

The Artifact

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The press of unwashed bodies created an acrid heat. Lev Armiger pushed through the crowd with his Officebook lifted, the video recorder capturing the tightly packed protesters. Gina, one of the other reporters at Enterprise News, emerged from between mine-crusted shoulders and shimmied her way to Lev.

“Anything good?” she asked. Her wireless headset covered her eyes, and the tinted lenses made her small face look bug-like. An LED glowed in the frame. She was recording too. “Shiplee sent me down, said to cover what happens.”

“Nothing yet,” Lev said. He checked the time on his tablet. He would run late for his assignment if he wasn't careful, but it was just a fluff piece Shipley, his editor, had assigned him. The protest seemed like the perfect place to find a scoop for the newswire, but with Gina covering the action there wouldn't be much room for him.

“It can still turn into a riot,” Gina said.

Earlier that day one of the massive supply ships from Earth docked at the spaceport missing most of its contents. A few things going missing in transport came with living on the fringes of the empire, but when everyone's vitamin orders and liquor failed to come through again? A mob of the loose-toothed and sallow-looking formed and demanded the ship's captain be strung up. The captain claimed the ship was full when he landed, and when it became clear the crowd didn't like that answer he made his escape on a waiting Argus Dart, the sleek little craft ferrying him to a waiting shuttle headed away from Balmera. The mob grew in size as miners and spacejunk cowboys joined in after their shifts, and by nightfall the streets of the Old City swarmed with people.

Lev said, “Let's hope. Maybe then I could weasel in on some coverage.”

Gina kept her head moving to take in as much of the scene as she could. “My Balmera Patrol source said they'd had reports of some off-worlders trying to stir things up. I was hoping to spot one, maybe figure out their deal and get some newswire action.” A couple of Argus Darts flew low over the street, their thruster exhaust settling over the crowd. “What are people saying?”

Lev stuffed the Officebook into his jacket pocket. With Gina there it didn't leave him much room for a story. A small colony like

Balmera meant stiff competition. "I haven't talked to anyone. I was waiting for something to happen."

Gina shook her head. "There are a dozen headlines floating by if you put it together." A guy stepped into her line of sight and she elbowed his ribs to get him to step off. "You have to stay on top of things, let Balmera seep into you."

"Not me." He left for where the crowd thinned out down the block. "First chance and I'm gone."

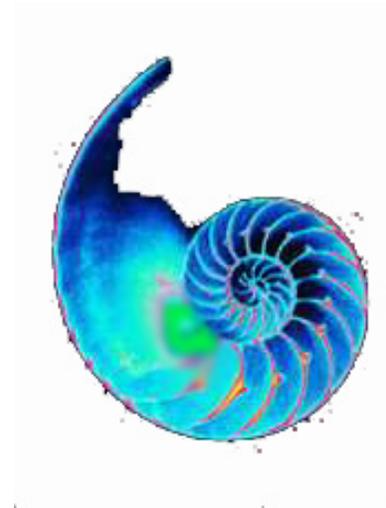
"Hey, do your thing," she shouted after him. "Don't let me stop you."

By the time Lev got to the arranged meeting place for his assignment, a warehouse on the edge of the Old City, the only company he had was the dusty plumes of wind carrying the odd bit of trash. The Severt Export Company logo, a cargo ship riding a beam of light, hung above the door.

An empty receptionist's desk greeted Lev in the lobby. He was surprised to see a framed photo of his subject, Dalton Severt, prominently displayed on the wall. Severt stood on the steps of the courthouse on the day he'd been acquitted of eight counts of tax evasion and smuggling. He was smiling. Lev figured that if the guy had the ego to put something like that out front, he'd want to talk about it. Lev knew that if he got him going Severt might say something that he could work into a new story, one that would get better newswire coverage than the profile piece.

"Mr. Severt?" Lev called. There was no reply. The warehouse was a tangled labyrinth of stacked crates. He rounded a corner and found a work area with packing supplies piled near a couple of desks. An overturned crate spilled onto the floor. Its contents glittered alluringly in the dim glow of the overhead lights.

There were dozens of Cedeno shells, the opalescent spirals of green and blue swirling in on themselves. The only ones Lev had ever seen were in the jewelry of diplomats and other agents of empire. This much in one place was unheard of. The Cedeno had been wiped out when runoff from the spaceport poisoned their breeding ground. There was still a shell or two that washed in with the tide, and an entire subculture developed around the beachcombers hoping for a nice payday by finding one. It was not unheard of for the Balmera Patrol to find a couple of bodies every time a new shell turned up. It was competitive, finding the shells . . .



“Some people would call me a thief.”

Dalton Severt emerged from a shadowy recess. His hair was grey but his face was unwrinkled, and Lev placed him in his early fifties. He wore a black suit, tailored in the Earth fashion. “Your newsfeed has called me as much before. I suppose it's true what they say, that in business everyone's a villain until you can make money with them.” He cocked his head to the side as a slight smile emerged.

“If you don't like Enterprise News you don't have to do the interview, but it's quite the show you've put on with the Cedeno shells casually laying about. Looking to impress?”

“You're not one to dance around,” Severt said. He took a seat at one of the desks in the work area. It was covered in paperwork and empty cartons of Noodlejoy, their sides slick with brown sauce. They came off as details left on purpose, something to convey I'm just a working stiff, too. Lev thought Severt's real office

was probably all hardwoods imported from Earth. “I admire that in a reporter. Not that the press has done anything but misrepresent me, but I find myself wanting to give it another shot. To set the record straight, you might say. These,” he said, pointing to the shells, “Are simply one facet of my business. What people demand of Balmera I give them.”

“I've done my research.” Lev could remember when The Society for the Preservation of Indigenous Balmera flooded the newswire after Severt's acquittal with pieces claiming that on top of the smuggling, Severt had been secretly mounting expeditions into some of the unexplored regions of Balmera's interior, that he was hiring entire labs to analyze the specimens he brought back. The group called for tighter regulations on exports to stop whatever new exploitations he had in the works. “From what I've seen,” Lev said, nodding to the Cedeno shells, “It seems the rumors could be true.”

“Your accusations wound me, Mr. Armiger.”

“Hey,” Lev said. “Just following protocol.”

“I expect nothing less from a representative of the esteemed Enterprise News.”

You bastard, Lev thought. It was a dig at him for working for the largest, most well-respected news provider in the system . . . and landing the Balmera gig. Interns scoffed at such a backwoods post, and no credible journalist wanted that stain upon their resume. It was where they stuck the albies and the screw-ups, people they didn't want the expense of breaking a contract with but still needed out of the way. Lev had been there a year, and he still awoke every morning telling himself it still wasn't too late to make it to a better market, that all it would take would be one good headline to get his name on the wire, something to help him gain

traction.

He removed the Officebook , opened Autonote, and hit record. “Where do we go from here?”

“I was hoping you would do another expose in the vein of your masterwork, 'Prominent Politico Accused of Extortion.'”

Lev cringed. It was his first story out of journalism school. He'd cited some unsound sources, upset a Colonel of the Empire, and wound up in Balmera. Lev still had work for the morning update to finish up, and if this sparring wasn't going to generate any new copy he was wasting his time. “It seems you've done your research as well. My advice, Mr. Severt? Sell some of that glitter over there and set up a home for wayward children. Tack your name over the door. Maybe that'd be worth a write-up.”

“Oh,” Severt said, “I have a story you'll be interested in hearing.”

Lev tapped the Enterprise News seal on the cover of his Officebook. “It's good or I'm walking. Sure, my editor will be mad I didn't deliver, but it wouldn't be the first time.”

Severt stood, a precision movement that didn't ruffle his suit, and walked down a dark corridor.

There was a sinister quality about the guy that Lev knew could be headline gold. He followed, trying to avoid bumping the precariously stacked crates. He wondered if there was a connection he wasn't seeing, one between the profiles he'd been writing and some of Severt's “business” interests. Sweat rose on his skin. What if he'd wandered into a trap? What if he was going to be shut up . . . permanently?

A light flashed on. When Lev's vision cleared he saw he was

standing on the edge of a circle, stacks of crates surrounding him. An obelisk stood in its center. It towered over Lev. There were faces carved into the rock. Old faces, rounded by weather. They had trunks and fangs and giant oval eyes.

Alien faces.

“Don't you think it strange,” Severt said, caressing a tusk, “that with all the natural wonders Balmera possesses, and in all the time humans have been scrambling over them, that there are still things out there that can surprise us?”

Lev nodded. Now that would be a story, he thought.

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When he made his way towards the Enterprise News office, Lev could hear the crowd long before he saw them. There was a trail of broken glass and overturned trash bins in their wake. A red glow shot into the low-hanging clouds, followed by the wiz of a laser pistol blast. An hour earlier he had been clamoring at the edges of the crowd, desperate to beat Gina on a scoop. Now all he wanted was for the protesters to hold it together. He had the lead of a lifetime--his lifetime, at least--and he didn't want to wade through a riot.

The conversation with Severt left Lev shaking his head in disbelief at his luck. Severt planned another sojourn into the heart of Balmera's wild country to a place only the mineral-scanning satellites had seen. He said there could be a whole lost civilization hidden out there.

He wanted Lev to document the whole expedition.

Lev opened his Officebook and pulled up the communications

folder. Shipley would still be giving the new articles another look before they'd hit the newswire. Lev tried to get through to his boss but it wasn't unusual for him to be hard to reach since he left his devices turned off when he was working, saying the distractions made him make mistakes. The screen flashed Unavailable and Lev picked up his pace, hoping to catch Shipley before he left for the night.

Shipley would have to sign off on the story before Lev could move forward. Without a prioritized code, the constant flood hitting the newswire from thousands of sources would swallow the story.

Lev scuttled by the mouth of a trash-strewn alley. A couple of men, still in their overalls with mine dirt crusting their hair and faces passed a bottle back and forth. Further down the street a group sat on a bar's patio, playing cards and laughing. Lev passed a young miner standing in front of a Noodlejoy takeout place. He didn't pay much attention to him until he came upon the Balmera Patrol blocking the roadway and he had to take a little-used footpath. Lev heard gravel crunching underfoot, and when he turned he saw the miner, his overalls spotless in the streetlights, following him.

Muggings were like the dust and Noodlejoy joints--stay in the city long enough and it became a part of your everyday life.

Lev took a short alley. On the other side he ducked against the wall and waited. The miner emerged and looked around for something.

Me, Lev thought. He's wondering where I went.

Lev shoved a hand into his pocket and gripped the slender Officebook, hoping it looked like a concealed laser pistol. "Good night for a walk."

If he was spooked, the guy didn't show it. "Not bad, if you know what to look for." He was young, like a lot of the guys that hopped ships to Balmera. By keeping Earth and the colonies supplied with columbite-tantalite, an essential mineral for manufacturing electronic equipment, they could build a fine bankroll if they put the work in. But this guy didn't have the haggard look that even new guys get after a few weeks working the grinders and loaders. And those clean overalls he wore . . .

Lev remembered what Gina said to him about the rumors going around about off-worlders coming in, trying to stir things up. Just because the guy wore overalls didn't mean he wanted money. He might want to blast Lev. A dead reporter made a good headline, one that might get the crowd to meltdown. Lev moved the hand in his jacket to draw attention to it, hoping he wouldn't need what he didn't have.

The guy walked on, taking another path that led back to the city center. Lev spent the rest of the walk back to the office thinking he heard footsteps behind him.

Sandwiched between a bookie and a video casino, the Enterprise Newswire station sat on a side street, two blocks from the main thoroughfare between the mines and the lanes of foldout housing where the miners lived. A few people sorting through instant updates and livestreams looking for stories to syndicate were still at their desks. A light shone through the pebbled glass of Shipley's office.

Lev knocked as he swung the door open. Shipley sat behind his desk, a neat stack of empty paper coffee cups next to his work tablet. His face was long and thin and looked sickly. That might have come from the rotgut booze everyone knew he mixed with his coffee. Lev felt a pang of fear facing the man. Around the newsroom Shipley had the reputation as being a merciless

story-killer. A couple of crime-beat reporters had once spent two weeks working up a piece about payroll swindling only to have Shipley blast it after he read the first two lines. He even cut the reporters' pay for wasting the hours they'd put on the clock working on the piece.

Shipley scratched a few days worth of stubble and said, "I'm killing these profiles you're doing. I pulled the file on that one you've got half-finished and it won't fly."

"Oh," Lev said. The profiles were the only things he'd filed since coming to Balmera, and Lev had the sense that there wasn't a whole lot besides them keeping him at the newsfeed. And if the Balmera desk dropped you, then nobody would hire you. "In that case, I have something better."

Lev related what had happened in the warehouse and the offer Severt made him. He tried to sell the idea that something like this could build a following on the newsfeed. Shipley leaned back, his chair groaning. He'd taken his attention away from the worktablet, so Lev took that as a positive sign that his boss was at least thinking it over.

"He's not telling you everything," Shipley said. "But I bet you don't care about that."

Everything Lev had felt that night--the excitement and elation and fear--welled up in him all at once at the thought of losing the piece. "I bring in the best lead since I've been here, something that could get our desk a good syndication run, and you want to can it before it starts?"

Shipley was nonplussed. "Too many holes, kid. Severt's a headline machine, all right, but I'd wager he'd get more out of it than we would. He's got you already. If he said 'write me a recipe

book' you'd do it. We can't have that." Shipley shrugged. "There have to be a few standards."

"That means a lot," Lev said. "Best news source on the wire."

"You've been set on leaving since you got here . . . and that's fine. Ambition doesn't hurt in this business. But if you don't get a grip on a story like this it'll make you wish you'd quit when you were still a dewy-eyed cub reporter."

"Come on, he can't be faking this."

"Let me give it to you straight since I doubt anyone else on this junk planet will. It sounds to me like he's working another angle, one he wants this story to cover. Not letting go of this could be your ride out of here, but you've already got one strike against you just by being here. Think about the consequences if the story sours, if you don't get the facts straight. What little name you have, whatever future reputation you could ever build? All that's gone." With his sunken cheeks and receding hairline, Shipley looked like weariness clung to him like static. "And take it from me," he said. "I've got a lifetime's worth of failure as my source."

Lev's face bloomed red with anger and embarrassment. He'd been so focused on getting a lead that would get him off-world that he'd forgotten about keeping his job long enough to make that happen. "Fine," he said. "I'll straighten it out."

"Good." Shipley turned his attention back to his work, letting his words trail after Lev as he left the room. "Find the right angle and we'll run with it. Pick the wrong one . . . and I'll have to can you."

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The protesters formed a solid line and taunted the Balmora Patrol.



The officers knocked batons against riot shields, waiting. All it would take would be a bottle thrown their way and the place would explode.

With all the focus on the protesters, the rest of the city was quiet. Dust swirled around the buildings, and the streetlights did little to cut the gloom. Lev tracked down Severt's address and roused the housekeeper from a sound sleep. She hadn't seen him all night, and for a palm full of folded cash she checked the house, only to report, "He hasn't returned."

Lev swung by the Exports office again.

A narrow beam of light shone under the lobby door. He figured Severt could still be inside, pawing over his riches. Or plunder, he reminded himself. Something like that was all about how you spun it, and he would be the one doing the spinning when the time came.

Lev thought about calling out, but decided against it. He might get lucky and surprise Severt in a compromising situation, something that would make good copy. He followed the path between the crates to the area with the desks and found Severt sprawled in a chair, a smoking hole in his chest. A laser pistol, its coils aglow from having been recently fired, lay at his feet. Lev heard footsteps a moment before a circle on the crate next to his head turned to glowing embers.

Lev ducked and a second smoking hole formed on the wall next to where he'd been standing, cutting through electrical wires. The room went dark. Lev lunged for the pistol on the floor. A thick mining boot slammed into his side.

He curled in on himself. The boot swung again and lit up Lev's aching ribs. Lev rolled, and a blast evaporated part of the ground where he'd been.

The boot stuck again, and Lev grabbed his attacker's leg. He slammed his fist into where he guessed the kneecap would be. A howl of pain above him. He'd hit his mark. Lev went for where he thought the pistol lay, but the dark made him come up empty.

A warm barrel poked his back.

"What's the drill?" a voice asked in the darkness above him. Lev put his hands atop his head as a miner's headlamp switched on, bathing the floor in light. "Good. Don't go squirming."

Another headlamp blinked on, and Lev could see the guy it belonged to. He had his hands knitted around his knee. It was the guy that had followed him earlier, the young miner.

"I'm hurting, man," the guy said.

"We'll take care of it later," the one above Lev said. He spoke to Lev. "Roll over, and if you kick me I'll blast you."

Lev did as he was told. The laser wielding man wore the same type of clean miner's overalls as his friend. He had the gun trained on Lev's chest.

Lev said, "I've got press credentials in my jacket. I'm just trying to track down a lead." From where he sprawled on the floor, Lev could see Severt's limp legs dangle from the chair. "But you guys nixed my story before my editor had the chance to kill it."

"Not every story needs telling," the man above him said. His voice was still firm, but he seemed to relax after Lev told him he was a

journalist. “Dalton Severt was a plunderer of natural history. Whatever he would have said would only serve that end.”

From deep in the recesses of the warehouse an electric engine hummed to life. There was a crash as a stack of crates fell over, spilling bottles of Bluespot brand vitamins across the floor. Lev itched to take out his Officebook. He could feel his story taking shape around him.

“Careful,” the man wielding the gun shouted. “It's impossible to preserve what's already destroyed.”

A forklift wheeled around, the great obelisk cradled in a sling between the machine's tines. From where he lay on the floor, Lev could see where the stone had been broken off of something else.

“So,” Lev asked. He tried to sound casual, even with the threat of a glowing death looming over him. “Why steal from a thief?”

“All will know in time,” the man said. He let the pistol's barrel drop.

Lev sat up as the forklift rolled to a cargo bay. The door rattled open to reveal a waiting Argus Dart outfitted with the heavy landing skids used to help land on the rugged terrain in-world. The spacecraft's rear bay door folded open, and men wearing the same clean miner gear loaded the artifact.

“What would you want the public to know?” Lev slowly slipped out the Officebook and hit record. “Care to put a statement on the record?”

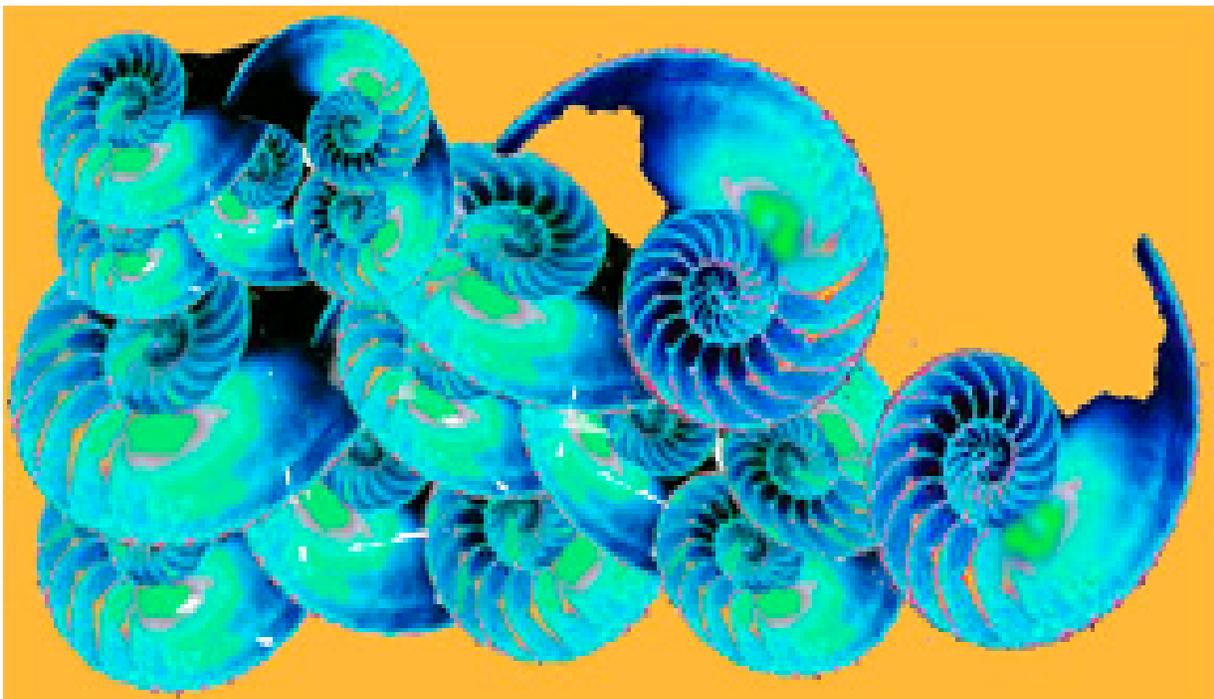
The man's boot crunched the Officebook into the floor.

“Our mission . . .” He wavered, unsure whether to blast Lev or not. In the end he stuffed the laser pistol into his belt and jumped

aboard the Argus Dart. Before its doors folded shut he tossed a folded card to Lev. It fluttered in the ship's exhaust as the Argus flew away.

Lev snatched the white paper, barren except for a seal with The Society for the Preservation of Indigenous Balmera written around it. So it hadn't been offworlders after all, Lev thought. He knew it was a lead that would develop with time and a lot of research, and he felt strangely alright with the prospect of staying on Balmera however long it would take to see it through. Until then, though . . .

Lev went to the crate of spilled vitamins and thought about how the whole of Balmera would love to know where they'd been hiding. He was just the guy to tell them about it.



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