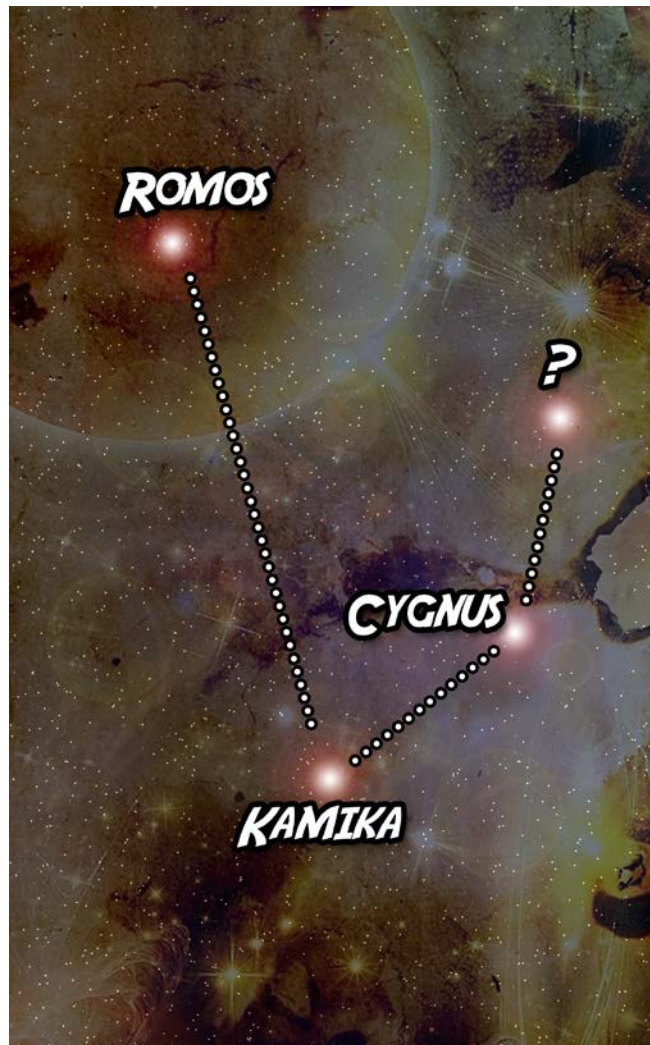


RELIC WORLDS
LANCASTER JAMES AND
THE SALIENT SEED OF THE GALAXY



CHAPTER ONE

CRIMES & RELATIVITY

Beads of rain pelted the metal road in aimless rhythms like hasty and uncertain fingers across a keyboard. Occasional globs formed on rooftops and slid along overhangs before oozing down and battering umbrellas of passing pedestrians, or reforming into puddles along the sidewalk.

The sole of a boot scattered the droplets of one of these puddles as it marched past with impatient purpose. The shadowed face under the wide brimmed hat gazed steadily forward as its body weaved nimbly through the tectonic crowds. An obstacle course of boxes and crates walled off the path, but the figure skipped over one after another, twisting like a dancer, its long jacket flowing behind like a waving cape. Then it was ducking underneath a steaming air condenser that stuck out the side of the wall.

The forward momentum was not to be disturbed, not even by a hairy beast of a man emerging from the dark depths of a hovel just below ground level and shambling up the stairs. His head burrowed under the figure's hat as though searching for whoever was underneath. The stench of his breath emerged as he tried to say something flirty. But he was met with sting spray, and he tumbled back into his pit.

The pace of the figure increased under the bright, pulsating lights and the flashing adverts above. It passed windows that framed lifelike bots inside store displays, or posing for some themselves. The agile figure maneuvered out to a wider intersection that granted a full five meters from the nearest wall. There it stopped long enough to pull a sheet of laminate paper from within the jacket. It unfolded to reveal a series of directions in both drawn and written form.

Mika's eyes took in every important piece of information from the map. She had sketched it out herself based on instructions from her wanderlust friend Jude, so it should be clear enough. But instructions described did not always match the true environment, and Mika was uncertain where to turn right.

"It's the next one over," came the voice in her ear. Jude was watching over her from a distance; Mika did not know exactly where. Her friend was there to protect her, but, it seemed, to also make sure she got to the right place.

"Next block goes on for half a click. Can't be that far," Mika said.

"Not that far," Jude answered. "A quarter of the way in you'll see a break in the buildings."

"An alley?" Mika asked.

"No, a fairground."

"You didn't tell me it would be such a strep space like that."

"Underworlders value their privacy," Jude told her, a little annoyed that an explanation was necessary. "You want this or not?"

Mika took in a breath and replaced the map under her jacket. This wasn't the safe world of the university, nor the comfort of a campus. This was how collections made their way to the museums. So she crossed the street and made her way to the alley.

The narrow corridor was wedged between a deli and a machine shop, the latter of which was closed. Light seemed to disappear within the narrow canyon. Mika stopped and stared, half marveling at how stark the transition was from the overbearing lights and noises of the city to the stillness within this vertical black hole.

"You want me to join you?" Jude asked.

"No. They said they want to vis me alone..."

"There are always excuses..."

"No," Mika insisted. "No risks to accomplishing what we're here for." She then drew in another full breath and stepped into the darkness.

The rain now reduced to an occasional trickle of drips that made their way down the maze of pipes, fire escapes, and filtration systems; finding their way into wide potholes and long cracks that formed minor rivers and lakes that Mika hopped over. She slowed when she came upon a pair of dozing men huddled in a corner.

Creeping by as quietly as she could, Mika found the iron door she sought embedded into the wall. An inconspicuous keypad sat next to it. Mika splashed some light onto it with her ring to make sure it had the numbers and symbols she was expecting; then she pulled out the paper from her coat again. Written along one side was a code. She began typing it in.

As she did, the light from her ring revealed a series of needle-like barrels. She knew them from her own security system. They would deliver electrical shocks that would cause horrible pain, and more importantly, scar the skin, thus branding the perpetrator for identification purposes. Set to a higher voltage, it could even severe a limb.

Mika typed slowly and carefully, making sure she got each number just right. One of the sleeping men stirred, but Mika remained steadfast, pressing each button deliberately. She paused before the last button. She looked at the needles. Getting out of their way would do no good; she just had to have faith in the code she was given. So she pushed it.

'Click.' The lock released and the door swung slowly inward. Mika sighed with relief and walked inside.

There was only a little more light than in the alley and less to see. A short corridor led to a small, dingy lobby. The smell of wet exhaust outside was replaced with the odor of stale mold.

On each side of the corridor were windows that appeared to lead into abandoned cubicles, but Mika knew their use as well. They were one-way facades that appeared to be office spaces, but the glass was filled with scanning equipment which measured every aspect of her; from whether she was carrying a weapon to what her heart rate was at to see if she was nervously planning something. Her own security team liked to measure perspiration and a few other variables. It certainly helped one understand a person's sincerity when going into a situation with them; but Mika did not see much help in it during her own experiences except to make sure the person coming in wasn't armed.

"You inside?" Jude asked in her ear.

"Yes," Mika whispered, trying to move her lips as little as possible.

"You want me to moze in?"

"No," Mika growled impatiently. "Just got here." As she emerged in the grimy entryway, Mika was met with a glass enclosed booth in front of her, and a sliding metal door next to it on the right. With all the security measures, Mika thought it a good idea to wait. A wooden

door stood inside the booth, so she assumed someone would be coming through it to speak with her.

A woman with a long head, almost the shape of a banana, and stringy hair emerged and took her place at the desk. Wordless, she stared at Mika, scrutinizing her. She then pressed a button on the desk. A muted click could be heard, and Mika could now hear the woman breathing, but still she said nothing.

Finally Mika spoke one word. "Brodin."

The woman lifted her long finger from the button and the sound system clicked off. She could see her press another button and begin to speak. Pieces of the woman's words were audible through the glass, but nothing solid. The woman finished and reached to press the first button again, but before she did, Mika met her with a pendant she had had covered under her jacket; one with a symbol Mika knew had meaning to them, but she had no understanding of it.

The woman hesitated with her finger hovering in the air, then pressed the second button and began to speak again. She waited for a moment, then nodded. The woman with the long face then pressed a third button, and the metal door slid open, moaning a rusty complaint along the way.

A factory floor was revealed beyond with rows of tables on each side forming a pathway between them. Masked individuals hunched over these tables feverishly formulating color coded dust into piles, and then into vials or beakers or bags or scales, or combined with one another, depending on what stage they were at in the process. At other tables, workers dealt with liquids and their pipe networks.

Each aisle had at least one robotic machine efficiently monitoring the process and scanning the products for quality control. Built-in shock weapons also served as a deterrent for workers who might slack off. Not that such a measure would be necessary; the indentured servants were visibly chained to the tables.

Beyond these aisles were offices whose windows revealed that something similar was happening inside. Though, when Mika took a solid look, it appeared that these were the rooms where other facets of their trade were applied. In one of them she spotted some out-of-breath individuals dropping a bag on a table before another of them pressed a button to darken the window. In another, several barely conscious people seemed to be partaking in the products being produced on the warehouse tables.

A younger, shorter man, who looked like he had a chip on his shoulder and something to prove, stepped up before Mika and asked if she was there to see Brodin. She only nodded, and he told her to wait in a fold-out chair nearby. She obliged, and the short man disappeared around a corner.

Across from her, in another one of the smaller rooms, Mika noticed a well-dressed man and woman escorted inside. The woman immediately ran toward the window and the man tried to reason with their captors. One of those captors pulled out a pistol, and the well-dressed captives panicked. Someone turned the windows dark, and two flashes of light blinked in unison with loud laser shot sounds before all went silent and dark within.

"What was that?" Jude asked insistently.

"Nada," Mika said.

"If you're having badgers, click your tongue."

"I'm not in trouble. They just..." Mika could hear them dragging the bodies out of the room. "I need to do this, and if you come blasting, that'll ruin all and the novas."

"I've got ways of getting what I want," Jude assured her.

"I have no doubt. But I've dealt with corporate overlords and I know their mindset. They just generally do their killings a little more out of sight..."

"Mika Sinovi," a voice interrupted as it approached from behind. Mika jumped, startled, and turned toward the source. It was a plump man, clearly the one feeding off the work of the famished souls within the warehouse. "What brings you to my workplace unannounced like this?"

Mika swallowed her panic, realizing that the man knew her name because of records they had pulled up after scanning her image when she entered. The first thing she noticed was that there was a faint smattering of blood on his suit and he was wiping his hands. She smiled politely, cleared her throat, and started, "Mr. Brodin, I am..."

"Who gave you the intel to find me here?" he interrupted.

Mika didn't answer with words, but instead reached into her jacket pocket. Four bodyguards all had their weapons out, and Mika pulled out a broach. Brodin stopped, his eyes fixed on the broach; his brows arched in an impressed expression. He waved for the others to lower their weapons. Then he said, "That's only half."

"Her little friend is hidden away safely with an Ambertrans," Mika said. "I can give you the location code in exchange for a location code of your own."

A smile of admiration grew across Brodin's face. "You do not look the type to treat with me," he said. Mika did not respond. She had showed her cards and anything more would be giving away too much. "Very well, let's talk in my office."

Brodin led the way to one of the side rooms. Mika followed, crowded from behind by Brodin's guards, who seemed to be breathing down Mika's neck. Mika held tightly onto the broach and clenched her teeth tight.

"Have a seat," Brodin said politely. Mika did, and he sat across from her. All the others stood behind Mika. "You know why that's so valuable to me?" he asked.

"Oh no," Jude sighed through the ear piece. "He's going to give us the whole boring back story."

Mika had only stared back at Brodin, so he went on, "It was the royal signet when my family ruled their own corporate barony. That's until it got bought and sold into pieces."

"I'm sorry," Mika said.

"You credit I want it for sentimental reasons?" Brodin chuckled. "No! Parts of the contract were never fulfilled because this thing was missing. Having the complete antique put back together will rake in at least a million. Now tell me..." Brodin leaned forward across the desk. "Why shouldn't I just have my friends here beat the location code out of you?"

"I'm coming in," Jude said.

Mika yanked the earpiece out and threw it on the table. "Because my friend... *who is not coming inside yet!*... has the architectural layout of this place. She knows every way in, every way out, every gap in the walls, every vent system, every power system, and where everything is that explodes, and how to set it off without even touching it. She knows every secret of this old place, even the ones you don't know yet. And most of all, she knows all your little security systems and how to bypass them. She's got the weakness in your personnel figured out and knows how to fight them. So, shall we talk cost-benefit analysis?"

Brodin did not look worried, but he was listening. So Mika continued, "You *might* beat the flair out of both of us. She's not immortal. But you will have lost a lot of assets, and your operation will be a wreck. The worst part will be all the attention brought to your little operation here from the noise and explosions... and the signal she'll send out to the local authorities just

before she attacks."

Brodin shrugged. "Like you said. It's a *little* operation..."

"Unlike the two large ones you have on Oseri and the other one you have on Chevas; none of which are welcome on their residing planets."

Brodin was no longer so relaxed. "How do you know about those?" he asked.

"I have a certain set of skills that might not be as useful in a scrape, but are thoroughly useful at reminding an underworld thug of the razor's edge upon which the remains of his empire balances. And directing his attention again to the cost, that of exposure of his holdings to his enemies, versus the benefit, roughing me up." Now Mika leaned over the table such that her nose was within a hair's breadth of Brodin's. "Or the cost, giving me the coordinates that I want, versus the benefit, regaining your family heirloom. All of it."

A look of surrender waved across Brodin's face, and he said, "What do you want to know?"

"I'm looking for an ancient ruin where your gang used to have a camp."

"Org."

"What?"

"Org, not gang. Short for organization. Gang sounds... unprincipled."

"Fine. Org then. This camp extracted primosap from the woods. I need to aprend what planet that was on and the coordinates of the ruins."

"We don't have anyone extracting primosap anymore. Found an easier way to synthesize, so all our camps were disassembled."

"I'm not interested in what you were harvesting, or in your camps. I'm going to the ruins."

"Nothing in those but a bunch of old..."

"The coordinates will be in your records. I know you still keep those; how else would you keep track of when your clients need more of your product."

"How am I abso you'll give me the right coordinates to the other half of the broach?" he asked.

"For the same reason you surm I won't tell anyone about the turfs of your operations. Because you got all the information on me that you need to track down everyone and everything I care about; and if I ever dare to cross you, they will suffer, and I will forever be on the run from your myriad of bounty hunters. And I'm pleasant with my life right where it is."

Brodin grinned with pride and nodded. Then he tapped a button on his desk. A screen rose out of it, and he pressed it a couple times, then typed some words and codes onto a keyboard and slid his finger along the side to bring up the proper information. As he did, he said, "You don't figure like the criminal type."

"Criminal is a relative term that depends on the perpetrator and the victim," Mika said. "For instance with your... organization. The primary drug you manufacture is Preponac, an ind-beta blocker some people need to keep their hearts pumping regularly. It literally saves their lives, but they can't catch access to it because the corporate drug companies charge too much; making their profits off the upper classes and the life savings that the poor spend to stay alive a hand of months longer. Your operations still charge, claro; you're not a charity. But you charge low enough that blue income households can afford the drug. Your undercutting of the companies who are in charge is what makes you a criminal." Mika's eyes rested on the blood stain on the man's shirt. "That and the occasional murder."

"It's a rough galaxy," Brodin said as he printed out a slip of paper with the coordinates

and offered it to her. Mika held out the half of the broach she had along with her own slip of paper, and they made the trade.

Mika immediately stood to leave. Brodin sat back and said, “Jondering off so fast? You afeared what we might do to you?”

“I’m more afraid what my friend will do to you if I don’t get out there,” Mika said, and she marched out the door.