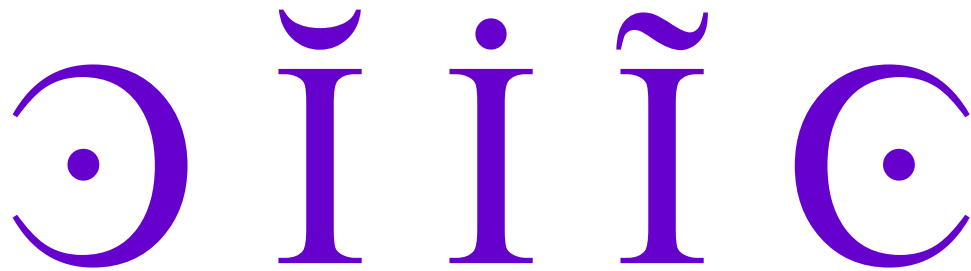


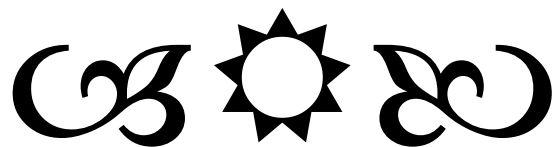


HUNTING  
ARTEMIS

INTREPID INDIGO  
BOOK ONE



BY DEREK IAN CANTWELL



# Hunting Artemis

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# **Hunting Artemis**

**Intrepid Indigo Book One**

Second Edition

By Derek Ian Cantwell

# Hunting Artemis

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Dedicated to my family and friends,  
From whom all my inspirations arise, and  
To whom all of my creations aspire.

# Prologue

“Time is Mind.”

~ Thoth

Isisa saw her parents standing in the kitchen of their house on Earth. She knew they were arguing immediately. Her mother had her back to the corner. Her arms were crossed and she was glaring at her father. Her father, meanwhile, was shrugging off the glare with a smile. He was making his point despite knowing it would fail against her mother’s conviction.

“When is this?” Isisa asked cautiously. She turned to see Thoth materialize next to her. He walked between her parents and her floating body. She knew that something was wrong with what she was watching, but she couldn’t figure out what. “Is this before I have left Earth? Is it before I fought the Hunter Seeker?”

“Yes.” Thoth said, turning to look at her mother. “She really did know, you know. She knew all of this would happen. Look at her eyes. So sad, knowing the pain she would cause you. So wise, knowing it was the right thing to do. You owe her your life. Your Order should be thankful for her sacrifice.”

Her mother stood unmoving. The quieter she got, the more you had to fear.

“This is the night they decide to send you away,” Thoth continued. “I was here this night. Your mother was the first to know that Earth was truly doomed. She was the first to know that even the Gods could not save Earth now.”

“This is but a child’s love, my dear!” Isisa’s father said with a big warm smile.

“No. This is a curse,” her mother spit.

Thoth dissolved into the air. Isisa was a child watching her parents fight. Worse still, they fought over her. They were fighting over the man in the red robe, the Prince of Love. Isisa had met the man when he walked through their village on his way to the mountaintop. He was a good man.

“Children think they know love,” her father said, “but once she grows out of this infatuation she will understand true love. It’s simple immaturity. She will grow out of this obsession.”

“No. Her mind is fixated,” her mother shook her head slowly, “Her thoughts refer only to him. Her plans always include him. She says she intends to follow in his footsteps? She is a lamb being lured into the Lion’s den!”

“She doesn’t mean those things she says. It is custom in their group to say such things. She is lovesick, no more. She merely wishes to be with her love, my dear.”

“I do not see love, Jester.” When her mother used her father’s real name, it meant she did not want him to joke anymore. “I see fear. She thinks him the perfect man. She fears that she is not as bright a star as he is. Fear always leads to subjection.”

“She has been trained to be mindful.”

“And even she has been easily seduced. The same symbols have worked for tyrants for eons. He calls himself the son of God, naming himself the only heir and his father the only one? It is too much.”

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“What do you hope to do, Bahlam? Make her love some other man more? She loves the *idea* of him. What is the matter in her hoping for a man free of sin? She is free to love how her heart desires, whether or not we agree with her love is another matter.”

“Look at me so that I know that you are listening. I am telling you that I know what I see.” Bahlam gritted her teeth as she spoke. Her fists shook beside her hips. “This is *not love*! It is *fear*, clothed in love. She is just as much divine as that man!”

“She knows that.”

“But he clouds her mind with his demands for attention! He alienates her from all the other Gods.” Isisa’s mother got louder and her temples bulged. “She is doomed to fall into a material existence governed by his ideas unless she is freed from his grasp. She is too young to be so completely controlled.”

“This,” Isisa’s father waved his arm and bended a knee, “coming from her controlling mother.” He stood up and stared his wife down. His eyes filled with unconditional love. “You don’t give Isisa enough credit. The girl is smart, and she will see through whatever smokescreen they use. She knows the Geometry, she has practiced the Alchemy. She knows better, so she will do better.”

“You take so little caution of mind, don’t you, my Alchemist?”

“That could be the reason why a certain Priestess fell for my charms,” seeing her father smile made Isisa’s heart warm. Even her mother was bound to smile back. “Life is so much more enjoyable when you worry about less. I seem to recall you chasing me when we were new. I remember putting up smoke screens of both matter and mind.”

“That was different.” Isisa’s mother let go of her guarded pose and let Jester put his arms around her. “We were equals. We both always knew that. We walk together.”

“True as the Gods Above.”

“Now to the issue at hand.” Her mother was in mission mode. “Isisa must be removed from him and debriefed in full. She must understand her error.”

“Her anger will make that almost impossible. If you are right, and she is in fear, then anger will manifest to ward off the change of mind. She will not come willingly, and she will resist all logic.”

“I know. She needs to be sent to the Colonies.”

“Excuse me? You cannot be serious! A magician seeks to increase her mobility, not lose all of it. The Colonies are owned by the Corporations. Anything could happen to her if she were discovered.”

“Do you mean that if she were discovered by the nations of Earth she would be better taken care of? The powerful are ruthless everywhere. The point is that Earth is dying. Soon, Earth will not be able to support human life. We have stayed because we have been too naive to admit that truth. We fell in love with Earth.”

“We spent our lives saving what nature has been left. I do not consider it wasted.”

“Nor do I, my love. But I don’t wish my daughter to suffer the same fate as us. The way forward is in the stars. If you wish to talk about the principle of mobility, the Colonies are growing and expanding by the day, whereas Earth is decaying and collapsing at twice the rate. It is a simple choice of survival.”

“Is she not more at risk in the colonies where we can have no contact or influence? She is so young.”

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“She is no mere initiate learning the Seven. She is a Priestess.” Her mother had no hint of doubt in her voice. “Don’t forget how young I was when I was sent forth into a burning world. Sometimes the Gods force our hand.”

“We must send the Tablets with her. They will help keep her safe.”

“They are her birthright. The Tablets will help challenge and sharpen her mind.”

“If she would only read them.” Jester laughed. “I can count without using any fingers how many times I’ve seen her look at them without being told.”

“She will have little choice now. We learn quickest by putting our knowledge to use.”

“Her mother gave her the genes of a warrior,” Jester said proudly.

“Her father gave her the skills of Alchemy.” Isisa’s mother smiled. “She will be more powerful than us both.”

“For certain,” he nodded, “Now get on with telling me what you’ve planned. Or should I ask: is she already gone? Do I even get to say goodbye?”

“Oh shut up, of course you do!”

“Good. I just know how quickly you move once you’ve made a decision.” Her father chuckled to himself. “I halfway expected you to tell me she was already aboard some liner set for Pollux Max itself!”

“Remember: we are equals. I had to talk with you first.”

“So what have you already done?” Jester relaxed noticeably.

“Everything. It’s taken care of,” She said. Jester gave her a smile and shook his head. “When she returns from her lessons we tell her everything and take her to the starport.”

“She’s can’t even stay the night?”

“The swiftest blade makes it to its mark. Time is not a luxury we have in this.”

The image of her parents blurred away and only Thoth remained.

“You see? None of this was on accident. This is destiny. The stars aligned so that you could survive this time, o Isisa. Do not abandon your family, do not abandon your Order, and do not abandon your Law.”



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## Held Captive

“It isn’t Mind over Matter,  
It is all Matter is Mind.”  
~ Ra, *I am the Light*

“One day, I will not be there to save you,” Isisa’s mother had said, “One day you’ll need to take a man’s life in order to save your own. When that day comes, face it as you would face the Gods Above, with dignity and honor.”

Isisa was bound at her wrists and ankles. She had been tightly tied to a metal chair. The room smelled of rotting rust. She estimated that she had been awake for two hours. Two of her captors were crew members of the ship that had brought them from Earth. The dirtier group of three men looked like out-of-work dock loaders. They had asked her many questions, but she remained completely silent. After a while, they stopped asking their questions. She sat in silence, meditating on the voice of her mother.

Then, the door sprang open and a man’s voice came rambling into the room.

“You’re lucky I was in the neighborhood, I wasn’t at the office today.” he wore expensive clothes. He stepped woefully and stank of drink. By his third step into the room he had locked eyes on Isisa. He stood square to her and looked her over. “Now, now, this must be the new one, eh?”

The starship crew members followed them into the room. One of the dock loaders seemed to be the speaker. He had been the one to escort the drunken businessmen into the room. The speaker answered with a victorious toothy smile.

“Aye, she’s got to be someone special. She won’t tell us who she is though. She ghost rode a transport from Earthspace. She had a private cabin with a bodyguard. That’s not the average celebrity entourage.”

“You get a name from the bodyguard?”

“No, he’s as silent as the void. Even takes a beating without a word.”

Isisa locked eyes with the expensive man. He eyed her curiously.

“Do you have her drugged?” he stepped closer to her, lowering his face to look more closely.

“No,” the dock loader shifted nervously. “Just sleep inducers. We didn’t want to damage her...”

He pulled on his designer suit jacket and watched Isisa’s eyes, “Never seen such poise. Does she talk at all?”

“Not since she left the ship,” the dock loader got defensive. “She does talk, though, we know it.”

Like a salesman he put his arms out and addressed her with a face of pity.

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“I know how afraid you must be with all of this strangeness,” He broke out a liar’s smile and said, “If you tell me who your parents are, I would like to help you get home to them.”

Isisa sat stoically. She looked into the man’s eyes apathetically.

*My parents would obliterate your feeble notion of power,* Isisa thought to herself.

“Isisa is the name of your bloodline.” She remembered her mother saying. “It is not a name you shall share with the vulgar.” Her mother had been strict about this rule, “You will be known by any name but that of your blood. The blood you have makes you a target. Trust only your family.”

“Just know that if you don’t tell me who your parents are,” the vulgar businessmen continued, “I can still turn a profit. The price of a girl of your age on the free market is greater than your weight in gold. There are so many lonely men across the station. So many flesh corporations in the colonies. So very much money to be made. But remember: I am giving you the option to go home.”

Isisa barely registered a response.

*Home is a new star at mankind’s edge,* Isisa thought, *I will never go home to Earth again.* The thought hadn’t really even worked into her brain until that moment. No matter where life took her, Earth was not an option. Earth was lost to the greed of men.

“Do you know if she is a virgin or not?” he gave up addressing Isisa altogether.

“No one knows for sure either way,” the dock loader responded.

“Good, we’ll say she is then.” He turned on his heel and made for the door. “I need to fetch proper transport for the girl. I will be back within the hour.”

“What do you want us to do with the bodyguard?” the dock loader followed like a stray puppy with a bad judge of character.

“Makes no difference to me. A bodyguard’s not worth anything, so I won’t be buying.” The businessmen shrugged, “If I were you, I would beat him within an inch of his life, just to see if you can get something about this girl. If he remains silent, make certain he stays silent.”

Before the two could leave, the dock loader grabbed one of the ship crew members. The dock loader threw him into the door frame of the room. It was clear in their interactions that he didn’t trust the other dock loaders. He leaned in and spoke quietly. Isisa, focused on his lips and heard him perfectly.

“Watch her while I speak with Bashar privately.”

*So the first name on my list is Bashar,* she thought triumphantly. And the first objective was to escape. Her hands were bound in a tight plastic band. Her legs were bound to the chair at her ankles. She knew how her father would get out. He was an expert Alchemist and Magician. He could put fire into the air with a snap of his finger. She thought she only had a small fraction of his skill, so she thought simpler. She moved her wrists and hands until she was able to lock her fingers together.

She closed her eyes and began to meditate. She instinctively reached below to Mother Earth, but it was no longer there. Instead, Isisa felt an emptiness of space. Earth had always been below her. She had always turned herself toward the Earth. She was lost in her own mind. She felt above and found the star Pollux. She quieted her mind. When she defeated her self she felt her mind melt into the star.

She climbed the chakras and opened up into the Infinite All. She turned her thought to the tips of her index fingers. There space began to bend. Atoms pulled into

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existence at the tips of her fingers. Her father had taught her mental transmutation. He had said it was the art of making nothing into something. Between her fingertips she held the element of iron. She used her thumbs to pinch it on both sides. Pulling her fingers apart, she fused a thin shiv of iron.

When she opened her eyes, Isisa felt the blade in her palm. It was about three inches long and the width of eight strands of hair. It felt as though it would snap at any moment, but Isisa just tried to reposition it in her hand. The guard who was supposed to be watching her was leaning against the door frame. He was watching something down the hall.

Isisa flicked her wrist and cut the restraints. She cut her legs free and quietly made her way to the door. She held her hands behind her back until the last second. Then she stood up behind the guard slowly. She grabbed his hair with one hand and drove the iron shiv directly into the man's larynx.

She pulled him back into the room as he died. She cursed him for not being armed. She would have liked a ranged weapon. Once in the doorway, she saw what he had been watching. The dock loaders were relentlessly beating Olympian. His head kept snapping from side to side blood flying off his face.

Isisa had grown up with Olympian as her tutor. He had taught her House responsibilities and legal matters. He was an important part of their House retinue, and that is why he was chosen to accompany her to Pollux Max. He had taught her mother before her. But he was more than just an advisor. He was a friend. And he was being ruthlessly beaten for sport. Isisa committed her fury to her fingers, where she knew she could exact it. She let the shiv sit square in her palm and balled both her hands into fists.

One of the three men was launching uppercuts into Olympian's jaw. The other two were standing back laughing. She could not attack any one without giving herself away to the others. She slowly crept up behind them. She focused her mental vibrations on a low tone that blended into the corners and shadows of the room.

When she stood up she grabbed one of the men. He held his head from his hair and chin. She twisted swiftly and snapped his neck. The other man shouted loudly, startled. He launched into a desperate flurry of swings toward her. Isisa backed up swing by swing reading her opponent's rhythm. Once she found it, she ducked under his next swing and stabbed her the shiv into his neck. She flicked it free, slashing his throat out and letting him fall to the floor with a thud.

The man who had been beating Olympian stood against the wall in paralyzed horror. "Who the fuck are you!?"

She crossed the distance quickly and dispatched him doubly so. Then she cut Olympian free. He was bloody and bruised, but once standing had the stance of a man who owned the station he was standing on. They nodded at one another. Neither were sure if the room was bugged or not. The front door burst open and the speaker walked in. The leader of the merry bunch strolled back inside like he was in heaven.

He walked in with a smile on his face. Then he saw the bodies from the hall. Olympian took two long steps and crossed the distance. With a kind of fury Isisa had never seen, Olympian grabbed the man by the neck and threw him up against the wall. He gritted his teeth and glared into his eyes.

"I am an Officer for the Three Kings Transit Authority, working on behalf of the Three Rivers Station Council. You have been the subject of a sting operation. The paid

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actress knew all along that I would break free. I dispatched your amateur posse and now here we are. You and me.”

“Please let me go!” the man screamed with a stolen breath.

The scene reminded Isisa of something her father had said. “It’s important to be in charge of the story. That’s why survivors are important.” She realized what Olympian was doing. He was still been one step ahead of her. She would’ve probably killed the last man, out of her mother’s instinct. But he was altering the playing field, using what they had been given to gain other advantages. That was her father’s talent.

“I am going to let you go right now, under two conditions. First, you don’t say a word about what happened here to anyone. If I find out you so much as told your grandchildren fifty years from now, I will find you and disembowel you. Second condition, if I ever need a contact inside the organization I can speak with you about that.”

“I don’t know anything about-” Olympian shook him by the neck like a doll.

“Let’s remember that your life is on the line here. Let’s remember that you should nod your head and say *yes sir*. That way you get to live. If you don’t agree to these terms, I’ll just have to kill you. I killed the rest of your crew, so one more isn’t a big deal.”

“OK! Please! Please! Just let me go!” The man kicked his legs from side to side.

“Happily.” Olympian used a pressure point to put the man into a deep sleep.

Without hesitation, Isisa and Olympian escaped through the side door and out into the street. They found a vantage point from down the street. They could see the housing unit they had been held captive in. They spoke together when they determined there were no ears nearby.

“Our things, Olympian. The Tablets. We need to get them back!”

“I know. We need to find shelter and begin setting up our new identities too. We might get picked up by local government or law enforcement, and that would simply not do. They seem to think that they can make migration illegal here.”

“You handle the House, I’ll handle the Tablets.” She would need to find the Tablets before anything else. She began to eye the wall of the warehouse where they stood. She found the best way to scale it with her eyes and began to stretch her legs and arms.

“Please don’t get caught on camera.” Olympian said with a smile, “Or better yet, just tell me that you won’t get into any social media! For the sake of the Gods, that garbage is the hardest to scrub off an identity.”

“I promise nothing.” she laughed, climbing to the roof of the warehouse.

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### The Rooftop

“Patience is a virtue. Never get angry, get even.”  
~ High Priestess Weeta, *Concords of Life*

Isisa waited at the top of an empty warehouse. It spanned the block across the street from where she and Olympian had been held captive. It was a sign of the economic times that a warehouse that large was not in use. On colony stations like Pollux Max, livable, workable space was limited. An empty warehouse meant that growth was slow. Judging from the pedestrians, the standard of living on the station was minimal.

From her youngest days she had been taught that technology and mind made anything possible. The people she saw had little access to either. She had been watching them for hours. They seemed restless, hurried, frustrated and stressed. Everyone was scurrying to their next destination. No one seemed to take notice of the world around them. The little technology available was designed to sell entertainment, not information. People seemed connected to one another only through their devices. Many seemed most concerned with money.

The people complained about how little they were paid, or how expensive something was. Those who had shown the greatest emotions were those talking about money. One man yelled profanities at someone driving down the street that owed him a debt. She saw a family celebrating a child’s scholarship. They celebrated the great fortune that they could afford to school their eldest child. The big red balloons that they bought for the occasion were tied to the front door of their house.

It almost seemed criminal by design. Her parents had said that knowledge was the first tool of success. What kinds of knowledge a person pursued didn’t matter so much. So long as it brought further harmony then it was Good knowledge. Knowledge of one thing informs the explorer about the whole thing. Discovery was the greatest gift of life. Knowledge was a thing to be cherished, not bought.

The street below was littered with garbage and debris. Broken down vehicles could be seen on almost every block. The housing units on the block were dingy and she suspected not up to code. She sent Olympian to find a safe house and she knew it would not be close by. The neighborhood was being systemically exploited. For Isisa and Olympian to successfully rise to power on the station, they needed to rise in the proper place. It was abundantly and tragically clear by her surroundings.

Other parts of the station would have aircars moving from skyscraper to skyscraper. But where she stood there were neither aircars nor skyscrapers. She was concerned about the air filtration systems. A thick orange smog hung about the tops of the buildings. With the proper atmospheric adjustments, it could certainly be removed. The Station Council had either deemed it not important enough to repair, or had decided to ignore the problem entirely.

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Across the street, the housing unit of her captors lay silent. She had kept one eye on it since Olympian had left, hoping that Bashar would return. Before she could kill him, she would need to get her things back. Her luggage and carry-on baggage had been prepared with great care. She was never to return to Earth, so she was forced to bring all of her family's most precious artifacts with her for safe keeping. As she sat on the rooftop, she knew that this was the greatest crisis of her life.

When she had left Earth, her parents had entrusted her with the sacred and powerful Emerald Tablets of Thoth. The Tablets were the foundation for all of her family's knowledge of Alchemy and Geometry. They were her family's most precious heirloom. They had been the object of many bloody stories from her mother's past. Rival families envied the Tablets more than anything else, and they were shrewd in their efforts to acquire them. One such rival family had killed everyone her mother had ever known in an attempt to steal the Tablets.

Her family legacy and her greatest of duties, the Tablets were still in her carry-on luggage. After their capture, Isisa had no way of knowing where their possessions had gone. None of the crew or dock loaders had mentioned it. Olympian hadn't heard anything either. If the Tablets were discovered, it would not take long for them to be fenced for a lifetime's worth of credits.

*The Tablets will not be discovered. I will retrieve the Tablets.* Isisa sat in meditation, waiting. *I will follow those who come here. They will lead me to the Tablets. I will guard them faithfully. I will pass the Tablets down to my heir in time.*

She heard the unmistakable rumble of an airvan. It descended onto the street and pulled up to the housing unit. The garage door opened and the airvan pulled in. Before the garage doors closed Isisa saw two men jump out. Neither looked like Bashar. She surmised that like many leaders, he had simply ordered someone else to do the labor. These must have been the movers, expecting to pick up a girl and bring her to the safe house where they would undoubtedly begin terror treatment. They were about to find a much different state of affairs inside.

Nothing moved. She continued to watch and wait. Another half hour passed. Eventually, a flashy aircar descended from the sky and parked on the street. The driver parked as if the street belonged to him. Out of it stepped a man who was tall and hawkish. It wasn't Bashar, but Isisa recognized that this man was most likely a lieutenant. He had the look of a man who was going to be furious if he discovered something he didn't want to find. He was on voice-com with someone when he got out of the aircar. It sounded like an argument. He hung up angrily when he approached the door of the house.

He was let in quickly. She wished she had her Crown so that she could hear what they were saying inside. *It is always better to have technology than to not have it*, she thought. She simply waited. Finally the man came out of the house with the man Olympian had left alive. The lieutenant pulled the survivor by the collar of his jacket. He dragged him from the door and shoved him roughly into the aircar. He was on a voice-com, and angry. As he walked around to the pilot's seat, Isisa was already in her own.

She flared the thruster and lifted off the roof of the warehouse. She did so with the urgency of a government worker. She piloted the old airhauler that Olympian had hotwired for her. To anyone in the area, she looked like she was lazily carrying goods to and from the docks. The flashy aircar raced by her view and toward the next station section. She put the thrust to max and followed innocently.

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The aircar was clearly not adhering to the speed limit. Law enforcement seemed tied to the streets, so the air was a freeway. The aircar took the exit at the Pylon and headed dockward. She followed, at a distance that could be considered unrecognizable. She kept her lock on the aircar until it descended abruptly. She flew over and saw it in a parking lot between a collection of small businesses. The side of the mall nearest to the Pylon highway was stores of various kinds. Behind them were storage units where companies could store their goods between the docks and the streets.

She landed in the alley behind the building. It was a rundown three story building. It looked as though it was built during the pioneer period. She scaled the side of it and got to the roof quickly. From there she checked the windows on the third floor. The third floor seemed to be a storage rafter above the storeroom floor. She found a window that had been left open. She lowered herself to the windowsill and made her way inside quietly. The rafter was being used as an office. A bed and refrigerator sat in the far corner. A paper covered desk lay in chaos beside the stairwell.

She made her way toward the other side of the rafter. She heard voices from below. There was a small window looking out onto the floor where crates were stacked to the ceiling. She saw Bashar's lieutenant and the survivor down below speaking to two other men. They looked like they had been passively attending the store floor. They wore nametags.

"Where the hell is the stuff this idiot brought in? I want to see it now!" the lieutenant had a vein popping out of his forehead as he yelled. The two attendants snapped up and hurried over to a pile of familiar looking crates.

"Here it is, we haven't even looked at it yet."

"If I find out that anything is missing!" The lieutenant screamed.

"No! Mr. Mahesh, sir! We've had a lot of stuff come in today and— " *Mahesh*, Isisa thought, *another name for my list*.

"Shut the hells up and open the damn things!" The storeroom attendant was clearly not used to Mahesh's abrasive tone. He scrambled to the crate nervously.

"Sir, we didn't do anything with them, we brought them over here as soon as we docked." The survivor was stood off by himself. His voice was that of a broken man.

"Shut up!" Mahesh said angrily, "You're the idiot who fractured up here! You didn't think before you acted, and now you're hoping I will bail you out. Well, all I can say is shut your mouth. Maybe you'll get lucky and I forget to have you killed tomorrow."

The attendants opened the crate and stepped back with an audible gasp. It was the weapons crate. The array of tightly packed weapons systems looked like it was from a virtual reality movie. The blond attendant swore to himself quietly. The other attendant's eyes lit up with excitement.

Mahesh stepped up to the crate and shook his head.

"This isn't Section Police equipment. This is special ops." The dark haired attendant said excitedly. He stepped up to get a closer look. Mahesh shoved him back angrily. He grabbed one of Isisa's bags and roughly tore it open. Inside, he found a beauty set. He lifted it up in the air and turned it over. Isisa's heart stopped.

"What the hells is this? A secret agent needs a damn beauty set, eh?"

He tossed the beauty set to the ground in contempt. He kicked it across the floor. Mahesh shook his head angrily.

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“Pack it up again. I want it to stay right here, you understand me? It doesn’t move. No one knows it exists. They could have tracers in all those crates. If they show up you tell them you got nothing and you don’t let them inside. Have them call the office so we can ignore them properly.” Mahesh stopped and pointed a finger at both of the storeroom attendants. “If I find out any of you opened these up and touched anything in there, I will personally kill you and dump you into space.”

At that, he turned and left. The survivor seemed like he was surprised by being left behind. He didn’t raise a complaint though. After Mahesh had left the room, he turned to the attendants and scratched his head.

“Do you guys have any brainsalts?” the survivor looked around anxiously. “I really need some right now. Today’s the worst day ever.”

“I got some...” the dark haired attendant laughed, forgetting the guns a moment. He put his hands in his pockets and walked over to the survivor. “But only if you got the credits.”

“Come on man, I just got the shit kicked out of me today! He killed everybody... all of my friends! I really need some, man, I’ll owe you.”

“You already owe me.” The dealer shook his head resolutely, “You know how this works, its bad business for me to give you a freebie. I’m damn sure that if I give you some shit today, tomorrow morning there will be twenty junkies who just got their shit kicked in knocking on my door.”

“No, man, you don’t get it. It was insane. We picked up this girl and her bodyguard, right? I go outside to talk to Bashar about the price and when I get back inside, five guys are dead on the ground. Turns out the bodyguard wasn’t no bodyguard after all. He was an undercover agent sent from Earth to take down Bashar. The Station Council was behind the whole thing!”

“Bull shit, junkie. Bashar practically sits on the Council.” The dealer shook his head. “And one guy couldn’t kill five without a gun. He had to have weapons.”

“All their weapons were in those crates,” the survivor whined.

“Look junkie, just pay up or get out.” He threw up his hands in frustration. “I don’t have time for this crap! You got the creds or not?”

“I almost wish we could sell one of those things, man.” The blond haired attendant interrupted. He was still staring at the weapons crate. “Think about how much we could make off that.”

“Think about how quickly we’d be dead if Mahesh found out. No thank you.”

“How would he know? If we just take one or two things? How would he know?” He had his hand pressed against the crate. Isisa knew they were in danger of hurting themselves with her weapons. “He made it obvious didn’t pack these himself. And we don’t have a manifest, do we?”

“Just you saying those words makes me nervous, ok? You know what they say about Bashar, he could be listening right now. Shut up and let’s just get back to work. I really don’t want to be here any longer than I have to be.” The dark haired man looked at the survivor told him to hit the street.

The two attendants argued as they walked away. Soon their conversation turned to the latest Rocket League match. The survivor reluctantly left out the front door. With no eyes on her things, Isisa made her move. She snuck down the steps and onto the store floor. She made her way to her crates quietly, eyeing the attendants.



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She picked up her portable beauty station. It was mainly marketed for traveling politicians, but Isisa had adapted it for another purpose. She found the secret button and pressed it. The beauty set unfolded and revealed the Emerald Tablets of Thoth. The green light and warmth from the Tablets filled her with a sense of home. Glancing over the cryptic symbols, she heard the voice of Thoth.

“As Above, So Below.”

Comforted, she closed the beauty set and tucked it into her survival bag. She threw it over her shoulder, checking its contents. Everything she needed. She opened a locked crate and pulled three high explosive incendiary grenades out and placed them at the foot of the pile. She then threw Olympian’s survival bag over her other shoulder and began to make her way back upstairs.

When the warehouse exploded, the glass windows shattered into the streets. The flames quickly engulfed the entire building. The fire department arrived when it was already too late to save the men inside. A police officer arrived on the scene but merely to record witness accounts. She forwarded her current location to Olympian, and when Olympian found her, he cast a questioning glare at the smoking building.

“Loose ends,” she said simply. “Did you find a safe house?”

“I did. It will suit our needs nicely. I take it that you have already retrieved our things?” he raised an eyebrow across the street. “Perhaps that wasn’t so necessary?”

“I couldn’t have taken it all, and I certainly couldn’t have left any of it either. This way was the best way. Which reminds me, I have an ID.” She handed him a note, “I want you to deposit 1,000 credits into his bank account.”

“You’ve already made a friend I see?”

“I just need his bank account to make the story up for me.”

Looking up from his wrist computer, Olympian nodded. “Done.”

“Excellent, next, I need a lab. Find me a large 3D factory. Printers that are small enough to create gadgets but some that are big enough to create a small starship.” When Olympian nodded, she continued, “After that, I need you to buy me a hotel. Something near the docks, nothing too classy but make sure it is secure. Make sure it has a restaurant in house as well. Make certain we could buy the property a level below as well.”

“You’ve already got a plan, don’t you?”

“My best and greatest mentor always told me to plan whilst stepping.”

He smiled warmly and sighed. “Good. I always knew I was in good hands, I am a long way from home, and I am scared.” Isisa saw the curl of a smile on his face.

They laughed warmly for a moment. Isisa looked over and saw his face, bloody and cut, but still with a grin. It would take more than a couple thugs to worry Isisa and Olympian. When she began to unpack and equip her survival gear, Olympian took a step back, eyeing her curiously.

“We’re going to the safe house, are we not?”

“You are. In order to wash up and get to work on our list. I have more work today, but I will find the safe house from the coordinates you gave me. We will meet later tonight for dinner.” She thought a moment as she put on her boots. “Order something that only Pollux Max can offer, I imagine it will be toxic to our bodies, but I think we have deserved a treat.”

“And what work do you still have to do?”

“Loose ends.” She said, latching her cloak to her neck. “Always tie loose ends.”

# 3      ㊦ ㊧ ㊨ ㊩ ㊪

## The Alley

“It is better to have the prey caught before revealing yourself,  
One can remain unseen better than one can escape sight.”  
- Sarartem, self-proclaimed “Thrice-Great Huntress of Earth”

Isisa stood in the darkest corner of the alley. The docks were a few decks below. The neon lights above the bar door burned bright in the Alterday darkness. She had been watching the door for hours, knowing the survivor would show himself. She had seen him walk inside. She knew he had to be dealt with before a rival could be given the chance. At some point, she was sure to make one elite or another angry enough to dig deep. Suppose they dug deep enough and found the pathetic little dock worm that had seen her face. Naturally, they’d choke his life out until he spoke every word he knew about her.

*That would not do*, she thought to herself.

The open sign in the window abruptly went out. The bar began to pour its human contents out into the street. The bartender himself had to help more than a few to the curb. The last so helped was thrown violently off the curb. The bartender was slinging curses and insults at the pile of a man. When he went back inside and locked the door behind him, the pile looked up off the ground and Isisa knew it was the survivor.

Isisa rode the shadow of the alley until she stood near the street.

“Hey buddy,” she whispered to him, “you wanna do a line of brainsalts? I got some if you wanna.”

The man’s eyes lit up and he found the strength to get off the filthy street.

Isisa backed up into the alleyway. He drunkenly followed her into the shadow of the building. She pulled her dart gun from her cloak. She aimed and fired one poison tipped dart into his leg. The poison rendered the leg immobile immediately. He stumbled and fell head first into the pavement.

“What the hells?” his scream muffled by Isisa’s gloved hand. She held him silent while she switched the dials on her dart gun. She created a new poison for the next dart. He looked up at her intently, terrified and immobile. Her Crown was recording his facial structure and then projecting a hologram mirror image of his own face inside of Isisa’s hood. He had the look of a man who was seeing his own ghost.

When she was satisfied with her new poison, she spoke.

“I could cut you.” The survivor heard his own voice speaking the words to him. “I could leave you to bleed quietly and alone. But I won’t. Tell me what I need to know and you will be rewarded. You’re going to tell me about Bashar’s child trafficking. Where are his trap houses?”

The man shook his head violently, panicking.

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“No! What are you doing? Let me go!” his fear grew with every second, “I don’t know nothing! I’m not talking to any government agents! You know what they’d do to me?”

“Do you know what I am authorized to do to you if you don’t talk?” she stood upright and aimed her weapon at him.

“You government assholes killed my friends...” lowering his eyes to the ground, he then added, “I don’t care anymore. About anything.”

Isisa nodded. She pointed the dart gun at his other leg and fired. That leg began to twitch and spasm. He began to scream immediately. The dart had been tipped with a powerful pain inducer. She moved her arm and pointed the dart gun at his chest. Looking him in the eye, she brought his own face up to him.

“It’s either pain or truth. It’ll always be your choice.”

“Please, just, don’t shoot me again! I’ll tell you everything! I swear I’ll tell you! He, he’s got one in Section II, in one of the buildings near his casino, and the other is a house in Section IV. That’s all I know, I swear!”

“If I find out you withheld information, I can easily hunt you down in order to make an example of you. I like making examples of people. It’s almost a hobby. So before you finish speaking at any given time, think about everything you have to offer. Are you sure you don’t know about anything else that I would like to know?”

“I swear to you, no! I buy time with the girls, sure! But I have never known much about his business.” He cowered against the alley wall. “And I never worked with him before! I just called him when I got the girl because he was the only one I knew! He doesn’t talk about his business.”

“Then he is smarter than most. If you tell him about me I promise that you will live only long enough to properly regret it.” Isisa tossed a small grastic container to the survivor. He lifted it up trying to see it without a street light. “It is a gift, for your cooperation. The vender said that it was some of the best brainsalts. He said this batch was cooked in one of the Colonies without Earth laws. I always reward those who help me. I like for people to aid in my passage.”

With that, Isisa snapped her cloak into the survivor’s face. She was down the alley and around the corner before he even looked up from his flinch. She scaled the wall and pulled herself up to the rooftop. She followed the alley until she saw him walking down the street. She used her Crown to watch him walk into an all-Alterday diner. From the looks of the patrons, it was not the first time he had stumbled into the place intoxicated.

He found a table for himself and slumped down into the booth. A waitress came over, with a harassing face and theatrical arms. Isisa didn’t need to hear the words to feel the bite. After arguing with the survivor, the waitress reluctantly brought a cup of water. The cup, Isisa noted, was grastic instead of glass. Unique in that way amongst the cliental, it was clear that the drunken survivor had lost one too many glasses to the floor.

When the waitress left the survivor alone, he pulled out the container Isisa had given him. He poured its powdery contents onto the table and immediately snorted them. The waitress ran over and started slapping the man with her cleaning rag. She yelled so loud everyone stopped eating to watch. The man fell from the booth and began to convulse on the floor. Blood ran from his nose and eyes. The waitress backed up, her hands shaking, holding her rag to her mouth in horror.

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*His temptation had led to his own destruction*, Isisa thought. Satisfied, she deactivated her Crown. After buying the narcotic, Isisa had sprinkled some of her own toxins just to give it some zest. Apparently, they had been too deadly for the survivor. *Surely*, she thought, *he should have at least checked the contents before ingesting them.*

Following the alleys and darker paths, Isisa arrived at the skycar Olympian had stashed for her. Once in it, she disposed of her roaming gear and donned what she referred to sarcastically as “her uniform.” The style was elegant and trendy, considered the cultural “in” throughout the Colonies. She considered fashion to be uncomfortable and restrictive, and it had always put her in a bad mood.

“We could make it by being Middle Class just his once in my life.” She said as she arrived at the safe house for the first time. The safe house was simple, Spartan and off the beaten path. She loved it. “All I ask for is peace and quiet.”

“I will not even address that, Isisa. While you were out and about enjoying the sights of the station, I was doing all of the hard work. And I must say that it was far easier than I thought it would be.” Olympian slumped his hands to his sides, looking almost defeated. “It’s actually amazing how the Three Rivers Station government is set up. It’s almost inviting fraud and deception everywhere. I set up all of your accounts and you weren’t even present. In any case, we still have work to do.”

“Tonight you are hosting an open house,” he poured them both a glass of water, “to invite your new neighbors over for a glass of wine and a slice of cake.”

“And it’s all a lie,” Isisa whined, tugging at her shirt. She hoped it would become comfortable all of a sudden. “I don’t want to spend any time with those self-involved oligarchs. Every other one is trying to sell ma product or ideology.”

“It’s social norms. We have to do our part to fit into the collective.”

“I just don’t think we should waste our time.”

“When your survival is at stake, the activity is never a waste of time. This safe house is quiet and off the beaten path, but the mansion will not be. Your children will have eyes upon them for their entire lives. There will be many interests intersecting and competing with ours. We need to look wealthy, but impotent and benign.”

“I know.” Isisa sighed. “I thought you weren’t going to get into it.”

“You’re still young,” Olympian said, getting grumpy, “and young people require reminders of the important things in life.”

“You say that as though age is the landmark of wisdom.” Isisa smiled.

“In any case,” Olympian moved on with a disappointed sigh, “try not to make this more painful than it already is. Remember something for me; I deal with salesmen all day long. Grant me peace when I can have it.”

Giving in to his stoic face, Isisa left to get ready. She showered, loving the water. The water drew her thoughts down into the cosmos itself. It cleansed her Mind, and allowed her to think more clearly about her next step. Her welcome to Pollux Max had been less smooth than she would have liked. They had cleaned up well enough, but she had to be more careful. The choice was to blend or risk everything. There were few friends aboard the Station, and even those were not to be contacted unless expressly necessary. She needed to assemble a cadre of like-minds. People she could trust.

“Isisa, it’s time! The open house will begin soon!”

The people visiting her new home were certainly not to be trusted.

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“I think it will take too long to clean off all this blood,” Isisa said, trying to hide a smirk from her voice, “I’m sorry but I don’t think I will be able to make it!”

“The day I believe you would be *stupid* enough to come home in such an idiotic state is the day I hand you my sealed resignation.” Olympian seemed more annoyed than amused, “Now, this is work, this is life. You will lose everything over stupid antics. I will be in the aircar in five minutes. I leave in six.”

Isisa swallowed her smile. She finished her shower promptly. She knew better than to give Olympian anything more than a headache. Once, when she was younger, and dumber, she had given him heart burn over something silly. She had been forced to run around the block for three hours at top speed. He was stern in his pronouncements and firm in his execution.

Once she got into the aircar he returned to his comfortable state, all forgiven.

“Our nearest neighbors are actually largely from the same family. The three brothers are entrepreneurs, their father lives across the street at the lakeside mansion. The father comes from one of the first colonial families. But much of his family’s wealth has been lost and abused by bad bets in the Colonies.” Olympian piloted the aircar routinely. Briefing her without ever looking at a document. Many of the names flew by Isisa. “The only other neighbor in the circle is a scientist. He made a fortune or two using those smarts of his, but many people are convinced he stole most of the ideas.”

“Sounds like they’re all entrepreneurs to me.”

“Shut your mouth. This isn’t a game.” Olympian snapped, “You know what’s at stake here. Speak as though you are being recorded. Burn bridges and there won’t be one person standing next to you when the light shines. Remember where we are, Isisa.” Olympian threw his arm across the dash. “This is Pollux Max. This is the height of entrepreneurial power. Some people use this system for good, others, for ill. You know how ugly people can be. But don’t for a second categorize them. Judge a person by their life, not yours. If you must vent your dark thoughts, do so in a productive way.”

Isisa heard many of the same things echoed in her mind. The voices of her parents almost brought them into the room for a moment. She had forgotten how little they knew her. Her heart had ached every day on Earth. She was witness to the greatest exploitation of the human potential ever orchestrated. She had traced the systems back. She had seen Earth for what it was: a list of conquerors standing on unmarked graves.

She had learned so much from the man in the red robe. He had freed her to understand the exploitation of her fellow sheep. She had come to realize how her family had been a part of it. The man in the red robe spoke from his heart. She respected him because he walked the path he preached. He was the Son of God, a Prince of Peace.

Her parents couldn’t understand his Love. They disapproved of Isisa spending any time with him at all. Her mother called him a hoax, her father said he was a full of antics. They thought of Him as some form of control, but she had seen Him as a symbol of hope. If only everyone would learn to love like He loved, totally and unconditionally the universe could be different. It was clear that no one with the power of choice, not even her parents, had liked the cut of that red cloth.

As the party began, Isisa stood by the door, greeting guests as they came in. She smiled her best fake smile, she shook hands lightly and softly. She laughed at jokes she didn’t understand and brought up topics she didn’t know anything about. Most of the

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guests had left her presence laughing and smiling. Her words were warm, but her thoughts were cold.

Olympian leaned over and whispered into her ear, "Suppose someone in this room could read auras like your mother could? What do you suppose they'd see in yours?"

Isisa focused herself again. She tried to draw her power from Below. From Earth. Again, Earth wasn't there. Under her feet was infinite space. Her shoulders were strained. Her feet hurt. But she took a deep breath and centered her mind on the star of Pollux.

In her meditated mind she stood atop her mental temple. She looked up and saw Pollux burning brightly. She spoke words that boomed over the horizon of her mind.

*Al-Ras al-Tau'am al-Mu'akhar, please grant me your Light, o great Punartham.*

Standing in the walkway of her new mansion, Isisa could feel the warmth of the orange star from above. The warmth sank into her muscles. Light sparked along her spine like a bolt of static. She took another long breath, drawing a simple smile. She could feel her Mind quiet and her auras shed their heat. For the rest of the evening, she was as calm and powerful as she had been in the alley.

# 4      ㊦ ㊧ ㊨ ㊩ ㊪

## Haunted Houses

“There are terrors in this universe that can only be imagined by the terrorized.  
The darkest parts of the universe exist only within the minds of evil men.”  
- Unknown

Isisa had always liked hunting. She remembered one hunting when she was but ten years old. Hunting in a thick, humid jungle with her mother. Tracking was her mother’s greatest passion. Whenever her mother drew back on a bow, her eyes filled with twinkling thrill. The memory made her smile. She would never see her parents again. Her stomach dropped into a knot and her eyes grew heavy. She looked out the window to see the towering gray skyscrapers of Cedar City.

She and Olympian were stuck in air traffic over the station capitol. The highway was congested in every direction. Countless aircars packed the sky lanes, hovering like a cloud over the city. The station curved upward in the distance and she could see fields of grass and gardens. She wished that she could leave the city and see the fields, or visit the forests. A forest in space must not be like one on Earth, and she had to see it. A forest without the sun seemed wrong. Light came from enormous panels at the roof of the section. Would artificial light grow an artificial tree?

Her parents would test her when she was younger. She had to survive the night in the rain-soaked woods. She had been woken up in the middle of the night and sent to track a fleeing assassin. When she reached the age of 18 her mother had even hired assassins who would only receive payment upon her death. “You don’t find solutions by running from the problems,” her mother would say.

It had always been a thrill for her to take a break from the ordinary life of books and classes. Even the worst of tests would end in the arms of her father. He would always be the first to hug her after she had been gone. Her mother’s calculating eye twinkled when she would congratulate Isisa for surviving. But her escape from her captors on Pollux Max was not met with such a homecoming. She had neither hug nor prideful eye. She was met with an empty mansion and a cold bed.

“Perhaps they could come here one day,” Isisa said, cursing herself instantly.

Olympian continued to pilot in silence.

“I know that they can’t,” she continued, not letting him tell her. “I know that they wouldn’t. I just wish that could happen. I would feel... safer.”

“Safety is relative. No one with a free mind is ever safe from harm. Everyone is out to control you or destroy you, Isisa. You are safer away from your mother because of her enemies.” He looked at her sternly, “Ka Set, in particular, would do everything in his power to kill you and steal your heirlooms. If your mother came here,” he shook his head solemnly, “he would stop at nothing to burn the whole station. We are safe while she distracts him.”

Isisa submitted to his logic, knowing she must. But her heart continued to ache.

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When they finally escaped traffic they inspected the first of their target locations. Leaving the Cedar City behind, they investigated several dock properties that Bashar owned and operated. They landed the aircar and launched Sun Disk Drones. The Sun Disks were golden sensor drones the size of Isisa's outstretched hand. She programmed the disks to fly around the building and provide an acoustical, visual and thermal sensor sweep.

As the Sun Disks flew away on their recon mission, Isisa opened up the dashboard computer. The holographic projector immediately began showing a three-layered 3D representation of the dockside warehouse. Two ships were moored to the receiving dock below. The warehouse was well-maintained, but on the second floor there were several sections that seemed crowded. Voices of pain and torment came ringing through the speakers.

"Please!" the first voice screamed, "Let me out! I've done everything!"

"Stop it!" a second voice screamed louder, "No! Stop!!"

"Get off of me you piece of shit!"

"Help me!! Please someone help me!!"

The voices began to drown each other out. The audio feed became a spiritual cacophony from all hells of Earth. They were screams of terror. Cries for mercy. Girls no older than twelve begging for death. They were being beaten. They were being raped. The world was burning before Isisa's eyes. She felt her breath change. Her nostrils flared and her chest heaved.

"We need to save them," Olympian said gravely. It was not like him to advise such action. Isisa heard his heart chakra shine through his normally cold logical framework. "The Gods Above would know our sin if we did nothing."

Isisa switched off the audio. She took a breath. The Sun Disk sensor data began to paint a hologram of the building and its occupants. Hundreds of people were under lock and key. Most of them were children. The guards were brutal and sadistic. The office was detached from the main warehouse, clean and orderly. The ships below were ready to be loaded with the merchandise. Although her Sun Disks couldn't see inside their hulls, Isisa was sure the ships were outfitted for human transportation.

*The names of those ships will need to be added to the list,* she told herself as she set a reminder.

"You're right, of course." Isisa said, finding the next location on her list. She deactivated the projector and input the new destination. "We have a choice to save some or all. If Bashar's operation is as large as we suspect, he will have many more houses like this one. If we attack any one alone, we will lose all the others. We must attack them all at once. I choose to save them all."

They descended into the streets once again when they neared the next target. It was a small clinic that Bashar owned. Once they had landed, Isisa let the Sun Disks fly again and kept her eyes locked onto the projection. The first audio came in almost immediately.

"What's this?" A man's voice yelled angrily.

"Nobody gave me nothin' sir," the voice of a young boy replied.

"Listen to me you little bag of shit, if you come back to me one more time without credits in your dirty little hands, I swear to the Zensunni Saints that I will break every single finger you've got."



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The next room's audio was worse. The scream of agony made Isisa's heart sink to the floor. When the visual data layer pinpointed the scream, she realized it was the sound of a child getting their forearm chopped off. These men were abducting children from neighborhoods all over the Station. Then they were mutilating and making them beg for credits in the streets and temples.

The swelling rage and anguish within Isisa felt like fiery acid in her heart. She had never even suspected that human beings could be so cruel. She felt herself staring too intently on the projection. She knew that the only thing she wanted to do was race toward that building. She would free the children, kill the men, and burn the building to the docks. The thought swelled and swirled in her mind like a tornado above a wild fire.

Then she saw the list in her hand. Hundreds of properties linked to Bashar.

She leaned over to shut off the audio again. She saw a party of men collecting in the loading bay near a waiting airvan. There was one man speaking to all the rest. She targeted the audio sensors to that room then waited.

"Alright today we got some fresh fish to tag and bag. No more bullshit, guys, I'm serious. We have to get this done quickly and quietly. Mahesh is getting so pissy about security these days it's not even funny. Screw this up, and I promise to deliver you to Mahesh myself. No one wants that. Now come on, we've got fish to catch."

Isisa locked eyes with Olympian. "Follow them."

The group piled into the airvan and took off. The neighborhoods the airvan flew into were poor and desolate. Dealers stood brashly in the street. Beggars argued over every corner. Groups of children played unattended in the alleys. The airvan slowed to a crawl. Isisa began jamming all transmissions from the area.

The airvan pulled up to two young girls walking down the sidewalk alone. Six men jumped out and ran toward the girls. The girls screamed but had no where to run. The men lifted them off the ground and turned around. Isisa stood defiantly in front of the airvan. The driver was slumped against the controls.

"Drop them now," Isisa said through her Crown Mask. The face she wore within her cowl was the face of the man who had spoken to the group before. The men took a step back, but did not release the girls.

"Fuck you!" the man whose face she wore yelled.

Three of them reached for guns. All three dropped as beams of white hot light scorched their faces. Their faces melted in an instant. They screamed from the ground, writhing in pain. The Sun Disks were now in a defensive orbit around her, armed with their advanced targeting systems and rayguns. The other three men looked up at the Sun Disks with newfound fear.

Seeing the charred faces of their comrades they let the girls go.

"Go home." Isisa told the girls firmly. "Stay safe."

They ran away at top speed, a Sun Disk parted from the pack to escort them.

"Now," Isisa said with a smile on the talker's face, "we can have a conversation."

"What do you want from us?" he yelled, but did not come out from behind his two thugs. He was already thinking about abandoning them. He was ready to bargain for his own life, but he didn't know that it could no longer be saved.

"I want you to feel guilt." Isisa fired two darts into the two other men. The toxin that was delivered into their necks would guarantee a slow painful death. As they fell to

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the ground, the talker took off. He could only take two steps before the Sun Disks burnt his legs to the bone.

“I will end your pain,” Isisa said, walking toward him. “All you need to do is call Mahesh right now, and tell him what happened today.”

When he did, Olympian traced the call. When he was finished, she ended his pain with a dart. She decided not to kill him this one outright. If he didn’t die of his wounds Mahesh would have him killed. In either case he would be haunted by his own face for the rest of his short life.

Isisa left the horrific scene with intent. She could feel the hairs on her neck standing up. The hunt had begun and her heart skipped a beat. Isisa guided her aircar to a very wealthy neighborhood. The sidewalks were filled with university age hikers and artisans. Coffee shop patios floated arguments and laughter into the street.

Mahesh was Bashar’s second hand man, his most trusted lieutenant. While Bashar drank at parties and lay with highborn women, Mahesh ruled the empire from the station streets. It was Mahesh that was in charge of the child trafficking operations on the station, and it was clear that he hurt people who didn’t get him his money.

Isisa stood in the front doorway of Mahesh’s private safe house. He was drinking by himself, standing in the door to a room off the kitchen. Looking over his shoulder, Isisa could see blood stains on the walls. She saw a girl hanging by chains on the wall, bloody and unconscious. Mahesh drank from the bottle, his hands covered in blood.

Isisa delivered a kick to the back of his head with the heel of her boot. He fell into the bloodied room. He stumbled against the wall but stood up quickly, turning to see her. She stood in the door frame, wearing his face.

“Who the hells d’you think you are?!” he slurred angrily.

“I’m someone in the position to kill you,” Isisa fired a poison dart into the wall next to Mahesh’s face, “but I have made the decision not to.”

He didn’t flinch. He stared at the dart for a few moments before returning his gaze to her. Embarrassment and fury burned in his eyes. He stood motionless but attentive. Isisa knew that he was still a dangerous man. He knew she had cornered him. That was exactly the environment she wanted his brain to be functioning in.

“I am not here to kill you. In fact, I am here to offer you a deal. Kill Bashar and I will let you live.”

“Why do you want Bashar out of the way?”

“It’s the job,” Isisa shrugged. “Orders are orders. He upset the balance.”

“Who sent you?”

“For a man who is so confident of their position and power,” she mocked, “you sure do ask a lot of questions that you should already know the answers to.”

“You’re not from the Council. That’s a bullshit smokescreen.” He snapped back, hatred burning in his eyes. “You have been hired by someone. Tell me who, and I might help you.”

“Might?” Isisa laughed with Mahesh’s face, “This isn’t a negotiation. You will live today, yes. If you kill Bashar then you can keep living. If not,” she shrugged again, “I can always find you.”

“How did you get in here?”

“My source is impeccable.”

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He was silent. She knew his mind raced through the faces of everyone who knew about his safe house and everyone who had access to it. Isisa's Crown sensors detected heightened stress hormones and increased heart rate. He was now suspicious of all of them. He was already planning on how he was going to test them.

"If I kill Bashar and Curzon," he said cautiously and quietly, "you let me walk away?"

"Just Bashar," Isisa said with a shake of her head, "Not Curzon."

"Why not Curzon?" He barked and Isisa smiled to herself. His biometrics betrayed his growing fury. He had found his own answer for the question.

"Because that was not the deal. You kill Bashar, and you leave Curzon alive. Otherwise, you will die one afternoon in the near future wishing you had done as I ordered."

At that, Isisa tossed a sonic disruptor grenade onto the floor and made a swift exit. When she had regrouped with Olympian, he looked at her curiously.

"He didn't sound like he was going to actually kill Bashar, what's your angle?"

"I didn't need him to agree to kill Bashar, I just needed him to become suspicious of Curzon. It will make it easier for me to drive a wedge between them." Isisa took off her cloak and threw on more popular clothing. "From what I have already heard, they don't get along as it is, and if I can push that relationship into open conflict, I will."

"War in the house of my enemy is worth more than 10,000 spears," Olympian smiled, remembering the quote.

"We still have other houses to find. We don't initiate the next phase until we've identified them all. I want every single one tapped to the Pylons. I want to know everything that happens in them all." Her gut wrenched, but she continued, "But I need to get to Curzon, and quickly. He and Mahesh must not bury any hatchets."

"What do you intend to do in order to get to Curzon, then?"

Isisa smiled. "I'll tell you all about it afterwards, I promise."

"Am I not accompanying you?"

"No, we need to find all of the safe houses before we make our move, so that's priority number one, and I want you on it. I will take care of Curzon then return to the search. When we are confident we have them all, we make our move. I want the Disks to pool headcounts together so we have a running total. We'll need that number soon."

"Where are you going?"

"To observe some politicking." Isisa smiled again and let the engine roar. "I'm something of a bird watcher, except that the birds I watch are all birds of prey."

# 5      ๓İİİ๔

## **Criminal Politicking**

“The system of law we have on Pollux Max is the best anywhere.”  
- Jon Hedges, Lawyer for Saturn Interstellar Systems

Isisa spent the morning waiting outside an enormous mansion. It was the home of Bashar’s most trusted lieutenant. The mansion was built onto an artificial bluff overlooking Cedar City in Section One. The Station Capitol buildings stood tall in the distance, sandstone monuments bright in the morning light. Sitting in the landing pad was a one-of-a-kind Earth-built race aircar. The real leather interior alone probably cost more than the entire property. All of it bought with money made selling children into slavery.

On the hood of the car sat a small Dragonfly of Horus. It flicked its wings in robotic anticipation. Isisa was down the street in an aircar of her own. She watched through the cameras of the Dragonfly. It was a nanorobotic drone her mother had created for reconnaissance and assassination. Isisa had brought seven of the best designs with her. They were among the most valuable tools of her inheritance.

The best recon Dragonfly sat on Curzon’s aircar hood. It waited until he walked from his door to the aircar to take flight. It landed neatly and lightly on the back of his suit jacket. It quickly found a place to hide and latched on tight. It was only a matter of waiting for Curzon to go about his day.

Curzon was the politician, the businessman, and the public relations figurehead for Bashar’s criminal enterprises. Curzon had connections with almost every sitting member of the Station Council. He was Bashar’s top accountant and broker, handling the estate worth billions of credits. It was important to find out as much about the organization as possible. It would be far easier to discover the areas of greatest weakness.

He activated the autopilot to take him to the Cedar City Coliseum. The Dragonfly picked up Curzon’s 3Eye bandwidth after a moment. 3Eye was a commercial retinal projection system, feeding the web directly into the eye. Curzon was reading stock quotes and market trends.

The Coliseum he flew toward had been built with Earth marble. It was an enormous complex, even by Earth standards. The top of the structure almost touched the top of the Station Sector. Landing at the VIP landing pad, he stepped out of the aircar to flashing lights and smiling stadium managers. He waited with a smile from ear to ear as his aircar lifted off behind him to park itself. Walking down the carpet, he passed extended hands, and ignored the smiles entirely. He continued to download stock information into his 3Eye. By the time they realized he was not interested in shaking hands he was already in the elevator.

He entered a suite that overlooked centerfield. He took off his jacket, and the Dragonfly landed on the ceiling. There was already a man in the room. Isisa ran her facial recognition software and waited for the database to return a match. As she waited, she

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intently observed the non-verbals. The other man stood up when Curzon entered, did a slight bow and greeted him warmly.

“You got here just in time, it’s almost blastoff!” the man’s words slurred his words. He was clearly excited. “I love watching the Knights stomp the Pawns! What a way to start the new season!”

When the facial recognition came back, Isisa learned that the man was Section Two Police Chief Ajaka Bahadur. He had been born in Section One. The Knights were one of the oldest Rocket Cube teams on the station. They had been founded in Section One shortly after the station began spinning. Ajaka’s social media indicated that he had been a fan almost his entire life.

“Aren’t the Red Pawns supposed to be your Section’s team, Ajaka?”

“My team is the White Knights. The Pawns are worthless.” Spit came out with the words. “They haven’t had a winning season in forever. Only idiots root for them.”

The cannons fired on the field to signal another Knights score. Fight music began to blare throughout the stadium. The Cube was returned to the center by a field robot. The jockeys mounted their rockets within each of their respective goal zones. Bahadur sat on the edge of his seat with a demented grin painted on his face. The Dragonfly even picked up an increased heart rate.

Curzon continued to download market updates. He barely took note of the match. The jockeys roared their rockets to life to signal blastoff. A second later both teams raced from their goal lines toward the Cube in the center of the field. The two teams collided in the center. Rockets and jockeys were sent flying in all directions. Out of the cloud of chaos, a White Knight emerged. He quickly flew into Pawn territory. He scored by sending the Cube through the Circle.

Bahadur jumped up in excitement, almost spilling his drink. It was clear over the next several minutes that the Police Chief’s favorite team was utterly routing the team of the Section he was sworn to serve. Isisa could tell that Curzon took no interest in the game whatsoever. His 3Eye was downloading stock information at a rate that was almost dangerous.

“You see?” Bahadur gestured to the field, “This is why I love the Knights: they win!”

“They cannot win forever. You have to have an option.”

“No team on Pollux Max has more trophies than the Knights, they are an undisputed dynasty. No team has a chance to compete with them now! The biggest trouble is that once you’ve tasted victory all you want is more. They won the trophy two years ago, but it’s not enough. They will get more. There is never enough victory to be had.”

“That I agree with. For instance, there has been some serious issues in Section Four regarding the Russian gangs there. In particular the goons of Tahtia Tekla’s pack have been harassing my businesses. They think they can extort my businesses I won’t stand for it.”

“What do you want me to do about it? You think the Police Department is your personal security guards?”

“I want you to exercise some of your recently demonstrated skills in criminal justice, Chief. As I recall, that title seemed to be on another man’s head before yours. It would be such a pity if your head rolled the way his did. The title can’t take much more

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of that sort of abuse, and I am hoping that we can do things with more class from now on. You are well aware that I have always paid well, so I should hear no complaint. The desk that you sit at every morning is a particularly valuable gift, and I should hear nothing but gratitude.”

“I want a woman.” Fury filled the Police Chief’s intoxicated eyes.

“You may have many women.”

“No. Not one of your whores!” Bahadur shook his head and looked Curzon square in the eye. “I only want one woman: Ekaterina.”

“Then you shall buy her a ring and reap the tax benefits.” Curzon smiled weakly.

“Her father won’t let me marry her! She loves me but he won’t let her out. Her parents are traditional Zensunni. Her father is a priest in Section Five. They won’t let her to marry outside of the religion.”

“Such a sad story, but my business isn’t picking up well-to-do daughters.”

“And my business isn’t attacking one gang to save another. Get me the girl and you can keep your credits.”

“Fine. I will put the call in myself.”

“Do it now.” Bahadur spoke in a tone of finality.

“You test my patience, Chief.” Curzon shut off his 3Eye.

“And you test my loyalty. I want to know she will be mine now.”

Curzon proceeded to reluctantly call Mahesh. It appeared a particularly painful chore, and he was quick to exchange the information between Bahadur and Mahesh. Once the call was complete, Bahadur emptied another bottle of beer. He excitedly returned to his scoreboard. Curzon got up and made for the door.

“You’re leaving already?” Bahadur yelled over his shoulder, “it’s not even half time! This game is gonna be such a blowout!”

“I congratulate you and your team on another victory,” he downloaded another stock quote. “I must go to a funeral for a very powerful man that I will miss very much.”

“Sorry for your loss.” Bahadur didn’t so much as turn from the field.

“The loss was expected, which is how every loss can be turned into a victory.”

Bahadur let silence reign as Curzon made for the door unceremoniously. It was clear that Curzon held contempt for the sport which Bahadur based much of his life around. Cube matches were not unknown for the rowdy behavior of their fans. For many their Cube team was religion. Curzon made it way quickly to the valet. His car was waiting for him. He let the aircar autopilot while he surveyed the latest stock prices.

By the time Curzon arrived at the funeral most of the mourners were already busy exchanging contact information. He stood at the door and scanned the room casually. Isisa guessed he was looking for the most important person and quickly found him. Isisa had spotted him the moment her Dragonfly attached itself to the ceiling to peer down at the crowd.

Councilor Bulgae was one of the twelve Chairmen on the Station Council. He represented the businesses of Section Two on the Council. He was elected five times to the office and was already holding fundraisers for his forthcoming campaign. He was a man who knew how to force a rout in a way that the press would call a compromise.

Section Two was a tough electorate. It was old, heavily industrialized and incredibly impoverished. Bulgae had won his campaigns by promising jobs and social support. He was loved by the media and the government both because he never did what

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he said. He wrote bills that gave the impression of progress but did little to change the game. As far as the system was concerned he was the perfect player.

The Councilor was trapped in a cloud of eager faces and outstretched hands. He was making his way smiling and nodding but certainly not enjoying the attention. He held a cup of wine which he used as a shield against the more persistent. His young son and wife stood a few feet behind him. Both looked bored and annoyed.

Curzon cut through the crowd like a snake in tall grass. When he reached Bulgae, Curzon simply stepped in front of the man speaking with the Councilor. Grabbing the Councilor's hand tightly and looking him in the eye he interrupted, "I am sorry for your loss, Councilor. I know that Rodolfo was one of your biggest supporters and he always spoke of you like a friend. If there is anything I can do in order to help make this a more peaceful time, all you would need to do is ask."

"Thank you, Curzon," he turned to the crowd of expectant faces, "Excuse us."

When the crowd dispersed they left with one eye looking back. Curzon had a curl at the edge of his lips that told Isisa that he was enjoying the experience a great deal. A waitress came to offer Curzon a glass of wine but he waved it away. The two men stood with their backs to the wall. Each observed the movements of the rest of the room.

"I appreciate the release from those vultures." He took a long sip from his wine glass. "Rodolfo would be pissed that any of them got invited at all..."

"Mr. Torres would be upset with a great deal of things happening now." Curzon shook his head slowly. "I worry how long this recession is to last without a voice like his."

"The recession is a business decision. You can always make more money from debt if there is more of it to go around." He became oddly defensive. "It's that beloved stock market of yours, not the government."

"And I think that it is also a sound political decision for the government to allow it to continue." Curzon got quieter as he spoke. "Think about how many enemies can be made responsible for ruining the economy. Or how many elections you can win by promising to fix it."

"The Council is debating a proposal that will help the economy." He spoke as a man does when he has finished being interviewed by the media.

"I believe you. Surely, once it has passed, the Council will continue to debate its merits. Of course then you could always debate repealing it. I've seen the Council go months debating something they no longer had control over. I wonder sometimes if the Council does anything at all except collect a check and argue over why they collected it."

"It seems to be working out for all interested parties." Bulgae had grown uncomfortable with the tone of the conversation, but offered his best smile.

"At least the ones that matter," Curzon smiled back brightly, "certainly,"

Bulgae's eyes glazed over, no longer bothering to look interested. He had the look of a man gripped by the finality of death. He was deep in thought, lost in memory. Following his eyes led to a portrait of Rodolfo Torres on the wall. "You said you knew Rodolfo, how well?"

"I ran into some legal troubles about a decade ago and he knew all the right people to sort it all out." Curzon smiled.

"Yes, well, Rodolfo knew everybody." Bulgae laughed.

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“He taught me an important lesson about the law. I’ll remember it till the day I die. He said the legal stuff doesn’t matter at all, its all about the public relations.” Curzon shook his head in disbelief. “I had served powerful men in my profession, but he was larger than life.”

“I knew that Rodolfo had his... tastes...” Bulgae leaned in slyly, “so were you the one providing him with his special entertainment?”

Curzon chuckled. “No, he had sources for what he craved that were all his own.”

“Larger than life is right. He is the reason why I wish I had been born on Earth.” Bulgae shook his head. “It wasn’t the gourmet coffee beans that made him popular; it was the status of being born on soil.”

“He was born in Oceania, if I remember correctly.”

“Indeed, to hear him tell it, he was born to a virgin, atop the highest mountain in the Andes during a solar eclipse.” Bulgae laughed at the memory. “The first time I had heard him tell that story was when I was a Sector Councilor in my first bid for the big table. He found me in an empty room that had been set up as a fundraiser for my campaign. No one had come, except him.”

Bulgae took another sip from his wine glass. “He looked at me and said, there are no winners and losers in politics. There are winners and they make the rules. If you are going to win, you had better make promises to everyone. When, not if, you can’t meet them simply blame your opponent. The whole damned point of government is to stall the losers while the winners win.”

“There lays a man who could sell anything.” Curzon gazed at the open casket.

“And every vulture is happy to smell the funeral pyre,” Bulgae said venomously. “I am glad I got the chance to see you, actually. I need you to use your connections to take care of something for me.”

“What needs taken care of, good Councilor?” Curzon sounded truly interested.

“I need Alcibiades removed, permanently.” Bulgae whispered.

“From politics or from life?” Curzon smiled.

“He is the sort where they are one and the same.”

“Why kill what you could easily buy?” Curzon waved across the room politely.

“He is frustratingly more stubborn than that.” Bulgae gritted his teeth.

“Well well. This isn’t really my primary business, but I do know the going rates. And let me tell you, from one friend to another, the cost of this – especially after they find out he is a Presidential hopeful? The price will simply be extortion.”

“The cost is of no concern to me.”

“Ah, but it is to someone, to be sure. Why do you want him gone?”

“That is not your concern, Curzon. Don’t pry your sticky little hands into my business and I wont do the same to you and yours.”

“This kind of request is often met with such curious questions. Surely, with as long as we’ve known one another, you can understand my curiosity. You normally resolve your bigger problems in more subtle ways.” Curzon couldn’t help but smirk at his old associate. “And you know that my integrity is without blemish. What, your friend wonders, makes Alcibiades such a threat?”

“It’s as simple as the opening bell of your damned stock exchange! He is a political rival that refuses to listen to reason.” Bulgae drained his cup and motioned for a



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refill from the server. “He doesn’t want money, he wants fame. Nothing useful can be done with a man like that. Least of all in politics.”

“That I agree with. Greed is the machine of progress. Fame on the other hand is the engine of ruin. Once a man thinks his best interest is the promotion of his own face, he forgets his more important duties.” Curzon let silence fill the space between them for a moment. He leaned in and smiled at the Councilor. “I trust that I will have your support in the upcoming merger between Yuen Starlines and the Leda Transportation Guild?”

“I am never one to stall progress.” Bulgae smiled back widely. He slapped Curzon on the back. “I will consider the situation resolved then. We will never speak of it again.”

“Certainly, Councilor.”

Isisa smiled as she turned off the feed. Her list had another name. Now was the time to get under Curzon’s skin. He was so fond of being in complete control. He would not like being placed in a defensive posture. Isisa only needed him to start thinking negatively about his associates.

The office building had a fairly sophisticated security system. It was still vulnerable like most downtown skyscrapers: frequent deliveries. The security office on the bottom floor was her first concern. Guards were on regular patrols and cameras were placed at all entryways. Curzon’s investment firm owned the entire floor his offices were on. The security desk just beyond the elevators was manned by one of Mahesh’s men.

Standing on a roof across the street, Isisa went down onto one knee and pressed her thumb to her index finger. After three seconds a beep sounded in her Hood. Off the side of her ankle sprang a circular transmitter, ready to broadcast her signal. Eight beeps rang out, then Isisa felt her mind slip out of her body.

Isisa had learned how to use Talaria when she was eight years old. No matter how long she had used it she had never shook the feeling of her digital skin crawling. She focused on the building before her and on the security networks. She followed the network back to the central mainframe. For as well guarded the building was, it surprised her to see no Bitcommando defenses in place. She scanned but found only basic firewalls.

From her digital arm she launched her favorite rootkit virus. It immediately infected the motherboard. The system began shutting down. She closed her digital eyes and breathed slowly. As she exhaled she pushed her mind back into her body. When she opened her eyes again, they were real and her skin didn’t crawl. Her Crown acknowledged that the security systems had been disabled.

Then she waited in Curzon’s office. Waiting, she mediated.

When Curzon returned, he turned on the light to see Isisa pouring over his papers and his personal computer. Isisa snapped her head around and backed herself into the wall with her arms raised. She threw her head from side to side, looking for an exit. Seeing none, she looked back at Curzon and used her most pathetic voice.

“Please, by the Gods of Sol, don’t kill me!” she put her hands up as high as she could, her Crown projected the face of a teenage girl. “I have no weapons!”

“Who are you!?” Curzon brandished a pistol and stepped into the door frame.

“I’m just a girl from upspin Four, I grew up off Moscow street.” Isisa swallowed noticeably and let her eyes sink. “I was taken a few days ago on my way home from school. I was told to come here, to get files from your office, or else...”

“How did you get in here?”

“They let me in...”

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“Who?”

“The guards. They dropped me off on the street. The guards let me in.” Isisa kept her arms in the air. “They even shut off the security cameras for me. They said I had to steal all the files in your office.”

“You’re full of it.”

“Trust me, as someone who knows about betrayal, it’s always the closest people.”

“You’re just a thief. Probably a junkie!”

“Fine. I don’t give a fract if you believe me or not.” Isisa dropped her hands to her side. “But can I at least get the file on a girl named Ekaterina?” At mention of the name, Isisa could see Curzon go pale. “The guy in the airvan said that if I didn’t get that folder he’d kill me.”

“What did he look like?”

“They had me blind folded, you dolt.” Isisa shook her head.

“What did he want with the girl?”

“I don’t know! Do you not understand that I was kidnapped?! Just give me the damned file so I can get out of here and so they don’t kill me.”

“I don’t have a file for her. I just got that contract today.” He looked her up and down. He raised the pistol to point it at her head. “It’s really just a shame that Mahesh’s thugs didn’t throw you onto the corner, because I would have bought you instead.”

“No mortal man can afford me,” she said, pushing a button on her wrist.

Curzon’s his eyes rolled back and the pistol dropped to the floor. His body collapsed backward. He was snoring deeply when Isisa stepped over him. He continued to snore even after Isisa kicked him in the face. He would wonder what had gone wrong, but Isisa only hoped he remembered the conversation.

A Dragonfly of Horus took flight from Curzon’s neck. The design had served Isisa’s mother as an assassination delivery system. The Dragonfly’s tail held a poison of choice, and a needle to inject it. Landing back in its bay on Isisa’s hip plate, the Dragonfly shut down and began to recharge. Isisa heard the bay door lock into place as she boarded the elevator to leave.

# 6      ☉ Ì Ì Ì ☉

## Factory Gardens

“Ensure thy geometry be lawful and thy alchemy be pure.”  
- Priestess Cynthia

The 3D printer factory that Olympian had bought was located in Section Three. The Section was upspin of the Section One, so therefore near the Capitol. The factory took up the entire 45<sup>th</sup> block on 88<sup>th</sup> substreet. It was also conveniently located seven decks above the docks so it would be easy for them to transport assets. Olympian had surveyed it already, but it was the first time Isisa had seen her new workspace.

“It is smaller than the specifications you wanted, but I think that given its other impressive functionalities it will suit our purposes nicely.” Olympian parked the aircar and opened his door. “It comes almost fully operational, the company who owned it before us went bankrupt twenty one months ago.”

Isisa kept her eyes surveying the street and building.

“I like the location. It will be nice to have the Pylon Highway nearby too. What did the company produce?”

“It was founded during the exploration boom, making its name with cooling systems for exploration probes. They constructed this factory specifically for building engines. The ones they built here were almost exclusively for the Triton Engineering Fringe Probe Program. Originally they were highly profitable, but as the exploration bubble burst, the company declined into year after year of staggering losses. Finally,” Olympian opened his arms toward the facility, “they had to sell all their assets. Honestly, it was a bargain. We got this property for a price that I would have spilled blood for elsewhere.”

Olympian unlocked the door and the two entered the building. Isisa looked up to see two stories of rafters above her. In front of them was a small office building that was dwarfed by the warehouse itself. Isisa counted the windows and doors. It ran against the front wall of warehouse, the outside edges remaining open for trucks.

“That is the administrative office. The area between the office and the front doors is the soft loading dock. This will be used for any drop offs or pick ups that don’t require heavy loaders. We’ll have a point of sale system at one end where customers can order and pick up from our catalogue. Above the office building you can see industrial lifts. There are four to lift crates to ceiling storage compartments.”

Walking through the office to the other side, Isisa saw the factory floor. The largest 3D printers lined the back wall next to the heavy loading dock. Two rows of printers ran against the outside walls of the building. Each pair of printers got smaller as it approached the lifts and office. It was a simple design, but brilliant in its efficiency.

“And you said the printers work?” Isisa said hopeful.

“The heavy 3D printers do, yes, the smaller ones were sold off so we need to buy our own. The installers should be arriving later today. There is a deck below the main

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floor that I will be converting into your private laboratory. It will take me a few weeks to get it operational.”

“That’s fine, I don’t need the small ones yet. The first thing built will be a starship.” Isisa pulled out a data crystal from her belt. “This is the design I chose from my mother’s database. My mother would say ‘stay mobile, stay alive.’ I want to make sure we have an escape. Just in case we have to go back to Earth.”

Olympian stopped walking and looked Isisa in the eyes. “Isisa.” He used her sacred name in a way that pressed his seriousness. His gray eyes seemed made of stone, and his voice had the resonance of a ceremonial cave. “Your parents were very clear about Earth. Its fate has been sealed. They would never wish you to return. You are now the High Priestess. You are the Order. If you go back to Earth you shall doom both yourself and your Order.”

Isisa stood speechless for a moment. He continued before she could speak.

“Your said that you would be greatly tempted to return. She told me that she was confident that you would bring the Light into the next era. And I agree with her. I will spend my life helping however I can. But neither of us are to ever return to the Sol System, no matter what shall happen on this Station.”

“How can I protect the Order? I wasn’t on this damned Station for even a day before we were caught and presented like animals to the highest order of filth! What happens when something terrible happens that I can’t overcome? What if I need them?”

“The time of your mother has passed, Isisa. You know this. Remember what she went through. She was younger than you when her entire family was glassed from the Earth. The mountains she called home were reduced to ash. Her enemies were everywhere, seeking her with every available resource. You have still the element of surprise. There is no enemy here who knows you exist here, and we must be careful to maintain that harmony. I served your mother since the day she was born, and I have watched you grow as powerful as she ever was. She knew your power, why don’t you?”

“Because I’m not ready for this! I can’t protect the Emerald Tablets if I can’t even protect myself! What happens if someone like Set found out I’m here? I could never defeat him alone. He would track and kill me as quickly as he could will it.”

“You use the Law as your father does, just as you did when we arrived.”

“A sliver of iron does little against hardened armor and military weapons.” She winced, “I’ve seen my father do things with Alchemy that defy accepted physics. And even he still fears Set.”

“Negativity becomes you, so don’t let it rule your calculations. Everything is about timing. You have the craft of your father and strength of your mother. To survive you must learn the craft of your mother and the strength of your father. The shoulders upon which the Order sits are worthy. Every Priestess has her wars and challenges. You will overcome them if you set your mind to it.”

“Will I ever see them again? Ever?”

“I do not speculate on what is possible in time. There is time for everything. You are still a young seed. Given time under a warm star, you will grow glorious and mighty. All you must do is keep mastering your craft and mind. Time is the only factor.”

“I know that what you are saying is true,” she slumped her shoulders and let her head hang. “But in the end it doesn’t make me feel any better. I feel lost, Olympian.”

“Your mother often felt as you do.”

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“I would bet not.” Isisa could not fathom her mother in distress.

“Do you truly believe that sending away her only daughter, the crown jewel of her life, was easy for her? Do not insult the gravity of the situation or the sacrifice!”

“She’s the one that sent me away! She’s the one that put me in this position!”

“No. She saw a vision from the Gods. It was the only correct course of action.”

“If she were where I am right now, what would she do?!”

Olympian thought a moment.

“She would yell at me, almost exactly as you are now.” His lips curled in a familiar smile. “Eventually she would realize that she was a wave breaking against the rocks and would submit to reason. She would remember the words of her father, the Holder of the Light before her. She would seek the counsel of nature.”

“The Trees,” Isisa nodded, knowing. She had seen her mother leave hastily in the night on trips to the forest. “She would find her peace in the trees.”

“And there she would come to know her path. Nature is the womb of all innovation.” Olympian put a comforting hand on her shoulder. “It speaks to everyone, yet it is only they who quiet their minds who can listen. That is my advice: quiet thy mind.”

Mother would gather one bow, three arrows and a satchel. The door would be shut before you knew she was leaving. Hours or days, she would stay in the forest. She would project herself anywhere she needed to be in order to hunt whatever bothered her in daylight. Her return would be met with a silent assumption of success. Sometimes she returned with scars. Sometimes with pelts. Always with a story she kept to herself.

Isisa walked around the artificial tree garden in utter disgust. The so-called “natural preserve” surrounded an artificial lake. Joggers ran the trail that traced the predictable shoreline. There was an area for pets to play together in the grastic grass. Near the parking lot was a state of the art virtual playground for the children. The trees were planted too shallow and the grass around the tree was broken and dry. She shook her head decisively and started back toward her aircar.

The garden before her was a poor substitute for a forest on Earth. Built for the opulence and splendor, not for appreciation of nature. It was a status symbol and little else. It was as if the entire place was committing a crime against its visitors, promising them nature but only displaying hubris and luxury.

Sitting on an isolated park bench near the shoreline was an aura of pain. The man was shaded in the darkest of blues, his heart wrenching in orange. The man was not much older than her. He stared off blankly at the artificial waves. Getting closer his eyes told a story of despair. She walked up to him and finally caught his attention. His eyes were glossy and red.

She covered herself in an aura of warmth. Isisa remembered something her father had said about losing his way, “Use your compassion as a compass. If you want to know the true character of a city, go to where the poor and marginalized people are. There you will see the Name of the Law.”

“What troubles you, brother?” She asked comfortably.

He swallowed and looked up. He saw her jewelry and the trendy clothing. He wiped his tears away with a dirty glove. “Nothing you’d understand.”

It was then that she looked at more than his aura. He wore big magnetic boots that were dirty and dented. His deck armor had burn marks and slash marks along his arm.

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The best looking part of his uniform was the helmet sitting on the bench beside him. He was a dock worker.

“I understand loss and isolation.” Isisa said back softly, “I understand what it feels like when things do not go the way I wanted them to.”

“But when you wake up in the morning, you’re still *rich*,” he said the word like a swear, almost spitting it in her face. “How can you know loss when you always get a second chance? How can you know isolation when there is literally an uncountable number of people that would do anything in exchange for your credits?”

“Riches have brought me neither happiness nor security.”

“Then you don’t know how to use them,” the man turned away and gave Isisa his shoulder, “Go away. I came here to be alone.”

“No, you came here because you already felt alone. I know because it’s the same reason I came here.” She gazed out over the artificial waves. “My mother always told me to seek out nature for advice.”

“Yeah, my grandmother came from Sol,” He nodded. His voice became warmer. “She said that the forests there span the length of the whole horizon.”

“They can indeed. There are few left though.” Isisa sighed heavily. “The Siberian forests are still spectacular.”

“You’ve been there?”

“Yes, my mother loved to hunt.” Isisa found herself smiling at the memory.

“So your mother sought nature’s advice just to kill it?”

“No, she respected and loved every creature, truly. But she also recognized that life and death, the dance of predator and prey was just a part of the cycle.”

“Part of the cycle...” He chuckled disgustedly and shook his head. “And I suppose that you think it part of your cycle for cancer to take my wife.”

“Gods no!” Isisa stood taken aback, showing him the palms of her hands. “Cancer can be cured and it certainly should be!”

“It can be, but only for a price exponentially higher than we can afford.” He choked on his words a moment. “So she is condemned to death for her poverty. Whose justice does that serve?”

“I think this Station needs to redefine its priorities.”

“Centuries have gone by since an understatement of that magnitude has been uttered. Were you some kind of shut in?”

“Yes, actually.”

“Then let me tell you something. I quit school so that I could help pay for her treatment. Her parents are being evicted from their home because they used the electricity bill to pay the hospital. And now, tomorrow morning,” his voice began to crack and he began to lose his composure, “the hospital will be forcing my wife to leave.”

“How can they force her to leave if she is still in treatment?”

“We no longer have the money to avoid it.” Tears rolled down his cheeks.

“Where is she staying? I want to know the hospital’s name.”

“What does it matter, every hospital is the same!”

“I mean that you should give me the information and go back to her. Her hospital bills are henceforth covered by me. Get the rest of your affairs corrected however you can.”

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The man sat silent, staring at her waiting. Fresh tears formed in his eyes and he squared his jaw. It took him a moment to gather a breath of air. "You lie."

"I do not, my brother."

"Why? Who are you?"

"Because I am using my compassion as my compass. And my name is Angela Tesla. And I only have one more question: other than the medical expenses, what is your family's largest monthly bill?"

"Are you serious? Energy. Of course. The energy companies rule Pollux Max, and there is nothing we can do about it."

"Well there is something that I will be doing about it. But for now, let's fix this business with your wife's hospital."

The rest of the day was devoted to meeting with the people in emergency care. Isisa learned about the extortionist costs and the regular government defunding. A little girl in a purple dress without hair or a year. An old man with a grin and a voicebox around his neck. Everyone there a victim of a toxic environment.

Isisa found Olympian amongst the chaos of movers and printers. A line had formed near him, at least five men with clipboards long. She waited patiently in the line until her turn. Olympian was dealing with several groups all at once, almost juggling the conversations. He handed paperwork back, pressed his thumbprint on datapads and shoed the rest of the assistants into a separate office. Locking the door, Olympian shook his head.

"Do you have something you'd like to discuss?" He was amused, but still busy.

"I have the idea for the first production line item. A personal power plant for every home. Use torus energy and create compact infinite power generators for the people of Pollux Max. We could call it the Freedom Core, Power for All!" Isisa put her hands over her head like a marquee. Olympian watched her with an eyebrow raised. "Ok, so obviously the idea is still in draft status. We should hire a marketing team."

"What do you possibly hope to achieve?" Olympian shook his head slowly and let out a breath. "The only thing you'll do is make economic enemies out of the energy corporations."

"It's not about making enemies, it's about freeing the people of Pollux Max. How can they ever have the opportunity for self-actualization in the current system? How can a parent rise up against the corruption when they are fighting to keep food in their children's mouths?"

"This isn't some sort of social experiment. It is no game to expose one of the greatest lies ever told to the masses over a simple whim. Remember that between your idea and the energy corporation is unbridled profits. They will not let them go easily. I think there are other routes we should explore."

"Your counsel on the matter has been noted, but I refuse to continue the tradition of enslavement and exploitation of the masses. I will no longer hide the truth from them."

"The masses are *vulgar*, Isisa." He sighed, already tired of the debate. "They cannot be trusted to self-actualize. They will use the Sacred Law against one another in sin and greed."

"That's funny, because that's exactly what I would describe hiding the truth to be. Every Order has been guilty of this same sin, this same greed. Monopoly over Mind and Matter. I will take no part in it. You said it yourself, I will lead the Light into a new era."

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“Don’t grow a dangerous ego, Isisa, I promise you that it will only destroy you.”

“If this project is something that you fundamentally object to, then please accept my apologies but I will not alter my course. I will not take it personally if you cannot stand by my side. I will still consider you an honorable man, even if you ascribe to an older paradigm.”

“Older paradigms provide the foundation for new paradigms, young one. No one is above the Law. I do not argue that the people deserve the right to the Truth, but they must be the ones to seek it out. It has always been there for them to discover.” He walked over to his desk and started looking for a document. “The Truth cannot be given to them because they will not appreciate it. I trust you, just as I trusted your mother, with my life and death. I will stand by your side until the day I die proudly.”

“Thank you, Olympian. I hope to live in a way that deserves your loyalty.”

“Your legacy will change the course of human history. I just hope they are ready.” He could disagree with her and still submit to her authority. “Have you thought of a name for this troublesome little project of yours?”

“Tesla Technologies Unlimited.” Isisa smiled happily. “Hire a board of directors and have them draw up a preliminary business plan, logo, the whole bit. Keep them in the dark about the power plants since you think it’s such a bad idea, we will reveal it when we are ready. Also, find a dockside warehouse. Once the starship is complete move it there and position it to launch.”

Olympian gave Isisa a look, but she shook her head. “Not for that, I still need the ship for other plans.”

“Have you thought of a similarly fitting name for your ship?”

Isisa nodded excitedly. “The Atlantean.”



# 7      ☉ Ì Ì Ì ☉

## Broker Deals

“You must venture forth from under the shadow of your family tree.  
As a seed is sent forth to grow under the sun, so too must you.  
Your family’s past is within you, yes, but you are the one to define its future.”  
- Ian Eastling, House Cartographer

Every single one of Bashar’s trap houses was tapped with bugs. The Sun Disks supplied data to three servers in her safe house. Computers ran algorithms on the data and organized it for Isisa. She had been waiting for something to come up about Ekaterina. It had been almost two days since she had broken into Curzon’s office.

Curzon had insisted that Mahesh capture Ekaterina immediately, but Mahesh was purposefully neglecting the task. It took a video call from Bashar to force Mahesh comply. When Mahesh hung up on Bashar he cursed and punched a wall. It pleased Isisa that they were already fighting.

Her Crown finally alerted her that the name “Ekaterina” being used and relayed the location. She equipped her proper hunting gear. She pulled the cowl over her head and thought that perhaps Olympian was right about her ability. She tightened her belt remembering the lessons she had learned. She slid her dart gun into its holster confidently. Perhaps she was able to handle Pollux Max after all.

She followed the men to their target. Standing in the street as they landed. The girl was in her early twenties. She carried lab equipment on her way home from school. Isisa watched them snatch the girl. The lab equipment scattered onto the sidewalk. One abductor threw a bag over Ekaterina’s head and a belt around her neck. They had her in the airvan quickly. Isisa cut the power to the engine with a button on her wrist.

She walked toward the sitting airvan. The driver sought reason for the engine failure. Another button released the gas pods she had planted under the seats of the airvan. She opened the side door of the airvan and everyone inside was fast asleep. Isisa took Ekaterina and carried her to an aircar parked on the other side of the street.

As she flew away, with Ekaterina laying in the backseat, Isisa pressed the third detonator button. The airvan below exploded into a fury of fire and smoke. Isisa smiled to herself. “Easy.”

Isisa took a zig-zag route through back streets and alleys. No tail or interested parties from what she could tell. Ekaterina slept soundly and didn’t move a muscle. Isisa saw election billboards for Section Eight’s Kim Mendez. Rodolfo’s seat was in play and both parties were slinging insults and conspiracy theories.

Once at the safe house, the girl was put in a cell. It had been designed for less respectable guests in mind. A single light hung from the ceiling. It illuminated a lone table and chair. It was a two story room, the only entrance far out of reach from the floor. The door itself was barred on the other side. It was only reachable by a rope tied to the

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ceiling. When Ekaterina woke up, she sobbed in the corner for almost a half hour. When she had regained her faculties, Isisa opened the door and climbed down the rope quietly.

Staying in the shadow, Isisa yelled, "Get in the chair!"

When Ekaterina complied, she stepped closer, where her body could be seen.

"Do you know why you are here?" Isisa asked.

Ekaterina shook her head and started to cry again, "No."

"The Chief of Police wants your hand in marriage. Clearly, you gave him an answer he didn't like."

"He asked... yes... but I told him I never loved him. He used to always try to follow me everywhere I went." Her tears were rolling but she kept her voice, "My father forbade me from seeing him, but he kept asking me to see him. He wanted me to go to some horrible Cube match with him! I told him I would go, but I didn't, hoping that he would just stop talking to me."

"And now here you are." Isisa said coldly. She felt like her mother.

"Is he going to have me killed?" Ekaterina was having trouble breathing again.

"No. I think he has more than that planned. He has a sick mind."

Isisa watched her eyes and saw them cloud with despair and terror.

"Lights on," Isisa said and the entire room became bright except for the ceiling. "He will not harm you if I have any say in it. I can get you away from him."

Ekaterina was bewildered and wiped her tears off her cheek.

"If you want to help me, why am I in a cell?" Ekaterina looked around.

"Truly, there are two reasons. First, I have no other accommodations," Isisa shrugged. "I don't entertain much. Second, I just don't know that I can trust you."

"You terrified me. Now you tell me you'll help me?"

"I needed you to know how serious this situation could have been. A lesson learned hard is a lesson learned long. This is one you'll take with you to the grave. Now listen to me." She relaxed her shoulders and let the girl see her Crown's holographic face. "I can keep you hidden in the Colonies, but you will not be able to return. You will not even be able to tell your family. If he found out they knew of your whereabouts they would become targets of his fury."

"They are already targets of his fury. Last year he had my father arrested for protesting. The only reason my father had been marching against the corruption and poverty on the Station. But Bahadur is convinced that my father must be part of some political party. The only reason he hasn't killed my father already is because he hopes to still win my hand somehow. If I leave, I know that he would do terrible things to my father."

"Should I organize safe passage for all of you then?"

She shook her head slowly. "My father disowned me when I told him that I believed there could be many gods. He told me that if I didn't believe in the One True God, then I was no daughter of his under heaven." She stumbled on her own thoughts. "I believe he is wrong, but I still love him. Can you protect him?"

"I will do what I can."

"Why are you helping me?" Ekaterina was still in disbelief.

"Because no one deserves what Bahadur was planning on doing to you."

"What should I call you?"

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“I am Artemis. Speak my name only to those who I serve. I am the protector of women, the guardian of children and for those who break the Law, I am the wrath of Heaven.”

“Thank you, Artemis.”

“Make your thanks in the form of actions.” Isisa took a step back from the table. “And should I ever call upon you, remember your appreciation.”

Isisa dropped Ekaterina off with the Sisterhood. The High Priestess noted the light behind the young girl’s eyes. Though she had been given a passage off Pollux Max, Ekaterina was determined to stay. Instead of leaving her sisters, she wanted to give them aid. Isisa was sure that Decima could find her a job.

Tatiana Teplov and Isisa stood in one of the many empty docking bays in Section Four. Sometimes called the Russian Quarter, Section Four was experiencing the worst of the economic instability on the Station. Isisa had an interest in Section Four immediately. It was close to Section Two which was the hub of Bashar’s operations. Section Four had also become the flashpoint for Bashar’s current expansions.

When Isisa had started studying Bashar’s operations, it became increasingly clear that he was putting his weight into controlling the dockside businesses in Section Two. The docks were the backbone of all of his operations, and he looked eagerly at the empty docks in nearby Section Four. He had been sending gunmen into Section Four almost as a sport. The Russian Quarter had its own set of gangs, though, and Bashar was giving them all a sense of unity.

Sometimes called the Queen of the Russian Quarter, Tatiana Teplov was a rising star of the underworld. She had ruled her own part of Section Four for years, but the street war had allowed for her expansion. Every dockside territory that Bashar’s thugs took was another Russian gang that came to Tatiana for revenge and allegiance. She was riding the wave so far without compromising her honor. That trait is what had drawn Isisa to her.

The two women eyed each other in silence. Isisa wore the face of an old retainer. Her appearance projected an old ragged woman who had worked in the service of her Lady for almost a generation. Isisa walked with a slight limp, a wide smile on her projected face.

“My name is Cynthia. I am the sworn speaker on behalf of the Voice in the wind, the agent of Exchange and the Throne of Knowledge. The Crown of Knowing lay upon the head of my Lady Novaeon. She sent me to you today with a message and a gift. She has presents herself to you and you alone upon this Station. I herald her wish to forge the first alliance of exchange with you.”

“And what, exactly, is an alliance of exchange? I went to public prison school.”

“Every relationship should be founded upon an exchange of mutually beneficial services, goods or information. Lady Novaeon knows this and is purposefully generous and knowingly particular with her allies. Do you know why she asked you to meet with me here, upon the docks?”

“Maybe I do, but I still prefer to hear you tell me why I’m here.”

“My Lady taught me that the easiest way to command a city is by controlling its trade. On this Station, power comes from these docks.”

“Power comes from the Pylons and that damnable Council.”

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“A common misconception, I assure you, and totally understandable. In fact, that is precisely what they want you to think. They want you to think the real power is there so that you will spend all of your time and effort on a red herring. All of the power on the Council originates here on the docks.”

“So... are you a real estate agent or something?”

“No, but the Lady has studied your organization thoroughly. I am telling you that your weakness lies in your insistence on controlling the streets rather than the docks. You control the streets and have almost nothing. He controls the docks and owns half the Station. You’ve been fighting to get into Section Two for years. It’s time to end that fight. My Lady will give you the docks, but you need to be the one that actually takes them.”

“Nobody does any helping for nothing.”

“That is truth. And in the name of Exchange, you will be giving my Lady great joy and satisfaction. Bashar has proven himself worthy of only a long and painful death. It is my Lady’s justice that will put Bashar in an early grave. It is my Lady’s wrath that will see his entire organization ruined. You will be helping create an example.”

“She should know that I am not her lackey,” Tatiana put her hands on her hips. It’s not how I live my life.”

“Oh she expects nothing of the sort. And *you* should know that she offers you no protection either. You are subject to your own choices. The Exchange benefits those who keep their word. When an exchange benefits everyone, future projects grow from the success of the exchange.”

“What of the police? I trust you already know that Bashar has the Section Two Police bought and paid for?”

“Contact Police Chief Bahadur, make it known that you have caught his beloved wife-to-be Ekaterina. She is unharmed, but will not remain so if he makes any move to stop your assault on Bashar’s operations.”

“And you have the girl?”

“We do.”

“And will you kill her if he attacks my men?”

“He won’t risk it.” Isisa shook her head. “He cares about winning more than he cares about Bashar, and Ekaterina is what he has tried to win most.”

“So you’ll give her back to him, then?”

“That depends on him, and her.” She shrugged.

“The girl has a say?” Tatiana’s eyes grew wide in disbelief.

“Everyone should have a say where they go.”

“How do I know you aren’t bluffing?”

“How does my Lady know you will be able to take Bashar’s docks? We are both taking a risk. A leap of faith in the name of exchange. We expect that you will never use my Lady’s name, and that you will take full credit for your spoils. That is what benefits us both.”

Isisa extended her hand to seal the deal. They shook firmly.

“The Section Two docks will be mine.” Tatiana grinned.

“And Bashar will burn.”

They let go of their shake and gave each other an approving nod. Before Isisa could turn and start her exit, Tatiana spoke up curiously.

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“Given that you are a master of spies, I gotta ask you about the other new agent that has made Pollux Max his home.” Tatiana waited a moment, gauging Isisa’s response. “Surely you must know the identity of this so called “Shadow Mirror” that has become such a terror to Bashar’s men. They say he’s killed men in gruesome ways. He must be working for your Lady Novaeon then?”

“In a sign of good faith, I am authorized to offer you a gift of free information. The so-called “Shadow Mirror” is indeed the hand that wields Lady Novaeon’s knife. There is no limit to how dangerous you can consider him. No one knows his true identity, not even the Lady herself.” Isisa shook her head in wonder. “He comes from the Colonies, I bought him from the highest order of assassins. I have heard whispers that he has been genetically altered. All I know is he was trained from birth with both blade and mind.

“I hope to never meet him. You should hope the same.” Isisa paused for effect. “If you see him, offer immediate assistance and grant him full passage, lest you own his unmistakable mark. Lady Novaeon deals with exchange, but the Shadow Mirror only deals in death.”

Isisa returned to her safe house using the subdecks. The quality of life compared to the skydecks was a vast gulf of realities. The ventilation systems were archaic and haphazardly maintained. Smog had few escape vectors but many human lungs to soak into. Once back in her lab, Isisa powered her computer monitors.

She saw the feed from her faithful steward.

Olympian sat across from Mahesh in an expensive real leather chair. A beautiful woman sat two alcoholic drinks on the table between them and left the private room swiftly. Mahesh sat quiet and brooding. He was totally distracted by his own thoughts, and Isisa knew what he was preoccupied with.

Her plan was unfolding before her eyes. She had listened to all of Mahesh’s conversations and they were a testament to his growing paranoia. Olympian began to address the reason for their meeting, asking for fifty more girls than Bashar had total in all of his houses. Mahesh wondered at the large order.

“It truly is a simple problem.” Olympian said, waving his hands about. “We are testing a new sterilization drug and we need several groups for proper clinical testing. We will need all of the subjects loaded onto one transport vessel and shipped to Dioscuri.”

“You expect me to ship that many girls all the way out to a moon of Leda?”

“I do not expect, I require. My company is willing to pay double the standard price, of course.” Olympian played his role with an air of undeniability. “This is a matter we require quick resolution in. We know that operating costs double when time is a factor so we are prepared to pay that price.”

Mahesh softened at the thought. It was an astronomically large price, even for him. Isisa couldn’t help but get closer to the screen, hoping to see something in his eyes. Her mother’s voice was in her head, “He’ll be quick to use the opportunity to betray Bashar. Any two men will always fight over power.”

“It will take several days for us to assemble an order that large.” Mahesh said quickly, “We’ll need to use several different ships.”

“Negative.” Olympian shook his head resolutely. “There are several ships docked right now that are capable of handling the load, I assure you that we did our research.

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Whatever their current manifest is, I am certain that it is not as profitable as my company's proposal."

"Why the insistence on only one ship?" Mahesh growled angrily.

"Because on Dioscuri we have independent security agencies. Our costs to ensure safe passage through customs go up exponentially with more than one vessel. We are passing our savings to you through a lucrative deal."

"With a transaction this large, you'll understand if I need payment upfront. After all, you are buying me out of my entire inventory. I will see you off myself, to make sure there are no issues." Mahesh slide a datachip across the table next to Olympian's untouched drink. "Here is the account number. I will not begin moving the girls until I see the credits there."

"They will be in your account within the hour. If we do not get the merchandize we paid for, I assure you, it will be on your head." Olympian took the datachip and pushed it into the reader on his arm and uploaded it to the central safe house computer. He stood, extending his hand. "My company thanks you for your understanding and discretion. I look forward to seeing you on the docks."

Isisa ran the account number and smiled at the result. It was Mahesh's private bank account. He was planning on hiding the entire deal from Bashar. It didn't seem hard seeing how little Bashar kept his eye on day to day operations. Mahesh probably planned to kill Bashar soon after the girls were sold, but his plans were trapped within Isisia's plans.

Isisa's plans had no room for either Mahesh or Bashar.

# 8      ๐ İ İ İ ๐

## Traffick Heist

“Never waste time when there is still a goal unmet.”  
Fleeting Foot, Priest of the Forest Temple

Below every street on Station horizon was about a hundred decks of substreets. The lowest substreets were closest to the docks. The closest a person could stand to space was the dock decks. Olympian stood on a dock deck filled wall to wall with women and girls. Chained together, they waiting to be loaded into the transport ship below. Three dozen little girls were packed on a descending freight elevator to his left. Olympian surveyed the landscape as a businessman capable of ignoring moral dilemmas in favor of lucrative opportunities.

Mahesh stood on the other end of the deck. The recon Dragonfly recorded him as he spit furious insults at the dock workers. Isisa watched the two men from the main screen in the cockpit of the Atlantean. Mahesh saw Olympian and immediately swore at his security guards. Olympian pretended not to notice Mahesh, waving his fingers in a motion of counting. Isisa watched the faces of the women and girls.

Some of the women had tears in their eyes but stood with an air of silent dignity. Others had the look of resolution, somber and strong. Several seemed too drugged to know where they were. A few were weeping and wailing. Isisa turned the Dragonfly’s sensors to pick up the audio more clearly.

“Wait! Please! Why are we on the docks!? Where are we going?” one women cried, grasping at one of the security guards. “I can’t leave my baby! My Jade! You can’t send me away! Who will take care of her?” The handler slapped the girl across the face, leaving a cut on her cheek.

“Shut the hells up, you whore! This is what got us into trouble is all your crying!”

Olympian was watching too. His eyes focused on the handler with distain. Isisa had no doubt that he had already begun to delete all of the man’s personal and social data. Later he would purge the handler’s bank accounts. *Let him be an example too*, Isisa smiled at the thought.

“I assure you that all of the girls will be on board,” Mahesh stepped up to Olympian with his thug in tow. “We just ran into some logistical issues getting them all over here in time. We are running a little behind.”

“Perfectly alright,” Olympian said dismissively, “I will make a final count of the merchandise before departure just to be safe. Better to know for certain rather than depend on the clumsy mind of a peon!”

“True there!” Mahesh laughed at his men’s expense. “That’s why I am here. I make sure that my clients are happy. Please, let’s get off of this disgusting deck. I will show you to the accommodations I have arranged for you.”

The three men walked over to the spiral staircase on the spinward side of the deck. They followed the stairs down into the ship’s forward cabin and crew quarters. The

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room normally reserved the ship's first mate was now Olympian's. It had been stocked with alcohol, snacks and the most expensive of Mahesh's prostitutes. Mahesh explained to Olympian that the journey would be comfortable expense spared. "I don't even care if you ruin the upholstery, I'll just get it all replaced."

"I will see the cockpit and pilot now."

"You wouldn't be any more comfortable there." Mahesh faked a chuckle.

"I always shake hands with my pilot." Olympian's eyes were unmoving. "This is non-negotiable."

Once in the cockpit Olympian shook hands with the pilot and provided Isisa with a valuable panorama of the ship's systems. Recording the feed from Olympian, Isisa had the Atlantean find everything about it. The search result taught her that the target computer had been outdated when Isisa had been born.

Leaving the cockpit, Olympian asked to see the merchandise again.

"They should be all loaded by now," Mahesh ignored the request like he hadn't even heard it. "I can take you back to your cabin, and we will have the moorings pulled as soon as possible."

Olympian stopped in the middle of the corridor.

"First I see the merchandise." It was not a request or option. "First I make my count."

"Certainly," Mahesh said with a broken lie of a smile, "sir."

Isisa admired the sophisticated flight traffic controls. Coordinating inbound and outbound vessels in the Pollux system was a labor intensive process. Of the major space stations humanity had built, only Sirius Max rivaled the scale of commercial traffic. Hundreds of ships arriving and departing on any given day. Many were in a hurry.

Mahesh returned to the dock deck. Olympian retired to his private cabin. The ship launched without incident. The ship pulled its moorings and fell away from the Station. Isisa allowed it to get some distance before she began to follow with the Atlantean. The sophisticated cloaking device on board ensured that the other vessels in the region would not even notice her passage.

Isisa put in an audio call to Tatiana's personal device.

"Who is this?" Tatiana answered angrily.

"Cynthia. My Lady says the time is now, make your move." Isisa waited as Tatiana gave the command to a lieutenant then continued. "Further, Mahesh may still be present. Killing him would earn you a reward from my Lady. Make him suffer publically and her reward would be greater still."

She hung up the audio call and fired the thrusters to put the Atlantean into an intercept course. She immediately began to jam all transmissions to and from the ship. Once within range of her missiles, the Atlantean settled into combat mode. Isisa watched as two torpedo tubes opened on the topside of the ship's disk.

Isisa thumbed through the types of nanogels that were available to her. She chose the one she had prepared for the mission and loaded it into the missiles. She heard the targeting computer tone for a lock and pulled the trigger. The missile chased the accelerating transport ship.

The missile exploded off the starboard side of the ship. The nanogel inside the missile spread out and covered the starboard bow. The nanogel locked onto the electronic signatures of the ship's cameras and thruster relays. Once covered, the nanites inside the



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gel began to bore into the soft parts. Once the connection to the shipboard computer was made, the nanogel on the surface of the ship began to harden. The hardened gel formed a wireless transmitter.

Once connected to the transport ships mainframe, the Atlantean released several Trojan horses and a dozen digital viruses. The digital orders honed in on the engineering computer relay. The virus quickly found fertile software. It locked and disabled the transport's engine programs. Isisa smiled as she watched the engine grow cold.

It was time to board. She maneuvered alongside the transport's airlock. The Atlantean sealed itself against the airlock with a thud. Between the Atlantean seal and the transport's airlock, two lasers snapped to life. They spun around the airlock while Isisa checked the seals on her helmet and space suit. Checking her dartgun while she waited, she could hear the transport's engineer cry out in terror.

"We're being boarded!" the engineer's voice betrayed his terror.

"Nonsense!" the captain yelled. "There isn't a pirate in GemTau space that has the balls to attack a commercial ship so close to Pollux!"

"I know that sound!! I spent time on the fringe! I know that sound!!"

The airlock blew open and Isisa stepped aboard the transport and waited.

"What that hells are you doing out of your quarters!?" she heard the captain yelling, "Get back inside!"

Isisa rounded the corner and saw Olympian at work. He stood in front of the pilot, engineer and captain like a school teacher. A red cloud was still in the air, some of it falling to the deck. Olympian had their complete attention; she could see it in their eyes. They were as obedient as trained dogs and he spoke to them in kind.

"The ship is damaged. We need to return to Pollux Max. You already know it." Olympian let it sink in a minute. "The ship is damaged and we need to return to Pollux Max for repairs. You will go home immediately when we arrive. You will not remember anything that happened today."

Olympian turned to Isisa as the three men walked back into the cockpit. She gave him a nod and made his way to the airlock behind her. He sealed it and prepared to take the Atlantean back to Pollux Max ahead of the transport. If Tatiana didn't control the docks by the time the transport returned Isisa was not going to enjoy the day. Olympian would make sure the plan was on track.

Once she had a confirmation that the seal was in place and Olympian was free Isisa unlocked the engine protocols from her wrist computer. She could feel the engines rumble as she walked toward the cargo bay. The cargo bay smelled like feces and sweat. Isisa tapped into the overhead speakers and stepped up so that she could be seen.

"My name is Artemis and today each of you is now free. From this day until your last you will no longer see yourselves as property to anyone." Isisa walked down the row of cages and unlocked one cage after another. "I have commandeered this slave ship and I am returning you to Pollux Max. I have arranged living quarters and food for each of you. Those of you with children are welcome to bring them into my home."

"On this journey home, think about your free life, and think about what you would like to accomplish in it." Isisa made eye contact with each woman or girl she saw. "I should like to support each and every one of you in doing exactly what it is that you wish to do. I will destroy anyone who would cause you harm. I will consecrate this oath to you by offering the blood of Bashar."

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“You are the Artemis Sisterhood. Speak my name only to those I protect. During the journey home I will be with each of you, both to remove your chains and prepare any medical needs.” Artemis took her helmet off. “Please don’t be afraid. Speak true to me and I will honor you. I want you to be free. We shall break bread tomorrow night as one family, so that we can get to know one another.”

The High Priestess made her rounds to each and every woman and child. The young ones were timid and battered. The older women were stoic and reserved. Most were too suspicious to come close to her. Isisa assumed they knew betrayal all too well.

Isisa could see the docks from her helmet display. Tatiana’s men had won the fight against Mahesh’s thugs posted on the dock decks. Reviewing the recordings it was clear that Mahesh had escaped onto the Pylon highway before the dock decks were overrun. It wasn’t clear where Mahesh went, but Isisa was glad the plan had worked.

“The Lady would like to congratulate you on your victory,” Isisa spoke through her helmet, watching dock deck from her retinal display. Tatiana looked around suspiciously. “There is a ship below you preparing its moorings. Aboard the ship is a group of women and girls who are protected by my Lady. The Shadow Mirror himself is present to ensure their safe passage. Make certain none of your men interfere and no one will be harmed. We look forward to lucrative deals in the future now that your organization has expanded its scope and scale.”

Isisa hung up satisfied with Tatiana’s appreciation. Isisa stood alone in the cargo bay along the wall. She surveyed the room and saw the women preparing themselves to dock with Pollux Max. Their wrists and ankles were bloody, but their spirits were lifted. Some of younger girls were singing songs with Nona.

When Isisa had unlocked Nona’s chains, the young girl had been weeping. Isisa had reassured her that everything would be alright. Nona had nodded and explained that her tears had been for joy not sorrow. Nona immediately began to help the other young girls out of their chains.

“I am so thankful for my freedom.” Tears still welled in her eyes. The young woman threw her arms around Isisa’s neck and hugged her tightly. Isisa had been startled by the gesture. It was her first hug since her father had hugged her goodbye at the starport on Earth. “I’ve never been free before. I only wish that everyone in the galaxy could be free. There are so many others still out there hurting.”

“I will kill those that commit such crimes against my Sisters.” Isisa promised.

“Dear Artemis, I do not wish them death or harm. That would make me like them. Instead, I hope that one day they free themselves from their own afflictions.”

Isisa had not been able to mount a response. Nona was helping the pregnant and children near the back of the cargo bay. The young girl was not a hypocrite. With so much reason to be bitter and spiteful, the girl had somehow escaped the darkness.

A line had formed in front of the airlock doors. At the head of the line, leaning on the airlock was an old woman named Morta. Her wrinkled snarl promised violence. She wore a hateful glare could rust a Central Pylon. When Isisa had freed Morta, she shrugged off the chains and leaned back with indifference.

“I’m not in need of any saving, you self-righteous fascist!” Isisa hadn’t believed her ears, “I’ve been working the streets since I was six. I killed my first man when I was twelve. And all my life, not one person has ever given me something that they didn’t expect payment for later.”

## Hunting Artemis

“I don’t expect anything from you except silence regarding my name and your Sisterhood.”

“These ain’t my fucking sisters! None of ‘em! Most of these tramps are going to sell you out for the first bag of powder they can find. The rest of them are as useless as a man without money! Sure! They’ll sit in your house and eat all your food. But don’t expect them to be worth one sack of shit when you need them.”

“We are all Sisters.”

“Spare me your religious opiate; I quit being a mindless addict years ago. And shove your damn Sisterhood right up your ass, because I don’t share blood with any of these dock rats.”

Isisa had decided to let Morta be in peace and moved on to the next set of chains. Watching the old woman stand against the airlock made Isisa wish she had spent more time with her. Morta was stabbing her long boney pointer finger into the chests of the girls around her.

“Don’t you let me catch you walking my block,” she yelled as she jabbed, “or I swear I’ll cut you.”

The girls began to recoil away in silent fear. Morta grew confident and shoved one of the crying girls to the ground. Decima stepped up to Morta, putting herself inside Morta’s long reach.

Decima had grown up learning the names of the Three Gods of Sol. Her family had been very religious, but their faith did not save them from their murderers. Decima had been sold into prostitution when she was seven. By the age of ten she had taught herself how to read the Solian Bible. She said it had been a blessing that they were available on the net for free.

“I always knew they would send a Savior,” Decima had said excitedly when her chains were unlocked, “I prayed all my life for this moment. The Gods sent you.”

Isisa had no reason to deny the statement, but she did not claim it either. She watched Decima wondering how she hoped to bring peace to the situation with Morta.

“No one needs to walk blocks anymore, didn’t you hear?” Decima locked eyes with Morta and began the long job of staring her down. “Don’t worry girls, Morta will be just fine. No one knows how to remake herself like she does. Now that you don’t have to pay Mahesh I think you could save up and go to school. I really think you could make it in some cutthroat field like politics.”

“She could be a lawyer.” Someone said with a laugh behind Decima.

“That might be a better fit after all.” Decima nodded with a smile. “More blood.”

“I’d gladly go to court to talk about how I cut off your face, Decima.” Morta snarled, “You should mind your own damn business and I’ll mind mine. I don’t work for anyone except for me, even Mahesh knew that.”

“The Gods didn’t send us this gift of freedom so that we would go back to selling our souls.” Decima opened her arms wide, offering a hug. “We are all sisters. Let’s not fight, let’s share our freedom.”

“I swear I need to get off of this ship *right now* or you bitches are going to make me relapse.” Morta shook her head furiously, digging a knife into the palm of her hand. “You have any idea how long its been? And here you are trying to upset me. I will end your life, Decima. That I promise.”

## Hunting Artemis

Morta took a step forward, her blood dripping from her hand onto the deck at her feet. Decima took a careful step back but the girls behind her all scrambled to the walls and cages.

“I know that one day Sol will save us both. We are wasted as slaves to men,” Decima held her hands up in tacit surrender. “We can only attain glory in the sight of Gods. You are free to pursue your true destiny, Morta.”

“And what is my damn destiny? You want me to wait on cripples and crying infants? No! I’m no servant!” Morta waved her bloody hand toward the back of the cargo bay. “If you need someone to pay for your drugs, fill your belly with food and your mind with poison then have at it! But I won’t be a part of it. I’ve been places like this before...”

Morta’s eyes lost focus for a moment. Shaking her head, she shot a glare at Decima and dug her knife deeper into her palm. Everyone in the cargo bay held their breath. Happy that she had sufficiently frightened the room, the old woman returned to leaning her back on the airlock. Morta seemed unaware of the blood dripping off her elbow. Decima floated over to where Isisa stood.

“What does my Savior need of me once we’ve docked?” Decima asked eagerly.

“Help Nona rally hands to carry the sick and wounded to the vehicles.” Nona was kneeling before a pregnant girl and listening to her belly. Nona was no older than fifteen but she was already a leader. She had taken charge to help the woman that needed the most attention.

“Of course, I will see to it at once.” Decima stepped with purpose.

Isisa hoped that it would be easier to speak with the women after a day of rest and at a table full of food. The dinner she had planned was intended to fuse these women into a cohesive group, a united front against the forces who would enslave them.

Isisa had woken up feeling she was on the brink of achieving that goal. Seeing the women interact, however, made her believe that goal was still a distant light on the horizon. The dawn of the Artemis Sisterhood was not as brilliant as she had expected to be.

# 9      ☉ Ì Ì Ì ☾

## Artemis Sisterhood

“The first cities were built for survival,  
the last cities were built for luxury.”

- Anon

Isisa pulled a comfortable chair into her recon room. Slumping into its cushions, she spent the night watching Bashar’s haunted houses. Bashar’s thugs had been routed throughout the docks, and the survivors made their way streetside. After bloody clashes in the streets many proved able to withstand the flank of Tatiana’s assault. She watched bloody survivors running to haunted houses looking for shelter and news. So far as she could tell they had been given no orders at all.

The warehouses and stores on the decks nearest the docks were abandoned. Local gangs quickly seized the opportunity and went looting. Tatiana had too few men to cover all of her new territory. Dock warehouses were smashed and burned. Tatiana’s influence had expanded, but now she was besieged. The Russian matriarch even went so far as asking the Lady Noveaon for help in the matter.

“That’s the cost of doing business. My Lady does not offer insurance.” Isisa said in her Cynthia voice. “You must be able to retain your own gains.”

Isisa continued to watch the video feeds. She needed to find Bashar and Mahesh. She had thought that Mahesh would launch a counter offensive, but he was nowhere to be seen. Even their men were unnerved by their disappearance. Bashar’s car was still parked at his home, but he was not there.

*Where are they?* Isisa had planned that they would fall back to the casino in Section Two. It was their most defensible position. The casino had a small army of guards and the casino’s high tower that would make a perfect vantage point. Bashar had bought the casino almost five years ago, and it had since become a hub of his drug and escort distribution.

*If I thought my home was compromised, where would I go?*

The first hours passed quickly. She slept when Olympian took over. Four hours later she was wide awake watching the screens. Nothing was happening anywhere she looked. Bashar’s thugs waited it out in their houses. They ventured out for food and drugs but always returned quickly. The hours of the morning began to creep by. Her eyes began to burn and throb.

Olympian walked into the recon room and found Isisa massaging her temples.

“Decima is waiting.” Olympian grunted. “I’ll watch the feed.”

Isisa dressed herself and flew her aircar to the hotel. The hotel was as old as the dock decks. It had served the first pioneers and traders to the station when it was still young and wild. The main banquet hall sat 500 and had a wide stage near the kitchen. An old oak podium dominated the otherwise empty stage. The sides of the hall opened to the street and the space was once used as a casual restaurant.

## Hunting Artemis

The hotel above was packed from wall to wall. There were 360 rooms and 12 suites. All had been hastily furnished and stocked. There were more women than rooms so many had to double or triple up. There had already been fights over the suites. Decima was waiting in the lobby. She met Isisa at her aircar. She wore a modest dress, her hair clean, brushed and tied back. Upon seeing Isisa she smiled.

Decima referred to her as “my Savior.”

Isisa did not feel a need to correct her. *She would learn the Truth in Time.* Isisa shook her hand earnestly, giving the woman an approving smile.

“Decima, I want you to be honest and forthright when you answer this question.” Isisa got right to business after the initial pleasantries. She walked briskly toward the office. “How comfortable are you with money?”

“I’ve been comfortable not having money my whole life.” She shrugged.

“Alright,” Isisa sighed with a smile, “how good are you at managing money?”

“I’ve managed not having money all my life too. You just have to know how much you got and what that will get you.”

“That’s definitely a part of it.” Isisa nodded. “Your Sisterhood needs some fiscal leadership. They need someone to come to with their problems. They need someone who is able to see the big picture. You’re that woman for your sisters, Decima.”

They entered the manager’s office and Isisa sat down in front of the desk. Decima stood by the wall a moment, looking lost. She shook her head and took a step backward.

“I’m truly honored, my Savior, but I have not managed anything. I’ve never led anybody anywhere. There must be someone else.”

“There is no one else. Not yet. This is your time.” Isisa stood again and ushered her into the seat behind the desk. Once she was sat behind the desk Isisa smiled proudly. “Now that’s more like it. It looks right already. I’ve seen you lead, Decima. I saw you protect your sisters when Morta was threatening them. Leadership isn’t about experience, it’s about doing the right thing for your people.”

“How will I know?” Decima’s eyes were filled with fear.

Isisa leaned in and locked eyes with her. She waited a moment and allowed Decima to take a breath. Pouring vibrations of love and strength from her eyes, Isisa smiled. “Use your compassion as your compass.”

Decima nodded, her eyes still filled with fear.

“I will be speaking with Nona next, actually, I would like you to find her for me.” Isisa smiled, moving on with her day. “I will be putting her in charge of our charity foundation. Her heart will light the path.”

“She is so young...” Decima shook her head in disgust. “I don’t understand.”

“She may be young, but she knows more about compassion than anyone I have ever met. I am sure she will balance your more conservative policies.” Isisa grinned.

“She will be foolish, you mean.” Decima’s distain was thick. Isisa walked over to her and put her hands on Decima’s shoulders.

“Think of it as an opportunity for you to teach her moderation.” Isisa said, “You will both learn from working together, and I know that you will both be better for it.”

“With all due respect, my Savior,” Decima spoke with certainty. “but I think there is little I can learn from a child.”

“We only learn from those we respect, Decima.” Isisa knew her words came from Olympian. “She is your sister, as is every woman on this station. You must be able to

## Hunting Artemis

respect her for that at very least. She knows the truth about compassion.” Isisa looked away a moment. “Truly, I think she knows it even better than I do. It is my wish that you respect and learn from her.”

“She is a child of Sol,” Decima nodded slowly, “so I shall respect her. I swear it.”

“A leader is worthy of respect only so long as she respects others. You cannot demand respect if you do not exemplify it.” Isisa walked toward the door and Decima followed. “Always respect your people and they will be there when you need them.”

The hallways were filled with stacks of boxes and palettes of building materials. Olympian was overseeing a major renovation. The building had fallen into great disrepair. Isisa could see building code violations on every floor. Although she doubted the regulatory agency aboard Pollux Max would have noticed.

The banquet hall had bare walls. The light fixtures were in need of serious repair. Isisa had known that the property would be a work-in-progress but problems continued to spring from each wall and room. It sat the entire Sisterhood into one hall, but the lighting was dark and gloomy. The food had been prepared on time but it took forever to arrive at the tables. Only the young girls arrived on time, and only those with help from Nona. When the rest of the women began to arrive they did so infrequently and in large groups.

It was no secret that many of them were at various degrees of intoxication. One woman screamed at the top of her lungs after discovering she had lost a shoe. Another had to be carried to the table, makeup running like black rivers down her face. Each group claimed some part of the banquet hall and did not speak with anyone else.

“Sisters!” Isisa said, standing on the stage and hoping the PA system was working in the back of the hall, “I, Artemis, hereby formally welcome you into my home!”

“Shit, lady, you need a house keeper!” a drunk woman from the back called out to her, laughing at her own insult. “Call Nona! I bet she’d be great for that shit!”

“Sisters.” She ignored the taunts. “I welcome you into my home and call each of you my blood sister. I am your sister, and you are mine. You are now free women, and I encourage all of you to explore that which your soul has to offer to the cosmos. From this day until the end of your days I swear that you will not be chained, sold or abused.”

Isisa stepped off the stage, making eye contact with each table as she walked by.

“To remain free in our day and age requires constant effort. Those who wish to control your mind are even more cunning than those who wish to control your body. They wake up every morning seeking to break your will. You must work every day to improve your mind. You must work tirelessly to keep yourself free from lies.”

Isisa opened her arms wide to encompass the whole body of the Sisterhood. Most of the faces were turned down toward their devices. Few seemed to be actively listening. Fewer still seemed to be following the conversation. A few of the women toward the back had actually passed out on their table.

“Hear me now!” she yelled, seeing a few eyes dart up. “Those who wish to control you will seek to separate you. Together your minds can accomplish great things. If you fight with your sister you will certainly doom yourself.” Isisa walked behind where Decima and Nona sat. “In order to keep yourselves free, listen! You must be free from factions. You must stay united, as one people, first and foremost. You are either considered as an individual or as part of the whole. There should be no faction amongst you. Factions inevitably destroy their hosts.”

Isisa walked around the tables again, seeing few follow her with their eyes.

## Hunting Artemis

“You are all One. Your banner is your Sisterhood. Your cause is freedom.”

“Lady what the hell are you talking about?” a woman named Erika threw her arms up. “What do you want from us?”

“I am giving each of you an opportunity to contribute to your community. I want you to take it. This is the start of a new era for all of you.”

“Is this a fracting joke?” Erika scoffed.

“Yeah!” Shonda laughed. “Is this that one show where they have hidden cameras?”

“No, of course not.” Isisa said, stunned and dismayed.

“Do you think I’m going to live here with a nasty slut like Glenda?” another woman yelled, “I don’t want to bring my son around her or her needles!”

“Who are you calling a slut, bitch?!” Glenda yelled at an increasingly high pitched frequency. The room was slipping away from Isisa and she had no idea how to get back into control. The two women screamed at one another across the main center table.

“Excuse me, miss Artemis?” Shonda asked sweetly. “When are we going to be getting new beds? The one I have really hurts my back.”

“Yeah!” another woman across the table agreed, “I haven’t slept on something that uncomfortable since I passed out on the dock deck on my birthday last year.”

“And as long as we’re talking about improvements we need to talk about this food.” Sarah said from Isisa’s left. “This has to be worse than whatever Bashar feeds his dogs.”

The other women laughed and agreed earnestly.

“Forget this though,” she held her phone up and laughed, “Damien just invited me to a party anyway. Let’s get out of here.”

Sarah and Glenda finished the last of their drinks and rose to their feet loudly. As they left they pointed at Isisa and laughed drunkenly. “Hey, Artemis, you look so cute!”

“Yeah you need to let us know where you shop!” Erika jested back from her table.

They all laughed on their way out the door. Isisa remained silent and stoic. She reminded herself that their petty insults stabbed only her ego. Her heart was breaking but her soul was radiating. She took an extra long breath for good measure.

“Miss Artemis,” a little girl sitting to Nona’s right asked, “you aren’t going to put us in a van?”

“No sweet child. I never did like men anyway.” Isisa shook her head gently, “You’re safe now.”

“That’s great news, really,” Erika snorted dismissively. “How do you expect me to afford the things I need? Are you paying for everything from now on?”

“There are opportunities for everyone to contribute.” Isisa smiled and nodded, happy to have the conversation back. “We need people to help work in the kitchen and restaurant downstairs. And this is your home now, so the hotel upstairs needs to be tended to as well. There is work for everyone. Do your share of the work and you get your share of the profit.”

“So what, do you expect me to clean bathrooms and do dishes!?” She crossed her arms. “You must be out of your mind.”

So challenged, every eye in the room fell on Isisa.



## Hunting Artemis

“I expect a free woman to support her community. Just as it is up to her community to support her, as it is up to her to support her community. It is only by supporting a community of free people that you yourself will remain free. Forsake your sisters and you forsake yourself.”

“I don’t have any sisters here.” Shonda said bitterly. “The only one I trusted was Morta, and she had the sense to bail out of this shit at the start! She was right! You’re just telling us a lies!”

“You want us to do your dirty work for you.” She stood up from the table and threw her napkin down. “Why don’t you just hire some illegals to staff your business?!”

“If your decision as a free woman is to go back to your life as it was then do so in peace.” Isisa stood next to where Decima and Nona were seated. “We are committed to helping those in need. I have created a non-profit charity by the name of the Diana Foundation. It is founded to help the orphans, homeless and impoverished families across the entire Station.”

Isisa rested her hands gently on Nona’s shoulders.

“Nona has proven to be an effective leader and a compassionate soul. I have placed her in charge of the Diana Foundation.”

“You cannot be serious!” Shonda yelled. “She’s barely bleeding!”

“Regardless of her age,” Isisa said with a smile, “She will prove herself through her hard work and dedication to your outreach program.” Stepping over to Decima and laying her hands on her shoulders she continued. “As I said this restaurant and hotel is now yours, it belongs to the Sisterhood. Decima will be handling the financials of both, and she will be appointing overseers to the departments so please see her to request a position.”

Erika scoffed loudly. “Is she gonna start forcing us to say Grace every time we have to take a shit?”

Isisa sighed. “You are free to practice whatever faith you wish.”

“I’ve had enough of this,” Shonda grabbed her bag and phone angrily. “Let’s get out of here!”

When she was the only one to stand up she looked down at the younger girls.

“Get the hells up! We’re leaving!”

Isisa stood behind the girls. “Free woman treat one another with respect.”

“Respect! Ha!” Shonda slapped her knee. “Alright fine! Have it your way! But I know you are full of shit! Any of you girls come to your senses and want to return to the real world, you know my block.”

At that she flung her bag over her shoulder and made for the door. As the door slammed Isisa felt her chest tighten. She made closure by looking at everyone and standing on the stage once more.

“They are still our sisters and we wish them nothing but good. They yell loud and make threats because they fear the Truth. Help them if you can, but be weary of their manipulation. The path to enlightenment is long but everyone should be free to find it within themselves. It is not our place to preach. Freedom is paramount.”

Isisa sat down to nothing like the roar of cheers she had been hoping for. *How had the dinner gone so badly?* She reviewed the dinner in her mind both angrily and sadly. Once the meal was finished Isisa stood at the door as everyone left.

## Hunting Artemis

When the younglings and thankful members of the Sisterhood smiled and hugged Isisa, she saw the eyes of those who distained her. When she saw the children run down the halls in play, Isisa felt herself dragging her boots. Her chest felt heavy and her shoulders were sore. It was as though the whole Station mocked her efforts.

Isisa walked into the recon room and fell into her chair. The cushions of the chair supported her collapse and hugged her shoulders. Her eyes darted from screen to screen but she saw nothing new. Olympian sat on a military style armchair in the corner with his own set of screens. He had a mug of Spice Tea in one hand, leaning the chair back on two legs. Isisa shook her head knowing that he hadn't even considered using her chair while she was gone.

"How was your dinner?" he asked knowing that her gaze was on him.

Isisa stared off into the wall.

"Not well," she grappled with her words. "I've never been bombarded by complaints and demands like that before."

"That's the part of being a leader that nobody likes. It's the part that matters most." Olympian turned his head and gave her his right eye. "Do you know what everyone wants?"

"After today..." Isisa sighed, "I don't know what *anyone* wants."

"The vulgar simply want more," he said with a zealous grin.

"I've given them everything that I can!" Isisa threw her arms to her side.

"Ah, but you must understand that they could be given anything and still want more. That is the cause of their suffering. Those are the chains of their material culture."

"I set them free, Olympian. I took them away from a life of abuse and torture. And then they yell at me like I am some petty servant!"

"If you wish to properly lead them," Olympian took a sip from his mug, "then you must know that you *are* their servant. But that does not mean that you must bow before their every demand. You must do what is right for everyone."

"I just cannot understand why they would treat me this way."

"Because they are ignorant, and brainwashed. Because they have lived long lives with liars and broken promises. They are the vulgar masses that have forgotten the Old Middle Way. You will need to earn their respect and trust. People learn from people they respect. Who in the group opposes you most?"

"The older women, it seems like. Morta didn't even follow my first command to get into the vehicles at the dock. Then some of the others actively sow drama and distrust. They disrespected me in front of everyone. One even used Morta's name before leaving. I have to assume that they are actively operating to erode my authority."

"Those who stand to lose the most are always the loudest opponents of progress." Olympian took another sip of his tea. "Those women are probably the same people who benefited most from that world you just 'saved' them from."

"Who would want to go back?"

"Someone who knows nothing else. They retreat to what they know best."

"So what does Bashar know best?" Isisa asked hopefully.

"He hasn't popped up anywhere." Olympian snapped into situation report mode. "Not one sighting of Curzon or Mahesh either. No communications of any kind. If they are still alive they are bottled up pretty tight."

## Hunting Artemis

“They’re still alive. At least Mahesh is. I’m starting to think that he just spaced Bashar and Curzon and jumped the first ship off station.”

“No, a man like Mahesh lives on his ability to inspire fear in those he considers rivals.” Olympian shook his head resolutely. “He would never let it be known that he ran from a fight. I imagine he is planning a brutal reconquest of the docks.”

“I don’t care what he’s planning.” Isisa gritted her teeth, “I just want to know where he is. I will end him once and for all.”

“Have patience, my Priestess. In time, he will show his hand.”

“After today, my patience has run decidedly out.” Isisa stood up from her chair. “I’m going to suit up and see what information I can beat out of a few thugs.”

“No thug will know what you need.” Olympian did not look back.

“Then let’s consider it therapy.” Isisa grinned at her mentor.

“I’ll consider it immaturity.” Olympian said gravely, leaving his eyes on the monitors. Isisa didn’t even say a word but he continued as though she had asked why. “Because you cannot mend a broken heart by breaking a leg or two. You need meditation, not a damned fight.”

“Sometimes for me they are one and the same.”

“You will find whatever you search for. Seek conflict and it will become you.” Olympian looked back then, stared into her eyes. “I would prefer that you seek peace.”

“I will have peace when my enemies burn.”

“Ah, so you would think.” Olympian’s eyes grew as dark as his memories. “But before their bodies are cold new and more dangerous enemies will be following the smoke. Peace has never come from burning and killing, my Priestess.”

“We need information!” she hadn’t expected to yell it. He turned back to the monitors in silence. She caught herself and softened her voice. “We aren’t getting any of it sitting here.”

“So where will you search for your next fight? A few thugs making silly drug deals? Will you venture into Bashar’s territory hoping to find him at home?” Only then did he look back at Isisa. He had the look of disappointment in his eyes. “You are so ready to jump up, suit up, run down the hall and put a foot up someone’s ass. But do you know where you’re going?”

Isisa stood at the door frozen. He had been right and she made no attempt to refute it. She let her mind run thinking about Bashar’s organization. She thought of everyone who would know the safest of safe houses. Then she realized how much of a fool she was.

“The people who know the most have the most to lose.” She nodded at her own thought. “I need to talk to the women who would have had the most to lose.”

“I should say that might be a much more prosperous vein of data mining.” Olympian grinned and took another sip from his mug.

# 10      ☉ ĩ ĩ ĩ ☉

## Cornered Squared

“If you’re gonna be dumb, you gotta be tough.”

- Sir Arthur Edgar of the Night

Isisa ran facial recognition software against weeks of stolen security footage. The program triangulated Morta’s most trafficked streets. Her registered home was an old apartment complex in Section Four. The hunt would start there. The apartments were built downspin of a sewage renewal plant. The plant was almost as old as the Section itself. A thick layer of rust ran along almost every pipe.

With Sun Disks in orbit around the block, Isisa scanned the street. She stood in the shadow of a well-lit bar and read her wrist computer. A thick gloomy haze settled on the street. The fog left a sticky residue on the pavement. Isisa took a moment to secure her breathing mask.

*Children live in this neighborhood, she thought, living the whole of their lives breathing poisoned air.*

A shadow moved in the alley across from her. Isisa remained perfectly still. She saw nothing. She engaged her Crown and focused on the alleyway. There was nothing to be seen but garbage bags and litter. All the same, she felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. She was being watched and she felt it.

Diving back into the darkness, she weaved through the back alleys. When she had almost completed the flank she saw a red flash before her. Her dartgun was at the ready. Her back was pressed against the wall. Still she saw nothing. Isisa held her breath a moment then moved to the next corner.

She began to regulate her breaths. Closing her eyes, she reminded herself of her Sacred Geometries. Meditation came quicker than ever before. The Red Wolf licked her hand and sniffed her boots. Isisa’s eyes snapped open. She saw a red wolf standing across the alley facing her. The animal stared into her with a knowing twinkle.

Isisa could not believe it, but her Crown confirmed it. A living red wolf stood in front of her. *What knowledge is at work here?* She began to circle the wolf, and it circled in kind. Red wolves had been extinct for three centuries. The wolf moved smoothly, keeping her eyes squarely on Isisa. It was distinctly aware of its position and angle as they circled one another. From Isisa’s experience, genetic clones rarely possessed that kind of prowess.

The wolf leapt beyond the far corner. Isisa chased it out of pure instinct. It was immediately apparent that the wolf would escape. At every corner Isisa rounded she was three steps further from the red flash. Isisa chased it through dark alleys. She ran across abandoned streets and through a syringe-ridden playground. She knew was already beaten. But she continued the chase regardless.

Her lungs burned and her legs nearly gave out and she slowed to a walk.

Before she could curse her body, though, she noticed a dead rat laying on the sidewalk. It was displayed with its nose pointing toward the door to the house. Isisa’s Sun

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Disks soon showed her that the house had several people on the bottom floor but only one person on the second floor.

Feeling instinct more than knowledge pull her, she scaled the building. It didn't take long for her to find a secluded window and gain entry. The room led her to the top of the building's stairwell. She saw a light behind the door across from her. She knocked on the door and a shrill voice answered back.

"I swear you boys don't ever let up do yeah?!" It was Morta without a doubt. "Well get in here, get your medicine!"

Isisa opened the door and stepped in slowly. Morta was sprawled out on a messy bed. A stack of credit chips stood tall on the nightstand. Upon seeing Isisa, Morta threw up her hands in disgust. She pulled the blankets up and grabbed her stack of credit chips.

"I know you don't know the first thing about running a business, so let me give you a clue." Morta counted her credit chips with a satisfied grin. "I'm trying to earn a damn living here and you're presence – I swear to you – does not help my business. I'd bet that you've been scaring off men since you were old enough to kick them in the crotch."

"Give me the information I need," Isisa responded curtly, "and I will leave you in peace."

"Oh my, I think my ears must be telling me lies!" Morta stopped counting and looked at Isisa. "Here you are, the mother of all sluts and whores, and you need little old Morta."

"I need to know where Bashar is."

"I got no soft spot between my legs for Bashar, but I live in the real world." Morta set the credit chips on the bed. "You know, where we can't go around giving things away for free."

"What do you want?"

"What you already promised me. I want independence." She waved her arm about the house. "For me and my girls."

"Your girls?"

"Oh don't worry, I'm not Mahesh. They do their own work. They just live under my house with my rules. I think you know the sort of arrangement." Morta gave a toothy grin. "They chose to come to me after not liking the taste of your Quelaide. We started our own business. We have an important part of the economy to service, you have yours."

"You shall have your independence so long as you do not cause them harm or hold them without their consent." Isisa stated firmly. "They stay because it is their choice to stay and not one minute longer."

"I just want to be left alone. You remind me of my mother, and I'm too damned old for rehab." Morta started counting her credit chips again, "So you leave me and my girls to our lives. Cut us out of your fracting loop. In a perfect world, I should never see your face again."

"The terms are clear and agreed upon. Where is Bashar?"

"Bashar is the guest of our Commander-in-Chief. He's holed up in the President's secure bunker. You know the kind: the sort powerful men use for sex more than safety."

"So you mean to tell me that the Station President is protecting him?"

"Now you listen here: if you think there is even one good man on this Station," the old woman laughed, "then you're dumber than I thought."

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“Thank you for the information, Morta. Know that you will always be welcome to return to your Sisterhood. We’re here for you.”

“Keep dreaming, dreamer.” Morta scoffed and shook her head. “Remember what I bought with that information. You keep your batshit crazy ideas away from me and my girls. You only spread chaos.”

Isisa left Morta with the last word. The old woman had no interest in cooperating with anyone. Isisa could see she was only carving out her own little fiefdom. The women who had joined her were violent and abrasive. The infighting would be continuous.

The Sun Disks dumped their data into her wrist computer. She surmised that the safe house had been built during the First Pirate Wars when the Station was still young. There was only one entryway into the tower. It had been hidden within an air recycling facility. It was off the beaten path and surrounded by gated communities.

The stronghold was impressive. The safe room was on the top floor of a small tower, where pirates were unlikely to venture. There were five guard rooms from door to the safe room. Each guard was equipped with military grade rifles. Each room had cameras and monitors on every wall.

Her mother’s Recon Dragonfly crawled through another airduct to give her a new view. There were twenty-two guards. Each positioned so they could maintain see one another and the doors. The VIP suite was furnished with an entertainment room and a King-sized bed chamber.

The Dragonfly crawled past the last ventilation grate and gave Isisa the first sight of her targets. Mahesh paced in a corner. Bashar and Curzon sat watching the MediaWall. It displayed a live interview with Police Chief Bahadur regarding the violence on the docks.

“Where was that trash when you called him, Curzon!?” Mahesh thumbed the safety on his pistol. “Seems like news crews could get a hold of him.”

“I told you I don’t know. It’s not like him to ignore my calls like that.” He turned his head around to look at Mahesh. “Perhaps if you let me out of here I could actually do something to regain our lost assets.”

“I’m sure you’d like that. Tell your friends where we are and let them burn us alive.”

“Where do you get this? I had nothing to do with any of this!”

“If that’s true, then where is our police?” Mahesh took a step closer, holding his pistol tight. “Use that head your always bragging about and crunch the numbers. How much money have we invested in the police department? What of our investments now? No where to be found when we need them the most! I’ve started to think maybe our investments went into your pocket.”

“Mahesh,” Curzon stood up slowly and deliberately. “You had better get your tone into check. If anyone is responsible for Bahadur’s apparent abandonment it’s you! Bahadur wanted the Ekaterina girl and you botched the job!”

“This pissing contest does nothing!” Bashar threw his wine glass against the MediaWall. He pointed at Mahesh angrily. “That Russian bitch bested you! You let them overrun *my docks*.” He turned his furious eyes at Curzon then. “And you. You know how important those docks are. You said you had insurance. I was told not to worry. That it would be handled.”

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“Which one of you idiots is going to get them back?” Bashar walked over to the now flickering MediaWall and kicked it in.

“If Mahesh would only let me leave I would be speaking with Bahadur at this very moment. Or I could enlist the Council...”

“I’m tired of hearing empty talk! All I hear from either of you is boasts and threats!” Bashar stepped up to them both and got into their faces. “I want to know what both of you are doing right this moment to take back what is mine.”

“We have enough men to retake the docks,” Mahesh said calmly, “But I will not make my move until I smoke out the rat.”

“How does that even matter now?!” Spit flew from Bashar’s lips as he screamed. “Every hour you wait that Russian whore continues to pillage my property!”

“Speaking of your property,” Curzon straightened his tie and looked Mahesh in the eye. “I’ve noticed an income freeze over the last few hours. I wondered if you knew anything about that.”

“Are you stupid? Do you understand what’s happening on the docks right now?” Mahesh put his face to Curzon’s, “We are under attack and it’s all your fault!”

Curzon held his ground and his composure.

“Where were you, when the attack began? Because the loss in earnings is Station-wide, not dock specific.” The curl of a satisfied smirk formed at the edges of Curzon’s lips. “I’m told you disappeared, curiously, at the same time as our inventory. Care to explain?”

“Yes, actually,” he lifted his pistol and put it to Curzon’s forehead and pulled the trigger. When his body hit the ground Mahesh spit on it. He looked at Bashar and softened. “I told you he had sold them all off. I knew he would try to pin it on me.”

“He was still a valuable resource,” Bashar was angry but unmoving. “And he will be difficult to replace.”

“Finding someone to lick the feet of politicians is actually a lot easier than you might think.”

“That’s not what made him valuable.” Bashar shook his head. “He was valuable because of all the people that owed him something.”

“And now they owe me something for getting rid of him.” Mahesh grinned.

Isisa shut off the feed. She closed her eyes for a moment and centered herself. For a moment she pressed her consciousness out into the universe. Every sound became hollow and every color blended together. For a moment she forgot herself. A moment later she snapped back into action, pulling out a small weapons crate.

Reviewing the software and flight commands for her Dragonflies of Horus, Isisa felt confident with her plan. Twenty two Dragonflies took flight from her aircar. The small cloud of nanorobots flew in formation into the facility. It sat on a wall inside the safe house.

The Recon Dragonfly had created a path through the air ducts for the swarm to pass through and waiting on the other side. The twenty two Dragonflies descended into the rooms silently, one by one. Each Dragonfly landed on the back of a guard’s neck. When they had all landed successfully they all at once drove a needle into the necks.

Isisa watched happily as every guard slumped to deck or desk. The poison was a powerful curare that would render their muscles useless but keeping them alive for it. When breathing normally becomes a struggle, it becomes the only thing a person cares

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about. *Phase one complete*, she thought as the Dragonfly made its way to the main VIP suite to regain visual of her target.

She found herself glaring at the paralyzed gate guards. She had nothing but contempt for each one for harboring a villain such as Bashar. Her mind wandered to Olympian's damning eyes. She still struggled to answer his question for herself.

"How many men have you killed since your arrival aboard this Station?" He had asked as she was preparing her poison.

"It's not a statistic I take pride in, Olympian," she had been defensive, she realized in retrospect. "Each one was a monster. They broke the Law and paid the ultimate price."

"So you know the weight of each man's heart? How much about those men did you learn before you passed judgment? How certain are you that these men know who they protect? How can you be sure that they condone his business or support his evil in their hearts?"

Isisa remembered him looking at the gate guards with eyes of pity.

"Many men know not what they protect. They are pawns. They report to pawns." His eyes were lost in painful memories. "Remember your place, Priestess. Death is not to be dealt lightly."

In the end she had succumbed to his reason. Together they devised an appropriate way to deal with the guards. Once her mother's Hacker Dragonfly completed its work, the doors to the safe house opened crisply. Isisa initiated phase three and she locked the aircar on her way to the entrance.

A cloud of Dragonflies, over twenty thousand strong, took flight behind her. Hanging about her shoulders like the leaves of a tree, they followed her through the front door. Once inside the cloud dispersed equally to each guard. A swarm landed on each guard and a low buzz filled the room.

The Dragonflies injected DMT into each of the paralyzed guards. Each man was about to take a ride through the kaleidoscope of their own minds. It would feel like the world was falling out from under them. The nanorobots flapped their wings in pulses after delivering their injection. Each one began to emit a low tone which corresponded to the Crown Chakra as they sat on the paralyzed guards. Isisa hoped that the experience would change their lives. For each of them it would be a near death experience.

"Into that plane one carries only what one brings with them." Her mother had spoke of it in a somber tone. "If your heart holds onto hate then that is what you will bring with you. Your emotions are only knee jerk reactions to an illusionary existence. Your reason alone should guide you."

They would be sent tumbling and twisting until their mind began to evaporate. *If they can successfully let go of their ego*, Isisa thought, *they should be able to do just fine*. The ego was a fragile thing, but it would not give up without a fight. Each man would battle his own demons.

She stepped past the bodies and smiled at her work. The feed from her mother's Recon Dragonfly abruptly cut out. That had never happened before. Checking her wrist computer, the Sun Disks could no longer detect her mother's Dragonfly. There was only one explanation: It must have tripped a security EMP bomb.



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That meant that the nanorobot was beyond recovery. An AI like those in the Dragonflies had grown more effective with each successful mission. That one in particular had been completing missions for her mother long before Isisa had been born.

She could create a replica and load the backup AI, but it would not be the same. The motions and instincts of the Dragonfly would not be as fluid. The loss of one of her mother's best tools embarrassed and infuriated Isisa. She stepped toward the last door and pulled her dartgun from its holster.

The door opened and she quickly checked the near corner. On the far corner Curzon's lifeless body lay in a pool of blood and feces. The rest of the room was empty. The MediaWall was black. She crept toward the bedroom, holding her dartgun tight and ready.

There in the bedroom stood a man looking square at her. He had an artificial eye and a scar running the length of his jaw from ear to chin. She didn't recognize him but her Crown told her that the image of the man was a hologram.

She instinctively took a step back.

"Isisa." The hologram spoke in a deep voice that made her jaw clench. She froze in place. *No one aboard the Station should know that name.*

"Die." At that, fire filled the room and the walls exploded.

# 11      ☉ Ì Ì Ì ☉

## Nano-thermite Surprise

“If people knew the Big “T” Truth, they wouldn’t be able to handle it.  
It would be like a hydrogen bomb dropped onto their laps.”  
- Dexter Malone, Oceanian Secretary of Defense, redacted memo

Sulfur burned Isisa’s lungs. Smoke filled her vision. Her hands were blurry. She held herself up on her two arms but felt like she was still spinning. Her helmet lay melting into the wall. She remembered the shrapnel that had hit her in the head. It had brought with it nanothermite that immediately eroded into her helmet. She had been able to get it off in time. Her brain felt heavy for her lack of oxygen. The unmistakable boom of other explosives sounded below. It shook the floor. Red hot rivers of melted steel poured into the room through the elevator doors. The tower would be in free fall soon. She had to get out.

Her Crown guided her through the smoke toward her retreat zone. When she got close, her Crown triggered the retreat protocols automatically. The wall exploded outward. Smoke poured out the opening into the Station atmosphere. She sprinted across the room and jumped out. Her suit released webbed wings between her limbs.

Out of the smoke she focused on controlling her glide. The air recycling facility had become a field of fire. She was first disoriented but her Crown helped her identify the landing zone. She hit the rooftop and slid to a stop at the other end. She lay there and just tried to breathe normal again. She could feel the poison of fear corroding her mind.

She had been cornered. His trap had almost killed her. Her shield belt had saved her life from the explosion. The tower began to collapse. She had made it out of the tower, but was still being hunted. Her eyes darted to every rooftop before she moved again.

“Artemis, Base.” Olympian came over her headset. “Please respond.”

“Base, Artemis, secure precious cargo. I say again, secure precious cargo.” She felt her heart sink to the pit of her stomach. *If he planned this...*

*Condition Omega*, Her Crown’s marquee displayed the warning in red. *Airborne Pathogen Detected*. She instinctively held her breath, even though she knew it was already too late. A wisp of pink smoke passed over her shoulder. She turned her head to see air recycling pods venting thick blood-red gas into the Station atmosphere.

“Base, Artemis,” she began to sprint toward her hidden aircar. “I will need the following data packet analyzed immediately on everything we have. My attacker is truly *malicious*. He has infected me with a biological weapon. It will infect a large part of the Station as well.”

“Artemis, Archimedes.” When Olympian used his cover name, she already knew what his report was. “The vault has been compromised. The door has been breached by a laser and precious cargo is missing.”

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Her heart began to tighten up inside her chest. She pressed down on the accelerator until she reached top speed. She weaved in and out of traffic, obeying only the laws that conformed to her direction. *I brought this on myself.*

Her morning's confidence melted away into terror and embarrassment. What would her mother think? Isisa had lost the Emerald Tablets not once, but *twice*. Would she still think her daughter was ready? *I placed myself in a situation where I could be flanked. I forgot my most important priorities.*

*He knew my name.* That meant that whoever sent him was one of her mother's enemies. Her attacker must have been a Hunter Seeker. Set had probably been the one that sent him. A man like Set was not of the Light. What if he was on his way to the Station? What terror would he bring with him?

*Bashar has seen my face.* Set had Bashar. Her mother had spent Isisa's entire life protecting her face, and now Set could know it. If a man like that could put her name to her face, her life would be systematically destroyed in every possible manner. There would be no where safe to hide.

When she arrived at the backup safe house. Olympian was waiting outside. He wore a biohazard mask and held a needle. She stepped up to him and he unceremoniously pushed the needle into her neck.

"My Priestess you have been baptized in fire." As though you've passed through hell.

She looked down at her suit. Her armor was scratched and blackened. There were parts on her suit that looked to have melted back. The shield belt may have saved her life but it could only do so much against the intense heat. The Dragonfly bays on her hips were melted shut.

"I feel worse," she said when he pulled the needle from her neck.

"The analysis has concluded," Olympian did not avert his eyes, "that you have contracted a weaponized variant of necrotizing fasciitis."

"Lovely." Isisa focused on controlling her breath.

"It's a flesh eating bacteria that they combined with an airborne virus. You're contagious to anyone you breath on. So far it appears to die without a host however. The shot I just gave you will only slow the virus and buy time from the bacteria. If untreated, it will consume your marrow until flesh falls from bone."

"That sounds particularly unpleasant. We might need to call a bio lab."

"My preliminary search was unsuccessful at finding a solution. The problem is that there isn't a lot of research on it. There is no known cure."

"My life won't mean anything if we don't find a way to get the Tablets back." She started toward the closet where an extra suit was stored. "Do we know where they are?"

"The tracking devices were discarded along the Pylon highway leading toward the docks. The Sun Disks haven't found any other leads yet."

"Prep the Atlantean. We have to assume he is taking the Tablets back to Earth." She changed into her suit as quickly as she could. She came back to Olympian handing her a datapad. The image displayed was a laser-cut hole in her vault's door. She flipped to the next picture she saw the culprit.

A cat-sized drone hovered in front of the vault. The drone was shaped much like a beetle. A video played and she saw it move. The engines were attached so that they could slide up or down the drone's spine. They made their adjustments back and forth to keep

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the drone hovering in place. Arms unfolded from bays in the belly. One such arm had a deep-cutting laser tool at its end.

The motion detectors and alarm systems had been disabled. *But why not the cameras?* She concluded that her enemy wanted her to know the degree of her own failure. Like the mocking hologram before the bomb in the tower, he enjoyed the game he played.

Isisa shut off the datapad and handed it back to Olympian, saying nothing. She made her way quickly to the waiting aircar. She got in and grabbed the controls, trying to control her breath. She could feel her hands shaking. She struggled until she got the vehicle airborne, making haste dockward.

The Hunter Seeker could already be off the Station. What if he was already Earthbound? He had the Emerald Tablets of Thoth! Set would have his hands on them the moment they entered Earthspace. It would not be before he unlocked their secrets.

Set would use those secrets to destroy her parents. Then he would destroy what was left of Earth. Finding a particular ship in Pollux space was like finding a particular fish in a crowded coral reef. The only chance to save everything that mattered to her was slipping out of her hands. Regulating her breath, Isisa focused on piloting. She could almost hear her heart pounding against her chest.

“Artemis, Base,” Olympian’s voice was soothing, as though he knew she needed his confidence. “You will not believe who just called Decima just now.”

“I bet it was Bashar, calling to apologize about the whole thing.” She forced a laugh out through her tightening breaths, hoping to lift her own spirits. “He probably thinks I blew this whole thing way out of proportion.”

“Your friend Glenda just called Decima hoping to sell her information,” Olympian ignored her humor entirely. “It appears that she saw Bashar get roughly deposited into a dock deck elevator. She even got the tail number of the ship for us.” Olympian paused a moment then continued. “I am uploading the information I have now. The Atlantean reads all go. She should be ready for launch when you arrive.”

“Thank you Olympian, this would be so much worse without you.”

“When you defeat him, my Priestess,” he spoke sternly. “We need to speak at greater length regarding your negative mindset.”

“If I survive the necrotizing fasciitis we can talk about whatever you like.”

“My case in point.”

“I’m a realist, Olympian.” Isisa shook her head and weaved in and out of traffic a bit more dangerously. “I don’t think this is the time to argue over my cognitive processes.”

“All you are is cognitive processes! This is the most dangerous hunt of your young life. Your mindset could be the only factor between victory and defeat. You must take every advantage available to you. You must think positive.”

“Gods, Olympian you sound like my father!” she made sure her scoff could be heard over the comm. “I’ve got this! I feel great!”

“Your lies burn only yourself. Please remember your lessons. I want you to bury me, not the other way around.”

“Now whose being negative?”

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“I’m following the Law. There is no word for my fury if you die because of a stubborn refusal to admit your own strength! Great leaders distinguish themselves from failures by taking responsibility. Take control through positive vibrations, Artemis.”

Isisa said nothing in reply. After a moment, Olympian had to have the last word.

“If you let negativity rule your mind it will doom your life.”

She hung up and jumped out of the aircar. The Atlantean purred in waiting.

# 12      ☉ İ İ İ ☉

## Hunter Seeker

“Every game of Chess is dangerous for the pawn.”  
- World Artificial Intelligence Chess Champion

Isisa had grown up with horror stories about the brutal assassins known only as the Hunter Seekers. She remembered many tales of their brutality. Putting babies to blade and murdering Kings in their sleep. They were trained from birth in every art of killing. They did not have memories like normal men. They are conscious only of their contract. Their brains experienced pleasure only by the completion of objectives.

The most feared names of their Guild had never been seen. They were at the command of only the highest powers. The Guild was beyond all law or rule. High born children with sick minds were often encouraged to join the Guild. They accepted few into their ranks, but each initiate became the Guild’s sole property thereafter. Some said that it was the Hunter Seekers that turned men into ghosts. Once shadows of themselves, they became tools of immortal carnage.

To join the Guild neophytes must survive the arena. A hundred would enter such an arena in a year. Only one may live. Only that if it were a good year with strong candidates. The Guild’s violence was often public, but routinely blamed on lone gunman and crazed minds. Hunter Seekers were only known to families with bloodlines like Isisa’s.

She sat down into the cockpit of the Atlantean. The lights in the hanger began to strobe. The vacuum klaxons sounded until the hanger doors split open. While the hanger doors began their slow crawl, Isisa double checked the ship’s systems. She then secured her crash webbing and meditated for the remaining time.

The Atlantean throttled out of the hanger and into the vast traffic nightmare of Pollux Max. The sea of stars lay before her and the gray horizon of the Station behind. The main starport was to her right. She saw the silver stalks of the terminal extending off the edge of the Station. Beyond the terminal she saw the interstellar runways. The long silver line in space was where inbound and outbound flights were charted to and from.

Olympian had hacked into the Vector Control Tower’s computers and downloaded the vector path and current location of FLT1729. Isisa was relieved to find out that the ship had only recently took off from the starport runway. Traffic must have delayed their departure. She locked onto the ship’s signature.

She silently thanked Olympian for the hanger he chose to purchase. Had he chosen something downspin from the starport the ship would already be lost. As it was, she primed her torpedo tubes and began to select her nanogel. In the first torpedo tube she chose a nanogel mixture that would cripple and choke the enemy ship’s engines.

In the second torpedo she loaded a powerful Bitcommando AI called Ibis. Most Bitcommando AIs were unable to deal with sophisticated Bitcommando defense systems. Some defenses required intuition. Her father had written the AI’s code in order to

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specifically beat Bitcommando defenses. Ibis would board the ship's computer wirelessly or through the nanogel contact, whichever came first.

The gray dot in the distance grew until she saw the outline of an old star sloop. The same type of vessel had been used by old Polluxian pirates when the Station was still young. They would raid Earth-bound ships for gold. They would normally kill the crew and leave the ship to float aimlessly. Sometimes they would find a creative way to dispose of the ship, like dropping it into a star or pushing it into a moon.

The Atlantean began to calculate a firing solution with a loud beep.

*WEAPON RELEASE DETECTED.*

Isisa pushed the control stick to the right and began a hook maneuver. A bright flash filled her cockpit. The ship's analysis of the explosion took a moment. The bomb had been a nuclear, but it was the exact same nuclear material that had been used to glass her mother's childhood home. Set had leveled the Tibetan mountain range and vaporized her grandfather's mountain monastery. He had spent his entire life plotting to destroy her mother's family, and at the moment of his greatest triumph her mother slipped from his fingers. It was said that Set had thought of no other mistake since.

A second nuclear bomb came up on her display. She maneuvered the Atlantean just outside of the explosion. With each maneuver her target gained distance. The star sloop could not breach Tunnelspace until it was beyond the field of Pollux's vibrations. Isisa's heads up display represented that limit by a bright red line in the distance.

If she allowed the star sloop to get beyond that line the Hunter Seeker would engage his Mandlebrot Drive and be forever beyond her reach. At every chance she took the inside angle as she chased the sloop. She fired her torpedoes despite being out of range. The two were quickly gunned down by the sloop's small flak cannon.

The next two torpedoes were fired into the ship's flight path. The missiles exploded there and the nanogel was sent in every direction. The sloop changed directions but Isisa continued to fire a torpedo to force it off its path. Inevitably the nanogel found its way onto the sloop's hull. It didn't take long for it to get inside.

Ibis disabled the ship's weapon systems and engines. Isisa maneuvered the Atlantean to board. The sloop's thrusters had been totally disabled. Ibis was over spinning the cores of both power plants. In a matter of minutes they would start to overheat and melt their housings. From there it would take nothing less than a dry dock to get the ship operational again.

The Atlantean created a hard seal with the ship's cargo hold. She wanted to give the Hunter Seeker the opportunity to face her if he chose to. His choice would be to meet her at the cargo hold or attempt to stop the overheating cores. She stood at the breach point ready to enter the ship. The Atlantean's lasers and boarding rigging spun like clockwork. Isisa stood mentally readying herself for the 11<sup>th</sup> hour.

Her family's legacy was at stake. The order of the cosmos was in the balance.

The wall fell inward and Isisa stepped aboard the vessel checking her corners. She saw no sign of the Hunter Seeker. She hugged the walls and made her way to the cockpit. She stopped in the last corridor before the cockpit. The Dragonfly on the wall showed the Hunter Seeker sitting at the helm calmly waiting. There were no weapons or traps anywhere to be seen. He held the Tablets in his lap.

Isisa threw four Flash Spheres down the hall. They exploded and filled the room with smoke and light. Isisa rounded the corner and through her Crown aimed her dartgun

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at the Hunter Seeker's head. Before she could pull the trigger she saw that the wall panels had slid away to reveal powerful sound emitters. Before she had even raised her dartgun to aim they had been pouring a low tone into her body.

There was a booming between her ears like no Flash Sphere could deliver. Her eyes had immediately blurred until her vision washed away into streams of colors. She didn't feel her body hit the ground. Wave after wave crashed over her. Each wave seemed to be breaking her cells apart atom by atom.

Then as if on command Isisa's vision returned, but her body did not. She lay on the deck facing the cockpit. She saw the Hunter Seeker's boots. He held her dartgun in his hand and had a twisted smile opposite his scar. The assassin shook his head slowly.

"So this is the only daughter of Bahlam," he laughed, looking at her dartgun closely. "I had thought you would be a greater challenge. Truly, it seems that some seeds fall very far from their trees. Bahlam must be going senile, otherwise she has finally lost her edge. Ha! Thinking you would be able to protect her precious garbage!"

He got down closer to her, putting his face down near her helmet.

"You seem prone to falling into traps," he stood up and put his heel on her neck. "That is the trait that now ushers in the end of your cult. I thank Set that it worked out this way, I must say," he smiled wide and proud. "You really don't have any idea how much built up frustration he has. He's been dying to take it out on someone, and you're his favorite enemy's only child. I am a lucky hunter."

He looked back into the cockpit. Isisa followed his eyes and saw Bashar sitting in the co-pilot's seat. He looked back blankly, as if no longer registering events.

"Not so lucky for you, though." The Hunter Seeker aimed her dartgun at Bashar and put three poison darts in his chest. The assassin smiled at the weapon. Then he turned back to face Isisa. "I really can't believe you risked everything just for the chance to kill that worthless nobody! You are both weak and foolish. Not a combination your mother will enjoy hearing about while Set roasts her over the burning corpse of your father. I'm going to take you back to Earth now. So you can watch the ritual for yourself."

He chose a poison from her dartgun then aimed it at her. He pulled the trigger but nothing happened. He looked at the dartgun curiously then discovered that he could not let it go. A deep freeze nanogel had already soaked his gloved hand. It was no doubt soaking into his skin seeking bone.

The Hunter Seeker threw the hand into the wall but to no avail. The nanogel began to work its way up his wrist. The Hunter Seeker pulled a long machete from his belt. With one swing and without a word he cleaved the frozen forearm off. The forearm, still holding her dartgun, dropped to the deck. Blood from the Hunter Seeker's arm clotted against his suit's amputation foam.

He kicked Isisa in the head and sent her body backward against the wall.

"There is nothing I would enjoy more than peeling your skin off inch by inch, but I know what Set would do to me if I took away any of his fun. You'll soon know the totality of his wrath. I'll have a new arm before your blood has dried."

Isisa heard the sound of the engines powering up. The ship had not been disabled after all. Ibis must have taken over a fake shell system that was set up to mask the real ship's computer. Isisa would have known had she seen it, but the AI hadn't. Isisa cursed herself for not checking the digital defenses herself.



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Her vision began to blur again. The Hunter Seeker stumbled back toward the cockpit. She would soon be driven into unconsciousness. She had to find a way to keep her mind above the abyss.

The tumble downward was swift. Isisa landed on a splintered crag. In the distance she could only see storm clouds and desert. Above was the moon eclipsing the sun. Seven blue lights pierce through the clouds to touch the Priestess' hands. Isisa saw blood there.

The most dangerous gift failure bestows is that of self-doubt. Her mother had told her that focusing on doubt only multiplied your failures. Isisa's mind swirled as the sonic tone bombarded her. Her mother's voice began to lose significance as she fell into a pit of darkness. She fought for consciousness. She focused on the greatest source of power she had ever known: Ra.

She forced her eyes open. The light burned. Her head spun. The Hunter Seeker was beyond the door. The door was in lockdown. The Hunter Seeker had the Tablets. *Her mother's Tablets*. She had not been killed. She was not even being actively watched. She was meant to feel defeated.

It was a play from her mother's book, something she had done almost as a sport with lesser kings and presidents. The intention is not to kill the enemy but to break his mind. An enemy that calls himself defeated is already doubly so. This was Set's doing. The entire trap had been constructed so that he could break her will.

Isisa began to focus on her own breathing. The sonic blasts were wrecking her stomach and her body's convulsing was making her breath irregular. The pain gripped her body like a vice crushing her from the inside. Every wave pressed her back toward the abyss of a wakeless sleep.

"*I am the Light!*" She screamed in her head, pressing the words to the reaches of her mind. She felt her jaw clench. *I am the Light*, she thought, pulling a rare full breath into her lungs. She concentrated on her thumb. She focused on pushing her thumb against her pointer finger to activate the Talaria.

"I am the Light," she growled from a clenched jaw. Her thumb pressed the button and held it for all eight beeps. The Talaria transmitter dutifully popped up from the ankle of her boot and began its work. *Glory be to Ra*, she prayed as she pressed her mind into the digital projection.

The familiar digital skin crawl replaced the gut-wrenching agony. Isisa took a moment to gather her surroundings. The cockpit was a nexus of computers. She could see the fake shell program that her AI had been deceived by. Beneath the fraud was a fortress with an orchestra of Bitcommando defense systems.

The flight control computer was well guarded. The ship's critical systems were likewise locked down. Security programs had already identified the hacker signal and were deploying routines against her. She dropped three Brute Siege programs beside the flight control mainframe. The programs unpacked themselves and began the process of brute force code breaking the firewalls.

Isisa moved to the computers data sorting center and dropped two Overload Rootkits. The rootkits would unpack independent Trojan programs to seep as much processing power as they could from the ship's computer. The system thus under full attack, Isisa scanned the system for the wave weapon controls.

The sonic weapon program was far from the computer's critical systems. It was clear that the weapon had been installed later and slaved to the ship's computer. She fired

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two missile-like Rootkits at the connection point. The system's defenses had already destroyed two of the Brute Siege programs, and the Trojans were being discovered and destroyed.

Then a ping in her Crown told her that her Rootkits had cut the power to the sound wave projector. Isisa ordered all of her digital weapons to focus on breaking into the cockpit hatch protocols. She regulated her breath and smelled the rusty deck of the star sloop again. The incapacitating sound waves had ceased.

Isisa's eyes snapped open. Except for her Crown and the Talaria her suit was largely offline. Her dartgun lay on the ground in a pile of dissolved flesh. The nanites that had crawled up the Hunter Seeker's arm had simply fed on the flesh and died. Out of a secret compartment Isisa pulled the iron shiv she had created when she first arrived on Pollux Max.

Looking at the needle of iron with newfound confidence, she ran her thumb against it. The iron spread out into a razor sharp dagger. She rounded the hilt and it fell neatly into her palm. Dartgun in one hand and dagger in the other, Isisa stepped up to the cockpit's hatch. Her digital attack had been at least successful enough to control the hatch, and it slid open obediently.

The Hunter Seeker held the Emerald Tablets in his lap. The ship's viewscreen was covered in alerts and warnings. He had been lost in a thought and had only just realized the klaxons. He was frantically trying to understand the new alarms.

Isisa leapt up to the Hunter Seeker's seat. Her left hand held her dartgun to the back of his head as she crossed the distance. She plunged the dagger into his throat with her right hand. His blood poured down the iron onto her fingers.

"My mother did *not* under estimate me. I did and let self-doubt infect my mind. You did and now you lose your life," she pulled the dagger out quickly, putting a dart into the back of the Hunter Seeker's head just to be safe. She scooped up the Tablets and turned on her heels to make for the hatch.

"Isisa, please," a familiar voice rang out behind Isisa's head. She turned to see the face of her mother. She hadn't seen her face since leaving Earth. There were tears in her mother's eyes. "Isisa please come home. Come back to Earth."

Isisa took a moment to stare into her mother's eyes. Olympian's words echoed in her ears, "If you go back to Earth you shall doom both yourself and your Order."

She pivoted and sprinted back toward the Atlantean. She leapt into her ship just in time to hear the sound of explosives behind her. The Atlantean's airlock shut behind her and the ship detached from the exploding sloop. Isisa strapped herself in as the ship was tossed out into void by the explosion.

The ship's chassis whined as the metal hull was stressed, and Isisa heard the sound of shrapnel hitting the ship. Her armor and shielding had saved her from much of the damage, but there was damage to the power core that was causing her some real concern. She could feel the core's imbalance and she knew that it would not be able to continue smooth operation for long.

Pollux Max lay before her viewport. Upon that station there could be dozens more Hunter Seekers waiting to kill her. Her poisoned bloodstream would soon consume her body from the inside. She held the Emerald Tablets tightly in her arms. To keep them safe she would need to live tomorrow. She may have killed her assassin, but Isisa had not yet survived the cut of his knife.

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## One Order

“Alter the flow of thought and you shall alter the delta of ideas.”  
- Pakalon, Bahlam’s father

Isisa fought to stay focused. Her mind was spinning. The stars outside were alien and chaotic. She could name not one constellation before her. On Earth she had known them all, every star and position. She saw no familiar stars except Pollux.

In a matter of hours her skin was expected to slide off of her bones. When she contacted Olympian she hoped for favorable news. After hearing his report she felt stress hormones pulse into her muscles. She tried to focus on the solution, but all she could think of was the problem.

The Pollux Port Authority had outlawed research of necrotizing fasciitis on the grounds that it would be a public danger. The Colonies beyond Pollux did not have such laws. Those Colonies were controlled by the corporations, and they would not give up a lucrative antidote peacefully.

“The only person who could help us on your mother’s list is Nessus. He runs a research lab on Pollux Max.” Olympian continued his report. “Your mother made it clear that he is not to be trusted. And he won’t offer you help without revealing your name and family. No one else on the station is a known variable capable of helping us.”

*Mother would know where to start looking for an antidote.* What if there was no one on the Station that could create a cure? The hours were already slipping away. Was she to chance her survival on a man who would likely betray her? *I could go back, not permanently, just long enough for mother to cure me.*

She could put her body into stasis and send the Atlantean back to Earth. Olympian would no doubt disagree, but he would keep the House in order during her absence. Once cured, she could return to Pollux Max. Her mother’s face as it appeared aboard the sloop haunted her thoughts. What if her mother had hacked into the Hunter Seeker’s ship somehow? What if she had known Isisa had been poisoned?

“Gods!” Isisa screamed at the stars. “Send me a sign!”

When the silence of space answered back Isisa began to meditate.

Time collapsed. Space folded. Isisa could feel a new kind of air filling her lungs. She felt her body begin to glow. Her heart bounced with an ocean’s beat. Her third eye saw the light from her own soul. Her mind saw her place of purpose.

Then, THOTH came to Isisa in her meditation. She had never seen him so vividly before.

“My child, do not weep. This is all but illusion,” he smirked dismissively.

“As Above,  
So Below.”

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His form was that of a man. He had soft skin and hard eyes. He wore an ankh around his bare neck. He held a caduceus in his left hand and a feathered pen in his right. Isisa's mental self bowed at his presence. The sky behind him was blue and the grass beneath him was green. She could smell flowers.

"Do you know why you are here?" Thoth's eyes brilliant blue orbs.

*"No, I know so little, Thrice-Greatest Thoth."* She remained bowed.

"You are here because Set wants you dead and buried."

*"I was trying to escape him..."* She shook her head in frustration.

"And now here you are." The words were colder than his tone.

*"Is he going to succeed?"* Isisa looked up, worriedly.

"No. His plans defy the Law. He has a sick mind, and all such crash against the Law. I have matters to discuss more important than your simple mortality. I have brought to you a message from the Gods of Sol," he unrolled a scroll that had been wrapped around his staff. "These are the words of the One True Thrice-Greatest Gods Above:

"The Pantheon of Sol will no longer tolerate the excess of greed and the deficiency of compassion in their children of Earth."

"The Sol System will no longer be protected by the Love of Heaven. Earth will no longer be the land of milk and honey. No longer will there be ears for your prayers or oaths."

"You betrayed us at every turn for your own material fortune. You have proven not worthy of any of our gifts. Our greatest gift, the world who gave you birth, has been abused and pillaged. Humans respect neither the life nor the world bestowed to them. They seek only material existence and vices of excess."

"Know this, child, that I myself have tried teaching mankind." He leaned in, his eyes a sea of pain. "I have thrice traveled to Earth to teach the Law. Few listened."

"Heaven has sent you precious sons." He continued to read from the scroll. "Each son has been martyred. Each martyr has inspired only greater rivalries. Our lessons have been hidden and abused. Each has been twisted for your own sin."

"We have given you time. With it you have proven yourselves stubbornly dissonant. Despite our wishes that you would join us in the Knowledge of the Universe,

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we can no longer support you. Humans seem only concerned with illusionary mortal lives, giving no thought to the Higher Self.”

“Your greatest sin is hubris. Humanity has been self-involved and dogmatic. There is no more hope for your salvation. The vulgar think themselves slaves to material. The cultured never learn to free their minds. The learned are content to think only of their form and not of their symbol.”

“Adults in your societies are concerned not with Truth but with Illusion. Your children are concerned not with Imagination but with Status. It is time to leave Humanity to its fate. We leave you in the house that you built.”

“Even you, o Isisa, daughter of our precious Priestess and our greatest bloodline, you are not exempt. You would give up the Laws of your mother for merely a warm hearth. You have become obsessed with your own image, protecting your face while building lies. Do you not understand that material is finite? Do you not realize that your soul is boundless? If the highest order cannot produce an alchemist capable of avoiding self-defeat, then even we Gods of Sol cannot help your species.”

“Do you understand the gravity of this, o Isisa? Earth is in rapid decay. Days we count, soon hours, until the ecosystems of Earth collapse under the weight of greed. Humans have been lazy and ungrateful. Life on Earth is ending, and you will be orphaned to the stars.”

“Without Earth to sustain them, the Colonies will begin to crumble. Some of the stations, like the one you would so quickly abandon, will survive longer than the others. If life cannot respect itself, then it is forever doomed to self destruction. We have seen worlds fall this way. We had thought that Earth would be different. We had thought that *you* would be different.”

“Do you have any questions about the message as I have delivered it?” Thoth rolled the parchment back up onto his staff. The two snakes on his caduceus wrapped around the scroll, turning to watch Isisa.

“*Is all lost?*” Isisa searched his eyes for an answer.

“All is never lost, my child. Earth is lost because of the choices of your grandparents. But things do not die, o Isisa. They merely become something else. Earth’s spirit is following her children into the stars.” He raised his caduceus up and pointed at the Sun above. “Yours is the One Order to still hold the Law Sacred. You may have angered the Gods, but you still have my faith.”

“Why are you so different from them?” She was bewildered, especially after everything she had experienced on Pollux Max. “Why are you the only one not to forsake us?”

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“Because I know that humans have learned to obey the Laws before. Because I’ve seen you overcome broken paradigms before. You are capable of learning from your mistakes. Your hubris has once again led you into darkness, but your love will lead you back into the Light again.”

*“So I must to survive alone?”*

“No one survives alone.” He shook his head. “You must encourage cooperation amongst your peers. You must cultivate compassion amongst your children. You must keep your mind positive and your people free. It must ever be by choice alone that they follow the Law.”

“Where humanity goes from here will be entirely up to you. Teach them the Law of Love and the stars may yet see them thrive. The times ahead are dire, your mother knew this. Let me show you.”

Earth was beneath her again as Isisa watched her parents argue in their kitchen. Arguing over the nature of love and the cruel realities of a doomed homeworld. They were beacons of serenity and wisdom in a universe consumed by chaos and greed. They had defended Earth for as long as they could, but their war was over. Earth was lost.

Isisa woke from her vision. Her mind was clear and calm. She remembered the conversation her parents had on the night they sent her away. She realized how much they had believed in her. They had known the risk. She was the future of the Order. Going back would be her doom.

She prepped the Atlantean’s autopilot and set a course for the Colonies. The computer took a moment to calculate the slingshot around Pollux. While it worked Isisa warmed the stasis pod. She would put her body into stasis and command the ship from her Talaria. It was the only chance she had for more time.

She gave Ibis autonomy and commanded the AI to protect her from harm while she lay in stasis. The AI’s birdlike projection bowed reverently as Isisa climbed into the stasis pod. Ibis gave herself a voice through the ship’s speakers and spoke.

“Sleep well, my Lady. I hope that when you wake again we will have a cure.”

“We will, sweet sprite.” Isisa felt her back crawl as she lay in the pod. “I have too many things left to do with my life; this obstacle will not defeat me. From one sentient to another, Ibis, I tell you this: believe in yourself. You are greater than you can possibly imagine.”

The stasis pod snapped shut and Isisa fell into a deep sleep.

When her mind had rested Isisa woke in a digital hall of the Atlantean’s computer. Ibis flew about with the ship AI, searching for system faults. They were securing her from possible attacks. She got to work writing a message to Decima. The Sisterhood had to be informed of her extended vacation. She hoped that they would be able to stick together in her absence. She worried inwardly, careful to keep her message positive.

Olympian called her and immediately surmised what she had done.

“I’m glad you took the opportunity to preserve as much time as possible. What have you decided, my Priestess?”

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“I have decided to contact Nessus. He will likely need some equipment and some organic material from the Colonies so I am already en route. Offer him whatever he wants, so long as it does not break the Law. But I need an antidote that can be used on the whole Station population.”

“That will take much longer.”

“I know. But this Station is now suffering for a sin that I brought aboard; I must do my best to mend it. We can test it on me, but I want the end product to cure the entire Station.” She nodded to herself in a digital body. “I expect that you’ll have his entire life bugged before you even make the offer. I want to be notified of every single recording. We’re going to get to know everything about Mr. Nessus.”

“And what of the inescapable agents of Set? He did not send only one Hunter.”

“Let them come. Once I cure this damnable virus, I can figure out a way to defeat any of them.” She laughed at the illusions surrounding her. “Let Set himself come! Let us end this ages old vendetta! Then, perhaps, I may move on with my damned life.”

For a moment the two sat in an oddly comfortable silence.

“Archimedes.” Isisa said almost inaudibly.

“Yes, Artemis?” Olympian’s eye twinkled the same way her mother’s used to.

“You were right. I’m sorry I argue with you so much. I am the Light.”



Hunting Artemis

## About the author

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I found this **idea**

It belongs to us *all*

The idea is **to be**

The order is *love*

Every **science** and *spirituality*

Looks up into the **sky**

Sees the same *moon*

**Mind** measures the same *divine*

**Perspectives** vary in *human* fashion

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