

CHAPTER THREE

I put Granda to bed after giving him a dish of brown tea laced with valerian. However, he'd still been clingy and tearful. Called me Jex – his pet name for me whenever he was upset or confused. I read to him until he was calm.

He used to love listening to Jolanzo Jex Starseer's *Paen to the Universe*, written in rhymed sestinas. I hated the tongue-tangler as he stented whenever I stumbled - a shame as my nickname evidently came from the poet. Nowadays, I read him adventure stories downloaded from the Node, which were easier to read and he liked well enough. We were currently working through *Gloriosa Gore*. After the fourth blood-soaked death, Granda's snuffles relaxed into a muttering snore.

I stared at him, wretched with angry guilt. Then looked at the Family hologic on the wall over his bed. With his waking face scrunched by brain damage, the white-haired man standing behind my mother in the pic seemed a distant stranger. Now though, as he relaxed in sleep, the resemblance was obvious. I was the solemn-faced toddler on my mother's knee. I peered at the image. Had she loved me then? It was hard to tell by the way she held me – although she did look tense. My father was sitting at her side. I couldn't remember him as he died soon after this pic was taken. I stared at his face till my eyes stung. Did I look like him? I wanted to. He was the only one smiling. His hand was resting on Mother's knee, carelessly possessive.

I'd like to feel like that about a woman, one day.

Grandma was standing next to Granda. I remembered that she felt soft and smelled safe.

I turned away. The sun was now high in the sky. I had to tidy the Nodery; discover why Mother had taken the datatabs and access the <History> levels of the Node.

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It was growing cooler when I finally shut the Node down and stretched through my stiffness. I hadn't found out what Mother intended to do with the datatabs - not a surprise. She avoided making notes because of her poor spelling. I'd tried her audio logs - her favoured method of record-keeping. But trawling through her chants and flower poems was a brain rotting chore and I only managed a couple before closing them in disgust.

I'd been more successful Facs-mining the <History> level. It was worrying how much busier the Node used to be. I noticed that Facs then had been downloaded in printed form. Meaning that everyone could read in those days. That jolted me. I'd grown up hearing Elders droning on about how much better things had been in pre-Turbulence times. But this was proof of how things had changed. Nowadays most people in our village could barely sound out their own name. Was it the same everywhere else?

Our ancestors had requested downloads of songs, stories, poems, geographical and historical facs. Most of the stuff wasn't connected with their Family Names, or their occupations. As if, they were just *interested* in them...

I set the Node on <Standby>, no longer concerned about the past. For one thing, I was hungry enough to eat my own foot.

In the kitchen I checked the prov bins, reluctantly deciding against a piece of Ajene Sticher's meat pie. Mother would only give me a mouthwhacking for 'gorging everything like a mantivore horde'. The hens were laying well, so I progged a cheese and egg pudding. Granda could have some once he woke up. I hoped he'd rouse

before my bedtime, else I'd have to get up in the night and toilet him. Or wash his soiled sheets in the morning.

While the pudding was cooking, I fed the hens and shut them up for the night; checked on Nana and her family; and played an unusually boisterous game of Chase the Camel with Dance. She didn't want to be stabled and made her feelings plain by kicking out at me and complaining in belching roars whilst capering around her corral. Sweat-slicked and panting by the time she was tucked up, I realised that come the morning, she'd be a godding nightmare to handle because I hadn't exercised her today.

I trudged back to the kitchen in a familiar hopeless stew. My day of freedom was nearly over for another whole month – and I hadn't found out all I needed from the Node. As usual.

I propped two extra-thick slices of bread to eat with my pudding, reckless with misery. Too wilting bad if there wasn't enough bread for Mother's breakfast in the morning. During my daily chores I fantasised about girls and food – Onice Carver in particular. But if I'm honest, even Onice came second to visions of a sizzling slab of meat with cassava and date syrup mash. I woke up hungry and often went to bed hungry. Mother ate no more than a god-struck priestling. And didn't seem to understand that now I was nearly head and shoulders taller than her, I needed more nourishment.

I'd crammed my mouth with the last eggy spoonful on a large crust, when a loud whine made me jump. Who in roaching hells was *that*? I choked. And stopped caring for a couple of moments, while I fought to breathe and cough and swallow. I *wasn't* going to spit out the last mouthful of food – no matter what it was. Mopping my streaming eyes and nose and feeling outright sick, I stumbled in the direction of the sound, back to the Nodery.

A blue light was flickering over the <Incoming> pressurehold on the Nodetable in sync to the keening drone. My mouth dried. I'd never seen this before.

What have I done?

I tried to think back to all the <Sites> I'd visited during the day, wondering how I could have triggered this reaction.

A terrible thought occurred. What if Idaline's baby had come and there were complications? What if Beneth Healer had been desperately struggling with a difficult birthing – and hadn't turned to me because she didn't think I'd be any good at Facs-mining the Node for help? What if this was some kind of emergency hail?

Our Family would be held responsible if Idaline died – that's what.

I rushed through the house and out of the front gate. And skidded to a halt at the sight of Idaline sitting on Beneth's veranda in the evening cool, one hand on her swollen belly, gabbling away to Beneth. I slunk back through the gate, angry with myself for needlessly panicking.

I checked on Granda, still sleeping peacefully despite the roaching row, then returned to the Nodery. I'd need to sort it out before the wagon-train got back. Probably wasn't even my fault. Probably Mother's roaching plants had crippled the Node and it was only complaining now because I'd been working it quite hard. However, on inspecting the organi-pacs, they looked healthy enough and the readouts were well within safety levels.

Wiping my hands down my tunic, I sat at the Nodetable, took hold of the pressurehold and turned it.

A worried-looking lad of about my age jumped onto the holomat. I flinched.
I didn't know it could do that!

Our age was all we had in common. He was dressed in expensive varicolour robes and his hair fluffed out from his head in the current trend-edge look. I became aware of my grubby work tunic and sweaty hair.

“Greetings to you, Jessob Brarian. This is something of a social call. My name is Kale Brarian, from the Reseda Node. I thought it was time we got to know each other.” He held up his hand in virtual greeting. It was soft and very clean, unlike mine.

What’s he doing here?

“I’m not the Brarian. That’s my mother. I’m afraid she’s in Reseda at the market,” I babbled.

“I know.” Kale Brarian smiled politely. “I’m not the Brarian of Reseda, either. Like you, I’m an apprentice. I thought it would be a good idea if we met.”

His poised words washed around me, making me feel a crisp-brained tic. But before I could reply, the <Emergency> bell rang.

Idaline Ferry’s baby...

I half rose from the Nodetable. “I-I’ll have to go and answer that... it might be important.”

“I’ll wait for you. If it is, just ping me with your ‘tab and I’ll leave you lulled and catch you another time,” he chattered.

“Yeah,” I mumbled. *Still don’t know why you’re here...*

I <Opened> the door. Demri Peaceman was still jabbing the bell as if his life depended on it.

Despite my worry, I snapped, “Hoe it flat, Demri. Granda’s had one of his turns and is trying to sleep.”

Demri, his finger still on the bell, shouted, “I heard a funny noise walking past your house. Papa says we must always in-vest-igate anything different.”

I removed his hand from the bell. “Thank you for your concern. But everything’s lulled.”

Demri didn’t move.

“Night, Demri,” I prompted, starting to <Close> the door.

His shovel-sized hand shot out and held it. “So?”

I felt a spasm of fear. With the temper and strength of a stenchd mantivore, Demri made a suncrazed camel look reasonable. And he had a rep for hitting first and thinking after. A long, long time after.

He took a few steps into the entrance hall, looking around, “What was the noise?”

“Oh that... it’s a new alarm I was trying out for Granda to use.” There were more holes in that story than in a sieve, but I hoped it was good enough for Demri.”

His mouth drooped like a small child’s. “So it wasn’t a burglar alarm? There’s no thief for me to arrest?”

“No.” *Now lose yourself so I can find out what Kale Brarian wants...*

He loomed in the room, his tongue wriggling through his lips with the strain of thinking. Cupert Peaceman also had a daughter. Damita was smarter than a stalking mantivore and would make a choicing Security officer. Except that Cupert had got it into his head that the Security Chief needed to be male. I’d discovered from the Node that there’d been many successful female Security Chiefs in the past. But I wasn’t sure how to tell Cupert. We didn’t get on.

“Hadn’t you better check on Seth? If he hasn’t had a drink for a while, he’ll be in a roaching panic. Your Dad’ll be stenchd if Seth hurts himself while you’re in charge.”

Because Cupert doesn't like it if you beat up Seth when he's away...

Demri's tongue nearly tied itself in a knot as he slowly thought through what I'd said. At last he swore and rushed off.

I ran back to the Nodery. Kale was still on the holomat, looking around the plant-crammed room with raised eyebrows and a smirk on his face.

Cursing under my breath at what he must be thinking, I suddenly wanted him gone.

"Why have you contacted me?" I slid back into my seat.

His eyes widened at my tone. "This vir-visit was my uncle's idea. He thought it important that someone from the Brarian network should link with you." His glance took in my dust-scurfed appearance.

I clenched my fists, wanting to knock the citted smile off his face.

"You caused quite a fuss, opening up that old <Music> Site. I have to say, you're not what I expected."

My resentment was blown away by guilty shock. I stared back, dry-mouthed.

"What jer mean – caused a fuss? Who else knows?"

Kale flicked his overlong hair off his forehead, like a girl. "The Node is linked in a local nexus. Brarians in our Sector can all communicate."

"Mother has never mentioned it," I muttered. *Neither has Granda - why not?*

"I'm not surprised." Kale's face went sour. "Uncle has tried to get her to link up with the other local Nodes, but she just ignores everyone else."

"And your Uncle is..."

That smirk again. "Oh, Uncle is the Brarian Major for Reseda," he preened, "and Acinos."

I clenched my teeth to stop my jaw dropping. No wonder Kale Brarian had roostered in here, looking down his scubbed nose at me like I was wormfood. Acinos was one of the largest provinces on Arcadia. While Cnicus was a scruffy, no-count village in the poorest corner of the province.

So what's Kale 'My uncle's the Brarian Major' doing here?

My mind raced through all the options I could think of. Every roaching one had me wanting to dive under the kitchen table.

I stopped myself wiping my hands down my tunic and struggled to focus. "So how did you know I was the one who opened up the <Music> Site? How did you know it wasn't Mother? It was under her codes."

Kale suddenly didn't look so roaching smart. His lips split into a grin, but his eyes were wide and scared.

"Huh! Should've known that anyone slick enough to slide under the pre-Turbulence barriers wouldn't let that pass." He tried to shrug, as if it didn't matter. And failed.

"Thing is, the Nodes are, um, logged. And when someone gets onto a Site that isn't... well, everyday, it causes... well, the local Nexus has to investigate."

My stomach slithered to somewhere around my knees. "You mean The Council monitors everything accessed on the Nodes?" I felt sick.

They must know how bad Mother really is. How much longer will our Family keep our Name?

"Oh, not every Node. Just the ones they're... not sure about." He smiled at me - as if this made things better.

"Like ours," I said, flatly. "So how did they know I had accessed that particular Site – and not Mother?"

Kale's fluffed hair was now hanging in rats-tails around his sweaty face. "I think my coming here was a mistake."

"Maybe so." I took a breath and calmed down. Being foamed at him was a feeb-witted way to go. He was only the messenger. And as a fellow apprentice, I might be able to reach out to him. "But maybe it was the best thing that could have happened to us. There is so much I need to know! Mother..."

Be very careful.

"...finds it difficult to pass her knowledge on."

"To you," Kale added, "but she's been in touch with some of her relations, looking for a girl as an Apprentice."

I swallowed hard, trying not to let my shock show. "Are you apprenticed directly to your uncle?" To my disgust, my voice squeaked.

Kale nodded, pity on his face.

I stared at the battered pile of mangoes. "So why did he think we should meet up?"

Kale hesitated, then cleared his throat. "Uncle wants to start a new initiative where Brarians and future Brarians strengthen their contacts. We are currently wasting our advantage of quick and easy communication, to the detriment of the communities that we serve." He recited this at me, avoiding my eyes. "Greater info-flow will help heal the wounds inflicted by the Turbulence and weld Arcadia into a stronger, more able society."

For the first time during his visit, I felt on solid ground. Messages like this – about every wilting job - flowed into Cnicus in a never-ending torrent. Through the Node; through postdrones trundling into the village and delivering <Bullits> door to door; through posters put on the village noticeboard. No way was anyone using the Node to deliver this drone-speak.

"That's roaching snaketalk. And you know it." I bared my teeth at him in an angry snarl. Not a lot to lose anymore – so I'd see Master Kale at the bottom of a cesspit before he'd go on roosting it over me.

He spluttered, gathering his expensive robes around himself, like a ruffled hen. But his heart wasn't in it. "There's no need for that kind of talk, I came to - to..." his voice trailed away and he bit his lip.

I leaned over the table towards him. "Yeah. What *did* you come for? You knew that Mother wouldn't be here. You want something from me, but you don't want it to take long."

I stood up, my anger building. "So you come in the evening, knowing when the wagon-train arrives back from Reseda; giving enough info to panic me, but not enough so I can make any sense of what's going down."

He opened and closed his mouth like a landed fish.

My hand closed on the pressurehold. "You got five secs to tell me why you came here tonight. Or I'll shut your skelping carcass out of our Nodery before you can blink."

He hunched, looking jaspered. "I can't tell you now." He glanced over his shoulder, then whispered, "I'll talk to you tomorrow at noonblast. On your datatab. Give me your ident coding. Quickly!"

Cold fear crawled up my spine as I gabbled my coding. He'd been sent by his uncle, the Brarian Major of the Acinos. He'd discovered that our Nodery resembled a jungle. How much longer were we going to keep our Name?

A flicker of the young rooster reappeared as he saluted me, "See ya in hard vac, brov-Brarian-" he jerked, as if hit by a stun gun, his gaze swivelling across the

room. “Oh, Uncle... no, ‘fraid he’s got to go... their wagon-train is just returning and-” The holomat blanked as he gabbled some snaketongued nonsense to the Brarian Major.

I returned the Node to Mother’s <Default> settings and shut off the air scrubbers with shaking hands.

Our Node is being specially monitored partly because Mother has cut Cnicus out of the local network. But there’s more to it than that. There must be. Kale Brarian wouldn’t be info-mining at my door if that were it.

Gods, gods, gods – what am I going to do?

I took a deep breath. For starters I could stop acting like a jaspered chicken. I’d find out tomorrow exactly what was going down.

Kale Brarian might like to act the smooth-sculpted cititod, but he’s not so roaching shiny as he thinks. He might well leak the info I’m after. Otherwise, why lie to his uncle? Or am I being set up?

My head was still spinning from these thoughts – and a dozen more like them – when I heard the distant roar of the wagon-train, getting steadily louder. Mother was back.

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She was blazed with excitement. Her eyes shone and her cheeks were flushed as she bounced into the kitchen.

Something has stirred her up and she’s come in to mouthwhack at me.

My heart sank. After my encounter with Kale Brarian, I needed Mother slicing at me like I needed to go skipping over an event horizon.

Her eyes flicked around the room. “You didn’t wash the floor, today, did you?”

“No,” I mumbled. *Keep calm... don’t look at her... don’t get stenchd.*

“And why not?”

I licked my lips, “Granda had one of his turns. It took a long time to lull him.”

“Caused by you, no doubt.” She waited for me to deny it – to try and prove to her that I was better than she thought...

What’s the point? Of anything?

A bleaking sense of futility washed through me, leaving me chilled and desolate.

Soon, he will lie down on these frozen stones, close his eyes, never to open them again. And it’ll be a relief. When he’s as stiff and cold as the bitter box they’ve shut him in...

“Jessob, stop foodling around. Give me a straightline answer. You haven’t washed out the entrance hall, either, have you? Answer me, or I’ll-” she strode towards me, her hand raised.

I flinched, “No.”

“Not good enough! You need to take some pride in our Name. It reflects badly on the Brarian Family if this place resembles a camel stall.”

My good intentions were blown away by a blast of fury at her double-tongued skelping. “*Our Name?* You don’t give an olive stone for my Name – you’re busy trawling for a new apprentice!”

She stiffened in shock, staring at me, “How do you-”

She bit her lip, her gaze shifting away from me. “I haven’t got very long, then,” she murmured to the wall behind my head.

Then turned back. “You’d better get to bed. You’ve got the household chores tomorrow and if the olives aren’t picked by the end of the week, we’ll be fined. Which will come out of your clothing allowance for the next quarter.”

She left the room without wishing me good night.

I stumbled to my room, with a sick sense of having made a major mistake. Which, of course, I had.