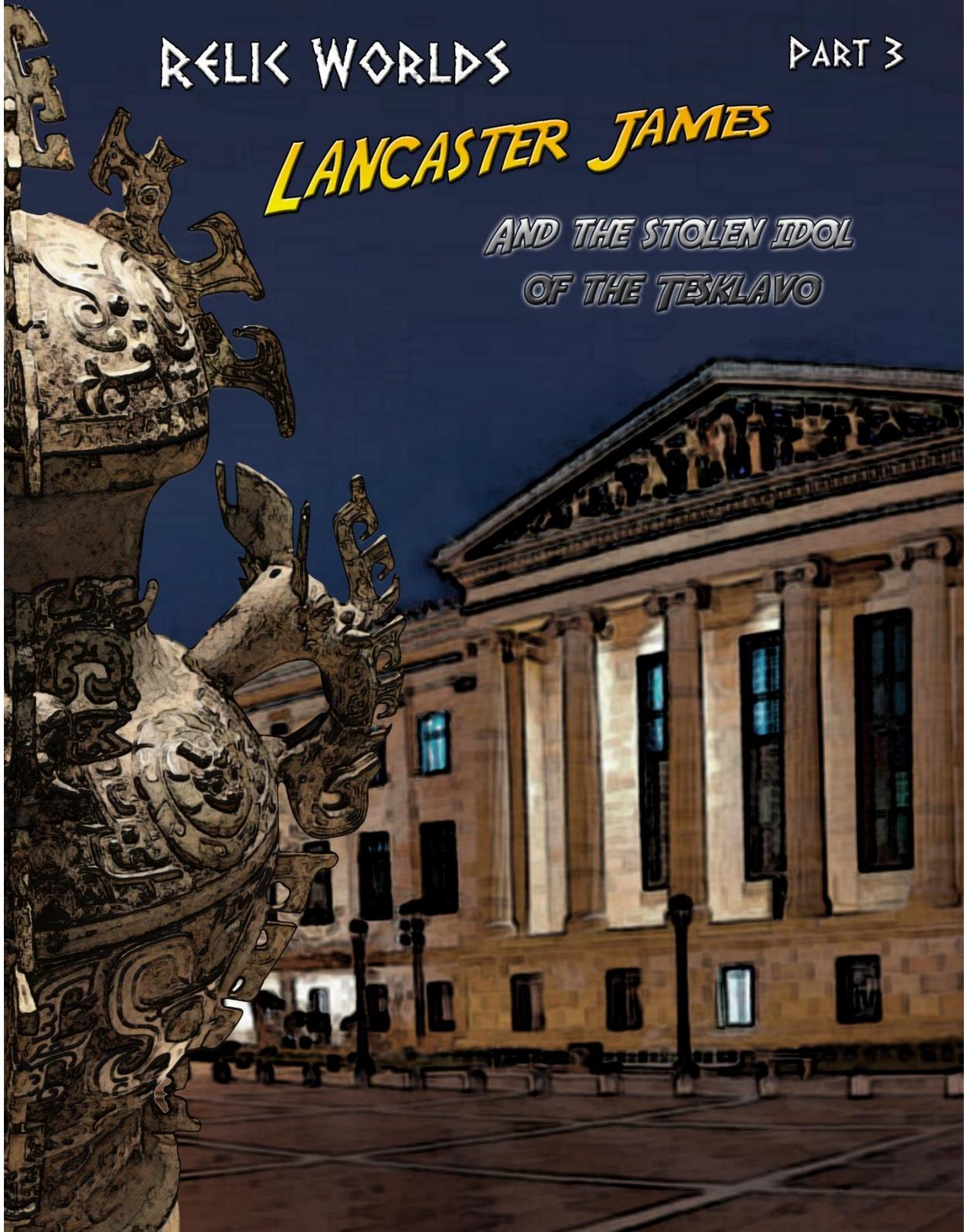


RELIC WORLDS

PART 3

LANCASTER JAMES

*AND THE STOLEN IDOL
OF THE TEKLAVO*



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PART 3

The crowd screamed in alarm, afraid what might happen next. No one seemed to know what to do except Little Jack and Lancaster, who were two of the only people moving now. Lancaster B-lined toward the last place he had seen Nikos, and Little Jack hurried after Jude's last known location. Both of them would likely be on the move as well, so the two men pushed through the crowds as quickly as they could, stumbling in the dark as they hurried forward.

Behind them, the double doors of the room slammed shut, sealing everyone inside. It was likely a standard security measure. What was not likely a standard security measure was the sound of the hissing above, to which more people began to scream.

Just as Little Jack became aware of the sound, he came upon Jude running the other direction. She didn't seem to see him until he grabbed her. "What are you doing!" he screamed almost frantically. There was some confusion in the question as well. She had locked herself inside and if they were poisoning everyone with gas, she would be with them.

"This isn't us!" Jude shouted back. "Get your friend!" She then shoved past Little Jack and hurried to the double doors.

Little Jack scanned the crowd in infrared. He found Lancaster by his movements and zeroed in on him. Little Jack weaved through the panicking people's legs as he made his way to his partner. Above him, people were beginning to cough and choke. Some had rushed toward the doors and he hoped Jude would have the room to cut open a hole in the door with the laser pistol she had stored. He also hoped she still had her hidden laser pistol.

His hand found Lancaster's jacket and he tugged. Lancaster had not found Nikos, but he was beginning to get dizzy from the gas. He had his jacket held against his mouth and nose to resist the toxin, but it wouldn't be for long. "Come!" Little Jack said, pointing, and Lancaster followed in faith.

Little Jack found Jude off to the side of the door. She had cut a hole in the wall, but had hidden it from the crowds who were banging at the locked regular exit. Little Jack saw this just in time to see her slipping through. He also saw shapes moving around just beyond the wall, and they were all moving fast. Something was happening out there. He guided Lancaster along and got them out through the makeshift exit.

They emerged into the main lobby. The overhead lights were off here as well, but a dim glow emanated through the front windows from the street lights outside. Little Jack and Lancaster could both make out Jude's figure running in the center of the room. They could also see a couple doors to another part of the building which had been closed before now wide open. Behind them at the hole in the wall, Nikos emerged. They didn't have time to deal with him now, Jude was clearly onto something.

Little Jack saw that Jude was looking up. Lancaster and Little Jack hurried to her and saw what she did. Five figures with large packs on their backs were zipping up grappling lines toward the domed roof high above. Jude, with her enhanced vision, was the only one who could see the holes in the roof they would be using to escape. She was also the only one with a weapon, which she used to fire at the perpetrators.

Each shot she fired generated an instant of light, like lightning inside the lobby. During that moment Lancaster could see that Nikos also had a gun and was firing it toward the ceiling. He wondered for an instant how he had gotten it inside; but it was only a moment, as he thought better of thinking too much of Nikos's ways.

Jude's shot hit one of the wires, knocking down a thief who flung every limb as it tumbled toward the hard floor below. Another shot hit another wire, but the thief had grasped the hole in the ceiling and was pulling itself up. She shot at and hit the person in the leg, but they managed to get through the hole regardless and escape with the others.

Unable to follow directly after them, Jude and Little Jack ran out the front door to find the ship they had seen hovering just over the roof. It would be the perpetrators' escape vehicle, and if it was small enough, the two of them might be able to bring it down.

Lancaster and Nikos approached the man who was lying among splashes of blood in the middle of the room. They saw two other bodies that belonged to guests who had lingered out in the lobby too long and had been shot down by the thieves as they came through. The thief was dressed all in black with dark goggles that had several metal rings around it. He also had a small, round hat which had fallen from his head during the fall, leaving an exposed, bald head that had a thin crack in it.

Lancaster searched for the source of the bleeding to try to stop it, at least long enough for them to get information from the man. They had all heard his bones crack when he hit the floor, so he was little more than a rag doll now and moving him more than a little bit would kill him.

This didn't matter much to Nikos who grabbed his collar with both hands and yanked him up to him. His look of charm was gone, replaced by a sneer that drew wrinkles all over his face. The man's eyes grew wide with pain, and his bones rustled like a bag of marbles. That mattered little to Nikos as he interrogated him. "Why are you here?"

Lancaster was only a little shocked at Nikos' behavior, but he was more confused by the question. He would have asked where the others were going. That seemed to be more pressing at the moment. But he awaited the man's reply.

All he heard was another 'click,' and the man's face froze still in a pathetic look of agony. His entire body grew stiff, and he was dead. Lancaster thought Nikos had killed him, and immediately suspected a cover-up. But then greenish foam dribbled from the man's mouth and dropped down his cheek. He had bitten down on a poisoned pellet.

Still suspicious, Lancaster looked at Nikos to see his reaction; and what he found there he did not expect. In the dim light of that room, he saw for the first time fear in the face of Nikos Kazakis. His eyes were searching for an answer and his lips were trembling. His hands numbly let go of the man, as though he was afraid of infection, and the body dropped to the ground. Lancaster later put the pieces together, assuming Nikos must have had difficulty understanding why someone would lay down their life for any cause, especially in this manner; purposely taking their own life rather than just risking it. Such a foe is always the hardest and most frightening of any enemy.

Jude and Little Jack returned about the same time that guests were finding their way out the hole Jude had made. They would need to go soon lest they be accused of being the

perpetrators. But they wanted to go wherever the thieves had gone, and Little Jack revealed that they had gotten away in their ship. It was an atmospheric one, so they were clearly somewhere on the planet, but that was still a large area to search.

Jude looked knowingly at Nikos, but said nothing. Nikos then pulled a device out of his jacket pocket and showed it to the others. Coordinates were written on the screen which were changing every second. "I know where they are," he said.

It was time to leave, but Little Jack had one thing to do first. He found the room where his pistol Munin was kept just past one of the bodies of the shot down event coordinators. He took the gun and hurried out the front with the others, past pointing guests who were beginning to believe they were the attempted killers.

As they hurried to Nikos' car, in the parking lot, Nikos explained that he had shot a tracking device onto one of the thieves. It was a small, camouflaged piece of equipment they would probably not find unless they looked explicitly for it, so they were likely to be able to follow them to their lair.

As Nikos and Jude jumped into the front seat of his lavish convertible sports magnecar, Lancaster hesitated. Was he jumping out of the frying pan into the fire? After all, he and Little Jack had rented a car. It ran with wheels and didn't have the speed of a car on a magnetic highway, but driving it would mean he wouldn't have to entrust his life in the hands of the man that essentially amounted to his arch rival.

Nikos noticed his hesitation and said, "Stay if you want, but I won't be slowing down for you."

"Why are you even letting me come with you?" Lancaster asked.

"Because you can be useful to me," Nikos admitted. "I only get paid if I bring back the Forlos Lethob."

"A Chiotho relic," Lancaster said.

Nikos raised his hands as though to say, 'You see?' "I'm loathe to admit this, Lancaster, but you know your alien artifacts better than I do. I was counting on the piece being labeled when we stole it, but with it mixed in with so many other items, I may not find it. If you help me identify the correct relic, I'll pay you a percentage. Deal?"

Little Jack arrived behind them. Some of the survivors of the attack were beginning to gather at the front door of the building, a couple of them pointing at the small party around the magnecar. The corporate police would be on them soon since the event organizers could pay them well, and even though they could prove their innocence through security footage, that would take time away from their pursuit. So Lancaster jumped into the back of the magnecar and they hurried away as fast as the road would carry them.

Nikos plugged the tracking device into the magnecar's system, and the coordinates were displaying on the dashboard along with directions that helped guide the vehicle. Nikos was concentrating on this and Lancaster was watching closely for a betrayal. Little Jack, meanwhile, used the opportunity to find Jude's eyes in the rear view mirror. When at last she returned the stare in the mirror, he made a quizzical expression. Jude had worked enough with Little Jack to know that this look meant that he wondered about her choices, specifically in joining forces with Nikos. She answered with an expression of her own that both shrugged off the question and answered it with 'I can take care of myself.' Little Jack was able to read that statement from her eyes as though she had spoken them. Living and working in close quarters with someone for years gave that ability to a pair of people.

The tracking device led them to a darker part of town where the locals were less able to get nighttime lights installed on every block. Even the magnetics of the road which operated the car were lacking, and Lancaster was beginning to regret not bringing his wheeled vehicle. It was an area where one might expect petty crimes and murders, not high-end heists to be planned.

But the coordinates led them to one of the oldest and most rough-hewn buildings along the street. It almost looked more like a dark castle wall than a modern building. Squeezed in between two smoother buildings of concrete and steel, the contrast was even more visible. Only five stories tall, the group could see that there was nothing parked on the top. Had their ship not arrived? Had it been and gone? They did not know. All they could tell for certain was that the coordinates led inside the dark building whose lights were all out.

Jude and Little Jack led with their weapons drawn and at the ready. Lancaster held the light with his thumb on a button that would activate a flash to blind anyone who might come at them. Nikos brought with him a small pistol as well, this one with more punch than a tracking device, and a setting to incinerate whomever it might hit.

Lancaster got a sidelong look at the weapon and recognized some of the alterations to its power supply. The majority of the gun was human-made, but it was altered with alien technology. But which civilization it originated from he did not know. He kept scanning.

The first floor was empty; not just of people but of everything; furniture, equipment, shelves... everything. There was nothing but blank walls, as though it was an abandoned building. But as they found when they flicked a switch, the power worked, and the lights came on, but with a dim greenish hue. They also found the occasional camera watching them from a corner, though none moved with them.

Jude located the stairs and they approached them in military fashion. Both she and Little Jack searched in infrared for bodies in motion at the top, especially wary of traps being set. They detected nothing. They made their way up quickly, Jude using the cybernetics in her legs to bound up in only a couple strides, her pistol scanning the room as quickly as possible once she reached the top.

Nothing. Although she saw something suspicious in the next room. A lump lay near the doorway, and checking infrared, there was a small amount of heat radiating from it which seemed to be dwindling. This implied a dying flame... or a body.

The latter proved to be true. When Jude and Little Jack approached, they found a person lying face down, smothered in its own blood. Further investigation of the room found a second corpse much the same way.

The room itself was a monitoring station. The computers were still running, and the group could see the rooms through which they had passed illuminated in a bay of monitors. Other rooms further up were visible as well, though only those near outside windows had any light to reveal their contents. One of them had a body inside it as well. Nowhere did they see lights on and activities taking place, nor any motion. The whole building was evidently deserted.

Little Jack turned over one of the bodies in the monitoring room to see what had happened. Like the man at the auction house, this one was wearing goggles. Red blood smeared over the whole face, but not over the lenses. Little Jack grabbed the goggles and pulled them up to the man's forehead. What he saw was disturbing even to someone as experienced in violence as Little Jack. The eyes were gouged out, leaving deep red sockets in their place that poured out blood like a waterfall of scarlet tears.

A further check of the other body found the same thing, and their skin was still slightly warm. This had happened recently. A cautious check of other rooms on the same floor found

more of the same. And there were more than four bodies, so this building housed more than just the thieves from the auction house; this was a blood bath of the entire building.

The rooms were no longer empty as they had been on the first floor. They had been living quarters and work spaces of the men and women of this organization, and there were meeting and research rooms, as well as the monitoring station.

A search of other floors found much of the same, though the upper levels seemed to be more populated, and bore more important accessories. And more bodies.

They were all dressed very similarly. Everyone was in black with only the types of shirts, pants and jackets changing. In every case, their eyes were gouged out behind their dark goggles. Something had set them all off to stab their wearers. Oddly, some of them seemed prepared for their fate. They were sitting, or kneeling, some with smiles on their faces, as though welcoming death.

There were just more than 20 bodies in all. None of the four now investigating bothered to get an exact count. They were all shaken by the sight, even though all of them had been exposed to death before. This was different. This was an extermination. But why?

Nikos found the tracking device on the trench coat of one of the dead thieves. She was in a room with three others, ostensibly the crooks who had gotten away. One of them was by the door facing outward. His eyes were not gouged out. Instead, his goggles were on his forehead. But a burn from a laser blast that cut through his back revealed what had happened. He had been trying to get away. The remaining two had been kneeling when they were killed, and they wore permanent smiles on their faces, as though at peace with what was happening to them.

Nikos wanted to run from this place and never look back. He could take death and destruction; he could even deal it out himself. But this voluntary self-slaughter was beyond him; it was more than he could handle. The only thing that kept him in the building was the knowledge that he needed to bring back his prize to get paid.

Lancaster found where they were stored; where these... cultists as he was now calling them, stored all the goods they stole. He had expected to find them locked in a vault to be sold at a hefty profit, or an empty hold where they had been but were taken when the killers left. But no. He found the remains of the artifacts half-incinerated in a metallic storage room. There were more, too; piles neatly stacked and labeled in their own enclosures. They were categorized by alien species. Every relic was melted down, broken into pieces, or turned half to ash. It was as though they were destroying any evidence that these civilizations had ever existed.

Studying the remains of the artifacts that had been stolen that day, Lancaster could only identify some of them by pieces that had not been turned to ash. They were in better shape than most of the others in this macabre storage facility, but they were beyond repair. This included the idol they had come for, and the Forlos Lethob for which Nikos had come.

The computer system, too, had been smashed, though the internal hard drives were intact. Jude tapped into them with her remote computer, which she held in one hand while she accessed it with the other. In this manner she dove into their computer system and found what was hidden inside.

She first saw their own security footage which revealed the gruesome murders of the occupants. The leader and his small entourage, who dressed like all the others, informed everyone of what was about to happen, then they pushed a button and something in the goggles poked into their faces, killing them. Only two had tried to get away by removing their goggles, and they were shot down in the back. The leaders then set the artifacts to burn while they

escaped out the roof to a waiting ship that hurried them away. The incineration had been brief, and ended just moments before the foursome had arrived.

But then Jude found the most disturbing part of all, which she waited to reveal to everyone at once when they gathered near her.

Nikos was upset by Lancaster's news that the Forlos Lethob was gone, and he would only accept the truth of it when Lancaster handed him the remains. Still, he was suspicious of his rival. Jude informed him, however, that it wouldn't have mattered. "You weren't going to get paid," she said.

"What do you mean I wouldn't get paid? How do you know?"

"Because these were the people behind hiring you."

Nikos shot her a quizzical look, which she answered by continuing, "Your contact at Mericai said..."

"I never told you it was Mericai that was hiring us," Nikos interrupted.

"I know," Jude said, then pointed at her remote computer. "Your contact at Mericai. They told you they were willing to pay top plastic, but they wouldn't tell you who they were passing it along to."

"That's right," Nikos said defensively, trying to hide how shaken up he was by this whole mystery.

Jude turned to Lancaster and said, "Saberaux University doesn't have the funds to pay for this to be returned, but they offered you a lot of money to come get this."

"That's right," Lancaster said. "The said that..."

"...an anonymous donor was willing to pay top dollar for it," Jude finished. "Did you ask who that donor was?"

Lancaster shook his head. Then Jude looked at both of them and said, "Whoever these people are, they wanted to target you. They wanted you both in that room when they gassed everyone."

"Some of the most elite collectors were there, too," Nikos said absently. "They were trying to take out a large chunk of the alien relic community."

"They didn't know we would be with you," Little Jack said, motioning toward Jude.

"Or that I would. You didn't have Munin with you," Jude said.

"We'd all be dead in that room," Nikos admitted.

Jude nodded. Little Jack said, "I think we should find out who's hunting us."

"Agreed," Nikos said, and he pointed at a few of the screens on one of the lower floors, saying, "We need to find any clues we can. You two take that region," then he pointed at an upper level, "and I'll take that region." Then he said to Jude, "And you watch over us, love. Agreeable for everyone?"

Everyone nodded and split up while Jude watched them through the monitors. Little Jack kept making sure that there was a camera in each room that they entered just in case whoever killed everyone here decided to come back. He wanted to know Jude would see them.

Lancaster didn't notice the cameras. He was trying to find a working computer terminal, files with paperwork, anything he could go through to find out who these people were. But the place was predictably cleared of any record as to who they were. Then Little Jack noticed one of the cameras move.

Nikos only feigned his attempt to find information. He knew there would be none. Whoever these people were, and whatever their motivation was, they were professionals, and

they wouldn't leave information behind. They would have to be dealt with later, in a more organized fashion.

In the meantime, he wanted to help them accomplish at least half of their goal. Lancaster James's idealism would always stand in the way of the progress Nikos was trying to achieve. And he had a bad habit of showing up exactly where Nikos was working. He had failed to kill him three years ago because he had turned his back and expected a natural phenomenon to take him. Now he had no such intention. Nikos had suggested they split up not because he wanted to cover more ground, but in order to sneak up on them.

So once Nikos had made heavy footfalls climbing the stairs to make it clear he had gone, he removed his shoes and sneaked back down. He followed the sounds of their footsteps, removing his pistol from his belt.

As he neared the room his prey was in, Nikos heard a noise that broke the rhythm of their walking. It was louder and hard to identify. For a moment he thought they had doubled back and were coming after him. Nikos hid behind some furniture and waited. Everything got still and quiet. Then he heard the beat of feet walking again, and everything was back to normal. Lancaster had probably bumped into something, as he often did.

Nikos got to his feet and crept through the rooms still dividing him from his target. One room away he saw their forms faced away from him. They were little more than silhouettes in the pale green light of the room, but he could tell it was them by the size difference. They appeared to have found something on a table and were looking through it. Nikos deduced that the sound he had heard was probably them finding a box or some other container that held forgotten clues. Nikos stood corrected. There were clues here. How good of those two to find them for him. This would be convenient.

Nikos crept up to the door, ready to hop behind it in a moment should the two turn around. They didn't. He aimed his pistol at Little Jack. He would need to go down first if Nikos was to stand a chance. He fired right into the short man's back, and didn't hesitate to put one into the back of Lancaster as well.

They disappeared quite suddenly, leaving only a cloud of dust and an empty table in front of them. Nikos was too confused to understand, and before he could recover from the shock, his pistol was snatched from his hand. Jude appeared before him, having revealed herself from around the corner. "You really do hate him," she said.

"Holo-projector?" Nikos asked.

Jude nodded.

"You have one of those?"

"I'm still full of surprises."

Nikos nodded, then asked very informally, "Are you going to shoot me with my own gun?"

Jude cocked a pirate smile out of the side of her mouth as she powered down the weapon. "You haven't paid me yet," she said.

"That's why I always make sure to pay, so the contractor knows I won't stiff them," Nikos said as he paced around the room making sure the others weren't sneaking up behind him. "So where are our guests?"

"On their way back to their ship. In your car."

"You could have called them a lift."

"You can afford a new vehicle more than they can afford a lift," Jude said, leaning against the door. "Care to tell me why you're so eager to kill them?"

“No more eager than you are to tell me why you warned them I was coming.”

“They’re still useful to me occasionally,” Jude answered immediately.

“Very well. No more than you are willing to tell me about your other cybernetics.”

Jude chuckled. Nikos always knew how to take something entirely unfair and make it seem perfectly reasonable. She tossed him back his gun and turned toward the window, looking out to make sure the boys had gotten away safe and sound.

“How do you know I won’t betray you?” Nikos asked.

“Oh, I know you will. I knew it the moment I laid eyes on you. But you won’t today.” She looked out at the city, at the reflection of headlights maneuvering through the concrete canyons, and at a distant storm gathering, coming their way, and she said, “And when that day comes, it’ll really be time to play.”

The End