

The inside of the Palace was cavernous and cool and Sarah looked around for a sign or any indication of where to go. Sister Adelaide, however, seemed to know exactly where she was going, so Sarah followed her across the atrium. Sister Adelaide reached a set of double doors on the far side, opened one and gestured for Sarah to precede her.

The smell of old books assaulted her nostrils. The library seemed to stretch on forever. Ahead of them: a large, circular desk where an elderly, bearded man with a blue pagri sat, engrossed in a book. Sister Adelaide nodded in his direction and Sarah walked over to the desk.

The old man looked up. "Good morning, how may I assist you?"

Sarah dug into her pocket and pulled out the piece of paper that Mendrika had given her, what seemed like forever ago on the docks of New Toliara. "Yes, I'm looking for this book."

The old man took the sheet of paper and glanced down at it. Then he folded it back up and handed it back to her. He pointed off to the left. "You want to go that way, it's going to be in biographies."

"Thank you," Sarah smiled. The old man favored Sister Adelaide with a brief, searching look, noting her weapon, but gave a half smile, shrugged and sat back down to read his book.

Sarah started walking down the stacks at a brisk pace, noting the signs overhead until she found the section marked 'biography', found the appropriate letter and began to walk down shelf. She scanned the bookshelf, getting closer and closer, running her fingers over the spines of the books until finally, her finger stopped on the correct title.

"Admiral Nelson: A Life," Sarah read out loud. She squatted down next to the shelf and raised an eyebrow. The fact she could see only one biography of Nelson in the biggest library on Venus seemed... significant. She pulled it off the shelf and as she did so, she heard a faint click. She opened the book and inside, a handwritten note: "I'll be in the garden." Sarah looked over at Sister Adelaide who shrugged. "I think the gardens are that way," she gestured with her pulse rifle.

Sarah walked back down the stacks and out into the aisle. She turned and saw the double doors that lead out to the gardens. Sister Adelaide a step behind her, she walked down the aisle, pushed open the doors and stepped out into the gardens.

Beautiful. It seemed like such an inadequate way to describe them, but apt nevertheless. Sweet smells of alien flowers hung in the air. A small stream ran off to the left, burbling and bubbling as it ran across the gardens to the edge of the city.

The dome of the Jaipur Palace and the sumptuous living quarters of the Peshwas of Samundra City were the envy of many a Venusian City- but their real wealth had been invested in these gardens.

Massive atmospheric filters bracketed each side of the garden, drawing the Venusian atmosphere down below the gardens before filtering out the toxic gases. Sarah hadn't the faintest idea how it worked- all she knew was that the gardens themselves appeared to be out in the open air.

She walked down the steps, Sister Adelaide beside her- though, Sarah noted, she had lowered her pulse rifle and seemed to have relaxed, even if only by an infinitesimal amount.

*"Zanak'anabavy!"*

Sarah jumped and Sister Adelaide's pulse rifle shot upward as Mendrika appeared from behind a tree. Sarah stepped in front of Sister Adelaide and pushed the barrel of the pulse rifle toward the ground. "Relax, he's a friend."

"Are you sure?"

"He's my Uncle," Sarah replied, firmly. "He got me out of New Toliara"

"All right," Sister Adelaide relaxed again.

"You're late," Mendrika said as he approached, nodding respectfully to Sister Adelaide and keeping his hands visible.

"I got held up," Sarah smiled. "I see you got out of New Toliara."

"Barely," Mendrika chuckled. "That was a hell of a riot you kicked up. I don't think any of the bad guys got out in the end."

"One of them did," Sarah grimaced.

"I heard," Mendrika said. "That mess at the Oasis attracted a lot of attention. But I'm glad you made it." He pointed toward the gazebo at the edge of the gardens. "He's waiting for you."

Sarah started forward and Sister Adelaide made to follow when Mendrika held up a hand. "She goes alone."

"I'll be fine." Sarah told Sister Adelaide who looked as if she wanted to object. The two women met each other's eyes for a long moment until finally Sister Adelaide relented. "Fine," she said. "But be careful."

"I will, I promise," Sarah replied. Then she started out across the gardens toward the gazebo. There, waiting for her on the bench under the gazebo was Abernathy. He had a book sitting beside him on the bench and was sipping from a silver flask. Sarah approached slowly, not really trusting her own eyes. Impossible. It had to be a trick of some kind. "Are you... alive?"

The old man chuckled, "I am very much alive, Ms. Hoavy. And I've been expecting you."