

CHAPTER TWO

The front gate of the Luna Lux Resort Casino curves around the entrance to its grounds like parentheses, two silver-white crescents holding a secret. They open onto a curved walkway that winds around a large pool, throughout which jets of water shoot up in multicolored arcs, creating showers of gems raining through the air. Jes flips both panels of his cape over his shoulders so that the green satin shines bright. He thinks it's a bit classier and will make him fit in better – he has witnessed far more flamboyant fashions than he's accustomed to in his small walk to get here.

He wishes he'd thought to find a washroom and freshen up a bit before making his way, and wonders if he can do that once he's inside. The garden he walks through is fragrant with flowers, and the path is lined with pale white lights that leave rainbow tracers in his eyes when he looks away. Benches are set along the path intermittently, and a couple of gazebos host small groups – clouds of reef smoke make stoned weather around them. Swings hang from some of the larger tree branches, and their solo occupants sit gazing out at the water, swaying lightly in the dark. The whole area is much less gaudy than the strip outside, peaceful even. The rushing sound of the crowded strip is muffled, distant. Constellations of white and golden lights twinkle from the places they've been set into the wall that contains the property.

The purple globe of the planet Persephone dominates the sky, and three of its other moons are visible. The towers of the Luna Lux reach for the heavenly bodies, gleaming silver and white surfaces and dark grey glass – clearly of Rijalen design. The light that marks the sky above it, the beam that guided him here, shines from the top of a central dome, and the main entrance presides over a grand courtyard that hugs a fountain at its center. He approaches the front door and spots a sign pointing towards the back of the casino: *Cirque Kozmiqa*. The lettering is gold holographic type on a matte, dark red surface. The sign hangs over a path of stars stenciled with the same gold holographic substance. It leads him along a route edged with gold velvet ropes that winds around the inside perimeter of the casino. The clicking of giant wheels of fortune, the clacking of roulette tables, the pinging of slot machines, and chatter in a multitude of languages fill the air, punctuated by the occasional cheer as someone reveals a winning hand. Servers walk by, carrying trays of drinks. He sees members of most species of the 9-Star Congress present, the love of games of chance common across cultures it would seem. There's a part of him that wants to wander around, out of curiosity and to get his bearings, but he feels an urgency to get to the destination the crystal indicated, to figure out how to settle himself in this place. He stays on the path.

Eventually he reaches a set of red curtains held open with golden sashes. He steps through the curtains and finds himself outside, on a lawn. Several meters away, a trio of large, lotus-shaped tents rise. They're made of swatches of red and gold fabric, and look heavy and sturdy. From the top of the center dome a star system spins, a radiant sun of amber glass ringed by planets, each a smaller sphere, glinting against the night.

Ticket takers are stationed at each of the entrances. Shit, he didn't think about that. There aren't any people going in or milling about outside on the lawn, and from inside the tent comes faint music – the show must already be going on. He

doesn't think he can bluff his way past the ticket takers and so continues walking.

Without getting any closer to the tents, he strolls casually around the edge of the lawn and looks for other ways in. He comes across a side tent that contains a kitchen. Through the clear panels that serve as windows, lines of cooks prepare what look like little desserts. This is a dinner-and-show kind of deal.

There are a couple of kitchen workers smoking outside and he hears one of them say to her friend, "You owe me, Lucian. Next time you're buying."

"Yeah, yeah I know I know," Lucian – presumably – replies.

Jes keeps walking, hoping for a side entrance – surely the front doors aren't the only way in or out. His hunch proves correct, and he spies a back door unattended. He rushes to it and pushes the panel open slowly. Just a couple of meters from the door stand two attendants with their backs to him. He slips in quietly and begins heading away when one of them calls out, "Hey!"

He turns to face them, all smiling and innocent.

"The show's already started," the attendant says.

"I know. I was having a smoke," he replies. "With my friend Lucian. In the kitchen? We got distracted. You know how he is."

The attendant chuckles. "I'm surprised that reefhead hasn't gotten fired yet. Come in through the front next time."

"I will. Thanks." He continues down the corridor lined with dark curtains, hearing light, delicate music. The crowd makes deep *mmmm* sounds, clearly appreciating whatever they're seeing. Finally, he reaches a door to the main arena, and steps through. He joins the standing room only section at the back of what must be the central tent. He sees that the audience is arranged in sections: standing room where he is, then a circle of arena style seating, then an area where a dinner service had clearly taken place at the tables set along the curve of the stage.

Onstage stands a tall Hydraxian. He wears a sparkling black

vest that exposes all four of his lean and muscular arms, and tight pants that are black but reflect rainbows. His orange skin appears to be dusted with glitter, his face painted up as some kind of mythological creature. He juggles eight balls with his four arms, forming complex and dizzying patterns with the arcs of their flight. He uses two of his arms to catch a series of balls, balancing them at different points along their length. They fly into the air, then land solidly, right where he wants them, and they stay there, perfectly still. He begins rolling these balls around his body, waving a couple of them fluidly with two hands while tossing with his other two, then catching and balancing one on his face.

He moves his body like a dancer and the balls are his partners, but two of his arms are doing one kind of dance while the other two are doing another. He juggles shifting patterns of diminishing numbers as he divests himself of one ball at a time, tossing them to the waiting assistants, until there is just one rolling on his palm. It looks like it's floating as he passes it from hand to hand to hand to hand. A series of short rolls, then an elongated one across a bridge formed by two arms one way, then back the other way along the other two arms. He changes his positions fluidly and Jes can't help but wonder if there's some kind of complex code being transmitted by the hypnotic movements. Finally he draws to a close – all four hands waver around the ball and again it looks like it's floating. As the spotlight dims and the crowd cheers its approval, Jes can't help but join in.

The stage goes dark as the crowd shuffles and coughs in anticipation of the next act. Then the center spot opens slowly on an amber gold mound of fabric and spangles as the music fades in. A face appears, flipping up from the mound. A beautiful human face, framed by legs – the performer's legs, he realizes, that are not in places they should be. Her chin is on the floor, framed by her feet, and her body is bent in half. The contortionist unfolds herself to the murmur of the crowd.

She tumbles across the floor, the embodiment of grace, lands in a split before sliding her front leg behind her, then bending them both forward over her head so that the tips of her toes are in front of her forehead. She presses down with her hands and lifts herself off the floor before slowly rising up into a handstand. She spins and walks on her hands to the center of the stage, kicking her legs gracefully.

A large silver hoop descends from the fly space above the stage; she grabs it and they rise up in the air together as she hangs, moving her legs as if treading water. Jes realizes that what he'd taken to be a tight bodysuit is, in fact, her skin. She wears a spangled bikini which keeps her from total nudity, but the iridescence is her, not a costume. Though she has human features and human toned skin, she has a shimmer. And what he'd thought to be a headpiece with crystals of rich amber has a familiar glitter – she has a halo, though hers is smaller than expected. Could she be interspecies? Asuna and human? The Asuna notoriously do not approve of interspecies mating so this performer is a rare creature indeed.

She hangs from the hoop, bends her body through a series of shapes that draw applause each time she stops and holds one. Now she hangs from one arm while her legs bend over her head; now she adds her other arm and flips over into a split; now she pulls herself up into the circle and presses her body into the curve, making herself a crescent moon. She contorts herself within the hoop, glides through a sequence of poses, her body seemingly boneless. The hoop lowers down to the stage and she flips to the floor. Then, gripping the bottom of the hoop, she begins to twirl and the hoop rises again, and she spins and spins and spins – a living jewel taking flight. Faster and faster she spins as she draws her legs up, then the spin slows as she brings her legs back down, held in right angles, bent at the knees. She continues spinning as the hoop lowers, then her feet make contact with the stage again and she finally stops as the crowd erupts with cheers. She beams, takes her

bow. Jes wonders what it must feel like to belong as perfectly as she does on the stage.

Could *he* belong here? At least for a little while? Was it too much to hope that this bawdy, gaudy moon could be his refuge? Somewhere the Institute would never come looking? Because why else would he have been guided here? He knows perfectly well that he could be standing here, now, in this alien crowd, by random happenstance. And yet something feels familiar about what he's watching.

A succession of acts take the stage: a trio of acrobats, a group doing flying trapeze, some annoying clowns. He barely takes them in as he strengthens his resolve. He wishes he could will his body to such feats as he's witnessing, but he can't. There *is* something he can do that would dazzle and delight the crowd into ooohs and aaahs. But he can't. Not as a public performance.

The crowd thins out after the show, but Jes doesn't move from his spot. He leans casually on the barrier that separates the standing section from the seats, watches as everyone makes their exit, chattering excitedly about the show. A few workers enter the space discreetly, invisible to all but the one looking out for them. They are humans and Bezans, and they quietly set about their duties: clearing glasses and empty bottles, cleaning the tables from the dinner service, sweeping the floors.

The house lights come on, and the air of mystery vanishes in sudden brightness. The space becomes not quite garish, but is certainly no longer the magical otherworld it had just been. "Excuse me," he says, politely as he can, to the young human woman tossing empty bottles into the receptacle floating behind her. "Who would I talk to about getting a job here?"

She sticks out her lower lip and blows a lock of pink hair out of her face as she continues working. "Aleia handles house staff, but if you're interested in crew, talk to Quint. Aleia's probably gone for the night, but Quint'll be backstage somewhere. Big Hydraxian guy."

“Oh, the juggler?”

She laughs. “No not him. Quint’s a *big* guy.” She pauses and looks at him closely, taking in his hair, his eyes. She’s trying to piece his heritage together but says nothing about it. He likes her for that.

“Big Hydraxian,” Jes says. “Got it.”

He begins heading down the steps towards the stage.

“Oh, don’t go that way,” the busgirl says. “You won’t get through. Go to the crew door – out into the corridor there,” she points to the door he entered by. “Go right, it curves around. There’s a little alcove with a black door. It’s unmarked, but you’ll hear people and probably smell the clouds of reef.”

“Thanks,” he says and follows her instructions.

An attendant walking the other way steps in his path. “The exit is behind you.”

“I’m here to talk to Quint. About some possible work.”

The usher sniffs in response and steps aside. Jes continues down the dim pathway, towards the sounds of chatter and laughter. As the girl predicted, the pungent smell of reef fills the air. He follows the sound and the smell, and sees a space where the curtains lining the walls are parted. He heads for it, then freezes when a multi-legged form emerges from the shadow. An insectoid being as tall as him steps into the corridor. It walks out on four back legs bearing a long abdomen, and its two front arms (or legs) are bent forward in front of it. Its head is triangular with rounded corners and two long, feather-like antennae sprout from the top of its face, wavering slightly. Its large, bulbous, oblong eyes are violet and black, like the rest of its body, and they seem to refract the dim light. A Mantodean. Jes has never seen one in person before.

The being emits a soft hissing sound, some clicks, then says in Ninespeak, “They will accept you when you make them float.”

As crept out as he is by the large compound eyes gazing at him, Jes can’t look away. He feels the alien’s attention unpeel

him to his very essence and he finds, disconcertingly, that he wants to be seen. Is he being judged? Jes can't suss this individual yet feels certain that he is being assessed somehow. He hopes he passes muster.

"Thank you," he stammers out. He's embarrassed to be so flustered by the – for lack of a better word – *alienness* of a member species of the 9-Star Congress. But the Mantodeans are the most alien of all of them and he's never met one before. Not that he accepts that as an excuse. "Thank you for the... advice?"

"My pleasure. It's what I do. My name is Kush O-Nhar and my pronouns are he/him. After you," the Mantodean says and gives a little bow, gesturing toward the door while emitting soft clicking sounds.

Jes pushes the door open, tamps down a feeling of revulsion at all the legs of the creature – person – behind him. He imagines the fine filaments of the front pincers whispering the air on the back of his neck. He wonders if that's speciesist of him.

The room is warmly lit as he enters, and he steps into a haze of reef, chordash leaf, and incense. To his surprise, nobody really pays him any mind, but he feels the keen attention of the Mantodean behind him. There's not much of the crew left, just a few lingering clowns gathering their things and dashing past him out the door. The trio of Bezan acrobats, triplets it looks like, stands together in a loose cluster, dressed in street clothes, satchels slung over their tiny shoulders, looking ready to go but in no hurry. They laugh together at some private humor.

"I thought you left," one of them says to the Mantodean with a look at Jes. Her sisters join her in looking at him and he susses from them mild curiosity tempered by indifference.

"I wanted to see how this plays out," the insect-person replies.

Curious.

The space is a mirror of the theater space, minus the stage

and seating. It is filled mostly by mats, and trampolines, and aerial rigs and other equipment. On one of the towers of trusses rising towards the circus top, a Bezan male in a safety harness climbs among the lighting instruments. At the base of the tower stands the biggest man Jes has ever seen – he must be the “big Hydraxian guy”. The Hydraxian he saw on stage was tall, but thin and long limbed, lithe even. But this guy is even taller and all brawn – thick and hefty, corpuscular in his musculature. He gazes attentively up at the Bezan in the rafters. Jes finds his concern all the more touching given his bulk.

“Excuse me,” Jes says, modulating his voice to be quiet and respectful, but not timid. “Are you Quint?”

The Hydraxian keeps his eyes on the Bezan, who’s still in costume – he must be one of the acrobats – then glances down to Jes for a click of a second, then back up to the guy climbing around high above them. “Who are you?”

“I’m wanting to ask you about a job. On your crew maybe?”

“How’s it looking up there?” Quint calls to the upper reaches of the tent.

“Almost got it!” comes the distant call back.

The hulking four-armed man turns his attention back to Jes. His brows are thick, his jaw square, and nose broad. Despite his intimidating build, his eyes are kind. “What’s your name?”

“Jes.”

“Ever crewed before?”

“Can’t say that I have.”

“Built stuff?”

“No.”

“Fixed stuff?”

“No.”

“Well, what can you do then?” His tone isn’t snide or sarcastic, he’s genuinely curious.

Jes wonders how he should spin his particular set of skills and wishes he had thought a bit more thoroughly before coming back here.

Before he can formulate a response, the contortionist-aerialist lady walks up. She's draped in a dark red cloak, her lustrous brown hair tied back in a loose ponytail. Her halo, though small, catches and refracts the light just as much as the Asuna on the shuttle. It's a golden amber color with some pale yellow that complements her deep copper-toned skin. The effect of the shimmer on human skin captivates his gaze. He tries not to stare but she catches him at it. If she minds, she doesn't say so.

"Hi Kush O-Nhar," she says to the Mantodean, who bows in return, bringing its front arms up in a sort of prayer pose. Its movements are graceful, delicate almost. She turns to Jes. "I'm Essa. You are...?"

"Jes."

"Jes. If I were to take a guess at your heritage I would say human and Rijala?" Her voice is silky and resonant.

"You would be correct."

"That's very unusual."

"Not any more unusual than human and Asuna."

She smiles faintly at this, nods her head toward him. Then she wraps her arms around Quint in an embrace, and her torso looks as thick as one of his legs. He rests one of his hands on her back and smiles down at her fondly.

"Jes here is asking about a job with the crew," Quint informs her.

"Oh really?" Essa arches an eyebrow and looks to Jes with fresh interest. "What can you do?"

"We were just getting to that when you made your enchanting appearance." Quint rubs his hand on her back gently as he speaks.

Essa giggles. "Flatterer. Someone's looking to get lucky tonight." A flush flows between them, one that Jes recognizes instantly. He looks away from the couple and shakes off the echoes their attraction leaves in him. Quint's suavity impresses and makes for an easier focus than his attraction to his apparent lover.

“So,” Quint begins again. “What is it that you—”

A yelp of alarm from overhead interrupts the conversation.

“You OK, Bo?” Quint calls up.

A loud crack sounds through the air, struts high above them snapping. A wedge of a support beam plummets towards them, cracked off the main structure along with a couple of big lights. Bo, tethered to a strut by his harness, yowls as he falls.

Reflexively, Jes reaches up and emits one of his fields. A pale blue bubble of light envelops the falling man and gear, suspending them in the air. Then the crewman, the broken scaffolding and the lighting instruments all float gently down at Jes’s direction.

When everything is safely on the floor, Jes closes his fingers into a fist and the blue light vanishes, winking out.

Bo, Essa, and Quint all stare at him. He can feel the intense looks of the Bezan triplets and the Mantodean burning into the back of his head. No use hiding it now...

“That,” Jes says nonchalantly. “I can do that.”