

CHAPTER TWO

Luzia throws herself backwards just as it all falls down, scrambling until her palms slap onto solid ground. Heart pounding, she clings to the steady steel and watches the last of the falling wreckage vanish. All manner of commotion arises from the guardsmen and she hastily throws up her hand to silence them. She listens.

There's the noise of all the rubble shifting and falling and then... nothing. No crash. No cracks. She heard it fall and she doesn't hear it land.

"Miss," the head guardsman says quietly, holding out a hand to her. "You all right?"

She grabs his hand and pulls herself away until she can rise up onto her feet again and get a proper glimpse of it all.

At first she had thought the shadows in the center of the wreck to be a result of poor lighting, but now that much of the upturned street has fallen away it becomes apparent that the darkness is far more sinister. The bits of wrecked metal and exposed piping have tumbled down to reveal a pit of pure, pitch blackness.

The head guardsman gets a tiny bit closer, craning his neck. "How far down does it go?"

"I have no idea," she replies. "I can't see a thing, and I couldn't hear the debris land."

Alarm pales the guardsman's face. "Right then. What do you need?"

Luzia plucks up her courage and begins to get as close as she can to the sinkhole without risking another tumble. Reaching into her pack to retrieve a set of delicate pliers, she crouches low to the ground to more evenly disperse her weight and then deposits her pack somewhere safe to make herself even lighter.

"I'd need a droplight or something similar to measure the depth," she says as she gets a better look. "If I didn't know better, I'd say it goes down an entire level. But that would be thousands and thousands of feet. It's oddly clean-looking, too."

"Maybe it's some sort of Era One shaft?" the guardsman suggests.

"Could be."

The Bastion is filled with buildings that are in use and those that aren't. Most stable buildings were refurbished in Era Two, reconstructed over and over again to the point where they cannot reasonably be referred to as the original building. Then there are Era One structures that are so old that all entrances to them have been sealed up over time and are now relegated to being merely support structures for the levels above and below. Impossibly far from the center of the city are the Fringes, uninhabited wastelands of Era One buildings that have no remaining stability to them. Due to the uncertain nature of the Bastion's structural integrity, they have long ago decided to shore up these Era One structures whenever possible and carefully not touch them when not.

Sometimes walls, grates, or hatches are found, but they're usually left alone. The Bastion can be a rickety place, and

breaking a rule about where not to go or what not to touch can get a person in a good deal of trouble very quickly. The world was built with Era One technology, and now they live in an age when most of it is broken beyond hope of repair and the rest is so old that the last generation to know how to use it must have died thousands of years ago.

Era One or not, Luzia finds her attention drawn to something beyond just the nature of the pit. Sticking out of the pit wall is something small and oddly shining.

“We’ve got an unknown object down here!” she calls out.

She readies her pliers, adjusting them to elongate the handle. Leaning over the hole in the ground, she tentatively shifts a few sheets of aluminum aside, making sure not to move anything that’s currently load-bearing.

What hides beneath is almost silver in color, and it shines with an internal luminescence in the same way the light cubes do, though its light is far weaker. It appears relatively spherical in shape, and at just over an inch in diameter it’s easy for her to remove it from the pit without being concerned that it might cause further collapse. After examining it to ensure that it’s not damaging the pliers, she drops it into her gloved palm.

The guardsman comes up to her as she inches her way out of the danger zone. “What’ve you got there? It safe?”

“It doesn’t appear to actively be doing anything, but I don’t have any real way of knowing.” She returns the pliers to her bag so that she can better prod at the object with her thick, plastic-coated gloves. “Have someone fetch a containment pod just in case. We don’t know what could activate it. There’s so many exposed wires and pipes here that if it starts heating up or sparking we could have a massive fire on our hands.”

The object isn't perfectly spherical. It's faceted – an icosahedron, if she counts correctly. She turns it over, checking for markings.

“It looks like it might be some sort of Era One device,” she remarks. Those pop up in the Bastion with more frequency than the average person might expect, sometimes when an Era Two building breaks or if they try to build something else over a dilapidated structure. “This one doesn't look so bad. It's not got a single scratch on it despite being so violently unearthed. Oh, that's interesting...”

“What?”

“There's some sort of odd pattern beneath the surface. It looks almost like circuitry.”

The guardsman leans over the object and pushes up his helmet. “You think? Hard for me to tell.”

“Mm, I think so. Do you see those lines? The tint of the metal? Whatever it is, it doesn't look like standard Era Two tech.”

A second guardsman has shuffled over with a small containment pod in hand and she too bends over Luzia's hand to ogle. “Weird shape. You know what, though? It does sort of look like something my mother had – a stone or something on a ring.”

“A stone? Really?” Luzia asks, raising an eyebrow. It looks nothing like a stone to her.

The same guardsman nods. “Yeah. It reminds me of a diamond.”

“Diamond?”

“Shiny sort of thing. Pretty rare, these days.”

A new voice from behind them says, “A diamond? Well now, that's certainly something, isn't it?”

Luzia whips around.

It's not a guardsman. Nor do they look like the average passerby who might have snuck under the yellow tape. They're wearing a ratty overcoat and boots that are more duct tape and string than boot. The bright light globes make the stranger's brown skin appear to glow, framing a strong jaw and a straight nose. A long, loose brown braid hangs down their back.

They snatch the device out of her hand and hold it up to peer at it.

"Excuse me," Luzia protests, hands on her hips. "This area is off limits. I'm going to need to see some form of identification."

"Oh, I haven't got any."

With an exasperated slump of his shoulders, the lead guardsman flaps his hand in the direction of the yellow tape. "No identification, no entry. Please hand over the object and step behind the line."

"Nah."

From the confusion on the guardsman's face, it's clear that he's unused to people not doing as they're told. He turns to the other members of the guard; similarly confused, they start mumbling to each other about what to do with this stranger. Even though defiance of the guard and intervention in the Bastion's infrastructure usually results in being written up on charges, they can't just drag them away. That would be unnecessarily violent, surely.

The stranger, on their part, withdraws a match from a battered box in their pocket and sticks it between their teeth.

It occurs again to Luzia that they are surrounded by exposed infrastructure of wires and piping and ventilation and chemicals. There is also a sinkhole of unknown properties that may or may not include flammable, toxic, or otherwise hazardous materials.

The guard may not be trained for such things, but Luzia is. When she was first hired, ten years, five months, and seventeen days ago, she was given a manual to read regarding the important aspects of her new job. There was a whole two hundred and thirty-eight pages dedicated to safety procedures and all the things that need to be done in case of an emergency. She'd read it back to front until she'd had the entire thing memorized because very small mistakes can add up to a very big disaster.

So instead of panicking and yelling at the stranger to put the damn match away, Luzia does exactly as the pamphlet instructs.

She rushes over to a panel on the wall, yanks it open, and hits the alarm.

“Fire hazard!”

Red lights start going off, flashing throughout the city block and turning everything an ominous crimson. A wailing siren sounds, the noise loud enough to reach everyone in the vicinity of what is potentially a very dangerous fire zone.

One thing to be said about the city's guardsmen is that they don't remain overwhelmed by shock for long. Emergencies happen in the Bastion unpredictably, but more often than people would like, and the guard is trained to react to anything from structural collapse to Astrosi threats in the event they occur.

Someone cries, “Hazard alert!”

“Clear the area!” the guards begin yelling, rushing to the perimeter to corral the onlookers, the call echoing outwards as guards further away hear the alert and shout out the message as well.

Luzia whips her head back and forth, her eyes quickly adjusting to the disorienting red lights. Where's Stazi? Her

heart skips a beat when she sees that the guardsman she left him with has moved to contain the perimeter. Stazi is no longer there. Maybe he's safe and she just can't see him. He's so small, so short, it would be so easy for him to get lost in a crush of people if he did the sensible thing and ran away from the alarm.

But Stazi so rarely does the sensible thing. Luzia's stomach is churning as she runs from the wreckage towards where he last was standing.

"Stazi!" she cries out, stumbling over an overturned hunk of street. "Stazi, where are you?"

In the controlled chaos, she barely notices that the stranger has turned to lay upon her the weight of their undivided attention.

She starts running towards the perimeter only to find that the stranger has suddenly appeared in her path, their intimidating presence stopping her dead in her tracks. They toss the diamond-like object into her hands with a pleasant smile and remove the matchstick from their mouth. "Have it back if you like. Unfortunately it's not a diamond, by the way. Just some rubbish Era One tech."

"Out of my way!" she demands. She shoves them in the chest to push around them as she desperately calls, "Stazi!"

The stranger grabs her by the arm and stops her again. "May I have your name?" they ask, sweet and slow.

"Luzia," she automatically replies. "Luzia N. E. Drainway. Now move—"

"Thanks, love."

They strike the match. It crackles into a droplet of orange flame and then, casual as anything, they toss it over their shoulder.