

Present Time: AD 50,000

With accuracy down to millimeters, the hover cab zipped in and out of heavy traffic around the spaceport on Gliese Major, one of the main home worlds of the descendants of Earth. The vehicle's artificial intelligence life-form, or AI for short, allowed it to maneuver better than any humanoid could. Brian Thorngood looked at the air above the palm of his hand. The implanted data pad projected up from his hand, giving him a virtual screen in the air to read. Not everyone decided to have such implants, but he found it convenient with all the traveling he did. Unfortunately, as always, the morning headlines were about the plague ravishing the human settlements. With just a thought from Brian, the pages of the virtual morning newspaper turned with ease. He had finally found the advertisement from the other day, dated June 4, 50,000. It was an advertisement for an auction of old ships and cargo.

Brian Thorngood was the owner and operator of Ye Olde Earth Antiquities in downtown Gliese City Prime. He was a large middle-aged man with slicked-down brown hair. His hands were weathered from years of archeology digs. He had since retired to concentrate on old-Earth antiques. That was where the money was. It had been thousands of centuries since the evacuation of Earth. Any relic would fetch considerable money.

Some of the salvage stuff was advertised as still sealed and very, very old. He had heard that before, but he had a good feeling he would score something of value this time, as long as he could actually win something at the auction. He had a good stash of credits on hand, but there were other well-funded antiquity shops that almost always outbid him.

The cab came to a stop and hovered down to the drop-off platform. The door slid into the shell of the car.

"That will be twenty credits," said the automated voice as a small device lowered from the ceiling.

Brian sighed. "I remember when it was only ten credits for a cab ride." He leaned forward a little and reached out, allowing the device to scan the chip embedded in his hand.

Brian exited the cab and buttoned his long coat. He knew it was out of style for this era, but a few thousand centuries ago, it would have been quite fashionable. He looked around to see various transports entering and leaving the spaceport. Some military ships were also departing, along with many medical ships.

"That damn plague. I wish we could end it," said a female voice from Brian's right.

Brian turned to see Dr. Katalina Winslow—Dr. Kat, as everyone called her, or just Kat, if you knew her well. She was a young doctor of medical science and archeology with the OTKE Corporation. She had black shoulder-length curly hair with blue streaks. He recalled them being red the last time he had seen her. Her left hand was gloved past her elbow. It was also blue. He had never had the stomach to ask why she always wore a glove, but it always matched her hair. Her dress was long on one side and high up on her hip on the other, revealing more of her leg than she should be showing, but the tactical boots she wore at least covered her up to her knees.

"Kat, I'm glad you could make it and see what I have to go through to get the good stuff."

Kat smiled at Brian and hugged him back.

"It was about time I find out how much you overcharge me," she said with a wink.

"Bah. Overcharge my you-know-what. You are lucky we are friends, or else."

"Or else what?"

"Or else...nothing. With a smile like yours, you would always get a discount."

Kat and Brian laughed at their little teasing, but Kat always won in the end.

Brian held out his right arm. "Shall we?"

Kat looked at him for a second, and he jumped around and held out his left arm. Kat smiled and hooked her nongloved right arm in his. "We shall."

They walked toward the entrance to the spaceport. The place was busy with people and cargo AIs moving about like ants. Everyone seemed to be on some sort of mission. Troops and scanners were stationed at every docking entrance. The human world leadership figured if they could catch plague victims early, the virus might not spread. Brian and Kat followed the signs to a closed docking bay where today's auction was being held.

Brian quickly scanned in at the entrance to cargo bay 7186 to get his bidding pad, and the two made their way to the item-viewing area.

"Wow. Look at all the stuff," said Kat. There were old ships, satellites, and cargo containers. Her mind raced, thinking about what some of the items had been designed for and what stories they could tell if they could speak.

Kat was already drooling over an old fighter from the early days of Earth's star travel. "Can we bid on this thing?"

"We can, but they would probably laugh at me if they saw my credit account totals."

The two kept walking and eyeing up the merchandise. Brian had to keep pulling Kat away from items they could not afford. "This way, Kat. Cargo containers are what we're after. Most of them are sealed, so it's like a birthday surprise. You never know what's going to be in them."

They wandered among the containers, ignoring the ones that were visibly tampered with or looked too new. Brian was inspecting some of the Caladin containers as Kat looked at some old-Earth ones. She seemed to be drawn to one container in particular. It was a rather large one with no visible markings on it. It was scorched and weathered from what looked like centuries.

"I'm guessing you find this one interesting?" asked Brian.

"You could say that. It looks like it's been through a lot."

Kat continued to walk around the container, her gloved hand slowly caressing it as she walked. A symbol on the other end caught her eye. She rubbed some of the grime off to reveal a spade.

"Hey, Brian, come over here and take a look at this."

Brian peered over Kat's shoulder to look at the symbol of the spade. "Hmm, never seen that symbol before. Very interesting. I'll tell you what. Since you seem to like this container's character, and it seems to have some odd markings, I will bid on this one when it comes up."

"Don't bid on something because of me," replied Kat, shaking her head.

"It can't be any worse than ones I have been getting lately. You never know, this could be a turning point—"

Brian's words were cut off as the announcement AI blared through cargo bay 7186. "All bidders, please make your way to the central area. The auction will begin in fifteen minutes."

"Well, let's get a move on so we can get a good view," said Brian.

The cargo bay was massive. The center was open so that cargo AIs and lifts could move the items into the center quickly and everyone could get a good view of the items up for auction. Kat was in awe of the place. There must have been ten thousand people there. Most were in the bleacher area and were your average people looking to see if they could get a good deal on an item. As she moved closer, she saw the more serious bidders standing with an intense look on their faces. Box seating was at the edge of the center area. These were the seats reserved for big-time bidders. Brian knew a few people, and he was able to get himself and Kat a standing view just behind the last row of reserved seats.

Shuttle and transport craft were the first to go on the auction block. These were the big-ticket items. Some of them would be used for parts, and others looked to be in good shape.

Kat tapped Brian on the shoulder as the next item was brought in by a hover AI truck.

"An old-Earth fighter. I think that would look cool over your shop."

Brian put his head down and sighed. "I am not putting a fighter over my shop. It would be a good theft deterrent, but no."

"Bah. You have no sense of style."

Two hours of ships and satellites had gone by. Credits were rolling like water, which Brian knew was a bad sign. Finally the storage containers were up. The one they had picked earlier was the third of five.

Kat cringed as the first container went for sixty-five thousand credits, about five thousand more than Brian could afford.

"I didn't think they would be that much," said Kat.

"You never know what the bidding is going to be like. The one we like is dirtier and older than the others. Either it will be ignored, or its age may increase the value. Just keep your fingers crossed."

The second container went for sixty-eight thousand credits. Both Brian and Kat cringed when the hammer fell to close that auction. The container they were interested in was finally moved into position.

The auctioneer started his pitch. "What we have here is an old cargo container that may date back to the final days of the home world Earth."

The crowd oohed at that statement.

"It has seen better days, but it is still in one piece with no apparent breaches to the environmental chamber. Let the bidding begin. Do I have ten thousand credits?"

A person in the back tapped their data pad, and ten thousand credits appeared and echoed above his head to start the bidding. Brian tapped his pad to increase it to fifteen thousand credits. The bid went to twenty, twenty-five, and thirty thousand, and Brian went to forty. Kat's head went back and forth, following the different bidders.

The bidding came to a halt as fifty thousand credits was announced. Kat turned quickly to see a fifty thousand credit sign appear above an Asian woman. Her hair was pulled back, and she wore what looked like a traditional Japanese geisha outfit, but from the waist down, the dress was slit into many pieces that seemed to sway in all directions as she moved. She had bright-red eye shadow and black lipstick. Two large combat AIs stood off to the side. Kat guessed they were some sort of bodyguards. After this lady bid, most of the hot bidders sat back down and were quiet.

"Who is she?" asked Kat.

"I'm not sure of her name, but she works for an underground artifact market. I believe it is run out of that night club built in the old Woland battle station. I forget its name."

"You mean the Little Lamb?" replied Kat.

"Yup. That's the name. Please tell me you don't frequent it."

"Uh, no. However, I'm somewhat aware of the owner. Let's leave it at that."

Brian just gave her a concerned look and tapped his data pad. Sixty thousand credits appeared above his head.

There was a murmur in the crowd, and anyone else who was standing was now sitting.

Seventy thousand was announced from the Asian lady.

"Well, sixty thousand was all I had. Let's—"

Brian was cut off as Kat ripped the data pad from Brian's hand. A bid of eighty thousand credits was announced above their heads.

"Kat! What the hell are you doing!"

"I'm not letting that bitch intimidate us."

The Asian lady gave them a dirty look as she had ninety thousand credits announced.

The two of them paused and stared at the lady and the cargo container.

"Kat, can we go now? I can't afford it anyway. Please."

Kat smiled at Brian as she tapped the pad, and one hundred thousand credits was announced. Brian fell to one knee as he started to hyperventilate.

The Asian lady tapped the side of her neck and started speaking frantically. The announcer waited a few seconds and then said, "Going once?" The Asian lady's hands were now moving in an angry manner as she talked and paced. "Going twice?" She was about to tap the pad but then looked up at the sky and put her hands down. "Sold!"

The data pad in Kat's hand cheered as "Congratulations on your purchase" appeared on the screen. Kat jumped up and down, screaming in excitement. She stopped when she realized Brian was now lying on the ground as some stranger splashed water in his face.

Brian's eyes finally opened to see Kat smiling down at him. "You live!"

"Oh, my head. What happened?"

"I kind of bid one hundred thousand credits, and you fainted and have been out for about an hour now."

"You mean you tried to kill me. Please tell me we lost."

"Uh, no, we won."

Brian sat up to find himself sitting on a couch in a small office. He just stared blankly at Kat.

"I'm ruined. I'm going to have to sell the shop. I will be—"

Kat covered Brian's mouth with her nongloved hand while holding the data pad in front of his face.

Brian squinted as "paid in full" blinked on the screen. Brian grabbed the data pad and stood up, forcing Kat to remove her hand from his mouth.

"How did we manage that?"

Kat smiled at him. "I decided to invest with you in that container. So I made up the difference with some of the credits I had saved away. Plus I didn't want that evil-looking lady to win. So now you have a container and a partner."

Brian pursed his lips and looked back at her.

"I have two conditions."

"What are they?" asked Kat.

"You will let me pay you back, and you promise to never do that again."

Kat looked up at the ceiling and swayed her head back and forth as she thought about it. "Deal!"

"Now that it's settled, I'm going to go back to the shop. When did they say the container would be delivered?"

"They are actually delivering it now. Amazing what a little flirty smile will get you," replied Kat, batting her eyelashes.

"Sigh. Why me?" mumbled Brian as he walked out the door and downstairs.

Kat caught up to Brian, and they made their way to where they had met. Brian was able to hail two cabs.

Brian opened the door for Kat, allowing her to easily enter. "Now remember to call me the instant you find anything interesting," said Kat from the back of the cab.

"I promise you will be the first to know. Now get out of here. You've caused enough trouble today," said Brian with a wink.

"Love you too," replied Kat as Brian tapped the door to initiate it to close. Kat's cab departed, and Brian entered his cab and headed back to the shop.

The trip was a smooth air ride across town. His fascination with the past always made him wonder if people back then had ever dreamed of flying vehicles or the robots or AIs that would be driving them. By the time he was done with his dreaming, the cab was settling down on the business district street on the outskirts of the city. This was one of the first construction areas before the great arrival, where the massive skyscrapers did not exist. If not for the futuristic buildings, it would have looked like a twenty-first-century small-town main street, which made it the perfect location for an antiques shop. Brian's shop was on the corner of one of the streets next to an Artesian café.

"Those Artesians could cook," he reminded himself as he let two people cross his path to enter the café.

Brian put his face up to the eye scanner and mumbled a password. "Verified," replied the security system as he entered the shop.

"Good afternoon, Brian," said the store AI system.

"Good afternoon, Lola. Any messages?"

"One message from Flavia Gormeck. She is interested in the thirty-third-century couch she looked at last week. Also, a cargo container arrived about fifteen minutes ago. It is in the storage bay."

“Thank you. Please contact Flavia and arrange a delivery time and payment with her. I will take inventory of the container.”

“Very well, sir.”

Brian went out back to the storage bay of his store. He was already behind on categorizing some boxes and crates that had been delivered a few weeks ago. The new container would not make anything easier. He just stared at the large thing and shook his head. The container took up most of his empty space and was still sealed.

“Ah, screw it. I’ll work on this on Monday,” Brian thought to himself. He shut off the light, went back to the main area of the store, grabbed his coat, and opened the front door.

“Lola, I’m heading out. Please lock up and set the security alarm when I leave. I will be back on Monday.”

“Very well, sir. Enjoy the rest of your weekend.”

Brian shut the door, took a deep breath, and headed off to take it easy.

Brian arrived at his store early Monday morning, refreshed and relaxed from fishing over the weekend. The fear over buying an expensive cargo container was now far from his thoughts. Curiosity about what was in it had gotten him up early. Lola greeted him as she did every morning. The store computer system started its morning ritual of turning on lights, booting up inactive systems, and replicating the usual breakfast of Vulturmary eggs and coffee.

Brian hung his coat up in his office and then went into the main area of the store to verify his antique displays. It was done up like an old-Earth trading post. He had used replicated lumber to make the inside look rustic, and a large counter kept space between him and the rest of the store, which was littered with antiques dating back thousands of years. The older, more delicate items were kept behind energy shields that had specialized vacuum glass as a backup. Satisfied that everything was in order, Brian eagerly went back down the hallway to the kitchenette as the smell of eggs and coffee grew stronger. He grabbed the mug of coffee and took a sip. The morning coffee satisfaction set in. It was the best old-Earth item that had never faded away. It was so popular that coffee shops were now littered throughout more alien worlds than there were human colonies.

After quickly devouring the eggs, Brian headed to the storage bay. The door slid open as he approached. The container was sitting dead center in the room of crates and boxes. In contrast to the store, this area was well lit and had modern metallic walls. Brian circled the cargo container. Centuries of damage and some scorch marks scarred the large container. The spade symbol was visible from where he and Kat had wiped the grime from it. Brian stared at it, unable to figure out what it meant.

“If this thing could talk, the stories it could tell.”

Years of working with containers helped him to locate the locking panel, but as he had feared, it was very corroded and damaged. Brian spent the better part of the morning and early afternoon breaking into the console and slicing into the old electronics. He only stopped to quickly eat, not because he was starving but due to Lola’s nagging. Many cables ran from the container’s locking panel to the store’s computer interface. Newer technology was much smaller and based on various organic compounds. The older stuff had some organic parts, but there were still conduits, wires, and interfaces to play with, hence the spaghetti mess of cables draped across the floor and other storage bins.

Brian tapped rapidly on the virtual screen. His fingers slid back and forth as he bypassed locks, codes, and passwords. He knew he was getting close. The lights in the shop dimmed, and the cargo mechanisms came to life. He heard beeping and grinding as old internal clasps and locks started to move. A few seconds later, there was a loud bang and a whoosh of air as the cargo door opened and the vacuum barrier was unsealed. Brian turned around and grinned. The whoosh meant that everything inside was as it had been when it was sealed.

Brian yelled, “Light!” and a light source came floating down from the ceiling and directed itself inside the container.

Brian ran over to behold his treasure. The contents were very well packed, and that made it all worth the trouble—and Kat would be very happy to regain her money plus some.

“Lola,” said Brian.

“Yes, sir,” replied the automated female voice.

“Continue breaking down the data so we can run through the manifest. I’m going to start removing the contents and inventorying them.”

“Yes, sir. Due to data corruption, it will be a few hours. Please remember to break for dinner.”

Brian shook his head at the last comment and started unpacking the container. The front of the container was stacked with old books and paperwork. He organized the items in what was left of the back room’s available space. He raised a stasis shield to protect the books from the elements. Brian was in awe at the age of the books. They predated the great evacuation of Earth. This was an antiques seller’s dream. After about three hours, Brian had removed most of the books from the container. That left him with one more row of books and another half of the container to go through.

“Sir, I have completed breaking down the manifest,” said Lola.

“Very good, Lola. Please bring it up on the portable data pad.”

Brian walked over to the high table scattered with various tools and pieces of old furniture. After a quick search under various items, he found the flat data pad. Leaning against the table, he started to scroll through the inventory list. The entire inventory was just books and important documents, and as he had thought, they were very old documents. Some predated the great nuclear world war. He smiled as he kept going through the inventory, but the smile was replaced with a frown of curiosity. He had only one five-foot row of books left to remove, and there was another half of the container to go.

“Three lights, please,” said Brian as he put the data pad down on the table and walked back over to the container.

Three hover lights met him at the container and entered ahead of him. Brian quickly moved a section of the remaining books to the side and peered into the now well-lit back section. The glistening of metal objects blinded him. There were piles of swords, goblets, shields, guns, and many other metal items. Brian thought he had hit the mother lode with the books, but this would give him his own wing at a museum.

“Lola, I’m going to start bringing out items. Please immediately scan, date, and inventory them.”

“Yes, sir.”

Brian worked through the night unloading the artifacts. He worked so fast that Lola fell behind in her item dating. Eventually, Brian called it quits, set up a hover bed, and went to sleep. He was in a happy place when Lola’s voice woke him up. Brian awoke groggy, and it took a second to realize where he was.

“Lola, what time is it?”

“Brian, it is six in the morning. You have been asleep for three hours.”

Brian shook his head to try to wake himself up. His body was sore from all the unloading, and his head hurt from lack of sleep.

“You could have let me sleep a little longer, you know.”

“Your orders were to inventory the items and inform you when completed.”

“Yeah, yeah,” replied Brian. “So have you completed it?”

“Yes, and it has been uploaded to all systems.”

“Excellent.” Brian headed to the kitchenette. He pushed a few buttons on the Foodographic machine, and about three seconds later, a ding alerted him that his Evuvian coffee and Hargnest eggs over easy were done. Grabbing his breakfast, he took a seat at the small table in the makeshift kitchen and took a sip of the coffee. It instantly woke him up. Old-Earth coffee was good, but Evuvian coffee hit you right away.

Brian looked at the wall opposite him and said, “Screen on.”

A virtual screen appeared on the wall.

“Lola, please bring up the cargo data analysis.”

Digging into his eggs, Brian started reviewing the analysis of the items he had pulled from the last part of the container. These items did not match the inventory manifest. It was as if someone had thrown them

in and then hidden them with the rows of books. There were rare swords, firearms, armor, goblets, vases, jewelry, and the list went on. This was an unbelievable find. There were items from all areas of Earth history before the great evacuation. Brian kept scrolling through the data and stopped at one particular item labeled “urn.”

“Lola, you have an item labeled ‘urn.’ An urn, as in what would hold a dead person after cremation?”

“Yes, sir. Item 2446-B. One urn bearing the name Ryan S. Hunt. Contents still contained and sealed. Current scan shows the urn to be around the Earth year 2070.”

Brian almost choked on his coffee and had to clear his throat before continuing. “Well. This makes him the oldest person I have ever met, and even though he is dead, I’m still counting it. Was this person of any importance to be part of these artifacts?”

“No, sir. According to old-Earth records, this person was of no great importance. Some data was lost after the destruction of Earth’s land masses, so there is a small chance I could be incorrect, but the name does not show up in any records.”

“It would seem we have a mystery on our hands then, Lola.”

“It would seem so, sir. Dr. Kat has inquired in the past about bones of old-Earth humans. Perhaps this urn would assist her in her quest?”

Brian recalled that conversation. Kat would not explain why, but she was looking for the remains of any old-Earth humans she could find. He had always wondered if it had something to do with the plague, but he had never asked.

“Thanks for reminding me. I’m going to clean up and then give Kat a call.”

“No problem, sir. I will start to document in greater detail all items that have been recovered.”

“Thank you, Lola,” replied Brian as he headed off to the lavatory.

It took Brian about a half hour to clean up and get himself in order. He got comfortable in the back office. His office walls were of the same metal detail that was in the storage bay. A replica old-Earth nineteenth-century Dutch desk was the centerpiece, and the walls were covered in artifacts he had found through the years. He tapped a few keys on the virtual screen covering his desk, and a circular tablet about eight inches in diameter rose from the right side. The holocircle allowed him to see an image of whomever he wanted to contact, and the other party would see the three-dimensional image of him. Larger holocircles would show a life-size image of the caller, but for his use, the smaller one was the most efficient and cheapest of the versions.

“Contact name, please,” stated the holocircle computer.

“Dr. Katalina Winslow at OTKE Corporation,” replied Brian.

“Contacting, please hold.”

About twenty seconds later, a three-dimensional image of Dr. Kat appeared on the disk. It was so lifelike she looked like a child’s doll.

“Hey, Brian, how are you?”

“I’m doing very well, Kat,” replied Brian as he stared at her for a second. “You changed your hair again. I thought that red you do was bright, but this is the brightest yet. And when I saw you a few days ago, it was blue.”

Kat touched the bright-pink streak in her hair with the matching bright-pink gloved hand. “Sorry, but the blue was too mellow,” she replied with a smirk.

“If you say so, but enough with the hair. Let’s get to why I called you. The cargo container was dead on.”

Brian smiled at the mini-image of Kat clapping her hands rapidly.

“Yay! That’s awesome, Brian! So you’re admitting I was correct, and you can’t wait to take me to an auction again?”

“I will never admit that, and if I decide to take you again, you will be bound.”

“I didn’t know you were into that, Brian.” Kat laughed at the image of Brian putting his hands on his blushing face. She liked backing him into corners.

“Focus, Kat. Focus.”

Kat stood up straight and put on her serious face. “Yes, sir. So what did we find?”

“We found very old Earth books that predate the Apocalypse, and some items that predate the great nuclear war. We hit the mother lode! Get a good color for your hair for the pictures and museum award ceremonies that will follow this find.”

“Oh! Yellow—maybe I will do a yellow streak. Or should I go white and look more sophisticated?”

Brian was now smiling ear to ear, picturing himself in proper attire standing next to a rainbow of colors.

“Oh, one more thing, Kat. Lola reminded me that you would be very interested in one item. For some unknown reason, there was an unimportant item among the relics.”

Kat stopped going on about colors and looked at Brian with awe, curiosity, and a large smile at the thought of something interesting.

“We found an urn. It contains the ashes of a deceased individual. Lola’s dating scanner estimates it to be around 2070, making it the oldest human remains that I know of.”

At the end of that sentence, the smile disappeared from Kat’s face. She became serious, and the tone of her voice changed.

“Brian. Put that in a safe place. I’m leaving now and will be there as fast I can to get it.”

Brian’s smile had vanished as well when Kat’s demeanor changed.

“Kat, is everything all right?”

“Yes. I’ll be there as fast I can.” Her image vanished.

Brian leaned backed in his chair. He had never seen her act like that before, but her tone told him she was very serious about this, and that worried him. Brian retrieved the urn and put it in a safe place.

A computer screen flickered as soon as Brian mentioned he discovered an urn containing remains to be dated around the Earth year 2070. The preprogrammed system had been scanning all communications for at least a century, looking for information such as this. The red alarm light flashed, and the computer system automatically set up a secure connection between its master and the bounty hunter he kept on retainer.

A lizard-looking humanoid in a black silk coat and hat—an outfit similar to a 1930s zoot suit, except that the back part of the hat flipped up—shook a pair of dice in his right hand. As the crowd screamed and cheered around him, his hand changed to the color of the white dice as he released them onto the gaming table. It was a rare talent, but some of the Chamai race were able to change their skin color to blend into the background, an effect that made the crowded table ooh and ahh. Larnex liked to do that for the effect it had. Along with the credits he was spending, it made him very popular with the women. Just as he threw the dice, the communication chip embedded in his head started to alert him of the incoming secure connection. Before the dice hit the table, Larnex was already moving to the ela-tubes that would take him to his room on the five hundredth floor of the casino.

“Receive comm,” he thought in his head. All he needed was just a thought to receive the communication. The device allowed him to receive and reply to communications directly to his thought process.

A scrambled voice echoed in his brain. “The location of the item I need to acquire has been discovered. It is a burial urn from the Earth year 2070. It will have the ash remains sealed inside. Coordinates are 122.4—6 degrees—mark 22.”

“Five hundredth floor,” said Larnex as he entered the ela-tube. The ela-tube brought him to the floor in less than five seconds.

He left the chute and headed toward his room. Without missing a beat, he replied to his customer, “Collateral damage criteria?”

“Get the urn at all costs. Level the city if you have to.”

Larnex smiled as he thought his reply. “Very well. Out.” The communication ended, and Larnex was already having his hand scanned to allow access to his room. He liked when there were no rules on the collateral damage—that meant anyone who got in his way was taken care of. Plus the coordinates were located on the planet he was currently on. Very convenient for him.

Larnex pulled a case from under his bed and immediately opened his home office. He dressed quickly into some tight-fitting Validor armor, attached a las-holster to his waist, and put on a long coat to cover himself up.

Ready to head out, Larnex raised the comm in his head to reach his associates located not too far from his current location.

“Yeah, boss,” the raspy voice answered.

“Sending you coordinates now. Meet me there, and bring Brig with you. We have an item to pick up.”

“Brig and I will be there shortly. Out.”

Larnex pulled his las-pistol from its case, checked the charge of the mag-cell, and slid it easily into its holster. Pulling his coat tight, he headed out.

Larnex’s personal transport vehicle, or PTV, was an Astorian Mark 12 hover sport coupe. It was a biointegrated car that recognized its owner as he approached. The left side of the car melded into the frame to allow access for its passenger and his gear. Larnex pulled his long coat tight and entered the car. The door reappeared in seconds to seal Larnex in. The car’s AI system was already activating the engines and plotting its course as Larnex spoke out the destination. The system blinked green with confirmation.

“ETA one hour,” replied the car’s AI.

Larnex sat back, stretched his neck, and prepared for his mission.

Larnex’s car’s ETA was correct. The car zipped its way through the busy flight traffic of the newer part of the city and landed in a building under construction in the old section close to the antiquities shop. The bounty hunter activated a homemade device that would melt the car once he got three hundred meters away from it. It was a shame to lose a PTV, but he would need to get off world quickly once he took ownership of the item, and leaving evidence behind was something he did not do. Larnex made the remaining few blocks on foot. As scheduled, he saw his associates sitting outside the Artesian café next to the antiquities shop. Callum the Wolfkin was a cross between a human and a wolf. They were not natural but had been scientifically developed during the gene wars of 42,960. Each Wolfkin was different based on how splicing of the two genetic structures merged. Callum had more human features but the muscled body of a wolf. It was rare that crosses were able to breed, but their kind was sometimes able to, allowing for the race to continue on. Brig, as always, was covered head to toe in black robes, showing none of his features or appendages. He just sat there as Callum sipped his beverage. Brig was a C-Tec, an unusual humanoid race that had integrated itself with technology. Since there were so many interplanetary races on this planet, no one paid them any mind as they sat outside the café.

Callum and Brig were Larnex’s most trusted associates. If something were to go wrong, Larnex wanted them at his side. The two noticed Larnex walking their way. Callum downed his beverage, and both of them casually left the table and headed toward the entrance of the antiquities store next door.

Larnex placed a small device on the wall between the two buildings that would set up a sound barrier in case the item retrieval got a little noisy, and then he headed into the antiquities shop.

Brian was pacing back and forth behind his front counter. He was organizing and cleaning anything to keep his mind off the urn. Kat’s words about hiding the urn and the way she spoke made him nervous. She was always bubbly and witty, but this time the serious tone she’d taken with him gave him a bad feeling. Brian just shook the thoughts off and bent down to organize some old Florarien parchments. They were three thousand years old but still smelled flowery after all this time. Brian took great care in handling

the parchments, but his organization was cut short. Lola's voice announced that customers had entered the store.

Brian jumped up to face a large Wolfkin looking down at him. He paused for a second and gulped as he also noticed the robed figure skulking about the store. The Wolfkin smiled as he took notice of the fear in Brian's face.

Standing up straighter to make himself look a little bit bigger, Brian asked, "How may I help you?"

Callum stepped back from the counter and looked around the store before speaking, but not to Brian. Callum thought in his head the word "clear." Larnex picked up the communication in his brain comm and entered the store. Larnex headed straight to the counter. Callum moved to flank the right half of the store, leaned his back on the counter, and watched the door. Brig ambled to the left and slowly peered at every angle of the store.

Brian watched the choreographed movement of the individuals with suspicion but focused his attention on the man in the long coat and hat coming straight at him.

"Um...is there something I can assist you gentlemen with?"

"Perhaps you can," replied Larnex in a very polite voice. He removed his hat and held it with both hands in front of him as if to show he was not hiding anything. Larnex could see some relief in Brian's face.

"I'm always glad to help new customers. If I do not have what you are looking for, I can most likely find it, or I can put you in touch with another off-world antiques dealer."

"That is very kind of you. I am a collector of old-Earth relics, and I am interested in one particular piece."

"I have a few old-Earth relics, but depending on the date, some are very rare and hard to find. What is it you are looking for?"

"The piece I am interested in is an old burial urn."

With that statement, Brian's face went pale, and he found himself at a loss for words.

"I...um...do not have such an item, but if you leave me your information, I can look around and contact you should I locate anything."

Larnex could smell the sweat starting to bead on Brian's forehead and hear his heart start to beat faster. Larnex slowly put his hat back on his head and fitted it so it felt right. The smile disappeared from his face as he now stared Brian down.

"Well, I thought we could do this the simple way. But now we are going to have to do it my way. I know you have something from old Earth called an urn. You can either give it to me and we'll leave, or we'll find it and level the building in the process. Your call."

Brian was now shaking. What had he gotten himself into? He jumped as he heard a click. The Wolfkin was unlatching the las-pistol that Brian now noticed on the creature's hip. Brian's eyes darted between Callum, Larnex, and Brigs.

Larnex stated, "Last chance, junk man. Three...two..."

Before he got to one, Brian yelled, "Lola, coffee bean!" In microseconds a blast shield rose across the counter, knocking the Wolfkin into and over one of the hover shelves in the store. An auto las-gun popped down from the ceiling and began shooting. Brian's emergency code had put Lola into defense mode. The ceiling las-gun hit Larnex twice, sending him to the ground in a shower of lights as his energy shield took most of the damage. Brig ducked behind a hover shelf for cover. This gave Brian time to run to the storage bay and seal the door.

Callum had rolled to a crouch after being thrown and now sprang back over the shelf with such force that it launched him ten feet in the air and right at the ceiling's auto las-gun. Callum hung from the las-gun and, with a roar, tore it off the ceiling. He and the gun fell to the floor in a shower of sparks. Callum tossed the las-gun aside and helped Larnex up.

Larnex pulled the spent energy shield off his belt and replaced it with a backup. Retrieving his hat, he looked at the humming shield and shook his head. "Brig, fix this now!" Larnex called out as he dusted himself off.

Brig, the C-Tec, walked from his hiding place to the wall of the building and started feeling the wall with his left hand. His hand suddenly stopped at a spot toward the floor. Brig raised his right arm and shook it so the robed sleeve fell back, revealing a metallic stump with swirling tendrils fitted with various probes. Two of them extended from the stump and crashed through the spot on the wall where his left hand had stopped. Brig had found a central cybernetic link to Lola's computer system and was now slicing it. Within five seconds the lights of the store went out, and so did the counter's blast shield. The small emergency lights crawled out of the ceiling and mounted themselves in strategic places.

"Callum, stay here and guard. Brig, you're with me."

The Wolfkin leaned on the center of the counter and watched the door as Larnex and Brig made their way after Brian. It did not take long for Larnex and Brig to get through the storage bay door.

"So, junk man, I guess we will forgo the easy way," announced Larnex as he and Brig entered the storage bay and the door closed behind them.