

Prelude

Mason Zanti made himself at home in the corner booth of the pub known as Boar Teeth. Although he was a merchant, the Brigader clientele of the bar had long accepted him as a regular. The business he managed, Outland Imports, was just around the arcing walkway. From there, on a low pedestrian day, he could just glimpse the giant tusks and pushed out snout of the pub as it beckoned all to enter into its maw.

The bar's back booths were notable for two things. First, the menu was displayed as a rotating holographic projection onto the tabletop. This trick was the result of a bit of salvaged ancient tech that the owner had bought on the black market. Second, and perhaps more important, the booths were cloaked in thick curtains that damped the thumping music that accompanied the dancers on the front stage. The combined novelty meant that the booths were often chosen as places where deals were discussed or carried out, the occupants feeling safe in their concealed curtained privacy.

Mason was a man with a certain reputation so although he was not expecting company, he was not amazed when a stranger poked his head in between the curtains, and upon seeing the opposite bench unoccupied, slid in, and joined him.

“Hello, friend,” offered the Brigader who wore sergeant stripes.

Mason gave him a questioning look and did not return the greeting.

The sergeant gave him a warm smile as he leaned forward.

“I hear tell . . .” he began matter-of-factly, “that you are a man of deals.”

The assertion raised Mason's eyebrows and his level of caution.

"That is mostly true during business hours, Sergeant . . .?" he gestured.

"Barker," supplied the sergeant, his joviality unfazed by Mason's cool reception.

"My store is just—"

"Yes," interrupted Barker, "Outland Imports. I am fully aware of your store and the trinkets it carries."

Mason rocked back in his seat.

"Trinkets . . ." he bristled.

Barker smiled, and then in a lowered voice that drew Mason forward, began, "I've got something far beyond those Tader handicrafts you so proudly display." Seeing that he had Mason's attention, he continued. "I have magic."

Mason's brow crinkled in dubious uncertainty.

"Magic?" he repeated in a disbelieving tone.

"Magic," affirmed Barker reaching into his uniform coat. He produced a silk cloth from his breast pocket. "Tell me, Mason Zanti, what would the CORE give for a new stash of these?"

He set the cloth on the table, carefully pulling the edges back to reveal a clear crystal some six centimeters in length. The perfect formation of the hexagon structure widened Mason's eyes, dropping his mouth slightly. He leaned forward in awe, not really sure he was seeing what he thought he was seeing. After all, he had never really seen one for real. He had only heard about

them as the existing ones were tightly controlled by the CORE, the Council of Replication Engineers.

“Is that . . .?”

“An ancient storage crystal . . . an ambry . . .” confirmed Barker with an affirmative nod, “. . . untouched by CORE hands. Acquired just recently from an outland mission, and . . .” he paused, leaving the last, most juiciest bit hanging for that merest extended moment, “I’ve confirmed that it is *not* empty.”

“Ancient information . . .” whispered Mason, awestruck by what he was hearing.

His mind reeled. Ancient information . . . From Before Time technology . . . Before the crash of the High Time, and the tergum of the Taden, a time when technologies were shaped to each person, doing their bidding in almost magical fashion. The Now Time of the restructured magist lived as a shadow of the Before Time. A place where great heaps of Before Time knowledge had been lost, leaving men like Mason to covet and scour for the remnants.

Although the CORE tried to cover the fact that they were unable to replicate the manufacture of much of the technology used for day-to-day activities, everyone knew that storage crystals were in short supply and carefully controlled. Not one piece of data was stored that wasn’t deemed of supreme necessity. Whole lobbying industries existed to determine whose genome was to be stored, what events, what recordings . . . The list was endless, but the storage capacity that had become more and more constrained over the centuries was not. The soldier had made a huge discovery!

“And what keeps me from killing you right here and taking the crystal?” asked Mason, now fully engaged in the art of the deal. There were now things he needed to determine.

“Ah,” smiled Barker, “much like you, I am someone’s proxy . . .”

The statement was equivalent to invoking Ponopin’s name, which narrowed Mason’s eyes. The insinuation that the proxy was reaching out to Ponopin put Mason back on guard. Ponopin was a man who was very much wanted by the CORE. Virtuoso entrepreneur that he was, he was also a Tader, and an enemy of the magist. He had spent countless rotations operating across the barrier between the two worlds. The numbers of his investments and aliases were unknown, but his influence seemed to pop up everywhere. Mason endeavored to protect his chief consort by not reacting, but the soldier’s next statement made it all but impossible.

“And why have one ambry when you can have five hundred . . .”

“Five hundred!?” choked Mason.

That was an unheard of expansion of capacity, and it came with the potential of reclaiming lost knowledge from the crystal’s contents. With that number, he and Ponopin could spend the rest of their lives being the sole provider of ambries to the CORE.

“But, of course, this person wants to move cautiously, you understand. With a transaction of this magnitude, there is a certain amount of trust that must be built.”

“Yes, of course . . .” nodded Mason.

“And to start, I’m going to let you have this crystal so that you can verify its veracity . . .”

Mason looked stunned as Barker pushed the silk package forward, then slid out of the booth.

“We’ll be in touch,” he nodded.

And then the sergeant disappeared through the curtain.