

THE  
NORTHERN  
ROUTE

WALTER ROBINSON

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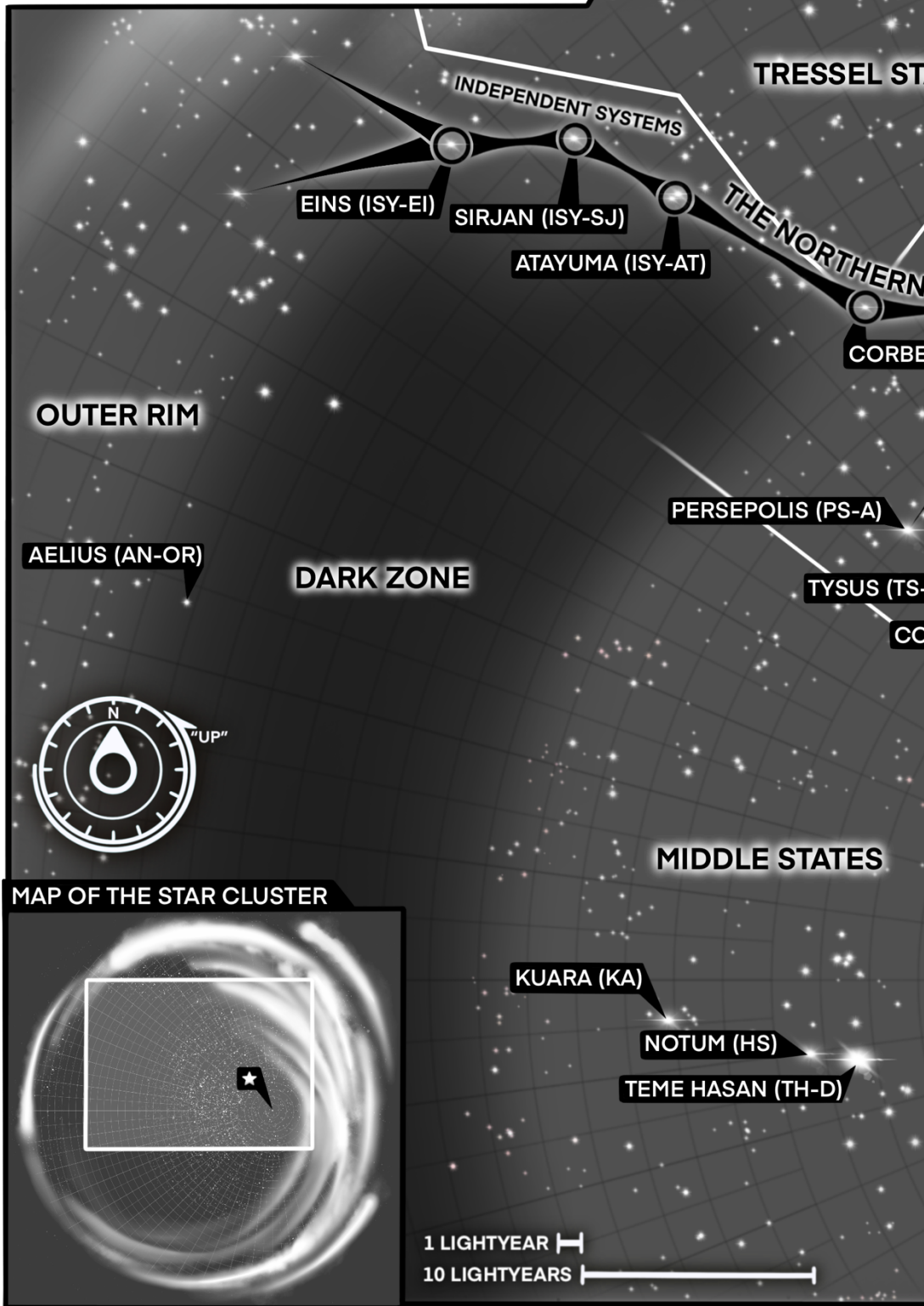
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# MAP OF THE NORTH 1320 T.A.



STATE

ERN ROUTE

RBEN (CB)

ISIN (IN-I)

THE CORDIAN TAILS

CORDIA MAJOR (C-1)

THE CORDIAN TAILS

L904

L605

NORTHERN STATES

TS-I)

CORTABERA (CA-A)

THE CORDIAN RIFT

KISO (KO-I)

CARNAC (CC)

★ LEROS (PO)

CENTRAL STATES

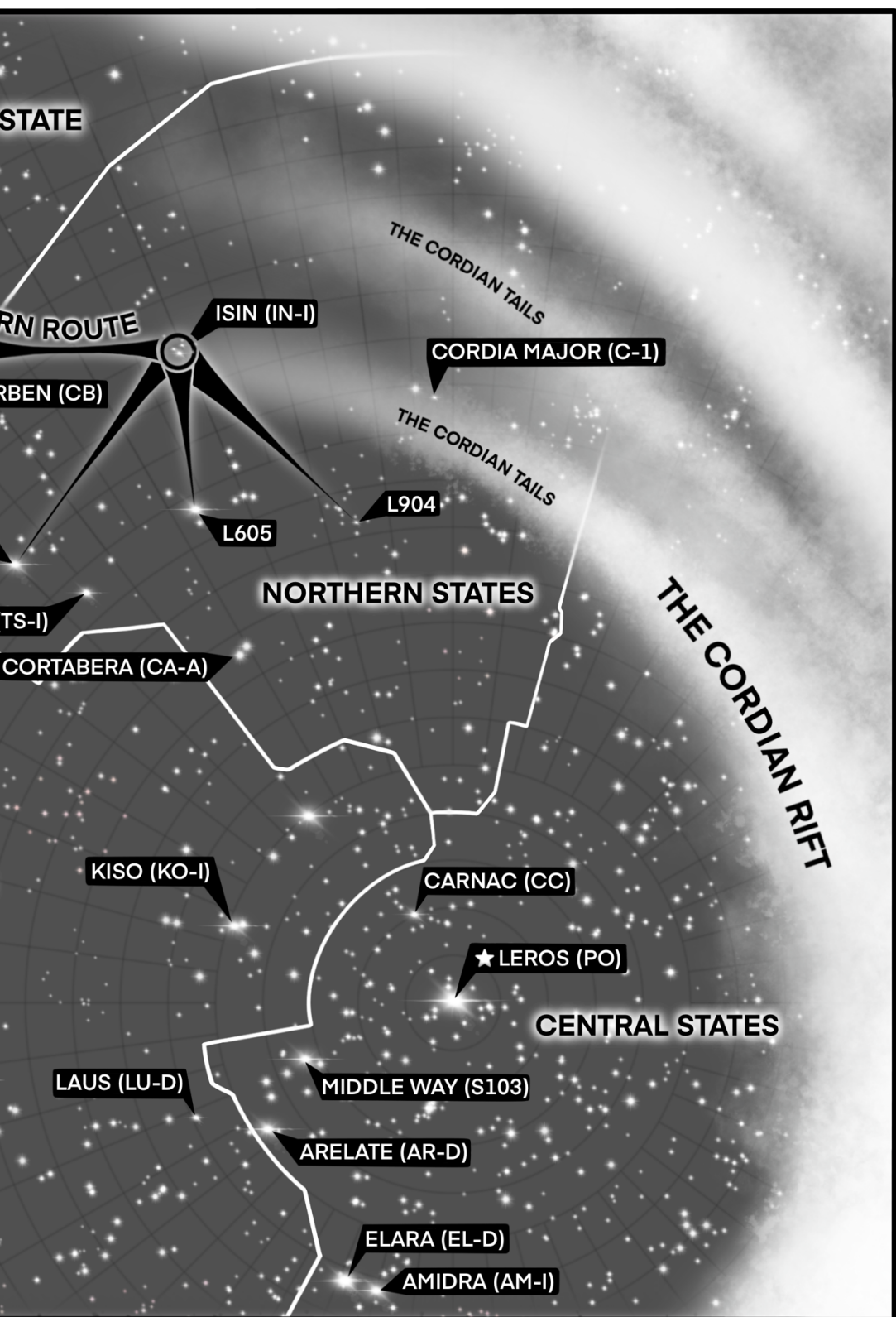
LAUS (LU-D)

MIDDLE WAY (S103)

ARELATE (AR-D)

ELARA (EL-D)

AMIDRA (AM-I)



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## WEBSITE

Find location details, character bios, ship blueprints, and more at:  
**[svf-state.com](http://svf-state.com)**



## SENSITIVITY WARNING

*The Northern Route* is an action-packed romantic and political science fiction adventure. While the prose avoids gory details, it includes elements that may not be suitable for some readers. Nudity and intimacy, physical violence in combat, including with knives and firearms, mental and physical trauma from sexual assault, and large-scale loss of life are present in this novel.





PREFACE  
A NIGHT OF STORIES

Surface Habitat, Earth's Moon  
The Year 2092

An elderly couple sat at a desk under a large telescope pointed up at a circular window in the domed ceiling. Their names were Ath and Amelia. She directed the large device with regular inputs. He added to a lengthy text document. They typed quietly while the telescope rotated to find its target.

The eyepiece of the towering device was a few centimeters in diameter. It stuck out of the end of the long multi-stepped cylindrical body more than two meters wide at its largest point, held up by a frame of yellowing carbon composite beams and lightly corroded aluminum junctions. A small plaque announced in dust-filled engraved letters that the device had been proudly built in Redondo Beach, California, in 2037, and transported to the moon by the Artemis Forty-Five Mission.

“Ath! Come quick; we have it in sight!”

A young boy came running into the room, and his grandfather, the elder Ath, picked him up, and set him standing on the chair. “Do you see it? That partial disk of blues and greens in a field of little glowing speckles?”

The boy murmured in the affirmative. Amelia remained at the desk, reviewing the list of celestial objects they planned to look at while she smiled at the interaction.

“That—that is Messier Four. It is a star cluster far, far away, seven thousand lightyears away. And in that star cluster is an ancient and advanced civilization called the Apeilous. It is home to beings emerging into a new and strange era, one where they can move through the star cluster with relative ease but cannot leave. Their home is too far from the galactic plane. They are exploring the last of the unknown regions. And exploiting them.”

“Why is it green and blue?”

“Ah, that is the remnants of stars, torn apart the last time the cluster got close to the galactic plane. The people of the Apeilous call it the Cordian Rift. It is a dangerous border and a source of almost boundless energy.”

“What do Apeilous people look like?”

“That...is something I do not know. See, text—text is easy, patterns in radio signals. Their language, which they call Basic, is designed to be universal and was almost trivial to translate. Images are an entirely different challenge. From descriptions in literature, well, let’s just say that they may as well be human.”

“Have you seen their spaceships? What do they look like?”

“Oh! That I can tell you about. Space travel is a dance to them, a beautiful choreography set in motion every time a starship departs from a station or launches from a planet—oh, what do they look like, yes.” He scratched his chin while Ath twisted his legs, spinning the chair while holding his upper body steady with both hands on the narrow end of the telescope body. “Some look like airplanes while others are tall and slender, like skyscrapers.”

Ath seemed unsure how to process all he had heard. Elder Ath felt Amelia squeeze his shoulder.

“Do not trouble yourself with understanding all this, Ath. This is just background, background to the human story. All these radio signals that we have picked up from M-Four, every personal message, company memo, and news report, they weave a glorious tale of change, of the rise



of unlikely leaders, and the formation and fall of alliances. Your grandmother and I are writing these stories now, the important stories, the human stories. Someday, when you are older, I would like you to read them. They will be a product of the people of the Apeilous, but I think you will find them particularly relevant to the troubles back on Earth.”

Ath grew restless so he lifted him back to the floor.

“But enough of the grandiose. It starts, as all the best stories do, with a grizzled old detective approaching retirement, sent out on an easy assignment.”



## CHAPTER 1 AMORE

Maressellya Summer Palace  
Conservation Zone, Arelate (AE-D)

The soft sound of synchronized brass instruments swept over the ancient palace grounds with about as much rush as a well-fed lion, leaving all that it passed in a calm lull. Cal Sunn stood in a grassy field next to the greeter and security guards with his hands clasped behind his back. Gray hairs crept out of his temples, and weathered insignia patches adorned his shoulders, the only signs of age on his person. His police uniform was immaculate, fresh cobalt blue with shoulder straps of metallic silver for the occasion. Despite his refined apparel, Cal was not a guest. His mission for the weekend was one of observation, a preamble into an investigation designed to root out corporate defectors.

Every few minutes the calm was snatched away by the whining and crackling of turbine engines. As sparkling ship after glittering ship descended to the grassy landing zone, Cal watched the population of the grounds grow steadily. The twenty-fifth arrival was a chrome gold vessel that touched down with its bird-like wings fully spread. A gangway folded from the ship's breast, and a dark-skinned woman in a pale olive-green suit emerged into the late morning light. Cal studied her blonde braids,

silver headpiece, and pale green eyes. She walked right past the greeter and did not so much as glance at Cal. The greeter, whose voice was amplified to reach the entire palace grounds, proudly announced the arrival of Piata Fausta Fortuna.

While her ship took to the skies, Fausta walked the short stone road to the gate. Cal tracked her every motion, wondering how someone could move with such a regal demeanor as to make the ancient palace seem beneath her. She disappeared through the arched gate, and Cal turned his attention to a low stone wall that failed to hide the white tents that covered most of the vast gardens. The endless pointed canvas shelters provided much-needed shade to the thousands of guests expected on the happy day.

A smooth ship of mirror-like silver set down gracefully at the end of the long stream of arrivals. Upon touchdown all four teardrop engine cowlings stood straight up while the landing struts compressed. The ship rolled forward a meter before coming to an abrupt stop. From a hexagonal hatch that opened reluctantly strode a trio of figures dressed in sharp close-fitting suits of deep indigo. The first was a pale woman short in stature but tall in air. Her nearly white blonde hair was wound and set on the back of her head. Her button nose and round cheeks were outshone by fluid-iris eyes backlit with a pink glow, the eyes of a Viran. Behind her trailed a male and female duo who didn't quite look similar enough to be twins though their height, narrow features, and tanned complexion were a match.

The Viran stopped by the greeter and looked studiously at Cal, no doubt seeing the polished name plate on his jacket.

*And what do you see with those eyes?* he thought. *My boredom? The twice-healed tissue in my shoulder?* Cal often wished he could, for even one day, possess the Virans' ability to see beyond the normal visible-light spectrum. He was still thinking about this when she nodded at him. Surprised, he nodded back.

"Miss Wright," the greeter said. "With an absentee note. Will your sister not be joining us?"

"I am afraid not." She bowed her head.

The greeter nodded and swept his arm toward the palace gate. She and her two followers took off down the stone road without fault in their

motions. Cal watched them go, noting that while they lacked the refined air of some of the other guests, they seemed at home, almost as if they had been here many times before.

Cal said to the greeter, "Who was that? She looked familiar."

"That was Erin Wright," he replied, opening his folder. "Specialist for the Maressellya North Division."

Cal thanked him and thought, *So, she arrives with the most affluent guests, a pair of lackeys, and the go-to vague job title.* He typed out a quick note on his wrist computer and wandered off into the palace gardens.

---

Erin Wright was a persona, one of many used by Vesta Amore. It was by far her least favorite to play as it was the one she used in the presence of the corporate elite of the Apeilous. At least playing Erin Wright usually came with a healthy paycheck and an opportunity to stick it to the system in her own small way.

Vesta scanned the central hallway of the palace and did her best to smile at the sea of brightly dressed guests. People moved lazily between the lounges and the dining hall, between the coffee bar and the expansive gardens. Waitstaff in gray milled around carrying silver trays laden with rare fruits, exotic meats, and aged cheeses. Despite the homogenized uniforms, there were clearly two types of people on staff: Those who moved with a choreographed carefreeness that always put them in the right place to dispense a delicacy or receive an empty plate, and those who walked stiffly, spending more time studying the guests than attending to them. Vesta decided it was a good ruse, hiding the guards in plain sight. She stopped her small entourage at one of the many pillars holding up the vaulted ceiling.

"Check in as soon as you find our target."

They nodded. A breath later, Vesta was in the atrium of the palace's east wing, a towering white marble structure filled with thick green palm plants. She followed the flow of people in fancy gowns meandering around

tall statues of ancient heroes and between tables of infinite delectables. She ducked into the lavatory behind a tarnished bronze statue of a man kneeling with a large mesh globe on his shoulders.

Even in the lavatory excessive ritz surrounded her. The three sinks were carved out of a single slab of pink marble and held up by dark bronze fixtures, a theme that carried through the entire room. She walked into the center of the three fully enclosed stalls, letting the door soft-close and lock itself behind her.

*This is a bad sign*, she thought, clenching her fists to combat the nausea that had built in her stomach and threatened to jump up her throat. She swallowed hard and tried to block out any thought of the people that populated the palace. The one hundred and fifty thousand credits in pay for the job spurred her on. She turned around and looked into the polished metal grating over an air duct. With her fingers wrapped around the coarse mesh in opposite corners, she pulled out the assembly with ease. She took a small black bag from a pocket in the lining of her jacket and set it in the duct, then replaced the grating.

Vesta stepped out of the stall and looked over herself in the mirror. Her hazy irises glowed like molten rock, casting small amounts of light onto her lower brow and upper cheek. She knew she looked too angry to fit in. With focused, painfully deep breaths, she looked at herself again. Her cheeks were flush, but her eyes had cooled to a violet blue.

“Vesta, acknowledge,” a familiar voice said into her ear. It belonged to her pilot and the fourth member of her team.

“I’m here, Jak,” she replied in a low tone.

“Found our man. He is atop the western wing. Fourth level, on the balcony. Rust-colored jacket and white pants.”

“Understood.” Vesta left the lavatory behind and meandered out into the crowd. She pretended to yawn and lazily looked around for a map or sign that might lead her upstairs. She knew exactly where to go.

“Can I help you find something, miss?” Vesta recognized the voice from the news. She turned, ready with her most winning smile.

“I’m told that the views from the roof garden are second to none.” She kept the edge from her voice as she spoke to the single most wealthy

individual in the Apeilous. He looked the part with his blonde hair slicked up over his head to let the light fully illuminate the edges of his pale temples. She tried to skip his icy blue eyes. His round chin and sharp jaw were shaved smooth. She broke her gaze from his face and glanced past him, sizing up his entourage. The best man and the other close friends fidgeted as if they were about to do something fun.

“I can lead you to the nearest stairs.” He swept his long arm in the direction of the main hall, ushering Vesta along. “Have you been to Arelate before?” His question was quiet, designed for her ears only.

“No, I have not, though my sister and I have worked a lot with your company.”

“Ah, well, I am glad you made the journey.”

Vesta looked down a side hallway.

“You and your sister, what is your profession?” He carried on the conversation as they rounded a corner under the dome that centered the palace. Light reflected off the golden surface, casting a like-colored glow on his head.

“I am a...specialist, Mr. SuMaressellya.”

“Please, you may call me Alexios. And then I will not press.” He flashed a smile. “The balcony is on the fourth level, nearly directly above us.” Alexios looked at the vaulted ceiling for a moment. His eyes lingered on the centuries-old painted stones. “The elevator is just around the corner, though with your build, I think the stairs would be easily conquerable.” He unabashedly took a long look up and down. She kept a wide stance, ensuring the curves of the muscles in her legs were displayed in the soft light.

“Thank you, sir.” She bowed shallowly and turned to the stairs.

“Hold on,” he called when she was a few paces away, “I never got your name.”

“Erin.” She threw him a desirous smile before turning and leaving the entourage behind.

The groom spoke loudly to his friends, “Hmph, Virans can be such heartbreakers. They are the best lovers, able to see your nerves and always know just where to touch...” His statement echoed up the stairs, and Vesta

fought her desire to charge back down there and drop the pompous bastard onto his exotic stone floor. He was right, but she had yet to use the full extent of her Viran vision since arriving on the planet.

Vesta climbed the stairs and rounded the turn at the landing. Coming down the next flight was the bride. Irene Madian Maressellya descended in a glittering white dress and an elaborate brown updo accented by a lace triangle that reminded Vesta of the jib on a sailing ship. Pale blue gemstones proliferated her outfit and accessories, lifting her like-colored eyes. Behind Irene was a dark woman in a pale green suit, Fausta Fortuna, if Vesta remembered the guest list correctly. Irene glared at Vesta, no doubt having heard her husband's voice. Fausta offered a kind and knowing smile in apology. Vesta was so wholly captivated by Fausta's soft expression and green-brown eyes that she completely forgot about the bride's obvious distaste for her. The two passed her by and resumed a bubbly conversation. It took Vesta a few moments to refocus.

"Well, what did you think?" Jak asked from the earbud.

"Of what, Jak?"

"I couldn't help but overhear your conversation with the Maressellya heir."

"*Angels*, what a creep," she said.

"Yeah, no way I'd put up with that, no matter how fancy the wedding."

"I feel sorry for the bride," Vesta said after a noisy group passed her on the last flight to the fourth floor. She climbed the top step and studied the wide row of oak-framed glass doors leading into the sunlit rooftop garden.

"Are you gonna swoop in and save her? Just let me know," he said. She could almost hear his smile.

"Toss off. I'm almost to our target." Vesta strode out into the warm noon-day air. While the palace's interior was a wash of dark wood panels and endless colored marble, the rooftop garden was a sea of pastels grounded in earth tones beneath a crisp sky. Brilliant blue flowers grew in long, narrow clay pots perched delicately above the sea of spiraling and bending dry-green-colored foliage. Beyond the railings, Vesta saw the entire grounds, all the way to the edge where the grass, hedges, and flower

beds fell away, ceding to the thick forest that covered the world beyond the mesa's edge.

The central body of the palace's western wing went up another three levels behind Vesta and kept her in shadow as she surveyed the area. Looking out over the garden, Vesta had no trouble finding the man she sought: A light rust-gold jacket atop white pants. She walked toward him and focused her deeper vision. All the world's colors disappeared in two blinks, replaced by grayscale with so much brightness and texture that it almost hurt to look at any flat surface. Her deeper vision continued to sharpen, and she saw colored streaks amongst the grays. A vibrating yellow-white blur followed an electrical conduit along the base of the stone balcony railing, ending in a small security module. She estimated its range to be about ten meters, just shy of reaching her target.

A few paces away, Vesta looked him up and down, finding myriad asymmetries in his nervous system as he readjusted his position against the railing. A wave of blue sparks danced over the right side of his brain, followed by a flash of red localized to a small spot above his ear. As best she could tell, he was nervous and struggling to remain calm. She knew her eyes, as the odd stranger reminded her, were creepy when she used her deeper vision, so she blinked and breathed until the world around her was rendered in its typical muted color. Like any with a long Viran lineage, she was partially colorblind, limiting her ability to distinguish the red end of the visible light spectrum.

"Are you waiting for someone?" Vesta addressed the man from behind.

"In a way." He turned his body a little but pointed only his face toward her. It was weathered, not in an intense way, but worn as if he had spent most of his life in bright sunlight. "Why do you ask?" The corners of his mouth curled a little as he found her eyes. His hand subtly disappeared behind his back. Vesta studied him up and down in a glance, determining what type of weapon he would most likely carry.

"You look at the distant forest as if you're waiting for some savior to ride in." She kept up her flirtatious demeanor, narrowing her eyes every time he broke eye contact.



His smile was broader as he brought his arm around. In his hand, a flower with five deep blue petals.

“I think that, between us, the award for the best eyes goes to you. I am merely admiring the landscape.” He brought the flower closer to her and kept his gaze moving as if comparing the petals to Vesta’s irises. She smiled and nearly accepted the compliment.

“Mr. Tion, my name is Vesta Amore.” The statement was made low and clear and drained the easy smile from the man’s face.

“So you are.” A grim nod started the remainder of their day. He tossed the flower into a nearby pot. “So how will I be leaving?” he asked, hands resting gently on the ancient stone railing that held him from a four-story fall onto the party below.

“You will go to the coffee bar by the Atlas statue. Approaching the bar, turn right and enter the lavatory. Behind the vent in the center stall is a bag with prosthetics. The bag is vacuum sealed. Open it slowly, so it doesn’t make too much noise. Are you wearing the reversible jacket?”

He nodded.

“Very good. Your last task in the lavatory is to flip it inside out. Leave at precisely twelve-fifty. For now, put this in your ear.” The earpiece she handed him darkened to match his skin tone as soon as it settled in his open palm. “Two of my team members will meet you. You’ll follow them down to the parking area. I’ll watch for trouble.”

“Okay. And if they spot us?”

“We have backup plans. Just follow along.”

“Miss Amore...” he tried and failed to fight the stern expression Vesta levied at him.

She turned and put her weight against the railing, leaning close enough to whisper. “All you need to do is walk straight. Whatever happens, we’ll handle it. Now, you can leave with us or face the wrath of your employer when they figure out that you tried to abscond on their happiest day.”

“It’s a bit more complicated than that.” He picked his hands up from the railing.

“Just do as we say, and you’ll be fine.” She put on a carefree smile. “Better get going.”

“Very well.” He took a few steps back. “Please excuse me.” He moved with surprising liteness. Vesta remained leaning on the railing.

She said quietly to the air, “Ama, he is on his way.”

“Understood, we’re in place.”

“Good.” Vesta scanned the gardens below. She struggled to pick out the security guards from a distance but had no trouble finding the sole Azmaveth police officer. He stood inside a tent facing away, though were he to turn, he would have a perfect line of sight to Vesta. She walked back toward the glass doors from the garden to the shaded main hall of the fourth level.

Back down on the palace’s main level, Vesta rounded the end of a food-filled table. She eyed her two team members as they leaned on the coffee bar on the far side of the room. It sat under a painting of a legend from Apeilous history two meters high and nearly twice as wide. A stern-looking sailor dominated the painting and gazed down at Vesta as she pretended the peruse the desserts until a disguised Alben Tion emerged from the lavatory and followed her indigo-suited teammates through the high archway at the left end of the room. She looked up again at the painted sailor as she approached the coffee bar. After ordering something simple, Vesta leaned on the wooden bar and watched the activity of the long room. She kept track of her teammates and every one of the disguised guards she could spot.

“Are you enjoying the party, Miss Wright?” a level male voice asked.

Vesta turned her head to find the Azmaveth officer standing with his hands on the bar. He looked at the barista but tilted his head with his chin angled toward her.

“So much that I’ve worn myself out. Officer Sunn, was it?”

“Investigator,” he corrected.

Vesta spent one brief panicked moment attempting to find her team and Tion. She spotted them as they paused at the entrance to an adjoining hall. The sound of a ceramic mug being set on the wooden bar top brought her attention back. Sunn looked directly at her. “I understand you work for the Maressellya North—”

“I’m going to stop you right there, officer,” she said smoothly. “We both know that Mr. SuMaressellya would not want me talking about my work.” Vesta nodded at him, picked up the mug, thanked the barista, and set off down the main hall. If the angels were smiling down on her, said groom would be somewhere else, bothering someone else.

“Jak,” she said quietly.

“Yeah.”

“Kio and Ama just started down the stairs with the mouse in tow. Give me the good news.”

“I’m in the parking lot. LZ ten zero eight.”

“Got it,” Kio said smoothly. “We are five minutes out.”

With steps no more hurried than those of the next guest, Vesta made her way down the impossibly grand central hall. She eyed the attendants and guards that milled around.

Ten paces from the exit, Vesta stopped in her tracks. A thin wall screen displayed the latest news from the capital. A rich kid named Maximus Menapharaoh stood at a podium. As far as Vesta was concerned, he was a younger version of Alexios. The text crawling along the bottom of the screen caught her eye. It said something about new Azmaveth operations in the northern states. While she waited for the text scroll to loop, a commanding voice said, “Gather around everyone!” Alexios beckoned the people around Vesta over to watch. They practically pushed her as they grouped around the groom.

On the screen, Maximus said, “...before that, however, I will thank one particularly generous donor, Mr. Alexios Marsaille SuMaressellya. He has, on the eve of his wedding, tabulated the value of every gift he received and made a thousand-fold donation to our Endeavor. As you might imagine, Mr. SuMaressellya is absent because he is now enjoying his three-day reception, but I hope you will join me in thanking him whenever we see him next.”

Vesta looked over to find him looking rather pleased with himself. He flashed his wife a broad smile, a gesture poorly reciprocated. Vesta tried to emote comfort to the woman, but the bride’s gaze returned to the ground before they could make eye contact.

“Thank you for watching this with me,” Alexios said to the group, though his eyes lingered on Vesta. She cursed silently. His attention had already waned from his glorious moment in the news.

“Hello there, Erin, right?” he said. The people around him started to disperse.

*Okay, okay, great view from the balcony, tired. I had to get coffee*, she repeated in her head. “Hello again, Mr. SuMaressellya,” she replied, bowing her head.

“The balcony did not hold you for long.”

“I was dying for some coffee.” She lifted her hand to bring his attention to the small mug. His eyes lingered elsewhere.

“Do you need help locating your suite? I can have an attendant guide you.”

“Oh no, thank you. I am not staying the night.” She bowed her head again with the hope of ending the interaction.

“Would you like to?” he asked in a low tone. Vesta unwillingly shook her head in reaction, though she quickly reigned in her surprise before speaking. He beat her to it. “A handful of guests have decided not to stay the evening. There are rooms aplenty.”

“I am honored by your offer, but I cannot.” She lifted her chin to look him squarely in the eye. There stood someone who could do anything behind a closed door, and his army of lawyers would fight to the death to exonerate him. “I must meet a friend. Goodbye, sir.”

She gave him a slight bow as she retreated into a flow of guests. The river of people hid her as she navigated down the main hall, along an offshoot, and into the quiet stairwell down to the parking area. After a moment of recovery, Vesta took a sip from her mug and started down the stairs. The sounds of several pairs of boots on stone echoed up from below.

“Did I hear that correctly?” Jak asked. His disbelief was unmistakable, even through the coms.

“Is it just me, or is every corporate heir we meet worse than the last?”

“It’s not just you,” he said, voice elevated. He continued, softer, “Gorgeous, rich, good, I guess you can only ever have two.”

“What about that handsome engineering manager you dated?”

“Okay, he was b and c. You clearly have no idea what makes a man good lo—”

Vesta tapped the mute icon on her wrist computer, silencing Jak’s voice in her ear. She stood still and listened carefully. There were more than three sets of footfalls in the stairwell below. New sounds came from above.

“Ama, Kio,” she whispered, “there is someone between us and more behind me.”

“The person between us is a pilot coming up from the hangar,” Kio said.

Vesta grimaced and shook her head. *That’s the kind of thing you need to report*, she thought, carrying on down the stairs and keeping an ear out for the footsteps she could hear above.

Kio was correct. The person coming up the stairs was just a pilot, and a cute one at that. She had midnight brown skin and wore a blue flight suit rolled down to her waist. Her crisp white polo shirt sported the crest of one of the dynastic corporate families. Vesta batted her eyelids, then lost focus when she got an earnest smile in response.

“Hi,” Vesta said, taking a quick breath to regain her composure. “Can I ask a favor?”

“Maybe,” the pilot said. She cocked an eyebrow, but her wide charmed smile remained.

“I might’ve said something mean to one of the guests.” Vesta rolled her eyes a little. “If you run into any staff on your way up, can you pretend to need water?”

The pilot huffed in a quiet laugh. “I won’t need to pretend. I’ll keep them busy.” She winked and carried on up the stairs.

The moment she was out of sight, Vesta set the coffee mug on a step and charged down the next flight as quickly and quietly as she could. The careful descent wore her out, but she was still too far behind her team. A minute after leaving the pilot, she heard a commotion far above. Someone sternly ordered the fetching of water before saying something too quiet for Vesta to hear.

The stairs ended in a plain room with two hallways facing opposite directions. Vesta consulted the directory on the wall and set off toward the

appropriate hangar. Like the palace halls, the tunnel was a barrel vault held up by colored marble columns. Unlike the stone block vaults in the palace, the ceiling appeared to be carved directly from the surrounding rock. The tunnel was not straight, and Vesta was uneasy about how little she could see approaching each bend. Even a slightly metallic rock blocked her deeper vision, forcing her to rely on her ears. Somewhere in the distance, a set of turbine engines barked into life. It sounded like their ship.

Vesta burst into an ornately decorated atrium. The room had a high ceiling and an outward-canted window that provided a clear view of the cave-like hangar. She watched Ama, Kio, and Alben Tion climb into the hatch of their ship. The whine of idle jet turbines echoed up a nearby staircase.

“Ma’am, excuse me,” a deep voice said from the hallway behind her. Vesta put on what she hoped was a mildly annoyed expression and turned. The man approaching her looked like any of the waitstaff she had seen that morning. His open blazer failed to hide a small pistol tucked away in a holster under his arm.

*Dammit*, Vesta thought, looking up at his serious expression as he approached. *Trip, block, stab*. She casually put her hands in her pockets and flapped the left front of her jacket to hide her retrieval of a small syringe from an inner pocket on the right.

The guard stopped at a safe distance and held up his hand to urge her to stop. As he opened his mouth to speak, Vesta said, “Do you need something?” She pulled her hands out and raised them as if to drive home her annoyance.

He paused as if he hadn’t thought about what to say when he caught up to her.

“I was going to get a new shirt,” she explained, “from my ship.” She tossed her thumb over her shoulder and stepped closer while looking back at the sloped window. As she turned to face him, she wavered and purposefully tripped. He lunged forward to catch her and Vesta fell into his embrace, driving the syringe into his chest. It dispensed its contents and retracted the needle automatically. She watched his face sharpen as he looked at her in disbelief. Before he could move, she quickly and

strategically latched onto his jacket with one hand and the webbing of his holster with the other.

The guard lifted her with ease, then set her down as his muscles failed. Vesta felt his breathing change as the drugs took effect. He pulled in and reached for his sidearm, but she already had her hand gripped around the strap that locked it in place. She looked into his wide eyes while forcing him to backpedal toward a bench at the base of the wall. Try as she might, he went entirely limp before she was ready and collapsed onto her. It took all her strength to push him up and onto the bench. His head bumped into the stone wall with a light thud.

*Oof, sorry,* she thought, kneeling in front of him to catch her breath. His eyelids slowly started to fall. “Tsk tsk,” Vesta said loudly, “sleeping on the job. You’ll need a good excuse to get out of this one.” His eyes fell shut. Vesta took a deep breath. She grabbed the empty syringe from the floor and then made a beeline for the stairs. While the drug was designed to fool any biosensors in the guard’s clothes, his failure to check in would probably raise alarms before too long.

Vesta crossed the hangar, keeping her attention between their ship and the atrium windows in the wall behind her. The former was ready to leave. The latter remained free of activity. Two minutes later, she was in, and they were airborne.



## CHAPTER 2 THE BANKER

*Pram Class Bird*  
Departure Orbit over Arelate (AE-D)

Vesta pushed off a bar mounted to the ceiling and floated into the main cabin of their ship. The limited motion of the suit jacket annoyed her, but not as much as the news report playing on the screen attached to the wall. The anchor complained about a new documentary supposedly blowing the whistle on corruption within the nationalist party governing the Viran home world of Corben Six.

“What do you think, Miss Amore?” Alben Tion sat in a canvas chair, strapped in with a four-point harness.

“I’m not torn either way,” she said with forced calm.

“No opinion on all this, even as a Viran? Especially as a Viran.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she snapped. Her body almost quaked as she floated across from him.

“Well, they’re your people, supposedly your homeland. I figured you would have an opinion.”



“I don’t care,” she growled. “I left Corben when I was sixteen, and I have no intention of ever going back. Viran leadership is no different from the rest of the politicians, bickering over bullshit.”

Alben cowered in his seat and slowly flicked to a different news channel. Ama and Kio sat silently nearby, eyes on the screen. Maximus Menapharaoh’s young face appeared above a pristine wooden podium.

“...come to an agreement with the central institutions. The Maurentia Institute of the Acropolis has agreed to take ten thousand new students. The universities of Kros will take up to eighty thousand. The list goes on and on. More than eight dozen institutions across the central systems have, on paper at least, agreed to take on a grand total of nearly two million refugee students.”

The camera zoomed slightly, impressing Vesta with just how young Maximus was.

“Here is the reality of the situation: Yes, that is an incredible number, yes, we have started the cogs of a machine that will put two million refugees into the best universities, but in the grand scheme of this Endeavor and of the number of refugees in the Apeilous, two million is a drop in the ocean. Thus, on this day fifty-three of the year thirteen twenty, we announce the creation of two new divisions of Menapharaoh Corporation. The first, called simply the Menapharaoh Endeavor, will handle the bulk of what the public has colloquially called the Endeavor. It will help secure and modernize outer rim planets, putting them on the path to becoming territories and, eventually, states. The company’s charter also includes dealmaking with the Apeilous’ higher level learning institutions to bring in what will amount to hundreds of millions of souls.”

Maximus shifted his weight from foot to foot.

“The second is the Fortuna Endeavor, so called for its primary partner, the Fortuna Corporation. It will strive to bring peace to the contested systems on our northern border. And in doing so will open up a trade route to the new territories in the northern crescent of the outer rim.” He took a deep breath and smiled. “The best part is that you all will not have to pay a single credit. In partnership with the Fortuna family, I will fund its creation and oversee its operation while my father runs the bulk of the

Endeavor. I hope you will continue to work with us as we create new worlds from failing ones and successes from past ruins. Keep on, my friends, and good day.”

“That man is going to either save the Apeilous or ruin it.”

“Why do you care, Kio?” Vesta asked immediately, turning her head from the news.

“It’s the single biggest humanitarian effort in the last half millennia. I’d say it’s very much worth my care. Might even contribute.”

“Why? Even their most distant relatives have more money than we’ll see in our lives.”

“It’s a personal thing.” The man fell silent, turning to look at Ama as she conversed quietly with their passenger.

“...we’ve only been with her for a few months. The pilot, Jak, he and Vesta go way back—”

“Mr. Tion, what do you think?” Kio asked, breaking their conversation. Both Ama and Tion turned.

“Of what? Sorry.”

“Of contributing to the Menapharaoh’s Endeavor.”

“Oh. I...it is up to you but give wisely. Alexios, my former boss, was very much in favor of supporting the Endeavor. He had hoped to be an equal partner with the Menapharaoh and Fortuna. *Angels save his naive soul*. It would have put his company on the verge of bankruptcy.” Tion nodded at the end of his short story, glancing at Vesta in search of some confirmation.

“What? Why? Wouldn’t the company make money?” Vesta asked.

Tion shrugged. “The north is unstable. If Corben collapses or is taken by Tressel, then—well, it is a huge risk, one that we in the Maressellya Corporation felt was not worth taking.”

“And what were you, then? A banker, accountant?”

“The latter, lead accountant for the Maressellya.”

“So why did we have to pull you like a defector? That is what the job description said, extract a defector from the Maressellya Corporation.” Vesta eyed him with as level a gaze as she could manage.

“Well, yes. But it’s not quite like that. I’m not defecting, but I did want to get away for a while without raising any alarms.”

“Oh, that’s rich!” Vesta quaked.

“I don’t see what the issue is,” he ventured.

“All you damn corporate cronies and your sense of doing whatever the hell you want. We are not a limo service! We specialize in saving people, extracting whistleblowers—helping them set up new lives. And—and you hired us for a low-key getaway!”

Tion kept himself composed. After a deep breath, he said, “It’s not that simple. I have information that the Maressellya want to keep under wraps and transmitting it from their planet would be too great of a risk.” He avoided eye contact. She could feel the heat in her face, and she knew her eyes glowed molten red. She pushed off a handy bulkhead and floated to the cockpit.

Vesta silently entered and looked down at Jak, who sat in the pilot’s seat in the nose of the ship. His pale and narrow head was topped by short black hair saturated with product. A scruffy jaw failed to gel with closely cut sides. Windows ahead of and below his station showed the sunlit horizon of the green Maressellya planet below.

“Really pushing the altruism there,” he said.

She narrowed her eyes at the back of his head, unsure whether he was joking.

“Ready for a lux ride?” he added.

“What?” she said sharply.

Jak turned and silently demanded an apology.

“Sorry.”

He nodded and said, “I’m going to burn the whole way, make this comfortable for our esteemed guest.”

“Jak, that’s s...how much is that gonna cost?”

He shrugged. “Three thousand or so.”

“Jak!”

“Don’t forget about the payout! One. Five. Zero. K. With half of running cost included, by the way, all for this little two-day jaunt.”

Vesta sighed and pulled herself down into the copilot's seat. The seat belts slid out and clinked together, securing her in place.

"I've also got us on the express gates," he added.

Vesta tossed up her hands in a do-whatever-you-want gesture. Jak just chuckled. A few minutes passed in silence as they caught up to the departure gateway, an immense gray ring floating above the planet. The closer they got, the clearer Vesta could see the small control tower protruding radially from its edge. She took care to keep her deeper vision at bay; a gateway transition was bright in visible light, harmfully so in higher wavelengths.

Precisely on time for their registered flight path, the gateway adjusted its orientation with small thrusters. A small dot emerged from the ring and began to glow as it translated toward the center, getting brighter and brighter with each passing moment until a white sphere erupted out to fill the aperture. Vesta closed her eyes just as the windows tinted to be near-opaque. She slowly opened them and peered through the glass, where she could just see the bright horizon of the planet below as their ship rotated to plunge spine-first into the artificial wormhole.

A gentle hum entered the cockpit from the sides, emanating from the ship's vacuum engines. Vesta glanced at the live schematic on the screen ahead of her. All four engine nacelles sat in a vertical orientation. The small ion thruster in each pointed downward, ramping up until they accelerated upward at a pleasant three-quarters standard gravity. The deck shifted, the entire ship shuddered, and Vesta knew they had entered the gateway. She tested the thrust gravity with her hands, picking them up and letting them fall back down onto the padded armrests.

"What's our route?"

"We'll pitch over in about forty-five minutes. We'll arrive at Nysa with good speed. It'll be quick to swing around the outer planet and switch transponders. It's a big planet, so I'll use it to sling us back in toward the gates. Should be about two hours on the interstate. All up, less than seven, I'd say."

Vesta nodded, impressed. *Maybe we should run powered flights more often*, she thought, relaxing her shoulders, and cueing her favorite

detective show. With all the prep work she had done in the lead up to extracting Alben Tion, she was about four episodes behind. A black-and-white title sequence replaced the ship's status indicators on the main screen of her console.

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The ship rocked back and forth with alarming frequency as they descended into the thick cloudy atmosphere of the post-industrial planet of Kiso.

“How does home base look?” Vesta asked.

“Looks all right, boss. Everything is normal enough. Someone tripped the perimeter sensors within the last two hours.”

“I'll check the thermals once we clear the clouds.”

As the ship descended, it plunged into the clouds, and all sense of motion ceased. The slower they flew, the more apparent Kiso's unusually high gravity became. Vesta tested the new weight of her arms and watched the dark gray mist press up against the cockpit window. Tiny droplets of water formed near the top of the window before rolling down and dispersing in the unseen wind. Heavier raindrops struck the cockpit glass with loud cracks.

The ship suddenly bucked under her seat, upsetting her stomach momentarily while giving her a new clear view of the world below. With the gray cloud layer hovering about a thousand meters above the ground, they were no more than a stone's throw from the top of the nearest building, a towering husk of a skyscraper. Jak followed the approach almost by memory, piloting the ship into a low and wide circle centered around the frame of an old warehouse. Vesta brought up an infrared scan of the area. Everything was a cool blue, somewhere around twelve Celsius.

“Sweater weather already,” Jak said.

Vesta studied the scan. She picked through the area around the tripped sensor. Nothing seemed amiss.

“Who would wander this far out?” she asked.

“I don’t know. One of the Kissoman?”

“Doubt it. They stay on the other side of the twenty lat-line.”

“Maybe an animal.”

“Here?” Vesta was almost amused. They were close enough for a remote link to their computer on the ground. She checked the security records. “Well, you were right, a cat of some type.”

Jak huffed and turned the ship for final approach, again flying past the decrepit skyscraper. Battling the wind, he guided them through the open side of the warehouse frame and set the ship down gently.

Under the fading whine of cooling turbines, Vesta strode out into the autumn air. Shaking off the urge to shiver, she turned to address the small group of disembarking souls and said, “Welcome to the planet Kiso, Mr. Tion, and to our humble home.” She swept her arm to the side toward a three-level concrete structure that may have been, at one point, a control tower with offices to whatever production plant occupied the building. As for the surrounding structure, little remained beyond the rusted frame. A handful of roof panels were still in place, and much of the cinderblock walls had collapsed into piles on the foundation. The concrete floor was mostly empty, save for a few rusty machines near the central tower.

“To say it’s our home might be a bit of a stretch,” Vesta said. She turned and set off for the low tower. The skyscraper loomed dark in the sky, blocked only by the patchwork ceiling. Her first stop was her room, a tiny space on the second level. The only objects in there were a bug-out bag, a twin bed, a few extra batteries for her pistol, and a minimal wardrobe. She swapped her wedding apparel for thick running pants and a sweatshirt and returned to the vast concrete floor.

As she stretched her legs against the side of the building, Vesta scanned the desolate world around her. Reminders of a prosperous planet were visible in all directions. To the north was the skyscraper, the first clue to Kiso’s past. The top three levels once held an elaborate penthouse, stripped bare by scavengers and violent storms. Fifty years ago, Kiso had been an industrial center to rival the capital planet of Leros itself.

On the other side of the scene was a vast landscape of ruin marked by small towers that barely poked above the low roofs and wide chimneys of

abandoned factories. In the foreground was a sailer, long since set up for storage and abandoned. It sat heavily on a collapsed frame that stuck out of a nearby structure. The ship was small, no more than twenty meters long, and was broadly nothing special. A subtle glimmer hinted at the partially furled golden sails. When the wind on Kiso was strong, it would blow enough of the dust off the torn material to catch the dull light that filtered down from the eternal clouds. The sails were the only dash of color in an otherwise grayscale planet.

Vesta set her sights on the walkway bridging the gap between the factory floor and the ground level of the skyscraper. She set off at a light jog, struggling to tread lightly in Kiso's eleven meters per second squared of gravitational acceleration. It pulled her down in subtle but compounding ways. Her hands felt heavy, drops of sweat fell faster than normal, and every footfall felt harsh. Treading lightly required an inordinate amount of effort. Picking up speed across the broad walkway, she looked straight up at the skyscraper's tattered facade before ducking into the gloomy first level. The glass doors had long since been rendered to sand, and the golden Beaulieu Corporation logo in the atrium retained nearly none of its precious coating. She didn't miss a beat as she mounted the steps of the grand staircase that connected the first four levels.

The top of the atrium was soon at eye level, and she ducked into the dark emergency stairway. Light from tall slits that were lined up with each level illuminated the flights inadequately. The emergency battery-powered diodes in each corner had long since died, forcing Vesta to take some steps blindly as she charged upward.

Half an hour after entering the building, she burst onto the bottom level of the penthouse. She leaned back and swore to herself, cursing the tension she carried in her upper back. Sucking in deep breaths and trying to exhale slowly, she walked briskly through the lower level, visiting the servants' rooms, the kitchen, an immense closet, and the service bay, which sat directly below the landing pad on the level above. The platform that lowered a ship down for maintenance was stuck about halfway down, too high for Vesta to reach. She jumped onto a toolbox and then pulled herself up onto the platform. No matter how many times she made the climb, her

fear of heights remained. She dared not go near the edge of the landing pad and stood near the door, hands firmly wrapped around a handrail.

From so high up, the details of Kiso were lost on her. She looked over the gray landscape, eyes peeled for any sign of motion. A burst of energy appeared on the horizon; a ship leaving the planet's sole remaining operational spaceport. Another vessel crept into view, descending until it crossed the jagged horizon.

*All because some spoiled brats couldn't divide up their parent's company peacefully. Angels save anyone living here, she thought, less so out of pity and more out of a desire to have the planet to themselves.* She brought her gaze down to their safe house just in time to see Jak stowing their ship. He moved it into place on an operational service platform with a small yellow remote tug. Jak, the tug, and the ship slowly lowered into the floor. Feeling more or less ready for the descent, Vesta strolled to the central staircase and looked down. Descending was a different challenge, made more perilous by the higher-than-normal gravity. She took a deep breath and set off.

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A gentle hum filled the tiny kitchen as Vesta stared at the open and empty cabinet in front of her. She closed it gently and looked down at the glossy gray countertop and the ready warm-green light on the front of the coffee maker. In a moment of anger, she shut the machine down and walked over to the closet by the outer door.

"I'm going to the storeroom!" she called up the open stairwell.

"Bring back some black beans and canned meat. I'm starting dinner soon!" Jak shouted back.

The first jacket she could find was old and blue, an Azmaveth officer's uniform jacket out of date by at least a decade. Dark shoulder pads sported a diamond texture that carried over to the collar and cuffs. Everything in between was a rich blue faded by time and wear. She grabbed an empty mug and stepped outside.



Vesta shuddered in the cold wind that blew in over the crumbling west foundation. Her destination was an old pallet machine on the edge of the concrete floor. It sat up against the remains of the western wall, and Vesta battled the wind head-on all the way there.

Even as she leaned against the near side of the cubic machine, Vesta found no reprieve from the chilling breeze. An unassuming lever triggered the battered door. It slid away silently on well-maintained hydraulic cylinders, and she stepped inside. She was finally in stillness. A small hole in the corner of one of the machine's outer panels whistled like breath over an empty bottle. A single overhead light buzzed, illuminating the final moment of the machine's use. Half a shipping pallet sat on the assembly pad, awaiting the remainder of its artificial planks. Opposite, a plank sat in the open mold, pressed into creation from a vat of molten material long since removed.

Following the flick of a small switch, a dusty old screen came to life. It added a soft blue to the dim illumination. She punched in the five-digit code without looking. With a hiss and a slight whoosh, the pallet assembly platform rose from its place. The motion once ejected a finished piece from the machine, but the half-finished pallet was stuck to the pad. Beneath it was a narrow gap just large enough for Vesta to slip into without getting dust on her clothes. Trusting that nothing in the hidden room had shifted, she stepped into the darkness before seeing the steep stairs' first step.

*Ah, there you are.* A row of metal cans, three high and a dozen long, sat quietly in front of her face. All four walls of the room were covered in deep shelves, each packed to the brim with preserves. She stood in front of the coffee shelf for a full minute before selecting a can. A scene full of purple-colored trees dominated the label.

To avoid a cold walk back, Vesta pulled out the backup coffee maker. She uncapped a water jug and filled the reservoir on the back of the machine. With the mug in place and the coffee beans poured into the top, she stood still for the three-minute wait. She could have occupied her time double-checking the reserve food and water stores, but instead, she just listened. There was always a symphony of noise blowing in from the post-industrial fields: Frail roofs flapped metallicly, the frame of the

skyscraper groaned, and debris pinged against metal chimneys and walls. The coffee machine let out a sharp crunch, then another, then a steady grinding sound. It ceased just a breath later, leaving Vesta to reacclimatize to the more distant sounds.

A soft and distant roar moved slowly across the landscape, creeping into the pallet machine, and cascading gently down the stairs to waft over the idle woman. It was so subtle that Vesta felt it more than she heard it. Though soothing in nature, the sound did not affect Vesta that way. Her mind wandered to all possible sources of the noise as she focused every bit of her energy on listening. A sudden hiss from the coffee machine hit her heightened state the same way an underwater explosion would concuss unsuspecting fish.

She pinched her right earlobe and said, “Jak, get everyone into the ship and get the hell out of here!” She waited five long seconds. The com in her ear made two short beeps, paused, then beeped once. Vesta nodded to herself. The distant and all-encompassing sound had grown tenfold since she’d first noticed it. She sighed, grabbed the mug, and moved carefully up the stairs. The walls of the pallet machine did little to disguise the now unmistakable roar that flooded her ears.

With her mug full of fresh dark coffee, Vesta stepped out into air that reminded her of a late summer breeze. It was not nearly as cold as it had been just a few minutes prior. She watched patiently as two dark blue police birds settled onto the concrete floor. The Azmaveth crest was large and proud on each heavily canted and forward-swept wing. Warmth poured down from the sky. Two more Azmaveth birds hovered just above the frame of the building.

*An entire Azmaveth squad just for us*, she thought, deciding that Alben Tion was deadly serious when he said that he had sensitive information. Instigating such a well-supported police investigation was no small feat, even for a family as powerful as the Maressellya.

The wide door covering the cabin of the closest patrol ship slid back to reveal three Azmaveth officers. Two of them wore obvious body armor. The third was probably armored below his fresh cobalt blue uniform.

Vesta took a long sip of her coffee, recognizing Cal Sunn when he stepped out into the diffuse light.

“Can I help you sir?” she shouted. Cal responded only by smoothing the top of his graying hair. They were too far apart to speak easily, so Vesta waited for him to get closer.

“I am looking for someone, Alben Tion. Have you seen him around here?”

“I know no such person,” Vesta fired back.

“You are Erin Wright? No, that’s not right. You’re Vesta Amore, are you not?”

“Yes,” she conceded.

“Let’s see...Viran Defense Force prospect, thirteen twelve Olympian in Boru Tou with a bronze medal...official occupation, specialist.” He looked up from the small computer on his wrist. “How vague.”

“It keeps me from getting tied down,” Vesta replied. She noted his crisp new flight jacket and studied his name tag, the fresh patch on his chest, the small orange pin next to it, and the old and faded patches on his upper arms, all in a split second. “And you are Cal Sunn. Investigator, former commander, decorated pilot.” Vesta stood up a little taller. “I’m humbled.”

“Why is that?” His pale blue irises seemed to get even colder.

“That a man of such esteem has come to visit my decrepit old home.”

“This is hardly a place to live, though it is a good place to hide. It took us a damn long time to find it. You took a real roundabout flight path to get here from Arelate.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“I wouldn’t—” His reply was overwhelmed by the howl of cold-fired engines and the sudden and prolonged hiss of a steam catapult. A few moments later, a silver sliver of a ship appeared from under the far northern foundation, arced up into the air, and disappeared into the thick clouds. The two birds in the air and one of the patrol craft that had come down with Sunn rose immediately, taking off with a whine and a succession of thunderous claps as their afterburners kicked to life.

*One ship left. One Cal Sunn, two guards, two pilots,* Vesta thought.

“Do your friends always leave you behind?” Sunn eyed the dark clouds.

“We have a way of reconnecting,” Vesta said low and slow while her ears picked up every little bit of information coming from the distant chase. A sudden series of echoing sizzles and a single massive crack put both into a new state, Sunn with a glare, Vesta with an easy smile.

“Come with me, Miss Amore.”

“Miss? What is this, a banquet?”

“Now.” He ushered her toward the remaining vessel. She complied.

As Vesta walked along the well-worn patrol ship, the engine, enclosed in an underslung nacelle on the wing, barked into life. She did not jump.

*Take the ship with at least one officer aboard, and they won't shoot it down.*

Vesta and Sunn mounted the small steps extended from the hull. She climbed slowly to avoid spilling her coffee; he rose slowly to stay behind her. On the edge of the dim cabin, Vesta eyed up the two Azmaveth officers. A pale and even white light illuminated each man.

*Left: younger, likely fast but sloppy. Right: early middle-aged, standing with deference to the left leg, she thought.*

In a fraction of a second, Vesta's foot landed on Cal's chest in a perfectly straight back kick while hot coffee splashed onto the younger armored officer's face. Sunn landed on the concrete floor with a heavy thud and a boney crack while the younger guard tried to wipe the coffee from his eyes. The older officer raised his stun gun, but Vesta was already there. She pulled him in before swinging him around and slamming him into his coworker. Both men stumbled backward but found their footing. Vesta positioned herself on their right-hand side.

With the officer's stun gun in her hand, Vesta shot the younger guard before the other struck her arm. The weapon was too heavy to raise quickly. A serious smack filled the air as a lightning-fast left hook connected with the older man's temple. He crumpled to his knees, and his shoulder hit the deck just as Vesta slammed the cockpit door with a heavy push kick. It swung open; the deadbolt sheared right in half. The pilot turned fully just as Vesta fired a stun shot into his shoulder, then another into his chest. A small screen on the back of the pistol displayed a big fat zero.

The woman ahead and below, in the co-pilot's seat, had already unbuckled and reached for her pistol. Vesta jumped forward and slammed the top of her boot into the side of the copilot's helmet with a precisely placed roundhouse kick.

The pilot and the copilot fought consciousness, and the latter dealt with the fallout of a minor concussion. Vesta pulled the pilot out of his seat and let him slump to the deck. Just as she was about to sit down, a heavy hand wrapped around the collar of her jacket and pulled her back. The move was so forceful that she found herself on her back and well into the main cabin by the time she could take stock of what had happened.

"That jacket doesn't belong on you," Sunn spoke with some pain in his voice.

Vesta only glared back, arms already pushing her body back up. The warm breeze gently wafted into the cabin. She lunged, finding much more purchase on the man's uniform than he on hers. The momentum Sunn gained when Vesta made contact sent him careening into the canvas seats. Vesta ran into a stack of crates along the center of the cabin. She rolled over them and landed on her feet. Cal reached for his empty holster where a stun gun usually hung.

Vesta clicked the safety off and kept her glare level as a bolt of glowing blue energy bridged the gap between the gun and the front of Cal's jacket. He sucked air and went down. She watched him breathe in the noxious smoke from the epoxy burning out of his composite body armor. With a slow blink, she refocused her eyes and studied the man for a moment, assessing the nerves firing frantically through his chest as he tried to restore his breath.

*One more shot and he's had it*, she thought, failing to see the pistol in the shadow of Cal's side. A needle of simmering yellow plasma traced an arced path through the dim cabin. It burned right through Vesta's jacket and shoulder muscle, struck the bulkhead behind her, and made a shower of sparks. The hull around them had acted like a giant inductor, slowing the flight of the energy bolt to a fraction of its normal speed. It also pulled the plasma projectile off course. The shot could have struck her anywhere.

She glared at Sunn's recklessness and focused all her mental energy on ignoring the pain in her shoulder.

Vesta did not wait for another chance; she unloaded the stun gun's last two shots into Cal's chest before diving over the crates toward him. The heat in his body armor scalded her shoulder and chest as she knocked him to the ground. She pushed herself up to her knees and looked down through narrow eyes. Sparks of red, orange, and violet danced through Cal's body, brightest in his chest and head.

Sunn started to pull himself up by one of the ship's ribs. His mistake. Vesta swept his feet with the last of her remaining energy. He fell with an uncontrollable weight, brought down harshly by the planet's high gravity.

The cool air soothed Vesta's burnt skin and stymied the pain in her shoulder muscle. She grabbed Cal's plasma pistol from the deck and used the crate in the center of the cabin to help her rise. As she passed the open door, she looked out to find two officers approaching with stun guns in hand, pointed at the ground but ready. She swayed unsteadily and eyed the two blue patrol ships resting on the concrete floor. Their engines poured out heatwaves, and their EMP cannons sat brandished atop their hulls, waiting for her to try and run.

For the short trip up to the cruiser in orbit, Sunn, Vesta, the two officers, and the two pilots sat in the canvas seats of the patrol ship's cabin. They were held up more by their seatbelts than by their own strength.

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Aboard the Azmaveth cruiser *Red Arrow*, the ship that ferried Cal Sunn around the Apeilous, Vesta was put into a small cell. A medic disinfected her shoulder, gave her some medication for the pain, and left her alone. She had only a few minutes to stargaze before they reached the sole gateway of the Kiso system. The once-busy port had long since fallen into disuse, a fact made evident by the array of control towers sprouting from the orbital station, only one of which was lit. Though she could not see the gateway open from her window, Vesta felt the vibration in the hull and

heard the groan of the ship's frame as the artificial tunnel between star systems sparked into life.

Through careful study of the door to her cell in the brig, Vesta determined its manufacturer. It would open if hit by a short-range radio signal at, and only at, the correct frequency. While most people had their endocrine controllers implanted deep in their abdomens, Vesta had hers near the surface for this very situation.

Somewhat reluctantly, the officers who had put her in the brig had let her keep her old Azmaveth jacket. Their mistake. The decorative buttons down the front of the jacket were made of soft heavy metal that filed nicely against the rough old walls. As soon as the edge of the removed button was sharp enough, Vesta pinched it between her thumb and finger and started a short cut down her side, just inboard of her hip bone.

She gritted her teeth and glared at the cold walls but made no sound as she finished the incision. She slipped the bloodied button into a pocket before reaching into the cut with her fingernails and pulling out a tiny capsule no longer than half her little finger. Gnawing at the edges of the soft casing, she made a hole large enough to pull out the small circuit board and directional antenna.

With her back against the cold metal of the door, her side marked by a line of blood that disappeared at the seam of her black pants, and the taste of blood in her mouth, Vesta cycled through the frequencies by clicking a minuscule manual jog button. She kept at it for the entirety of the two-hour voyage through the artificial wormhole between Kiso and their first waypoint.

“Normal space transition, count ten, brace,” a computerized voice said through the com on the wall. A moment later, Vesta discovered the right frequency and the door slid open with a beep and a sigh. She glanced out the window and recognized the massive gas giant as Middle-Way. The prickly metal sea cucumber that was Mid-Town Station floated ominously on the fuzzy red-orange horizon.

“Attention. Count thirty, zero-g, one eight zero rotation, duration two zero minutes,” the com barked.

As she felt the thrusters wind down and acceleration fade to nothing, Vesta made her escape, floating silently through the narrow stairways and corridors deep in the *Red Arrow*'s hull.

Using a rib in the wall to pull herself around a corner, Vesta smiled at a row of five plain gray hatches bordered by orange and white stripes. She pushed off the opposite wall and slowly floated to the furthest hatch. The command crew would know when she opened it and started the escape pod's launch sequence. She had to time it perfectly.

"Attention, count five zero seconds, one g, ten hours to Myos."

*A ship this size probably starts accelerating about thirty seconds from a gateway*, she thought, running through her hastily organized plan. As she felt the deck rush upward and the feeling of gravity return, Vesta counted out ten seconds and opened the escape hatch. She slid into the narrow pod without a hitch and yanked the yellow launch handle.

Pushed to the edge of consciousness by the brutal acceleration, Vesta strained to see the world around her. Ships floated in long lines that pointed at distant gray rings, some of which were filled with white spheres of energy almost too bright to look at.

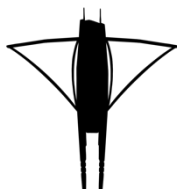
The pod's launch thruster burned out, and Vesta was left in eerie silence, floating toward a nearby queue. She spotted a dilapidated-looking freighter carrying an array of dimly colored shipping containers. Perfect.

Just as Vesta punched the throttle for the pod's maneuvering thrusters, the gateway ahead opened in a flash of simmering white. Streaks of energy shot out in all directions. The freighter suddenly translated down, pushed by the cones of blue flame along its spine.

"What? Come on!" she yelled at the window, watching her target slowly, then quickly sink from view. The ship behind it lumbered forward; its massive, immaculate dark bronze hull suddenly filled the window.

Vesta cursed to herself and activated the pod's anchor program. She yanked on the seat belts to double-check them and let out a small sigh. The hull plates grew closer and closer, and then she was out, knocked unconscious by the impact.





## CHAPTER 3

### SOME LIGHT SMUGGLING

Fortuna Caravel *Miren Star* (FO-8)  
In a Solar Orbit of Isin (IN-I)

A voice entered Vesta's mind. It was female, sharp, and had an accent far from her own, but she swore she had heard it before. Her eyes flew open, and she sucked in a deep breath and slammed her forehead against the padding above the foggy window. As her mind cleared, she could hear people talking.

"...anyone know how to open it?"

"Yes."

A loud hiss flooded the pod's interior with noise before a wave of fresh warm air washed over Vesta. She relaxed in peace for a moment before the hatch automatically slid fully to the side, exposing her. She lay still and studied the ornate ceiling. It was gray but held no less than six multilayered classically styled light fixtures anchored where the fan vault structure was most dense.

"Are you conscious?" the woman's uncanny voice called out.

Vesta sat up suddenly, immediately regretting the decision as sharp pains proliferated in all parts of her head. After taking a few seconds to

come to her senses, she looked forward to see a vast starfield. A thin, almost invisible atmosphere shield glimmered blue over the distant twinkling lights. She lifted her hand and relaxed. It fell and thumped against the edge of the hatch. *Of course, we're under thrust gravity*, she thought, *look at this place*. Vesta slowly turned and looked at all thirteen persons present. Twelve were soldiers or guards of some kind dressed in full combat gear. Their faces were obscured. Amongst them stood a woman in a white suit with skin as dark as night, hair like ripe grain, and eyes of pale warm green.

“Thank you,” Vesta said without any gratitude in her voice.

“You are welcome, stranger.”

*The Fortuna heir! Dammit*, Vesta thought, suddenly remembering when they had passed on the stairs at the wedding reception.

“Let us start with introductions.” She took a few steps, allowing Vesta to untwist without breaking eye contact. “My name is Fausta Fortuna. I am the current head of this ship, the *Miren Star*.” She paused for a moment. “Your turn.”

“My name is Vesta.”

“That is all you have to say?” Fausta lifted her chin a little higher, looking down her nose.

“What are you going to do with me?” Vesta asked. She moved her hands to the edge of the hatch but quickly discovered that she did not have the strength to pull herself out.

“I do not know. I need some answers. Start with why you attached yourself to the hull of my ship in an Azmaveth escape pod.”

Vesta glanced back, eyeing the guards and their dark gear.

“I escaped,” she stated plainly. “I was unfairly jailed. Through a bit of effort...with a bit of effort, I managed to get off the ship. I aimed for that freighter ahead of you, but apparently, I missed.”

Fausta nodded. Doubt sharpened her words. “Would you care to elaborate on the part where you were unfairly jailed?”

She nodded back slowly. “Could you spare some food and water first? And maybe show me where the lavatory is.”

Fausta nodded. She glanced at the guards and patiently waited as they helped Vesta climb out of the escape pod.

Walking from the escape pod in the hangar to the lavatory to the ship's stateroom was a slog that robbed Vesta of the last of her strength. She fell into a dining chair before the lights in the room rose. A man in a dirty white apron charged into the room with a heavy-looking silver platter. He set it down on the table directly before her and whisked away the lid. As he retreated, Vesta finally took in the scale of her surroundings. The ceiling towered above her, chandeliers glittering with thousands of tiny fake flames. She guessed the walls to be some ten meters high and the room nearly twenty meters square.

Vesta tried to hide her lack of coordination as she picked up the silverware and dug into the contents of the nearest plate. She glanced up at Fausta, who waited. The way her eyebrow ticked upward with every instance of eye contact conveyed waning patience. Vesta guessed a dozen minutes had passed before she set down her fork.

"This is how I got here, at least the shortened version." Vesta felt energy return to her arms. "The important bit started just a few days ago, well, ten days, I guess. I lead a team in private security." Vesta looked over at the four guards standing at the open door. "We were hired to get a banker out of a tight spot. That is what we did. This man was bugged, or something got messed up, and the Azmaveth came knocking just after we reached our safe house."

"For a mercenary, you seem pretty clueless."

Vesta turned her impassive stare into a glare. "I'm not a mercenary." She sighed and leaned forward. "Point is, the Azmaveth came in and raided our house. My team managed to get away. I wasn't so lucky."

"Your team, and this banker, are being hunted by the Azmaveth. Do they know a lot about you?"

"No. A veteran investigator was put in charge; he's experienced, but I keep my record clear. I doubt he knows much beyond my government bio."

"For your sake, I hope so," Fausta replied. "What was so important to the banker that he had to sneak away during a wedding?"

Vesta blinked and stared, trying to figure out when Fausta had recognized her.

“So you-you remember me?” she stammered.

“Clearly,” Fausta said, leaning forward and offering an expression as if to say *duh*.

“I umm—We chose the wedding for a number of reasons. It was a time-sensitive getaway for Tion—”

“Tion?”

*Dammit*, Vesta thought.

“You mean Alben Tion, the Maressellya accountant?”

Vesta stared into her eyes and focused her deeper vision, trying to make sense of the waves of energy dancing around the front of Fausta’s mind. Hints of green curiosity and orange satisfaction cropped up and disappeared. She nodded at Fausta once.

“That is bold,” Fausta said. “He must have a good reason for leaving.”

Vesta shrugged. A guard walked over to Fausta and whispered something into her ear with his hand over his mouth.

She stood up. “The Azmaveth are here, a ship called the *Red Arrow*,” she said, looking down her nose again. Vesta dropped her shoulders and looked back with the softest expression she could manage. Fausta said, “Come with me.” She gestured toward a pair of guards, and they stepped in and flanked Vesta as she followed Fausta into the hallway. They piled into a narrow elevator. “Dock-master,” she said into the sleek computer on her wrist.

“Here, ma’am,” a gruff voice replied.

“Hide the Azmaveth escape pod quickly.”

“Yes, right away, ma’am.”

Fausta took half a step forward just before the elevator door opened. Vesta followed her onto a catwalk that arced around a massive cylindrical structure. The two guards remained at the elevator, standing in the doorway to keep it open.

Fausta typed furiously at a console in front of what looked like the entrance to a maintenance tunnel. The hatch split in half and hissed open. After a loud warning sound from the console, a great flood of electricity

rushed through every wire in what Vesta quickly identified as a fusion reactor. The air started to hum as the conduits leading into the reactor's top began to blink with regularly spaced yellow indicator lights.

"You can hide in here." Fausta held up her hand as if to urge Vesta into the hatch.

"A slow death, how kind of you," Vesta said, keeping still.

"It will effectively mask your presence."

Vesta nodded slowly, trying desperately to peer into the woman's mind. Nothing in her brain activity implied deceit.

"Once you are inside, I will close the reactor and power up the cooling system. The magnetic retainers will be off, and the fuel injectors will remain closed." Fausta nodded at Vesta's furrowed brows. "Close the inner hatch, and the reactor will appear to enter startup. You should be safe, even in the core."

Vesta did not respond. Instead, she took a step closer to Fausta and looked into the long tunnel from the catwalk into the reactor core. She ducked in and started crawling. The hatch thunked closed behind her.

The metal mesh that made up the floor of the narrow tunnel felt like a cheese grater under Vesta's palms. Every surface was bathed in dim pink-yellow light. She crawled through the inner hatch, barely fitting her hips through. Fully inside, she pulled the inner hatch closed, turning the ambient light orange. A small maintenance computer was bolted to the wall. It displayed a long list of warnings about the fuel injectors. Several of the tiles in the toroidal core were missing.

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The orange light of the half-awakened reactor leeches through Vesta's skin and triggered tiny twitches in her outer muscles. Her arms and legs shivered irregularly as she tried not to let her head slam into the ceramic tiles that formed the torus-shaped inner wall. Suddenly the light faded, replaced by absolute darkness. Vesta opened the inner hatch as quickly as she could and crawled out of the intolerably warm core.

After what felt like an eternity, a long hiss accompanied the opening of the outer hatch. Fausta's dark face and uncanny green-gold eyes peered into the dark tunnel.

"The Azmaveth are gone," she stated plainly.

Vesta nodded, crawling the last meter and gingerly stepping down onto the catwalk. They stood still for a long moment, Fausta at ease, Vesta leaning heavily on the railing.

"Thank you for keeping me from them."

"What is a little smuggling here and there?" She looked down for a moment. "You are welcome to stay aboard until you make contact with your people."

"I can't make contact with them. I need to go somewhere."

Fausta sighed. "Where?"

"L-six o'five."

"That's on the other side of the state."

"That's where my team is."

Fausta looked her straight in the eyes, clearly thinking hard. "The man in charge of your search, Cal Sunn, will be back, and he will also be monitoring every gateway within two days' travel."

Vesta took a short breath and readied a gentle tone. She said softly, "I have no desire to burden you."

Fausta looked away.

Vesta continued, "We're in the State of Isin, right? There is a mining colony in the asteroid belt of the Tysus System. My team has a safe house that you can drop me at."

Fausta spent a long moment in thought, eyes locked on the active reactor adjacent to the one Vesta had emerged from. She said, "I came out here to sail, and I still want to catch a few flares on this voyage. We..." She looked at Vesta's shoulder and wrinkled her nose. "Were you shot?"

She nodded.

Fausta narrowed her eyes and continued, "We will do some sailing, then set course for the Tysus System. In the meantime, please go see the ship's doctor." Fausta strode swiftly toward the elevator. A single guard stood in the gloom.

“Thank you,” Vesta called at the last moment.

“Of course.” She flashed a kind smile and stepped back to let the elevator doors close.

Vesta looked awkwardly at the guard. He stared back, silent. The elevator doors opened again, this time to an empty car. They stepped inside. A tall black screen in the curved wall showed a deck-by-deck schematic of the vertically oriented vessel. The outline of the *Miren Star* looked like a pair of dragonflies fastened together at the stomach. The guard tapped one of the decks near the top.

The elevator car hummed as it ascended. Vesta studied the tiny labels on the screen and noted all the elements she wanted to visit on the ship: Armory, guards’ quarters, mess hall, escape pods, hangar, anything she might need to borrow from or avoid.

The doors opened with a swish to reveal a pristine white medical ward. A tall, lanky dark-skinned man in a long white coat spotted them from behind a glass divider and stepped out to greet them.

“Vesta Amore?” he asked, glancing down at his wrist computer then slightly less down at her. She nodded. “Please follow me.” He led her to one of the many beds. A curtain snapped out of the wall, following the u-shaped track in the ceiling with remarkable and silent speed.

“It’s my shoulder and side,” she said.

“Yes, I know. It appears you have a small knife wound on the side of your abdomen and a small burn on your shoulder?”

She nodded, eyes wide in disbelief.

“Sensors in the hangar, Miss Amore, every guest of importance is scanned. Usually, it’s for hospitality, clothing fit, accessibility, the like. In this case, it looks like you’re in rough shape.”

“Thanks.”

“Please, remove your jacket and shirt.” He turned to the side so that he was not looking at her. She sighed, struggling to remove the dirty blue Azmaveth jacket without grunting in pain. She got her running shirt off with less discomfort. She touched the skin around the wound on her shoulder, then felt her side. The small cut had been bleeding, and blood was soaked into the waistband of her pants.

“What?” she asked as the doctor raised his eyebrow.

“That is not just a burn,” he said, leaning in to look closer at her shoulder. “That is a wound from a plasma gun. Most peculiar.”

She nodded. “I left my attacker with no other options.” She sucked in a short breath as the doctor touched the skin around the burn.

“All things considered, you are quite lucky, Miss Amore.”

“Yeah, I know.”

After explaining the details of her shoulder wound, most of which she already knew, the doctor addressed the cut in her side. She told him what was missing. Installing a new implant controller and making the wound disappear took the doctor just fifteen minutes. Vesta ran her fingers over the now smooth, sore skin, feeling no trace of the injury or the new implant.

An hour later, the micro-meter-sized burn hole in Vesta’s shoulder had been cleared of damaged tissue and filled with scaffolding. The doctor sealed the entry and exit points with fresh skin and warned her against over-exerting her shoulder muscle for a few weeks. Someone arrived outside the curtain and passed a box around the edge without revealing themselves. It contained a new wrist computer, and a nice one at that, both up-market and several generations newer than the one confiscated from her on the *Red Arrow*.

With some final parting advice about getting rest and some other things Vesta promptly forgot, the doctor handed her the old Azmaveth jacket, waited for her to put it on, and called for the curtains to retreat. The guard stood up from a couch on the side of the room where he had been sitting and led Vesta back into an elevator. They rode it up two levels and emerged into a quiet hallway.

“Miss Fortuna has given you free rein of the ship. This is your room.”

The door in front of him opened, and he stepped aside. Vesta walked past and turned to say thank you, but his footsteps were already receding down the hallway. The door closed a moment later.

Vesta reached up toward the ceiling only to find her hands half a meter shy of touching the dark gray metal. A smooth bronze-colored floor stretched flat from the door to the large window. It was a studio space,



with everything except the bathroom in view. The bed sat near the window, half hidden by a trifold changing curtain. The inner wall sported a kitchen of sorts, and on the counter sat machines Vesta had never seen before, well beyond the preserved coffee she typically enjoyed in the morning. Having studied the room's perimeter, her eyes fell on an odd dome-shaped chest of drawers in the center. A quick check revealed them to be stocked with clothing in her exact size.

“I guess the free clothes rumor is true,” she murmured.

After changing into clean clothes, Vesta looked around and spotted the wide bed. Its soft purple covers beckoned her closer. Her plans to scope out key points on the ship faded, and her focus blurred. She hung her jacket on the rigidly fixed trifold and fell into bed. Sleep took her before the self-tensioning covers had finished adjusting over her form.

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## FACTIONS

### In Order of Prominence

#### **The Apeilous**

Comprised of seventy-two member states under a three-branch republican government. The executive branch is the office of the Trident, with three presidents of unequal power. The judicial branch is presided over by the seventeen high supreme courts, each with fifteen members. The legislative branch consists of three bodies: The Lyver, the House, and the Senate. Bills are introduced and approved in ascending order.

Many states of the Apeilous, especially those in the north, operate their own militaries. These territorial forces regularly change and are often largely comprised of for-hire soldiers and ships rented from one or several of the forty-three officially registered private militaries. By law, the Apeilous Central Military remains the largest army and navy in the star cluster by an order of magnitude.

All states maintain their own Azmaveth police force. The Central Azmaveth have the widest-reaching jurisdiction, into territories and international space within two lightyears of the border of the Apeilous. The only place the Central Azmaveth cannot go are the home worlds of the dynastic corporate families.

Several states, mostly located in the south, are governed by the families that also run the Apeilous' largest dynastic corporations. The most notable older companies are Maressellya, Idona, and Menapharaoh. Newly successful companies include Fortuna and LaBelle. Companies that recently collapsed include Beaulieu and Lioporvo.

## Factions

### **Tressel State**

Once a prosperous northern state, Tressel seceded from the Apeilous, plunging the north into a brutal forty-year conflict and creating ethnic tensions that persisted through multiple generations to the present day. Tressel retains much of its original Apeilous-style state government, with a large elected legislative branch, but rampant corruption at all levels casts uncertainty onto the validity of elections. The same extremist party has been in power for more than two decades.

### **Territory of Corben**

Claimed by both the government of Tressel and the powerful Viran minority in the Apeilous, Corben is technically a territorial extension of the Apeilous State of Isin. Its status as a disputed territory puts it in a state of legal limbo, receiving large amounts of financial aid and military support from the Apeilous while depriving its citizens of many of the fundamental rights afforded to those in adjacent star systems.

Corben is technically jointly governed by the Corbenite Congress and the Viran Council. However, it is broadly understood that the Viran Council runs the system and directs policy at all levels of government.

## IMPORTANT LOCATIONS

### **Leros (PO)** – The Capital of the Apeilous

Location	Central, not within any state
Climate	Controlled, Temperate (5-19 Celsius)
Bodies	Minon (Large Moon), Talir (Small Moon)
Star	Lerosun (M-Type)
Population	80B
Locations of Interest	Capitol Complex Home of the citizen-government of the Apeilous The Quad Cultural heart of Leros with shops selling goods from across the Apeilous Court District Facilities of the seventeen supreme courts contained the largest single building in the Apeilous

### **Elara (EL-D)** – Home of the Fortuna Family and Corporation

Location	Central-Southern, in the State of Elara-Amidra
Climate	Natural, Temperate Equator and Icy Poles
Bodies	None
Star	Sol (M-Type)
Population	4M
Locations of Interest	Capital City Headquarters of the Fortuna Corporation featuring a blend of modern and ancient architecture Development Yards An array of prototype construction silos in the northern tundra

## Important Locations

### **Corben Six (CB)** – Contested Homeland of the Viran People

Location	Northern Border, in the State of Isin
Climate	Natural, Uninhabitable Equator and Arid, Hot Poles
Bodies	Kya (Large Moon)
Star	Vira (A-Type)
Population	408M
Locations of Interest	City of Parchey Home to some of the oldest revered locations in the Bible of the Forth Angel Capital City of Timit Location of the planetary government Lake Timit The largest body of water on the planet

### **Atayuma (ISY-AT)** – Independent Northern System

Location	Far Northern
Climate	Natural, Tropical Equator and Temperate Poles
Bodies	Bire (Small Moon), Ekie (Small Moon)
Stars	Atamayahana (A-Type), Abiyahana (G-Type)
Population	18M
Locations of Interest	Capital City of Kisto Ancient coastal city and home to the Atayuman crown and military leadership

### **Cortabera (CA-A)** – Agricultural Planet

Location	Northern, in the State of Toro
Climate	Controlled, Temperate
Bodies	None
Stars	Sol (M-Type), Sola (K-Type), Cora (M-Type)
Population	900M (120M surface, 780M subterranean)
Locations of Interest	Eastern Continent Covered in farmland growing luxury crops Crescent City Largest city on the planet and located inside a deep rift valley

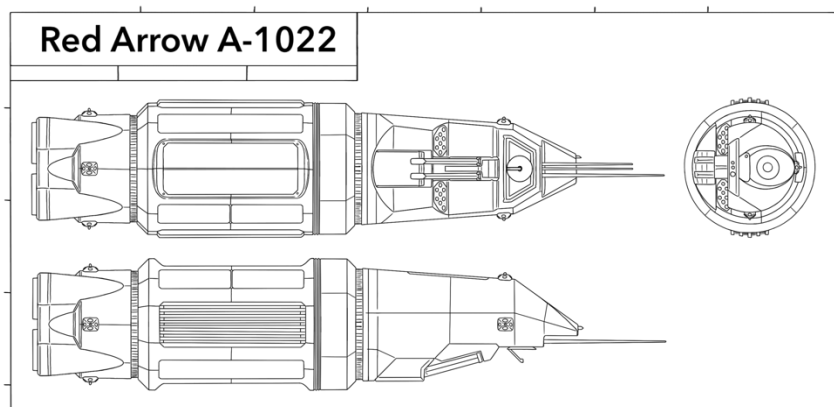
## SPACECRAFT

In Order of Appearance

### ***Red Arrow* (A-1022)**

FDV <i>Athens</i> Class Cruiser	Azmaveth Spec
Length	160 meters
Beam	39 meters
Dry Mass	16 kilotonnes
Unit Cost	c1.1B
Personnel	20 Officers 80 Enlisted

The *Red Arrow* entered service in 1293 T.A. with the Central Azmaveth Department on Leros. Since then, it has dutifully ferried Azmaveth Investigators around the Apeilous, acting as a mobile command center for several high-profile police operations, including the infamous raid on Beaulieu operations on Kiso in 1307 T.A.

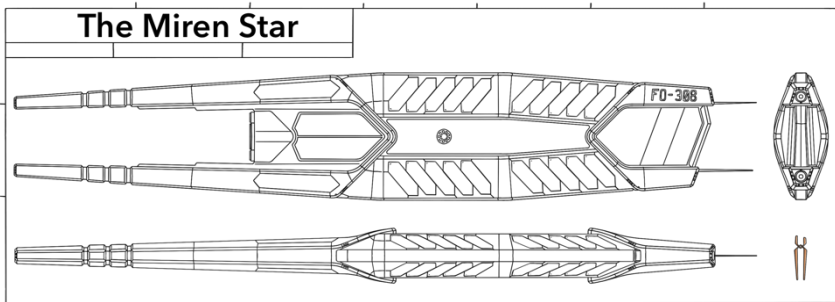


## Spacecraft

### The Miren Star (FO-308)

Fortuna Caravel	Custom Starship
Length	304 meters
Beam	56 meters
Depth	25 meters
Dry Mass	49 kilotonnes
Cost	c27B
Personnel	210 Crew
	Max. 1200 Passengers

*The Miren Star* was completed in 1172 T.A. and has ferried four generations of Fortuna leaders between their home world Elara and the capital Leros. The ship's numerous unique amenities have entertained guests of all types, from presidents of the Apeilous to refugees from the outer rim.



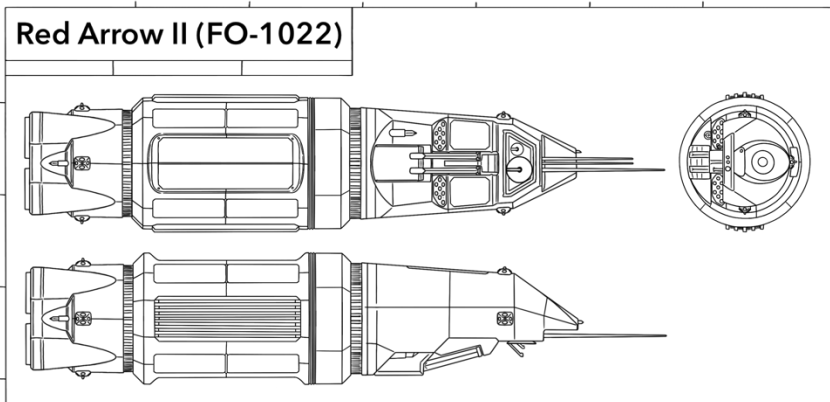


Spacecraft

**Red Arrow II (FO-1022)**

FDV <i>Athens</i> Class Cruiser	Expeditionary Military Spec
Length	165 meters
Beam	42 meters
Dry Mass	17 kilotonnes
Cost	c1.6B
Personnel	25 Officers 75 Enlisted

The *Red Arrow II* is an early prototype Gen 4 *Athens* Class Cruiser configured for use in an expeditionary military. It features more advanced and numerous offensive and defense systems in comparison to its namesake. It was assigned to Investigator Cal Sunn and Captain Carrey Monroe in late 1320 T.A.

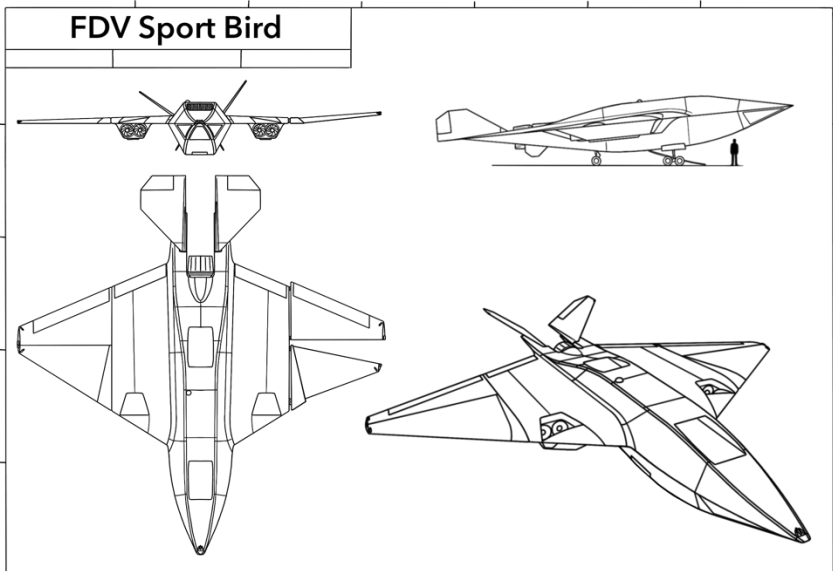


## Spacecraft

### ***Panther* (FO-6V)**

FDV Sport Bird	General Aerospace
Length	23 meters
Width	22 meters
Height	4.5 meters
Dry Mass	31 kilotonnes
Unit Cost	c38M
Personnel	2 Crew
	Max. 10 Passengers

*Panther* is one of nearly three-dozen birds built by the Fortuna Development Yards in direct service of the Fortuna Family. This bird was completed in 1321 T.A. and delivered brand new to the *Miren Star* for orbit-to-surface operations in the Atayuma System.



## PROMINENT FAMILIES

### **Fortuna**

Date of Modern Form	1192 T.A.
Place on Warrow's 500	27 <sup>th</sup>
Home World	Elara (EL-D)
Leader	Erastos Florus
Heir	Piata Fausta
Specialty	Design and Manufacturing of Birds and Light Starships

### **Maressellya**

Date of Modern Form	816 T.A.
Place on Warrow's 500	1 <sup>st</sup>
Home World	Arelate (AE-D)
Leaders	Spouses Alexios Marsaille and Irene Madian
Heirs	None
Specialty	Design and Manufacturing of Fusion Power plants, Capital Warships, and Guided Ordnance

### **Menapharaoh**

Date of Modern Form	840 T.A.
Place on Warrow's 500	3 <sup>rd</sup>
Home World	Laus (LU-D)
Leaders	Spouses Vinson and Ramira May
Heir	Odesseo Ramone Maximus
Specialty	Design and Management of Logistics Chains and Cargo Systems

## Prominent Families

### **LaBelle**

Date of Modern Form	1025 T.A.
Place on Warrow's 500	439 <sup>th</sup>
Home World	Teme Hasan (TH-D)
Leader	Adrian
Heir	Parmys
Specialty	Design and Production of Synthetic Fuels, Management of Private Militaries of Paris and Dracon

### **Keowan**

Date of Modern Form	6 T.A.
Place on Warrow's 500	NA
Home World	Corben (CB)
Leaders	Siblings Mina, Tynan, and Jericho
Heirs	6, Names Unknown
Specialty	Politics of the Viran Home World

### **Sunn**

Date of Modern Form	971 T.A.
Place on Warrow's 500	NA
Home World	Cortabera (CA-A)
Leaders	Spouses Cal and Imora
Heirs	Siblings Kiton, Aelia, and Kora
Specialty	Farming of Luxury Crops

## CHARACTERS

### In Order of Appearance

Cal Sunn, M 51

Azmaveth Officer, Sr. Investigator, Assigned to the *Red Arrow* (A-1022)

Northerner, born on the agricultural world of Cortabera (CA-A)

Piata Fausta Fortuna, F 29

Head of the Fortuna Corporation, Heiress to the Fortuna Family

Southerner, born on the Fortuna home world of Elara (EL-D)

Vesta Amore, F 32

Founder and Leader, Private Security Team

Viran, born on the contested world of Corben Six (CB)

Ama Loch, F 30

Member, Private Security Team

Central-Born, born on the central planet of Carnac (CC)

Kio Loch, M 30

Member, Private Security Team

Central-Born, born on the central planet of Carnac (CC)

Alexios Marsaille SuMaressellya, M 30

Head of the Maressellya Family and Corporation

Southerner, born on the Maressellya home world of Arelate (AR-D)

## Characters

Irene Madian SuMaressellya, F 22

Wife to Alexios Marsaille

Southerner, born on the Volante home world of Rosso (RO-D)

Alben Tion, M 58

Head Accountant, Maressellya Corporation

Northerner, born on the northern commercial planet of Vasiliki (VI-I)

Jak, M 34

Member, Private Security Team

Space-Born, born in the Sharo-Kin Enclave of Mid-Town Station (S103)

Tripp Fortuna, M 52

Captain of the *Miren Star* (FO-8)

Southerner, born on the Fortuna home world of Elara (EL-D)

Carrey Monroe, F 40

Azmaveth Officer, Captain of the *Red Arrow* (AZ-1022)

Central-Born, born on the central planet of Myos (MS)

Ewen Tyson, M 38

Captain in the Fortuna Guard

Viran, born on the contested world of Corben Six (CB)

Characters

Erastos Florus SuFortuna, M 68

Head of the Fortuna Family and Corporation

Southerner, born on the Fortuna home world of Elara (EL-D)

Vinson SuMenapharaoh, M 58

Head of the Menapharaoh Family and Corporation

Southerner, born on the Menapharaoh home world of Laus (LU-D)

Odesseo Ramone Maximus Menapharaoh, M 16

Heir to the Menapharaoh Family and Corporation

Southerner, born on the Menapharaoh home world of Laus (LU-D)

Micah Ritwald-Fortuna, M 53

CEO of Fortuna Yards

Central-Born, born on the capital planet of Leros (PO)

Clarence Jesemera, M 43

Senior Negotiator, Menapharaoh Corporation

Southerner, born on the Menapharaoh home world of Laus (LU-D)

Adrian LaBelle, M 50

Head of the LaBelle Corporation, Director of the private army Paris

Northerner, born on the planet of Sirjan (ISY-SJ)

## Characters

Mina Keowan, F 58

Heiress to the Keowan Family

Misurinian, born in the uncharted system of Nocturne

Renmir, M 172

Head technician of the traveling Meheomats

Meheomat, constructed on the computer world of Cordia Major (C-1)

Phoebe Gavlin, F 30

Captain in the Fortuna Guard

Southerner, born on the Fortuna home world of Elara (EL-D)

Royston Blue, M 35

Captain in the Central Army

Central-Born, born on the industrial planet of Kiso (KO-I)

Kite Fortuna, M 42

Designer and Head Public Relations Officer for the Fortuna Family

Southerner, born on the Fortuna home world of Elara (EL-D)

Atum Ataya, M 47

King of Atayuma

Outlander, born in the Independent System of Atayuma (ISY-AT)



Characters

Aline Sierra, F 48

Major General of the Royal Army of Atayuma

Outlander, born in the Independent System of Atayuma (ISY-AT)

Abye Castillo, M 30

Biologist, Academic, and Professor of the Royal Academy of Atayuma

Outlander, born in the Independent System of Atayuma (ISY-AT)

Remy Harlow, M 58

Governor of the Holy City of Timit

Viran, born on the contested world of Corben Six (CB)

Eros Martin, M 28

Commander in the Fortuna Guard

Southerner, born on the Fortuna home world of Elara (EL-D)

Philippe Barros, M 61

General of the Royal Navy of Atayuma

Outlander, born in the Independent System of Atayuma (ISY-AT)

Len Tome, M 40

General of the Royal Army of Atayuma

Outlander, born in the Independent System of Atayuma (ISY-AT)

## Characters

Pascal Munon, M 43

Head Academic of the Royal Academy of Atayuma, Mathematician  
Outlander, born in the Independent System of Atayuma (ISY-AT)

Fala Milton, F 45

Academic and Professor of the Royal Academy of Atayuma, Economist  
Outlander, born in the Independent System of Atayuma (ISY-AT)

Tansay Alma, M 39

Captain of the King's Royal Guards  
Outlander, born in the Independent System of Atayuma (ISY-AT)

Maska Paz, M 55

Head of the Church of Atayuma  
Outlander, born in the Independent System of Atayuma (ISY-AT)

Maison Carrera, F 48

Governor of Kisto, the Capital City of Atayuma  
Outlander, born in the Independent System of Atayuma (ISY-AT)

Yahto Cabe, M 46

Master of Ceremonies for the Royal Court  
Outlander, born in the Independent System of Atayuma (ISY-AT)

Characters

Imora Sunn, F 49

Farmer

Northerner, born on the agricultural world of Cortabera (CA-A)

Kora Sunn, F 8

Kid

Northerner, born on the agricultural world of Cortabera (CA-A)

Kiton Sunn, M 16

Student

Northerner, born on the agricultural world of Cortabera (CA-A)

Aelia Sunn, F 15

Student, Refugee

Outlander, born on the outer rim planet Aelius (AN-OR)

Rau Moscoso, M 29

Owner of Rau's Tap House in Kisto, the Capital City of Atayuma

Outlander, born in the Independent System of Atayuma (ISY-AT)

Marshall Barner, M 35

Expedition Pilot, Former Butler of the Lioporvo Family

Southerner, born on the central planet of Carnac (CC)

Ada Drott, F 20

Migrant

Corbenite, born on the Corbenite home world of Corben Six (CB)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Walter Robinson is a speculative fiction author based in Western PA. A classically trained engineer with experience in product development and advanced materials manufacturing, he has a passion for telling the human stories that are fundamental to the built world. When he isn't writing or drawing, Walter spends his time designing and fabricating.