

THE LEGEND OF DARKNESS AND LIGHT

By
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The Legend of Darkness and Light

Kristine Williams

“Tell me it’s not true, uncle Saul.”

“I wish I could.” Saul Trubnick sighed and shook his head as he took a seat on the couch, slouching in defeat. His niece was pacing the room in a short pattern that promised to wear a rut into the rare wood floor if she didn’t stop soon. Her short turns and angry stomping adding to the stress he was already feeling. Next to him, sitting in a chair looking pensive and angry, was her brother. He wasn’t pacing, but Saul didn’t think his nephew realized he was tapping the arm of the chair in a nervous, rapid pattern nearly in step with his sister’s stride.

“Chloe, would you please just sit down? We’re all aggravated enough as it is.” David looked at his uncle. “Do we have any recourse at all? The courts? There must be something we can do.”

Saul shook his head slowly back and forth, keeping his gaze on a knot in the wood slats his niece was trying so hard to wear down. “I checked every option, legal and otherwise. Your father really stepped in it this time, I’m afraid.”

“He stepped in it for all of us!” Chloe snapped. She stopped pacing and stared at her brother, then her uncle. “So what do we do?”

Saul pursed his lips and looked at his hands, mentally working out the best approach to what really had no good way to be approached. He could see nothing positive in what little he had to offer them for hope, but it was all he had. It was a chance, at least, regardless of how slim it seemed.

“What is it, Saul?” David asked. “What did he say?”

“You’re not going to like it,” he admitted.

Chloe pressed her hands on her hips, her knuckles digging in to what little padding there was between bone and skin. “What? Is there a chance? Can we get our land back or not?”

Saul held up his hands. “All right, just have a seat, would you? Let’s all just relax and take a breath and I’ll try to explain.”

“Yes, Chloe, for the love of God, sit down.” David pushed a chair with his foot. “This isn’t the first time dad lost the deed in a game.”

Chloe tugged at the seat, pulling it a few inches further away from her brother before sitting down, arms crossed. “But it’s the first time we haven’t been able to get it back.”

Saul took a long, deep breath and rested his hands on his lap. “All right, I spoke with Resnick, and there is still a chance. He won’t sell us back the deed.”

“Of course not, he knows what it’s worth,” Chloe replied.

“Yes, he does,” Saul agreed. “He knows exactly what six hundred thousand square miles of the southern continent are worth, and he has every intention of making that land work for him.” He rubbed his forehead. “But it’s not the land he wants, it’s something else.”

“Like what?” David asked, sitting forward. “How can he not want the land? Resnick is a baron, it would double his stake on this planet.”

“He’s no baron, he’s a mobster,” Chloe replied. “His tenants pay slave’s wages for their land. He’s rewritten Galactic Union law for the cities on his property and no one does a thing to stop him.”

“Yes, yes, but that’s beside the point right now,” Saul replied. “What he wants is even more valuable, at least to him, but I’m afraid it will prove impossible to -- ” He took a breath and tried another angle. “Resnick wants a gemstone, a vary rare and possibly non-existent gemstone, and in order to get it, he’s offered up the deed to your father’s land to anyone who can find and bring him this gemstone.” He sat back against the couch cushions, dismayed by how much more ridiculous it sounded coming from his lips as it had coming from Resnick’s.

“A gemstone?” Chloe unfolded her arms and gestured wildly in the air. “I have a hundred gemstones in my room. It can’t possibly be as simple as that.”

“No, it isn’t,” Saul agreed. He looked up, bracing himself for the inevitable. “Resnick wants the Darkness stone.”

It was David who laughed, surprising Saul for a moment.

“Darkness? Resnick wants the Darkness stone?” David shook his head, his laughter filled with disgust and irony in place of humor. With a slap of both hands on the arms of the chair, he stood and took up the pacing his sister had been coaxed out of. “Everyone knows Darkness is a myth!”

“It’s a legend,” Chloe corrected. “Not necessarily a myth.” She leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees as she ignored her brother and looked to Saul. “Is he serious? He’d hand over the deed if we could find that stone for him?”

Saul nodded. “To you, or anyone. He’s opened up this challenge to any and all interested parties. Darkness for that deed.” Saul glanced at his nephew, who’d stopped pacing only long enough to change direction. “One fabled gemstone, for a quarter of the southern hemisphere.”

“And an open cattle call to all the treasure hunters of the galaxy to beat us there?” David finally stopped pacing. “Did he at least limit the offer to this planet only?”

“Well, no, not so far as I can tell,” Saul replied. “But it stands to reason only those on this world will have a chance. It’s not something you announce if you’re in the race yourself. And Resnick’s in no hurry. While we all run around the dark continent searching for a tiny little black stone that might not even exist, he’s got your father’s land. He can govern the cities, change the laws, develop the Churling Forests, whatever he’d like. There’s more profit to be made on that land than even we can fathom.”

“So the sooner we find this stupid thing, the sooner we get our land back.” Chloe stood and looked at her brother. “We shouldn’t just stand here and waste time, then. What do we do?” She turned to Saul. “Do we even know where to start? Legend has it the Darkness gemstone is on the dark continent, but that’s a massive swath of unexplored land.”

Saul stood and walked to the table in the center of the room. He pulled a map from his back pocket and spread it out as his niece and nephew came closer. The spark was there, tingling in the back of his gut. The tiny rush of excitement and smell of adventure permeating his senses as the smell of the old worn leather map hit his nose.

He cleared his throat, trying to hide his rising excitement and remain objective and grounded. "According to legend, the dark continent of this planet was central to the religion and culture of the extinct native species that once inhabited this planet. They've found more ruins and evidence of the aliens there than anywhere else on this massive world." He pointed to the land mass in question, furthest north on the map. It was a small mass in comparison to the entire Jupiter-class planet, but one of few with settlements large enough to call cities.

"Now, Ember City is here, on the coast, where none of the artifacts were found." Saul planted a finger on the map, then pushed upward. "The jungles begin a few thousand miles this way, and then over here, the canopy creates an entirely new sky when looking up from below."

The map didn't give justice to the sight Saul had witnessed only a few times himself. Trees that grew so tall and thick, their branches intertwined, forming a canopy above so solid, even radar and biometric sensors had trouble penetrating. From below, the sky was blackness, even at high noon when the blazing sun was bathing Ember City in temperatures in excess of eighty degrees on the Fahrenheit scale.

Beneath the forested canopy was a jungle, sweaty and dank, filled with swamps and unpredictable rivers prone to changing their path in the middle of a season. Roots grew above the sandy ground as often as beneath, making any trek a treacherous venture.

"Now, the largest of the ruins are here, in the center of the Dark Forest," Saul tapped the leather map. "Archeologists have explored about a third of them, they estimate. Partly because of the sheer number of ancient buildings and catacombs, but partly because the buildings are just that -- catacombs. Men have been lost for months in the mazes, many of which travel deep under ground."

"You're painting a lovely picture here, Saul," David said. "But I think we all knew this gemstone wouldn't exactly be mounted and dangling around a high society lady's neck. Just how in the hell are we supposed to find it in there?"

"By dissecting the legend, of course," Chloe replied for her uncle. She leaned over the map and touched the dark northern continent with a finger. "Now, what I've heard was that this stone -- Darkness -- is a black Utopian diamond, darker and deeper black than any other. And the story says the aliens who once called this world home worshipped it, and kept it in a temple somewhere here in the Dark Forest."

"Oh, well, there you go," David replied. "It's in a temple." He gestured toward the map. "In one of a thousand temples, only ten of which have even been touched by archeologists in the past two hundred and eight years." He threw his hands up, then crossed his arms and shook his head. "It should be easy, then."

Chloe straightened. "Look, at least I'm trying, all right? Are we going to just sit around here and complain, or try and do something about this new level of hell our father saw fit to deal us?"

Saul looked up at his brother's children. They both had their mother's fire, dark eyes and black hair, and her athletic build, thank the gods. He'd worked hard on his own physic through the many years, fighting against the familial tendency toward sloth and debauchery that his brother had given in to without a struggle.

What on old Earth had led such a beautiful and intelligent woman as Karina Clark to marry Raul Trubnick was beyond Saul's understanding. But at least the union had

produced two well balanced, intelligent offspring who thankfully had enough sense to take after their mother.

“That’s not all there is to the legend,” Saul said, pointing again at the map. “There’s another side to the stories, one that may hold more water. It would explain Resnick’s desire to own the stone, at least.” He placed a palm on the map and looked up at his niece and nephew. “They say the gemstone is called Darkness not only because of the extreme black appearance, but because this stone brought about the end of the entire native species. I’ve heard it said that the aliens who called this planet home, and died off long before humans took to space, created the stone and used some kind of alien magic or science to place in it all negative emotions. Hatred, envy, jealousy, anger. They removed from themselves all of those emotions and placed them in the stone, hoping to live peaceful, happy lives. Only something went wrong, and instead of capturing all the negative energy, the stone amplified it, spreading it out over this entire planet.” He moved his hand over the whole map, feeling the soft leather beneath his palm. “The evil inside the stone wiped out an entire species, but not before the last survivors could lock it away inside a temple, surrounded by poisons and traps least it ever be discovered.” He shook his head, feeling the old sense of adventure welling up from inside him once again. Fighting back a grin, he shrugged. “That’s the legend, anyway. I can only assume Resnick wants the stone because he believes it does hold some sort of power. He could want to try and harness the curse.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Chloe said in disgust. “It’s just a diamond.”

“Of course it is,” Saul agreed.

“And the aliens were probably wiped out by a simple virus. Or their own lack of progress.”

“Indeed,” Saul nodded.

“All right,” David held up both hands. “Silly stories aside, how do we get to this thing before anyone else? Assuming it does exist. And assuming we can find it?”

Saul shook himself out of a rising memory and cleared his throat once again.

“Well, I know a guy who might just be able to pull this off, if we can get to him before anyone else does.” He folded up the soft leather map and slipped it back in a pocket as he walked over to the wall directory. “He’s a pilot, and treasure hunter for hire. Likes to think of himself as a retrieval specialist.”

“And he’s good?” Chloe asked.

“Good enough to find the Documents of the Damien Cluster, and smart enough to retrieve the lost Amulet of Namabia.” Saul flicked on the directory and dialed up Ember City. “And he was brave enough to fight his way through the volcanoes of Vulcan-Nine to find the fabled city of Tracala. I figure he stands as good a chance as any to find Darkness.”

“But will he?” Chloe followed Saul to the phone book. “Will he find it for us, I mean, and not just turn it in to Resnick himself?”

“Oh, I don’t think--” Saul paused, finger poised over the dial command. He shot a glance back at his nephew. “That is, I don’t see why he wouldn’t. We’re going to pay him, after all.” He hit the dial command and pursed his lips as the connection was made. “I mean, what would he want with that much land?”

The directory lit up a moment later, and a soft, female voice recorder started speaking.

“I’m sorry, the person to which you wish to speak is not answering. Would you like to leave a message?”

Saul disconnected. “One thing Jayden Pearce never does is answer his damn calls, or return messages.” He forced a smile. “We’ll just have to go ask him in person. It’ll be better that way, but we’d better hurry.” Starting back toward the main room, he ushered David and Chloe ahead, pushing them toward their respective hallways. “You two go pack, and make it quick.”

“Pack?” Chloe had to hurry her pace to keep up with the hand pushing her forward.

“Pack light,” he replied. “We’ll buy whatever gear we need in Ember City. And pack for rough conditions.” He stopped when they reached the Y of the connecting hallways that led to each sibling’s personal apartments. “Imagine your worst day mapping the Churling Forests and times that by ten. Or a hundred!”

Saul watched them go, then walked back to the table and pulled a second map from his pocket. As he unfolded it, the smell of the old leather tickled his nose and stirred up old senses once again. This time, he didn’t quell them, but let them rush through his veins like a shot of adrenaline.

“To the hunt, once again,” he breathed quietly, smiling down at the map. “God how I’ve missed this.”

Chapter 2

Saul stood at one of the many windows lining the deck of the passenger transport and watched the ocean waves cresting below the massive, lumbering ship. Only capable of a traveling altitude of one hundred feet, these continental ferries were still the preferred method of travel across the vast oceans of the planet Echo. They'd considered chartering a private ship, one of many smaller vessels that could attain higher altitudes and cross the seas in half the time as the public ferry, but they were notoriously difficult to secure. By the time they could have reserved a private ship, argued price with the pilot, negotiated speed and arrival times, they could have walked on to a ferry and walked off at the desired destination in under ten hours.

He could feel the adrenaline rising inside with every passing mile. The tingling sensation in his chest, the slight elevation in heart rate, the anticipation as he imagined climbing through the ruins of the dark continent in search of treasure and adventure.

Saul had been with Pearce when they found the lost Amulet of Namabia. An ancient symbol of the royal house of Namast, in the Uncharted Rim, the Amulet had been secreted away in the center of a vast system of caves, protected by traps and puzzles the likes of which he'd never seen before. But Pearce had a knack for just that sort of thing. Saul often thought Jayden Pearce's mind worked differently than most, the way he could instinctively work out tricks laid out as traps by long dead cultures designed to protect their secrets and reward only the most cunning.

He could remember that month-long trek as if it happened last week. The cold of the frozen mountain giving way to a jungle-like heat in the caves, where vines grew over resin-covered rock walls and ancient warnings carved in stone had even the most hardened treasure hunters jumping at shadows.

"Oh my God, you're enjoying this."

Saul turned, startled by his nephew's approach, and surprised to realize he'd been grinning like an old fool.

He shook his head and coughed. "Enjoying? No, heaven's sake. Enjoying the fact that my selfish brother has once again squandered his children's inheritance and left me to try and fix it?"

David handed his uncle the bottle of beer he'd gone to retrieve.

"How could I be enjoying that?" Saul raised the bottle in thanks. "Though after this, when we get that deed back, I don't care what your mother says. You need to get a judge who doesn't owe your father a gambling debt and have his name stricken from the damn thing. Maybe if he can't gamble away a quarter of a continent, he'll finally stop getting himself into such high risk games." He took a drink of beer, hoping to wipe clear any traces of the smile, but he could feel it was still there, tugging at the left corner of his mouth.

"Nice try, but you're still grinning." David crossed his arms and looked at Saul. "Might as well let it out, before Chloe gets back from the bathroom."

Saul shrugged as innocently as he could manage. "Get what out?"

"You and this Jayden Pearce guy, you've been out with him on treasure hunts before, haven't you? That's how you know him, isn't it?" David raised one eyebrow, an

annoying little trait he shared with his mother that he could use to distraction at times.
“What was it, then? Those Document things?”

Saul gave in to his reverie. “The Amulet of Namabia,” he replied, grin spreading across his face once again. “Pearce got us into the caves, and right away I knew we were in for it.” He raised both hands, animating his tale. “At first they were easy to miss. But the deeper we went, the more I noticed these carvings in the cave walls. Well, what few parts of the cave walls you could see. Most of the rocks were coated in this resin, really odd smelling stuff that you thought should burn, but really it just sorta glowed, casting everything in this eerie bluish light.” Saul took a breath, remembering the sight. “Anyway, these carvings were warnings, threatening death and curses and all manner of vile fates if we were to keep looking for the Amulet.”

“But you kept looking.”

Saul feigned offense. “Of course we kept looking. Those warnings are for sissies,” he said. “The deeper we went into the heart of this mountain, the more threatening the carvings became, and Pearce read every single one of them, but not because he was scared. He knew, better than anyone, that those warnings held clues.” Saul tapped his forehead. “That’s what makes this guy so good, he’s got a sense for these things.”

“That and a map, no doubt,” David replied dryly.

“It wasn’t a map, it was more of a . . . notebook,” Saul shrugged. “Anyway, we came to this chamber, well beyond the final warning, and I figured that was it, we were at the end of the line.” He paused, letting the memory of that massive chamber fill his mind. “The cave opened up to a chamber so huge, I bet this entire transport could have fit inside.”

“Another tall tale, uncle Saul?” Chloe stepped up to the two men and crossed her arms, matching her brother’s look and stance. She didn’t have David’s talent with the single eyebrow, but her face had no trouble expressing doubt.

“Tall, yes,” Saul replied. “But not a tale. There were statues all around this chamber. Massive stone things, with incredible details carved in gold and copper.” He raised both arms in demonstration. “Each statue represented one of these old gods, and they all had arms stretching out, holding various things like spears or daggers, one had a gold and copper fish, damndest thing I ever saw. No one before us had ever gone beyond this point, but that’s because they couldn’t figure out what Pearce had figured out.”

Chloe rolled her eyes at her brother, but consented to ask. “Which was?”

Saul grinned in spite of her sarcasm. “The statues were the key,” he said. “Pearce had been studying those warnings, each one claiming what the various gods would do to punish anyone trying to take the Amulet. But Pearce saw what all the other treasure hunters had missed.” He licked his lips, the beer completely forgotten in his hands. “Those statues arms were a puzzle sorta thing.”

“A puzzle sorta thing,” David echoed. “You mean, like a puzzle?”

Making a point to ignore the jibe, Saul continued. “Each arm had to be moved into a certain position, and to do that, someone had to climb all the way up onto the shoulders of these things and work some little hidden panels to move the arms.” Saul took a breath and sighed in awe at the memory. “Now, in my younger years, maybe I coulda done it, but with these old bones . . . I tell ya, Jayden clambered right up those

things, some of them thirty, even forty feet off the ground. There were times he was dangling by nothing more than his fingertips, shimmying along those stone statues. But damn if he didn't figure 'em all out."

"What happened when he moved the arms?"

Saul couldn't help noticing his niece's expression and tone had lost all of their sarcasm. Both her and her brother were listening, probably unaware of the intensity of the interest showing plain on their faces. He leaned closer and continued in a conspiratory tone.

"Once he moved that last statue's arm into the right position, the floor opened up. I don't mind tellin' you, I nearly needed a change of shorts. I was standing down below, kinda felt like I should be ready to catch Pearce if he slipped or something, though sure as the sky is red, if I'd have tried, he'd have killed us both. Anyway, the whole chamber started shaking, like a quake, but then the rocks I was standing on started to slide and shift, and the middle part fell away. Took a few minutes for the dust to clear, but when it did, we could see the ground had sorta spiraled down, like a funnel, only making steps with the rocks that had a second before been nothin' but the floor."

"Down?" David blinked. "I thought you were already deep inside the mountain."

Saul nodded. "Yep, down. Surprised me to no end that there was any more 'down' left to go, but down we went, into a maze of tunnels, some of which were flooded with rank, algae-infested water." He sighed and straightened back up, smiling.

"That's it?" Chloe glanced over her shoulder, then stepped closer to her uncle. "Where was the Amulet?"

"Oh it was down there, in the tunnels," Saul replied casually. "Sitting in this little statue's belly. It was all pretty much downhill after that, so to speak. Sure, there were the Namabian flying lizards to deal with, and the shifting vines that nearly had us hopelessly lost down there in the dark, but those are stories for another time." Saul could see his tale had caught their attention in all the right ways. He started toward the front of the ferry with a purposeful stride. "Looks like we're docking."

Behind him, David and Chloe had to hurry and catch up.

"So this Pearce guy, if he's not answering his calls, where do we find him?" David asked as he matched his uncle's pace.

"The easiest way would be to find his ship at the docks and wait," Saul replied as they made their way down the ferry ramp and out onto the pedestrian walk. "But if he's not there, we'd have to wait God knows how long. And my fear is someone's beaten us to him. If that's the case, he could already be on his way to the Dark Forest as we speak."

"Resnick just issued this challenge a day ago," Chloe said. "How could anyone already be heading out there?"

"Don't underestimate our competition," Saul warned. "Most of these treasure hunters live for this. They're ready at the drop of a hat for just about any occasion. The only thing that might slow them down would be any lack of particulars concerning the legend they wanted to track down. Though I'd wager every one of them is so well versed in every legend, myth or fable from every system and every world in it."

Once they rounded the first corner off the docks, the crowds from the ferry dispersed, heading into the various quarters of Ember City, hailing cabs or walking to the many shops and markets nearby. Saul paused at the corner, scrutinizing the many walkways branching off in all directions.

There were hotels to the left, an open produce market to the right, department stores and specialty shops directly ahead of them, but angling off to one side, wedged between the span of hotels and the boutique section stood a group of pubs. Lining that street, a traveler could find everything from a high-end club serving colorful drinks with flowers floating in them, to seedy little taverns serving only whisky and beer to regulars and the occasional college student during pledge week.

“What are you looking for?” David asked.

Saul smiled, then pointed down that street. “My guess, that one with the metal roof.”

“Oh, great,” Chloe hefted her bag over one shoulder. “This Pearce guy is gonna be in there, passed out under a table? I’m pretty sure I’ve seen this in a movie.”

They merged with the pedestrians, then angled off down the tavern road while the majority of travelers continued on to the shopping district. Saul glanced in the windows of each pub and tavern they passed, but he was convinced the one he’d picked would be right. He seemed to recall Pearce mentioning a cousin who owned a bar on this street, and complaining about having had to help put up that metal roof when the fancy-assed -- Pearce’s words -- special order glass roof cracked during a sonic storm.

As soon as Saul saw the sign hanging from that metal roof, he was sure.

“Hidden Treasure, of course,” Chloe said with a shake of her head.

David grinned and pushed his sister through the door. “Lighten up, sis. We’re literally on the edge of what could be the adventure we’ll tell our grandkids about.”

“If we survive,” she shot back. “And if we succeed.”

Saul walked straight to the bar, giving his eyes a chance to adjust to the dim lighting. The place was about half full, which was pretty good considering it was midday of a standard work week cycle. The bartender was busy chatting up a pretty patron at the far end of the bar, so Saul turned around to scan the room, hoping to catch sight of Jayden Pearce, before someone else did.

The man he did find coming out of the men’s room and heading for a table worried him more than he wanted to admit.

“We may be too late,” he said, nodding toward the man then turning quickly so he wouldn’t be spotted.

“What?” David glanced around, then stepped closer to his uncle. “Is Pearce here?”

“That man over there, table next to the call boxes,” Saul lowered his voice slightly. “That’s Bernard Drake.”

“*The* Bernard Drake?” Chloe gasped, clutching her brother’s shoulder. “I’m kidding. Who the hell is Bernard Drake?”

“Bernard Drake is one of the preeminent treasure hunters of this sector,” Saul replied, ignoring Chloe’s joke. “You can bet credits to candy he’s heard of Resnick’s challenge.”

“Okay, but if he’s a treasure hunter himself, then why would he be here looking for Pearce?” David asked. “Why isn’t he already halfway out to the ruins already?”

“If I had to guess, and that’s pretty much all I can do right now, I’d say his people are busy getting his ship supplied, or maybe verifying some facts. But I’m thinking he’s here right now waiting to see who comes along and hires Pearce.”

“So who hired him?” Chloe asked with genuine curiosity. “Or is he after the stone so he can get the deed for himself?”

“And for that matter, what’s to keep this Pearce guy from doing that?” David asked again.

“These people aren’t like that. Most of them aren’t even in this for the money,” Saul replied as he kept an eye on Drake from across the room. “It’s the glory for them, or for some, the excitement and challenge. Finding something most people don’t believe exists, or reaching it before anyone else can. Deciphering the clues, working out the puzzles.”

“Avoiding the curses, deadly traps, dangerous creatures,” David added. “Okay, so what does this Pearce guy look like then? Old, grizzled, graying temples and sun-dried skin?”

“Does he wear leather and carry a whip?” Chloe teased.

Saul laughed shortly. “He’s your age,” he replied. “Thirty two, thereabouts, I’m not positive. Six one, athletic but kinda wiry. Dark hair, blue eyes, we’ll have to keep an eye on your sister.”

“Yum,” Chloe breathed. “I think I found him.”

She pointed to the far end of the room, where a man was standing up from behind the bar, wrench in hand and cursing at something near the floor.

“That’d be him,” Saul nodded, then moved down the bar as casually as he could manage, hoping Drake wouldn’t take notice of another patron ordering a beer. “What kind of hidden secrets does a man find behind a bar, I wonder?”

The spark of recognition was instantaneous. “Saul?” Jayden Pearce smiled and tossed the wrench to the bar, then grasped the offered hand. “Saul Trubnick, how the hell are ya?”

“A little older, a little wiser,” Saul replied, smiling widely as he shook Jayden’s hand. “I brought company this time.” He held an arm out to David and Chloe, who’d followed him to the far end of the bar. “My nephew, David, and niece Chloe. I’d like to introduce you to Jayden Pearce, best treasure hunter in the quadrant.”

“My God, it’s true then,” Jayden shook each of their hands in turn. “You do have family.”

“And you do have a reputation to live up to,” Chloe replied. “I hope you’re up to the task.”

Jayden blinked, looking at Saul. “There’s a task?”

“There is,” Saul replied. He’d hoped to keep things quiet, but quiet was never really Pearce’s style. Nevertheless, he leaned closer and lowered his voice. “It’s important, and I’d go so far as to say urgent. And you’re gonna love it.”

“I’m piqued,” Jayden replied, leaning on the bar. He tilted his head to see between Saul and David. “Are you piqued, Bennie, or is this not news to you?”

Saul looked over his shoulder and saw Bernard Drake raise a glass and shoot Pearce a nasty look. “I’m piqued any time someone’s fool enough or drunk enough to enlist your help on a matter, Jayde.”

“Jackass,” Jayden muttered while smiling.

“Is there somewhere private we can talk?” Chloe asked, shooting a glance back toward Drake. “It’s important, and we can make it worth your while.”

Jay glanced at Saul, then shrugged and slid the wrench down the length of the bar. “Hey, Frankie, try not to break it again!” He stepped out from behind the bar. “We can go to my ship and have a chat. Can’t ask for more privacy than that.”

“Good,” Saul nodded and fell in step beside Pearce, throwing a quick look in Drake’s direction. “This job is right up your alley, but we’ll wait till we get to your ship to discuss it.”

They left the bar and walked back toward the docks, but angled north from the passenger ferry terminal to the private docking district. The sun was high in the sky, and the pedestrian walkways were populated heavily by the lunchtime crowd, so David and Chloe were forced to follow behind their uncle as they made their way toward the rental bay Pearce’s ship was berthed in.

“You look good, Saul,” Jayden remarked as they walked. “Maybe a little softer around the edges, but good.”

“I do all right,” Saul replied with a grin. “Been yearning lately for something besides cleaning up my brother’s messes, though.” They rounded a corner deli and took a sharp right down a long pier. “I gotta say, the circumstances around this whole thing notwithstanding, it’s exactly the kind of adventure I’ve been craving lately. I’d have been happy coming to you with the idea alone, but time is of the essence here.”

“Competition, you mean?”

Saul nodded. “Drake for one, but I’m positive there will be more, sooner or later.”

They’d stopped at a gangway walkup next to a modestly sized ship that served as Jayden Pearce’s main method of transport and housing.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Chloe stared up at the ship, held in place by docking clamps in a residential berth. “I suppose you’re going to tell us the dirt helps keep an airtight seal?”

“This is a space ship,” David replied. “We need to get to the Dark Forest, uncle Saul, not another world.”

“Relax.” Jayden pulled a keylock remote from his pocket and pressed a button, sending the gangway down from the upper hatch cradle arm. “The dirt’s for effect. Tourists expect that sort of thing when they’re chatting up a treasure hunter, yanno. Gives the old bird a bit of mystique.”

Saul followed his friend up the gangway. “Don’t worry, it’s a sound ship. Took us to the Uncharted Rim comfortably enough.”

They stepped through the hatch into a wide receiving area, then down a long corridor to the room Jayden used as an office and planning room. The space was situated directly above the bridge, and maps covered every flat surface in the room. There were notebooks stuffed into every nook and cranny, while artifacts and assorted odds and ends filled up the rest. A table in the center of the room had five chairs and a nice view of the massive exhaust port of the ship berthed twenty feet ahead.

The interior of the Marco Polo might not have been pristine, but there was an order to the clutter, and the ship itself was a solid and perfectly clean industry standard.

“How’s this for someplace a little more private?” Jayden asked. “Anyone want coffee? Tea?” He crossed the room and poured himself a cup, then turned around and leaned back against the counter.

Chloe folded her arms and glanced around the room, while David took a seat at the map-strewn table.

“We need you to find Darkness,” Saul said simply.

The coffee that had just touched Jayden’s lips experienced a violent change in direction, misting out over the carpeted floor.

“Darkness?” he asked, eyebrows raised. “You mean the Darkness gem? As in *the* Darkness gem?”

“Wow, you were right, Uncle Saul, this guy’s real bright,” David remarked.

Saul held up a hand and took a step closer to Jayden, letting the shock settle out a bit. “If anyone could find that thing, my money’s on you.”

Jayden laughed shortly, glanced at his coffee, then set the cup down and walked to the large window. “Darkness is just a myth, you know. Probably not even real.”

“Or it is,” Saul countered.

Jayden turned around. “What makes you want that thing, anyway? I thought you guys owned half the southern continent or something. A stone like that isn’t gonna be so impressive a token as half a continent.”

“It’s a quarter,” Chloe corrected. “And that’s precisely why we need Darkness.”

“You see, their father -- my drunken asshole of a brother -- has a gambling problem. He has a tendency to get into high-stakes games and put up the deed to their land as a wager.”

Jayden nodded. “Ah, I get it. And he lost, so you’re broke and figure that gemstone would be worth . . . what? No one’s really put a value on it, seeing as how it’s not even real and all.”

“Not exactly,” Saul explained. “The man who won the deed wants Darkness, and he’ll give back the deed to their land if we can get him that stone.”

“He’s giving the deed to *whoever* gets him the stone,” David added. “Hence the competition issue, and need for privacy.”

“Okay,” Jayden shrugged. “Still, what makes you think Darkness is real?”

“We don’t,” Chloe said simply. “But Resnick does, and it’s the only thing he’s willing to trade for our deed.”

Saul watched Jayden’s face for the spark he’d seen many times before, a hint that he was tempted, despite the odds. “What do you know about the legend of Darkness, Jay? There must be clues, something in all the stories and tall tales that would give you a hint whether or not the gemstone is real.”

Jayden was rubbing his chin, staring down at the carpet. He nodded slowly. “Sure, yeah, I know the legend. I also know they say this stone possesses the darkest, most deadly aspects of the alien race that used to live here. And that the very darkness contained in that gem destroyed their entire species.”

“And the Amulet of Namabia was cursed,” Saul said. “Like the Documents of the Damien Cluster were said to melt the eyes of anyone who read them.” He waved a hand. “Neither of those proved to be true.”

“Hey, I got sand in my eyes when I read the first few lines,” Jayden said.

“Any number of treasure hunters could be out there, right now, looking for this thing and beating us to it,” David stood, pushing his chair back roughly. “If we’re wasting our time asking you, just say so.”

Chloe put a hand on her brother’s shoulder and looked at Pearce. “We’re willing to pay you three hundred thousand credits.”

Saul saw the spark ignite in Jayden’s eyes.

“Three hundred thousand, you say? That’s quite a lot of credit.”

“The land our father lost is worth six billion,” Chloe shrugged. “You do the math.”

Saul smiled slightly as he saw that familiar spark grow larger. “Are you in?”

Jayden looked at him, then Chloe and David, then turned to Saul again. “They’re coming with?”

“They’re tougher than they look,” Saul replied. “Just tell us what we need, what we’ll be up against, and we can get the supplies and be ready in an hour.” He followed Jayden to the table and watched as his friend pushed maps out of the way, looking for one in particular. “You’ve been to the Dark Forest before, and see the ruins. What can we expect?”

Jayden shook his head as he found out the map he’d been looking for. “The ruins are everywhere, in and out of the Dark Forest, but the Darkness gem is said to be right smack in the middle, where it’s darkest and thickest.” He pointed to the center of the map he unfolded on the table, then straightened as the others looked at it. “In there, the trees block out one hundred percent of the sunlight. It’s pitch black, and the roots grow six, sometimes eight feet up, blocking your way and tripping you up. And they’re narrow, so you can’t just get up on one and walk the length to the next one. It’s shit for moving in, but once you get to the ruins, it doesn’t matter.”

Saul pulled out a chair and sat down. “So we’ll need climbing gear and lights.”

“The ruins go down for miles underground,” Jayden added. “You remember what that was like, eh Saul? Hot, slippery, claustrophobic at times. They wind around in a maze, too.”

“Don’t they all?”

“Yeah, but this one doesn’t just have warnings all over it,” Jayden replied. “These ruins are littered with false leads and dead ends with traps. More than the average. You could be lost down there for months, years really. They lose an average of ten archeologists a season in the ruins, and those aren’t even at the heard of the Dark Forest, where the gem would be, if it were real.”

“You can’t pass this up,” Saul said, pointing to the map on the table. “Come on, Jayden. An adventure like this? And we’ll be paying for all the supplies you could ask for.” He took a breath, thankful his friend hadn’t technically refused yet. He just had to appeal to the temptation he knew was welling up inside Jayden’s chest, stronger and more pronounced than his own. “Think of it, Darkness, proving it really is there. And being the one to find it.”

Jayden was rubbing his chin, lips pursed as he seemed to fight an internal battle. “It’s cursed, they say. You suppose that’s why this Resnick fella wants it? He thinks all that dark emotion trapped inside is gonna serve his own twisted, diabolical needs or somethin’?”

Saul laughed, then raised his arms in a shrug. “Sounds like you’ve been reading too many illustrations, but who the hell knows? I think he just wants to own something no one else has.”

“Whatever Resnick might think he’s getting, there’s no such thing as a black diamond with evil powers, for crying out loud,” Chloe quipped. “Will you help us, or should we go hire that Drake fella?”

Saul watched Jayden pace away, back toward the window, as he continued to rub his chin in thought.

“For three hundred thousand, you say?” Jayden asked, pacing back toward the table. “What if this stone isn’t in the Dark Forest?”

“There were fewer clues circling around about the Amulet, and we found that, didn’t we?” Saul replied. “Darkness is real, Jay. Just tell us what supplies we’ll need to get us to those ruins, and we can find it.”

Jayden took a long, deep breath, then nodded. “Just to get to the ruins, you’d need climbing gear, lots of it, and portable lights. Once inside, well basically the same. Ropes, grips, a hoist would really help. I usually just wing it and end up climbing around on whatever’s jutting out just right.”

Saul chuckled, remembering several of those very occasions.

“But that won’t help you find Darkness,” Jayden said. “It’s not there.”

“It’s real, Jayden, I’m sure of it,” Saul replied.

“Oh, it’s real all right.” Jayden paced back toward the window and ran a hand through his hair. “It’s just not in the ruins.”

Saul glanced at his niece and nephew as they walked up beside him, staring at Jayden, eyebrows raised in unison.

Jayden turned to face them and shrugged. “Darkness is right here, in Ember City.”

Chapter 3

Jayden slammed back another shot of tequila and held up the bottle.

“You sure you don’t want any?” He looked from Saul to the pair at the table, then back again. When all he got in return were crossed arms and stern looks, he shrugged and put the bottle back, then ran both hands over his hair as he contemplated the carpet.

“Jay, how about you just spill it?” Saul suggested. “You found Darkness, didn’t you?”

“In a manner of speaking,” Jayden nodded. He was trying to figure out if Markem had said it was a secret, as in ‘I’ll kill you if you ever tell anyone what you did for me, Pearce’ or really just more of a ‘Let’s keep this between you and me, okay chum?’ kind of deal.

Then he remembered the three hundred thousand.

“Okay, see, the thing is,” Jayden put one hand on his belt as he held the other up, explaining. “There’s this guy, see. He’s rich, and powerful, and really really scary up close. You’ve seen the type, Saul. The kinda guy you know has deep pockets, and you figure you can push him a bit while you’re doin’ a job, but you’re sure, deep down, if you fuck up, he’ll probably have you killed.”

Saul nodded, eyeing Jayden. “Yeah, I know the type. Exactly the kind of guy you always swore you’d never take a job for.”

“Yeah, that.”

“So you took a job for him?”

“Basically, yeah,” Jayden nodded. “Hey, I couldn’t pass it up, like you said. This guy had a map the likes of which I’d never seen before. Dunno where he got it, or how he even knew what it was, but he offered me damn good money.” He shrugged. “You know I don’t do this for the cash, but I admit not having to worry about docking fees for a few years is pretty sweet.” Jay pointed to the map on the table. He could feel the familiar rush filling his gut, tingling out through his fingers, pulling his mouth into a child-like grin. “It was there, Saul, right where I said. Right smack dab in the heart of the darkest, dankest, crampie-- er, smallest place I’d ever climbed into.” He jabbed at the map, grinning wildly with the memory. “Damn, Saul, you shoulda been there. It was amazing!”

“I wish I was,” Saul admitted. “Then I’d have the damn thing and I could get their land back.”

“So where is it now, then?” David asked drolly. “Or wait, let me guess, you lost it?”

“No, I didn’t lose it,” Jayden shot back. He already didn’t like this guy. The sister was okay, pretty and all, but still Saul’s niece and thereby off limits. “It was never mine to begin with. I just wanted to find it.” He held both hands out, fingers rubbing together. “I needed to hold it, to see it with my own eyes. And it was amazing.” He looked at Saul again. “I’ve never seen a stone so dark, Saul. I mean really dark, like it was constantly sucking in all the light around it. Not just a black diamond, but something else.”

Jayden paced away from the table, back to the window overlooking the ship in the next berth as he remembered the stone.

“The legends say those aliens who lived here, whatever they were, had found a way to take out all the negative emotions they had, and put them into this stone,” he said as he faced the window. “And then they lived for generations without any wars or

fighting or any negative stuff because this gem held all their dark emotions. The priests had it secreted away in a temple.” He turned around, looking at Saul again. “So they say this stone still holds all that negative energy, and whoever possesses it can channel that somehow. It’s all crap, of course, like all the other curses and things. But I gotta tell ya, Saul, when I looked into that stone, I saw . . . That is, I felt this sorta . . .” He searched for a phrase or word that could describe the sensation, but even as he could so easily recall it, he still couldn’t put it to words. Not that anyone would understand, anyway.

“Well, it was weird.”

“Weird?” Saul’s eyebrows arched.

“Yeah, Saul, it was weird,” Jayden replied. “I can’t explain it.”

“But you found it,” Chloe reiterated.

“I found it,” Jayden nodded. “For a guy who paid me to find it.”

Saul rubbed his forehead. “That complicates things.”

“Why?” Chloe asked. “We can just find this guy and see what it’ll take to get it back from him. Even Resnick knows the deed to our land is worth more than that gemstone could ever be.”

Jay shook his head, picturing the look on Markem’s face if he was to knock on the door and ask for that stone back. “He’s not gonna give one rip about your deed, your land, or what your father did to lose it. He’s a collector, and Darkness represents something unique to him. I doubt you could talk him in to selling.”

“Then we steal it,” David said matter-of-factly. “We can’t afford to make an offer, have him refuse, and then take it. It’d be obvious who stole it from him. And if he’s not likely to accept any offer, then why bother offering?”

“We can’t just steal it,” Saul reprimanded. “We’re not common thieves.”

“It was stolen once already,” Chloe said, pointing at Jayden. “He took it, right out of those ruins.”

Jayden held up a hand. “Hang on, that wasn’t stealing.” All three of them looked at him. “Well it wasn’t. That gemstone was just sitting there, where it had been for probably hundreds of thousands of years. I simply found it, that’s all.”

“And now it’s sitting in someone’s apartment, where it’s been for -- what, a year? Waiting for someone else to find it,” Chloe said. “You stole it from the ruins, you can steal it from this Markem fella.”

Even if there was a modicum of truth to what she was saying, Jayden felt rankled by her description of what he’d done. It wasn’t stealing if the original owners were long dead. The government certainly couldn’t make a claim to national treasures of an alien race no longer around. Treasure hunters followed a creed, just like Salvagers followed a law. But Markem -- he was alive and well, and not likely to look kindly on someone stealing his wife’s engagement gift.

Before he could lash back at the woman, Saul took a step forward, blocking his view of her.

“Okay, just hang on a second here,” he said calmly. “Now Jay, you know me. I’m not one for suggesting anyone break the law just on a whim or anything. But right now, I gotta say I’m leaning toward agreeing with their suggestion.”

Jayden blinked. “Saul, come on, you’re better than that.”

“Most days, maybe,” Saul replied with a grin. “But seriously, the land we’re talking about is too valuable to lose. What if,” he glanced at his niece and nephew. “What if we were to take the gem, and leave behind, oh, say two hundred thousand credits?”

“Two hundred thousand?” Jayden stared at his old friend. “I swear, Saul, it’s like I never knew you.” Confused, and admittedly struggling with a strong desire to flat-out agree to the deal, Jay paced the room. “Suddenly you’ve got all this ready cash, makes a man wonder why you ever went out on treasure hunts with me.”

Saul put a hand over his heart, feigning sudden injury. “Jay, buddy, you wound me. You know all these credits aren’t mine. Hell, my brother hasn’t even put me in the will. I’m doing this for the kids. This is their money, not mine.” He shook his head. “As for the treasure hunting, I don’t have to tell you why I did it. Same reason as you. That itch, under your skin, that can only be scratched while dangling off the edge of some giant stone idol by your fingertips, notebook in your teeth, tryin’ to figure out which brick to push and which one to pull.”

A sudden memory put a smile to Jayden’s face. “Hey, remember those gears back on Himalayan II?”

Saul barked a laugh. “Remember ‘em? I lost two good years off my life watchin’ you try to navigate ‘em!” He turned to Chloe and David. “We’d run into this massive, ancient building blocking a canyon we had to pass through, and it was filled with all manner of turning, moving gears. God only knew what they were for, other than to block our way.” He pointed at Jay. “But this guy figures there’s a key to it all. So up he goes, hangin’ on to these gears while they spin him up and over and around and . . .” He shook his head and sighed. “It was all I could do to watch, expecting any second he was gonna fall to his death, or get crushed between gears.”

“But I didn’t, obviously,” Jay added.

“No, you didn’t,” Saul agreed. “He got to the top and found a way to stop the gears, which opened up this sorta damn that filled the canyon with water.” He shrugged. “After that, we floated over the gears on a slab of wood and on to the prize.”

“And this is a guy afraid to break into someone’s apartment and steal a simple little stone?” David quipped. “Listen, Pearce, if you’re afraid of this, just say so. I’m sure for three hundred thousand credits we could hire a simple thief to get the job done.”

Jayden made up his mind. He definitely didn’t like these two. Turning to Saul, he ignored the suggestion. “Listen, Markem’s not gonna be an easy mark, but I have an idea.” He held up a finger. “Hang on a second, I’ll be right back.” As Jayden started for the door, he glanced over his shoulder. “Help yourself to the tequila, I’ll just be a minute.”

He left the office, formally known as the Marco Polo’s observation deck, if you believed the sign above the door, and turned left, then down a stairway and around to the bridge, directly below. From there, he took a side door into his private quarters -- although seeing as how the entire ship was his and his alone, he’d considered pulling off that sign. The redundancy was annoying.

Once in his room, he had to pause and try to recall where he’d stashed the thing. After a brief moment of panic when he thought maybe he’d left it back in the ruins, or dropped it on the way out without knowing, he remembered cutting his finger on the old coffee tin.

From there, it was simply a matter of digging through the ancient wood cabinet, underneath his spare pack, three lines of climbing rope and half a tiki carved from red jade that had cracked in two when he'd used it to hold open a massive chamber door that had been inches away from cracking his head.

The tiki took the brunt of that miscalculation, and he hadn't the heart to toss it out. It was real jade, after all.

"There you are," Jayden said as he pulled the black stone from under an old leather jacket. It wasn't the real thing, naturally, and probably wouldn't fool an expert for long. But it was the right size, shape, color and weight of Darkness. In a silver fitting, with a nice expensive chain, and a little dusting, it might fool Markem's wife.

On the way back up to the office to show Saul, Jayden managed to come up with a plan, however marginal it may be.

"A fake?" Chloe stared at the stone in disbelief. "There's no way Resnick is going to fall for a fake gem."

"He doesn't have to," Jayden replied, tossing the rock to Saul. "Markem gave Darkness to his wife, then fiancé, as an engagement gift a year ago. That's why he hired me to find the stone, for her. At the time, he knew it was real, so we'll assume she did too."

Saul nodded as his smile widened. "So you're thinking if we switch them out now, no one's gonna be the wiser."

Jayden shrugged. "He's had the real thing for a year, why would he suddenly suspect it now?"

"Well for one thing, this isn't in a setting," David observed. "How do you plan to make the switch?"

"She must keep the thing in a safe or something," Jayden said. "I figure we find a way into that, we can pop Darkness out of the setting, pop this in, and we're done." It sounded so simple, he knew it must be doomed to miserable failure. And yet he was still inclined to give it a shot.

"First things first," Saul held up a hand, then tossed the fake gem back to Jayden. "We'll need to figure out how to break in to this guy's apartment, after making sure he's not in it. Then find and break into a safe. After that, switching the gem is gonna be a piece of cake."

"Can't be any harder than finding Darkness the first time," Jayden replied casually.

"Listen, you two," Saul looked at his brother's children. "I don't want either of you doing any of the actual breaking in. Leave that up to Pearce and me, we're used to this sorta thing, and if we get caught, we stand a better chance of talking our way out of it. Bullshit is part and parcel of what any treasure hunter does for a living. The pair of you have no record or reputations, and we need to keep it that way."

Jayden wasn't positive, but he assumed there was a slight insult in there somewhere. Still, if it meant he could take Saul along and leave these two out of it, he was all for the idea.

"But why do you have a fake copy of Darkness, anyway?" David asked.

"Standard practice," Jayden replied. He tossed the gem in the air and caught it. "You never know what you're going to find, but you can always count on traps protecting things like this. Sometimes just picking up a statue from off a pedestal triggers a

landslide. Or pulling a rolled document out of a holder unleashes hoards of scorpion bats.” He shuddered at the memory and saw Saul suddenly rubbing his arms, no doubt with remembered tingling from the millions of tiny, sharp-tailed flying insects that swarmed out of the --

He shook himself out of the thought. “Always a good idea to think ahead. I had this made according to the legends, for size and shape.” He glanced at the gem in his hand. “Actually I was off by a little bit on the weight. Good thing I didn’t need it.”

“All right, so we’re settled then,” Saul said. “Let’s get to work. Where do we find this Markem guy?”

Jayden slipped the fake gem into his pocket. “I’ll show you. Meanwhile, why don’t you two make yourselves useful.”

“Doing what, exactly?” Chloe asked.

“Staying out of trouble,” Saul ordered sternly. “You could be nice and head out to the grocery store, maybe go so far as to have dinner ready when we get back?”

“Whatever,” Chloe replied as she pushed her chair back. She grabbed her brother’s shirt. “Come on, keep me company.”

“I’d head over to Chang’s, on Third,” Jayden called after them. “He has actual fruit instead of that government processed crap.” When they’d gone, he slapped a hand on Saul’s shoulder and started for the door. “Just like old times, eh?”

“Just like old times,” Saul replied with a wide grin.

They left the ship a few minutes behind Chloe and David, making their way down the pier and back to the pedestrian walkway, now crowded with the after-work commuters. They turned right for one block, hugging the private docks, then took a sharp left and started toward the heart of Ember City.

A thriving, bustling center of commerce, Ember City was the only real settlement on the dark continent, but it was large enough to hold everyone and then some. On a planet already one hundred times the size of any other occupied world, Ember City easily held over ten million residents at any given time. The wealthiest of which flocked to the high, towering glass buildings in the center, where Jayden and Saul ended their walk.

They bought beers and found a table on the edge of the pub’s outdoor seating perimeter, where they could easily glance up at a building sporting the name Shangri-La in massive, silver letters adhered to the west side.

“Markem’s on the forty-third floor,” Jayden said as he licked the foam off the top of his glass.

Saul nodded. “Which apartment?”

Jay looked at his friend. “The forty-third floor.”

“Ah, I see,” Saul laughed shortly. “He’s that rich, then?”

Jayden shrugged and sat back, propping his feet on an empty chair. “I dunno what you’re using for comparison. I mean, he’s no heir to a deed of land worth sixty *billion* or anything, but then again, neither are you.” He eyed his friend, waiting for some kind of hint or shoe-dropping sound. Shoes always dropped around Saul, you just never knew when, or how many.

“I can see now why he wouldn’t be interested in selling the stone,” Saul said, looking up at the building. “But I don’t see how we’re gonna manage to break into his apartment, then into a safe.”

“An hour ago, you thought that’d be pretty easy.”

“Well, sure, in front of the kids,” Saul replied, turning to Jayden. “But seriously, how are we gonna pull this off?” He glanced over his shoulder, making sure no one was within earshot. “Breaking into an apartment, then a jewelry safe, isn’t exactly the same as figuring out some ancient trap or maze full of poison darts.”

Jayden laughed. “That was a good time, huh? I thought you were gonna piss yourself when that wall opened up and all those darts came wizzin’ by your face.”

Saul smiled back. “That was something else, I admit.”

Jayden raised his beer glass. “And if I recall, that wouldn’t have happened if Kowalski -- a guy who happened to find us minutes after I dug up that little map and declared himself to be our new partner -- hadn’t been along for the ride.”

Saul shifted in his seat. “Well, now, come on, Jay. I explained all of that.” He waved a hand. “Besides, it all worked out. Kowalski got what I owed him, you got the jade statue. It was a win-win.”

“It was Kowalski who stepped on the wrong tile,” Jay quipped.

“Which opened up that little hidden panel where the key was,” Saul countered.

“And sent a hail of poison darts straight at our faces.”

“Which missed us when we ducked,” Saul replied. “Well, except poor ‘What’dya Say’ Jenkins, God rest his soul.”

“Amen,” Jayden touched beer glasses with Saul. “So when does it drop this time?”

“What? When does what drop?”

“The shoe, when does it drop, or fall, or shoot out of a hidden panel and turn Jenkins into a pin cushion.” Jayden set his glass down. “What’s your angle here, Saul?”

“Dammit, Jay, I told you what the score is,” Saul replied. “It has nothing to do with me. My brother screwed over his kids, and I’m tryin’ to fix it.”

Jayden held up a finger. “That’s exactly it. This has nothing to do with you. So what’s your angle?” He watched his friend, but instead of coming clean, Saul crossed his arms and looked out at the Shangri-La. “In all the years we’ve been working jobs together, you’ve never once mentioned your niece or nephew. Hell, you never even talk about your brother.”

“And why would I? I’m not in the will, that jackass got everything.”

“So you’re just doing this out of the goodness of your heart?”

Saul shifted again, then took a long drink of beer. Finally, he shrugged. “Okay, so if the kids are grateful enough to take their father off the deed, and slip my name in there somewhere, it’d be a nice gesture.”

Jayden laughed. “Nice gesture.”

“Hey, I’m not gettin’ any younger,” Saul retorted. “A guy gets to be my age, he begins to take stock. Now, I’m not sayin’ I have any regrets, and I sure as hell don’t miss not having kids of my own.”

“But?”

“But, it dawned on me the other day that I don’t have a place to retire, once I get to that point.” Saul straightened up slightly. “I’m not looking for much, just a small spot of land I could call my own, maybe settle down, get a house built, rent out some spaces for income. Nothing fancy.”

“Uh-huh,” Jayden replied with another chuckle. “Nothing fancy.” He sighed and looked back at the Shangri-La, relieved to have that out of the way. He liked Saul, a lot.

He was a good man, braver than most, and perfectly willing to go out on some pretty crazy limbs. But there was always something -- always a little tidbit he tried to keep to himself, working his own angles.

Still, Jayden couldn't really fault the man for wanting to look after his own interests. Treasure hunting was a fickle business, if it could even be called a business. It was like leaping from one ice shelf to another. You were pretty sure you could make it, relatively confident you were gonna land okay, but there was always that chance the ice would crack, or you'd slip, muck up the landing and wind up hanging by your fingers while some God awful Yeti closed in.

A man coming out of the apartment tower caught Jayden's eye.

"There he is, that's Markem," he said, elbowing Saul.

"Who's that lady with him, the wife?"

"His secretary," Jayden replied. They watched the pair walk to the curb and hail a cab. "She went everywhere with him when I was around, obviously still does."

When a cab pulled over, Markem opened the door and his secretary climbed inside, then he shut it and spoke to the driver, standing up to wave as they drove off. A moment later, he was back inside the apartment.

"He works from his place," Jayden said. "Makes it tough to break in there. We're gonna have to catch him when he's out for the night."

"Damn," Saul finished his beer. "If he goes out for the night to a social fling, his wife will just wear the damn stone. There's gotta be another way."

Jayden sighed, staring at his drink. He watched the bubbles climb the sides of the glass and pictured the apartment tower as if it were an old shanty town, full of men hell-bent on stopping him from finding what he wanted. They were going to have to get in to that apartment undetected, find Darkness, and have enough time to pop it out of whatever setting it was in so they could make the switch. Saul was right, waiting for Markem to go to a social gala meant his wife would wear the gemstone, but trying to break in while the two of them were inside was suicide.

Suddenly it hit him.

"Clarksville," he said, smiling at Saul. "Remember that bar?"

A grin spread across the older man's face as he nodded. "And the map hidden under the floorboards? Hell yes, I remember." He leaned on the table, toward Jayden, lowering his voice. "You really think that'd work?"

Jay shrugged. "Why not? Just roll a canister of gas inside, wait for it to take effect, then walk in and do what we need to do. Markem and his wife will sleep it off and never know we were there."

Saul laughed and raised his empty beer glass. "Good thinking, kid. This might just work."

Jayden raised his beer in salute. "Might not, but it could."

Chapter 4

Saul slid his phone back into his pocket and gave Jayden's shoulder a clap. "Okay, David and Chloe are on it. Everything should be ready for us by the time we get back."

Jayden nodded and tossed some credits to the table. "Good, let's get this done."

They left the café and made it three blocks back toward the docks before Saul noticed the familiar face following them half a block away. When they stopped at a pedestrian crossing, he gazed at a shop window, noting the reflection.

"How long has he been back there?"

"Drake? Oh, since we left the café," Jayden replied casually. "He wasn't close enough to listen, but he's definitely interested."

Saul cursed under his breath. "Whaddaya suggest we do about it?"

"There's nothing to do," Jayden replied. "He's trying to figure out what we're up to, and wasting time doing it."

The light changed and they stepped off the curb with the rest of the commuters, crossing the motorway to the path that would lead straight back to the docks. Saul kept watch, noting how Drake no longer pretended not to be following them, but still kept his distance. It bothered him to think the man would rather keep an eye on them than head into the Dark Forest himself in search of the stone.

When they got back to Jayden's ship, he told his friend as much.

"He's wasting time," Saul said as he shot one final glance back among the people moving up and down the public pier. "If he's trying to find Darkness and get that deed from Resnick, why is he still here, following us around? Why hasn't he left for the Dark Forest already?"

Jayden seemed completely nonplussed. "I dunno," he shrugged. "He stands just as much chance of finding that thing as I do."

Saul shot him a look.

"Well, I mean, he stood as much chance of finding it if it were still out there," Jayden corrected. "Although clearly I'm the better retrieval expert, if we were going head to head."

"Let's not," Saul said as he started up the gangplank to the ship.

Chloe and David were waiting inside, with dinner ready as promised. They couldn't make a play for the stone until after dark, so Saul took the opportunity to explain the details of their plan.

"And you're sure you can pull this off without tripping any alarms or alerting the police?" Chloe asked as they sat around the table after the meal.

"Are we sure? No, of course not," Jayden replied. "Nothing's ever sure in this business."

"This business?" She raised an eyebrow. "I thought you were in the treasure hunting business, not the breaking and entering business."

Saul held up a hand to defuse his niece's attitude before it could sour everyone's mood and threaten their successful self-delusion. "That's what he meant, Chloe," he said. "Besides, if it weren't for our insisting, Jayden wouldn't be breaking or entering anything." He picked up the fake Darkness stone from the table and turned it around and

around in his fingers. "We just need to keep an eye out for Drake, I'm convinced he's suspicious."

"I can assure you, no one knows I went out there last year and found Darkness," Jayden said, stabbing his finger at the table. "I was in the Dark Forest for three months, never even saw an archeology team while I was there."

Saul looked at the fabricated gem and shrugged. "Maybe he's waiting to follow us out there, see where you go, or maybe he's waiting to steal it when we get back. Assuming he believes that's where we're going. I just don't like him being this close, when we're so close."

Jayden pushed his chair back and got up. "We'll just have to keep a few steps ahead."

Curious, Saul got up and followed. Chloe and David were right behind, as they all went to the bridge.

Jayden pointed to a row of monitors. "Keep an eye on those and tell me what you see."

"What are you up to?" Saul asked, taking a position in front of one monitor.

"See that ship one pier over? The big black one? That's the Mayan Gold, Drake's ship," he replied. "Keep an eye out while I vent."

"While you what?" David asked.

Before Jayden could answer, Saul noticed a large cloud of steam puffing out from below the Marco Polo, rising up across the screen he was watching. When the cloud passed by the main hatch, he saw the red flicker of a light beam, tracing back toward the Mayan Gold. "He's pointing a laser at the hatch. Son of a bitch," Saul turned to look at his niece and nephew. "Drake's getting word any time we open the door."

"It's an old trick," Jayden replied. "I've used it myself a time or two."

"So how do we get out without tipping him off? Is there a back door?" Chloe asked.

"Sure, there's always a back door, but he'll be watching that, too," Jayden said. He flipped a switch and altered the monitors to the below-deck hatch. "Probably has a remote, or he's paying a guy to keep an eye on it. No, we'll have to be smarter than that to get back to Markem's place without tipping Drake off."

"And you have a plan on how we go about that?" Saul asked, knowing already that Jayden most likely did.

"Of course," Jay smiled. He led the way back up to the office in the observation deck and gathered up their gear, handing Saul his half of the ropes, a harness, gas mask, and one of the two canisters of Ether David and Chloe had purchased for them.

"My ship has been docked here for more than a year," Jayden said as he began strapping on the climbing harness. "So the engines are cold. All we have to do is open up the access panel, and walk through the outtakes. From there, we repel down to the shipping pier below -- there's a freighter right under us, nice and flat -- we walk off to the pier, back up to the street, and we're good to go."

Saul laughed as he buckled his harness. "Through the engine outtakes, that's pure Jayden Pearce right there."

They all followed Jayden to the engine room, and David helped open the small shield-door maintenance hatch. Luckily, with the engines having been shut down for

more than a year, there was no residual heat, and the radiation levels were far less likely to turn your brains to tapioca.

“Okay, so you two are clear on what to do?” Saul asked as he prepared to follow Jayden through the narrow opening.

Chloe crossed her arms, but David nodded. “We’ll take care of it. Just be careful, Uncle Saul.”

He waited until Jayden was clear of the hatch, then ducked in and shuffled down the length of the buffer tube until he was able to straighten up inside the massive outtake vent itself. It was pitch black inside the vent, but the lights on the ship berthed directly behind the Marco Polo were visible through the wide opening at the far end.

They walked to the edge where Jayden secured one end of the climbing rope around a clip that was bolted to the lower lip of the outtake chamber.

“You’ve done this before,” Saul remarked as he found another clip to secure his own rope to.

“Comes in handy now and then,” Jayden replied. He secured the rope through his harness and jumped out the wide exhaust pipe, repelling down with practiced ease.

“I bet it does.”

Saul eased himself over the edge, then kicked away and let himself drop half the distance in one fluid motion before stopping, then starting again much more slowly. His knees had lost some of the cushion of youth, and his back was a bit more stiff than it used to be. He liked to think he could still do all the things Jayden could, only a tad more slowly and with greater caution.

When he reached the bottom, he unhooked his rope and nodded to Jayden. “Lead the way, kid.”

They were on top of a deep-space freighter, on the lower commercial dock. Since it was well after dark, all the union freight loaders had gone home at end of shift and the crews were at the bars. No one was around to see them run the length of the hauler, then take a service ladder down to the dock. Even if someone had noticed them, it’s not likely they’d have taken a second look.

Once on the dock, they made sure their jackets were covering the climbing harnesses and nothing untoward was sticking out of their packs before stepping out onto the pedestrian walkway.

From there, it was an easy stroll through lighted city streets back up town to the Shangri-La apartment building, then around back in the darkened alley where they were even less likely to be noticed.

The back of the towering building was a smooth wall of cement for the first three floors, then windows and balconies formed a sort of staggered stairway spanning forty five floors. Above that, the open spaces were sealed with shatterproof windows.

“Okay, so we can use the balconies to get to the forty-third floor,” Saul observed, staring up at the first protruding patio. “But how do we get to the first one?” He looked over at Jayden, who was pulling rope out from under his coat and curling it around one shoulder. “This ain’t no fancy old castle with bricks to use as finger holds, yanno.”

“Sure it is,” Jayden replied with a wry grin. “You just have to know where to look.”

As Saul watched, Jayden moved back toward the alley's opening, then stopped next to a tall post supporting several street signs and three billboards, stacked one on top of the other.

"You've got to be kidding me."

He watched Jayden look up and down the street, then grab the pole and start climbing up, easily clearing the street signs and using them as a launching pad to grab the lowermost sheet of metal advertising the newest handbag collection found at the Metroplex shopping mall. From there, it was a stretch to a sign for smokeless cigarettes, then a shimmy to a sign closest to the Shangri-La building, advising citizens to remember the speed laws.

"I hope you know I won't be following you," Saul said, watching his younger friend scale the sign and slide down to the furthest edge.

When Jayden reached the outside edge of the sign, he pulled both feet up, braced them against the metal, then stretched out a hand toward the nearest balcony. Saul had to close his eyes the moment Jayden pushed away from the sign.

When no scream met his ears, he looked up again.

"You're one lucky son of a bitch," he muttered.

Jayden was on the lower balcony, tying one end of his rope to the railing and waving down.

Saul took a deep breath, then grabbed the rope and hauled himself up to the patio. With a finger to his lips, Jayden stood on top of the metal railing and leapt up, grabbing the bottom rung of the next patio up. After pulling himself up and over, he reached out a hand and Saul made the jump, grabbing both Jayden's hand and the railing.

They continued this way, leaping and climbing, grunting and shushing each other, until they found themselves outside Markem's patio door on the forty third floor of the Shangri-La.

Saul's fingers were burning from the effort, and his biceps felt like limp noodles, but Jayden was barely sweating.

"Oh, to be young and in shape again," he muttered under his breath.

"There he is, look." Jayden pointed at an open door visible through the vast expanse of living room they could see into. "Looks like they're asleep," he said. "At least, I can see someone in the bed, not sure if it's both of 'em."

Saul pulled one of the gas canisters from his pack and looked over the capping mechanism. "Well, it's now or never. How long do we get with these?"

Jayden pulled his canister and gas mask out of his own pack. "Thirty minutes, tops. We toss 'em in, wait for a full twenty count, then it should be clear. It dissipates quick, so we can take these off once we find the safe."

Jay had already pulled on the gas mask, so Saul didn't bother trying to add anything. He donned his own mask, then nodded for Jayden to pick the lock on the patio door.

Luckily, few people bothered to set an intruder alarm for a patio door forty three stories up. Once the door was opened wide enough to toss their canisters through, they lobbed both containers of ether as far as they could, then watched them roll right into the open bedroom door. Jayden closed the door again and they waited while the rooms filled with a bluish gas.

Saul knew there'd be no turning back at this point. They were breaking the law, no doubt about it. Sure, it wasn't all that different than sabotaging another treasure hunter's efforts and stealing an ancient find themselves. It really just boiled down to semantics.

And legal ownership, maybe.

But mostly semantics.

After all, this Markem fella had no more legal right to own Darkness than anyone. It wasn't his to begin with, so technically they couldn't be stealing it.

"Okay, I think we're clear," Jayden said as he pushed the patio door open again.

Saul followed him inside, moving quietly through the elaborately decorated living room. He couldn't help noticing several pieces of priceless art displayed on shelves and walls, matching perfectly with the expensive leather furniture and solid silver coffee table.

The bedroom was just as opulent, with its massive gilded bed and towering sets of dressers holding more exquisite art.

They paused long enough to take note of the two sleeping figures in the bed, then Jayden waved him toward a door at the far side of the room. Pushing up his gas mask, he leaned closer and kept his voice low.

"The safe's in here. I saw him go in when he paid me," Jayden said. He reached into a pocket and pulled out the fake Darkness gem.

"I'm feeling less and less guilty about this," Saul remarked. "Let's make the switch." He set his gas mask on the dresser where Jayden had put his and moved aside so his friend could work on the lock.

The room still smelled faintly of ether, filling Saul's nose with the scent of juicy fruit gum, but the effect wasn't enough to make him dizzy. Luckily it had been enough to keep the two sleeping figures on the bed from stirring, and hopefully it would be enough to let them make the switch and leave.

The last thing Saul needed was another complication.

"Got it," Jayden declared in a strong whisper.

Saul turned and pulled his tool kit from the pack, ready to carefully pry Darkness from whatever setting they might find, and replace it with the fake gem.

Jayden gave the door a tug. There seemed to be a slight hesitation, then it opened freely, swinging away, while a light automatically popped on inside the wide, walk-in safe.

"Jackpot," Saul led the way, scanning the many shelves for a jewelry box of any kind.

"Hey, what's that smell?"

He turned to Jayden just as the scent reached his own nose.

"Oh shit."

Chapter 5

Jayden inhaled deeply. For a moment -- a very comfortable and altogether far too fleeting a moment -- he wasn't sure where he was. He'd been sleeping, he knew that much, and hadn't heard the alarm go off, so maybe he could just roll over and . . .

"Jayden Pearce, I shoulda known I hadn't seen the last of you."

"Oh shit." Jayden pushed himself up off the floor of Markem's room and stood next to Saul, who still looked half asleep. "Listen, I can explain this whole thing."

Giles Markem laughed and waved a cigar around, leaving wisps of smoke like a specter's road map around the room. "I just bet you can," he bellowed through the cloud. "Would this little gem have anything to do with it?"

The fake Darkness stone was in his hand, the same one holding the cigar.

"Oh, that, well --"

Markem waved his cigar again. "Sally wanted to call the cops, but I said no, let's wait and hear him out. After all, this is Jayden Pearce we're talking about." Markem glanced at Saul, frowning. "And I suppose you must be Saul Trubnick?"

Saul seemed to perk up just then. "You've heard of me?"

But Markem was no longer interested. He looked at Jayden, eyelids lowered in a scowl. "It's obvious you're here to rob me, Pearce. But since I managed to stop you before you had the chance, I'm willing to hear you out."

"Then can we call the cops?"

Jay turned and noticed the woman who'd been occupying the bed next to Markem was Sally, his secretary, instead of Marge, the woman Jay had found Darkness for.

"Maybe, Sally. Maybe," Markem replied. He took a pull on the cigar and let the smoke simply find its own exit as he spoke. "Could be that Pearce here doesn't want the cops involved," he said. "That's what I'd expect, anyhow. And if that's the case, what we have here is a situation."

"What are you talking about, Giles?" Sally crossed her arms, tugging her evening robe even tighter around herself.

"I'm talking about favors," Markem replied, speaking to Jayden. "So, spill it, Pearce. What the hell are you doing in my bedroom, inside my safe, holding this copy of a stone only four of us knows I have?"

Jayden swallowed. He could taste the lingering flavor of ether in the back of his throat and cursed himself for not having kept the gas mask on. Of course Markem's safe was protected. He was the type not to want police involved if they could be avoided, and gassing anyone breaking in to a safe is the surest way to get the upper hand and not trigger any alarms.

"Look, I just needed to examine the stone, that's all," Jayden began in his most innocent tone. "I wasn't sure how long it'd take, so I figured swapping them out would be the easiest thing to do. And I was gonna switch them back, I swear." It sounded just as stupid as it reached his own ears.

"Bullshit," Markem barked. "But let's say I buy it." He turned the fake stone over in his hand and looked at it closely. "What were you hoping to find on the real one?"

Jayden glanced at Saul, who looked back and shrugged, willing to follow along but not take the lead. "The map," he blurted.

It was habit, and not a good one. More often than not, he was wrong, or whoever he was bullshitting called his bluff. That's when things usually got ugly and involved a whole lot of running, cursing, jumping and sometimes Yetis. But a map was always the safer bet, and Markem seemed to be falling for it, so far.

"What map?" He asked, staring at the fake stone as if it would have the clue. "Map to where?"

He was committed now, so he let his instincts build on it. "The map," he said. "The one that shows the location of the actual alien burial site." Jayden noticed Sally perk up and uncross her arms at the mention of the aliens.

Markem's mouth dropped open, cigar momentarily forgotten. He clamped down again just in time to save it from falling out. "You mean, the aliens? The ones who lived here first?"

Jayden nodded, shooting Saul a wink. "The very ones," he replied. "The original owners of Darkness. Legend has it there's a burial site, somewhere on this massive planet, where the last of their race went to die. No one was around to bury them, so they built a tomb and must have gone inside when they knew they were done for." Jayden smiled. This part was always so easy, he had to be careful not to get carried away.

"There's a reward for anyone who can find alien remains," Markem said quietly, still staring at the fake gem.

"Ten million, if memory serves," Saul chimed in. "Not to mention the fame of being the first human to find solid evidence of the race that built those ruins."

"Yeah, yeah," Markem waved a hand, dismissing the idea of fame. "Ten million." He looked at Jayden, expression suddenly very serious. "Tell me about the map."

"How about you let me see the real stone first, see if it's even there," Jayden replied.

Sally laughed, then crossed her arms again and sat on the edge of the bed.

"Listen, Pearce, I've just caught you breaking in to my apartment, and my safe," Markem countered. "I could still have you arrested."

"And I just caught you in bed with your secretary," Jayden shot back. "What would Marge have to say about that?"

"Damn little," Markem replied simply. "I divorced her six months ago and married Sally."

Jayden blinked, feeling somewhat deflated. "Oh."

"Don't tell me you let her keep a gem worth that much." Saul asked.

Sally cleared her throat and Markem shrugged. "Her lawyer did," he said. "It was either that stone or half my estate."

"The woman was mental," Sally added. "Right after the wedding, seems like she snapped or something."

Giles Markem was a big man, imposing and loud, but he seemed to shrink a bit just then, lowering his gaze to the floor and slumping his shoulders slightly.

"I dunno what happened," he said sullenly. "We were so in love. The wedding was everything she wanted. I let her plan every detail. But during the honeymoon, on Ganymede, she was so irritable."

"Women," Saul snorted with a shake of his head. "That's why I always say, better to bed 'em than wed 'em."

Jayden rolled his eyes.

"It was the curse," Sally said. Her statement made all three men mutter with embarrassment. "No, no, not that curse, you idiots," she added. "The stone was cursed."

"Oh," Jay perked up. "But seriously, that's just myth."

"I dunno, Pearce, I think maybe there's something to it," Markem said. "That thing was black as hell itself, and they say it held all the negative emotions of an alien race. Who are we to say?"

"You're saying the curse of the Darkness gem turned your wife into an irritable bitch?" Saul asked, suppressing a wry grin. "Not much of a curse, y'ask me."

Markem looked at Saul but directed his words to Jayden. "Be that as it may, we still have this here little situation, involving you breaking in to my apartment, and a map." He crossed his arms, effecting his most imposing look. "What do you propose I do about it?"

Jayden scratched his chin as he contemplated his next move. He'd hoped a little brevity and some manly bonding over love lost would do the trick, but clearly it hadn't. There was only one other way he could think of to get out of this situation, skin intact.

"How about a bargain?" he asked finally. "You tell me where Marge and that gemstone are, and I credit you for finding the burial site, providing we actually do find a burial site." He looked from Markem to Saul, then glanced at Sally, who seemed to have lost all interest, then Markem again.

"You come in here with a wild tale about some map on a stone I've had for a year now, a map you didn't bothering mentioning back when you found this trinket in the first place, and expect me now to just hand it over without any sort of guarantee I'll get my fare share?"

"Giles, come on, you know I'm good for my word," Jayden replied, feigning injury. "I found Darkness for you, didn't I, back when everyone said it wasn't real. Wasn't I the only one willing to go that deep into the dark forest?"

"You were the only one I asked," Markem replied.

Jayden chewed his lip. "Okay, listen, I'll be straight with you. There's no map. Saul and I were just stealing the gem, flat out. Seems his niece and nephew got themselves in a pickle, and they need to trade that stone for the deed to their land." He shrugged. "You caught me. May as well call the cops."

Markem chewed his cigar. "Nice try, Pearce. There's a map, and I want in on it."

Jayden saw his out then, and realized this could end up being a win-win after all. He took a long, slow breath as if considering his options, then nodded. "Okay, fine. You tell me where I can find the stone, and if it leads me anywhere, you're in fifty-fifty on whatever I find."

"Sixty-forty," Markem countered. "Considering you were about to steal it from me."

To sell it, Jayden stepped back and leaned closer to Saul. "It'll be enough to go around, after all," he whispered a bit loudly.

"But we'd be doing all the work, and taking all the risk," Saul whispered back.

Jayden nodded gravely, then turned back to Markem. "Fifty-Fifty."

Markem turned to Sally. "Say, hon, you still have the number to that Drake fella?"

"Sixty-forty," Jayden said.

Markem smiled. "Deal." He held out a hand and Jayden shook it. "Sally, fetch me my assistant."

Jayden ran a hand through his short hair as Markem's wife brought him his digital assistant. He didn't dare look at Saul, or babble small talk, for fear his entire bluff would unravel before they could get out of the apartment.

"Here's her last address," Markem showed Jayden the screen. "Last I heard, she was running the office of her father's department store, and living in one of the apartments above. If I were you, I wouldn't ask her for it, just make the switch like you were gonna do with me."

"And if we get caught?"

Markem shrugged. "Don't get caught."

"Well I think we can all agree that didn't go well," Chloe said as she crossed her arms and stared at Jayden and Saul.

"We didn't get arrested, so we must have done something right," Jayden replied. He was frustrated enough without this woman harping on him about how it had all gone so ridiculously bad, so ridiculously fast.

"Where's your brother?" Saul asked.

"He's gone to find the former Mrs. Markem," Chloe replied. "We did a little research while you and Mr. Fixit here were walking back from the Shangri-La last night." She crossed the room to the conference table and held up a print-out. "Seems Marge Bensen-Markem divorced her husband six months after the wedding, and returned to her job as Office Manager in her father's department store."

"That much we already knew," Jayden said. He stood at the table, both hands on his hips, waiting for something new to impress him. "Her father owns DC Goods, it's a big shopping complex down town."

"Not just a big one," Chloe corrected. "The biggest. And Marge is in charge of the fine jewelry department."

Jay shook his head. "If you're thinking she might have sold Darkness, think again. Even Marge knows you can't put a price on that gem, and selling it would call into question insurance, legal documentation, all kinds of issues she wouldn't be able to answer for."

"Sure, if she sold it legally," Chloe countered. "But a job like that puts her into contact with plenty of people willing to deal under the table, I'm sure."

"No, she's got it," Saul said. "If I know anything at all about women, and I think I do, I'm positive she kept that thing. She won't wear it, except to a function where her ex husband might show up, but she's got it. Out of spite alone, she'd have kept that thing. Now we just have to find it, and make the switch."

"And we have to do it fast," Jayden said. He crossed the room to the coffee pot and filled the unit with fresh beans, then turned it on. There'd be no time for sleep until after they finished this job. Besides, his little ether-induced nap on Markem's closet floor had been oddly refreshing. "Now that Markem has it in his head there's something to be found on that stone, there's nothing to stop him from hiring Drake to get it before we can. One phone call to his ex wife, and we're history."

“She won’t deal with him,” Chloe said. “If you divorce a man as rich as that after six months, you’re either a complete boob, or you’ve developed a serious hatred for him rather quickly. If Marge Bensen-Markem was a complete boob, she couldn’t be running the jewelry department at her father’s store.”

Saul nodded. “So if he did call with a business proposal, she’d just hang up.”

Before anyone could reply, Chloe’s phone rang. She pulled it from her pocket and stepped away from the table to talk.

“The problem’s going to be getting our hands on that gem and switching it out,” Jayden said. “If Marge works around high-end jewelry, she’s probably got Darkness in a big company safe. No way you and I could break into a big company safe.”

“How’d you know about the map, anyway?” Saul asked, keeping his voice low. “I mean, I was gonna tell you once we had our hands on it, but . . .”

Jayden stared at his friend. In the distance, he heard the distinct sound of a shoe dropping. “Saul,” he put down the coffee cup and leaned on the map-strewn table. “What the hell’s going on?”

Saul blinked.

“There is no map, Saul,” Jayden said slowly and carefully. “I was bullshittin’ so Markem wouldn’t call the cops.”

Saul made a chopping motion with one hand and jerked his head toward Chloe, who was just hanging up the phone.

Jayden glared.

“We’ve got problems,” Chloe said, oblivious to the looks both men were shooting each other. “That was David. He just saw that Drake guy leaving the department store, but when he went inside to find Marge, the manager told him she’s on vacation, off world. Not due back for another week.”

“Dammit!” Saul slapped his hand on the table. “Drake’s probably going after her.” He looked at Jayden. “What are the chances he knows about the map?”

“Map?” Chloe stepped closer. “What map?”

“Yeah, Saul,” Jayden asked. “What map?”

Chloe stared at her uncle. “Uncle Saul, what’s going on? What’s this about?”

Jayden watched his friend squirm a bit under his niece’s scrutiny. While he waited for an answer, he pulled out a chair and sat down, taking the copy of Darkness from his pocket so he could twirl it around on the table.

“Now, see, I knew you’d react like this, which is why I wasn’t gonna tell you,” Saul replied, turning to look at Jayden instead of his niece. “All Resnick wanted was the stone, then he’d give back the deed and everybody would be happy.” He shrugged. “Who would care if an old man and some treasure hunter went after a cemetery?”

“You’re serious?” Jayden laughed shortly. “Saul, there’s no map.”

“There is,” he countered.

“No, there isn’t,” Jayden replied. “Look, I had that thing in my possession for weeks. Don’t you think if there was a map on it, I’d have noticed?”

“Were you looking for a map?”

Jayden blinked. “Still, I’ve never heard of any map.”

Saul held up a finger, then dashed out of the conference room. A moment later, he came running back in, carrying a small leather-bound notebook. He tossed it to Jayden and smiled.

“Go ahead, have a look,” Saul said, crossing his arms and looking smug. “I found it last summer, while I was courting a very nice lady in the south quad.”

Jayden opened the leather notebook and flipped through a few pages of handwritten notes, then a drawing of the ruins where he’d found Darkness.

“Her late husband was an antique dealer and collector, and had this tendency to keep all the really good stuff for his own private collection.”

The page after that drawing appeared to be a hastily drawn representation of a tree, a stick figure in repose, and a row of strange markings Jayden couldn’t identify.

“The jewel of his private stash was an old parchment, some kind of tanned animal hide or something,” Saul continued. “On it I found a tree, and below that, in a mass of huge roots, what looked like an altar, only on top of this altar was--”

“A really skinny guy?” Jayden quipped.

“An alien,” Saul replied, ignoring the jibe. “I dunno how else to describe it.”

“An alien?” Chloe asked, stepping closer. “What do you mean, alien?”

Saul shook his head. “I can’t really describe it, that’s how odd it looked. Plus it was an old, seriously old, drawing, so God knows how accurate it really is. Then those markings, like no language I’ve ever come across.”

Jayden looked at the marks again.

“I did some research, and they’re not part of any language in any database,” Saul said. “I asked her about the parchment, and she said her husband found that on a dig in the ruins, on the Dark Continent. He’d gone out with some archeologists to find antiquities, and stumbled over that stashed inside a gilded statue. She says he hid it from the scientists and kept it for himself, then never pursued it.”

Jayden shook his head, slowly, as he stared at the drawing. The following pages detailed someone’s notes about the ruins, the statue the parchment was found hidden inside, and a very elaborate and accurate representation of more statues, as well as an overview of the ruins themselves.

“And you figured this -- what little there is -- meant you were gonna find a map inside Darkness, leading you to the burial site of the last of the aliens of this world?” Jayden tossed the notebook down. “Seriously?”

“It makes sense,” Saul replied. “This guy was looking for that burial site all his life. I mean, he had books and manuscripts and maps and all kinds of stuff, Jay. All pointing to a map, a secret map, that would lead straight to this burial place. Only he could never find the map, because he could never find the stone.”

“Did he ever look?” Chloe asked.

“Look for what?”

They all looked up when David came into the room.

“Uncle Saul here has been holding out on us,” she replied.

Jay picked up the copy of Darkness again and gazed at it while everyone brought David up to speed. The stone itself was unusual, no doubt about that. Oddly shaped, rather like a kidney or tear drop, with all the facets off-center, putting the focal point down and to the right, in the meatiest portion of the stone but not centered there.

“Never mind that,” Saul was saying. “Did she still have Darkness?”

Jayden turned the stone over and over in his hand, pondering where -- or if -- there could be a map hidden within all those facets. He’d had the real stone for weeks,

and the fence he'd used to cut the copy more exact before giving it to Markem hadn't mentioned anything odd about it.

"She wasn't there, Saul," David replied. "But her manager did let it slip that she was a real bitch to work with. I assumed that's probably the curse, still working. I'd guess that means she still has the stone and wears it, too."

"Or maybe she's just not a nice person." Jayden stood, tossing the copied gem to the table, and went for a coffee refill.

"So Drake's after it too, and he knows it's not out there in the ruins," Chloe said. "Which means he somehow figured out Pearce here found it, and Markem had it."

"That's Drake," Saul agreed. "Always one step ahead or right on your heels."

Jayden came back to the table, still stewing over the idea of a map, the alien burial site, the massive screw up that had him agreeing to give Markem a sixty-forty split. Especially now that there might actually be something to split.

He set his cup down on the map covering the table and reached out to give the fake gem a spin, watching the light catch the odd facets and sparkle against the black gem surface.

When the stone stopped moving, he looked at it. There was something oddly familiar to the shape that tickled the back of his mind. Sure, he'd thought of it before as a kidney, or mutant tear drop, but now -- as it lay there on the map covering the conference table -- something inside his head was clicking together. It was a familiar feeling, and one he never gave any thought to, usually because it happened while he was dangling by his fingertips in front of a statue, or working his way through a maze of crumbling ruins, ducking gunfire and swinging from vine to vine.

Then, just as suddenly as he'd realized it was happening, everything came into crystal clear focus.

"There's no map inside Darkness."

Saul, Chloe and David stopped their arguing and turned to stare.

Jayden took a breath, then pointed to the table. "The stone *is* the map."

Chapter 6

Saul stared at the map in near-disbelief. “Of course!” He put a finger on the fake gemstone and turned it slightly. “It’s a perfect match.”

“And I’m betting the facets are pointing the way,” Jay added.

The copy of Darkness was the exact same shape as the Southern Continent. Not to scale, but a perfect representation. Saul, Chloe and David watched as Jayden used a caliper to take exact measurements of the stone.

“We can’t use this map to pinpoint exactly where the facets are pointing,” Jayden said as he opened up Saul’s leather-bound notebook and began drawing out the stone and its details. “We’ll need actual measurements of the continent itself.”

“But this gives us a pretty good idea,” Saul turned the map slightly, eyed it for a moment, then stabbed a finger over the Churling Forests. “Of course, the forests,” he said. “That stands to reason, don’t you think? Darkness was found in the ruins of the Dark Forest, so the alien’s final resting place is in the Churling Forests. Guess these guys liked trees.”

“And it was on our own property all along,” Chloe replied with a snort. “All this time. We would have found it, eventually.”

“That’s what Resnick wanted with our deed,” David said. “He knows. Maybe he doesn’t know exactly where inside the forest, or how to find it, but he knows, doesn’t he?”

Jayden shook his head. “I dunno, maybe. Could be coincidence.” He looked at Saul. “How much of that place do you have mapped out?”

“Not much,” Saul replied with a shake of his head. “Maybe a quarter, tops.”

“And just the perimeter,” Chloe added. “The trees there are supported above ground by their roots, nothing at all like other trees.”

“Not only that, but they move,” David added. “The roots don’t go beneath the surface of the soil, they just rest on top, like legs and feet, and they can move.”

“We don’t know that for sure,” Saul corrected. He looked at Jayden and shrugged. “It’s a strange place, some say haunted. Frankly, we’ve spent as little time in and around that forest as we could. My brother figured one of these days, we’d just hire out the job of digging around inside and mapping it all out, since he could never quite get a handle on it. Besides, there’s so much open, useable land down there, it was never a priority.”

“This is what Resnick wants,” Jayden said. “I’d bet that, somehow, he knew Darkness was the key to finding exactly where the aliens are buried. And Drake knows, too. I dunno how he knew the gem was here in Ember City and not out there in the Dark Forest, but we can bet he does.”

“Sounds like we backed the wrong horse in this race,” Chloe quipped.

Saul shot his niece a stern look. “You really think Drake would have been interested in helping you and your brother get your deed back? No, he would have taken your money, then taken the stone straight to Resnick, who probably plans to finance the excursion that he’d hire Drake to lead.” He pointed to Jayden. “At least here, we have a fighting chance of beating everyone else to the punch.” With that, he turned to his friend, eyebrow raised. “Right? I mean, you can figure this out, can’t you?”

Jayden seemed not to be listening. He was staring off into the distance, his finger tapping the map on the table in front of him. Saul knew the look. He put both hands on the table and leaned toward his friend.

“What are you thinking?”

After a moment, Jayden looked at him.

“This lady-friend of yours, did the two of you part on speaking terms?”

Saul blinked, then straightened up. “Well, I -- sure, we didn’t have a huge fight, if that’s what you’re getting at.”

“That’s what I’m getting at,” Jayden replied.

Saul took a breath, considering the situation. “Basically she wanted to settle down, and I wasn’t real keen. But we parted all friendly-like.” He hoped that was true, but you never knew with women. “What’s your plan?”

Jayden looked up at Chloe and David. “Look, whatever we do, Drake’s gonna be right on our tails, if not out in front. We can’t just fly straight out to this forest of yours without more information, but in order to get that information, we’ll need to stay off Drake’s radar.”

“Agreed,” Saul nodded, following his friend’s thinking. “A pair of eyes in the enemy camp would go a long way.”

“Enemy camp?” Chloe asked.

“You’re asking us to go sign on with Drake?”

Saul gave his nephew points for catching on. “Not sign on, just convince him that Pearce here refused to help, then offer to hire him to find Darkness and get your deed back.”

“If I know Drake -- and I do -- he’ll take you up on it because it’s free money in his eyes. He’s already being paid to find Darkness, and probably plans to get Resnick to hire him to find the burial site.” Jayden tapped the map with a finger. “All you need to do is keep him off our heels.”

“You’ll be our eyes and ears,” Saul said. He could see his nephew was already agreeing with the idea, but they’d have to both go in order to sell it. “Think of it this way, Chloe -- If Drake gets there first, Resnick wins. If Pearce and I can get it, you and your brother win. You’ll stand a better chance if you let us do what we do best, and make sure Drake doesn’t.”

“Come on, Chloe,” David stood. “We’re not advancing the plot over here as it is. At least with Drake, maybe we can accomplish something.”

“What the hell does that mean?” Chloe argued even as she followed her brother to the door. “Who talks like that?”

Saul followed after them. “Just be careful, you hear? Drake should buy the story that Pearce isn’t interested if you sell it right.”

“Oh I think we can sell it, Uncle Saul,” Chloe said. “We’ve been taking lessons from the best.”

Saul stopped in the corridor.

“She means dad,” David said, quickly grabbing his sister’s arm and pushing her toward the exit. “Don’t worry, Saul, we’ll call you when we can.” He pushed Chloe out the exit, then made a show of looking for Drake’s ship and elbowing his sister before they headed off in the right direction, muttering loudly about useless drunks who talk a good game. “We’ll find a serious tracker!”

Saul watched from just inside the door until they'd crossed over to the next pier, where Drake's ship was berthed, hoping and praying they'd just done the right thing.

"Think that was a bad idea?" Jayden asked when Saul returned. "If they're pissed enough at us, all they have to do is clue Drake in and cut us out of the picture entirely."

Saul shook his head and poured himself a cup of coffee to fuel the bravado he really didn't feel. "They're family," he said. "They're not gonna cross us."

"The way you crossed them?"

Feigning injury, he stumbled back to the table. "I never betrayed them."

"You lied about the map," Jayden corrected.

"That wasn't betrayal, that was very simple omission," Saul replied. "And where's the harm? They were going to get their deed, I was gonna see to that first and foremost."

"And the map?"

Saul shrugged. "Like I said before, the kids get what's theirs, but what does that leave me? A man my age has to start thinking about securing his future, you know." He raised his coffee cup. "Adventure's all well and good, don't get me wrong. I've got some good years left in me, but what then?"

Jayden just shook his head.

"Listen, do you really think they're safe over there, with Drake? What if he figures us out?"

"Oh he'll figure us out," Jayden said casually. "I'm counting on it."

Saul blinked. "Come again?"

"If Drake knows we're on to him being on to us, he's gonna follow us like a dog on the hunt," Jayden replied. "And if he's following us, then we can lead him."

Saul stared at his friend and fellow treasure hunter, and briefly wondered if he maybe should have followed Chloe and David over to Drake's ship.

Jayden's eyebrows rose, waiting for Saul to catch on. "The idea being that we can lead him wherever we want him to go."

"But in order to do that, we have to know where we want him to go, and where we don't want him to go." Saul matched his friend eyebrow for raised eyebrow.

Jayden made a face and sat back, chewing his lip. "Okay, so my plan needs some work, but you gotta admit there's a beauty in there, somewhere."

Saul laughed shortly. "So now what?"

"Now, we head back South and you introduce me to your girlfriend."

"Ex-girlfriend."

"Whatever."

It took some time to pack up a few things, sneak back out of the Marco Polo through the engine ducts, then charter a fast taxi back to the Southern continent, but it was all worth the effort when Saul got the phone call.

"Okay, Uncle Saul, he bought it," Chloe said in hushed tones. "Apparently Drake found out exactly where the ex-Mrs. Markem is vacationing, and we're going there right now."

“He’s going after the stone, then?” Saul asked, surprised. “Does he know about the map?”

“I don’t know yet,” Chloe replied. “He just said he knows who has Darkness and how to get it. This lady’s on a cruise through Orion’s Belt, so we’re heading out to meet the ship when it docks. Listen, I gotta go, I’ll call again when I can.”

“Okay, stay --” Saul heard the call end. “Safe.” He put his phone away and shrugged. “Well Drake either bought it, or he figures the same thing we do.”

“Keep your enemies closer?” Jayden offered.

Saul nodded and checked his watch. They were still an hour out, then they’d have to drive down the coast, to Lana’s house. He’d decided it might be best to surprise her, rather than let her know they were coming. Sure, they’d ended things on speaking terms, but he hadn’t told Jayden what words she’d used that last day they were together.

There’s speaking, and then there’s speaking.

“How do you suppose things like this get started?”

Saul looked up. “What?” Jayden was holding the fake gemstone, turning it around with his fingers and making the sunlight dance off the facets.

“Legends like these,” he said. “I mean, humans first colonized this planet, what, almost two thousand years ago?”

“Give or take, yeah.”

“And there was no sign of alien life, other than those ruins in the Dark Forest, and occasionally a few bits and pieces here and there.”

“That’s the way I understand it,” Saul said.

“So then how do these legends get started?” He held the gem up. “How does someone decide that the alien race that lived here first found a way to capture all of the evil inside of them and put it into a stone? I mean, bullshit is one thing, but then it turns out there really *is* a stone.”

They’d had this discussion before, on nearly every trip, whenever they had some down-time and nothing else to talk about. Saul knew there was no answer, and he knew Jayden knew it, too.

“Does it matter?” he asked with a shrug. “It’s real, and you found it. What more do you want?”

Jayden laughed shortly and pocketed the stone. “I dunno. Just passing the time I suppose. Wanna know what I really think?”

Saul raised an eyebrow. “Do tell.”

“I really think some guy, or maybe a group of guys, back in the old days when they first found this planet, all hunkered down in some bar, drunk one night, and pulled it all together.”

“You think the entire mythos of Darkness is due to some drunk guys, two thousand years ago?” Saul nodded.

“Yeah, can’t you see it? Bunch of guys, drunk and bored outta their skulls. One of ‘em probably found this nifty black diamond, another one thought up a great little story, maybe someone else figured it’d be a hoot to stash the rock deep inside the ancient ruins, underneath a massive corner stone, set just inside a carved-out . . .”

Saul laughed.

“Yeah, I just heard myself,” Jayden said, shaking his head. “Okay, so maybe not.”

“It’s a nice thought, though. Something you might do, if you were drunk enough.”

They landed in town and Saul secured a rental to get them down the coast as quickly as possible. He figured it would take Drake at least a full day to reach Orion's Belt, then another day, maybe two, to hook up with Markem's ex wife. He had no idea how the man was going to get Darkness from her, but they should have a good two-day lead, at the very least.

"Are you sure we shouldn't call first?" Jayden asked as they rounded the last bay.

"Nah, no, she'll be fine with this," Saul replied. Another fifteen minutes down this main road, and they'd be at her place. "Well, I guess I should -- that is, Lana and me were sorta an item for a while."

Jayden turned in his seat to look at him. "What did you do, Saul?"

"It's not so much what I did, it's more a case of what I didn't," Saul replied. Pearce was a guy, a single guy, he'd understand. "Lana asked me to marry her, and I said no."

"You what?"

Saul shrugged and turned down the long, sloping drive to Lana's expansive house. "You know me, Jay. She wanted to settle down, sell the house here and move to Luna Seven. Did you hear that? A retirement moon. Do I look like a man ready to settle down and play shuffleboard on a retirement moon, for cryin' out loud?"

"Jesus, Saul, you might have said something," Jayden replied. "She's not going to come to the door with a shotgun when she sees you, is she?"

"Nah, not Lana, give me some credit here, kid. She's a smart woman. After I explained to her that neither of us is so old we need to be packing it in, she sorta figured I was right, and that she could probably do a lot better than me." He shrugged again. "We parted friendly enough." He pulled up to the front and parked, then glanced over at Lana's front door. "Maybe you should be the first one she sees, though. Company always puts Lana at her best."

Jayden climbed out of the car and eyed Saul as he walked toward the door. "But you're still friends?"

"Oh yeah," Saul said. "It's just that her dogs never did take to me."

Chapter 7

At first, Jayden was glad to have made it up the trellis and onto the roof before the first of the massive guard dogs had his leg for brunch. Not long after he was treed, Lana -- he'd assumed at the time -- came rushing out the front door, shotgun in hand, to see what the commotion was all about. When she caught sight of Saul, she sent the dogs after him, but since he hadn't so much as rolled down a window, all they could manage was scratching the paint off the rental.

Jayden couldn't hear their conversation, even after the dogs were sent back inside, but since he hadn't seen the animals actually get locked up, he figured it'd be best to stay put until Saul introduced him.

After about twenty minutes of talking through a rolled-up car window, then another fifteen while standing in Lana's driveway, Saul finally waved and shouted up that the dogs were put away.

"Sorry about that, Jay," Saul said. "Lana, this is Jayden Pearce. I'm sure I've mentioned him once or twice."

Jayden smiled and shook the lady's hand once he returned to solid ground. "Sorry about climbing your trellis, and all."

Lana shook his hand, gazing into Jayden's eyes with a confidence born only of years worth of experience sizing people up. She smiled, then covered Jay's hand with both of hers and began leading him toward the front door.

"Never you mind about that, young man," Lana said as they stepped into the foyer. "I've heard so much about you."

"Well, I apologize for dropping by unannounced," he said, glaring quickly at Saul. "I was led to believe you wouldn't mind a visit."

Lana laughed shortly, leading the way through a massive foyer into a well furnished, expansive living room with a sweeping view of the ocean. "Saul's an ass. I don't know what I ever saw in him."

"Hey, now, that's not exactly called for," Saul protested.

"But it is earned," Lana said. She shot him a scolding glance, then shook her head and smiled. "But never mind, that's all water under the bridge, as they say. Can I offer you some iced tea?" She released Jay's hand finally and wafted into the large, open kitchen in a flow of colorful skirts. "I assume, knowing what I do about the famous Jayden Pearce, that you're here to look at something of Frederick's?"

"Frederick?" Jayden glanced from Lana to Saul.

"Her late husband," Saul replied. "Ah, yes, actually, we are. You see, we're in kind of a pickle."

"Tea first," Lana said as she returned with tall, iced glasses on a tray. "If you're going to drop in like this and make demands, I'll have to insist you at least be cordial about it."

Jayden accepted the glass, then took a seat when she pointed to the couch. From there, he could see a painting hanging above the large stone mantel of a fireplace and the sight made him forget his tea and the dogs.

"Good lord, is that . . ." Jayden set his glass down and hurried over to the painting, studying the lines and colors with a practiced eye. "This can't be the original."

"It is," Lana replied.

Jayden blinked, staring up at the framed oil. "My God, I thought this was lost in the fires on Acadia, six hundred years ago."

"That's what everyone thought, except my late husband." Lana crossed the room and stood beside Jayden, gazing at the painting. "Frederick always believed the rumor that someone had swapped out the original, weeks before the fire, then used that crime to cover up his theft."

"This painting is worth--"

"Thirty million, give or take," Lana replied with a smile. "And that's on the black market. If we could legitimately claim ownership, I could sell it for double. But since it's supposed to have been destroyed, the insurance company that paid the claim -- if they're still in existence -- would have something to say about it." She turned to Saul. "So, what exactly is it that brings you back here? You mentioned something about a pickle."

Jayden had to drag his gaze off the painting by turning around, but he couldn't help glancing back at it now and again.

"It's my brother, again," Saul explained. "He's gone a lost the deed, and his kids asked for my help getting it back."

"I don't have any deeds," Lana said. "How am I supposed to help you there?"

"No, no, we don't need the deed -- well, we do, but the man who has it is holding it in trade for something a tad more exotic."

"The man wants Darkness," Jayden offered. He knew they probably had a head start on Drake, but he didn't want to waste any more time than he had to, waiting for Saul to cut to the chase.

Lana's eyes opened wide. "Darkness? That's supposed to be a myth."

Jayden saw it in her eyes, and he figured Saul probably did, too. She not only knew Darkness was real, she probably knew it hid a map. Or at least, her late husband Frederick most likely had known. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the copy, holding it up for her to see.

Lana gasped, a very lady-like intake of breath, and reached out for it. "Darkness!"

"A copy," Jayden corrected. "I found the stone last year, for a paying customer, and as you can imagine, he's not interested in parting with it."

She was holding the gem up to the light, turning it this way and that, staring at it with one eye squinted.

"But what we think he really wants -- the guy holding the deed -- is a map to the alien burial grounds," Saul said. "We figured if we could get there first, well . . . It's for Chloe and David."

Lana was still examining the copied gem, and her scrutiny was making Jayden nervous.

"Saul told me about the artifacts your late husband had collected," he said. "And I was hoping he might have come across something in his travels that could narrow down the location."

"You found the map?" She suddenly looked at him, the gemstone forgotten. "You actually found the map?"

"I -- well, yeah. That is, we figured out a general location based on --"

"We found the map," Saul interrupted. "But we still need to narrow things down a bit. The map was, to say the least, a tad unspecific."

Lana handed back the gemstone with a wink, then gestured for them both to follow her. "Upstairs, in his study, are all of his finds from this world," she said as she led them up a long, wide staircase. "Frederick would have given anything to see Darkness before he died. I want to thank you for showing it to me."

"It's just a copy, you realize," Jayden said.

Lana paused at a door and smiled. "Don't worry, dear." She pushed the door open, revealing a large office filled with all manner of relics, furnishings and artwork. "Frederick would have liked you."

Jayden stepped into the room, eyes wide, and tried not to stare open-mouthed at the treasures inside. "My God."

"Yeah, it's really something, isn't it?" Saul marched through the room to the far wall, where a framed parchment hung from an iron rod. "This is the piece I was talking about, right here."

Ignoring the statues, framed maps, a large brass compass of star charts and a chest that looked like it was filled with wooden blocks, Jayden focused on the parchment. Just as Saul had drawn, he saw a tree with large, raised roots that seemed to be holding an altar of stacked stones.

On top of the altar was, just as Saul had drawn, a stick figure.

At least, that's what it looked like.

"That's one of the least impressive depictions of the creatures," Lana said. She opened a desk drawer and pulled out an old leather notebook, flipping to a page in the middle before handing it to Jayden. "I'm not sure where he found that one, but he always said it was the best representation of the aliens that he'd ever seen."

Jayden took the notebook and looked at the full page pencil drawing. "Yipes."

The creature drawn there, as indicated by a side notation, was six foot tall and roughly humanoid in shape, having two arms and two legs, but the resemblance pretty much ended right there.

Where a human's legs sprout from the base of the trunk and head straight down, this creature had arms that came down, then bent at the elbow and curved back up. And where a human's arms come out at the sides from the top of the trunk, the alien in the drawing sported two legs, starting at shoulder height and traveling straight down to the ground.

The head did have hair, in the form of a single thick pony tail that began at the center of the top of the skull, then draped down nearly to the ground. The eyes were long, thin slits that wrapped almost all the way around the head, and the nose was no more than a dot, dead center.

Or the mouth. Jayden wasn't at all sure which opening it was, and there were no notations to guide him.

"Yipes, indeed," Saul agreed.

"My husband got that from a spice trader, here on the Southern continent," Lana explained. "He always believed it had some connection to Darkness, and ventured into the Dark Forest several times, trying to find the ruins that held the stone, but he never found it. Well, obviously, because you did." She pointed to some of the markings at the bottom of the paper. "My husband said the best translation he could manage there was something like 'The heart has two desires.' I don't think he ever knew what that meant."

Jayden opened up the notebook Saul had given him, then pushed the pages back until he found the drawing of the parchment. There were some details lacking, so he found a pencil from Lana's late husband's desk and started to add them.

"He was right, wasn't he?"

"We think so," Saul answered. "That's why I wanted to show Jayden this piece. He found Darkness in the ruins of the Dark Forest, but the stone itself is a map to somewhere on the Southern continent, inside the Churling Forest, we think."

Jayden carefully recreated the alien's shape, in place of the stick figure Saul had drawn, then stepped closer to examine some markings carved into the altar.

"The Churling Forest?" Lana sounded surprised. "I've heard stories about the trees in there, that they walk?"

"They move, that much we know," Saul replied. "Some say they're haunted with the ghosts of those creatures that lived here first, and that they move in order to confuse anyone trying to find this altar. Others say they're the aliens themselves, keeping their own secrets."

"The'th more ooh id th-that." Jayden pulled the pencil out of his mouth and turned to Saul and Lana. "There's more to it than that," he said, holding up his drawing for them to see. "Look closely at the figure." He tapped it with the pencil tip. "At the chest, or chest area."

They obeyed, leaning in to get a better look. Lana pulled a pair of reading glasses from a pocket of her flowing skirts and studied the image.

"The chest," Jayden repeated, tapping the picture.

"It's a chest," Saul shrugged. "Bare, muscled, kinda squared-off, two nipples."

"Two nipples," Jayden declared.

"So they were mammals."

Lana peered more closely. "No, they're inverted, aren't they?"

When she glanced up, Jayden smiled widely. "Exactly! They're inverted, and in the shape of Darkness." He pointed to the original parchment. "Just like a keyhole, which you'd expect to find on a map to a treasure, right?"

Lana's face lit up. "Oh, I see, of course. So the stone is a key, and this figure on the altar is the door it unlocks."

"There's just one problem," Saul said.

"Finding the altar?" Lana asked as she straightened up and removed her glasses.

Jayden shook his head. "There are two key holes," he said. "And only one Darkness." He looked down at his notes, where he'd carefully recreated the alien wording along the bottom. "The heart has two desires."

"Well that makes sense, doesn't it?" Lana asked, looking from Jayden to Saul and back again. "I always said, you have to take the bad with the good. It's true of any marriage, or individual. So if these creatures removed everything inside of them that was bad, or negative, as the legend goes, and placed it inside Darkness, then what did they do with the good?"

"We all assume that was what they were left with," Saul explained. "Removing the bad, leaves only the good. So you'd have a race of peaceful, pleasant creatures."

Jayden was beginning to see the light as things fell into place in his mind. He shook his head and looked at Saul. "Not exactly. Imagine it, Saul. Imagine if humans

were all one emotion. What if everyone around you could only be happy and calm, all the time. Twenty-nine, eight, just happy, shiny people.”

Saul shrugged. “Well, after a few days, I’d wanna murder ‘em.”

“But you couldn’t,” Lana said. “Not if all of the negative emotion and desire was removed, you wouldn’t murder them, or even think you wanted to.”

“Exactly,” Jayden replied. “You’d be just as lobotomized. But an entire species like that, wandering around without a care in the world, how would they manage much of anything?”

Now Lana was nodding. “Of course, without any real passion, they’d be a subdued, stagnant race.” She looked at Jayden. “And that’s why they died out. No ambition, no drive, all of which are -- if we’re honest -- considered negative emotions. Aggression and ambition go hand in hand.”

Jayden sighed, feeling only slightly elevated by his discovery. “Only that doesn’t get us any closer to figuring out why there are two keyholes, and we only know about one key.” He tapped his chin with the pencil. “Lana, you said your husband bought this parchment from a spice trader here, in the South?”

She nodded. “Yes, but he traveled the globe, and never did say where he’d found it. I just assumed, since you say Darkness is a map to the Churling Forest, that the altar must be in there.”

“But we can’t open the altar with only one key,” Saul said. “Assuming we’re right about Darkness being a key, and the altar being a door.”

Jayden’s mind was running a familiar course, and he knew the path by heart. “If there’s bad, then there’s good, right? If there’s Darkness, there should be Light. Two stones, one carrying the darkness of the creatures, and another holding the light.”

Saul nodded slowly. “Sure, sounds reasonable. But that doesn’t help us find it.”

“Sure it does,” Jayden smiled, feeling his mind take a tried-and-true curve. “The altar isn’t in the Churling Forest, this other key is. Darkness always gives way to light, right? So Darkness is pointing us to Light, and that stone will point us to the altar.” It was clear, logical, and pretty damn typical of every treasure hunt he’d ever been on.

Which was why Jayden didn’t understand the skeptical looks he was getting.

“What?”

Saul rubbed his chin. “You’re making kind of a leap there, aren’t you, kid? I mean, Darkness is one thing, but Light? Who ever heard of a stone called Light?”

Suddenly Lana snapped her fingers and rushed across the room to a cabinet. After some searching, she pulled out a rolled document.

“It makes just as much sense as a stone called Darkness,” Jayden replied.

“Here.” Lana carried the rolled document back to them, pushing aside some things on her late husband’s desk so she could unroll it. “Frederick copied this from something he found in the ruins, in the Dark Forest, when he spent a summer there on excavation.”

Jayden helped her unroll the large piece, then whistled in appreciation of the late Frederick’s technique.

“He found this carving on one of the temples inside the ruins, but none of the archeologists understood what it meant, or where it was leading.”

When the scroll was unrolled, they all found themselves gazing down at an elaborate rub -- a copy taken directly off a stone. In the center was a stepped pyramid, with a circle hovering over the top square. Beneath it were more alien writing marks.

"Now, he managed to interpret this," Lana tapped the marks. "In the light of darkness, the truth will rise."

Jayden wrote that in the notebook, then above it began copying the design on the scroll. "And he had no idea what it was referring to?"

Lana shook her head.

"That could be anything," Saul said. "It could have nothing to do with this altar." He looked at Lana. "Your husband got that parchment from a spice trader, but where did he first see it? I mean, he'd had a parchment, but where's the real stone? If this is a cap piece to an altar, where did he see it?"

"From one of the dig sites in the Dark Forest," she replied.

"So the altar's in the Dark Forest."

Jayden shook his head. "I don't think so, Saul." He glanced up at the parchment on the wall, then back down at the notes in the small leather journal in his hand. "You wouldn't put your biggest secret next to your darkest one, so why have your burial site next to Darkness, when Light is so far away?"

Saul laughed shortly. "Listen to you. Light, Darkness, as if you already know" He crossed his arms. "You figured it out, haven't you?"

Jayden could almost see the pieces of the puzzle fall into place in his mind, and for a moment, he wondered if this was how Drake saw things, too. If so, he wouldn't be too far behind.

He closed the notebook and rolled up the scroll for Lana. "We need to get into the Churling Forest and find this other stone."

Chapter 8

Jayden double checked the figures and calculations, then wrote down the exact coordinates in his notebook before trying to plug them in to the GPS. It was a glitchy thing on a good day, but it did have a useful compass at least.

“Have you narrowed down your search?”

He looked up when Lana came into the study. “Um, yeah, seems to have worked. I got the details off the geological survey satellites, then called up a gemology program that calculated all the angles of this gem. Once I got the math worked out, it seems to all point here.” He tapped a map of the Churling Forest, dead-center. “Now I just have to get there, find whatever’s hidden, and figure out what to do with it before Drake does.”

Lana nodded. “I only know Drake by reputation, but I understand he’s very good.” She pushed a few things aside on her late husband’s desk and sat on it, facing Jayden. “Saul’s niece and nephew are with him now, right? Keeping an eye on his progress?”

“That’s the idea,” Jayden shrugged. “Although if he figures this out and beats us there, it won’t do me a hell of a lot of good to hear about it.”

Lana took a long, slow breath and glanced back at the study door. “I wouldn’t count on those two looking out for your best interests. Chloe, especially. They’re such spoiled children, it’s no wonder Saul was keeping the map from them.”

Jayden sat back in the thickly padded office chair and nodded slowly. He’d figured that to be the truth the other day, when he met those two, but it was nice to hear another outside party agree. “Not a lot I can do about them, if they decide to screw over their uncle, but I thought it’d be best to get them out of my hair.”

“Of course, you’re right. You can move a lot faster without having to drag them along, complaining the whole way,” she agreed. “I think it’s obvious that Resnick was never interested in the deed to their land. He’s known all along about the map, and what it leads to. He’s just never had any idea how to find it.”

Jayden chewed his lower lip. “This would be a hell of a lot easier if I didn’t have Drake, Resnick and Markem all breathing down my neck.” He stopped chewing and the corners of his mouth instantly curled up. “Although I admit, it wouldn’t be as much fun, either.”

Lana laughed, very lightly, and put a hand on Jayden’s shoulder. “You remind me so much of my late husband.” She looked at him, still smiling. “Such strong arms, the energy of youth, and the drive of a well deserved ego.”

Jay shifted in the chair, unsure what to say.

“Don’t worry, I’m not flirting with you.” Lana patted his shoulder, then stood up and walked to a cabinet behind the desk. “Those were just the ramblings of a old woman, fondly remembering her late husband in his hay-days.”

Jayden blushed. “I didn’t, I mean-- ”

“Here.” Lana turned around, holding out a small package. “I want you to have this.” She handed him a small GPS, in a worn leather case. “It was Frederick’s, and I know it doesn’t look like much. It’s not as fancy as the newer models. You can’t dial up

the Con-Net from the woods or remotely turn on the lights at your house, but it's reliable and sturdy."

Jayden blinked, then shook his head even as the voice inside his head urged him to take the new toy and play with it. "Oh, I couldn't. Really."

Lana shoved it forward, then reached for his hand and put the case firmly against his palm before letting go. "You can and you will. What good is it doing me, sitting here in this cabinet all these years, going unused? Frederick would have given it to you himself, and been proud to do it."

"I -- thank you," Jayden managed as he pulled the older unit from the worn case. "It's a Mark Eight." He really hoped he hadn't just sounded like the twelve year old he felt, but the Mark Eight was -- among treasure hunters -- considered one of the seventeen wonders of the world. He turned it over in his hands and imagined the tales those scratches and nicks could tell.

"Frederick always said that unit was reliable down to the inch, and he'd trust his life with it," she said. "He believed those fancier units tried too hard to out think themselves, and the technology just got in the way."

"Your late husband was a wise man," Jayden said. He slid the Mark Eight from the worn case and turned it on. Instantly the face glowed soft green, a machine willing and able to wake up and get down to business after so many years gathering dust. Without another word, he dialed in the coordinates from the map. After only a moment's hesitation, the screen opened up, displaying a detailed image of Lana's house from above, while a simple yellow arrow blinked silently in the corner, directing them South.

"Now, Saul sent me up to tell you he's ready to go whenever you are. He's got the hopper loaded, I'm loaning you both my hopper because it'll take you a full day to rent one, and with Drake on your heels you don't have a full day to waste."

Jayden closed the Mark Eight and slipped it back in its case, then stood and secured the unit to his belt. "I can't thank you enough for all your help."

"I only wish my late husband was here to be a part of this," she said. "But since he isn't, all I ask is that you let me know what you found. Frederick spent a lifetime contemplating the final resting place of those aliens. I'd like to think of it as finally getting his answers."

Jayden was never sure how to react to things like this, mostly since he liked to avoid any thoughts of aging or death or anything else terribly grown-up whenever possible, so he could only smile in return. "I promise, you'll be the first to hear all about it when it's over."

That seemed to be all Lana needed to hear. She smiled widely, then took Jayden by the arm and walked with him out to the driveway, where Saul was waiting in the hopper.

"Perfect timing," he said as they neared. "I just heard from Chloe. Drake's got the stone."

Jayden cursed and hurried to the passenger side. "He's got Darkness?"

Saul nodded, tipped a hand in salute to Lana, and kicked the hopper into lift mode. "He's on his way back here right now."

They crossed the bay, flying high over the shipping lanes before angling South, a route that put them at the leading edge of the Churling Forest in under an hour.

Jayden watched the tops of the trees move by as they flew overhead, occasionally glancing at the face of the Mark Eight to make sure they were flying in the right direction.

“So tell me about this forest,” he said after pointing for Saul to turn a little more left. “Why does everyone keep saying the trees move?”

“They do,” he nodded. “We think. See, every single time we’ve gone in there to map some of it out, when you go back, it’s all different. Trees aren’t where they were before, paths are gone, new clearings appear. No matter what you do.” Saul adjusted his direction again. “There’ve been countless people lost in there, some are found, some never come out. Those that do have stories of the trees moving in the middle of the night, actually walking around on their roots, changing position like they’re doin’ it on purpose.”

“On purpose?” Jayden looked down at the thick top layer of branches below him.

“Now I was thinkin’, we’ve got a full tank here,” Saul said. “We could just fly right over our spot and repel down, find whatever this is we’re after, and come back up. But then Chloe called and Drake’s not more than half a day out.”

Jayden nodded. “He’ll see the hopper and know right where we are.” He looked at the Mark Eight again. They were only twenty miles out now, but there was no telling what was waiting for them below, or how hard it would be to locate another gem. “So you’re saying if we found a clearing and landed, we might not have a clearing to fly out of when we’re done?”

Saul nodded once. “That’s exactly what I’m sayin’.”

“All right.” Jayden rubbed his chin, glanced at the screen of the Mark Eight, then had an idea. He pulled a map of the forest from the hopper’s glove box, then found a pen. With a few careful marks, then an X and several circles around it, he marked a spot five miles from their destination. “We’re here,” he said, double checking the Mark Eight. The sun was still rising, casting an orange glow over the tops of the trees as branches swayed very gently in the slight morning breeze. A moment later, he saw what he wanted. “There’s a clearing, about a mile East. We’ll go down there, leave the hopper above, and hope Drake doesn’t get here before we’re done and gone. But if he does, maybe a little misdirection will help.” He held up the map he’d just drawn in.

Saul smiled, shot off a wink and pulled the hopper over the clearing. “Good thinking. Might even work.”

They settled the vehicle a few feet above the top branches of a tree to the left of the clearing, then buckled in to harnesses and secured repelling lines from the landing gear. Jayden double checked the belt loop holding the Mark Eight to his hip, then pushed away from the hopper and started down to the forest floor as quickly as he could manage. When he landed, he stepped aside and unstrapped his harness while waiting for Saul.

The clearing was bright with the late morning sun, making it very easy to see the massive roots of the trees surrounding it. Jayden hadn’t seen trees like this before, on any other world. Even in the Dark Forest, the roots dove underground after spreading around in a tangled mess. Here, the tree trunks stopped thirty feet above ground, where the roots then sprouted outward and reached down, supporting them like thick legs which flattened out like feet on the dirt. Looking more like candlesticks perched on a table-top rather than trees, it was easy to see how they could move.

If a tree could actually move.

“You’re sure about these trees?” he asked as Saul finally touched down. “That they move, I mean.” He glanced at the nearest root-foot. “You know, after a few days lost in the woods, people get confused, scared even. It’s pretty easy to convince yourself the landscape changed and you didn’t.”

“Believe me, it’s not a myth,” Saul said as he unhooked his harness. “I’ve seen it before with my own eyes. Well, seen the results. No one’s ever really seen them walk, per say.”

Jayden laughed shortly and pulled the Mark Eight from its holder. After marking the location of the clearing and their waiting hopper, he switched back to the coordinates he’d taken from the duplicate Darkness stone. “Yeah, figured as much.” He looked at the screen, then pointed. “Okay, let’s get this done.”

They started into the forest, following the arrow on the GPS and weaving through massive tree roots. Now and then, Jayden looked up at the thick trunks, suspended overhead. The trees in the Dark Forest wove their upper branches together, effectively blocking out all light, and took their nutrients from the top, down. Their roots were a tangled mess to navigate, but they did eventually plunge into the dirt and seek out water. The rapid growth, however, could easily relocate rivers and streams from one season to the next.

Here in the Churling Forest, the branches were thickly plumed and plentiful, but waved easily in the breeze and kept enough distance between them to let the light of the sun reach the forest floor.

“How do you suppose Drake got his hands on the gem?” Jayden asked as he clambered up and over a thick root.

“I don’t know, Chloe didn’t elaborate,” Saul replied.

“You trust your niece and nephew?”

“Trust them? They’re family, Jay,” Saul said, jumping down from the tall impeding root. “Of course I don’t trust them. I just don’t think they’re smart enough to figure a way around Drake and Resnick. I mean, at worst, they’re gonna wait ‘em out. Soon as Drake finds whatever it is this map leads to, and Resnick gets his hands on it, they’ll get the deed back.”

“Or not,” Jayden said.

“Or not, yeah.” Saul wiped sweat from his forehead and glanced at the screen on the Mark Eight in Jayden’s hand. “We should be right on top of this thing.”

Jayden nodded, glancing around. “I know.” He looked at the screen of the Mark Eight. Directly in the center of the screen, the large X had changed from yellow to green, and was blinking, indicating they couldn’t be more than ten feet from their goal. “All I see are tree roots. No ruins, no altars, no statue or cairn to be found.”

“I don’t get it,” Saul said, rubbing his head. “You checked those measurements a dozen times. It made perfect sense. Where else could it be?”

“Maybe nowhere,” Jayden replied. “Maybe there’s nothing here to find, Saul.” He kicked the dirt. “Maybe I just let my imagination run too far this time because I wanted there to be something here.”

Saul shook his head. “No, no, no, there’s something here. There has to be. That parchment said the heart has two desires.”

“For all we know, whoever wrote that was having an affair.”

Saul was pacing around. He'd pulled a cigar from his shirt pocket and managed to light it after three tries. "I don't buy it. Sure, we've followed a few dead ends before, taken one or two wrong turns, gotten stuck in a few interesting places we shouldn't have been in, but there's something to this. I can feel it in my gut, Jay. There's something here to find."

Jayden opened his mouth to reply, then heard voices in the distance, familiar voices, coming closer. He grabbed Saul by the arm and pointed up, then shoved the Mark Eight away and started climbing the tree root as quickly as he could, making sure Saul was right behind him.

They had to climb up and around to the inside portion of the root in order to be hidden by the shadows, but managed to find enough purchase to stay out of sight as the group came into view.

Stopping just below their tree stood none other than Bernard Drake, holding a shiny new GPS and shouting at a man with a folding map.

"This has to be it, dammit," Drake said, glaring down at the GPS. "Carlson, if you fucked up those measurements --"

"No, sir," Carlson stammered from Drake's left. "I'm positive we're near the spot."

"It would help if we knew what we were looking for."

That was Chloe, coming into view just behind Drake, with her brother beside her. Jayden glanced at Saul, who looked like he would have shrugged if he weren't so precariously wedged on the tree root twelve feet above ground.

"Your boss said all he wanted was Darkness, and he'd give us back our deed."

"Yeah, well we didn't exactly get Darkness, did we?" Drake replied. "Pearce had some balls, double crossing Markem. He's just lucky he got away with it."

Jayden's right hand slipped and he nearly fell out of the tree.

"Don't remind me," Chloe replied. "I had that stone in my hands! I could have gone back to Resnick with that and been done with this whole mess by now."

Jayden looked at Saul and whispered. "It's a copy, I swear. I gave Markem the original." Drake had to be lying, working some sort of angle or triple-cross.

"Just keep looking!" Drake shouted. "Whatever it is, it has to be close."

They moved left, out of view, their footsteps growing quieter in the distance.

"I swear to you Saul, this is a copy."

"Maybe you think it's a copy, kid," Saul replied, shifting his grip on the root. "Maybe that forger you used screwed up, or you got them confused."

Jayden shook his head, trying to remember that day he'd had the copy made. He had his created before going to the Dark Forest, but it was a crude mock-up. Once he got Darkness, he figured there was no harm in having his little bauble re-cut to perfectly match the original. What good's a souvenir if it's not realistic?

"I think they're gone," Saul said. "Let's get outta this tree."

Jayden glanced up, looking for a hand-hold, when something caught his eye. "Hang on a second." He pushed forward, moving directly underneath the bottom of the truck, where the roots branched out. "There's something here."

Saul moved closer. "Here, kid, use this light."

"It's . . . There's a plaque here." Jayden took the light and directed the beam dead-center at the base of the tree's trunk.

Wedged there, pushed in as if part of the tree, was a stone tile covered in alien letters. In the center was a carved depiction of a tree, with an inverted tear drop in the center of the top branches.

“Saul, I know where to find Light.”

Chapter 9

Saul hit the ground and looked around, listening for anything out of the ordinary while Jayden finished climbing down from the roots. Satisfied Drake and the others were long gone, he moved out from under the massive trunk and thick supporting roots.

“So now we just have to find our clearing again and get the hell outta here, right?”

Jayden nodded. “Right. And hopefully without running into Drake.”

He pulled out the Mark Eight and Saul leaned closer to see the screen. The yellow arrow pointed West, so they headed out, climbing over roots and under trunks.

Saul didn’t want to think about how the trail back seemed a little different, or what they might do if the clearing wasn’t there, but it was all he *could* think about.

Which was why he didn’t hear anything until he and Jayden rounded a thick root and nearly walked right into Drake and his people.

“Pearce,” Drake turned to face them, his people spreading out to see who had just appeared.

“Drake,” Jayden replied.

“Uncle Saul,” Chloe crossed her arms and looked at her uncle.

“Chloe,” Saul replied. “David. Hello Drake.”

“Trubnick.”

“I hope we’re not gonna bother introducing all these minor players,” Jayden said. “You know I’m not good with names.”

Drake laughed shortly. “I wouldn’t bother, since I barely remember them myself.”

Saul couldn’t help noticing how badly outnumbered they were, or how Drake’s men had so easily surrounded them.

“So, what brings you out here?” Jayden asked. “Sight seeing?”

“It’s an interesting place,” Drake replied. “Not as exciting as the Dark Forest, but I’m told these trees can move, trap the average wanderer for days.”

Jayden nodded. “Interesting. I hope you left breadcrumbs.”

Saul sighed and pulled what was left of his cigar from a pocket, lighting it and settling in for the usual long, slow dance.

“I have to congratulate you, Pearce,” Drake smiled and folded his arms. “Not many people would have the balls to double cross a guy like Markem.”

“I didn’t double cross anyone,” Jayden replied. “He paid me to find Darkness for him, and I did. Whoever convinced you I kept the original --”

“Oh no one convinced me, Pearce. You see, I paid the ex-Mrs. Markem a very tidy sum for her gemstone,” Drake replied. He unfolded his arms so he could gesture while he spoke. “As luck would have it, she was sick and tired of being reminded of her ex husband every time she put the thing on, so when I offered to buy it for a half-million, she was more than happy to sell. Of course, she was on vacation, and very inebriated at the time, but it was all legit.” He shrugged. “Being the cautious man that I am, I took it to be inspected by a jeweler I trust.” Drake pulled a black, glistening gemstone from his

pocket and tossed it up in the air, catching it easily. "Imagine my surprise when it turned out to be nothing more than a diamond, and not even a true black one."

He threw the black gem at Jayden, who caught it in one hand.

"I had a copy made, sure. But I gave Markem the real gem."

Drake pointed at Jayden. "You had a copy made, all right. But then you kept the original. This stone has your artist's mark."

"Dammit," Saul swore around his cigar. "Jay, do you have any idea what a guy like Markem will do if he ever finds out you screwed him?"

"I didn't screw anybody," Jayden replied, staring at the gem in his hand.

"You know forgers can't resist signing their work," Drake said. "Well your guy's no different. Took mine a while to find, but sure enough, it's there." He held out his hand. "So, now you're gonna hand over the real Darkness."

Saul heard the unmistakable sound of guns being cocked and looked up. Drake was unarmed, but a man beside him was holding a handgun. A quick glance around showed another three of his men equally armed.

"You're resorting to guns now, Drake?" Jayden asked, hands raised.

"Me? Heavens no," Drake replied. "People like us, we don't use guns. But these five men here, they're Resnick's, not mine. I suggest you hand over the stone."

Chloe stepped forward then. "Better let me find it. You don't want Pearce making another switch."

Saul watched his niece step closer, then begin to pat Jayden down. "I take it he promised you the lease?"

"Nothing personal, Uncle Saul," Chloe replied. "But you had your chance. We need that deed back, and we don't care about the stone or whatever else it might lead to."

"I would have done the same," Saul said, and meant it. When he saw Jayden giving him a look, he shrugged. "Listen, they have their future to look out for, I've got mine. They're not the one's holding the guns, after all."

Chloe stuck her hand in Jayden's pocket and pulled out Darkness, holding it up. "Exactly. And now, there's no reason for anyone to be holding guns." She turned and tossed the gemstone to her brother. "Put that somewhere safe."

"Hold on a second," Drake held up a hand. "We had a deal, missy."

"You'll get to spend time with it on our way back to Resnick," Chloe said. "Now, let's get out of here, shall we?"

Saul watched the men lower their guns, then slowly put them away. He relaxed with a slight sigh, but Drake wasn't finished.

"What'd you expect to find out here, Pearce?" he asked, stepping closer to Jayden.

"Same thing you were hoping for, Drake," Jayden replied. "But as it turns out, there's nothing here."

"What about the map?" Drake pulled a folded map from his pocket and turned it over, pointing to a spot in the center. "We all know Darkness was a map, pointing to the Churling Forest."

Jayden laughed shortly. "Did we?" He looked to Saul, then back to Drake.

"Seriously, did we really expect it to lead somewhere? We're treasure hunters, you and I. If we tried hard enough, we could find hidden meaning in our Wheaties." He gestured at the trees around them. "There's nothing here. Saul and I have been looking for hours, and

all we found were trees. If there's anything more to find, it'll be in the Dark Forest, where the ruins are, not here."

Drake turned to Saul, then looked at his men, then back to Jayden. "We've been looking, too."

"We've got what we came for," Chloe said. "Resnick hired you to find Darkness, and we're paying you extra to get it back to him in trade for our deed. Whatever map you've all been talking about is meaningless."

Drake smiled, shaking his head slightly. "Kids, they just don't get it, do they?"

"They're not born to this sort of stuff," Jayden replied. "Right, Saul?"

"They're landlords," Saul replied. "No harm in that." He wanted to get this over with and get back to the hopper, before the trees managed to hide their clearing. Whatever Jayden found in that tree trunk was waiting for them.

"Indeed," Drake agreed. "No harm. Well, I suppose we should take our leave then. Thanks so much for doing all the grunt work, Pearce. I really wasn't relishing the idea of trudging around the Dark Forest for this stone."

"By the way, how'd you know I'd already found it?"

"I didn't," Drake replied. "Not until Saul's nephew called me and let me know."

"What?" Saul glared at David, who'd slipped behind one of Drake's men, avoiding his direct gaze. "Now that's low, David. I can understand you two wanting to hurry this up and switching sides, but to sell us out before Pearce even had a chance?"

"You'd have done the same if it were your land, Uncle Saul," Chloe said. She turned and started marching back through the trees. "Let's go!"

"See you around the bars, Pearce," Drake smiled as he left.

"Dammit, Jay, I'm sorry about this," Saul said as the rest of the men followed the others. "I knew the kids would take whatever side got them their deed the fastest, but I never figured--"

"It doesn't matter, Saul," Jayden said. He pocketed the gem Drake had tossed at him and started back through the trees toward the clearing. "He may have Darkness, but we've got Light."

"About that," Saul hurried to catch up. "Where exactly are we going?"

Jayden pointed skyward. "Up. I tagged that tree we were on, now we just have to get topside and find it."

"I gotta tell you, Jay, I can't quite picture you double crossing Markem like that. Keeping the real stone and giving him a fake to give to his wife."

"I didn't, Saul," Jayden replied. "I swear I gave him the real Darkness." He pulled the stone Drake had tossed him from his pocket and stared at it while they walked down a short open path. "I took the stone to Gates, my forger, and he made the copy I had more exact, so it would match the real one down to the angle. You know, just for souvenir's sake." He shook his head and pocketed the stone again. "He gave me back Darkness and the copy, but there's no way I mixed them up. I wouldn't take that kind of risk."

"I hear ya, kid. But how do you account for what Drake said?"

"I dunno. Either he's lying, or he made a mistake."

Saul glanced around, but saw only trees and roots. "You think he's following us?"

"I don't know what his game is," Jayden said, stopping to take out the Mark Eight and check their position. "We should be there."

Saul looked up. He could see blue sky above, between the branches of the trees around them, but this was definitely not the clearing they'd come down in. "Shit."

Jayden held up a hand. "Not to worry, I set a ping on the hopper, just in case."

"I didn't see them move," Saul eyed the nearest tree. The roots were resting squarely on the soil, no marks in the dirt suggested massive tree-prints anywhere. "Did you see them move?"

"There it is," Jayden pointed East. "We're a mile off, that's all."

"A mile." Saul looked at the tree behind them, half afraid he'd see it stand up and step closer. "Well let's get moving."

They continued East, following the arrow on the small screen of the Mark Eight. Saul had his own theories about Gates and the authenticity of the Darkness stone, but he was too distracted by the trees and the location of their hopper to voice them while they walked. He'd rather wait until they were back at the Marco Polo, or maybe Lana's house, where he could check things out first before discussing them.

"Hang on," Jayden stopped, checking the GPS. "According to this, the hopper is directly above us."

Saul looked up. They weren't anywhere near what he would call a clearing. Large trees towered over them, nestled rather closely together, branches all but obstructing their view. When the breeze picked up, and a few of the trees rustled with the wind, he could see the unmistakable metal shine of a hopper, waiting patiently above.

"There, you see, what did I tell you!" He would have punched a tree root, but he was too intimidated. "The damn things move!"

"Okay, okay, just hang on," Jayden put the Mark Eight away and took a deep breath. "We found the hopper, at least. We're not hopelessly lost in the woods or anything."

Before Saul could comment on the uselessness of finding a vehicle they couldn't reach, thanks to repel lines most likely tangled in the tree's branches, they heard voices approaching. Moments later, Drake and his people stepped around a large root and came into view.

"Pearce."

"Drake," Jayden replied.

"Trubnick," Drake stopped, looking slightly puzzled.

"We're not gonna go through this again, are we?" Saul asked.

"You two wouldn't happen to be lost, would you?" Drake asked, smiling.

Jayden shook his head, then pointed up. "Not at all. There's our ride, as a matter of fact. You?"

Drake waved a hand in the air. "Not in the least. We're simply looking for a suitable clearing, so I can have our man pick us up."

"Well, lucky you."

Drake held up his GPS, shining silver in the sunlight streaming down from above. "What on earth are you using, is that a Mark Eight?"

Jayden glanced at the unit in his hand. "Yep, it's a Mark Eight."

"Jesus, Pearce," Drake laughed. "You could be down here all week. You really should invest in something a tad more modern. Like my Gallagher Three-Ten here," he hefted the GPS he was holding. "Does everything. I can store locations, trace a mark

down to the inch. Hell, I can even turn on the lights remotely back on my ship with this thing.”

“I’m surprised Resnick needed to hire you then,” Jayden replied. “When he could have just gotten a Gallagher Three-Ten to find Darkness for him.”

“Is everything all right, Uncle Saul?”

“Yes, Chloe. Like Jayden said, our ride’s just up there.”

“But how do you--”

“Come along, everyone,” Drake interrupted. “We’d best be off. Pearce and Trubnick have a tree to climb.”

Saul could hear the man’s laughter even after his last man was out of sight. He looked up at the hopper again. “Jay, I’m not so sure I can make that climb. I mean, taking the ropes back up is one thing, I can manage that. But--”

“Don’t worry, Saul.” Jayden stepped up to the nearest root. “I should be able to untangle the ropes on my way up.”

“Just be careful up there.” Saul stepped aside and watched Jayden find his footing on the nearest root, then launch himself upward.

After a few scrambles, and a change of roots partway up, Jayden reached the trunk. “This bark is pretty rough, I should be able to get hand holds all the way up.”

Saul had learned a long time ago that if anyone could scale a ridiculously steep climb, or find finger holds in the most unlikely places, it was Jayden Pearce. He’d seen the man swing from a cliff face to the head of a carved statue just using his fingertips and a prayer, the latter of which usually came from Saul himself. As he watched, Jayden worked his way around the tree trunk a few times, occasionally sending bits of bark down as his feet scrambled for footing.

“Okay, here’s a line, Saul. Head’s up.”

He heard rustling, then saw a rain of leaves and needles heading down, which he ducked to miss, then the end of a repel line appeared, waving back and forth just in front of him.

“Hey, thanks, kid.” Saul climbed into the harness dangling from the end of the line, wrapped the spare rope around his waist, and started up. Unimpeded by the bark and branches, he passed Jayden halfway to the hopper. “I didn’t wanna mention this with Drake around, Jay, but I have a theory about the forgery.”

Jayden didn’t risk a glance as he stepped out onto a branch to see if he could reach the one above him. “I’m a little busy here, Saul.”

“You see, forgers like to sign their work, right?” Saul climbed the rope to stay ahead of Jayden and out of his way. “They can’t resist. It’s like an artist thing or something.”

“It’s a long way to the ground, you know? Probably a fatal drop.”

Saul nodded. “Drake said his man saw the signature on the stone.” He went up another few feet, nearly high enough to reach the hopper. “What if this guy’s ego got the better of him, and he signed the real stone, too?”

The branch directly below Saul rustled and shifted.

“Jay?” Saul looked down. “Did you hear me?”

The branch moved again, and Saul heard a shout. An instant later, something tugged on the bottom of his line and the hopper shifted momentarily from the added weight on one side.

“You okay, kid?”

Jayden poked through the leaves just then, climbing bare-handed up Saul’s repel line. “Peachy, Saul. Just peachy.”

“Good,” he said, reaching up for the hopper’s runner. “So what do you think?”

“I think I’m not tied on to this line.”

Saul climbed up into the vehicle and unhooked his harness, then moved over to the driver’s seat so Jayden could come up. “I mean about the forger signing the real Darkness. Do you think he might have done that?”

Jayden half sat, half fell into the passenger seat, cursing under his breath as he pushed the rope out of his way. Before he could answer, they saw a larger hovercraft flying toward them from the South. As it passed by, Drake waved.

“If that’s true,” Jayden straightened up in his seat and watched Drake’s hopper leave the Churling Forest. “Then he just gave me the real Darkness.”

Chapter 10

Jayden checked the Mark Eight. He'd pinged the marker he stuck in the trunk of the tree he and Saul had been up inside, and expected it to be South, but the Mark Eight was indicating to the East.

"Okay Saul, it should be coming up right . . . There, that one." He pointed through the windscreen of the hopper. "That's the one."

"Seems too far East to me," Saul said as he brought the hopper directly over the tree's top.

"Yeah, well this is it." Jayden didn't want to think about how far these trees seemed to move, or how they managed it without really being noticed. He just wanted to lower himself down on the repel lines and find Light, then get back to Lana's to regroup and figure a few things out. "Just hold steady right here."

"Okay, but keep on the lines, will ya?" Saul set the craft to hover. "Just in case. I'd be happier if you stayed attached to this thing."

Jayden nodded as he clipped himself back into his harness. "Yeah, sure. I think I'll find what I'm looking for right at the top here." He stepped out of the hopper, grabbed the line with both hands, and dropped off the landing rung into the open air.

After a moment of free-fall, he landed easily on the top of the tree, in a flattened area where the branches arched outward and down. The center of the tree's top was cushioned with a thick layer of leaves that had to be pushed and pulled away, until finally he could see a flattened carved piece of stone lying like a tiled insert in the top of the trunk.

"Bingo." Jayden wiped the surface of the stone clear, revealing a tree with a Yin-Yang looking symbol at the top. With his thumb, he pushed the symbol.

For a moment, nothing happened, but then he felt the stone pop under his thumb, and with the grating of rock-on-rock, the symbol depressed and the image of the tree cracked and opened down the middle, exposing a shimmering, gold gemstone the same size and shape of Darkness.

Jayden reached for the stone, but a sudden quaking and tug on his harness pulled him backwards, nearly sending him right off the tree.

"Saul, hold the hopper still!" He leaned forward, trying to reach the stone.

"I haven't moved an inch!" Saul shouted back.

Jayden strained against the harness, and the trunk beneath him shifted. When he reached for the clip to release him from the ropes, the hopper moved to compensate, pulling him over the golden gemstone and off the tree in the opposite direction.

"Saul!"

"Hang on!"

Another shift and he saw the stone spinning by under him again. With a quick grab, he caught it as the tree seemed to duck under his grasp.

"Got it!" He spun upward and started climbing back to the hopper. "Saul, I got it." Unwilling to let go, Jayden clutched the gemstone in his palm until he was sitting in the hopper again, door closed, harness off.

"Well I'll be." Saul whistled at the golden stone Jayden held up. "So that's Light, huh?"

Jayden fished the dark stone from his pocket and held it up. "Check this out." With Darkness upside down, he pressed it against Light, one up-ended teardrop against a straight one.

They fit together like a glove.

"Would you look at that." Saul whistled again, out of habit. "They fit like on of those whadyacallits."

"Like a Yin-Yang," Jayden said.

"Yeah, that's it, a Yin-Yang thingy."

He pulled them apart and stuffed the Darkness stone back in his pocket, then looked at the golden gem. It was the color of sunshine, and multi-faceted, but in a slightly different pattern than Darkness.

"So what do we do with it?"

"I have no idea." Jayden carefully placed the stone in his other pocket, just in case the two would damage each other, then shook his head. "Let's head back to Lana's, maybe we can find a map on this stone, too."

They flew straight back the way they'd come, returned the hopper to it's garage, and went inside to show Lana their discovery.

"It's beautiful," she said, examining the new gemstone. "Like a sunstone, only more dazzling."

"The perfect contrast to Darkness, I suppose." Jayden was holding the gem Drake had tossed at him, right before Chloe had taken the forged copy from his pocket. "But I really don't get it. I gave Markem the real stone."

Lana set down Light and reached out for Darkness. "Let me have another look at that." She pulled a jeweler's scope from a small decorative box on the table and set it in one eye, then held the stone up. "When you first showed me the one you had, I was convinced that was the real thing, so whoever does your forging is a master at his craft."

"Gates, and he is," Jayden agreed.

"Which makes me wonder if he didn't just go ahead and sign the original, as well as the copy," Saul said.

Lana turned the stone around in her hand. "It's not unheard of. And with there being only one Darkness, and nothing to compare it with, also no legitimate way of insuring it, I wouldn't put it past someone to mark it in some way. A sort of artistic I-was-here-first."

Jayden picked up Light and shrugged. He was too irritated by the idea that he would have taken Markem's money, gone to all that trouble to get Darkness, only to turn around and cheat the man by giving him a fake. And he felt a little guilty -- if his copy really had been the original -- about having kept it in a trunk full of crap all this time.

"Mr. Pearce, I think I can solve this mystery." Lana smiled widely, then stood and waved for them to follow. "I'm familiar with the signature Gates uses, since Frederick would often buy me mock-ups of famous gems. Gates is one of the best, and if I'm wearing a fake, I like it to look as authentic as possible," she explained.

They'd followed her to her late husband's office, where she placed the gemstone in a projector and displayed the image on a blank portion of the office wall, magnifying one corner until a microscopic image there could easily be seen.

"Now here, you see where he's used his initials, BG?"

Jayden and Saul stepped closer, obediently examining the letters on the screen.

“Now, if I angle the stone a fraction to the left, there you can see it. The cross line on the G isn’t actually a cross line, it’s a tiny X. Do you see it?”

Jayden had to squint a little, and Saul resorted to pulling his reading glasses from a pocket and slipping them on, but when Lana turned the stone, they could clearly see a multi-dimensional aspect to that small portion of the G.

“Yeah, I do see it,” Jayden said. “I’ve never seen him use that before.”

Lana shut off the projector and lifted the stone, smiling. “That’s because he only uses the X when he’s marking a one-of-a-kind original. A sort of X marks the spot,” she said. “I believe it has something to do with artistic ego.”

Jayden blinked. “But, that would mean. . . .”

“You didn’t screw Markem,” Saul said. “And Drake just handed over Darkness for a copy.”

Lana handed him the gem. “That’s his problem,” she said. “When Resnick finds the mark on Jayden’s copy, he’ll figure Drake double crossed him.”

“No, he won’t,” Jayden slipped the stone into his pocket again and walked over to the parchment hanging on the office wall. “Drake will check the stone before giving it to Resnick. Then he’ll find the mark and realize what we’ve just figure out.”

“How do you know?” Saul asked. “Chloe’s gonna want nothing more than to rush straight to Resnick and get that deed back.”

“I know because it’s what I’d do,” Jayden replied. “Drake’s as good as me at this, he’ll go the extra mile to make sure, before he risks pissing off Resnick. Once he sees that mark, we’ll be out of time.”

“You need to find the altar,” Lana said. “You’ve got both stones now, you just need the key.”

Jayden turned back to the desk and found the rub Lana had shown them still rolled up. “We have the key, and maybe we can find the lock, but we’ll still need to know what door it opens.” He unrolled the paper again and studied the pencil rub. “You said the translation here was ‘In the light of darkness, the truth will rise.’ But we don’t know what that means. Not yet.”

“But this isn’t the key,” Saul pointed out. “You said the altar on that parchment there was the key. This is just another map.”

Jayden was nodding absently as he saw the puzzle pieces in his mind fall into place. There were still a few missing corners, and the center was blank, but things were beginning to take shape.

“The altar is the key,” he said. “But that rub is a clue to what door our key opens.”

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“Don’t worry, Lana,” Saul said. “No one ever does. I find it’s best just to go along with him.”

Jayden ignored them both. “We need to find the original.”

Lana held up a hand. “Now that, I can help you with. While you two were gone, I did a little research of my own. Follow me.”

They obeyed, ending up back down stairs at Lana’s desk in the far corner of the living room. She took a seat at the computer terminal and called up the public information page of the Museum of Natural History, in downtown Ember City.

“A couple of years ago they had a display of recent archeological finds, things that had been unearthed and cataloged well over ten years prior, but only just then cleared

for public showing.” She clicked a few links and typed in an older date, bringing up a press report from two Springs ago. “Here, on page four of the brochure, see there, in the background, behind the picture of that little boy holding the camera.”

Jayden leaned closer and squinted at the screen. “That’s it!”

The stone wasn’t in focus, but on the far wall between a diorama of the Dark Forest and an abstract painting of something possibly carnal in nature, it could just be seen.

“Well look at that,” Saul whistled.

“But I don’t understand,” Lana turned to them. “What good is a key going to do us when it’s been removed from the door it opens?”

“Think of it more like a doorknob,” Jayden said, still staring at the image on the computer screen. “The entire assembly is removable, but it’ll only work when you reassemble it on the right door.” He straightened up and looked at Saul. “We have to get back to Ember City and find this thing, before Drake catches on.”

Saul scratched his head and sighed. “I don’t like the sound of this, Jay. You saw what happened when we tried to steal Darkness from a closet safe. Now you’re sayin’ we’re gonna waltz right in to a city museum and walk out with a national treasure? How you figure we’re gonna pull this one off?”

Jayden smiled and slapped Saul on the arm. “That’s the best part. I have no idea.”

He did, but not enough of one to fully explain, and certainly not enough of one to win over Saul or Lana’s confidence.

“Let me make a few calls in the morning,” Lana said as she shut down the computer. “I may have a few ideas of my own. In the meantime, you two should get that rental back to the port and find a way back to Ember City. We should keep moving, if we’re going to beat Drake to the punch.”

Jayden laughed, then nodded his agreement. “I think Frederick would be happy to see you so involved with this.”

“Frederick wasn’t the only treasure hunter, you know,” Lana replied. “I just wish he were here now. He would had loved all of this.”

“We’ll do him proud, Lana,” Saul said. “Come on, Jay. Drake’s probably having that stone looked at as we speak.”

“Get moving, both of you. I’ll call you when I have news.”

Jayden touched a finger to his forehead. “Thanks for all the help, Lana. And the Mark Eight.”

“Go on now, hurry up. We can chat more when this is over.”

Jayden and Saul obeyed, hurrying out to the rental and starting the long drive back to the port in the dark.

It was too late in the evening to find transport back, so they were forced to take the last public sailing back to Ember City. They booked a sleeper for the ride, and Saul fell into a bunk the minute they closed the door.

“We should get there right when the museum opens,” he said as he kicked off his shoes. “You gonna have a plan by then?”

Jayden sat on the other bunk and pulled Darkness and Light from his pockets, shrugging. “I sure hope so.”

He raised the small table between the bunks while Saul fell instantly to snoring, and got out the notebook and a pencil. Taking great care to duplicate each facet, Jayden

drew a sketch of Light on a blank page, then unfolded a map of their world and laid it out, placing Darkness on top of the Southern continent. The shape was uncanny, but it was the only land mass resembling anything close to a skewed teardrop on the entire planet.

Light was the exact opposite of Darkness, and fit against it perfectly to form a circle, but there were no other continents shaped like the stone. He put them together and looked at the form.

"Yin-Yang, fine," he said quietly. "It forms a circle, but that can't represent the entire planet if Darkness was a continent." He put a finger on the map and traced over the Northern continent, where the Dark Forest and Ember City resided. "Not even close."

The Northern coast had a smooth, sweeping shape, but the continent was anything but a tear drop. Ember City along the coast had angling lines to the West, but East it took a severe turn and dipped in. The further North, the land pinched, just beyond the Dark Forest, and formed a peninsula before opening up again.

It wasn't going to do them a lot of good to find the key if they couldn't figure out where the door was. Frustrated, he set the stones down on the table and rubbed his eyes, then blinked them back into focus and stared at the map.

"Of course!"

"Wha? Are we there already?" Saul sat up, startled awake.

Jayden pointed at the map, excited by his find and stunned by how long it had taken him to figure out. "Look at this, Saul, it was right there. So obvious, it's -- Look at this!" Saul was taking too long to shake himself clear and sit up, so Jayden jabbed the map with a finger. "Right there, look. What's the opposite of Darkness? Light, right?"

"Kid, I haven't even had my coffee yet," Saul looked down at the map on the table, shaking his head. "What are you on about?"

"Light, Saul," Jayden replied. "Darkness pointed to the Churling Forest, in the Southern Continent. Light is the opposite of Darkness, look where it's pointing."

Saul leaned forward, blinking. "That's the damn ocean, Jay."

"Right." Jayden sat back, smiling proudly. "Darkness, Light. Land, water. It was right there the whole time. Yin-Yang, see?"

"In the middle of the damn ocean?" Saul sat up straight, staring at him. "So now all we have to do is find the key, steal it from inside a public museum, keep it and the stones away from Drake, Chloe, Resnick and Markem, then locate a door somewhere in the middle of a very deep ocean."

Jayden shrugged as he slipped the stones back into his pockets and closed the journal. "Piece of cake."

"I prefer pie," Saul muttered.

Chapter 11

They landed in Ember City late the next morning, just after the early commute and right when most shops and businesses were opening for the day. Jayden had managed about an hour of combined sleep, in a restless, anxious manner. They'd come so far in such a short time, but had so far still to go, and the road ahead was looking less and less passable.

He and Saul both knew what had to be done, but neither of them had a clue how to go about it.

"You know, this is technically stealing," Jayden pointed out as they approached the long stone steps leading up to the impressive Ember City Museum of Natural History. "I don't mean what we were doing in Markem's apartment, I mean *stealing*, stealing. This stuff belongs to the people."

"It belongs to the aliens who created it, but they're not here to lay claim," Saul corrected.

"I'm a treasure hunter, Saul," Jayden said. "Not a thief. I find things that go into museums, not the other way around. Hell, I'm probably responsible for a whole section of their artifacts."

Saul stopped halfway up the steps. "Look at it as borrowing, then."

"And how do you propose we go about borrowing an artifact?"

"How should I know? I'm not a thief."

Jayden shook his head and turned around, ready to go back to the Marco Polo and figure something else out altogether.

"Hang on." Saul stopped him with a hand on his arm. "Listen, kid, we're not thieves, neither of us. And technically we're not stealing anything. We just happened to figure out one of the pieces on display in this place is . . . Let's say cataloged incorrectly. Those archeologist fellas who found this particular piece had it wrong, and didn't know what it's really for. We do, see. And when we're done borrowing it, we'll have so much more to show for it, they'll soon forget all about one little plaque."

Jayden chewed his lower lip, staring up at the museum's large doors.

"Now, we could go through proper channels," Saul continued. "We could fill out some forms, petition the Mayor, have the Artifact Retrieval Committee put it to debate, and maybe hear back from them in six months or a year. Those aliens have been long gone for a couple thousand years, so finding their remains isn't exactly a rush." He shrugged. "I mean, if that's what you figure Drake's gonna do, take all that time to wait."

Jayden took a deep breath and resigned himself to it, climbing the rest of the steps and pushing through the massive, carved doors. Saul was right, technically. And while Jayden didn't like the idea of taking something out of a museum, it was their intent to eventually put more back in, after all. He wanted to find where this plaque led, and follow both Darkness and Light all the way through to whatever logical conclusion they offered, but he had no intention of keeping any of it.

Sure, there was a reward. More of a prize, really, of several million for the first person to discover actual, provable, alien remains. All these years of human occupation on this planet, all the ancient alien artifacts, and no one yet had found physical remains of the builders themselves.

Whoever did would score the reputation of a lifetime. It was a treasure hunter's dream, and Jayden knew they were close.

Too close to turn back now.

"Okay, first we have to find it."

They passed through the entrance and Jayden picked up a map and brochure of the newest displays.

"Lana said it was on display last year, right?" Saul quickly flipped through the brochure.

"She said a couple of years ago," Jayden replied. "Chances are it's in another room now, if it's even on display." A sudden panic washed over him then. "Saul, we don't even know it's here. What if it's on loan to another museum? It could be anywhere, on another world even."

"Well, before we flip out, let's just have a looksee." Saul pointed down a long corridor. "There, that sign says we can find local artifacts on the third floor."

Jayden glanced around as they stepped on the elevator. It was a stretch to think Drake would be here, that he'd figured out they had Light, or that he even knew about the plaque, but Jayden knew Drake. He'd known Darkness wasn't still out in the ruins somewhere inside the Dark Forest, and he'd figured out the stone, fake or not, had pointed directly to the Churling Forest. It wasn't a stretch to imagine the man was already here, already three steps ahead of them.

"Maybe you should call Chloe or David, see if they got their deed back."

Saul shook his head. "Why bother? I'm starting to wonder if this wasn't all their idea to begin with."

Jayden looked at his friend. "What, you mean all of this? I thought they just needed to get the deed back that their father lost in some bet?"

"And they thought I was helping them out of the goodness of my own heart," Saul replied, stepping off the lift when it came to a stop on the third floor. "Those selfish little twits haven't even considered writing me into the will, which is why I was looking out for myself in this little venture."

Jayden shook his head. "Real close-knit family you got there, Saul."

"Oh they're not bad," Saul replied. "Pretty typical of most families, I'd wager. You're lucky you don't have one."

"Honestly, I think I am," Jayden replied.

They searched the third floor, then the fourth, the fifth, sixth and down to the second, and found nothing even resembling the plaque they needed. Everything on display right now was from a section of ruins Jayden had seen plenty of in person, while he was trudging through current dig sites to find the clues that eventually led him to Darkness.

"You know, those archeologists, they didn't even know what they were looking at," Jayden said as they searched the last room on the main floor. "They wouldn't have known a clue if it hit them in the face and had map lines drawn on it. You shoulda seen them, fawning over a tile they'd uncovered and spending hours debating the symbolism." He shook his head in disgusted wonder. "They didn't even notice when I angled the carving in the headpiece and the door behind the cluster of vines opened up."

"Didn't notice? Did you by chance make this little adjustment under the cover of darkness, when they were all sound asleep in their tents?"

Jayden made a face. "That's hardly the point."

They were back where they'd started, in the hallway that opened out to the museum foyer and gift shop, and still hadn't spotted the plaque.

"Now what?"

Jayden was about to throw in the towel, at least for the morning, when he suddenly spotted a familiar face, marching toward them both with a museum employee quick-stepping to keep up.

"As I said, dear, I did call ahead," Lana was saying matter-of-factly to the confused woman struggling to keep pace. "And no, I didn't write the man's name down when I spoke to him, though clearly I should have."

Before Jayden or Saul could react, she walked straight to them, handing Jayden a large, heavy messenger bag and giving Saul the handle to her mobile case.

"At least my staff arrived ahead of me," Lana announced for the benefit of the museum worker and anyone else within earshot. "Now, if you would be so kind as to show us to the curator's office?"

"Yes, ma'am, of course," the woman replied. "If you'll all just follow me?"

Saul fell into step beside Lana, pulling the case over marbled tiles, leaving Jayden to bring up the rear. He managed to get the messenger bag's strap over his head so he could support the weight of it's contents with one shoulder, but he couldn't get the flap open and see what it was he carried, between shuffling around to the back of an elevator and trying to keep up as they all hurried toward the curator's office in the underground level of the museum.

"Again, Mrs. Adele, I do apologize for not realizing you were coming. Mr. Cooper will be delighted you've brought us something new for the museum."

"Yes, I expect he will," Lana replied. "Honestly, I suppose one day you'll have all of my late husband's things. But I do take such great comfort in spending time among his many collections. Still, now and then I remind myself he would have wanted to share them with the public."

They stopped in front of a closed office door, and Jayden took the brief delay to quickly raise the corner flap of the messenger bag. Inside was a stone tile, nothing terribly interesting, but it did have a depiction typical of the ruins in the Dark Forest.

"Ah, Mrs. Adele, what a nice surprise."

Jayden looked up and saw a man holding the door open for Lana, who stepped through the entrance and into the office beyond. She waved her hand for he and Saul to follow along.

"Mr. Cooper, nice to see you again," Lana replied. "This is Saul Trubnick, a friend of mine." She waved a hand toward Jayden. "And one of my employees, I forget his name."

Mr. Cooper smiled at Saul, then glanced at Jayden until Lana waved her hand, and he promptly turned his attention back to her. "And what brings you to the city on such a lovely morning?"

"Well, as I was explaining to your girl--"

"Claudia?"

"Indeed," Lana shrugged. "I had called ahead, so you wouldn't be caught unawares. I can see now that was a waste of my time."

Jayden had to stifle a smile when Mr. Cooper visibly flushed.

“Oh, my goodness, I am so sorry if there was any confusion, Mrs. Adele. We are always so pleased to see you. Every time you bring us a treasure from your late husband’s collection, why it just delights the staff so much.”

Jayden couldn’t stop his eye-rolling, but Mr. Cooper didn’t seem to notice.

“Yes, I’m sure,” Lana replied. “Why don’t we take these into the vault, I’ll have my man here get everything ready for you to inspect while you take me upstairs for coffee.”

Without waiting for Mr. Cooper to agree, Lana headed back through the office door and turned left, motioning for Saul and Jayden to follow.

“Oh, um, yes,” Mr. Cooper launched off his desk where he’d perched just seconds ago and rushed down the hallway, fumbling with a set of keycards. “Of course, yes, into the vault. Well, I suppose it’ll be all right.”

“Of course it’ll be all right, James. We can lock the vault while we’re gone, my man here won’t mind a bit. Will you, um. . .”

“Phillip, ma’am,” Jayden said hurriedly. “No, ma’am, that’s no bother.”

“Good,” Lana nodded, calling an end to the debate. “So tell me, James, have you and the wife reconciled yet? That was such a nasty scandal, the woman has no shame.”

Mr. Cooper nearly dropped the keycard he’d just swiped through the scanner. He had to do it again in order to catch the lock and get the door to the museum storage vault opened. “Ah, no, actually. We finalized the divorce six months ago.” He pushed the door open wide and stood aside so Lana could enter first. “She’s engaged already, as a matter of fact.”

“Is that so?” Lana marched straight into the massive vault, paused for Mr. Cooper to catch up, then took his arm as they walked down several rows of shelved artifacts and cataloged archeological finds. “Well, you shouldn’t feel badly about it,” she said. “I’m surprised anyone bothers to get married at all these days. Such a temporary institution, it seems.”

They stopped at a wide, long table fitted with lights and scanners and covered in warnings about using gloves to touch delicate finds and orders to ensure each artifact was properly categorized and logged into both mainframes and the emergency back up system.

Jayden caught himself staring, open-mouthed, at the sheer volume of artifacts stacked on shelves and inside crates all around them. Saul opened the case he’d been pulling and the latches clicked loudly, startling Jayden out of his stupor.

“I’m sure Saul wouldn’t mind hanging around here while we go have coffee and catch up,” Lana said, clutching Mr. Cooper’s arm with a smile. “Would you, Saul?”

“Coffee? That would be -- yes, that sounds lovely. Although I’m afraid I’ll have to lock you both in, for security reasons, you understand,” Mr. Cooper said.

“Sure,” Saul shrugged. “I can give Phillip here a hand cataloging these items.”

Lana smiled widely. “There’s a good man.” She gave Mr. Cooper’s arm a pat and pulled him back the way they’d come. “So, James, tell me what you’ve been up to these past six months.”

Jayden watched the pair leave, then heard the door close and the muffled beep of the lock activate. He heaved the messenger bag onto the table and pulled out the stone tile.

“We’re not going to be able to smuggle anything out in this,” he said, showing Saul the now empty bag. “Mr. Cooper might not be completely on top of things, but he’s gonna notice if this bag is still full on the way out.”

“Oh, that’s my girl,” Saul said. He turned the case around, then pulled up the false bottom panel inside. “Here’s how.”

Jayden raised an eyebrow. “You should have married her, Saul.”

Saul laughed shortly. “Well, ain’t neither of us dead yet. So, I’m guessing she figured out our plaque is in storage here, and knew we’d have to get inside.”

Jayden looked around at the rows and rows of crated artifacts and stored archeological finds. Some were packed, some were sitting open on shelves, all gathering dust. “There must be thousands of artifacts in here, Saul.”

“Ten thousand eight hundred and thirty two, if you’re counting.”

Jayden turned, then snapped his fingers and moved around the table to the computer Saul was accessing. “Jackpot!” He looked at the screen displaying the contents of the warehouse, then followed along as Saul clicked through a few menus, looking for searchable categories. “Can you narrow it down by the depiction?”

Saul shook his head. “Nah, looks like they’re classified by region, but in order to figure out their regions, we’ll have to study the maps they used to grid off the Dark Forest.” He shook his head. “Dammit, I thought this would be faster, but it ain’t, not by a long shot.”

“No, no no, look,” Jayden pointed to a ledger at the bottom of the screen. “Click that, see if we can just scan through the images.”

Saul clicked the link and the screen filled with thumb-nailed images of the artifacts in storage. “Yeah, now we’re talkin’.” He scanned down the screen and clicked an arrow for a new set of images. “Oh, look, I can sort by removing some categories. Here, we know we’re not looking for a statue, and it’s not a possible utensil or tool.”

After a few dozen screen-fulls of images were removed, the batch they had to scan through was manageably reduced. With both pairs of eyes, they moved quickly through the cataloged photos, looking for anything that resembled their alien figure and the pyramid-shaped altar. Now and then, Jayden shot a glance back toward the door, hoping Lana could keep Mr. Cooper occupied long enough for them to find the plaque and fit it into the case, as well as quickly cataloging the items she’d brought along, in case the curator got curious before letting them leave.

They had only one page full of images to go, and Jayden was beginning to lose confidence, when Saul finally spotted what they were looking for.

“There’s our boy!” he exclaimed, pointing at the screen. He double clicked the image and a page opened up, declaring this wall tile to be from Quadrant L inside the Atrium of Structure B-32. “And it now resides on shelf four, row ninety-seven B.” He pointed to his left. “That way.”

Jayden hurried down the long row of frames and boxes. “Saul, get those things Lana brought logged in their system, in case Cooper checks us out.”

He didn’t wait to make sure Saul heard him. Row ninety-seven B was nearly at the far end of the massive warehouse, and while it might have been a straight run for your average man in good health and fit body, it was murder on Jayden Pearce.

Easily every third artifact he passed lying open on a shelf was labeled incorrectly, something he’d found that was categorized in completely the wrong location and credited

to someone he'd never heard of, or -- and these were the worst of all -- something he'd never seen before.

"Would you look at that," he whispered as he stopped to examine a carving. "Is that a pyramid, or a volcano?" He tilted his head, trying to see the tile in the manner it was likely intended to be viewed, and not the odd angle someone had propped it up in. The triangle appeared to be similar to the altar on the plaque he was looking for, but the top was flat and seemingly open, like the mouth of a volcano. Nothing was coming out the top, which led him to believe it was a pyramid, but the shape was decidedly more cone-like, and less mathematical.

"Jay! You find it yet?"

Jayden pulled himself away from the tile. "Almost there!" He found row ninety-seven B and a platform ladder, then climbed up to shelf four. "Saul, I found it!"

Careful not to crack the stone, he slid it along the shelf until he could get his fingers under the edges and lift. Straining a little under the weight, he carefully walked back down the sturdy ladder and hurried back down the rows, toward Saul and the catalog table.

"We're outta time," Saul said as he held open the case with the secret lid moved out of the way. "I can hear them coming."

Jayden slipped the tile into the case and closed the lid, then helped Saul put the rolling case back on the floor and leaned over the item Lana had actually brought, holding a pair of white gloves in one hand.

"Ah, there we are, right where we left them," she said as they approached the table. "All finished?"

"Yes, ma'am," Jayde replied, touching a finger to his eyebrow.

Mr. Cooper's eyes widened as he saw the pair of heavy, metal statuettes resting on the catalog table. "Oh my word! Oh, my, these are just precious." He quickly donned clean, white gloves and reached out for one of the statues. "Good gracious, I've never seen a matching pair in such good condition."

"They were some of Frederick's favorites," Lana replied. "Well, I really must be going. I'll leave you to enjoy your new additions."

"Oh, of course, yes." Mr. Cooper set the statue back down with extra care, then turned to Lana, smiling apologetically. "I'm terribly sorry to have to even broach this subject, but, well, you see, we're in the public's trust, you understand."

Lana blinked, then nodded. "Oh, of course." With a wave of her hand, she had Saul open up the rolling case, while Jayden pulled open the messenger bag, displaying the decidedly empty contents of each.

"Yes, very good, well thank you, Mrs. Adele," Mr. Cooper said. "Thank you ever so much. Shall I see you out?"

"Oh no, James, we'll be just fine." Lana waited for Saul and Jayden to close their cases and move toward the door. "You enjoy those, and do send me a note when they're put on display."

"Yes, yes of course, I will, thank you again. You've been very generous."

Jayden held the door for Saul, then Lana, and smiled back at Mr. Cooper as he let the it shut on the massive warehouse of the Museum of Natural History. "No, Mr. Cooper, thank you."

Chapter 12

“Well, let’s have a look at it.” Lana finished her coffee and set the cup aside, then gave the large table a pat. “You didn’t take anything else from the warehouse, did you?”

Jayden opened the case, then flipped down the secret panel and carefully lifted the heavy tile from its hiding place. “I could have spent a day in there,” he admitted.

“I imagine you’ve supplied them with more than enough inventory to warrant a tour,” she replied. “Although now that Mr. Cooper knows you as Phillip, my trusted -- if forgettable -- assistant, that might be out of the question.”

Saul laughed and Jayden resisted giving him a look. “That’s all right, I’ve got my hands full right now with this mystery.”

“Yeah, plus they might start askin’ questions about some of his finds, and some details are better left unknown,” Saul said.

“Okay, can we just concentrate here, please?” Jayden set the tile down carefully, then cocked his head so he could see it straight-on. “This is definitely the image that spice trader had on the parchment.”

Lana ran a finger over the alien writing along one side. “In the light of darkness, the truth shall rise.” She glanced at Jayden. “That’s what Frederick said this meant. I’ve checked his interpretation against all known archeological conclusions, and it seems to be a literal translation. I just don’t know what it means.”

Saul was leaning over the tile, beside Lana, but Jayden turned to pace the room. They’d all returned to the Marco Polo after successfully borrowing the tile from the museum to regroup and figure things out, taking care to check for signs of Drake’s men before boarding the ship. Jayden knew if his rival hadn’t figured out what was hidden in the Churling Forest, chances were he knew Jay figured it out. It was probably just a matter of time.

“All right, we’ve got the key, now we have to find the door it fits, and see what’s behind it.” Jayden stopped pacing and pulled both Darkness and Light from his pocket, then walked back to the tile. “We know Darkness pointed to Light, and I’m pretty sure Light is pointing to somewhere in the ocean, probably midpoint between continents.” He slipped Darkness back into his pocket and pointed to a rolled up map. “Saul, spread that out.”

“This isn’t exactly to scale, you know,” Saul said as he unrolled the map.

Lana held down the edges. “Should give us a general idea, though, wouldn’t it?”

“Enough of one.” Jayden set the gemstone on the map, covering the ocean, then grabbed a pencil and marked the area the stone’s facets seemed to point toward. “Okay, what’s there?”

Lana leaned forward. “Well, water.”

“And lots of it,” Saul replied.

“But I think this general area is dotted with, not exactly islands.” Lana retrieved her phone from her purse. “They’re just rocky crags, for the most part. Not enough land around them to settle or even claim.” She held out her phone, showing the satellite image map of that section of ocean.

Jayden squinted at the small screen. It was too small to be overly detailed, but you could see massive rocky structures jutting out from the blue water, forming a rough and wholly uninhabitable chain of craggy islands.

"I just had a terrible thought," Saul said as he looked at the image. "What if these creatures had a burial at sea mentality? If they all took to the waves as their final resting place, we'll never find any remains. Hell, no one will."

"No, that doesn't wash," Jayden said. He tapped his chin as he started rearranging the puzzle pieces in his head. "Every culture that used burial at sea had a relationship with it. Fishing tribes, sea fairing nomads, pirates and the like." He shook his head. "No, these guys, they liked the forests. They liked the forests, and opposites."

His pacing resumed, with Lana and Saul watching him work his way back and forth, tapping his chin and working things out.

"They lived in the forests, and built cities there," he said, walking toward the table. "No one's ever found ruins in the deserts of the Eastern Quad, or anywhere else, really." He worked his way back to the large window. "Somehow when they died out, they managed to vanish without a trace, leaving no remains other than things they'd built." He turned again, tapping his chin as he walked. "And for some reason, they hid their tracks. Or something about their culture made them want to cover up where they'd gone."

"But they left clues," Saul said.

Jayden nodded. "They left clues."

"Well that's just human nature," Lana interjected.

"They're not human," Jayden said. "But they do have a penchant for opposites." He snapped his fingers and looked at Saul. "What do forest dwelling people fear the most?"

"Termites?"

"Fire," Jayden said. "In every single one of those ruins, you never found fire pits, fire places, torch bowls, nothing. I figured maybe they just never figured fire out, but what if they avoided it on purpose?"

Lana nodded slowly. "That makes sense. Fire can rip through an entire forest pretty quickly, so one good loose flame or errand spark during the dry season and your whole city could go up."

"How does a species intelligent enough to build complex cities and carved gemstones not invent fire?" Saul asked.

Jayden shrugged. "They drank tea."

Saul blinked. "Come again?"

"The Chinese?" Lana asked.

"Exactly. The ancient Chinese, back on Earth long ago, they drank tea," Jayden said. "So one day someone invented porcelain, you know, the china cups, and that took care of things. They didn't need to invent anything else, and the pottery they were using wasn't good for anything other than tea, so they were stuck. But everyone else, all the other cultures, they liked to drink cold things, and needed something to carry cold stuff around that would keep it cool."

"So someone there invented glass," Lana took over the explanation. "And from glass, you got transistors, windscreens, monitors, and it snowballed."

"And you're sayin' our alien friends here, they were tea drinkers?"

Jayden shrugged. "I'm saying whatever they did do, they didn't need fire to do it. And probably their lack of fire kept them from doing other things." He snapped his fingers. "And, you can bet a civilization hell bent on avoiding fire would consider it something special." He moved back to the tile they'd borrowed from the museum and tapped the pyramid carving. "This isn't a pyramid, it's a volcano." He pulled the unrolled map over the tile and tapped the part he'd marked with the pencil. "A volcano in the middle of the ocean." He looked at Saul, then Lana. "Darkness and Light, land and sea, fire and water. Only they used a fire *in* the water to bury their dead."

Saul rubbed his head and sighed. "Well, Jay, I gotta say it makes some sense. But there's just one problem. If they tossed their dead into an active volcano, they might as well have been turned into fish food, 'cause we ain't never gonna find their remains."

Jayden shook his head. "The important thing is finding out what happened to them. Where they went, why there aren't any signs of their remains."

"That's true," Lana agreed. "I believe the reward is for any hard evidence of their final resting place, whether they're still in it or not."

"So we find proof they all jumped into an active volcano, like some sorta note on a wall showing them all jumping in, and that's good enough?" Saul laughed shortly. "I have a feeling there's gotta be more to it than that."

Jayden walked back to the window and gazed out at the ship berthed directly in front of him. He didn't much care about the reward, or the acclaim, not really. It was the puzzle he needed to solve, now that he'd let himself push the pieces around. Before, he'd been satisfied simply finding Darkness and giving it to Markem, but now . . .

Now he knew there was more to it than a single black gemstone.

He turned and looked at Saul. "Drake won't be far behind. We need to pinpoint these coordinates and find out what's there."

"Can we get a boat?" Lana asked.

Jayden crossed the room back to the map table and started looking for a scaled version of that part of the planet.

"No ships will get that close to the archipelago," Saul said. "The currents run too wild, and there are rocks hidden just beneath the surface." He pointed a finger at the map Jayden finally found. "You can see all the warnings. Only ships going near that section are gonna be in the air."

"That might be good enough." Jayden pulled Light from his pocket and flipped open the notebook. "If we can get a look from above, at least see what we're dealing with, then we can lease a boat and go in ourselves. Might be easier to narrow down this location from above, anyway."

With a pencil and some calculations, Jayden had the location Light was pointing to narrowed down to a spot within a three square mile radius, centered just off the coast of the largest island in the craggy group.

"That's gotta be it," he said, closing up the notebook. "Whatever's there, we'll find it right off the coast of that rocky island."

"You mean right next to that dead volcano," Saul corrected.

"Relax, Saul," Lana laughed. "Won't it be enough to know we were right? Does it matter that we might not be able to prove it to the government or scientific community?"

Saul made a face. "You're just like him," he said. "What's the good of bein' right if there's no reward involved?"

Jayden rolled up the map. "If we beat Drake there, you can think of it as a moral victory. Resnick loses, unless he keeps that deed, which I'm beginning to wonder if he even had in the first place."

"Look," Lana had her phone in hand again. "We don't even have to rent a ship. That line is right along the trade routes. There's a freight liner leaving here in three hours that'll pass right over the spot we need to see."

"A freight liner?" Saul scratched his chin. "Not exactly speedy service, hitching a ride on one of those air trains."

Jayden saw a twinkle in Lana's eye. "You have a plan, don't you?"

She smiled back at him. "Well I was thinking, Drake may or may not know what we took from the museum, but chances are he knows we're a step ahead. He'll be watching to see where we go from here."

"And as soon as we board that supply train, he'll find a way to drop in mid-flight," Saul agreed.

"Which is why you two should get on that freighter, take the stone tile with you, while I book us a charter going to the opposite side of the island chain. I'll be sure to be as secretive as I need to be, in order for Drake to believe it's for real."

Jayden gave Lana a wink. "I like how you think." He tucked the rolled-up map into a pocket on the strap of the Mark Eight. "You can come along with me on a treasure hunt any day."

"Careful, I might take you up on that some time."

"So how do we get on this freight train?" Saul asked.

"Well rather than ship ourselves off in a crate, I think I'll make some calls."

Jayden had to make five calls, in fact, just to find the number of a guy who knew a guy who worked the loading dock for the freighter. But once he made the right connection, and reached an agreeable price, he secured Saul and himself a space in the third to last car on the air train set to depart in one hour. They left through the engine exhaust ports again, in case Drake's people were still watching the main hatch of the Marco Polo, while Lana went out that way and hurried over to a private transport service to book a flight of her own under another name.

The freighter was a low-flying air cargo train, consisting of a pilot car and twenty three separate cars carrying various shipments and supplies. Each car had independent hovering, in case of accidental detachment, and could remain in place for up to a full week until retrieved, and all were propelled forward by the final engine car.

Jayden and Saul found the man in charge of loading the last three cars and paid his required bribe, then were shown to car number twenty -- a load of processed lumber from the Dark Forest for building projects on the Southern continent.

"You couldn't get us on a shipment of whisky, or maybe a few crates of Ember City pizza?" Saul muttered as he found a comfortable seat on a pile of lumber.

Chapter 13

Saul had just finished his inspection of the last three freight cars when Jayden returned, looking triumphant.

"Okay, it's all set," he said as he took a seat on the lumber once again. "I've got the release switch set to drop us and those last two cars out of the sequence as soon as we pull the emergency brake."

"What makes you think the rest of this hauler will just keep on goin' and not sweep around to pick us back up?"

"Priorities," Jayden replied. "They've got time sensitive cargo that needs to arrive on schedule, and these last few cars are expendable. We'll be left to hover for a good eight to ten hours before a pickup arrives. By then, we'll have found what we're looking for or given up trying, and called Lana for a ride."

"Uh-huh." Saul was still skeptical of the whole plan, but that was always his role. If Jayden was flying forward, balls-to-the-wall, it was his job to cast doubt and suspicion in order to keep a clear head and balance. Then, when necessary, the roles would reverse.

Jayden pulled out the Mark Eight and turned it on. "I figure we've got about two more hours before we reach that island cluster."

"You think Drake took the bait, and he's following Lana?"

"We'll know soon enough, I suppose." He put the GPS back into it's case. "Since we have some time to kill, and this lumber isn't the best thing to nap on, lemme ask you something."

Saul was about to suggest just that, convinced he could find a comfortable enough spot on the planks. He'd seen Jayden sleep standing up enough times to know it's possible. "Sure thing, kid. What's on your mind?"

"I was wondering what really happened to that lease," he said, leaning back. "The one your brother lost to Resnick."

Saul shrugged as casually as he could. "Whaddaya mean?"

"It seems to me that even a drunk with a gambling problem is gonna think twice before putting something that important into a poker game," he said. "Especially someone who'd lost this deed before."

"You don't know my brother," Saul replied.

"But I do know you."

Saul laughed shortly. "That you do. But you also know me well enough to know that I'd never lie to you, Jay." He shifted, partly to ease his left buttock off the corner of a two by four and partly to buy some time under the gaze aimed at him from across the freight car. "Well, never to your face," he admitted. "And lose that deed is exactly what he did."

"I'm guessin' maybe he had some help?"

It was no use, and Saul knew it. He shifted, pulling his legs up underneath him, and looked at Jayden. "My brother was taking a business trip, out to the Oort cloud, and he was -- well, he is -- gonna be away for a couple of months, see. So I decided to give him a send off."

"A send off," Jayden sighed.

"We were on the moon."

"Which one?"

Saul smiled. "Arnum Three."

Jayden nodded, eyebrows raised. "They've got good beer there."

"Great beer," Saul replied. "Anyway, we'd put back quite a few when the game started up, and I suppose as things progressed, we put back quite a few more. Anyway, before I knew what was happening, we were both really hammered and losing bad. The deed was put up, and ultimately Resnick walked off with it." He held up a hand. "But my hand to God, Jay, it wasn't my fault. We were both in that game, and we were both drunker'n I don't know what. All I remember is wakin' up with a whopper of a headache, and my brother making me swear to get that deed back before his trip was over."

"You figure Chloe and David don't know you had a hand in all this from the start?"

Saul shrugged and pulled a cigar from his shirt pocket. "Family is a tricky thing, Jay. You're lucky not to have any." He lit the cigar and pulled air through the thickly packed leaves, leaning back against another pile of lumber. "You take David, for instance. Not a bad kid, really, but not the most ambitious go-getter in the pack. He'll manage his daddy's land well enough, and maybe even develop a good portion of it, but he'll be content with whatever he ends up with, so long as he hasn't got any worries. Now, Chloe, she's another matter entirely." He waved the cigar in the air. "Just like her father, in a lot of ways. Always looking for an angle, some way to expand her empire, so to speak."

"Sounds like her uncle," Jayden replied.

"Anyway, I gave it a try," Saul said, ignoring his friend's remark. "After our little romp in Signus Prime and all that lay-low business, I figured it'd be a good time to settle down with the family, see what all the fuss is about. But I gotta tell you, Jay, it's just not for me. Between my brother's kids squablin' all the time about how best to manage the land, and Lana pushing for me to marry her -- not that she ain't a fine woman, don't get me wrong. Well, you've seen her."

"I have."

"She's a fine woman."

"She is."

"And smart, yanno, about stuff."

"Very clever."

Saul puffed his cigar. "I got to thinkin' one day that there was a distinct possibility I was more enamored with her collection than herself, and that wouldn't have been fair."

"No, it wouldn't."

"Though that is a very impressive collection," he said. "Did you know her late husband once found a crate that belonged to famed explorer Adalto Benolini?"

Jayden perked up. "*The* Adalto Benolini?"

"The one and only."

"The man who found the map to the lost caves of Aqualarus?"

Saul nodded, grinning around his cigar. "None other. She said Frederick, her late husband, picked up a delivery one day and didn't realize until he got home that the shipping company had sent him the wrong crate. Naturally, when he realized what he had, he contacted the shipper to sort it all out."

"Naturally."

“But as luck would have it, someone messed up that paperwork so good, they couldn’t even figure out they’d made a mistake.”

“And all this time not one of Benolini’s heirs came looking for the crate?”

Saul shrugged. “None of ‘em realized it’d gone missing. Or they were too thick headed to know what was inside, or how important it was.”

“So what was inside?” Jayden asked. “Did you get a look?”

Saul tapped his cigar, sending ashes off the end to scatter over the stacked lumber. “Nah, never did. Lana had it locked away in a safe deposit box. The map, anyway. I saw the crate and all the rest of the junk inside.”

“What’s she keeping it for?”

He could tell, despite his friend’s efforts not to, Jayden was feeling the itch. It was inevitable, like a sunrise or galaxy import tax. “She never said,” Saul admitted. “I asked her once and she just shrugged it off, said it would come in handy one day.”

“Damn.”

“I’m sayin’,” Saul puffed his cigar again. “Fine woman.”

Jayden rubbed his chin. “The lost caves of Aqualarus. That’s legend.”

“Well hell, what do you think Darkness is? Not too many people even believed it was real, let alone Light, and whatever else this plaque is gonna lead us to.” He puffed his smoke. “I figure, even if we don’t find those remains, the two stones alone should be worth a fortune to the museum.”

“What about the deed?”

Saul coughed, then crushed out his cigar on the lumber and slipped it back into his pocket. “Resnick can’t possibly hold out for Darkness once the public finds out it’s real. Besides, I don’t believe that’s what he was after. He wants credit for this find.”

“Credit, he can have,” Jayden replied. “I’ve got Markem to worry about, once he hears this stone led to something bigger, he’s gonna want a piece.” He shifted on the lumber. “If we play this right, we could set Markem and Resnick against each other and get the hell outta Dodge while the government sorts out all the credit.”

“That’s what I love about you, Jay,” Saul said. “You never worry about public acclaim, or big fat rewards.” He shook his head and brushed cigar ash from his pants. “No concern over nest eggs, or grocery bills. Just finding stuff for the pure pleasure of seeing it with your own eyes.” He stood, stretched, and checked his watch. “No worries about docking fees or ship repairs. Yep, that’s what I love about you.”

Jayden laughed and stood up. “Well I don’t gamble and drink so much, that helps. Besides, you can’t possibly have spent all that gold we found in the mountains of Ruluu Seven. Might not have been enough to buy the Southern continent, but it was a serious haul.”

He waved a hand dismissively. “I put enough of that away, I may be getting old, but I’m not stupid. But don’t you ever wonder, even just a little bit, what it’d be like to work the press the way someone like Drake does?”

“Drake?” Jayden laughed shortly. “You’re jealous of Drake?”

Saul made a face and walked to the doorway of their cargo car, looking out and down at the ocean nearly half a mile below. “Jealous, no. But you gotta admit, once or twice it’d be nice to have your name on a little sign beside one of those displays.” He held out both hands, picturing what it would look like. “Discovered by Saul Trubnick and Jayden Pearce.”

“You figure you’d get first billing?”

“Age before beauty, kid,” Saul replied.

Jayden walked to the doorway and reached out, grabbing hold of the access ladder on the outside of the car. “Well, with your advanced age and all, why don’t you go back to the last car and pull that hand brake. That should pop us up and out of the engine cradle, which will pass below and leave us right over our spot.”

Saul tapped his forehead. “You just be careful up there, kid.” He turned and worked his way through the piles of lumber, passed the stone plaque resting beside their gear, and through the center door that connected the cars. Just like land-trains, he had to pass through each car by stepping outside, then crossing over the exterior platform by stepping out over the connecting pin and then back into the next car. Behind their lumber cargo was a car filled entirely with boxes of spun yarn in every color he could imagine.

What he couldn’t imagine, was any honest need for that much yarn. Lana wasn’t one for knitting, and his niece Chloe had certainly never picked up a needle in her lifetime. Although if he was honest with himself, neither of them were your average, every-day type female.

The last car was carrying party favors, clearly a supply run for the party rental business designed to provide happy surprises to the unsuspecting.

Saul definitely qualified.

“Trubnick.”

“Drake.”

“Don’t be angry, Uncle Saul,” Chloe said. “It’s just business. David and I had to side with the man most likely to get us what we need.”

“Which as you can clearly tell, is Jayden Pearce,” Saul replied. “Since obviously you’re here, Drake, because you followed us.”

Bernard Drake shrugged, suppressing a smile very poorly. “I have men following your lady friend, just in case her ruse was the real thing and this was the trick, but I had a feeling wherever Pearce was, that’s where the prize would be.”

“Does he have the stones?” Chloe asked.

“They’re not the prize,” Saul replied.

“Oh for crying out loud.” She pushed by him and out the door, heading toward the lumber car.

“I wouldn’t blame her,” Drake said. “She’s a business woman. Her brother could learn a lot from him.”

“But he won’t. Chloe will always run their interests.” Saul heard the timer on his watch beep quietly. It was time to pull the emergency brake. “I take it you followed us from the museum.” He moved to the side of the car as if looking for a more comfortable spot to stand.

Drake folded his arms and leaned against a crate. “I knew Pearce had found something in the Churling Forest, I just couldn’t suss what. So when my friend at the museum -- you met her, Claudia -- when she called to tell me that none other than Jayden Pearce had been spotted inside her museum warehouse, I knew he was on to something.” He shrugged. “After that, it was as simple as following you, and covering my bases with a trail on Lana. Interesting woman, that one.”

“Yes, she is. Well, since you’ve come all this way, no sense in disappointing you.” Saul reached up and pulled the emergency brake, bracing himself for the sudden decrease in momentum.

And there was no sense in rushing, either. Saul waited until the car had stopped moving, then started back through the connecting door, with Drake and his three men following.

“So tell me, Drake, are you doing this for the sake of your reputation, or Resnick’s money?”

“Is there something that says I can’t do it for both?”

They walked through the yarn car.

“Oh, I should mention, since you brought him up, that Resnick’s men are here, too.”

Saul opened the door to the lumber car and saw immediately what was missing. Namely his niece, and the stone tile. He ran to the open side door, then carefully climbed out and up to the roof of the now stationary car, with Drake right behind him.

Standing on the far end, Jayden and Chloe were playing tug-of-war with the stone tile, while another man held a gun on them both, demanding they hand it over.

“Jay!”

“Pearce!” Drake scrambled up behind Saul.

“Drake, tell your goon to put down the gun, or I toss this over the side!” Jayden pulled on the tile, but Chloe wasn’t letting go.

“He’s not my goon,” Drake yelled back.

Saul glanced over the edge of the train car. Below them, the ocean was deeply blue and calm in the pre-dusk light. It was beautiful, from the safety of the inside of a hovering cargo train. Out here, with a breeze blowing and sea birds flying closer to see if there was anything to be eaten on the stalled cars, one became all too aware of the drop.

“I’m not giving this up, Drake,” Jayden said. “If you want to find the answers, you’re gonna have to put away the guns.”

“Like I said, he’s not my goon,” Drake replied. “He works for Resnick.”

“Just hand it over!” Chloe tugged again, nearly setting Jayden off balance.

“Enough of this!” The gunman took aim.

Saul wasn’t close enough to do anything truly heroic, so he settled for slamming into the gunman, knocking him forward to get the gun out of his hands.

When the hit man landed on top of the car, the weapon flew away, bouncing toward Jayden and Chloe. He scrambled toward it, not realizing he was too close to the curve of the roof. As he slid over the edge, hands flailing around for purchase, he caught Chloe’s pant leg.

In an instant, both she and Jayden -- still fighting over the stone tile -- disappeared over the edge.

Chapter 14

There was a lot of screaming.

For nearly a full second, Jayden thought it was all coming from him, then he noticed the gunman a few feet below him, destined to hit the water first. And Chloe, still holding fast to the stone tile -- she had some serious volume.

Thankfully, aside from the screaming, there wasn't enough time to think about his impending death. It was too dark to really see the water below, even with the full moon rising into a clear sky.

An instant before the gunman hit the water, Jayden found the wherewithal to release his death-grip on the stone tile, though he really didn't know why. Hitting a wall of ocean water would end him sooner than sinking to the bottom with an ancient stone plaque in his hands.

Chloe must have had the same fleeting partial thought, because the next thing he saw was the gunman flattening out on the water's surface, then a heavy stone tile hitting the man square in the back.

Then there was water, lots of it, and the screaming was replaced by frantic arm movements, frothing, bubbling water, and a heavy drag on his clothes as he struggled toward the surface, lungs bursting with effort.

He gasped for air, treading water, and was startled to see Chloe pop up next to him, still screaming.

The gunman wasn't so lucky.

"Oh my God!" Chloe gasped. "Are you crazy?"

"We're alive." Jayden felt that was far more interesting than his mental state.

"Holy crap, we survived!" He was treading water, still trying to convince himself he'd remained in the land of the living, and not in some watery hell where he'd be doomed to paddle around with Saul's niece harping in his ear for eternity.

Chloe's scream brought him back to the here and now.

"Oh my God! Get it away from me!"

Jayden blinked, then saw the body of the gunman bobbing up next to her. "That's no way to talk to the man who saved your life," he said as he tugged at the man's belt, then gave him a shove to send him floating a few feet away. "Between him and that stone plaque, the water tension must have been broken just enough to keep us from flattening like pancakes." He wiped water from his face and glanced down, trying hard to see through the dark water to the bottom.

"You call this lucky?" Chloe demanded. "We're stranded in the ocean, you idiot!"

Jayden shrugged, sending little waves out from his shoulders. "I didn't say lucky, and we're not exactly stranded. Saul and the others know where we are. I expect they figure we're dead, but they do know where we are."

He was more interested in where the stone had sank, and how hard it was going to be to find again.

"We wouldn't be here if you'd let go of that damn tile," Chloe said. She was treading water a few feet away, her expression clear in the bright light of the full moon.

“You know I could say the same,” Jayden replied. He looked down again, trying in vain to see through the dark water and reflective moonlight. “I thought all you wanted was your damn deed back, why’d you come after the stone?”

Something below the surface seemed to be glowing, but he wasn’t sure if it was an illusion from the glistening moonlight, or something else. Did ocean predators glow?

“Do you see that?”

“I see an idiot too stupid to know when a man is pointing a gun at him, that’s what I see,” Chloe replied. “You would have gotten us both killed just to keep that stupid plaque.”

“There’s something glowing down there.” He was sure of it now, some type of bioluminescence. He turned his head to the side, trying to gauge the size and distance, but it was difficult while treading water.

“You stole it from the museum, what makes you think we weren’t retrieving it for them?”

“That’s pretty lame,” he said. “Especially coming from someone who wanted me to steal Darkness from Markem’s wife.”

Whatever was glowing down there was definitely moving. Not like a fish or glob of plankton, but moving. Growing larger, or coming closer, he couldn’t tell which.

“You’re the one who screwed Markem over, keeping the original,” she shot back. “You could have just sold it to us when we came to you. What was your game, huh? Were you trying to angle for even more money?”

“That thing is getting closer.” Either that, or growing in size. He paddled a few feet to the left and looked at it from another angle. As hard as it was to see clearly into the dark water, it appeared to be a triangle-shaped something, quite large, and slowly growing closer and larger at the same time.

“If we get out of this, I’m going to--”

“Have you ever seen a whale?”

“What?” Chloe paused in her treading and for a moment, her mouth dipped below the surface. She spat and frantically looked around. “What whale? Where?”

Jayden stared down at the form taking shape beneath them. It wasn’t a triangle, but a pyramid, and it was growing, getting taller by the second and coming straight up at them.

“That whale, there.” He pointed, dipping his arm under the surface to touch the familiar shape reaching up to him.

An instant later, the stone tile broke the surface and stopped moving, held in place as the top piece to a massive pyramid, covered in bioluminescent algae.

Jayden laughed as he touched the stone, then found purchase for his feet on the pyramid. “In the light of darkness, the truth shall rise.”

“What in the hell is that?” Chloe swam closer cautiously, reaching out to touch it with a fingertip before trusting her feet to the lower stones. “This isn’t a whale.”

“That, as it happens, is the very definition of dumb luck,” Jayden replied. “And the door these keys open.” He stood on the lower lip of stone, bringing his upper body out of the water entirely, and fished through his pockets for both Darkness and Light. “This is the door the stone tile was made for, see here?” He pushed water from the depressions of the carved alien’s nipples and set Darkness in one, then Light into the

other. “We were right over it the whole time, and that tile we dropped managed to land right where it belonged. And now, with the twin keys in place . . .”

As Chloe stood on the opposite side of the pyramid, the stones began to slowly move toward each other, grinding stone against stone until the two nipples became one, forming a gemstone Yin-Yang in the center of the alien carving.

Jayden heard and felt a deep, resonating thud, and the tile angled outward, revealing an opening into the top of the pyramid. He grabbed a flashlight from his belt and turned it on, hitting it a few times to clear out the water. When the beam illuminated a dry, stone staircase built into the side of the structure, he grinned and held out a hand.

“Ladies first.”

Chloe glared at him, but reluctantly swung a leg over the rim of the opening and found purchase on the inner stairwell. He waited for her to step down far enough, then swung over and in himself, pausing long enough to pull Darkness and Light back out of the tile.

The inside of the pyramid was dark, and inexplicably dry inside. They followed the steps downward, circling the inner walls as it slowly descended, guided only by the dim light of Jayden’s small flashlight and a beam of moonlight filtering down from the opening.

No sooner had Jayden opened his mouth to mention their luck, when the tile above them closed back up, plunging them into near-complete darkness.

Chloe screamed, then turned to glare at Jayden.

“Brilliant! Now not only have you stranded me in the middle of the ocean, you’ve closed the only way out of this mess!”

“First off, you don’t know that,” he replied. “We’re inside a pyramid in the ocean, following a staircase down. Traditionally, that means there’s another way out.” He passed her on the narrow stone steps, resisting the urge to leave her behind in the dark, where she could wait for Saul to find a way through and pick her up.

“And second?”

“What?”

“You said first,” Chloe replied. “Traditionally that’s followed by a second.”

Jayden turned and aimed the light at her. “You know, you’re a lot more annoying than I expected.”

She blinked at him, hands flying to her hips. “Well you’re no walk in the park yourself,” she said. “No wonder you took a job for the likes of Markem, and screwed him over, to boot.”

“Look who’s working for Resnick all of a sudden,” he said. “And I did not screw him over.” He pointed a finger at Chloe. “Did you, or did you not, happen to notice that tile opened this pyramid up when I put those stones in place?”

When she replied with only a blank stare, he fought back a smile.

“You think that would have worked if the Darkness I have was a fake? The Darkness you took from my pocket and gave to Drake?”

Chloe folded her arms, staring at him from two stone steps higher up.

“I had the fake all along, and Drake bought the original from the ex-Mrs. Markem. Then, there in the forest, you took the fake and gave me the original.”

“Knowing you that was probably your plan all along.” She pushed by him then, taking the lead again and marching down the steps in the near-utter dark.

For a brief, fleeting moment, Jayden imagined shutting off his flashlight, turning around, climbing back up the steps and jumping back into the sea.

Then Chloe screamed.

He raised the light, but she was gone, off the steps.

"Shit." He hurried down five steps and found her hanging there by her fingers, where the stone staircase had broken away.

"Get me up!"

"Hang on, just a second." Jayden had to get to his knees and put the flashlight in his mouth, then reach down to grab her forearms. "Fimb some foobing!"

"Pull me up!"

"Fimb some foobing!"

He pulled, but she wasn't trying to find any footing to help him. Finally he brought her torso up high enough for her to grab the stones and lean forward, putting most of her weight back on the stairs.

"Foobing!" He let go of her arm and took the flashlight from his mouth. "How hard is it to find footing, for Christ's sake? It's a stone wall."

"I was hanging by my fingers!" She reached out and grabbed his shirt, pulling herself up the rest of the way.

They both turned and looked at the gap in the staircase, Jayden aiming his light along the wall until he found where the stones started up again. A solid ten foot section had crumbled away, likely due to age, but after that they appeared to resume again, as solid as the section they were kneeling on.

Jayden nodded as he stood up. "Okay, well that's not so bad. We just need to jump."

"Jump?" Chloe was staring at him instead of the stairs. "You're out of your mind, you can't jump ten feet. I sure as hell can't jump ten feet. We have to go back up."

He aimed his light up, toward the sealed pyramid's top. "You wanna go back to being stranded in the middle of the ocean?"

"You want to jump to your death in the middle of an ancient pyramid?" She shook her head and brushed dirt from her pants. "I swear to every god imaginable, if I make it out of this alive, I'll --"

"Thank me?"

She looked up, glaring. "You're certifiable, you know that?"

Jayden shrugged and looked back at the jump, gauging the distance and run-up he was going to need. "Your uncle Saul never complained about this stuff."

"My uncle Saul is just as nuts as you are," she replied. "I can't believe this is the crap he always talked about as his days of adventure and daring-do."

The jump wouldn't be all that bad, seeing as how it was at a serious downward angle, ten feet was relative when you were higher up.

"He would look back at those trips with such fondness, he made it all sound like entertainment or something." Chloe was still wiping dirt from her clothes, which resulted in only smearing it in to the wet cotton.

It was the landing he wasn't looking forward to. Coming down hard, on narrow stones. He'd have to be sure not to back-step right off the edge.

"Do you know he had my brother interested in trying this? All that heroic talk of swashbuckling around the galaxy."

Jayden handed her the light. "Hold this, just right there." He'd aimed the beam at his presumed landing spot.

"My brother is no more the adventurer than I am, he's just been so enthralled by uncle Saul's ridiculous stories."

Jayden would have replied, but he'd launched himself into the darkness, dropping down at a slightly steeper angle than he'd intended. He landed hard, then slid on some loose pebbles. As he felt his left foot slip off the steps, he scrambled for a finger-hold on the rough rock, stopping his backward slide just before his lower half went over the edge.

When he got to his feet, he saw Chloe staring at him, her face framed by the pale flashlight beam.

"See? Not so bad. It's a downward jump, so the distance is a little deceiving," he said, wiping dust from his hands. "Now it's your turn. I'll catch you on this side." He held out both hands.

Chloe shook her head. "You're fucking nuts! I can't jump that."

"Okay." Jayden rubbed his chin. "Just toss me the light, then. You can stay there and I'll pick you up on the way back. Unless I don't come back this way. I'm sure eventually Saul and Drake will find a way through the top without the gemstones."

Without another word, Chloe threw Jayden the flashlight. Or, rather, threw the flashlight *at* Jayden, missing his head by an inch and slamming into the stone wall.

He tried to catch it, but an instant later, she was flying through the air toward him, and would have knocked them both off the steps if he hadn't braced himself.

She fell into him just as the flashlight bounced off the stones and fell down the center of the pyramid, illuminating Jayden as he scrambled to hold Chloe and himself upright.

After the initial shock wore off, Jayden found himself staring down the long, dark shaft at the tiny little dot of brightness where the flashlight had landed.

"You said throw you the flashlight!"

"I said toss me the flashlight," he replied. "Figures you'd throw like a girl, angry and aiming for my head." He moved against the stone wall and started carefully inching forward, down the stairs, feeling his way.

"Can we just get out of here?"

Moving down the stairs was slow going. Jayden found he could see a few feet ahead if he concentrated, but he didn't want to rush into another gap with Chloe holding his belt and pushing him forward the way she was.

The further down they went, the wider the pyramid became. He could see carvings in the walls as they moved, but without a light he couldn't study them, and that was getting really annoying.

"Hang on, stop pushing," he said when his hand felt along the stones. He could feel a carving, more elaborate than the others, and stopped to stare at it in the darkness. With one finger tracing the depressions in the rock, he could just make out a volcano shape and several little alien stick figures walking toward it.

"Here's a thought, Mr. Treasure Hunter. How about we get down to the bottom of this thing so you can pick up your flashlight and come back up here, and stare at all these pretty pictures at your leisure." Chloe said. "While I get the hell out of here."

"It looks like they're all walking into the volcano," Jayden replied.

“Brilliant. After an hour climbing down these stairs with you, I’ll happily join them.” Chloe moved around him and started down. “Just point me to the flames.”

“If I’m right, that’s exactly where we’re headed.”

She stopped.

Jayden started down the steps, moving by her again. “Those islands not far from here were volcanoes back in their day,” he said. “But why would they walk into an active volcano?”

“You mean other than the traditional reasons?”

Another plaque came into view, and Jayden realized he could actually see most of it, albeit faintly.

“Is it getting lighter?”

Chloe pushed by him again, moving down several steps. “I can see better down here, there’s light coming from somewhere.” She hurried down a few more. “There’s an opening down here, I think it’s a way out!”

“Thank God for small favors,” Jayden murmured.

Chloe looked up at him. “What?”

He pointed to the stone carving. “I said I think this one’s a dog eating papers.”

Chapter 15

Jayden picked up his flashlight at the bottom of the pyramid's steps and turned it off. There was enough light filtering in now from an open doorway to their left, he didn't need the small light to see by.

Chloe had already passed through the stone doorway and was picking her way along a narrow tunnel, stepping over crumbled stones and other debris lining the ground.

"You might want to slow down a bit," Jayden cautioned. "We don't exactly know where this leads."

"It leads out of here," she replied. "And obviously toward whatever mystery we've all been looking for."

"Which is what, exactly?"

Chloe stopped, waiting for Jayden to catch up. "You're the treasure hunter, you tell me."

"I don't know," he replied. The tunnel was lined with carved plaques, glowing slightly with traces of bioluminescence. He fingered one, digging at the depiction of a tree with a fingernail. "I thought this stuff only grew in the water."

"Well we are under water, aren't we?"

He shook his head and moved further down the tunnel, looking for another carved plaque. "Technically I suppose, but the inside of the pyramid was bone dry. None of the walls were glowing in there, and that top tile didn't open until it was above water."

"No, it opened when you put those two gemstones in it. Who's to say it wouldn't have opened under water? And why does it matter? Can't we just get the hell out of here and figure it out later?"

Jayden kept walking so Chloe couldn't get too far ahead. He could have explained how all the signs were pointing toward trouble, or that these little hints he was finding generally tended to lead into ancient traps and deadly puzzles, but she was annoying enough as it was. The last thing he wanted to do was explain his line of work to someone who really didn't give a shit.

"What exactly are you here for, anyway?"

Chloe kept walking. "What do you think?"

"That's just it," he replied. "You got the stone, at least you assumed you had the real Darkness. Why didn't you just give it to Resnick and get your deed back?"

She sped up slightly without answering.

"Oh, I get it." Jayden idly scraped at more glowing algae on the walls of the tunnel. "You did get the deed back, but that wasn't enough, is that it?"

Chloe stopped, turning on him with an angry flare in her eyes. "The deed was never lost," she said.

Jayden blinked back at her. "What do -- You mean you've been playing Saul all along?" He felt his face heat up. "You've been playing all of us, all this time, just to get here?"

"We knew Saul would feel so guilty about losing the deed, he'd have to find a way to get Darkness," Chloe replied. "Once we realized there might be more to it than just the one stone, David and I decided to go all the way and see what we could get out of it."

“David and you.” Jayden shook his head, surprised her brother could be credited with independent thinking.

“We knew losing the deed would be all the evidence we would need to have our father legally removed from the titles,” she continued. “Once we realized there was more to it than just Darkness, we hired Drake, so we could use Uncle Saul’s failure to recover the deed to keep him from making any claim once our father was removed from it.” She folded her arms. “It’s a win-win.”

“A win-win?” Jayden laughed shortly and shook his head. “Never mind what you’ve put your uncle through, or the lives you’ve risked.”

“Uncle Saul had his own agenda.”

“I can understand why,” Jayden replied. “With a family like yours, an agenda would be a defense mechanism.” He pushed by her and kept walking.

“Well that’s brilliant, coming from you,” Chloe replied. “What are you in this for, if not the money?”

“Are you kidding?” Jayden shot her a look over his shoulder.

If she replied, he didn’t hear it. Their tunnel had taken a right turn, and opened up to another pyramid, only this time they were on the bottom, looking up to a bright, blue, morning sky. The base was incredibly wide, so much so, he couldn’t see the opposite side in the filtered sunlight. More glowing algae illuminated parts of the lower wall, but further up it seemed to disappear.

“Where are the stairs?”

Jayden looked at the wall next to him, then moved along the stacked stones, looking for a way up.

“Where in the hell are the stairs?” Chloe asked again.

Part way along the left wall, Jayden found a massive chain extending from above, down through the floor. At the top, the chain ended at a connection to a massive, square stone platform currently suspended a few feet below the opening. Where the chain vanished below the stone ground was a metal wheel with spikes, protruding into the lower most links in the chain. He took a step back and looked up, squinting against the backlight of sun.

“How do we get up there if there aren’t any stairs?”

When he found what he was looking for, Jayden smiled. “We take the elevator.” He moved to the large wheel and grabbed hold of the top spike, giving the whole wheel a shove. It moved just enough to release one link and hook into another. “You’re gonna have to give me a hand here.”

“With what?” Chloe moved to his side, staring at the rusted metal wheel, then up at the platform near the opening above.

“That,” he said. “Come on, grab the other side. You’ll have to pull when I push, it’s too heavy for one person.”

They sat on the ground opposite each other, with the wheel between them, and started the hard work of pulling the elevator platform down from above.

“So what are you in this for?” Chloe asked after ten minutes of sweating and pulling.

Jayden shook his head and glanced up to see how much further they had to go before one of them could reach the platform. “You wouldn’t understand.”

She laughed. “You mean you do this just because it’s here? Seriously?”

“I told you, you wouldn’t understand.”

“You’re right, I don’t.”

He pushed the wheel toward her. “Look, it’s not like there aren’t treasures involved. I’m not an idiot. Bills have to be paid. It’s just not my sole motivation.”

“Whatever you say.” Chloe pulled the wheel toward her, then reached forward to grab it again.

“I just happen to love history,” he said. “And mysteries that need to be solved.”

“You should try puzzles, they’re a lot easier on the body.”

The platform lowered another few feet.

“Aren’t you ever curious?” Jayden asked, pushing the wheel again. “Don’t you ever want to be first somewhere?”

“I fail to see the point, if there’s no reward or recognition,” Chloe replied.

The platform jerked slightly when they both paused to wipe at sweat beading up from the effort.

“It’s like the first snowfall,” Jayden said. “When you look out on a field of it, and there aren’t any footprints anywhere. You don’t want to disturb it, but you know someone’s going to eventually, so you go out there to be the first one, to see something and touch something that no one else has.”

“I don’t particularly care for snow,” Chloe replied.

Jayden let out a sigh. He wished Saul was here, instead of her. He’d have taken more time to explore the pyramid, read all the plaques they could find, try to figure out what they all meant and how they’d gotten there. Finding a way up and out wouldn’t have been such a high priority.

As it was, he could hardly wait to get Chloe out of this hole and off his back.

“Almost there.” He could just about reach the platform now, if he were to stand up. “There must be a counterweight somewhere that’ll raise this thing with us on it.”

“What if there isn’t?” She looked up at the flat stone lowering down on heavy chains.

“Then there isn’t,” Jayden replied. He let go of the wheel to test it and nodded for her to do the same. It stayed in place, the platform swinging very slightly only four feet from the floor of the pyramid. “Okay, stand up and get on, let’s see how it’s gonna work.”

Chloe jumped to her feet and brushed dirt and small rocks from her pants, then turned and climbed onto the platform.

And screamed.

“Oh my God!”

“What is it?”

Chloe fell back, slamming into Jayden as he tried to hurry off the ground. She spun around and pointed.

“Get it off! Get rid of it!”

Jayden had to physically set her aside so he could see what the issue was. “What is it, a spider?”

Sitting square in the center of the stone platform, lying prone as if staring up at the blue sky above, was a skeleton.

“It’s one of them! It’s an alien, isn’t it?”

Jayden stepped closer, then climbed up on the platform to examine it more closely. “Two legs, two arms, head and torso. I’d say it’s male, probably middle aged.”

Chloe turned back toward him. “How can you tell?” Gingerly, she took a few steps closer. “You don’t know that.”

“Well, first of all, the arms and legs are in the same place as yours and mine,” he said. “Then there’s the clothes. Looks like denim pants, maybe a cotton blend shirt, what was probably a nice leather jacket at one point.” He reached down and pulled at something sticking out from the inside of the rotting coat. “But the real kicker are these.”

Chloe was standing next to the platform now, looking at the set of keys Jayden held out. “What are those?”

“These are keys to a Hover’craft Nine-sixty.” He looked at the keys, then shoved them into a pocket and pushed the skeleton off the platform. “Nothing says midlife crisis like a Hover’craft Nine-sixty. Sorry pal, but you’re done impressing the ladies.”

After pushing the skeletal remains off the platform, Jayden reached out a hand to help Chloe up. She didn’t waste the opportunity to glare at him, then accepted the help.

She situated herself on the center of the platform next to Jayden and stared up at the opening above.

“We’re not moving,” she said after nearly a minute.

“I see that.” Not trusting it enough to get off, Jayden knelt down and pulled his light out, then looked over the wheel and chain pulley. “Gimmie your shoe.”

“Why?”

He turned to her, hand outstretched. “I need to hit the wheel, get it to release.”

“Use your own shoe.”

They stared at each other for a moment.

Frustrated, Jayden looked around, then found the skeleton he’d pushed off the platform. Reaching down, he managed to hook the eye socket with a finger.

“Maybe he’d be happy to know his death wasn’t in vain.” Jayden took aim, then let the skull fly. It slammed into the wheel and shattered into several pieces, but the impact was just enough to wobble the chain.

They heard a loud popping sound, then the wheel started to reverse, unwinding the ancient metal chain and slowly sending the platform back up toward the top of the open pyramid.

“What’s that rumbling noise?” Chloe wrapped her arms around herself and looked up at the blue sky above. “This volcano isn’t still active, is it?”

Jayden stood, brushing dirt from his pants, and shook his head. “None of them have been active on this world for centuries.” He knew that was true, but he could feel a cold breeze coming up from below, and hear the rumbling too. Almost a thundering now, though the sky above was clear and blue. A look over the edge showed only darkness, with a few shafts of light hitting the floor below from around the square platform.

Then the platform began to vibrate.

“An earthquake, then?” Chloe was hugging herself.

Jayden looked out at the walls of the pyramid. There were no sketches or carved stones, only the occasional clump of bioluminescent algae.

And seaweed.

“Oh shit.”

“What?”

He clutched one of the chains holding the platform and stared down at the darkness below. “Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit.”

“What?!” Chloe took a step toward him, then froze and looked down as the thundering sound of water pouring in through the tunnel that connected their open pyramid to the ocean side.

“The sea is coming in!”

She grabbed a chain opposite Jayden. “Oh my God!”

“The first structure must be going back down!” He called over the roar of the rushing water.

“But it had the cap! We saw it close!”

“I don’t know, it must have come off!” He looked up at the square of sky above, realizing then what the platform was for. “Just hang on! If we can ride it up, we’ll be fine!”

He didn’t believe that for a second, but it sounded good.

Chapter 16

When the wall of water hit the bottom of the platform, the massive stone lurched upward, dislodging Jayden momentarily. Only his iron grip on the chain kept him from plunging into the cold water.

Chloe was thrown to the center of the ancient elevator, where she flattened out, fingertips gripping the stone as it rushed to the top of the pyramid.

Jayden scrambled back on just as the elevator hit the opening, its edges slamming into the lip of the open square with the full force of the ocean behind it. He would have shouted for Chloe to roll off, in case a backflow sucked the platform back down, but the force of the impact sent them both tumbling off the small rise and onto dry, green grass.

Jayden rolled over to his back and found himself staring up at a clear, late morning sky. "Well, that was something."

"You're an idiot," Chloe said.

Jayden shrugged, then nodded as he glanced around, slowly getting to his feet. They were in a bowl, obviously the inside of what had once been a volcano, and was now a very small, very private tropical oasis. He walked around the raised dais now solidly sealed by the elevator platform, to where Chloe was shaking grass from her hair.

"It's a far cry from being stranded in the middle of an ocean with a dead guy, isn't it?"

She glared at him, lips pursed, then blinked and looked around him, pointing. "What was that?"

Jayden turned.

"I saw movement in those trees."

"Probably a bird or something." He dug his hand into his pocket and pulled out the keys to the skeleton's Hover'craft Nine-sixty. "If we can find this guy's ride, you can get out of here." Jayden started walking toward the ring of trees to their left, and Chloe hurried to follow.

"I can get out of here?" she asked. "What about you?"

"I'm not leaving, I came here on purpose, remember?"

"You came here after pushing me off that train," she argued, following toward the woods.

He shook his head. "You pulled me, if I recall."

Chloe stopped, grabbing Jayden's arm.

"There, I saw it again," she said, pointing to a group of bushes.

Jayden pushed around the underbrush, stepping through the bushes and into the tree line while Chloe remained in the open. "There's nothing here." He glanced up, looked left, then right, moving further into the trees. "Must have been a --" Then he saw it, not more than a few yards ahead and covered with vines. "Dammit." The Hover'craft Nine-sixty lay in a heap of mangled, torn and twisted metal. "There goes our ride."

He pushed back through the brush and out into the open grass, but Chloe wasn't there.

"Where did --" A bush beside him rustled slightly. "Oh." Jayden was turning his head to give her some privacy, when something popped out from the other side of the shrub.

Something decidedly not Chloe.

“Holy shit!” Jayden backed away from the creature, shocked not just by the physical appearance, but the fact that it was stomping toward him in a very menacing manner. His hand shot to his hip, but he wasn’t carrying a weapon, only the Mark Eight, and he wasn’t about to toss that at the thing.

“Run, you idiot, they’re everywhere!”

Chloe was several yards away, standing in the open field, waving frantically and jumping up and down. Jayden only knew this because he’d turned to run seconds after ten of the creature’s compatriots came charging out from behind the bushes, brandishing pointed sticks and hissing through grotesquely wide mouths.

“Run where?” he shouted as he raced toward her.

Chloe had returned to the stone elevator plate covering the top of the square rise, and was jumping up and down trying in vain to make it retreat back into the ocean-filled pyramid.

Jayden leapt up to the flat rock, not more than two paces ahead of the leading edge of alien creatures. They were everywhere now, circling around them as if afraid to approach the stone, but not in the least bit impressed by the fact that their quarry stood a solid three feet taller.

“What are they?”

Jayden was breathing hard, eyeing their attackers in astonished disbelief. “They’re . . . Them,” he said. “They’re the aliens in the carvings.”

“What aliens?” Chloe pressed her back into Jayden’s as they kept an eye on as many of the circling beasts as they could.

“*The* aliens,” he said. “The one’s we’ve been searching for. The one’s who built those cities, and the gemstones. The one’s who’ve supposedly been extinct for centuries.”

“Are you shitting me? These things are, like, two feet tall. And trying to kill us with pointed sticks! No way these are the same creatures!”

Jayden shrugged, his mind struggling to come to grips. “Maybe those depictions were to size, I don’t know!”

The creatures were circling, staring at the pair of them on the stone the way a wild animal stares at a menu. Their movements seemed unnaturally fluid, walking as they were on legs that hung down from shoulder height. Arms that sprouted out from their lower half ended in multi-digit fingers, all clutching pointed sticks or sharp rocks. But it was their bald heads and massive, wide mouths full of sharp, pointed teeth that held Jayden’s attention.

“Why aren’t they coming up here?” he wondered, glancing down at the stone elevator momentarily.

“How are we going to get out of here is what you should be asking!” Chloe shouted.

Jayden saw one creature stop circling and pull its arm back, preparing to throw his pointed stick. Before he could warn Chloe, they heard a gun fire. An instant later, the creatures were scattering back to the trees with unexpected speed.

“You missed,” Saul said as he and Drake approached the raised stone platform.

“Got them to run off, didn’t I?” Drake replied. “That’s gotta be worth something.”

“Uncle Saul!” Chloe hurried off the platform. “How did you get here?”

Saul pointed up and behind them, to a ship parked precariously on top of a rocky cliff.

"I don't know if this solves the mystery or deepens it," Jayden said as he stepped down between Saul and Drake. He noticed then the rest of Drake's men, coming out of the tree line behind them, some armed, some not.

"What the hell were those things?" Saul asked.

"They looked just like the aliens in the carvings," Drake said, holstering his weapon. "Descendants of the original builders?"

Jayden shook his head. "I have no idea. Maybe they weren't the builders at all, maybe the builders were warning us about them." He glanced up at the ship Drake had landed in, and noticed an odd sort of wobbling. "I hope you got rental insurance on that ride."

Everyone turned, looking up where Jayden was pointing, just in time to see the ship wobble again, and tip backwards, falling away and out of sight.

"Shit!" Drake started forward, then stopped when it was clear there'd be no saving the craft. In the distance, they heard it smash against the rocks on the outside of the volcanic bowl. Standing on top of the rock that had housed the ship stood several of the creatures, jumping up and down in victory.

"Great," Chloe said. "Now what do we do?" She stormed up to Drake and pointed toward the stone elevator. "That thing filled with sea water, we can't go back the way we came."

"Oh, yeah, about that," Saul said. "We figured you'd gone inside somehow, so Drake had a couple of men pry the stone plaque off the top. Soon as they did, the damn thing sank and filled up. That's why we had to come up this way."

"It's all right," Drake replied. "I told Resnick where we were. He'll be along shortly, to stake his claim."

"His claim?" Jayden glanced around. "Is that how you see it, that you were here first?"

Drake pointed to Chloe. "That's how I see it."

"Seems to me, Chloe and Jayden arrived at the same time," Saul said.

Before Drake could answer, they all heard a hovercraft approach from the East, where it landed on a ledge of the rocky bowl's lip.

"Ah, that would be Resnick, no doubt," Drake said with a smile. He looked at Jayden. "There's no shame in being beaten to the punch."

Jayden laughed shortly, shaking his head. "Who says I got beat?" He pointed toward the stone platform covering the open pyramid he and Chloe had come up through. "Which one of us found that entrance again?" He glanced over at Chloe, then back to Drake. "And which one of us found the tile in the museum? Or the stone in the Churling Forest?"

"Let alone Darkness itself," Saul added.

Drake shrugged. "If you'll recall, I was in the Churling Forest, too. You happened to catch a lucky break. But you're gonna find it more difficult to win against these odds."

"Then maybe we change the odds."

Everyone turned, expecting to see Resnick and his men coming down through the trees from their hovercraft parked on the cliffs above.

"Markem," Jayden said, surprised.

“Who were you expecting?” Markem and Sally came up behind Drake, while the three armed men behind them gestured for Drake’s goons to drop their weapons. “Pearce and I had an agreement, isn’t that right?”

“I seem to recall a verbal exchange,” Jayden replied.

Markem stopped just a few feet behind Drake, who was now flanked by his own, unarmed men and Chloe.

“When we didn’t hear from you, Sally and I thought maybe we should check in, see how this search of yours was coming along,” Markem said. He looked around the little tropical bowl, eyebrows raised. “So, is this the place?”

“I don’t see any alien burial ground,” Sally said. “We don’t need sixty percent of a tiny little island too small to build on.”

Jayden shrugged. “It’s a bit more complicated than we expected. Maybe we should just all climb in your hovercraft and head back to the city and see if we can figure it out, somewhere safe.” He glanced up at the ship, parked high on the rocks, then blinked and stared up at it. The reflections of sun off metal were flashing, as if the ship were rocking back and forth. “Damn, either they’re quick little shits, or we are seriously outnumbered here.”

Everyone turned in time to see the hovercraft pitch up, then slide backwards off the rocks and vanish over the side of the cliff face.

“Shit!” Markem started, as if to run back, then stopped himself when it was clear the vehicle was gone. “Who did that? What the hell happened?”

Jayden grabbed Saul by the arm and pointed to the leading tree line. “I think they happened.”

“Run!” Saul turned away from the platform, grabbed Jayden’s sleeve, then pushed Chloe ahead and took off.

Jayden paused long enough to see Drake’s men rush to the stone platform, followed by Markem’s armed guards.

“No, not there, it won’t hold the weight!”

He would have stayed to explain, but the little armed creatures were closing fast. Markem and Sally had quickly followed Saul, so Jayden turned and ran into the woods after them, toward a cave the others were rushing in to. As he reached the tree line, he shot a glance over his shoulder.

There were six men on the stone platform now, surrounded by the pacing, menacing creatures. They had all clamored onto the stone, then tried to shove and push each other off, which was all the instability the stone cover needed.

As Jayden watched, the men began shifting, losing their balance as the stone tipped beneath their feet and ducked down on one side, dumping all of them off and into the water-filled pyramid.

Before he could even shout a warning, they were gone, and the stone had righted itself once again.

Saul pulled Jayden behind the cover of the trees and pushed him forward, into the cave.

“What happened?” Chloe asked as she backed further into the shelter.

“They overbalanced,” Jayden said. “The cover tipped and they all went under. I don’t think we could have helped them if we’d tried.”

“What were those things?” Sally asked, clutching Markem’s arm in horror. “Those weren’t the aliens. Those couldn’t have been the aliens. They’re extinct, aren’t they?”

“We don’t know what they are, exactly,” Drake replied. “But they destroyed my ship, and yours. We’re trapped here.”

“Those things are exactly the same as the aliens on the stone tiles in the old ruins,” Jayden said. “If they’re not the aliens, then what are they?”

“Whatever creatures built those old ruins died off thousands of years ago,” Drake replied. “Maybe those things killed them all. Maybe those plaques really were warnings, or some kind of explanation of what happened.”

“Hold on here,” Markem said, moving up to stand between Jayden and Drake. “Let’s get down to brass tacks, shall we? Who, or what those things are is irrelevant. The question is, did you find enough for me to stake the claim of discovery and get the reward?”

Jayden shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“It has to be!” Sally said. “No one’s ever seen those creatures anywhere else. If they’re not the aliens who built the old cities, then at the very least they’re a brand new species. There has to be a reward for discovering a brand new species.”

“Hey, Jay, look at this.”

Everyone turned to see Saul walking deeper into the cave, aiming a flashlight at the rock walls.

Jayden was the first to see what his friend was looking at. The cave walls were painted with squares that advanced down the length of the cave which became more of a long, dark tunnel.

“Look at this, here,” Jayden touched the first picture, tracing over a map of the continents etched into the rock wall. “It’s the Dark Forest, here.” He pointed, then moved further down the wall. “And the old cities, and here’s Darkness. This is the temple I found it in, deep under ground.”

They all followed the paintings in single file, moving further down the tunnel. Jayden grew more and more excited with each new panel Saul aimed his light on.

“This is making more and more sense now,” he said. “Look, between that one back about five, and this one, our little creepy friends have gotten not only shorter in relation to the other elements pictured, but now they’re all carrying weapons, where before they were either carrying tools or nothing at all.”

“Yeah, I see it,” Saul said. “But what the heck does it all mean?”

“I think. . .” Jayden stopped at the final panel, and the tunnel’s end, and turned back toward Drake. “Do you see it?”

“Yeah, I see it,” Drake nodded. “I never would have believed it, but I see it.”

“Someone wanna clue the rest of us in?” Markem asked.

Jayden took a breath. “These drawings say it all. Those creatures -- our alien builders from thousands of years ago -- they devolved.”

Chapter 17

“Devolved?” Chloe shook her head and crossed her arms. “That’s absurd.”

“I dunno,” Drake said as he examined the pictographs. “They do seem to suggest that.”

Sally stepped forward, flashlight dancing over the tunnel walls. “Whatever it’s suggesting, this is it, right? This is the proof we would need to register with the government and win the claim?”

Jayden looked to Saul, then Drake, then shrugged. “I suppose so, yeah.”

“Excellent.”

They all spun around at the sound of a new voice.

“Resnick,” Drake said, stepping forward.

“Marge?”

“Hello, Giles.”

Jayden aimed his light at the two who had entered the tunnel behind them. The man was Resnick, clearly, but the woman beside him was a real surprise.

“Pearce, nice to see you again,” she said with a smile.

“Marge, how’ve you been?”

She wrapped an arm around Resnick. “Engaged, as a matter of fact.”

“To him?!” Markem took a step forward, but Sally held his arm. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Well this is a surprise,” Saul said with a quiet laugh.

“Wait, do you mean . . .” Chloe looked from Resnick to Markem, then Sally to Marge. “Where’s David?”

“Oh he’s with the hovercraft,” Resnick said, waving a hand. “With my men. I’m surprised you didn’t come here with backup, Markem. Looks like I’m going to be the winner by default.”

“You have a ship here?” Jayden pushed by everyone and started toward the mouth of the tunnel. “Where did you land it?”

Before Resnick or Marge could reply, they saw David rushing toward them from the mouth of the tunnel.

“They’re everywhere!” he screamed.

Jayden started for the cave’s mouth in a rush, pushing by David as everyone followed. If any of them were going to stake a claim, they’d have to find a way out of this volcanic bowl first.

He heard the screams coming from the clearing ahead, and broke through the underbrush just in time to see five armed men fall beneath the tipping platform. An instant later, the stone righted itself, sealing them in under the sea.

In the center of the clearing was a hovercraft, large enough to easily fly all of them out of the bowl to argue about claims and rewards later. That is, if it hadn’t been for the hundreds of small, spear-carrying bi-peds currently rolling it onto it’s side and doing their best to smash it to bits with their sharp spears, heavy rocks and sheer weight of their numbers.

“Shit!” He stopped, then backed into the tree line when a few of the creatures heard his exclamation.

As he stepped back, he was slammed from behind by everyone else.

“Oh my God, what are those things?!” Marge gasped.

“Your aliens,” Saul replied.

“My ship!” Resnick elbowed by Jayden, but was pulled back by Sally just as the creatures jumped off the overturned hovercraft. “What are they doing?”

“I dunno,” Jayden said.

The aliens had all jumped off the ship now, and were running away as quickly as their odd leg-arms could carry them.

An instant later, the ship exploded.

“Damn,” Saul whispered.

“Now what do we do?” Sally asked.

Jayden pointed toward the creatures, now staring at them from the clearing. “We run!”

Within seconds, they were back inside the cave tunnel. When Jayden turned around, to try and convince everyone they’d just clamored into a dead-end, he realized the aliens had all stopped at the mouth of the cave, and were just gathering there, staring in at them.

“Saul, look at that,” he pointed. “They won’t come in here.”

“Well thank God for that,” Marge said.

“But it’s a dead-end,” Markem replied. “How do we get out of here?”

Jayden aimed his light at the cave drawings again while the others debated their situation.

“They’ve destroyed every hovercraft that landed,” Chloe said.

“How did you and Pearce get here?” David asked.

“Who cares how any of us got here,” Resnick barked. “How the hell do we get out?”

Jayden shook his head. “I don’t know yet.” He was following the drawings back through to the end of the tunnel, searching for a clue. “But there’s a way. There’s always a way out.”

“How do you know there’s a way out?” Sally asked, following him. “What makes you think we’re going to find a way out of here? Those creatures keep destroying the ships, how can you say there’s a way out?”

“There’s always a way out,” he replied. “Look, I’m alive, aren’t I?” He stopped at the end of the tunnel and looked back at everyone. “I do this all the time, and there’s always a way out.” He glanced at Saul, who did his best to smile in agreement. “Right Saul? There’s always a way out.”

His assurances were met with only blank stares and crossed arms.

“So, let me see if I have this straight,” Saul said, still facing the others. “Markem was married to -- Marge, is it? Who is now engaged to Resnick, while Sally the secretary married --”

“My boss,” Sally finished for him. “Yes, that’s right.”

“Wait a second,” Markem said. “Sally, did you know Marge was engaged to this guy?”

“Sally and I kept in touch,” Marge replied. “We were friends for several years, you know. Even before either of us met you, dear.”

“Hey, Drake, have a look at this,” Jayden stepped to the side, aiming his light at the drawing on the wall that ended their tunnel.

Drake obliged, moving through the crowd to stand beside Jayden. He examined the depiction with the beam of his light. "Looks almost the exact opposite of that stone tile you stole from the museum," he said.

"Borrowed," Jayden replied. "We intended to give it back when we were finished."

"Yeah? Where is it now?"

Jayden shifted his feet. "Well I would have said it was just above the surface, out there where Chloe and I splashed down."

"But it sank," Drake replied.

"Which is not my fault, obviously," Jayden replied. "Saul said you had your men pull it off, that's why the entire entrance pyramid flooded. We were nearly trapped, you know, when that thing went back down."

"My bad," Drake shrugged. "So what's this, then?"

Jayden reached into his pocket and pulled out both Darkness and Light. They'd fused together into the Yin Yang symbol when the nipples on the stone tile converged, but now looked as if they might fit into this new drawing.

Instead of the alien figure having two recessed nipples, it's chest was drawn with a sunken circle in the center. The alien itself was no longer depicted as being at the top of the altar, but at the bottom.

"It might work," Drake said when he realized what Jayden was thinking. "But what does it open up to?"

"Let's find out." Jayden stepped closer, then pushed the combined gemstones into the circle on the cave wall.

At first, nothing happened. But a moment later they heard the rumble of stone on stone as both Darkness and Light began to separate, moving away from each other as the center circle slowly became two nipples on an alien carving.

In a showering of dust and pebbles, the stone shifted and cracked, then opened up to blue sky and a mild sea breeze. Jayden peered through the opening.

"It's the outside of the bowl," he said, looking down at the waves crashing against stone below them. "There's no way down, just out. No steps or path or anything like that."

Before he could speculate on how this could be good news, he heard a gasp of surprise behind them.

"What are you doing with that, Sally?"

Jayden turned and saw the group suddenly shifting, moving away from Sally and the weapon she was aiming at everyone.

"We have our proof now," she was saying. "And our way out." She looked at her husband. "I'm sorry you had to find out this way, Giles."

"It's really for the best." Marge had drawn a weapon as well, and was waving for everyone, including her fiancé, to step to the side.

"You, too?" Resnick blinked in surprise. "What's going on here?"

"I think we've just stepped into a hornet's nest," Saul said as he moved closer to Jayden and Drake near the opening.

Sally and Marge were standing side by side now, blocking the way out of the tunnel and standing between them and the creatures outside the cave mouth.

“We’re taking over, that’s what’s going on here,” Marge replied. “Sally and I are going to register this claim, and split the reward. She’ll take over your business, Giles, and I’ll be the proud owner of half the Southern Continent.”

“How do you figure that?” Resnick demanded.

“Simple, dear,” she replied. “You signed me on as your heir as an engagement present, remember? And as such, your property is my property. And as luck would have it, although I believe you did promise these little twats could have their deed back, you haven’t actually given it up yet. Nothing in writing, no other witnesses to the agreement, besides me, of course.”

Jayden winced. “See, this is why I’m still single.”

“You won’t get away with it,” Markem replied.

“Guys -- ” Chloe stepped back a few feet, moving toward Saul and Jayden.

“Marge, I thought . . . You said you loved me,” Resnick said.

Marge shrugged, then smiled at Sally. “I’m sure you believed that.”

Saul leaned closer to Jayden. “You think they’re gonna kiss?”

David pointed down the tunnel. “Hey, those things--”

“Is that it?” Markem asked. “You and Sally are together? How long has this been going on?”

“Since we met,” Sally replied. “Years ago. We thought we’d hatched a good plan when I started working as your secretary, and Marge agreed to marry you. But then we met a spice trader from the North.”

“I showed him the Darkness stone you’d given me as a wedding gift, and he had the most interesting stories to tell.”

Jayden had been keeping an eye on the two women with guns, but now saw the movement coming toward them from the dark. “Oh shit!”

“Don’t even try it,” Sally replied, holding her weapon higher.

“We gotta run,” Saul said.

“This way!” Drake stepped through the tunnel opening, seemingly out into mid air.

“Stop! Don’t think we won’t shoot!” Marge shouted.

Jayden followed, quickly grabbing the gemstones from either side of the doorway before scrambling out onto the rocky ledge. He twisted around and started climbing up, following Drake as they searched for foot and finger holds in the rough outer edge of the volcano.

“Get back here!” Sally ordered.

Saul was right behind them, with Chloe and David following his lead.

“Wait, let them fall, it’ll be more convincing,” Marge replied.

They went up as quickly as their grips and the rocks would allow, hurrying away from the tunnel opening and the approaching creatures. Jayden glanced down to spot Saul and saw Markem and Resnick struggling to get out onto the ledge. Sally poked her head out behind them, with Marge beside her.

Both women were looking up, watching them climb, when the creatures reached the opening.

Someone screamed, and both Sally and five alien creatures launched out of the opening, arching down slightly as they fell several hundred feet to the rocks below.

Resnick screamed in a higher pitch than Jayden would have thought possible, lost his footing, and hit the surf and rocks below an instant later.

“Move, you fat bastard!” Marge yelled as she grabbed for her ex-husband’s shoulder. “They’re right behind me!”
“Leave off!”

Jayden saw Markem lose his grip. He reached down, but they were both too far below. A moment later, accompanied by at least fifty alien creatures, he and Marge tumbled down the rock face, crashing down to the foaming surf below.

“Keep going!” Drake shouted. “We can reach the top.”

Jayden moved up another few hand holds, then risked one final look back. Streaming from the cave opening, creature after creature plummeted to its death like lemmings to the slaughter.

He swore he saw smiles on every one of their alien faces.

After a solid half-hour of exhaustive rock climbing, they reached the top. Drake turned and leaned back down, helping Chloe and David up and over the edge, then he gave Saul a brace for the final push as Jayden swung his own legs over the cliff’s top.

“Oh this is great,” Chloe said as she looked around. “Now what?”

Jayden wiped aching, dirty hands on his pants and looked around. They were up and out of the bowl now, but all that got them was a high perch on a ledge that circled the old volcano.

“At least we’re out of that tunnel,” he said.

“Do you think they all jumped?” Saul asked. “It looked like hundreds of ‘em launching out of that opening.”

Jayden shrugged. “I think so, yeah.” He looked back down at the ocean below. “Which means, our aliens are extinct again.”

“Resnick’s dead,” David said. “Everyone’s dead.”

They all stood there, staring down at the crashing surf and the bodies being tossed against the rocks below, each lost in his or her silent reverie.

Until Drake cleared his throat. “Well it’s really sort of a win win for us, isn’t it?”

Jayden looked at him. “How do you figure?”

“Well, look at it this way,” Drake replied. “We’re alive, for one. Neither of them gets to make the claim on what we found.”

“We found?” Saul asked.

“I’m here, aren’t I?” Drake smiled. “Anyway, it’s been found, and an argument could be made that both Jayden Pearce and Bernard Drake made the discovery.” He pointed to Chloe and David. “And these two little nips get to keep their daddy’s deed.”

“Yeah, it’s a win, win,” Jayden agreed. “Except for the all dead people.”

Drake shrugged. “They were obviously going to kill each other anyway. Besides, none of us pushed them. As I recall, they had all the guns, and we were running for our lives at the time. Well, climbing, anyway.”

“We only wanted what was ours to begin with,” Chloe said.

Jayden felt the two gemstones in his pocket. He looked at Saul. “I’ve got what I wanted.”

Drake turned to Saul as well. “Fine, how about you, Trubnick? I’ll buy you out for sole billing.”

“You’ll buy me out?” Saul raised an eyebrow. “The government reward for this discovery is several million, if I’m not mistaken.”

“It’s six point three, I believe,” Drake replied. He held out a hand. “I’ll pay you one, up front, in cash, for sole credit.”

Saul shook Drake’s hand. “Deal.”

Jayden nodded. “Okay, great, so we’re all happy. Those of us still alive, that is. But there’s still one tiny little problem that needs to be addressed.”

Drake opened his mouth to reply, then closed it and cocked his head to the side, staring at something over Jayden’s shoulder.

He turned and saw the hovercraft flying toward them, trailing a rope ladder from its hull door.

“Lana!” Saul laughed.

Jayden squinted up through the sunlight and saw Lana smiling at them from the cockpit. “Saul, that is one fine woman.”

“That’s what I’ve been sayin’.”

Chapter 18

“And then they all jumped out of the cave opening to their deaths, like lemmings?”

Jayden shrugged and propped his feet up on the conference table in the observation deck of the Marco Polo. “I don’t know why, but that’s what they did,” he said. “And I swear by my honor, they were grinning and laughing the whole way down. It was as if they’d just finished a hard day’s work and were jumping into the pool, for shit’s sake.”

Lana shook her head slowly back and forth. “I don’t get it,” she replied. “But I do have it on good authority that when the inspectors landed, they scoured that little bowl and didn’t find a single sign of them, aside from some tools and spears left behind.” She sat back in her seat and held her coffee cup in both hands, contemplatively. “I hate to think how long you would have been trapped there if I hadn’t come along.”

“Years, I’d guess,” Jayden replied. “Like that poor sap whose remains we found on the elevator slab. He must have stumbled on that and realized they wouldn’t go on it, then got stuck there and starved to death. Or maybe they speared him and wouldn’t go up to get the body. Hell of a way to go, either way.”

“Anything other than dying in your sleep is a hell of a way to go,” Lana replied. “I’m just glad one of us had the foresight to send me out in a rented hover, instead of on the train with the rest of you.”

Jayden glanced up and caught her wink, then touched his forehead with one finger. “Yes, ma’am, that was fortuitous, all right.”

“So what’s happening now? And where has Saul run off to?”

Jayden checked his watch. “Well, Saul’s at the bank, making sure Drake’s check is gonna clear. It’s my understanding his niece and nephew are back home, locking that deed up where their father and uncle can’t get to it again. They never did find the bodies of Resnick, Sally, Markem or Marge. I don’t think they’ve even found any of the bodies of those creatures, either.” He sniffed indifferently. “Probably fish food. That’ll leave Drake with credit for some new cave drawings and a handful of spears, I guess.”

“Which would mean--”

“Damn his hide!” Saul interrupted Lana when he stormed into the room, kicking a chair out of his path.

It was Jayden’s turn to wink at Lana before turning to look at his friend. “Drake canceled the check?”

“They couldn’t find a single body!” Saul stormed around the room, pacing between the table and coffee pot. “Without solid evidence, all they’re crediting him for are the new petroglyphs! In fact, the only reason they’re not charging all of us for the deaths of Markem and Resnick and those traitorous women is because Lana testified seeing all of us running for our lives outta that tunnel, and seeing the others fall of their own accord.” He stormed back to the table again. “Drake isn’t getting any reward, so he’s not paying me to keep quiet about it. And I can’t even use that against him, because as it turns out, there’s no evidence left for me to keep quiet about!”

Jayden and Lana laughed.

He kicked out a chair and pointed for Saul to sit down. "Come on, things could have been worse. Look at it this way -- we know what we found, right? We were there, like old times. We found it, not Drake. We solved the centuries-old mystery, even if no one else believes us, we were there. Besides," he reached into a pocket and pulled out both Darkness and Light, setting the gemstones on the table. "We still have these."

Saul picked up Light. "I didn't see you grab these."

"It was habit, I guess," Jayden replied.

"So what are your plans?" Lana lifted Darkness to the light and turned it around with two fingers. "Give them in to the museum as an apology?"

Jayden shook his head. "We stole a stone plaque from their warehouse and failed to bring it back, I'm not going to be visiting the museum on this world again any time soon."

"Sell them to the government archeological society?" Saul asked.

"How would I explain the marks on Darkness that my fence's ego couldn't help etching in?" Jayden shook his head again and leaned back, gazing up at the ceiling.

"They're only worth a few hundred thousand as gemstones, I suppose. Might as well just keep them, see if I can find a better market somewhere else."

"Speaking of somewhere else," Saul said as he put Darkness back down. "My brother returned from his business trip the other day, and . . . Well long story short, after he heard about our little adventure, he had some words to say. I think I'll be heading out soon, maybe take a vacation somewhere that isn't this planet."

"Got much money?" Jayden asked.

"None to speak of, no," Saul replied.

Lana set Light down and reached for her attaché case she'd set under the table. "Maybe this will brighten both your moods." She reached inside and pulled out an old wooden case, then set the attaché back on the floor.

Jayden took his feet off the table and sat forward. "What's this?"

"Just a little something I've been holding on to." Carefully, Lana opened the wooden case and reached in, removing a wrapped leather scroll. "Something my husband found, years ago. He always talked about wanting to see if it was real." She unfolded the leather, slowly, and revealed a delicate parchment covered in figures, diagrams and coordinates.

Jayden blinked, sure he was dreaming this bit.

"Is that. . . ?" Saul leaned forward, jaw falling open in awe.

"The Lost Caves of Aqualarus," Jayden breathed.

Lana smiled at them both. "From a chest belonging to famed explorer Adalto Benolini, yes," she replied. "Years ago, my husband went to a shipping office to pick up a chest he'd had delivered, only the company gave him the wrong one. He didn't find out until he'd gotten home with it and opened it, weeks afterward. When he tried to return it to the shipping company, they swore they'd made no such mistake, and even claimed they hadn't heard of him or the case in question." She shrugged. "Apparently the person it was intended for never came looking."

Jayden reached out, but stopped just shy of touching the ancient map. "Is it real?"

"It has to be real," Saul said, equally respectful of the map's age and delicacy. "It has to be."

“Oh it’s real,” Lana replied, still smiling. “According to Frederick, everything else in the crate proved it was the property of the late Adalto Benolini. I think his heirs had no idea what their forefather had, or they were simply too rich from his other quests to care about one more map.”

“Do you know what this leads to?” Jayden asked.

“The Lost Caves of Aqualarus,” Lana replied. “Fabled caves inside the asteroid Aqualarus Ten, said to hold the riches of five kings. If I recall correctly, the story says King Arnos of Aqualarus set up his kingdom as a sort of galactic safety deposit box, using his planet’s only moon as a fortress to protect the wealth and guard the secrets of every royal family in his system.”

“Until his world came under attack, and a stray ballastic or three slammed into that moon, sending it spiraling toward it’s primary,” Saul continued. “The planet broke up, and so did the moon, which became a collection of wild asteroids that travel through space, destined to destroy the planet that started the war.”

Jayden laughed shortly at the wild tale, but he couldn’t take his eyes off the map. “Basically, there’s an asteroid out there somewhere full of treasures that no one’s found yet.”

“Don’t forget the curses,” Lana said. “King Ralph, of Alaania, placed the Cursed Papers of Regular in King Arnos’s bank. It’s said anything you write on those papers is destined to come about. And King Applane secured the Code of Completion – a binary system with a code so powerful, so sinister, that if it were to be inserted into even something as incongruous as a phone, it would transmit itself to every computer on every world in every system throughout the galaxy in a matter of minutes, enslaving them to a single code master.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Saul waved a hand. “But the really impressive bit is the cave itself. They say it’s hollowed out of one massive, solid diamond.”

“Of course, these are all just stories,” Jayden said, trying hard to bring himself back down from this treasure-hunter high. “For all we know, this asteroid was a junkyard that five other planets used, and it went wandering off after an environmental disaster no one wants to take blame for.” He sat back and took a deep breath. “Probably burned itself out in a sun somewhere centuries ago.”

Lana shrugged and gently wrapped the map back up in it’s leather shell. “You’re probably right.”

“Yeah,” Saul agreed, sniffing. “It’d be a wild goose chase, for sure.” He pushed his chair back and got up, then walked to the coffee pot. “Still, I suppose there’d be no harm in checking it out. You know, just for something to do.”

Jayden frowned, considering the notion. “It would be a good excuse to get off this world and go somewhere else, before that museum curator figures out what happened to his plaque.”

“I could certainly use a vacation, myself,” Lana said, slipping the map back into her attaché case.

Jayden at Saul, who turned to Lana, who smiled back at Jayden.

“I’m already packed.”

---- The End ----