

SEARCH FOR THE ARK

George Sebastian Lace, Admiral in the Galactic Alliance of Federated Planets, called the meeting to order. "Are we good to go?" He shuffled the papers in front of him and glanced at the five attendees seated around the oval boardroom table. Each nodded their assent. Before he could begin, the door slid open, and a young woman with green eyes and long burnished red hair popped her head inside. "Hickory, glad you could make it. Come in, come in." He waved his arm to indicate she should take a seat.

Hickory Lace slipped in between her partners, Jess Parker and Gareth Blanquette and nodded to James Brandt and the two Agency staffers sitting beside him. "My apologies, Admiral. I've been in detox all week and just got your message." She spoke in a husky voice then coughed, raising a hand to her mouth. "Sorry, still have a touch of bronchitis from the trip."

Gareth grinned wryly then assumed a straight face at the Admiral's stern look. "Everyone knows my daughter? Hickory's on temporary loan to us from the Alien Corps. She's just returned from a diplomatic mission to Cygnus, a class IV planet in Canis Major. Commander Lace has been in our med-center regressing to Earth-normal after undergoing a Maquillage procedure to allow her body to cope with the high concentration of Xenon in that planet's atmosphere. Well, now we're all here, let's get started." He went straight to the point. "Our friends the Bikashi have been spotted entering the quadrant."

Hickory glanced at Jess and Gareth and raised her eyebrows. Although not currently at war, the Bikashi were friends with no-one in the Allied Federation of Planets. If they were hereabouts, it spelled trouble, with a capital T.

The Admiral continued. "In the last week, several Alpha-class jets exited hyperspace inside the Eridanus system and rendezvoused with a mothership in high orbit over the planet Prosperine. At first, we thought this might be the start of another attempt by the Bikashi Warlord, Kabutai, to grab the planet's FTL fuel. Auriga's faster-than-light capability is inferior to ours, as you know, and they'd do anything to get their hands on some crynidium."

He leaned forward and slapped his palms on the table. "Well, we were wrong. The jets flew to a point in space, about three million miles from Prosperine's sun, and held their position."

Gareth whistled through his teeth. "As close as they could get, eh? Any nearer and they'd burn up."

The Admiral nodded. “They stayed there a little over six hours, then hightailed it back to their mother ship.” He paused, looking up from the podium. “Then, five days ago, the jets stopped coming, and the mother ship disappeared.”

Jess emitted a nervous laugh. “What—were they hoping to find the Ark?” She folded her arms across her stomach. “Good luck with that. It blew up into a million pieces.”

“They found *something*.” Surprise made Hickory’s voice rise in pitch. She wondered what there could possibly have been left to salvage. She’d witnessed the Teacher’s spaceship, nicknamed the Ark, fly into Eridani’s corona where the temperature was over 35,000 degrees, Kelvin. The ship had lit up like a roman candle. Jess was right, there *couldn’t* have been anything left to find. She felt a flare of anger tinged with guilt at the mere hint the Bikashi might think differently.

Jess gripped her wrist. “Take it easy, Hick. We don’t know they found anything. Maybe they just got bored looking.” She shrugged at Gareth’s scornful face.

The Admiral stood and paced around the table. “I don’t think so, Jess—”

“They found the Sword.” Hickory completed her thought.

“The odds on that are a zillion to one,” said Gareth, shaking his head. “When the ship went nova, it was the equivalent of a thousand simultaneous nuclear explosions. Nothing could have survived. There wouldn’t *be* any wreckage.”

In the end, I left him to go to his death alone. She’d fought to stay with him, but her father had dragged her to safety.

The Admiral held up a hand to forestall further argument. “Normally, I’d agree with you, but we need to remember the Ark was constructed from materials unknown to us. The technology of its drive systems was incomprehensible-still is. We’ve pored over the visual records left by the Ark builders and to be honest we’ve made little progress. We know the ship was designed to withstand extreme conditions-it was intended for a long space migration to New Prosperine, somewhere on the other side of the universe.”

He picked up the holoscreen remote and dimmed the lights. “I asked for a review of all the data we had on the Ark’s first and only flight. This is a recording from two hours after the Ark exploded. Look at the lower left corner of the projection, just...there.” He paused the video and waited for their reactions.

At first, Hickory could see nothing unusual.

Gareth shook his head, and Jess squinted, trying to make out anything other than the sun, its corona and the outlying stars.

“I’ll increase the magnification,” said the Admiral. “Now, do you see it?”

Hickory’s heart missed a beat. She clutched at the emerald-encrusted crucifix around her neck. There, in the bottom left quadrant, was a point of light that shouldn’t have been there.

“What is that, some sort of computer glitch? A cyber ghost?” said Jess, pointing her finger at the screen.

“It’s a reflection,” said Gareth, awed. “A solid body of some sort, but too smooth for a meteor, eh?”

“It’s a life-pod.” Hickory bit her lip, then coughed uncontrollably into her handkerchief.

The Admiral frowned at his stepdaughter, then his stern expression softened. “I’m sorry, Hickory. It’s a capsule, approximately five feet long by two in diameter at its widest point. It’s much too small to sustain organic life for very long. If you watch the recording again in real time, you’ll see it sparkle like a star. Or like a beacon.” He paused. “We think it’s some sort of black box, jettisoned by the Ark before it exploded.”

Hickory’s mind was in turmoil. *No, you don’t know that! It might be Kar, he might have survived.* But the spark of hope dimmed quickly in the face of the Admiral’s certainty. “You’re sure it couldn’t be a life pod?” Her hoarse whisper was lost amid Gareth’s outburst.

He jumped from his seat, his eyes wide and face flushed. “Where is it, is it here?” His eyes swiveled around the room as though expecting the pod to be displayed nearby.

“I wish it were,” said the Admiral. “But it’s gone, vanished, poof!” He snapped his fingers, then walked over to the side table and poured himself some coffee.

The three Alien Corps executives glanced at each other. “You think Kabutai has it, don’t you?” Jess asked.

The Admiral pressed his lips together and sipped his coffee. “It’s a logical explanation.” He shrugged, and the others stared at him, waiting. He blew on his coffee before taking a second sip. A pink blush appeared above his collar. “You three have been through so much already, especially you Gareth after the treatment the Bikashi Commander, Vogel, dished out to you.” He paused, placing his cup on the table. “And you’re due to return to your regular post at the Alien Corps soon, Hickory, but if there’s the slightest chance the Bikashi have that capsule, we must make certain they don’t use it.

“The Ark builders were the furthest advanced of any people in the galaxy then *and* now, and their science is still centuries ahead of ours. If Kabutai manages to harness their technology, it will change the balance of power. I don’t want to be dramatic, but I’m talking a doomsday scenario.

“We must prevent that happening at all costs, but I can’t risk all-out war by sending in the troops, not yet anyway. This has to be a clandestine operation. You three are our most senior agents when it comes to dealing with the Bikashi. I would understand if you refused to go to Auriga, but...” He let the question hang in the air.

Hickory gripped her hands to stop them shaking. *It’s big enough for the Sword, but not the Teacher.* She replayed in her mind the last few moments of her final encounter with Vogel. The Sword had transformed him into a gigantic horror who’d only been destroyed because of an underhand attack on him by one of his own. But Vogel was no more, and neither was Thurle, his lieutenant. She looked up and realized the others were waiting.

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Since the discovery of the prophecy that the Messiah would appear on distant planets prior to the end of days, the Alien Corps had encountered many false prophets and would-be redeemers throughout the galaxy, but never a true Messiah. Three years previously, a spiritual leader calling himself *The Teacher* was reported to be performing miracles on Prosperine—a medieval planet critically important to Earth and its allies.

Hickory was sent to investigate and had witnessed the Teacher’s last moments as he’d piloted the Segniori spaceship, *the Ark*, into the sun to prevent a massive explosion destroying Prosperine. The resulting impact had triggered the onset of a nuclear fusion process in the 28G Eridani’s core, which the scientists estimated would generate energy for hundreds of thousands of years.

As a result, Prosperine’s sun became a main sequence star once more, and the radiation poisoning the planet’s atmosphere for the last several centuries had ceased. Prosperine’s inhabitants would have eons of normal evolution to look forward to.

She wondered whether he had known. His sacrifice was intentional, of course. He’d planned to take the spacecraft far enough away from the planet to keep Prosperine safe from the blast, but did he realize crashing into the sun would provide his people with a future free from the crippling effects of their dying star? It was the question Hickory asked herself every day. She wanted it to be true because if he did know,

then Philip's prophecy was fulfilled. Kar was a Son of God, the savior of his people just like Jesus was on Earth. And she would follow him forever.

Hickory fingered the glittering crucifix dangling from her neck. The priceless jewel had been presented for distinguished service to Talya, her great grandmother, the co-discoverer of Philip's prophecy, and the first female to join the Alien Corps. Hickory wore it as a talisman of sorts, but it was more than a lucky charm. It represented a connection with a heroic past and provided inspiration for her future.

She looked at the expectant faces of her friends and the others around the boardroom table. None of them really believed there was a God, except maybe Jess. *They could be right.* But if the quest that had driven the Alien Corps for almost a century was based on a fallacy, and the prophecy a lie, then her work over the last ten years had been worthless. She couldn't bring herself to believe it, not really, but she needed time to get her head straight. What was the point of her volunteering for an assignment that had little to do with the Alien Corps' quest? *Surely other operatives are better suited?*

The Admiral shifted in his seat and glanced at Jess and Gareth. "Hickory, what do you say. Are you good to go?"

Hickory's lips were dry. She tried to moisten them with her tongue, but it too had dried up.

"I...I don't think I can," she said. "Not now."