

*** Planet: Rekorla * GDAT 3237.028 ***

Luka hadn't expected to be back at the planetary spaceport quite so soon, and not in the middle of a workday. The huge port was teeming with crowds of people, some in a hurry to get somewhere, some doing their jobs, some waiting. He'd never cared for crowds, and especially not since his talent had flared. More than half the people were carrying one or more weapons in holsters, rigs, sheaths, and pockets, which he still wasn't used to even after a year of living in Etonver. The city didn't even require biometric safeties on any of them.

His eventual destination was the food court commons, the public place where the informant wanted to meet. The unlooked-for informant that Zheer had sent him to meet, in Leo Balkovsky's place.

For now, he stood on the pedestrian bridge above to get the lay of the land. Morganthur stood quietly to the side and a couple of paces behind him, as had been her habit so far. Her dark green civilian suit, a long jacket over a buttoned shirt and pants, didn't fit perfectly, so she probably bought it set-sized instead of from an autotailor. He wondered if she didn't have the money or didn't care. At least it and her light overcoat concealed any weapons she might be carrying besides the wrist knife he'd seen at the warehouse. Her expression and body stance were neutral, but he had the feeling she was very aware of her surroundings.

He hadn't planned on bringing Morganthur today, except he'd been in a bloody-minded mood the day before. He'd mostly forgotten about her after the dead-of-night meeting when Zheer had forced him into leading the case. He owed Zheer for giving him a job and working around his... eccentricities. If he really wanted off the hook, he'd have to tell her the truth about his talent, and he wasn't willing to take the chance that she'd consider him impaired. The case was too important to give to anyone else. Zheer knew he'd been a lead investigator before, and had the record to prove it. La Plata's top investigator had been Leo Balkovsky, a mid-level finder who made it out of the Minder Corps of the Citizen Protection Service more or less sane, but he'd been gutted like a fish in the Centaurus warehouse. Luka missed Leo's good-natured teasing and confident leadership with painful intensity.

After what had happened at the warehouse, Luka hadn't slept well and had gone into work early. He'd been too restless to work in his office, so he'd decamped to a nearby conference room, as he sometimes did when he needed room to pace. Vengeance fantasies kept infiltrating his rational thought processes, and the movement helped him stay focused. He'd heard Velasco looking for him, but hadn't been in the mood to deal with him. Then he'd heard another voice, and it became apparent that Velasco had run into Malamig, the scheduling manager from Security Division. Luka wouldn't have eavesdropped if he hadn't heard his own name.

"...Morganthur to drive me and Foxe last night?" asked Velasco.

"Don't ask me," replied Malamig with evident antipathy. "Investigation Division picked her from *my* roster. Something about availability and location. Why, did she screw up?"

"No, she didn't do anything except drive and stand around. Wouldn't talk to either of us. Typical graveyard shifter—no social skills whatsoever." He snorted. "Once I saw her in the light, I remembered meeting her a few months ago. Tall, skinny blondes with little titties aren't my type." Some men remembered women's names, faces, or jobs; Velasco remembered their bodies. "I mean, Foxe is weird and all, but he's got nothing on her. Dekkil says she always carries two or three knives."

"She's stupid, and she doesn't know how to cooperate," said Malamig with vitriol. Luka wondered what she'd done to piss off her boss. Perhaps she'd turned him down for sex. If so, Luka's estimation of her taste rose a couple of notches.

"You better be careful," continued Malamig. "She might be willing to spread for Foxe to get *your* job, and then you'll be back in patrol doing shift work again."

Velasco laughed. "I'm not worried. Foxe is oblivious to women, and even if he wasn't, I doubt he goes for zero-witted or hostile."

The conversation had ended a minute later, with Malamig headed back to his office and Velasco leaving for parts unknown.

If they hadn't mentioned Morganthur's name, Luka would never have guessed they'd been talking about the same quiet, unexpectedly competent woman who'd helped him in the warehouse. Even if she was uncooperative or hostile, which he highly doubted, she'd been immediately more useful than Velasco. He didn't care what either Velasco or Malamig thought of him personally, but oddly, he found himself annoyed on Morganthur's behalf.

So Luka had given in to malicious impulse and sent a request to Zheer for Morganthur to accompany him the next day to the meeting. An informant with information about the case just dropping in from the sky still felt entirely too convenient. He firmly told himself he'd asked for Morganthur because he hated to see good talent to go waste, and definitely not because, for the first time in a couple of years, he was attracted to someone—a lithe, cheetah-slim woman with hidden depths.

"Ten minutes."

Her low-pitched, slightly raspy voice brought him back to the present. He'd asked her to give him a countdown at five-minute intervals, in case he got distracted by his talent or violent memories. He hadn't, but only because he'd been distracted by thinking about her. He gave himself a mental shake to focus on the job at hand.

"Showtime, I guess."

He was still bothered by this meeting. Even if his talent was unpredictable, his intuition was as good as ever, and it was pulsing warning pings.

They rode the moving stairs to the floor below and threaded through the thinning lunchtime crowd to the prearranged meeting place under the giant clock. It displayed galactic coordinated date and time, local time, and similar data for a dozen popular destination cities on Rekorla and other planets. The murmurs of dozens of languages made a sea of sound. Luka snagged an abandoned tray so he wouldn't look out of place and found an empty table. Morganthur had already drifted away, making their connection less obvious. The informant knew what he looked like, so all he had to do was wait to be found.

It didn't take long. An older, round-faced, olive-skinned woman with gray-streaked black hair, wearing the uniform of a spaceport maintenance worker, slipped into the chair opposite his. She was trying to play it cool, but her eyes darted around too often.

"Lukasz Foxe?" She mangled the pronunciation of his first name. Most people did.

When he nodded, she said, "I'm Sandy Green."

Almost certainly not her name, but he understood her caution.

"Call me Luka. Pleased to meet you," he said, not as warmly as he'd intended. He was liking this situation less and less. It felt like a setup, although he didn't know who the target was. "I understand you have some data you're willing to share?"

Green pushed her hair back behind her ear in a nervous gesture. "Do you work with Balkovsky? He's who I talked to."

"He's unavailable at the moment." If she didn't know Leo was dead, Luka wasn't going to be the one to tell her. "Your message said you wanted to talk immediately. You're moving soon?"

"I'm being transferred," she said, and her flat tone hinted she wasn't happy about it. She leaned closer and said more quietly, "Look, Balkovsky promised me a reward if I told him who's been after Centaurus Transport."

Luka showed more surprise than he felt. Greed was so dependable. "This is the first I've heard of it. I'd have to run it by the office."

"*Carajo*, don't you people even talk to one another?" Green's expression hardened in annoyance.

Luka made a placating gesture. "If your information is good, I think we can work something out. How much did you have in mind?"

She named a figure that raised his eyebrows. Small ocean yachts could be bought for less.

"I'm the one taking a chance here," she said defensively. "He'll kill me if he finds out I'm talking to you."

She painted a picture of a man with a grudge because Centaurus Transport's poor service had cost him his business, his home, and eventually his family. She was saying all the right things, but Luka thought it felt too easy, too believable. On the other hand, it could be true and he could be twisting himself with patterns that didn't exist. He wasn't a finder like Leo, able to extrapolate truths from unconnected, random data.

Hell, this was why he'd resigned his Concordance Command commission and left criminal investigation. Before last year, he could have focused his talent on her to get a sense of whether or not to trust her. Then he'd forced his talent to burn bright to catch a predator. It had nearly cost him his own life, and now he couldn't make it stop. He could see a lot more and deeper, but once he started, his own thoughts got swamped and he drowned.

Luka was rocked by a stark memory of Leo, curled like a child in death. If Luka didn't take a chance, he'd never get justice for his friend. Maybe with so many people nearby, he'd be able to use them like a white noise generator to counter the input from his talent.

For the first time in months, he hesitantly tried to see the essence of the woman in front of him. His initial impression was that Green was sincere and worried, maybe with a thread of vengeance, but there was an unexpected layer under it, and it was nothing he recognized. It was almost like looking at pieces of a mosaic without being able to see the whole, and seeing the whole was the core of his talent. He'd never felt anything like it, and didn't want to now or ever again. His stomach turned leaden.

Needing to get away from the disturbing fractures in her, he dragged his focus to the young man at the next table. It helped some, but now he was starting to sense the man, and cold visions started to form around the details that told stories of the possible. In growing desperation, he looked around as casually as he could. His eyes lighted on Morganthur, who was leaning one shoulder against the pillar of the huge clock, looking like a bored passenger with time to kill. He focused his talent on her, keeping her in his peripheral vision as he looked down at his hands resting on the table.

To his relief, the images in his mind began to mist away and his talent cooled. For whatever reason, focusing on someone he knew, however slightly, was helping him regain control. He returned his gaze to the woman in front of him, while still keeping Morganthur

in his sight as his talent quieted. Green had stopped talking, and he quickly replayed in his head her last few words, something about being scared of the vengeful man who had nothing to lose. She was fidgeting nervously with the beads of her necklace-style percomp.

He opened his mouth to speak reassuringly, but movement from Morganthur caught his attention. She'd straightened up and gone from being still to... not still. It was subtle, but if he had to describe it, he'd say she was looking antsy. It reminded him of how she'd looked in the warehouse when she'd thought she'd heard something, and turned out to be right. Even though the food court was large and open, he was suddenly feeling claustrophobic.

That was enough for him. He stood up, and Green did, too, though with obvious reluctance.

"I don't blame you for being cautious," he told her, not meeting her eyes. "You deserve the reward you were promised, so don't give me the man's name right now or my boss might think he doesn't need to pay you." He handed her a La Plata comm card. "I'll do what I can on my end, so ping me tomorrow." He didn't care if she thought he was rude, but he had to get away.

He strode quickly toward the moving stairs with the pace of someone running late. To his relief, his talent quieted fully as the distance increased. On the stairs, he turned to check the local time on the big clock, giving him the chance to confirm that Morganthur wasn't far behind him. She was seemingly focused on her percomp, but the immobility of her shoulders said she was still on alert. At the bridge level, he threaded himself in and between clumps of people until he got to a safe vantage point from the pedestrian bridge. Keeping his face in shadow, he looked at the food court to see if Green was still there. She was, though she was now closer to the clock pillar.

He felt Morganthur's approach behind him without having to look. "What now?" she asked softly. He was grateful not to have to explain his actions to her. Velasco would have been on his twentieth question by then.

"We watch Green," he said. "Too many inconsistencies."

Once he'd gotten away from the woman, away from the threat of losing control, he'd had the chance to consider why his intuition was giving off warnings. Mostly little things, like her uniform had been too new, her makeup too expertly applied, her English accent too precise, and her percomp too delicate and expensive for a maintenance worker. The story about a vengeful man sounded like the plot from a tri-D detective drama. Not to mention that nauseating fracturing of her that he'd sensed, though his talent wasn't exactly reliable these days.

Morganthur stepped forward and leaned her elbows on the railing. Though she was looking down at the food court, she looked like she was lost in thought, not really seeing anything.

After only a minute, one man, clearly a mercenary even when seen from a distance, approached Green, and two other mercs converged on her from two other directions. Green talked, the merc nodded and talked, Green shrugged, the merc talked more. Her body language said she knew the man and wasn't afraid of him. Green walked away, and the first merc said something to the other two that had them heading in the same direction Luka and Morganthur had taken, toward the moving stairs. Luka had to force himself to keep in mind the possibility that Green had hired the mercs to protect her, not target him.

He was startled out of his thoughts by Morganthur, who had turned to look at him. "I need to run an errand." Her expression was unreadable. He suddenly realized he hadn't

given a thought to how her schedule had been disrupted because of him, and he felt guilty for not asking.

“Sure, go ahead. We’re done here.” He looked at his percomp for the time. “I’ll catch a flitter. That should get me back in time to do some running on an actual planet for a change.”

She nodded and strode off, but into the port instead of toward the exit. Out of curiosity, he’d have liked to see where she was going, but decided it wouldn’t be prudent to chance running into the two mercs who’d headed for the moving stairs.