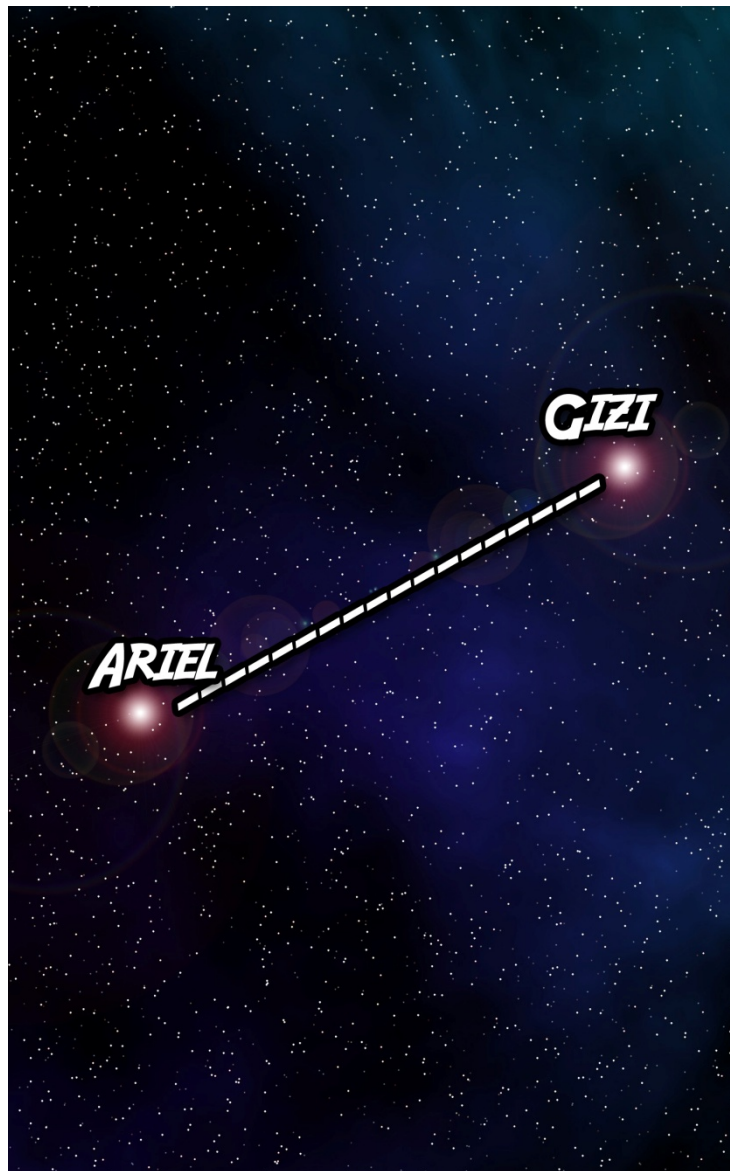


RELIC WORLDS
LANCASTER JAMES AND
THE SALIENT SEED OF THE GALAXY



CHAPTER TWO

TWO PATHS

Miniature ruins lay out across the table before Lancaster in holographic form. Remains of buildings squatted in pools of gathered liquid surrounded by walls of small sandstone cliffs. He leaned over, peering closely into the light illusion, studying entryways and other details, committing them to memory while Mika described it all.

"The wilderness of Issur, badlands that were once underwater, but over the eons dried up. The land masses altered, but the ever-sturdy alien building structures remained. The planet is owned by Bitterpub Corp within the Koneraad conglomeration, and they have settlements on the world, so this isn't Teo's final destination or he would have found his way to them. Whatever he uncovered here caused him to continue on to another planet. The ruins you see are that of the Milak Shivar, so it's the most likely location that he went."

"To look for the Idol of Haniz," Lancaster said in contemplation.

Mika bit her lip. The obsession with locating this artifact had cost her husband Teo his freedom, and possibly his life. He had gone out searching for the ancient alien idol and had disappeared. He was presumed dead until an acquaintance named Nikos Kazakis had shown evidence that he was stranded on a wooded world. However, Nikos had wanted payment for this information that would cost far more people their lives; a price Mika would not pay.

More than a year since this revelation, and more than three years since Teo's disappearance, Mika was on the trail that may find him. The information she had gathered from the underworld had led her to her last hope, Issur. The ruins on this planet would either point her to where Teo had gone, or end the search altogether.

She had done as much as she could on her own, but now she would need the help of the one person she wanted to keep furthest from this, Lancaster James, her ex-husband. They had been married before Teo, a union that had ended because of his wanderlust spirit. She had thought she'd moved on to a more steady life with a partner who had interest in settling down, only to learn that she'd made the same mistake again. The only difference was that Teo had initially done it behind her back.

Looking at Lancaster do his work now, Mika realized why he made it out of so many tight situations. Despite appearing to jump into things, he studied what he was getting himself into as thoroughly as possible before landing. It was probably why his own search for the Idol of Haniz had been a success after Teo had disappeared.

"Yes," Mika said an awkwardly long time after Lancaster had spoken. "Clearly, though, the clues he found didn't lead him to the idol, otherwise you would have found him... or his remains, on Elkis 4."

Lancaster turned to her and almost responded that Teo still could have died there and Lancaster just didn't see him. The holo vid she had seen of her husband showed him in a jungle,

the same environment surrounding the ruins on Elkis 4. There had also been a local tribe who had nearly killed and eaten Lancaster, a fate that still could have befallen Teo. But seeing the almost desperate look of hope on Mika's face, Lancaster decided not to mention any of this.

Mika faced him and said, "You don't have to do this if you don't want to. Your debt to the museum is paid off, so you don't owe me anything."

"Yeah, but..." Lancaster started. He stopped himself from saying it was for her and said, "Ruins are always filled with artifacts. This could turn out to be quite a valuable run."

Mika nodded, as if expecting the answer. "How very mercenarial."

Lancaster shifted his attention back to the model. He flipped through some older files of other Milak Shivar sites. This species varied its architecture wildly, so it was difficult to make predictions based on previous discoveries. However, the similarities that did exist generated valuable clues.

Mika switched on a recording, one that was scratchy and full of interference; the last transmission Teo had sent: "*This... for Mika... to meet her... from the heart... below... you are... always with me.*"

Lancaster had heard the message before, but had not focused as closely on each word. "Did he call you Micah?" he asked.

"What?" Mika asked annoyed.

"It sounds like he says Micah instead of Mika. Was that a thing between you two..."

"Stop," Mika said.

"I'm just... Listen to it..."

"I have, many times. He's not calling me Micah..."

"And who is her?" Lancaster mused.

"What do you mean?"

"He says to meet her. Do you think..."

"No."

"Mika, I never met this guy, but are you completely sure he wasn't..."

"I know, Lancaster. That's not something you should dwell on."

"I wonder if Micah is supposed to go meet her..."

"You want to focus on the ruins?" Mika demanded.

"I am! This might have been a message with clues in it. All this time we've been assuming that was a message of affection, but maybe he was trying to say something in it. Play it again."

"This... for Mika..."

"See?"

"Shhh!"

"...to meet her... from the heart..."

"That really sounds like..."

"I know what it sounds like..."

"...below... you are... always with me."

"I know this is hard for you, Lan. And if you can't do it, I understand."

"The question is, can you do it?" Lancaster said. "Can you handle this if the truth turns out to be something other than what you want it to be?"

"I'll be okay," Mika said determined. "Will you be okay if the truth isn't what you want it to be?"

"What's that?"

Mika rolled her eyes. “You’re going to make me say it. You want him to not be in love with me the way you were. You’re looking for ways to prove he was cheating on me, or leaving me, or not interested anymore, or, or...”

“Or doing what I did to drive you away,” Lancaster said mournfully.

Mika was silent for a moment. Lancaster’s suggestion was the most likely answer, and it was strangely the one that made her most angry, because it reflected more on her choices than anything else. She allowed only a slight nod as she turned her head away. Then she left the room saying, “Don’t let your feelings interfere with the job.”

Lancaster wanted to say that she needed to take the same advice, but he thought better of it and instead turned his focus back onto the ruins where they would be going, and comparing them to past sites where he had been.

The clacking of Mika’s shoes across the museum floor always denoted her mood. Whenever students heard steps this sharp, they knew to stay out of the way. Mika never noticed this. But today she noticed one figure, Little Jack; Lancaster’s partner. His diminutive form stood by the doorway, hands in his leather jacket pockets, his large, frosty glasses peering up at her like a stoic statue. One had to look closely to even see he was breathing.

“He’s downstairs” Mika said.

“I know,” Little Jack said, moving only his mouth.

His sudden appearances always unnerved Mika. She never knew what to make of the ex-con Lancaster always relied on, so she continued on out the door.

The fresh air of St. Marguerite was always refreshing; more so than most worlds due to the ever-present ocean breeze. With just under 90% of the planet made up of water, and none of the land being particularly large, wind and moisture were every day aspects of life. Above, gathering clouds denoted an upcoming storm; a wildly unpredictable part of life on the planet. Days ranged from mild and breezy to major storms whose electrical discharges could destroy unprotected structures.

As such, communities such as Saberaux University huddled together under protective framework that captured lightning and tempered heavy winds. But even with this assistance, moving about during bad weather was difficult, and most people hunkered down.

The stone buildings being protected were of a distinct architecture once known as French. The planet had been founded by a corporate baroness from that part of Earth and she had named it after an island she had enjoyed visiting off the southern coast before it was swallowed up by the sea. The school had been set up for and partially named after her daughter, Sabine, for whom there were statues in pious poses. Mika always thought that the names should have been reversed: St. Sabine and Marguerite.

Regardless, the “saint” portion was an irony as the school was anything but religious. But it did attract some of the few remaining theological organizations to islands on other parts of the world. Mika could see one of them as she leaned over the railing and stared out into the now roiling ocean. A storm was building, and this was going to be a big one.