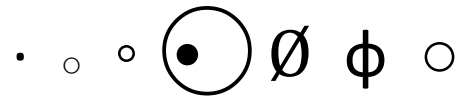




# First Look Access

(Episode 1: Lyssa Ciavari)

# FOURTH WORLD



the iamos trilogy, book one

LYSSA CHIAVARI

## THE SKY LOOKED RED.

That was all I could think as I gazed out over the desiccated plain. The once-gray rocks and boulders, strewn about the old dry coastline, were now almost completely covered with rust. Orange-tinged clouds swirled above my head, the air thick with choking dust kicked up by the harsh wind that raked over the parched ground.

Even though we'd been forbidden to leave the safety of the citidome, I'd decided to take the risk that night. I had wanted to see the sunset—*really* see the sunset—for what could be the last time. It had been so long since I'd seen the sky, I couldn't remember what it looked like.

But I certainly hadn't expected it to be so *red*.

The oxygen was too thin. It made breathing difficult, painful. I couldn't believe how quickly it was depleting now, at the end. Last year on my annual we'd still been able to go outside. But now we had to huddle in our enclosed cities, looking out at the world through the tinted filter of smooth blue glass. And even that option wouldn't last much longer. The world really was ending.

It was much too soon. This was the first day of my eighth year, my *enilikin*. I still had my whole life ahead of me. I hadn't even completed my schooling yet, thanks to Gitrin. It would be at least another year, now, before I was ready to take my place in the ranks of the *geroi*.

But in their last report, the scientists said that our planet couldn't sustain us another year. My heart stuck in my throat at the thought. Standing here, looking at this, I knew it to be true. Sometime in the next six-hundred days the last of our atmosphere would be gone. The energy sources used to power the citidome would be entirely depleted. And if the colony on Hamos wasn't stabilized—if we didn't complete evacuation by that time—we'd all be dead.

*I'd be dead. Before I even got a chance to live.*

We needed more *geroi*. And still she told me I wasn't ready. Everything was so hideously unfair.

I shivered as the biting wind dragged over me, pulling wisps of colorless hair loose from the tight braid encircling my scalp. There was the briefest hint of the fragrance of flowers on the wind's breath, but it was overpowered by the dry, metallic scent of the ever-reddening earth. What if this was the last time I'd ever smell Iamos? The last time I'd ever see the sun, or the sky, without something in between me and it?

*No.*

I took a final shuddering breath, and, tucking a flyaway hair behind my ear, I made my decision. I was not giving up. It was not over. No matter what it took, this would not be my last annual.

It was only as I turned to head inside that I saw him.

I might have missed him otherwise, but the light from the setting sun threw his form into relief. A boy was sprawled across the ground. He wore no breathing apparatus. He was completely unprotected. And he wasn't moving.

Panicked, I raced to his side. I was out of breath by the time I reached him, even though he lay only a short distance away. "Are you all right?" I asked, wheezing. When he didn't respond, I rolled him over onto his back.

He was young—probably close to my own age. I realized instantly he couldn't be from my city; his traits were all wrong. He must have come from another citidome. But how? He couldn't have walked. All that way, unprotected? He would never have made it...

I reached for my earpiece, then hesitated. I was invisible right now—the System couldn't track me—but if I called for help, I'd be back online and the *geroi* would know I'd broken the edict. Not to mention that it could draw their attention to the fact that my earpiece had been altered. Ceilos would never forgive me.

But there was no way I could shift this boy's dead weight on my own, not when I was already feeling the effects of the thin air.

Before I could give myself a chance to change my mind, I pressed the button. "*Gerouin* Melusin," I called.

"Nadin?" Melusin's voice was soft in my ears, like the drip of water in the caverns.

There was no time for explanations. "I need help outside the dome," I said as calmly as possible.

"'Outside'?" she repeated, her gentle voice faltering almost imperceptibly. "What are you doing—"

"Just hurry," I interrupted her, breathless. "I found someone out here. He's injured."

The *gerouin* said nothing more, simply disconnecting. I turned back to the boy. He was still unconscious, but he was breathing—barely. I crouched to get a better look at him. His hair was coated in the red dust that the wind kicked up in swirling eddies, but I could see it was curly and dark. His skin, on the other hand, appeared bleached like an old man's, even though he was clearly young. Could unprotected exposure to solar rays have done this? The atmosphere was so thin now...

I inhaled shakily, my lungs burning. It was already painful for me to be outside, and I couldn't have been out for more than five minutes. This boy... how did he get here?

PART ONE  
**ISAAK**

Tierra Nueva, Aeolis Province  
Martian Colony  
2073 C.E.

## CHAPTER I



THE SUN'S WARMTH MELTED OVER ME AS I STEPPED OFF THE bus. I paused for a moment, blinking away the startling brightness of the open air after the dim confines of the school bus. It was near the end of April II—our spring April—of my junior annum, but it was weird for it to be this warm on Mars, even during the summer months. As my classmates filed off the vehicle behind me, I rolled up my long thermal sleeves. Here in the hills, the wind was stronger, with a cooling bite, but the undercurrent of warmth to the day was still unmistakable. I grinned in spite of myself.

"Right, right, everyone, keep clear of the steps, we need to get everyone off the bus if we're ever going to get moving with this," my homeroom teacher, Mr. Johnson, yelled over my classmates' chatter. "Henry, that means you. Isaak! Would you please do something about your partner in crime?"

I started at the sound of my name and glanced over my shoulder. At the foot of the bus steps, a stocky kid with long black hair and a faded t-shirt that proclaimed "FREE MARS" in what was once bold red text was streaming music on his earpod loud enough to be heard five meters away, seemingly oblivious to the world around him.

Turning back to Mr. Johnson, I shrugged. "I don't know what you expect me to do about him."

"I suppose it would be too much to ask you to make him behave for the rest of the day," said Mr. Johnson. "But for a start, you can move him."

I rolled my eyes and tromped back towards the bus. "Come on." I nudged Henry away from the steps.

"What? What'd I do this time?"

He looked up and caught Mr. Johnson's eye. They exchanged matching glares.

"That guy's got it in for me," Henry complained.

I opened my mouth to answer, but broke off as my other best friend, Tamara, elbowed her way between the two of us. "Well, maybe if you didn't get called into the principal's office every other day," she pointed out reasonably.

"I'm only in the principal's office every other day because *he*"—Henry gestured towards Mr. Johnson—"has it in for me."

"Right." Tamara's reply was more of a laugh than a word. "I'm sure it has nothing to do with your *conscientious homework objections*, or your habit of leaving class early, or the anti-government graffiti in the boy's bathroom that I heard about last week."

As she spoke, she glanced knowingly over at me, a smirk tugging at the corner of her lips. My heart lurched momentarily, and I—discreetly, I hoped—urged it to settle back into its regular pattern. For the amount of time I spent with Tamara on almost a daily basis, you'd think I'd manage to *not* go into full spaz-mode every time I saw her.

Yeah. You'd think.

Fortunately, she hadn't seemed to notice my suddenly red face. Henry certainly hadn't. He was too busy complaining.

"Tamara," he said solemnly, "as conscientious citizens of Mars, we have an obligation to future generations to prevent this world from falling into the cycle of imperialism that destroyed so many lives on Earth. I'm simply providing an alternative to the narrative being forwarded by the administration, to prevent the further spread of misinformation. Graffiti is the people's tool, you know."

He was off again. Tamara shot me a pained expression and I shrugged. She should have known better than to get him

started on one of his rants.

I moved a few paces away, craning my neck to get a better look at the red hills around us. From up here, Tierra Nueva seemed to spread out before me: a small valley crammed with a rambling mishmash of tightly clustered buildings and, in the center of town where the rivers converged, the clump of high rises that made up the AresTec complex on Sparta Island. The valley was blanketed in a filmy gray haze from the factory district on the edge of town, blurring the details, but in the distance I could just see the sun glinting off the waters of Escalante Bay.

I jammed my hands in my pockets and breathed in deeply through my nose. It was nice out here, where the air smelled fresh and the acrid scent of the factory exhaust was just a wispy memory. Maybe today wouldn't be so bad after all.

"Okay, everyone, eyes and ears up here!" The chattering voices around me tapered off at Mr. Johnson's shout. "We've got a lot to get through today, so I'm just going to go ahead and turn this show over to Dr. Luna here, if everyone would *please*"—he narrowed his eyes at the lot of us—"give her your attention."

A tall woman with black hair reaching almost to her knees stepped forward, smiling at us. "Hello, everybody, I'm Professor Clara Luna. Thank you for coming all the way out here to visit us today. I understand you're having Career Week at your school right now. How has that been going for you?"

The group grumbled noncommittally. Career Week was the week-long round of field trips that the junior class at the Academy had to take every year to help pick their study emphases for senior annum. All week, we'd been visiting different "high-need" areas in the peninsula, to help the undecided kids figure out what they wanted to do with their lives—the ones who hadn't had that predetermined for them by a scholarship committee like Henry and I had, anyway. On Monday they'd dragged us to the GSAF branch in the city, and yesterday we'd taken a tour of AresTec's newly-completed offices. Today, they'd switched things up by busing us out to this isolated site in the hills that divided the peninsula into its east and west halves. It would have made a great horror flick premise—a *group of teens brought to the middle of nowhere, only to be massacred where we stood!*—but it was nothing as exciting as that. Instead, they were apparently planning to bore us to death with a presentation from these Kimbal University professors who were doing some kind of geology survey out here. But at least it got me out of Earth Lit for a week.

Mr. Johnson rolled his eyes at my classmates' lack of enthusiasm, but Dr. Luna seemed undaunted. "It's good to see so many fresh faces out here today," she said, her smile never wavering for an instant. "What we're working on is a very exciting project that is helping us to learn more about our planet's past, which in turn will help us understand how to shape the future of Mars. I'm one of the co-leads on this project. My associate should be coming along any second—"

"I'm here, I'm here," a man's voice broke in, and a moment later its owner popped up over the top of the sloping crater behind her. He was tall and dark, with a head of thick black hair and a neatly trimmed mustache to match. My breath hissed in through my teeth, louder than I meant it to. Henry and Tamara both looked at me.

"What's your problem?" Henry whispered.

"That guy." I nodded in the direction of the newcomer. "He's—"

"Hello, everyone," the man said over me. He brushed off his dirt-encrusted hands on the sides of his pants. "Sorry I'm late. There's always so much to do on a dig like this. Anyway, my name is Professor Erick Gomez, I'm the head researcher for this field survey."

"Wait, *that* Erick Gomez?" Henry whispered. "That tool your mom's dating now?" Tamara winced sympathetically in my direction as I nodded.

Maybe I was being unfair. I suppose I hadn't really known Erick long enough to know, objectively, if he was *actually* a

tool or not. Mom had only introduced him to me and Celeste a couple of weeks ago. Although, from the way they were acting, I suspected they'd been seeing each other for a while before Mom told us about him. I mean, they'd worked together as long as we'd lived in Tierra Nueva. They had plenty of opportunity.

And I couldn't really begrudge her dating again. After all, Dad was the one who'd abandoned us all so unceremoniously two annums ago, during my first term at the Academy. Considering the fact that he hadn't contacted me or Celeste once since he'd left, it was obvious he was only concerned with his own happiness. So why shouldn't Mom be happy, too?

It was just weird to have some new guy showing up at the house all the time. Especially since this one was so... *different* from how Dad had been.

"I'm sure most of you are wondering what exactly we're working on way out here in the middle of nowhere," Erick said, smiling with way too many teeth. "It might not look like much, but it's actually very exciting. This study is continuing work begun by the first Mars landers sent from Earth over a hundred years ago."

"Riveting," Henry muttered. I snickered.

"As you all know, we humans have not been on Mars for very long. There's still a *lot* to learn about our new home. And here, we're using geological methods to do just that. We're studying the planet's past, specifically its atmospheric makeup over the millennia and behavior of ancient and precolonial waterways. Our data will enable modern scientists currently working on Phase Three of terraformation to better understand what challenges to expect while adapting the planet for life now."

As Erick spoke, Dr. Luna started leading the group of us down a trail that wound between ditches of varying size. A few of these had groups of people working inside them with shovels and picks, but most were empty and roped off—to keep us from wandering around inside them, I guess.

"This site we're currently excavating is fascinating for two reasons. First of all, it's the site of an ancient stream bed, which provides us with information about how water behaved on Mars in the past, and what sort of organic material it supported. We've already found fossil evidence of early ancestors of the modern spider weed, as well as extinct forms of Martian flora, and even primitive fauna. We're hoping to uncover more evidence of other ancient lifeforms that might have existed here before atmospheric degradation set in."

My arms were still crossed, but I have to admit, he caught my interest with "fossil." Against my better judgment, I found myself paying a bit more attention to Erick's little spiel.

I might never have noticed *it* otherwise.

Erick had turned to face the group of us, walking backwards and gesturing here and there like some kind of tour guide. "The second reason this site is so interesting is that the entire hills are pockmarked with craters from various meteor impacts over millions of years. The crater walls left behind can give us a snapshot of Mars' geological processes over time." He indicated a smallish crater to his right that appeared to have been widened by the dig crew. The sides of the hole were striped, with a variety of different-colored rocks mashed together. It almost looked like Neapolitan ice cream, I thought as I glanced absently down at the bottom of the trench.

Then I froze.

On the crater floor, carefully dug out from the dirt by Erick's crew, was a pile of smooth-topped stones stacked in the shape of an arch.

I cleared my throat. "Hey, Eri—uh, Professor Gomez," I interrupted.

He stared for a moment. Then recognition washed over him and he grinned at me. "Oh, Isaak. Did you have a



question?"

He seemed so pleased by my interest in his project that I nearly didn't respond to him. But my curiosity got the better of me. I pointed to the bottom of the pit. "Um, yeah. What's up with that pile of rocks down there?"

"Oh, that. That's a natural rock formation. We've discovered a number of them throughout this site. We believe they were pushed into that formation by the movement of ancient waterways. Then they calcified, solidifying together like mortar. If you all will follow me, we'll see a few more of those 'arches' on the tour."

He turned to lead the group through a narrower part of the trail. The rest of my classmates shuffled off after him, but I hung back. Something wasn't sitting well with me. It may have been a "natural" rock formation, but I'd seen it before—on something that was definitely man-made.

"Isaak, come on," Tamara called when she noticed I was still hovering at the side of the crater.

I paused for a moment, still looking down at the trench floor. Then, resolved, I turned to her and Henry. "Hang on just a sec." I ducked under the rope surrounding the ditch.

"Whoa, what are you doing?" I heard Henry exclaim as I stumbled my way down the steep, rocky side of the crater.

"I just want to get a better look at it," I replied.

"Isaak!" hissed Tamara. "You're going to get in trouble!"

"Just keep a watch for me, then. Let me know if you hear them coming back."

She frowned down at me, her eyebrows knitted with worry. Henry, on the other hand, had already pushed his way under the rope and was thundering down the slope after me.

Red dust settled in a cloud around me as I crouched at the base of the pile of stones. It was only about waist high, but otherwise it looked exactly like the design on the coin. I supposed it could just be a coincidence, but that would be too weird.

"What's so great about this thing, man?" Henry asked. "It's just a pile of rocks."

"Yeah, but the way they're shaped..." I reached out impulsively to touch the arch.

When my fingers brushed the rock, a deafening klaxon shrieked.

Henry cursed at the sound. I cringed, my head jerking up. I hadn't noticed the security drone hovering at the perimeter of the crater, but its camera was focused on us now, the red light on top of its body flashing.

In moments, our group was back at the side of the crater. Erick silenced the security drone, and in the stillness that followed, Mr. Johnson's voice echoed.

"Contreras and Sandhu. Why am I not surprised?"

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After ensuring that I hadn't caused any damage to the site with my "reckless behavior," Mr. Johnson had hauled the three of us back to the bus while Erick got the rest of our classmates back on their regularly scheduled field trip. As we lowered ourselves into the front row of benches, I glanced over at Tamara and felt a twinge of remorse. Her normally tanned face was white as a sheet. Henry and I were more used to getting in trouble, but Tamara had always managed to keep her nose clean. I hadn't meant to drag her into this as well.

"All right," said Mr. Johnson, leaning against the bus' emergency manual drive console and looking the three of us over, his arms crossed. "What was it this time, Sandhu? Now even scientific studies are a tool of Earth-based imperialism? Kind of a stretch, don't you think?"

Henry was aghast. "What makes you think this was my idea? I'm innocent!"

“Right. Like I’m going to fall for that.”

“He’s telling the truth,” I broke in. “He really didn’t have anything to do with it this time. It was my fault.”

Mr. Johnson gaped at me, then began to massage the bridge of his nose in exasperation. “Really, Isaak? Being Henry’s accomplice wasn’t good enough for you? Now you have to commit the crimes yourself?”

“I wasn’t going to *do* anything to it!” I protested. “I just wanted to get a better look at it!”

My teacher sighed. “Isaak, I don’t know what to do about you. In just one annum, you went from being one of the best students at the Academy to having a C-average and being in the principal’s office every other week. What happened?”

I knew it was true, but his words still stung. That didn’t mean I had any intention to tell my homeroom teacher *what happened*, though—especially while he was sitting there all torqued off at me.

“Look, Mr. J,” I said quietly. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t trying to make trouble. I just wanted to get a better look at it.”

Mr. Johnson shook his head. “Fine. But that doesn’t mean I’m going to let you off the hook. All three of you are getting a one-week in-school suspension...”

“Me?” Tamara squeaked. It was the first noise she’d made since the drone alarm went off. “But Mr. Johnson, I wasn’t—”

“You’re on the drone’s security footage just like the two of them,” replied Mr. Johnson. “I know you’re a good kid, Tamara, but you need to take responsibility for your actions. Maybe it’s time to think about who you choose for your friends.”

Tamara looked like she was going to cry. My stomach knotted with guilt.

“Andy?” a voice broke in from the bus’s doorway. I turned in annoyance to see Erick standing there. “Sorry to interrupt. Clara’s finishing the tour for the rest of the students. Might I make a suggestion?”

Mr. Johnson seemed as taken aback by the professor’s interruption as the rest of us. “Regarding?”

“I looked over the crater, and there’s no damage done to the site. And it seems to me if the students are really that interested in my team’s findings, there’s a more productive way for them to pay their penance than an in-school suspension.”

Johnson folded his arms and nodded. “Such as?”

“We always could use a few more workers at the site. There’s still quite a bit of digging to do. The three of them could volunteer here on weekends and put in a few hours of community service. They’d be helping out the GSAF science division, and they might learn a few things in the process.”

It took all my effort not to leap to my feet in protest. I honestly would have preferred an in-school suspension over having to spend my free time with Erick.

Tamara looked down at the floor, her shoulders slumped. “I have voice lessons at Herschel on the weekends, though.”

Mr. Johnson’s grin was devilish. “I’m sure your schedule can be worked out. I know your parents will be willing to cooperate once they know the alternative.”

Tamara nodded glumly, and my temper flared on her behalf. Was it really necessary for him to be so happy about this? I was starting to think Henry was right about Mr. Johnson—maybe he really did have it out for us.

“Of course, we can work around your other classes,” Erick intervened. He smiled encouragingly at Tamara. “I know there was no harm meant here today. I think this can be a learning experience for everybody.”

I was just starting to feel a grudging ounce of respect for him when he turned and grinned at me. The charitable feelings I had towards him dissolved. I could just tell he was going to make a huge deal out of us “getting to know each other.”

I knew then that the rest of this annum was going to be hell.

## CHAPTER 2



THE REMAINDER OF THE TRIP HAD GONE PRETTY NORMALLY, apart from Henry giving me the cold shoulder on the bus ride back. Well, and Tamara. She wouldn't even look at me—or anyone else, for that matter. She just stared down at her rhinestone-studded sneakers like they were the most interesting thing in the world.

I felt really guilty for dragging them into this. Though, honestly, Henry didn't really have any room to complain. He'd gotten me into trouble way more often than vice versa. So it was an enormous relief when school got out that afternoon and I saw the two of them waiting for me out in front of the Academy as usual. Henry and I always walked with Tamara over to the pier, where she took the ferry over to Herschel Island for her music lessons, before catching the train down to the south side of town where the two of us lived.

I hurried down the first set of steps to meet them. "You're not too torqued at me?" I asked when I caught up with them.

"That depends on whether you're going to explain to us what all that was about," Henry replied. He led the way down the second set of steps. The Academy was perched among the flat-faced cliffs on the northwest side of town, and it was quite a trek down to the street for those of us who didn't qualify for a key to the elevator. There were some mornings when cutting class seemed a more appealing alternative than climbing all those flights of stairs. "Seriously, Isaak, what's so special about that pile of rocks that it was worth six weeks of Saturday school? That's a new record, even for me."

I flushed. "It's probably stupid," I admitted. "It's just... I really felt like I'd seen that arch before."

We were onto the second-to-last flight of stairs by now, and the street sloped down before us. The stopping zone was loaded, as usual, with a line of swanky cars sent by the richer parents to pick up their kids. Wyatt Ponsford—a particularly obnoxious classmate of mine, the son of the Lieutenant Governor—was just sidling casually into the backseat of his family's shiny black Tesla. Considering that the Ponsfords' bayfront mansion was probably only a five-minute walk from the Academy, it always seemed a bit ridiculous for Wyatt to get chauffeured back and forth while most of the rest of us had to hoof it. But I supposed it didn't matter to the truly rich if their legs atrophied.

"Where could you have seen it?" Henry scrunched his nose up. "You mean, like, online? Or in real life?"

When the Tesla pulled out, I noticed a rundown blue pickup truck had been parked behind it. The truck stuck out like a sore thumb in the midst of the usual luxury sedans. Its sides were caked with red-brown mud, and the paint on the roof was badly oxidized. I wondered vaguely what a deathtrap like that was doing parked outside the Academy. Maybe they were lost.

"Neither. You know that box of junk we found in my mom's garden after my dad took off? It looked like something I—" I broke off as I realized that the driver of the blue truck was gesturing wildly at me. "Oh, geez."

I trudged up to the driver's side window. There was Erick, smiling with way too many teeth again. "Hey, Isaak. Fancy

seeing you again so soon.”

Yeah, imagine that. And I was sure it was a coincidence and everything. “What are you doing here?”

“I told your mom I’d give you a ride home today,” he said blithely.

I looked at him in horror. “You didn’t tell her—”

“No, no. Well, not all of it. I just said you’d decided after the presentation to volunteer to work at the site on weekends. I omitted the rest of it.”

I suppose he probably expected me to thank him or something, but I just stared at him warily. After a moment—when he realized I wasn’t going to say anything—he went on, with a bit less enthusiasm, “I do think we need to talk, though, Isaak. And I thought it might be easier to do it this way. You know, without your mother here.”

I blinked at him, uncertain whether that was a threat or not. Probably better not to find out. I glanced over my shoulder at Henry and Tamara. “Uh, I guess you guys better go on ahead.”

The two of them stared incredulously at me for a moment, Tamara’s mouth drawn into a frown and Henry’s burly arms crossed. I shrugged helplessly at them.

“Whatever,” Henry said at last. “But you’d better be on Speculus later.”

“Sure thing,” I agreed, skirting around the front of the pickup and pulling open the passenger door.

As we pulled away from the curb, I realized that Tamara hadn’t said a word the whole time.

The truck was a relic. Its vinyl seats were rough and cracked, and the rearview mirror had apparently fallen off at some point and been reattached with duct tape. Erick drove the vehicle himself, rather than relying on the self-steering mechanism. For some reason, this didn’t surprise me. The truck seemed to fit his personality in a way I couldn’t quite describe. Sort of old-fashioned, like a pioneer. I supposed it fit with the rugged-Martian-colonist stereotype you saw in flix, though I hadn’t ever known anyone who was actually like that in real life: sun-baked cowboys who wanted to shape the new planet with their own two hands.

It was a polar opposite from my dad. He’d always liked the modern conveniences. I don’t think he even knew how to drive a car himself. I guess maybe that’s why he wound up heading back to Earth, in the end. Building a new world yourself is too much work. That thought made me feel bitter, and I folded my arms and slumped down in my seat.

Erick steered the pickup in the opposite direction from the way Henry, Tamara and I usually walked, heading for the crosstown expressway. Through the window, red boulders and scraggy clumps of spider weeds gave way to ever-denser clusters of buildings. Before long, the blue of the bay disappeared behind the city skyline.

We rode in silence. He didn’t even have music streaming. There was nothing but the constant, electronic hum of the engine and the swoosh of the tires over the pavement. It was only a matter of time before the quiet drove me out of my mind.

Finally, I shifted in my seat and blurted out, “Well? Aren’t you going to ask me what I was doing in the crater?”

“Not unless you want to tell me.”

That wasn’t the response I’d expected, and it knocked the wind out of my sails. What was even with this guy? My mom would have been all over me—“*Explain yourself, Isaak!*” I supposed my dad wouldn’t have pressed, but that’s just because he wouldn’t have cared one way or the other. This was an approach I was unfamiliar with. Now I felt obligated to say *something*, since I’d opened my stupid mouth, but for the life of me, I couldn’t think of what to say.

So I just looked back out the windshield at the road in front of us.

After several more moments of silence, Erick said, “I understand you’re very close to your grandfather. He’s an archaeologist on Earth?”

This abrupt change of subject threw me even more than his prior reverse psychology crap. “I... uh, yeah?” I replied lamely. “Well, he used to be, anyway.” Abuelo had retired five years ago, when the dig site on the eroding Veracruz coastline that he’d dedicated his life to finally crumbled into the sea. He’d known it was coming—that’s what had made his excavation so critical—but it had still been a major blow.

Erick smiled, but kept his eyes trained on the road. “I’m familiar with his work. Dr. Hector Garcia. You might not realize it, but geologists and archaeologists actually have a lot of overlap, professionally. We use similar methods. But that’s not why I’ve heard of Hector Garcia, of course. He’s quite famous on Earth. Or he was for a time.”

“Yeah, since he’s the one who finally translated the Cascajal Block.” It was sort of a Rosetta Stone, only for the ancient Olmec—a civilization that existed in Mexico over three thousand years ago. People had tried for over sixty years to decipher the writing on the block, which was the oldest written language in the Americas. But Abuelo was the one who had finally done it.

Erick nodded. “And I understand you inherited your grandfather’s knack for languages. Your mother tells me you’re a regular polyglot. How many do you speak, anyway?”

“Eight.”

Erick swore.

I flushed. “Well, to different degrees of fluency.”

“Still, at your age? That’s impressive.”

I stared down at my scuffed shoes. They looked embarrassingly at home on the mud-caked vinyl car mats. “I grew up speaking English, and my mom wanted to make sure I knew Spanish. Heritage and all. None of us really use it, though, apart from the EBCs.”

“The EBCs?”

“Yeah, you know. Exclamations, baby names and curse words.”

Erick laughed at this, a huge, bellowing sound that felt much too large for the cramped pickup cab. I squirmed in my seat.

“I picked up some Greek and Russian just from kids in our neighborhood,” I went on, staring out the window at a group of pedestrians waiting at a crosswalk. Businesspeople in suits trying to ignore the tourists beside them, snapping pics of the AresTec tower on their palmtops. “Henry’s mom taught me some Hindi... the rest are from the classes the Academy is having me take. Japanese, Mandarin Chinese, stuff like that.”

That was the root of my scholarship to the Academy. The Academy had pretty much been founded as a place for government officials and GalaX execs here on Mars to send their kids to, since they’d sooner cut their own right arms off than see *their* precious snowflakes in a public school. But the Academy did recruit a few kids from the local middle schools every annum. They sought out students who not only had good grades, but who were *gifted* at something. Kids they knew, if they were given the opportunity, would grow up to be useful.

My usefulness was in my knack for language. I guess I could see why that stood out to them—all of Mars is kind of a mishmash of different Earth cultures, what with the simultaneous colonization process, but Aeolis province is an especially diverse area. See, the International Climate Treaty of the late 2040s had provided generous financial incentives for any Earth nation that reduced its carbon output, and most of the industrial hubs of the world had done that by moving their manufacturing plants to Mars. GalaX had started the terraformation process a decade before with their MarsEpoch

project, but the planet was still basically a frozen popsicle at that point. Even with the McKay-Zubrin space mirrors melting most of the permafrost, Mars didn't have much of an atmosphere to speak of. It needed more carbon dioxide. And that was something Earth had in abundance.

With the jobs moving to Mars, and the government subsidizing most of the costs, people from all over Earth started flocking to Mars to find a "better life" in the new world. In less than a decade, Mars went from having just a few pockets of scientific outposts to major colonies all over the entire planet. That's when GSAF was established, to oversee the colonization process.

My hometown, Tierra Nueva, had been one of the first manufacturing towns in Aeolis. When it was first founded, it was mostly made up of immigrants from Mexico. You can see their fingerprints all over the south part of town, where most of the landmarks and street names are still in Spanish. But Tierra Nueva has gotten a lot bigger over the years. More corporations have shifted their manufacturing plants to the valley, and that's drawn large communities of immigrants from India, Russia, and most recently Greece, still reeling from its civil war back on Earth.

But the biggest change in Tierra Nueva came with the founding of AresTec almost ten annums ago. It was the first corporation ever to be based on Mars instead of on Earth. Their corporate offices are here in Tierra Nueva, and everything they do—from design, to business, to manufacturing their electronics—is done here.

I was only eight when it happened, so I didn't really understand what was going on, but I remember that no one in town could shut up about it. It was this huge opportunity for people on Mars, and here in Tierra Nueva at that. And I definitely noticed that things in town changed after AresTec opened its doors. It wasn't just that they'd built Sparta Island and the huge AresTec campus—the whole face of downtown changed. The older, kind of rundown areas in the business district got bulldozed, replaced with high-rises and tourist traps, coffee shops and kitschy boutiques. Then the mansions started appearing, dotting the cliffs on the northwest side of town. The Academy had opened not long after. In what seemed like a really short amount of time, Tierra Nueva got really, really big.

Actually, all of Mars was getting really, really big.

With so many people from so many different backgrounds coming and working and living together, GSAF had a lot of work to do to keep the new world in order. And that was the "use" that the Academy had seen for me. I was being groomed for a translating job with GSAF, the details of which I still didn't really know. But I guess the idea of a native Martian who could speak eight languages—and that wasn't even counting the dead ones, like Olmec and Mayan, that Abuelo had taught me—had been very appealing to the scholarship board at the Academy. So I'd been offered a full ride, with my linguistics emphasis already laid out for me as an incoming freshman.

My parents had been ridiculously pleased by this. I suppose they'd been a little bit worried about my future beforehand. My mom's a GSAF bioengineer—basically a hacker for plants, splicing them together like a jigsaw puzzle in a laboratory in the hopes that she can take a plant that had evolved for life on Earth and change it into one that can survive on a totally different planet. She loves her job, but it's not exactly known for its spectacular pay grade. My dad, on the other hand, had worked in a factory. They'd met here on Mars, and if my abuela's lengthy rantings about how they "always knew he was no good" are to be believed, it wasn't exactly a match made in heaven.

Either way, between the two of them we were comfortable enough, but I knew they were worried about my future. Dad was always telling me I was living my life wrong, rolling his eyes at me for being myself. Saying my identity was the product of an overly-active imagination, and if I didn't knock it off, I'd be sorry when I got older. The Academy scholarship had been like a dream come true—a guarantee that I would be successful, that maybe I *could* "make it" as an adult after all. My future was laid out for me.

I hadn't been quite as thrilled as they were, although I didn't say anything about it. Sure, I liked learning languages, but... the Academy's plan, it wasn't what I wanted to *do* with my life, you know what I mean? Working in some windowless cubicle in the GSAF building seemed like a complete soul-drain. I'd never told anyone, but what I really wanted, more than anything, was to be like Abuelo. To be an archaeologist. Working outside, digging in the dirt, uncovering hidden treasure. I wanted to hold the ancient past in my hand and uncover its secrets. I'd even hoped to maybe dig at the same site in Veracruz, even though I'd known there wasn't much time left before they'd have to shut it down for safety reasons.

But things hadn't been going well between my parents. And when I got the scholarship, that changed for a little while. Dad was proud of me for the first time since I started middle school. So I went along with it, happily believing that everything was going to be better. If it meant Mom and Dad would stop fighting, anything would be worth it.

The fighting hadn't stopped for long.

"So, do you like the Academy? And your program?" Erick broke the silence again. I was so preoccupied with my thoughts, it took me a minute to come up with a response.

"Yeah, I guess. I mean, school is school, right? And I'll get a good job out of it, at least."

Erick signaled to merge onto the bridge fording Santos Creek. On the north side of the river, downtown bustled with its typical fervor. The neighborhoods across the bridge seemed dead in comparison, rows of tiny duplexes with minuscule yards and peeling siding. "Naturally," Erick said, keeping his eyes fixed on the road. "That's important. People would say it's wise of you to have such a mature idea about your future at your age." His voice sounded odd, and I glanced sideways at him. "I've heard a lot of good things about the Academy, the way it structures its emphases like a college major. Career preparation at the high school level, rather than post-secondary. It gives kids an extra edge, which we always need in this economy. Of course, I would argue that seventeen is kind of a young age to have your whole life written in stone. You never know what direction your interests are going to lead you in."

I rolled my eyes. "I've been hearing that all week—AresTec, GSAF, you name it. Guys in cravats and ties telling me to *follow my dreams*. Kind of a moot point, though, isn't it? It's not like I can change my scholarship."

"That's true. Well, it's all academic, regardless. I guess what I mean is... I hope you'll go into this survey with an open mind, Isaak. I know Andy was looking to give the three of you a punishment, but that's not really my style. I honestly don't see any harm in pursuing your natural-born curiosity. The whole reason we're out there in the first place is to learn. We want to know the whole story behind Mars' geologic history. I'm as eager to learn about the processes that created that arch as you are."

Somehow I doubted that, unless he'd somehow come across my dad's coin, too.

Gravel crunched beneath the tires as the truck turned onto my street. "Like I said earlier, geology and archaeology have a lot in common. So I'm hoping we can turn this whole situation into something fun. I know it's been a rough couple years for you."

I bristled. I was getting tired of hearing iterations of that sentence.

"But I have to say," Erick went on, "I think I understand why you jumped into that trench. You're a bright kid. You're curious. I know what that's like, especially when you're maybe in an environment that's not challenging you in the ways your mind craves." When I stared at him, dumbfounded, he chuckled. "You know, you kind of remind me of me when I was your age."

I didn't respond. I couldn't. The anger building in my chest was too intense. It choked the words right out of me. Who the hell did this guy think he was? To think he knew me, after just meeting me a couple of times? To think he had a right to that, just because he wanted in my mom's pants? And to say I was like *him*. I could tell right then and there that he and I

were nothing alike.

He was wrong. He had no clue why I had jumped in that trench.

I kicked the passenger door open before he'd even finished pulling into the driveway. "See you on Saturday," he called as I stomped past the garage up to the front door and jammed my thumb onto the keypad. I could still feel his eyes on my back as I slammed the door behind me.

It was four o'clock. Mom and Celeste wouldn't be home for a couple more hours, at least. It was time to dig out that box.

## CHAPTER 3



I SEARCHED HIGH AND LOW FOR THAT DAMNED THING. MY first thought was that it would be in Mom's lab, the converted garden shed in our backyard where she worked on her smaller projects. But I checked every drawer and cupboard, every nook and cranny, and found nothing. It wasn't in the garage, either, or in the kitchen. I looked in her dresser drawers, the back corner of her closet, everything.

It occurred to me, as I slumped back on my heels after feeling around under her shoe rack, that she might have thrown the box away when she took all of Dad's clothes to the recycling center. The thought made me sick to my stomach.

I closed my eyes, trying to remember what the coin had looked like. I was sure the arch engraved on its face looked just like the one out at Erick's dig site, but my memory was fuzzy. There had been other things in the box that had held my attention more, things that were more definitely *Dad's*, like his spare e-cig atomizer and his great-uncle's wristwatch. And his wedding band.

That's what I'd been looking at when Mom caught me. I still remember the way her face hardened when she saw that ring there, in a box of junk he must have buried in the garden before he took off. I still don't know why he'd left that stuff there. I guess maybe I'd hoped he was planning to come back for it. But when Mom saw that ring, I think she knew once and for all that he wasn't coming back.

Mom had taken the box and told me she wanted me to forget about it. Fat chance of that.

I sighed and opened my eyes. It must be long gone by now, buried in some landfill where I'd never find it. I was just starting to get back to my feet when my eye caught on the hatch to the crawlspace on the ceiling of the closet. We'd never stored anything up there, since it was loaded with insulation and Mom was worried Celeste or I would get sick. But I shoved the hatch open now and, stretching up on my tiptoes, reached my hand inside.

I felt around for a few seconds, encountering nothing but dust and bits of fiberglass. But then my fingers struck something hard and metal.

I pulled the object out. It was the box.

It looked like some kind of vintage lunch box you'd see in flix, with the remnants of a painted cartoon character on its lid. I didn't know how old it was, but I knew he'd brought it from Earth. The hinges were rusty, which made opening the lid



difficult, but I finally managed to pry it open. There was all the junk I remembered, all the weirdly personal objects that seemed strange to leave behind. Little knick-knacks and trinkets, and a handful of memory cards and flash drives.

And amongst all of Dad's *Dad* things, shoved up in the corner, was the coin.

You could tell right away that it was ancient. It was made out of some kind of metal, but it was all corroded and discolored, kind of a greenish hue now. Its reverse was engraved with nine circles, each differently sized. The front face of the coin, meanwhile, had three marks along the upper rim, but they were too worn for me to make out. They didn't quite look like writing; more like pictures, or maybe symbols of some kind.

And beneath these markings was an engraving of an arch. It looked bigger than the one that I'd seen at the dig site—that one was only waist high, and the one depicted on the coin showed a figure standing beneath it, as if passing through a doorway—but the pattern of the flat-topped stones was identical, sort of an upside-down-V-shaped archway.

I hadn't thought much about the coin at the time Henry and I found the box. We'd come across it, buried in the garden, while we were supposed to be yanking up spider weeds to get the ground ready for Mom to plant the new experimental seeds she'd developed to grow during the long Martian autumn. It had been clear when we'd got the lid open that it was Dad's stuff, but there was so much else in the box that I hadn't dwelled on the coin too much. I guess I'd figured he had probably gotten it from one of his friends at the factory. You'd never believe the kind of weird junk they'd brought with them from Earth.

Maybe arches like this were common. Erick had said it was a natural formation—maybe there were some like it on Earth, too. Or maybe it was just a coincidence. But something felt really weird about this whole thing.

I hadn't heard the garage door go up, but the slam of the kitchen door was unmistakable. My little sister Celeste's voice echoed noisily down the hall. She was chattering at Mom about something they'd done at her after-school program.

*Crap.* I slid my palmtop out of my pocket to look at the time. It was already after six. Quickly, I yanked the crawlspace hatch back shut and rushed out of my mom's room.

The idea had been to sneak the box into my own room, but as I turned the corner, there was Mom standing in my doorway.

"Oh, Isaak, there you are," she said.

"Hey, Mom. How was your day?" My heart was pounding so loud that I was sure she'd be able to hear it, but she didn't seem to notice anything amiss.

"Just the usual. You know, boring lab stuff." She grinned and nudged me. "But how about you? What's this I hear about you volunteering at Erick's geological survey? That was unexpected!"

"Oh, yeah, well, you know." My fingers clenched around the box behind my back. I hoped it didn't look too obvious. "It was... fresher than I thought it would be."

"But that's wonderful! To see you taking an interest and engaging in something..." I thought for panicked a minute that she was going to hug me, and how exactly would I be able to conceal the box then? But she got this far-off look on her face and sort of turned, looking off into nowhere. "*Ay, niño,* I was really worried about you for a while there. Well, I suppose it's only natural, such big changes at such a young age—everyone needs time to cope..."

I tried to take advantage of her reverie to creep backwards into my bedroom. I'd forgotten, of course, about Celeste. I hadn't even noticed her standing in her own doorway, watching Mom fawn over me with her ever-sticky fingers in her mouth, until I heard her say, "Zak, what's in the box?"

*Dammitdammitdammitdammit*

Mom's eyes flicked over to me and her smile faded. "Isaak, what are you hiding there?"

“Nothing.”

“Isaak.”

Her face left no room for argument. I sighed and reluctantly produced the lunch box.

She frowned momentarily, as if trying to remember where she knew the thing from. Then realization dawned. “Isaak, where did you get that?”

I hate when adults do crap like that. “*Where did you get that?*” You torquing know where I got it from, you’re the one who put it there. What you really want to know is, “*What were you doing in my closet? Besides invading my privacy and defying my orders, that is.*”

I sighed. Might as well come clean. “It’s just, I saw something at Erick’s dig site that reminded me of something I saw with Dad’s stuff—”

As soon as the word “Dad” came out of my mouth, Mom blew her stack. “That’s what all this is about?” I wouldn’t say she *shouted*, but she wasn’t exactly quiet. “Here I was thinking you were just expressing an interest—”

“Well, technically I am. I’m interested in knowing why, exactly, Dad had something in this box that looks like something from Erick’s dig site.”

“Like what, a piece of equipment? He probably stole it.”

“Not equipment! It was... like... a thing they dug up. There was a picture of it. Sort of. In here.” It sounded completely insane, once I said it aloud. What was I expecting, aliens?

“Isaak,” Mom groaned, “you know that’s not possible.”

“No kidding! But that doesn’t change the fact that—”

“I hid this box for a reason, Isaak. I saw the way that you were looking at it the last time you found it. Your father is gone. He hasn’t even contacted you or Celeste once since he went back to Earth. The last thing I want is for you to spend your time chasing the shadow of a man who doesn’t want anything to do with you.”

Her words stung like a slap in the face. I knew they were true, but to hear them spoken aloud hurt in a way I wouldn’t have expected.

“I’m not chasing anyone’s shadow, Mom,” I argued. “But I just... don’t you think it was weird, how he just... *disappeared* like that? I mean, leaving is one thing, but to take off with no warning, not even bringing any of his stuff with him?”

“No, Isaak. I don’t think it was weird. It happens every day. It’s a coward’s move.” Mom’s voice went from livid with anger to just hollow, almost dead. Maybe she wasn’t as over it as I’d thought she was. “We all knew your father was on his way out. It was just a question of when.”

My shoulders slumped. “Okay, but... why’d he bury the box? Why not take this stuff with him?”

“That, I don’t know. But there’s no point obsessing over it. Sometimes you need to know when to just let things go. Let this go, Isaak.”

So I let the box go.

She took it, but didn’t go back in her bedroom with it. She would have to hide it somewhere new, now, to keep it away from me. Maybe this time she’d throw it away after all.

It didn’t matter. I wouldn’t look for it again. The coin was in my pocket.

Neither of us brought it up again, but an awkward silence hovered over us throughout dinner. I looked down at my plate the whole time and poked sullenly at my *calabacitas*, stirring the small squash and tomatoes together with the beans and

rice until they formed a wholly unappetizing brown lump. Celeste chattered excitedly about what she'd done at school today, and how this friend and that friend weren't speaking to each other again, and on and on and on, while Mom's eyes bored into the top of my head. Eventually I dumped my half-eaten plate in the sink and wandered back into my room.

I had no homework, what with Career Week and everything, and for the first time in my life, I actually found myself wishing that I did. Then I'd have something to think about other than the fact that I'd alienated my two best friends, torqued off my mother, and gotten myself roped into Saturday school for the rest of the annum.

I put on my Speculus headset and browsed the internet for a while, looking for... I don't know. Something to show that I wasn't crazy. But I couldn't find any information about that coin of Dad's.

Next I tried searching for the arch. This is how I learned that corbeled vaults, as they are apparently called, are a dime a dozen. Practically every civilization on Earth had built something that looked like that. There was even a similar-looking one in Veracruz, where Abuelo's old summer site had been. I couldn't find any natural examples that looked like the same—most natural arches were worn out of solid rock, not stacked in a pattern like that—but I was starting to think that Erick was right. It was just a coincidence, the coin came from somewhere on Earth, and now I was stuck spending my weekends with my mom's new loser boyfriend digging up rocks.

Way to go, Isaak.

Notification bubbles from Henry urging me to go on chat kept popping up in my peripheral, but I flicked them away. I wasn't in the mood to talk to him and have to explain away my stupid behavior. Honestly, the person I wanted to talk to most was Abuelo, but it was 2:00 AM in Berkeley where he and my grandma lived, so I figured I'd better not. Finally I took the headset off altogether and wandered towards the kitchen in search of something to fill my growling stomach with.

As I turned the corner past my mom's room, I heard her say, "I'm just so worried about Isaak. He's been... *drifting* so much since Raymond left."

I froze in front of the closed door. A second later, I heard the response, much fainter and somewhat tinny. My mom was using the chat app on her deskpad. She'd never been much of an Speculus person; she always insisted VR gave her motion sickness.

"It's natural, Jess. You need to not push him so much."

I recognized my Tia Mayra's voice. Mayra wasn't my *real* aunt, but she was my mom's best friend, so that's what we'd always called her. She lived in California—apparently Mom had been less concerned about time zone differences than me.

"I know, but his grades at the Academy are slipping. I'm worried about his scholarship. If he loses that, I don't know what we're going to do. It's so much harder to get into a university here with a public school diploma, and without a degree, there's not a whole lot he could do here. Apart from the factories. I don't want that to be his only alternative."

"What about a school here on Earth? He'd be a third-generation student at Cal, that must count for something. If his grades aren't high enough, he could start at a community college and transfer."

Mom's voice shook a little when she answered her. "I thought about that, but I don't know if I could bear him going back to Earth. I already had to leave behind my parents and my friends when I came here. And then Raymond... you know. So to lose my son, too?" She sniffled. "But if he can't get his act together here, what choice do I have?"

My chest clenched. This was ridiculous. Everyone had been planning my life out for me when I was a straight-A student, and now here they were, doing it again when my grades slipped. Was I ever going to get to have any input on anything?

"Have faith in the kid, Jess," Tia Mayra said. "He's going through a lot of crap in his life. He still has another year of high school left. He's smart, and you said his grades in his language classes are fine. He's probably just bored with his G.E.s.

Happens to the best of us.”

“I know. You’re right. Maybe I’m just stressed. My last round of crops didn’t come out any better than the ones before, and there’s pressure from GSAF...” She sighed. “I just... deep down, I worry. Isaak is so much like his father. I just pray he’s not like him in the ways that count.”

I couldn’t listen to any more of this. All thoughts of snack food forgotten, I rushed through the kitchen and out the back door. I clumsily made my way across the small yard, taken up almost entirely by Celeste’s playset and Mom’s vegetable garden and orchard of fruit trees, and vaulted the waist-high fence. My mind was a blur as I stormed down the alley behind our house. I tried to keep it focused on the sound of the rolling waves in the bay, to let it drown out the echoes of the conversation I’d just overheard. The disappointment in my mother’s voice. The crushing guilt that I’d been trying to avoid all day.

Why’d she have to compare me to Dad like that? I was nothing like him. For one thing, I’d never abandon her and Celeste the way he did.

But I was nothing like Erick Gomez, either. Why did all these adults keep trying to stick me into some kind of box, like they couldn’t make sense of me without comparing me to someone else? Why couldn’t they just let me be myself? Make my own choices, do what I want to do? Maybe my grades at the precious Academy wouldn’t have dropped so much if everyone in my life wasn’t hell-bent on giving me so much shit all the time!

My feet unconsciously led me down to the wharf that lined the water’s edge. There were lots of people out tonight, couples on dates and families out to dinner. A large and noisy group of Earth tourists clamored past me to get down the stairs to the beach. They nearly collided with four girls coming up from the ferry docks, and I stepped back to give them some room. The tourists were chattering to themselves about wanting to catch a glimpse of “authentic” Martian life, rather than sticking to the more upscale and artificial areas the northern waterfront had to offer. I snorted. If they wanted to see the real Mars, they should take a tour of the factory district. That would dash their little sci-fi dreams in a nanosecond. The idea was almost funny enough to snap me out of my bad mood.

I was so preoccupied, I didn’t even notice one of the girls detach herself from the group that had just come up the stairs. I nearly jumped out of my skin when Tamara clapped her hand down on my shoulder. “Isaak, what’s the matter?” she asked. “You stomped right past me back there, you didn’t even notice when I said ‘hi.’”

“I’m sorry, Tam. Nothing’s wrong, I was just... thinking.”

Silence hung heavy between us, and I thought back to what had happened on the field trip this afternoon. One more thing I’d screwed up. More than anything, I just wanted to wake up and find that this day had never happened, that I could have a do-over.

“Look, Isaak,” Tamara said. “I’m sorry about earlier.”

I blinked. “Why are *you* sorry?”

“I was acting like a brat, not speaking to you after what happened with Mr. Johnson. I guess I really am a goody two-shoes, like everyone says.”

“You’re not—” I started, but she held up a hand.

“No, seriously. It was lame of me. So can we just pretend it didn’t happen? And you can just tell me what’s wrong? Because, seriously, you’re not fooling anyone. I can tell you’re torqued. You’ve been acting weird all day, and I just...” She trailed off and shrugged. “I just want to help you.”

The breeze off the bay picked up, biting at my face and playing at the wisps of hair around Tamara’s face. A couple of meters away, the girls she’d been walking with—probably classmates from Herschel—were watching us pointedly. One of

them tried to cover a giggle with her hand.

Awkwardly, I turned to face the water. The smaller of our two moons, Deimos, was setting in the west. It hovered over the bay like a bright star. The lights of the city glinted off the waves, vibrant dashes of white and gold.

“Okay,” I said. “But it can wait, honestly. It’s a long story. I’ll tell you tomorrow before class or something.”

Tamara rolled her eyes. “I don’t think so. Where are you headed, the beach?” When I nodded, she said, “I’ll go with you.”

## CHAPTER 4



SOMETHING ABOUT ESCALANTE BAY HAD ALWAYS BEEN VERY calming to me. I loved the rhythmic motion of the rolling waves washing over the dull red sand on the beach. The wind was strong and fresh, its briny scent masking the memory of the acrid stench of factory smoke. Just being here by the bay made my problems seem to disappear.

Beside me, Tamara had yanked off her shoes and rolled her leggings halfway up her calves. She sat close enough to the shoreline that occasional waves lapped over the tips of her toes. Neither of us said a word, but Tamara hummed to herself, running her fingers across the sand beside her like she was playing a keyboard.

“Did I tell you that I got my first official gig?” she said suddenly.

“What? No! Where at?”

“Museum opening. That big building they’ve been building on Sparta Island, the one with all the columns in front. It’s an art museum, but I heard they’re opening with an archaeology exhibit—‘classical art of the ancient world’ or something.” She grinned at my dumbstruck expression. “Up your alley, huh?”

I nodded, rubbing the back of my neck with my left hand. “You know it. But what about you? You’re singing?”

“Yeah, they’re having some kind of hoity-toity Grand Opening banquet for the board of trustees in June. Supposedly the Governor’s going to be there. They want me to play and sing.” She wiggled her fingers, miming the keyboard again. “I think they just invited me because of my parents. Mom is one of their donors.”

“Come on. You know that had nothing to do with it. You’re one of the most talented musicians in Tierra Nueva. How do you think you got into Herschel?”

She looked down, her long brown hair hiding her face, but I thought her ear looked sort of red. It was hard to tell in the near-darkness. “Well, I’d argue my moms again, but it’s nice to have a vote of confidence. I hope I don’t blow it.”

“You won’t. You’ll be stellar, for sure.”

Tamara’s toes dug into the silty sand, so fine that it was more like dust, really. She kept her gaze fixed on her feet as she said, “Do you want to come? With me? To the opening? I mean, not just to hear me sing, there’s the exhibit and stuff, too. They’ve got some Olmec artifacts, they might even have some of your grandpa’s...”

My heart jumped. I could barely hear my own voice over its hammering. “Of course I’ll come. Not... not just for the exhibit. For you.” Oh, *Cristo*, did I really just say that? Could I be any more embarrassing?

But then she grinned at me, and I couldn’t help but grin back.

Tamara leaned back on her hands. “So. What were you saying earlier? You thought you’d seen an arch like that before?”

I flushed. For a minute, I thought about just telling her to forget it—it was stupid and crazy. I knew that. But deep down, a little, tiny piece of me wanted to hear someone tell me that I *wasn’t* crazy. That maybe my mom was the one who was wrong, and that there really was more to that box of Dad’s than just a collection of Earth junk.

I shifted, digging down into my pocket to pull the coin out. “It’s probably stupid, but I thought it looked like this.”

I handed her the coin. She shifted onto her knees, holding the coin up to examine it in the glow of the fluorescent lamps on the wharf behind us. She squinted as she turned it over and back. “It does look the same. Look at the way the stones are stacked.”

“Right?” Eagerly, I scooted closer. “I mean, it’s probably just a coincidence, but still.”

She’d flipped the coin over again and was frowning at the markings on the reverse. “Where did you find this, again?”

“Henry and I found a box of my dad’s junk buried in the garden at the end of last summer.”

“This was your dad’s?”

“Yeah. Well, I think so. It was in this metal box that had a ton of other stuff that I know was his. I’d never seen it before, though. I figured he won it off one of his buddies at the factory or something.”

Tamara hesitated. “Maybe. But...” She stretched out her hand, the reverse side of the coin facing me. “Look at that.”

I peered at the nine engraved circles again. Looking more closely, I realized one of them was actually a star, not a circle. The other eight had oblong rings coming out of them, stretching around the coin. Eight circles, each of various sizes. The fourth from the center was a different color than the others. I took the coin back from Tamara and scraped my fingernail across it. It was tarnished, but it almost looked like gold.

I looked back up at Tamara. “The solar system?” I said.

“Right. And the central planet isn’t Earth. That’s Mars.”

I flopped back down on the sand. The breath had left my body entirely. “Mars?!”

Tamara snorted. “What are you acting so shocked for? You’re the one who thought it looked like the arch at Professor Gomez’s site.”

“Yeah, but... I thought I was crazy!”

“Congratulations, then—you’re as sane as I am.” She grinned like a Cheshire cat. Deimos winked over her shoulder, completing the effect.

The wind picked up, and a large wave gushed over the sand, soaking my shoes. The water was freezing, but I barely noticed.

Mars was a dead planet. There was no one here before us. Nothing but spider weeds, and weird little fish things, and underground germs. I knew that had to be true, because GSAF had done a study before they approved the planet for terraformation, to find out if the planet could sustain life or if there was anything here that could harm humans. I’d been hearing about it my whole life just from listening to Mom talk to herself while she worked. We all had to learn about this in sophomore biology class. Everyone knew this.

But what if they were wrong?

*Santa torquing Maria.*

Tamara got to her feet shakily, brushing the red sand off her leggings. She held out a hand to help me up, as I was none too sturdy myself.

“You know what, Isaak?” she said. “I don’t think I’m going to mind missing my weekend classes at Herschel after all.”

“So that’s why you didn’t go on Speculus last night, huh?” Henry asked. We were standing on the platform of the South Gateway station, waiting for the 7:20 train that we took to the Academy every morning. Groups of factory workers and commuters shuffled around us, yawning and taking huge swigs from plastic travel mugs. One scraggly-looking old man was vaping by the trash can, even though there was a huge sign a meter away from him prohibiting both vaping and smoking on the platform.

“Pretty much. Sorry, man. Not that I didn’t want to talk to you, but I kind of had too much on my mind to even think straight, let alone articulate.”

“Understandable. So, did you kiss her?”

I choked on my own spit. “I’m sorry, *what?*” I managed between coughs.

Henry shook his head, his sleek black hair flipping back and forth dramatically. “Ta-ma-ra. Did you kiss her, you moron?”

“Of course not!”

He sighed. “I don’t know what I’m going to do with you, Zak. If you don’t get your act together, someone else is going to make a move on her, and you don’t get to say I didn’t warn you.”

I spluttered indignantly. “I made a date with her, what more do you want? It’s not exactly like I had a chance to get super romantic, considering the fact that the very fabric of our existence has been challenged.”

“Blow it out of proportion, why don’t we?” said Henry. “We haven’t even seen much of that dig site, other than getting up close and personal with one hole—and GSAF’s security system. We can freak out *after* we find the underground kingdom of the Little Green Men. Let me see that coin.”

I’d already shown him once, but I dutifully produced the tarnished coin from my pocket once more. Henry frowned down at it. “Yeah, I guess it does look like that arch. But they had vaults like this in India, too, I know that much. So it could be from Earth.” He flipped it over to examine the solar system on the back. “This, on the other hand...”

“What’s that you have there, boy?” a throaty voice interjected. I looked up with a start. The vaper had wandered over to us, and he was leering at Henry now over the top of his hawkish nose.

Henry, ever polite, replied, “None of your business.” He accompanied this with a gesture.

“Don’t get testy, now,” the old man said, powering off his e-cig and buttoning it into his shirtfront pocket. His hair was white and unkempt, sticking out every which way in longish clumps like an even-crazier Albert Einstein. He wore a gray factory uniform like my dad’s old one, with the name *Emil* stitched onto the lapel in cursive writing. “It’s just that that looks like something of mine that went missing a few years back.”

“Pretty sure it’s not. Because we found it at *his* house.”

Henry pointed, and the scruffy man whirled on me. He narrowed his eyes for a long moment, and then said, “Contreras.”

The air left my lungs. “W-what?”

“You’re Contreras’ kid. You look just like him. Where’s your daddy, boy?” He moved close enough that I could smell his breath, a sour combination of cheap apple e-cig flavoring and tooth decay.

“He’s gone,” I replied shakily. “He left Mars two annums ago.”

“Don’t answer him!” Henry interjected.

I turned to respond, but Emil beat me to it, snapping, “Keep out of this, Paki!”

Henry moved faster than my eyes could keep up. One second he was standing on my left, the next he’d charged forward and his fist was sailing briskly towards the man’s jaw. Emil must have expected this reaction, though, because he ducked with practiced skill. He had good reflexes for someone who appeared to be in his seventies.

I grabbed onto Henry and attempted to drag him off the man, but it was difficult to keep my grip on him. Even though I was taller, I was also pretty skinny. Henry, on the other hand, was built like a tank—sturdy and strong.

“Henry, you can’t just beat up an old guy in the train station!” I shouted, pulling him back. “Do you want to get arrested?”

Henry replied by yelling something in Hindi at the top of his lungs. Mrs. Sandhu had definitely not taught me that phrase, but its meaning was pretty easy to figure out. The throngs of commuters had all turned their eyes on us, and a couple of men in business suits came rushing over, trying to help me break up the fight. Between the three of us, we managed to separate Henry and the factory worker.

“Take it back, you racist bastard,” Henry snarled.

“I will not. You need to keep your nose where it belongs. My business is with the Contreras kid.” Thrusting his jaw towards me, Emil hissed, “That coin of yours is stolen, boy. It belongs to me, and I want it back. And I want the key, too.”

One of the business suit guys looked up from straightening his cravat. “Look, buddy, if you’ve got a problem with these kids, you need to take it up with ADOT security. You can’t just go picking fights with teenagers on a train platform.”

As they argued, I heard the telltale clacking of the train on its way down the tracks. “Come on,” I said to Henry, and we hurried to the platform’s edge. The train coasted to a stop and we rushed through the sliding doors. I could hear the business suit guys calling after us, saying that security was on its way, but I didn’t want anything to do with that. I just wanted to get the heck out of there.

“What the actual...” Henry panted as we slumped into our seats.

“I have no clue. That guy was a fruitcake and a half.”

“You shouldn’t have told him anything about your dad.”

“You’re the one who told him we found the coin at my house!” I flopped back against the roughly upholstered seat, exasperated. “What was I supposed to do? He was all up in my face with his nasty-ass breath! And he knew my dad, *and* about the coin. He might have known where it came from. And what else was he on about? A key?”



“Gee, I dunno, do you want to go back and ask him?” Henry suggested snidely.

“Of course not. And I think we’d better find another train to take to school, if that weirdo’s going to be there every morning.”

“No kidding. I just hope he doesn’t know where you live, dude.”

I hadn’t thought of that. He obviously had known my dad, but I didn’t know how well. The thought of Emil turning up on my doorstep was enough to give me nightmares for the rest of my life. I pulled up my palmtop’s phone app just to make sure it had emergency services saved on speed dial.

This stupid coin was causing me nothing but trouble. Maybe my mom was right—I should have let the whole thing go. But it was too late now. I was in it up to my neck.



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