

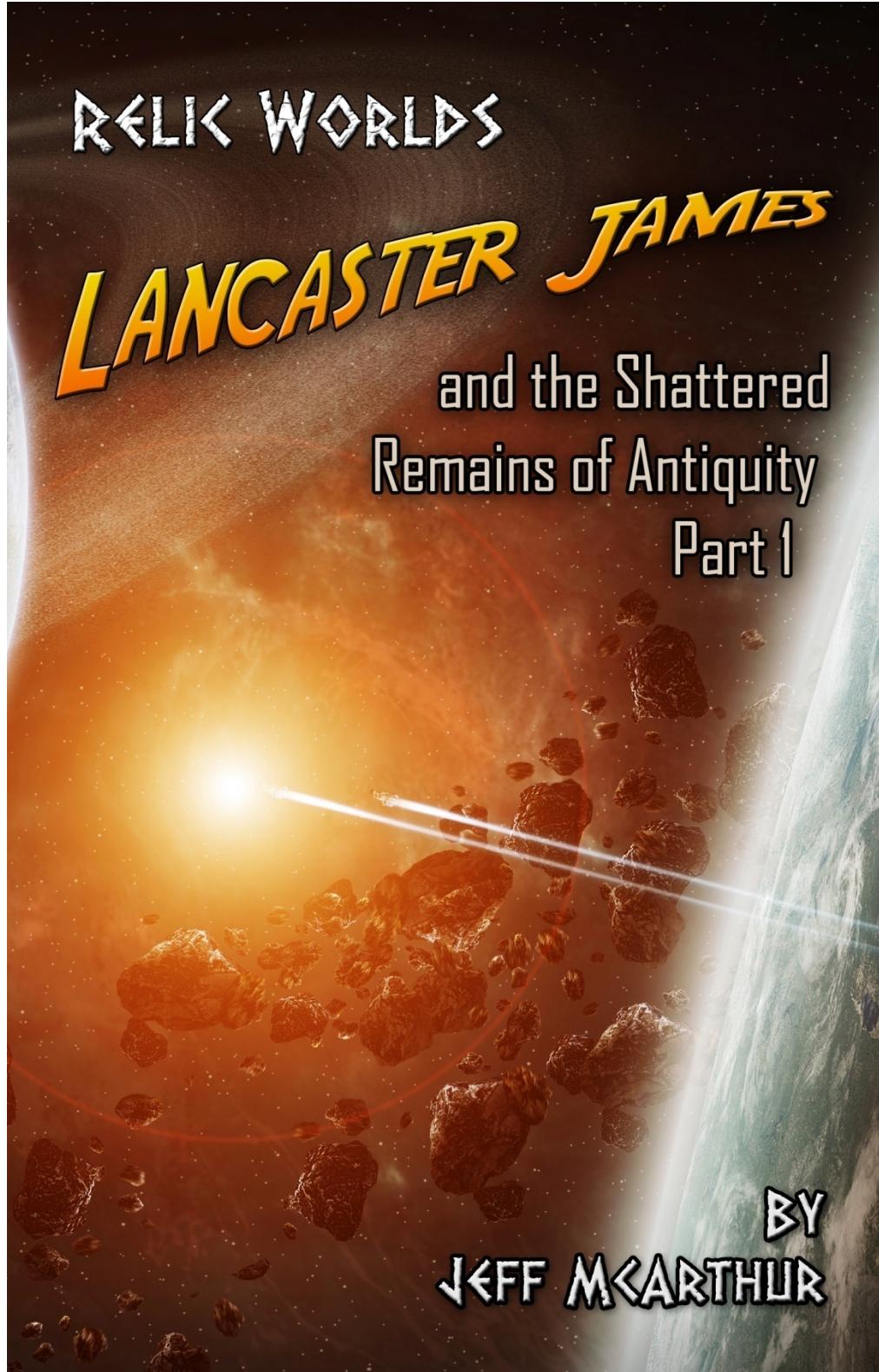
RELIC WORLDS

**LANCASTER JAMES**

and the Shattered  
Remains of Antiquity

Part I

BY  
**JEFF MCARTHUR**



***RELIC WORLDS:  
LANCASTER JAMES  
AND  
THE SHATTERED REMAINS OF ANTIQUITY***

**PART 1**

Jeff McArthur

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## PREFACE

Relic Worlds is typically broken into serialized short stories and full length novels. This time it will be both. The novel is broken into three parts as a serialized story. You are reading part one, and parts two and three will release later in the year, followed by a completed novel, which will be released on paperback and as a completed ebook.

We begin with the end of our last short story which leads into the novel *Lancaster James and the Hunt for the Uther Maris*. In it, Lancaster has been captured by his nemesis, Nikos Kazakis, an archaeologist bent on looting and profit, who is torturing information out of Lancaster:

Lancaster could not help but smile pathetically. He was unable to laugh, and this was the closest he could get. He then met eyes with Nikos with a “get real” expression and said, “You’re going to kill Little Jack. Really.”

Just then, the ship’s alarm sounded; a squawking, raucous noise, the sure sign of a low rent civilian vessel. Just as everyone was reacting to the sound, a loud explosion was accompanied by the ship shaking violently. All four of the men in the corridor stumbled. The gangsters tried to regain their footing, but found they were beginning to float. The suction from the floor that created the artificial gravity was failing, as were the lights, and anything else that used power. While the thugs began to scream in panic, Nikos waited for the reserve power to kick in. Even lesser ships usually had something to fall back on that was not attached to the main power plant in case it was taken out.

While they waited, Nikos looked at Lancaster. He was holding onto the floor, smiling. Nikos simply asked him, “How?”

Lancaster didn’t answer. He didn’t want Nikos to know about the tracking device in his jacket, nor the button he pressed to warn Little Jack of danger. Lancaster also knew that Little Jack had methods of entering a star system undetected, dropping out of spectrum drive in the outer ring, using the sensors to find his target, then jumping through spectrum to appear very close to the target; close enough to get a hit on it before it was able to turn on its defense systems.

After nearly a minute of stumbling in the dark, the lights and artificial gravity turned back on. After everyone landed hard on the floor, they saw Lancaster. He had not in any way tried to escape. He was just holding onto the grating of the floor with a large smile on his face. “Keep a gun on him!” Nikos ordered, and the thugs did as he said. All of them were looking around, wondering what would happen next.

Just then they got their answer. They saw outside the windows of the airlock doors a vessel pull up and stop, then connect to the outside air lock door. Nikos called for reinforcements, and in a few moments, they had a crowd of armed syndicate soldiers in the corridor looking through the same window they were looking.

They saw the outer air lock open and a small figured step through into the airlock chamber. He wore large, frosted over glasses that covered nearly his entire face, and a thick, padded, black outfit. He was in no hurry, strolling casually inside. They noted his two custom crafted laser pistols with various settings; the kind only the most skillful gunmen carried.

Lancaster looked at Nikos and noticed he was growing uneasy. But as Little Jack took his time, Lancaster became uneasy as well, wondering if his partner was trying to come up with a plan.

The small man was stretching his neck in different directions, cracking his knuckles, as though preparing for a fight. One of the gangsters said, "I'm tired of waiting. Someone open the door so we can crack his shaft."

One of the thugs stepped forward toward the control panel. Little Jack did the same, each of them arriving at their own side of the door at the same time. Little Jack was so short that only his glasses and forehead were still visible in the window, and they were staring straight at the gangster who had approached the door controls. Unnerved by Little Jack's calm behavior, the woman kept her gun pointed straight at where Little Jack's body would be, and she pressed the button to open the door...

Nothing happened. She pressed it again, and a few of the others shouted at her to get the door opened. "He locked us in," she said baffled.

Nikos had an idea what was about to happen, so he hurried for the door toward the front of the ship.

A hood flapped over the back of Little Jack's head, and a mask covered over the front. He lifted a gloved hand which was holding a detonator. Every eye grew wide in the corridor except Lancaster's. He laced his fingers as tightly as he could into the floor grating.

Little Jack pressed the trigger.

The ceiling exploded, and the syndicate crew was sucked out. The one with a gun on Lancaster tried to hold onto him, but his grip slipped, and he tumbled outside with the others. Lancaster's legs flew up as well, but he kept hold of the floor.

Nikos made his escape, throwing open the door and slipping through just as the explosion occurred, then closing it before he could get sucked back out. Little Jack paid him no attention. He opened the door, reached in, and grabbed his partner, then yanked him back out, closing the inner airlock door behind him.

Lancaster was panting as he dropped to the floor. "Come on," Little Jack said, and he began toward his ship.

"Wait! We need to get the artifact."

Little Jack wanted to argue, but he sighed, knowing that if it got left behind, their trip would be for nothing. "What does it look like?"

Lancaster described it to him, and Little Jack agreed. But he first had to put Lancaster in his ship so he wouldn't get sucked out when he opened the door to the corridor again. Once Lancaster was safely stored, Little Jack entered the syndicate's vessel and made his way to the hold. They were using a cargo ship with a standard design, one Little Jack knew well. It wasn't far away from the airlock through which he was walking.

Once he arrived in the room, he spotted the equipment they had used to torture Lancaster. He shook his head, muttering, "Amateurs." He scanned the items in a shelf behind glass. Some were relics, some were standard equipment on a ship. While he was searching, another doorway opened. Without turning toward it, Little Jack raised his pistol and fired, hitting the first person through the door, who tumbled back onto his partner, and the door slammed shut again. Little Jack blasted the door controls, hoping that would keep it stuck for a little while. He then shot the glass of the container, reached in, and grabbed the artifact Lancaster had described. He picked up Lancaster's pack and shoved the item in there. He also shoved in Lancaster's jacket, and slung the utility belt over his shoulder. He saw his hat, but

didn't want to use the other hand to carry it, and it wasn't carrying tools as the jacket was, so he left it. Thus equipped, Little Jack made his way back to the corridor.

The door closest to the front of the ship opened with a couple thugs behind it. Their guns were drawn and they fired immediately. Little Jack fired back instantly, shooting the enemy laser bolts out of the sky, deflecting them into the walls. He then fired two more rapid shots into them, killing the thugs. He pressed a button on the gun with his thumb and the cartridge on the bottom of it swiveled and locked in place. He fired again, and a small rocket flew down the hall and exploded at the end. Little jack didn't want anyone else bothering him. That done, he made his way through the airlock, and onto Odin's Revenge.

As they pulled away and flew into spectrum drive, Lancaster pulled the artifact out of the pack. It was not the Maris. Instead it was a device with a square bottom and a round head with spikes, some of which had a few blood stains on them. Lancaster smiled with delight.

"I thought we came for the Uther Maris," Little Jack said.

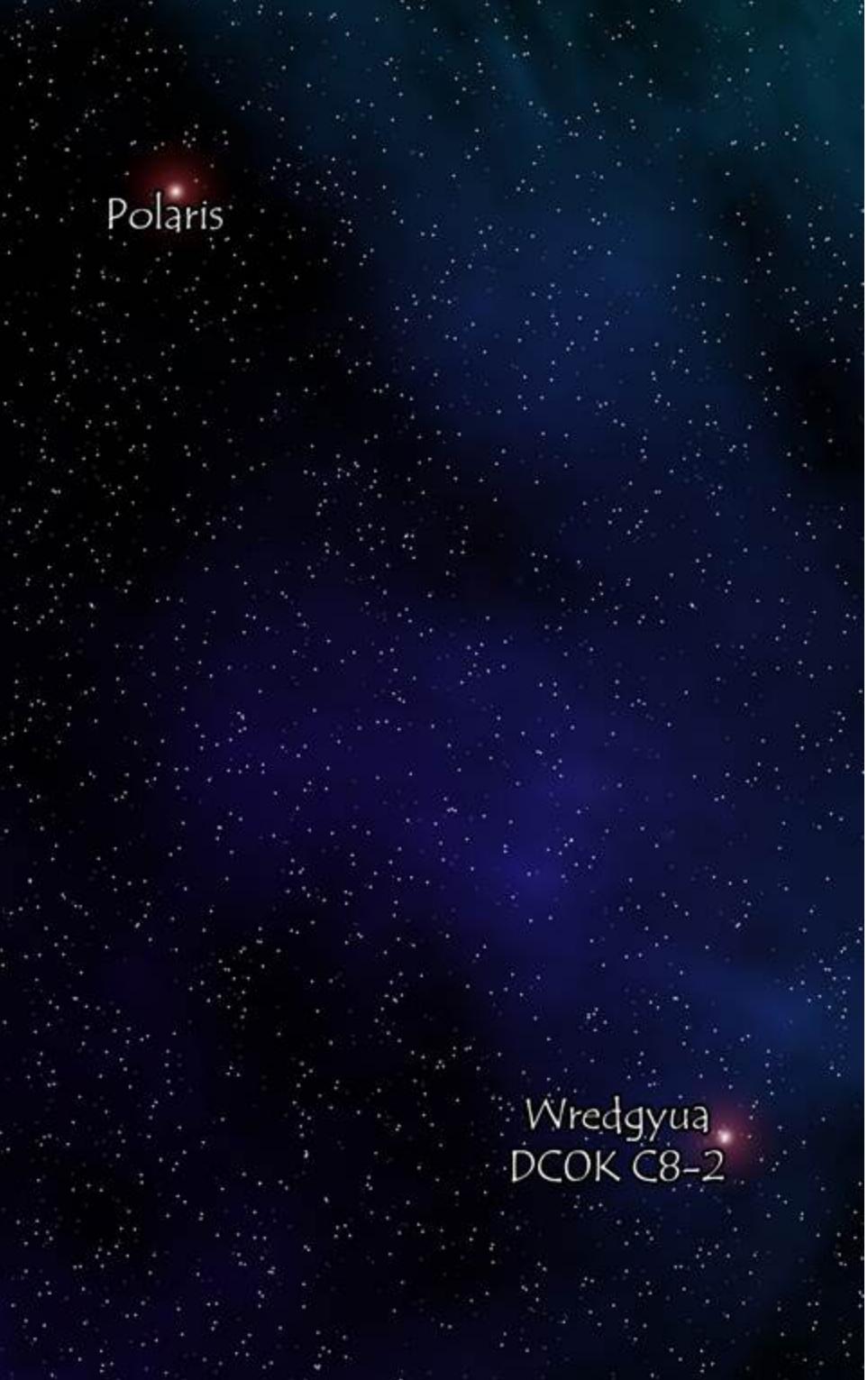
Lancaster shrugged and said, "This was much more big ticket. And more valuable. The Uther Maris was still in development by the Siguers, so it won't work no matter how many R&D people they put on it. But this..." Lancaster held the item aloft as well as he could in his weak state. "The Taiper Anslees is a deciphering machine, and it can lead us to one of the most important discoveries in the galaxy."

There was a silence as Lancaster beamed with pride, and the light outside dimmed from the glow of a star system to the darkness of the brane in spectrum drive. "And they were beating you with it."

"Ironies will never cease," Lancaster said, as the star system disappeared behind them.

To  
Cindy Banach

who made me think again  
about turning to writing



Polaris

Wredgyua  
DCOK C8-2

# CHAPTER

## ONE

### RUINS OF THE ZEBORNO

With each wall of foliage bypassed, a new host of colors exploded with vibrancy. Acajou tree roots gave birth to deep blue trunks which faded lighter as they reached toward the dotted canopy and the winking sunlight above. Verdant branches stretched from these columns and tangled with their neighbors whose colors faded slowly through emerald to golden jasmine and peridot; from pale flaxen to sallow platinum. Wrinkled palms of citrine saffron and tangerine orange grew from bushes whose stalks looked like hidden flames of scarlet and crimson. Violet vines with pastel pink tips hung from oblivion above, and everywhere clung a thick mist which blended the chromaticity into a light dissolve.

Lancaster James had to force himself not to be distracted by the beauty of it all and to focus on the task at hand. He had to also keep an eye out for carnivorous animals who may take him for a meal. He had spotted vividly hued insects crawling along stems and buds, and zipping through the air between branches, but he had not seen any larger animals. Lancaster had, however, heard movement just beyond his eyesight, often accompanied with fluttering chatter or low whooping animal noises. He even occasionally spotted the vegetation moving. Something was nearby, and he needed to be cautious.

Lancaster was searching for ancient walls or other signs of ruins that might have been left behind by the Zeborno, a bygone species that had gone extinct millions of years ago, but whose civic remains had proven fascinating. Lancaster had gone to several of their worlds over the past few years tracking down some of their most important artifacts which had belonged to their seats of power.

Inside five of them he had found carved crystal shards. At the tips of each one was the symbol of the faction from which it had come. They all snapped together to form one large clear stone. The bottom seemed to form together a flat-like foot, and the symbols pointed in a similar direction, yet on separate trajectories. What the crystal did or was intended for, Lancaster did not know.

However, when he had gotten all five pieces to Saberaux University, researchers there discovered patterns in the hieroglyphics carved into the relics. They determined that these symbols were providing coordinates to a world that had been recorded by astronomers, but never explored; Wredgyua DC0K C8-2.

Lancaster was certain there would be an important lost Zeborno city on this planet; and within that city, a pantheon, inside of which should rest an artifact known to human historians as the Scepter Sonaga; the symbol of the seat of power of the Zeborno.

The deduction that this was the location of a lost Zeborno city was confirmed by LiDAR images from orbit which revealed fragments of walls scattered somewhere in these chromatic woods. However, it was harder to locate something once on the ground than it was to look at it

from an overhead map. Lancaster knew he was close, but had not yet found any trace of the lost city.

Presently, he heard other sounds that were more familiar to his ears. These were not noises from nature, but the low rumbling of human machinery. They were coming from beyond a copse of trees, so Lancaster crept toward it to sneak a look.

Nudging aside some orange and purple leaves, Lancaster immediately spotted the source of the noise. A squad of recon drones were weaving through the woods approximately three meters from the ground, each equidistant from one another. They were moving over the land like they were laying carpet, covering every inch in their long line; stalling occasionally as a pair of them swooped into a crevice or hole to record what was present before moving on.

Lancaster got a good look at the logo on the back of one of them; Lupid Industries. Corporations often sent drone scouting parties to get the layout of land they were considering mining or colonizing. More recently they had begun sending them to see if there were valuable or powerful artifacts to be found. Instead of doing the research and leg work that Lancaster did, they simply sent out as many of these automated probes as they could to as many planets as possible until they stumbled upon something.

Lancaster decided that he needed to warn his partner, who was flying his ship in orbit so he could monitor Lancaster's progress in relation to where they had located the ruins. He stepped back from his spying position and pulled out his Talki.

"Little Jack," he said in a hushed tone.

"It's the same as I told you earlier, the ruins are still fifteen degrees to the northeast," came the impatient response. "You'll get there in ten minutes if you stop hailing me..."

"I'm not hailing about that," Lancaster interrupted. "I just spotted recon drones."

Silence on the Talki for a moment. Then on the other end, "That means someone will regress back for them."

"That's right rip. Keep eyes around here," Lancaster said.

"You want me to..."

"Nope. As you said, I'm only ten minutes out. I'll get this done adjontly."

"Famous last words every time," Little Jack concluded.

Lancaster pushed through another wall of foliage, cutting a couple branches as he went. He stalled, noticing the sap that was seeping from one of the leaves. It was neon blue, and it dripped slowly off the end. Lancaster was used to exotic trees, but there was something... organic about this. Unsure whether it was poisonous, he gave a wide berth to the cut leaves and tried to continue on without slicing the foliage as often.

Lancaster stepped into a soft-hued clearing with a few smaller trees and brambles scattered about. It was like a private room with walls of plant life in every direction. Lancaster peered as best he could in the direction he needed to go. More woods. They were all beginning to meld together and form mirages in his mind.

He turned in another direction and it seemed as though the woods had shifted somehow, like they were not as they had seemed a few moments before. He turned back in the direction from which he had come, and he couldn't locate the path he had tread. Looking in the direction he was going again, the foliage was different from what he had seen earlier. He was certain of it. One of the trees was now blocking the very gap he had been planning to walk through.

Lancaster turned in the second direction he had looked, and those trees were now closer. So were the ones behind him. In fact, there was little left of a clearing. Had they all been doing

this since he entered the woods, Lancaster thought. He wondered about their consciousness, and whether they had an intent.

He pulled from one of the many pockets in his jacket a particle scanner and he aimed it at one of the nearby trees. He had to get fairly close, so he watched the branches to make sure they weren't reaching down to grab him. They remained, and the information he got back revealed muscles within the tree's core. Scanning more of it, he found the muscles connected to nerve endings in the roots, some of which came close to the surface, or broke through.

It seemed that where he was standing now there were several roots crisscrossing just below the surface. The trees had stayed still in the time since he had stopped moving, so Lancaster theorized that his footfalls were causing this movement, so he was more careful now as he continued forward beyond the wooded wall on the opposite end of the former clearing.

He had woven through the woods for a handful more minutes when he glanced over his shoulder to discover that one of the barricades of colorful woods he had passed was thinner than usual, and bore a resemblance to a facade crumbling on one end. Lancaster stepped toward it, exaggerating his steps to avoid landing on plant life. When he arrived at the radiantly yellow, orange, and red vines and weeds, he continued with care to brush enough aside to peer underneath. As he expected, the plastic metal and stone mixture revealed itself.

Lancaster smirked out of one side of his mouth as he rubbed across several sections of the wall. His hands moved more animatedly as more and more of the former building was unveiled. He spun round, taking in the surrounding area, noticing other tall, thin mounds which rose up suddenly out of the ground. Shaking slightly now, Lancaster pulled the Talki up to his lips. "Little Jack, I register I found it!"

"You want a prize?" Little Jack asked.

"I want you to confirm that I'm within the expected area."

Little Jack was silent for a moment, checking his scopes against the LiDAR. Lancaster was definitely where they had suspected the Zeborno city to be. And it shouldn't be too large. The Zeborno were known for splitting up into smaller communities rather than grouping into large metropolises.

Something else the Zeborno were famous for was their mastery of horticulture. They were known to have elaborate gardens during their heyday, and over the centuries, some of these gardens had evolved into some of the most complex plant life ever witnessed. These woods could quite possibly be a by-product of their work; and if it was, there was all the more reason for Lancaster to be cautious. He avoided the walls which seemed to be several plants deep for this reason.

Despite his caution, his hip brushed against a large plant with several stems which opened up their petals as Lancaster jumped back in surprise. They each puffed out of their tops a cloud of dust and seeds. Lancaster covered his mouth, expecting a gas attack. This was one place recon drones were definitely superior. But much to Lancaster's amazement, the plume formed into symbols which hovered above the flowers like holograms. There were four in all. He tried to read them; tried to translate, but he did not understand their language. As they melted away, Lancaster photographed them and ran them through the image database for a match. One of them slightly resembled a letter in the Zeborno alphabet, but there was no other match. He supposed they must be the language of the plants.

He then heard the language of the drones as the low thudding approached. Lancaster took cover behind one of the walls, then peeked out a side to spot where they were. The squad

was approaching the cluster of rubble walls, but were not heading directly toward him. Lancaster would just have to stay out of their lines of sight.

Lancaster remained low as he dodged among the stone barriers. He listened for the whirring noises to hear where the drones were so he wouldn't have to expose his head as often. As he maneuvered, he also searched for the building that would most likely hold the Scepter Sonaga. If the ruins he was hiding in were any indication, the temple was likely no longer in any discernable form, and his prize might be gone. But he needed to confirm it one way or the other.

Then he spotted the most likely candidate for his search. Sunk halfway into the ground was a platform which raised up on one side like a ramp. A blinding light reflected off a surface about midway across the platform. It was a window; and from the looks of it, one with colors. That was a definite clue of a building of importance for the Zeborno. Lancaster found the walls underneath the ramp, and then, on the tallest side, he found an hour glass shaped entryway. There was no door; it had rotted away. But the walls, made of the stone-cement, metal and plastic mixture that several alien civilizations had come up with which preserved their most important structures for millennia, were still intact. Either this was the resting place of the Scepter Sonaga, or that building didn't exist.

Lancaster reached into his pack and placed his hand on the crystal antique he had brought with him to make sure it was secure. It was. He peeked around some ruins to make sure the drones weren't near. They were busy checking out some holes they had found. So Lancaster hurried to the building, then stepped down into the darkness of the entryway.

The shifting spectrums of light that emerged from Lancaster's Illuminator led the way as he watched for traps. Many of the species whose items he was taking had left behind protections for their valuables. Whether to keep them safe in hopes they would return, or simply to ward off those who shouldn't have them, Lancaster did not know. But he had to be cautious whenever he entered important old buildings like this.

His foot reached the bottom and landed on squishy moss nestled in exposed roots. Lancaster detected no danger, so he continued onward, into a small chamber with a couple dark passageways on the opposite end. Lancaster maneuvered through one of these passageways and found himself in a stone corridor which wound its way further into the building.

It felt close and damp here, and moisture hung in the air. As Lancaster moved forward, he felt thin tendrils brush past his shoulders. Lifting his Illuminator, he could see they were branches and roots, but they felt like fingers reaching out to him, readying themselves to grab the anthropologist. Lancaster kept the light forward, again watching for traps, and trying to ignore the creepy feeling.

He then felt the tiny fingers of something else feeling around other sections of his back, and on his legs. Lancaster slowed and shone his light down his body. He saw little except shadows of movement until the light spectrum shifted through black light, at which time bright neon colors on top of long bugs appeared crawling all over him. One of them, attracted to the light, was scurrying up toward his torso. Lancaster took in a breath to avoid panicking, and he scooped the bug off with his Illuminator. He then set the hand device to 600 nanometers and flashed it at high intensity down his legs. It worked. The powerful light stunned the creatures and they fell off the front of his legs.

He now felt more crawling along the back of his leg; a couple of them were on his butt, and a couple more had made it onto his jacket. He didn't know how dangerous their bites could be, so he didn't want to anger them before they were off. So he held the Illuminator over his back and flashed it a couple more times. He felt most of them fall off, and he stepped forward to

get away. The last couple he slowly swiped off with his hat. Lancaster looked inside his hat before placing it back on his head, and he continued through to the next chamber.

Now he came upon a much larger room. Again, flora and fauna had claimed the floor and lower walls, while roots had claimed the upper walls and the ceilings. The occasional chromatic vine slithered down from above, forming natural pillars randomly about the chamber. At the far end was a large, solid metal door stuck into the stone wall. Next to it emerged a line of decorative horns at about Lancaster's eye level.

Scattered across the room in a seemingly random fashion were statues of three-legged beasts bearing bludgeoning weapons as arms with spikes as fingers. Lancaster recognized them as mythical animals in Zeborno lore. Halfway across the room was a row of pedestals made of a solid marble that stretched lengthwise across the space. A group of them on the left were bathed in a colorful light that beamed down through the stained glass window above.

Lancaster was cautious of this illumination as he approached it, and the ground confirmed that he was making the right decision. Along the path of the beam of sunlight throughout the day ran a solid line where there was no vegetation. The edges of the plants which grew into the beam's path were singed, and the bare floor was exposed along its length like a dug out road. This course ran directly along the path of pedestals, which told Lancaster they held some sort of significance.

He bypassed this line and approached the door on the opposite wall. Dirt was heaped so heavily upon it that many wouldn't have even recognized it as unique from the stone wall, but Lancaster was used to searching for such things. He also noticed patterns in the shapes of the dirt; the sign of carvings beneath. Scraping away the muck, Lancaster uncovered shapes on the door. He then used an X-ray setting on his Illuminator to get a reading of the rest of it. The engraving appeared to be a crowning ceremony of some sort. At least that's what Lancaster believed it to be. Translating the meaning of alien activities was difficult, considering their differences not only in cultures, but in biology. He got a snapshot of it to take back to the university for study.

Lancaster's attention was drawn to the horns. Next to them he spotted some more etchings. He dusted them off, finding one engraving next to each horn. As he did, he found that dust was also scraping off of separate small carvings above and below in straight columns. Lancaster took another X-ray snapshot of these, and found that each horn had a column of symbols next to it, as well as lines cut into the walls vertically up and down from the horns. Some of the symbols seemed oddly familiar to Lancaster, but he couldn't put his finger on it.

Now more on the alert, Lancaster noticed a few other carvings peeking out of the layers of dust like islands sticking out of an ocean. They were all along this far wall, and none hung on any of the other walls. Lancaster cleared all of them, using a compressed air blower to shoot off the grime from those he couldn't reach. Again, some of these looked vaguely familiar, and they all had tiny holes inside them.

Though all of this was fascinating, Lancaster was still stuck, and he had to find his way through the door. So he returned to the pedestals lined up along the center of the room. He searched for carvings on their trunks, but they had none. So he opened up his trusty notebook and turned to the tab labeled Zeborno. From there he quickly found all of his information about this mysterious ancient race. What caught his attention was a reference to a time of day for which he had never found an explanation.

Though the pedestals had no symbols, their top surfaces had an indentation in the center, and a bump on one side. Each pedestal along the path of the light appeared to have the bump at a new point along the surface, as if it was marking points on a clock.

Lancaster determined which of these matched the time in his notes; a post soon to go under the searing gaze of the sunlight. Lancaster ducked as he approached the pedestal. Squatting to the same level, Lancaster reached forward and placed the crystal relic onto the indentation, facing the symbols toward the wall. He looked around to see where those carvings were, then adjusted the crystal to line the symbols up with their doppelgangers in the room.

A crackling sound was accompanied by the faint smell of smoke. Lancaster removed his hat and saw that the top was sheared off, and the ends were singed. The sunlight was moving down to his pedestal, so he needed to stop messing with the artifact, hop out of the way, and wait.

He did not have to wait very long, about ten minutes; during which time he stepped to the side where he could watch the wall unimpeded. He discarded his hat; something he was used to doing enough that he had a stash back on Little Jack's ship.

As soon as the first light hit the crystal, it glowed white hot. Then a band of colors shot forth from the prism, one color emerging from each of the shards, escaping through the symbols and shooting onto the hieroglyphs upon the wall that Lancaster had uncovered. A few moments later, the large metal door began to lift, accompanied by a loud, creaking cry.

The chamber beyond was lit up with colorful spotlights which emerged from small holes on every wall. These were evidently the continuation of the beams from the prism, which bounced around inside the walls before being released into the royal chamber. Some of these beams combined into beautiful chromatic spots of light in patterns across the floor. A couple of these lights were directed upon the altar in the center of the room.

Like the first room, several statues of mythological Zeborno beasts stood about the floor, only these did not have weapons carved into their arms. Instead they wore colorful monocles. The altar itself was made of a rare dark stone found only on the hardest of asteroids with sparkles of Vega diamonds which twinkled like stars. A few rows of palladium silver ran across the top, out of which several silver lines dropped down like long teardrops. Thin, platinum wings arose off the corners of the shrine with what looked like faces in their ruffles.

Upon the altar sat Lancaster's prize. A scepter made of starlight gold and lined in utherion silver, one of the rarest metals ever discovered. Chromatic jewels surrounded a bulbous head, and thin wings flowed down one side. The Scepter Sonaga; their symbol of leadership. Anthropologists at the university had theorized that it had been placed here when a terrible illness was wiping out the Zeborno population. They might have left this here for whomever survived, but none of the Zeborno did.

Lancaster studied the room carefully for more traps. The Zeborno had protected far less important finds with far more security, and this was the most important artifact of all. However, some traps degraded with time, and the difficulty with finding this location in the first place could be security enough.

Lancaster made it all the way to the altar without incident. He ran the Illuminator over the shrine in every wavelength, from X-ray to infrared. It was too solid to have anything sinister inside. Lancaster scanned the floor around it, as well as the walls which were further away. To his surprise, there was nothing; not even traces of a former trap that had degraded with time.

At last, certain that it was safe, Lancaster reached forward with both hands ready to grab the scepter. But as soon as his fingers tapped the light, a searing heat burned them and he

yanked his hands back. His fingertips were burning red and smoldering with smoke. He licked at them to cool them down as he remembered that the Zeborno had somehow figured out how to manipulate light into beam energy that could kill a person. He wouldn't be able to take the scepter until the light went out, which was not an option because the door would likely close at that time, and there would probably be some other trap at that point. The only other option would be to alter the light.

Lancaster looked around the room to see what he had to work with; and his eyes quickly settled on the colored monocles of the statues. He chose one and approached it. It bore wings, three legs plus a tale, and a large, heart shaped torso with a head of serpents emerging from its center. Each serpent had an eye, and one of them bore a green monocle. Lancaster studied it carefully, and though it was made of fine craftsmanship, there was little else on it of note.

Lancaster ran the Illuminator over it set on X-ray and found that it was hollow with machinery inside. He then ran the particle scanner over it since it would give him a more thorough view of the inner workings. It revealed that the statue had joints at its limbs and on the monocle. Gears caused it to move, which were in turn operated by an underground system. In studying this piece of the equipment, Lancaster noticed an indentation in the floor, and he blew away more of the dust to reveal a track that led from the statue to one of the colorful beams of light.

Lancaster grinned again widely out of that same side of his mouth, proud in the knowledge that he had figured part of it out. He then ran the particle scanner along the floor, following the apparatus to the wall that separated the royal chamber from the room in which he had entered. Going onto the other side, he found that the gears went directly into the part of the wall where the decorative horns emerged. Remembering the vertical slits in the walls above and below the horns, Lancaster used his fingers to clear them out to their full distances. From this, it became clear to him that the horns themselves were levers, and the symbols beside them marked points to move them.

That's when he remembered where he had seen these symbols before. Certain ones matched hieroglyphs he had noticed on the artifacts he had collected on the Zeborno aristocratic worlds. He had gone to five of them, and there were five levers here. He quickly remembered which symbol was on the first artifact, and he matched it with one of the symbols on the first vertical row. He grabbed the horn, and he pushed it toward the correct symbol. The lever moved slowly at first, its ancient bones clicking one by one until it fell into place with a thud.

A slew of clicking began in the wall, then the floor, then on into the next room where he heard a cackling of mechanical noise and the moaning of ancient machinery. Lancaster hurried to the door and looked in. There, one of the statues was moving, drifting toward one of the lights as it stretched out its monocle. The lens hit the light, causing it to bounce into a hole in the ceiling. That light then came out of the ceiling through another hole, projecting a green pattern onto the altar. Lancaster could not make out what the image was supposed to be, but it looked like it was part of a bigger picture which would only be complete with the other colors added.

And so he hurried back to the wall of horns and he moved the second one to the hieroglyph that matched the second artifact. He didn't need to look these up because he had spent so much time with them while finding these relics.

The rod clicked into place, the machinery clattered to life, and one of the statues maneuvered into place and beamed a yellow light into the ceiling, which then splashed a yellow pattern onto the altar. Now giddy, Lancaster hurried back to the board and moved the next horn

into place. He heard the gears rattle, the chains clank, and the rusty roar of the statue moving. He ran to the door to watch it move into place...

Nothing. None of the statues were moving. But he had moved the lever. And more importantly he could hear the...

Lancaster suddenly realized, he could indeed hear a statue, and it was behind him. It was still moving in fact. A shiver ran down his spine as he heard its feet clang across the floor right behind him. He even felt the ground shake a little in its wake.

He leaped to the side just as the statue's giant club hand came down, smashing the floor. Looking up, Lancaster saw the giant metal beast with its indifferent expression pulling its mallet back out of the ground. Lancaster could hardly move, he was in such awe of the mechanical animal. The statue, though, wasted no time. It had been programmed for this. While its weapon hand raised slowly, its other hand swatted at Lancaster. Lancaster dodged, but in the wrong direction, and now the robot was between him and the console. He tried to run past, but the statue-bot had its weapon ready, and it swung at him, smashing a part of the wall, whose chunks crashed into Lancaster, sending him rolling across the floor.

The statue-bot followed quickly after. Lancaster noticed the thick dust in the air, and the fact that the bot seemed to be using sight to detect where he was, so he began to run one way, further into the thick of the dust. When it seemed that Lancaster had disappeared from view, he gave it a moment, then doubled back and ran the other way.

The ruse worked. The statue-bot was charging into the thickest of the dust cloud, and Lancaster had a clear path to sprint to the horn lever. The bot figured out its mistake a moment later, and chased after him. Lancaster reached the wall and pulled the lever before the bot could get to him. It froze in place just under a couple meters from Lancaster; its body contorted into an assault position, ready to pounce.

Lancaster sighed with relief, and waited a few moments to make sure the statue was done. Now with some time, he pulled out his notebook and checked each artifact and their corresponding symbol to make sure he had the right one before pulling each horn-lever.

Soon he had locked them all into their correct locations, and he walked over to the doorway. Inside the other chamber he saw that each beam of light hit a monocle, which then bounced the light into a hole in the center of the ceiling, which then beamed down onto the altar. Each one provided a different color, and they combined into a single, chromatic hologram which hovered over the top. Lancaster recognized the design; it was the same as the carving on the door. Now he could make out a few details he hadn't noticed before, including a Zeborno hand reaching for the scepter.

Lancaster placed himself at this side of the altar. He removed his jacket and tied it around his waist, then rolled up his sleeve. He began reaching in at the exact point of the Zeborno hand, trying to keep it aligned along the same track. He was able to break past the light barrier this time without being burned, but the hairs on his arm sizzled as they brushed by the edge of the border. This was made all the more difficult by the fact that Zeborno arms were thinner than human ones, even though this one was exaggerated in size to allow for extra room should an arm shake as it entered. He had no such luxury.

Slowly, Lancaster stretched his arm, careful not to shake it. His hand was only inches away when he noticed the light beginning to dim. This could mean that he wouldn't be as severely damaged by it, but it also meant something much more devastating. The light was leaving the crystal on the pedestal. That meant...

As if on cue, the crackling of stone and the moaning of metal combined to announce that the door was closing. Without regard to his safety, Lancaster reached the rest of the way in and nabbed the scepter, then yanked it out. As he did, his arm passed through the light, searing it severely. There was no time to acknowledge the pain. He had to get out. Lancaster scooped up his jacket and dashed for the door. When he reached it, he slid underneath, emerging a little more than a second before the door slammed shut with a deafening bang that echoed through the otherwise silent room.

The light had indeed abandoned the crystal, so Lancaster yanked it off its pedestal and approached the exit as he put on his jacket. He was admiring the craftsmanship of the scepter when he was stopped in his tracks. His forehead had nearly bumped into a hovering recon drone. There were ten of them in two rows of five hovering near the entrance. They had evidently heard the commotion and come over, stalling just before going inside.

A polite, professional voice, much like a secretary, emerged from the center drone. "Greetings stranger. You will now deposit the item you are carrying into my receptacle." A claw-like tray emerged from the bottom of the drone and reached toward Lancaster.

"The hades I will," Lancaster grunted.

A small gun emerged from each drone, all of them pointed at Lancaster. Then the center one said again, "You will deposit your item into the receptacle. You will then place all weapons, and other valuables into the receptacle."

Lancaster scowled at them, but he knew he was caught. With nothing more to do, he placed the scepter into the tray and said, "I haven't got any weapons or valuables."

"You seem to have forgotten that you have an item of incredible worth in your right pocket. Kindly hand it over or we will shoot you into oblivion." The voice was still as cordial as if it was offering a side dish with his meal.

Scowling, Lancaster reached into his pocket and grabbed the crystal made up of the relics he had found on each of the Zeborno planets. He was losing everything. The ball felt heavy in his hand. He wasn't certain he could lift it enough to place it into the tray, but somehow he found the strength.

As soon as the items were pulled back to the drone, it said, "Thank you. You are now under the authority of Belladon Corp. Any resistance or attempts to escape will be met with lethal force. Do you comprehend?"

Again, the voice was so conciliatory it was difficult to take it seriously. But the ten guns trained on Lancaster explained what he needed to understand, and he nodded, and followed their orders.

Though outwardly Lancaster obeyed the recon drone's orders; inwardly, he was trying to think of how he was going to contact Little Jack to come get him without being spotted. Worse yet, he would have to get onto the ship before he was shot down...

They were all stopped by a humanoid creature standing in their way. Lancaster recognized it immediately; it was a plant. It stood on four vines while several more hung down from its torso of tangled weeds. Its closed head of petals was pointed toward them. The fauna creature seemed curious, moving only enough to make its sentience known.

The recon drones didn't seem to understand how to react to it. Though it was blocking their path, they could go around it. However, this was a living, conscious being, the very thing the drones were supposed to be on the lookout for. So finally one of them moved forward, directly ahead of the plant, and said in its polite, congratulatory voice, "Greetings. You are now

under the authority of Beladon Corp. Any resistance or attempts to escape will be met with lethal force. Do you comprehend?"

The plant person did not respond. But its petals slowly opened as if trying to soak in what was happening before it. The drone took either the lack of response or the unfolding of the petals to be a threat, so it shot an electrical discharge into the beast.

The plant shook in reaction to being hit, looked down momentarily at its wound, then smacked the drone with one of its wadded up leaf hands. The other drones retaliated with their small lasers, reducing it to a pile of dust in no time.

Lancaster felt momentarily bad for the plant. Then he felt bad for himself and the drones as they urged him forward under the gaze of hundreds more plants whose petals seemed to frown down upon them. The drones were unaware of the danger, even as a rustling noise grew louder and louder in every direction. The drones seemed curious by the noises as they turned in each direction. But it was too late.

Stems, weeds, branches and twigs all emerged from their fellow foliage. Flowers that were not moving shot pollen and seeds. Those that were attacking fired thorns from their bodies. Most bounced off the shells of the drones, and those that penetrated did no damage with their poison. The drones fired back, reducing many of the plants to ash. Then the trees retaliated with long vines, wrapping themselves around the drones and squeezing, blowing three of them up in quick succession before the drones turned on them as well.

Not being a drone, Lancaster was not immune to the damage of poisoned needles, so he shrank down to take as little space as he could. He needed to get away from the drones, both to escape from them, and to clear out of the target range of the plants. But first he needed something.

Lancaster jumped onto the back of one of the drones; the one that had taken two artifacts he had suffered and strained to recover. It twisted and turned, trying to shake him off, but to no avail. Lancaster found a dark line along the top that denoted a flap, and he pulled it open, revealing a hatch. Inside were a few repair items, and a remote control, presumably an overdrive of the robot. This would be useful to Lancaster, but the drone was already rushing away from the battlefield in an attempt to buck Lancaster off, which was what he wanted anyway. So he yanked open another container near the bottom of the drone. This one had the artifacts, so he pulled them out and stuck them in his bag.

Then he noticed some of the other drones were in pursuit, and the one he was on was slowing so they could catch up. That's when it was time for him to grab the remote. He didn't understand the controls as well as his partner did, but Little Jack had given Lancaster some instructions, so he recollected as best he could and maneuvered away. The other drones took chase, firing at him as they went. He juked left and right, avoiding their shots, but they were gaining on him. He tried to dive, but couldn't figure out the control, so he pressed his weight down on the front and they dipped down below the tree line.

The drones followed, and soon there was another danger. The branches moved, trying to get in Lancaster's way, swiping at him and the drones. He swooped under and over their blows, as did the others, though one took the brunt of a hit, and exploded; its fire setting the tree ablaze. Lancaster heard a scream from the forest like that of a wounded animal, but from the voice of wood itself. Aware they would be angry with him, he lifted up out of the forest canopy, and just in time, for the forest greenery was reaching for him and the others.

Unfortunately, he still had two drones on his tail, which were proving to be equally dangerous. And they were once again gaining on him.

Then a large blast of laser fire came down from above, and one of the drones exploded. The other fired back into the sky, pinging against the armor of the vessel. It was Little Jack's ship, Odin's Revenge, and it had turned, revealing its open hatch. Lancaster twisted his drone toward it and rushed inside.

The hatch closed behind him, but not fast enough. The other drone followed, rushing inside right next to Lancaster, who grabbed it and knocked it against the wall. Seeing it was still wiggling he banged it against the bulkhead again. Still operational. So he smashed it several times, only denting its gun and the top.

Then a loud blast fired and ended the drone, followed by a second which blew up the one Lancaster had been flying. Little Jack, whose stature lived up to his name and whose face was almost entirely covered by two enormous, opaque lenses from his glasses, stood behind the pistol.

"We could have used the one I was riding," Lancaster said.

"Why were you putting a dent in my wall?" Little Jack said, ignoring Lancaster's point.

Lancaster flushed, and retorted, "What was I supposed to do? You didn't close the door fast enough..."

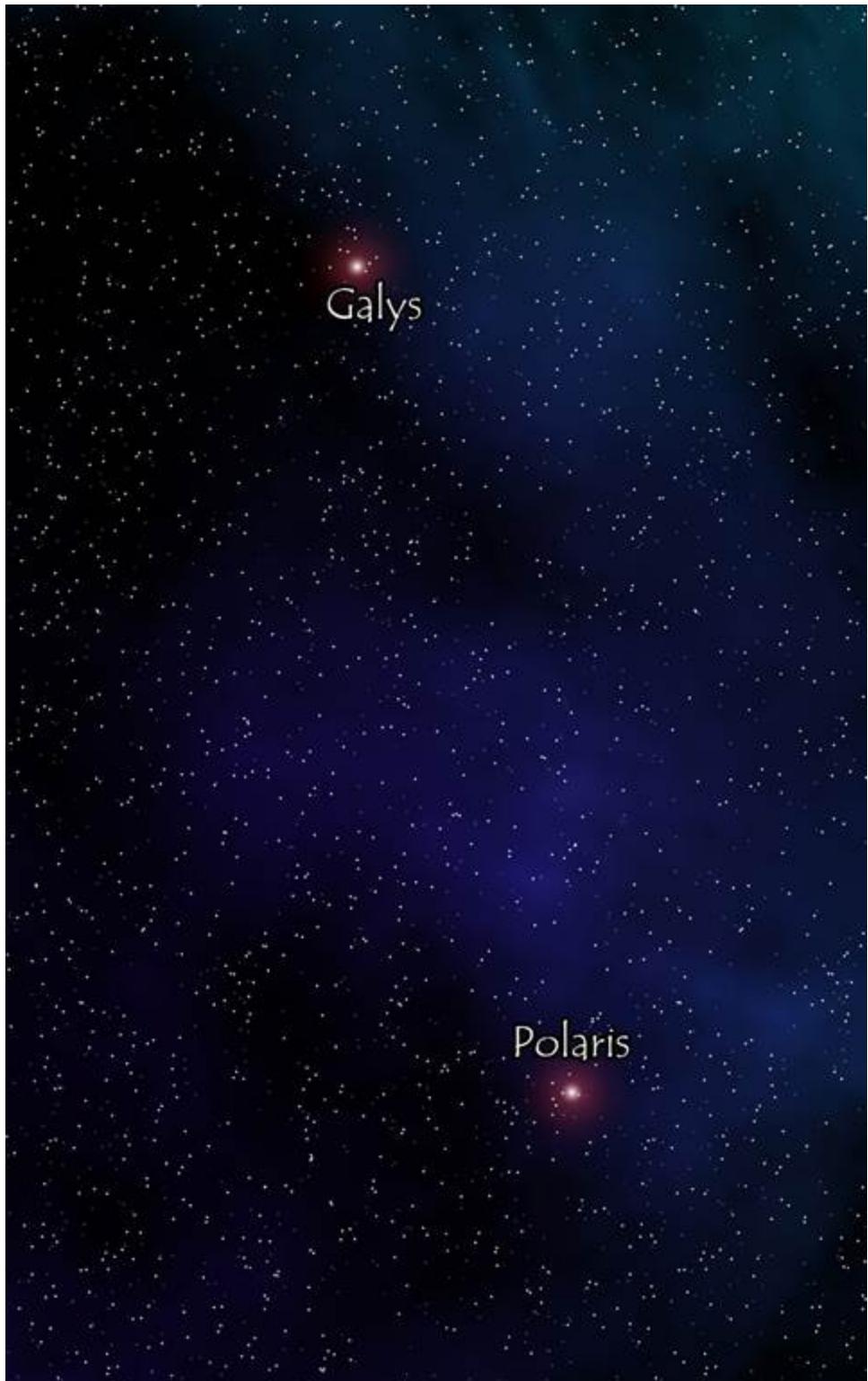
"If you took a weapon like I keep telling you to, you could have shot it," Little Jack explained, but Lancaster interrupted.

"I had this right rip, and we might have had two drones..."

"You viewed mighty right rip there. Should I have left you with them?" Little Jack asked. This silenced Lancaster, so Little Jack took the initiative. "Don't damage Odin," Little Jack said, his gun still raised, even though it wasn't pointed at his partner.

"Who's flying?" Lancaster asked.

Little Jack rarely showed emotion, so his eyebrows raising momentarily said it all and he hurried back into the cockpit to regain the controls.



## CHAPTER TWO

### THE STREET SAMURAI

The assassin sat with his legs crossed, though his feet always firmly on the ground, ready to spring; his weapons spread before him. He reassembled his pistol Ilene after having cleaned it to a sheen so bright he could see his reflection in the metal.

*Cleanliness of a weapon is of paramount importance. One must be respectful of the deed being performed. The weapon is a tool whose sole purpose is to take a life; to steal it forever, and remove all possibilities of the individual now and in the future. It is an act that extinguishes all of their senses and awareness of existence. And it takes away from the universe all they could have offered. To perform such an act with a less than spotless tool would be nothing short of disgraceful.*

As the last piece of the pistol snapped into place, the assassin's face contorted over the engraved words on the handle. They were the names of every life that had been taken by that weapon. The assassin always made certain to add the names after the work was done; sometimes going to great lengths to make certain he got the spelling correct. He had even tracked down family members of his victims, risking reprisal, just for a few letters. If he killed someone during an escape, perhaps a soldier or a pursuing corporate agent, he set off on a quest to learn the person's name, no matter how low in rank they were, and he added them to the roster.

In many ways, however, the assassin didn't really need them as a reminder. They all existed in his mind. He had memorized every name on every weapon; every life he had taken with the aid of his tools of death. Whenever he thought he might forget one, he went through all of them again, reading each name carefully and setting them to memory. Rakul Sayo, Lilia Burgata, Cyril Filip Gozales Anwe, and Donnetta Rausch were taken by the pistol. The katana, named Cypress, bore the lives of Ida Manuel Kingspin Rothstone, Vincent Yejellen, Gabriella Simms, and Lorenzo W Masterson. Satsuma, his wakizashi, a shorter form of a katana, bore nine names; so many they filled almost the entire handle and would likely need to soon have names added to the blade. His sniper rifle, called Lovat, had twelve names; the most significant of which were Nilis Porvin Alexandros and, Gavin Yatunde Newsome Hedwig; the latter of which was the son of a prominent corporate mogul who had since placed a bounty on the assassin's head so high it would bankrupt his corporation. But since he had no information on who the assassin was exactly, it was unlikely he would ever have to pay the bounty.

*Today a new name will be added to one of the weapons, Naomit Riley. She dishonored herself when she betrayed Damaio Chow, Emperor of the Risi Barony; a man both of us owe our allegiances to. Traitors are the easiest to kill. Their dishonor speaks louder than their cries of mercy, removing all distraction from the act. Riley had informed our enemies of some of our empire's secret deployments. She was paid handsomely for this treachery, which in most minds today would be a reasonable defense for her motives. For most, money is the only loyalty. But*

*to me it is a distraction from true enlightenment. Fealty to one's superiors is the only path to order. And so Riley must die.*

It seemed clear that Naomit's name would be added to Satsuma, the wakizashi. The assassin had set his ambush at a location where he would easily appear at short range from his subject, but just long enough that the target might get a shot off if she was armed. And so the assassin would need the weapon of death to be in one hand while he held the pistol in the other so as to deflect incoming shots.

Hearing the woman approaching, the assassin grasped Ilene in one hand and Satsuma in the other. Both vibrated momentarily as they linked with his neural implants that connected to his bionic eyes. The targeting array and enhanced reflexes switched on in his right eye to aid in his shooting incoming blasts out of the sky with his left hand; and his vitals vision and precision control turned on in his left eye to aid with his right hand holding the wakizashi.

The snapping sounds of Naomit's feet stepping across the cement echoed as it drew closer in the parking garage. The assassin had determined through careful reconnaissance that this level would be empty by the time Naomit was leaving. There would also be ample room for him to hide among a bundle of vehicle cleaning and powering stations. Plus, getting in and out of this lot was easy and unobserved. The only problem was judging the distance through sound due to the reverberating nature of the environment. But he was confident in his judgment.

*Each step is like a clock ticking down the last moments of this person's life. The path of everything she's done has led her to this final impasse.*

The assassin drew in a breath as he closed his eyes and pictured a baby born, its growing through toddler and adolescence years. She becomes a teenager and has several relationships; grows friendships and chooses a path in life. She deals with the complications of adulthood and navigates her life based on what she sees as right. She celebrates her victories and struggles through her challenges. At last she makes the fatal decision to betray her boss... then she leaves home saying goodbye to her children and husband unknowingly for the last time.

The vision in his mind was replaced by the woman walking past the threshold. The reality of the person in the flesh was the one thing that came closest to knocking the assassin off balance, but he pulled himself together. She was sharply dressed, like most executives trying to work their way up; pretty and aging. The assassin stepped up behind her.

*I can kill her without her knowing. Surprise is the tactic of the wise. But it is also the tactic of the coward. She must be given her due course. She must be allowed to make herself ready.*

The assassin let his feet fall loudly enough to be heard. Naomit turned with a start, her eyes wide. When she saw the weapons, she nearly panicked, but she pulled herself together. She threw her pursatchel to the ground and began pulling off her jewelry. "I thought the security was better in this building. There's sufficient Electros in my card to satisfy you, and these rings are worth a til. Just don't take my wedding ring, okay?"

"Naomit Riley," the assassin said firmly like he was about to make a proclamation. "I am not here to rob you. Your possessions will be returned to your family."

Naomit's look of fear was replaced with a look of confusion. "What... What do you mean? You're not robbing me?"

The assassin shook his head without moving his eyes from her.

"Then what are you..." She stopped herself.

"I'm here because of your disloyalty, Ms. Riley."

Fear tightened Naomit's chest, and she began to gasp for air. "I needed the worth. They paid well. I can give you some of it. You can..."

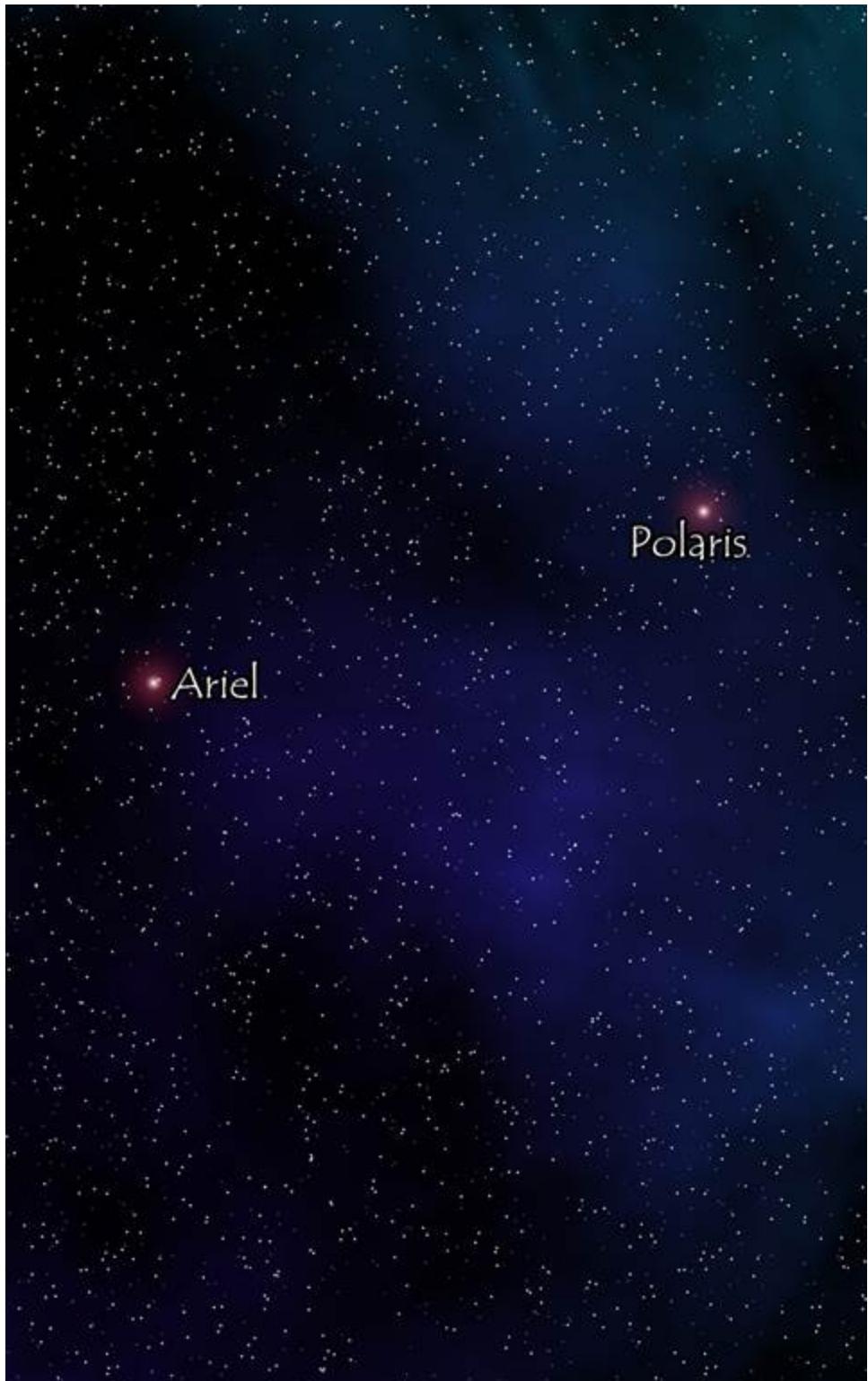
"Prepare yourself, Ms. Riley. It is time."

She spoke quickly now. "You must listen! My children need better education. I have a family! This empire is going to lose the war, you have to see that..." Seeing she wasn't getting through to the man, Naomit reached into her pocket and shot through her jacket at him.

Without a thought, the assassin's left hand jerked up and fired. The laser bolt knocked the woman's shot out of the sky. The gun fired again, hitting the pistol in the pocket and causing it to explode. Naomit fell to the ground in pain, screaming in agony, and for help, and for mercy.

*I give her a moment longer to make her final preparations for death. She wastes it blubbering, so I end it with a stab to the heart. That is, as I understand, the fastest, short of a beheading. But sometimes that is not clean, and I wish her family to be able to pay their last respects to her face.*

*I will carry her name with me, and it shall be added to Satsuma. I shall then carry on my master's bidding, serving both him and my honor. For honor is the only true possession of a street samurai aside from my title and my identity. I am Maximillian Risi Arma Benoto, Bushi of the Risi Corporate Empire.*



# CHAPTER THREE

## THE TAIPER ANSLEES

It was one of those venues whose decor was lavish and expensive enough to both impress and intimidate. The required wardrobe of the attendees added to this façade with expensive suits and dresses whose styles varied slightly based on world of origin, but not below a certain price. The lighting was as subdued as the volume of the voices; any imperfection of the room had disappeared into blackness, and the clinking of utensils bobbed over the quiet hum of polite conversation. There was an unspoken tension that held together the delicate social fabric of the event.

Mika was at a table where the various wines were being poured into specialty crystal glasses for a tasting. The crisply dressed waiter described the history of each one, certain to include the world and company from which it came, along with the average temperature, humidity, and other information during the growth and harvesting of its ingredients. It all went over Mika's head, but she pretended to be interested and soak it all in, as it seemed very important to those with whom she sat.

They were all members of the Universalis Arcanum, the premier organization for the study of xeno-archaeology. Its members were the elite of locating rare antiquities on ancient alien worlds. Their expeditions were the best funded and most prestigious. The members were also experts at hosting formal events in their own honor, and sometimes it seemed that their understanding of human formal culture far exceeded that of any alien cultures.

Despite her lack of expertise in these latter fields, members of the organization were beginning to accept Dr. Sinovi, and she didn't want to lose the ground she had gained. So she did her best to keep pace with them; to know when they were joking even when she didn't understand; to agree with the trending opinions; to compliment and to pretend she liked all the fancy wines and accompanying hors d'oeuvres... unless the rest at the table said it was horrible.

Most of all, she kept her mouth shut when they spoke about bending ethical rules to do things for corporate interests. It was, after all, how they made enough money to pay for the fancy venues and the expensive but less than tasty wines and finger foods. And it was how they could afford so many expeditions with such large crews. They just had to understand that they were at the disposal of the corporation, and would be handing over anything that was valuable to their executives.

This didn't seem to bother most of the members at the table, though. They were swapping stories of their digs; about their handlers and how frustrating they could be watching over their shoulders, but laughing it off. One of them, Dr. Viktor, had spent two years with his team uncovering a small Digu settlement in the further half of the fourth quadrant. The financing corporation had been relatively hands off, allowing the dig and research to progress, but then one of the corporation's enemies paid a higher price to give them some of the artifacts they had found. Dr. Viktor rolled his eyes as he told Mika and the others at the table, "After that

this other corporation wouldn't leave me alone. They thought they could dictate where we could search."

As those gathered around clicked their tongues, Mika asked, "Had you given them the artifacts?"

"Of course! That's why they wouldn't leave me alone. They didn't pass on until our sponsoring corp. showed up with warships." There were several laughs, followed by a distrustful glare one of them shot at Mika. It was a warning not to be judgmental.

Mika covered her mouth as though wiping it, though she was really hiding her disgust. Once she could overcome it, she straightened up and lowered the napkin, revealing an accepting smile.

They all made a toast, ready to try the next bottle of wine. Mika prepared to choke it down, but was interrupted by a different sort of emergency. She first heard Professor Benuto sigh, and she spotted her expression. Others joined the look of annoyance, and Mika followed their eyes. She saw him at the same moment she heard Professor Benuto say, "Here comes your treasure hunter, Sinovi." Not Dr. Sinovi, not professor... just her last name. She had lost ground with them.

They were reacting to the dusty man with his adventurer's hat and pocket-laden jacket who had entered the ballroom restaurant with his large bag knocking into tables and other guests. His tramping footsteps alone were louder than everything else at the party. He smiled through his unshaven chin, the wrinkles forming across his face without shame.

Lancaster James seemed oblivious to their judgmental glares. He strode boldly up to the table and pronounced, "Hi everyone!" His voice carried over the room enough to sound like he was speaking to the entire gathered throng. No one answered. Impervious to the cold reception, Lancaster removed the bag, opened it, and said, "Hi Mika. Gand over what I got!" And he poured the contents onto the table. The guests recoiled, pulling away from the dust cloud that billowed from the relics that thudded onto the expensive tablecloth.

A gasp rose from the crowd, loudest at its epicenter and fading like a wave into the crowd. Lancaster spotted an unattended full glass of white wine and exclaimed, "Oh, great!" He grabbed it boldly, not delicately from its base as it was supposed to be held, and he chugged it into his mouth. His eyes then widened and he brought the glass down quickly, some of the liquid dribbling out the side of his mouth.

Mika was now looking away, wishing she could hide her face. One of the others said in her most passive aggressive tone, "Well isn't this an unwelcome surprise."

"You're telling me," Lancaster said. "I registered that was water."

"I'm leaving," one of the others said, throwing his napkin on the table.

"But you're going to miss the best part!" Lancaster said, yanking the last object out of his bag. It was the Scepter Sonaga. He brought it down onto the table with no regard to the loud sound it projected and the amount it made the dishes jump.

Most of the table now leaped back and some of them left. The ones who remained muttered in protest and shook their heads. But Mika's eyes grew wide, and she leaned in to the object. She knew what it was, and its importance, by sight. The others would be impressed later when they looked it up on their Xenowikis. For now, the disapproval was spreading through the room like a flood.

Lancaster hardly noticed any of the others. He was standing proud, looking at the only person in the room whose opinion mattered to him. Mika looked up at him, the awe in her face not yet faded until she noticed the disapproval of everyone around them. What was worse, the

story she had just heard told at her table reminded her how quickly some of these people became mercenaries when they found out a valuable artifact was within their midst. So she told Lancaster to pack it all up and follow her. She had something to show him back at the office.

As they hurried out, one of the people they passed located the image of the Scepter Sonaga on her fon, and she gasped as she realized its importance. Noticing the woman, Lancaster placed his finger to his smiling lips as he continued out the door.

\* \* \*

It only took them fifteen minutes to get to the museum at Saberaux University. The venue had not been far from the school as many of the attendees were either from there or would be visiting at some point during their stay. The museum was tucked away in a gated section that had a private and well-hidden security system. Some of the artifacts held within would be valuable on the black market and sought after by corporate interests trying to get a leg up on the competition. There were only a few others like it, and two of them had been destroyed by looters. The others had found protection through corporations which took as their payments any information and relics that were useful to them.

Saberaux had remained uniquely independent through the help of some of Little Jack's underworld connections. Their interest was strictly monetary, so Lancaster made sure to pick up something that was less historically valuable, but could be sold to someone who thought it was pretty, on each of his runs, and gave it to them.

These contacts, who were calling themselves Neues Unter, knew more about defending a location than the experts as they had years of experience getting past other people's systems. They understood the value of discretion. Rather than impressing outsiders with their powerful appearance, their equipment was hidden, elusive. Would-be thieves and raiders were already identified and scrutinized long before reaching the museum as they had been monitored by invisible cameras on the approach. Visitors to the museum could expect no privacy as every form of monitoring was used to watch and listen to everything they did.

These underworld security designers also understood the value of modesty. The building itself and its grounds were unassuming, without the prestige it deserved. While other curators had lavish media campaigns about their architecture and exhibits, Mika, who was a partner in running the museum at her university, kept a low profile. Professionals in the industry knew how important this museum was, and that was all the praise the curators here sought.

Neither Mika, Lancaster, nor anyone else who had hired Neues Unter knew every hidden security measure that existed; nor did they know every member of the organization. This, while unnerving, was an acceptable risk for Mika.

At present, the museum was closed. The surrounding area was dark, and the grounds around it were dimly lit with light that emanated from every angle, denying any shadows for someone to hide inside. The gate opened as the duo were approaching it and closed behind them, reminding them of their guardians' presence.

Mika still unlocked the front door manually. She had asked for that inconvenience never to change. It made her feel some sense of power over the place, even though she knew it was only a formality. She waved her card before the door, heard the magno-locks unbuckle, and she pressed inside with Lancaster in tow.

The clacking of their feet across the floor echoed against the firm wood walls of the empty chambers. Shapes of shadows spied on them from shelves they passed until Mika pressed

a button on the remote in her pocket that faded up the lights. Now the relics came into view, and Lancaster recognized them. Many were items he was responsible for getting here.

Mika did not notice Lancaster stop behind her as she continued on through an entryway that read, "Employees only". When at last she turned around and saw him one chamber behind, she noticed he was picking up a couple of the artifacts. "Lancast..." she began, but she was too late. As he pulled the pieces to his chest, a deafening alarm blared. He almost dropped them, and Mika pressed another button on the device in her pocket, cancelling the alarm. "You're worse than a freshman," Mika sighed.

"These are categorized wrong," Lancaster said. "They belong over..."

"The museum council mags how to categorize them, Lancaster," she said, approaching him.

"But..." he began.

She grabbed the artifacts and placed them on their shelves, saying, "Do you want to stay here and make these decisions?"

Lancaster hesitated, then began, "But..."

"Do you want to sit through the long meetings where these decisions are made? Do you want to set a house here, attire a suit, sit in an office, and pass through the daily grind of regular work life?"

Lancaster wore an expression of perplexity, still staring at the displays that he felt were poorly organized.

Mika could see he had not given up his argument, so she said, "Do you want to leave behind your adventures and lay down roots here?"

Still Lancaster said nothing. His expression looked defeated. So Mika made an expression with one of her hands and said, "Then seal it!" She then turned to the other chamber and led the way.

Following, Lancaster grabbed one of the items. Aware the alarm had been disabled, and would continue to be for about ten minutes, he found the shelf where he felt it should rest and he hurried to it, placing it there while Mika began her explanation. "Our experts have analyzed the Taiper Anslees; the one that got dented and contaminated."

"I'm sorry my head got in the way of that thug swinging it," Lancaster said, mocking her accusatory tone.

Mika stopped and looked at him, her hand on a fake alien statuette. "It's priceless. And there's more to it than..." She noticed the piece Lancaster had moved and stared at him annoyed. He answered with his usual oblivious smile.

She twisted the fake statuette and a wall panel opened, revealing a second wall behind it which at first appearance looked blank with textured stucco. But closer examination with the eyes, or especially fingers, revealed patterns of symbols. Mika pressed several of them in a specific order, and a metallic latching sound escaped. Then a meter square sized portion of the wall lowered, creating a shelf. Behind it was a small closet space where a handful of valuable artifacts being researched were kept. Front and center was the Taiper Anslees, a globe-like metal statue with four shallow spikes that jutted out of a textured surface, (one of which bore Lancaster's dried blood,) and a square base on which it could sit. This base was small enough for a human to grab with one hand, while the globe was just smaller than an average sized human head. The rough surface of the globe had sharp peaks, with four distinctive spikes that ran from one side to the top; so Mika was careful as she picked it up.

Lancaster shivered as she held it before him. Noticing how it made him squirm, she kept it aloft to keep him in line while she closed the secret closet and led him out of the room. "This way," she said. "You need to scry it in its natural environment."

As Lancaster followed curiously, he noticed that they passed the turn to go toward the Sigueran wing. "Shouldn't we be going that way?" he asked.

"It turns out this isn't Sigueran," she said. "Though they were interested in this device. It holds several secrets they would have been blinged with getting their claws into. This is Chiotho with a lot of Cerritac design influence."

"That must have been fun to cipher out," Lancaster said.

"More of that getting up day after day and doing the necessary research you find so tedious," Mika prodded.

"I don't..." Lancaster began to protest, but he stopped himself, aware that his ex-wife knew him better than he knew himself sometimes. He would only dig himself in deeper. This was, after all, the divide that had ended their marriage.

"The Chiotho culture was dedicated to aprending the galaxy's past the way humans are dedicated to accumulating wealth. It was almost their instinct. They integrated the designs of others into their own..."

"I know, you've nagged me about claiming relics were from the first epoch when they turned out to be Chiotho..."

"Or sometimes they were, but they were on Chiotho worlds. Their civilizations were not unlike this museum." Mika finished her sentence with the dramatic flourish of fading up the lights in the Chiotho wing. It was a conglomeration of artifacts from every era; like a "best of" collection of every other part of the museum.

Lancaster marveled at the sight. Though he had brought many of these artifacts here, he had not seen them all gathered into the same large room, polished, and presented under dramatic lighting. It resembled a mismatched treasury. Some of the artifacts were objects the Chiotho had built; others were relics they had found from earlier civilizations.

Mika led Lancaster toward an archway at one end of the chamber. As she did, she explained, "We know the Taiper Anslees was made by the Chiotho, but we can't cipher exactly what it does. We did, however, find a legend about it."

A large metal door dropped down behind them, closing the archway and shutting them inside the new chamber Mika had led them into. Lancaster jumped, startled, and by habit he hurried toward the exit, trying to get out before he was trapped. Mika let out a little chuckle. "That's not funny," Lancaster said, his tone unamused. Mika sucked it in, realizing she had been unfair to a man whose life had been threatened in similar circumstances so he could bring historical objects back to her museum.

Moving forward she gestured toward the room with her head. It was octagonal with decorative support beams arching up the walls. Above was a domed ceiling that was tiled with hexagonal flats; each approximately a foot in size. There were perhaps a hundred or more of these tiles which covered the ceiling. The middle of the room stepped up to a platform that was approximately three meters in length, and was also octagonal, matching the walls. In the very center of this platform was a dais with a circular gap at the top. Silver lining etched along the corners, and crystal décor adorned the platform edges and altar.

The Chiotho had been a very pragmatic race; rarely wasting space. So Lancaster knew there had to be a purpose to just about everything in this room, and he waited for Mika to tell him. She explained that this room was a full-size replica of what they believed the Celestial

Toran to look like. It was a legendary chamber that was rumored to point the way to some important Chiotho secrets. They had learned about it at other Chiotho sites, and had gathered evidence on its appearance from some drawings and how some other similar Chiotho rooms looked. This was as close as they could come to how it should appear.

They had built it full size to study and as one of the more dramatic looking stops for museum guests. "But now that we have the Taiper Anslees," Mika said, "we register we could finally unlock its purpose."

She held up the relic in one hand, then pulled hard at its base. "What are you doing?" Lancaster asked, reaching forward.

Mika didn't heed him, instead yanking the bottom all the way off, which sounded with a hollow pop. Beneath the boxy cover she had just removed was a metallic dial with several layers one could twist. These had symbols all over them; most of which were Chiotho, but close to half of them were other alien races.

Mika twisted these dials into the order she believed to be the correct ones, then placed the artifact on top of the pedestal. She had to stretch onto her tiptoes. The Chiotho were deceitfully taller than humans, only enough so to make it look like one could easily reach onto their shelves and across their platforms; but their extra foot or so they had on their torsos, and the extra additional inches on their arms gave their furniture a slightly larger feel than one expected when interacting with their things.

The gears inside the dais locked onto the ones on the Taiper Anslees. They could hear machinery whirring inside accompanied by mechanical clicks. Something was about to happen... or so Lancaster thought. He should have taken the hint from the fact that Mika didn't even back up. Each spike pulled into the globe top, beginning with the one that still held some of Lancaster's dried blood, leaving a round, black cavity, and when the last one ducked inside...

Nothing. The artifact stopped vibrating. Lancaster waited for something more; perhaps a projection to emerge from one of the holes, or a booming sound to reveal its purpose. He tensed his muscles and watched the relic closely, prepared for a trap. But still, there was nothing.

Mika neither flinched nor waited expectantly. She had had her arms crossed while watching, and now she approached the pedestal, reaching for the Taiper Anslees. "Impressive," Lancaster said with a sardonic grin. "Does it do impressions, too?"

"It's doing everything it does right now," she said, reaching out and picking it up. As soon as she did, all four spikes jumped up through the holes, covering them again. "Something in the architecture of this replica room activates it, but it doesn't do enough for it to reveal its true purpose."

"What's inside it?" Lancaster asked.

"Chiotho machinery," she said. "So tightly packed and tangled together we can't get a perfect magging of what it is. Might be some sort of projectors; we're not abso. The legend has it that the Taiper Anslees held the location of a collection of important artifacts from several races throughout history."

"Artifacts they were searching for?" Lancaster asked.

"Or wanting to keep a record of," Mika responded. "Anyway, that's the legend. Who knows if it's myth."

"So all I have to do is take that to one of the Chiotho rooms like this one," Lancaster said.

"That's the sticky part," Mika said. "According to our records, there was only one room that would activate this device; the Celestial Toran, and it's at Ambernmonk of the Adelaide System."

"You keep underestimating me. I've been to more than enough hostile worlds. I can rec my way through it..."

"This one's been colonized by a corporation," Mika said, cutting off Lancaster's confidence. "And it gands like their colony is right next to the site."

"Well, we'll have to moze in as tourists then, and..."

Mika interrupted again, saying, "What makes this extra thick is they're part of the Risi Corporate Empire, and they're desperately searching for whatever artifacts they can in their growing war against the Navarus Barony and some of the others. You've got competition already waiting for you there, and it's their home turf."

"How close are they to finding the Celestial Toran?" Lancaster asked.

"We don't have reconnaissance forces," Mika said. "But we have seen job postings for that location. They're establishing a camp just outside the colony and gathering corporate scientists to excavate the ruins and search them for anything of value. It's not likely they'll credit anything of the room if they find it. But they'll probably have people studying it along with their guards."

"Right," Lancaster said. "Little Jack's going to have to work on overdrive."

"I think we have someone who can help him," Mika said, nodding her head toward the exit.

\* \* \*

On a cliff-side peninsula high above the crashing waves sat a single small tiki-style house whose bright wooden frame and long, open bar windows provided the perfect atmosphere for parties. Well placed for such occasions, it sat within sight and easy walking distance of the university, as long as one was sober enough to make the trek around the bend in the cliff. This was the home of Vidiid Schultz, one of the most promising and least fruitful students ever to come out of Saberaux University. While many students went on to fortune in the corporate world as CEOs or heads of industry, and others went on to great fame by developing highly profitable products and formulas, Vidiid satisfied himself with what he always wanted, enough to sustain his life and shelter so he could enjoy his self-made man cave, and teach the next generations of college students the proper art of throwing a good fiesta.

"How old is he now?" Lancaster asked.

"Somewhere around 30," Mika answered. "I don't regard he even knows. I'm abso he's lost track of days and years... at least in the real world."

Lancaster smiled with a partial chuckle. Mika went on to explain that once a week the acre around his house lights up and it's so loud you have to be on the other side of campus not to hear it. The rest of the time you would think the house is abandoned.

At present it almost seemed haunted with the lights out and the shadow of the house only framed in moonlight. There was no sound save for the consistent crashing of the waves against the rocky shore below. The grass upon which they walked was soft and the tall trees they passed swayed lazily in the wind. Lancaster could understand why someone might lack otherworldly ambitions if this was their life with the comforts of college and good memories so nearby. But then again, he knew he'd grow restless.

Arriving at the front door, Mika pressed a button, but no sound emerged. She stepped away, waiting expectantly. "I don't credit his doorbell is working," Lancaster said, stepping up to knock.

“That alerts him inside Virtua.”

“How do you know he’s in his computers...”

“He is,” Mika said confidently, and a voice over the speakers confirmed she was correct.

“Mika! Lancaster! Come on in! Door’s unlocking.” Lancaster recognized Vidiid’s voice, and more importantly, the familiar sound of a computerized battle was blasting in the background. Mika was right, he hadn’t changed. A click at the door announced that the magnolocks released, and Mika opened and went through it, Lancaster following.

An entryway made for hosting large numbers of people opened up into a broad room before them. Steps led down into an open area that seemed too large for the modest house it appeared to be on the outside. A kitchen with a pair of bar tables and window access to the outside waited empty on the left side of the room; and a lounge complete with used couches and hanging chairs rested on the right side of the room. In the middle sat the main event; a ring of screens, computers, and other electronic equipment hovered over the most expensive and comfortable lounging chairs money could buy. Keyboards, game controllers, access boards, and supplies for plugging into Virtua sat on metal tables or hung from silver supports that were holding up monitors for viewing from above. A few of them were on, and each of them played something different, from games to a movie to the weather. None were on high, but they made a droning cacophony of incomprehensible sound together.

It was the ultimate immersive entertainment center, and it was all for the chubby man sprawled out in one of the chairs; his body as relaxed as the dead, pedals at the base of his feet, metal electrodes attached to his fingers, and a helmet over the top of his head. This was heaven for Vidiid.

The body twitched slightly, like it was reacting to a dream, and the noise from the screens overhead all stopped, their images frozen. Then one face appeared over all of them, and they slid together onto one screen. It was not Vidiid’s face, but rather one of a robot wearing a soccer jersey. The face was looking directly at them, as though he could see Mika and Lancaster from the screen. Then it said over the speakers in Vidiid’s voice, “Hi guys! Welcome! Make yourselves at home. There are some mimosas at the bar, and... well, lots of stuff really. Some of the gang left a bunch of stuff; and I think some food, too. I probably have some leftover takeout...”

“We’re fine, thanks,” Mika said. “We need to talk to you about something.”

“All right, I’ll be right out,” Vidiid said. “I’m just a couple dozen space zombies away from completing my badge.”

“I’ll have a mimosa,” Lancaster said, heading to the bar.

Mika sighed familiarly, and Vidiid said, “Help yourself. I’ll be with you... Oh, shaz! They started!” The robot in the jersey yanked up its gun hand and turned away as the screen went blank.

Lancaster pushed aside some of the bottles to get what he needed and he began to pour a drink. A second glass was next to it. “How strong you want yours?” Lancaster asked Mika.

Mika was glancing over some of the other terminals, her mind elsewhere. When Lancaster asked again, she said, “None for me. I already said.”

“Extra strong then,” Lancaster said, and he poured the second.

Mika gave in and met Lancaster halfway so he wouldn’t get the drinks near the computers. She also knew how curious Lancaster was, and didn’t want him snooping around Vidiid’s other activities.

Lancaster wasn't so concerned about that as he was Mika's eyes. The light was dim and it landed across her face softly. Her carob skin was wrinkled only by her lines of concentration, which served only to enhance her beauty. Several unchecked strands of hair fell across her eyes, which were themselves caught in a distant stare, thinking of something else. He used their distracted gaze to allow him a few moments of watching her. He soaked in every second until her sharp eyes jolted toward him. He smiled and raised his mimosa, then drank. 'Those were days gone by,' he reminded himself. They had been divorced more than four years now. She wanted the sedentary life and he could not stay planet bound, so that was final.

Mika knew his stare and his feelings were not entirely exclusive. But she had moved on, even married and lost a husband since that time. And she had other worries now that she did not want Lancaster burdened with.

Vidid awoke and removed his helmet. He sluggishly swung his feet over the side as he sat up and began removing the metal pieces from his fingertips.

"Welcome back to the world, zombie slayer," Lancaster said. "Can I get you something?"

"Water," Vidid said. He would move on to either energy drinks or alcohol soon, but his first needs after emerging from Virtua were always basic. "And whatever's the easiest food to throw in the nuker."

"You got it," Lancaster said, bringing Vidid a glass of water.

Mika stepped into the ring of computers to speak since the light was brighter there. "Vidid, we need your help with something."

"You're not here for a game? Klaxon Red 8 just came out."

"That sounds more like something for Lancaster. I'm better with the tame simulators."

"You tried the simulators?" Lancaster asked, surprised.

"He had a diving simulator of the oceans. It was nice," she said.

"She got eaten by a leviathan."

"I liked it up until then."

"Is that why you don't go back?" Lancaster said while Vidid laughed.

"He was only going to help with something if I tried one of his games, and I thought that was going to be easy."

"The seas are a dangerous place," Lancaster smirked.

Mika focused on the issue at hand. "We need to insert Lancaster and his partner onto Ambergmonk."

"Where's that?" Vidid asked.

"Adelaide. It's controlled by the Tsunamo Corporation."

"I take it they're not pleasant with you to landing there?" Vidid asked.

"That's why we're coming to you," Lancaster said.

Vidid finished his water and looked at both of them disappointedly. Then he said gravely. "You know that my buddies are out there right now fighting the boss monster of Zombie Eye without me. I'm holding you personally responsible for every digital life lost out there tonight."

"Noted," Mika said. "Lancaster needs to get onto the planet to find an important clue in recovering some valuable artifacts. Tsunamo's spirits may not be blinged with him being there, so we need to do it discretely. I can pay you the usual under the table value as our other projects if you can help us."

Vidid squinted at the offer, like it didn't quite interest him. Then he said, "I can help you out, no problem, but money's not my issue right now."

"What's your price?" Mika asked.

"Ms. Sinovi, for you I'll do anything you need," he said shrugging. "But there's a student in one of your classes right now..."

"Vidid," Mika said, straightening.

"She's a graduate student, so she's not that much younger..."

"I'm not your dating service..."

"I just want her to come to one of my parties. Just tell her about it. Tell her we've got Aerdoni wine. It's her favorite."

"And how do you know this?"

Vidid's eyes widened like a deer in headlights for a moment, then said, "There are some things best you don't know. But I just want a chance for her to come visit." His eyes now switched to puppy dog pleading. Lancaster joined him. He just wanted onto that planet, and if an introduction to a woman was all it took, he hoped she'd do it.

Mika relented, taking in a deep breath and saying, "Okay. Invitation only. I don't guarantee she'll come. What's her name?"

"Samantha Wilke. Her favorite color is red. She lives at..."

"The name will suffice. Now, can you get us onto that planet?"

"As it so happens, I've recently browsed around in their neighborhood of the Galaganet."

Mika understood that when Vidid said "browsed around" he meant something much deeper than window shopping. He had been deep inside their systems and had what she needed. Vidid grabbed some chips he had sitting near a station and sat at one of the terminals chomping away at them. He tapped the screen, bringing up a menu and hit one of the selections so fast no one got a chance to read any of them. That brought up another screen which Vidid tapped away at before it was fully visible, and a holograph appeared above the keyboard. He tapped on something in the middle, bringing up another hologram, out of which he grabbed something into his finger which he tapped into the monitor, and more information came up. He tapped in some information on the keyboard and up came notes he had on the corporation in question.

Vidid took a moment to look them over. His head bobbed with recognition as he munched a couple handfuls of chips. He wiped his fingers on his shirt, then spread them over the control board the way a pianist readies himself before playing a concerto. Then, quite suddenly, he danced those fingers over the keyboard, swiping the cursor board and pressing the screen as images blinked across and holograms swirled. He explained to Mika that when he had been browsing around inside the corporation's computers earlier he had located several locations where he could get pass codes to their employees and subsidiaries. What he needed now was the name of the company that ran supplies for the planet, and access to their employee and shipping records.

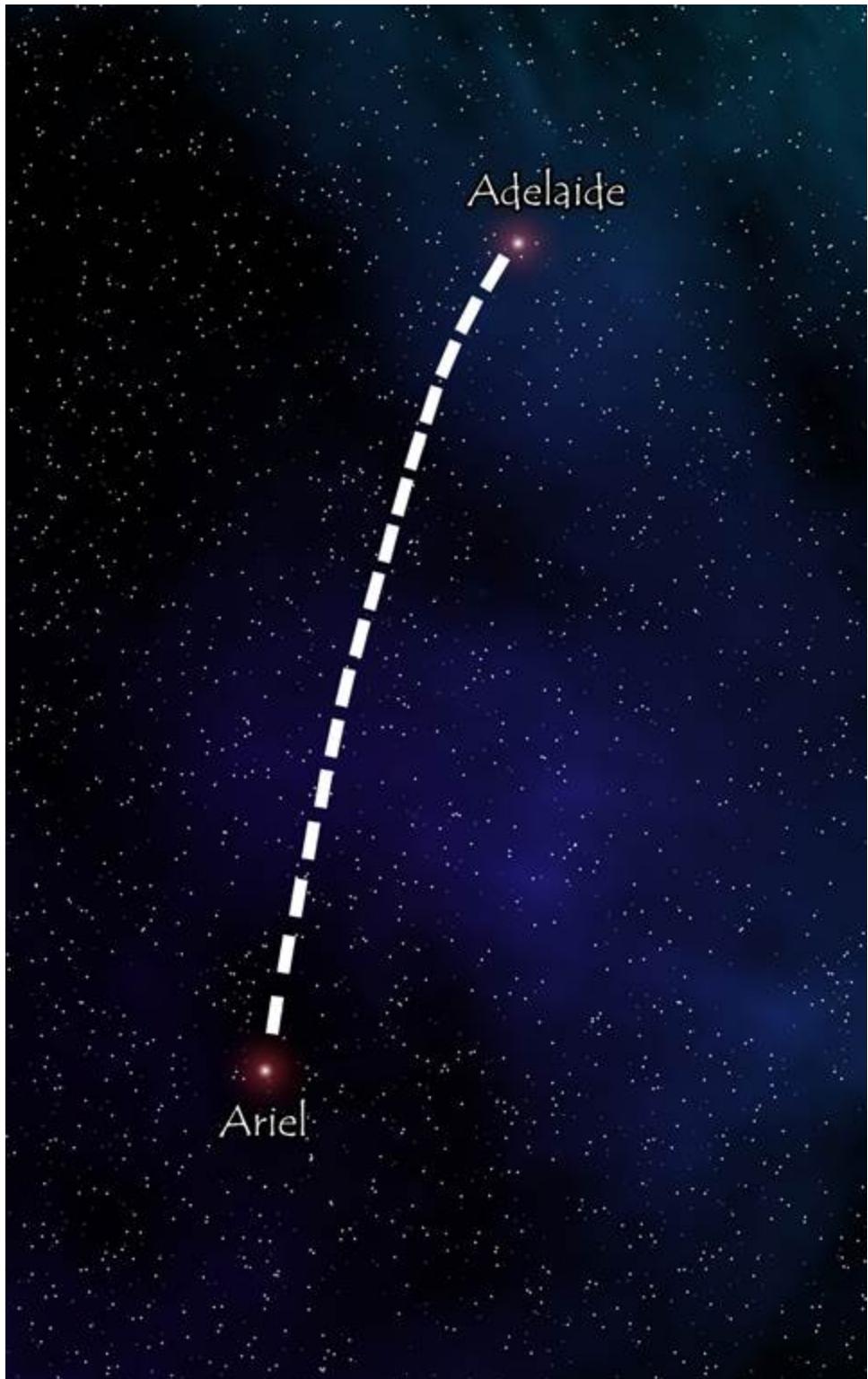
Mika had a sudden thought. "If they ever detected you running around in their system, would they trace you back to the university?"

"Miss Sinovi," he said, "if you ever find I'm gone and my house has burned to the ground, you can assume they traced me and I won't be regressing." Before Mika could digest that, Vidid said, "There. I used some pass codes I had gathered from the Tsunoamo to get into the Gowanic Company who are the suppliers of the planet. I scheduled an independent contractor supply run with... I'm assuming you still fly in Little Jack's bucket of bolts."

Lancaster said yeah, and Vidiid continued pressing buttons in all their forms, finishing up. The screens still went by too quickly to read until he was done, at which point credentials for Lancaster and Little Jack remained.

"All I need to do now is run it through the encryption printer," Vidiid said, turning to them with a smile and one finger above the button he needed to press. He rested his eyes on Mika. "So... Samantha Wilke?"

Mika sighed, looked at Lancaster, then nodded. Vidiid pressed the button.



# CHAPTER FOUR

## *THE CELESTIAL TORAN*

A blinding white flash of light tore out of the fabric of space and time, inside of which swirled a cornucopia of colors which dazzled like chromatic starlight. Out of this gap spat a bluish-gray ship called Odin's Revenge which drifted briefly before engaging its engines and making its way toward the nearby planet of Ambernmonk.

Other bright rips in space opened around it, and vessels entered or exited through them. They were mostly larger than Little Jack's ship, and they all bore emblems from the Risi Corporate Empire's business interests. Vidid had put together a realistic looking independent contractor logo and they had it printed with a digital ID marker to place onto the ship. Little Jack had completed this disguise with a forged electronic signature in the ship's computer system. Everything matched the registration Vidid had created online and in the Gowanic database. They were, for all intents and purposes, the Richard Johnson Toiletries Suppliers.

Before anyone could protest, Vidid had explained that toiletries was the one business most overlooked by auditors and security, and the one that came with the most excuses to bypass security. Plus, they were wanting to get to an archaeological site already in progress. That would be a supply no one would question was needed. This meant that Mika had to pay for plumbing supplies they could transport, but it also meant Lancaster could get inside the corporate archaeological site without much danger, so it was worth the cost to the university; or at least to her own peace of mind.

Little Jack checked for the space ports and found the one closest to the excavation site to be restricted, as they had suspected. He opened a channel with them and sent the credentials. There was a silent pause, during which time Lancaster found himself scooting to the edge of his seat. Little Jack didn't budge. He was confident in the forgery they had created, and even if there was a problem, there wouldn't be any difficulty escaping at this distance.

The control center reconnected and cleared them to land on the supplies section of the space port. Lancaster let out an excited gasp of relief while Little Jack prepared for reentry.

Once on the surface, they arranged for Gowanic trucks to haul the supplies out of town to the excavation site. One of the truckers, a bald man with tattoos where his hair would have been, gave them grief, complaining that this was not in the schedule for the day. Little Jack dealt with him, asking the burly man, "Do you want to explain a class three ammonium MSRL coli injection blockage to the Executive Manager when they get a chlorinated galvanization leakage and their sanitation fecal matter has reached comatizing aromatic proportions?"

The man answered his speedy monologue with a blank stare, to which Little Jack said, "Neither do I. So unless you want a level two diagnostic evaluation write-up, I suggest you get your vehicles loaded and take us to the site."

The man's glare told Little Jack it wasn't over with, but Little Jack let on no fear, simply staring back at the man behind his large, frosted-over glasses. The sanitation supplies were loaded, and the truckers began to move them with Little Jack and Lancaster inside the cab of the trucker who had complained; to keep an eye on him.

Soon after leaving the spaceport colony, the road weaved among oversized outcroppings that jutted from the ground like giant monoliths, then it dropped into a canyon where the road hugged the cliff-side to the right, and fell hundreds of meters to jagged rapids on the left.

The caravan didn't slow. Used to this route, and egged on by threats to their courage by other truckers, the drivers took every turn as if there was no danger. Lancaster felt one side of the car lift off the ground as it sped around a corner, threatening to tilt them over the side. Little Jack squirmed, peeking up over the dashboard momentarily to see what was below. The bald man smiled at his uneasiness, and exaggerated the swerves a little more.

Lancaster was distracted from his fear when he spotted the outline of a building formed out of the rock wall. It was faint, buried over by time and the slow progress of geology; but fragments endured, still just discernible, like a hand barely reaching out of quicksand.

More ancient remnants followed - parcels of walls, empty windows, slanted sections of roofs; each half faded and ghostly, like they were dissolving into their rocky surfaces. All bore the architectural label of the Chiotho. Weaving among these visages of eons gone by were streams of water which snaked down the cliff face like vertical rivers. Here and there the water rolled over an ancient roof, which leaned over, spilling it onto another time-worn roof that spilled over the edge into a mighty waterfall hundreds of meters to the bottom. The pragmatic engineering of the Chiotho was still effective millions of years after their demise.

On the opposite canyon wall Lancaster found more evidence of ancient architecture, along with a tall carving almost the size of the cliff face itself that matched the look of Cerritac more than Chiotho art and architecture. Water flowed down the center of this giant monument which dropped in layers; sometimes falling straight like a waterfall, other times stepping down like stairs, and still other times disappearing into the rocky cliff-face, then reappearing to flow horizontally until it dropped again several meters, and continued its path.

Water flowed out of the rock in several other places as well, sometimes flowing out of a hole to be caught by a jutting section of stone that swallowed it back into the canyon wall, sometimes peeking out in the form of rapids before flowing back inside again, and other times dropping all the way down to the base below, where Lancaster saw now that some of the rapids were not swirling over common rocks, but pieces of buildings that had been swallowed up by the growing river over the ages.

One of these waterfalls fell over the road, a stone roof overhead protecting the travelers from the flow. Lancaster began to wonder if this road was here before Gowanic came along, but didn't bother to ask, aware that the driver wasn't keen on telling them anything.

Soon after the waterfall, the road curved into the cliff wall and upward; into an area where towering rock outcroppings were coupled with ancient buildings whose doors led into the stone. Lancaster recognized the hexagonal hive-like structures to be Chiotho, and he searched for the Celestial Toran. Company workers and corporate managers strode about the ruins, busily attending to their duties. Some of these chores included chiseling away at the ancient structures, sometimes with Lazcutters and Sledgebots. Lancaster had to resist the temptation to shout out; and he was glad Mika wasn't there, as she wouldn't have suppressed her outrage.

Temporary human structures had been built throughout the area; the blue collar workers having barracks rolled out on top of one another, middle management in apartments, and corporate executives in suites atop the outcroppings with views over the cliff and the horizon.

The trucks pulled into the supply area and parked with their backs toward the loading docks. The supply manager approached them with ClipScreen in hand, her forehead curled up in quiet confusion. She did not express her dismay, however, as she handed it to Lancaster and had him sign. He scribbled incoherently across it and handed it back, and she went to the rear to check out what they had.

The bald man with the head tattoos watched the pair leave the truck, and Little Jack watched him back, pointing his fingers to his eyes, then at the man, as if they would be keeping an eye on him. The trucker simply chuckled.

When Little Jack caught up with Lancaster, he was already walking through the area scanning with his eyes for places to look for the Celestial Toran. Much of the site was still being excavated; many buildings were still underground. Those that were exposed were populated with miners, appraisers, guards, and the occasional mercenary archaeologist. They weren't so much interested in a blank room with secrets to reveal; their primary goal was to find valuable and/or powerful objects. This meant that if they had found the room he wanted, they would probably have left it alone, but they may not have uncovered it to begin with.

Lancaster glanced at the walls, and stole glances inside the rooms whose doors were left open as he passed. He found little of interest. Part of the reason was the speed by which he had to move to avoid suspicion; part of it was because the company excavation teams were not uncovering more than they needed to be able to search for what they wanted. Part of the reason also, Lancaster had to admit, was because the Chioho were not much for flourishes in their designs. They could be some of the most frustrating alien races to study with their excruciating practicality.

While thinking through all this, Lancaster came upon a company map splayed out on a board in the middle of a clearing. Lancaster studied it, looking past the labels describing the best odds at locating valuable treasures and searching for clues for what was important to him. He came up empty, except for a view from the top of one of the spires from which he could get a look at the entire layout. It had apparently been a balcony of a Chioho building which was now used to see as much of the dig site as possible.

Lancaster led Little Jack to the spot, stepping up stairs and passing through a couple rooms where workers were chipping away at walls and opening containers, to finally arrive at the top. There he could see the extensive excavation site below, and the majestic canyon alongside. The view exposed miles of terrain, from the glittering colony in one direction to the boundless desert in the other.

But what caught Lancaster's attention the most was the opposite side of the canyon. Along the edges of the cliff carving he could see partially exposed buildings where the ancient Chioho city used to follow the path of the vertical river that flowed down to the bottom. More buildings sat alongside the bridge that connected the two sections over the great gorge. Pulling out his Spectralnoculars, Lancaster canvassed the area. He found far fewer signs of life on the opposite side of the canyon, and most of them were guards, not searchers. That meant the corporation didn't feel there was much of value over there. There were fewer obvious objects sitting around, which seemed a better chance for his room.

What also caught his eye was when he switched the Spectralnoculars to highlight the contour details on walls and other stone structures. He again spotted several points that matched

a Cerritac influence, even if they were still clearly Chioho built. The fact that the Taiper Anslees also included that species' influence gave Lancaster the feeling that this was where he was supposed to take the artifact.

And so Lancaster and his friend returned to the surface and headed to the bridge where they crossed over to the other side. Guards at the head of the bridge took notice of their passing, but did not stop them.

As they crossed over the land bridge, Lancaster took a look over the side to see the seemingly endless expanse downward to the river below. Now more used to the look of the building structures, he noticed more points where they peeked out of the rocky cliffs, but he didn't linger long on them. The vertigo and the feel of gravity tugging him downward caused him to pull away from the edge. Little Jack didn't bother looking at all. He knew better than to tempt fate, and he took note of the lack of arm rails as he felt the occasional strong gust of wind. So he saw no point in leaning over the edge.

Once on the opposite side, Lancaster got to work looking over the buildings, keeping clear of the occasional company guards and workers he spotted. Little Jack noticed that they didn't seem much interested, thinking they were in a secure area and not paid enough to care very highly.

The streets dipped and rounded monolithic rock structures, occasionally passing over or around waterways and rapids, and small waterfalls that crisscrossed through the ancient town. These streams sometimes passed underground to pop back out of holes in the boulders, then dabbled over rapids until they dropped underground again or reached the edge of the cliff and tumbled hundreds of meters to the river far below.

Lancaster was disappointed by the lack of options. The variety of buildings exceeded those on the opposite side of the cliff, but few came close to matching the Celestial Toran. To be fair, he was not entirely sure that the room would match the description he had had, so Lancaster was afraid that he could be looking right at his quarry and pass it by, so he took note of several potential candidates to possibly return.

After passing a short pond and hopping over one stream that branched out of it, Lancaster followed a second stream which led to a few dips down some stairs, then a long drop off the cliff wall. It would be just another dead end that Lancaster turned away from, but this time he stopped to ponder a moment, and to look at the view. He had inadvertently arrived at the giant carving along the edge of the cliff, the flourishes of which matched a race that had gone extinct millions of years before the Chioho were ever even formed. The Chioho was an entire race that looked backward, the way he did. He wondered if they had learned from the others' mistakes, or had just lived in the past. The Chioho had gone extinct, so at the very least they hadn't learned very much.

His thoughts were interrupted as he noticed that the stairs that led down the cliff wall were sliced off about a hundred feet down; leaving a large gap in the path with only a sheer drop of hundreds of meters. The concave shape of the cliff next to him implied that a rock slide had brought down that section and it had taken the walking structure with it. Most interesting, however, was the entrance to an artificial structure along this platform just past the gap. This entrance was framed in the décor of the large carving, with gothic wings spread from it and round bulbs at all four corners. The two bulbs at the top looked like eyes pointed inward, and the two at the bottom looked like nostrils pointed outward. It had the design features of the Cerritac, but it was not exact; nor was it the correct height. This was built by the Chioho to resemble the Cerritac.

Lancaster removed the Taiper Anslees from his pack and looked it over. The craftsmanship was the same. He was certain this was the room he sought.

This came as both pleasant and disappointing news. Though he had found the Celestial Toran, it didn't look like he could get to it. Not only was the path cut for him, the rocks and mud next to it appeared loose and untenable, even with his grappling hook and line. Jumping it would be impossible. And glancing around, he found no other path.

Beyond the doorway, however, he spotted an ongoing gush of water spouting from the rocks and rolling down a path just under the walkway before dropping off the cliff. He considered a possibility. Hurrying back up to the pond, he took from one of his jacket pockets an electronic, flashing flare, and he tossed it into the pond near the creek he had hopped over earlier.

He then dashed down to the gap in the stairs and watched the water he had spotted earlier flow. After about 30 seconds, the flashing ball tumbled out, rolled along the roiling rapids' path, then dropped with the water into the abyss below.

Little Jack saw what he was doing, and as Lancaster turned toward him with large eyes, his partner shook his head. "No, this is a dumb idea."

"Less dumb than making a jump for it," Lancaster explained.

"You remember when you told me to warn you when you had a brain damaged idea?" Little Jack said.

"This isn't brain damaged. I can grab onto the walkway before I fall over the edge..."

"And how fast will you be going?"

"It's a lot more firm than the rockslide wall," Lancaster said, determined. Little Jack knew that tone in his voice. It was one that said he couldn't be talked out of whatever he had planned. So he said nothing. All he could do was have his partner's back. "Take my hat," Lancaster said, placing it on Little Jack's head.

Little Jack threw it off, declaring, "Don't touch the hair!"

Lancaster ignored him, checking his pack to make sure it was secure, and looking himself over. He considered removing his jacket, but he might need something from it, and he wouldn't have to worry about being weighted down, the water was going to be sending him where he needed to go. If he got into real trouble, he could take it off there.

"You have your grappling gun," Little Jack said.

"Yes," Lancaster answered, checking to make sure it was secure.

"Be ready to use it."

"Got you," Lancaster said, looking at his partner and smiling confidently. He tried to make it reassure his partner.

Little Jack's expression didn't change. He usually looked indifferent, but now he had tiny, slight wrinkles on his forehead.

"No worries," Lancaster said, and he hopped in.

Little Jack hadn't been ready. He hurried to the broken path to watch for Lancaster emerging.

Aware that time was short with a lack of oxygen, Lancaster immediately began swimming in the direction of the stream. He felt the current speed up, the pressure building around him, like it was grasping tighter at his body while pressing him forward at the same time.

The world grew pitch black around him. He felt forward with his hands, touching the cave walls on all sides ahead of him to make sure he wasn't running into anything, and to control his speed. He wanted to make sure that if it shrank too small for him, that he would be able to turn around.

The walls were indeed closing in, and his outstretched hands drew closer together. The tunnel was narrowing so much that he would be unable to turn around. Was it worth it? Lancaster pictured the mock up room in the museum, the Taiper Anslees in the middle, and what it could tell him. He pulled one hand back and felt the artifact in his pack. It was worth it, so he continued forward with one hand forward and the other further back, close to his grappling gun.

The tunnel swerved. The water pressure grew more intense, and he was quickly swept forward. His front hand lost its grip and he lost control. He tried to bring his other hand forward but there was no longer enough room. His body was barely fitting. He was tossed one way, then another. His head hit sharp rock and he lost consciousness for a moment, awakening to horrible pain and a swirling white and red mass of air bubbles. It felt like he was being spun now, and he had no idea where he was going.

Then he felt a sudden jolt as he stopped. Water was still rushing past him, but he was not moving. Frantically feeling around, he found his jacket stuck to a craggy corner. He pulled it loose, but held to the rock a moment. He might be able to fire his grappling hook back and still get out in the direction from which he had come. He didn't know how much further it was, and his lungs felt hot, ready to burst. Nausea overtook him, and a few gulps of water swished around in his mouth that had gotten in when he had fallen unconscious. He was growing dizzy, and didn't know if he'd make it out.

But looking forward, he spotted a glow. Light was seeping in from around the corner, so he let go and allowed the water to take him, pushing left or right with his one forward hand as needed, and pulling aside his jacket and pack when they came close to latching onto something.

In this way, Lancaster fished through the tunnels, coming closer and closer to the light. But as the light grew brighter and larger, Lancaster could hear the roar outside. He suddenly remembered the deep drop. He grabbed a handle from his utility belt and readied his thumb over its button near the top.

Little Jack spotted Lancaster as he was spat out of the hole that was barely large enough for him. He knocked into the stone lip of the rocky balcony and was carried down the rapids toward the waterfall drop. It looked like his hands were flailing, but one of them came up with a small black object, a Pocket Pickaxe. He slammed it into the stony lip next to the walkway and it snagged on a crack.

Little Jack breathed a sigh of relief as Lancaster's momentum stopped. His legs skipped over the driving tide as the running water rushed beneath. He began to pull himself up, but much to Jack's dismay, he only made it a little way. The power of the rapids was overcoming Lancaster's diminished energy, and it was pulling him harder than he was lifting. After a few moments of his limbs shaking, Lancaster succumbed, losing his grip and pulled along by the foamy white water.

Little Jack drew one of his guns and pressed a button, shifting the revolving clips to explosive rounds, and he fired at the rock near the waterfall. Boulders fell in Lancaster's path; and Little Jack hoped it was enough, as Lancaster's arms were flailing uncontrollably. He would not be able to stop before he fell off the edge. Much to Jack's relief, his partner hit the large rock full-torso. His arms wrapped around it... and the boulder didn't move. The water rushed quickly along both sides, but Lancaster remained stuck to the stone.

After catching his breath a moment, Lancaster climbed on top, then skipped off onto the cliff side, grasping at gaps with his hands and ledges with his feet. Like this, he climbed his way back to the path and hopped onto it. He gave a little thank you wave to Little Jack, and approached the entryway.

He slowed to look over the décor carved out of the stone. The eyes at the top had pupils that were placed such that they would follow the viewer no matter where they went. The wings looked like they belonged to a type of hunting bird that might have once lived in the canyon. There were also thin etchings that looked like they once held a metal frame within them to highlight certain features. Perhaps this was the feature that was used to open and close the door, for it was missing, leaving an open gap through which he could walk.

Lancaster passed through a short corridor until it opened up into a larger chamber. Lighting it up with his Illuminator, Lancaster recognized it immediately. This was the room imitated at the university, this was the Celestial Toran.

There were a few differences that were likely to be important. The most obvious was due only to the passage of time; the entire chamber was covered in inches of dust and sand, including the ceiling; making it all seem smaller.

More importantly, however, the support arches were not blank, but bore carvings of figures on them. Lancaster dusted them off enough to get a good look at them, and found that they were mythological figures from ancient Chiotho lore. They represented the end of time, much like the human four horsemen. Their foursome represented similar ideas, except death was represented in the broader stroke of extinction, and famine represented both starvation and suffocation.

As he took quick holo and 2D pictures of the support beams, Lancaster got a better look, and realized they also vaguely resembled what other alien species might look like. One of them had the unmistakable bird-like appearance of the Orhaap, but Lancaster couldn't tell who the other three were.

He approached one of them whose features were less crusted over. He scraped away at the dirt, uncovering more of the stone features, and began to recognize the more rugged, short hair appearance of the Banillic. The last two he decided to leave for later study back at the museum where more time and imaging equipment could be put to them.

Perhaps even more obvious of a change from the university version of the room was the dais in the middle. There were four rings that surrounded it, each spread out to cover as much territory, as though forming a hollow sphere. On each ring was a large lens, approximately a foot in diameter. These, too, Lancaster had to clear of dust, though he did it with more care so as to not damage the ancient optics.

As he moved, he noticed that his feet uncovered bits of the floor, and he noticed ancient Chiotho writing carved into them. They were short phrases, and there were so many of them, he didn't try to translate any yet. He just made sure none of them were hiding traps so he could continue his inspection.

The final difference, and perhaps the least important, was that a couple of the water flows came into the room through fissures in the walls, cascading like fountains into a natatorium carved out of the stone floor which formed a crescent halfway around the room along its periphery.

Having taken in everything about the chamber, Lancaster stepped atop the platform in the middle. He moved slowly, watching everything carefully for the slightest movement from which he might have to jump. But it seemed the coast was clear.

Lancaster brushed off the surface of the dais, locating the central plug where the Taiper Anslees was to go. Inside he spotted the mechanical knobs that would latch onto the rings at the bottom of the artifact. But he got a sudden thought.

Removing the bottom cover of the Taiper Anslees, Lancaster studied the metal rings. It had been easy to miss before due to all the notches and tiny claws on them, but each one had a subtle design. Looking at them closely, Lancaster realized they were each symbols of the Chiotho's four horsemen. At one point of the base of the artifact was a convex notch; the alignment point he supposed.

Lancaster twisted the one that matched their version of pestilence. Click, click, click, click, click, click... He had it in place. He then moved to the next, snapping it into place, then the next, and finally the last.

The relic prepared, Lancaster glanced at the four support arches as if to ask the faces if they were ready, then he reached into the middle, aligned the artifact over the slot, then slid it into place. He heard a few quiet clacks as the metal parts passed one another, then a final snapping sound as it latched into its place.

The pedestal came to life, a clattering noise humming inside. Lancaster leaped back to give the outer rings space to turn, and none too soon. They twisted and rotated, as though searching for the right location. As they did, the dust from each one trailed behind, completing the appearance of a misty sphere around the central altar.

Through the haze Lancaster could see that the Taiper Anslees was doing the same thing it had at the museum. Each spike was lowering into its own hole. It was also turning slightly, as though getting into position.

The whole room was creaking and clanking like a rusty wind-up doll. The machinery spun faster and faster until suddenly... it stopped.

And once again there was nothing. The curtain of dust fell revealing everything sitting silently in place. There wasn't even any projection Lancaster had expected. It seemed an awful waste to have had everything twist and turn to no effect, so he was certain there had to be something wrong.

That's when he noticed some of the dust still hovering around one of the lenses. There was a faint glow emanating around it. It was so slight that it seemed to both exist and not exist, like it was a mirage or a ghostly visage.

Then Lancaster remembered something so obvious to him he felt like kicking himself. This room, and much of this settlement, was designed very much in the style of the Cerritac; and their primary method of seeing was at the edge of human sight fading into ultraviolet.

He pulled out of one of his jacket pockets his Spectrogoggles and snapped them over his eyes. He shifted them to ultraviolet and looked in the directions the holes were pointing.

Indeed, they were all projecting images in ultraviolet; every image landing in a different section of the ceiling over bumpy dust that rolled across the surface like a landscape. Each of these forms was in the shape of a different artifact accompanied by the visage of one of the archway statues depicting both an apocalypse horseman and a specific alien race.

Lancaster noticed a couple points of the ceiling where enough dirt had fallen from the vibrations that the stone was revealed. There he could see concave designs carved into the rocky surface.

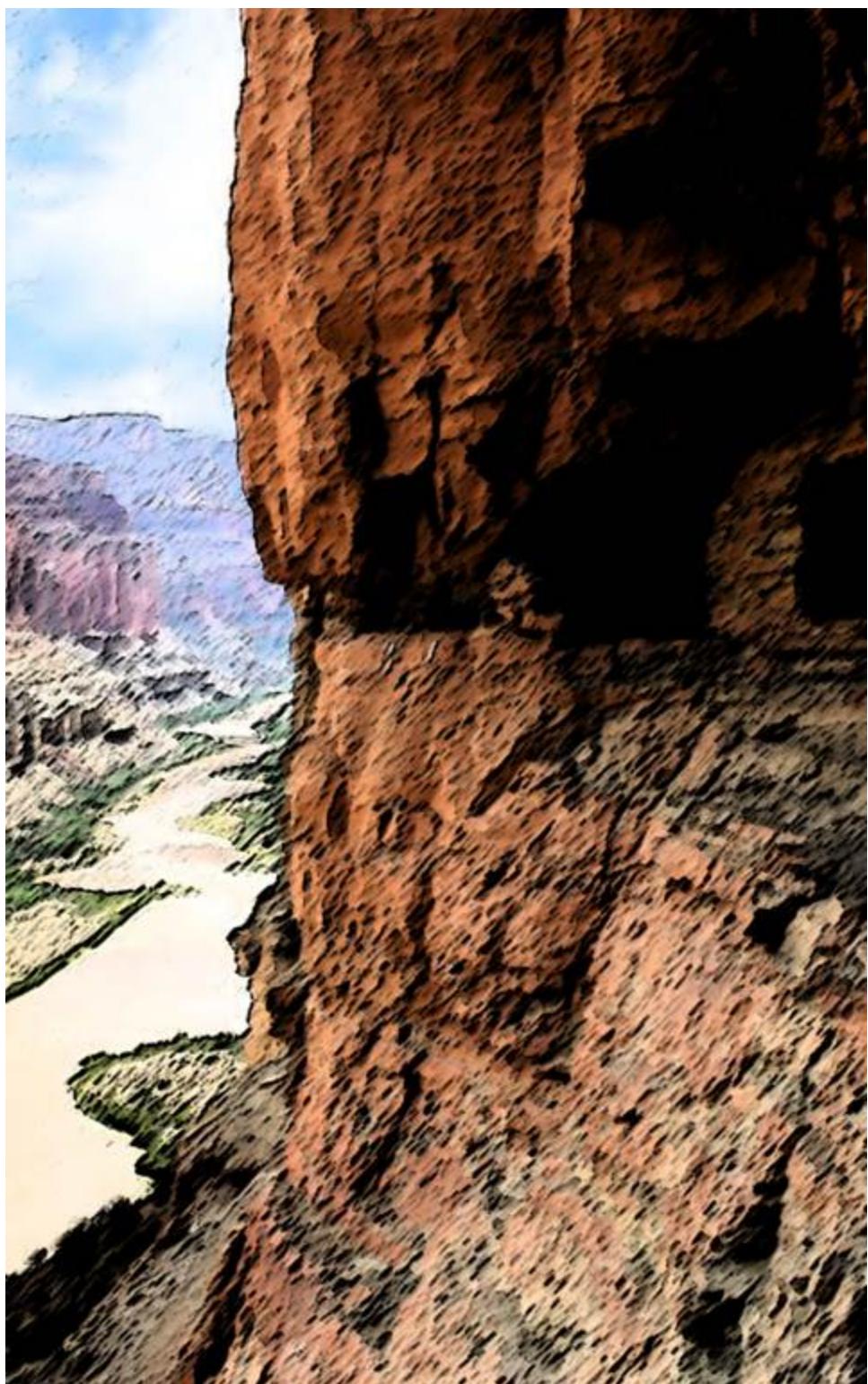
Lancaster positioned himself directly underneath the parts of the ceiling where the beams would have landed. He could not hope to reach them, so he opened his utility belt and pulled out his Aircone gun. Pointing it at the ceiling and pressing the trigger, compressed air fired, hitting the ceiling in a one meter diameter. Dust and sand spewed to all sides and poured down in an arch, like rain falling off an umbrella. He then hit another point where a beam was trying to hit the ceiling, then a third and a fourth.

At each point he found a one foot large hexagonal panel that was part of many other hexagonal panels making up most of the ceiling. Each one of these panels had the shape of an object carved into them along with Chiotho letters. The ultraviolet projections were of star systems and planets with coordinates, and very small Chiotho writing.

Lancaster quickly grabbed his Spectimager, set it to ultraviolet through human sight, and captured the images. As he did, he noticed that his feet were inadvertently brushing away sand and dirt from the floor, and he remembered that some were embossed with writing. He maneuvered himself directly under the ultraviolet projections and cleared the debris away from the floor, revealing the carved designs.

He knew that all of these elements were important clues to the locations of these artifacts, but he didn't have time to research them at the moment. Lancaster knew that the best he could do right now was capture them all in as clear of images as he could so he could study them later.

No sooner had he gotten the last picture than Little Jack was calling to him. They had been discovered.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### LOST CITY OF THE CERRITAC

Little Jack was used to waiting for Lancaster. On myriad worlds where his partner chopped through the jungle or trudged across the tundra in search of some ruins, Little Jack had needed to find ways to amuse himself during these long waiting periods whether it was on the ship or waiting on a cliff edge as he was presently doing. Though a patient man when his job called for it, waiting on someone caused Jack a great deal of boredom. Sometimes he had something in his glasses that he would watch on a light opaqueness setting so he'd still see whatever was happening beyond them. Other times he found something around him with which to amuse himself.

Such was the case today as he was picking up pebbles and tossing them over the side of the cliff to see how long it took them to reach the bottom where it landed in the raging river. "One supernova, two supernova, three supernova, four supernova, five superno..." Plop. Another. "One supernova, two supernova, three supernova, four supernova, five supernova, si..." Plop. He realized he was throwing them forward so they were arcing outward. So he tried dropping some right next to the cliff. Unfortunately, it was truly a sheer drop with boulders bulging out of the wall, which also curved from time to time. By the time those stones hit the ground, it was hard to tell what he had thrown and what they had pushed into motion along the way.

Little Jack wasted a bit of time determining the sweet spot of sending one far enough away from the cliff wall, but not getting too much air time. He then tossed several to get an idea. "One supernova, two supernova, three supernova, four supernova, five s..." Plop. A proper scientist would be able to tell him exactly how many meters that was based on velocity, local gravity, wind speed, etc. Little Jack judged distance on intuition; and on the information his glasses gave him. He could look down and simply have the sensors in the glasses measure how far it was from the bottom, but he figured he was better off not knowing and letting the pebbles find out. "One supernova, two supernova, three supernova, four supernova, five super..."

He knew the distance to the stone bridge; 140 meters... or further, depending on which part he was measuring. It stretched across the entire canyon after all, and took a couple minutes to cross. He was keeping his eye on it as well as the pathway down to where he was standing. If and when guards came, he wanted to be ready.

And sure enough they did come, led by the bald truck driver with the hair replacement tattoos. His head, which reflected the sunlight so distinctly he was difficult to miss, was visibly animated, scanning the cliff face for his prey. A commander searched with him, though less exaggerated in his movement, and the corporate soldiers in their armor plating with their rifles at the ready followed obediently. They were all moving quickly, at a trot rather than a march.

Little Jack readied his hand near his pistol Huginn. He knew he was going to need it; he would need both his Raven pistols. But he also knew that the moment he opened fire, Lancaster's work would be done. So he gave it as much time as he could.

The driver's head stopped on Little Jack. His hand moved to point at him. That was as much time as he could give. Little Jack drew Huginn, his thumb pressing the button to shift to sharp shooter ranged shot. The commander reacted, and all the soldiers turned toward the small man on the cliff edge. Little Jack called out for Lancaster, and fired, the long laser blast hitting the driver straight in the chest. Though he carried no weapon, Little Jack knew he was the biggest danger because he could identify Little Jack's ship, and they'd have no escape from the planet.

Now with their target identified, the soldiers lifted their rifles and opened fire. Little Jack pressed the button in the back of his pistol with his thumb and the revolving clips switched to rapid fire. He shot at the incoming blasts, deflecting many of them away. With his left hand he drew Muninn and switched it to explosive round. He lifted it and fired at the bridge. The shot hit below the front half of the soldiers, and they went tumbling down into the canyon with their commander. "One supernova, two supernova, three..."

Lancaster emerged from the Celestial Toran just as the bridge exploded. "What are you doing?" he exclaimed.

Little Jack looked at him confused. "Protecting our shafts," he answered.

"That's part of the ruins! They stood for millions of years..."

"It's the ruins or us today," Little Jack said, firing another round that blew up more of the bridge. The surviving soldiers retreated back to the other side of the canyon.

They had a short break now to figure out what they were going to do. "You need to pike down here," Lancaster said.

"How?"

"Take the underground waterway like I did."

"You're kidding."

"No. Hurry."

"I'm not taking that death trap."

"I was nove. And I'm bigger than you."

"No way. Let's find something else." Little Jack looked around him.

Then Lancaster noticed that the cliff wall was solid enough near Little Jack for the grappling hook to connect; so he pulled his grappling gun and pointed it toward his partner.

Little Jack turned to find Lancaster leveling a gun at him, and he pointed his pistols back at him. "What the hades?" he exclaimed.

"Take stock in me," Lancaster said, and he fired into the stone wall. The grapple bit into the stone and connected. The wire grew tight.

Little Jack figured out quickly what Lancaster was suggesting, so he holstered Muninn and held Huginn over the wire. Then, holding with both hands, he zip lined across the gap as Lancaster held the line firm.

Little Jack landed on the other end just as snipers began firing. One of them hit the line, snapping the wire and rendering the grappling gun useless. But there was no time to think about that. The two men began to run down the path.

The sniper scopes stayed with the two men, leading slightly. Their pace was steady enough that their internal computers were able to combine with the range information to

determine where exactly they needed to shoot to hit. Two of them had the intruders locked, but just as they fired, the path slid into the canyon and out of sight.

Lancaster and Little Jack found themselves in a steep valley cut into the rocky ground. Half buried Chioho buildings protruded from bulging rock outcroppings which divided this small community into sections. Another path dropped into this valley on the other side which a squad of soldiers was hurrying down to cut them off. The pair found some immediate cover. Little Jack readied his weapon while Lancaster looked quickly for another way out.

Spotting Little Jack, the soldiers began firing as they took cover themselves. A few began making their way around the buildings and boulders to get in an attack from the flank. Little Jack shot some of their laser blasts out of the air and returned fire. He didn't expect to hit, but he hoped to keep the enemies ducking for cover.

Lancaster kept his head down as he scurried around the buildings, trying to see where the road continued downward. But he was disappointed to find the only other exit was along the path the soldiers had come down. Then relief washed over him as he recognized a building with a very specific Chioho design. It protruded from a round corner of the stone wall and had an overhang over the wide entrance. "This way!" he shouted to his partner.

Little Jack arrived just to see Lancaster disappear inside. "Great, so we can be even more trapped?" Little Jack said, looking around for some other cover.

"Take stock in me!" Lancaster said.

Little Jack sighed with annoyance and dashed inside. As soon as he had broken the shadow line into darkness, a hand grabbed him by the chest. It was Lancaster. Once Little Jack's eyes adjusted, he saw why. A wide gap was in the floor and ceiling. Both led to other levels whose platform rings denoted separate floors. It resembled a giant elevator shaft. In the center was a long, stone pole with carvings that resembled a totem. It leaned a bit to one side, looking dilapidated. Lancaster knew that it was once the centerpiece that held a long, winding staircase together; but the steps had obviously rotted and fallen many eons ago.

"Ready for a climb?" Lancaster asked with a smirk. Little Jack tried to say no, but Lancaster was already jumping for the stone pole, using the carvings in it as handholds. Little Jack holstered his weapons and leaped for a point near Lancaster. This was his partner's area of expertise, so if Jack slipped, he counted on Lancaster to catch him.

Both men managed to hang on and climbed downward. Little Jack was slowed at points where the stone became smooth, and he saw Lancaster slide down until he reached more footholds, or leap to the wall where some rough rock provided places to hang on, then he jumped back further down the pole. All the while he seemed to disregard the fact that the hole beneath them disappeared into what seemed like an eternal darkness. When he leaped, Little Jack hissed at him to stop as it made the whole thing shake, and he reminded his partner that he wasn't as confident in this climbing business as Lancaster was.

Soon, however, they heard the voices of officers barking orders to other soldiers not far above, and they needed to hurry. Little Jack studied what Lancaster was doing and tried to mimic him to speed up.

They were about two stories down when the silhouettes of the soldiers appeared at the mouth of the hole above them. The pair had almost gotten out of sight, but the light from the entry just reached them and one of the soldiers pointed.

Little Jack grabbed the pole with one hand and pulled Huginn with the other, switching it to rapid shot. He fired a full blast, forcing the soldiers to back off. He then scooted onto the

further side of the pole and continued down with one hand on his pistol. Lancaster also hurried, searching for a good place to jump off.

The guards appeared again, and Little Jack fired another barrage, hitting one of them randomly, and unnerving the rest. They fired back almost blindly. Their shots came unsettlingly close to their target, who was slowly making his way down the shaft.

Lancaster found a safe spot to hop off about three floors down. He laid a light flare down for Little Jack to see. Little Jack set his pistol to explosive rounds and fired, hitting the wall behind the soldiers and covering them in ancient dust. A few of their shots still came sporadically, but none close enough to concern Little Jack. He climbed down as quickly as he could, then readied himself to jump onto the platform. Then he readied himself again... and again... and...

"Hurry," Lancaster urged, holding out his arms to show he'd catch Little Jack if he stumbled.

"I'm, I'm coming," Little Jack said.

A shot from above gave him the necessary encouragement, and he jumped right onto the light. His legs kept going and he hit the wall. He bounced off and stumbled to the edge, falling off into the abyss. He felt his arm grabbed by Lancaster as his feet went over the lip. He wondered for a moment if he was going to drag his partner down with him. But Lancaster yanked him up onto solid flooring. And as more shots found their way down to their level, Lancaster and Little Jack hurried off into the darkness.

With the way illuminated by their devices, Lancaster and Little Jack hurried through the chambers and corridors, hopping through holes in walls they found whenever possible to lose the track of their pursuers. Soon they were lost as well, though they hadn't known where exactly they were anyway, so it was not much of a loss.

To fix this last problem, they stalled momentarily. Lancaster pulled a Geo-Analyzer to get a sense of how far the canyon wall was likely to be so they could decide where they wanted to go. He knew they had gone further down since jumping off the carved pole, but he didn't know how far.

As Lancaster was working with the device, Little Jack heard something in the distance; something around several corners in another chamber; coming closer. Lancaster soon heard it, too and looked up from his analyzer. He had recently heard that sound on Wredgyua DC0K-2. Drones. Only these were not recon. They had a deeper rumbling to their engines, one that stirred the stomach. These machines needed the extra power to hold their larger weapons. They were combat drones.

"Move," Little Jack said, and they hurried as fast as they could, Lancaster leading the most probable way toward the edge where they might find natural light.

Passing a hole in the wall, the buzzing became much louder. The drones had found them. A shot fired, flying just above Little Jack's head, and blasting a large hole in the wall next to him. It was as though they were firing explosive rounds.

The pair didn't stop moving. Lancaster tried to think like a Chiotho in the construction of their building to determine where a turn or a room or a hallway would be. He found another opening where they were able to drop a level, and they cut to the left as soon as they landed, heading in the direction Lancaster believed was toward the outside.

The drones clearly had sensor readings on them, because they remained on their tails. Little Jack determined that it would come to a fight anyway, so he drew both guns and whirled around, his glasses set to hi-definition dark vision, which combined every spectrum for seeing

without light with sensor readings of movement and energy to give the most precise vision of a target. When one of the drones rounded a corner, Little Jack gave it a moment, betting it would be moving too fast to fire accurately. He was correct. It shot wildly, and two more appeared. Little Jack let off a barrage, destroying all three, and one more that rounded a corner the next moment. But more were on their way.

Little Jack continued to follow Lancaster, watching around corners behind them, listening for the buzzing robots now trying to find a tactically superior route to get at the duo.

Watching ahead of them, Lancaster had finally spotted the white glow of light. But he also heard the chatter of voices and more engines. Peeking around a corner, he saw an opening in the wall that led out into the canyon. A transport skiff was hovering at the entrance, and soldiers were disembarking. Guns at the ready, they were hurrying into the room.

The pleasant surprise was that none of them were facing him or Little Jack. They didn't seem to yet know which direction to find their targets. The soldiers were going further into the room, and a gap was left open behind them straight to the skiff.

Lancaster wasted no time. He grabbed Little Jack by the back of his jacket and yanked him along. Little Jack quickly recognized what he was doing when he spotted the gap, and the two of them dashed to the skiff as it was pulling away from the opening. They jumped on board, and Lancaster pushed the driver over the edge, sending him screaming far below into the canyon. Little Jack spotted a second skiff behind them. The soldiers on board who were supposed to unload next instead pointed their weapons at them. Those inside the canyon building turned and bore down on them. And the drones came out with their cannons at the ready.

"Drive!" Little Jack shouted, and Lancaster pressed the engine to full and dropped them almost straight down. Laser blasts fired all around them, some of them hitting the rocky cliff next to him sending debris into their sides.

Both men held on for dear life, trying not to tumble off the edge. Lancaster steadied them, but kept them moving as fast as he could, gaining and losing altitude to dodge the incoming blasts. Little Jack peeked up over the back, holding onto a handlebar with one hand and firing with the other. There were now too many variables for his glasses and weapon sensors to be able to shoot laser blasts out of the sky, so he took pot shots at the soldiers. It wasn't very difficult; the enemy skiff was open faced and so filled with troops it was almost hard to miss. But they still had so many more shots coming at him they would get a hit before he could take them all down; and the driver was keeping himself well hidden.

Though skiffs were not known for their maneuverability, Lancaster tested the limits by pulling up next to the canyon edge at full speed. He juked aside when stone slabs emerged, hoping the skiff behind them would hit, but it didn't. He found an overhang and dropped just under it, barely missing it at full speed. But the skiff behind pulled out further toward the center, refusing to play that game, and keeping close enough for its occupants to pour fire down on them.

Little Jack's thumb pressed its button at the back of Huginn and the cartridges rotated. He fired, and an explosive round went off near the enemy. It rocked and shook, then lost ground on them. The soldiers inside had to hold on for dear life to avoid being bucked out. But they were still flying.

Behind them, the battle drones were gaining on them. And to make matters worse, shots began to fly past them from the ground. Glancing over the edge, Little Jack spotted a couple trucks driving along the narrow roads below, passengers firing up at them. Little Jack didn't

calculate that this would be much of a problem until a lucky shot solidly hit the bottom of their skiff. Now Lancaster's skiff began to rattle and shake. He felt the floor drop from under him, and butterflies swarmed his stomach. They were going down.

Lancaster could see that they were passing rapids, and they would continue for quite a bit longer. But he remembered something about the rapids. He had spotted earlier that they were made up not of rocks, but of ancient buildings buried by the water over time. This didn't so much help with the danger, but he had an idea. "Hang on!" Lancaster said, and without awaiting a reply, he pressed down into a nose dive.

Little Jack held on tight with the one hand and arm he had grasping to something, and he held tight to Huginn with the other; his eyes still glued to their pursuers.

The other skiff tried to drop down with them, but when one of its occupants fell out, they slowed their descent. The drones were catching up, however, and they were falling toward the trucks on the street. This last was a matter which Little Jack could handle. He fired an explosive round into the road ahead of one of the trucks, and the ground flew up in front of them, sending the lead truck off the side and stopping all the rest.

"We're going to need to jump!" Lancaster shouted.

"I was afeared you were going to say that!" Little Jack shouted back.

Lancaster got them a few meters from the ground and slowed significantly. "You ready?" he asked.

"No!" Little Jack answered.

Lancaster jumped. Though Little Jack hesitated, the laser shots from the drones hurried him up and he leaped off the side toward his partner.

As Little Jack tumbled through the current uncontrollably, he made sure his guns were safely secured. He found the debris of a ruined house approaching, and he dodged to the side. He seemed to have gone directly into the path of another, and he knocked into a piece of a wall, which sent him spinning.

He felt Lancaster's arm grab him, and pull him into a more controlled drift. They were yanked around a boulder and a large building appeared before them. Lancaster yanked Little Jack with him and they ducked through a window. He then maneuvered them around a jagged wall. It was some impressive maneuvering, but they would eventually hit something they didn't see coming. Either that or the drones, now only a few meters above, would find them and shoot them while they were helpless.

Little Jack's thoughts were interrupted by Lancaster shouting, "That one!" and he shifted his body toward one of the buildings. Little Jack followed, guided by one of Lancaster's hands which had his arm. They were shifting their direction toward a building that seemed to have an opening on one end, but no exit on the other.

"Are you abso?" Little Jack asked through sputtering breaths.

A shot from the drone above was the only answer Little Jack had. It was go into a water trap to drown, or be target practice to the drones. Little Jack would rather not give them the satisfaction, so he followed his partner.

As Little Jack had feared, the water rushed into the building and had nowhere to go except to swirl and pound against the stone walls. Lancaster beckoned him to follow, and dove underneath. Little Jack took in a deep breath and followed.

Lancaster led them through an opening into a chamber which didn't look like it was supposed to be underwater despite the fact that it was entirely flooded. Undaunted, Lancaster dove deeper, passing through a window, then across an alley or a corridor, then through another

door and into a larger room where they mercifully came up for air. It was only temporary, however. There were mere inches for them to lift their lips out of the water. Then it was time to go under again and down through another doorway.

They emerged into a dark cavern. The little amount of it Jack could see did not seem much like any building or even former building. Worse yet, Lancaster appeared lost. He even had to use his Illuminator to get his bearings. Little Jack hoped he was turning back to where at least they were familiar, but instead he pressed forward, finding a passage which led forward.

Little Jack reluctantly followed. He felt very claustrophobic passing through a rocky tube with no view of the surface, and no certainty he was heading toward it. His chest felt tight as he ran out of air. He became light headed. Everything was growing darker, which could be the world around him, or it could be his losing consciousness, or it could be both.

Suddenly, Lancaster's legs slanted upward. Kicking off the top of the tube, he rushed upward. Little Jack could see ahead of him that he was leading them to another underground room. He was ready to lose hope and cursed his partner for drowning him, when he realized he was seeing the walls as well as he was because they were illuminated with light from above. The surface was near! He pointed his head upward and waved his arms as quickly as he could to rise...

He exploded from the water gasping for air. Lancaster was next to him, doing the same. Pieces of the walls of the building they had swum through poked out of the water like pointing fingers. Lancaster had known the type of building they were swimming through, so he knew his way out to safety.

Now they found themselves inside a giant cave. Grand beams of light streamed in at an angle through huge holes in the ceiling revealing the underground lake in which they were treading, and a magnificent lost city wading at the side. The structures of this ancient settlement marched up along the shoreline to the enormous cave wall behind it. Dots of light blinked and glimmered out of gems and other precious stones scattered both on and among the untouched vestiges.

Lancaster recognized this mixture of architecture and natural underground stone placement as Cerritac; and not an imitation. This was the real thing. Perhaps it was why the Chiotho had chosen to build their own replica structures on the surface.

Regardless of the motivations of long-dead civilizations, Lancaster was in awe of the epic sight before him. He felt like crying; partly because he was so overwhelmed, but also because he knew the corporate soldiers chasing them would eventually find their way in here, and they would tear down the city to strip it of all its valuables. Lancaster couldn't help but feel responsible; after all, he had led them in this direction.

Little Jack was not so conflicted. He urged Lancaster to hurry and he swam with all his might toward shore. Lancaster hesitantly did the same, and they climbed up the wall of a building that was half-submerged. Lancaster then led the way along the streets and through rooms in the buildings, much as they had with the buildings in the canyon; although the lack of decay in these structures made navigating them distinctly more difficult. When they took a poor choice of turn, there was no hole in the wall that let them out the other side.

Their goal was to get to the end of the ancient city where they hoped to find some hole to squeeze out to the surface, or perhaps Little Jack could create one. As they went, Lancaster tried to get photos and holovids in passing. It was killing him to bypass these priceless finds; many of which would capture a high price when sold, or provide a lot of insight into the way this ancient race lived. He stopped briefly to snatch a couple items that fit in his pack, much to Little Jack's

chagrin, and a scolding reminder that the drones or even soldiers would be bobbing out of the water any moment.

An hour later they had made it most of the way up the slanted city and were nearing the gigantic cave wall. Lancaster had begun to hope that they had entirely lost their pursuers and the lost city would remain hidden from view; but they realized there was no such luck when they hopped across a couple balconies that had a view of the underground lake now far below. Heads covered in submersible swim-gear were now bobbing just above the water level. They too seemed struck by the beauty of the city, as Lancaster had been, and remained transfixed where they were.

Little Jack saw what Lancaster was looking at and hissed for him to keep going. They did, now with Lancaster watching below more often, almost causing him to trip and fall off a railing, or run into a wall. The swimmers remained where they were for some time, but at length, as Lancaster emerged from behind a building, he saw that they had begun ambling in their direction, and were nearing the shore.

He hushed Little Jack, who was now leading them toward a source of light he had noticed up ahead. They reached the end of a road, which had led to the stone wall at the edge of town. Little Jack had his glasses set to be sensitive to light, and they had found a hot spot here. Looking at it through normal eyes, Lancaster didn't see anything of note; just a barrier from their escape. Little Jack switched his view and saw why Lancaster wasn't continuing.

Switching the settings back to light sensitivity, Little Jack located the bright spot, and found that the crack in the stone was at an angle low to the ground. Sunlight was coming through it at such an angle which only provided a dim glow unnoticed by most people. Little Jack went first since he saw where the hole was, and he was able to slip through rather easily.

Lancaster was a different story. Though he learned where it was by seeing Little Jack slip through what looked like solid stone, it was short and narrow, so Lancaster had to feel for the opening, then press inside. As he did, the light became brighter and brighter until he emerged out the other end to full sunlight.

And then there was the next problem. They had come out into a canyon valley where sheer cliffs surrounded them in an unbroken circle. Scanning the walls, Lancaster didn't spot any paths up, nor much of any handholds for them to climb out. This would not normally be much of a problem with Lancaster's grappling hook; as long as there was something in range in which to fire the weapon. But the line had been cut on it and the item he so relied upon was useless.

They would literally be like fish in a barrel should the corporate soldiers arrive at the tops of any of these canyon walls. Those inside the cave, meanwhile, would be making their way up through the ancient city, and would likely spot them at some point if the pair returned.

Little Jack appeared unconcerned. It was his normal state of being, but he seemed particularly distracted as he pulled a device out from his pocket and began fiddling with it.

"What are you doing?" Lancaster asked impatiently.

"Calling Floyd," Little Jack responded in his usual untroubled monotone.

"Who's Floyd?"

"Flight Leader Operational Yes Droid."

Lancaster took a moment to consider all the words in the name, then said, "That's the worst acronym I've ever heard."

"I like the name Floyd," Little Jack said.

"It shows. Can we ferret out what we're going to do here?"

“I am.”

“With Floyd.”

“Yep.”

“He a friend that can rub away all our pursuers? And if so, why didn’t you set Floyd after them a little earlier?”

“Floyd’s my co-pilot,” Little Jack explained, his face never leaving the remote.

“Oh,” Lancaster responded. “What?”

“My co-pilot. Remote co-pilot to be exact,” Little Jack said as he now scanned the horizon over the canyon walls. “I had it installed lately so I can have the ship brought to me in emergency situations like this. ‘Course, if the corporation that runs this planet or anyone else that doesn’t like us blinks it in transit, they’ll shoot it out of the sky before it gets anywhere near.”

“Won’t Floyd fight back?” Lancaster asked.

Little Jack shook his head and said, “Floyd’s not good with conflict.”

They waited there for a few tense minutes. Lancaster’s heart began to pound harder when he heard movement inside the cave just past the opening they had slipped through.

But then he heard a familiar sound that boosted his morale. The roaring engines of Odin’s Revenge began to echo throughout their basin, then the ship appeared, flying over the cliffs at one side. It turned toward them and lowered, its masthead of the bearded god staring at them as the landing gear settled onto the ground behind. Little Jack pressed another button on the remote and the ramp lowered out of one end.

Lancaster ran to the ramp and hurried on. Little Jack glanced over his shoulder and saw a body trying to wiggle out of the crevice he had discovered. He fired one warning shot and the limbs jolted back into the darkness.

Lancaster was frozen at the cockpit, staring at the pilot’s seat. When Little Jack found him, he said, “You found Floyd?”

“Is he a sock monkey?”

“A hologram of one, yes.”

“Then I found Floyd.”

“Good. Let’s get going.”

“Why do you have a sock monkey flying the ship?”

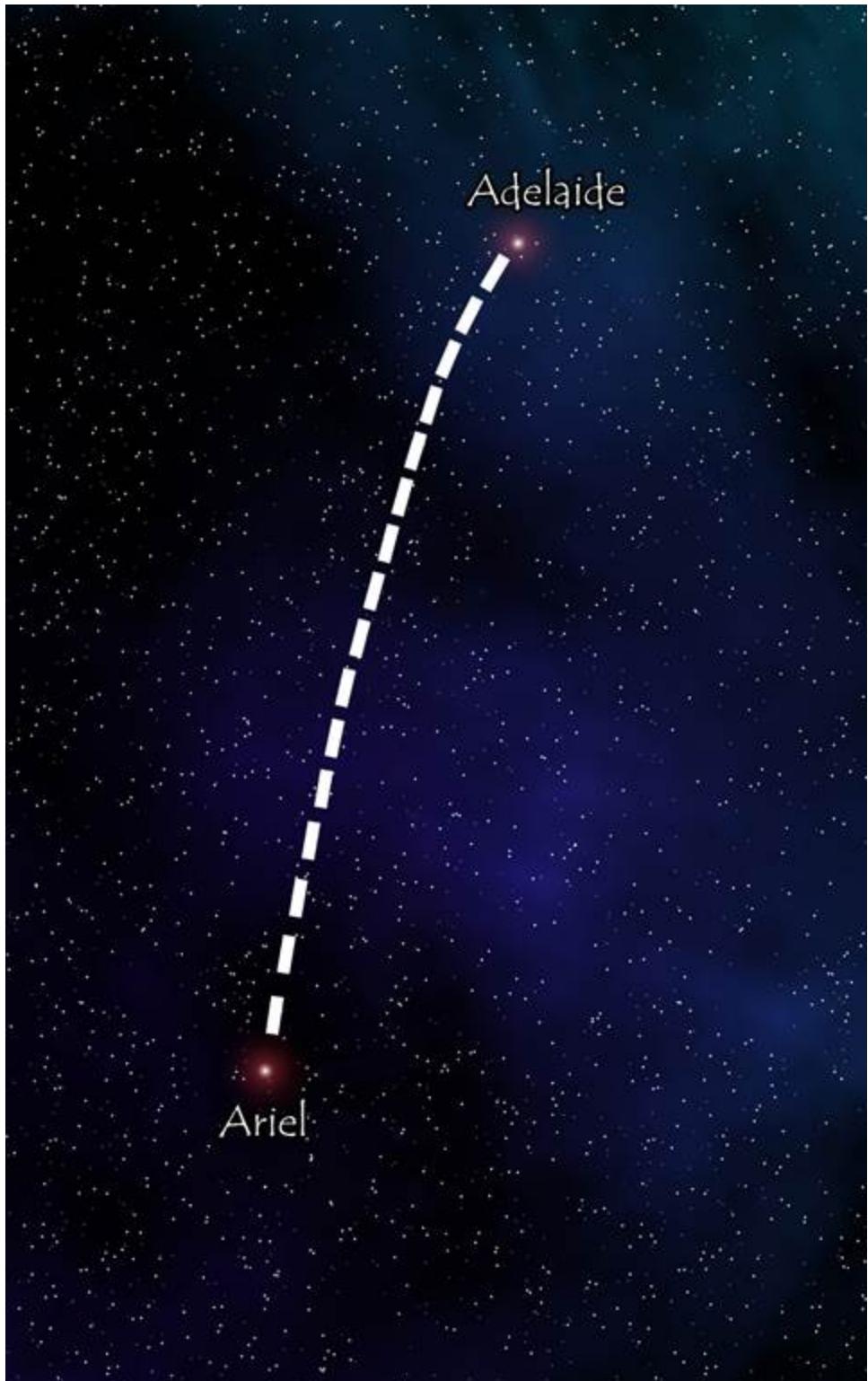
“Don’t knock Floyd,” Little Jack insisted as he turned off the hologram in the pilot’s seat and sat down in its place.

“How does he fly the ship?” Lancaster asked.

“Don’t be daft. The controls are run by the computer. Sock monkey’s there so it doesn’t look strange.”

As Little Jack lifted off, Lancaster took his seat and said with a wrinkled forehead, “Of course. Doesn’t look strange at all this way.”

“Besides, Floyd makes me laugh,” Little Jack said, his face as fixed and sullen as always, looking over the instruments and out the window at what he was doing as the ship turned toward the heavens and rocketed away.



# CHAPTER

# SIX

## VICTORIOUS WARRIORS

## WIN FIRST

“If you know the enemy and know yourself, your victory will not stand in doubt.” I know little of my enemy at present, but I am learning. There are two of them, and one of them is armed with twin KI-49 custom built pistols. He used explosive rounds to destroy a bridge, and has a neural link to the guns that allows him to deflect incoming shots. His other capabilities lie in mystery due to the fact that he has left few survivors in his wake. The other was not reported to have fired a weapon, and is assumed to be unarmed. However, only a fool would define one as unarmed simply because they do not carry a weapon.

The assassin stood at the precipice of the damaged bridge looking down at the pathway that hugged the cliff where his targets had made their escape. Gideon Chow, top executive of the Risi Corporate Empire, had ordered the assassin to Ambergmonk when the reports of the attack sounded serious. This had not been a simple corporate raid or strategic bombing. The attackers had been precise, and skilled. What was more, they had only seemed interested in what was in the chamber they studied, and had made good their escape through an army of resistance. This implied that something important was in that room. They had gotten their answer in there and had left. The excavation corporation that was investigating the site had all but ignored that chamber while scouring over practically everything else in the ruins. Clearly, these two assailants knew something they didn’t.

The assassin stared at the gaping maw of the special room. The carved statuary seemed to invite him in, and he wondered how the hired team could have ignored it. The architecture was so different from the rest, and it clearly held some ceremonial importance to the people who had built it. The assassin supposed it had something to do with the gap in the path from above, but they should have gone the longer way from below, or built a bridge with their excessive resources.

He pressed a button on his left glove and his jet pack ignited. He flew across the deep gap to the part of the path where the smaller man had been standing and firing. He landed carefully, avoiding the footprints so he could study them. Other footprints from the corporate investigators who had looked over the scene after the incident were mixed in, nearly covering the footprints of the attacker. But the assassin was able to distinguish the unique prints of his target from the others. The man he was tracking was short, just over four and a half feet. He wore custom formal shoes with good traction. This was a man who cared about how he looked even when in the wilderness or doing battle. He was also someone who was precise in his movements, making few steps. In combat, he planted his feet, relying on his ability to deflect shots rather than dodging them.

The assassin followed the prints to the break in the path where he spotted the grappling hook speared into the rocky wall. The severed wire explained why that was still there. He hopped over to the other side with his jet pack and landed close to the point where the small man

had landed. He followed those prints to the doorway. There, the sets were even more buried under careless prints made by the damage assessment investigators. But he could still just make out those created by the second of the intruders. This one was nearly six feet tall, and someone who wore a utilitarian shoe meant to be well-used. Its wearer was less confident than his smaller partner. It moved a lot more, turning and backing up, second guessing itself. After helping his partner cross, the two sets of prints hurried down the path. But the assassin was more concerned with where the larger footprints had come from; further inside the room.

Still trying to avoid the prints, the assassin followed them inside, then traced them backward through their activities. It was evident that this person was focused on the pedestal in the center. He had steadied himself while there, a clear sign he had been placing something on top; or, more likely plugging something in, as evidenced by the fact that the podium had a hole in its top with mechanical gears inside. The footprints led from here to specific points in the room before returning.

The assassin followed these paths barely taking notice of the two individuals who had appeared at the doorway. In a quick glance, the assassin had photographed them with his bionic right eye, and he was running through the databanks of his enhanced mind to learn who they were before he began speaking.

Aware she was being partially ignored, and short on time, (for she was always short on time), the colonel cleared her throat less to get attention, and more as a demand that she was not to be neglected. She followed that by stating, "Maximillian Benoto."

"That I am," the assassin said without removing his eyes from their assignment.

The woman continued, "I am Colonel Ramisi Udimi, commander of this investigation. You are to report to me all findings... And when arriving at your assignment." She said the last part with an accusatory emphasis that was not lost on Maximillian.

But he barely reacted. The assassin was now studying the ceiling with one eye, and with the other he was reading the information he had discovered about her in his mental databanks. After a short pause to gather up what he needed, he said, "The consummate leader cultivates the moral law, and strictly adheres to method and discipline; thus it is in his power to control success."

Slightly perturbed, Colonel Udimi said curtly, "I'm not one for riddles, or talking around the issue. So when you report to me, I expect..."

"You were one of only five survivors at the Second Battle of Quixar," Maximillian said. "There your contagious fortitude kept the soldiers alive, and the discipline you instilled in them granted them the ability to fight their way to safety. You have been awarded three times for gallantry, but always for a team effort that you led. Never for personal heroics."

"A team wins through unity," she said, her words snapping like boots clicking together. "Individualism makes one weak."

"A chain is certainly a formidable opponent," Maximillian said, at last looking at the colonel. She was as wooden as he expected. So was the tall man standing next to her who had needed to duck when entering the room. "Who is your friend?"

The man stood even taller if that was possible, and he saluted as Colonel Udimi introduced him. "Lieutenant Gregor Cadorna. He is my second in command, and your superior officer."

"I am an independent contractor," Maximillian said, returning to his inspection. "I report to you, but I do not answer to you. You may dispense with my services at any time should I displease you, but I am not one of your soldiers."

Colonel Udimi hesitated before answering. She was not used to speaking on the same level as someone. In the military a person said yes to their superiors, and dictated to their inferiors. There were no exact equals. At length she said, "Our objective is to apred what these intruders were after, and if applicable, locate and overcome them to confiscate what they have found."

The assassin nodded and said, "We cannot know what the intruder was after. But we do now have a list of where they can be going next."

The colonel's eyes widened, revealing the surprise she was trying to hide. Maximillian pointed toward the ceiling and a laser pointer fired a red dot onto a cleared portion of the ceiling. A thick layer of dust and sand clung to every part of the walls and roof, but four spots had been cleared. Switching his wrist device's light, the depths within the ceiling tile became clearer, revealing the carving of a star system. The writing was in an alien language, but the assassin had already studied the basics of Chioho written language before he came.

One must always be prepared when entering a situation. Lack of understanding is an excuse given by the ill-suited. Study, research, education; these are the first weapons in any combat. Tsun Su warned us of the importance of all of this when he said, "Victorious warriors win first, and then go to war, while defeated warriors go to war first, and then seek to win."

\* \* \*

Lancaster, Little Jack, and Mika stood around the round table of the Constellation Crest looking over the freckled air of holographic dots slowly spinning in a miniaturized model of their neighborhood of the galaxy. Lancaster had shown Mika what he had found in the Celestial Toran and they were both certain that the four projections were revealing important artifacts of four alien civilizations, and the carvings in the ceiling were of the star systems and their coordinates.

Mika had a console with her that was remotely tied into the university's primary database which held all the information that was known about the various alien races they were tracking. A visual recognition of the projections, cross referenced with the coordinates of the star systems revealed that one of the objects had been collected by the Universalis Arcanum during one of their expeditions.

"They call it the Elysio," she said, bringing up a holographic projection of it next to the Constellation Crest. It matched the appearance of one of the projections Lancaster had found in the Celestial Toran. The item was approximately a half meter in diameter, made of gold, palladium, and other similar precious metals, and resembled an animal mixed with a planet. "Originally crafted by the Estrals, it had been picked up by the Chioho and altered."

"Altered?" Lancaster asked. "Why would they do that?"

"That's the big question," Mika said, adjusting the angle of the hologram to reveal one of the sides she was describing. "It's been the big mystery the Universalis Arcanum been trying to uncover. The Chioho valued ancient artifacts from other races. Why cut into one of them? You may have just found the answer."

"Don't tell your friends at the institute that," Lancaster said, grinning. Mika rolled her eyes slightly, and Little Jack looked at him curiously. Lancaster explained, "They won't deem any of it is valid." Little Jack now turned his quizzical expression on Mika, who moved on, twisting the hologram again.

"Each of the slots has mechanical interiors, and there's a power core inside the Elycio whose trigger to turn on is also shrouded in mystery. It's my theory that the reason it's listed among these other artifacts in the Celestial Toran is because it somehow connects with these other relics. If you look carefully at the projections of each of the items, you'll notice a part on each one of them that fits in a slot."

The projections now zoomed in on the specific sections of each artifact that Mika was describing. Indeed, they all had something in them that could plug into the Elycio.

"But they're all relics from different eras," Lancaster said. "Formed millions of years apart by species that never met one another. How..."

"The Chiotho somehow learned about each one and discerned how to put them together. Structural dating of the Taiper Anslees revealed that it was built during the decline of the Chiotho Empire. By that time the Siguerans had control of the planets where these objects could be found, so there was no getting to them. They might have found some importance if they could somehow be recovered and combined..."

"And they left clues for future species if they failed," Lancaster finished. The two of them were now moving closer together, despite their eyes remaining on the holograms.

Mika continued, "After years of studying other races that had come before them, they had to know the importance of leaving valuable information for future beings."

"Like us," Lancaster said, now noticing his proximity to his ex-wife. Spots from the stars were dancing in her eyes as the glow of the holograms softly illuminated her dark olive skin. She just nodded at what he said. Then, reacting to the silence, she glanced at him; at the energy of his face, the glow behind his eyes when he grew excited about his work.

Little Jack coughed; as fake a sound as any of them had heard, but they had invited him and he hadn't come to be part of another drama scene. Lancaster and Mika both drew in breaths. They had a job to do, and if they wanted to walk across the over-used bridge of personal matters, they could do so another time.

"So where are these pieces?" Lancaster asked.

Mika rolled her fingers over the alien controls of the Constellation Crest. The holographic star map adjusted in conjunction with her movements. Manipulating the ancient device was tricky; it had been made for Sigueran limbs and minds; but Mika had spent enough time with it that it had become second nature to her. The hologram zoomed in on one of the systems, then a small dot, representing a planet, that was orbiting it.

She said, "There is one relic for each epoch. The first one is Banillic design, and is at HD 34120-4. As you can ferret by its name designation; it's not an inhabited world. While the atmosphere is breathable, it's not particularly comfortable. The weather is unusual, and the gravity is pretty weak. So corporations have bypassed it. No ruins have been spotted on the planet, but it's listed on this map as having at least one Banillic settlement, so you should be able to find something."

Mika now rolled the map over to another sector. The stars streaked by like colorful lines. It stopped on a small community of stars with one highlighted brighter than the others. "Relic number two is at Octovo of Sinufa."

"Part of the Navarus barony," Little Jack interjected.

"That's right," Mika said. "Galek Navarus, its former head, was an avid collector of rare antiquities. When these ruins were discovered, he had his employees bring him everything valuable from the site, which should include this."

"His daughter took over the barony in a coup," Little Jack said.

“Do you think she kept it?” Lancaster asked.

“Those are all questions we need answered,” Mika said. “Vidid said he thinks he can hack into their systems enough to get that information for us.”

“Whose digits did you have to give him to get him to do that?” Little Jack asked. Lancaster smirked, but Mika did not look amused. She just moved on to relic number three.

“The last one had been built by the Orhaap,” she said, moving the Constellation Crest hologram to another system. This one was made up of three stars all orbiting one another in a celestial dance. Around each star were several smaller dots; planets that each made up their own system. “As you can see, there are a lot of choices, and the coordinates didn’t explain which of these worlds it was on. We’re going to have to do some research about the Orhaap to figure out which of these worlds you’ll be going to.”

“All right, then,” Lancaster said. “Register’s like we’ll be doing these in the order of the epochs. Banillic will be first. By the time we get back, Vidid will have our second objective set for us.”

“Or he’ll be in jail for stalking,” Little Jack said dryly.

Lancaster looked to Mika for the usual eye roll, but she wasn’t reacting. She was staring into the hologram, lost in some thought. “Something else to tell us?” he asked. She didn’t respond until he said her name, “Mika?”

Mika jumped slightly and looked at Lancaster, then shook her head. “No. No, that’s all we know… Except that this is an artifact of extreme importance. If these pieces combine the way the Chiotho believed they would, it could be the tool to stave off the Siguerans, whenever they return. Whatever it makes, the Chiotho deemed it was the only defense against extinction.”

*To be continued...*

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