

Hunters

On a random summer night, in an uninteresting corner of the Hungarian countryside, at the edge of just another wheat field, at the intersection of the dirt road that surrounds the field with one of the many dirt roads crossing it, a figure in black clothes took out a large chest from the trunk of an old car and heavily placed it on the ground at the corner of the intersection. Neither the chest nor the figure seemed unusual, other than the fact that they were at that intersection that night.

The figure was a young man. He was wearing dark jeans and a long sleeved shirt. He looked like any other young man. The chest was even less unique than the man. There aren't many unique men in the world, but unique chests are a common thing. Some, like Blackbeard's treasure chest, are special because of their story. Others, like the Ark of the Covenant, are special because of their contents. However, most scientists who study chests - a group that includes nine people around the world that communicate with each other primarily via Reddit forums - agree that the thing that makes a chest unique is not the thing that sets it apart, but rather the fact that it radiates a sense of uniqueness. Unique chests should be decorated with paintings of mythological scenes or be covered with cuts and fire marks from the hardships of their prolonged existence. In other words, when you see a unique chest, you should know it.

For that reason - these scientists will say - this chest had a complete lack of uniqueness. They will even make the claim - and then unanimously agree on it by clicking "upvote" - that it doesn't even deserve the title of "chest". This is because it was, in reality, A plastic crate of the type used for transportation of goods in supermarket chains, with a fabric cover designed to maintain the illusion of separation between its contents and the outside world.

But in the eyes of the man that was now opening it, the crate was no less a chest than if it had been made of ancient oak and decorated with ivory. Not only because - like most people in the world - he had never heard of those chest scientists, and even if he had heard of them, their opinion probably wouldn't have mattered to him, but also because according to tradition every hunter must keep his equipment in a designated chest. Despite his disdain for such traditions, he understood the importance of the orderly work that comes from them. Since his previous chest

was taken from him, and since he was still a hunter, a plastic crate with a fabric cover was a chest for him in every relevant aspect.

And damn it, he was a hunter. Who cares what some council says? He was a hunter and tonight he will capture something the likes of which has not been seen in years.

The problem with this claim was that all of his equipment was taken from him with his former chest. That meant he had to make quite a few improvisations in order to hunt. The ancient runes, which are supposed to be drawn in concentric circles around the center of the trap with volcanic sand, he drew instead with scoria stones he bought at a plant nursery on the edge of the village where he currently was. Instead of using stainless steel astrolabe to find the correct angle of the stars, he used a star map app with questionable accuracy. The chalk pegs that are supposed to be made of coral skeletons were instead made from colored chalks. Finally, he could not get the chemicals to paint the fire the right shade of green - shade number #4F7942 - but the ones he found in the chemistry kit for children should produce a color close enough.

He lit the fire in the center of the circle, threw in the chemicals - which brought it to shade #4F7A42, indeed close enough - and placed on top of it the last part of the trap: a glass container with a copper lid that was, in fact, a pickle jar.

He looked at his watch. The time was twelve minutes past ten. He had five minutes left. He decided to use this time to fix the runes. Better to make sure he didn't make mistakes. He examined them one by one, comparing them to the heavy book in his hand. He reached the center of the circle when a familiar came from the direction of the car.

"Interesting," said the voice. "What were you going to use instead of a music box?"

The man stopped working and looked in the direction of the car. Unlike the man or the chest, the woman who emerged from the shadows looked very unique. She was wearing a long garment, something that could be a dress or a robe, depending on the angle from which you look. The garment was black, but shades of purple, blue and azure reflected from it wherever the light reached. She stood tall, holding herself in a position that said she was in control of the situation.

As if with a wave of the hand she could turn off the stars themselves. A fact that was partially true.

The man saw who it was, rolled his eyes, and continued working.

"How long have you been here?" he asked her over his shoulder. He didn't ask how she got here. Shadow walking is an ability that most experienced hunters possess. The fact that he still couldn't do it himself frustrated him to no end.

"Just for a few minutes. It's very impressive to see what you can do even when you have no resources."

"Not impressive enough for you to let me show you what I can do when I do have resources."

"Perhaps impressive enough for us to not allow it to you."

The man did not answer. He found a mistake in one of his runes, and had to redo an entire arm of the northern spiral. He didn't have time for this.

"You have a mistake in your southeast system as well," she told him. Her tone was somehow hard and soft at the same time. A combination of a chef scolding one of the cooks for burning down the kitchen and a kindergarten teacher explaining to one of the kids that it isn't actually a good idea to eat one's own snot.

"And you only have-" she looked on the clock on her hand "-two minutes. I'm not sure you'll make it in time."

"I'll make it if you stop distracting me."

The woman didn't respond.

The man finished arranging the northern runes and moved to the southeastern system. The mistake she mentioned was obvious now. He went over to fix it, moving the stones one by one.

"Why are you here?" he asked her. "You're not here to stop me, otherwise you would have done it already. Or at least you wouldn't tell me about my mistake."

"Couldn't it be that you have other errors I haven't told you about?"

"Could be, but it doesn't sound like you. If you wanted to arrest me, you would have already done it. You'd have me dragged to jail for hunting without a permit or something."

"That's what the law says I should do."

"But you're not doing it. That means there are three options. Either you don't think it will work. Or you think it's not really dangerous. Or—" He stopped his work to look at her. He wanted to see her face when he said it. In the dim light of the green fire it was hard to see her expression, but a small smile clearly appeared on her lips as he said "- or you're just as curious as I am to see what will happen."

He smiled when he saw her face and went back to assembling his runes. A quick glance at the clock showed him that there were less than thirty seconds left.

"Do you really think you're the first to think that the academy is stuck in the past? No original research in almost two centuries?"

"Then why am I the only one trying to do something?"

"We are doing things, but we do them right. There are methods, procedures. You know why there are no new experiments. You know how dangerous it is."

"So that's why you're here? To make sure I'm doing it 'right'?"

"Yes. And," she added with the same smile, "I am actually curious to see what you can do. You've got five seconds and I still don't know—what are you going to use instead of a music box?"

The man did not answer. He simply pressed a button on his phone and music began to blare from the speakers in the car. The woman could barely contain herself from laughing at the simplicity of the solution. Their council really deserved it, after they voted to expel from the academy a person with such a logical mind, that he would do innovative experiments and leave them behind.

She looked at her watch and the man looked at his.

Three seconds remained. Two. One.

The band of light from the shooting star SA-3025 (the Academy also got really bad at naming things) crossed the sky at exactly the expected angle. It appeared among the stars of the Scorpius system, flying quickly towards the north and disappeared without a trace, not far from the place where Venus took residence tonight.

A second later the sky returned to its normal state. All the stars hung unchanged. The jar remained empty.

"Okay," said the woman in a tone of finality. "This was an interesting experiment. The truth is, there's no telling why it didn't work. There were so many improvisations, it could be any one of them. I want you to know that in my opinion you did everything right."

"I know..." The man sounded shocked. "It was supposed to work... why didn't it work?"

The woman was quiet for a second. "Like I said, you never know. Maybe this gravel isn't fine enough."

"It's scoria."

"Whatever. Maybe there are holes in it that the sand doesn't have. Maybe these chinks aren't high enough or the fire isn't exactly the in the right shade."

"But that's all within margin! I followed the instructions in the most updated edition of *recipes*! I made the measurements, it should work."

"Look, Orio-"

"Don't call me that. I'm not a part of the academy anymore."

"It doesn't matter. Will you stop calling me by my name?"

"What? North? That's not your name. Maybe I'll start calling you Maria. That's your real name, right?"

"Stop it right now."

"And if you want, you can call me Amit. That's my name."

"It doesn't matter if you're an official part of the academy or not. If you act like a hunter, you'll follow the safety rules. These names help us remain anonymous from those who want to use the power of the stars for themselves. You really wish people would come in the middle of the night and kidnap Amit Ramoni from his house in Netanya for him to catch them a star? You really should be more-"

The woman who was born with the name Maria and calls herself North stopped the sentence in the middle and looked at the fire. She hadn't noticed it until now, but the fire was clearly getting stronger.

The man who calls himself Amit looked in the same direction.

"Maybe you put too much fuel?" she asked.

"I put in exactly three hundred and two milliliters. Plus or minus half a milliliter."

She nodded. It's definitely in the right range. The fire grew stronger and stronger. This shouldn't happen.

"Back up."

Amit did as she said. He managed to take two steps outside the circle of runes when the flame broke out, and it seems that it was just far enough to only get slightly burned. The light was much stronger than it was supposed to be, far more powerful than the light any of them had ever seen in any of their previous captures.

The flame went out as quickly as it appeared, leaving behind a jar full of silvery starlight. The light was so strong that it was difficult to look directly at it, but those who did so - for example with the help of a camera filter or through six pairs of sunglasses - would see that it had a slightly more golden hue than ordinary stars.

And that's exactly what the two people standing next to the jar did.

"Is that him? Did I catch him?" asked Amit, looking at the light through six pairs of sunglasses.

"I don't think so," said North, looking at it through a darkening camera filter. "This thing is much stronger."

"The idea was to catch a strong star."

"Still. It's much stronger than any comet. And you see it's a little golden?"

A look of panic appeared on the face of North. She took out a thick cloth from the folds of her garment, covered the jar, and looked at the night sky.

"Oh no," she said "This is really, really bad."

"What happened?" Amit asked, then looked at himself. It took him a second to understand. His face turned white.

"It doesn't make sense," he said "No way."

"What are you saying?! No way?! So show me! Please! I'd love it if you could show me where, in the night sky, is Venus?!"

And then the ground began to shake.

Less than an hour later, the only thing left in the field from the incident were a few cracks in the ground and a circle of burnt grain that will make the farmer start obsessively watching documentaries about extraterrestrials and sleeping with a gun next to his bed. The box and the vehicle it was in were in an alley on the north side of Paris, having been shadow walked there. The young man and the woman in the black robe were in the lab in the basement of the building adjacent to that alley, with the jar from which emanates the silvery-golden light of one of the planets is placed in a metal cage on the table.

North paced back and forth across the room trying to think. Amit sat down in front of the table when five books on the mechanics of hunting is open in front of him and he writes quickly in a notebook.

"I think I understand what happened," he said after a while.

North stopped and looked at him.

"I think my trap was two energy levels too strong."

"But that's what they're supposed to do," she said tiredly. "It gives you a margin of error in case the star is stronger than you expect."

"Maybe it's problematic in big stars. There's an equation here that doesn't exist in *recipes*. It includes prioritization according to angular momentum and not only according to speed and distance. I think if you go past the seventh energy level, planets take precedence over shooting stars."

"What energy level did your experiment require?"

"Six. I did eight."

"I see," she said, returning to her tense walk.

"It doesn't really matter why it happened," she said after a minute. "The real question is how to get her back to its place."

"Wait, wait," he said, placing the notebook on the table and closing the books. "Do you want to just return her? Without trying to do anything with her first?"

She stopped again and looked at him in shock.

"Think about it," he said, "that is one of the strongest stars in the sky."

"We're not Dismantling her."

He rolled his eyes. Of course that's what someone from the academy would think he wanted to do.

"I didn't mean to Dismantle her."

"So what? You want to keep her as an energy source? Maybe as a table lamp? Oh, how about we simply sell her to the highest bidding alchemist?"

"Honestly, I was thinking of trying to communicate with her a little, take some measurements, and then send her back."

North approached him with a dangerous look on her face.

"Listen to me and listen to me well," she said, "I really am in favor of experimentation and I want the academy to advance, and I'm all for progress and all that. But. There's a reason planets don't appear in our books. They're far too powerful to bring them to Earth. We're lucky that I had Faraday cage big enough and that we managed to bring her here before another disaster happened. Every moment she is here there is danger the cage will crack under the pressure, and probably this half of the sky will break with it. Venus belongs to the sky, and to there she will return. Tonight."

"Tonight?"

"Tonight."

Amit nodded.

"How?" he asked.

North started to answer but stopped herself. Pulling a star from the sky is one thing. Getting it back there is another thing entirely. What if it is returned in the wrong place? There was once a similar attempt to return a star to its place, two hundred years ago in Indonesia. A misstep of two degrees caused the Tambora volcano to erupt. The result was a year in which neither sun nor stars were seen anywhere on Earth. And that star was a comet.

"Okay," said Amit. "So until you figure out how to get her back up there, I'll ask her a few questions."

"Absolutely not."

"It's not like you have anything better to do with her. What if she knows how to get back on her own?"

North thought about it for a second.

"Okay," she finally said. "But I'm going to keep an eye on you."

The only difference between the measurements Faraday cage and a usual Faraday cage was a small hole to the side of the container, which was currently covered with a copper plug. The hole is meant for a probe, a funnel made of zinc whose narrow end fits into the hole. When you connect the probe to the cage you can hear messages from the star as musical ripples in the wind.

North took out her probe, but Amit stopped her.

"I have a method that I think could be better," he said, taking a laptop out of his bag.

"Um... what do you mean?"

Amit did not answer. He pulled out a USB cable connected to a zinc plug identical to the one on the end of the probe, connected the USB to the computer and offered her plug.

"Are you going to connect the star to the internet?"

"No, I don't have Wi-Fi here. I intend to use software that does Fourier decomposition to analyze her music, and thus interpret the answers more accurately."

"And how do you know that it works?"

"I..." Amit hesitated, scratching the back of his neck and showing unusual interest in the wood patterns on the table. "I did some experiments on stars while volunteering at the library."

"What?!"

"I just wanted to know if I could detect their patterns with math! And it worked! Now we can make the most out of this opportunity."

"Oh, Amit, of course you could find their patterns with math! It's not a big discovery, it's been known for ages. But from here to connecting a star to your computer..."

"Is there any reason not to try?"

She struggled for a few seconds but couldn't think of any reason.

"I guess not."

Amit inserted the USB-connected probe into the hole in the measurement cage. The computer flashed for a second, puffed a strand of smoke, and turned off.

"Huh," said Amit. "I guess I should have seen that coming."

"What voltage did you think would pass?"

"A USB connection can handle five volts. I have a voltage drop of two thousand."

"Got it. So," she switched to her teacher's voice, "do you know what you did wrong?"

"I had to put a bigger voltage drop," his voice was the voice of a child who for the thousandth time had to hear his parents scold him for going outside when it's cold without a jacket - knows he's wrong but doesn't like being reminded of it.

"Right. Do you know how much?"

"No. I should have measured the star's voltage first."

"That's right," North said as she took out a voltmeter from the drawer next to her. She connected it to the measurement hole.

It puffed smoke and went off as well.

She sighed and went to the drawer on the other side of the room. She took out a voltmeter with a much higher range and connect it to the cage. It didn't short. Instead, the little screen had the number *22,342,130 V* on it.

"So it looks like I needed a 22,342,125 volt voltage drop," said Amit.

"Looks like it. Do you have one of these?"

"I don't think it's something you can buy or make."

"It is possible, but we need the right materials."

Amit nodded, still staring at the voltmeter.

"Shall we use the analog probe?" North asked.

Amit shook himself and nodded again.

North disconnected the voltmeter and inserted the analog probe into the hole in the measuring cage.

Communication protocol #422125

Object: The planet Venus

input: Opening a communication line

output: curiosity

input: friend or foe?

output: no

input: Lack of energy or excess of energy?

output: Yes

input: What do you want

output: Want?

input: Trying to move?

output: Already moving

input: Know where you are?

output: On earth

input: Want to leave Earth?

output: Not in Earth. On Earth.

input: Want to stop being on Earth?

output: No

input: It's dangerous

output: No

input: Should be in the sky

output: Already in the sky

input: On earth

output: Earth is in the sky

Amit wrote the response to their last message to the star. Venus' reactions were fascinating. She had such a different perception of reality. Is it really not dangerous for her to be here? Maybe it's actually only dangerous for humans, and she just doesn't notice it?

He didn't have time to ask that question. This is because while he was writing the last response in the protocol, the door opened and three people entered the room in robes identical to the one North had.

The four members of the CHS - The Council for Hunter Studies - should be elected according to seniority. However, one of the rules of the council is that it must contain experts in all nine areas of the hunter's knowledge. The mathematical result is that an average councilman should be an expert in two and a quarter subjects. That is why sometimes a hunter will be chosen to be a council member even though he has both less experience and less knowledge than other hunters, simply because he chose to study many subjects at a superficial level, instead of studying a particular subject in depth. Hunters who didn't want to get involved in politics and in the bureaucracy of this role deliberately focused on one subject they liked and avoided even hearing anecdotes about other subjects, lest they get on the radar of the other hunters as potential council members.

Of the four current council members, two of them - Maria, the holder in the position of North, and Ming, who holds the position of West - ran for this position. Sanima, who holds the East position, received the position only two years ago, in her signature apathy.

Ricardo, who holds the position of South, strongly opposed his election. Unfortunately, he had nothing he could do about it. He was elected, and so he had to do the job. He decided, therefore, not to do anything he wasn't specifically required to do. It turns out, he found out tonight, that the duties of the job include being woken up in the middle of the night by loud knocks on his door accompanied by West's shouts about the one of the planets going missing, searching all the entire campus for a missing councilwoman, and finally finding her in a secret private lab with a researcher who was kicked out of the academy and the lost planet placed in a research cage on her desk.

Proactivity was not yet part of the job requirements. Therefore, even though he was not happy about the situation he got into, he decided not to do anything about it.

"North," said West, anger subdued in his voice, "what's going on here?"

"Orion accidentally dropped Venus from the sky. We're trying to get her back."

"That's not my name," said Amit. No one seemed to be listening to him.

"Let me understand," said West, "he took her down—accidentally?"

"He tried to take down SA-3025 but set the trap to be at energy level eight and—"

"Of course that's what he did! And you helped him? Why didn't you stop him?"

North was silent.

West sighed.

"Look," said North, "give me eight hours and I'll fix it. I'll get her back to the place."

"I don't think so," said West in a harsh voice. "You betrayed your position. You will give up your title and resign."

"What?!" she said. East and even South also looked at him with surprised looks. She knew that West wanted to get rid of her for a while now, mostly because of her attempts to get the academy moving, but it didn't seem like a sufficient excuse to her.

"Look," he said, "participating in illegal hunting is one thing—"

"Oh come on! We both know it's not—"

"But your hunt ended up with a planet on Earth?"

North fell silent. That might have been a sufficient excuse.

"Did you even think about what you were doing?"

She didn't answer. Is... is West right? Could it be that she should have stopped all of this and now it's too late?

"Even you have to admit that it is inappropriate, irresponsible, and even dangerous to keep you in this position."

North looked at the floor, trying - without much success - to keep the anger and shame from rising on her face.

"East?" West said.

East took two steps towards the cage on the table.

Amit stood up.

"Boy," said West, "I'd sit down now if I were you."

"I don't work for you anymore, remember?"

East moved so fast it was difficult to see it even if it was noon on a sunny day. Amit managed to feel the familiar heat of starlight-filled metal approaching his chest before he flew to the other side of the room, crashing into a bookcase and landing on the floor in a mess of old pages and dust.

East took the cage.

North did not move.

"I'll give you a day before I'll send the summons for your formal trial," said West and the three turned to leave the room.

"What are you going to do with her?" shouted Amit from his corner under the books.

"With such a powerful star?" West said, "We'll Dismantle her of course. It's dangerous to let her exist on Earth. Plus—" his smile grew so big you would think his head would split in two "—her parts will fund a new planetary research institute. You know, to make sure things like this never happen again."

The woman who soon will no longer be able to call herself North stared into the fireplace and tried to identify the exact moment she started becoming to failure. There were many possible moments. There was the moment when she chose the wrong major. Or maybe the moment she chose the wrong partner. Maybe it actually all started thirty years ago, when she chose the wrong career. All of these moments were good options for the title "the moment her life started to deteriorate", but it was clear that the moment they were deteriorating toward was the present moment.

In a day she will receive the summons for her trial. In two days, three out of four council members will vote to remove her from her position in disgrace. She will be the second

councilwoman in history to have this happen to her. The first time it was because of the murder of a council member. North considered the idea for a second before deciding it wasn't worth the effort. In any case, North's crime was much worse. The murder of a planet.

She looked at the fire as she thought about the consequences of this act. She was aware, at the edge of her mind, of Amit walking along the walls of the room, collecting books and equipment from the shelves and placing them in a plastic crate on the table. She paid him no attention.

West was right. It was her fault. Amit could be blamed, but at least officially, he was no longer a hunter. She, however, was a councilwoman. She came out of her house after she recognized the signature of a trap. She saw him hunting. She realized he was improvising. She realized that what he was doing was dangerous. And she decided not to stop him.

Maybe this is when it all started to go downhill. The moment she decided to betray her responsibility. She would like to think it was because she didn't believe in all this bureaucracy, or because she felt that the academy needed to be pushed forward, but that wasn't really the reason. The bureaucracy is supposed to protect them from exactly such things. The truth was that she was simply curious, and she let that childish curiosity get the better of her. At the end of the day, there is nothing-

She felt a hand on her shoulder. She looked towards the source of the hand and saw Amit.

"We have to go," he told her. "You should think about these things later."

It took her a second to respond.

"We don't stand a chance against all three of them," she said "East is the world's greatest expert in starfueled combat and West is the world's greatest expert in Dissection. He will finish the ceremony so quickly that she'll only kill us after it's over."

"They can't kill you. You're still North."

"That's not the point."

"So you're going to sit here and do nothing? Let Venus die?"

She continued to stare at the fire. She didn't say what she wanted to say. "Just another disappointment."

"Well, I'm going to try," he said "And you're going to help me."

She looked at the fire. He looked at her.

"And what are you going to do if you get her? You still have no way of getting her back."

"Actually... I have an idea about that."

She looked at him and lifted an eyebrow.

"Okay. Let's go. But you know I don't think it's going to work."

"That's what you said last time," he said

"And I was right," she said, disappointed in herself.

One shadow walk later they were standing next to a large sandstone boulder on a beach in northern Nigeria. On the other side of the boulder, which was one of a row of similar boulders, was a circle of runes made of volcanic sand surrounded by chalk pegs made from corals and in the center was a green fire of the right shade. A jar was placed over the fire from which a silvery-golden light emanated. Around the circle were three large musical boxes, and between them three large urns intended to hold the different parts of the star after Dismantling it - stardust, ether, and starlight.

Unlike the trap meant to hunt for a planet, where the music is meant to call the planet and is therefore beautiful and subtle, the structure meant for deconstruction is more similar to the process that takes place in nightclubs where the musical taste of the participants is grinded to dust, and therefore uses a similar bass rhythm described by people in those parties as *dutz-dutz-dutz*. For that reason, Dismantling should be done quickly, otherwise drunk students start arriving with the intention of joining the party they think is happening. The time it takes for those potential revelers to arrive is called "Half Party Time," and it depends on location, time of year, and local culture. The average Half Party Time in the world is just over twenty seven minutes. The beach in Nigeria chosen by the three councilmembers is a perfect place for such a powerful Dismantling, because its Half Party Time is among the highest in the world, more than an hour and a half.

From the other side of the boulder, Amit and North could already hear the deep rhythm emanating from the three musical boxes.

"Okay, now I need you to distract them while I release Venus."

"How am I supposed to do that? There are three of them."

"Be especially distracting," he said.

North rolled his eyes and stepped out from the shadow of the boulder. On the other side she saw the ceremony. West walked around the circle and calibrated the urns. South and East sat not far from him and built a castle in the sand. Venus's light emanated from the center of the circle. With every bass the star retreated deeper into the jar. She seemed to be suffering.

"West, that's enough," she said, her voice hesitant. She wouldn't have succeeded in dissuading any child from eating snot, and certainly not instilling fear in a cook who burned down the kitchen.

West rolled his eyes.

"You have no reason to be here," he said

"I... I'm still part of the council," she said

"You betrayed your position."

North was silent.

"Where's the boy?" East asked from her spot on the sand without looking up from the tower she was now working on.

North was silent.

East, still without looking up, pulled out a small glowing ball and threw it on the boulder from closest to North. North jumped aside a second before the ball hit. The boulder exploded with light and noise that was so loud it cut the half party time of the ceremony by twenty minutes. There was nothing behind him.

Then, with a whoosh, something fast and small flew from the behind the furthest boulder in the row and landed in the sand near the circle.

The four council members looked in the direction the object came from and saw Amit emerge from the shadows, holding another stone in his hand ready to throw.

"Huh! It took you a while, didn't it?" West said.

"Oh, leave him," said South. "Shadow walking is hard."

West started to respond to him, but stopped himself in time. South was the shadow walking expert. Any counter-argument could be interpreted as a claim that he is not an expert, which would release him from his role.

"Never mind," West said. East has already thrown another ball towards the boulder next to Amit. Amit jumped, getting away from the boulder, and threw the second stone. It hit inside the circle but missed its target.

The boulder behind him exploded. East ran in his direction.

Amit stopped and waited for her to approach. When she was close enough, he threw his third stone. East pivoted and dodged from it easily. The stone passed behind East and this time it hit its target. The jar shattered into pieces smelling of scorched rain and pickles.

Jars containing stars sometimes break, but usually it's a small star and the result isn't stronger than a regular gas explosion. You can't know what kind of explosion will result from breaking a jar containing a planet.

All five hunters clung to the ground in preparation for what happened next, but the explosion did not come.

After the case, South is going to claim that he didn't duck to the ground, and didn't even notice that anything happened to the jar. Anyone who hears this will say that maybe he should not be a council member if he cannot pay attention to such things. South will agree, but since no one will volunteer to replace him, he will remain a councilman for another thirty-two years.

Other than South, the first to rise was Amit. He was therefore the first to see the shapeless lump of glowing plasma that was Venus. Venus hovered where she had been a moment before the jar and tried to send rays of starlight outwards, but every bass that erupted from the music boxes made her retreat further inside.

Amit stared at her. He never saw a star outside of a jar. She was beautiful and emanated a lot of very strong emotions. She felt trapped, scared and confused. Her music was barely audible over the sound of the basses.

Anger rose in Amit. He looked around at the other council members who were still starting to get up. East stood not far from him, while North and West stood near the circle a few paces apart.

Then Amit saw that something had changed in North. A few minutes ago she was closed and scared, as if this whole story was her fault. Now she looked angry.

"Do you hear what she's saying?" She told West. Her voice was barely a whisper, but it was clearly audible. It seems to be mixed and strengthened by the music of Venus.

"She's going to kill us?" he guessed.

"I guess you're not really an expert in listening," North said. "It's okay. I am. You see, that's just part of it. She says there was never any danger. That we lived a lie. That your obsolete approaches, the ones that tell us to resist our curiosity, the ones that a few hours ago my instincts told me were wrong, are what got us into this mess. That because of these approaches, after the last explosion, they threw all the information about the planets into the volcano. She says we used to bring planets down to the face of the Earth all the time, and they went back to their place safely in their own time. And she says we never tried to Dismantle them."

West's face was horrified for a second before the decisiveness came back to them.

"I see," he said "Looks like it's either her or us. I know what I'm choosing."

He took a step towards the nearest music box.

"No," said North.

At that moment, Amit remembered what North's field of expertise was. The field that made her the member of the council with the most seniority other than West. It wasn't just listening.

North was the expert in Resonance. The creation of echoes. The usage of the natural rhythm of stars. Amit managed to hear it now. North spoke exactly to the rhythm of Venus, amplifying it against the bass.

Venus sent a beam of light to the edge of the circle.

"It's either her or you," North said.

Her words echoed in the rhythm of the planet.

The light beam crossed the edge of a circle runes.

The three music boxes collapsed in on themselves as if crushed by a steam roller from all directions. A great flash of light blinded all five of them and Amit passed out.

When he got up, Amit saw North sitting on a mound of sand that was once a circle of runes. Another mound of sand, narrow and long, was next to the closest boulder in the line. Not far from all of these, South and East sat and kept building their sandcastle as if they had never stopped.

Amit walked to North and settled on the sand next to her. The sun has already begun to rise, but on the northern side of the sky a bright spot marked the location of a planet that went back to its place.