to no avail. She might have caught a slower wheeled vehicle, but a Magnocar on one of its cleared streets away from the battle was just too fast. She had been kicking herself ever since then for being distracted with the anthropologist. Jude had assumed he knew something. Who would have guessed he was chasing someone for it? Sometimes her bionics

interfered with her reason, especially when they had been active for a time. Cooled down now and thinking more logically, she realized how obvious it was that he had been chasing the people with the objective. But it was too late to change her choices, and she was now trying to make up for her mistake by locating where the group in the Magnocar had gone.

She had done some digging on the Galaganet and found rumors and speculation about this faction that some called the Dark Ones. They were known for destroying alien artifacts and covering their tracks. No one knew where they were based and how they recruited; and the fact that they appeared in so many places implied that they moved around a lot.

Jude had stayed away from Nikos' office for a couple days after she had given him the news that the Constellation Crest was gone. After winning the battle, he had sent out search parties and inventory specialists to every storage facility in the city. When she told him she had seen it taken away, his eyes burned, his face wrinkled, and his body tensed so completely that it looked as though he would explode with nuclear force. He did not blame Jude, at least not openly, but since she had failed to recover it, she thought it best to steer clear of him for a little while.

She also thought a little bit about what Lancaster James had said about Nikos. Something about him using her only for his own ends. She didn't remember the exact words; she had been in her cybernetic adrenaline rush. But the point struck home for her. She had noticed his egocentricities in their travels. Every decision had to be his, and every opinion was measured by its nearness to his point of view. As it so happened, these ideologies had led him to be right, and were the reason they had remained on the trail this long.

However, the anthropologist had said something else that was a bit unnerving. He had claimed that Nikos was selling out to corporations. Jude shook this off as untrue because they were using corporations for their own purposes, manipulating them to accomplish their goals. Nikos had even convinced one of the baronies to let him lead one of their armies.

But now he was settling into one of their offices, moving in like it was his home base. Sure, he was using it to find the Constellation Crest, but how long was this going to last? He was even having it redecorated in this own style, which included the heads of animals he'd hunted all over the known galaxy; a practice that made Jude's stomach turn.

She shared none of these concerns with him as she leaned back against the ivory table that had replaced the Constellation Crest in the room. Jude instead listened to Nikos' plan to get the device back.

He was rambling more than he typically did. Usually concise with his words, Nikos was now elaborating on why this idea was the best one to get back the artifact that she had lost. She noted the blame, but did not argue it. His plan was to have sketches made of the Dark Ones that they had seen and post them in every computer system throughout Navarus space, and to post them all across the Galaganet in case someone in a different corporate territory had anything to say about them.

"I've already scoured the Galaganet," Jude said. "I even plugged into it and apreended quite a bit of information."

"Uh-huh," Nikos responded vaguely, not looking at her.

"I learned their name and some of the other places they've struck..."

"Anything about the artifact you lost?"

"No... They don't even seem to have a home base. But I recced some leads; some places I could start to ask around about their methods, maybe a pattern. Some might even sav where they like to go for pleasure on their off days..."

“Yeah,” Nikos said again, unclear as to whether he heard anything. This time he turned his back, looking over the office furniture he planned to replace.

Frustrated, Jude said impatiently, “You know I was once part of a powerful corporate spy ring, and am an expert at subterfuge and network operations.”

“Part of Unterorg,” Nikos said paying only a little more attention to her. “An organization that dissolved after it took too many hits to recover. I’d take their leads about as seriously as I’d take Azizi’s advice on military strategy.” He stopped, looking at Jude and her tense expression. “Present company excluded, of course,” he said with a large, wrinkled, phony smile. “I’m not hithering off on any wild tulko hunts; we don’t have enough resources for that. Or time, for that matter. I’m having these images 3D rendered now, and as soon as they’re ready, you are to plug into the Galaganet and spread them to as many places as possible.”

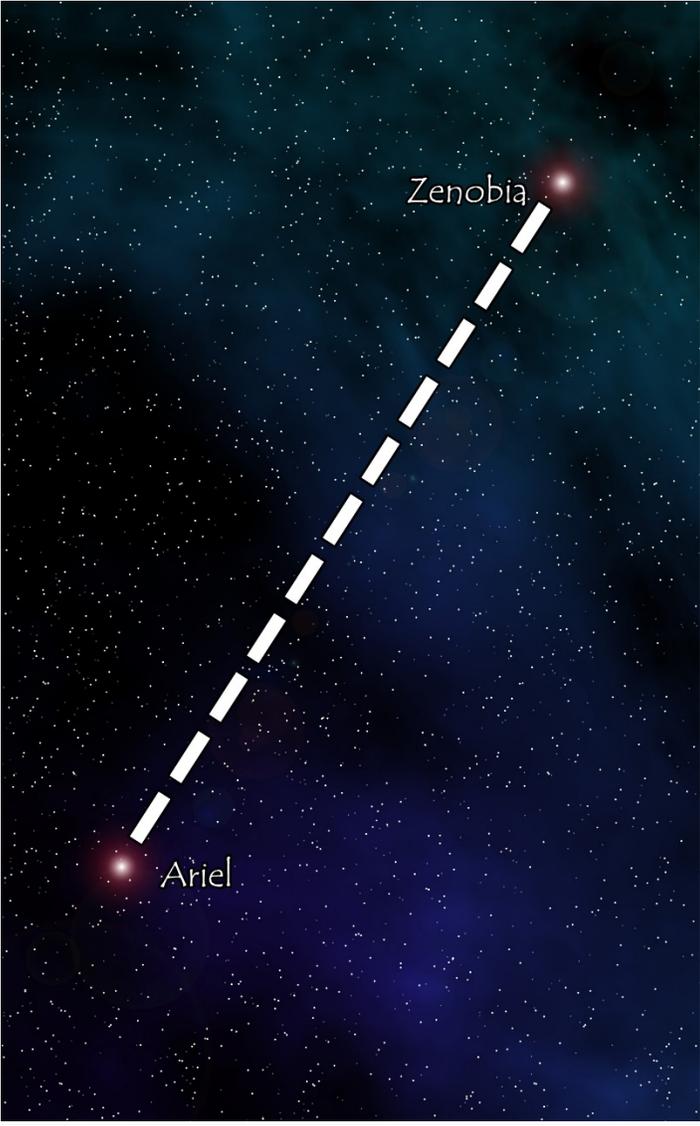
“If I’m going there anyway, I might as well look up some of my connections, and...”

“Don’t waste any time looking up old friends,” Nikos interrupted, his attention now fully on Jude, and the impatient expression on his face said he didn’t want it to be. “You are on my time now. You’re a hired gun, well paid, and you are to follow my commands. Understood?”

Jude’s face dropped. She thought of what Lancaster had said. “Yes, sir.”

The large, insincere smile returned to Nikos’ face. “Good girl. Don’t worry that pretty little head of yours. No need for you to think. Just go do your job.” Finished with her, Nikos returned to his job.

And Jude turned and returned to hers.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

STARTING OVER

A rushed knock at the door startled Mika, but when she headed toward it she took her time. It was probably some student taking a project too seriously, or worried more about getting a good grade than doing the work to earn one. She opened the door to find something more disturbing. Lancaster was leaning so far over Little Jack's shoulders it appeared that he could not hold himself up. His face was discolored by lumpy bruises. The right side of his body looked like someone had tried to skin him alive. His left hand was in a brace, and his legs were buckled over such that he didn't appear to be standing by his own will.

"He wouldn't let me take him to a hospital until he'd seen you," Little Jack explained.

"They ripped my jacket," Lancaster squeaked in the most pathetic voice Mika had ever heard.

"He liked that jacket," Little Jack added.

"What..." she started to ask. Then she realized she didn't want to know, and he needed to sit down. "Come in. Sit down over there."

Little Jack helped Lancaster into the house and they made their way to the couch. Lancaster started to moan out some words, and Mika told him to wait until he was sitting to speak.

He fell back into the couch like a dropped bag of potatoes and a relieved expression filled his purple and red face. He looked like he could fall asleep.

"Should I get you gents anything?" Mika asked.

"Perhaps some water..." Little Jack started.

But Lancaster interrupted, "I found where they were going. I saw where Teo was going, Mika."

Mika knelt down to Lancaster, mesmerized by his weak voice.

"It was an entire city," he said, catching his breath between each sentence. "You should have seen it. Towers of the Milak Shivar that stretched into the clouds. It was beautiful."

"Where?" she asked, trying not to sound urgent.

"Teo wasn't there," Lancaster replied, getting at what she was asking. "His partner... didn't make it. But Teo piked on."

"I'll get you some water," Mika said, rising. Lancaster grabbed her arm. "It was the Constellation Crest they were after. I've seen it. I touched it."

Mika began to shiver. They had searched so long for the elusive artifact that she had begun to question their own theory; to doubt its existence.

"It does exactly what we thought it would do," Lancaster told her. "It is the key... The master key... To everything the Siguerans sought after."

"Did you get it?"

"I tried," Lancaster said, nodding down at his battered body. "And then I tried to destroy it."

Mika's eyes and forehead folded up, baffled and a little disgusted.

“I was weak, and afraid. And I gave into my fears. But I’m not also that I was wrong.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I had my eyes opened to what will happen if these relics are disked into the wrong hands. Mika, I think there’s a reason these civilizations fell. I think nature weeded them out, and not because they weren’t fit to survive. Maybe they had gotten too strong.”

Mika’s forehead was furrowing even more, but now out of confusion. “I don’t comprehend; how does that work?”

“They had too much. Too much they could use to destroy each other. And now humans are discovering their weapons; and it’s like a child discovering the launch codes of nuclear missiles.”

Mika did not respond, though her wrinkles of confusion subsided. She had seen the news about the Navarus Barony spreading from system to system defeating every corporate empire it came across as though they were bugs to be stepped upon. When she heard the description of their jump drives, she knew they were alien in nature. Someone had finally unlocked their secrets.

“Have you heard of the Dark Agents?” Lancaster asked.

“I’ve heard rumors about the Dark Ones.”

“That’s them. They’re an organization that claims to want to destroy all artifacts and evidence that alien life ever existed. I led them to the crest because I came to believe that it would lead to the end of the human race if it lands in the wrong hands. But it turned out I simply gave it to psychopaths.”

The confused wrinkles returned to Mika’s face.

“The Dark Agents kept it,” Little Jack blurted bluntly.

The confused creases turned to worried ones.

“I failed, Mika,” Lancaster said, looking at no one and nothing. “I failed, and I don’t know what to do. I feel like everything I have believed was wrong. That we need to destroy everything that existed in the stars before mankind populated it, because our civilization can’t handle it. But I’m afearred that might be too late.”

Mika remained where she was, knelt down beside Lancaster on the sofa, allowing his broken hand to rest on her arm. It was so quiet in the room they could hear distant clicks deep inside the machinery of her temperature controller.

After a long silence, Mika said, “Then again, ignorance never has truly led to bliss. People register they’re safe when their heads are buried in the sand, but all that really means is you don’t see the danger coming.” She thought a moment, then said, “Do you remember the Yisajarans? You’re the one who told me about them. They discovered the limitless power they could generate from their planet’s core, and they had the machinery to do it. As they dug deeper into their world, they cut through a layer of gases. They were slicing toward the core from so many locations that when the gas emerged, it was everywhere. By the time they realized what was passing, it was too late, and the entire population of the planet suffocated. But what you discovered was the most heartbreaking of all.”

Lancaster nodded. Little Jack couldn’t stand the suspense and broke the silence by asking, “What was it?”

Lancaster explained, “A team of scientists had begun to learn about the gaseous layer of the planet. They were so afraid that their discoveries would interfere with the perpetual power source, which was so popular among the population, that they stopped studying it. They could have saved their entire species.”

“What if you’ve discovered the gaseous layer?” Mika asked.

“What if the artifacts are the digging tools that released the gases?” Lancaster asked.

“The tool would have been built regardless. Nothing can ever halt the progress of inventions. You will never be able to destroy every artifact. The only thing that can ever be done is to understand why things work the way they do so that they can be dealt with. Extinction is not avoided by hiding; it’s beaten by cutting it off at the pass.”

Lancaster considered her words for a time, then smirked. “I just ciphered why you have a tendency to get together with wanderlust men.”

“Because there’s something wrong with me?” she asked.

“No,” he said. “It’s because you know that we need you to talk sense into us.”

The two of them had a laugh at that, and even Little Jack chuckled. When they quieted, Mika added, “We still don’t comprehend why so many healthy, star-faring civilizations disappeared into extinction. It could be that humanity’s only hope is that we find out before the same thing happens to us.” She looked over his cuts and bruises, then added, “After you’ve recovered a bit.”

* * *

Lancaster spent the next several days in the university hospital. He had been banged up before, but never this badly. During that time, Mika got the full picture of what happened: The Dark Agents, the Milak Shivar cities, the fate of Teo and his partner, Nikos, the underwater ruins, and the Constellation Crest. She feared for her husband, but she recognized that there were no true leads as to his whereabouts. She only hoped that wherever he was, he was somehow still alive.

Aside from that, what most disturbed her was the news of Nikos’ involvement. Lancaster had insisted that he was a dangerous man, though Mika hadn’t entirely believed him. Nikos was a fellow scientist, and a brilliant one at that. It was hard for her to believe that he would find artifacts only for his personal gain. She had always assumed Lancaster was just jealous, but the way he handled information about Teo, her second husband, suggested that he didn’t react to jealousy the way she expected. So if Nikos was uncovering relics only to sell them to the most powerful and wealthy bidder; that would not bode well.

As she followed the news of the corporate wars and the inventions by Navarus, she became more convinced that Nikos was working with them, and probably others. He had once been a valued friend, but now Mika feared him more than anyone else in the galaxy.

Lancaster allowed himself to sleep a lot once he recognized that it was the best thing he could do to get back on his feet. He had a lot of catching up to do, and he often drifted in and out of dreams during the middle of the day.

In one such dream he stood in a tall chamber at the base of a black tower. All around the periphery was a ring of Dark Agents standing at attention, their faces mostly covered by their goggles. In the center of the room was the Constellation Crest. Its surface was glowing gold and silver, and the intensity grew stronger until it was nearly blinding. The beam of light from it seemed to stretch to the very top, but the area around it sucked into pure nothingness.

Out of the void stepped Alpha 25. His eye patch was replaced by a large, mechanical eye which seemed to be soaking everything in. Lancaster realized after a moment of staring at him that the eye resembled what many scientists believed the Milak Shivar’s eyes to look like; reptilian, red and gray, with a sort of deadness to it like a shark’s. He stood at the edge of the

Constellation Crest and stared out at the gathered congregation. A moment later, Lancaster looked at them and saw that their goggles had all been replaced with Milak Shivar eyes.

Alpha 25 raised his hands over the crest as though it was his altar, and he began to chant in a language Lancaster did not know, though it resembled what was known of the Havaka language. The agents all around him repeated his words verbatim just a moment after he said them. They were repeating him so close to when he spoke that one could barely distinguish his voice from theirs, and Lancaster could only wonder how they could know what he was saying next since they were speaking over him.

Mika then stepped out onto a medieval balcony which stuck out of a wall. Behind her, still in the shadows, stood Teo. Lancaster could barely make him out. Mika said to Lancaster, "You're not going to want to see what's next."

On cue, audible footsteps approached from the opposite side. Lancaster turned to see a young man being carried by a robot into the room. Lancaster recognized the android; it was the Clockwork Man, a powerful robot he had fought and barely survived. It was tall, metal, and had no discernible eyes. It stood hunched over and by its nature looked intimidating. Despite its lack of pupils, it somehow appeared to be looking at nothing, indifferent to everyone in the room as it headed toward the Constellation Crest.

Lancaster knew the boy was in trouble. This was a sacrifice, yet the young man did nothing to resist. Lancaster looked to the other agents assembled. They had their regular human eyes now, and they all appeared young. A few of them held metal cups with calendars of various alien races carved into them. Lancaster pleaded with the young people to do something, but no one budged. Instead, they began chanting with Alpha 25 again. Lancaster began shouting, and his voice was lost in the echoes reverberating up into the rafters. He looked at Mika. She watched indifferently. He looked at Alpha 25. He was leading the chorus and pulling up his monowhip.

Lancaster ran toward the table as the boy was laid upon it. The whole room filled with the chorus of the chanting Dark Agents led by their leader. The Clockwork Man stepped away. Alpha 25 raised his monowhip. Lancaster lunged on top of the boy. The Dark Agent leader snapped his wrist downward, and the monowhip sliced Lancaster James in half...

And Lancaster awoke with a start, breathing heavily, catching his breath. He looked around to convince himself that he was back in reality. He was used to this by now; several of his dreams had been about the Dark Agents or any one of a number of other factions that had tried to kill him. He now had a process for bringing himself back into reality.

Little Jack was sitting in a chair slouched back. He had been watching over Lancaster most of the time, despite Lancaster telling him he could go enjoy the town. Little Jack had shrugged and said there wasn't much to enjoy, just bratty college students who conformed to nonconformity. Lancaster had little argument to that, but still he wished his partner would go out and at least search for a life.

Right now, Lancaster couldn't tell if Little Jack was awake or asleep. His frosted glasses continued to cover his eyes, and much of his face, like the Dark Agents with their goggles, and for the same reason. At first he had reacted to Lancaster's sudden fits, but now he just sat back and watched, even if he had been awake the whole time.

Lancaster was glad he didn't react. He would fall asleep again soon, and it made him uncomfortable to be doted on. He lay back again and relaxed.

But Lancaster did not fall asleep. He couldn't help but think about the dream. It had

been different from his other dreams. Some had been just as disturbing, so why this one was standing out, he didn't know. But he felt like his mind was trying to tell him something. He humored the notion and considered what it might mean.

As he paged through the various elements, his mind drifted from the task at hand; the sounds outside his room, the dimness of the light outside from the gathering clouds, the memories of the last couple weeks. He tried to go back to the dream and concentrate on it. He saw Alpha 25 with the alien eye. He remembered his chanting, which led to him remembering the man speaking in real life. He recalled the thick roughness of his voice, like a body being dragged against gravel. Most of what he recalled the man saying was orders to his followers, the young men and women who would do anything for him, even die. They were easily manipulated; desperate to fit in. He had taken advantage of their weak wills and susceptibility to conformity...

Lancaster stalled his thinking. His blood froze at the thought he was having. He looked out at the hallway of the hospital; all the young people of the university. He thought about what Little Jack said. 'Conforming to nonconformity.' Who was more susceptible to manipulation and brainwashing than the young? College students would be the best targets for a cult such as the Dark Agents. They were idealistic, yet self-centered. They were arrogant, yet easily swayed if manipulated correctly. They were ambitious, yet directionless. Well, not every college student was that way, perhaps not even the majority of them. But enough were a combination of those traits to make them targets for an organization like the Dark Agents.

And then Lancaster remembered the student who had followed him out of Mika's office, and that he had followed back to the fraternity. The look the young man had given him when Lancaster was told to leave was the same indifferent arrogance he saw in so many of the Dark Agents. All he needed was a pair of goggles. The house itself had been suspiciously well-groomed for a college fraternity. Not that cleanliness was proof of an interstellar cult, but it was the sort of place the Dark Agents would keep up. The agency could be recruiting kids who already felt isolated and different from everyone else.

Lancaster threw the sheets off of his body and swung his feet off the side of the bed. Little Jack shot awake, hearing his partner on the move. There was no time for Lancaster to explain his reasoning, he'd do that on the way. Right now he needed his clothes, his jacket, and most of all, a new hat. He hopped off the bed, and quickly proceeded to crumble onto the floor from lack of body strength.

* * *

Emilio Blaise woke from his stupor tied to a chair. There was little difference between his eyes opened and his eyes closed. The room he was in was all dark save for a smattering of lit candles. There were no other visible features.

He did not have enough of his bearings yet to be afraid. He was too confused. Thinking back, he remembered walking along a quieter part of campus near the lagoon. He had needed some peace from the daily grind of the useless studies and the childish students with whom he went to school. He also wanted to get away from the stresses of running his organization, preparing fellow students for their new futures that would mean so much more than the daily rigors of office work. He was leading them into something so much bigger, but some days he just needed some alone time.

The last thing he remembered was hearing someone stepping up behind him that he had

not known was there. It was hard sneaking up on Emilio Blaise, but somehow someone had done it. They must have been waiting for him at the lone building along the path. It was closed up that time of day, which was why Emilio chose that route, and he didn't know he had any enemies... until now.

A droning hum of voices began on each side of him, one by a male; one by a female. They sounded like the beginnings of a chant. He relaxed, relieved. This was likely the ritual by his superiors to officially take him out of zeta status and make him a true gamma. The school year was nearly finished, and he was ready to ascend to the next level.

A third voice began behind him; this one low and steady, the sort of voice he expected from an alpha. "Mighty spirits of the deep, we bring forth a sacrifice."

Emilio tensed. This didn't seem much like an ascension ceremony. He had never been to one, but he was pretty sure the Dark Agents that he joined were not involved with mythologies or religions.

"It may not be much of a sacrifice. It's scrawny and has a unibrow, but its blood runs true as the richness of soil."

Emilio now tried to look around, but found that his head was tied straight on the chair. He heard one of the chanting voices clear its throat, and the voice behind him paused before beginning to speak again. Emilio interrupted him and said, "Hey! What is this all about?"

"Spirits, we summon you," the voice behind him said.

"Hey! You, you need to make yourselves known right now. This is not..."

"This is a safe space for you, spirits. Bless us with your presence..."

"I am a prominent member of Phi Zeta Erebus! If you are with the same, give me your alpha numeric designation, otherwise..."

He felt cold, skeletal fingers rub down the back of his exposed arm. He screamed in fear. It sounded like a little girl.

"There is much fear in this one, oh spirits. His blood shall feed your lost souls..."

"Please no!" the boy screamed.

"You shall feast if we are not satisfied with his words."

"What words? What do you want me to say?"

"You will tell us where you were going to report to your superior with the Dark Ones."

"With the Dark Agents?"

"That's what I said!" the voice said, raising, but trying to keep the spookiness in its tone.

The spell was fading on Emilio. He began to wonder if this was a prank.

The voice behind him spoke again, quivering as though trying to sound intimidating. "We call upon you spirits, to take this boy's soul..."

The boy was beginning to roll his eyes now. This was not only hokey, it was amateurish. He and his fellow Erebus brothers had held scarier ceremonies as pledges.

As he was leaning forward in his chair, Emilio felt a cold blade run across his arm, then cut a small thin slice where blood trickled out while the voice behind him continued, "For regardless of whether you spirits exist or not, his blood will run as steadily, and his life shall dispense from his body very painfully if we cut it in the right place." The knife rose up to his throat. The voice continued, with the quiver slowly fading from it, "But it shall not if it registers what's good for it and answers our questions."

The chanting beside Emilio had stopped by now and the male one said, "That's really a lame voice, Little Jack."

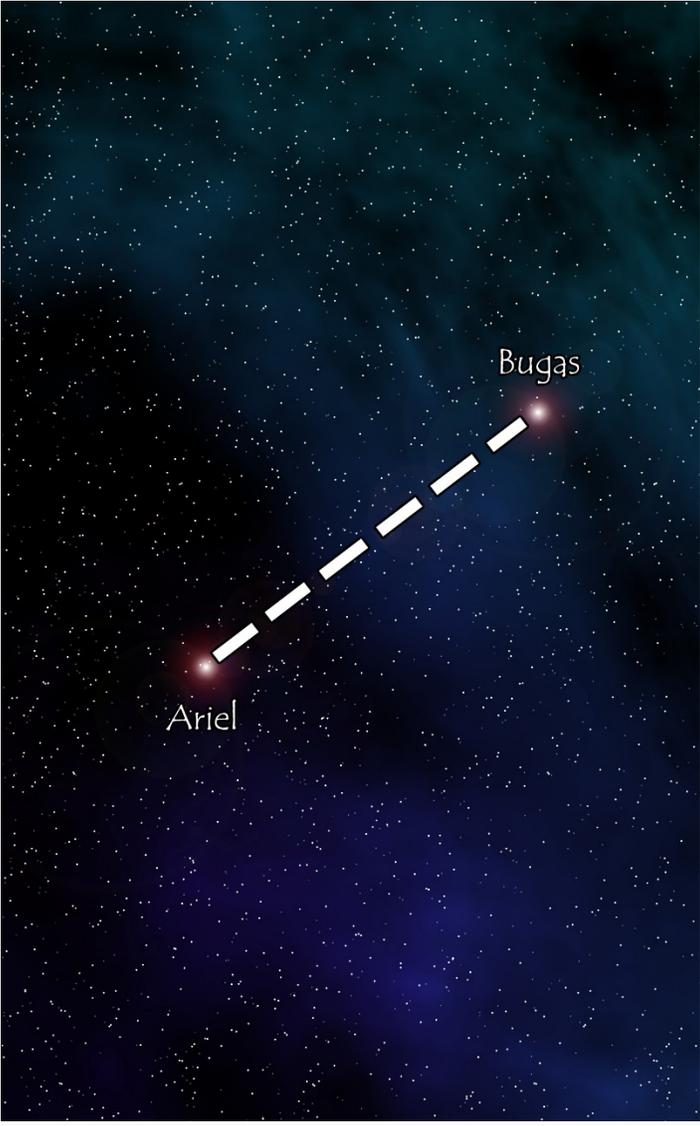
The female voice on the other side then said, "Sounds like you're setting a sight for

Dracula and miserably failing.”

“You’re the ones who wanted to do it,” the voice behind Emilio said. “Now can we get on with killing this gent? He’s claro not going to tell us anything...”

“I’ll talk!” Emilio said feeling the blade of the knife pressed up against his esophagus. It only took the hand not even paying attention to simply move by accident and it would end his life.

“Okay then,” came the male voice beside him. It sounded familiar, like someone Emilio had met briefly, but he couldn’t place it. “Let’s talk about your promotion. Where were you going to go start your life with the Dark Agents after you graduate?”



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

LAIR OF THE DARK AGENTS

The pews of the Black Cathedral were crowded with recruits. They had gathered from planets across colonized space eager to be part of something bigger than themselves, a movement that would save humanity from itself, and preserve the balance of the galaxy. They had all joined the movement in their own ways, following their idealism; some through secret meetings at universities, others through outreach groups they had joined, and still others who had been convinced by a representative who had met them while giving out literature. In most cases they had started out with small commitments, taking a personality test that pumped up their egos but claimed they needed work on him or herself, attending a small class or seminar that taught of the dangers in the relics aliens left behind, or seeing a movie made by celebrities who they were told were Dark Agents undercover that revealed the inherent evil of any being who was not human; and how their machinations would be the end of everyone.

They had arrived over the past few days. The new recruits were being provided rooms and living arrangements. The sooner they got there, the more choices they had over where they would stay. Few were surprised to find that there was no instrument for contacting the outside world. Most had joined knowing they would be cut off from their families and friends; the cost of joining such an elite organization. The few who protested were “allowed” to leave... though they never made it back to their former lives. In every case, their fellow recruits who asked were told that they had been cowards and ran back home to their parents, while their loved ones were still under the belief that the recruit had gone away into the cult. No one knew the truth of what happened to these “deserters.”

The orientation days before the induction ceremony were filled with events, entertainment, and field trips that were all designed to reinforce the recruits’ beliefs that the spreading of “rumors” of ancient alien life was harmful to humanity and the galaxy at large. At night they could make their rooms their own, under the strict guidelines of the Dark Agent code for what was acceptable and what was not.

They had all been summoned slightly earlier than their expected start date because of something very important that had reportedly arisen. What it was exactly they did not yet know, but they would be told at their induction ceremony. All they knew was that an event of epic proportions was about to unfold, and they were privileged to be a vital part of it.

And now the waiting was almost complete. They were soon to be inducted as zetas in the Dark Agent fold. They stood under the beaming spotlights that shone down from the high, faded ceilings above. There were no windows, and the walls were varying shades of ornate shadows made up of gothic designs. Gargoyle faces stared out at them from obscured corners. Winged shapes without faces froze mid-flight at the edge of sight above.

Behind the new recruits stood the double doorway through which they had walked to take their places in this vast chamber. In front of them sat the steps and stage that led to the altar

made of black obsidian and embossed with block designs; the straight line symbols for perfection and order. The entire architecture, from the marble designs on the floor to the medieval furnishings was intended to intimidate. The soon to be zetas, far from being frightened by it all, took pride in the layout knowing that they would soon be causing this level of fear and respect in others.

Approximately a dozen current Dark Agents stood at attention at strategic points around the hall. There were two at the double door entrance, a handful at the stage, and a few scattered along the edges. They were there less as a security measure; this was a secret meeting location and no one knew about it outside the faith. But it built upon the feeling of strength and power the leadership wanted to get across. These guards were important members; some were deltas and some were gammas. All were enough to impress the recruits.

At last, the doors at the back swung shut, and as they slammed together with a mighty, echoing boom, the lights went out. A murmuring reverberated through the recruits as they began to wonder about their decision. Then bright lights flashed on the stage accompanied by thunderous, yet droning music that sounded like it was being sung by a choir of gargoyles. The murmuring in the crowd shifted to delight, which amounted to near cheering as four figures emerged onto the stage from the back. Two were high ranking betas walking along the flanks. One was Alpha 25, who had just been promoted to Alpha 9 for his achievement of recovering the Constellation Crest.

He was hiding his limp as best he could. The fall from the car just before it crashed had banged him up significantly, despite the hefty leather armor of his suit. However, his promotion, and his brand new monocle, adorned with several precious metals, helped raise his spirits enough to make his strut cover up his wounded gait.

The last to enter was a man dressed in long, flowing vestments of black and white. The lighter trim glowed in the luminance, giving him an angelic appearance as he virtually floated across the room. His goggles were tiny, barely covering the eyes; though their straps were wrapped in designs. He was an alpha, though his name was outside the numerical designation. He was the archdiocese of recruitment and morale, and therefore he went by the moniker Cardinal Alpha.

The occult leader took his place at the altar. Alpha 9 stood to one side of the stage, and the two betas took positions on either side, standing at attention, facing the congregation, watching them.

Behind them, four more betas marched slowly and reverently in carrying the Constellation Crest, and two more carried in a crate from another direction while the Cardinal Alpha began to preach. "The universe needs you!" he called in a booming voice. Behind him, the gargoylian chant continued, enhanced by the occasional muted gong. "We stand at a pivotal point in the existence of the cosmos. And *you* are to be a part of it. The Dark Agents have been the guardians of humanity, the protectors of peace. Safeguarding mankind from their own greed and temptations. We have bases of operation now on a multitude of planets!" Images of apothic medieval towers in various environments appeared in the darkness above the stage. This slide show continued to illustrate what the preacher was saying as he continued. "From these headquarters have we discharged missions to every quadrant of space and defeated numerous plots to bring back the scourges of the past that will bring ruin upon our civilization. We have covered up the wounds to the fabric of the universe, and applied healing to our dimension. We are one in the greater good. And now shall you be as well, brothers and sisters."

The agents with the Constellation Crest placed the artifact respectfully down on a short

support beam that rose up from the stage. The others placed their crate on the floor. Gammas approached it and began removing goggles from them.

Cardinal Alpha continued, "With these adornments, you become one with the collective; a part of the galaxy's only hope. Place them on, and ye shall begin your journey up the Celestial Bridge to total enlightenment."

The dark priest's voice rose into a crescendo along with the music. Some of the other agents along the sides joined in on the chant, and the music filled the hall in a loud, long droning as the goggles were distributed.

Lancaster watched quietly, hidden in the shadows of the balcony on the second floor that looked over the first. He had sneaked in a few days ago with the others and had been waiting for this to begin. He, Little Jack, and Mika had hatched a plan that would begin with this ceremony. They did not know exactly how it would go, and much of it would have to be played by ear, so he was watching and waiting for his cue to act.

Once the goggles were all handed out and placed on the new recruit's faces, Cardinal Alpha began again, pumping up the egos of the new zetas, telling them what an important role they would be playing in the cosmos, and how the Dark Agents were the only path to achieving these goals. All this was timed in concert with imagery both blatant and subliminal that ran across their goggles. Phrases like "Only hope" and "Saviors all" cut into videos and photos of beautiful scenery and crowds of happy people, while phrases like "Evil" and frightening imagery ran across pictures of alien ruins and artifacts. Once the members were lost in the collages, the minister turned to more controversial subjects. He claimed that education killed. He, and the accompanying imagery and sounds around them, beat into their brains that the study of xenological subjects was the very nature of evil; and those who taught them were the devils themselves. Images of universities consumed in flames and over-watched by demon professors were accompanied by more subliminal messages chanted in the music above.

The congregation was falling in line. From above, Lancaster could see them all standing still, their jaws dropped slightly, but set firmly in place; their wills in the hands of their masters at the front. He was truly watching the creation of a hive mind.

Then a huge hologram appeared across the void above the crowd. It was the shadow of a head; and even without a face, one could tell he was looking down upon its children. "Behold," announced Cardinal Alpha. "Alpha 1 has blessed us with his presence!"

Then Alpha 1 began to speak in a low, ominous voice that shook the very foundations of the building. "Greetings, my fellow agents. You are about to embark upon the greatest journey of your lives. You kuro against the very powers of evil. Before you stands one of those heroes of the struggle. Two days ago, he was Alpha 25. But he has now risen all the way up the Celestial Bridge to Alpha 9. Only 8 of us have achieved a higher state of being than he. So, too, can you become as great a hero for the struggle of the human soul. You will begin by carrying on what Alpha 9 has begun, and he will be your commander in this quest. Before you sits the greatest map of alien species ever created. From it, we will assign each of you a task. You will go with your assigned alphas and betas, who will determine whether the artifacts are to be destroyed, or preserved for future study."

The words ended, but the voice reverberated for a time while another voice slipped in, "You are not to inquire about the artifacts, whether they are destroyed or preserved. All will be made clear as you climb the Celestial Bridge of Enlightenment."

As the caveat played, Alpha 9 stepped up to the Constellation Crest and ran his fingers across a few points. A faint hologram appeared above it, but most of the information was being

sent out.

Then the booming voice continued, “The coordinates and all the information you require is currently being beamed to your goggles. You will break into your assigned teams...”

The large head broke up for a moment both visually and audibly. It reformed, but the words were garbled. It sounded like a drunkard speaking through a malfunctioning megaphone. It then went quiet again, the entire image going completely black. The choir, too, silenced as everyone looked around in confusion. Even the view in the goggles, which had previously shown both what was on the ceiling and the visual aids and subliminal messages, had gone silent, working only as see-through goggles.

Then the face of a mighty beast appeared above them, its mouth wide, its huge teeth sharp, its jaw snapping at them, and a deafening roar filled everyone’s ears. The vision was made all the more horrific with enhancements turned on in their goggles which allowed them to see every tiny detail of the creature. The new recruits screamed in fear, as did a number of the other more experienced members. Even Alpha 9 ducked low like the rest of them.

The beast disappeared, and they were left in an eerie darkness momentarily. But then a wave of horrors returned. They saw demons among them, the walking dead, and swarming pests who had come to eat their flesh bit by bit. The recruits screamed in horror and ran for their lives. The resultant chaos found the zetas smashing into one another, panicking further, and large fistfights erupted.

Alpha 9 saw the ghostly visages of eight large people dressed in Dark Agent garb approaching him. His superiors? He felt a deep sense of dread that they had come to beat him down for his failure to control his subjects. He was distracted from them by the sight of flying beasts in the rafters. They, too, looked like ghostly apparitions, partly transparent, as they swooped down at him. He backed away, frightened of everyone that was approaching him. He vaguely heard the Cardinal Alpha crying out, running in fear nearby.

Then Alpha 9 stopped. He closed his eye inside his eye patch and the horrifying visions disappeared. He heard terrible screeching and the voices of monsters, but saw nothing. He closed the eye to the outside and saw only the frightening images, and few of them were transparent, as they had seemed before. He realized instantly that the shrieking was from his own congregation, and the other sounds were being projected. The images, meanwhile, were being beamed into their goggles. Someone had hacked their system.

Alpha 9 ripped the eye patch from his face, revealing a metallic lizard eye beneath; a clear piece of alien cybernetics he had had installed for himself. He marched over to the betas that had been assisting him on the stage and he ripped off their eye pieces. They tried to pull away as he came at them, and some of them broke out and ran. But Alpha 9 managed to get a couple of them free of their goggles and showed them the situation. They overcame their panic and started pulling goggles off of other agents.

Alpha 9 then went to the Cardinal Alpha, who was on the ground crawling away, his face covered in tears. One of his eyes was already uncovered, and Alpha 9 pulled the lens away from the other one. It didn’t make a difference aside from causing the bleating man to look at the alpha he had introduced a few minutes earlier with welled up tears in his eyes. He finally blubbered, “It’s all so hopeless. All for nothing!”

Alpha 9 did not know what the cardinal saw in his goggles, but it was clearly something more horrifying than the zetas saw. It was something designed to destroy his will even after he got away from the goggles. Whatever it was, Alpha 9 did not have time for it. He left the heap of cowardice curling up into a fetal position on the floor and searched around.

He could see nothing except the crowd churning as bodies crunched and flew in every direction. They seemed to break off into groups; one mass drifting one way, another crowd stumbling elsewhere. Some members were just on the ground bludgeoning one another. Alpha 9 did not try to stop them. He had to think about how this whole matter could have started. Clearly someone had gotten into their remote systems where they could manipulate the images in the goggles and the sound system in the room. The cathedral was in a network-free bubble, meaning someone would have to get inside... They'd have to be close to the circuit boards... He knew where they'd be.

“Upper floors!” he shouted to the nearest beta that could hear him. “Fifth floor! Take who you’ve got! Leave everyone else. Let’s go!”

The beta he had called upon asked no questions. He simply obeyed, grabbing everyone whose goggles he had been able to rip off and cutting a path through the horde of bodies toward the nearest exit at the side of the room. It was strangely easy. As they neared a pack, the agents’ horror seemed to come from their direction, and they scattered. It was almost as if the fear was directing them...

Alpha 9 looked back into the crowd and saw the largest pile moving toward the main exit further away. He looked closer, using his bionic eye to zoom in and get a closer look. Through the swirling mass he spotted two bodies that did not seem to be performing some sort of demented interpretive dance like everyone else. One of these bodies was very short, and one looked like it was shaped like a woman. Between them, Alpha 9 caught a glimpse of a golden object they appeared to be rolling... The Constellation Crest!

Alpha 9 suddenly realized what they were doing. Someone was using fear to control and direct his agents. It was essentially what the Dark Agency did, but on a much smaller and more immediate scale. He didn’t take the time to explain anything to his agents. He just redirected a half dozen of them and chased after the mob that was nearing the front exit. The rest continued to the nearby exit going up the stairs to the fifth floor.

When Alpha 9 and his assistants made it to the mob, they tried to claw their way through to the middle. However, the zetas had been convinced that the queen of the galaxy was in the center, and if any harm came to her, the entire universe would implode. They assaulted Alpha 9 and his associates with suicidal viciousness. The betas beat them down, and Alpha 9 lowered his monowhip from the ring and sliced them in half. The zetas now got desperate, and a whole wall of them flew at Alpha 9 and his assistants. One of the betas was taken down and smothered under the onslaught of bodies. The others were saved by Alpha 9’s monowhip which cleared a path, but by that time the thieves had escaped, and the door was jammed with bodies willing to sacrifice themselves for the all-important cause for which they alone had been selected.

Upstairs, the Dark Agents were all but lost without their goggles. They had gotten so used to doing everything with them that they now had difficulty performing basic functions without them. Some even tripped on the stairs.

When at last they reached the top floor and found the room their assailants had been operating from, the work station had been abandoned. There was a temporary setup with an Insta-table and a fold-out stool where one could set out a Pad or portable computer and access the Intranet. There was also an unconscious guard who had not yet missed a check-in, so his attack could not have been long ago.

The following two doors were open, and in the furthest room they could see a window open to the outdoors. A man and a woman were in it. They kissed each other in a deep embrace, then launched outside in their jet shoes and glider outfits holding hands, narrowly escaping the

laser blasts that followed them.

Alpha 9 and the five remaining guards with him cut their way through the door blockade and rushed through the bloody mess into the long, tall main corridor. Far in the distance they could see the golden disk rolling along with the aid of its two burglars and a few remaining zeta agents. A couple of the beta agents fired their weapons, and the zetas turned and jumped in front of the shots to save their queen. That left only the two thieves, one of whom fired back at them. The agents took cover and made their way slowly forward, firing as they went. These shots were deflected out of the air by the short thief who wielded two guns.

They passed an adjoining corridor, and through it Alpha 9 spotted a familiar sight: the man in the jacket with the hat; Lancaster James. He was the cause of this whole mess. If he could be captured, Alpha 9 could convince the others to come back to rescue him. And even if they didn't, the joy of simply killing this man would in some small measure make up for Alpha 9's failure and likely upcoming demotion.

He grabbed two of the betas and they started down the smaller corridor. The man with the jacket and the hat had curved around a corner, so they hurried to it, cautiously took the corner, then pursued, guns at the ready.

They did not see the anthropologist, but they did see a statue of an alien head in the middle of the floor. It had horns like a ram on the sides of its head and one giant eye formed out of a crystal in the center. Alpha 9 and his two goons approached it cautiously. Alpha 9 was still watching for Lancaster, his monowhip at the ready, and one of the betas at his side, while the other beta approached the face. He looked into the crystalline eye, trying to understand the statue's purpose of being here, or perhaps seeing how to disconnect the crystal. Suddenly he disappeared, leaving behind a few pieces of ash on the floor.

Alpha 9 and the other beta moved away from the statue, staying clear of its eye. Then came a voice echoing through the corridor, "Don't you know the curse of the one eyed monster? It was part of Raginor lore. You would know it if you learned about it rather than destroying it, or using it for your own ends."

The voice was clearer in one direction down a specific corridor, so they hurried down it.

"Speaking of which," the voice continued, "We've sent that little pint-bit of information out to your network of recruits."

The voice went silent, and Alpha 9 had not found its source yet, so he asked, "What information?"

"That you keep some of your discoveries..."

Alpha 9 and his remaining beta turned toward the source of the sound and fired and whipped. The laser blast hit a jewel encrusted scepter held aloft by a carved skeletal hand. The laser beam was sucked into one jewel and a separate blast shot out another, hitting and killing the beta.

"See, now if you knew about the Staff of Lost Kings from the Yenhop, you'd know about that little doozy," came the mocking voice.

Alpha 9 did not catch where the voice came from, so he needed it to speak again. So he called into the walls, "You have me alone now. This is what you wanted? Show yourself!"

Alpha 9 had not expected that to work, except that he hoped the voice would mock him again and he might narrow down a little further where it was coming from. But much to his surprise, the man in the jacket and hat did step around the corner. Alpha 9 wondered how he had gotten in dressed like that; how he had found this place to begin with. But none of that mattered

now. What did matter was this man's death, and in the absence of that, if Alpha 9 was to die instead, he needed to make a statement that may last beyond his demise. He said, "Whatever you do to me; whatever you get away with, you will not stop the flow of the darkness."

The anthropologist did not answer. He simply strode by him, stopping in the middle of the corridor, a mocking grin glued on his face.

Offended at this arrogance, Alpha 9 now shouted, "We are saving the universe from itself!"

Silence. The man just stared at him and smiled below the shadow of his hat.

His temper at its peak, Alpha 9 sliced down with his entire hand, the whip bearing down on its target. He was too fast for the man to react. Lancaster James was sliced in half, his entire body falling in two even parts while his smile remained plastered on his face.

But Alpha 9 noticed something almost right away. There was no blood. The rest of the body crumpled, the pieces of clothing tumbled to the ground, but nothing flowed from the body. And he immediately recognized the illusion. It was his own device. He had used it on the guards on Remo of Zenobia but he had never picked it up. The anthropologist must have gotten it.

The mocking voice appeared behind him, "No one can be saved by denying the truth."

Alpha 9 didn't hesitate. This voice was real, and the man was revealing his true self. Alpha 9 spun quickly, ducking low and swinging the monowhip as he went. It bit into the wall, slicing a scar into it without slowing.

A laser blast spat into Alpha 9's skull, and he fell backward. The whip snapped back on its bearer, and cut him in two.

Lancaster James stood before the pieces of the corpse, pistol in hand. He wore a Dark Agent's outfit, complete with the short top hat, and the goggles on his forehead. He remained for only a moment, a little surprised at the ease of his success; and a little saddened by what he'd had to do. Lancaster had taken that journey into the Dark Agents' beliefs, and he knew how deeply they held that they were doing the right thing. But for the grace of his ex-wife, Lancaster himself could have been carrying on their legacy. He, too, could have been trapped behind those goggles seeing the universe through the same fear-frosted glass that they saw it.

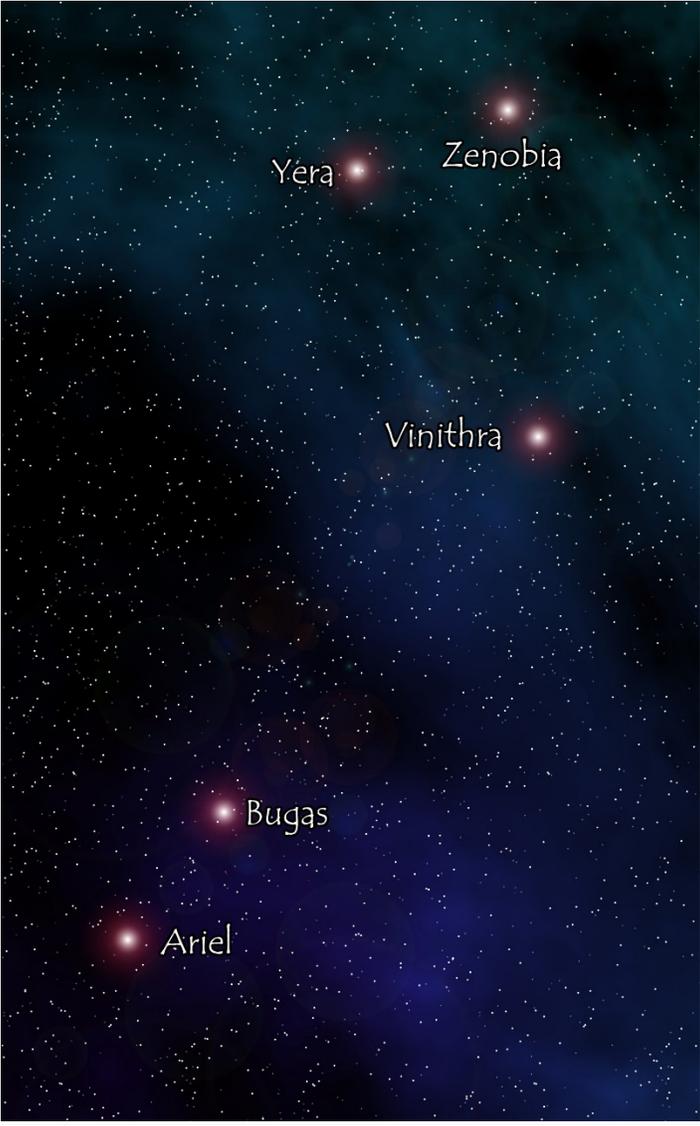
But there was no more time to linger. He gathered up the Dark Agent chief's solid Holographer, and the two trap artifacts he had left along the path. He placed them in a bag he had brought slung across his shoulder and headed back to the main corridor which he would take to the ship. In the direction he needed to go, he spotted the bodies of several agents who had been shot, no doubt trying to follow Little Jack. In the other, he saw the surviving zetas draining out into the hall past the bloody exit of the cathedral doors. Their goggles were now on their heads, and their eyes had thousand yard stares of fear. They had seen more than they had ever wanted to, and they were ready to go home.

Lancaster spotted the one man who may stop them, the Cardinal Alpha who had given the big speech only minutes before. Now he staggered as though lost in a deep, scary wood. He bore a look of anguish in his eyes. Cardinal Alpha noticed Lancaster, and Lancaster froze, tightening his grip on his pistol. There may yet be a fight for him to escape.

But the unholy man only stared as though searching for an answer. His own beliefs had been diminished, his entire universe destroyed. What he had seen was not what the others had witnessed. It was not some demon from the deep or army of darkness come to take his life. It was a vision of the mighty cities, the great works of art, the vast civilizations spread across the myriad worlds. He saw great inventions, incredible thoughts and entire creations that defined

whole cultures. And the monster he saw was himself; thousands of him spreading out across the cosmos and destroying it all. He saw himself trampling the great works and dreams of whole civilizations, smothering the candles of millions of years of evolution.

The man was crushed. He hated no one more than himself. Lancaster realized he was just the man to lead these lost souls away from this place, and to start again. He turned, and walked away down the corridor toward his ship.



Yera

Zenobia

Vinitra

Bugas

Ariel

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

VAGABOND SANDS

The Navarus expansion, which seemed so unstoppable for a time, stalled quite suddenly. Most organizations had no idea why this happened, but they were relieved by the respite. Only some of the top executives of the Navarus and Risi baronies knew what had slowed the attacks; and even they didn't have the full picture. Gideon Chow of the Risi Barony had ordered a series of daring raids on Navarus supply and construction bases. These surgical strikes were at such strategically important locations that the invasions had to stop until they could be repaired or replaced. How Gideon Chow had known about these hot spots, or how to get by the defenses, was beyond Ceriliseta Navarus. She supposed he had spies within her ranks, and she had her security measures increased.

When at last she was able to resume the offensive, she pressed for a strategically important planet with one of her large fleets that was equipped with wormhole drives. The enemy looked small and weak in comparison. But when the wormholes opened, several precise beams sliced out of the small vessels and touched the wormholes in very specific locations. As the Navarus ships began to emerge from the holes, they were closed up, crushing everything inside them.

After that, Gideon Chow went on the offensive, capturing a number of border planets, and taking several from both of his former allies to keep for himself. He celebrated when the Navarus ships tried to use their secret weapon on his vessels because it meant they could close them up in their wormholes and crush their fleets in one blow.

Smelling blood in the water, other corporations and empires joined the fight, and the Navarus Barony was forced to pull back. With their momentum gone and their secret weapon now revealed and nearly useless, the Navarus Barony had to sue for peace.

Ceriliseta left this task to her diplomats. She was more interested in uncovering who foiled her plans in so few moves. Placing her best counter-detectives on the case, they discovered first that the secret weapon the Risi Barony was using was alien in nature; another artifact altered for human use. This placed suspicion on Nikos Kazakis, who had stalled in being useful to the Navarus Barony while he claimed to be searching for the artifact that had slipped through his fingers. Ceriliseta had granted him a sizeable army and had yet to see any dividends from it.

Instead, it became increasingly clear that he had betrayed her. His computer systems and access codes had been used to seek out information about the very strategic points that had been hit. This information was not available to him, but he had somehow manipulated his way through the barony's intranet until he had located the necessary information; including the base defenses and weaknesses. This was enough evidence for Ceriliseta to personally order his apprehension, dead or alive.

Nikos was one step ahead of the order, but just barely. He had noticed that his protégé Jude had gone missing. He thought little of it as she seemed to come and go like a cat; loyal when it was feeding time, but usually wandering around with her own agenda. But this time

there was no contact for days, even when he sent an e-message directly to her cyberwear. Something was amiss.

He had nowhere near the same skills at hacking computers that she did, but he understood enough to trace where his own account had been, and he searched to see if there was some clue as to where she had been. When he found some recent visits to entries regarding specific planets within Risi space he thought they might be potential locations as to where she might have gone. But when he then saw that they were the exact points that had been attacked, he knew this was a framing, and his time was limited. Learning that the Risi Barony had used equipment Nikos had taken from Cygnus A-1 to defend against the Navarus fleets was confirmation as to what was happening, and the biggest betrayal of all. He was planning on selling that to Gideon Chow for a tidy sum when the time was right; and now he had it for free.

All because of Jude. Nikos would handle her in due time. For now, he had to go. He left most of his office the way it was. He didn't want to arouse any suspicion. But he wasn't about to leave the treasures he had discovered behind. The city of Vesuvius upon Remo was built on top of Sigueran ruins. Even though the most priceless of the artifacts was gone, there were plenty of others underground and stored away in the former Navarus and Parabur warehouses.

Nikos had made mental notes about the most valuable ones, and he now traveled to their locations and gathered them up quietly, transporting them to his ship, the Avoca. He did not use any soldiers, as he normally would. He avoided everyone's sight in case this fact seemed suspicious. After a few hours of this work, he was painfully aware that an order could be coming down from Ceriliseta for his capture and execution, and every transport was a choice between value and the odds.

At last, with his hull a little more than three quarters full, Nikos launched off without an announcement or explanation. He just slipped away into the night sky hours before the hunt began for his life.

He did not have to wait long to start again, however. He had barely fled when he received a Galaganet message from a client seeking to purchase some of his most powerful artifacts for a tidy sum. It was the Goddard family, and they were not pleased with the Navarus girl that had humiliated one of their own, yet knew the value of a dish best served cold.

* * *

The incident with Nikos Kazakis was not the only breach the Navarus Barony had in their security. While their attention was focused on the shifting tides of battle, and while their military was adjusting from offense to defense, they had a minor prison break. It would have amounted to very little except for the fact that one of the escapees was Ceriliseta's father Galek Navarus.

Their cells, and the entire cell block, were supposed to be impenetrable; and they were when they were operating. But the entire section of the building where the prisoners were held lost power, backup power, and tertiary power for just over an hour. The incident occurred during the night when the leadership was at its lowest, and their attentions were on an attack currently taking place on one of their outlying worlds. The alert had barely been noticed until the power was coming back up.

Ceriliseta was baffled. It had obviously been an inside job by someone who could operate the power in the building. She had believed that she had whittled down her top staff to pure loyalists to her throne, not her father's; but obviously someone remained steadfast to his monarchy.

There was little time to dwell on the guilty party at present, however. Galek needed to be found before he rose up support and came after her. She dispatched search parties and set a blockade around the planet. This stripped resources from the badly needed war, including the most important resource, Ceriliseta's devious mind, but she was set on finding her father.

Not long into the search, as they discovered a rocket transport had been waiting for Galek on a nearby floor, and that a personal sized ship had launched out of the atmosphere and into spectrum drive soon after the power outage, Ceriliseta knew the search would be fruitless. He was gone. 'Good riddance anyway,' she thought. Feeding him had been a waste of resources, and she had never figured out what she wanted to do with him anyway.

So her mind turned back to who might have helped him escape, especially with all the additional resources that had been used. Her answer came to her not from any clues, or any confession, or even any proof that came to light. It was when she saw the protocols that had gone into place when the power went out in the area of the cell block. She saw that other systems had turned on throughout the building. Doors that led up into vital systems were locked while doors that led to the escape route were opened. This was of little surprise, though Ceriliseta was a bit confused as to why a traitor would bother blocking his passage to headquarters. Why not let him get there with other escaped convicts and they could take the Headquarters Building by force? From there, they could have rallied Galek Navarus supporters to take Ceriliseta down.

But then she saw the doors to her own room. They were sealed shut with an extra security system of reinforced doors that were impenetrable to explosive rounds, and electrical currents that would shoot lethal currents into anyone who came near them. These doors had been sealed shut just *before* the power outage.

Upon discovering this, Ceriliseta turned to the man who had had the doors installed, her right hand man and confidante, Bela. He had been a part of the overthrow of her father, but he had also spent a lot of time alone with him. Had he taken pity on his old commander? This man who never gave off any discernible emotion?

When she began staring at Bela after listening to a report about the sealed doors, he turned his head mechanically to her and said, "It's pleasant to know the new security doors prevay so well."

"Yes," she said, knowingly. "They work splendidly."

Bela's face remained hard, though he swallowed nervously. The two masters of controlled emotions remained locked in a stare with one another, each waiting for the other to break. Neither did.

At last he asked, "May I help you with anything more, my lady?"

"Yes," she said. "Remove your rank insignia, your officer's uniform... Facto, remove all of your clothes. And report to my chambers immediately. I require a respite." As she spoke, Ceriliseta strode away from Bela. Her hips swayed side to side, her slender figure visible even through all the layers of florid garments and jewelry. Bela was well aware that he had just avoided death by a hair's breadth; and he knew he would have to prove his loyalty to her now more than ever. But at least there was only one loyalty now, unsplit and unchallenged by anything else.

* * *

After dozens of surviving Dark Agent recruits trickled back to their homes, the truth got

out about the cult's recruiting stations and their predatory practices at central locations for young people. A number of universities banned them, or anyone who spoke for them, from their campuses, and even entire corporate empires made the organization illegal on their planets because of the danger it posed on a larger scale.

They were especially reviled by organizations that were now beginning to learn the value of ancient alien artifacts, and wanted no one to interfere with their acquisition of them. The Navarus Barony had proven their value, and now everyone wanted a leg up. Many research and development departments were eager to get their hands on powerful relics, and appraisal teams were now scouting unexplored worlds for ancient ruins.

Though forced further underground, the loyalty of those who believed in the Dark Agent cause grew stronger. The actions of corporate empires were proving the point behind the very existence of the Dark Agents. Humans were too dangerous to be trusted with the power they could yield through these ancient discoveries. They would regroup for now, but soon they would emerge stronger than before, fueled by the dangers revealed by the corporate wars.

As they rebuilt, Alpha 1 and some select followers would try to get to the bottom of what happened at the cathedral on Elron of Bugas. Alpha 25 had gotten help in searching for the Constellation Crest, but he had not admitted it. He wanted all the glory for himself. Alpha 1 knew that this mysterious stranger was most likely the one who caused all the problems; and he set his sights on finding him.

* * *

Of course, Lancaster had not pulled it off on his own. After learning the location of the secret meeting, they had formulated their plan. Mika and Little Jack went as new recruits wishing to join. They would find a way to sneak in and would then get Lancaster inside. This step was easier than expected. The Dark Agents had evidently not expected anyone other than the recruits to even know where this building was.

They also sneaked in Eddie and Carres, whom they had managed to convince to join when they revealed that the Dark Agents were hoarding large amounts of money from the sales of artifacts they hadn't destroyed. They also had the fortunes of some members who had given up everything when becoming members.

The small band had slipped in a day before the event, giving everyone enough time to prepare their parts. Lancaster found where he could set up some alien traps to distract the stronger agents away from Little Jack and Mika, who would be getting the Constellation Crest out. They would in turn be covered by Eddie and Carres sending horrifying images and sounds into the Dark Agent goggles and projection systems. Carres would use this fear to manipulate the movements of the agents while Eddie maneuvered into the agents' banking systems.

The plan had gone nearly flawless, though Mika had thought there had been a mistake when Lancaster trapped himself down a corridor with the highest ranking agent at the event. She had expected Lancaster to distract them in that direction while he made good his escape. This sort of unnecessary risk was what bothered Mika; what she could never get used to.

Lancaster reminded her, however, that she was the one taking the bigger risk. Corporate empires and factions like the Dark Agents would be coming after her museum now, yearning for the artifacts they had stored inside. They had already begun; one curator to a museum having recently been murdered mysteriously a couple weeks past, just weeks before the Navarus Barony revealed their secret weapon.

All too aware of this fact, Mika and the university staff sold some of their collection to a high paying bidder to make enough money to create a state of the art security system throughout the museum that was set up by the best at breaking such systems; the former employees of Unterorg. Though Mika never trusted Little Jack, and she trusted his two friends even less, they had it in their best interest to keep this place secure since it was a likely place for future employment, and may be the only place in the galaxy where they weren't already wanted dead or alive.

They also created a private, underground wing of the museum where all the most valuable and powerful artifacts would be stored. The public would not be allowed there; they would not even be aware of its existence. Most of the staff at the university didn't even know it was built. Here these items would be safe, only to be used to help put the pieces together to some of the greatest mysteries of the galaxy; and discover what happened to alien life before humans evolved.

At the cradle of it all was the Constellation Crest. Here, in a chamber built solely for this most priceless of artifacts, they would study its secrets, and unlock what it was hiding. With the school's break started, Mika got right to work. She learned to manipulate the map and found the first most likely locations to use as leads. She gathered all the information she could find and provided all the support she was able to muster through the artifact; while Lancaster, with his new jacket and hat, and his partner Little Jack, got their ship fueled up, and set out for the planet.

Lancaster always stole one last glance at Mika before he went, watching her do her work; her face in studious contemplation. There was no treasure in the galaxy more beautiful than that.

Mika, too, stole a glance at Lancaster; but later, as the ship was a streak in the sky on its way out of the atmosphere, heading to unspeakable dangers. Today they were taking off as the sun was setting, and the stars they were off to were fading into view. She stood behind the safety of the tall windows of her classroom, fearful, yet proud of the work they were doing.

A smooth, charming voice behind her interrupted Mika's contemplation. "Lovely view."

Mika recognized it immediately, and she tried to hide how frightened she was as she turned to face him. Nikos was smiling amiably; yet his grin implied a high degree of greed. At least now it did. Mika had not always seen him for what he was, but now she believed Lancaster's stories of the man who had once been their friend and confidante.

Still, Nikos did not know what she believed, and so she smiled back, hoping he bought it as sincere. So far it seemed to be working. He entered the room and strolled casually toward her. "I hear you're remodeling the museum."

"We're freshening it up a bit, yes," she answered, considering how close she'd let him come before revealing that she didn't want him around.

He seemed to mock this fact, marching steadily closer, the confident grin plastered on his face. He knew something she didn't, and she raced through her mind to figure out what it could be. "I may have a few items you'll want to add," he said, his voice as sleek as pudding.

Just as Mika started to shift uncomfortably by the wall, Nikos stopped next to the desk at the front of the classroom. He reached into his jacket, felt around for a moment, then removed a handheld relic. It looked valuable, covered in rare and precious metals with artful designs inlaid. He then reached into his jacket and pulled out some ancient jewelry and placed them on the table. Then he pulled out a small statuette and set it down.

"What do you want for them?" Mika asked.

Nikos stalled and brought out the last item slowly. It was a plain looking box. In fact, it didn't even look alien. It was smaller on top with a slightly rounded bulb. It looked just like a

small Holoalbum. His grin grew larger, every wrinkle on his face creasing deeply, and his eyes disappearing into darkness while he placed the item deliberately down on the hardwood surface with a loud click that seemed to echo through the room. Then he said, "I'll give you this one alone for the thing you're hiding."

Mika showed her hands as she said genuinely confused, "I'm not hiding anything."

Nikos chuckled slightly, a bit of disappointment revealed on his face like a father who believes his daughter is capable of more. "Mika, Mika, Mika, Mika, Mika," he said. Each time he spoke her name, his voice changed from one of old friend to one of impatient tyrant. The nature of their relationship was changing forever with every word; or rather, becoming more honest. "You know what I'm here for," he said, threat now in his voice.

"What makes you credit I have it?" she asked, her voice now shed of all pretenses.

"Let's not waste our time with games," he said. "Lancaster got it here. I don't know how, but he did. And you have it hidden somewhere. I want it. And I'm willing to trade for it."

"What?" Mika asked, merely curious as to the value Nikos put on finding the Constellation Crest.

"I told you, this," Nikos said, reaching for the bland object on the table.

"Is this a threat or a joke..." Mika began.

She was interrupted by Nikos pressing a button. It was indeed a Holoalbum, and the holograph image that came up was her husband, Teo, as seen from above. He was wearing the ragged remains of his clothing that were barely hanging on to him. He sat in the dirt next to a scratch-built fire. His beard was long and scraggly, and his face was covered in dirt. Most of all he was thin, and appeared weak.

"This is a live image, Mika," he said. "Well, nearly live. The relay from the satellite drone I set up over his planet takes a little time to..."

"Where is this?" Mika demanded.

"Oh, not so fast," Nikos retorted. "That's the trade-off. You give me the Constellation Crest, and I give you him. Fair... straight... trade."

Mika stared at the image of her husband, her breath shallow and slow. Teo happened to look up at the satellite and she locked eyes. Mika couldn't help but gasp. Covering her mouth, she closed her eyes to avoid seeing any more.

Nikos left it on and said, "He may have a couple weeks left... maybe days. He's been hearty, but eventually the elements will get up with him. Or I may just hurry him along."

Mika opened her eyes, but she fixed them with furious anger onto Nikos. "I should kill you here in my classroom."

"Then you'll never know where he is. Facto, you may just want to ensure I stay alive so you can find him. Because I promise you, I'm the only one who knows where he is. No one is going to find where he's hithered off to, 'cause he went way off the grid. Oh, and thanks to your ex-husband's friends the Dark Agents, the city that had the information of his whereabouts has been leveled to the ground. Oh yes, did Lancaster forget to tell you that part? He helped those freaks destroy an entire Milak Shivar city; the only location that held the secret of where Teo Sinovi is."

Mika was silent. Her shoulders were heaving as her eyes shot daggers into Nikos. Inside, she was torn up as to what she should do. But outwardly she revealed only contempt.

Nikos then went a step further. "You know, he sent you a message. You probably got some garbled version of it. Signals weren't coming off that planet very well. But the original one got stored in one of their memory banks. I managed to place it in..."

Mika strode up to Nikos and punched him squarely across the face. He tumbled onto the desk. "Where... is he!" she shouted in a furious rage.

Nikos smiled. He had her. "Where is the Crest?" he asked.

Mika just stared at him, her fists clenched, her breathing heavy.

Nikos shrugged. "I surm that will be for another day. You can keep these. Consider them gifts. And you can listen to your husband's real message any time you're ready. Just press the button on this side of the Replayer. You can reach me by pressing the button on the other side." Nikos was strolling away as he said all this. He stopped at the door and looked back at her. "He's waiting for you," Nikos said, then tapped his hat and disappeared past the doorway.

Alone with the relics and the device, Mika silently studied the hologram of Teo. He looked so helpless, so alone. How long would he have?

She couldn't listen to his voice; not now. She knew that if she did she would chase Nikos into the hall and hand him the Constellation Crest along with everything else in the museum and its secret lair. She had to pull herself together, to be stronger than she'd ever been in her life.

Mika needed fresh air. She pressed a button and the window's structure altered to one of a transparent screen which kept the bugs out, but allowed a swift ocean breeze to blow in.

She could see plainly how the day was turning to night. The ocean waves below were altering into eventide swirls. The shadows of the school buildings reached out like claws, enveloping smaller structures in their darkness. The birds of day were being drowned out by their evening cousins, and the voices of the students rose one last time in their farewells to daytime activities in exchange for the more intense cadences of nightlife. On the horizon, the memory of their sun still clung to life, its yellow and orange hues glowing in the sky, yet fading fast. Beyond them, a layer of blue slowly gave way to purples, before finally fading to black directly above. With the gradient change came the twinkling stars, at first faint and hard to see in the lambent colors, but standing out plainly against the deep darkness of night. They looked like vagabond sands sprinkled like dice that had been cast across a vast table. Slicing across the center was the thick cloud of the Milky Way, its billions of stars so clumped together eyes could not distinguish one from the next.

The sight was so vast that Mika could not see all of it at once. She would merely have to point her eyes skyward, and soak in as much as her mind could absorb in the cooling breeze of dusk.

The End

Afterward and Acknowledgements

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Being independently published, this series relies on the support of its fans. If you enjoyed this, please consider placing a review up on Amazon. The more reviews a book has, the higher in the rankings it is listed.

You can also find more books, short stories, and games at the website. There you will also find further information about the series, such as character profiles, maps, and further information about Lancaster James's research.

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