

Chapter XVI - Beralaxon

Planet Ornebule

Beralaxon Ducelest strode through the tables, ignoring the heads being turned his way. Usually, he would relish the attention being paid to him by the patrons of Ambros Restaurant, but today, his mind was focused on something far more important... and disturbing.

Still, even today, he hadn't compromised on putting up a spectacle of his appearance. He had a rectangular face with black hair that he almost always styled in spikes and bright-blue eyes. Today, he wore a designer, turquoise dress shirt with white pinstripes, white dress pants, and black monk straps. Lastly, he sported his vintage, silver, Zapstromiss watch with a turquoise dial.

Beralaxon looked around the hall and at the mezzanine levels, analyzing the customers. Is he already here, watching me as I walk by? he wondered.

The spacious restaurant was abuzz with the droning chatter of some half a hundred patrons and the clinking of silverware superimposed over a soothing melody being played by the violinist on the stage. The hall was dimly lit with soft, copper wall lights and warm, overhead chandeliers. The tables were thick glass, adorned with floral centerpieces, while the chairs were upholstered with plush, burgundy velvet.

A rich aroma of steaks, pizzas, herbs, and sauces wafted through the hall, enticing enough for a mer with a full belly to order three courses. Beralaxon ignored the rumbling in his stomach and decided to head straight for the rendezvous.

He navigated his way between the tables, the bars, and the automated serving trolleys to reach the elevators at the end of the hall. He summoned one of them and got in.

As it ascended, Beralaxon tried to soothe his nerves by gazing out toward the view of the city from its glass walls. Up and up, he rose above the city center with its skyscrapers interspersed with marble buildings built in the traditional Ornebular style consisting of domes, arches, and columns.

How could he have known? When have I been careless? A thousand doubts assailed Beralaxon's mind just when the elevator doors opened. He disembarked onto the fourth floor of Ambros Restaurant.

In stark contrast to the ground floor, it was much quieter here. The walls were glass, and all the seats were arranged next to them in cabins partially enclosed by padded dividers. In the middle was the drinks bar, surrounded by red bar stools, some of them occupied by elegantly dressed patrons. Beralaxon could even see a few familiar faces, but he deliberately avoided eye contact. The floor was covered in a thick, luxuriant, burgundy carpet so that there was not even footfall as Beralaxon walked over to one of the cabins.

He moved through the maze-like dividers and sat down in front of a table on a burgundy, high-backed armchair. Once again, he gazed out at the city through the adjoining glass wall. His most favorite building, the Cosmellini Museum, was visible from this wall. Its grand, white, marble dome glimmered despite the overcast sky, and its redbrick structure stood out among the drab grays of the city.

Soon, there was a knock on one of the dividers, and a voice asked, "May I come in, sir?"

"Yes, Biurella," Beralaxon answered.

The hostess appeared inside the cabin. She had olive-green eyes and long, brown hair pulled back into a high ponytail. She wore a dark-gray pantsuit with a tea-pink dress shirt.

"What will you have today, sir?" Biurella asked.

"Whatever you can whip up really fast," Beralaxon replied wearily.

"Oh," Biurella said, seemingly at a loss for what to say. "Well then, sir, how about an olconni pizza with—"

"No, not that," Beralaxon interjected.

"Umm... sarbarese macaroni served with—"

"No."

Biurella hesitated. "No, sir?"

"Oh, OK, I want alucca rice balls as an appetizer with some nolce sauce. Then a serving of chicken riola."

"What would you like with the chicken, sir?"

"Some vorselli pasta."

"Plain-boiled or sautéed with—"

"Boiled!"

"Dessert, sir?"

"Coffee-flavored peronna giette. And bring everything as soon as it's ready, please."

"Right away, sir," Biurella said and disappeared hurriedly.

Beralaxon looked at his watch. It was quarter to seventeen, and they had agreed to meet at seventeen. Beralaxon buried his head in his hands as he sat waiting, a thousand doubts probing his mind. He thought of the mail he had received yesterday, something he still had not been able to wrap his head around.

A couple minutes later, a screen on his side of the table blinked to life, and Beralaxon could see the feed from different cameras being worn by chefs working in the kitchen as they prepared his meal. He watched as one of the views showed fresh tomatoes and basil being cut while another showed an oblong slab of lab-grown chicken meat being taken out of the refrigerator. Ambros Restaurant was the only restaurant in the galaxy where customers could see their meals being prepared firsthand. There was even a little countdown timer in the corner — if it ran out before the food had been served, customers would get their meal for free.

Today, watching the meal being prepared seemed too tedious and mind-numbingly slow, so Beralaxon swiped at the screen, which shifted to a news channel. It was muted, but a really animated newscaster could be seen delivering the news about some deadly disease that had broken out at some pool party on Karomoz. Footage of the deserted venue was being played where the pool was colored a disgusting, sickly green. Beralaxon felt like throwing up. He quickly changed the display back to the chefs' cameras before he lost all his appetite.

Another knock brought Beralaxon back to reality. "Yes?" he called out.

Biurella appeared again, simpering. "Sir, your guest is here. Should I send him in?"

Beralaxon looked at his watch. Ten to seventeen. And here I thought the time was crawling. "Is he carrying anything?" he inquired.

"A briefcase, yes. He wouldn't let us open it and said the contents were for your eyes only. The scanner didn't detect anything dangerous, though, you can rest assured."

Beralaxon had lately heard rumors of a device regular scanners were unable to detect — one that could store multiple, deadly weapons. What a stupid thought to entertain at this point, he chided himself. I'm getting paranoid.

"OK, then, send him in."

"Right away, sir," Biurella said and left again.

Beralaxon spent the next few moments in agony, his pulse quickening. He shook his legs and put his knuckle to his mouth as he waited for the man to appear. He tried to imagine what the man would look like but could only imagine a mysterious figure in an overcoat and a hat.

"Thank you," a voice mumbled as it drew closer.

Beralaxon sat at attention as the man appeared from between the dividers into the cabin. He was wearing a hat, but other than that, he was nothing like Beralaxon had imagined. He was a small, wrinkly old man with a pink face, gentle, light-gray eyes, and a scraggly, white stubble. He wore a khaki safari suit that went with his hat and made him look like he came straight from an expedition.

"Hello, Mr. Ducelest. I must thank you for having me," the old man said pleasantly.

Beralaxon's eyes darted toward the heavy, silver briefcase he was carrying and then back to his face. Doesn't seem dangerous, he thought. "My pleasure," Beralaxon said, getting up from his chair. "You must be..."

"Oh, Hersh Bonnel," he said, shaking hands with Beralaxon.

"Well, have a seat, Mr. Bonnel," Beralaxon said, gesturing toward the vacant chair. "What would you like to have?" Beralaxon asked when they settled down.

"I don't really have an appetite after the voyage, I'm afraid," Mr. Bonnel said with an apologetic smile. "I'll just have some soup, I guess."

Don't even dare to share my meal, then. Beralaxon summoned Biurella with the service button and told her to have their 'best' soup prepared, which really meant anything that wouldn't take too much time or effort.

Do I straight up ask him how he found out about me? Beralaxon considered.

"I must say your reputation precedes you, Mr. Ducelest," Mr. Bonnel began. "If the matter at hand were not of utmost importance, I would not have requested you so insistently for a meeting."

"And what is the matter at hand, Mr. Bonnel?" Beralaxon inquired.

"Right," Mr. Bonnel said and put up a finger as if he was about to do a magic trick. He reached down to pick up his briefcase and plopped it down on the table over the screen that showed his soup being prepared. I hope they have the sense to bring my alucca first, Beralaxon thought.

Mr. Bonnel unclasped the case, lifted its top, and then spun it around so that Beralaxon could see its contents. "Do you recognize these?" Mr. Bonnel asked.

Beralaxon's eyes widened just as his jaw dropped. He found his hand irresistibly reaching for the objects to feel them under his fingertips just to make sure they were real, but he jerked it back in time. Where did he find them? he wondered in awe.

The three objects were cubical, ivory stones engraved with runes and symbols, set inside the purple, felt lining of the briefcase. The stone was gouged out circularly from all six sides of the cubes, and the gaps were inset with crystal. The hazy crystal was blazoned with a certain sigil — a tower adorned with a pair of wings near its top.

"By the look on your face, I am guessing you do recognize them." Mr. Bonnel's voice broke him out of his trance.

"Of course, I do. Any archaeologist worth his salt would recognize Nova Blocks of all the objects in the galaxy," Beralaxon said incredulously. "I must ask, Mr. Bonnel, where did you find them?"

"I am afraid I can't reveal much before we can work some things out... which I'm sure we will, eventually," Mr. Bonnel said with a smile.

"What things?"

Mr. Bonnel cleared his throat to speak, but just then, a low whirl distracted them. Seconds later, an automated trolley navigated its way through the dividers and entered the cabin bearing Beralaxon's appetizer and Mr. Bonnel's soup. Turns out, they don't have enough sense.

A drone with robotic claws buzzed out of a compartment in the trolley and grabbed Mr. Bonnel's soup bowl. It deposited it in front of Mr. Bonnel and then proceeded to grab and

place the tray with Beralaxon's alucca. Then it laid down forks, knives, and spoons before it returned to its compartment. The trolley left soon after.

Beralaxon had forgotten how ravenous he was when he had first laid eyes on the Nova Blocks. Now that he dug into his alucca, he almost forgot all about the Nova Blocks. The chunky and mildly flavored rice balls dipped in the spicy, yet herby, nolce sauce along with the cheese that melted in his mouth created an explosion of flavor that drove away all thoughts in Beralaxon's mind at the moment. He devoured by the mouthful until he was all finished.

"This restaurant is one of its kind, I must say," Mr. Bonnel, who had barely had a couple spoonfuls, said gleefully. "I must commend you on your choice of the meeting place."

I know, Beralaxon thought. "Thank you. You were saying something, Mr. Bonnel? Right before our meals arrived?" Beralaxon reminded him as he watched the old man slurp at his soup.

"Right," Mr. Bonnel said after swallowing. "Why don't you tell me all you know about Nova Blocks? Pretend I am an amateur."

Is this a test of some sort? Beralaxon thought. He reached over to pick up one of the blocks, but Mr. Bonnel stopped him. "Just a minute, Mr. Ducelest," he said apologetically and produced a pair of gloves from his pocket. "If you will," he said and offered the gloves to Beralaxon.

Great, Beralaxon thought and put on the gloves. He then picked up one of the blocks and ran his other hand, which released electric-crimson cosmic energy, over its surface. Precise information about its geometry, texture, angulations, and material composition began to flood his mind as his hand skimmed over its various sides. I am holding a Nova Block in my hand, Beralaxon marveled.

"Alright," he began. "They were invented by scientists working at the court of Emperor Yilabar the Fourth of Malora. They were designed to store large amounts of enertrons — then called the 'sparks' or the 'nova force' — at a time. They would then be unleashed all at

once using specialized weaponry to level entire cities. From then on, the sigil of the winged towers became a herald of terror — the emperor would often only need to display the sigil on banners, and cities would immediately surrender."

He recounted how, near the end of his life, the emperor ordered the remaining Nova Blocks to be buried at a secret location, along with the slaves at work, that no one was sure about to this day.

"Hence, all knowledge about the process of the creation of Nova Blocks or the exact method to use them has been lost," Beralaxon finished.

"Yes, about that... that is what I am here about, Mr. Ducelest," Mr. Bonnel said somberly. "We were hoping to regain that knowledge — if not the knowledge of the process of their creation, then at least the knowledge to enable us to use them." He studied Beralaxon's face for a moment. "Do you think you could help with that?"

That's a weird question, Beralaxon thought. He had researched quite a lot about the theories regarding how Nova Blocks functioned, but purely as an academic curiosity. Never had he thought somebody would plop down a bunch of them in front of him and ask him how they worked. Beralaxon's mind went back to four years ago. Now, that was one invaluable artifact. I didn't let it end up in the wrong hands then. What about now? he pondered.

He replaced the Nova Block in its place and peered down at the screen just to double-check if his chicken was almost ready. Removing his gloves, he said, "I suppose I could, Mr. Bonnel. I have done quite a lot of research. But there's something I have been meaning to ask you all this time as well." He pursed his lips for a moment as Mr. Bonnel looked at him in consternation. "How did you find out about me?"

He let his question linger in the air as he watched Mr. Bonnel shift uncomfortably in his chair. "We looked up some of your dissertations on ancient relics, Mr. Ducelest, including those on Nova Blocks," Mr. Bonnel said. "We employed the help of some Karomozian contacts to help locate you. You and your Brotherhood of Cosmos... or whatever you call it."

Beralaxon studied the old man. "Mr. Bonnel? Do you know who owns this place?"

"Not really," Mr. Bonnel said dubiously.

"Me! I own it!" Beralaxon stated, pointing at himself. "Because I have quitted archaeology and that blasted brotherhood for more than four years now! I severed all connections to my past life. And since all of us in the brotherhood used aliases, none of us knew each other's real names — which means they haven't been able to get at me all these years, and I have been able to live my life in peace!"

Mr. Bonnel listened on in stunned silence. Before he could speak, the trolley reappeared, this time bearing Beralaxon's chicken riola and vorselli pasta. The drone set to work, clearing away the dishes.

"And yet," Beralaxon continued, as the drone buzzed about. "Yesterday morning, I receive a mail from a Karomozian archaeologist who claims he needs my expertise on some urgent matters and who happens to know not only my alias, 'Bergamot' but also my real name!"

A silence fell as Mr. Bonnel sat gaping at Beralaxon. "I... I... think there's been some—"

"Tell me the truth, Mr. Bonnel. How did you find out about me?" Beralaxon demanded. Stressed out, he tore into the chicken, freshly laid down by the drone.

Mr. Bonnel bit his lip. Finally, he gave in to Beralaxon's glare. "We contacted your... this Brotherhood of Cosmos after we learned they specialized in forgotten relics and artifacts," Mr. Bonnel admitted. "One of the gentlemen, who goes by the name of Redwolf, gave us your name and contact details, claiming you were the most important member. He said you could be met here at Ambros Restaurant and that you didn't entertain everyone. And so, I mailed you. Then I got a call from him again, saying he and two other gentlemen would be waiting at the Ornebular spaceport should I convince you to come to Karomoz. That's all I know, I swear."

Redwolf and Sphinx and Whirlwind. No. That's not possible. How did they find me? "You have landed me in big trouble, Mr. Bonnel, you know that?" Beralaxon said, stuffing his mouth with some pasta.

"I would beg to differ, Mr. Ducelest," Mr. Bonnel said. "You said no one knew your real name. And yet they were the ones who gave me your alias and your real name. If I may say so, it seems like you were already in this trouble you speak of."

"I don't care. I need to get out of here as quickly as possible. This meeting is over," Beralaxon said, picking the last bits of his meal. "And please, do not try to contact—"

"Mr. Ducelest, listen to me," Mr. Bonnel interjected. "I can always tell them I couldn't convince you to come. They will no longer wait for us at the spaceport. Then you can come with me to Karomoz."

"What? Are you out of your mind?" Beralaxon said incredulously. "Do you think I should just pack up and leave, just like that?"

"These gentlemen tracked you down after four years. Clearly, you have no idea how they did that. Doesn't that mean you are no longer safe on Ornebule?" Mr. Bonnel questioned. "Come with me to Karomoz, and we will see that no one will be able to get near you. You, on the other hand, can help us with these Nova Blocks and any other archaeological finds. You are going to make history if you can make them work. We both benefit from this, Mr. Ducelest."

Beralaxon considered the situation. He was not safe anymore — that much was true. If they had tracked him down after all these years, they would find him anywhere on Ornebule.

Just then, Mr. Bonnel's holophone rang. He fished it out of his pocket and looked at the display. "Ah, it's that gentleman — Redwolf," Mr. Bonnel said, looking directly at Beralaxon. "What would you like me to say?"

"Tell him you couldn't find me. And put it on loudspeaker."

"Very well." Mr. Bonnel picked up the call and turned the loudspeaker on.

"Did you make any progress, Mr. Bonnel?" Redwolf's husky voice, just as Beralaxon remembered it, responded from the other end.

"No, I did not. This acquaintance of yours stood me up," Mr. Bonnel said, sternly. "Never have I been insulted like this in my career."

"He will come eventually, I assure you," Redwolf insisted. "Did you ask any of the staff?"

"No need. I am leaving for Karomoz, Mr. Redwolf. Thank you for wasting my time."

"No, wait!" Redwolf said. "Look, we didn't want to be seen, but we are on our way to the restaurant now anyway. We will find a way to flush him out wherever he is. Just stay there."

Mr. Bonnel looked up at Beralaxon. They can't come here. He urgently shook his head at Mr. Bonnel, who nodded back.

"No need, Mr. Redwolf. I will be looking for help elsewhere. Do not contact me again," Mr. Bonnel said.

"Mr. Bonnel, if you are not there when we—" Redwolf's threat was cut short as Mr. Bonnel hung up.

"What do you say now, Mr. Ducelest?" Mr. Bonnel asked after a pause. "Should we leave for the spaceport?"

They will come again even if they don't find me this time. Beralaxon feared. I will always be looking over my shoulder. "No. We will not go to the spaceport. We will go to my personal spacestrip. We are going to Karomoz in my spacecraft."

"Fine by me," Mr. Bonnel relented with a smile and clasped his briefcase shut.

They both got up and headed out of the cabin.

"Will you not be having the dessert, sir?" Biurella asked as she approached them.

"No," Beralaxon said. "I need you to make sure that the entrance is strictly monitored. If you see three suspicious men around here, do not let them in and inform me immediately."

"Where are you going, sir?" Biurella inquired.

"Best if no one knows," Beralaxon replied and headed toward the elevator.

Do give me your feedback about this chapter, and if you enjoyed it, please consider dropping a vote. Have a great day!