

# NEBULA RIFT

The background of the cover is a detailed illustration of a futuristic, industrial interior. The scene is dominated by a large, central red spherical object with a metallic, reflective surface. This sphere is connected to a complex network of dark, branching structures that resemble a neural network or a data processing system. The environment is filled with various mechanical components, pipes, and glowing lights in shades of blue and purple, creating a high-tech, atmospheric setting. The overall aesthetic is reminiscent of a sci-fi or cyberpunk theme.

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# NEBULA RIFT

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# INTO THE JADE VALLEY

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“We’re being watched.” Theron was matter-of-fact but whispered. He glanced at the hills and sand dunes, then back to the bloodroot tree tubers from which he was draining water into our canteens. A day into our journey across the Vacant Lands, we had stopped to rest. Theron, my guide, surveyed the hills and dunes, squinting against the glare of the afternoon sun.

“Is it the Langurs?” I asked, but Theron didn’t answer.

“We must move, and we must move quickly.” This made me a bit concerned. Did Theron sense some danger? I couldn’t tell. “They do not like we stop. Must see us always moving.”

“OK,” I said and hoisted my backpack. I had known about these creatures since arriving at Ridgley Station. They were large, fierce beasts called Langurs because they looked similar to a type



of monkey back on Earth; only these creatures were taller than humans and were known to be intelligent and sentient. They claimed the desert territories we were crossing as their home known locally as the Vacant Lands. It is a vast expanse of dusty green and umber colored sand, yellowed rock, and dead plants.

Theron already had his pack up on his back and started off down the dry riverbed at a brisk clip. The thought of these creatures watching us was unsettling. "Think we'll have trouble?" I asked. Theron and I each had a late model laser pistol but against these creatures, they seemed pointless.

"No, Mr. Porter," whispered Theron, turning his head slightly. "And be glad. It is this safety for which you are paying me. They are there, but I believe they will stay hidden. They will simply watch us as we cross. As I told you, I am the only guide at Ridgley Station who can take you safely across the Vacant Lands to the Jade Valley. I always say, 'the man who prepares is the man who succeeds.' You see, I did them a good deed a couple of years ago."

"Really?" I said not that I cared.

"Yes, indeed, Mr. Porter. I got the Ridgley Station scientists to move a road that crossed a bit of the Vacant Lands. I make a deal with their leader, Palis. The scientists move the road, and I get credit. So, they let me take people across, and, in return, I bring them food. Saves two weeks from going around through Iron Mountains."

"And that's how you know they speak English?"

"Yes, that is correct. Everyone surprised. No one knows how they learn."

Theron's pace was too fast for me, and I tended to fall behind.



Periodically, he would stop to let me catch up, all the while trying to hide his irritation. He mentioned nothing about running across the desert back at the hotel bar in Ridgley.

The Station is the forgotten colony. It is a remote outpost on Kepler-69c, the farthest point mankind has ever explored. Colonized during a period of aggressive and enthusiastic space exploration, a period when there seemed to be no limits to mankind's reach in the universe. Once humanity broke the light barrier, once there were deep-space fusion drives, tungsten ion extravehicular particle shields, and quantum laser mass/time reversal cells, explorers could reach interstellar distances only dreamed of just a few years before. But later, the enthusiasm waned, economics changed, and the professional class left the colony for better prospects elsewhere.

Far away I heard a shriek, like the cry of a red-tailed hawk or the screech of an owl. Then there was another, and another, fainter and from different directions, but just as blood-curdling.

"Damn, Theron," I mumbled. The shrieks reminded me just how exposed we were, how vulnerable. These creatures seemed to be everywhere. I couldn't see them, but Theron was sure they were watching us.

Theron turned his gaze to the horizon, checking the rocks and outcrops, the escarpments and dunes for signs of the Langurs. "I always keep my bargain. I provide the meat they crave," he said. "But we must keep moving Mr. Porter. Please try to keep up."

Theron may feel comfortable around these savages, but I didn't. The whole idea of being out here, exposed like this, made me nervous. Scanning the horizon and gullies, I still saw nothing.



“They are hard to see,” said Theron. “Well camouflaged. And their eyes, like amber, no pupils, very weird look.”

I reminded myself I knew very little about this Theron. People in Ridgley Station regarded him highly as a guide, but he was a drifter who would hire on to construction crews when there wasn't much guide business to keep the rent paid. No one I talked with knew where he had come from or anything about his past. The only consistent comment I heard was that he was the only person in Ridgley Station that could take someone across the Vacant Lands and back without any trouble from the Langurs. That was the one thing I needed.

“You think they'll watch us all the way across?”

“Yes, I think they will, indeed, Mr. Porter. They don't want us off the trail. So long as we move and stay in the riverbed, I am sure, no trouble.” He waved his hand dismissively.

Theron was too smug. He was too sure of himself, too trusting of the Langurs. I was sure he was hiding something. I decided I didn't like him, didn't trust him.

We stopped for the night under another bloodroot tree. I gulped some water and slapped at the flying insects that bit the hell out of wherever they could get at me. My neck and arms were gritty and sweaty, and I sat in the shade scanning the hills. This time out of the corner of my eye, I caught the briefest movements near the crest of a dune, a sweep of dirty yellow that seemed to melt into some rocks. It disappeared so quickly I wondered if I had seen anything at all.

“Theron laughed, “Mr. Porter, did you see that?” He laughed again. “It is sometimes a game with them, a ‘le jeu’. He laughed again,



or perhaps, 'le gibier'. He wanted you to see him, to make you think you are his prey. It is to heighten your fear, sir, or, maybe, to let you know that they have not forgotten you. I have known them sometimes to dart in and out of sight. I understand they will taunt their victims, or simply alarm them for sport. They hunt as a pack. Our pistols would be of no use. But, I think he is only playful. I wouldn't read anything into it, Mr. Porter."

"I'm not interested in playing games," I whispered. "I just want to get through this damn desert." Taking this short cut had seemed like a good idea back at the hotel bar in Ridgley. There were still two days to get across, and I was sick of the sun, the infernal heat, the sand, the grit, and the tiny biting insects that hovered around our heads.

"We will most certainly get across safely, Mr. Porter," said Theron, perhaps sensing my discomfort. "We are only a day or so from the river and over that is the Valley." Theron was still checking the horizon in all directions.

Night folded in on us, and an odd sprinkling of stars and larger planets lit the sky. The shrieks of the Langurs calmed some and stillness settled over our camp. Theron had built a small fire, and we ate dried meat and vegetables. Theron sat on the ground quietly smoking and looking at the sky. He seemed totally unfazed by the long hike that day. He had continually pushed me to pick up the pace, so I was exhausted. I rolled myself up in my blanket and quickly fell into a deep sleep.

Barely conscious of reality, a part of some nightmare, I thought I heard a rustle deep in the darkness of my dreams. It startled me



awake, and I questioned whether I had heard anything at all. I lay perfectly still, straining to detect any sound or movement that might account for the noise. The fire had gone out, it was pitch dark, and we were hours into the night. Then there was another sound, a movement, muffled, a faint crunching of gravel, a rustling that convinced me it had not been a dream. My body was frozen as fear swept through me. The Langurs, I thought. We could be torn to shreds any second.

Then, suddenly, a yell rang through the quietness. I involuntarily jerked in fear, and then fumbled for my pistol. Everything was dark, but I heard snarling and then a blast from Theron's gun. The entire campsite lit up with a white-blue explosion as the laser fragmented the ground into a shower of sand and rock. Gravel rained down on us. In the flash of brightness, I saw what looked like a small wolverine or badger running up the far embankment. Theron yelled after him as darkness folded in around us again.

In minutes, Theron had the fire going and I warmed my hands to stop the shaking. The commotion had caused the Langurs to issue a series of shrieks and cries that only made the lonely darkness more ominous.

"It was a Sharptail," said Theron. "I think unusual, but not unheard of in this part of the desert. He smells the food and just find his way into our camp."

"Did you hit him?"

"I don't think so. He was running full speed when he go over hill. It was dark. I don't think he returns. From now on we'll keep the fire going all night. That will keep him and any others away."



It was almost dawn, so we packed our gear, ate some of the dried meat, and moved off in the dim light. Theron had taken the invasion of the Sharptail in stride, but I was still shaking from the terror of the night before. I was sure it had been the Langurs, and I was near the point of wanting to return to Ridgley Station, but we were more than halfway across. I decided this would be the last time I'd cross the Vacant Lands, not realizing the prescience of that thought.

“So, Mr. Porter,” Theron whispered suddenly, shifting his pack, “what brought you to Ridgley?” The question struck me as nosey and almost impertinent. Ridgley Station was not a typical intergalactic colony. It had become a refuge of last resort for all sorts of human detritus, and chief among its advantages was privacy. At the moment, feeling agitated with the Sharptail incident, I didn't appreciate questions of any kind, especially about my motives or my past.

The station had changed over the years. Interest had waned in exploring the most distant galaxies and, even with the discovery of high-quality jade, law-abiding people packed up and left. Ridgley Station became a haven for those seeking a place where laws were not so strictly enforced. It was the preferred destination of thugs and misfits. Only the drifters, gem traders, and scientists still came and went. A single transport vessel docked once a month, which maintained a fragile link to the greater civilization. Over time, though, Ridgley Station had taken on the appearance of a down and out twenty-first-century mining town.

Theron was a step or two in front but turned his head slightly, and said more loudly, “To Ridgley Station, Mr. Porter? What brought you here?”



Personal subjects were something I simply did not want to talk about, and I had hoped the question would be lost in the scramble to press on, but Theron waited for an answer.

I hesitated, then muttered, “Jade.”

“Jade, ah yes, jade. Of course.” He turned and eyed me, then hesitated, “But you have applied to be permanent resident. The other agents, they only come when there is need for jade, and then they go. But you, you have come to stay.”

“I can do a better job if I live here.” My answer sounded flat, unconvincing, but I said no more. I looked over the undulating landscape and thought I saw another flicker of yellow but wasn’t sure.

Theron laughed again, a knowing, smug sort of laugh that grated my nerves. “Yes, of course. A better job. That is very understandable. . . But, frankly, Mr. Porter, I think that is very unlikely. I am a simple man, but I know of no one except the science research teams who come to Ridgley Station only for their work. Few here even use their real names.” He glanced back at me and raised one eyebrow slightly, but I made no response.

The dirty yellow gravel on the stream bed crunched as we trudged single file. Shimmers of heat rose in front of us and, in all directions; parched rocks rested motionless. It was clear the area had had plenty of water, or something, sometime in the past.

“I know very little, Mr. Porter, and what I do know is not complicated. Few things will pull a man willingly to Ridgley Station. . . but, there are many things that will push him here . . . or, chase him here.”

“Is that right?” I eyed Theron suspiciously. “Well, consider me a



simple and dedicated gem merchant, Theron. Nothing more, nothing less. Pulled here by my work and the jade.”

“Of course, Mr. Porter, and I believe you. But many here are not so dedicated as you. Many are being pursued by something or someone. Perhaps some legal entanglement, an unsympathetic tribunal, a debt owed, even a crime unpaid for, who can tell? Perhaps a woman, eh, Mr. Porter?” Theron laughed then continued, “Ridgley Station is the only outpost on Kepler-69c. It is an unimaginable distance from Earth and known as the forgotten colony. But, people here call it Hells-Gate, and for a reason.

I frowned, gripped my shoulder straps tightly, and clenched my teeth. The walking was hard, Theron kept pressing ahead faster than I could keep up, the larger rocks sharp and angular, twisting under my feet if I stepped on them. It was bad enough to be out in this godforsaken desert, walking in some hot as hell river bed, spied on by creatures that were all but invisible but who might rush out from behind a dune at any moment and tear us to shreds. They were unpredictable savages capable of devouring a carload of meat in less than five minutes. And with all that, to have the person upon whom I depended for my safety pry into my private life. It was disconcerting, maddening. He said nothing, and I was silent.

Stepping around a large boulder that had rolled down into the streambed, Theron again surveyed the horizon and whispered, not looking directly at me, “But, please Mr. Porter, forgive me. I ask too many questions. Going on and on. I apologize. No one in Ridgley Station should ask questions, certainly not too many questions. I am afraid I am overstepping my bounds; please forgive me.” Theron



had now stopped and was rearranging items in his pack. "Questions about the past are often much too personal," he continued. "It is none of my business. You are a dedicated agent in the jade line, and that is all that matters" He adjusted his pack frame then continued down the trail. "If we don't keep moving, and quickly, the Langurs will get nervous."

I ventured, "No one can change the past, Theron, mine or anyone else's. It is something best left in the dark."

Theron grunted an acknowledgment and gazed off down our trail. "As I say, I am a simple man Mr. Porter, but in my experience, the past has a way of stepping out into the light."

In the far distance, I heard the shrieks of the Langurs again. I was already sweating but the cries of the beasts caused the sweat to turn cold, and a dread filled my lungs. Surely, nothing good could come from creatures that made that sound. Then, as I skirted around a large boulder, I inadvertently stepped on a loose rock. The rock rolled as I applied my weight and my ankle twisted under itself. I went down as a shooting pain surged through my ankle and up my leg. My shout of pain stopped Theron in his tracks and brought him quickly to my side.

"Aye, Mr. Porter. Let us hope your ankle is not broken." Theron was nervously looking around at the embankments sloping upward from the river bed. "Let me feel it, please."

After a good bit of poking and jabbing and rotating my foot it was determined there probably wasn't a break, but instead a bad sprain. With some help from Theron, I managed to get upright and sat on a boulder. Theron looked concerned and kept asking if I could



continue with the hike. I rubbed the ankle, then walked back and forth to test it. After a while, the pain subsided.

“I think I can go on,” I said, “but not as fast as before.”

Theron looked irritated and a bit downcast but, with some encouraging words, we hiked on in silence. The heat was excruciating. Both Theron and I had arranged handkerchiefs tucked into our hats and covering the backs of our necks. I had to limp along and tried my best to keep pace with Theron, who insisted on moving ahead as fast as we could manage.

The tan, yellow sky blended into the distant horizon making it difficult to see where the land ended, and the sky began. It reminded me of a distant sandstorm. My attention was focused downward on the path, where I carefully watched to avoid putting any additional pressure on my injured ankle or tripping on exposed roots. It was even harder to keep pace with Theron now, even though he had slowed down.

We finally crossed the riverbed with its tiny trickle of water that marked the boundary of the Langurs' territory. It was a great relief to leave the Vacant Lands and the last of the beasts. I was still tense, but Theron appeared to relax. A few bloodroot trees clung to the slopes, and the heart of the valley was dark against the yellow sky.

Immediately before us, perhaps no more than an hour's hike, were a small group of buildings, roughly built from bloodroot tree logs and local rock. One larger building dominated the group and was, I assumed the mine headquarters.

Theron had told me back in Ridgley that the mine belonged to a man named Bud Lefebvre, an unsavory character from Ceres. He



was said to be a heavy man, tough, who would sit on the porch and smoke large cigars made of wrapped JaJa leaves. The narcotic from the leaves left him punching and thrashing at unseen assailants, then collapsing to the floor in that strange stupor that always followed JaJa. I was hoping my dealing with him would not be difficult.

“We should reach the mine offices in less than an hour,” said Theron, as he hesitated on the trail, catching his breath.

Once we drew close to the buildings, the mining operations were visible in the distance as patches of disturbances along the slopes of the valley. Like green gashes cut by huge knives in the sides of the mountain, the jade veins radiated out from flat places on the steep slopes. The rich aeruginous wealth would be hacked from the walls of the cliffs and the quality judged. The best pieces were then set aside for the jewelry buyers.

We dropped our packs and approached the mine office, but no one greeted us. Theron called out “Hallo!”. We stopped near the front steps waiting to be acknowledged.

There were footsteps and a rustling inside. Suddenly, a large Langur stepped from the darkness of the office, stood perfectly still on the building porch, and fixed his odd, penetrating, yellowed gaze on us. I froze and gasped, taking a step backward. I was not prepared for this. What the hell was a Langur doing here? Had the Langurs attacked the mine? Theron, too, stiffened at the sight. The Langur held up his hand as a gesture to stop though I certainly had no intention of moving even an inch closer to the beast.

“We were expecting you. Please wait here,” he said, then disappeared into the office.

I quickly turned to Theron and whispered urgently, “What’s the hell’s going on? . . . The Langur? I mean, what’s with ‘We were expecting you?’” I thought we were done with those things. What the hell is it doing here?” What if the Langurs had attacked the camp and killed everyone. I could not think of anything worse. I waited for Theron to answer but he was silent. I couldn’t tell if he was worried but he stood very still.

The sudden appearance of the Langur was a shock, but nothing prepared me for what happened next. From out of the darkness of the office stepped Angel Delgado. Like a ghost from my past, she took two steps out onto the porch and stopped, hands on her hips. There was no doubt it was her. The beautiful Angel of the fifteen feathers, a dancer in the temple of Azul, and the one who could coax songs from river wraiths just by whistling her secret haunting melodies. A regular penitent at the temple, Angel worshiped the gods of stone from which she believed she received special powers, powers she was convinced made her a dominant gem trader.

Her expression was not friendly, her eyes, the steely gray that could drill into your brain like a laser, a red and white bandana wrapped tightly around auburn hair. My mind reeled. It had been more than two years since I had seen Angel. What was she doing here? How, to this one tiny corner of the universe, had she managed to find her way? She wore mining work boots and was covered with a thin layer of dust.

She was feared and loved for her sharp tongue and shrewd trading in the marketplaces and bazaars, sweeping through the gem stalls like a sandstorm and coming away with the choicest treasures – em-



eralds, rubies, turquoises, and jade. She was well known by miners and jewelry merchants alike. – Loved, feared, and hated. She was a woman, who was tough and fair but was known to put a laser hole in anyone that cheated. I could remember two dead traders and one dead miner last time I knew anything about her.

And, she was the woman who had confided in me that she was in love with a man who, so far as I was concerned, was one of the biggest conmen in the universe. Justin March was a trader wannabe who hung around the marketplaces and fed off of tourists and visitors who couldn't tell a ruby from a piece of broken glass. Worse than a trader with rigged scales or fraudulently graded gems, this thief simply stole from the innocent and unsuspecting. Angel was very good at picking gems, but damn poor at picking men. Justin Marsh was a scumbag. I knew it; the traders knew it, and the miners knew it. But, for some reason, Angel completely misjudged him. So, she fell in love with him.

When Justin broke into my living pod and tried to steal my delivery of emeralds, I shot him and left him crying for help. Simple as that. The local traders shrugged their shoulders, people looked the other way, nobody blamed me, it was part of an unwritten code. I could have gotten around the law, but Angel was another matter. She was in love with the man and to her way of thinking an eye for an eye was a good simple way of bringing balance back into the universe. Even before I got out of town, I heard rumors Angel was going to kill me. That's when I took the emeralds, and a box of turquoise Angel had given me and left Epsilon. I sold the turquoise on Ceres.



With the money, I changed my name, got fake papers, hitched a ride on the monthly Kepler transport, and moved into Ridgley. Now, somehow she had found me, or maybe I found her, I didn't quite know, but I swallowed hard.

"Well, Jack," she said facing me directly, "it's good to see you. So, you just thought you'd abandon me on Epsilon, take the turquoise, fence 'em, and run off to someplace where you didn't think I'd find you. By the way, Justin died after you shot him. Did you know he died or is it a surprise? Anybody tell you?"

"Look Angel. I didn't have time to get the turquoise back to you. I had to run. After Justin was shot, you know, I had to leave. You gave me the turquoise, so I had them with me, I couldn't leave the whole box.

"Uh huh," she glared at me with a hard stare that sent a chill down my spine. "Justin and I were building a business together, and a life. You ruined both of them. I didn't have insurance on those stones, and it took me a year to replace 'em. And as for Justin, well. . ." Her voice trailed off. I couldn't imagine Angel and Justin making a business together, or a life, but Justin was a hell of a con-man.

Time slowly crept by and she just stood and stared at me, her crooked smile set in stone. "I found you, Jack. You see, I used to buy gems from Bud Lefebvre. Once I worked off the debt for the turquoise, I went looking for you. And now, it looks like I found you. Wasn't hard, the Judicial Enforcers are after Bud. He was looking to sell and move on, and that's what he did. He figured they would be here soon, so he knew he had to leave. It was an easy choice. He sold it, and I took the mine over about six months ago. It's nice here.



Quiet.”

“Listen, Angel, I’m just here trying to make a living. You could have had the turquoise back, but I had to leave quick. And Justin was an accident, I swear. Now that I know you’re here I’ll pay you back. He broke into my pod. I thought he was gonna kill me. I had to protect myself. I call it self-defense, some might call it an accident, but I didn’t mean to kill him. I didn’t even know he was dead until now.”

“Well, he is dead whether you knew it or not. And frankly, I don’t care if it was an accident or self-defense. When he died back on Epsilon, I promised I’d find you and kill you, even if I had to go to the end of the galaxy. Turns out this is the damn end of the galaxy. And I promised that when I found you, I’d kill you, which is exactly what I’m going to do. I figured sooner or later you’d be up here to buy jade and that when you showed up, we’d settle the question of Justin.” She laughed a low laugh. Sinister, I thought.

When Angel had stepped out onto the porch, Theron had quietly edged away from me. Now, he stood silently off to the side. Then from behind her back, Angel drew a pistol. It was a new one, Type II, dual infrared laser. I knew this would put a hand size hole through me before I could take one step, so I was still and just looked at her. We stood like this for a long time.

“So Angel,” I said, “you’ve gone to a lot of trouble to find me, spent a lot of money, and now I have no weapon, and you run the mine. Let’s work a deal, I’ll pay you back.”

“No way, Jack. I want to finish this job here and now.”

“Just think about it for a minute, Angel. You sell me jade, and

I'll trade it into the markets. Could be a nice arrangement. Why don't you spend some time? Think it over?"

"I've done all the thinking over I plan to do, Jack. What I call a nice arrangement is you dead and gone." Angel shifted on her feet and began to raise her hand. I took a small step back and braced for the laser impact that was seconds away. Then she hesitated, lowered her pistol slightly and said, "Okay, so, let's say we did make a deal. It would have to be on my terms, right? Since I've been here, I learned there's enough high-quality jade to supply the entire galaxy. So, what would you say to a 70/30 split? She stopped for a moment, and a little hope rose in my chest.

"Sure, Angel. Anything you say." I felt I was grasping at straws, but that was all there was.

She glanced away as though she was thinking about something and then looked at me again. "I know that's a little hard scrabble for you, Jack, but I don't believe you have much choice. We might actually make it work. There're a few things I'd have to figure out, though. Why don't we sit down and talk about...."

Suddenly a blast erupted from my left. I saw Angel fold forward with a jerk, her eyes wide and not focused, her mouth suddenly open. A dull sound like a fist hitting a punching bag instantly followed the blast, and Angel lurched backward, crashed against the wall, and then crumpled forward to the floor. The Langur recoiled and held his arms up in front of his body. Theron stood rigidly; his pistol out and pointed towards where Angel lay. The Langur held his arms aside and showed no signs of challenging Theron.

Then Theron turned to the Langur and said, "Serus, get Palis



and the others. We need to bury this one, and I need to talk with all of you.”

I was in shock and stared at Angel. “What do you mean?” I screamed. “I don’t get it. What do you mean, ‘get Palis’? What the hell is going on with these Langurs? I don’t trust ‘em. Why are they here?” My hands and arms were shaking, and cold sweat was running down my back.

I looked at Theron, then at Angel, then back at Theron. I moved towards Theron and yelled, “What the hell is happening? You just shot Angel, and you are going to talk to the Langur like they’re a bunch of old buddies.” I began pacing frantically, yelling at an all too reticent Theron and waving one arm in the air as I dug for answers. Theron was not helping, and I was near losing it. “Why the hell is Palis here?”

“Please be calm Mr. Porter, er, Mr. Everett. You must be calm around the Langurs. They will misunderstand. You see, I must talk with them. I am just trying to keep us safe, Mr. Porter, er, Jack. As I told you, I know them. I have done business with them. It is important they don’t misunderstand our position.”

“Our position? I think we have only one position, and that’s to get the hell out of here. What are you talking about? You just killed someone; the Langurs are around here somewhere, and we need to leave. I think that about sums it up.” I realized I was shouting at Theron. I wasn’t sure of anything anymore, what had happened, what Theron was telling me, and I certainly didn’t trust the vicious beasts apparently roaming around nearby.

“Please Mr. Everett, calm. Calm, please.”

I couldn't help staring at Angel. A trickle of blood seeped outward from her body and through cracks in the wooden porch floor. "Right, Ok, Ok. I understand. I'll be calm." I tried to be calm, or at least, appear to be calm. "But, as soon as you finish, we need to talk."

Theron stepped up onto the porch as Langurs appeared, seemingly from nowhere, and gathered around. Some had come from the other buildings, some from the dig sites.

"Do you mean the miners are Langurs?" I looked at Theron incredulously. He merely nodded.

Gradually all Langurs formed a group in front of the porch. In total, there were about 12 or 15. As they gathered, they stood in silence, watching Theron.

I was looking at Theron and my mind was swirling. I suddenly wondered how he knew the miners were Langurs and why he hadn't mentioned it before. I tried to shake off the shock of seeing Angel gunned down. I had to think. Other questions rose up. Why had Angel ignored Theron? Wouldn't she have been concerned he would think his life was in danger too? I wanted to take Theron aside and talk, but there was no way at the moment.

Finally, when everyone was present Theron began his speech. "An unfortunate accident has occurred as you can see. It happened that Ms. Angel threatened Mr. Porter and was preparing to kill him. To stop her, should anyone ever ask you, I used my pistol to defend him. Unfortunately, Ms. Delgado was killed instantly." Some of the Langurs looked at one another.

I felt weak; my knees seemed to be buckling, and my ankle throbbed. My arms had started shaking and the sweat that covered



my body had turned cold. All I could do at this point was stare at Theron.

Theron continued, “Now, Serus and Mr. Porter were both here, and they saw everything so we will have no problems with the authorities.”

But Theron went on, “We have several important matters to attend to.” Then he withdrew a folded paper from his shirt and held it up for all to see. “First,” he announced, “this is the warranty deed to the mine. The fact is, I am and have been for some time, the actual owner of this mine. Angel and I had agreed that she would manage the mine and pretend to be the owner until she had settled her business with Mr. Porter.” Theron stopped, and was silent for a moment, “Well, Angel believed she and I would operate this mine together, become business partners, and enjoy a quiet life here. She believed that once she finished with Mr. Porter, she and I would build a profitable business. Frankly, it was never my intention to include Ms. Delgado in my plans. Unfortunately, one of Ms. Delgado’s faults was misjudging men and, I was just another one of her bad decisions. It hurt me to shoot her, but Mr. Porter’s life was in danger.”

I gasped, how was it that Theron owned the mine? The whole situation swirled before my eyes. I had just witnessed a person I knew shot down in cold blood, and now he was talking with the Langurs as though no one should be surprised. My mind was trying to make sense of what was happening.

“Damn it, Theron, we need to talk. . .,” I started.

Theron raised his hand. “Please Mr. Porter, perhaps we can talk later.”



Theron continued his speech, “Just so there is no misunderstanding, I have always been the rightful owner of the mine. I bought it from Bud Lefebvre some time back. Angel was more than willing to pretend she bought the mine and agreed to manage it until she could settle her score with Mr. Porter. So far as the mine goes, nothing changes. We will continue to mine jade and transport it directly to Ridgley Station across the Vacant Lands as we discussed. You will receive compensation in food and various articles I can procure in Ridgley Station. This mine, my mine, will produce the finest jade available in the M81 galaxy. As I have always said, “the man who prepares is the man who succeeds.”

“That brings me to the issue of Mr. Porter, whose real name is Mr. Jack Everett. Mr. Everett is on the run from Epsilon for murdering a man there in a gem dispute. When Ms. Delgado had the opportunity to kill Mr. Everett, she hesitated. Had things worked more perfectly, she would have killed Porter, and I would have killed her. Her hesitation now leaves us with a problem, that is, it leaves us with Mr. Porter. He is a man I have grown to like and against whom I have no animus.”

I yelled at Theron, “No No, All you have to do is tell the authorities you acted to defend me from Angel. I’ll testify. It’s open and shut. No one will ask questions.”

Theron smiled faintly and shook his head, “I am truly sorry Mr. Everett, but that cannot be done. Already, the authorities are looking into this mine because of Bud Lefebvre. And, I must admit there are some inner planet judicial councils interested in talking to me. Like you, Mr. Everett, I have certain legal issues that must stay hidden



and cannot be brought into the open. It wouldn't work to have the Judicial Enforcers poking around, asking questions, checking into our backgrounds. A shooting, like that of Ms. Delgado, brings far too many complications. It would not be good for any of us, eh, Mr. Porter, I mean Mr. Everett? You did murder a man on Epsilon, and my background is not entirely, how do you say, clean.

"No, Mr. Porter, we need to bring this matter to a close quickly. The Enforcers will learn that Bud Lefebvre sold me the mine, packed up hurriedly, and caught the transport back to the inner planets. If the issue of Ms. Delgado comes up, we will simply say she left some time ago. We, of course, have no idea where either of them went. They'll check the records, everything will be in order, the trail will be cold, and they will quickly leave us. Anything else could get quite messy."

As Theron was talking, I eased myself towards the edge of the group. I thought of my pistol, but it was in my pack at least 20 feet away. I could see where this was headed. Theron would suddenly turn on me, put a charge through my chest and that would be the end of it. Theron would tell the authorities the Langurs carried me off, or I fell off a cliff, or Angel shot me when I tried to kill her. Who knows what story he would dream up.

I realized I had only the remaining food I brought, and that was in my pack. If I made a run for it and got into the Vacant Lands, the Langurs would certainly catch me. I had no idea of the path around the lands through the Iron Mountains. My ankle still ached, and I struggled to think of a way out. If I could get to the river, hide in the bushes, then follow it around the Vacant Lands, then maybe there was a chance.

Then Serus said, "We must kill him." Several Langurs nodded their heads in agreement.

Hearing this sent a new wave of fear down my spine. I knew they would not hesitate if Theron gave the word.

Then Theron said, "No, I think maybe we have a use for him here at the mine. Unfortunately, Mr. Porter has been witness to this little incident with Ms. Delgado, so I am afraid we cannot let him return to Ridgley Station. If anyone asks, which I doubt, we simply tell them Mr. Porter stole a box of jade and attempted to cross the Vacant Land. He has a history of stealing gems so no one will question his disappearance.

"He is certainly capable of helping us dig jade out of the mountain. Mr. Porter has a debt to pay for the murder of a man on Epsilon. That means nothing to me, but there is no reason we cannot, in the name of the galactic community, extract justice here at the mine. The former owner had, I believe, several sets of work shackles, and I am sure one of them will fit Mr. Porter. Serus, you'll find them hanging on the walls in the equipment shed. Fetch one please and we will secure Mr. Porter." At this Serus ran off towards the shed.

I began backing away from the group. Whatever the risk I knew now was perhaps my last chance to get away. I turned to run, but a Langur grabbed my shoulder, wrenched me back, and threw me to the ground. A bolt of pain streaked through my back and another up my leg. I tried to break free, but the Langur pinned me to the ground. Powdery dust and grit filled my nose and mouth and my eyes burned and watered.

This brief struggle brought on a general roar of excitement as



many of the Langurs gathered around ready to help. But, it was not necessary. The first one had me in a powerful grip. Though my head was against the dusty ground, I could see Serus trotting back from the shed with a set of chains in his hand. I tried again to break free, but the Langur's strength was too much. Soon I could feel iron against my ankles and the rattle of chain against chain. The excitement and speed with which this all took place caused the Langurs to slip into their strange speech. They were moving and jumping, kicking up a cloud of dust. In their great agitation, they began shrieking and calling in their native language. I was jerked to my feet and made to shuffle to the front of the group.

Theron said, "Serus, please assign Mr. Porter to the digging crew. Loan him some tools until he has earned enough to purchase his own. Now everyone, get back to work, there are a number of orders to fill, and buyers are due in camp within a few weeks.

Coughing and spitting out foul tasting mud, I screamed at Theron, "Wait," but he had turned, gone into the office, and closed the door.