

RELIC WORLDS

LANCASTER JAMES

**AND THE SALIENT
SEED OF THE GALAXY**

JEFF MCARTHUR

Relic Worlds:

Lancaster James
And The Salient Seed
of the Galaxy
Part 1

Jeff McArthur

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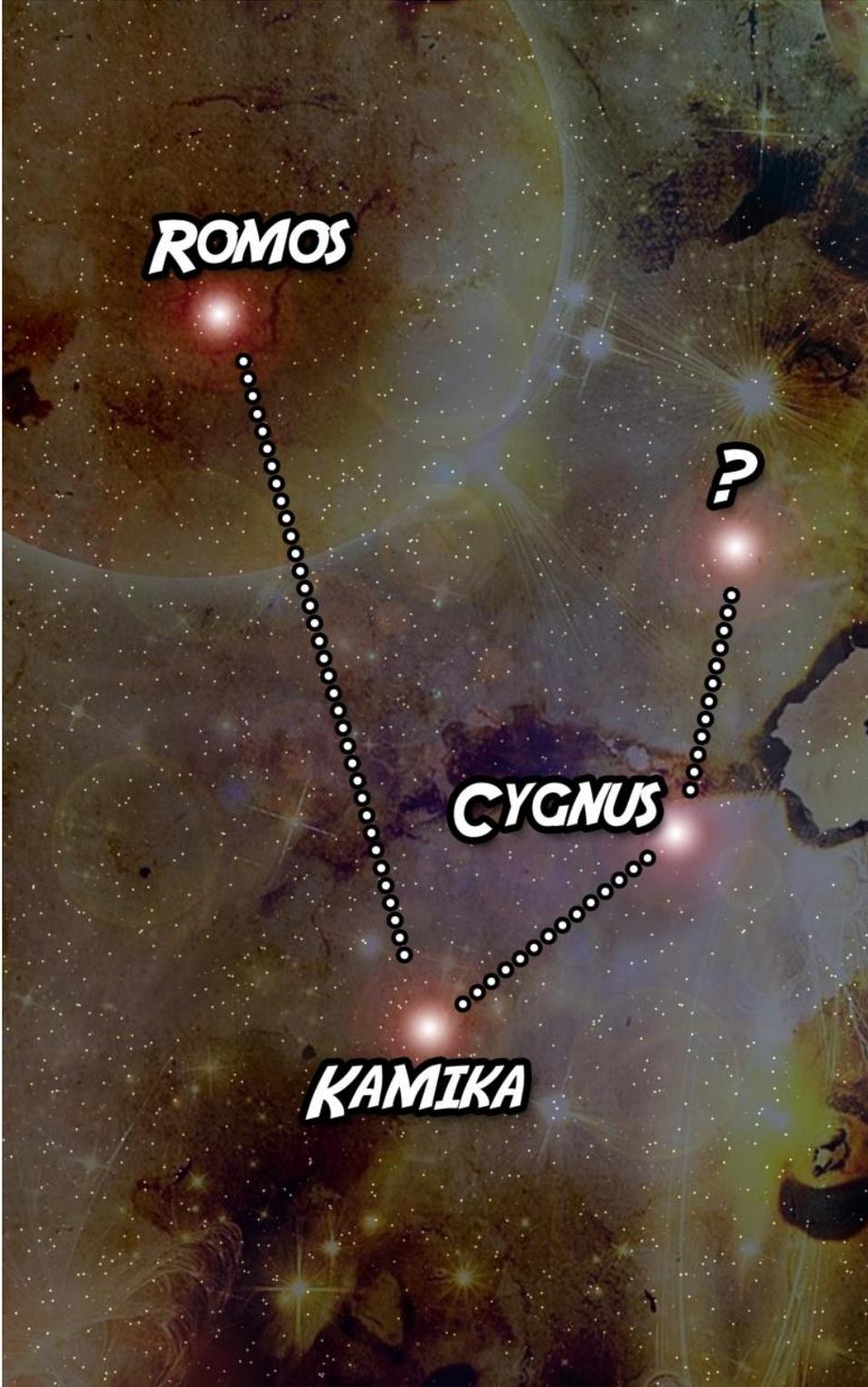
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Preface

“This... for Mika... to meet her... from the heart... below... you are... always with me.”

- Last transmission of Teo Sinovi



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."

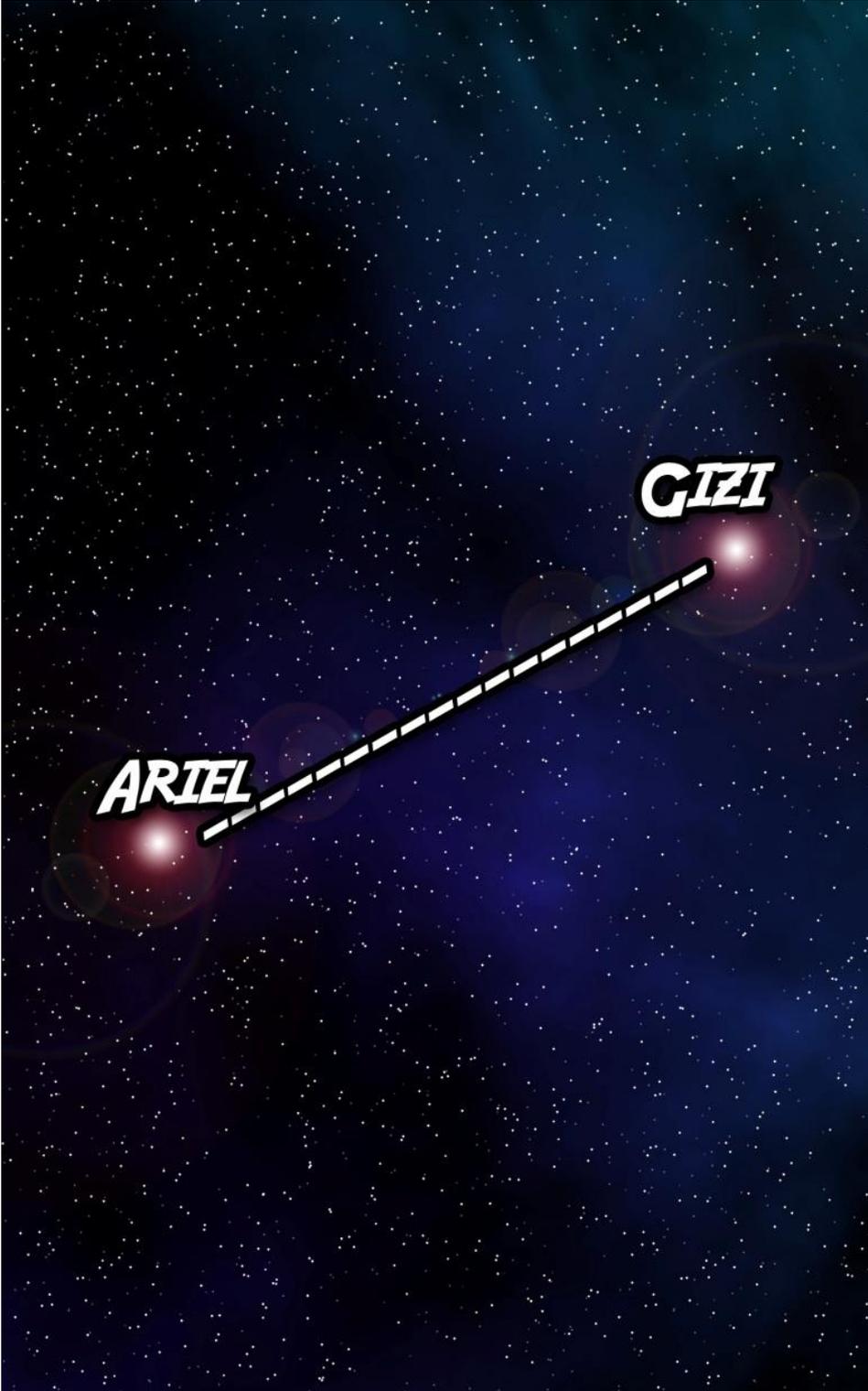
Brodin grinned with pride and nodded. Then he tapped a button on his desk. A screen rose out of it, and he pressed it a couple times, then typed some words and codes onto a keyboard and slid his finger along the side to bring up the proper information. As he did, he said, "You don't figure like the criminal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



Chapter Two

Two Paths

Miniature holographic ruins sprawled out across the table before Lancaster. 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 upon Haedus-Sadatoni. 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 desto or he would have found his way to them. Whatever he uncovered here caused him to jonder 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, Haedus-Sadatoni. 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. “It's claro, though, the clues he found didn't lead him to the idol, otherwise you would have found him... or his remains, on Alkis 4.”

Lancaster turned to her and almost responded that Teo still could have died there and Lancaster just did not see him. The holovid she had seen of her husband showed him in a jungle, the same environment surrounding the ruins on Alkis 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. Instead he observed something else about the ruins before him. “Some of the lower structures near the center look like they might be intact.”

“I considered them, but they view too small to house Milak Shivar,” Mika said.

Lancaster lowered his head and looked up at the hologram as if he could peer inside from below. “Yeah, but it views like the top and the roof. The rest might be buried underneath. We might be able to get in through this waterway if it's not too solidified. Won't be comfortable, but...”

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 fuzzy 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 credit...”

“No.”

“Mika, I never met this guy, but are you completely abso 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 Micah...”

“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 dagni for you, Lan. And if you can't do it, I comprehend.”

“The question is, can you do it?” Lancaster said. “Can you ruko 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 scrying 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 spotted 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 out the door.

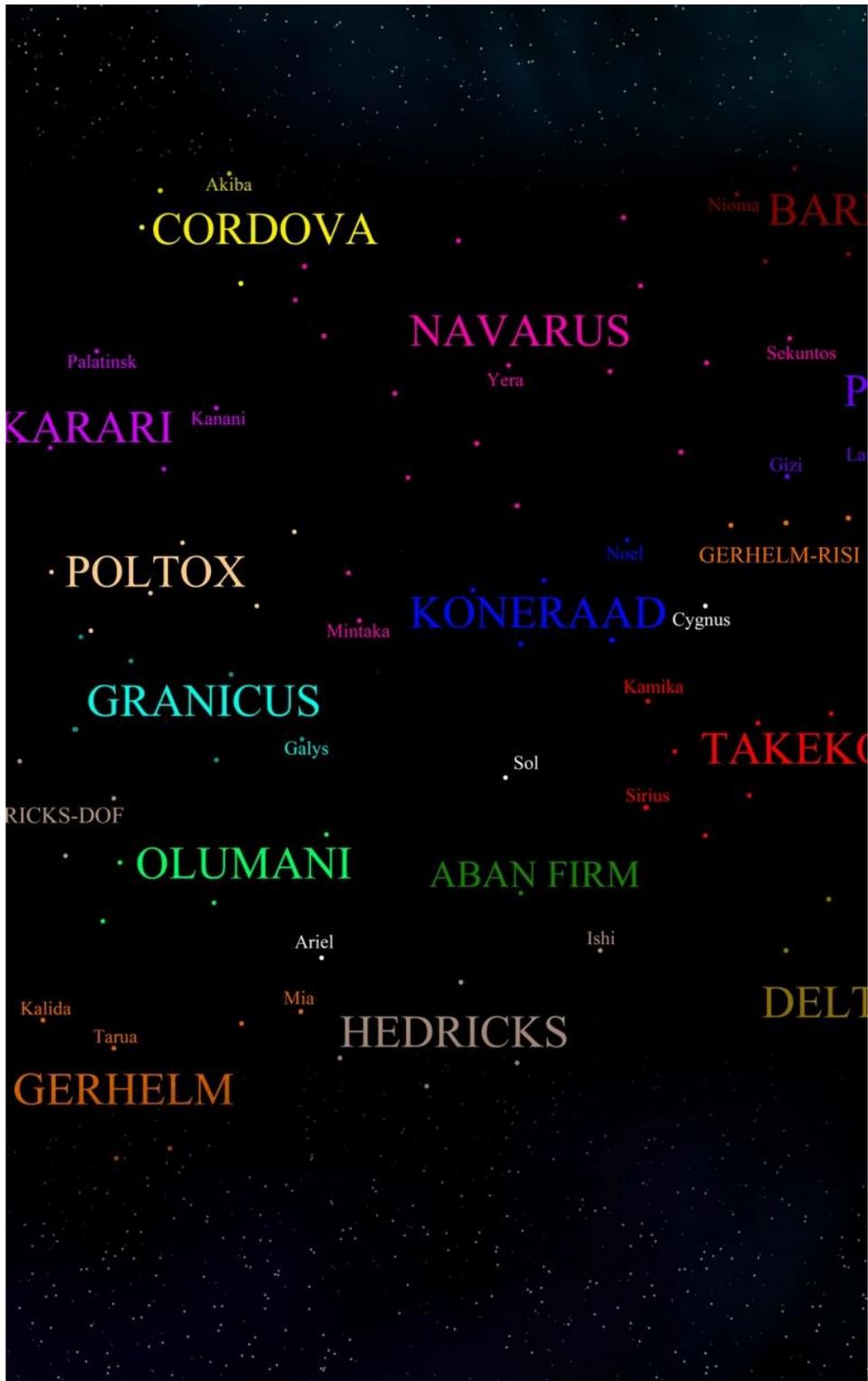
The fresh air of St. Marguerite was always refreshing; more so than most worlds due to the ever-present ocean breeze. With just under 90% of the planet made up of water, and none of the land being particularly large, wind and moisture were every day aspects of life. Above, gathering clouds denoted an upcoming downpour; a wildly unpredictable part of life on this world. 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 sheltered were of a distinct architecture once known as French. The planet had been founded by a corporate baroness from that part of Earth before it was abandoned; and she had named it after an island she had enjoyed visiting off the southern coast of France before it was swallowed up by the sea. The school had been set up for and partially named after the baroness's daughter, Sabine, for whom there were statues in pious poses across campus. It was because of this that Mika always thought the names should have been reversed: the world of Marguerite and the school of St. Sabine.

The fact that the word "saint" was associated with the school at all was an irony as it was one of the most prestigious locations for learning in all of the settled stars. The world did have a religious side though, as the name had attracted some of the few remaining theological organizations to islands on other parts of the world. And so it was a world of faith and knowledge all embroiled together under a tempest sky.

Mika could see one of the monasteries in the distance 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.



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.”

* * *

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 Eudosic 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 Cerilseta 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. Ceriliseta'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 Eudosic 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.”

Kalida

Mia

Tarua

La Ida

GERHELM

Petras

Astra

Chapter Four

The Menagerie

The flora and fauna had filled out to cover much of the greenhouse rooms in which they were grown. Over the course of three years, they had gone from seedlings in unused chambers to thick woods through which a passerby would have to carefully maneuver. Only the metal floor and ceiling reminded a person that they were inside a station floating kilometers above the surface of an inhospitable molten rock.

It had been an adjustment for Princess Rezia Nogotha Tarua Eudotic, Heiress to House Eudotic of the Gerhelm Barony. She had gotten used to the fresh air and warm colored auroras in the skies of Navarus. Though she had been sold into marriage as part of a trade deal in her youth, her life with her husband and daughter had been a good one. Her duties were minimal, even as a parent, and she had large tracts of land on which to appease her green thumb.

Aside from the occasional grumblings of her husband about his work, she did not have to deal with the politics or worry about staying on top and profitable. But she did listen, and after hearing the same names over and over, she had gained an understanding of who the major players were in the galaxy.

Her daughter and son had taken some of her time; usually when they got away from the nannies and educator bots to go to Rezia for attention. It was an amusing distraction, but luckily one that did not take too much of her time before someone came to pull the crying children away. They were both being groomed for positions of leadership, or to be used in trade deals as their mother had been; depending on the needs of the barony and the children's abilities.

Her son Leonodero's abilities lay in command and combat, and he was sent away as a teenager to learn how to lead their great warriors. Unfortunately, he learned to lead from the front, and he died in the next corporate conflict.

Ceriliseta had been blessed with beauty, and the golden hair she had inherited from her mother made her stand out among princesses. Her greatest asset was going to be in connecting with another barony through a relationship. As such, she would be leaving soon.

And so there was no point in Rezia becoming close with her children. She had more of a chance of having a solid relationship with members of the court than she did with either of her offspring.

Then Ceriliseta surprised everyone by taking over the barony, labeling it her empire, sending her father to prison, and banishing her mother. That's gratitude for you.

It had been a period of adjustment; a time of anger and deep resentment. It was not so much the rejection that hurt; her family was more outraged by this, revealed when they had killed the soldiers and pilot who had delivered Rezia. It was the wasted life of more than 20 years. She had played the role of the passive royal wife attending to her social duties and keeping quiet about her opinions and her points of view. Even when she heard all the bad ideas coming out of Galek's mouth when he spoke about his political dealings, she let him walk into his own steel walls, or she had manipulated him into the right direction with her words, always giving him the impression that it had been his idea. And despite being the source of many great decisions for the Navarus barony, Rezia stepped aside and let her husband bathe in the credit.

She had spent days wandering the balconies outside the floating city of Arod Upon Cypran, glaring over the pale yellow gasses upon which the kilometers-long station seemed to drift. It was

a putrid sight and a nagging sulfuric smell, one that did not follow her inside; but Rezia was punishing herself by facing it. Though her family had come from a different system altogether, they had made this planet their capitol because of the grand increase in mining profits.

Learning about her hobby while on Navarus, her brother had ordered several unused chambers to be transformed into botanical rooms, complete with the necessary environmental controls and shelves of soil.

Inspired by the olfactory nature of their various home planets and wanting to fight back the residual stink from outside, Rezia determined to organize the plants by their smells. Walking through the area, one might not be met by matching colors or an orderly assortment of vines and flowers; but their nostrils would take a journey of delicious sensations, fading from one recipe of smells to the next. Rezia trimmed the plants regularly to keep the sensations from becoming too overwhelming, though many of those odors clung to her.

The care for these gardens gave Rezia a renewed confidence to face the world, and she did so with their help. Since the smell of the plants were clinging to her, she chose those with the more pleasant aroma to turn into perfumes. With botanical choices from a wide swath of planets, she was able to find many with nearly hypnotic properties. Her popularity grew among the executive royalty, and she began hosting parties.

With the popularity of ancient artifacts on the rise, and since Rezia had taken many of her husband's relics with her when she was banished, these parties became auctions, and soon they were the most sought after tickets in the known galaxy. The latest one, however, had ended in chaos when Navarus invaders landed and attacked the palace where the proceedings were being held. Civilians from many different factions were killed. It had sparked a war with the majority of corporate baronies either attacking Navarus, or sanctioning them. Gerhelm had taken the high road, allowing others to fight for them.

In her private time, Rezia retreated into her gardens, disappearing behind the curtains of vines and leaves. This was where Daragor found her. He was the brother who had had this wing built, and he knew how much it meant to her.

"Greetings and salutations, dear Daragor!" Rezia almost sang in their family's native tongue as she fluttered among the greenery, spraying the correct amount of water on each plant, which she had memorized. The family language had passed down as a combination of several languages from Earth in an area that had been called Eastern Europe.

Daragor looked over the plants as he followed his sister. *"I see your project is doing well,"* he said, also using their native words.

"Robare has some gristle in it, and Marten is struggling to keep up its leaves. But Mariana is..."

"You've named the plants now."

"Oh, they've had names since they were seedlings. It encourages me to be all the more vigilant."

"Did you have to give them human names?"

"What names would you have me use?" Rezia was not stopping to chat; she maneuvered through the maze of greenery.

"Scientific? Their plant names? Person names makes it confusing."

"They are the discarded names I never got to use for my children," she said, pausing for a moment before continuing again.

Daragor knew he should say he was sorry; if not for his bluntness than for her inability to have more than two children, one of whom died bravely, the other of whom stabbed her in the

back. Instead, after a short time of silence, he asked which one was Ceriliseta. Rezia unraveled a long vine and held it out to Daragor. The smell was rank, and he recoiled in surrender. She smiled and moved on.

They came to another plant. *“This one here is Malachi. He would be 19 now... had he not come out early as a premature mess. Had I not drunk him into that state and then ruined my womb.”*

“You can be glad you didn’t leave Navarus with any more heirs to turn on you.”

“Yes,” Rezia said, stopping.

“More heirs to attack your auctions.”

“Yes.”

“Or one to even do it in the first place.”

Rezia now looked at Daragor quizzically. He did not have such an expression; his was of certainty. *“I saw the analysis of the enemy attack craft wreckage... What little I could get access to. Funny how much of that became classified, even from family members...”*

“I certainly didn’t have access to it...”

“No, only those of the company you employed did.” Daragor weaved around some branches in full accusatory mode now. *“I am Regent Apprentice of our house and of our empire. If there are plans that affect our prosperity, then I should know about them.”*

“There’s nothing to know, dear brother.”

“Material used in the ships and the enemy armor came from factories we own,” Daragor pressed, but Rezia interrupted.

“When my daughter banished me, you, and father and mother and even our siblings and much of the Board wanted to get all our revenge on all Navarus holdings. Either through force of arms or financial ruin, you wanted to make them pay. But I stopped you all, didn’t I?”

“I didn’t say you shouldn’t do it; just that I should be involved.”

Rezia drew in a breath. She did not blame her brother for being mad. It’s hard to run any operation where there are wildcards. So she switched gears and said, still in their family tongue, *“So many people have speculated on the intrigues of Ceriliseta. Some say it came out of nowhere. That she must have gotten her ruthlessness from her father. That Galek Navarus was overthrown by a spawn of his own making. But none of them knew Galek. I did. He was a sentimentalist. He’d have rather spent his life in a warehouse with the ancient treasures he was collecting. Hades, he never even learned what they did. If he had, we’d have been leagues ahead in the Relic Wars... I mean, sorry, they would be leagues ahead. In any event, they’re wrong. Ceriliseta did not learn her skills of intrigue from her father. She inherited them from me.”*

Daragor was unnerved by the sly grin that grew across his sister’s face. She even looked a little proud. He was not surprised by the truth of it, but he was afraid of the confidence of it. This was not the sister he thought existed underneath the veneer of flighty joy.

After only a brief pause, a speaker crackled to life. “Donna Rezia. You have an esteemed visitor who desires a short tour of your garden.”

“Show him in,” Rezia said, her eyes remaining on her brother. Daragor took the opportunity to exit the situation. He had noticed that Rezia knew it was a man who had come to visit, which made him curious, but not curious enough to stick around. Rezia’s stare was unnerving him enough to seek out the better part of wisdom; so he left as another man entered.

Before the man had come close, while he was still obscured through a veil of greenery, Rezia said, “Greetings and salutations, Nikos Kazakis. Graduate of Highest Honors at Reeve University. First to discover the lost city of Rexal, from which you were able to recover countless

artifacts made of precious metals which you stripped to make yourself gorgeously wealthy. Rather than resting on your laurels, you used it to hunt down rare animals and not only sell their heads, but take others on hunts from which they could bag their own trophies. You acquired enough to build your own little empire, but then angered the wrong people and have been scrounging for treasures instead.”

“I prefer not to live under someone else's thumb, Donna Eudotic. I'm sure you can relate.”

Rezia stepped closer to Nikos so he could see her face. “The way you stabbed your former classmates in the back at Rexal. The ones who had actually discovered the city? But come now, you were the one to take credit, so you must have been the actual person to discover it.”

Nikos was visibly taken aback. The reference to his classmates had particularly shaken him. But he pulled himself together and said, “If you sav so much about me, then you must know why I'm here now.”

“I know it's because you wish to prove yourself to me. You don't have a lot of others to turn to due to the twists in your reputation. Twists due in part by my daughter. You need a win. And you always register how to choose a winner, don't you, Mr. Kazakis?”

Nikos took a moment to answer. He now knew he would have to choose his words wisely in Rezia's presence. At last he said, “I never took my lady for such calculation.”

“Do not overestimate me, looter,” she said, causing Nikos to wince. She knew it would. Nothing galled Nikos more than calling him out for what he was. She then continued, “The only thing I can't cipher is how exactly you wish to prove yourself to me. And how you expect to leave alive if you can't.”

“Donna Eudotic, you truly are the mother of your daughter,” Nikos said, taking a small, cloth bag from his jacket pocket and tossing it to the floor. It landed with an audible thud. Rezia hesitated before kneeling down and picking it up. She opened the top and looked inside. “Scientists call it aroradite. Getil Corporation, which you own, calls it Riol. They use it as a power source for operating your dark bases at...”

“I sav what you speak of,” Rezia said. “But I am not in charge of these decisions. You will need to speak with my father or my brother.”

“My... lady...” Nikos dragged out the words as if disappointed in a student. “There is being in charge. And then... there's... really being in charge.” He looked her in the eye with the final statement. Then he pointed at the plants as he named them. “Robare. Marten, Mariana, Carmaina, Leonodero... Malachi... All real human beings who would have lived if you hadn't killed Malachi.”

“Aborted.”

“Yes,” Nikos said, grinning victoriously. “Is that the first time you've admitted to *aborting* Malachi?”

Rezia didn't answer. She looked away.

“I won't pretend to speculate on which medication you took, but it wasn't the alcohol which ended the pregnancy and killed any future chance at a Navarus heir other than Ceriliseta. But you didn't know she would end up banishing you...”

Rezia lunged at Nikos. “WHAT DO YOU WANT!” she shouted.

Nikos merely took a step back and said, “A chance at redemption. I want you to fund my expedition. If you know my credentials, you know my reputation for successfully locating artifacts that are beneficial to the client.”

Cooling down, Rezia asked, “What will you bring to me?”

“Well in our tongue, we're calling it quantum crystals. I know it's not a very exciting name like most relics, but...”

“How will it benefit me?”

“Exactly. That's more important. Imagine communication across the known galaxy instantaneously.”

“That's wormcom,” Rezia said.

“That's not instantaneous. And it takes longer and is less reliable the further away you are. Plus, you're limited on how much graphical information you can send through. So no visual communication past a certain distance. Quantum crystals, the ancient Milak Shivar were onto them, but they didn't sav how to exploit them to their fullest potential. I know the planet where I can find them and bring them back.” Rezia was intrigued, but on the fence, so Nikos added in the Eudotic family language, “*And if we move quickly, we can beat your daughter to it.*”

Rezia was impressed by Nikos' language skills, and his ability to tap into exactly what she wanted to hear. “What kind of backing do you need?” she asked.

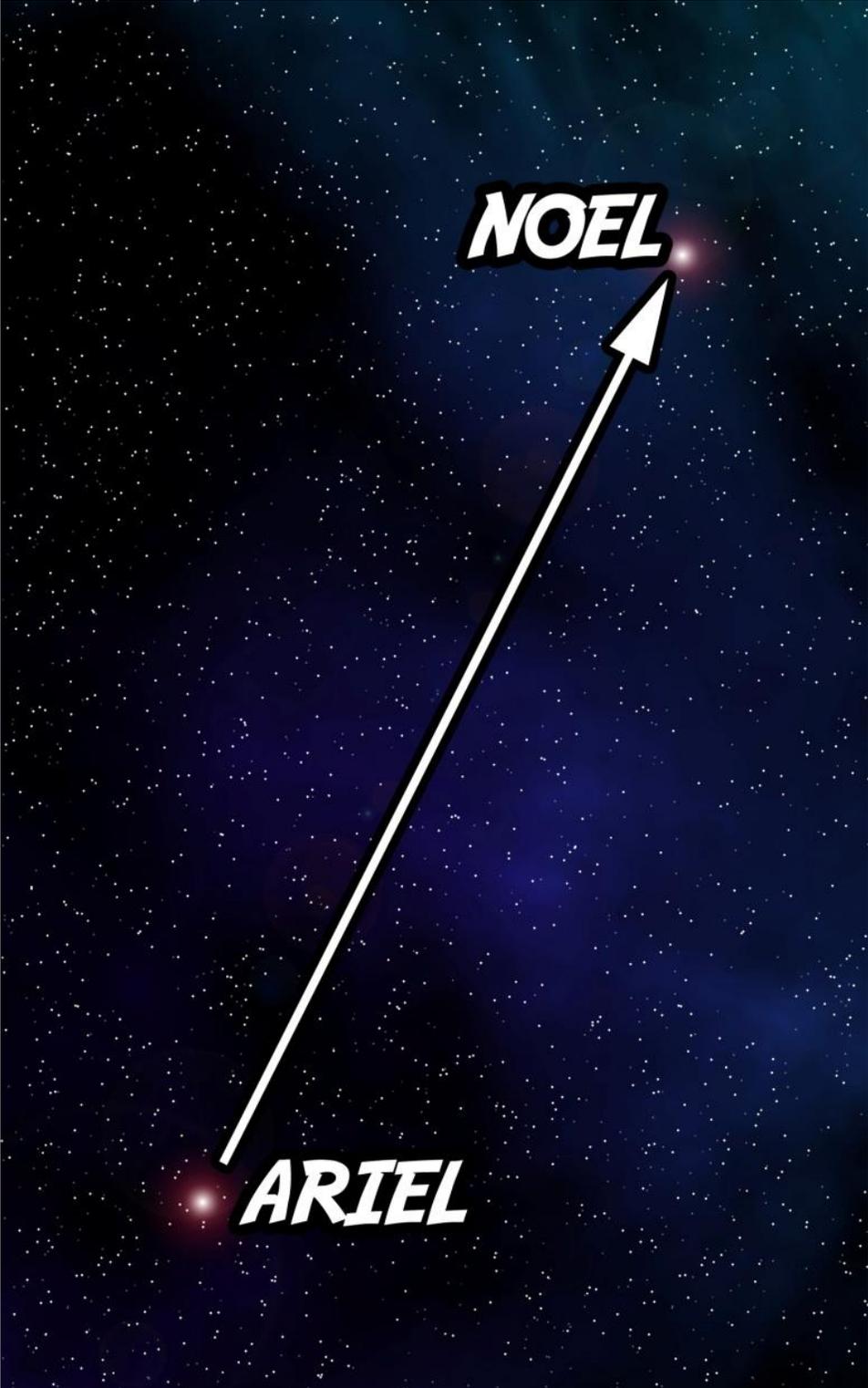
“Electros,” Nikos said. “And a team.”

Rezia thought for only a moment. Then she stepped behind a large plant and said, “You shall have it. But you shall go with one of my own champions.”

“I already have someone I trust as a lieutenant,” Nikos said.

“You will want this one as your lieutenant,” Rezia said, disappearing behind her greenery.

Nikos searched for Rezia, where she had gone. Then he saw what she was speaking of, and his eyes grew wide.



Chapter Five

The Badlands

Lancaster and Mika were both leaning far over the control panel peering down at the scenery below that was growing larger as they approached. The hotel/casino where they were landing sat between woods on one side where Brodin's organization once gathered primosap, and a cliff on the other, which dropped into the chasm of badlands that stretched out over the horizon. Though a wasteland, dots of quartz outcroppings and other variegated stone glimmered across the sharp ripples of the rocky ocean. This view made the Bollermo an enticing location to stay for the affluent who had Electros to gamble away, despite the common knowledge that it was run by the underworld.

Though the planet was owned by Bitterpub Corporation, the Laui Syndicate controlled the entertainment centers that made the most amount of money. Their interstellar presence and covert operations made them powerful enough to dictate their own terms. And they paid the right people off handsomely enough to be left alone.

The glow of the lights from the windows were growing dominant over the waning light of the primary sun. Twilight faded over the sky, though it was not going entirely dark. The Noel system's second sun hung in the sky, distant, but still commanding among the stars, along with three moons that reflected enough light to generate multiple shadows.

Landing lights flickered to life, guiding Little Jack onto the platform. "Sit down," he said annoyed at his two passengers still dangling over his controls.

They did as commanded, and before they had strapped themselves in, the ship landed with a thud, and they bounced uncomfortably in their seats. Mika eyed Little Jack with an expression that said she knew he had done that on purpose; and he eyed her back with an expression that said yes, he had.

The Bollermo bore the cozen opulence of a palace with a muted tackiness within the gambling arenas. A pit of card tables surrounded by a restaurant and the check-in center covered the first floor. The second and third levels were opened up with a central atrium that held more games of chance for which the decor belied how little chance the players had of winning.

Mika stalled, staring at some of the ornamentation. Lancaster looked over a couple of the statues standing atop Formica platforms. The theme of the interior design was that of the reptilian Milak Shivar, and many of the ornamentations were clearly from their ruins. It was a veritable museum, but used in the most disrespectful of manners. Laid out among stereotypical depictions of early tribal cultures, the relics of this space-faring race were surrounded by vulgar adornments of ancient fantasy and folklore.

Little Jack rolled his eyes when he realized he wasn't being followed anymore, and he turned around to look at Lancaster and Mika. When each turned their eyes toward him, he motioned his head in the direction they had been going, and they abandoned their judgments and followed.

Little Jack was used to such venues. Most corporate establishments appropriated whatever profitable element they could from any and all cultures that would attract the eyes of the wealthiest customers. Underworlders did the same, but with less taste. These places were not made for those who cared about those ancient people who came before humans were even sparkles in the eyes of primates.

The threesome exited the elevator on the third floor and Little Jack led them toward a

balcony that overlooked the badlands. There they found a lone figure dressed in a long evening gown with luxurious, flowing hair that faded from sky blue to deep violet streaming down her exposed back like a lazy river. A gap in the right side of her gown revealed a rose, and her leg ran out of it like an angled marble pillar.

“High heels?” Little Jack asked.

“Makes me almost look courtly, doesn't it?” the woman asked.

“Going to be hard to do the job,” Little Jack said.

“Hi Jude,” Mika said once they were out of earshot of others.

Jude glanced past Mika to confirm that no one else could hear, then smiled her cocky grin of greeting and said to Little Jack, “Our job is going to be to keep eyes off these two.”

“We're looking for evidence down there,” Little Jack said.

“You mean those ruins we can easily see from here,” Jude said. “You see all the decor on your way in? They like taking whatever looks nice. If they vis folks poking around finding something that's valuable, they may just want you to work for them. And you don't say no to Laui.” Jude stopped a moment and looked into the eyes of Lancaster and Mika to emphasize what she was saying. “You *don't* say no to Laui.” Then she said to Little Jack, “The best way for us to help find whatever they're looking for is to distract whoever might want to watch them.”

Little Jack didn't argue. He just stared at her as she spoke, then said, “So we have all of those obsessed with nice shoes covered.”

“And good taste in clothing. You look great, Jude,” Lancaster said.

“Thank you!” she responded. “You clean up pretty well yourself.”

Jude wasn't lying. Lancaster rarely dressed up. He preferred the life out in the wild territory that hadn't been populated for millions of years dressed in whatever was most comfortable and could carry the tools he would most need to survive. Today, however, he knew that he would need to fit in with respectable society; or something trying to pass for that, so he had worn a suit with a sash-vest and a lightly rippled tie. More importantly, he wanted to look good for Mika. He had even studiously shaven every hair from his cheeks and chin.

Mika had done the same. Used to parties that strove to this level of excess when she was fundraising, Mika had a wardrobe of clothes appropriate for such a location. However, she wanted to be wearing something that would be functional and flexible in case they went out into the badlands sooner rather than later, so she wore a practical suit with pleated slacks and polished shoes. Now seeing Jude so smoothly poured into a form fitting dress, a competitive part of Mika wished she had chosen something less pragmatic.

Little Jack, meanwhile, had dressed as he always had; pressed clothes, impeccable taste, mostly blacks with occasional glimpses of whites.

Everyone gathered at the railing and looked over at the badlands and the ruins within as they schemed. Twilight had set in, and the sky was flushed fuchsia sparkled with white dots, three full moons, and a small, distant sun.

The multiple angles of light illuminated most sides of every butte, though fog had curled up inside the deeper chasms where water settled, and obscured what was beneath. Chunks of the ruins stuck out the sides like sharp crags scattered haphazardly at the foot of the cliff. They increasingly formed together the further away they got until entire wall sections and archways could be distinguished. By the time they reached a half kilometer away, intact roof sections remained, and nearly full buildings could be discerned. The view was part of the attraction of the hotel.

Lancaster and Mika confirmed that they were indeed Milak Shivar; more specifically, their

underwater structures. Lancaster pulled a foldable Vizros from his inside jacket pocket and peered through it to get a better look. He zoomed in on points of interest and made a sound of recognition. Mika leaned into him and said, "Let me see."

Holding the telescopic device steadily on their target, Lancaster handed the Vizros carefully to her. "I think that's an Ekolad Hearth."

"If it is, there should be a transference station nearby," she said, scanning around the structure in question. She settled on part of a wall next to a tall mound. "And chances be that's it."

"I've never seen one of those above the surface of an ocean," Lancaster said.

"I've never seen them outside of a hologram."

"That's what you miss by not going out in the field."

"How did the Stellar Arcanum overlook this site?" Mika asked.

"Lau isn't fond of outsiders gandering over their territory," Jude said. "Not even scientists. It's spotty that any organization you're associated with knows better. Individuals who try it are known to go missing."

"Like your husband," Little Jack said.

"But he's been spotted since then," Mika said. "And he wasn't in a cell. Wherever he went, it was from a clue down there."

Jude and Little Jack eyed each other skeptically. Then Little Jack turned his face up toward the building, laying the back of his head on the railing. He switched the settings on his glasses to analyze the structure and its materials; then switched to electro-settings to get a sense of where monitoring equipment and other command-control elements might be.

Jude leaned over the railing near his ear, a smile across the side of her lips facing him. This was where the fun would begin. "Blick over the landing platform on 18."

"Not a VIP suite?" Little Jack asked.

Jude shook her head slowly as though swaying it to amusing music. She bit her lip as though holding in a secret, then let her purple-blue hair fall in front of the lower half of her face as though dropping a veil and whispered, "Drone port."

"That's inconvenient," Little Jack said.

"For someone who doesn't sav how to hack into remotes," Jude said at the edge of a laugh.

Lancaster had taken the Vizros back from Mika. She was making too many excited sounds for him to stand idly by. "Where was the Soklis Biosphere?"

Mika closed her right eye and placed her left cheek against Lancaster's so she could see his same eyeline, then unfolded her arm straight forward to point at the building.

Lancaster followed it; but he paused before reaching the finger, lingering on a ring of walls holding parts of a roof whose sharp ends stabbed toward the sky.

"You find it?" Mika asked.

"No, I'm vising an Asmenius Basilica."

"Are you abso?" she asked, yanking the Vizros away. "Where was it?"

Smiling, Lancaster said, "I saved the spot on three." Mika pulled her eyes away and looked at the small number pad on the side of the Vizros. She pressed three and looked inside again. Arrows pointed her to where Lancaster had been looking and provided the range to it. She gasped.

"If it is Asmenius it could mean the Shivar were continuing to practice Peluki through this period," Lancaster said.

"They might even have a Shivaran Kukori inside," Mika said.

"If the casino hasn't looted it."

“Probably isn't gaudy enough for them,” Mika grumbled. Lancaster chuckled. Mika peeked over to him. His look of confidence comforted her worry and annoyance of the syndicate. She pulled the Vizros to her face again. “I've got to find the Soklis Biosphere for you again... Wait!” She straightened. “There's a Steuric wall.”

Little Jack and Jude overheard them now. “We might need to distract Laui for a little longer than we think.”

“I had you come at night not just because it's a little darker, but security is more concerned with the casino. They'll be ranging inward. I got us a couple rooms; one near the control center, one near the drone hangar. Here.” Jude handed him a small, magnetic earring.

Little Jack looked around them briefly to make sure they weren't being watched, then took the earring and placed each part of it on either side of his earlobe. He immediately began hearing several of the security guards cracking jokes about some of their ugliest customers. “That can get annoying quick,” he said.

“You control it by contorting your face,” Jude told him.

Little Jack stared at her. “You did that part on purpose,” he said.

“Maybe,” she said, smirking broadly. “I'm finally getting an expression out of you.”

Little Jack contorted his face, lifting and lowering his jaw. The frequency altered, became clearer, then drifted further away. Some expressions made one guard louder; others focused on the second or the third guard. He found that clenching his teeth made him skip to an entirely different conversation. Jude giggled with delight, and he didn't give her the satisfaction of reacting. Finally he asked, “How do I turn the volume down?”

“That's easy for you,” Jude said. “Frown.”

Little Jack frowned, and the volume dropped to nearly unintelligible levels. “And to go up?” he asked. Jude smiled. “Why did I ask,” Little Jack groaned.

“Come on,” she coaxed.

“No,” he said.

“You're going to need to hear them,” she said. Little Jack looked right at her, and she could read his annoyance through his frosted white lenses. It only made her laugh.

But her laughter was cut short. She held her ear, listening to something.

“What is it?” Little Jack asked.

“It's on the headset,” she said.

Little Jack rolled his head indignantly and waited for her to tell him. She just turned away, urgently concentrating on what she could hear. Little Jack sighed. Then he smiled.

Jude turned around quickly enough to catch that rare expression Little Jack hid so well, and she caught a photograph through her cybernetic eye complete with a flash. His grin disappeared the moment he heard that the guards were talking about someone's large butt. “I hate you,” he said.

Mika had located the ruins of the building she had been trying to show Lancaster earlier, and had programmed it into the device. Lancaster now took it and peered at the ancient walls with bated breath. “Amazingly intact,” he said.

“Yes,” she replied. “Holograms from that will be invaluable to comprehending their mid-epoch aquatic engineering...”

“The practices, the artistic culture...” Lancaster interjected.

“Tool types. The confirmations alone will be priceless. Lancaster, this could be like Orlan of the Nadif system.”

“Yeah, before Ivar Corp came in and... There might be a forum nearby,” Lancaster added.

“Let me take a gander,” Mika said, grabbing the Vizros. Then she said almost to herself, “Teo, what did you lead us to?”

Lancaster went suddenly quiet, remembering their goal. “We should find what it was he was searching for,” he said. “Best way to cipher where he went.”

The Vizros lowered from Mika's eyes contemplatively. “Yeah,” she said, and she placed them back over her eyes and began looking. “He was searching for the Idol of Haniz. That would be in the doctrinal district.”

The two historical scientists continued to scour the badlands, looking for likely locations that Mika's husband might have gone, and discrete ways to approach it without being seen.

Little did they know, however, that they had already been spotted.

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