

## **Artifice: Episode Two**

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## Chapter 1

John rubbed at his sore shoulder.

“That was for scaring me half to death just now!” Sophia exclaimed, her fist still tightly clenched.

John didn’t even want to think about what Melissa’s reaction to the portal would have been. Chances are that it would have involved a heavy object and his head. He decided that it was best to count his blessings for now.

Sophia seemed to be gathering her wits as she plopped herself down on the nearby couch with a heavy sigh. Her eyes closed, she groaned, “You’ve got just under ten minutes to explain what’s going on before Mel gets back. Else, I’ll hold you down while she hits you with the frying pan.”

With a noticeable wince, John then took a deep breath, then tried his best to give her an extremely condensed and partially censored account of the past few days.

After about two minutes of non-stop talking, he could see that this attempt at an abbreviated explanation was a quest destined for failure. Plus, it looked like Sophia was constantly restraining herself from chiming in with questions. Just as he was realizing the futility of trying to finish his tale before Melissa returned, there was a beep from one of the desks in the living room.

Still with a look of mild bewilderment in her eyes, Sophia managed to say, “I... hang on a sec. Let me see what Carol wants.”

She got up and made her way to the desk. Pressing a button on the telephone, she spoke to her assistant, “Yes, Carol?”

The speaker on the device piped up, “A message from your sister, ma’am. They’ve requested her help down on the eighteenth floor. She says she may be there for a few hours, and that she’s asked Mr. McGarrett to handle the meeting with the Japanese contingent. She does request that you-”

“Sit in to make sure Pete doesn’t trade the company for some magic beans?” interrupted Sophia.

“Not her exact wording, ma’am,” replied Carol with a laugh.

“Very well, let Melissa know that I’ll be there,” said Sophia. “Also, give me a heads up about fifteen minutes before the meeting.”

“Will do.”

“Thanks, Carol.”

Pressing the button again, she turned to John. “Looks like you’ve got a reprieve, and I’ve got just over an hour. Start again. Now.”

Making a mental note to thank whichever deity was responsible for luck, he started again with a more detailed, but still partially censored, version of the story.

## Chapter 2

Director Rinard slouched in an effort to keep his head low. Despite the ever watchful eyes of the Nebar Cluster marines, he wasn't taking any chances. Unfortunately, that meant the back of his head would occasionally collide with the metal chair every time the small patrol boat crossed over a large wave.

More than once, he winced and wished he was travelling aboard the *Midnight Dawn*. However, the incredibly shallow area surrounding the swamps made it impossible to navigate even a small warship there. Besides, he was hoping that the presence of the *Midnight Dawn* in the harbour would fool any spies into thinking that he was still in the town.

Fleet Admiral Krane chuckled and said to him, "You might as well sit up. If they're after us, they'll probably try to blow the entire boat out of the water with those new weapons of theirs, rather than risk getting lucky with a single shot. In any case, considering how far out we are from shore right now, I doubt even their best marksman could make that shot. So, no sense in throwing your back out, or giving yourself brain damage. Not while we've still got that nice hike ahead of us."

The marines were well trained enough to pretend to not hear the conversation. None of them cracked a smile or pricked an ear.

Sitting up and sighing, Rinard replied, "Don't remind me. I guess I might as well try to get as comfortable as I can for the next little while."

Krane laughed, "Besides, no offense, I would think that I'm a more high profile target. Militarily speaking, of course."

That managed to get a laugh from Rinard, and he visibly relaxed.

He did start to look a little downcast as he commented, "Well, let's just hope the enemy's not near sighted."

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Rinard looked at the herd of orgots grazing. The semi-domesticated creatures were allowed free reign in the swamps, as there was no danger of them straying. Their sheer bulk made them at home when partially submerged in water, and nothing short of a nearby battle would encourage the apathetic creatures to wander off on to the surrounding plains. Furthermore, the swamp was

massively overgrown with kelweed. While a nuisance to fishermen, the incredibly prolific seaweed seemed to be a delicacy for orgots.

“They’re pretty far north,” he idly commented.

Krane replied, “You keep forgetting how many orgots there actually are. I’m sure Iathera’s also supplying many of the neighbouring towns with meat as well.”

“Who’d have thought a swamp to be a good real estate investment?” laughed Rinard.

“I’m sure it wasn’t unintentional. It was probably designed to help grow the town as quickly as possible. At least, I assume that’s what happened when the old man helped them plan the institute. Speaking of which, have you decided what you’re going to tell him?”

“The truth. I don’t think I’m in any position to offer advice at this point. On second thought, maybe I should have just sent a message with our large friend here,” he said, gesturing to Garh, who had been lying asleep in the gunwale for the entire trip.

“I’m sure the old man would have loved that.”

“Let’s not forget I’m the only Director in history to have something even remotely close to this happen on their watch.”

“Honestly, I wouldn’t worry too much about that. I get the feeling there’s something else at play here. The best we can do is to make sure he’s fully briefed, and hope he’s got a few tricks up his sleeve.”

“You’ve a lot of faith in his abilities, Krane. Despite my respect for him, I’m not sure he’ll be able to do anything.”

“I’m sure there was a reason he chose to remain nearby to us,” Krane said. “In any case, speculation about his capabilities is irrelevant right now.”

“I understand. I just can’t help but feel like a schoolchild on his way to the headmaster’s office.”

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Half of the marines jumped up on the rickety dock and ran to take defensive positions, while two others climbed out to secure the boat.

“Clear, sir!” shouted the marine furthest away.

“Here comes the fun part of the journey,” groaned Rinard.

“Cheer up,” said Krane. “At least it’s not raining.”

Garh opened his eyes, and with surprising nimbleness, sat up and hopped out of the boat.

“How does something that big move so fast?” commented Rinard.

“Well, at least he won’t get slowed down carrying you if you twist your ankle this time,” laughed Krane.

“You’re never going to let me live that one down, are you? Is it my fault that I don’t usually go traipsing through swamps?”

“Come on, let’s get going before it starts getting dark,” replied Krane, still laughing.

As they walked to the end of the dock, the remaining marines also disembarked carrying several large bags of gear.

Like the well trained team they were, the marines immediately began construction of a small basecamp. Six marines were erecting a large canopy for shelter, while others began clearing the area of brush, foliage, and small trees. Small but sturdy barriers were strategically placed around the canopy to provide cover in the unlikely event of an ambush, while potential spots for pits were marked on the ground.

Krane watched their handiwork for a few minutes, then spoke to the leader, “Well, you know the drill by now, Commander. Keep the fires burning until we get back.”

“Metaphorically speaking, of course,” Rinard added quickly. “We don’t need a beacon drawing any more trouble to us.”

To his credit, Commander Nuretz didn’t crack a smile when he answered, “Don’t worry about us, Director. I’ll make sure this lot’s still alive to greet you when you get back.”

“Are you sure you’d rather not accompany us?” asked Rinard, a slight note of eagerness in his voice.

“I appreciate the offer, sir, but I think I’d better stay here and keep an eye on things. I don’t want you being welcomed back by Kierdans when you get back. Besides,” he added with a chuckle, “I doubt the old man would even remember me.”

“I think he might just remember the only person to ever make it to his front door unaided,” laughed Krane.

“There is that,” Nuretz replied, returning the laugh. “Plus, I do believe that I’m still technically under contract to kill him.”

“Just make sure no Kierdans try to finish the job for you.”

“We’ll keep a sharp eye on the coast. I’m sure the old man’s guard dogs have the interior covered. Just remember to signal if you run into any trouble.”

“Same goes for you,” replied Krane

“I just hope the flare can make it through that tree canopy,” commented Rinard.

“I’d be more worried about it starting a fire up there,” remarked Krane cheerfully. “Be a real ironic tragedy to burn to death in a swamp.”

“You’re a real bundle of joy and inspiration, you know that?”

Krane let out a small laugh and turned to Nuretz, “Well, you know what to do. If we don’t return by noon tomorrow, assume the worst and head back to Iathera. Report to the Intendant and follow her orders.”

“Will do, sir. Good luck in there.”

Turning back to Rinard, Krane asked, “Ready?”

Resigned to his fate, Rinard replied, “As much as I’ll ever be.”

Krane then turned his head to the silent giant, “Garh?”

Garh grunted what Krane assumed to be an affirmation.

With that, the three of them set out north into the Foggy Swamp. Though not a particularly original name, the moniker did a creditable job of describing the area.

While the Orgot Swamp to the south of the dock was mainly water and contained sparse above-ground vegetation, the Foggy Swamp seemed to be a strange hybrid somewhere between a rainforest and a marsh.

It contained similar vegetation to its southern neighbour, but it also played host to massive trees that resembled nothing more than enormously overgrown mangroves. Over time, the above-ground root systems allowed for large amounts of silt buildup, which ended up forming a series of natural passageways arched by the giant roots. Looking up, hundred foot canopies blotted out almost all sunlight that tried to make its way in.

The entire area was also perpetually blanketed in a layer of fog that only served to compound the visibility issue. Furthermore, the fog increased in density the further one went into the swamp, until one could barely see their hands in front of their face.

Kelweed wouldn’t even grow in the area due to reasons unknown, and no one particularly cared enough to bother investigating the matter. Fortunately, that meant no orgots ventured there,

since not even the bravest of herders would care to venture far into the swamp to round up the creatures.

Also, on top of that, there were rumours of vicious half-man beasts that called the swamp their home. Every so often there would be a tale of some poor traveller who had wandered too far into the swamp and met their fate at the hands of these creatures. No one had ever produced decisive proof of such a creature though, so most folks blamed the disappearances on people simply getting lost.

As such, while most sane individuals still stayed clear of the area, such stories were relegated to the realm of tall tales told to children to keep them from idly wandering into the Foggy Swamp.

“I hate this place,” Rinard said.

“Tell the old man. I’m sure he’ll move on your account.”

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Commander Nuretz surveyed the camp. Fourteen marines patrolled the area, while the remaining sixteen were essentially off-duty until their watch.

“Sir?”

The question had come from Captain Harker. Despite his rank, he was a relative newcomer to Director Rinard’s personal retinue.

“Yes, Captain?”

“A question, sir.”

“Don’t be shy. Spit it out.”

“With all due respect, why did we just let the two most important people in the cluster wander blindly into a fog laden swamp? Shouldn’t we have sent an escort with them?” Harker seemed genuinely perplexed and concerned.

Nuretz smiled. “Not as blindly as you might think. Besides, there are things in that swamp that don’t welcome strangers. Which, by the way, is what you’ll be if you go roaming around in there.

“Anyway,” he continued, “from what I understand, if Garh can’t keep them safe in there, we wouldn’t stand a chance.”

“I see...” Harker trailed off, hesitation still in his voice.



“I hate to pull rank, Captain, but let’s just say it’s above your pay grade. For now, our main concern is just to make sure that we’re still here when they get back tomorrow morning. Concentrate on your work, and maybe when this is over, we’ll all get an explanation of what exactly happened.”

### Chapter 3

“What do you think the chances are that they’ll ever tell us what they’re up to right now?” Athash wondered aloud, as he sat back in his tent, restless thoughts stopping sleep from taking hold.

“Judging from their past record, I’d say slim to none,” Rush answered, without even looking up from the stack of papers he was reviewing. “That Lazano seems to take particular pleasure in being as obtuse as possible.”

“So, I’m guessing that you’ve still made no headway in finding out anything more about his organization?” Athash asked of his spymaster.

“None, sir, and it’s causing me no end of frustration. The few times that I thought I was on the verge of success ended up with me finding my agents’ throats cut, and their bodies dumped where I was sure to find them. They even posed them.”

Athash grimaced. “Well, if it’s any consolation, I don’t think anyone else will be able to infiltrate his organization if you can’t.”

“Scant consolation, sir. But, I’ll keep trying.”

“I know you will, Rush.” Changing the topic, he continued, “Any worrying news regarding the blockade fleet?”

“None, so far. The last scout arrived a few hours ago, and reported no problems. If their plan failed, I would expect to see the first of the escaping ships returning here starting tomorrow.”

“Possibly leading a very angry Cluster battle group behind them,” Athash sighed.

“In all honesty, I wouldn’t worry, sir,” Rush assured him. “Despite my feelings about Lazano, I have to admit that it’s a solid plan. Besides, he did mention having a contingency in place.”

“Plans within plans within plans,” Athash sighed again. “Give me a good straight forward battle any day.”

“Give me a good plan, sir, and I can guarantee that you won’t be needing a battle.”

Athash laughed, “That’s why I keep you around, old friend. Well, I’ll let you get back to those reports of yours. Send for me on the hill if you need me.”

“Will do, sir.”

Athash left Rush in his command tent and began the short hike to the small hill overlooking the harbour. Strictly speaking, he was not a man given to the study and appreciation of art. However, he found the view from the top of the hill particularly tranquil, despite the constant movement of troops, supplies, and ships.

Even though they possessed a wealth of ships down in the harbour, Athash was doubtful of their effectiveness should the Cluster actually show up. They had little to no coastal defenses, and certainly nothing on the level of a Cluster defense platform. A determined enemy fleet would have relatively no problems landing troops right next to their base.

He really wished that Lazano had allowed them time to grow more ships, but he had been insistent about the timing of the attack. *Blast it, if Lazano could only have waited two more weeks, we'd have over a thousand more ships to help defend us.*

Regardless, Lazano had been adamant about his employers' mysterious schedule.

As he walked, his main thoughts were centred around the fact that he hoped Lazano's contingencies were enough to prevent a very angry and vengeful Nebar Cluster from sweeping in and massacring them.

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"Are you insane? That's suicide!" Athash managed to say.

"No, it's not," Lazano calmly answered. "The risk to you is completely minimal."

"You're not the ones whose blood they'll be howling for, if this goes sideways," retorted Athash.

"Have faith," Lazano chuckled. "Besides, in all these years, have I ever steered you wrong? Believe me when I say that the Cluster will have much larger concerns than trekking across an entire ocean to find you."

"How so?"

"You'll just have to trust me on that. By the time they're able to mount any kind of counterattack, your position on this continent will be solidified. At the very worst, you'll have to send them a small tribute to placate them. Remember, they're businessmen, not a nation."

"And what's to stop you from leaving us to rot, once you've got what you need from them?"

"We're businessmen too, and that would be a bad investment. Rest assured, we didn't pour all these resources into you, only to essentially flush them down the toilet in the end."

Athash calmed down a little. “What exactly are you hoping to gain from this little excursion?”

Lazano grinned, “That would be telling. And, in any case, I don’t know. My employers-”

Athash cut him off, “I know. I know. Your mysterious employers work on a need to know basis. Though, it could be argued that I need to know how their goals are going to affect Kierd.”

The coyly frustrating reply was simply, “They’ll let you know what you need to know.”

Athash didn’t like taking orders from Lazano’s mysterious employers. But, like Lazano had stressed to him to so many years ago, he didn’t really have a choice in the matter.

“Fine. But tell me how you’re going to handle the logistics of this. For example, where do you plan on magically getting a refugee fleet from?”

“Leave everything to us. Just make sure your patrols stay clear of the areas I’ve marked off, and you’ll be fine,” Lazano replied in that infuriatingly calm tone.

“You’re asking us to commit a lot of manpower to this fleet. Manpower that we could be using to fight this little war I’ve got going on.”

“You’ve got it, and more, to spare. Besides, we both know that you’re in a holding action until you get your invasion fleet ready.”

“Which might already have been on its way, if you had provided the necessary equipment in advance,” Athash retorted.

Lazano chuckled. “Timing, my friend. You’ll receive the full shipment as soon as this plan is put into action.”

“You’re holding the supplies hostage?” Athash asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Not me. My employers want to make sure you don’t get any funny ideas, and end up throwing their entire schedule off balance.”

“I see,” Athash responded flatly.

“Don’t take it personally,” laughed Lazano. “Believe me when I say that this little endeavour has been in the works for a very, very long time. Timing is everything at this point.”

“I guess I’ve no choice but to take your word for it.”

“Like I said so long ago, there’s always a choice,” Lazano replied, laughing harder.

## Chapter 4

“Wow,” was all that Sophia could say after John had finished his tale.

John stayed silent while she sat back and processed the information.

“Do you know why this dragon thing-,” she began.

“Mag,” John interjected.

“Why Mag,” she continued with a scowl, “chose you for this... whatever you want to call this strange escapade of yours?”

“Well, I didn’t really think to ask her. However, I’m assuming she wants our help-”

“*Our?*”

“You’re starting to sound more and more like Melissa every time I see you,” John grinned. “Soon you’ll just need the horns and pitchfork.”

Sophia tried to maintain her scowl, but failed and broke out in a peal of laughter.

“I’ll give you that one. Honestly, I’m just trying to make sure they don’t have any nefarious plans for you. I don’t want to find out later that they tossed you into a volcano to get the crops to grow or something.”

John laughed, “I appreciate the concern, really, but you know me. Call me immodest, but there’s a reason dad’s buddies hated having me in on poker night. Believe me, we can trust them.”

“Okay, but then there’s also the flip side. Why do they think they can trust you?”

Remembering the previous night with Venarya, John shifted uncomfortably in his chair. *So much for censoring the story.*

“Er, let’s just say that they do and leave it at that. Next question.”

Sophia raised an eyebrow, but let it pass. “Okay, then. Again, this is just for my peace of mind. You don’t plan on running around here pretending to be a superhero or something idiotic like that?”

John laughed. “No, that thought hadn’t even occurred to me. Besides, what could I do? Help old ladies cross busy roads safely?”

“Just keep it on the down low. Again, I don’t want to find out that some gang kidnapped you to help them teleport into Fort Knox or something.”

“No worries on that. Besides, how would they keep me prisoner?” he joked.

He saw her brow starting to crease, and quickly added, “Tell you what? I’ll make you a deal to put your mind at rest. I won’t use my ‘superpowers’ except to travel between my place and this penthouse. Deal?”

“Deal,” she replied with a note of relief in her voice. “Now, we need to deal with another matter.”

“Melissa?”

“Melissa.”

“I don’t suppose…” John trailed off, his eyebrow cocked in a query.

“Not for all the tea in China. You’ll explain it to her yourself.”

“I’ll be your friend,” he replied, a mock puppy-eyed expression on his face.

Sophia laughed as she replied, “Fine, I’ll handle it. But you owe me a favour for this. A *big* favour.”

“Which brings me back to that original favour I mentioned. Do you think you can arrange to pull out Ganz and Nolan for me?”

Sophia stayed silent in thought for a few seconds. She finally replied, “Not simultaneously. At least, not without it looking suspicious to any competitors that might be watching.”

She sighed, and continued, “But, tell you what, let me see what I can do. I believe Ganz’s conference is almost finished, anyways. I’ll arrange for him to fly straight to your place. Expect him tomorrow morning. As for Nolan, I’ll see if I can get a replacement for him sent out. Realistically, don’t expect him for the next few days.”

“Thanks,” John said in genuine appreciation. His face took on an amused look as he continued, “I know that look, though. What’s your price, li’l sis? My dessert portions for a week again?”

“You wish it was that easy this time,” she laughed. “No, I want to see this new world of yours.”

John gulped. He didn’t care much for putting his kid sister in potential danger. “You do realize that the place could potentially end up being under siege, right?”

“I’ll take the risk. Not that I don’t trust your judgment, but I’d like to see who we’re essentially allying ourselves with. Plus, I can’t say that I’m not a little curious about this strange world.”

“Well, I can’t fault your reasoning,” John laughed. “No wonder they’ve got you negotiating the big deals now.”

“You taught me well. Now, make yourself scarce for the rest of the afternoon while I explain things to Mel. Head back here around dinner time to pick up *both* of us.”

John winced at that last part, and Sophia giggled at his discomfort.

“Don’t worry,” she continued. “I’ll make sure she calms down by then.”

“I’ll hold you to that, li’l sis.”

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Deep in thought, John lay on the couch in his cabin.

He had thought to bring his mobile phone with him this time, though. *No sense in antagonizing either sister again.*

He didn’t anticipate having this small amount of downtime, but he was glad for it. He had half expected that he would have had to spend most of the day explaining himself, but Sophia had been pragmatic enough about the whole ordeal. And, more importantly, she had opted to explain everything to Melissa.

Reflecting back on the whole adventure, he wondered what exactly he had got himself into. More so, he wondered what he had gotten Rheus and Venarya into. He wasn’t sure whether to chuckle or grimace at the thought of the likely interrogation they would receive from Mel later that night.

He hoped, at the very least, Mel would appreciate the potential business upside to this whole adventure. For all John knew, gold may be as common as dirt over there. Heck, maybe that weird blue crystal could end up being as valuable as diamonds here.

He rethought that last point. No. He couldn’t risk selling any unique items from that world over here. At least, not for the time being. *Besides*, he silently laughed to himself, *for all I know, that crystal could be radioactive.*

While not really believing that, he did remember that he had a chunk of similar crystal tied around his neck. Alone, and curious to examine it, he reached into his shirt and pulled the pendant out. He was a little startled by what he saw.

While the pendant still retained the same basic shape it initially had, the colour was now that of a dull and unpolished piece of onyx. There was no hint of it being a formerly translucent piece of jewelry, and no sign of that intricate design that had somehow been etched inside it.

Turning it over in his palm, he almost thought he saw a faint spot of purple that quickly disappeared. He turned it over again, but saw no traces of purple on the other side. He would have to remember to show this piece of tasrac to Rheus. *Hopefully, he can explain this why this happened.*

Remembering his previous joke about radioactivity and suddenly feeling a little paranoid, he quickly stuck his head into his shirt to have a look at his chest. *No red spots or rashes.* He was safe. Or, at least, every movie he remembered seeing in his childhood would tend to indicate that.

Replacing the pendant inside his shirt, he remembered the bag of assorted trinkets from the bazaar. Indeed, if it hadn't been for Venarya handing it to him just before he left, he would have forgotten to bring them along. Walking over to the closet, he picked up and opened the bag.

Pulling out a random piece, he examined it. It was a multi-coloured elastic wristband, with several pieces of blue tasrac attached to it. Rheus had said that it was the equivalent of a children's toy. With practice, he claimed that the pieces could be made to light up, though John still had no idea how exactly one even began to accomplish that. However, like his pendant, all the pieces of tasrac were pitch black. *So much for Sophia's and Melissa's souvenirs.*

Going through the bag, he found that every piece of tasrac was in the same state. He would definitely have to talk to Rheus about this.

Invigorated by his curiosity, he decided to not waste any more time. *I hope Rheus is in his workshop. I don't fancy walking in on their janitor and having to explain myself.*

The two dogs had been idly laying in front of the fire, but quickly perked up as John whistled for them.

“Ready for another adventure, girls?”

Tongues hanging out and tails wagging, John could almost swear that they seemed to nod their heads in agreement.

Laughing, he replied, “Okay, just try not to scare the janitor.”

Standing in front of an empty portion of wall, he began to concentrate. The familiar whispering and whirling smoke crept up the wall and did its strange dance. Soon, the smoke



coalesced into a shimmering portal, and John gazed into the other side. Thankfully, there was no janitor running for his life. Instead, standing a few metres away was a smiling and waving Rheus.

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“But that’s a good thing, right?” asked Rheus.

Both men sat in the courtyard just outside of Rheus’s building, and watched on as Kail played with the dogs.

John had just spent the last little while explaining the events that had transpired between Sophia and himself. He had ended it by alerting him to the fact that both sisters would be coming over for dinner.

“I’ll let you be the judge of that after you meet Melissa.”

“Surely she can’t be that hard to please?”

“I’ll admit, I’m exaggerating a little,” John conceded. “However, please don’t wear a bathrobe to dinner,” he quickly added.

Rheus laughed, “No worries there. Venarya already warned me to be ready for any visitors through the portal.”

Indeed, Rheus did look like he had put some effort into his appearance. Or, at the very least, Venarya had instructed his young assistant Kail to make sure he was appropriately dressed.

“Speaking of Venarya,” Rheus continued, “we should probably head over to her place and let her know about dinner tonight.”

“Especially seeing as how she’ll probably be hosting it. I hope she’s not too busy with all that’s happening.”

“Well, everyone is still on high alert. Krane’s marines are helping patrol the outlying areas, but it looks pretty calm so far. The Intendant is handling most of the city defense details, anyway. I suspect Venarya won’t have much to do until Rinard returns tomorrow.”

“So, Iathera may not be Kierd’s intended target after all?”

“It’s a possibility. Their ships don’t seem to be moving away from the blockade, but that doesn’t discount the fact that they may have clandestinely planted forces here earlier.”

“I still don’t see what they hope to gain from all this,” John commented.

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