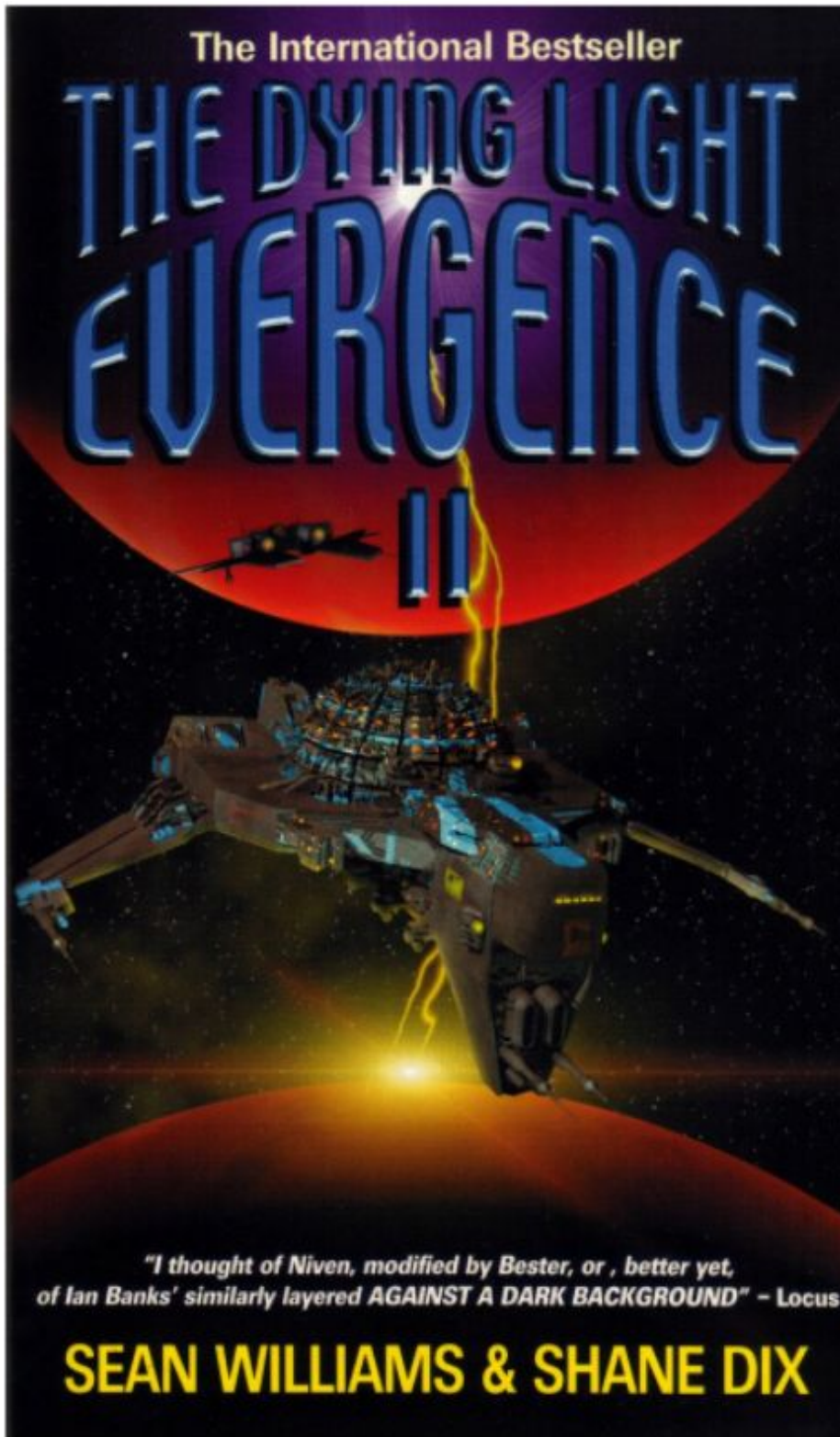


The Dying Light



The Dying Light

**THE DYING LIGHT**  
**EVERGENCE II**

Sean Williams & Shane Dix



The Dying Light

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# **The Dying Light**

**For Scott And Kerri**

## The Dying Light

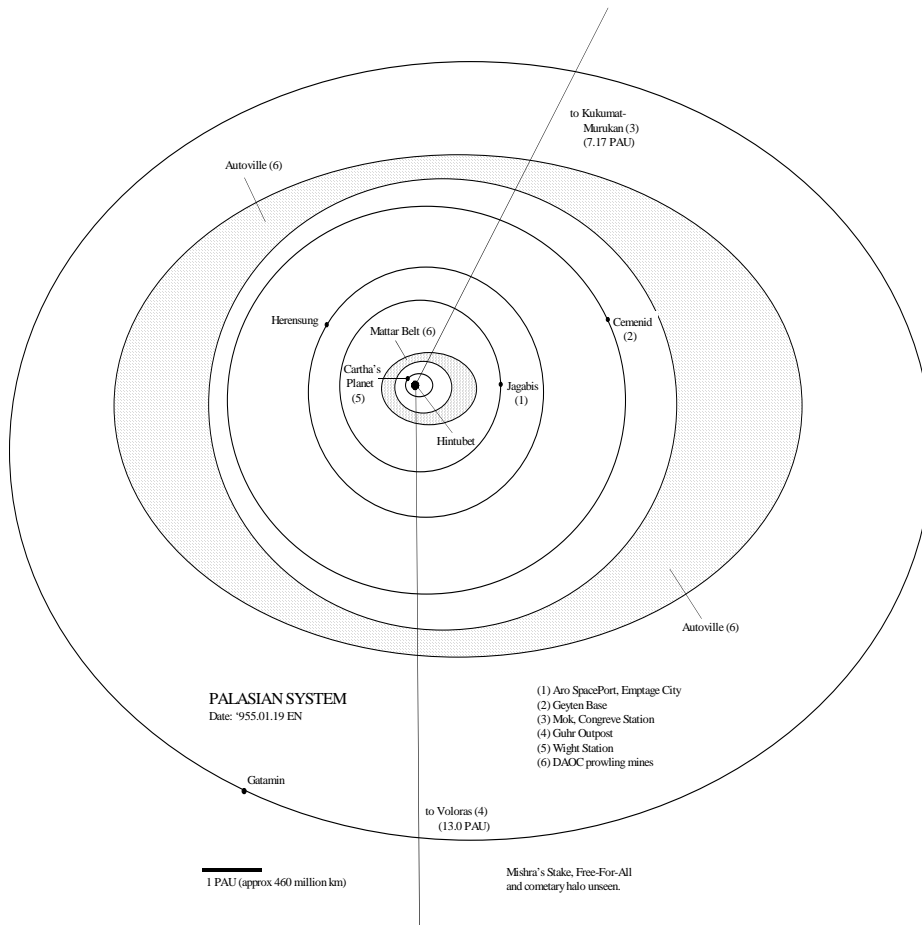
*Darkness is looking forward and saying: 'I do not know what to do next; I have lost my way and it is too late to find it now'.*

Hubert Van Zeller

*The cruellest lies are often told in silence.*

Robert Louis Stevenson

# The Dying Light



PART ONE:

**PALASIAN SYSTEM**

## PROLOGUE

Words could not describe what he saw; they could only approximate. And therein lay the terrible irony of his situation: that he, of all beings in the galaxy, who could see things as (perhaps) they truly were, was utterly unable to convey all but the vaguest of impressions to those few who wanted to know.

>Find<

Thoughts flew at him from all directions – thoughts tangled with emotions, sensations and subconscious associations. So entwined were they, so hopelessly meshed, that by the time they reached him it was often impossible to disentangle a single thought from the rest. Sometimes one stood out, or several in concert, but he was rarely their intended recipient. Only occasionally did they demand a response, and when they did, he tried his best. Even so, his efforts rarely satisfied the demands of the Cruel One's servant.

>Find me<

He looked.

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All beings perceived the galaxy by their own unique light—brightest in the young, flickering as age increased, ultimately extinguished with death. It was this light he saw, not what it revealed, and the more these individual lights overlapped the clearer his vision became. Perceived reality reached him from so many perspectives, some of them conflicting or downright contradictory, that the overlap took on its own life and became a thing unto itself. The *essence* of reality dominated his world. Not what a rock looked like to one person, or what it was called, but what it meant to everyone who encountered it – what it *was* in the larger weave of minds.

Through his eyes the galaxy was unrecognisable: densely populated planets hung like bright galaxies spinning in gulfs of impenetrable dark. As attention wandered across the void, his all-pervading sense followed, lighting up a place, a person, an artefact, then moving on. What it did not touch was irrelevant, for according to the rules of his Universe anything not sensed did not exist. Yet even at the very fringes of his senses, the void was speckled by fleeting glimpses of life. Every experience was there for him to harvest, no matter how exotic, or how hidden.

Normally, at least, that was so. But the Cruel One had taken the galaxy away from him, and left only darkness in its place. The infinite abyss pressed in upon him, making him feel like he was suffocating. Only a handful of minds occupied the space surrounding him. One major clump represented the installation that contained him, accounting for almost ninety percent of the impressions he gathered – maybe a thousand minds in all. The rest were scattered, their lights weak, solitary and frightened. All except one—the one the others wanted him to find.

>the Shining One<

Sometimes the void would part and allow him a glimpse of the being he sought. Just for a second – but in that briefest of moments its brightness and elegance outshone all else around. Whenever the mind appeared to him, he received an impression of something magnificent and wondrous. Something that was almost ... *chilling*.

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>Respond!<

The Cruel One's servant was persistent. The voice hammered at him, wearing down his resistance. He struggled to orient himself within his body, fought the outward urge that tugged him into the void. His limbs trembled – unseen directly by himself, but registered by the people watching him. Even in this much reduced form, his influence extended many thousands of metres.

>Find me the Shining One!<

The muscles of his distant body twitched. Electrodes recorded the minuscule currents of electrons and fluid through his brain. Powerful computers dedicated to the task took these vague data and translated them into words.

: **ANOTHER**

: **RESONATES**

A moment passed while the listeners absorbed his response. He could feel their minds turning, reacting in a dozen different ways – some with surprise, others relief, even a few with ill-disguised fear. None held the object of his quest in awe, as did he.

Then:

>Where?<

That question. Always the same question: *where?*

How should *he* know? Spatial orientations were things he barely understood; they were too easily confused with temporal or emotional impressions. What was space when measured against the combined input of so many disparate minds?

But he did his best. The Cruel One was impatient for results, and that made her servants anxious. They regarded their master with contempt, yet they feared her also, and when they feared her most, their contempt found an outlet in those further down the chain.

The watcher in their midst absorbed their feelings without rancour. He knew his place; he knew where he fitted into the Cruel One's schemes. His usefulness was defined solely by his ability to locate the Shining One.

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If he failed to do so, then his usefulness was at an end. The Cruel One was not known to be tolerant of anyone who failed, especially those who did not belong to her own Caste.

Every being sees the Universe in their own unique light, but very few see themselves with such acute honesty.

>Find me the Shining One!<

He did his best. He always did his best. And if his reply displeased the Cruel One's servant, he was never to know for certain.

>Where?<

: **HERE**

: **SOON**

# 1

**IND** *Ana Vereine*

**'955.01.19 EN**

**0415**

Alone but for the screaming wind, she fell. Her outstretched arms sought to find equilibrium, but to no avail. With nothing around for her hands to find purchase upon, her fall continued unchecked. The sickening sensation persisted in her stomach; the wind at her face and in her ears was relentless.

When exactly she had begun to fall she couldn't tell. Not that it mattered. Once she had been weightless, now she was falling; the only difference between the two was a matter of *destination*. Everything in the universe was just an orbiting body looking for something with which to intersect. If she had found her ultimate trajectory, then perhaps that was for the best. At least the waiting was over.

Suddenly from the darkness, something touched her hand. She pulled away instinctively, sending herself into a spin. But the touch against her skin was persistent. It fluttered like a flesh-warm moth, moving along her wrist, her elbow, and finally settled on her upper arm.

She tried too late to pull away. Its grip tightened; slender, smooth digits dug deeply into her and tugged her forward. She called out in panic, but the blackness absorbed any sound she made.

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When she flailed at the limb clutching her, her hand found skin. A hand. No fur, no scales, no chitinous exoskeleton; no claws, no suckers, no pincers. It was a *Pristine* hand.

Cautiously, she explored the one that was falling with her. She moved her fingers along the person's wrist, elbow and upper arm; her other hand found a smooth stomach, rib-cage and breast. Then, alarmed by the all too familiar terrain, she gripped the other person tightly. Wanting to push her away, instead she pulled her closer.

From the darkness she saw her own frightened face emerge; from the roaring wind she heard herself call out ...

#

Morgan Roche woke with a start and clutched her sweat-drenched sheets to her chest. A lingering vertigo made her giddy, and for a moment she didn't know where she was. The narrow bed, the dark room, the smell of deep-space service: she could have been anywhere, aboard any Commonwealth of Empires' vessel, on any number of missions for COE Intelligence.

Then, in the dull glow from the room's ceiling light, she saw the valise resting on a nearby table, and reality suddenly dispelled her confusion. She was in the Second Lieutenant's quarters of the *Ana Vereine*, a former Dato Bloc vessel now registered under her name, and she had no mission apart from the one she had given herself. Her indenture to COE Intelligence was a thing of the past – a memory returning to haunt her like the nightmare she had awoken from, and just as difficult to shake.

Rubbing at her arm, she vividly recalled the falling, the fear.

Then the flat echoes of an incident alarm wailing beyond her room goaded her to full consciousness. Disentangling her legs from the sheets, she climbed out of the bunk.

"Full lights." Squinting in the sudden glare, she amended: "Half lights. *Half*lights!"

The glare dimmed as she stumbled to the cabin's small wardrobe. She grabbed the first shipsuit she saw. Standard fare for a Dato Bloc officer,

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it consisted of a unisex, form-fitting garment cut from a rust-coloured fabric with black insignia at shoulders and waist. Active fibres tightened the weave around her limbs, guaranteeing a perfect fit every time.

As she dressed, she sent a subvocal inquiry via her implants to the transmitter on her left wrist:

<Uri? Box? What's going on?>

The voice of the Box answered immediately, the AI's neutral tones coming from the tiny speaker beside the bed:

"We have completed our final jump, Morgan. The *Ana Vereine* entered real-space fifteen minutes ago."

At the end of the sentence, the sirens ceased.

Roche glanced at the clock beside her bed. <Why? We weren't due to arrive at the Palasian anchor-point for another three hours.>

"Indeed. That was our original schedule." The Box paused before adding: "There has been an unusual development. Cane thought it best that you were here on the bridge."

<What sort of 'development', Box?> A knot of worry began to tighten in her stomach. <Is it the other clone warrior?>

"Nothing so dramatic, Morgan. Simply – perplexing."

She took a deep breath to hide her irritation. If the *Box* was perplexed, then she doubted she would be much help. What the most sophisticated artificial intelligence in the Commonwealth couldn't fathom, no mundane Human would have a chance of deciphering.

Still, tired or not, she had to keep up appearances. Sitting down on the bunk, she slid her feet into a pair of boots and fastened the ankle-straps.

<Okay, Box, tell Cane I'm on my way. Are the others on deck?>

"Kajic and Maii are asleep. Haid is awake, but has not responded to my summons."

<Where is he?>

"In the rehabilitation unit."

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<Break into the program, then. We need three on the bridge, just in case it turns out to be serious.>

“Understood.” Again the Box hesitated, as though it was about to debate her assumption that it didn’t rate as a crew member. But all it said in the end was: “I shall wait until you have arrived before taking any action.”

<Good.> Boots on and fastened, Roche stood. At her approach, the door to her quarters slid open. She heard an airlock chime in the distance, ready for her to step into the ship’s central transit corridor. <Give me two minutes.>

#

The *Ana Vereine*, first of the new Marauder class combat ships to roll off the Dato Bloc production lines, was designed to hold a full complement of three thousand crew members. Its size reflected that—uncomfortably at times. Currently carrying a crew of just five, its labyrinthine holds were sealed; active life support was restricted to officers’ quarters, the bridge and a handful of essential areas; major access-ways were dimly-lit and cool, filled with nothing but the gentle susurrus of hundreds of cubic kilometres of moving air.

Sometimes it seemed to Roche, as it did now, on her way to the bridge, that she had been swallowed by a vast, metal beast. That at any moment the ship would spring to life, shrug free of its carbon-based passengers and head off on its own adventure. And perhaps it would serve them right if it did; they were so far from realising its true potential.

In the eighteen days since leaving COE Intelligence HQ, they had travelled a highly circuitous route. Fearing a double-cross from Page De Bruyn, Head of Strategy and Roche’s former employer, the Box had plotted an untraceable course to Walan Third, where they had surrendered Makil Veden’s body to the Commerce Artel. That small but necessary detour cost them time: although they remained at the Eckandi base for less than a day, their total on the run had already reached eight by the time they left.

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From Walan Third the *Ana Vereine* headed toward Baeris Osh, a Surin territory, before abruptly changing course for the Handrelle System. Every time they completed a hyperspace jump, Roche half-expected to find an ambush waiting for them. The chances of De Bruyn second-guessing their path were practically zero, since it was impossible to predict the destination of a ship once it had entered hyperspace, but the fear was hard to shake. Only on the last two jumps, when they finally angled back toward the border of the Kesh N’Kor Republic and their original destination, had she begun to believe that she was actually safe, that she might yet outrun her past.

Still, there was always the future to worry about. If an ambush was what De Bruyn intended, Palasian System was the obvious place to stage it. Only a stubborn belief—based mainly on recent experience—that COE Intelligence would never do anything quite so obvious kept her from losing sleep over that possibility. Page De Bruyn had revealed herself to be a far more cunning and deceitful opponent than that.

Besides, it wasn’t what she was running *from* that most concerned her, but what she was running *to*. The Box had said that the alert had nothing to do with the Sol Wunderkind in Palasian System. A gut instinct told her that that was not the whole truth.

Rounding the last corner on her approach to the bridge, Roche felt the peculiar hopelessness of her dream return with a vividness that stung. She slowed her pace and took a few deep breaths, wanting to regain her composure before she stepped onto the bridge to join the others.

The last time she’d had that dream had been the night before sitting the Armada entrance exam on Ascensio, many years before. But why had it returned *now*, on this, her nineteenth day free of COE Intelligence? She was at a loss to understand the connection. The dream spoke of her deepest fears: of failure, the future, and ... *freedom*?

She shook her head to free herself of the discomforting notion. She *was* glad to be free of COE Intelligence, wasn’t she? She didn’t like to think that even the smallest part of her might be having regrets.

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When her mind was relatively still, if not entirely clear, she took another deep breath and stepped through the open portal and onto the bridge.

#

The bridge was not the largest room on the *Ana Vereine*, even though it felt like it could have been. The main chamber was roughly heart-shaped, with a single holographic screen dominating the left lobe, more specialised displays in the right, and various officer stations sweeping in three arcs towards the rounded base. A smaller, circular room at the base of the heart was the Captain's private chamber. This chamber, plus the shape of the bridge itself, leant the entire floor-plan a passing resemblance to the Mandelbrot Set, with the Captain's podium located at the intersection of X and Y axes. Except that on the *Ana Vereine*, there was no Captain's podium. There was just a large hologram projector occupying its usual spot.

Mollifying the bewildering array of displays and control stations, the walls bore the colours of late sunset with the occasional tapestry to blunt sharp corners. The lighting was muted, and only ever brightened under battle conditions.

One person occupied the vast area. He was leaning against the astrogation officer's station with his arms folded, the shipsuit he was wearing emphasising his supple strength.

"Sorry to disturb you," said Cane, straightening as Roche entered. His dark brown skin and bald skull made him seem Exotic, subtly alien, and the little Roche knew about his origins didn't help shake that impression.

"That's okay," she said, wishing she could emulate his alertness. Not for the first time, she cursed the modified genes responsible for his extraordinary resilience. "What's the situation?"

"We found something." Cane nodded at the main screen. "Or at least, the Box did."

She crossed the bridge to the First Officer's chair as he talked. "Show me," she said, sitting.

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“Well, that’s the strange thing,” Cane said. “There’s nothing to show.”

Roche, frowning, swivelled in her chair to face him. Before she could speak, Cane added: “At least, nothing *I* can see.”

“The phenomenon we have encountered is not visible on the physical universe,” explained the Box, its voice issuing from speakers at the base of the holographic projector.

Roche shifted her attention back to the main screen. The only thing it revealed were the cold specks of distant stars.

She sighed, impatience rising within her again. “Is someone going to explain what’s going on here?”

“Of course,” said the Box. The view on the main screen changed, became the route plotted by Roche and the Box while refuelling at COE Intelligence HQ. “Our original course from Walan Third consisted of fourteen hyperspace jumps across the Commonwealth of Empires, culminating in one final jump to the anchor point of Palasian System. We travelled entirely without incident until this last jump.” An arrow skittered through the depths of the screen, settled upon a point almost at the end of their route. “Here. Four hours into the jump, sensors aboard the *Ana Vereine* detected an anomaly in our vicinity.”

The screen displayed complex diagrams representing the distorted topology of hyperspace – that strange realm where even the basic laws of physics could not be taken for granted.

“The disturbance lay directly in our path,” the Box continued, “although its distance from us in physical terms was difficult to determine. My one attempt to change course around it was unsuccessful, perhaps because of the influence it was – and is still – exerting over our navigational data.”

“What sort of influence?” Roche asked.

“A type I have never encountered before, Morgan. Our course became increasingly uncertain the closer we approached it. By attempting to go around it, we ran the risk of passing through it instead. Eventually the potential hazard became so great that I decided to return prematurely.

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We had nearly completed the final jump by that point, so I thought the loss in time would be off-set by the chance to see what awaited us.”

“And?” Roche watched in guarded fascination as the main screen changed again; n-dimensional mathematics was not her specialty, but she assumed the Box knew what it was talking about.

“The source of the disturbance remains a mystery.”

“So? As long as we don’t hit it, we can still make it to Palasian System, right?”

“If only it were that simple, Morgan.” The screen returned to the picture it had displayed when Roche had entered the bridge: stars, none so close as to be remarkable, and nothing else within the external scanners’ fields of view.

*Nothing...*

“Where’s the primary of Palasian System?” she asked, frowning.

“We can’t find it,” Cane said. “That’s the problem.”

Roche’s frown deepened. “We’re *lost*?”

“If anything,” said the Box, “it is the system itself that is lost.” A navigation chart appeared in the screen. “If you study the data, you will see that we have arrived with the correct orientation one light-week short of the terminus of our original jump, two light-weeks from Palasian System. Star-charts confirm this. What we are seeing is what we *should* be seeing, except for one important detail: Hintubet, Palasian System’s primary, appears nowhere within the starscape before us.”

“I find that hard to believe. It has to be here somewhere —”

“None of the stars in this region produce a spectral match. Neither do any within a fifty light-year radius.” The Box paused before pronouncing its conclusion: “Palasian System is patently not where it is supposed to be.”

Roche found her sense of fatigue quickly fading. “That’s impossible. The disturbance must have knocked us more off-course than you thought.”

“Not by so great a margin as to lose an entire star, Morgan.”

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“Then the star-charts must be wrong.”

“They aren’t. Apart from a few slight discrepancies, every other navigational marker in this region matches.”

“Well, *what* then?” She shook her head in annoyance. To come so close to her destination only to find that it had been snatched away from her was like something from a bad dream – another one. “A system can’t just disappear without trace!”

“I agree that it is improbable,” said the Box, its tone mollifying. “But the only conceivable alternative is that it has been destroyed.”

“How?” She automatically glanced at Cane. No-one knew exactly what the genetically modified clone warriors made by the Sol Apotheosis Movement were capable of—possibly not even Cane, who was one of them. “Surely not even a Sol Wunderkind could do *that*.”

“It would seem unlikely that the entire system was destroyed,” agreed Cane. “But when you consider that the only alternative explanation is that it has been moved, you have to admit —”

“This is a rhetorical point,” the Box cut in. “We lack data, Morgan. What measurements I can make from this distance are hampered by the fact that light from the region is at least one week old. I have found no evidence to suggest any sort of event sufficiently calamitous to destroy a star without leaving any trace of stellar wreckage – but I may be missing something. We need to go closer to find out.”

Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. “I thought you said the disturbance posed too great a risk to navigation?”

“Not necessarily. Long-distance jumps through this region of space are likely to be perturbed. I suggest instead that we approach the vicinity of where Palasian System used to be by increments, studying the anomaly as we go. Should the risk increase further still, we can come to a halt again and consider other courses of action.”

Roche nodded, agreeing in principle with what the Box was saying. If the risk was only to navigation and the ship was in little physical danger, then there was little reason not to continue. The lack of information,

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however, made it hard even to guess how much danger they were in: if something *had* destroyed Palasian System, then they might be heading right for it.

Nevertheless, there was no choice. They had to keep going. It was either that or turn around – and the latter was hardly an attractive prospect. With the possible exception of the Box, none of them had a home to return to any longer.

“What does COE Intelligence have to say about this?” Roche asked. “Is there any mention in the data they’ve given us?”

“Very little, I’m afraid, Morgan. We have the report transmitted by the battalion of Armada Marines before it was destroyed, including a vague description of the damage done to the system at that time. It describes Palasian System as quarantined or sealed, but nothing else.”

“No updates since then?”

“Since the *Ana Vereine* disengaged from COE Intelligence HQ, reports have been intermittent at best.”

So much for their agreement with De Bruyn, she thought sourly. Still, if that was the worst the Head of Strategy had planned, then she should be grateful. Unless—

Again she shook her head. Not even Page De Bruyn would destroy an entire solar system to obtain revenge – especially not when the fate of the Commonwealth of Empires might be at stake.

“I agree with your analysis of the situation, Box,” she said slowly. “We need to find Palasian System, but to do *that* we need information. We will, therefore, proceed with your plan: to approach the last known location of Palasian System more cautiously, by slow-jumping a little closer each time and taking stock as we go. That way we’ll have a chance of staying on course and avoiding anything waiting for us.”

There was almost an air of smugness to the Box’s tone as it replied: “Very well, Morgan. I will begin plotting a new course immediately.”

“Good. But don’t perform any manoeuvres until Uri is conscious and watching what you do. We don’t know what effect rapid transfers might

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have on the ship. Defer to him if he thinks you should take it more cautiously.”

“Naturally.” The Box’s smug tone had faded, and Roche did her best to suppress a smile of satisfaction. Although the uniquely self-aware AI had been programmed by its creators on Trinity to obey her orders, that didn’t mean it had to enjoy the situation; any chance it found to assert its independence, the Box took it. She had learned the hard way not to give it generalised orders that were too easily evaded, or outright perverted, in order to meet its own hidden agenda – whatever *that* was. Where her own lack of experience made it difficult for her to be specific, she allocated an overseer to keep an eye on the Box’s activities, just to make sure.

If that bothered the Box, all the better. She had earned this subtle form of revenge, at least, after the way it had manipulated her in the past and probably intended to in the future.

“Okay,” she said. “You get started, Box. Cane, track down Maii and get her up here. We’ll need her to search for life-signs when we get close enough. I’m going down to rehab to see what’s happened to Haid.”

“Shall I rouse Kajic?” asked the Box.

“No,” said Roche, levering herself out of the chair. “He’ll be awake soon enough, if he isn’t already. Let him come to you in his own time, when he’s finished any status checks he needs to perform. We don’t need to rush him. I want to take this slowly: we might not get a second a chance to find out what’s going on.”

*Especially if the other Sol Wunderkind is behind it*, she added to herself.

“I’ll notify you when we are about to begin,” said the Box.

“You do that,” Roche said as she left the bridge.

#

The ship’s rehabilitation unit was four levels down from the bridge, in an annex off the medical unit. On the way down, Roche was joined by a fist-sized drone that darted from a service hatch and assumed a position near

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her right shoulder. The jets of air propelling it sounded like a cough played at high speed. When the drone spoke, it did so with a tinny version of Uri Kajic's voice.

"What do you think, Morgan?" he asked.

Roche glanced at the drone without breaking step. "I thought you'd be listening in."

"And?"

"I think something strange is going on."

"Likewise. The sooner we find out what it is, the better." The drone skittered ahead, emitting agitated fft's as it turned a corner. "I do believe the Box, though," he said, "when it says it doesn't know what the anomaly is."

"So do I, strangely enough," Roche admitted. "Otherwise it wouldn't have brought us out of the jump so suddenly."

"There's more to it than that, Morgan. I've studied the astrogation data. The Box mentioned a few 'slight discrepancies' but it didn't tell you what they were."

"Are they significant?"

"Perhaps. The stars in the direction of Palasian System appear to be closer than they should be. Not much closer, admittedly – a few billion kilometres or so—but closer all the same. It's as though a big chunk of space is missing from this area."

"The space containing Palasian System?"

"That would seem the logical conclusion," Kajic said. "But can you imagine the force required to achieve this? Destroying a star, or even moving it, is bad enough; taking the space surrounding it as well is a completely different matter."

Roche contemplated the possibility for a long moment. She had never heard of such a thing – indeed, she found it hard to visualise. Nothing could destroy space itself, surely? Nothing she had ever heard of, anyway.

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“All the more reason, then, to make our approach a cautious one,” she said. “Will the ship hold up? *Can* it slow-jump as often as the Box would like?”

“I’ve looked at the basic plan, and it seems sound. We’ll drop in and out of hyperspace once every ten minutes, travelling several million kilometres each time and accelerating between. At first we’ll approach the anomaly in tangents, so we can look at it from a number of directions; that way we might be able to determine exactly how large it is. If things go well, we’ll try getting a little closer to see what else we find.” The drone bobbed as Kajic spoke. “The ship itself will be fine. Its engines are designed to function under battle conditions. In fact, it’ll be good to have a really thorough work-out. The last time we put it through its paces was back at Sciacca’s World.”

Roche nodded to herself. The *Ana Vereine* and a handful of Raiders had made short work of the *Midnight*, the ship she had been travelling in at the time. Only the Box’s decision to blow the Frigate’s anti-matter reserves had prevented the Dato Bloc Captain from capturing the ship, or destroying it himself. As a result, the *Ana Vereine* had yet to make its first kill.

Still, it had performed well in battle, and she accepted Kajic’s opinion that it would survive the coming hours. It was only an old superstition that made her hesitant to place her faith completely in a new ship.

“We’ll stick out like a beacon, jumping that often,” she said, half-heartedly trying to pick holes in the Box’s plan.

“True. But there’s nothing we can do to avoid that.” Kajic paused, then suggested: “We can camouflage the ship, if you like. Make it look like a freighter experiencing drive difficulties —?”

She shook her head. “Palasian System has been quarantined. Only a fool would try to get in, faulty drive or not. If we stumble across an Armada blockade, as unlikely as that is, they’ll shoot us out of the sky regardless what we look like.”

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“They can try.” Roche heard the ghost of a grin in the thin reproduction of Kajic’s voice. “Any other questions?”

“Only one.” The one she had avoided asking herself: “What do we do if we can’t work out what happened to the system? Where do we go from there?”

“Only time will tell us that, Morgan. Time, and the right data.”

“I know, I know.” Roche inhaled deeply, trying to centre herself. “Just make sure the Box tells me if we *do* find something, okay? That’d give me one less thing to worry about.”

“You have my word,” said Kajic. “And don’t worry, Morgan. You’re doing fine.”

Roche smiled. “Thanks, Uri.”

With a staccato tattoo of air-bursts, the drone accelerated ahead of her and ducked into a maintenance closet.

Roche continued the rest of the way to rehab alone, genuinely reassured by Kajic’s closing comment. Her relationship with the Dato Bloc ex-Captain was still an ambivalent one. Although both had been betrayed by their respective governments, making them allies of sorts, Roche had initially felt uncomfortable having the ship’s previous commander aboard. Removing or imprisoning him had never been an option, though: he was as much a part of the ship as the navigation AI or the engines. What remained of his body floated in a life-support tank in a little-visited section, plugged by an experimental neural interface into the workings of the vessel surrounding him. As much as she might have preferred, she couldn’t have one without the other.

So it was just lucky that he had chosen to take her under his metaphorical wing and train her in the art of command. All her years in COE Intelligence had taught her how to obey orders, not how to give them. Already she had come to rely on his judgement in many matters, not just those to do with the ship; without him, these last few weeks would have been considerably harder.

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Still, she could understand why others might be suspicious of a Dato Bloc Captain in their midst with unlimited access to the entire ship. The situation begged betrayal of some sort—which is why she had instructed the Box to keep as close an eye on Kajic as *he* was keeping on *it*. She couldn't allow her own, possibly irrational, opinions to place her or her other companions at risk; she mistrusted all of them equally, had to do so in order to keep going. And if Kajic ever found out, she was sure that he would understand.

The Box's voice broke into her thoughts via her implants: <All is arranged, Morgan. We will proceed in ninety seconds, once the *Ana Vereine* has achieved the necessary velocity to slow-jump.>

<Good work,> she subvocalised. <The ship is in your and Uri's hands.>

<Understood.>

She increased her pace through the Marauder's glowing corridors. The entrance to the rehabilitation unit finally appeared on her left. At the same time, a warning buzzer sounded, alerting the occupants of the ship to an imminent hyperspace jump.

Barely had she steadied herself when the ship's drives went to work. Reality flexed around her; space-time twisted in impossible directions. A wave of giddiness came and went, making her blink.

Then everything was as it had been a moment before – except that the ship was no longer a part of the physical universe. It had entered hyperspace, and was accelerating at many thousand standard gravities relative to the normal universe. For all the effect the jump had on the interior of the ship, however, it might have gone nowhere. Which was exactly how it should have been.

The doors to the rehab unit slid open when she took another step forward. Yet another step took her across the threshold, into a world she rarely visited.

Rehabilitation, as the term was employed in most military organisations, was synonymous with cybernetic enhancement. Where

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more orthodox medical techniques failed to heal a wound, replace a limb or rebuild a broken mind – or there was no time to employ sophisticated methods of healing—technology stepped in to breach the gap. Everything from artificial limbs to neurone patches could be provided by the best mobile rehab units in the Commonwealth of Empires, and those of the Dato Bloc were at least as advanced. The *Ana Vereine* in particular, given its recent manufacture, possessed facilities Roche had only ever heard about.

The large workroom was designed as an open surgery, with several adjoining chambers available for procedures requiring more sterile environments. Four long tables, uncomfortably like mortuary slabs, awaited patients in states of perpetual readiness, while close by hung numerous multi-jointed waldoes, medical scanners and replacement parts. Along one wall, screens could project views of any operations under way, or retrieve from memory similar situations to compare prognoses. Another wall boasted three holographic ‘cybercorpses’—Human bodies composed entirely of replacement parts, from carbon-fibre bones to synthetic skin—with no single part repeated in either ‘body’. Designed for reference, the cybercorpses rotated once every twenty seconds, as though performing a macabre pirouette. When Roche stepped further into the room to look for Haid, six glassy, empty eyes seemed to follow her for a moment, then drifted away.

She found him in one of the auxiliary chambers, hardwired into a simulation that was teaching him to use his new support biomes. After their escape from Sciacca’s World, an immediate priority had been to equip Haid with a body at least approximating the Pristine. Time had been against them, however. The surgery alone required for a total rebuild would have taken several weeks; recovery and readjustment at least the same again. Haid had opted instead for a basic overhaul: an eye to replace his empty socket, the support biomes to compensate for his lack of an arm and to supplement the strength of his legs, plus new interfaces to control the lot.

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The installation, undergone piece-meal, had taken seven days. Another five had seen him on his feet for the first time. The remaining seven had been spent in the simulator, retraining his reflexes to respond to new stimuli.

When Roche found him, he was floating in free-fall, twisting about his centre of gravity in an ungainly manner. The glossy, black mesh of the exoskeleton stood out against the grey of his undersuit, but perfectly matched the sweat-soaked sheen of his midnight skin. Despite years of abuse and layers of scar-tissue millimetres thick, Haid still possessed the distinctive colouring of a Montaban native – along with the rugged good looks.

His eyes were uncovered, but Roche could tell that she was invisible to him—along with the rest of the ship. Placing her left hand on a panel flush to the door frame, she synchronised her own implants to the illusion in which he was embroiled. The vision through her left eye went grey with static for a moment, then cleared.

With his feet anchored by magnetic soles to the hull of a spacecraft, Haid was trying to thread a gossamer-thin guideline through a moving eyelet. He was naked, apart from the biomesh, and very clumsy. The surface beneath his feet moved without warning, making his judgement unreliable, so every action with his new arm had to be carefully considered. In other simulations that she had observed, he had run over burning sand while carrying a glass of water, balanced on a narrow ledge with his old arm behind his back, and attempted to imitate the movements of garishly dressed dancers – all with the critical eye of the rehab AI grading every movement.

Roche gave him five minutes before actively interfering. In that time, he came close to tying a loop through the eyelet, but a sudden shift in the surface beneath his feet cost him his grip on the thread, forcing him to start again. His lips moved silently, cursing under his breath.

“Haid.” Roche tried to keep her voice soft, but its incongruity broke the illusion instantly. “Ameidio, can you hear me?”

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Haid sighed; his new skeletal arm, with its black, mesh skin, sagged. “Yes, Morgan, I hear you.”

“The Box said you weren’t responding, so I thought I’d better check on you myself. Is everything okay?”

Ignoring her concerns, Haid said: “This rehab AI is a sadist. I *swear* this damn hole is getting smaller.” His eyes gazed blankly into the distance, away from her. It wasn’t just the simulation: he was exhausted. “Next time I’ll get it, though. Next time I’ll —”

“Something’s come up,” she interrupted, trying to keep her voice firm and level – a line dragging him back to reality. “We needed you on the bridge.”

“I felt us come out of hyperspace,” he said. “Are we there already?” He looked around him, as though waking from a dream, and frowned. “No, wait. We jumped again just a moment ago, didn’t we? That wasn’t planned.”

“No, it wasn’t.” She outlined the situation as briefly as she could—that Palasian System appeared to have disappeared – not wanting to worry him, but at the same time reinforcing the fact that he hadn’t been there when she *might* have needed him. If the ship had been under attack —

“I would have noticed instantly.” His voice was calm but there was no disguising his indignation. “There would have been sirens, impacts, power fluctuations. Not even a wirehead could sim through something like that.”

“But if you *had* noticed, it would’ve been too late for you to do anything.”

“Like I could do anything, anyway, with *this*.” Haid raised his new arm and flexed it. The movement was smoother than it had been even a day earlier but was still noticeably jerky.

Roche shook her head, even though Haid wouldn’t see the gesture. “Your other arm is fine. And besides, you don’t need coordination to help on the bridge. Not unless we’re boarded – and I hope it’ll never come to that.”

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“Likewise.” He let the arm fall to his side. An instant later, the illusion collapsed around them, brought to an end by his mental command. The zero-g field relaxed, eased him slowly to the floor of the auxiliary chamber. His legs became rigid when they touched the floor, held him upright as his full weight returned. “But the fact remains that you need me in full working order—and that means as much deep-training as possible —”

“It also means getting some rest.” She let go of the touch panel and took a step closer. “You look terrible.”

He grimaced. “Thanks a lot.”

“I’m serious. Take a shower, have something to eat and drink. Then meet me as soon as you can to discuss what’s going on—”

A second wave of disorientation rushed through her as the *Ana Vereine* returned to real space. Roche moved forward as Haid swayed, but he reached out with his new arm and steadied himself.

“See?” He smiled wryly at his own achievement. “Give me another week and I’ll be wrestling clone warriors barehanded.”

“I sincerely hope not,” she said, turning her back on him and walking out of the simulation room.

“Any news on that front?” Haid asked, moving stiffly after her. Picking up a towel from a bench by the door, he wiped the skin of his upper body dry, where the active fabric of his absorbent undersuit was unable to reach.

“None,” she said. “We’re still too far away.”

“Unless the disappearance of the system is a related event.” Haid put the towel aside. “Does anybody know how advanced the Sol Apotheosis Movement was? Maybe they found a way to camouflage an entire system.”

“I doubt it,” she said, although the possibility wasn’t one she had considered. “If they’d possessed that sort of tech, they wouldn’t have been destroyed so easily. They could have camouflaged their base and escaped the siege any time they wanted.”

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“Siege?” Haid shook his head. “A simple ‘no’ would have done, Morgan. You know history isn’t my strong point.”

“Nor mine,” she said. “It took me days to find what little there was available. I’ve condensed it into a single file and placed it in the open datapool. You can access it later, if you want.”

“Maybe.” The ship rolled beneath them again. Haid’s oddly mismatched eyes – one much like a monocle covering the entire socket, and the other, the recent addition, a crystal sphere where a normal eye would sit—lifted in surprise to meet hers. “The Box’s not wasting any time, is it?”

“It’s found something it doesn’t understand, and doesn’t like it.”

Haid chuckled softly. “So trying to make me feel guilty about not responding is just your way of taking out on me your frustration with it.”

Roche smiled in return, ignoring the jibe. “I’m heading back to the bridge,” she said. “When you’re ready, join us there. We could use your input.”

The ex-mercenary nodded as she headed for the door. “At least it looks like we might have something to do, for a change.”

#

Haid’s parting comment pursued her after she left the rehab unit. Eighteen days on the run, fearing a COE Intelligence betrayal every step of the way; major surgery, followed by recovery and intense rehabilitation; a destination about which they knew little, except for the fact that it had nearly been destroyed by the deadliest warrior to grace the galaxy in two and a half thousand years – and Haid was complaining about being *bored*?

Roche didn’t need that sort of excitement in her life. In fact, an uninterrupted sleep would have suited her much better.

A familiar mind-touch greeted her as she headed back to the bridge:

<Good morning, Morgan.>

Startled by the unexpected intrusion upon her thoughts, Roche missed a step. <Hello, Maii. Cane woke you, I see.>

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<Yes.> The reave's voice carried with it a faint tinge of grief. Hardly surprising, Roche thought; the girl had had so little time to adjust to the death of her mentor, Veden. As his ward, she had earned the right to recite the ritual leave-taking during the ceremony on Walan Third, but she had declined, both reluctant to appear in public and conscious of time pressing.

<Did he fill you in?>

<He said that Palasian System seems to have disappeared. And while the Box tries to find it, you want me to check for life-signs.>

<Near enough. See if you can detect anyone where the system used to be. An eyewitness would be good, but anyone at all will do.>

<I have already tried several times. From such a distance, resolution is poor.>

<I know.> Privately, Roche was amazed that the girl thought she could detect anything at all. <But keep trying. At least there's a chance you might be able to tell us something the Box can't.>

<Okay,> said Maii. <We're jumping at the moment, so I'll wait until we come out again. It's easier that way.>

<Whatever. You're the expert.> Roche walked on, trying to fight the weariness eating at her stride.

<You're tired,> observed Maii. <Cane woke you too?>

<I wouldn't have slept much longer anyway.>

<Another nightmare, Morgan?>

She nodded unnecessarily. <Yes.>

<I can help you, you know.>

As an accompaniment to her words, Maii sent a brief image of an underwater scene: a coral reef lit by mottled green sun sunlight with large, grey fish lightly brushing against her body. Despite the constant motion, the endless cycle of life and death swirling around her, the mood generated by the image was one of peace and inner calm.

A healing dream, designed to ease the girl's own path through grief.

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Roche hesitated before answering. As uncomfortable as she still was with epsense therapy, she had to admit that the offer was made with the best intentions. That made a flat 'no' much harder to pronounce.

<I'd be happier to have breakfast,> she said eventually.

<Well, there's not much happening on the bridge at the moment. Cane and I can take care of things for a while if you want to grab yourself a meal.>

Even though she disliked being away from the heart of the action, the offer was appealing. It could be her last chance for a long while. <Thanks, Maii.>

<My pleasure.> A mental smile accompanied her next words: <And don't worry, Morgan. We'll keep you informed.>

Roche hurried to the officer's mess, two levels up from the rehab facility. There she ordered a nondescript breakfast and took a seat at one of the many empty tables filling the room. The dispenser provided her with a good imitation of eggs, cereal and fruit juice. She forced herself to eat slowly, chewing each bite rather than gulping it down.

Every ten minutes the ship rolled as it moved from one universe to the next, edging closer to the anomaly each time. She couldn't help but wonder what the Box was learning along the way, but she refrained from asking for an update. If anything happened, one of them would be sure to call her. Until they did, all she had to do was relax.

After a couple more mouthfuls, she realised that she couldn't. There was too much at stake – and too little known about the situation to help her guess at what she had to do.

There was something she *could* do, however. Mid-way through the small meal, she routed a display through her implants and selected the file she had collated on the Sol Apotheosis Movement from the combined data resources of the Commonwealth of Empires and the Dato Bloc. Somewhere in there, she hoped, was a clue regarding the technological prowess of her enemy.

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Whether she would find anything of use was doubtful, though. The history of the Sol Apotheosis Movement was poorly documented until the time of its destruction. It had been founded early in the 36th millennium, '325 EN, by a visionary whose name was no longer recorded. The Movement's aim had been to achieve Transcendence by means of genetic manipulation and biomodification, rather than by down-loading living minds into AI networks, as was usual. By bucking both tradition and common sense, they were ostracised and banned by their native government – also unnamed – so they sought and found an empty system deep in the backwaters of their region of the galaxy. Acquiring the system by the expedient means of simply moving in and adopting its name, they devoted their considerable energy to consolidating their position rather than taking their message any further – for a while.

By '836 of the following Millennium, they had established trade with the Eckandar Trade Axis which, along with the Commonwealth of Empires, had begun expansion into the area surrounding them. With trade came a new openness, and it wasn't long before biomodified prophets began to spread through neighbouring regions, looking for converts. Some of these prophets were early versions of the Movement's crowning – and most deadly – achievement: the Sol Wunderkind, a genetically modified combat soldier with abilities far superior to any known Caste. Word began to spread, and within decades their existence was well-known, as was the threat they represented.

Many attempts were made to discourage or disperse the prophets, but they persisted. Squabbles broke out when the Ataman Theocracy attempted to reclaim Sol System as its own – even though the system had been abandoned centuries before as an uneconomic prospect. Tempers flared; the Movement countered every attempt to take the system away from them. Eventually an alliance was formed between the Commonwealth of Empires, the Dominion and the Ataman Theocracy—the three largest Pristine nations in the Movement's range—to wipe out the threat once and for all.

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The largest joint military flotilla ever assembled by the three nations was despatched to Sol System. There, they surrounded the main base of the Sol Apotheosis Movement and presented its members with an ultimatum: leave or be destroyed. The Movement refused to leave, so the leader of the combined Pristine forces ordered his ships to open fire.

Within seconds of the first shot, the main base of the Sol Apotheosis Movement self-destructed, destroying with it ninety percent of the Pristine flotilla. The Sol Apotheosis Movement was utterly destroyed.

The name of the man who gave the order to fire was Adoni Cane. His fate was not recorded, but Roche could only assume that he had died along with the millions of others in the system.

Details beyond that point were particularly scarce. The Pristine alliance, although nominal victors of that bloody conflict, chose to erase the entire event from their various histories. Exactly why the Movement had chosen to suicide so dramatically was not explained convincingly anywhere that Roche could find. No-one then postulated the theory that they might have considered long-term revenge.

Until now ...

A lone Human with no memories apart from the name 'Adoni Cane' had been recovered from a life support capsule in a backwater region of the Commonwealth of Empires. In the time Roche had known him he had demonstrated extraordinary feats of endurance, intelligence and strength, plus bore an uncanny likeness to the man who had shared his name two and half thousand years ago. At roughly the same time, another such castaway, name unknown, had been recovered near Palasian System. Within days, the system had been in flames, and now appeared to have disappeared entirely. The Sol Apotheosis Movement, it seemed, was back. Why, though, was anyone's guess.

As far as finding out exactly how advanced the Movement had been, there were few indicators. With regards to genetic technology at least, they'd had no peer. The few researchers who had studied the history of the Movement had all arrived at the conclusion that the COE was still

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behind them in many ways, despite the intervening millennia. Any doubts Roche herself might have had regarding that claim were easily dispelled by the existence of the Adoni Cane she knew. No other mundane civilisation in the history of the galaxy, to her knowledge, had the ability to craft such a superbly capable Human purely by manipulating genetic code. Only High Humans might possess that knowledge, and they had no reason to meddle in affairs beneath them.

In other areas, however, less was known. The destruction of the Movement's base in Sol System had been accomplished by means of an enormous explosion, the likes of which had never been seen before or since. The weapons systems employed by the earlier versions of the Wunderkind had also outstripped anything available at the time. And their defensive abilities must have been remarkable, to have held off frequent attacks for so long before their eventual suicide.

But did they have enough technological know-how to destroy or to hide an entire system? Roche might have accepted the possibility had the Sol Wunderkind that had invaded Palasian System been discovered in a fully-functional warship. With such a vessel, he might have been capable of anything. But he hadn't. He had been removed from a life-support capsule similar – if not identical – to the one in which Cane had been found.

She skimmed through the data collected by the medical officers aboard the *Midnight*. Cane's capsule had been unique in that he had actually been grown from a zygote within it, but otherwise it had been empty. Its empty shell contained no obvious navigation or propulsion systems; the only life support provided was the hibernation regulator that had kept Cane in stasis during the months until his discovery; only the most basic of AIs kept the whole system operating. If every capsule was the same, then the Sol clone warrior in Palasian System had woken naked and unarmed, not better-equipped than most small armies.

Since then, however, he had somehow managed to commandeer at least one COE Armada vessel and attack no fewer than five semi-

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permanent COE installations. And now he had effectively disappeared, taking the entire system with him.

So little was known about his – what his intentions were, how capable he was of fulfilling them, and exactly what he had done in the few weeks since his awakening. Even if Roche found Palasian System, there was no guarantee the clone warrior would even be there any more. He could be light-years away, wreaking havoc on other outposts.

Then a new thought struck her. The clone warrior had woken unarmed, but had immediately taken control of the nearest ship. Perhaps he had performed a similar feat in Palasian System as a whole. Given the right knowledge, he could have made his own equipment from the resources scattered across the system – if the right resources were present.

She checked the COE database. Palasian System contained a small Armada refuelling base, one communications outpost, one town-sized colony, and a scattered handful of scientific installations – two of the latter devoted to studying solar flares and xenoarchaeology. That was all, on eight planets and a large assortment of smaller satellites. Nothing stood out as possessing the sort of equipment the fugitive would have required to build a device capable of hiding an entire system. Of course, not knowing *how* the device worked made it hard to guess what was required to build it, and even more difficult to work out how to counteract its effect.

Before Roche could take her exploration of the files any further, the ship shuddered violently. She looked up in alarm as the bulkheads around her rattled.

<Box! What was that?> she asked via her implants, letting her spoon fall into what remained of her breakfast.

<A difficult translation, Morgan,> replied the AI. <There is no need to be alarmed.>

<If you're pushing the ship too hard —>

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<I am doing nothing of the sort.> The Box sounded mildly offended. <We are simply coming closer to the anomaly. Disturbance is to be expected.>

<How much worse do you think it will get?>

<I am unable to answer that question at this point,> said the Box. <But I can assure you that the situation is being closely monitored.>

<Good.> Roche stood and placed her plate into a disposal hatch. <I'm on my way anyway.>

The Box said nothing more, perhaps sensing the renewed determination she felt—partly a result of the food, partly the refocussing of her attention on the goals they all shared. For the first time in the hours since her rude awakening, she actually felt alert.

When she reached the bridge, Cane occupied exactly the same position he had earlier, watching the expanse of the big screen with his arms folded.

Maii sat not far from him. A strip of white cloth covered her empty sockets, matching the loose shift she wore in preference to Dato Bloc shipsuits. Roche automatically sent a smile her way, and when she saw the Surin return one knew that the ritually-blinded girl was using Cane's eyes for visual input. The only other person available to read was Roche herself – but that would have meant the smile would have been invisible to the epsense adept.

Out loud, Roche asked: “Any news, Maii?”

<None so far, Morgan. The area seems to be empty.>

She grunted acknowledgment of the fact to herself, then added: “What if the system was camouflaged? Would it be possible for the Sol Wunderkind to block epsense as well?”

Cane looked up. “The whole system?” he said. “Highly unlikely.”

“But it is a possibility.” She turned to face him. “A remote one, I'll admit—”

“What I meant was,” Cane interrupted her, “if the system is camouflaged, then I doubt my sibling is responsible.”

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*My sibling ...* The words made Roche's skin crawl. Sometimes it was hard to accept that Cane and the Sol Wunderkind that had effectively destroyed Palasian System were of the same breed – possibly even identical in every respect.

“Why not?” she asked.

“Because, tactically speaking, it makes no sense to be confined to a single system. If I were in his shoes, I would want to move on, taking with me only the resources needed to make my task easier at my next destination.” Cane's shoulders lifted in a smooth and easy shrug, as though he was discussing a poor tactic in a bar-room game, not the destruction of a whole system. “Also, to hide in such a manner would be tantamount to admitting defeat. Camouflaged or not, it's only matter of time before the system is found – if not by us, then by someone else.”

Roche nodded. “It could be a decoy, then. Something to keep us occupied while he slips away.”

“A lot of effort for little reward. However he did it, *if* he did it, it must have been enormously energy-expensive.”

“Maybe. But what if —”

Box's soft, controlled voice cut across her own: “There's really no point even trying to guess until we have more data, Morgan.”

“Okay, okay.” Roche raised her arms in mock defeat. Sitting in her seat, she faced the main screen to check the status of the ship: it was about to emerge from the short slow-jump that had begun so awkwardly. Maybe when Haid appeared, they could discuss the situation in more detail.

<There is no known way to block epsense,> said Maii, continuing the conversation Cane had interrupted, <apart from at the source. Any thought that slips past a mental shield can be detected. No matter how small. The most powerful E-shield wouldn't even weaken it.>

Roche nodded, absorbing that fact without comment.

“Emerging from hyperspace in fifteen seconds,” said Kajic, his voice issuing from the base of the holographic projector. Now that he had no

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crew to impress, he only occasionally bothered to manifest in a 'physical' form.

The ship groaned back into reality as noisily as it had left. Roche held onto the edge of her seat as the floor writhed beneath her, seeming to melt for an instant as space transformed. Somewhere nearby, something clattered. When the ship stabilised, she forced her muscles to relax, then looked around.

"Someone warn me next time," said Haid from the entrance to the bridge. He held a tray in his new hand, and bent to pick up packages of food that had spilled during the disturbance with the other.

"Klaxons sound automatically prior to every translation," said the Box.

"Yeah, but who listens to them?" Haid finished piling the meal back onto the tray. "I thought this ship could handle anything."

"Not quite," said Kajic. "But close enough."

Haid's face lost some of its good humour at the sound of the ex-Dato Bloc Captain's voice.

"Yeah, well," he said, taking a seat at an empty station. "When the Box summoned me, I thought I'd bring breakfast up here. Hope that's okay."

Roche frowned, puzzled. She hadn't asked the Box to summon anyone. "Box? What's going on?"

"I have an announcement to make," the AI said. "The preliminary survey is now complete and, although much of the data remains to be processed, I have one confirmed observation to report. In accordance with your wishes, Morgan, I summoned Haid to ensure that the entire crew was present to hear it."

Roche didn't respond immediately. The Box wasn't normally so considerate of her wishes. It smacked of over-compensation, as though it was courting disapproval elsewhere.

"Continue," she said after a moment. If it *was* planning something, then she would have to wait until later to find out what it was.

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The Box complied, calling up a number of complicated diagrams on the main screen. “At the heart of the region formerly occupied by Palasian System lies a radiant point-source.”

“A singularity?” Roche broke in. She hadn’t even considered the possibility that the system had been sucked into a black hole.

“No,” said the Box. “The point-source appears to have zero mass and is radiant predominantly in the upper infra-red spectrum. I have detected what may be a cloud of primordial gas surrounding the point-source, but will have to make more observations before confirming that suspicion.”

“How close are we?” asked Haid, clearly as disturbed by the thought of a black hole nearby as Roche was, despite the Box’s assurance of their safety.

“Twelve billion kilometres.” The map on the screen highlighted points as the Box spoke. “The next slow-jump will halve that distance.”

“Is that a good idea?” asked Roche.

“All available evidence indicates that the risk of undertaking such a manoeuvre would be small.”

“The risk for whom?” said Roche. “Yourself or all of us?”

The Box hesitated before snapping: “Both, of course.”

Roche smiled at the Box’s apparent indignation. “Okay,” she said. “Then I can’t see why we shouldn’t do it. As soon as you’re ready —”

<I have something.> Soft but clear, Maii’s words touched Roche’s thoughts—as, she assumed, they touched everyone else’s simultaneously.

Roche looked across the bridge, the discussion of the point-source instantly shelved. The Surin’s face was blank, indicating intense concentration, as it had been since the end of the last jump.

“What is it?” Roche asked, leaning closer.

<Something strange.> The girl frowned. <Or an echo of something. I can’t tell which. It’s very faint. I’ve missed it so far because it’s so hard to sense at all.>

“Describe it,” Roche prodded.

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<It's not a person – but it is alive.> Confusion deepened Maii's frown. <A great distance from here, yet close. I don't understand what I'm seeing.>

“Are you picking up any *thoughts*?” Roche pressed.

<None. Not even a base emotion.>

“Could it be an AI, then, or hidden by a very effective shield?”

<A shield would leak somewhere, and not even the Box has thoughts I can read.> The reave's body sagged. <Damn. Every time I think I've got a grip on it, I lose it again. It's like trying to catch air!>

Roche reached out with a mental hand to touch the Surin's straining mind and ease her frustration. “It's okay, Maii. Wait until the next jump. It might be stronger then.”

“It' might be the anomaly itself,” suggested Haid.

“Now there's a possibility I *don't* want to consider.” Roche sighed as warning klaxons began to sound again. “Box, any thoughts on that?”

“None that would not offend.”

The rare joke from the Box elicited a chuckle from Haid, but one that was short-lived. The Box's sense of humour – usually at the expense of carbon-based life-forms or epsense science – only reinforced its uniqueness. Roche also detected a faint hint of annoyance, as though it was peeved that the reave had taken the wind out of its big announcement.

Maii emerged from her trance as the ship jumped in accordance with the Box's wishes. <I sensed no malice,> she said, her mental voice clearly audible through the groaning of metal. The slow-jump was easily the most uncomfortable so far.

“That's something.” Haid folded his arms. “But I'd still feel happier knowing what we were heading for.”

“A black hole doesn't have to bear us any ill-will to be dangerous,” agreed Kajic.

“It is not a black hole,” asserted the Box.

“Famous last words,” muttered the ex-mercenary.

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“I agree with Kajic,” said Cane. “Just because it’s a natural phenomenon doesn’t mean it can’t still be dangerous.”

“At least we could go in with weapons armed,” added Haid.

“Do it, then.” Roche agreed with the ex-mercenary’s unspoken message: sitting around waiting was only making them more tense. “Cane, work with him.”

“Done.” The two men crossed the bridge to take positions at the weapons station. “Anything else to report, Box?”

“Some inconclusive findings,” it said.

“Such as?” she persisted, silently cursing its reticence.

“The steep flexure gradient in this region is suggestive of significant, and recent, spatial trauma.”

Roche’s eyebrows knitted. “That means nothing to me.”

“Space-time has been warped on a massive scale,” the Box translated. “The traumatised region occupies a disc-shaped area roughly seventeen billion kilometres across and two billion kilometres thick. The radiant point-source lies at the heart of this region, although I have been unable as yet to determine whether it is the cause of the flexure or simply another effect. It is conceivable, perhaps even likely, that the point-source and the anomaly are different facets of the same phenomenon. However, more research is required before I can be certain of that.”

“How much more?”

“That depends on the result of this slow-jump,” the Box said. “We will be jumping to the very edge of what should be Palasian System, not far from the anchor point that was our original destination. It is my conjecture that the degree of flexure will increase sharply at this point.”

“Proving ... ?”

“Again, I hesitate to speculate until we have concrete data.”

Roche grunted. “How long, then?”

“I estimate fifteen minutes before we arrive at our destination.”

“So soon?”

## The Dying Light

“As a result of the flexure gradient, our relative velocity is greatly increased. In a sense, the anomaly has been drawing us towards the point-source.”

“It sounds even more like a black hole, now,” said Haid over his shoulder.

“The effect is only relative to real space,” continued the Box. “In hyperspace, we are actually fighting an uphill battle: although our movement in hyperspace corresponds to greater than normal movement in the real universe, it is becoming increasingly difficult to move in hyperspace at all. I have consulted Kajic and arrived at a maximum output rating for the slow-jump drive – a rating which we will not exceed.”

Roche nodded in satisfaction. Even though she didn’t understand how progress could be easier in real space but more difficult in hyperspace, at least Kajic and the Box were cooperating.

<I’m picking up that trace again,> said Maii into the break in conversation.

Roche glanced across the bridge. The Surin was frowning once more. “Where?”

<I’m not sure. It’s always hard to tell from hyperspace. The trace is definitely stronger, but maybe no closer. There’s still no sense of threat.>

“Can you at least tell if it’s mundane?”

The reave looked troubled. <Part of me says it isn’t, but that’s just a gut feeling. High Human, perhaps, but I don’t think it’s that either. The source is something I’ve never come across before.>

*A Sol Wunderkind?* Roche wanted to ask, but didn’t. Maii would have said if that had been the case. Yet she couldn’t quash the thought: something in hyperspace was pushing them away while in real space drawing them closer. If not the fugitive, then what?

Roche folded her arms and watched the main screen as the minutes ticked by, the large number of unknowns confronting her making her want to scream out in frustration. She needed answers, not possibilities.

## The Dying Light

<If there *are* any answers,> put in Maii, <we'll find them when we find Palasian System.>

Before Roche could acknowledge the truth of the reave's comment, a low rumble echoed through the ship, beginning at the stern and fading to silence at the distant prow.

"Now what?" asked Roche, looking around in alarm.

"Uh – one moment," said Kajic.

"We had a flicker of red lights down the port hull," said Haid, "but they've cleared now."

"A slight disturbance," said the Box. "Nothing to be concerned about."

Roche bit her tongue until Kajic delivered his own report.

"No problems with the drive," said the ex-Captain finally. "We must have encountered some sort of turbulence. Possibly a hyperspatial shock wave of some kind."

"The anomaly again?" said Roche.

"It seems likely."

"We are nearing the edge of the anomaly," said the AI. "Obviously there will be some turbulence."

"Aimed at us, perhaps?" suggested Haid.

"No," said the Box. "Describing what we are experiencing as a shock wave is peculiarly apt. The turbulence may be caused by the anomaly only in the same way that the presence of a large mass 'causes' gravity."

"Not deliberate then, but symptomatic." Roche ran a hand restlessly along the arm of her chair. "It's all the same from this end, isn't it?"

"Not really," said the Box. "If we can piece together a pattern to the symptoms, we should be able to deduce the nature of the anomaly that is causing it."

"Here comes another one," said Cane, his head cocked, listening.

The groan returned, as gradually as before but noticeably louder when it peaked. Roche, her hands pressed firmly into her armrests, felt a faint buzz through her fingertips.

"Could it hurt us, Uri?" she asked.

## The Dying Light

“Conceivably, yes. The stress is caused by sympathetic vibrations in the hull. So far I have been able to dampen the resonance.”

“Let me know if it gets too bad.”

“I will. If we encounter it again.”

Roche waited anxiously as the ship travelled onward. Barely two minutes later, a third shock wave rolled through the ship, this time accompanied by a slewing sensation to starboard and down, as though the ship were being dragged off-course.

“Red lights again,” said Haid.

An instant later, from Cane: “Clear.”

Roche waited anxiously for Kajic’s report.

“No damage,” he said finally. “But it was definitely more severe. The closer we get to the anomaly, the stronger they’re becoming.”

“Can we ride them for much longer?”

“If they continue worsening at this rate, no,” said Kajic. “But we’ll come close.”

“Good enough.” Roche swivelled her chair to face the main screen. There was only a handful minutes left before the slow-jump was due to end. “Pull us out the moment we can’t take it. I’ll leave that decision in your hands.”

“Understood.”

As another groan began to build, Roche again put her hands on the sides of her chair and held tight. She felt as though someone were tolling a bell directly behind her head, a bell so large that its vibrations were absorbed by her bones rather than heard. Before it had completely faded, another swelled to take its place.

“Box,” she said, raising her voice above the noise. “If you have any idea at all what that anomaly is, I want to hear it.”

“I now have several theories, Morgan. Which will be the correct one, of course, remains to be seen.”

## The Dying Light

Roche opened her mouth to demand an outline of the various possibilities, but was cut off by a sudden lurch upwards. Her stomach dropped, then lifted again into her chest.

“We’re experiencing gravity fluctuations,” said Kajic. “I can only keep us going another fifty seconds.”

Roche studied the main screen, momentarily tempted to call a halt. Their planned arrival point was inching slowly closer. Given a further half-minute, they would almost make it. She decided to trust Kajic’s instincts.

“There must be some way to dampen the shock-waves,” she said.

“I’ll raise the E-shields, but I don’t think that’ll help much.” The ex-Captain’s voice sounded strained.

“Whatever you can do, Uri.”

The noise worsened, despite the shields, as did the rolling sensation in her gut. Maii, lacking eyes of her own and therefore more susceptible to balance problems, looked decidedly uncomfortable. Haid had taken the precaution of fastening his impact harness. Cane, behind him, was as steadfast as ever—but even he swayed when a particularly strong wave shunted the ship in an unexpected direction.

Roche watched the seconds counting down on the big screen: 21 ... 20 ... 19 ...

The shock waves became inseparable, and the ship seemed to toss on the surface of a stormy sea. Red lights flickered on and off across all the boards, registering slight damages across the hull. Most would be repaired almost instantly by the tide of maintenance nanomachines swarming over every external surface of the ship, but the fact that they were occurring at all was disturbing.

Ten seconds remained.

Roche watched their destination creep closer. It was becoming increasingly difficult to hear over the prolonged groan surrounding them.

The lights flickered once, steadied, then flickered again.

## The Dying Light

“We have a standing wave in sectors G through K,” announced Kajic grimly. “Preparing to abort the slow-jump.”

Five seconds. Roche winced as the smell of ozone reached her nose.

Three seconds. On the main screen, the difference between the ship’s current location and its destination was measured in millimetres.

Two seconds —

“Aborting now,” said Kajic, the very instant artificial gravity ceased entirely. A siren began to wail a split-second later. The lights flickered a third time as the drive drained power from the bulk of the ship to translate itself safely back into real space. In the short-lived darkness, Roche actually heard the engines strain — a deep, regular thrumming coming from somewhere to her left. Their tempo was rapid but reassuringly regular under the circumstances.

Then the lights returned, unsteadily and noticeably dimmer than they usually were. Space twisted inside-out, and the floor bucked under her feet. Her momentum tried to pull her forward, onto the floor and across the bridge. Gripping the sides of her chair even tighter, she resisted the impetus with all her strength. To her left, Maii lost a similar battle and skidded on her knees into a bank of instruments. Even Cane staggered, clasping Haid’s shoulder to keep his balance.

The floor bucked again, this time in the opposite direction. Maii gasped in pain as she slid backwards and collided with her seat. The bulkheads around them likewise groaned in protest.

“Uri!” Roche shouted above the racket. “What’s happening?”

“We are experiencing difficulty emerging from hyperspace,” said the Box, its voice amplified but calm — *too* calm for Roche’s liking. “I will act as an intermediary between Kajic and yourself for the time being. The ship is his primary concern at the moment.”

Another jolt almost cost her grip. She clutched behind and over her shoulder to fasten the seat’s restraint harness. “Are we going to make it?”

“I should think so,” said the Box. “The chances are very good that we will all survive.”

## The Dying Light

Roche was grateful for the 'all'. The Box could endure almost anything, and had been known to assume the same indestructibility of its wards in the past. Cane, on the other hand, had already moved across the bridge to help Maii into her harness.

"We have damage," reported Haid from the weapons station, his voice raised to be heard. "Lost some banks on the starboard bow. I don't quite know what happened; looks like they've been sheared clean off. No pressure-drops reported, though, and hull integrity's intact."

Roche concentrated on what he was saying. "What have we lost?"

"Hypershields in that area. Some A-P cannon. We'll be able to compensate easily enough."

"Good. We—uh!" The *Ana Vereine* swung to starboard, then down; Roche winced as her restraint harness cut deep into her chest. The thrumming of the engines rose in both pitch and intensity until it became a screaming—like the screaming of a mighty wind—

— *she was falling*—

— and nausea flared deep within her as the association with the dream made her feel impotent and therefore even more anxious.

The main screen flickered, attracting her attention. Abstract representations of their course swirled into increasingly complex shapes, then disappeared entirely, leaving nothing in their wake. White lines scattered across the screen, making Roche blink; then it went black again.

Without warning, the ship began to steady. Bulkheads settled back into place with a series of decreasing creaks. The screaming of the engines ebbed, losing the desperate edge that had contributed to Roche's anxiety. The groan of tortured space faded with one last renting sound, then ceased entirely.

In the sudden silence, Roche didn't dare ask the question.

She didn't need to.

"We made it," said Kajic, his voice from near Roche's right shoulder clear and relieved.

## The Dying Light

“Yes,” echoed the Box, its voice oddly hushed. “We most certainly did.”

At that moment, the main screen came back to life. Blinding light filled the bridge, dazzling Roche until she managed to bring an arm up to protect her eyes. Compensators cut in an instant later, reducing the glare to more manageable levels. Through the gaps between her fingers, Roche peered at what lay before them.

“What the hell is that?” exclaimed Haid, pre-empting her own initial reaction.

A blazing yellow-white oval filled the centre of the screen. At first she thought it was a sun, but the shape was wrong: it was distorted as though giant hands had gripped it at each pole and stretched it lengthwise. In addition, there were no flares or prominences, no hints of corona or sunspots. Just light, bright and unceasing, coming from something far too close for comfort.

There was only one thing it could be.

“It’s the point-source,” she said, directing her words at the Box.

“Precisely,” it replied, as she’d half-hoped it would not.

“But we should be millions of kilometres away from it. I thought you were taking us to the edge of where the system used to be —”

“I did. Yet here we are, only a short distance from what appears to be the centre. Remarkable, isn’t it?”

*Remarkable?* Roche echoed to herself. She could think of words to describe it, but that wasn’t one of them.

Before she could say anything, however, Haid’s voice broke into the conversation.

“We have targets!” he called. “Someone else got here before us!”

“Where?” she asked, instantly turning her seat to face his station.

“Two behind us,” he said. “One on the far side of whatever that thing is. Emissions suggest ships, probably Commonwealth, but it’s hard to be sure. There’s some sort of interference fudging our data.”

“They’ve seen us,” said Cane. “One of them is moving in to engage.”

## The Dying Light

“Launch baseline probes and broadcast our ID,” Roche said, her heart pounding as she considered their options. To Kajic she added: “Uri, keep well out of their way until we know what they are and who sent them. We don’t want to intimidate them unnecessarily.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Haid shot back dryly. “I won’t be making *any* moves until you can prove to me there isn’t a clone warrior on one of them.”

Roche watched nervously as the view shifted on the main screen. Numerous tiny drones spread out in a circle away from the *Ana Vereine*, expanding their baseline of observation and thereby improving the clarity and range of the picture. The third ship came into view, oddly distorted like the glowing object it had been hiding behind. It was hard to determine exactly what sort of ship it was, let alone where it hailed from; the image was of a warped, white line, burning bright with reflected light.

“Box,” she said, “can you figure out what’s jamming us?”

“There is no deliberate interference of transmissions in this region,” said the Box.

“No? Then —”

“Our sensors are being swamped by emissions from the point-source. It is extremely radiant in both infra-red electromagnetic and Perez radiations.”

Roche blinked, surprised. Perez radiation was a side-effect of a crudely tuned hyperspace jump, not what she would have expected of a seemingly stellar object.

Before she could inquire further, the Box went on: “Try looking for transmissions on the Eckandi emergency band. It should be relatively unaffected.”

Roche indicated for Haid to do as the Box suggested. Within seconds, a rapid pulse of sound from the speakers of the main screen indicated that the ship had detected a digital transmission. An instant later, text appeared on the main screen and the pulse became an audible voice:

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“– ONLY WARNING. REPEAT: YOU ARE IN CONTRAVENTION OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF EMPIRES SECURITY ACT, SECTIONS 45, 63 AND 72. THIS AREA HAS BEEN QUARANTINED. LEAVE IMMEDIATELY OR PREPARE TO BE FIRED UPON. THIS IS YOUR FIRST AND ONLY

WARNING. MESSAGE ENDS.”

The voice spoke with the clear, crisp tones of a machine, not a Human—but that hardly made its words any less appalling. Roche took only a second to absorb the implications of what it was saying.

*An ambush.*

“Haid, Cane – move us away,” she said, thinking furiously. “Don’t do anything else unless I tell you. Box, signal that we wish to respond; see if you can initiate a dialogue—or even subvert the AI to let us go.” Even as she spoke the words she knew it was unlikely the Box would be capable of doing this quickly enough. Nevertheless, she had to at least explore the possibility. “Uri, continue with repairs. Get that down shield back up as soon as you can. And Maii, find out what they’re doing here and who the hell sent them. I need to know if we have a chance to convince them to let us through or not.”

From her seat on the far side of the bridge, the reave shook her head. <I can’t,> she said.

“What?” Roche swivelled to face her. “Why not?”

<I can’t read them.> The reave’s voice was strangely muffled, as though her thoughts were coming from a great distance rather than simply across the room. <They’re not shielded. I just can’t pick them up at all. If I could, I would have detected them long before now. We would have known they were here before we arrived.>

Roche frowned. Maii’s last comment was worryingly true, if perplexing. “Keep trying. I need to know how they found us and whether they knew we were coming or not. If De Bruyn sent them, we know we’ll have to fight, no matter what they say.”

## The Dying Light

“But if they weren’t expecting us,” put in Haid, “how did they know where we’d be? I thought we couldn’t be traced through a slow-jump.”

“They didn’t need to,” replied the Box.

Roche was reminded of the point-source on the screen, twisted as though viewed through a giant lens. The spatial distortion the Box had been monitoring was obviously even more severe than she had imagined: anything trying to enter the space where the system had been was forced to emerge at this point—the heart of the system, yet at the same time its edge.

“They just sat here and waited,” she said. “No matter where we tried to go, this is where we’d end up.”

“Precisely, Morgan,” said the Box.

“And the only way to get away from them is outward, away from where the system should be.” She slapped her hand palm-down on the side of her chair. “Dammit. We can’t leave now, not until we know what the hell is going on!”

“I have convinced someone to let you talk,” said the Box. “The AI has put me in direct contact with the officer in command of the primary vessel.”

She took a deep breath. “Open the line.”

“Ready, Morgan.”

Roche tried to calm her nerves, then began to speak:

“This is Morgan Roche of the independent vessel *Ana Vereine*. We are travelling as a peaceful envoy under the provision of Page De Bruyn of COE Intelligence. Why are you harassing us, and by whose authority?”

The moment she finished talking, the automatic broadcast ceased and a Human voice took its place.

“COE Intelligence has no jurisdiction here,” said the woman. “I am Commander Bassett of the COE Armada vessel *Golden Dawn* with orders countersigned by General Ramage. My directive is to prevent all unauthorised vessels from proceeding any further into Palasian System.”

## The Dying Light

“Further *where?*” Roche shot back. “The system’s *gone*. And as for authorisation, I just gave you mine. We’ve been sent by the COE Intelligence Strategy Head to study the situation here, and to offer what help —”

The woman broke in firmly: “Your help is not required. Should you not leave immediately, then *I* have been authorised to use whatever force is necessary to ensure your compliance. You have exactly thirty seconds.”

The vocal transmission ceased, and was replaced by the automatic recording.

Roche sat stunned for a moment, unable to believe what she had heard. Treachery she had learned to deal with, but not this blind, military farce.

“We’ve got confirmation on the ID,” said Haid. “It’s the *Golden Dawn*, and it’s an Armada vessel as she said. A Destroyer, to be exact.”

Not quite a match for the *Ana Vereine*, Roche thought to herself. But there were three of them.

“Maii?” she asked. “Can you persuade them to change their minds?”

<I’m still not picking up anything.> The reave’s voice was steeped in apology and confusion. <A few shadows, but nothing definite ... >

Roche rubbed her forehead. On the main screen, the three Armada ships moved into position around the *Ana Vereine*.

“All shields to full strength,” she said, sitting upright in her seat. “Uri, how’re those repairs looking?”

“Almost there,” Kajic replied. “Another two minutes and we’ll be optimal.”

Roche glanced at the screen. The *Golden Dawn*’s half-minute deadline had expired twenty seconds ago.

“They mean it, Morgan,” said Cane, watching the screen with naked fascination. “They’re going to fire.”

Remembering the uncanny way he had picked the decisive moment during the battle for the *Midnight*, she didn’t hesitate.

## The Dying Light

“Uri, take evasive action. Haid, arm the disrupters. Cane, prepare to return fire on my command.”

“You’re going to fight?” asked the Box.

“Do I have any choice?”

“Of course you do,” the AI said.

“Well, *what?*” Roche snapped.

“You can turn control of the ship over to me,” said the Box.

Roche opened her mouth, then closed it again. “Why?” she eventually managed.

“There is insufficient time to explain, Morgan.”

“Try me,” she growled.

“I have deduced the exact natures of both the point-source and the anomaly, and in the process have verified the location of Palasian System. By giving me control of the ship, I can take you there in a matter of minutes.”

“So tell us where it is and we’ll get *ourselves* there.”

“Impossible, Morgan. Not that I am underestimating your abilities; there is simply too little time to—”

Lances of energy flashed on the main screen; static momentarily scrambled the picture.

“They’re firing on our drones!” announced Haid.

“Take reciprocal action,” Roche ordered. Barely had she finished when Cane began destroying the Armada’s own baseline probes. Specks of light flashed in the space between the three ships, their brightness negligible against the fiercely burning point-source dominating the view.

“They’re tightening shields,” said Haid.

Roche’s thoughts went into overdrive. Tightening shields was a standard tactic in close space warfare. Any moment now, the attack would begin in earnest: the three Armada ships against the sole Ana Vereine. Numbers were against them, but that didn’t mean that they would necessarily be overcome. Apart from the *Ana Vereine*’s technological superiority, it also possessed a number of armed scutters

## The Dying Light

and shuttles in its docking bays; she could order the Box to launch these smaller craft to assist in the battle, and have Kajic employ the camouflage to make them harder to target. With so many diffuse targets to aim for, the outcome the Armada expected was far from certain. Still, the *Ana Vereine* was bound to incur *some* damage.

And if it prevailed, what then? They would be unable to return to the Commonwealth for certain after destroying three Armada ships while on a supposedly peaceful mission, and the matter of Palasian System would still be unresolved. If the Box was right, then it had offered her a way to avoid the battle and to reach her goal – both with one decisive move.

She had seen more death in the handful of weeks since meeting Adoni Cane than she had in twelve years of active service for COE Intelligence. The thought of still more on her conscience made the decision easier than she expected.

At that very moment, the *Golden Dawn* opened fire.

“Incoming!” Haid’s shout echoed through the bridge, closely followed by a juddering wrench as a full volley of flicker-bombs impacted upon the ship’s aft hypershields. Cane’s fingers played the weapons board like a maestro as Kajic swung the ship to bear on its primary antagonist. As the exchange intensified, violent discharges painted the space between the two ships with fiery colours of death.

“Box!” Roche called out over the sounds of battle: the shouts, the explosions, the roaring of engines. “Whatever you’ve got planned, do it fast!”

“Thank you, Morgan.” The AI’s reply was more gracious than Roche had expected, considering the moral victory it had won. To Haid and Cane it said: “Maintain a covering fire across the ship on the upper left of your screens. On my command, prepare to release proximity mines to prevent them from following.”

Haid frowned at the screen. The ship the Box had indicated was the one that had been hiding behind the point-source; even now, the white-hot object filled most of that segment of the screen. “Where the hell —?”

## The Dying Light

“Just do it, Ameidio,” Roche ordered, even though she felt less than certain herself.

“I have surrendered control of the slow-jump drive to the Box,” said Kajic via her implants, “and I will obey its orders until you tell me otherwise.”

Roche nodded dumbly, wondering what the Box wanted with the drive, and why it wanted sole control over the systems. So close to the point-source, massless or not, even the smallest slow-jump had to be risky.

“Prepare for acceleration,” announced the Box. “Maximum reactive power in fifteen seconds!”

As though the commander of the *Golden Dawn* had sensed Roche’s change of plans, the Armada ships drew closer in a sudden rush, two of them overlapping shields and forming a solid wall of defence. The third sent bolt after bolt of energy hurtling towards the *Ana Vereine*—an assault designed to weaken E-shields prior to the arrival of a second wave of A-P fire and flicker-bombs.

An instant before the second wave arrived, the *Ana Vereine* surged forward. Roche was pressed back into her seat as the view through the main screen rushed at her. The single ship the Box had targeted reacted instantly, obviously believing that the *Ana Vereine* intended to ram; its E-shield formed a narrow cone pointed at the hurtling ship, hoping either to deflect it off-course or to spear through its hull.

The Box’s intention was further afield, however. The *Ana Vereine* changed course an instant before striking the shield. As the Armada ship flashed by, Roche began to guess where they were headed. At the same time, the two vessels they had left behind began to turn, accelerating in pursuit.

The sound of proximity mines being fired behind them rattled in her ears. Two caught the single ship by surprise, slipping through its weakened aft shields and impacting on its hull. Damage was minor, but significant. Cane focussed more and more firepower on the injured ship

## The Dying Light

until it was forced to turn away, leaving the chase to its more distant, but fitter, siblings.

Too late. There was no way now that any of the ships could intercept the *Ana Vereine*; its lead was too great, and its destination too close.

Roche watched numbly as the image of the point-source swelled in the main screen. Not even automatic compensators could dull its brilliance.

“I hope you know what you’re doing, Box,” she whispered to herself.

Haid stared mutely up at the screen, his fingers working the disrupter controls automatically. Then a hand fell across his own.

“It’s all right,” Cane said. “The E-shields can manage from here.”

“No they can’t,” Roche said urgently, leaning forward. “We’ll need everything up front. Kajic, what’s the ambient temperature and composition of the region ahead?”

“Unknown,” was the ex-Captain’s reply. “Our instruments are—”

“Prepare for imminent hyperspace translation,” broke in the Box.

“*What?*” On hearing the AI’s intentions, Roche instantly regretted giving the Box absolute control. “You can’t be serious! We’re too close —”

“Not close enough, actually,” returned the Box. “But we will be in ten seconds. Fasten your harnesses, everyone. This will be rough.”

Roche’s hands gripped her seat as the point-source ballooned to fill the entire main screen. She was dimly aware of the others around her—even Cane—doing the same, and of the stubborn thumping of the Armada guns on their aft shields, still harassing the *Ana Vereine* from behind. Part of her recalled the way the Box had threatened a collision course with COE Intelligence HQ under similar circumstances; she could only hope that its timing and intentions were as critical now as they had been then.

White fire consumed the screen. Sirens began to wail. The ship jerked once; she thought she heard Kajic call something to her. Then:

Space flowered open before them, unfolding in a series of crimson waves that quickly and violently enveloped the *Ana Vereine*. The ship

## The Dying Light

shivered from nose to tail, shaken by forces Roche could only imagine. At the centre of the vortex, several tiny specks of light flickered into being – only to disappear again as the main screen went black.

Then everything simply stopped.

## 2

**IND *Ana Vereine***

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The main screen was empty.

Roche stared at it for a few moments, expecting it to suddenly clear and fill with ... *what?* She had no idea what she expected to see out there. She had no idea where the Box had even taken them.

When it became apparent that the screen wasn't about to change, Roche swivelled around to check the others on the bridge. Cane had freed himself from his restraint harness and was assisting Maii back into her seat, their movements in the unnatural silence oddly loud and unreal. When he stepped away from her, Roche saw that the girl's head was bleeding slightly from her fall. Haid, the hand of his new arm resting on a touch pad, was still staring quizzically at the view that Roche had just turned from.

Then it struck her: the drive was no longer audible. But the *Ana Vereine* hadn't completed its plane-jump. It had just ... stopped.

"Uri," she asked, her voice booming in the quiet. "What's going on?"

The holographic projector in the centre of the bridge flickered. Kajic's image appeared through the static, the light brown skin and black hair of his old body looking as composed as always. His expression was serious, but not concerned.

## The Dying Light

“Minor damage,” said the ex-captain. “We weathered the stress well.”

“How long until we can see where we are?”

“My sensors are gathering some unusual data. The Box is checking to see if the irregularities are due to instrument malfunction. When its diagnosis is complete, vision will be restored.”

“I have partial telemetry readings,” said Haid from the weapons console. After a moment: “No targets. No sign of the point-source, either. We must have left them all behind when we jumped.”

“We did jump, then?” Roche asked Kajic.

“Well, we certainly entered hyperspace,” said Kajic.

“But have we *left* it?”

“I didn’t think an open-ended jump was possible,” Haid said.

Kajic’s image shrugged. “You’ll have to ask the Box. I just did as it told me.”

Roche put her palm on the arm-link of her chair, intending to access the raw data herself, but changed her mind before she did so. Better to remain distant for a moment rather than dive in head-first. She needed to maintain a measure of objectivity if a quick decision was required.

“There appears to be a planet nearby,” said Kajic. “That much I can tell you. A medium-sized gas giant if its mass reading is accurate.”

“Try cross-referencing it with the navigation records of Palasian System,” said Roche. “A match would at least confirm where we are.”

Kajic dissolved in a burst of static that lasted a few heartbeats. When he reformed, he said: “There’s a ninety-nine percent chance the planet is Voloras, the outermost planet of Palasian System. If so, that places us well inside the cometary shell and the third dark body halo.”

Roche searched her memory for what she knew about the system. “Wasn’t there a refuelling base around Voloras?”

“Guhr Outpost,” confirmed Kajic.

“Any signals?”

“Apart from some strong crackles on the hydrogen band, “ said Haid, “we aren’t getting a thing on any frequency.”

## The Dying Light

“Try elsewhere,” Roche said. “This far out, we should be able to pick up hyperspace transmissions.”

“Already tried,” said Haid. “Nothing; not even the beacon of the local anchor point.”

“That can’t be right.” Roche frowned. “We’re near the N’Kor border, and the Kesh have warning stations every few light-years —”

“I’m telling you, Morgan,” said Haid, glancing over his shoulder. “There’s nothing there.”

“How could all of those beacons be blocked?” Roche could feel her confusion gradually developing into frustration. “Uri, *could* it be instrument failure?”

Before Kajic could reply, the Box cut in:

“It *is* possible, Morgan. And the fact that it has happened confirms my hypothesis quite neatly.” At that moment, the main screen cleared. “Welcome to Palasian System.”

Roche studied the screen. Initially she saw nothing but darkness—not even stars. Then the view changed, and a single red speck slid into view. Increased magnification made the speck a bright circle. The image was too fuzzy to make out any detail, but there was no mistaking what it was: against the unnaturally black background, one solitary sun burned.

“It can’t be,” she muttered, standing. “Hintubet is a calcium star —”

“And should be on the green side of yellow,” the Box interrupted. “I am aware of that fact, Morgan. The difficulty in reconciling the emission spectrum of this star and that which Hintubet’s *should* be was the main reason I delayed giving you this information. Now that I have had time to collate the data and to extrapolate from historical records, I believe I can now say with certainty that this *is* Hintubet, albeit with a wildly altered photosphere.”

“The star has changed?” asked Haid. “*How?* “

“The precise method is unknown at the moment; the archives lack specifics in that regard, although the general principles are clear. Until

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we dispatch probes to study Hintubet in more detail, we are limited to the data we can scavenge from this distance.”

“Which isn’t enough,” said Roche. She faced Kajic. “Uri, I want high-speed drones launched to the sun and any planetary bodies we can find.” She turned back to the screen. “Speaking of which, any sign of Voloras?”

The red star shrunk and slid out of view. Seconds later, the crescent of a large planet appeared, red-tinged due to the sun’s baleful light. The image of the planet came to rest in the centre of the screen, its dense atmosphere swirled with grey bands.

“I have despatched a probe,” said Kajic. “The baseline is already large enough for us to detect four moons.”

“Voloras has five,” said Roche.

“The fifth may be occluded,” said Kajic. “The sizes of the four we can see match COE records.”

“How long until the probe can get a decent look at the base?”

“One hour and fifty minutes. Guhr Outpost is on the missing moon.”

Roche nodded. “Until then, we can’t afford to take anything for granted. Give us a heading that will take us by Voloras, with the option to use it as a gravity-whip if we decide not to stop. Leave a drone behind to relay the data from the probes. I want the ship camouflaged, too, just in case someone saw us arrive and is waiting for us there.”

Kajic’s image winked out as he went to work.

Roche slumped back into the chair with a sigh and rubbed at her temples. They appeared to be in Palasian System, just as the Box had promised they would be. But it wasn’t quite what she had expected: no hyperspace transmissions, a profoundly altered primary, and no stars in sight.

The first and last details suggested that the system had indeed been encapsulated within some sort of barrier. But what? She knew of no process that could hide an entire system from view *and* account for the warped space outside.

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Or did she? The change in the sun's appearance did ring a faint bell. A name she had heard back in her days on the moon of Bodh Gaya, when she had been studying for her Armada exams, returned to her ...

"Asha's Gauntlet," she said out loud.

"I'm impressed, Morgan," said the Box. "I didn't think you would work it out so —"

"We're picking up a transmission!" broke in Haid.

"Where?" Roche swivelled to face him, automatically linking with the weapons system. If life remained in the system, the chances were good that it belonged to the Sol Wunderkind. And if he was signalling them, then he knew where they were.

"It's not directed at us." Haid was skimming through the various diagnostic tools that enabled him to enhance a weak signal. "It's a wide-beam microwave from in-system. I'm picking up echoes off several objects near the source; the slight delays should give us a fair triangulation."

Roche let herself relax slightly. The signal must have been sent some time ago, given the distance at light-speed to the inner system.

"What about the content of the transmission?" she said.

"It's in some sort of cipher," he said, then shook his head. "Haven't broken it yet, which isn't a good sign. They either crack immediately or take forever."

"Box, have a go at it," she said. Haid's refinement of the signal's source proceeded while she watched. The area containing a probable location of the transmitter gradually narrowed on a diagnostic display, until a single point flashed once and turned green.

"Got it," Haid said.

Roche overlaid a navigation chart. "It's the same distance from the primary as Jagabis would have been. And Jagabis has moons."

Haid nodded. "That'd give us the echoes."

"Uri, do we have confirmation of a planet in this area?"

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Kajic's image returned at the mention of his name. "Not yet. It's off to one side of Hintubet, and I haven't searched that area in any detail yet. Now that I'm looking, it shouldn't take long to find —" He stopped, smiled. "In fact, there it is. Give me a little longer and I'll be able to estimate it's mass."

"It *has* to be Jagabis," Roche said. "Someone's alive there."

"The signal could be a beacon," Haid suggested.

"In cipher? Unlikely," said Roche. "Besides, Jagabis was the innermost gas giant in the system. If I remember correctly, the main spaceport and colony were on one of its moons."

"Correct," said the Box. "The moon is called Aro, the colony Emptage City."

"Right," said Roche. "So if there are survivors, that's the first place to look."

"I can get us there in two days," said Kajic. "Faster if we fly-by Voloras."

Roche nodded. "Plot a course, but don't do anything definite until we decipher the message."

Cane stirred, speaking for the first time since their arrival. "It could be a warning," he said. "Or a trap."

Roche looked over at him. "For whom? It couldn't be us. We weren't even here when that message was transmitted."

"True," Cane said. "But I find it disturbing nonetheless. The impression I get is that someone is still fighting."

"That's a good sign," said Roche. "That there's the slightest resistance left in the system is something of a miracle."

"Which is precisely what bothers me." The bridge's light glowed in his unblinking eyes. "I would never have been so careless as to leave any survivors."

Roche met his quiet expression uneasily, his words reminding her of the ruthlessness of the adversary they were hunting – and of Cane's ancestry.

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“It’s worth checking, at least,” she said after a moment. Then, turning from Cane, turning from the thought, she said: “Have you sent a probe, Uri?”

“I have despatched five so far,” Kajic reported. “Three are under way to Hintubet, Voloras and Jagabis; the other two are heading to Cartha’s Planet, the innermost world, and Cemenid, the largest. There are four planets outstanding: Herensung, Gatamin, Kukumat and Murukan.”

“The last two being the double world?” Roche asked.

“That’s right. There are also some sizeable rocks in the dark body haloes that might be worth exploring, but they’re not a priority at the moment. I’ll let you know when we have the system mapped.”

“Okay.” Roche visualised the bullet-like probes crossing the system under accelerations that not even the *Ana Vereine’s* protective fields could negate, thereby traversing the empty space more quickly than they could ever hope to. Even so, it would be hours before they started getting any data. At light-speed, the lag across the system was appreciable.

“That transmission just ended,” said Haid.

“Box?” Roche said. “How’s the deciphering coming along?”

“Completed,” said the AI. “However, the translation is proving difficult. It appears to be in a language with which I am unfamiliar.”

“Show me.”

Several lines of standard alphanumeric script flowed across the screen. Roche studied it for a moment before admitting that she too was stumped. “It’s definitely a language, not another cipher?”

“Without sufficient text to analyse, I am unable to do more than guess.”

“Fair enough. Keep guessing, then, Box, and let me know if you come up with anything.”

“Certainly.”

“Uri, how long until the Voloras fly-by?”

“One hour and thirty-seven minutes.”

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Roche sat back with a weary sigh, running a hand through her cropped hair. She was already impatient with the delay in obtaining information. Being trapped in this system without any idea of what was going on or even where the clone warrior might be filled her with anxiety.

“I don’t suppose there’s any way you could hurry things along?” she said wryly.

“Not unless you know some way to circumvent the barriers of light-speed, Morgan,” said Kajic.

Roche smiled tiredly.

“There is,” said Cane.

Roche looked over to him. “What?”

“Thought is not constrained by the physical laws of the universe,” said Cane.

Roche sat forward with a start. *Maii!* If the girl could contact the minds of the people behind the transmission, Roche would have the data she needed immediately.

Only then did she realise that the reave had neither moved nor spoken since shortly after the *Ana Vereine* had arrived in Palasian System. Roche turned to see what the problem was.

The Surin girl sat motionless on the edge of her seat with her hands clasped together in her lap. A thin line of blood had trickled down from the gash on her forehead, staining red the white material of her blindfold.

“Maii? Are you all right?”

There was no response.

Roche moved over to the reave, squatting down in front of her to examine the small lesion on the girl’s forehead. It seemed to Roche to be nothing more than a superficial cut, and yet ...

“Maii?” Still no reply. She touched the girl’s shoulders and tried again: “Maii, can you—?”

Startled, Maii jumped back in her seat, pushing Roche’s hand away.

<Maii, it’s me!> Roche fought to restrain the reave’s flailing arms.  
<*Maii!* It’s Morgan!>

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After a moment, the girl's panic subsided and her breathing eased.

<Maii?> said Roche. <Can you hear me?>

<I—I am here, Morgan.> The words were barely a whisper in Roche's mind.

<Are you sure? You're very faint.>

<So are you.> There was an edge of confusion to her words. <I couldn't sense you at all. There was nothing. I was afraid you were all dead.>

Roche winced as a wave of images and emotions washed into her mind: fear, loneliness, darkness, panic ... She concentrated, doing her best to hold the mental in-rush at bay while trying to radiate reassurance to the Surin child. When the torrent of emotions ebbed, Roche continued.

<We've been here all the time, talking unshielded as we always do. Surely you picked up something?>

<Only Cane,> replied the reave. <But nothing specific. I just knew he was there—somewhere.>

Roche searched the girl's blank face. The blood on her cheek stood out against pale skin and hair. <Could it have been the blow to your head?>

<No. It's nothing like that. Your thoughts are being ... smothered. It's like only the ones specifically directed at me can get through, and only then if their source is nearby—as you are now.>

<Smothered?> Roche said. <By what?>

<I don't know.> Almost imperceptibly, Maii shrugged. <All I can tell you is that it started when we arrived at the point-source. But it didn't become severe until we slow-jumped.>

<So whatever's causing it must be somewhere in the system with us.> Roche rocked back on her haunches as she considered the reave's words. Another ominous sign. <Is there anything I can do to help?>

Maii nodded slowly. <Physical contact strengthens an epsense link. If you were to keep touching me ... >

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Roche's understanding filled the void of the Surin's unfinished sentence. The thought of Maii locked in the darkness of the blind and deaf-mute easily over-rode her reservations—even though it meant having the girl constantly at her side. The last person to have depended on her so totally had killed himself to save her —

She stamped down on the memory. The last thing Maii needed right now was both of them dwelling on Veden's death.

<Thank you, Morgan.> The girl half-smiled. <I can read you clearly, but will respect your privacy.>

“Is she all right?” Cane called out from his station.

“She will be.” Then, to Maii: <Can you stand?>

<Yes.>

<Good. If we can't use you to hunt for survivors, then you can help me brush up on local geography instead.> Taking one of Maii's hands in her own, she raised the girl to her feet. Together, with Maii's hand on her arm, they moved across the bridge to Roche's seat. The reave remained standing when Roche sat, her hand resting on Roche's shoulder.

<Are we really in Palasian System?> Maii asked.

<The Box brought us here after the Armada ships attacked,> said Roche.

<How?>

<That's a little hard to explain. Hang on. I'll see if we can get the Box in on this conversation. The others might like to hear, too.>

Triggering her implants, Roche spoke aloud: “Box, if you've got the time, I'd like to talk to you about Asha's Gauntlet.”

“Of course, Morgan.”

“We studied them under Weapons Conventions in Military College,” she explained to the others. “The idea is to turn a star into a giant hypershield generator or something. Is that right, Box?”

“Essentially,” replied the Box. “A primitive ‘solar envelope’, as it was originally known, was designed by the Eckandar Trade Axis several thousand years ago. Two prototypes—called *K'mok ni Asha*, which

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translates as 'Asha's Gauntlet' – were built in the Thirty-Eighth Millennium by the Kesh government. They tested one on a frontier system, but the experiment was a failure. Because of the disastrous results the second prototype was never used. It was rumoured to have been dismantled, although this was never confirmed.”

“I remember,” said Roche, nodding. “The Gauntlet was supposedly designed as a means of protection for a system against attack, but the one experiment they did ended up completely destroying the system.” Roche looked at the screen, and the sky empty of stars – all but one; the reddened Hintubet now occupied central stage again. “And now it seems we're inside one.”

“At first,” said the Box, “I was reluctant to accept the possibility that Palasian System had been encapsulated in such a fashion – even though the data suggested as much. It wasn't until we arrived at the point-source—the external manifestation of the Gauntlet's boundary – that the evidence became too conclusive to ignore.”

“How does it work?” asked Cane.

The Box explained: “By manipulating a star in precisely the right fashion, it is possible to create and sustain a Riem-Perez Horizon large enough to enclose an entire system.”

“That's the same sort of shield COE Intelligence HQ uses, isn't it?” said Roche.

“Correct,” said the Box. “And the *Ana Vereine*, and most other ships large enough to power one.”

“But we couldn't see the system from the outside,” she said. “A hypershield isn't the same as camouflage —”

“No; hypershields are used as barriers against intrusion against hyperspatial attack rather than to hide something from view. However, scale comes into play for Riem-Perez Horizons greater than two thousand cubic kilometres in volume. Space-time can only tolerate such a disturbance on a small scale; any larger and the enclosed area is parcelled off and lifted to hyperspace.”

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“Where we are now,” finished Roche.

“Thus the area of space contained within the affected area cannot be seen, because it simply no longer exists in the ‘real’ universe,” said the Box. “The anomaly – which is a boundary effect – is all that remains.”

“That explains why the engines stopped in mid-jump,” said Kajic. “The jump was literally open-ended – across the boundary and into the space within.”

“In a sense, we are still jumping,” said the Box.

Cane moved closer to the screen, studying the image with fascination. “It’s a remarkable concept,” he said. “To *move* an entire system —”

“No distance at all, really,” said the Box. “It has no vector relative to the real universe, and will not travel in the same way this ship slow-jumps.”

“So I assume it will return when the Gauntlet is switched off?”

“No,” said the Box.

“That’s where the original Kesh experiment went wrong,” added Roche. “It *can’t* be switched off.”

“The process is extremely energy expensive,” explained the Box. “The sun’s fuel is exhausted in a matter of weeks, during which time the Gauntlet gradually collapses back to a point. The system is destroyed in the process.”

Cane tilted his head. “Then employing one to defend a system would be a pointless exercise.”

“Which is why the Warfare Protocol forbids its use.” Roche nodded at the screen. “It’s no use at all for defence, and would make too destructive a weapon.”

<So why does Palasian System have one?> asked Maii, using Roche’s neural implants as an interface between her and the Box.

“I can think of only one possible explanation,” it said. “Any attempt to cross the external boundary of the Gauntlet without simultaneously slow-jumping back to the real universe will result in complete annihilation.

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Similarly, any attempt to use a hyperspace drive while within the space contained by the Gauntlet will render the drive useless.”

“So if the Sol clone warrior has no access to a hyperspace drive,” Haid cut in, “or doesn’t know how to employ one properly in the Gauntlet, he’ll be unable to leave the system.”

“Exactly,” said the Box.

“A trap, then.” Cane nodded. “And one which is not immediately lethal. But why go to so much trouble?”

“And who laid the trap?” asked Haid.

“Whoever got their hands on the second prototype, I guess,” Roche said. “Which could have been almost anyone, depending on where the Kesh stored it.”

“At least we know one thing,” said Kajic. “It probably wasn’t the Sol Wunderkind.”

“Don’t be so sure about that,” said Haid. “We’re trapped in here, too, remember?”

“Not ‘trapped’,” said the Box. “We can leave any time we wish, simply by crossing the boundary the correct way.”

“But the boundary *is* shrinking, right?” said Haid.

“Yes—”

“And we can’t signal for help if we get into trouble.” Haid grimaced. “That makes us a little more vulnerable than I like to be.”

“As long as we do not employ our slow-jump drive while inside the Gauntlet, we will be able to leave.” The Box sounded weary of the argument. “And even so, the natural collapse of the boundary is relatively slow. Should something go wrong, we would have several weeks to find another means out.”

“Your confidence is admirable,” said Haid, “even if I find it slightly naive.”

Roche decided it was time to change the subject. “Uri, how long now until the first probe arrives at Voloras?”

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“One hour and fifteen minutes. That’s when you can expect the first decent pictures, anyway.”

“Good. I suggest we get back to work until then. We might need to move fast, depending on what we see.”

Haid scratched his scalp with his new fingers as he swung back to the weapons console. “Chances are it won’t be a welcoming committee.”

#

For Roche, finding something to keep herself occupied while the probe was in transit proved to be easy. With repairs still to be completed, the transmission waiting to be translated, and small amounts of long-distance data still trickling in, there was more than enough work for a crew of several dozen. Even with the Box and Kajic both able to perform multiple tasks at once, running a ship the size of the *Ana Vereine* under such conditions would never be straightforward.

Nevertheless, Roche had the opportunity to double-check her memory of Palasian System’s records against the data the ship-bound detectors had collected.

The COE navigation register had been updated during the last survey, in ‘850 EN. Since then, few changes had been appended to the record. Palasian System had never been fully colonised; given its lack of a planet with a breathable atmosphere, that wasn’t surprising. The innermost world was a rocky ball boiling under the glare of the F2 primary and was home only to an automated solar research facility. The remaining seven planets were gas giants, two of them bloated with hydrogen. All possessed numerous moons; two had extensive ring-systems, but it would take more than pretty scenery to attract colonists. As it was, only the system’s proximity to a Kesh border had earned it an Armada base and refuelling station. Not even the presence of three mineral-rich dark body haloes around the sun had tempted more than a cursory mining presence, an arm of the same company that had run the operation—and the penal colony—on Sciacca’s World: Dirt & Other Commodities, Inc.

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Still, Roche told herself, almost half a million people had called Palasian System home – at least temporarily. And she had to admit that there *was* plenty to look at,. In all her travels for COE Intelligence, she had never had the chance to see a double-Jovian before.

Part of her had hoped that, when the confirmation came that Kajic had finally located the pair on the far side of the system, it would look somehow different to the other faint blobs he assured her were planets – but it didn't. All she saw was another dot, tinged red by Hintubet's new colour.

With Maii at her side, she returned to mapping the locations of the planets and planning contingency routes between them.

<The population was certainly spread thin,> the reave commented at one point. <It's hard to see how an army could have killed them all.>

<It doesn't make our job any easier, either,> Roche responded. <If survivors are unable to communicate, we'll have to turn the system inside out to find them.>

<Unless, as you think, they've regrouped at Jagabis. It would make sense to pool resources.>

<Or to present a united front.>

<One last stand?>

<Perhaps.> Roche shrugged, trying not to dwell on the ramifications of that thought: had such a battle been lost ... <Whoever sent the message, Emptage City and Aro SpacePort are the first places we have to go, right after we fly-by Guhr Outpost. If we don't find anything in either of these places, then we'll try the Armada facility around Cemenid; Geyten Base would have been the next most likely place to mount some sort of counter-attack.>

<What about the research station?> Maii asked, indicating with a mental prompt the installation orbiting the double-jovian.

<According to the records, Congreve Station was abandoned some decades ago. Unless that changed, it would have been empty when the Sol Wunderkind arrived.>

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<What were they studying there?>

<I don't know, exactly. It says 'xenoarchaeological research' when I ask. But planetary evolution seems more likely.>

<I guess.> Roche felt the reave's attention drift elsewhere, studying the files vicariously through Roche's senses. <DAOC are here, I notice. Does Ameidio know that yet?>

Roche shook her head. <Not that I'm aware of, and I'd rather he didn't find out until it's necessary.>

Dirt and Other Commodities Inc. had been the main target of Haid's underground resistance movement on Sciacca's world. After so many years fighting them, Roche would understand any lingering resentment he might still feel. At the same time she didn't want it to get in the way. She would attempt to rescue DAOC employees just as she would anyone else—if there *were* any remaining in the system ...

<The asteroid belt and innermost dark body halo – the Mattar Belt and 'Autoville' – were mined by prowlers, not people,> said Roche. <So chances are they won't be a problem. The others were untouched.>

<I've never liked prowling mines,> Maii said with a mental moue. <They're just a small step from planet-wreckers.>

<At least they're civilised, not like outriggers.>

<All robots are civilised,> said Maii. <I just don't happen to enjoy their company.>

"The probe's rounding Voloras," announced Kajic, breaking the silence on the bridge. Roche cleared the vision in her artificial eye and looked up. The screen showed a close-up of the swollen arc of the grey gas giant's banded atmosphere. Purple haze tinged the view as the probe used the planet's magnetic field to brake.

"Seen anything yet?" she asked.

"Not much," Kajic replied. "The other moons appear to be untouched. The change in Hintubet's radiation has raised a few storms in Voloras' outer atmosphere, and there's a little more rubble in closer than the

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records say there should be. But apart from that, the planet is as expected.”

“Still no signals?”

“All quiet,” said Haid. “I can try provoking something, if you like.”

“Best not to at this stage.”

“I’ve no problem with that.” Haid absently tapped the console as he talked. “Nothing’s obstructed the probes so far, but that’s not to say it won’t happen. They’re not exactly subtle, the way they accelerate.”

“As long as no-one traces the tightbeams back to us, we’ll be okay.” Roche gestured at the screen. “How long until the moon comes into view?”

“A few seconds,” said Kajic, his image facing the screen from the centre of the bridge. “When it does, I’ve programmed the probe to begin its survey automatically. There’s enough of a delay to make direct control tricky.”

“So it might already be seeing the moon?” asked Roche.

“Or even have been destroyed,” said Kajic. “Although I —”

He stopped before he could finish the sentence. “Wait. Here it comes. I’ll enhance the image as much as I can for the screen, but it might be better through your implants.”

Roche put her hand back onto the link and slaved her vision to the probe’s data, at the same time shutting her right to eye to prevent overlap. Instantly she found herself hanging over the surface of the gas giant, spearing through space with a magnetic storm roiling around her. Ahead and just over the bulge of the horizon, a reddish dot had appeared.

“That’s it,” said Kajic. “We’re lucky it’s not eclipsed by the planet; the image would have been much less strong.”

“Can you make anything out yet?” Roche asked.

“Nothing definite. The albedo matches, except for a dark patch on the southern hemisphere. You’ll see it as the probe gets closer. It doesn’t appear on the maps, so it probably isn’t a surface feature.”

“It isn’t the base itself?” asked Haid.

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“Refuelling bases are always around the equator,” Roche answered. “Orbital tethers won’t work anywhere else.”

“Of course.” Haid’s tone was apologetic. “It’s been a while since I last saw one.”

The image sharpened as the moon came closer, becoming a gibbous disc. Its surface was smooth and grey, like its parent, covered with a thick layer of ice. The unusual patch Kajic had pointed out dominated the bottom left quarter: a drop of ink on a circular bloodstain.

“It looks like a shadow,” said Roche.

“I think it might be,” Kajic agreed. “A shadow at the bottom of a crater.”

Roche took a deep breath at the implications of that thought. As the probe swooped closer for its first pass, the details became clear all too quickly. Something had struck the moon’s southern hemisphere with the force of a large asteroid. The resulting impact had torn a sizeable chunk out of the moon and rung its cold core like a bell. Deep fault lines ran from pole to pole, where the brittle, icy crust had fractured. In infra-red, the heat at the shadowy bottom of the crater was obvious, glowing like a red pupil in a dead, grey eye.

“Whatever it was,” said Haid, “it hit hard.”

“Is there any way to tell how long ago it happened?” asked Cane.

“My guess would be sometime in the last six weeks,” said Kajic. “But probably no earlier than a month.”

“Agreed,” added the Box. “The rubble the probe encountered in the orbit of the moon is clearly ejecta from the impact that has not had time to disperse; that makes the impact fairly recent. But the crater floor is no longer molten, indicating that some time has passed. Between four and five weeks ago is my estimate.”

“Any idea what it might have been?” asked Haid.

“At this point, no,” the Box said. “But my intuition tells me it was most likely a ship of some description. It would have been much easier to

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have caused one to crash than to have given an asteroid the vector required to make it impact in such a way.”

“Is it worth looking for survivors?” asked Roche.

“No.” The Box sent an icon darting into the view, pointing out details Roche had missed. “Here you can see the fallen cable of the orbital docking facility; this fragment here corresponds to part of the base itself. You can also see how a major fracture line runs directly through the site of the main installation. This last detail must surely have been fortuitous—no-one could have predicted exactly how the moon would fault—but I doubt that anyone would have survived the impact alone, anyway. The seismic energy released must have been tremendous.” The icon disappeared. “It would have been over in seconds. A very effective blow against the Armada presence in this system – both in terms of resources and morale.”

“It was deliberate, then,” Haid said. “It couldn’t have been an accident – a coincidence?”

“Possible,” said the Box. “But unlikely.”

Roche listened to the Box with a growing sense of unreality. The destruction of an entire Armada refuelling base was still something she could hardly believe possible – even though the scant reports COE Intelligence had received from the system had intimated far worse. And now she was seeing it.

The destruction of Palasian System was no longer a morsel of information to gain leverage with COE Intelligence; it had actually happened.

<The Sol Wunderkind did this?> asked Maii, her voice relayed by Roche’s implants and broadcast over the bridge speakers.

“We don’t have any other suspects,” said Haid.

<How many people were in the base?>

“Three hundred,” Roche replied. “Plus whoever was on the ship when it crashed—if it was a ship, of course.”

“Either way, that’s a lot of dead people,” said Haid grimly.

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“Whether there was one person or a thousand, the actual number is irrelevant,” said Cane. “The only thing of importance to the clone warrior was to ensure that no-one was left alive.” He glanced over top Roche. “Assuming, of course, we have correctly interpreted my sibling’s motives.”

Roche studied Cane’s through the ghost image of the planet in her artificial eye. “Even more important than the base’s strategic value?”

He paused before answering, his features flinching as though he was fighting conflicting emotions.

“Yes,” he said finally, calmly, then turned from Roche back to the screen. “The primary objective would have been to destroy as many people as possible as efficiently as possible. The drive for efficiency would have necessitated an early strike against this base, yes, but if it had been automated, that need would have been reduced. Where there are no people to command them, machines can be inefficient in battle.”

“So he would have attacked Aro SpacePort first?” Roche asked.

“Yes, had the refuelling base been uninhabited.” Another pause. “I’m sorry,” he said, again facing her. “I do not like thinking this way. It is too easy for me.”

Roche nodded, even though she didn’t truly understand how his mind worked and therefore could not empathise with his feelings. When he used his genetically modified abilities, he was terrifying to watch. That he had not used them against *her* was a fact she would be forever grateful for—and therein, she thought, lay the paradox. Of the two Sol clone warriors at large in the Commonwealth, only one was obeying its natural instincts. Cane was not. But *why?*

*Because he doesn’t want to.* That was the only answer she could supply. He had said as much himself. And if the part of him that wanted to kill indiscriminately had been subsumed by the part of him that didn’t—which perhaps not even the Sol geneticists could have suppressed entirely—then she hoped it stayed that way. Especially now that she had seen what he *could* have done.

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She rubbed her eyes, breaking the link and killing the image of the planet in her left eye. Fatigue, which she had successfully kept at bay since her abrupt awakening, was numbing her limbs and pressing at the backs of her eyes.

She was aware enough of her inner feelings, however, to suspect that something more than fatigue was at work.

“The base is dead,” she said, letting the issue slip for the moment. “The how and the why can wait until later. Uri, set course for the Voloras fly-by and get us on the way to Jagabis. I want to see what’s left of Aro SpacePort before we start making any decisions.”

“The probe will be there in approximately ten hours,” said Kajic. “We’ll be past Voloras in four, and well on our way by the time data arrives.”

“Good. I’ll leave that side of things to you and the Box. As long as I’m kept informed, the two of you can run the ship for a while.”

“Where will you be?” asked Kajic.

“In my room, catching up on some sleep.” Then to the others on the bridge: “I suggest you do the same. In thirteen hours we’ll have much more data on our hands than we have now, and we’ll need to be alert to deal with it.”

<I’ll stay here with Cane,> said Maii, <if that’s okay with you, Morgan. I can sleep on a couch.>

“Make sure she does, Cane,” said Roche. “I know you probably won’t need to rest, but she does.”

Cane nodded.

“That goes for you too, Ameidio.”

“I’ll do so as soon as I’ve finished here,” said Haid, his hands busy over a console.

“Okay.” She stood. “Unless something happens, we’ll meet back here in twelve hours.”

She stood and led Maii to Cane. The reave’s hands briefly linked Roche with Cane, and in that instant she received a mental flash of Cane’s

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mind. The impression was short-lived, and carried with it no actual thoughts, but it left her with the impression of rapid motion. Even after the contact had been broken, she couldn't shake a mental image of a gyroscope spinning, perpetually on the verge of toppling over but never quite doing so.

"Wait," said Kajic as she was making to leave. "I'm picking up another transmission."

Roche continued towards the doorway. "I doubt we'll learn anything new," she said. "Unless we work out the language—"

"It's not from Jagabis, this time," Kajic said. Roche stopped and faced Kajic's flickering image. "We're picking up the fringes of a tightbeam, probably reflected off the source of the first transmission. Whoever's sending this one must be doing the best they can with a fairly low-tech outfit. Hang on—we'll see if we can decode it."

"It's not in cipher," said the Box. "It is a standard text message. No voice, no images."

"Display it," said Roche, curious despite her exhaustion.

The view of Hintubet faded from the main screen. Now in its place were several lines of text:

I DO NOT RUN FROM YOU,  
BUT NEITHER WILL I RUN TO YOU.  
I DO NOT REQUIRE YOUR AID.

WHEN OR IF I DO NEED ANYTHING THAT YOU POSSESS,  
I WILL TAKE IT.  
YOU WILL NOT STOP ME.

I AM NOT YOURS TO COMMAND.

Roche read it once, then again. "That's it?" she asked after a third and final reading.

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“The same message is repeated twice,” said the Box.

“And it’s not encrypted?”

“No.”

“But it *was* sent on a tightbeam.”

“Yes.”

“Then that tells us something. I’ll bet the reason we’re picking up the fringes of the beam is because it’s been through a number of relays to prevent triangulation of the source. Whoever sent it was less concerned about the contents of the message than keeping their location a secret.”

Haid nodded. “That would make sense.”

“And judging by the content I’d say there’s only one person who could’ve sent it.”

“My sibling,” said Cane, meeting her accusatory stare.

Roche nodded slowly. “He’s alive.”

“And kicking,” said Haid. “I’m glad I’m not in the shoes of whoever he’s talking to.”

“The fact that he’s talking at all is interesting,” Roche mused. “In fact, it sounds like he’s bluffing.”

“You think so?” said Haid.

She shrugged. “If he’s hiding, he’s vulnerable.”

“I guess we’ll find out soon enough.” Haid returned his attention to the console before him. “I’ll see if any of the probes picked up the signal and try to pin down a source.”

“Good. Any more, Box?”

“The transmission has now ceased,” said the Box.

She considered whether she should stay on the bridge to see if anything else came, but decided against it. The communication from the Sol clone warrior was important enough to warrant further examination, but not informative. Again, without further data, she would only be speculating widely.

“The situation’s unchanged, then,” she said. “I’ll keep my implants open for any further developments. Don’t hesitate to call me.”

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“I won’t,” said Kajic. His image dissolved the same moment Roche stepped from the bridge.

#

Back in her cabin, Roche lay back on her bunk going over the data they had collected so far. Detailed images of the ruined Guhr Outpost came as often as the probe—now orbiting the small moon—passed by. All that remained of the refuelling base were fragments twisted beyond recognition. Sensors detected high levels of radiation in the heart of the crater, which supported the theory that a ship, not an asteroid, had crashed there, but no remains of the ship had been found. Given the force of the explosion, Roche didn’t expect any. The ship must have been fully fuelled to have caused such a blast. Only time would tell how greatly the moon’s orbit around the gas giant had been disturbed.

The remainder of the probes, now on their way to every major body in the system, were still too far away from their destinations to provide any new perspectives. The earliest she could expect data would be from the probe heading to Gatamin, six hours away; the latest, from the probe aimed at Kukumat and Murukan, the jovian pair, at over twenty hours.

Determined not to let frustration get the better of her—there was, after all, nothing she could do to change the speed of light—she tried instead to focus her thoughts on what she did know about Palasian System.

First of all, the COE Intelligence data appeared to be accurate so far. There had been a battle of some sort that had cost the Armada at least a refuelling base.

Second, the system was suspiciously silent, apart from one unintelligible signal emanating from near the major port around Jagabis and another whose source was in hiding.

Third, the sun had been transformed into a cosmic hypershield generator by a weapon used only once before, over a thousand years ago. The last government known to have had access to the sole remaining Asha’s Gauntlet prototype was the Kesh.

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Fourth, Maii's mind-riding abilities had been negated by a mysterious 'smothering' effect.

Fifth, the system had been cordoned off on the outside by three Armada vessels acting under direct orders from General Ramage, commander-in-chief of the COE Armada.

And that was all. Roche was fairly confident that the Sol Wunderkind was trapped in the system, but beyond that she didn't want to speculate too far. It was tempting to write off the epsense-dampening phenomenon as another of his extraordinary abilities, but that seemed unlikely. Apart from the occasional suggestion from Maii that Cane possessed a strong but latent epsense ability, there was no indication that he possessed any such talents. Nevertheless, she was cautious of closing off any avenues of exploration too early. Not while the matters of the Gauntlet and the Armada flotilla were still to be explained, anyway. She had learned from experience that, especially where conspiracies were concerned, the major factor preventing the truth being discovered was the observer's unwillingness to explore connections between facts that on the surface seemed unconnectable.

She leaned back into the pillow, pushing her knuckles into her aching and tired eyes. There was, in short, enough to make her wary, but not enough to give her a definite focus for her fears.

And that, in a sense, only made it worse.

*You will not stop me*, the second transmission had said. Could she have stopped *Cane*, had he chosen to attack rather than to aid her? Was he even on her side? *I am not yours to command*, the message had said. The words made Roche wonder whether he had ever truly been...

#

She didn't realise she had fallen asleep until the alarm on her door buzzed.

In the dream she heard the hiss of a predator. She jerked forward on her bunk and called out in the dark, clutching at the fringe of the dream even as she was wrenched from it. She had been back on Ascensio, trying

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to lure a viridant out of its burrow by offering it a dead rodent. The lizard-like animal had been suspicious, but she had managed to encourage it by repeating the offer several times. She had no intention of giving it the bait, though; her only intention had been to gain its trust—and then strangle it. Only too late had she seen the glint in its eye and known that she was the one being lured. Her hand had lashed out, and the viridant had snapped its jaws around her, pulling her into its burrow ...

The door buzzed again. She shook herself from a daze and spoke into the intercom:

“Who is it?”

“It’s me,” Cane answered. “The data from the probes are due soon. I would like to discuss something with you before then, if it’s not inconvenient.”

“Wait a moment.” She ran her hands over her stubbled scalp and wiped her face. Her skin was greasy and coarse at the same time—a grim reminder that she was overdue for a shower. After a moment she said: “Lights; door open.”

The room brightened at her command. Cane stepped into the cabin.

“I’m assuming it’s not an emergency,” she said, “or else Uri would’ve called first.”

“Little has changed,” said Cane. “We have received another transmission from the same source as the first, but that’s about it. Kajic posted details of it to your buffer, marking it as a low priority. If you were asleep, you wouldn’t have seen it.”

She checked her implants out of habit; sure enough, the message was there. She also learned that she had been asleep for seven hours. It felt more like four.

She stayed on the bed and offered Cane the chair. “So, what can I do for you?”

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“Everyone is resting,” he said. When he sat he folded his hands in his lap, making him look uncharacteristically unsure of himself. “I thought I’d take advantage of the situation to talk to you alone.”

“About?” she prompted.

“The transmission from Jagabis.”

“What about it?”

“I can translate it.”

She studied him suspiciously. “The Box said it wasn’t in any language that it recognised.”

“I know.”

“But *you* recognise it?”

“I didn’t at first,” he said. “Only after reading through the raw text for some hours did it begin to make sense. And even then not all of it.”

“I’m not sure I follow you.”

“I am not *certain* what it means, but I do understand it. I know how odd that sounds, but the situation is as confusing to me as it is to you. And that’s why I wanted to talk to you first rather than the others.”

“You’ve kept this from Maii?”

“She knows I’m hiding something, but she won’t learn what it is unless I let her.”

Roche nodded. “So what does the transmission say?”

“It is a call to arms,” he said. “It is also a plea for help. And a request to negotiate. And an order to retreat. And an offer of assistance. And—”

She cut him off: “I don’t understand. How can it be all these things at once?”

“The message is composed of fragments. Some make sense, but a lot don’t. The bits that don’t are just meaningless, but there is still a resonance in the words – as though they have been engraved in mind, that I might never forget them.”

She suddenly grasped the implication. “Are you suggesting that this is some sort of language used by the Sol Apotheosis Movement? That you’ve been *programmed* to understand it?”

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“Nothing else can explain why I know what some of them mean, and respond to them –” he put a hand on his stomach “– *here*, almost before I have time to realise.”

“Are they dangerous? Could they make you do things you don’t want to do?”

Cane shook his head. “Whoever is broadcasting the orders doesn’t know what they are doing. The fragments that make the most sense are the most emphatic, of course, but they are often the most inconsistent, too. The fragment repeated most often, for instance, is a request to trade information that is not relevant in exchange for supplies that no-one in this century would need.”

“Why would anyone broadcast something like that?” Roche asked. “And where did they find the code? It wasn’t in any of the records I accessed.”

“I don’t know, exactly,” Cane said. “Perhaps the source is a beacon, after all.”

“One the Sol Apotheosis Movement left behind, perhaps?”

He shrugged. “It may have successfully summoned my sibling here, then malfunctioned.”

“That wouldn’t explain why he bothered to reply.”

“Unless the beacon is an AI,” Cane suggested. “Or we have it the wrong way around. Perhaps the Sol transmission is from my sibling, and the reply from someone else entirely.”

Roche thought this over. The first transmission had come from Jagabis, their current destination. “If so, that means we’re heading into trouble.”

“I know.” His dark features remained expressionless. “It appears that being able to translate the transmission, even in part, has only made the situation worse.”

“It’s not your fault, Cane,” she said. “This whole system is a mess.” She rubbed sleep from her eyes with the heels of her hands. “Besides, you can’t help what you are,” she went on, sensing that he wanted something

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more from her than just a confessor. “Your lack of motive worries me sometimes, but you’ve convinced me that you don’t mean me any harm—for what that’s worth. Just because you’re a weapon, and you’ve been designed to do certain things that might harm a great number of people, that doesn’t mean you will. There’s a big difference between design and intent, after all; I try to keep that in mind.”

Cane nodded slowly. “Thank you, Morgan. I was worried that the reminder of what I am might cause you to rethink our association.”

She smiled vaguely. “I’m glad you told me. At the very least, we can get the Box onto it and see whether it can’t translate the rest.”

“You would like me to tell the Box?”

“I can’t see why not. Having some understanding of a high-level Sol language will probably come in handy one day.” She went on: “When you get the time, go over the text of the transmission, pull out the bits that you can translate and see what the Box can come up with. It may be no more of a linguist than you or I, but it must be able to run basic statistical checks. Something’s bound to come up.”

Cane stood, his muscles flexing smoothly with the movement. “We’ll begin immediately.”

“I’ll be down to review your results soon.” She stood, too, and followed him to the door. “But don’t let it get in the way of mapping the system. That’s our first priority at the moment.”

The door slid closed behind Cane, leaving Roche with yet another mystery to ponder. She wondered how many more this system would throw at her before finally surrendering some definite answers. And how much longer she could juggle the conflicting trust and suspicion she felt for Adoni Cane.

When she made it to the bridge almost an hour later, the first wave of information had begun to arrive. The probe aimed at the sun had announced that it had data to send within moments of Cane’s return. Since then, the Box, Cane and Kajic had been fully occupied, paring back the packets of data to the ones most relevant or likely to contain answers

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to Roche's many questions. As a result, the mystery of the possible Sol transmissions had been placed on hold.

"Okay," she said, settling into her seat. Maii took a place next to her, apart from a hand on her shoulder keeping carefully unobtrusive. "Let's see what we've got."

"Pictures in visual spectra, mostly," said Kajic. "And, according to the Box, the mechanism underlying the Gauntlet."

"Show me."

The main screen blossomed to reveal a bloated red giant, magnified to fill one third of the view. Cooler patches had been dimmed by compensators to appear charcoal black, giving the star's surface a cracked appearance. Massive disturbances, clearly visible despite the blur of distance, flowed sluggishly from each pole to the equator, skewed east by the star's rotation.

Roche winced at the sight. "You'd never guess that, until a month ago, that used to be a green dwarf."

"Precisely," said the Box. "The change in its composition goes much deeper than I thought."

"How deep, exactly?"

"To the core. Look closely, Morgan."

The view zoomed forward, closer to the star. Gases bubbled like magma from an unimaginable interior, casting a baleful red light through the bridge. A green ring stood out on the screen, highlighting a darker point. As the ring swung past, Roche realised that the point at its centre was an object orbiting the star, deep within its chromosphere. She had no reference points against which to estimate the object's size, but the way it disturbed the gases around it, leaving a deep, roiling scar in its wake, suggested enormous size or mass, or both.

"That can't be a ship," she said.

"It isn't," said the Box. "It is one of sixteen quark breeders in high-speed orbit, firing pellets of strange matter into the heart of the star."

"You can tell that just by looking at it?"

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“Not entirely, Morgan. If you watch carefully, you can see the pellets strike the photosphere.”

Roche looked more closely at the image. Sure enough, every few seconds or so, a bright spark of blue light flared at the base of the wake.

“Why strange matter?” asked Haid.

“Strange matter is super-dense,” Roche said before the Box could reply, “and it can be moved more easily and more precisely than neutronium. With it, you can alter the workings of a star’s core. Once you control the core, you can play with its electromagnetic and gravity fields.”

“This, clearly, is how the Riem-Perez Horizon is generated,” added the Box.

“Overkill,” said Haid.

“The Gauntlet is a grotesque example of just that,” the AI agreed. “If its designers had stopped to consider what they were doing even for a moment, they would have realised that what they hoped for simply wasn’t possible.”

Haid shrugged. “You have to admire them for trying, anyway.”

The quark breeder continued to plough its way through Hintubet’s wounded chromosphere, as implacable as the physics that foretold the star’s death.

“What would happen if we destroyed them?” Cane asked.

“Disaster,” said the Box. “The nuclear processes inside the sun would spiral out of control until the reactions sustaining the Riem-Perez Horizon ceased. The boundary would become increasingly chaotic until, within a very short period of time, it collapsed entirely.”

“Any idea who planted the breeders?” said Roche.

“Detail is sparse at this resolution,” said the Box. “I cannot tell if the breeders display any markings. However, only one nation in this region manufactures breeders of the sort required for such a macro-project as this, and that is the Eckandar Trade Axis.”

“Do you think they might be involved?”

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“No. These devices have been available for many centuries; the array is probably that belonging to the original Gauntlet prototype, not one manufactured recently.”

“That’s good to know. I hate to think why anyone would build them today.” Roche mused to herself for a moment. “If this is the prototype, and it’s being used to entrap the Sol Wunderkind, then it must have been kept somewhere nearby. Allowing time for the weapon to be dusted off and programmed, then put into place and activated, that doesn’t leave much for transport.”

“Do we know when it was activated?” asked Haid.

“Not before the 26th of last month,” said the Box. “That was when the Armada Marines investigating the system were ambushed. Presumably the system was open at that point.”

“Is there any way to pin it down further?”

“I have been observing the rate of decay of the boundary. If we assume that it originally extended to cover Palasian System’s cometary halo, then that gives us an activation date somewhere between the 37th and 40th.”

“So that means the people behind the Gauntlet had a little more than one week to get it here,” Roche said.

“How would they have got it past the clone warrior?” said Haid.

“One assumes the breeders were slow-jumped as close to the sun as possible with a large relative velocity,” said the Box. “Once they were captured by Hintubet’s gravity and safely inside the chromosphere, there would have been very little the Sol Wunderkind could have done to interfere with them.”

“He wouldn’t have known what they were, after all,” said Roche.

“They would have demonstrated no overtly hostile behaviour,” added Cane. “And there may have been more pressing matters demanding his attention.”

“That makes sense.” Roche turned her attention away from the sun and the device crippling it. “What else have we found?”

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“We have a probe orbiting Cartha’s Planet,” said Kajic. “Everything seems in order there. Wight Station—the automated solar research installation—has not been damaged.”

“Because it was no threat,” Roche said. “Go on.”

“The same probe examined the Mattar Belt as it flew through,” Kajic went on. “There is evidence of activity on several asteroids, although only one prowling mine was observed in situ. Likewise, it had not been interfered with.”

“Any sign of people?”

“No. The inner system appears to be uninhabited, except by machines.”

“Perhaps we can use them to our advantage, then. Box, as we get closer, I want you to make contact with the AIs on Wight Station and the prowling mines. They may have recorded information that will help us plot the movements of the Sol Wunderkind.”

“I will do so,” said the Box. “If other installations have been attacked in the same manner as Guhr Outpost, the explosions should have been noticed by one or more of these observers. We may be able to pinpoint the exact time each attack took place.”

“Let me know what you find.” Roche turned to Kajic. “Any news from Jagabis?”

“The probe will be in position, relative to us, in about an hour. All transmissions ceased from that region twenty-five minutes ago, corresponding almost exactly with our arrival in the system.”

Roche mentally approximated the time it would take data travelling at light-speed to cross the system twice; as Kajic had said, it did match the time required for someone on Jagabis to observe the arrival of the *Ana Vereine*, then for the immediate cessation of transmissions to be observed by Kajic.

“So someone knows we’re here,” she said sombrely.

“They knew where we *were*,” said Haid. “We’ve been camouflaged since we arrived, which still gives us some element of surprise.”

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Roche nodded. "Have the other probes found anything?"

"Two used Gatamin as a gravity-whip, but neither reported anything unusual," said Kajic. "Again, that planetary system was uninhabited."

Roche took a moment to study the images of the smallish, once blue-green gas giant, third most distant from the sun. Apart from its remarkable rings, it was easy to overlook.

"Herensung likewise appears untouched," Kajic went on, "at least from a distance. There were a few orbital communication relays that are now silent, but until the probe arrives we have no way of knowing what has happened to them."

"That leaves Cemenid, and the double jovian." Roche was curious to see both. Cemenid, the largest planet, had been home to a COE communications base; Kukumat and Murukan were simply mysterious, on the opposite side of the system.

"Cemenid is a couple of hours away," said Kajic. "The double will be at least another twelve."

Roche couldn't complain about that; she already had enough data to keep her occupied for days, and would soon have more. The double jovian was simply a bonus.

She applied herself to the information with a will and Maii's help, trying to find any evidence of the Sol clone warrior's passage. Occasional details surfaced from the growing files—wreckage of satellite here, an ion after-wash there—but no actual sightings. Wherever the Wunderkind was, he had been effective in hiding himself—so far. When the data from the other major planets arrived, she hoped to know where he was not, at least. Then it would become a more difficult quest, through the gulfs between planets or in the mess of dark bodies known as Autoville between Cemenid and Gatamin. She didn't like to think that he might have hidden any further out than that; Mishra's Stake, the second dark body halo, extended in a band one and half thousand million kilometres wide almost as far as Voloras. If he was hiding in there, he would be impossible to find.

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The only consolation was that, if he *was* in there, he would be effectively unable to surprise them. Which is why Roche felt safe ruling it out. He would never have allowed himself to reduce his options so severely, assuming Cane's behaviour was anything to go by.

<He will watch patiently until he has sufficient information,> said Maii, <then strike. It won't be in his nature to act unprepared, or to wait too long. As soon as he knows how to destroy us, he will do so without hesitation.>

<There's a cheerful thought,> Roche responded, still acutely aware of what had happened to Guhr Outpost.

<We just have to be ready for him, and make sure he doesn't force us into any mistakes.>

Roche pondered this. <We may already be making a mistake by rushing into the system before the probes have had time to report.>

<I don't think so,> the reave said. <Even in-system the distances are large enough to give us an edge, given the power of the *Ana Vereine*. And besides, where are we now?>

<Inside the orbit of Gatamin.>

<The inner system doesn't really start until Cemenid. That gives us plenty of time to change course if the remaining probes *do* find anything.>

<But between Gatamin and Cemenid is Autoville, and there could be *anything* in there.>

<True. Then we'll just have to keep our eyes open.>

Roche smiled at the irony in the blind Surin's words, but she kept the thought carefully to herself.

"We're picking up something unusual," said Kajic.

"From Jagabis?" Roche asked, pushing the data she had been studying to one side and focussing her attention on the main screen.

"No. It's a tightbeam from roughly the same direction, though."

"Contents?"

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“A request for ID on a COE band. That’s all.” Kajic paused. “The transmission is coming once every minute, and we’re only picking up the fringes of it. Also, it’s blue-shifted, indicating that the source is moving toward us.”

*Toward* them? Roche stiffened in her seat. “A ship?”

“That seems likely, although I haven’t detected any emissions yet.”

“Keep looking. Show me the message in full.”

A window on the main screen opened, displaying four brief lines of text:

VESSEL ENTERING PALASIAN SYSTEM 08:05

ID REQUESTED

RESPOND ASAP

QUOLMANN

“Who’s this ‘Quolmann’?” asked Haid.

“It’s not a who,” said Roche. “It’s COE Intelligence short-hand for ‘Trust me; I’m an ally’.”

“And should we?” asked Haid evenly.

“That depends,” said Cane. “If the code is common knowledge, then we should treat its use here with suspicion.”

“It’s not well-known,” said Roche, “otherwise it would have been changed. But I’m disinclined to trust someone even if they are from COE Intelligence.”

“So what do we do?” Kajic asked. “Ignore it?”

“We can’t afford to,” said Roche uneasily. “The message was sent to us. They may not know exactly where we are, given that we’re only picking up the edges of the tightbeam, but they do have a rough idea.”

“They could be sending the message to several likely locations,” suggested Cane.

Roche quickly dismissed the idea. “No, the ship is still coming in this direction.” She thought for a moment, then: “We’re being predictable.”

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Uri, I want us to change course slightly; swing us away from the sun and to a wider approach. I know it'll mean taking longer to get to Jagabis, but I think we have to do it—at least until we know how far away this ship is. At the same time, send a remote to reply to the tightbeam on our original course. Give it half an hour before sending our ID and the 'Quolmann' codeword—that's all. Keep the probe on our old heading until it receives a reply. It can relay any messages without putting the *Ana Vereine* at risk."

"Consider it done," said Kajic.

Roche read the text of the message again. "It's almost as though they were expecting someone from COE Intelligence to come," she mused.

"And have nothing to fear from them," added Cane.

"That puts them in a minority," said Haid wryly.

"The Jagabis data is being processed," announced Kajic.

"Finally." Roche prepared herself for another inrush of information. "Okay. Let's see it."

The probe had inserted itself into a polar orbit around the innermost jovian world of Palasian System. Even under Hintubet's stark, crimson light, Roche was struck by the beauty of the planet. Its bands and vortices were manifold and varied, ranging from thick jet streams to thin wisps; its pole was a region of intense electromagnetic activity, the atmosphere constantly erupting with flashes of lightning. Its rings were small relative to those of some of the other planets, but they were there, framing a large number of moons—fourteen known, Roche recalled from the COE files. The largest of them, Aro, was also the largest solid body in the system; for that reason, plus its more hospitable distance from the sun, it had been chosen over Cartha's Planet for the system's permanent civilian base.

She studied the data intently, eager for – and yet simultaneously dreading—her first sight of Aro SpacePort and its close neighbour, Emptage City. Although she knew that the probe had sent this view some hours ago, she couldn't help but feel nervous of what she might see, as though she was more intimately involved than a mere observer. What if

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the Sol Wunderkind were to be attacking Aro at the very moment the moon came into view? What would she do? She fought to suppress the discomfoting notion, because the truth was, there would be nothing she *could* do. They would be helpless to defend the base ...

The probe changed course as it crossed Jagabis' north pole. Its tiny but powerful thrusters fired to insert it into an equatorial orbit intersecting that of Aro. Roche waited impatiently as the minutes ticked by until, finally, the red dot of the moon appeared over the bulge of the distant horizon.

The dot became a disc. The probe's thrusters ceased firing; momentum and the pull of Jagabis' gravity would complete the manoeuvre. The last leg of its approach would be conducted with as few emissions as possible.

The disc swelled steadily. A hazy atmosphere, rich in methane and sulphur, softened its edges. The hemisphere facing the probe was mostly in shadow, making details hard to discern, and Hintubet's bloody glare in the background only complicated the matter. Roche watched as Kajic tried various enhancement routines on the image, methodically refining the picture.

"I can't see the orbital tower," Roche said.

"What's that in the south-east quadrant?" Haid pointed. "Another crater?"

"No," said the Box. "Remember the scale. An impact that large would have cracked the moon in two."

"The COE maps have two methane seas listed," said Roche. "That must be one of them."

"It's a little hard to make out at the moment," said Kajic. "But I think you're right, Morgan."

"We'll soon find out," she said.

The moon expanded until its shadowed image filled most of the screen. Red sunlight glinted on an object in orbit around it, startling Roche until she realised that the telemetry data was still empty of signs of

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technological activity. An abandoned satellite, she guessed. Or wreckage. Whatever it was, it caught the light twice more before vanishing from view. Kajic's display showed several other unidentified and inactive objects, invisible to her limited senses, also in distant orbits, and she followed them instead to pass the time. A similar display on Haid's console revealed that he too was tracking them, ready to respond if one of them made any move at all – or showed signs of life.

The probe slid neatly into a geostationary orbit above Aro SpacePort and turned its instruments downward.

"Radar has located the main launch field," said Kajic intently. "No other clear landmarks, yet."

"The main dome?" asked Roche.

"I have something that might be an outline, but ..." He shook his head. "It's not clear. The dome might be down. There's no way to be sure until the sun rises."

"How long will that be?"

"Ten minutes or so."

"Try infra-red," she suggested. "If there are survivors, they'll show up as hot-spots."

"I'm not finding anything, Morgan," Kajic said after a moment. "It's uniformly cool down there. Even the launch field."

"No fires?" asked Haid. "Traces of explosions?"

"Aro has an atmosphere and weather," said Kajic. "Excess heat will dissipate relatively quickly."

"But there's no evidence of the sort of damage we saw at Guhr Outpost, is there?" Roche studied the image on the main screen in detail, clutching at anything that would justify optimism. "There might still be a chance."

"Underground," said Cane.

"The main dome was fully exposed," said Kajic. "In fact, it was built in the walls of an old crater, so it needed only a roof."

"But the spaceport might have subterranean facilities," said Roche.

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“The only way to check would be to go down there.” Haid glanced around the bridge. “Any volunteers?”

“Let’s see if we can’t contact them first.” Roche swivelled away from the screen. “Uri, have the probe broadcast a brief message asking for ID. Use the ‘Quolmann’ code. There may be a connection between survivors here and the ship signalling us.”

“The people speaking the Sol command language?” asked Haid.

“Speaking it badly,” Cane put in.

“Whatever,” said Haid. “I’d be wary of letting them know we’re anywhere near them just yet – if they’re even there at all, that is.”

“I know,” said Roche. “That’s what the probe is for. Send the signal, Uri. Repeat it once.”

“Done.” Kajic’s image shifted within the hologrid. “And now we wait. We’ll see a reply in about five hours, if there is one.”

“Damn it.” Roche cursed the situation—and herself for forgetting the light-speed delay. “I guess that’s all we —”

“Hold it!” Kajic barked as something flashed across the screen. “The probe—something’s firing on it!”

Roche slaved her implants to the data-feed. The hazy radar outline of the spaceport jerked once, then disappeared entirely from view. In the visual spectrum, the view slewed wildly as the probe fought to stabilise itself. Damage readings scrolled down the borders of her field of view, suggesting that the probe had been struck on one side.

“Uri? What the hell is —?”

“I’m getting a fix on something,” Kajic interrupted. The probe steadied, its cameras pointing toward the horizon of the moon. Light flashed from something metallic. “It’s a derelict.”

The view zoomed closer. The ship had once been a freighter, but now had a hole in its side that could have housed one of the *Ana Vereine’s* scutters. It was travelling in an orbit above and at right angles to that of the probe.

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A cloud of escaping gas flowered briefly from the shadow of the ship's hole. A second later, it happened again.

"I'm picking up very low electromagnetic readings," said Kajic. "Almost undetectable. Hardly a life-sign, and nothing like any weapon I've ever seen."

The view jumped again. Red warning indicators began to flash in the probe's telemetry display.

"I can't tell what's hitting it," Kajic said with some frustration. "And neither can the probe."

"Why isn't it doing anything?" asked Haid.

"It doesn't know *what* to do," Haid responded. "It can't even run without knowing what it's running from."

Roche leaned forward as inspiration struck her. "Does the probe have anti-meteorite shields?"

"Of course; they're standard in anything designed to travel at speed in-system—"

"What about when it's not 'at speed'?"

"They shut down to conserve power ..."

Sudden understanding stopped him short.

On the main screen, the probe's cameras caught a glimpse of the derelict ship. Red sunlight flashed on its pitted hull more strongly than before. Dust was still puffing out of the shadow in its side, as regular as a metronome. Then the image shook and disappeared again, the probe clearly having difficulty maintaining its attitude with so much damage interfering with its systems.

"It's a gas-gun," Roche said. "Probably a chemical thruster modified to fire slivers of metal or plastic; they're not hard to jury-rig. All that's needed is a small amount of power to run a targeter or a receiver, and no-one will ever know it's there – until it's activated, anyway. And then, before you know it, you've been hit by something with enough kinetic energy to punch a hole right through your hull."

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“The presence of the probe must have been enough to set it off,” said Haid, nodding. “Just being there. Imagine what would’ve happened if it had sent that signal.”

“Are there other derelicts in orbit?” Cane asked.

“I have plotted the orbits of at least a dozen small masses,” confirmed Kajic, “many in similar orbits to this one—high and at extreme angles to anything around the equator.”

“Thereby maximising the relative velocities of the slivers,” said Roche.

“So it’s likely that all the derelicts are similarly armed,” Cane said.

“But why bother?” said Haid.

“It’s a trap, “ said Roche.

“But for whom?”

“For us, I guess.”

“No,” said Cane. “This would have taken time to prepare. There must have been another target.”

The probe shuddered again as another of the slivers struck it toward the rear. This time, the damage was severe. The feed died for a second before flickering back to life.

“We’re going to lose it,” said Roche, cursing under her breath.

“Soon, yes,” said Kajic. “But not immediately. The probe knows it’s been profoundly damaged, but it has been programmed to complete its mission before allowing total shut down. See? It’s already changing orbit.”

Roche followed the changing telemetry data. “What *was* it’s mission, Uri? I thought it had already accomplished it by getting there.”

“Not quite. We needed to know what happened to Emptage City; that’s its ultimate objective.”

The probe’s trajectory steepened at a frightening rate, accomplished by the faltering push of its thrusters and the steady drag of Aro’s gravity. Roche fought the urge to grip her armrests as the atmosphere of the moon rushed toward the probe – and *her*, according to her senses.

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Then clouds were sweeping past, red-tinged with sunrise. The radar image of Aro SpacePort expanded to meet her just moments after dawn broke across the surface of the moon.

Roche started slightly as the probe struck and the screen flashed with high-speed bursts of data. Then it went black.

“The feed has ceased,” said Kajic.

“What did we get?” Roche managed, breaking the link to her implants.

“A number of partial images,” the Box said. “I am reconstructing them for you now.”

The main screen scanned through a number of blurry views of the surface of Aro. The first three contained scenes that could have been anywhere – too dark to make out details – but the fourth was surprisingly sharp. It showed the landing field of Aro SpacePort with a resolution down to three metres.

There were three ships parked in its dry-docks. All were lifeless and gutted, with black holes along their spines indicating that they had been fired upon from above.

“Orbital laser-fire,” said Haid. “Or bombardment of some sort.”

“Maybe more pieces of derelict ships,” Roche agreed. The field itself was pock-marked with circles – craters left behind from shots that had missed. The buildings of the landing field had been similarly destroyed.

“There’s nothing here,” she said. “Anything, else, Uri?”

“One other clear snapshot,” Kajic said. “The probe managed a course-change before it crashed and flew over the edge of Emptage City. There’s just enough light to pick out fine detail.”

“Let’s see it.” The spaceport vanished. In its place appeared the curved rim of an eroded crater wall, its lip blackened and jagged. From the point of view of the probe, she was unable to make out the dome that had covered the colony.

“Can we see any closer?” she asked.

The crater wall rose to meet them as Kajic magnified the image.

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“We were fortunate, in a way,” said Kajic, “that the sun had only just risen. The incident light was striking at such a low angle that shadows revealed details we would normally have missed from above.”

“I see them,” said Roche, her stomach sinking.

The shattered base of the dome stood out clearly in the image, as did the bases of the struts and girders that had once held it in place.

“He cracked it open.” Haid’s words were steeped in awe and disbelief.

“That’s all he needed to do,” said Roche. “He let the air out, and everyone died.”

“No,” said Cane. “See the area around the base of the dome? It’s blackened, as though by fire.”

“But it’s a methane atmosphere —” Kajic began, then stopped.

“Methane burns in the presence of oxygen,” Cane finished.

“He punctured the dome, then started a fire.” Roche could picture it all too clearly. “Then he left it to burn. It might have taken days.”

Roche detected a mental frown an instant before Maii’s voice intruded into her thoughts. <Why didn’t he finish them off when he had the chance?>

“Because he didn’t need to, Maii,” Roche explained. “The gas-guns in orbit would pick off anyone who managed to survive and get off-planet—and anyone who tried to mount a rescue, for that matter. Before the dome over Emptage City finally collapsed, he was probably on the other side of the system, attacking somewhere else.”

“A very efficient strategy,” said Cane.

Roche glanced at him, but was unable to tell from his expression exactly what he was feeling. Approval? Admiration? Respect? She herself felt nothing but sickened by the cruelty with which the warrior had acted.

“What are the odds that someone could still be alive?” she asked of no-one in particular.

“Minimal,” replied the Box. “There may still be airtight chambers in some of the buildings, or underground as Cane suggested; small numbers

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of people may have taken shelter within them. But how would we go about rescuing them?”

“The gas-guns are easily avoided,” she began.

“True. Without the element of surprise and against appropriate shields, they would be ineffective. We could even destroy the derelicts before assuming orbit, thereby neutralising the threat entirely. But the problem lies in locating the survivors quickly enough to mount a rescue attempt—survivors who have no way to communicate with us and may not have even the most basic of pressure suits to survive exposure to the atmosphere. Any rescue attempt would be complicated, time-consuming and risky.”

“With the Sol clone warrior still out there,” said Haid grimly. “Laughing at us.”

“Or hunting us,” the Box added. “We cannot allow ourselves to be distracted. Our mission is to track him down.”

“I know, I *know*.” Roche sighed. “I just feel we should at least *try*.”

“It’s an honourable thought,” said Cane softly, “but not one we can entertain at this moment. It’s what he will expect us to do. Perhaps later, when we have the time.”

She straightened in the chair, trying to regain the appearance of the staunch commander. “Perhaps. For now, though, we’ve lost our probe at Jagabis. Uri, how long until another can take its place?”

“A few hours.”

“Do it. I don’t want any blind spots.”

“Understood.”

She stood. “I’ll be in the captain’s office for a moment.”

Maii lightly squeezed Roche’s shoulder. <I’ll come with you,> she said.

Roche considered arguing, but knew it would make a scene – and that was exactly what she was trying to avoid. She couldn’t meet Haid’s eyes as, together, they crossed the bridge and entered the smaller chamber at its rear. When the doors slid shut behind them, Roche let herself sink

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into a padded chair and put her head in her hands. Acutely conscious of Maii's thin-boned hand on her shoulder, she drew a heavy veil across her thoughts.

To no avail.

*They're all dead...*

<It's harder than you thought it would be,> said the reave, her mental voice a gentle breeze blowing between their minds.

<Much,> said Roche, kneading her temples with her fingertips.

<There is too much unknown, and too much at stake,> Maii continued. <You have to confront the Sol Wunderkind before it escapes this system and destroys another; but how can you confront it without sufficient information to guarantee that you will not fail like the others who tried before? The more you look, the more death you see, and the less likely it seems that you will ever succeed – but that only makes it all the more important that you keep trying. You might be all that stands between the clone warrior and the rest of the Commonwealth.>

<Look, Maii,> said Roche sharply. <I don't need this right now.>

<No,> the reave soothed. <You don't. And yet you continue to torture yourself with it.>

Roche smiled to herself. <I suppose I do, don't I?>

<I don't know,> said Maii. <I'm guessing, not reading.>

Roche removed the girl's hand from her shoulder, and held it in her own. <Maii, this is the first thing I have ever tried to do on my own. And I guess I'm just a little ... scared. Not of the Sol Wunderkind escaping or anything, but of —>

<Failing,> said Maii, finishing what Roche was reluctant to voice.

<I mean, I know I'm not really on my own, with you and the others there to help me, but COE Intelligence isn't there issuing the orders for once, and that makes it so important not to screw up in any way at all ... > She stopped, realising that she was close to babbling, and sighed. <I just need time to get my head straight.>

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<I understand,> Maii said, her face expressionless but the waves of sympathy she offered were real. <There have been many moments since Veden died when I wondered how I could even think of going on without him. But here I am. I have no choice *but* to do so. The alternative, as they say, is far worse.>

Roche smiled. <And better to try and fail than to go back to COE Intelligence or give up entirely. At least it's *my* failure, not theirs.>

<I'm sure they'd be keen to contribute,> said Maii, the words stained with amusement.

<I'm sure they would.> Her mood sobered as an image of the ruined city on Aro returned to her. No doubt the killer of almost half a million people would have something to say, also.

With a *fizz*, a full-size image of Kajic appeared, standing opposite them with his hands respectfully behind his back.

"Apologies for intruding, Morgan. I have detected the emissions of a vessel on an intercept course with the relay probe we left to follow our previous course."

She took a deep breath. "The ship that hailed us earlier?"

"I assume so. It's still several million kilometres away, and I am unable to discern its class or origins, but I can tell you that it's small. Maybe a mini-shuttle or singleship."

"Occupied, I presume?"

"It is accelerating within the physical tolerances of a living being, yes."

The ghost of a thought from Maii: *But what kind of being is it?*

It was with some unease that Roche realised that the Surin's words echoed her own suspicions: A singleship. One person. Who else *could* it be?

"Send something to meet it. An armoured – and armed – probe, this time."

"To destroy it?"

"Not yet. Just to let the pilot know we're not taking any chances."

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With a slight nod of acknowledgment, Kajic's image disappeared, leaving Roche alone with Maii once more. She could feel the girl's hand on her shoulder, but couldn't decide whether the firmness of the grip was an attempt at reassurance or an indication of Maii's own fears.