

RELIC WORLDS
LANCASTER JAMES AND
THE SALIENT SEED OF THE GALAXY



CHAPTER THREE

MOMMY DEAREST

Captain Bistan stood at the front of the bridge watching the swirling mass of the wormhole tube. He was grateful to be on a ship with a broad window across the front rather than a view screen. He always felt claustrophobic with those. Even though they provided more perspectives of any part of the ship, he could never stop remembering that the view was artificial, through a lens; not transparent for him to see with his own eyes.

The panorama outside at the moment was harder to see. The shades of dark and the types of matter within the wormhole were not intended for human receptacles. On a view screen he could alter the settings to translate various types of radiation and electromagnetism to colors and shapes, but Bistan liked stretching his eyesight to its limits in order to make out the subtle differences in the shades of black.

“Coming up on Fleurbis Relay Point,” reported the navigator. She always gave this warning exactly one minute before arrival.

“All hands prepare for arrival,” Captain Bistan said, remaining at the front. “Any delay on our escorts?” he asked.

“Negative,” the resource manager responded. “All twelve transports and both escort frigates are registering stable tunnels and are expected to emerge within a five minute window.”

Bistan did not like having to wait several minutes for all of his ships, but it was the price one paid for the faster travel of Wormdrives. Spectrum drives had had to deal with gravitational fluctuations within the trans-dimensional highway of the brane, but ships within them could coordinate a little better upon emerging. Wormdrives placed each ship into its own space-time tunnel, which transported them to their destination faster, but by varying degrees; and so at each destination fleets had to wait to regroup.

The mouth of the wormhole opened before them, creating a sudden whirlpool of light whose center faded into the familiar black canvas with pearly dots and a translucent, creamy belt across its axis. Directly before them sat a space station surrounded by three small fleets of the Navarus Corporate Barony. Each had one escort frigate and a half-dozen transports under their care.

Bistan’s small fleet was to break up into these convoys and go their own ways toward their destinations. This was the most efficient and safest way to do it with wormhole travel and with the Relic Wars currently raging. Bistan’s ships had items recovered from a site identified as having once been occupied by an alien civilization, and they were on their way to either R&D centers, augmentation departments, or construction facilities, depending on how well they were understood.

Transports with goods like these used to travel on their own, but now they had to be guarded from attack by other corporate entities. Navarus was ahead in this ancient technology race, but others coveted their position, and raids were not uncommon.

As such, Captain Bistan held back his ships as they emerged from their wormholes until they were all united and ready to push on to the relay station together.

While waiting, the captain noticed something strange beyond the station. A deep darkness, blacker than the void of space, seemed to expand, warping the view of the stars beyond like a black hole.

Just over a second after Bistan began to notice it, the sensors operator reported an anomaly emerging from the same spot. “Activate the power shell. Reinforce the front. That’s an order for the

fleet. Comms, tell the relay station..."

"Something's emerging, sir!" came the heightened voice of the sensors operator. Everyone on the bridge looked out the front to witness the bubble become a burst of light and energy. Emerging from it was a small fleet of very large war vessels. One was a dreadnaught; the Authoritor, large enough to swallow almost all three of Bistan's frigates in its belly. The other three were only half as big.

The sensors operator scanned their origin, but Bistan already recognized them; they were from the Poltox Corporate Barony. They were not likely to show much mercy. Nor were they likely to back down, though the relay station still ordered them to do so. Bistan knew they would not come this far only to turn away; not with what his side had.

The relay station and other ships were now reacting, scrambling to ready their weapons and defense systems. Fleurbis Station had a solid rack of missiles and some good guns, but the attackers knew that, and no doubt had come prepared to counter all of their ordinance.

"Fleurbis Station is calling all ships to them," said the communications officer.

"Setting course," said the navigator, trying to save time.

"Negative," Captain Bistan said. "Our charge is our convoy. All ships in our fleet are to remain in this zone until the rest of the transports arrive."

The relay station covered the three convoys as they pulled away from the station. A flurry of missiles shot out of the station like wild, growing hair and curved toward the enemy. The frigates fired their long-range beam weapons. Clouds of chafe engulfed all four enemy ships, then a second puff emerged from the smaller ones: massive squadrons of drones.

The frigates and the station launched their own drones to intercept. It took all they had just to equal what was coming at them.

"How many transports do we have?" Bistan demanded, wanting to get into the fight.

"Six, sir. Now seven."

Five to go, and they could take another four minutes. He spotted a new mass of drones emerging from the enemy capitol ship; and with all the station's fleets' drones engaged, they would have to resort to manned fighters.

"Our fleet is going in," Bistan ordered. "Transports follow the frigates. Frigates, ready our drones."

The three Navarus war ships moved in to engage. Fleurbis Station was swarmed by the time they arrived, and they had launched their fighters. Bistan launched his drones, and ordered his other ships to launch theirs at one of the enemy's smaller vessels.

The station's transports were making their way out of the battle zone, preparing to deploy their wormholes.

"Tell our transports to go with theirs. Full speed!" Bistan said. The message was relayed, and the transports headed toward their allies.

Three wormholes opened up. One of the transports slipped inside, but the second got only halfway when a beam from the Poltox ship hit the cosmic hole and closed it up, cutting the vessel in half. The third was closed before the ship got to it.

"What is that thing?" Bistan asked, pointing at a small device tumbling onto the battle area. He would think it was debris, but nothing nearby had been destroyed. He would think it was a drone, but no squadrons were close enough. It was drifting among the transports.

"Unknown, sir. It..."

The device stopped, and a moment later, all the transports that had started near the station were sucked toward it. They smashed together, their hulls twisting over one another into a giant ball.

"Message all our transports: strass out of here, any direction you can," Captain Bistan ordered. "Open wormholes to any destination."

"Our heading, captain?" the navigator asked.

"Get between us and the transports. Don't let the invaders get them..."

"Important message, Captain," the comm officer said, and he put it on speaker.

It was the captain of the lead Poltox ship. She was calling Fleurbis Station, offering amnesty.

However, it was not a demand for surrender, it was a bid. The Poltox Barony would pay them to join their side. Silence followed, during which the opposing front-line ships came within range of their beam weapons, but no one fired, awaiting the response.

The commander of the station took the buyoff; so did two of their ships. One of them refused, and turned to flee. Fleurbis station fired into it to show their loyalty to their new commanders.

“How many of our transports are here?” Bistan asked.

“Nine,” reported the resource manager. That’s three they would have to wait for. Another three minutes. They would not survive. The drones were already aligning to one another and turning on them, so were the fighters. Though manned by people, they were loyal to their paychecks, so they would cut down their former allies in a heartbeat.

“Prepare for Wormdrive,” Captain Bistan said. “Fastest desto you can bring up. Order all ships in our fleet to retreat.”

The remaining Navarus vessels turned in several directions, each preparing to withdraw. They were in range of Fleurbis Station, which was firing everything it had at them. It managed to destroy one of the transports; a choice partially remaining loyal to Navarus by keeping its contents out of the hands of Poltox. But then it turned its weapons on Bistan’s ship.

“Evasive!” he shouted. Their wormhole disappeared and the ship rocked one way, then the other. The stars out their large front windows spun mercilessly.

But all the fire was on them. The transports and other frigates were opening their wormholes and heading inside. One of the wormholes was destroyed and another graviton device managed to capture the transport that was trying to get inside. The same device also grabbed an additional transport that was just arriving.

“Send the report by Wormmessenger,” Bistan told the comm officer. “Fleurbis Station lost. Transports captured or scattered.”

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Bela of Navarus received the news in his office. He had gotten word that raids were taking place along several borders; incursions which were turning into all-out assaults. They were coming from three different baronies and two unaffiliated corporations. All claimed outrage at the unwarranted attack on Gerhelm, especially while Princess Rezia Eudotic was hosting an event for dignitaries and CEOs of other baronies and corporations on Akolgar.

Navarus had not planned, nor performed, the attack for which they were blamed; Bela was certain of that. Her Highness, Empress Cerilisetia Navarus did keep her decision-making process close to her chest, but *all* military matters ran through Bela.

He had considered the possibility of misidentification; but he saw video footage from the incident. Gerhelm was hosting an auction which many top corporations and baronies had attended. Ships landed and armored soldiers attacked. They did not distinguish between military personnel and civilians. In fact, some seemed to target high-level executives. But for what purpose, Bela could not ascertain. This was how he knew it was none of his people. No one under his employ would be so pointless. If they killed, it was done for a profit.

Armor and signets recovered from the site were uniquely Navarus, however. Even some of the strategies used were methods they were specifically trained to perform. The details were so exact that Bela even spotted subtle methods that his soldiers were trained to utilize that were not publically known. The plan was obviously a setup, but by someone who knew their inner workings.

But now they were beyond diplomacy. No one had believed Navarus’ official denials of responsibility. Their own delegation to the event had suspiciously disappeared, and they had even condemned the attack as against the agreed upon code of that Galactic Market.

Whether anyone believed them or not was irrelevant. The Navarus Barony had had a leg up in the race to gather powerful alien relics which improved their technologies. Cerilisetia’s father had collected them as a hobby, and upon overthrowing him, the now self-proclaimed empress had discovered

their useful properties. This made Navarus a perceived threat to all other factions, and everyone was looking for a new excuse to overthrow them, or at least peck at their borders.

Bela placed the information in a projection-disk and carried it to his boss. It took him a few minutes to locate her. She was not in her usual locations, which included the Galagamarket center, the operations headquarters, her room, her personal office, or the swimming pool on top of the tower. Today, he learned, she was in the Nebulaic Chamber.

He went to one of the floors that had long observation windows and peeked in. There she was, floating among the thick vapor like there was no gravity. In fact, there was, and the atmospheric pressure was greater inside than it was in the rest of the building. But the luxurious enclosure, typically used for relaxing days off, had a thick brume that was filled with an alien liquid that was both light, and thick enough to slide through; like a cloudy gelatin.

Bela was surprised to find her here. She did not take days off, and was usually working from the moment she woke to when she fell asleep. When she needed to think, she usually took a swim. This was similar to the Nebulaic Chamber, but took less effort on the part of the relaxer, who just floated with the misty currents. He saw that she was wearing an oxygen mask, so he could call her.

Ceriliseta did not need the mask to breathe in the chamber; the air was perfectly fine. She wore it because she did not like the smell, or the taste when some of the gelatin inevitably floated into her mouth. The downside was that she was reachable by those who disturbed her meditative thought process. "Yes, Bela," she said.

"There's been another attack."

"To be expected."

"This one at the hub of Fleurbis Relay Point."

Ceriliseta stared at Bela through the window saying nothing for a while. She was calculating, picturing the pieces on the board.

Finally Bela said, "Did the pool get boring for you?"

She did not answer, but instead rolled over on her back to look up toward the ceiling. Bela had noticed her eyes moving, like she was looking around in her imagination. He had something that would help. He approached a nearby door and opened it. This led to an airlock which he had to wait inside while the first door closed, then he opened the inner door to the Nebulaic Chamber.

Stepping out onto the ramp, his clothes were immediately dampened. Ceriliseta did not react. She lay there, wrapped in ribbon-like clothing and the faint brume. Bela pulled a disk from his dress jacket pocket, pressed a button and held it aloft. A holographic map of the stars in their area of the galaxy cut through the gelatinous haze. Ceriliseta floated through the middle of her kingdom. This had clearly caught her attention as she turned her head toward several conflict zones.

"They've been targeting relay centers rather than the star systems. We've taken no planetary losses, but supply chains are cut, especially to our... experimental wings."

"So they have some of the relics we had acquired."

"Yes ma'am. I have a complete report on what they've taken and what they've destroyed."

"Their focus has been on the cellular tech," Ceriliseta said with confidence.

"Yes," Bela answered with some surprise that she already had that figured out. "The larger attacks have been where miniaturizing cargo was being transpoed."

"Because that's what they're developing," Ceriliseta said twisting around to face a star cluster at the edge of her border. "They already purchased the facilities and tools needed for this work. One of the companies got bid right out from under my nose."

Ceriliseta now swam further up, wafting past star systems and out beyond the border of her empire. Bela could see that her eyes were scanning the stars as her face revealed how deep in thought she was. Bela did not try to guess her mind. The best he had ever done was catch up with two moves behind where she was. He just waited to take his orders from the woman he deemed the most beautiful creature in the galaxy.

She stared at one world circling a tiny star, then another, as though determining their fate. She had already come to the conclusion that Gerhelm had attacked their own auction and framed her barony.

Ceriliseta knew this not because she had not ordered an attack; not because there was any evidence to the theory; but because Rezia Eudotic was Ceriliseta's mother, and this was exactly the sort of devious thing Ceriliseta would do.

To be sure, Rezia had not really raised Ceriliseta; that had been the job of nannies and nursemaids and the occasional robot. But just as they both shared a rare gene which made their hair both a bright blonde, (something that was nearly extinct in all humans,) they also shared other genetic traits, and Ceriliseta was beginning to believe one of them was a cunning intellect.

Most believed her mother to be simple-minded. Ceriliseta had even believed it, and she had assumed her mother would be grateful when she returned her to her homeland after Ceriliseta overthrew her father's barony. But now, with what was happening, Ceriliseta wondered if they had more in common than she had assumed. Whoever had set up the attack clearly had a great deal of inside information about Navarus; the counterfeit had been perfect, even to the smallest details. Who else could possibly pull that off?

She began looking over one star system after another, connecting the dots and seeing what her moves would be in her mind's eye. She settled on the region now known as Gerhelm-Risi; territory recently conquered by her mother's barony, and right on Navarus's doorstep.

"Did you find something, my lady?" Bela asked.

Ceriliseta did not take her eyes off the holographic planets as she said, "Bela, do you credit Leonodero would have had the courage to overthrow my father?"

Of all the times Ceriliseta had surprised Bela, this was the most unexpected. He could not recall a time she had ever spoken about her dead brother. He answered as best he could, "I doubt anyone would have had the fortitude you have had, miss."

"I sometimes would gladly trade it all to him." She stalled a moment in contemplation. Then she shook her head. Time for work. "Here's what we're going to do."

Ceriliseta now swam quickly through the holographic cosmos, pointing at stars and explaining the plan. Bela did his best to keep up and take notes. "Before Risi was taken down, they were developing a new drive system for their ships. It required a special form of fuel that they had just acquired through Scole Corporation. Gerhelm doesn't sav how valuable this all is because they're barely guarding the planets where these are being kept. We're going to raid those systems just enough to destroy their defenses, and at the same time spread the word of these valuable assets that are just sitting there undefended. That will turn their attention from us to them."

"Are you certain that would work?" Bela asked.

"There's one thing CEOs love more than revenge. Money," she answered. "Meanwhile we'll reconnect our wormhole routes and set them up to strike wherever we want." She stopped, floating in front of a small dot that represented the Kalida System, and an even tinier dot representing its planet Cypran, and said, "Even you, Mommy dearest."