

GLASS
ROCK
NARRATIVE

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CHAPTER ONE

The black ship breaks atmo like a falling star, burning up the sky.

Pressing a scanner to my eyes, I squint and adjust the settings until the ship sharpens into focus. It's a big one, sleek and fast. Fire licks its hull as it descends, and then it passes across the great violet sun, turning to a silhouette.

Balanced precariously in the crooking branches of a slinke tree, its noodle-like leaves tickling the back of my neck, I have a grand view of the landscape below. My father's vineyards stripe the land from east to west, a thick tangle of leaves and sweet grapes. Houses and winery facilities cluster at the north end of the property. Made of honey-colored wood and glass, the buildings sparkle in the late afternoon sun, the windows cast in hues of soft purple.

Glancing away from the scanner, I see the vineyard workers moving to and from the warehouses, rolling barrels onto hovering dories, taking tallies of the stock. Harnessed to the dories, red-furred pack animals called mantibu bray at one another, tossing their antlers at the flies that are the bane of the wet season.

As I'd expected, the black ship angles for the east, where the city of Estonrya waits over the horizon. It's the usual flight pattern of the interstellar vessels that come and go.

But this is no ordinary ship.

Leaning outward for a better view, I put too much weight on the branch, and it cracks.

With a shout, I tumble down, landing hard on my back and feeling the wind rush from my lungs. Bits of twig and leaves rain around me. I blink at the sky, momentarily stunned.

"Stacia! Oh my stars! Are you okay?"

Clio's face appears above mine, big blue eyes wide with concern.

“Fine,” I groan, pushing myself up. I’ve sunk into the spongy lavender moss that carpets the ground. “Astronika.”

“What?”

“The ship.” With a wince, I pick up the scanner, which shattered when it hit the ground. “It’s an astronika. Class nine.”

I could add that it’s powered by a Takhimir reactor and insulated with a premium magnetic RAM layer. But Clio wouldn’t care. She tends to nod off when I drone on about ship specs. Everyone does.

“An astronika?” Clio shakes her head. “What could a ship like that be doing way out here? I mean, I love our planet, but Amethyne’s not exactly the hub of the galaxy. Or the hub of *anywhere*, for that matter.”

I shrug and click open the bulky metal cuff on my wrist. What looks like a large silver bracelet is actually the universe’s greatest invention—or at least a mechanic’s best friend—and I’d rather run around stark naked than go without my multicuff for a day. Pushing my fingernail into little grooves along it causes several miniature tools to release—a screwdriver, flashlight, and pincers. Bending over the scanner, I start piecing the parts together. “I’ll bet it’s military.”

“Which makes it even weirder.” Clio presses her lips together, eyeing the trail of smoke the ship left behind. Then she asks softly, “Is it the draft, you think?”

I shake my head, but my chest tightens involuntarily as I turn a screw on the scanner’s back panel. “It’s too early in the year. We have five months at least. They always come in the dry season.”

But when our eyes meet, I can see my friend isn’t convinced.

Not that Clio need necessarily worry. She’s not the soldier type, with her delicate frame and dreamy eyes. Me, on the other hand . . . Well, with my muscular build and mechanic’s certification, I’m just the type that the drafting committees love to haul off to boot camp

on distant Alexandrine. I've always dreamed of exploring the other systems that glitter in the night sky, but not as some grunt on a military vessel, confined to strict schedules and rules. No, thank you.

"It's probably just some rich Alexandrian tourist with nothing better to do than slum around the outer systems."

"Yeah." Clio gives a wistful sigh. "Maybe a *handsome*, rich Alexandrian tourist, with a troubled past and a broody air and a heart yearning for love."

With a groan, I haul myself to my feet. "You can have his heart. I'll take his ship."

She points at the scanner in my hand. "That was fast."

The scanner is whole again, its circuits operating normally despite the tumble. I snap the multicuff back on my wrist. "Good thing too, or my dad would've skinned me."

My eyes fix on something over her shoulder, and my brow furrows.

"I told you to stop frowning like that," says Clio. "I swear, Stace, you'll be nothing but wrinkles by the time you're thirty."

"The ship," I murmur. "It's not heading to Estonrya."

"Of course it is. All the ships go to Estonrya."

"Clio, *look*. It's coming here. To Afka."

"What?" She turns and squints at the horizon, where the astronika's growing larger in the distance.

The black ship must have passed through Estonryan air space for security clearance, but instead of touching down in the city, it turned around, heading straight to our little town.

Seconds later, the astronika swoops overhead, a low, silent shadow. This close, I can see the call sign stamped on its sides, along with the emblem of the Galactic Union: nine stars in a circle, representing the nine Jewel systems. Each one a different color, with purple Amethyne

between green Emerault and red Rubyat. The ship descends into the valley, where Afka is huddled between the hills.

“That’s weird.” I break into a grin. I’ll probably never get another chance to see an astronika up close. “Let’s go check it out.”

But Clio hesitates.

“Oh, it’ll be fine!” I prod. “Don’t you want to see your handsome Alexandrian bachelor up close?”

Clio’s lips curl into a slow, wicked smile. Then she raises an eyebrow. “You want to change first?”

I look down at my outfit: black tank top beneath a ragged jersey, baggy gray cargo pants tucked into dusty boots—in other words, my usual ensemble. I like that I can carry my tools in my pockets without having to haul around an extra bag. You never know when one of the vineyard lorries is going to break down, and anyway, the smell of engine oil that’s permanently worked into the fabric keeps away the gnats.

“What’s wrong?” I ask. “This is how I always look.”

“Yeah. Like a sentient toolbox.” She releases a puff of air and rolls her eyes. “Forget it. Just so long as we stop at Ravi’s and get strawberry ice after.”

“My treat,” I promise her. “Now where did Elki get to?”

Slipping my fingers between my teeth, I give a sharp whistle. Moments later, the foliage behind us rustles, and the large mantibu comes ambling out of the trees, his saddle knocked askew by the low branches. I run my hand down his side, from the reddish fur on his shoulders to the leathery skin on his hindquarters. Then I leap into the saddle, holding out a hand for Clio, pulling her up with practiced ease. She’s wearing a knee-length blue sundress over white leggings, and her skirt bunches around her waist as she straddles the mantibu. Below us, Elki grumbles and huffs, shaking his antlers until we’re settled in.

We follow the dirt track that runs between the vineyard and the

slink forest. Birds flit overhead, their long, scaly tails flicking in frustration as they try to get the grapes. Their every attempt is foiled by the invisible shield projected over the vines; at a bird's touch, it flashes and sizzles, a grid of white that fades as soon as the bird flees. No harm is done to the birds, but they still squawk angrily, dashing their tiny horns in frustration.

A rumble of hooves catches my ear, and I peer into the rows of grapevines to see a blurry shape racing toward us—a mantibu doe, with a rider clinging to her back.

I glance at Clio over my shoulder. “Trouble incoming. Try not to make a fool of yourself, will you?”

“Ooh,” Clio purrs, her eyes going soft. “Forget strawberry ice. I found something yummier.”

The boy perched in the mantibu's saddle rides with easy grace, reins tight in one hand. Sunlight glints off the pale horns atop his head. He's dressed in tight-fitted riding pants with a loose gray tunic, and his boots are glued to the stirrups. He's so intent on the timer in his other hand, he doesn't notice us ahead.

“Whoa!” I shout. “Pull up, Pol!”

Mantibu and rider burst through the security shield. It flickers and parts, resealing behind them and fading into invisibility as the boy reins in, pulling his mount into a tight circle.

“Stacia! Sorry. Didn't see you there.”

He and the mantibu are both breathing hard as they pull up alongside us, and sweat dampens his shirt, making the fabric cling to his skin. His hair tumbles in dark curls around his horns, shining with the grapeseed oil I know he slathers on every morning.

“Did you see that?” he says, grinning as he waves the timer. “New record. Tinka's ready for the Afkan Cup. We have a real chance of winning this year.”

“And to think, three months ago no one could even get a saddle on her.” I shake my head. “I don’t know how you do it.”

“Oh, that’s easy,” he laughs, scratching the creature’s ears. “Sheer bribery. Feed her enough and she turns to putty. Don’t you, girl?”

“Not unlike Stacia,” Clio points out.

“Oh, you’re a funny one, Clio Markova.” I elbow her while Pol gives a weak grin, as if he’s afraid I’ll jump on him if he dares laugh.

Pol slides to the ground and rubs the mantibu’s neck, and the beast swats him playfully with her scaled tail. Laughing, he reaches through the security shield to grab a cluster of grapes, which he feeds to Tinka and Elki both.

“We’re on our way to Afka,” I say to Pol. “Come with us.”

“I don’t know. I’ve got to clean the stables, and there’s that trellis by the pond that needs repairing . . .”

“Pol, you never stop working. Come have fun with us! Like the old days. Anyway, I don’t think Clio’s going to take no for an answer.”

She grins.

“Oh, all right,” he mutters, his cheeks flushing. “If *Clio* insists. Tinka needs to cool down, anyway.”

He falls into step with us, scratching Elki’s chin and feeding him the rest of the grapes. The mantibu grumbles with pleasure, slowing his pace.

From my position on Elki, I have a view of the top of Pol’s head. I’m surprised to see how much his horns have grown lately, poking through his hair where they’ve usually been half-hidden.

As Amethyne’s adapted race, the aeyla tend toward lavender-gray complexions and pale hair and lashes. But Pol is only half aeyla, lacking the species’ more distinct features. He inherited his human father’s bronze Rubyati skin and dark hair, but he has the ivory aeylic horns—or the beginnings of them, anyway. They won’t fully grow in for a few

more years, and until they do, he's still considered a child in the eyes of the aeyla, even though he's already taller than half the men in town. Ever since his growth spurt last year, he's been putting on muscle as well as height.

I'm still not quite sure what to make of this *man* replacing the boy I grew up with, running wild in the slinke forest and jumping into the turquoise lakes that pool in the hills. Though by aeyla tradition, he won't be considered an adult until his horns grow all the way in—a painful ordeal they call the Trying. Pol's got a few years to go before that happens—something I probably remind him of a bit too often . . . and a bit too smugly.

“So what's in Afka?” Pol asks, startling me from my wandering thoughts. I realize I've been staring at him.

“An astronika.”

“There's an astronika *here*?” Pol stops walking abruptly, and Tinka nudges his shoulder blades in reproach.

“See it for yourself.” Reining in Elki, I pluck the scanner from around my neck and toss it to him. “It's landed in the docks.”

“Stacia's smitten,” Clio adds.

He peers through the lens at the town below, zooming in on the docks. “We should go back to the house.”

“Why? I want to see what's up.”

“Me too,” Clio adds.

He shakes his head, handing the scanner back to me. “It's an Alexandrian ship. Nothing good comes from those.”

“Except handsome Alexandrian bachelors,” I point out, eliciting a giggle from Clio.

Pol frowns. “This isn't a joke.”

“What do *you* think it wants?”

“At best?” His jaw tightens. “Your father's finest vintage. They'll

clean out your cellars, pay you nothing, and tell you they need it for the good of the Committee. They'll even strip the vines just for the fun of it." He reaches out, fingers briefly closing on a cluster of grapes. Rich, fat, and as purple as the sun, they'll make for a good harvest this year. An excellent vintage. Unless Pol is right, and the ship is here to rob us blind and get away clean, the power of the law behind them. I've heard of it happening to other vintners on Amethyne, usually by roving bands of soldiers on leave. Not from ships as important as an astronika.

"What about at worst?" I ask quietly.

He only shakes his head.

I stare toward the docks, where the ship shines like obsidian, no larger than the tip of my thumb at this distance. I feel a quiver of nervousness in my stomach.

But Pol has always been a bit paranoid. He routinely rebuilds the vineyard comm network because, as he put it to me, "you never know who might be listening in." Same with the security system. It drives me crazy, always having to relearn the codes for the doors.

The afternoon is waning; the violet sun slips lower in the east, while the Twins rise in the west, one moon full, one gibbous, each tinged pale blue. We won't have much light left. It'll be a dark ride home for me if we don't hurry.

"Well, we're going," I say. "You go hide in the cellars if you like."

Pol gives a growl of frustration. "Why don't you *ever* listen to me?"

"Because you're allergic to fun."

"I'm allergic to always saving your neck when you go poking things bigger and meaner than you. Just last month you jumped on a snap-tooth, thinking it was a floating log! If I hadn't been there—"

"I had everything under control. Clio, what do you think?"