

Julius Nix asked the nun to have a seat. She was pretty, if you didn't mind blue scales. Only her hands and face were visible under the white robes of course, but they had an appealing delicateness to them. His relationship with all things religious was one of attempted ignorance, but even he recognized the golden symbol embroidered on her shoulder. The Sisters of Celestial Harmony were known across the sector for their work as volunteer diplomats, counselors, nurses, and any other job that might contribute to the overall harmony of the universe. The fact that she was in his office probably wasn't good.

"What brings a Sister to a private investigator?" he asked as he sat down at his desk across from her. It was an old sheet metal thing that he'd picked up for cheap a while back, just like the rest of the furniture. The hodgepodge of steel and plastics didn't exactly scream professionalism, but clients were typically too desperate to care.

Which made the presence of a calm and collected nun in the client chair even weirder. She smiled, "What do you know of my Order?"

"You do lots of good charity work, take that whole harmony thing seriously, and claim to have the key to the universe."

Her smile widened, showing a bit of her sharp opalescent teeth, "It is more nuanced than that—"

"Not interested in theology, ma'am, no offense. Just want to know why you're here."

The smile vanished, the Sister instantly all business, "The Key has been stolen."

Julius frowned. "The key. You mean, your 'Celestial Key,' the center of your religion. That key?"

She was perfectly serious. "Yes. I have been entrusted with the Key and given the holy task of taking it to your people's homeworld, Earth, where it will join the relic called the Ark of the Covenant."

Sounded like either a hoax or a publicity stunt, but he'd heard stranger things. Julius leaned back in his chair, arms folded. "And you want me to find it?"

"I am unfamiliar with this station. I need someone intimately acquainted, and discreet."

"Why not go to the Port Guard?"

"I did say 'discreet.' It is important that my task be kept as secret as possible. The Key must not fall into the wrong hands."

Julius's brow rose skeptically. "Wrong hands? Other than the ones that stole it?"

"Not everyone is friendly to my Order."

Julius shrugged, "There are people who have a hard time believing your intentions are as pure as they seem, but I can't imagine why anyone would mug a Celestialite. The whole vow of poverty thing makes you a poor target, and you wouldn't have come out of the experience without a scratch if it'd been a hate crime."

"All I know is my bag was forced from my hands and the thief ran."

There was a lot about this that seemed unlikely, but he was getting paid and rent wasn't getting any lower. "It'd make my job a hell of a lot easier if you knew who took it."

"I know the face, but nothing else. I was attacked on my way to book passage for the next part of my journey."

"Describe the person."

"Thin. It had three eyes, black, on a pale grey face. There was a long scar under the leftmost eye and it had no mouth—"

"Arakyn." The chances of this being a random mugging just got significantly lower. "They have mouths, you just can't see them til they open up, and you generally don't want to see that. What's the key look like?"

"Exactly as the symbol on our robes, and the length of your hand."

Gold swirl, linking into a skinnier smaller swirl. "Is it valuable? Beyond the religious significance, I mean."

"Not particularly. Its material construction is common."

"Where are you staying?"

"A hotel that is called Terraal's."

Standard working class, no questions asked sort of place. "I didn't get your name?"

"Lysh'sk."

There was a glottal stop in there he knew he'd fuck up if he tried. "Alright, Sister, I'm going to ask you to stay in your hotel room until you hear from me, ok? Just to be on the safe side until I have some sort of information on who took your key and why. I'll call tomorrow at the latest."

There weren't many Arakyn thugs for hire in Port, and only one that Julius knew of had a scar under its leftmost eye. This time of day, it'd be at Starboard. The bar was small, dimly lit, and perpetually half-full. If you needed muscle, you bought it at Starboard. The Port Guard all knew about the place, but they were more concerned with the profit-making ships coming through than with the day-to-day affairs of the people who actually lived on the station. As long as Starboard was quiet, the Guard left it alone.

Julius paused in the doorway, letting his eyes adjust to the dim lighting as he scanned the room. He wore a thigh-length deep red jacket with an orange collar, faded and worn but comfortable. Add his rust-colored shirt, olive pants, and worn shoes, and he fit in just fine in most worker bars.

The Arakyn stood out. Long limbed and deceptively thin, the grey skinned alien looked like someone took a three-eyed salamander, flattened its face, and stretched out everything else before teaching it to move like a spider. Oh, and no visible mouth. Most of the time.

"All optical sensors are on you," the digital monotone of a universal translator said as Julius sat down at its table in the corner. Arakyn communicated on an infrasonic frequency impossible for some races to hear, including humans. The translators unfortunately couldn't mimic Arakyn emotional cues, if there were any, which made having a conversation with one a bit like talking to a wall with hidden teeth. "What do you want?"

"I want to know who hired you to steal from a nun. I was hoping we could keep this simple and you'd just tell me."

"What is a nun?"

Julius sighed. "A Celestialite Sister, blue scales, white robes? An Arakyn stole her bag, and there aren't that many of you on station, and even fewer of you that have that scar on your face."

"Why is this your concern?"

“It’s my business. You were hired to steal it, I was hired to get it back.” The outline of its triangular mouth appeared as it hissed. “Whoa, there’s no need for that. You got paid, right? Just tell me who paid you.”

“Why would I tell you?”

“Why not?”

It was a dumb gamble, but the Arakyn stared at him for a few long moments and said, “Nothing is free.”

Julius raised an eyebrow. “Fine. I’ll buy you a drink.”

The Arakyn hissed again, a shorter and lighter sound than the last. Julius hoped it was a laugh. “Intergalactic Evangelical Church of Salvation.

“What’s the IECS want with it?” Julius wondered aloud. The Arakyn looked at him expectantly. Julius ordered it a drink. “Don’t suppose you’d tell me if you already ditched the goods, would you?”

“That would cost another drink.”

Julius rolled his eyes and ordered a second. The Arakyn made a weird hissing rumble as it drank the first, its mouth opening just enough for a thin black tongue to slide from the center into the tall glass, sucking up the liquid like a straw. “The Key is at a death fall.”

It took Julius a moment to realize the translator error. “A dead drop. You dropped it off for it to be picked up by someone else.”

“Yes.”

“How many drinks will the location cost me?”

“Two.”

The fact that the Arakyn was so forthcoming in the first place meant whoever hired it had paid a pittance and sure as hell didn’t pay for its silence. This was a quick amateur level job, and now the damn thing was going to bleed him dry for drinks... but better metaphorically than literally. The only real chance humans had in a fight with an Arakyn was to be heavily armored or far enough away to kill it before it reached you. Julius had neither of those options right now.

He paid for the drinks, and the Arakyn described a spot right on the border of the Market and the Religious Sector.

“Right. Well, thanks for your time, and for not trying to kill me.”

By the time Julius found the dead drop (a loose decorative panel on a recently empty market stall that once sold incense,) the Key was long gone, assuming it had ever been there in the first place. At least Julius had a lead for who might have it, though he couldn’t figure why.

Sector Green-Five, as the Religious Sector was technically called, was full of temples, churches, chapels, and shrines from across the galaxy. The IECS chapel was ironically nestled between a Dalarn shrine to the Devourer of Fate and a Rekelian love house. The IECS had spawned from a coalition of Protestant denominations back on Earth, after first contact with aliens was made. Since then, they’d established mission chapels on multiple worlds, eventually bringing them into contact with the Celestialites. The two churches did not get along.

Julius had never been inside an IECS chapel. It was remarkably plain. There were a few pews made to look like wood, a large black cross hanging on the wall behind the simple white altar. A soft-faced middle-aged man in black trousers and a white shirt came out of a back room.

“Welcome,” he greeted with a warm smile, holding out a hand. “Pastor William, but Bill is fine.”

Julius shook hands. “Julius Nix.”

“Welcome, Julius. Are you a practitioner?”

“No. Actually, I had some questions.”

“Feel free to ask.”

“Is this the only one of your chapels here in Port?”

“It is.”

“And you’re the one in charge?”

“I am.”

Julius smiled, “Just the man I’m looking for then. See, I’ve never been much of a believer, and there’s this lady... well, she’s into Celestialism.”

Pastor Bill’s smile seemed a little more forced. “Oh?”

“Well, like I said, I’m not really a believer, but my folks were, and so I remember hearing about the Celestialites and that there was this conflict but I don’t really know any of the details, and I think it might be something worth knowing.”

The forced smile turned to relief. “The Intergalactic Evangelical Church of Salvation teaches the Christian message from Earth, reborn for a new era of travel among the stars. We bring the Word of the One God to all of His races—”

“But the Celestialites do that too.”

The pastor didn’t miss a beat, “The Celestialites confuse and conflate their pagan goddess with our Savior. They claim to preach the same message, even going so far as to say that it is the exact same but revealed through women instead of men. Their ‘mother’ god is but an imitation of our God the Father—”

“But they’ve been worshipping for millennia.”

“They have been worshipping an imitator. There is no God but the One God, and we are his chosen people. We do not judge our alien brothers and sisters, but neither can we stand idly by as they willfully march towards damnation.”

That sounded an awful lot like a contradiction to Julius, but he wasn’t really here to discuss theology. “What about this business with the Key?”

“Yes, their so-called Celestial Key, the key to the heart of the universe.” Pastor Bill almost rolled his eyes. “Many interpret it to be a key to heaven, some a key to the fabric of reality, there are all sorts of ramblings on ancient scrolls. No one seems to agree on what it does, some talk of salvation, some of apocalypse. It’s an old rumor-fueled relic given religious significance.”

“Worthless, then.”

“Of course. We must continue spreading the Good Word and have faith we will prevail.”

It was hard to think of a reason why the IECS would steal the Key. It would be a P.R. nightmare if they were ever discovered, the whole ‘not judging’ thing completely killed. It could be a personal vendetta, someone taking it upon themselves to strike directly at the heathen faith, but if so then Julius doubted Pastor Bill was involved. “Thanks for the talk, Pastor. I appreciate it.”

“Anytime, friend. I hope to see you again?”

“We’ll see. Thanks.”

Julius made a quick escape. It was possible the IECS had heard about the Key and arranged things without the pastor’s knowledge, but what would they gain from stealing it? There was animosity between the two churches, sure, but was it really to such a level that they’d steal a holy relic? More likely was that a parishioner had gone vigilante, and even then, there were just too many holes. What if the Arakyn lied? What if its employer had said IECS as a cover?

Julius decided to pay a visit to the Sister and see if she could enlighten him any.

The Sister’s room was cheap, only the most basic amenities but at least it was clean. There was a small table and chair, a short chest of drawers, and a bed attached to the wall that looked unslept in. No pictures, no travel supplies set out anywhere. If Celestialites carried anything personal with them when they travelled, she was either keeping it hidden or it had been stolen when the Arakyn took her bag. She welcomed him inside and sat down on the bed with a concerned look, “Have you found something?”

“The good news is I found who stole your Key, though he doesn’t have it anymore. He said he’s working for the IECS. The bad news is that I don’t know if that’s true, or if he even knows if it’s true or not. The only official IECS representative on station doesn’t seem involved, but it could be an off-station contract, or it could be through unofficial channels, or it could be someone else entirely using the name of a rival church as a decoy. If you let the Guard know about the theft, they could—”

“I appreciate your help, Mr. Nix. I will pray for guidance.”

He blinked. “This thing is supposed to be a sacred relic, right? Just tell the Guard what happened and they can at least put out an alert.”

“No. Thank you, Mr. Nix. I appreciate your concern, but I do not want the Guard involved. I am willing to trust your discretion, as it is your profession, but I have no such trust in the Port Guard.”

Julius threw his hands up in surrender. “Have it your way.”

While the Sister was praying for guidance, Julius made his way back to his office. The Sister’s case had been a long shot anyway, and he had a living to make. If she wouldn’t involve the Guard, then there was no chance of them tracking the Key down. Who thought a nun could get all the way to Earth without any trouble, anyway? What Abbess or Mother Superior or Whatever thought this was a good idea? Did they honestly think the symbol on her robes would protect her from harm, or was their faith just that deep?

Why Earth, anyway? Why the Ark?

Julius stopped walking. “Yeah,” he muttered to himself, “that’s a good question, now that I think of it.”

It was starting to get late, but that thought was going to bug him all night if he didn’t look into it. Father Dominic was just the guy to ask about religious relations, plus the priest owed him a favor. Julius headed back to the Religious Sector.

The Port Guards standing outside the IECS chapel were surprising. He walked with purpose and eyes averted to keep from drawing attention to himself as he went past. Pastor Bill was talking about a thief, or someone who would have been a thief if they’d stolen anything. The Guard was considering it simple vandalism. Vandals who could get past a security system to

upturn the insides of the church and escape again all while the Pastor was taking a short walk? Pastor Bill was not satisfied. Neither was Julius. He was starting to get a very bad feeling about this case.

The Catholic church looked a little like a miniature cathedral. While the stark IECS church was between two ornate buildings, the mini-cathedral stood between a lush exotic greenhouse garden for Athee ancestor worship, and a minimalist Zek'ha shrine to The Void. Julius didn't give the imagery much thought. He was more concerned with the fact that he was being followed.

Whoever it was hadn't been there when he got on the transport shuttle to the sector, so they must have joined him as he passed the chapel. Julius entered the Athee garden, thankful for the lack of attendants, and carefully walked the overgrown paths until the surrounding plants were tall and dense enough that no one would see anything. Some species were surprised by the human ability to sense when something is behind them, especially since humans only have a single pair of forward-facing eyes. Julius was hoping whoever was following him was one of those species.

He was right. The figure froze in confusion as Julius suddenly turned around in the artificial dusk, stunner drawn. "Nice evening."

It was small, and Julius wasn't a hundred percent sure if the black fur was clothing or natural. Either way, he'd surprised it. Unfortunately, humans only have one set of forward-facing eyes.

Something hard came down across the back of his skull as the little one darted in fast for his legs, tripping him up and sending him sprawling, weapon lost among the greenery. A hoof collided with his gut as he tried to stand, then his ribs. Julius's arms were held in place as his chest constricted, tiny fast hands scurrying over his pockets, and with a high pitched squeak he was released, his attackers running off.

Julius lay still and just breathed. Rib was probably cracked. He tenderly touched the back of his head, fingers coming away wet. Damn it. He slowly stood up and rummaged around the plants until he found his gun before heading to the church.

Father Dominic's pleasant surprise when he opened the door quickly turned to a frown. "Mr. Nix! What can I do— you're bleeding, come inside."

Father Dominic was a Slanae, skin an almost black shade of plum, his branched ebony horns sweeping back over the layered copper hair on his head. Or was it feathers? Julius wasn't sure, and it didn't seem polite to ask. The priest's real name wasn't Dominic, of course, but he claimed it was the closest humans could get to pronouncing his real name and "as it is the name of a saint I am fond of, it has grown on me." Which was a joke of its own, given that Dominic was short for his race, standing at only seven feet tall. Father Dominic kept a concerned hand on Julius's arm the whole time as he led him through the church to his office in the back.

"Sit," he commanded. "I'll be right back." He returned with a wooden box that didn't look like a first-aid kit. "It's my own people's form of medicine, but it is equally effective on many races. Best if you don't look."

"How could I look if it's on the back of my head? Wait, why don't I want to look?"

Father Dominic smiled, and stood behind him. "Head down."

"I can fix myself up just fine if—" his head was pushed forward, something warm and spongy pressed to his scalp. "Ow." He sighed, resigned to his fate. "Sorry about the trouble."

"No trouble at all." It felt like the priest's whole hand was on the back of Julius's head. He made a small, considering sound. "This could have been much worse."

"Thanks, that's comforting."

After a moment, Father Dominic idly wondered, "What word do humans use to describe this color?"

"Of my hair? I dunno, dirty blonde? Though my old man always said it was the color of wet sand. I wouldn't know." Julius coughed, and then grimaced.

"You also injured your lungs."

"Nah, my rib cage just got a little banged up is all." Julius hurried to interrupt, "And no, you don't have to worry about that. Cracked rib, no big deal."

"Why do you prefer being in pain to seeking treatment?"

"Treatment costs credits, and I don't have much of those right now." The hand pulled away from the back of his head. The pain in his head was gone at least, and as Julius tentatively touched the spot there should have been blood, he couldn't feel any. He couldn't even feel a cut. "Uh. Thanks."

"If your concern is money—"

"Honestly I'm too freaked out right now by whatever you just did to want you anywhere near my lungs, Father. No offense."

Father Dominic put away his box with a smile. "None taken. I will make some tea, and you will tell me what brought you to my door after losing a fight."

"What makes you think I lost?" Father Dominic looked at him. Julius shrugged, "Alright, yeah."

Julius looked around the office while the priest made tea. It looked like someone had carved it out of dark stone, the shelves and desk formed from whatever the actual material was. The air was cool, but not cold. Light shone from covered lamps on the ceiling casting the office in a sort of twilight, and the variety of potted plant life attempting to swallow the walls made it look a lot less like an office and a lot more like he was visiting a wizard. A crucifix delicately framed by a purple vine near the door, a picture of Dominic's patron saint on a mossy shelf, and a picture of a woman in blue Julius was pretty sure was the Virgin Mary on a red leafy wall were the only religious indicators.

Father Dominic returned with a teapot and cups. "Priestess Anne from next door highly recommends this blend."

"Priestess Anne?" Julius blinked.

"Yes, one of the Devotees of the Void," Fr. Dominic poured. "Lovely human woman, makes excellent tea. Shame about her obsession with the true nature of reality as simply an illusion existing within nothingness."

Julius took the offered cup, and looked at it with mild skepticism, "But she makes good tea."

Fr. Dominic sat down behind his desk, "If this is all an illusion, may as well make it a pleasant one, or so she says."

"Huh." Julius took a sip. The tea really was good. "Makes sense I guess."

Fr. Dominic scoffed, "It doesn't make sense at all, the theological implications of such a worldview..." he caught himself, "are not what you came to discuss, and have no bearing on that gash across the back of your head."

Julius had another sip. "I've got a bit of a historical question."

The priest was amused. "Historical?"

"Religious history, it's pertinent to a case I'm working. What can you tell me about the Ark of the Covenant? The one on Earth."

The Slanae tilted his head, stirring his tea with his fingers. "It is the chest containing the Ten Commandments, as described in the Book of Exodus."

"Where is it kept now?"

"Many places have claimed to have the Ark. It could be buried outside Jerusalem, under guard in a church in Ethiopia, a number of places in Europe. Personally, I think it is lost to antiquity."

So how the hell was the Sister going to deliver her Key to it? Was she going to visit all the possibilities? "Have you ever heard of a connection between the Ark and the Celestialite Key?"

Fr. Dominic's feathers or hair or whatever fluffed up slightly in surprise. "The Celestialites? No, I don't think so. Why do you ask?"

"Someone I know mentioned something about it. There a Celestialite shrine around?"

"Celestialites do not keep shrines, or temples, only the convents."

Julius sighed, "Yeah, thought as much."

"Mr. Nix, I am intrigued by your line of questioning."

"Don't worry about it, Father," Julius put his cup of tea on the desk and started to stand, "I'm sorry to have troubled you."

"Wait a moment," Fr. Dominic gestured Julius should sit back down. "You can explain how this relates to your wound while I do some research."

"Look, you don't have to—"

"I still haven't repaid you for that business when I first arrived in Port."

Even though that was one reason Julius had come to the priest in the first place, it felt like he was taking advantage of his host's generosity. "You patched me up, we're good."

"Nonsense." Fr. Dominic pressed a spot on the desk and a projection of symbols appeared just over the surface.

Julius sat back down. "A Sister of Celestial Harmony hired me to find something that was stolen from her. Supposedly, she was transporting it to Earth."

"She was carrying the Key, and bringing it to the Ark?" Father Dominic's feathers rose again as he swiped through the symbols hovering over his desk.

Julius shrugged, "That's what she said. The Arakyn that stole it from her said it was hired by the IECS, but the local pastor doesn't seem the type. Got me wondering why she was taking this sacred relic to Earth in the first place. Someone followed me as I was coming here, so I guess I'm not the only one looking for it. The ones who mugged me didn't take anything, just knocked me around and did a quick search. They were looking for something specific."

Father Dominic searched in silence. Julius carefully ran his fingers over the back of his head. No sign of blood, no pain. It almost felt like he'd never even been injured, except for a



papery patch of dry skin. He turned his attention back to the priest. The Slanae was absorbed in his task, fingers flying in tiny gestures as he scrolled through what Julius imagined to be obscure texts in ancient languages, but what were probably just dry academic papers. Occasionally Father Dominic would cock his head or his brow would furrow slightly, making Julius wonder exactly how fast the Slanae could process information given the speed of his fingers.

Said fingers were long and lean, like the rest of him. Good shoulders though, and you could cut steel on those cheekbones— he cut off the thought with a hand over his face. *For fuck's sake, Julius, do not check out the priest.*

Julius covered his embarrassment with a yawn.

Fr. Dominic chuckled softly, "Mr. Nix, I will continue my esoteric research and let you know what I find. As you chose to travel here in person, I assume your office is without a communication terminal?"

"Business has been slow, and Port's maintenance costs aren't getting cheaper." Part of the problem was that Port Station was old and underfunded. The only reason it had stayed in business was it was the only station in the sector, but there wasn't much else in the sector, either. Better ships meant less need for pit stops, which meant fewer ships coming through every year.

The other part of the problem was that management sucked.

"I've often wondered why the Council doesn't simply place the burden on the station's visitors, rather than the permanent residents," Father Dominic said.

"Oh, they do," Julius winced as he stood, "but everyone living in Port contributes. For the good of everyone, or something like that."

"I fail to see how removing simple comforts from those who struggle to afford the arbitrary flat fee for living here is for the good of everyone."

"Well, it's not like I'm providing any sort of vital service."

Father Dominic's feathers... sharpened? "I disagree, and that is irrelevant."

Julius grinned, he couldn't help it. Making a career out of trying to look at things people preferred not to be looked at meant he didn't see a whole lot of friendly faces. It was kinda nice having someone in his corner for a change, even for something as little as Port's maintenance fees. "I'll check in with my client in the morning, make sure she's ok, and drop by after."

"You may use my communication terminal since you are here, if you would rather speak to your client immediately."

"No, that's..." Julius changed his mind. "That'd be great, actually. Thanks." Save him a trip in the morning, and give him a chance to do more digging.

The terminal was in the wall behind the desk. He contacted the hotel and was put through to her room.

"Mr. Nix?" The Sister adjusted her hood or habit or whatever on her head as she came on screen.

"Sister, just wanted to check in. I know you don't want the Guard involved, and that's your business, but I thought you should know you're not the only person looking for your Key."

Her eyes widened. "What do you mean?"

"The IECS church was broken into, but nothing was stolen. Shortly after, I was roughed up by a pair of toughs looking for something specific, and they ran off when they didn't find it. I'm going to see if I can get any more information from that Arakyn tomorrow, but it seems like someone's following my trail, and eventually that's gonna lead back to you."

"I see."

Julius frowned, arms crossed. "You sound less worried than you probably should."

"My flight leaves tomorrow at 13:00 standard hours. I will be fine until then."

That was surprising. "But you don't have the key back yet. Isn't it too important to just leave it behind?"

"My Sisters have sent someone to try to track it down. I am to report elsewhere. Thank you for your concern, Mr. Nix..." she seemed to notice something behind him. "Is someone with you?"

He glanced back, like he didn't know there was a seven foot tall horned humanoid sitting behind him. "Oh, I know the Catholic priest on the station, he patched me up after those thugs I mentioned got me. I wanted to talk to you right away, so I borrowed his terminal." A sudden impulse made him add, "We had a fascinating chat about the Ark, too."

She was unimpressed. "I see. I'm glad to hear your interest in theology is growing, Mr. Nix. Let me know if anything urgent should happen before I leave the station tomorrow. Goodnight."

The screen went black. Julius whistled low, "Sounds like she's going to be reprimanded pretty hard."

"Not surprising, if she was given the Key to transport and lost it," Father Dominic muttered.

"Yeah." Julius shook his head, baffled. "This whole thing has been fishy from the start. Why send her to Earth with the damn thing in the first place? Why is she so insistent that the Guard not be involved? Hell, I'm even just assuming she's a real nun!"

"Before you let your paranoia run away with your imagination," Father Dominic sounded like he was trying not to smile, "the Sisters of Celestial Harmony have a history of coming into conflict with authority figures, as they tend to do what they see is right regardless of rules or regulations, and governments have historically tried to take advantage of Celestialite generosity and good works."

"Why bother fixing the infrastructure of your civilization if the nuns will take care of the poor for free?"

"Something like that. So, your client's mistrust may be based in some unpleasant personal experiences."

Julius half sat on the edge of the priest's desk, "Maybe." That explanation didn't feel right, but he couldn't give a reason for it, yet. So, he changed the subject. "Can I ask why Catholicism?"

"Hm?"

"I mean you, personally." Julius shrugged, "I don't understand why any alien would convert to an Earth religion, honestly, but something like Buddhism seems like it would hold more universal appeal than 'God came to our planet to tell us how to live and then we killed him.'"

Father Dominic chuckled, "And then he came back. The Jesuits were the first Christian order to reach my world, and the imagery of a dead piece of wood being soaked by the blood of Life Itself to generate an Eternal Life anew was particularly compelling to many of my people."

Julius was fairly certain something about that had gotten lost in translation, but he'd also made a point out of avoiding religion when he could, so what did he know? What he did know was, "I'm realizing I don't know a whole lot about your planet or people."

"Perhaps you should remedy that," Father Dominic responded lightly.

Julius forcefully reminded himself that the *priest* was definitely *not* flirting with him. He cleared his throat and said, "Not many Slanae come through Port, and the ones that do don't stick around." He shrugged, again. "I looked it up when we met, got the data entry for your homeworld. A single continent toward the pole means civilization lives in perpetual twilight half the year and constant sun the other half, and a heavily agrarian economy gives the impression your people got to the stars and said, 'eh, never mind.'"

"That is not inaccurate," Father Dominic smirked.

Julius waited for him to explain what he meant, but the priest was absorbed in his research. Julius tried not to be disappointed. "Got anything yet?"

"Not yet. If you drop by in the morning, I will let you know what I've found. Or I can come to your office." He glanced up, "As I assume your communication terminal will still be nonfunctional?"

"Yep." Seemed the priest wasn't the kind of guy for small talk while working. He stood up, "I'll drop by. I really appreciate this, Father, thanks."

"I am happy to help, and it's an entertaining topic of research."

Julius smiled. At least there was that. "I'll take your word for it and leave you to it."

"Goodnight, Mr. Nix."

The morning station news made Julius rethink his plan. The body of an Arakyn with a scar under its leftmost eye had been found, apparently killed with a poisoned blade. If whoever had done it could kill an Arakyn, then they were either scarily fast or ridiculously strong. Or both.

He thought of the two that had attacked him in the garden. Maybe instead of one killer that was either fast or strong, he should be keeping an eye out for one of each. Either way, he had to warn the Sister. His comms were still out of service, and he couldn't show up in person or he might lead whoever it was right to her.

Father Dominic would let him use the comms for free, even if it would take longer to get to that sector than it would to the Sister's hotel. He figured he'd decide as he walked, just to get moving in a direction, and grabbed his jacket off the hook by the door on his way out. He had one arm in the jacket and one foot out the open door when a large shape blocked his way.

The person standing in front of him was about his height, twice as broad, with a face that looked like it was literally chiseled from granite. All of it looked like it had been hewn from rock, actually, which Julius was in perfect position to see considering the alien wore nothing but a gold sash Julius assumed had some cultural significance he was ignorant of. He glanced down. The feet had hooves. Well, it looked like hooves, if hooves were crudely carved from jagged rock, but close enough.

"Sorry, office is closed right now," Julius said as he closed the door. He heard the automatic lock engage. He got his other arm through his jacket and straightened it with a wince as his ribs protested. "You gonna let me pass, or are you here to rough me up some more?"

"Where is Sister Lysh'sk?"

It didn't have any trouble with the glottal stop. "Not here. Where's your furry friend?"

The question was ignored. "We know she contacted you."

"I don't discuss my clients with people who fracture my ribs, sorry." He gestured behind him, "Need me to leave the office unlocked? I'd rather you not kick the door down if you want to look inside."

"Your residence is attached."

"Yeah, that door's unlocked inside. Come on in, have a beer, but just so you know I haven't done laundry in a couple weeks."

Granite-Face said nothing for a moment, then took a single step back. "Unnecessary."

Julius hesitated, wary. "Right. Ok." He'd gotten pretty good at 'amiable talking without saying anything helpful,' but this might have been the first time it actually worked the way he wanted it to. He made his way past Granite-Face and called over his shoulder, "No kicking my door down while I'm gone!"

It didn't follow him. He also hadn't seen the furry one, which made him wonder if he was being followed by it. Since he didn't want to lead them to the Sister, that meant he was calling on Father Dominic after all.

The church was always open during the day, as long as Father Dominic was present, and Julius hurried inside. He wondered briefly if he should ask the priest to lock the door in case he'd been followed... and stopped thinking of anything as he saw Father Dominic kneeling by the holy water font, a hand reached up into the water, something black and viscous dripping from his mouth onto the floor as he shuddered.

"Father Dominic!" Julius hurried over but the priest stopped him with a warning hand.

"I'll be fine. I think."

Father Dominic's horns were somehow thinner but branched all around his head now, obscuring the copper feathers almost completely. The hand he'd held out to stop Julius's approach was rough, like some sort of natural armor.

Julius winced as more black stuff poured forth. "How do I help? What happened?"

"I'm expelling the toxin," Father Dominic groaned.

Julius blinked. "You're— what the hell happened?!"

"Please get more water from the sacristy."

"Where?"

"The room behind the altar."

Julius took off. A sacristy, it turned out, was a prep room where vestments and altar coverings were kept, among other things. It also had a sink. Julius found an empty pitcher and filled it, unsure of how this was going to help but what the hell did he know about Slanae biology?

"Into the font," Father Dominic groaned as Julius returned with the water.

Julius poured the water into the almost empty font over the priest's hand, which didn't really look like a hand anymore as much as a hand-shaped mass of roots.

"... Huh," Julius observed.

Father Dominic chuckled, or would have if another mouthful of black stuff hadn't interrupted. With a cough he said, "I believe I've met your client."

"You what?!" He was starting to sound like he was stuck in a loop, and felt just as confused.

The priest nodded, "Hisshek'k female, blue scales. Came into the church shortly after I opened the doors. She did not wear her robes, but I recognized her voice." He coughed again, chagrined, "I probably shouldn't have mentioned her cult."

Julius kneeled next to him with a sigh. "Father, I know you feel like shit right now, but I'm really gonna need you to start from the beginning. Even if you only get a few words out between black stuff."

Father Dominic's horns-branches visibly constricted as he straightened. "I discovered there is a connection between the Key and the Ark, though tenuous. Apparently, the Celestial Key is considered to be not just a symbol of the faith, but a holy relic direct from the Goddess herself to their first prophet. It is the 'key to the universe,' and there's a great deal of debate concerning what that means. The dominant practice is that the key is meant to 'unlock the hearts of beings,' symbolizing the great concerns for harmony and peace the Sisters of Celestial Harmony maintain. Once peace and harmony are achieved, the doors to paradise will again be presented, the key will be used, and the universe will achieve its pre-fallen state."

He paused to spit out more toxin before resuming like he'd never stopped. "However, there was a cult that formed perhaps a thousand years ago with the belief that the key was meant to open a lock, a physical one, present somewhere in the universe. As contact was made with other cultures, the Seekers of the Lock came to the conclusion that if there was only one ultimate being, it must have different aspects to account for the different understandings of it. If the Celestialites had the Key, what if another faith had the Lock?"

Julius had honestly been more focused on watching the priest pull himself together than the history lesson, but that got his attention. "And they decided on Christian?"

"Judaism, Mr. Nix," Father Dominic corrected with an arched brow. "The Ark of the Covenant was on Earth long before Jesus was born." He cleared his throat, "Of course, if a Seeker of the Lock were to take the Key to the Ark, if she could find it, she would be disappointed to find there is no lock on it."

Julius smirked, "I hope that means this is a case of an overzealous believer running with an idea and not an entire cult incapable of research."

"Likely so. Unless the thought is that the Key will make the Lock appear."

Julius rolled his eyes at the idea. "So my client is one of these Seekers, and when you let on you knew her secret, she poisoned you?"

"Bit me. Hisshek'k are fast and venomous, please be careful when you go after her."

"I can't leave you on the floor of the church spitting up venom!"

"I will be fine, Mr. Nix," he glanced at him with a small grateful smile, "though I appreciate the concern. Thank God she decided to come to me first. If she'd attacked you, you would have died."

Julius only frowned and got up to use the comms. He placed a call to the hotel and confirmed that the Sister had left earlier that day. Then he called the Docks and made sure there

actually was a ship to Earth scheduled to sail at 13:00. There was. There was also one leaving in thirty minutes.

"Shit." Julius ran out the door, and stopped short at the sight of two figures on the street. "For fuck's sake, I do not have time for this!"

Granite-Face folded its arms, a tiny furry humanoid beside it twitching in either nervousness or excitement, it was hard to tell which.

"We have realized you are not helping her steal the Key," Granite-Face said.

Julius's jaw dropped, then he scowled. "You *what*?" He stalked forward, "Hang on, you're the ones sent to come after her! You're Celestialites, here to get back the Key, right? And you thought beating the shit out of me was better than, I don't know, explaining what the hell was going on? What sort of universal cosmic mercy is that?!"

The furry one was super twitchy and Granite-Face was, well, stone, but both their eyes rose to look a foot and a half above Julius's head.

"I suggest," Father Dominic said from behind him, "you give my friend the explanation he is owed on our way to the Docks."

Julius spun around, "You're not coming, you're recovering!"

"I've already locked the church, I'm coming."

Julius looked him over with a skeptical frown. His hands looked like hands again, though still rough, and his horn-branches had retreated some to reveal more of his feathers again. His face was thin, though, thinner than usual, and his skin had lost its purple tint. Julius felt guilty, which made him frustrated. "Fine, all of you hurry up."

He didn't wait to see if the two Celestialites followed or not. He felt Father Dominic behind him, his long strides keeping pace easily with the rushing human. "You shouldn't be doing this," Julius grumbled.

The priest tilted his head, "Perhaps, but you do not trust either of the women following, and if you face the rogue Sister of Celestial Harmony alone, you will die. I cannot stand idly by and watch that happen."

"You've more than made up for me helping you out once."

"I'm not doing this out of debt, Mr. Nix. I'm doing this because if your client makes it to Earth, the prophecy states existence as we know it will cease."

Julius stared at him.

Father Dominic grinned. "If you believe in that sort of thing."

Julius laughed in surprise. "Did you just make a religion joke?"

"Priests can have senses of humor, Mr. Nix."

Julius shrugged, "Not something I think of when someone says 'priest,' but I guess they'd almost have to."

Father Dominic shook his head, "I've known a few who most certainly did not. Look, the shuttle's pulling in."

They boarded the station shuttle, with the Celestialites close behind. The little one was being carried on the back of her stone-faced companion, and scurried down to sit by the window. She chirruped something high pitched. Granite translated, "According to the Guard, you are a man of loose morals who is little better than a mercenary, hired for blackmail and failing to help those who cannot pay."

"The Guard can kiss my ass," Julius stated.

Father Dominic looked confused.

"I'm not talking about this with people who think it's acceptable to attack without provocation and ask questions later," Julius grumbled.

"The information from the Guard was our provocation," Granite said. He hadn't asked for her name, she hadn't offered it, and he didn't give a damn.

"You don't get out much, do you?" he snapped. "You're on Port Station, a rundown rust bucket held together by luck and stubbornness. The Port Guard's first concern is security for anywhere trade happens, which is essential since that's the only reason this place is still running. I wouldn't trust any of them for an honest character assessment if it was their own mother, which you would have known if you had talked to anyone who actually lives here."

He clenched his fists, "Fuck, I'm so annoyed right now." He quietly ranted to Father Dominic without looking at him, guilt still knotted in his core, "You got attacked and now she's getting away because I'm too dense to see when I'm being played! She never lost the damn Key, I was just a distraction! When these two clumsily ransacked the IECS church, I assumed her concerns were legit and alerted her to the fact that someone else was looking for the Key. So she killed the Arakyn because she didn't pay it enough to keep its mouth shut and it would have told the Celestialites everything if they could afford to pay for it, if they even thought to ask it in the first place. And then she nearly kills the only person on this goddamn station who takes me seriously..." he stopped himself.

Everyone was quiet for a long moment.

"You are right," Granite said, "we do not 'get out much.' I was selected because I am strong and immune to her venom." She made a high pitched sound and gestured to the little one, "—is here because I am not fast, or stealthy, and she volunteered to help. We apologize for the misunderstanding."

Julius nodded, unable to trust himself to speak.

"You can apologize by covering his medical bills," Father Dominic said.

Julius almost laughed. "Bills?"

Father Dominic smiled, "For the ribs you still haven't tended to."

Julius rolled his eyes, but he was a little less angry at himself, so that was something. And unusual.

The shuttle reached the Docks, and they hurried to find the next ship to Earth. "How did she manage to steal the Key in the first place? Don't you have guards or something?" Julius asked.

The little one with the high pitched name responded, her friend translating again, "Lysh'sk was one of the guards. We had no idea she was secretly a Seeker."

Julius scoffed, "You might want to be a little more thorough in your background checks."

"We have realized this," was the flat response.

Julius checked the list of departures to find what docking bay the ship would be in. "Why didn't you two tell the Port Guard to haul her in?"

"We do not have any diplomatic authority, and asking for their assistance would mean revealing our sacred relic had been stolen by one of our own people."

Julius nodded. "Bad P.R, I get it."

"P.R.?"

"Public relations, press. Looks bad if an organization dedicated to helping people has a cult that wants to bring the apocalypse." He started moving again, "Found it, let's go."

"What is the plan once we reach her ship?" Father Dominic asked.

"It hasn't started boarding yet, so if we hurry we should get there before she gets on."

"And then?" the priest prompted after a moment.

"I'm working on it."

They found the ship, just as the boarding began. Sister Lysh'sk was standing in line.

Before Julius even had time to swear, Father Dominic strode forward to the nearest Port Guard, his voice earnest, "Guard? The Hisshek'k in the Celestialite robes is a fraud. She attacked me in the church, I've no doubt she's the one who ransacked the IECS chapel as well."

The Guard blinked and stared at the Slanae for a moment before looking at the Sister of Celestial Harmony waiting in line. "Are you sure?"

"Unless you know of another venomous blue scaled species, yes."

He eyed the priest suspiciously, "How'd you survive?"

Father Dominic looked down from his full height, "We are very resilient."

"Must be." He grumbled with a sigh, "This is gonna look great, arresting a Sister." He spoke into his wristcomm, "Hey, Mark? Yeah, pretend there's a problem with the Celestialite's boarding card. Just do it, I'll talk to her."

"Thank you," Father Dominic inclined his head.

Julius was amused, and tried not to draw attention to himself as they waited. He realized after a moment they were a person short.

"Where's your friend?" he asked Granite.

"Preparing."

Julius thought about asking for more details, and decided he'd find out soon enough.

As Sister Lysh'sk reached the Guard checking boarding passes, it seemed like for once the Guard were being helpful. Her back went ramrod straight as the Guard said something, then she followed his gesture to step to the side with a quick look around...

... and saw the horned head of the seven foot tall priest she'd just left for dead watching her.

As the Guard Father Dominic had spoken to approached with the priest close behind, the Sister started walking the opposite direction. Julius circled around so he could head her off when something small, black, and fast tripped up the Sister's feet. She went down with a hiss, giving the perfect opportunity for a "concerned stranger" to hurry to her side.

"Just so you know," Julius said as knelt by her, "if that Guard sees you attack someone, he will not hesitate to shoot you. Stun cartridges, but very unpleasant."

A stone hand clamped over the Sister's mouth from behind her. Granite said something in a language Julius didn't recognize, but it was clear Sister Lysh'sk wasn't happy to hear it.

"What did you say?" he asked.

"A formal declaration of discipline. We will take her back, now."

"That's not going to be as simple as you think," Julius pointed to the Guard arriving behind him, Father Dominic alongside.



Father Dominic would have been content to let her go and let the Sisters see to her, but the Guard was involved now and unhappy with the story he heard. Letting the Sisters of Celestial Harmony take care of the rogue nun was all well and good, but there was a dead Arakyn and the vandalism of an IECS temple to consider.

Granite and her tiny companion promised recompense for all damage caused, as long as Sister Lysh'sk was delivered to their custody.

"We don't have anything solid to link anyone here to anything, except the Sister's attempted murder of the Father," Julius pointed out. "Everything's circumstantial until you hear one of them confess."

"And I don't suppose you'd have heard anything like that?" The Guard looked like he had a headache.

Julius shrugged, "You want my help, you know my rates."

The Guard scoffed, "Right." He turned to the Celestialites, "Just get all three of you off the station as fast as possible, got it?"

Granite and friend nodded. The Guard walked away, muttering to himself.

Sister Lysh'sk was restrained and taken away by her Sisters. Granite thanked Julius and Father Dominic for their assistance, her friend chirped an agreement (at least that's what it sounded like,) and Sister Lysh'sk glared daggers. Julius felt pretty good about it.

As the nuns moved down the Docks to the area for private vessels, Father Dominic steadied himself on Julius's shoulder.

"Ok, back to the church. Come on," Julius put a supporting arm around him as they walked despite the height difference.

"I know the way, Mr. Nix," was the half-hearted protest.

Julius shook his head. "You look like you're about to pass out, I'm coming with."

"Mm. I have extended myself a bit... overmuch."

"Told you to stay behind."

"I couldn't do that, and my presence was of use."

Julius sighed, "Yeah. You were a huge help, actually. I owe you."

Father Dominic chuckled, "I might take you up on that."

They waited for a shuttle to the Religious Sector. "Hey, Father, you seriously don't look good. Way too thin, skin's the wrong color. You sure you're ok?"

Father Dominic smiled gently, "Some nourishment and I will be fine. Trust me."

Julius wasn't convinced, but he hoped that was true. "Ok. We don't have to go all the way back, there's a place nearby that's cheap but decent—"

"No, thank you. I have everything I require at the church."

"Water?" Julius guessed, remembering the hand in the font.

"Nutrient supplement. I often mix it with tea."

And everything clicked. "You drink through your fingers. I thought you were stirring your tea, but you were drinking it. Then when you were poisoned, you used the water to... force the poison out?"

"Something like that," he said as they got on the shuttle. He sounded exhausted.

They arrived at the Religious Sector and headed for the church. It was slow going with Father Dominic leaning on Julius for support, but he somehow managed to stay dignified all the way inside and back to his office.

"Thanks again, for all your help," Julius said as he followed Father Dominic's instructions on making tea and how much supplement powder to add to it.

"You're welcome, Mr. Nix."

Julius set the teapot and cup on the desk where the priest sat. "I'll let you get some rest. If you need anything... well, I still don't have a functioning comms terminal, but—"

"I will be fine, but I appreciate the thought."

"Sure." Julius started to walk out and turned back, "Do people visit priests just to say hi? Is that a thing?"

Father Dominic smiled. "Yes, Mr. Nix, priests can have social lives."

"Ok. That's good."

At Julius's hesitation, Father Dominic added, "I hope to see you again."

*Should I tell him he sounds like he's flirting,* Julius wondered, and decided that was a conversation for another day. "Definitely. See you then."

He hurried out and headed back to the office. Becoming fast friends with a priest was somewhere at the bottom of the list of things he thought he'd ever do, but he liked him and not just because he had a thing for tall, shoulders, and cheekbones, either. Father Dominic seemed like a rare decent guy, someone who was considerate of others but also didn't feel the need to pretend for the sake of society. Julius still thought the religion was ridiculous, but the guy he liked.

This was going to be a strange friendship, that was for sure.