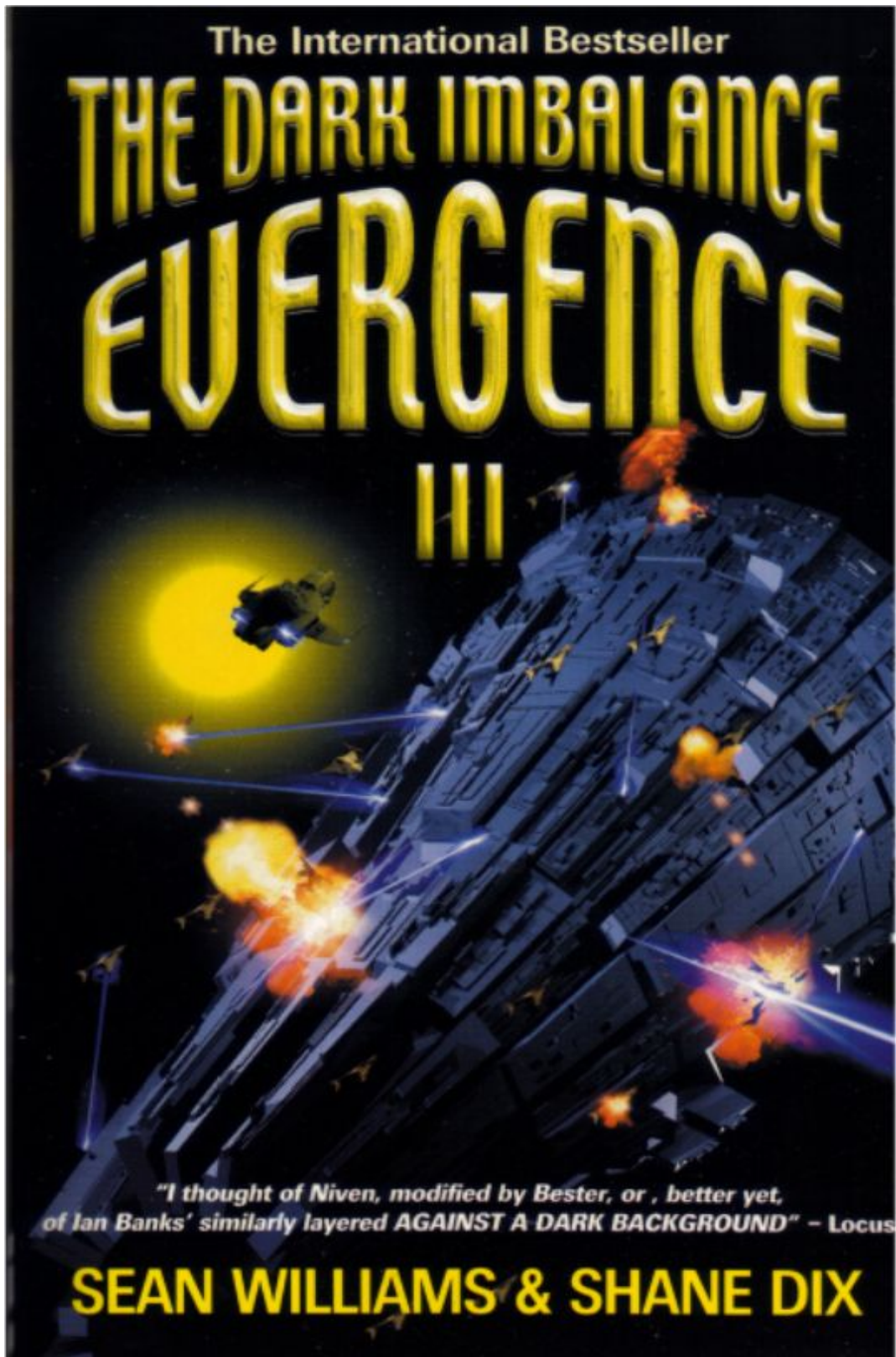


The Dark Imbalance



*The Dark Imbalance* is the final book in **The Evergence Trilogy**, which has become a phenomenon in science-fiction circles, attracting widespread acclaim as well as bestseller status throughout the world.

### THE AUTHORS

**Sean Williams** has written more than 50 short stories, two of these prize-winning and many nominated for awards. *Metal Fatigue*, his first full-length novel, won the Aurealis award for the best science-fiction novel and *The Resurrected Man* won the Ditmar Award, as did one of his anthologies. Aged just 33, he was honoured with the year 2000 Great Award for Literature in his home state of South Australia.

**Shane Dix** has been writing since he was fifteen, mainly Science-Fiction. His story, *Through the Water That Binds*, won the 1991 Canberra SF Society's short story competition. It also featured in the Australian landmark Science-Fiction anthology, *Alien Shores*. In addition to Science-Fiction, he has written mainstream stories, poetry and articles about the state of Science-Fiction in film and television. He is currently working with Sean Williams on a new Science-Fiction project – *The Orphan's Trilogy*.

# The Dark Imbalance

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# **THE DARK IMBALANCE**

## **EVERGENCE III**

The Dark Imbalance

**Also by Sean Williams and Shane Dix**

***Evergence I: The Prodigal Sun***

***Evergence II: The Dying Light***

**Also by Sean Williams and published by Swift**

***Metal Fatigue***

The Dark Imbalance

# **THE DARK IMBALANCE**

## **EVERGENCE III**

**Sean Williams & Shane Dix**



The Dark Imbalance

Swift Publishers

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The Dark Imbalance

**For Richard Curtis and Ginjer Buchanan, without whom this  
project would have remained forever incomplete**

The Dark Imbalance

*One knows what a war is about only when it is over.*

H.N. Brailsford

*Unser Leben geht hin mit Verwandlung.*

*(Our life passes in transformation)*

Rainer Maria Rilke

PART ONE:

**SOL SYSTEM**

## PROLOGUE

The former COE Intelligence Head of Strategy didn't need to study her stolen fighter's instruments to know that something strange was going on in Sol System. Something strange and very unsettling.

Page De Bruyn swung her fighter down into the plane of the ecliptic, braving a navigational nightmare as she went. The reopening of the Sol anchor point behind her had allowed – and continued to allow – a flood of vessels into the system. In the first few minutes she catalogued fifty vessels whose design matched none in her records and logged markings of fifteen new nations. None of them was the one she sought – and she had barely touched the surface. According to the fighter's instruments, the total number of ships, stations and launchers present in the system might well be in the order of several hundred thousand. Given that she hadn't properly surveyed the inner – and outermost extremes, she wouldn't be surprised if that figure doubled by the end of the day.

Possibly a million ships, then, representing maybe tens of thousands of nations, near and far. She had heard of larger gatherings, but never in a solar gravity well. Even the combined fleet that had assembled in this very place to destroy the Sol Apotheosis Movement two thousand years earlier had, according to records, barely numbered ten thousand ships. Whether or not that record was accurate, she was now unsure, but the point remained: nothing

like this had occurred in or near the Commonwealth of Empires before. It would make finding her quarry that much more difficult.

As she skimmed the morass, she was scanned and hailed twice but not challenged. There didn't seem to be a central authority operating anywhere. The system was a mess. But the longer she looked at it, the more she realised that this might not be a bad thing after all. It might even work to her advantage. She could travel freely through it, confident that no-one would notice a single fighter among the other ships. That was indeed a good thing, for the journey to Sol System had been long and exhausting, and she was going to need rest to prepare for the days ahead.

She had work out what was going on, and how it related to an unambitious orphan whom she appeared to have completely underestimated. And to do that, she needed to be closer to those who had spurned her.

She instructed the fighter to hunt for COE signals among the babble of transmissions filling the spectra around her. It wasn't a sophisticated craft, but it would do that for her. Once registered as TBC-14, she had renamed it *Kindling* upon stealing it from Intelligence HQ. Although she was, theoretically, a fugitive from justice, in reality she had enough friends remaining in high places to divert attention from her, provided she didn't ruffle anyone's feathers too soon. The time would eventually come, though, when she wouldn't care who she offended or how she offended them. The question of why she had been so abruptly dismissed from her post in COE Intelligence was proving a vexing one, and one that became increasingly far-reaching the more she probed. She refused to let it go unasked.

Obtaining an answer was all that mattered to her, now. That, and revenge ...

Six hours after she had arrived in Sol System, *Kindling* detected signals from a vanguard of the COE Advance Fleet. De Bruyn ordered the fighter to approach, carefully. She didn't know quite what to expect – although, given the COE's proximity to Sol System, it was only natural to suppose that it would have a role to play in the emerging power base in the system, however small. That there would be such a power base before long she didn't doubt, for it was the nature of Humans to coalesce into groups. Maybe not one single group, but something larger than isolated clumps would do. Looking for such an

emerging group in the obvious Pristine camp was something she was sure others would be doing also.

Whether this focus of attention on the Advance Fleet would work to its advantage or detriment was difficult to tell. De Bruyn wasn't convinced the COE Armada commanders had the ability to exploit such a situation properly. It needed someone with a flair for intrigue, someone prepared to be ruthless, someone who knew an opportunity when she saw it.

She smirked in the dim light of *Kindling's* cockpit. It would be the COE's loss, disposing of her the way they had. She would show them that she wasn't a trifle to be used up and tossed away. She would pursue the mystery of her dismissal no matter where it led. And if it brought down the Eupatrid himself, then so be it. She would allow nothing and no-one to come between herself and the answer ...

And Roche.

The thought of that name made her fists ball, as it always did. *Damn* that woman! Roche had disobeyed her superior officers, jeopardised her mission as an Intelligence Field Agent, even caused a diplomatic incident over the theft of the *Ana Vereine* – yet she had been allowed to walk away – *free*. And the sole person who seemed to care about righting this wrong was penalised for being 'unduly enthusiastic'.

De Bruyn would give Burne Absenger – chief liaison officer with the COE Armada – *unduly enthusiastic*. That she promised herself. She would expose the truth: a truth so large even *he* would choke on it; a truth she sensed hiding deep in the data, deep in the mystery that was Morgan Roche.

All she needed was information. All she wanted was *proof*. No matter how long it took, she was dedicated to finding it.

She sent a coded message to a drone on the edge of the Advance Fleet. It relayed her message to a nexus deeper within the COE camp. There, her message triggered a coded response from a communications AI, which sent another message higher still in the command structure. From there, it was out of her hands – but she was sure one of her contacts would see the message and work out what it meant. It was just a matter of tracing her message to its source. To her.

In the middle of the second largest fleet ever assembled by Humanity, she settled back to wait.

And when, finally, *Kindling* told her that it had recognised the distinctive camouflage signature of the *Ana Vereine* as it entered the system, she clasped her hands together with something approaching eagerness. This was precisely what she had been hoping for. If Roche thought she could just walk in and throw everything into a spin to suit her own ends, whatever they were, she was about to be disappointed.

De Bruyn sent a brief, coded message to a Dato warship she had found lurking nearby, notifying it that the stolen property of its Ethnarch had arrived in the system.

Then she settled back to see what happened next.

# 1

## **COEA *Lucence-2***

**955.1.29**

**1860**

The feet of Morgan Roche's suit came away sticky as she stepped across the bridge of the *Lucence-2* toward the commander's chair. She stopped a metre from it, staring with a mix of apprehension and disgust at the fist-sized object lying on the brown-spattered cushion. She didn't need to touch it to know that it was organic.

<It's a heart,> said the Box through her implants.

She nodded mutely as her gaze panned around the bridge, the light from her suit's helmet cutting through the dark to reveal the carnage: here a dismembered body, there walls splashed with swathes of blood. She couldn't smell the blood through the triple thickness armour of her powered Dato suit, but she could imagine its stench.

"Commander Roche?" The voice of the Basigo First Officer crackled loudly in her ears, his accent as thick as that of a Hurn peasant, and not dissimilar.

She didn't respond for almost thirty seconds; it took that long for her to find her voice – and even then all she could manage was a grunt of acknowledgment.

"Commander?" the First Officer repeated.

"Forget the 'Commander'," she said. "I'd prefer you to just call me by my name."

“Whatever,” the voice shot back impatiently. “Have you found what you were looking for?”

Her helmet light once again caught the organ in the commander’s chair, and she winced. “Yes and no,” she said, turning from the disturbing sight. “You say you intercepted this vessel on your last orbit?”

“We were in close to the primary when it intersected our orbit. We hailed it, but it didn’t respond. We thought it was a derelict, so we boarded it.”

*Looking for bounty*, she didn’t doubt.

“That’s when we saw your name.”

She nodded. She had seen it too, painted in blood on the wall in front of the main airlock, where no-one could miss it. That it was painted in letters two metres high had made certain of the fact.

“And its orbit was highly elliptical?” she said.

“Aye, that it was,” he said. “Would’ve swung past us and headed way out-system if we hadn’t slowed it down a touch during docking.”

*Headed right for us*, she concluded, privately. The Box had superimposed trajectories before she had come aboard. Barely had they arrived at Sol System’s anchor point when the ship they had been chasing had been hurled at the *Ana Vereine* like an insult, filled with the blood of its crew.

But even if the Basigo scout hadn’t intercepted it, Kajic would have seen the ship approaching long before it became a serious threat, and avoided it with ease. Such a crude tactic would never have worked. Roche knew that it was never intended to.

“Repeating herself,” Ameidio Haid had said upon the discovery. Jelena Heidik, the clone warrior who had hijacked the ship, had committed the same atrocity in Palasian System within days of her first awakening, that time to the crew of the *Daybreak*. “Honing her skills,” he added sombrely.

Heidik had gone on to single-handedly kill more than five hundred thousand people in Palasian System before escaping. Roche shuddered to imagine what she could accomplish here, in Sol System.

“It might be a trap,” said Uri Kajic from the *Ana Vereine*, on a channel the Basigo weren’t listening to.

<I sense no life.> Maii’s words came from the same source but by utterly different means. The reave’s voice sounded like a whisper in Roche’s skull, as

though the very cells of her brain were listening. It came with an image of a bone picked clean by the elements. <But that means little. Cane is closed to me now – even his senses – and Heidik could be doing the same. If she were standing next to you, I might not know.>

Roche nodded, waiting to see if Cane himself would say anything, but he didn't. The clone warrior she had once been happy to call an ally – who was at least distantly related to the woman Jelena Heidik – had been reticent since his awakening from the coma in which he had been imprisoned by Linegar Rufo. Under the circumstances, she wasn't sure she blamed him. Nevertheless, it still made her uneasy ...

“We've lost her, haven't we?” said Haid from elsewhere in the ship.

Roche glanced at the pools of blood around the bridge. “I think so,” she said, unsure whether to feel relieved or piqued. The clone warrior presumably had more important things to worry about now she was in Sol System. And Roche would have no chance of finding her unless Heidik chose to attack – a notion she didn't particularly like to entertain.

Switching back to the Basigo channel, Roche came to a decision. “We're going to disable all the drives bar attitude adjustment and program a warning beacon. This ship shouldn't be disturbed any more than it already has been. Do you agree to that?”

“It's not my place to decide,” said the First Officer with some relief. “They're your bodies, not mine.”

“My.. ?” she started, a sick feeling rising in her stomach.

“They were addressed to you,” he said. “And that's good enough for me.”

#

By the time Roche and Haid returned to the *Ana Vereine*, the Basigo ship had already gone, powering rapidly in-system on a torch of blue energy as though its crew was keen to put as much distance between it and the death-ship as possible. Roche could at least empathise with this. Behind her, the *Lucence-2* had been scuttled with cold efficiency, its navigation AIs wiped. Its only remaining sign of life was the beacon warning people away.

“Heidik knew we were following her,” Roche said aloud as she stepped out of the back of her suit and down onto the rubberised floor of the changing

room. The moment the suit was empty, it walked itself to an empty niche in the wall for recharging.

Haid watched her from a bench in one corner, his dark skin and biomesh glistening with sweat. “It couldn’t just be a lucky guess?”

“She wrote my name, Ameidio, using the blood of the people she’d murdered.” Roche ran a hand across her stubbled scalp. “Trust me, she knew we were coming after her, and exactly when we would arrive, too.”

“She could have destroyed us if she’d really wanted to,” Haid mused.

“But she didn’t,” said Roche. “My name was left there for someone to find, and that wouldn’t have happened if the ship had been destroyed.” She slipped a loose top over her head. “No, the *Lucence-2* was only ever intended as a parting gesture – a spit in the eye.”

“One hell of a spit,” said Haid humourlessly.

She shrugged wearily, as though settling a burden on her back. “Our options now are limited. We keep looking for her – although just how we’re going to do that, I don’t know. Or we warn whoever’s in charge to keep an eye out.”

“You really think someone is in charge, here?”

“Not yet. But that won’t stop someone trying.”

Haid paused before saying: “There’s something I still don’t understand, Morgan. How did *we* know where *she* was going?”

Roche avoided meeting his eye. “I told you, the Box talked about the gathering here before we left Palasian System. Before it was destroyed.”

“Yeah, but how did *it* know?” said Haid. “We could have been heading into an ambush.”

Roche snorted. “Didn’t we just about do that?”

“You know what I mean,” said Haid. “The Box could have —”

Kajic’s voice over the intercom interrupted him: “Morgan, you’re receiving another hail.”

“Me specifically?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t suppose the Basigo simply forgot something?”

“No,” said Kajic. “It’s a representative of the Eckandar Trade Axis in what looks like a Commerce Artel ship. They’re radiating an impartial sigil, anyway.”

“What do they want?”

“They haven’t said. I can open a line if you like.”

“Give me a minute to get to the bridge.” Roche indicated for Haid to come with her. He tossed the towel aside and followed her from the change-rooms, along a stretch of corridor and to an internal transit tube. Two harnesses awaited them there, ready to whisk them across the ship.

Not that their physical presence was actually required on the bridge. The *Ana Vereine* was as advanced as anything the Dato Bloc could build; in some areas it was even slightly ahead of the Commonwealth of Empires. She could run the ship in every respect from any point within it – or beyond its hull, if necessary. But being at the heart of the ship helped her concentrate, she had found, and it was as good a place as any for everyone to gather.

Maii was there when they arrived. So was Cane. The dark-skinned clone warrior watched impassively from where he stood off-centre in the large room, facing the main screen. On it was an image of a ship: flat, petal-shaped, a sheen to it like that of polished bone. There were no visible markings, although on ultra-violet a repeating pattern of symbols raced around the undulating rim. Artel sigils, as Kajic had already noted.

There was no obvious means of propulsion to the ship, but it advanced steadily toward them.

Thinking of Heidik, Roche said: “Be careful, Uri. It could be a trap.”

“I am battle-ready,” said Kajic.

“I would not attack like this,” said Cane, facing Roche. “They are foolishly exposed. Until it is clear who are your enemies and who are your allies, it would be best to wait.”

“Then what is it they want?” asked Haid.

“Let’s find out.” Roche indicated for Kajic to open a line to the Artel ship. “This is Morgan Roche of the vessel *Ana Vereine*. What is —?”

“Ah, Roche.” The long, grey face of an Eckandi in middle-age appeared on the screen. “My name is Alwen Ustinik. I am sorry to trouble you, but, having been advised of your arrival, I thought it prudent to contact you as soon as possible.”

“Advised? By whom?”

“An associate. I do not speak for myself, of course. I am merely the representative of a number of interested parties. The Commerce Artel has many such representatives scattered throughout this system, as I’m sure you would expect. Even at a time such as this the possibilities of trade are enormous. So many new contacts to make and avenues to explore ...”

*She’s trying to distract me*, Roche realised. “Get on with it, Ustinik.”

There was a pause, then a smile. “Naturally,” she said. “The people I represent have an interest in seeing justice served, as I’m sure you do too, Roche. When people are hurt, they desire recompense – or, at the very least, a sense that some attempt at retribution has been made. How one dispenses punishment depends on one’s society, of course, but there tends to be more overlap than dissent, I have found. The majority decides, and, where the justice system fails, it is often up to the Artel to facilitate corrective dialogue.”

“Can we get to the point here?” sighed Roche. “I have no idea what it is you’re talking about.”

“I am talking about war, Roche,” she said evenly. “The ultimate destabilisation an economy can experience. Yes, it may have its short-term benefits, but in the long-term it leads to nothing but hardship. The legacy of death and heartbreak is enduring; everyone ends up paying in the end.”

Roche thought of the clone warriors, spreading dissent throughout the galaxy, and guessed that Ustinik had been sent to get her hands on Cane. Why? For a show-trial, perhaps, to suggest that her ‘associates’ knew what they were doing. Or in a last-minute, desperate attempt to obtain information ...

“I’m not turning him over,” she said, despite her own misgivings about having him around.

“Please reconsider. I speak on behalf of those who have had the misfortune in the past to be on the receiving end of his business dealings. He is a mercenary and a terrorist who has not fully atoned for his crimes —”

“Wait a second!” Roche gestured her to silence. “Are you talking about Haid?”

The Eckandi frowned. “Yes, of course.”

Roche frowned also. “But what the hell would you want with him?”

“I am here to ensure his return to a corrective institution,” said Ustinik, “where the remainder of his sentence can be carried out.”

Roche was momentarily taken aback. “His sentence was repealed by the High Equity Court —”

“Not formally – and under some duress, if the information I have at my disposal is correct. Quite apart from the crimes committed before his capture, I am told that he was also the leader of a resistance movement on Sciacca’s World, and that this movement overthrew the legally appointed Warden of the planet.”

“The Warden was corrupt, and colluding with the Dato Bloc —”

“The Cartel doesn’t get involved in regional disputes, Roche.” Ustinik’s tone was calm but commanding; not once did her pitch rise, nor her face display any annoyance or anger. “There is still such a thing as due process. My clients are dissatisfied by a pardon extracted under gunpoint. If they do not make an example of his flagrant disregard for the law, where will it end?”

“It wasn’t like that. If you’ll let me explain —”

“No explanations are necessary,” Ustinik cut in again. “Or desired. To resist would only implicate yourself further, Roche.”

“Are you threatening me?”

“My clients’ words, not mine.” The woman’s smile was economical and short-lived. “I am a mediator, nothing more.”

Roche’s fists clenched. “And I have more important things to worry about.”

“Regardless, the facts remain: you helped Ameidio Haid evade justice, and you continue to shield him from those who wish to see that justice served in full. I doubt they will smile on your venture, no matter how important you think it is. Turn him over to my custody, and you will have nothing further to worry about.”

Anger flared, but Roche kept it in tight check. “Give me ten minutes to think about it.”

“You have five.” Ustinik killed the line without change in expression.

“You should’ve asked her who she was representing,” said Haid after a few moments.

“I was hoping you might be able to answer that one,” said Roche.

“Well, there are a number of people they could be.” The ex-mercenary shrugged. “Maybe all of them. I was busy for a long time, Morgan.”

“Great.” Roche sighed. A representative of the Commerce Artel would be easy to ignore if she was on her own; but if some of her clients showed up to back her claim ...

<She represents several factions from the M'taio and Reshima Systems,> said Maii, <plus a venge-seeker from Imi.>

“You can read her?” said Roche.

<Her shield is strong, but not leak-proofs.> The blind girl smiled from her place in one corner of the bridge, black lips pulling back to crease her ginger-haired cheeks. <It's nice to be useful again.>

Roche smiled also; she had missed Maii's input in Palasian System, where the reave's abilities had been dampened. “How serious does she think her clients are? Are they prepared to use force if we don't give them what they want?”

<She believes so. She has been authorised to threaten us with it.>

Haid hissed between his teeth. “I should have known that i-Hurn thing was going to cost me one day.”

“We're not handing you over,” Roche said. “It's not even an option. There must be some way to convince her to see reason.”

“Will her side of the conversation be monitored?” asked Cane.

“Probably,” said Roche. “Uri, can you detect any signals leaving her ship?”

“None,” said Kajic. “But given the strong possibility that she would use a tightbeam, and the large amount of noise in this system, I doubt that I could detect anything at all.”

“Then we'll have to assume that she's being monitored,” Roche said. “Which means we can't just blow her out of the sky.”

“You'd really do that?” asked Haid.

Roche shrugged, grinned. “No, but it *is* tempting.”

They discussed a number of more or less fanciful options for several minutes, until Kajic interrupted with the news that he was receiving another hail.

“Our friend Ustinik again, I presume?”

“No, Morgan. It's coming from elsewhere.”

“What?”

“From a Surin imaret closing in on our position, to be exact.”

“I don’t believe this,” said Roche. “We’ve been in-system just over half a day and we’ve already had one attempt made on our lives, one threat, and now ...” She shook her head. “Put them through.”

“Morgan Roche.” The face of a large, male Surin adult appeared on the main screen. “I am Fighter-For-Peace Jancin Xumai. You have one of our citizens aboard your ship, and we request that she be returned to us.”

Roche was confused. “Returned? Why?”

“So that she may be reunited with her mother.”

<No!>

Roche called out in pain as a bolt anger and fear slammed into her mind. Clutching her head, her sight swimming with intense second-hand anxiety, she turned to face Maii. Through the discomfort she saw Cane move over quickly to the girl’s side and take her shoulders in his large hands. A second later, as he eased her back into her seat, the debilitating emotions ebbed and died.

<I’m sorry, Morgan. I – I just ... > The mental equivalent of tears soaked the girl’s words, diluting her emotions.

“It’s okay, Maii. I understand. It’s all right. We’re not going to let them take you. Did you hear that, Jancin?”

“I advise against that course of action.” The Surin’s unnerved expression belied the threat in his words. Roche supposed that he had felt a backlash of the girl’s epsense projection. “The Surin Caste has a strong military presence in Sol System. Should you not comply with the wishes of the ruling Agora, I am instructed to call for backup.”

“Then you’d better do just that,” said Roche bluntly. “Because we won’t be surrendering her to you – certainly not against her wishes.”

“Her wishes are irrelevant,” said Jancin. “It is the mother’s wishes, and that of the Agora, which are important here.”

<I have no mother,> said Maii. Her words were edged with bitterness, and Roche could feel the anger inside the Surin girl wanting to break free. <She sold me for medical experiments! These people are more family to me than she or the Agora could ever be!>

Ignoring the girl’s outburst, Jancin addressed Roche once more: “I urge you to consider the implications of going against the Agora. They only want the girl; they do not wish you or your crew any harm.”

“No,” said Roche. “No-one ever does, yet everyone keeps threatening us.”

She killed the line before Jancin could speak again, then turned to Cane.

“Thanks,” she said to him. The clone warrior nodded a brief acknowledgment.

“We can’t take on the Surin as well,” said Kajic, his hologram appearing on the bridge.

“And we can’t give them what they want, either.” Roche tapped the arm of her chair. “Maybe this is what it’s all about. Uri, have any other ships changed course to intercept us?”

“It’s hard to say, Morgan.” Kajic called up a display of the portion of the System surrounding the *Ana Vereine*. Even in that small bubble of space, there were over fifty ships following a wide variety of vectors and ranging in size from anonymous fighters to bulky cruisers. The display was awash with energy and particulate wakes. As she watched, a new cluster of six medium-sized attack craft appeared, following a high-energy elliptical orbit around the System’s sun; who they were, Roche didn’t know, nor did she care. All that mattered was that they weren’t homing in on her ship.

Kajic ringed three craft. “There is a Dato pursuit vehicle that seemed to react to our appearance an hour ago, but so far has not displayed any hostile intentions. This ship here, which I have not been able to identify, is almost certainly following us. And this one – “ the third ship was a stationary speck in the centre of the swirl of orbits “ – has done nothing at all.”

“Trying to remain inconspicuous?” suggested Haid.

“Trying a little *too* hard,” said Cane.

“Exactly my feeling.” Roche turned to the young epsense-adept. “Maii? Anything?”

<This Jancin Xumai wants me because the Agora has heard about the experiments that gave me full epsense ability.> The girl’s voice still had a thick edge to it. <They want to know how it worked.>

“Is that what you’re reading from him?”

The girl hesitated. <No. I’m assuming, and nothing he’s giving me contradicts it.>

Roche could understand her suspicions but wanted hard facts, not suppositions. “What *is* he giving you?”

<He has known that we’ve been in Sol System for three hours, and he knew which region of the system to stake out. His orders came from his superiors, though, so he doesn’t know where that information came from originally.>

Roche nodded. “What else?”

<There’s a lot of overlap in this system; it’s hard to isolate individual thoughts without knowing precisely who to focus on ... > Roche appreciated the girl’s difficulties, reaching out across space, clutching at any thought that seemed important out of the millions flung her way. <But I do sense a growing awareness of you, Morgan. Word is spreading.>

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t be modest, Morgan,” Haid put in lightly. “You’ve made a lot of enemies in the last few weeks. It’s only natural they’re going to be talking about you.”

<Wait ... There’s something else ... > The girl frowned and fell silent.

And into the silence spoke a new voice, a voice that resounded through their minds with discomforting familiarity:

<You have given my people everything we needed.> The speaker was a strong but faceless epsense presence. <For that, we will permit your existence.>

On the main screen, the stationary dot suddenly moved to a new course, away from them.

“*Now* what?” asked Roche, increasingly bewildered.

Maii’s voice was hushed. <Greyboot.>

Haid stiffened over the weapons board. “*Olmahoi?* Here?”

<He’s leaving us now.> The girl’s relief was touched with an underlying fear. <He read me without even knowing! He knows what happened in Palasian System; he knows about the *irikeii* ... >

“Great,” said Roche dryly, rubbing at her forehead. The *irikeii* – lynchpin of the epsense-dependant Olmahoi Caste – had been killed by a representative of the Kesh. If the greyboots had suspected that they were involved – and why else would he have tracked them down so quickly? – they were lucky to have

escaped some sort of automatic reprisal. The Olmahoi retribution squads weren't known for their patience.

Still, she thought, having her brain instantly fried might just solve her problems right now ...

"Ustinik is hailing us again," said Kajic. "As is the Surin."

"Okay." Roche sat forward. "Uri, take us somewhere else – somewhere a *long* way from here, and as fast as possible."

"In-system?"

"Yes, but make it hard for someone to follow, without being too obvious about it. Use camouflage if you think it will help. Ustinik might be bluffing, and so might the Surin. Either way, I don't like being an open target."

Roche felt a gentle thrum through her fingertips and thighs as the ship broke orbit.

She waited a moment, then checked the main screen. Kajic's words only confirmed what she saw.

"Ustinik is changing course, at a discrete distance, and continuing to hail us. The Surin *imaret* has broken off communications and is heading away. That Dato ship I mentioned is still keeping quiet, but looks like it's going to follow too. There is another ship ..." He ringed a newcomer to the screen. "It's a COE fighter we passed before. Might be tagging along for the ride as well."

Roche used her controls to expand the view and scan the regions ahead of them. There were ships everywhere – all moving in wildly varying directions with dangerously different velocities, all orbiting the yellow star at the heart of the system. She was glad it was Kajic piloting the ship, not her.

"No sign of the Kesh?" she asked.

"None yet."

"Good." That was one less thing to worry about. If the Olmahoi were annoyed at the Kesh for killing the *irikeii*, she was sure the Kesh would be just as annoyed with her for having destroyed one of their prized ships.

<Box? Any thoughts?>

<I think you correctly summarised the situation a moment ago, Morgan.> The voice of the AI whispered solely through her implants. Now that she was becoming used to the idea that it was actually part of her, living in her cells, she

found its voice less discomforting. It was almost like hearing another part of herself think.

<Someone is attempting to draw attention to you.> it said. <Any hopes you might have had of slipping unnoticed into Sol System and quietly going about your investigation have been effectively dashed. You are exposed, compromised, threatened. If, somehow, you were to – >

“Another hail,” Kajic interrupted the voice only Roche could hear. “Another new one, I mean.”

She shook her head. “Who now?”

“Assistant Vice Primate Rey Nemeth of the Second Ju Mandate, according to his ID.”

“I don’t recognise the name.” A glance about the bridge; no-one volunteered anything. “I suppose he’s following us too?”

“No. He’s coming in on a relay.”

“Ignore him, then. Now —” She stopped herself in time and subvocalised: <Now, Box, what were you saying?>

<Nothing of any great importance. For now I suggest you simply continue your avoidance tactics. We will talk later.>

She took that as a sign that at least in the Box’s eyes, she wasn’t doing anything outrageously wrong. That made a nice change.

“Uri, ignore further hails, unless you think it’s something particularly important. We’ve got better things to do than listen to other peoples’ grievances.”

Haid grinned wryly. “You figure we have so many enemies already that making a few more won’t make much difference?”

“That, and I’m loathe to believe *anyone* at the moment. If, as we think, the clone warriors are interested in infiltrating and stirring up dissent, then they could be anywhere. Who’s to say which complaint is legitimate and which a trap? I’d prefer not to take the risk either way. And anyway, it’ll be easier for us to keep dodging than it will be for someone to catch us, no matter how many of them there are.”

Cane nodded. “True.”

Roche turned to face him. “And while Uri, Maii and Ameidio see to that, maybe you and I should take the opportunity to have a private talk.”

Cane shrugged. “Whatever you say, Morgan.”

“Good.” Roche stood. “I like the sound of that.”

#

In the small room at the rear of the bridge, Roche sat in chair opposite the large hologram emplacement where Uri Kajic had once projected his image. On a display she studied a detailed image of Sol System composited from old map records and incoming data. She had lost count of the number of ships they had passed since leaving the anchor point, but the Box estimated that around seven hundred Castes were represented in various forms – from the fringe-lovers out where a comet cloud might once have once been to the hot-bloods in close. The sun had seen better days; there was evidence of large-scale waste dumping in its outer atmosphere – unsurprising, she thought; it had to go *somewhere* – but thankfully no-one had tried any tricks such as the Kesh had in Palasian System. One system utterly destroyed in the a month was more than enough for the region.

Not that there was much to lose. Discounting the ships, the system was mostly empty. There was a faint but well-defined ring around the sun, approximately half a million kilometres in width and less than a thousand thick, just straddling the regions that might have been mundane-habitable had there been a planet to live on. Apart from the ring and the ships, the system contained nothing but vacuum. Anything larger than a pebble had been stripped back to molecules long ago, leaving behind only a wisp of smoke around the system’s star.

If the system *had* ever been inhabited – let alone the birth-place of Humanity, as a few scholars had once suggested – nothing remained to show of it.

Roche watched the endlessly chaotic dance of ships for a long moment, wondering who was in them and what they wanted. Then she turned to Cane.

He sat opposite her, his expression unreadable. The overhead light reflecting off his scalp made it look like he had a third eye.

*Appropriate*, she thought.

“You wanted to talk to me,” he prompted.

She paused, wondering, then asked: “Are you reading my mind?”

“Why do you ask that?”

“Just answer me, Cane.”

“No,” he said. “I’m not reading your mind.”

“Could you if you wanted to?”

He frowned. “Morgan, why are you asking me these questions?”

She held his gaze for a moment, then let it wander back to the screen. “On the way here, I talked to Maii. She told me in detail everything she’d picked up from the *irikeii* before he died. She says ...” Roche sought the words, not sure she herself understood everything the young reave had told her. “She says that the *irikeii* was like a pit, sucking in thoughts. For him, minds were lights, or suns, and he was the black hole dragging them in. He experienced the universe through the minds around him, like a reave but with less selectivity; he experienced everything at once, all at once – which was why the Kesh and Linegar Rufo had kidnapped him. Once Palasian System had been enclosed he was able to search it thoroughly. And nothing was able to hide from him.”

“Not even a clone warrior,” said Cane.

Roche nodded. “In theory.”

“It makes sense,” Cane went on. “And had it worked, the advantage might have outweighed the inevitable backlash.”

“It *did* work. To the *irikeii*, Jelena Heidik and yourself stood out like supernovae, by far the brightest things he had ever seen. He called you ‘The Shining Ones’.”

“We radiate thought,” mused Cane. “Is that what he meant?”

She studied him closely; he was still frowning, although now apparently at the puzzle posed by the *irikeii*, not at her. “Possibly,” she said. “But we have no evidence to back it up.”

“So ... ?”

“So there’s more to it than that.” Roche leaned forward slightly in her seat. “Maii says that one of the *irikeii*’s last impressions was of your mind while under the influence of Xarodine. He was aware of a dark space behind the glare – a dark space similar to the one inside his own mind. He thought you and he might have had a lot in common.”

“I don’t see how that follows.”

“Obviously the metaphor is strained.” She couldn’t tell if he was prevaricating. “As far as I can understand it, he thought that you, like him,

could absorb thoughts from the people around you. You're a sponge, soaking everything up. And the glare he described –"

"Was just a form of camouflage?" Cane finished. "Something to hide our epsense ability?"

Roche nodded slowly. "Something like that, yes."

"I am unaware of any such ability, Morgan," he said evenly.

"But how can I be sure you're telling the *truth*? How do I know you're not reading my mind right now?"

"Because I give you my personal assurance, Morgan."

She studied him for a few moments. He was perfectly still, hands folded in his lap, eyes not leaving hers for an instant. Even at rest, the air of strength didn't leave him. She had seen how fast he could move; she knew what he was capable of. And having witnessed what his siblings could do if they turned against the people around them, she was reluctant to trust him without reserve. She needed reassurance.

"That's all well and good," she said, "but I still can't help wondering. Heidik knew we were coming here; she even knew when. I can't believe it was just a good guess – so who told her? The COE squadron we left behind at Palasian System might have sent word to expect us, but how would she have got hold of that information? We were less than a day behind her. That's not long enough to infiltrate the COE presence here. We haven't even *found* them yet.

"And I keep thinking of that dark speck – and Maii. She's proof that you can bioengineer for epsense ability. If you *were* made to blend in and to fight, what better way could there be to gather intelligence than to act as an *irikeii* – passively absorbing data from the minds of the people around you? Even if you couldn't actually read minds, you could at least see and hear through them – and maybe even communicate with others like yourself. If these black specks linked up somehow, you could share information, talk, plan, whatever you needed without anyone knowing."

"Yes – *if*," said Cane. "But ask yourself this, Morgan: if I *was* in touch with Heidik or any of the other warriors, why would I be here? My siblings were clearly made for a purpose; they have spread across the galaxy seeding dissent and destruction wherever they go. But I have not. So *why* would I bother with you if I shared their goals? Why would I not be with *them*?"

“Evidence of absence is not absence of evidence.”

“Guilty until proven innocent?” Cane smiled slightly. “I’m surprised at you, Morgan.”

“There’s too much at stake to take chances, Cane.”

“The only way to be sure is to take no chances at all.” His smile disappeared and he relaxed back into his seat. “Space me, or imprison me – get me out of the way entirely. Better to do that than to be perpetually in doubt. The chance that I might betray you will never leave your mind until I am gone.”

She nodded. That had occurred to her. For all the times he had saved her on Sciacca’s World, the casual cruelty and treachery of Jelena Heidik had tainted him in her eyes. She would never be free of it.

And if he ever *did* betray her, she stood to lose everything. Not just her life, but the lives of her companions and every other Pristine in the Galaxy.

She wasn’t sure she had the right to take that chance.

<What do you think, Box?>

<I know that if he could read minds, he would know that I continue to exist,> said the AI smoothly.

<What about using the command language Rufo was using? Could we force the truth out of him?>

<If we knew how to speak the language properly, we might – assuming, of course, that he isn’t already telling the truth. But the exact use of the command language eludes even me; it seems a fairly crude device. I suspect it may relate to the capsules in which the clone warriors were born rather than the finished product. The best we could hope for is to nudge him to do our will.>

Roche fought a twinge of annoyance. Why did things have to be so uncertain all the time? She would welcome a single, uncomplicated fact with open arms.

<Besides,> added the Box, <if we use the command language, correctly or not, he will suspect that I gave you the knowledge to use it.>

“Morgan?”

She looked over to him to see Cane watching her suspiciously.

“Are you all right?” he said.

She brushed his suspicions aside by ignoring the question altogether: “If you *were* reading my mind, you’d know that spacing you isn’t an option. And

as there's no way you can prove conclusively that you're not in communication with the other clones, then all I can do is follow my gut instincts."

Cane nodded. "But again, I assure you that I am telling you the truth, Morgan."

She remembered the words he had tapped in code shortly after he had wakened from his coma: *I'm as Human as you are*. That was patently untrue in the details – after all, she was not a genetically engineered combat soldier designed to blend in with the Pristine Humans and kill them – but in essence it might not be far from the truth.

"Okay." She exhaled slowly. "I'll believe you. Commander Gent must have sent word to his superiors after we left Palasian System. It's possible that Heidik already had a contact in the COE Armada, through which she found out when we were due to arrive. That's the only alternative I can think of."

"It is certainly a less speculative hypothesis." There was a glint of humour in his eyes. "But if the rest of my siblings *do* communicate by epsense, I would be keen to find out why I have been excluded from the conversations."

That was a point Roche had not missed. "Maybe something went wrong with you: your capsule was damaged, or corrupted. There might even be others out there like you – others who could help us ..."

Before Roche could pursue the thought, Kajic's image appeared in the empty corner of the suite.

"My apologies again, Morgan."

She swivelled to face him. "Problems?"

His broad, pleasant face was concerned. "I have been ignoring hails as you instructed, although their numbers are increasing – as is the number of ships following us. There are eight currently matching our course, and I have detected emissions from another five suggesting that they might also attempt to do so. No-one has actually made a move against us; although it is difficult to project the precise make-up of the regions ahead of us, I am doing my best to keep us out of any regions where forces are massing. But we can't keep this up indefinitely; sooner or later, we *will* miscalculate."

Roche could see what Kajic was saying: they ran the risk of running headlong into a trap. "So you suggest we stop running?"

“No, Morgan. There’s something else.” Kajic changed the view in the screen to a recent telemetry display. The eight ships tailing them were marked clearly in red; a handful in yellow were the ones he suspected were about to join the convoy. As Roche watched, one green dot darted into view from off-screen, angling down and toward her to match velocities with the white *Ana Vereine* at the centre.

“Is that real-time?” she asked.

“Yes. This happened only a minute ago. I should point out that I am currently accelerating at seventy percent of my design tolerance.”

The green dot braked effortlessly to a relative halt a hundred kilometres away. “What the hell is it?”

“A large drone or singleship. I’m not familiar with the design or its markings. But we clearly can’t out-run it.”

“Has it tried to contact us?”

“Not yet.”

“Are we camouflaged?”

“Mildly, only in order to give the appearance of trying. Our position has been well-known since we arrived and we are currently too well-observed to successfully drop out of sight.”

She nodded. “Drop the pretence, then. Hail that drone, or whatever it is. I want to talk to it.”

Kajic’s hologram abruptly dissolved.

Roche stood, and Cane followed her out of the office. “As you said, Morgan: absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. Just because they haven’t threatened you yet doesn’t mean that they won’t.”

“At the moment, that’s good enough for me.” She assumed her usual station at the First Officer’s post. “Maii? Anything?”

<The craft is either unoccupied or its occupants are extremely well-shielded,> said the reave.

“I have a lock on it,” said Haid. “It’s e- and hyper-shields are down.”

“I doubt it’s defenceless,” she said, watching a close-up of the craft on the main screen. It resembled a mushroom in shape: flat, circular cap with a trailing stem five metres long and two metres wide. There were no visible drive

outlets or weapons ports. “Whoever it belongs to, they’re more advanced than us.”

“I have a reply,” said Kajic. “The drone is a relay.”

“Open a direct line. Let its source talk to me.”

Seconds later, a voice issued from the bridge’s speakers:

“Welcome to Sol System, Morgan Roche.” The female voice was precise and clipped, and unfamiliar. “The Interim Executive Pristine Council has been expecting you.”

“You’re not the only ones, it seems.”

“Your arrival has created something of a disturbance. As the news spreads, we expect the situation to worsen.”

“Meaning?” Roche wished for an image to give her something to focus on.

“In case you failed to notice, the atmosphere in this system is somewhat tense. There have been many skirmishes in the last few days – even several attempts at outright war. As we speak, Olmahoi forces are preparing to engage the Kesh – acting on information you brought with you. You are a catalyst, Roche, a destabilising influence. The Council would ask you to restrict your activities before you cause more damage.”

“Is that a request or an instruction?”

The woman’s voice sounded amused. “It is an appeal,” she said, “to your better judgment.”

Roche was silent for a second. “Perhaps you should tell me who you are and what exactly the Council is.”

“Perhaps it might be easier to demonstrate,” she returned. “Turn your instruments to the following coordinates ... “

Kajic swung the view on the main screen accordingly, but only starlight dusted the empty space.

“There’s nothing there,” said Roche irritably.

“Give the light a chance to reach you,” said the woman.

Even as she spoke, something appeared on the screen. It looked like a ship, but the perspective was all wrong. Where a dot might represent other craft, here glowed a tiny arrowhead.

“Whatever it is,” said Kajic, magnifying the view, “it’s millions of kilometres away.”

Within seconds the display was taken up with a huge vessel, and Roche found herself involuntarily gasping at its enormity. It was shaped like a long cone flattened on one side, hollow at tip and base and bristling with instruments and weapons emplacements – some as large as the *Ana Vereine* itself. It had to be at least a thousand kilometres long and as much as one hundred and fifty wide; it made COE Intelligence HQ look like a drone.

“You’re seeing the *Phlegethon*,” said the woman. “It’s a consistory vessel of the Skehan Heterodox. You have been invited to approach.”

Roche stared at the screen a moment longer. The name meant nothing to her. “Why?” she said eventually.

“To discuss the situation,” the woman replied. “For the duration of those discussions, at least, we can offer you our protection.”

“Again: why?”

The woman hesitated slightly, as though Roche’s suspicion annoyed her. “The IEPC exists to assess the threat presented by the clone warriors you seek. To do that, we must gather as much information as possible. Contacting you is an important part of that process. Understand, Roche, we are not asking you to join forces; we are not asking you to surrender to control to us. We ask merely to exchange information, and in return we will get your pursuers off your back.”

Roche hesitated, thinking of the Surin backup Jancin Xumai had threatened her with, and the Kesh, and the Commerce Artel, and Jelena Heidik ...

<Morgan,> said the Box, <I urge you to comply.>

<I thought you might.>

<They are exactly what we need: a significant presence in this system with the resources to investigate it properly. You will note that she is communicating with the drone by faster-than-light methods. Access to such resources will make our quest that much easier.>

<And what exactly is our quest, Box? I’m still a little uncertain about that.>

<All will become clear soon enough, Morgan. I suggest you take the opportunity given to us and see what happens.>

The AI was making sense. Any group with a ship that big would be a fair contender for the role of central authority in the system – and she had to take on allies sooner or later. She couldn’t do it on her own.

“Roche? Are you still there?” The woman’s voice sounded more amused than concerned.

“I was just considering your offer.” Roche glanced at Haid, who shrugged: *Your decision ...* “Very well. We agree to talk, at least.”

“Good. I will instruct the Heresiarch to give you an approach vector to match orbits. We will contact you again when everything is in order.”

Before Roche could reply, the woman had cut the line. A moment later, the drone accelerated impossibly fast, outward, away from the sun, away from them. Within seconds, it was gone.

## 2

**AVS-44**

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Something stirred inside Roche as they approached the *Phlegethon*.

For the most part, the uneven surface of the giant ship's hull was bleak and lifeless, with only the occasional beacon sporadically flaring in the darkness. But as they moved along the length of the ship's vast exterior, a patch of quivering energy some fifty kilometres wide followed, lighting up the ship's black, moist-looking skin. There were no windows of any description to be seen, yet Roche couldn't help but feel she was being watched. Not by the ship's instruments perhaps, but by the ship itself. It seemed ... *alive* to her. And the *Phlegethon's* only identifying mark, a mural of a giant, half-lidded eye on the flattened underbelly of the beast, only enhanced that feeling in her.

She suppressed a shudder as the bulk of it passed between her and the distant, yellow sun. This close to the monster craft, she felt intimidated, ineffectual. Worse, she felt vulnerable.

"The ships following us have broken off," said Kajic via the scutter's intercom. "Whatever Vischilglin said to them, it's had the desired effect."

She could tell by the tone of his voice that he wasn't saying what was most on his mind. "You think I'm doing the wrong thing, don't you?"

He didn't reply immediately. When he did, he sounded almost relieved. "Yes, Morgan."

He didn't need to saying anything more than that. She could see his reasoning: after Linegar Rufo had captured half her crew by luring them into his station in Palasian System, Kajic had every right to point out that she might be making the same mistake twice – and for similar reasons, too. But those reasons were sound, and they outweighed any risk she personally had to take.

She needed information, first and foremost, and she had information others might find useful. She had to take the chance that this Interim Executive Pristine Council – whatever *that* was – was in the system to help, not hinder.

And she had Maii with her, as well as the Box, hidden away in her flesh. Haid hadn't liked being left behind, but he could see that Roche needed the sort of help only a reave might be able to give her. If it was a trap, then she was never going to be able to fight her way out of the *Phlegethon* with force alone.

"Trim," said the traffic controller, guiding her in with almost perfunctory disinterest.

She concentrated on flying the scutter. It had drifted slightly off-course. She corrected easily, following the trajectory she had been given to three decimal places.

"We don't have a better option at the moment," she told Kajic.

"I know," he replied. "That's the main reason I've kept silent."

The scutter arced gracefully toward an open dock two thirds from the hollow tip of the *Phlegethon* to its base. A line of docks encircled the ship, one every fifty metres. Roche performed the arithmetic in her head: assuming the ring went right around the ship, that made almost a thousand docks in that band alone, and she could see several more bands in either direction along the hull. She could only wonder why they needed so many. Fighter launchers, perhaps?

There was no denying the sophistication of the vessel. How far it had come was still unknown, but she had no doubt it belonged to an empire of similarly spectacular proportions.

"You getting anything from the crew, Maii?" Roche turned unnecessarily to the girl. "Any clues as to where they're from?"

<Not much,> said the girl. She sat next to Roche in the co-pilot's station, wearing an undersized hazard suit that brought her up to Roche's height and twice her thickness. Inside she would be safe from Xarodine or any other

physical anti-epsense attacks. Roche wore a simple environment suit in Dato colours with a bare minimum of ceramic armour and an energy pistol at her side. <What I am getting suggests that the ship *is* their home. If there was a place prior to this, it didn't leave much of an impression on them. Most are simply focussed on their jobs or their daily lives.> She paused for a few seconds. <And there's a lot of prayer going on, too – perhaps unsurprising given there are several million people on board.>

“Prayers? To who?”

<No-one I've ever heard of,” said Maii. <Whoever it is, they don't seem to be answering.>

Roche smiled. “And what about the Interim Executive Pristine Council? Anything there?”

<There are a number of chambers warded by high-grade reaves toward the top of the cone. I haven't been able to worm my way in yet. My bet is the Council work is done there, where it's most secure.>

“Well, keep trying,” said Roche. “And let me know if you learn anything important.”

<I will, Morgan.>

Roche eased the scutter into the large dock, bringing it to a halt in exactly the spot indicated. There followed a series of clangs and small bumps, then the traffic controller spoke again.

“You're docked,” he said. “Praise Weryn, and welcome aboard the *Phlegethon*.”

“Thanks.” Roche unclipped her harness and stepped from the couch.

“Air outside is normal,” said Kajic. “And so far our transmissions aren't being interfered with.” He still sounded concerned.

“Good. I think we're going to be okay, Uri.”

“You'd better hope so, Morgan,” put in Haid on the open line. “Because if something does go wrong, I don't fancy our chances of getting you out of there.”

“Personally, I don't give you any chance at all. Not against this thing.” Roche forced herself to sound casual. “But let's hope it doesn't come to that.”

<You could say a prayer,> said Maii. <That's what most people here would do.>

<Mine would just be another voice among the millions, then,> said Roche. <A sigh in a storm.> She let the hint of a smile carry with her reply. <But you feel free to try, Maii, if you think it will make a difference ... >

#

A tall woman with a solid build met them outside the airlock bay. She was dressed in a sky-blue uniform that seemed part robe, part jumpsuit. It was hard to tell where the folds of fabric stopped or started. Her face was long and strong-boned, her chin curved and slightly protruding.

“My name is Hue Vischilglin,” she said, taking both of Roche’s hands in hers and pressing them to her forehead. She repeated the ritual with Maii, when Roche introduced her. The young reave, made awkward by the hazard suit, bowed slightly in return. “Be welcome here.”

“Thank you,” said Roche distractedly, glancing along the empty, curving corridor that connected all the various docks on the inside of the ship. It was so long that the air blurred the details in the distance, and so wide that, with gravity pointing down away from the centre of the ship, it almost appeared flat. She shook her head. “I never expected ... *this!*”

“Few do.” Vischilglin smiled warmly and gestured for them to follow her across the flat plain toward a distant pillar. There was no-one else in sight. “The Heterodoxies have come from the Far Reaches on the other side of the Galaxy. They’ve known about the problem longer than most, and have possibly suffered its worst effects. This ship is all that’s left of one of their fleets. Its Heresiarch – its ‘Captain’ – rebelled when he was ordered to destroy a civilian outpost inhabited by several billion people. It would seem his superiors had been infiltrated by the enemy. He managed to escape reprisal and kept on running. Eventually he was contacted by others in similar situations and directed here.

“Like some of the other outermost Castes, their greater lead-in time has given him more chance to prepare for being here. On the other hand, his crew is exhausted from having come so far. That’s probably why they’re being so open-minded about the Council running the show.” She smiled widely. “Although I suspect they were as glad to get their hands on our ftl relays and advanced camouflage as much as we were glad to get our hands on such a

figurehead. What a beast, eh? And to think this was just one ship from one of the Heterodox fleets!”

“So you’re not one of them?”

“Oh, no,” she said, surprised by Roche’s misunderstanding. “I’m from the Rond-Spellor Outlook, myself.” Catching Roche’s reaction, she went on with even more surprise: “You’ve heard of us! That makes us practically family around here.”

They reached the pillar, which turned out to be much thicker than Roche had first imagined; the lack of perspective was playing tricks on her eyes. Vischilglin waved a hand across a black panel and it slid silently open, revealing an elevator cab.

Roche hesitated outside. “Where are you taking us?”

“For debriefing,” said Vischilglin. “Don’t worry; you won’t come to any harm.”

“Sentiments I have had expressed to me in the past,” said Roche cynically. Adding: “No offence.”

“None taken, I assure you,” said Vischilglin.

“I just want my crew to know, that’s all.”

Vischilglin nodded. “We’re aware that you’re in contact with them; we wouldn’t have it any other way.” Vischilglin stood on the threshold. “Is there anything else we can do to put your mind at ease?”

Roche shook her head slowly. “I’m just habitually nervous these days, that’s all.”

“As you should be. I’m taking you to the secure areas on level 391. Your reave would have noted them already, I’m sure. We keep them shielded as best we can to keep word getting out. Maybe its effective; maybe it’s not. Either way, we have to try. But we’re not keeping secrets from our allies. That would be counter-productive. We’re just trying to maintain security against our common foe.”

“And do you know who *they* are?”

Vischilglin grimaced. “If you mean do we know their origins or the identities of the individuals, then no, I’m afraid not. But we are hoping you might be able to help us.” She indicated the interior of the lift. “Won’t you?” she said. “They’re waiting.”

Roche forced herself to ignore the nagging uncertainty and stepped into the chamber. Besides, what choice did she really have? If they had wanted to spring a trap then her position was already so compromised that she wouldn't be able to do anything about it anyway.

Maii followed her in. As the doors closed, Vischilglin turned to the girl with an amused expression.

"You know, you're free to remove that suit any time you like," she said. When Maii didn't respond she added: "I hate those things. Too confining, constricting – and they *chafe*. We have more suitable clothing if you're uncomfortable."

<Are there any of my people where we're going?> Maii asked.

Vischilglin looked uneasy for a moment, and Roche suspected the girl had known the answer before she'd asked.

"There is one, yes," she replied.

<Then I am quite comfortable as I am, thank you.>

Roche felt the slight tickle in her mind that meant the Box wanted to talk to her. <What is it?>

<I thought you might like to know that the Rond-Spellor Outlook has been in a state of civil war for some weeks, now.>

<You think they've been infected by the clone warriors?>

<Most likely. Or at the very least, *affected*.>

<Could she be one of them?>

<I have no reason to believe so. Neither her name nor her appearance match any in my database, and one must assume that any organisation devoted to the investigation of the clone warriors would take precautions against such an infiltration. Nevertheless ... >

The Box left the sentence unfinished, but the sentiment was clear.

<Consider me warned,> she said.

<I have every confidence in your abilities, Morgan.>

<Let's hope I can live up to your expectations,> she said. <For both our sakes.>

The lift didn't seem to have moved, but when the doors opened a second or two later, an entirely different vista spread out before them. Gentle waterfalls washed down numerous curved walls to undulating ground between them,

collecting in valley floors to form small, slow-moving streams which curled and divided in unpredictable directions, some emptying into numerous ponds scattered about the area. The air was moist and sweet – scented, Roche suspected, by the various plants growing in the waters.

The banks of the waterways, though, were grey and sterile – a striking contrast to the exotic flowers and reeds. And high above it all hung featureless white cloud. The vista gave Roche the impression of an attempt at terraforming by a clerical AI.

She moved out of the lift. “Is this the right level?” she asked.

“Incredible, isn’t it?” Vischilglin stepped up beside Roche. “The waterways form a giant, maze-like circuit around the ship. Given long enough, the Heterodoxies believe it will spell out the name of God. Or something like that.” Vischilglin shrugged helplessly. “It all sounds nonsense to me. But I can’t help but admire it whenever I see it.”

She led them through the strange landscape, across modest but elegant bridges and along the narrow valleys. As they climbed over each rise, Roche could clearly discern the curve of the floor beneath them; they were obviously higher along the cone than they had been before.

She realised then that nowhere on their journey had they seen another person.

<Are we blocked here, Maii?>

The head of Maii’s suit rose when she spoke via epsense, uncannily as though the girl was looking at her. The visor was black, however, and the girl had no eyes to see with behind the white bandage she wore across her face; she was using Roche’s to guide herself by.

<We have passed through several barriers,> she said, <and are now ... Well, the best analogy I can think of is that we have reached the eye of a storm. I am not being interfered with, although I am finding it difficult to reach the outside world.>

<Can you pick up anyone else near here?>

<There is a large group up ahead,> she said. <They seem to be waiting for us.>

<Is it the Council she was telling us about?>

<I think so. Look ... > Roche received a mental impression of many minds congregated in one place, focussing intently on one thing. She couldn't make out any individuals in that crowd, but she could sense their combined will. <But I suspect this might be an illusion,> the girl went on. <A powerful one, if it is. I can't break through it.>

<Interesting that they've made the effort,> put in Roche.

They reached a flight of stone steps which twisted and turned around a sharp rise in the landscape like a thread around a screw.

"The place we're going is known as 'the fane'," Vischilglin said, pausing at the base of the steps. "You and I would probably call it the ship's bridge, but that just doesn't do it justice." She hesitated for a moment. Then: "The Heterodox are great believers in ritual. There are some protocol you'll need to observe. When you reach the nave, in the centre of the fane, bow to the Heresiarch – you'll see me do it before you, so you'll know who he is. When you're asked to speak, always address at least part of your reply to him. He may not speak directly to you, but if he does, look him right in the eye. Should you hear bells at any point, be prepared for everything to stop. That means the ship requires his attention."

Roche nodded her understanding, and Vischilglin began their ascent up the broad and shallow steps. After a while, cloud obscured not only their destination above, but also around them. It was composed of thick and surprisingly dry mist that smelt of ozone and left no residue as they passed through it.

Roche followed Maii, allowing the girl to use her eyes to navigate her way up the steps. With each step the girl took, the suit would strike sparks from the stones, but she expressed no discomfort to Roche.

"Not far now," said Vischilglin.

<Kajic, are you tracking us?> Roche asked via her implants.

<Yes,> he replied, <and monitoring via Maii's suit.>

<And no problems at your end?>

<We're still holding in the position they gave us. There have been no other attempts to approach us. I suspect we are being camouflaged; we've fired a couple of baseline probes away from our position, but so far none have reported back. They seem to keep losing our location.>

<At least you're safe,> said Roche.

<If a little frustrated,> he replied. <I envy Ameidio: he can sleep at times like these.>

Roche smiled. <Years of practice, I guess.>

<It wouldn't be so bad if Cane was better company.>

Her smile slipped a notch. <Listen, make sure -->

<I know, Morgan,> he cut in. < I'm keeping an eye on him for you. He hasn't done anything suspicious, and if he did I would notify you immediately. But I don't think he will. He knows he's being watched.>

<He also knows you're going to have to sleep *some* time. You're not the Box.>

<Don't worry about me, Morgan. Just take care of yourself, okay?>

Her smile returned. Under the concern in his voice she heard a genuine warmth. If they had become friends in the weeks since she had taken control of his ship, then that was all to the better. It took some of the edge off the uncertainty she felt about her situation.

Roche's first feeling as she emerged from the cloud a few minutes later and looked out over the vast bridge – the *fane*, she reminded herself – was relief that it had been the Dato Bloc she had fought on Sciacca's World and not the Skehan Heterodox.

She was standing in the middle of a wide, concave space carved out of what looked like dark grey stone. This space was one of many – like the petals of a flower – abutting a central bowl almost two hundred metres across. The bowl was stepped in the fashion of an ancient amphitheatre, but with no sharp edges; everything was rounded, moulded – smooth, perhaps, from the generations of people that had sat on those seats and worn them down. A few were occupied now, as were spaces in the petals, where people stood rather than sat and observed what was happening in the bowl. At the bowl's centre was a rough-hewn font filled with water.

Roche looked up. If symmetry was anything to go by, local gravity had taken a turn through ninety degrees in the clouds. Far above, hanging from the central point of a convex roof hung a slender spike, pointing downward like a stiletto about to strike. Its tip burned white, with enough light to cast a shadow

from everything it illuminated below. Roche guessed that the spike and the font at centre of the bowl delineated the long axis of the ship.

Vischilglin led her along a short walkway through the petal, and down, toward the central bowl. When they stepped across its lip, the woman stopped and turned to face a man dressed in gold, who stood on the far side.

She bowed. Assuming the man in gold to be the Heresiarch Vischilglin had warned them about, Roche bowed also. Besides her, Maii did the same.

“Morgan Roche wishes an audience with the Heresiarch.” Vischilglin gestured toward Roche, speaking in a voice only slightly louder than her normal speaking tone.

“Bring her down.”

Roche couldn't tell who had spoken, yet the voice was as clear as if he had been standing directly beside her. The Heresiarch didn't appear to have moved.

They descended step by step into the heart of the central bowl – the nave, Vischilglin had called it. When they reached the lowest circle, they stopped and waited. Even at the edge of the nave, the font was still some distance away.

Only when they had come to a halt did the voice speak again: “Do you know who we are?” She was still uncertain as to who had spoken, but she knew it was directed at her.

She looked around. Apart from the Heresiarch in his gold attire, nobody else stood out. Most wore white robes or ship-suits; only a few, like Vischilglin, wore blue. All were watching Roche, waiting on her reply. She didn't dare presume that the Heresiarch was the one who had spoken, so when she did reply it was to the space in general: “No.”

It was a few moments before the speaker continued, and when he did, the words still seemed to issue from everywhere at once: “Five hundred thousand years ago, more or less, Humanity diversified to the point where its origins were forgotten.” The man spoke slowly and with a nasally accent. “Only the dimensions and attributes of the Pristine form remained known. In order to ensure that the cause of the Pristine would never be lost among those of the other mundane Castes, the framework for a council was established – a council that would surface from obscurity only when it was needed. All Pristine governors of all Pristine governances know how to summon the council into

being, and all know that to do so improperly would have its ... consequences.” The word was chosen carefully. “Only the gravest of circumstances can justify such a summoning – such as when the genetic code of our distant ancestors becomes threatened.”

“But this is not such an occasion, is it?” said Roche. The silence which followed was filled with unspoken disapproval for her interruption.

“This council,” continued the voice shortly, “was called forty six months ago, and is now in full session.”

“Forty-six *months?*” she exclaimed, not caring whose sensibilities she offended. She wanted answers, not speeches.

Movement to her right caught her eye as a figure in blue took a step toward her. She interpreted it as a warning against further interruptions, and ground her teeth together.

“We have been aware of this threat for that long. Only recently, however, did we learn about Sol System. Our data showed an apparent convergence upon this region, although not enough on its own to fix the location precisely. An attack on a nearby system helped us triangulate traffic among the civilisations we’ve been keeping an eye on, suspecting them to be corrupted. We were among the first to arrive here, barely a week ago.”

The figure in blue to her right shifted once again.

“The speed with which word has spread is phenomenal,” the speaker continued. “Ships continue to arrive at the rate of over one hundred every hour. We have reopened several secondary anchor-points on the fringes of the system, to act as exits should congestion worsen. If that is not enough, we might have to close the main anchor point altogether. That way, only the most determined will be able to come here.”

The figure took several more steps forward, close enough now so that Roche make out the face of a man, the blue-white light from the spike above casting deep shadows in the lines of his aging features. He was the one talking, not the Heresiarch.

“The situation here is approaching a watershed,” he said. “The council senses a change coming, but does not know what form it will take, or to what purpose it comes. Some of us suspect that you might lie at the heart of it,

Morgan Roche, and believe that you can help us with an answer to this question. Will you do so?"

"Of course," she said without hesitation. Looking at the Heresiarch, she added: "After all, That's why I'm here."

She saw Vischilglin nod approvingly as she turned back to the speaker.

"I am Esko Murnane," he continued. "My superiors in Pompili sent me as their plenipotent envoy to the council, and the council in turn has declared me chairperson for this hearing. You have already met Hue Vischilglin, coadjutant to the leaders of the Rond-Spellor Outlook. Although a minimum of thirty Pristine nations are required to allow the full and proper council to sit, at present we number four hundred and seven. All have representatives here today, although few, if any, will be known to you. We will, therefore, forego introductions for the time being. Should you be asked to join our cause, the identities of your questioners will become known to you then."

Again, she nodded. "I understand."

"Good. You stand before the council as a witness to the aftermath of the atrocity that recently occurred in Palasian System, and as someone who appears to have a deeper association with the enemy than most of us here." The slow steadiness of his speech combined with what he was saying lent him an air of deep, long-standing authority. "All of us have been touched by them, in one way or another, to our detriment and lasting regret. So we are keen now to hear all that you have learned."

He paused and looked around the enormous chamber, his eyes eventually finding their way back to Roche. When he spoke, they remained upon her, but his words were directed to everyone present.

"Who will begin?" he said.

"I will." The voice came from the far side of the chamber. Another male, but younger, and fair in complexion. "Each of the many nations in the council was drawn here under a different pretext, none seemingly more convincing than any other. We hope to find one that predominates, for that one might contain a shred of truth. By what name do you refer to the enemy, Morgan Roche?"

"At first," she said, speaking slowly and clearly, dividing her time equally between her questioner, Murnane and the Heresiarch, "we thought they were

Wunderkind created by the Sol Apotheosis Movement. They had a base in this system, a couple of thousand years ago —”

“We are familiar with their history,” the speaker interrupted. “So have you ascertained another name for them now?”

“No,” said Roche. “I’m afraid not.”

“We are told that you have one of the enemy aboard your ship.”

“Yes, we do.”

“And what does he have to say on the matter?”

Roche shook her head. “Nothing.”

Another voice spoke, this time a woman to her left: “But he *does* have a name?”

“Yes,” said Roche. “His name is Adoni Cane.”

“A name of your choosing?” said the woman.

“No, it’s what he called himself when we first met. I’ve never had cause to doubt him. Later it produced a match in Dato Bloc’s historical records, confirming a link to the Sol Apotheosis Movement.”

“Which later turned out to be spurious?”

Roche nodded.

“How do you account for that?”

<Answer that question carefully,> the Box cautioned gently.

She frowned, fighting her automatic urge to answer with the truth. The AI had faked the historical data in order to mislead the COE and other neighbouring governments – and also to throw any of the ‘the enemy’ off the trail. If the enemy knew how close the High Humans behind the Crescend and the Box were getting – even if it wasn’t very close at all – it might work to their advantage.

The fact that it still might, in the midst of the Interim Emergency Pristine Council, gave her cause to reconsider.

“Would you like the question repeated?” said Murnane.

“No, that’s okay,” she said. “I guess I can’t account for the discrepancy. Maybe the data was deliberately corrupted by the enemy in order to throw us off the trail.”

<Well done, Morgan,> enthused the Box.

“That is certainly a possibility,” said Murnane, coming forward. “There is a risk of infiltration and perversion at every level. I fear we have not yet seen the full extent of the enemy’s abilities or motivations. Until we do, we must assume the worst – even of ourselves.”

“Has Adoni Cane ever revealed any detail regarding his origins?” The speaker, another woman, was very close and directly behind Roche.

She turned toward the voice, but was unsure which of the many faces looking back at her had asked the question. “He seems to have no knowledge of his origins,” she said, addressing them all. “He doesn’t know where he came from or why he’s here.”

“You’re saying he has no memory?” This time she saw who had spoken: a young girl, tall and thin, with flaxen hair touching the blue robe about her shoulders.

“Everything since his awakening is clear,” said Roche. “But nothing before then.”

“And you are convinced he is telling the truth?”

She hesitated, remembering her most recent conversation with him. “I trust him as much as I can,” she said. “Under the circumstances.”

“Because he claims to be one of the enemy?”

“Yes. That is, he talks about them as if they are his siblings; he shares certain characteristics with them.”

“What characteristics, precisely?”

“Well, his genetic profile is profoundly abnormal,” she said. “And his body is patently modified in order to make him a good soldier. I haven’t seen hard data on others like him, but I do know that if he set his mind to it, he’d be more than capable of the same destructive force that they have displayed. And when in Palasian System he did respond to a command language understood by the other clone warriors – “

Murnane held up a hand. “We will return to Palasian System in a moment,” he said. “First we’d like to hear about how you met up with this Adoni Cane, and what you have observed about his behaviour to date.”

She took a moment to organise her thoughts, then began to talk – describing succinctly how she and Cane had met on the *Midnight*, how they

had escaped and crash-landed on the surface of Sciacca's World, and their pursuit and eventual escape from the penal colony.

"He helped you escape?" This from another council member whose thick accent was unfamiliar to Roche; she had to concentrate to understand what he was saying. "From prison wardens corrupted by a rival government? Do you know *why* he did this?"

"No," she said, with a shake of head. "And I have to admit that it's puzzled me."

"Can you explain why his behaviour is so different to the others?"

She shrugged lightly. "The best explanation I can come up with is that he's a freak," she said. "A mistake."

"You mentioned genetic data, earlier," said one of the previous speakers, the man with the light voice. "Will you give us access to this data?"

"Gladly," she said. "If I may contact my ship ..."

"Your lines of communication are not being interfered with in any way," said Murnane.

<Uri?> she said, checking to see if this was true.

<We're still receiving you loud and clear,> he said in reply. <I have all the info the Box compiled before it was destroyed. Do you want me to send it?>

<Yes, but I don't know where, though. >

<They've allocated me a buffer,> he said. <Leave it to me, Morgan.>

She was about to turn back to Murnane when she remembered Maii's suit standing immobile beside her. <You okay, Maii?> she asked via epsense.

<I'm fine,> came the reply. <I'm having fun poking at shields. Did you know that there are five high-grade reaves within the nave alone? They're the hooded ones around the edge. I've never heard of so many being in the one place at the same time before!>

<What are they doing? Probing me without my knowledge?>

<I wouldn't let them do that, Morgan,> the girl reassured her. <I think they're just trying to make sure *I* don't get up to anything.>

Murnane cleared his throat. "Thank you," he said. "We have received the data and will examine it later." He folded his arms and took a couple of thoughtful paces around the font. "But I am curious as to how you managed to piece this all together. At the time Cane was examined on the *Midnight*, news

had not yet reached your corner of the galaxy that there even was a problem he might be part of, otherwise his capsule would have been instantly identified. And on Sciacca's World, your rebel friends had access to even more limited information about the outside world. Yet our sources in the Commonwealth of Empires reveal that in a very short space of time you had determined precisely what was going on – bearing in mind the Sol Apotheosis Movement fallacy – and confronted your superiors with that knowledge. When was it that you realised?”

Roche opened her mouth to speak – then shut it again. If they had sources in the COE, the chances were they'd already known the answers to every question they had asked so far. So why go through the motions?

Then she reminded herself: trust no-one. They could no more believe their sources than they could believe her – even if they corroborated.

She didn't envy them their position.

“It wasn't me so much who put it all together.” She half-expected a nagging voice in her ear telling her to be careful what she said. “It was the Box.”

“What is this 'Box'?” The same thick accent as before, except this time as female. “I take it you are referring to some sort of intelligence-gathering device?”

“An AI, yes.” Roche nodded. “I was carrying it to Intelligence HQ when I was intercepted by the Dato Bloc. That's how I ended up on Sciacca's World in the first place.”

“This device reasoned that Adoni Cane was one of the enemy?”

“Yes,” she said. “And everything afterward seemed to confirm it.”

“How was this device able to do something you yourself were unable to do?”

“The Box was no ordinary device,” she said, remembering to use past tense. “It was a truly remarkable piece of engineering. It suspected from the very start who Cane was. It even faked the distress call that led to the capsule's discovery.”

“So it had access to information which you did not?”

“Yes, like the command language. But it wasn't just that. It actually thought better than I did.”

“Impossible. No AI has yet surpassed a Human intelligence.”

She shrugged. “I told you it was remarkable.”

“And who built this amazing device?”

“It was manufactured on Trinity,” said Roche. “They specialise in AIs there.”

There was a muted whisper. Then from Murnane: “We have no record of such a place.”

“No?” She looked around and caught the gold robes of the Heresiarch out of the corner of her eye. She had forgotten he was there. “Go ask your sources,” she said. “They’ll confirm it exists.”

Murnane stirred from the pulpit. “What say you, Trezise?”

Startled first by the familiar name, Roche almost jumped as a familiar voice followed: “We know the place. It’s administered by a High Human we have had some dealings with – an entity calling himself the Crescend.” The man’s voice was flat, emotionless, almost dead. “The AI Roche refers to did indeed come from this place, but as to its other abilities ... “

Saltan Tresize, Roche remembered – senior aide to Auberon Chase, head of COE Intelligence. She should’ve guessed someone like him would be here.

“You are not aware of any facility capable of making Human-superior AIs in COE jurisdiction?” Murnane pressed.

Trezise’s tone didn’t change as he said: “I’d sooner believe in aliens.”

Murnane turned back to Roche. “You will understand if we hesitate to accept this aspect of your story without any hard evidence to back it up,” he said. “Unless you could produce this AI for us to examine, perhaps?”

She didn’t need the tiny prod the Box gave her. “I’m afraid it was destroyed along with Palasian System.”

“I see.” A sigh carried his words. “Well, the exact manner of your discovery of the enemy is not the issue here. What is important is the fact that you learned of their existence and went seeking more data. What can you tell us about Adoni Cane that we have not already covered?”

“The Box thought we should check the introns of Cane’s genetic code,” she said. “But I don’t know what for.”

Murnane nodded as though the suggestion was trivial. “And your young charge here.” He pointed to Maii. “Does she have nothing to contribute to this discussion?”

<Maii?>

<Ask him how I'm supposed to talk with everyone's minds walled-up,> the girl shot back.

Murnane raised a hand before Roche could pass the message on. "Simply speak to me," he said, "as you would to Roche, and a relay will announce the message for all to hear."

<Oh. Only – >

" – words?"

Roche heard the girl's voice directly through her own senses and a split-second later through the relay, aloud. The relay stood on the far side of Roche; it was disconcerting to hear the girl's voice coming from two directions almost simultaneously.

"And appropriate images, where necessary." Murnane incline his head in welcome. "Please feel free to share with us any impressions you received regarding the mind of Adoni Cane and any other member of the enemy's number you have encountered."

Maii did so, conveying as best she could a number of conflicting visions. Cane possessed a mental shield that was difficult to penetrate, but did allow him to communicate with her by epsense and occasionally offered strange glimpses of what lay beyond. Sometimes, Cane's mind seemed to spin like a top; others it was as still and clear as a lake, or a mirror. The *irikeii* had imagined him as a glowing light-source with a speck of black at its heart, and also as a snake coiling and uncoiling around itself.

"What sense do you make of these impressions?" she was asked.

"None of them are necessarily true representations of his mind," she said. "They're like the different reflections you get off the facets of a diamond, or the different meanings one collection of sounds has in different languages. I'm not seeing the underlying reality, just the secondary effects."

She shrugged, and the heavy shoulders of the suit magnified the gesture. She sent an image via the relay of a crystal turned inside-out: smooth and spherical outside, facets crossing and tangling inside.

"It's hard to find words for this," she said.

"Evidently," said Murnane. "But if you had to choose just one word to describe him ... ?"

“I’m not sure,” she went on. “‘Complex’ isn’t enough. ‘Incipient’, perhaps? ‘Numinous’ has too many spiritual overtones, and I don’t believe ‘unknowable’ applies to anything. There’s a great potential within him. I don’t know what for, but it’s there.”

Murnane waited a moment to see if she would add anything else – or perhaps to confer mentally with the reaves surrounding them. After a moment he said: “And what of the *irikeii*? What did he think of you?”

Maii was silent so long Roche thought she wouldn’t answer. Finally, she said: “He disapproved of me.”

“We thought as much,” said Murnane, nodding. “The Olmahoi Caste petitioned strongly for your capture prior to your arrival – as did your own government. Somehow the word of your existence has spread, although exactly how has yet to be determined. We decided not to become involved, for very good reasons; there is enough inter-Caste tensions as it is without the council seeming to take sides – and what happens in non-Pristine Castes is, ultimately, none of our concern.” Murnane stopped and took a deep breath. “Still, it is clear that the events that occurred within Palasian System have had far-reaching repercussions – many, perhaps, still to felt. Morgan Roche, would you care to explain to us what happened there?”

Roche did so, outlining the exploration of the system after it had been ransacked by the clone warrior, her disastrous attempts to cooperate with Linegar Rufo, and her clash with the Kesh. Later, she hoped, she would be able to discuss things in more detail, but for the time being she contented her self with an overview.

“You say that the name of the enemy in this case was ‘Jelena Heidik’?” someone asked when she reached the aftermath of the destruction of Palasian System.

“Yes. It’s one of a list of names we ... found in an old archive. The others included Vani Wehr, Sadoc Lleshi, Ralf Dreher – “

“Do you know who they refer to?” Murnane interrupted. “Was there any other information in that archive, apart from the names?”

<Box?>

<No. But I can give you a full list of names, if you require it.>

“No,” she said. She would give them the rest of the names later.

“And where is this Jelena Heidik now?”

“I don’t know,” Roche admitted. “We came here looking for her, but she’s managed to get away.”

“But you do think she’s still somewhere in Sol System?”

“Yes.”

“Why do you believe that?”

“Well, this seems to be where it’s all coming to a head. She would hardly leave so soon.”

Murnane leaned forward, his hands each side of the font supporting him. “But why Sol System? Are we here following the enemy, or has the enemy followed us? We see patterns of movement across the galaxy, leading here, but we still cannot be one hundred percent certain that we are not fulfilling our own prophecy.” He shrugged. “That is always a risk, I suppose, in any war of espionage; words and hints and suppositions carry little weight compared to maps and soldiers and bullets. So little is certain.”

“We heard that Sol System was the location of an ancient battle,” said Roche.

“It is the location of many things, if you believe the records; few stand up to strict examination. Which battle do you refer to?”

“I’m not sure,” she said. “We’ve begun to suspect that the clone warriors – Cane and Heidik and the others – are seeking revenge for a war lost a long time ago. A war won by the Pristines.”

“Do you know when?”

She shrugged. “As far back as we can remember. Half a million years or more. Back when there were only Pristines; the other Castes didn’t exist yet.”

“Do you have records to support this?”

“Nothing concrete – but surely that indirectly supports this theory? If there were records, someone would have found them by now. The fact that we haven’t implies that they no longer exist – that the events we’re looking for lie back in the earliest times.”

“Perhaps.” Murnane’s expression remained impassive. “Remember, though, that many millions of civilisations have risen and fallen since then. That is an awful lot of data to sift through; if the records indeed are lost, not

hidden, then we might never know. And without knowing when this battle you refer to took place – and who it was who lost – we have little to go on.”

Roche conceded the point. “That’s partly why we came here,” she said. “We were following Heidik, yes, but we were also interested to see what happened. If the clone warriors attacked, then who they attacked first – and last – could be very revealing in regards to who their allies are, or even who might be related to their creators.”

“Tell me, Roche,” Murnane said. “Did you have any idea how complex the situation here would be before you came?”

“The Box had mentioned a gathering of sorts, and the COE Commander I spoke to confirmed it, but that’s all. I expected nothing like this.”

“Did this Box of yours also happen to say anything about the composition of this system?” asked another voice. “There are several anomalies we have not yet fathomed, and I fear they may become hazards to navigation. And more of these we do not need.”

It took Roche a second to realise that it was the Heresiarch himself speaking. When she replied, she made certain she followed Vischilglin’s advice and looked him directly in the eye – or at least in the direction of where he stood.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know anything about that.”

“The behaviour of the solar wind is quite peculiar, and its effect on the gaseous volatiles of the planetary ring even more anomalous. If your AI had had *anything* to say about that, I would’ve been grateful.”

“Like I said,” Roche replied evenly, keeping her attention fixed firmly on the Heresiarch. “It never mentioned a thing. I’m sorry.”

She thought she saw him shrug, but he was too far away to tell for certain.

“There is no need for apology if one speaks the truth,” he said, with wry humour to his tone.

“We have asked the High Humans for this information, too,” said Murnane into the silence that followed. “They haven’t told us anything that might conceivably help, on that or any other subject. I for one find their silence unnerving. Do you know why this might be the case?”

“No,” said Roche.

“Given that your Box came from Trinity, which had connections to this High Human called the Crescend, do you think its destruction would be of some concern to him? Would he respond to a call for more information, perhaps?”

“I really don’t know.” She hoped he wouldn’t; if the Crescend revealed to the council that she had lied about the Box’s destruction, that certainly wouldn’t count in her favour.

“The Crescend never contacted you while the Box was in your presence?”

“No, never.”

“Do you expect him to?”

She resisted the urge to ask where this line of questioning was going. “Look, I went to Trinity to collect the Box, but met no-one while I was there. I was rendered unconscious in orbit, and when I woke up the Box was ... in my possession. That’s all. You’re obviously hoping that I can act as some sort of link between yourselves and the High Humans, but I don’t see that as being an option. I’ve never communicated with them, and I doubt I ever will. Why should they bother with me? I’m just someone who happens to be caught in the middle of all this.”

<I hope you know what you’re doing, Box,> she whispered via her implants to the AI in her body.

<Trust me,> it said.

“We are *all* caught in this,” Murnane said. “But outside of the enemy, few individuals have had such a catalytic effect as yourself.” He paused. “Is there anything else you would like to tell us, while this council is in session?”

<Box?>

<No.>

“No,” she repeated.

“Will you submit to a probe by one of our reaves to verify the answers you have given us?”

The question surprised her. “Why do you need that? The hard data speaks for itself, and I’ve no reason to deceive you.”

“Nevertheless – will you?”

If she said yes, they would know that she was lying about the Box. Although she knew it would look suspicious, she had no choice but to say: “No. I’m sorry.”

“Will you allow us, then, to examine you and, if necessary, take a genetic sample?”

She squirmed. <Box, could they find you that way?>

<The Dato missed me when you were captured,> the Box replied, <but that was partly because I had infiltrated their systems. I cannot rule out the possibility that the council will see something the Dato missed, and that I will be unable to suppress the information once it emerges.>

<Haven't you got into their systems?>

<Of course I have. But the Skehan Heterodox places a great faith in the role of people in or alongside all its systems. At least one Human doctor would be present during your examination, and I see no easy way to suppress any knowledge that might emerge at that time.>

Again, she had no choice. “I'd prefer not to,” she said. “I'm sorry.”

Murnane studied her for a long moment. “As are we,” he said. “But we cannot force you to submit to either examination – nor would we wish to.” He gestured helplessly. “This meeting is now concluded. We would ask you to return to your ship, Roche, and –”

“*What!*” Roche snapped. “Aren't you even going to discuss it?”

“There is no need,” he said. “We've been conferring by epsense the entire time.”

“But you can't just dismiss everything I've told you!”

“Can't we?” He took a step toward her. “Roche, we had hoped that you would provide us with information that is both new and verifiable. We had hoped that this might show us a way to combat the enemy we fear has infiltrated every group we deal with and perverts everything we attempt to do to stop them. Now it seems certain that you yourself have fallen into the same trap – either willingly or by accident.”

Roche felt herself straighten, her tired back and stomach muscles tensing as though ready for attack. “Meaning?”

“You have told us *nothing*, Roche. You claim that Adoni Cane is one of the enemy, yet you can offer neither an explanation for this surety nor a reason for his atypical behaviour. Of what value is his genetic data under those circumstances? You offer us names that you assure us are relevant, but do not give us a context in which to place them or access to the records you say they

came from. On what grounds can we possibly use them as means to uncover the enemy among us? You cannot tell us why Sol System has become such a focus of so much concern – you can't even tell us why *you* came here without resorting to vague explanations involving this mysterious AI of yours! And as to *that*, well, I hardly need to state how the council feels. *If* it existed at all, its tenuous connections to the High Humans might have been exploitable, but as it stands –”

“I'm telling you the *truth*,” she broke in angrily.

“Are you?” Murnane moved closer again, his own anger evident in his face. “There is much to suggest that what you are doing is far from innocent. Ameidio Haid is a convicted criminal who, as the Commerce Artel points out, has not served his full term; who is to say you don't have criminal intent in mind as well? Add to that the fact that both your young friend here and the pilot of your vessel are the subjects of biological experiments; if Adoni Cane's genetic data and physiognomy turn out to be peculiar, could he not also be an experimental subject, and not the enemy you claim he is?”

“Then there are the credibility gaps in your story. How did you come to the conclusion that Adoni Cane was one of the enemy? How did you survive Palasian System when even the Kesh destroyer sent to monitor the situation did not? Why did you come here? And why has your arrival caused such a furore among all those who have known you: the COE, the Dato Bloc, The Commerce Artel, the Surin, the Kesh, the Olmahoi ... ?”

“Even if what you are telling us is the truth, and Adoni Cane is one of the enemy, then how can we trust someone who openly admits to having one aboard her ship – as part of her *crew*?”

Murnane shook his head. “It may seem like we pre-judged you, but we have done nothing of the sort. We simply considered all possible conclusions prior to your arrival and allowed you to show us the one that best fitted the circumstances. Because you seem not to be dealing honestly with us, we are forced to accept the conclusion that Adoni Cane is a fake, or a misdiagnosis, or an enemy plant. We are unsure of *your* motives, but we are sure that we will no longer allow our precious time to be wasted examining your spurious claims and false offers. We have work to do, Roche, and distractions such as this, even if not maliciously intended, does the enemy's work for them.”

Tight-lipped, Roche forced herself to speak calmly. “If I could just say – “

“There is nothing more to be said,” Murnane cut in. “Hue Vischilglin will escort you both to your vessel. Once on board, the protection offered by the *Phlegethon* will be retracted.”

Vischilglin appeared, expressionless, at her side as Murnane turned his back to Roche and moved away without another word. The Heresiarch made no move at all. Roche let herself be taken by the arm and led away, furious but impotent, as a growing murmur filled the fane.