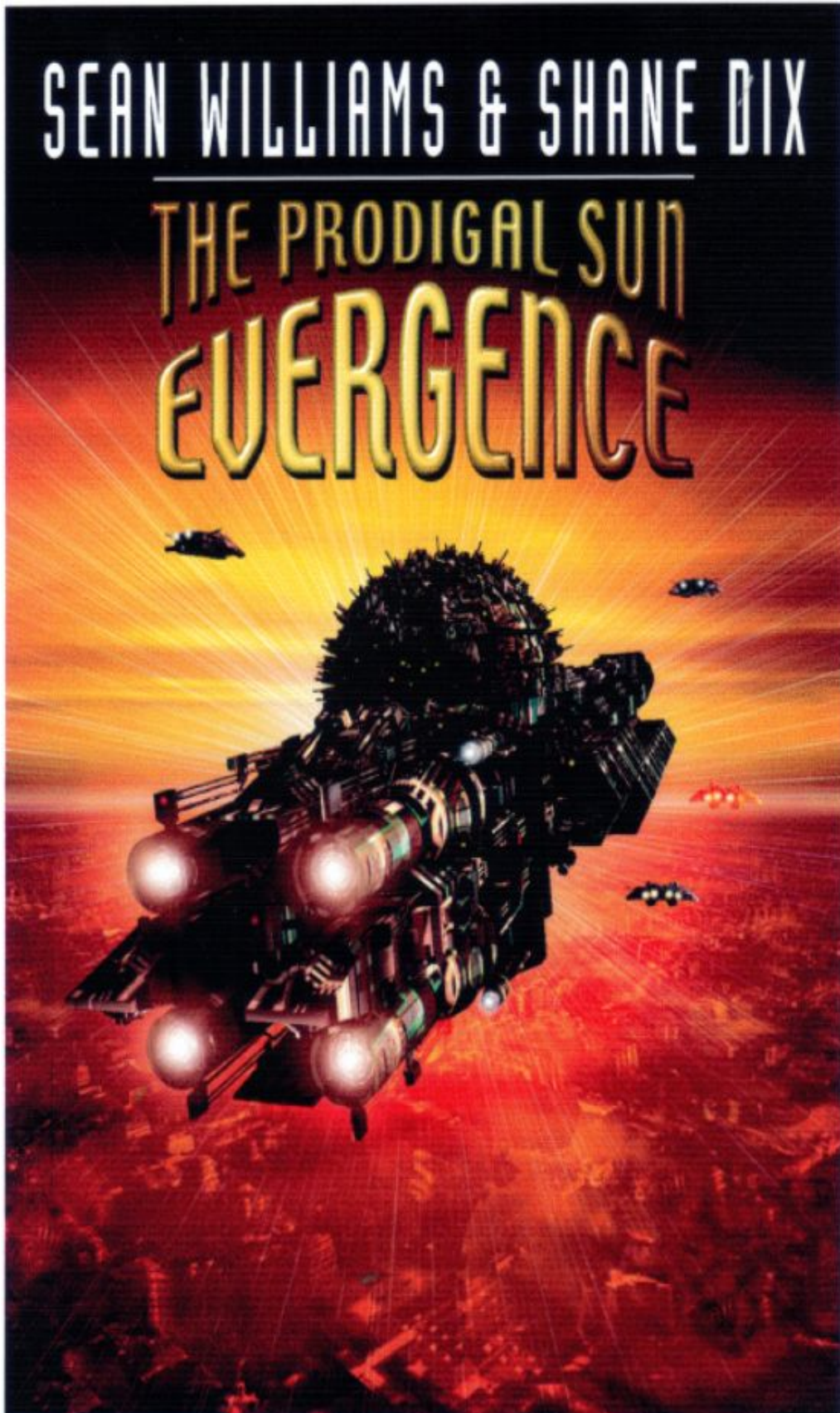


The Prodigal Sun



The Prodigal Sun

THE PRODIGAL SUN
EVERGENCE 1

Sean Williams & Shane Dix



The Prodigal Sun

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“Violence can only be concealed by a lie, and the lie can only be maintained by violence. Any man who has once proclaimed violence as his method is inevitably forced to take the lie as his principle.”

Alexander

Solzhenitsyn

“Darkness is looking back and saying: 'I have been deluded from the start; it has all been a mistake.'“

Hubert van

Zeller

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For Rachel and Sarah who, despite everything, are still the mothers of the children we love.

For Peter McNamara, Patrick McNamara, Andrew Stunnell, Peter Stunnell and everyone involved in the Cogal project, without whom this book would not have been possible.

Prologue

The pillow-shaped capsule tumbled end over end through the gulf between stars. Every point of its four-metre length showed evidence of age: its matt-grey surface was pitted from micro-impacts; the molecules of its ablative shield were scarred by radiation; gravity waves from distant black holes spiralling inevitably to collision had warped it from true. Had it been noticed by any passing ship, it would have been ignored as flotsam, for after millennia of exploration and trade such drifting junk was common in the Galaxy. It wouldn't even have been worth the effort required to destroy it.

Had it been noticed ...

Junk it may have appeared to be, but it was far from that. A detailed analysis of the skin of the capsule would have revealed that nothing – not even radiation – penetrated deeper than five centimetres. It had retained its structural integrity despite the forces tugging at it. And, had its density been measured, the fact that it was hollow would have become immediately obvious.

As it tumbled through the void, sensors within monitored the frequency and intensity of incident radiation. It emitted nothing, yet analysed in minute detail everything that fell upon it. Data was collated and processed. Three-dimensional maps were drawn, on which the course of the capsule – past and future – was plotted. Options were considered.

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The capsule had passed through numerous governments and territories during its long journey: from the Giel, remote and aloof in the Perseus Arm, to the Bright Suzerains tucked hot and hardy close to the Galactic Core. There was hardly a solar system in the Milky Way that had not been colonised or explored at least once by the Human race in all its forms. The descendants of the apes who had once reached in wonder for the night sky now owned the stars. They were the sole heirs of a Galaxy ripe for the taking.

Decisions were made.

Patient exploitation of the local magnetic field brought the capsule to the boundary between two nations: one an unwieldy alliance that had outlived its usefulness and was already dissolving under the weight of administration and ennui; the other a small but heated theocracy bursting like a boil from its parent's side. Stray emissions – some almost certainly decades out of date – carried reports of occasional conflict, harried officials, rising tension ... The capsule didn't care much for the details, just as long as there was friction, an ambient heat it could exploit. Who fought who was irrelevant. There was only one Right and Wrong it cared to recall, for it was this duality the capsule existed to serve.

It was a seed looking for soil in which to germinate. A seed that had come a long way and waited a long, long time, to bear fruit. A seed whose interior became increasingly active the more certain it was that the end of its journey was near ...

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PART ONE:
MIDNIGHT

1

COEA *Midnight*

'954.10.30 EN

02.35

Morgan Roche was trapped, and she knew it. Trapped by orders, by circumstance, by the bracelet around her left wrist, and by the stare of the wide-shouldered, middle-aged man standing in front of the main viewscreen of the Frigate *Midnight*.

“We have discussed this before,” he said, frowning down at her from his elevated position. The Captain's podium normally remained flush to the floor except during battle, but Proctor Klose preferred it at its full metre extension. Surrounded by the half-light of the bridge, with its flashing displays and blank-faced officers, he reminded Roche of a half-finished statue – so full of self-importance that, had she not been so frustrated, she would have found him laughable. “Has anything changed since then, Commander?”

“No, sir,” she replied. “All I ask is that you reconsider your decision.”

Klose shook his head. “Call me inflexible, if you like, but I see no reason to entertain the whims of my passengers.”

“It's more than a whim, Captain,” she snapped.

“No, Commander,” said Klose, the ghost of a grin hovering at the corners of his mouth. “It is not. What you request is clearly outside your jurisdiction.”

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“Not necessarily.” Her free hand betrayed the half-lie by adjusting the tight-fitting neck of her uniform, making her look nervous. When she realised what she was doing, she returned the hand to her side. The cord connecting the bracelet to the valise brushed against her leg as she straightened her posture, but she had learned long ago to ignore it.

“Without access to the relevant information,” she said, “I am unable to determine where my jurisdiction lies in this matter. Perhaps if you would explain your reason for denying me access to the capsule, then I might understand.”

Klose's frown deepened. “I am not required to explain anything to you, Commander. Need I remind you who is the commanding officer of this vessel?”

“No, sir.” Roche gritted her teeth on an angry retort.

“Then I think that concludes our discussion.” He turned to face the viewscreen.

Roche remained where she was, unwilling to let the matter rest – although she knew that technically he was in the right. But there was more than the life capsule and its contents at stake. There was a *principle*.

“Captain ... “

Klose sighed. “Yes, Commander?”

“Forgive me for saying this, but your manner seems to indicate a resentment of my presence aboard this ship. I hope you have not allowed your feelings to cloud your judgement.”

Klose faced her once again, his narrowed eyes displaying an indignation which told Roche her remark had hit home.

The Captain of the *Midnight* outranked Roche, but her superior officer – and, therefore, her mission – outranked his. In the course of their voyage, the unassuming valise she carried had become a focus for every slight, real or imagined. That she carried it because of the cord and bracelet ensuring its permanent attachment to her person, rather than out of any real choice, he seemed to have forgotten. Orders were orders

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and she had less choice than he did, if only in the short term. But the basic fact, the one the Captain detested, remained: Klose was just a donkey for the courier on his back.

The situation might never have become a problem had it not been for the length of time available for circumstance to rub shoulders with resentment. In six weeks, the gentle but constant friction had generated enough heat to spark flame. The matter of the capsule and its mysterious occupant, although trivial in itself, was the catalyst of a much more significant reaction.

“On the contrary,” replied the Captain, responding to her comment with frosty politeness. “It is not I who has allowed emotions to interfere. Frankly, Commander, I would say that your curiosity has gotten the better of you.”

“I’m an active field agent for COE Intelligence,” she retorted. “It comes with the job.”

“Nevertheless.” Klose folded his arms. “The most intelligent thing for you to do right now is let the matter rest.”

“With respect, sir —”

“Commander, the simple fact of the matter is that I am not permitted to allow you to place yourself in a situation which is potentially dangerous.”

“I’m quite capable of looking after myself.”

“I don’t doubt that, Commander. But I think you underestimate the risk — “

“How can I underestimate him if I know nothing about him?”

“ ‘Him’? You seem to have learned too much as it is.”

She ignored this. “If you would simply let me view the science officer’s report — “

“Which is classified.”

“My security rating is as high as yours, Captain.” It was higher, in fact, but she didn’t press the fact. “At least give me the opportunity to use my position as I have been trained to do.”

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Klose sighed in resignation. “Very well, then. I will consider letting you view the report, but only after we have arrived at Sciacca's World and off-loaded our cargo. In the meantime, your mission – and mine – is best served by you returning to your quarters and remaining there.”

“But — “

“Shields detecting micro-impacts.” The voice came from somewhere behind Roche, but Klose didn't take his eyes from hers to acknowledge it. “Captain, we are brushing the halo.”

“Please, Commander,” he said evenly, gesturing at the exit from the bridge. “Or will I have to have you removed?”

Roche fumed silently to herself. Klose's promises to 'consider' or 'review' the situation had proven worthless before, and she doubted that this time would be any different. But she had to admit that he did have a point. The *Midnight* was about to insert itself into orbit around one of the most hazardous planets to approach in the Commonwealth of Empires; he and his crew needed to concentrate on their work without distraction.

Refusing to concede defeat by speaking, she turned away from Klose and moved towards the exit. The door slid aside with a grind of metal on metal, but instead of stepping through, Roche stopped on the threshold and turned to watch the goings-on of the bridge. It was both a show of strength and a demonstration of her independence.

The main screen displayed an image of Sciacca's World. The grey-brown orb floated in the centre of the screen, with the ring of densely packed moonlets that girdled the planet's equator glistening in the light from the system's primary. The occasional explosion flaring from some of the larger rocks made the miniature asteroid-belt look deceptively attractive from the *Midnight's* distance. Roche knew how dangerous it could be. Some of the moonlets were over ten kilometres in diameter; one slip near something that size would rip the *Midnight* in two.

Apart from the belt, what really struck her about the view was something that might have been lost on the average deep-space tourist.

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Few people outside military service would have noted the absence of orbital towers girding the planet; if they had, it was doubtful they would have understood the significance of the fact. To Roche, the planet appeared completely uninhabited, with nothing but a handful of navigation stations in orbit and the pocket asteroid belt to keep it company – like a reef holding all but the most determined at bay; a shoal around a desert island.

<They call it the Soul – not the *shoal*,> said a voice deep in her skull, intruding upon her subvocal thoughts. <The origins of the name are clouded, but one recurring folk-myth from the planet's inhabitants asserts that the band of light – as the asteroid-belt appears to those living on the planet – is comprised of the souls of people who have died in captivity. The myth of transubstantiation from the mortal to the sublime is common to many repressed societies – but the image is still evocative, don't you think, Morgan?>

The voice fell silent. No-one else in the bridge had heard it speak, apart from her.

“You can go to hell too,” Roche whispered, and walked out.

#

The Retriever Class Frigate *Midnight*, one of the few ships to survive the Ataman and Secession Wars, had been built around the 43rd-generation anchor drive common in the years '212 to '286 EN. Shaped like a fat sausage, with a shaft containing the drive mechanism running along its axis, she had five levels of concentric decking to house a 450-odd crew, two freight-locks and enough storage space to hold five independent fighters. Artificial gravity, produced as an after-effect of the drive, had resulted in a sense of down being inwards rather than outwards as was the case on centrifugal ships. This feature also gave her a degree of manoeuvrability far superior than that of other ships of her day – which was one reason she endured both Ataman Wars relatively unscathed.

The centuries since, however, had left her behind, despite numerous remodels and even complete refits in dry-dock. Her drive systems had

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been replaced in '755 EN, upgrading her to 46th-generation and full battle status. Her most recent overhaul had been after service as a supply vessel during the Secession War. In '837 EN, only weeks after the Terms of Revocation had been agreed between the Commonwealth of Empires and the newly-independent Dato Bloc, she had received new viewscreens and E-shields but little in the way of either fundamental or cosmetic changes.

To Roche's eyes, as she left the bridge and headed through the cramped and dimly-lit corridors to her quarters, the *Midnight* looked more like a museum piece than an active Frigate. Doors clicked and hissed, elevators shuddered, manual systems still operated where in recent ships crude but efficient AIs had taken over. Current hyperspace technology in the COE – kept homogenous by the nearby Eckandar Trade Axis and its links with the Commerce Artel – stood at 49th-generation, three orders of magnitude more efficient and responsive than that propelling the ancient Frigate. The discrepancy between the *Midnight* and other Armada vessels didn't surprise her, however; prison ships were renowned for being poorly-outfitted, outdated relics fit for little more than so-called 'cattle' runs and other routine jobs.

The uppermost level housed officers and command stations; levels two to three were the crew quarters. The lowest levels contained cells for the transportees heading to the penal colony on Sciacca's World. Roche's room – her own cell, as she thought of it – was the last on the first floor, sandwiched between the drive shielding and a water reclamation plant. Straining engines kept her awake during manoeuvres, with bubbling pipes a constant counterpoint. She doubted that the room was used often, being too uncomfortable for either a regular officer or an important guest. As she was neither, it was her dubious honour to be its occupant.

The bulkhead leading to her section slid aside with a noise like tearing metal, jamming as it always did when it was only three quarters opened. Set into the wall opposite the door was a security station inhabited by a single crewman. He saluted as she approached, recognising her on sight,

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and she returned the gesture automatically. Behind him, a battered flatscreen followed the progress of the *Midnight*.

The view of Sciacca's World hadn't changed much. The *Midnight's* contingent of fighters, standard escort for a prison ship, had adopted a defensive configuration for planetary approach.

Catching the direction of her glance, the crewman nodded. "Almost there," he said. "Not that we'll see much of it."

Roche felt compelled to respond, although her anger at Klose still burned. "We're not landing?"

"No, sir. We'll simply dock at Kanaga Station to off-load the cattle and to refuel." He shrugged. "No-one goes down; no-one comes up. That's the rules. No-one escapes from this place."

"What about staffing changes?"

"Oh, DAOC sends a shuttle every year or so, independent of us. This is the fifth time I've been this way, and it's always the same. Occasionally we bring supplies to trade for service credit, but not this time. I wouldn't let it worry you though, sir," he added quickly, mistaking her dark expression for concern. "It's all very routine."

Roche nodded distantly – the last thing she needed at the moment was more routine – and continued on her way. The entrance to her room lay at the end of the corridor. Half-way there, the voice inside her head spoke again. She ignored it. It wouldn't do for the crewman to hear her talking to empty air. Rumours had spread as it was.

With a sigh of relief, she keyed the palmlock and opened the door to her room. Stale air gusted past her face as pressures equalised, indicating a faulty valve somewhere in the life-support system. Nothing serious; just an irritation. No doubt it was on a maintenance list somewhere, awaiting repair.

When the door slid shut behind her, she ran a hand across her close-cropped scalp and vented her frustration on the empty room.

"Damn him."

<Who?>

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“Klose. Weren't you listening?”

The voice in her head chided her gently. <You know that I am unable to study information to which I have no direct access. Besides, it would be immoral to eavesdrop without your permission.>

Roche doubted both statements but kept her thoughts to herself, not wishing to encourage conversation. A short corridor led from the doorway to a small work-space; the far end of her quarters housed a toilet, bathroom and sleeping chamber. In cross-section, the space was shaped like a narrow triangle with the door at its apex, its size dictated by the space available rather than comfort or aesthetics. Nowhere within it was there room for someone of her height to lie fully outstretched, let alone swing any sizeable organism.

The voice remained silent, perhaps considerate of her mood for a change. Before it could begin again, she walked to the work-space and put the valise on the desk. The cuff was made of monofilament cord wrapped in black leather and ended in the bracelet that fitted around her left wrist tightly enough to prevent it slipping loose – or being removed by force – but not so tight that it caused her discomfort. Tiny contacts on its inner surface matched nodes on her skin, which in turn patched into a modified ulnar nerve leading up her forearm and into her spinal column, thus enabling data to flow in either direction. The voice in her head – intrusive, often unwelcome even though it was her only company – was not so much heard as insinuated directly in the aural centres of her brain.

Flipping open the valise's grey lid, she studied its interior with an emotion bordering on hatred.

“Oh, for an axe,” she whispered out loud, although she had no need to.

<It wouldn't do any good, Morgan,> said the voice. <I am graded to withstand – >

“ – a nuclear strike from one hundred metres.” She nodded wearily. “I know, I know, but if it wasn't for you I wouldn't be in this mess. Can you understand how frustrating it is to be cooped up in here with nothing to do?”

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<As a matter of fact, Morgan, I can.>

Roche bit her lip. Of course it understood. The AI's previous environment had been the massive information workshops of Trinity, the planet of its birth. There, protected by the System's neutral status, secretive craftspersons in the service of High Humanity produced the AIs of the COE – rare and precious mind-machines lovingly crafted by carefully-guarded techniques. Few people were allowed onto the planet itself, and she had been no exception. As she'd waited in orbit for the envoy from the manufacturers to arrive, then for the *Midnight* to collect her on its way past the system, she had had almost a week to watch the world below, but had learned little. Only a handful of what might have been cities were visible above the smoky-orange surface of the planet; apart from a ring of five skyhooks circling the equator, there was little sign of advanced life. And yet ...

Somehow she had been rendered unconscious prior to their arrival. She had no memory of the High Caste manufacturers – who they were, what they looked like or how they behaved. There was just a blankness, after which she had woken in her singleship with the valise already strapped to her. The experience had been dreamlike, surreal – and frustrating. Such levels of secrecy were paranoid to an extreme – all for the sake of technology no mundane Human could understand anyway.

The valise's imitation cover fitted over an ebony rectangular box with a small keypad of touch points and recessed nodes along its top. The heart of the valise was a densely-packed mass of complex micro-technology, crammed neatly into the small space available, both shielded and camouflaged by the shell of briefcase itself. Moulded in superhard composite along the inside of the lid was the AI's identification tag: JW111101000, one digit longer than usual. Without a name in the usual sense of the word to fall back on, Roche resorted as billions of people had before her to popular slang. In this case, the term 'Black Box' was even more appropriate, given the shape of the AI's container.

“The sooner we're back in HQ, Box, the better.”

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<I agree, Morgan, although I feel no distress at our union; I am a burden upon you, not the other way around. If it makes you feel any better, it should take only another six weeks to reach Intelligence HQ.>

“Only six weeks ... “ She forced a short-lived smile. “If it wasn't for Klose being so pedantic, I'd probably enjoy the break from normal duties.”

<I sense — >

“I don't want to talk about it.” Swivelling the room's only chair to face the work-station and placing her left palm on the contact pad, she activated the console and called up the ship's outlet of the Information Dissemination network. IDnet granted her access to all non-restricted data, from the volume of processed foodstuff in the *Midnight's* holds to current affairs on any of the worlds in the COE. Raw data coursed up her arm into the small processor at the base of her skull, where it was interpreted as visual and audio signals and routed to the implanted systems in her left eye and ear. Her implants were by no means the most sophisticated available – lacking three-dimensional clarity and line-of-sight commands – but set her above ninety percent of Armada employees. Such subtle means of communication were sometimes required of Intelligence operatives, so these basic implants were standard to all of her rank.

A virtual screen appeared over her field of vision, seeming to hang two metres from her, impossibly deep in the bulkhead. Skimming at random through the channels, she found a station devoted to general COE news and settled back to discover what the rest of the universe was up to. Try as she might, however, her mind kept returning to Klose and his reasons for denying her what she wanted, while the patient, steady voice of IDnet murmured into her ear, an incessant counterpoint to her thoughts.

// in the wake of crippling solar flares, which destroyed asteroid mining facilities and a hydrogen purification plant in orbit around the system's innermost gas-giant. Ede Prime's Presiding Minister today

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released a statement exonerating two members of her advisory staff who yesterday committed ritual suicide, after it was revealed that the Eckandar Trade Axis has been conclusively linked to corruption within a local chapter of the Commerce Artel //

Ship and Captain: for better or for worse, their destinies and characters were intertwined. The post of ship command, contrary to popular opinion, offered not liberation but a lifetime of snail-like confinement. With a prison strapped to his or her back, unable to shrug free even for a moment, every Captain had the power to travel vast distances but in reality no more freedom than any of the convicts on Sciacca's World.

Few deep-space commands led to promotion, at least in the COE Armada; Captains quickly learned that the chance of achieving advancement via success in battle was slim, as battles themselves were rare and usually fatal to those involved, and most missions were more concerned with distribution of resources across that region of the galaxy than the expansion of the COE – the Commonwealth of Empires, which had ceased expanding entirely some centuries ago and indeed had, upon the secession of the Dato Bloc, begun to shrink. If they failed to die in space, Captains inevitably retired to one of the bleak Space Command planets (whose very architecture mirrored deep-space engineering) and spent their remaining days reminiscing on imagined glories. Meanwhile their ships, unfaithful lovers at best, flew on, piloted by younger versions of themselves who were no less doomed than their predecessors. Doomed to a life of confinement, first in their ships and later in retirement or death.

In a very real sense, then, Proctor Klose was the *Midnight*, but only for a little while. Jealous of his small command he would resist any attempt to undermine it. And therein lay the problem.

Roche didn't want to take over. She just wanted something to do. Armada training had prepared her for a wide range of combat scenarios,

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not months of being cooped up on a clapped-out frigate acting as nursemaid for an artificial mind. She knew she should be patient, and perhaps even grateful for the undemanding task, but it wasn't in her nature to sit still for long. She wanted to move, to act, to investigate.

// shock discovery of remains in the Greater Vexisen Republic dating the emergence of Pristine Humanity into the wider galaxy fifty thousand years earlier than the previous best estimate. Renowned xenarcheologist Linegar Rufo, nominal overseer of the excavation, was not available for comment, but acting overseer Dev Bogasi commented that: "This find represents the most exciting development in the field for over five hundred years. I'm not saying we've found the ultimate source of the Human Race, but we're well on the way. The further back we push the envelope – and we're up to half a million years, now – the closer we're coming to a pure genetic strain. Give us another discovery of this magnitude and I predict we'll be able to narrow our field of search to a handful of//

Feeling the tension knotting her muscles, Roche shifted in her seat and unbuttoned the tight collar of her uniform. Brooding on it wasn't going to do her any good, and talking was better than nothing. The Box wasn't the confidant she would have chosen, but she had no choice. It was either that, or go stir-crazy.

"To be fair, Box," she said, picking up the conversation where she had ended it earlier, "it's partly my fault. You remember that derelict we picked up seven days ago?"

<I do recall it in the daysheets.>

"Well, I've been hearing rumours among the crew – "

An all-stations announcement interrupted her, warning the crew and transportees alike of imminent deceleration. The *Midnight* had come out of the anchor point at the edge of the system seven days earlier; this final manoeuvre would bring the frigate into an inclined polar orbit around the

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planet, dipping through the belt of moonlets once every two hours. Within moments of the announcement, the engines groaned through the bulkheads of Roche's room, and a wave of rattles and clatters shivered through the ship.

<You were saying, Morgan?>

"Hang on." She adjusted the work-station to bring up a view of the planet, overlaying IDnet. "It's nothing, really. The derelict was a life-support capsule with one man inside."

<Alive?>

"Apparently. No-one knows where he's from, though, which makes me curious. The other eight capsules we picked up coming here all contained survivors ejected from the wreckage of the *Courtesan*, the passenger cruiser that broke up near Furioso. But this one ... They don't recognise him. I asked Klose if I could interview the man, but he told me to mind my own business." She shrugged. "That's it, I guess."

She didn't mention the other snippets of gossip she'd heard: that the capsule had been drifting through space far longer than usual before being detected by the *Midnight*, and that its design was anything but orthodox.

<Your curiosity is understandable, Morgan,> said the Box. <And commendable.>

The AI's overt praise surprised her. "It is?"

<Of course. The man in the capsule might be anyone. He might even be a threat to your mission, a saboteur posing as a castaway to cover his true intentions.>

"That doesn't seem likely."

<Nevertheless, it is a possibility. The capsule might contain a bomb, or some sort of communication device. Or a virus. I am, after all, an information-retrieval device – albeit one of spectacular sophistication.>

"Not forgetting modesty," Roche cut in.

The Box ignored her. <The point is, Morgan, that the plan may not be to destroy me, but to corrupt my function.>

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Roche rubbed her chin thoughtfully. She hadn't considered this possibility before. The *Midnight* had been chosen as the vehicle to carry the Box because its route to Intelligence HQ was circuitous, not the direct route one might expect for such an important cargo. If the man in the capsule was a spy, all he had to do was ascertain that the Box was definitely aboard this ship, instead of the many decoys, and notify his superiors.

It was barely plausible, certainly not likely.

And it didn't make sense, not if the capsule was older than the plans to ferry the Box to Intelligence HQ. Still, it would be an interesting point to raise when she and Klose were next at loggerheads.

// until the vector has been isolated and the outbreak contained, all scheduled traffic in- and out-system – including that for the purpose of trade and Armada activity – is either severely restricted or cancelled indefinitely. Anyone attempting to break the blockade will be in violation of the Commonwealth of Empires Security Act and liable to face the severest penalty, by order of Chief Liaison Officer for the COE Armada, Burne Absenger. Repeat: Palasian System has been declared a no-go zone as a result of a Class Three Medical Emergency //

The *Midnight's* engines roared again, swinging its ponderous bulk around to the correct attitude for polar insertion.

“So this is the way you spend your time, Box. Is there anything that could go wrong that you haven't thought about?”

<Of course there isn't. The datapool of this ship is too small to provide stimulating conversation, and I am hesitant to intrude upon you any more than I already do. I am therefore left with one means of amusement: to explore possible situations and prepare contingency plans.>

“Such as?”

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Before it could answer, a red light flashed in the virtual screen, indicating a deviation from the mission plan. She returned her attention to the view of the planet and its attendant asteroid-belt – 'the Soul,' she reminded herself. The halo of moonlets had grown in size dramatically; individual motes of light now stood out against the indistinct glow of dust and pebbles. Nothing seemed immediately out of the ordinary, so she superimposed a navigation overlay across the view. Multicoloured lines defined the vectors and mass of the largest rocks, while bold green angles indicated the *Midnight's* orbital approach. The latter should have been clear of all obstacles larger than the Frigate's shields could handle, but it wasn't.

Four red circles – ships, judging by their mass and velocity – occupied the exact centre of the *Midnight's* path.

“That's strange,” Roche mused, more to herself than to her artificial companion. “The corridor should be clear by now.”

<I agree,> replied the Box. <I am monitoring this development through the bridge log. The ships moved into this orbit fifteen minutes ago and have not made any attempt to alter their course since then.>

“Any ident?”

<Surface scan indicates ore-freighters from the Eckandar Trade Axis, although their size suggests otherwise.> The Box hesitated for the briefest of moments, as though scanning data. <Captain Klose has received a communication from the commanding officer of the largest ship. It is this woman's opinion that she has right of way in this corridor, and that the *Midnight* should adjust its course to compensate. We will over-take the nearest vessel in approximately fifteen minutes. A course-correction is required shortly. Captain Klose has denied her request.>

“Typical.” Roche could well imagine the *Midnight's* Captain fuming at the woman's impudence. All manoeuvres by the Armada were booked well in advance; there was no question that Klose was in the right. That didn't mean, of course, that he couldn't do the courteous thing and oblige her, but it wasn't in his nature to deviate from the regulations one iota.

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Not for COE Intelligence, as Roche knew well, and especially not for a civilian.

<A compromise has been reached,> announced the Box shortly. <The Captain of the freighter will instruct her ships to spread their formation. The *Midnight* will pass between the three smaller vessels without need for course-correction in – fourteen minutes and seventeen seconds.>

“Between the freighters?” Roche frowned, concerned.

<Although unorthodox, the manoeuvre has been authorised by Kanaga Station traffic control.>

“That's not what worries me. What if they're freebooters? We'll be at a disadvantage should one of them take a shot at us. It goes against everything I learned in Tactics.”

<It would seem that Captain Klose does not share your concern.> Something in the Box's tone suggested that it was playing devil's advocate, rather than honestly defending the Captain.

“Captain Klose is – “ A fool, she had been about to say, but thought better of it. He had travelled this route many times, after all, and knew its dangers better than she. A course-correction would cost them energy and delay their docking at Kanaga Station. Why should he give way, when he was so obviously in the right? Besides, fears of freebooting and other forms of treachery seemed naive even to her.

“ – just doing his job, I guess,” she concluded with a sigh, and settled back into the chair to watch the approach. The red circles on the navigation display drifted apart, widening like a mouth to swallow the *Midnight*. Although no longer protesting, she was unable to quell the flutter in her stomach.

// continuing hostilities forced intervention on the behalf of the Commerce Artel two weeks ago. The long-running dispute between the Hierocratic Kingdom of Shurdu and the Pan-Rationalist Alliance of neighbouring Zanshin flared into open warfare two months ago, following racist comments made by Hierocrat Kaatje Lene in response to a plea for peace from his opposite number, Provost Hemi Felucca.

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The exacerbation of inter-Caste tensions as a result of these comments has been cited by concerned observers as a major contributing factor to the current situation. Some have even suggested that the comments were made deliberately, in order to incite war. Exactly why the Hierocrat would do such a thing remains a mystery at this time, although some delegates have not ruled out interference from an unknown third party keen to see war between the two nations.

Meanwhile, on a more cheerful note, an explanation has come from High Human Interventionist, the Crescend, regarding a garbled transmission received from the home-world of the Jaaf Caste – which, it turns out, has successfully Transcended to the status of High Human, not been annihilated by the nova of their primary star as was first thought. Concerned friends and business associates can contact //

A brisk rap at her door startled her from both the view and IDnet's incessant patter. She stood automatically and straightened her uniform. The moment her hand left the contact pad without cancelling her link to IDnet, an inactive screen mounted in the wall above the work-station flickered to life, continuing the display of the *Midnight's* approach.

“Who is it?” she called into the intercom.

“To be honest, I was hoping you might be able to help me answer that question.”

Her hand hovered over the switch that would open the door. The voice had been male, deep and articulate, but the statement itself suggested anything but conviction. “If this is some sort of joke – ?”

“I assure you its not.” There was a moment’s pause before the man on the other side of the door spoke again. “Look, my name is Adoni Cane, but that's about all I can tell you. Everything else is just – “ Another pause. “Please, I need to speak to you.”

Roche removed her hand from the switch and checked the name in the ship's datapool; it didn't register. Although no rigid stickler to standard military procedure, like Klose, there were some basic guidelines she simply wouldn't break. Admitting a mysterious visitor at her door in the

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middle of a potentially dangerous manoeuvre while on a priority mission was one of them.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m going to need a positive ident before I let you in. Come back later, when we’ve docked, and maybe we can discuss it.”

Symbolically turning her back on the door, she switched off the intercom.

With a hiss, the door slid open behind her. Roche's left hand was instantly on the cover of the valise, slamming it closed, while her right reached across the narrow work-space for her service pistol. The grip slid smoothly into place as she snap-turned to face the intruder.

Her breath caught in her throat.

His skin was very dark, almost chocolate-brown, and he was tall, a full half-head taller even than herself, with strong shoulders, wide chest and powerful hips and upper legs. He was dressed in a simple grey shipsuit, and its narrow fit accentuated the impression of power. He reminded Roche of an oversized Surin war-dancer – exuding a rare physical presence that went beyond simple strength – except that he appeared to be completely hairless. And looked like a Pristine Human, not an exotic.

The smooth dome of his skull was lit by the overhead door-light as he took a step forward into the room. The flow of muscle beneath his shipsuit was powerful, oddly graceful, and potentially very dangerous.

Roche reacted with alarm. “Hold it right there,” she barked, gesturing with the pistol.

“I don't understand,” he said, raising his hands placatingly. “Why did you let me in if – “

“Me let you in? I told you to go away. The door was locked.”

Despite the pistol trained on him, his eyes betrayed not the slightest hint of fear.

“I didn't open it.” He glanced over his shoulder at the door, which remained open, then back to her. “If you want me to leave – “

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“No, wait.” She grasped the handle of the valise and lifted it off the desk. “I want to know what you're doing here.”

He lowered his hands slightly, and took another step inside. The door slid shut behind him. “I was told to see you.”

“See me? Who told you this?”

He shrugged. “Somebody spoke to me through the security intercom in my cell. He told me that when the doors opened I was to come here to you, to these quarters. He gave me directions, but no name.” His face, when the light caught it, displayed a genuine puzzlement. “I'm sorry I can't be any more specific than that.”

“You said you were in a cell,” said Roche, keeping the pistol trained upon him. “What happened to the guards? Didn't they try to stop you?”

“I suppose they should have. But when the door opened, there was no-one there.”

Suspicion made Roche apply slightly more pressure upon the trigger. “Conveniently allowing your escape.”

His eyes dropped to the muzzle of the pistol; when they met her own a second later, he was smiling. “If 'escape' is the appropriate word. After all, no-one ever told me why I was locked up in the first place.”

“You're not a transportee?” she asked, although something about his manner had already convinced her of that. He didn't seem like a petty criminal: too self-possessed, perhaps, or too confident. And despite the absurdity of his tale, he didn't seem to be lying. Roche's curiosity began to outweigh her sense of caution.

“I don't know what I am,” he said. “All I know is that I awoke seven days ago and have been confined to a cell ever since. I have no memories of a time before that. All I have is my name.” He shrugged. “I was told that you would be able to help me.”

“Help you? In what way?”

He offered his hands, palms-up, to demonstrate that he had no answer to that question either. If she wanted answers, she would have to deduce them herself from what scant information he had to offer.

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Roche swallowed her frustration with difficulty, kicked the chair to him and indicated for him to sit. Keeping the pistol trained carefully on his chest, she retreated to the far corner of the room to think.

Adoni Cane. If he wasn't a transportee then he could have been a passenger, but then why didn't his name register in the datapool? He had to be lying. But why? She could ask the Box to investigate the mysterious message that had led Cane to her; it would have been recorded by security monitors, if it existed at all. And if it didn't –

Her hand instinctively tightened on the valise as she realised the stranger's intentions. Before she could express her concerns to the Box, the AI's voice cut across her train of thought:

<Morgan, that freighter has just – >

She blinked and subvocalised: <Not now. Listen – >

<I strongly suggest that you check the monitor, Morgan.>

Roche swung her gaze to the screen. It showed an overhead view of the *Midnight's* bridge, from cameras mounted above the access locks at the rear of the chamber, and took in most if not all of the hemispherical sweep of work stations.

Klose was standing on the podium, his First Officer, Terrison, with him; both were studying the forward displays. There was a superficial impression of calm about the scene that belied the tension in their stances. Roche could tell at a glance that they and the other personnel on the bridge were operating under unusual pressure. Something had gone wrong.

As she watched, Janek, the Tactician, turned from her station to face Klose and Terrison.

“Ident confirmed,” the Tactician said. “Dato warships. Four of them.”

Roche slipped her hand onto the contact pad to overlay the navigation display in one corner of the screen, hardly believing what she was hearing. *Dato* ships? From where? The Dato Bloc had no business this side of the border.

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A moment's glance showed her what had happened: the three Eckandi 'freighters' had deactivated their sophisticated camouflage systems, revealing the truth beneath. A Dreadnought and three Raiders, plus at least a dozen tiny fighters, swooping free of the Dreadnought even as she watched.

// disturbance within the sector under Olmahoi control has both puzzled and concerned COE observers. Reaves in neighbouring systems have reported surges in epsense //

Roche irritably killed IDnet and swore softly to herself. Cane leaned closer; out of the corner of her eye she saw him echo her frown.

"Trouble?" he asked.

"You might say that." Mindful that her pistol no longer covered him, she waved him back. "We've just cruised straight into an ambush."

"Is there conflict between your people and the owners of these ships?"

"Are you serious?" She saw no indication of irony in his composed features. She had never met anyone who wasn't at least vaguely aware of the political realities of the region. "How long have you been imprisoned here?"

"Seven days, as I said."

"This really isn't turning into a very good day for me," she said, shaking her head. Then, returning to the screen before her, added: "Officially the Commonwealth of Empires and the Dato Bloc are at peace." She focussed her attention on the ships on the screen. "But I get the impression that this isn't official business."

"Could it be a mistake?"

She glanced down at the valise. "Unlikely."

The Dato ships had assumed a tight arrow-head formation and were powering-up their drives to meet the incoming Frigate. Alert strips above the door to her room flashed to amber simultaneously with the light in the tank. A sterile voice announced an order for provisional Battle-stations.

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“Four against one,” mused Cane, studying the formation intently. “Not insuperable odds. Why hasn't the Captain – “ He stopped in mid-sentence and glanced at Roche quizzically, as though suddenly remembering her presence. “You're an officer. Why aren't you on the bridge?”

“I'm just a guest, non-combat.” She turned to study him in return. If the impending battle concerned him, he didn't show it. Even his voice echoed the easy strength and confidence of his physique. “What were you about to say? Do you know something about this?”

“Nothing.” Klose's voice had taken Cane's attention back to the screen, and Roche followed it at once.

“Any communication?” the Captain had asked.

“None, sir.” The officer glanced up from his console. “They are not responding to our signals.”

“Janek: ETA?”

“Three minutes, sir,” replied the Tactician without looking up. Then she leaned in close to her console. “Sir, that Dreadnought – “

“What about it?”

“It's not a Dreadnought. Configuration reads way off.” She leaned in close again. “It could be the ship we've heard rumours about – the new Marauder.”

Roche studied the image forming on the screen. The ship did look different: a large dolioform drive facility connected to seven pointed nacelles by a complicated web of what looked like threads but were probably access tubes and girders made small by distance. Stream-lined mouths at either end of the drive flashed red as the ship manoeuvred; smaller spiracles on five of the nacelles were inactive but open, obviously weapon bays or fighter launchers ready for action. The ship looked like nothing Roche had seen before, but she could tell just by its appearance – an ominous cross between a spider and shark – that it was designed for speed and resilience in battle.

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“Broadcast full battle-alert,” announced Klose, his voice booming. “Seal the bridge and all compartments! Prepare for defensive manoeuvres!”

“Too late,” mumbled Cane. “Much too late.”

“What is?”

“The Captain should have attacked the moment he saw them.”

“Not Klose.” She grimaced bitterly. “He'd never risk a diplomatic incident on the off-chance there'd been some sort of misunderstanding.”

“What do you think?” The approaching Dato ships glinted in Cane's eyes. “Does this look like a misunderstanding to you?”

“They haven't attacked us – “

“But they will,” Cane interjected calmly. “And if the Captain waits any longer – “

A groan from the bulkheads interrupted him. The view in the telemetry display shifted suddenly as the *Midnight's* engines kicked into life, thrusting the ship along a different course. Life-support dampened the violent shift in momentum, leaving a lingering sense of disorientation in its wake.

Roche blinked and shook her head. Cane seemed entirely unaffected, although she realised with alarm that he was standing much closer than he had been before. If he had wanted to overpower her, he could have done so easily during the manoeuvre. The fact that he hadn't did not reassure her. That she had let him get that close in the first place –

Another disturbance rolled through the ship, more violently than before. Cane's hand came down on her shoulder. She brushed it aside with the hand holding the pistol before realising that he was only steadying her.

He raised an eyebrow at her confusion, then turned back to the screen.

Klose had sent the *Midnight* angling along a path heading below the approaching triangle of Dato ships, demonstrating an initial reluctance to engage but without placing the ship in too vulnerable a position. The Frigate's contingent of five fighters peeled away to draw fire. Instantly,

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the arrow-head formation dissolved, with the Marauder swooping to intercept the *Midnight* and the three Raiders at the rear peeling to either side and below to pen the COE Frigate in a potential cross-fire.

The *Midnight* turned again, to port, disturbing the deadly symmetry of the pattern. The Marauder followed while the Raiders jockeyed for new positions.

Klose ordered the raising of hyperspace disrupters and E-shields. The *Midnight's* armoury targeted and tracked the Dato ships, awaiting the order to fire.

Roche's hands gripped the valise tightly. Cane's observations had been acute: she did want to be on the bridge, instead of watching the action impotently from her room; and Klose had indeed waited too long to act. Her heart beat faster; she was afraid to take her eyes off the screen unless she missed the crucial moment.

When it came, however, it surprised her. The Dato Raider to starboard of *Midnight* was the first to fire – not the Marauder. A salvo of flicker-bombs, dropping in and out of hyperspace with intermittent flashes of light, lashed towards the green dot at the centre of the telemetry screen. Fast in its wake came a wave of A-P fire.

The first of the missiles struck the aft disrupters, making the ship shudder. Roche flinched automatically.

“Lucky,” said Cane, as Klose finally ordered the firing of the *Midnight's* laser and A-P cannon. The power in Roche's room flickered at the same time as spears of light darted across the telemetry screen in the direction of the dots representing the Dato ships. “If the trailing ship had fired first, a missile could have passed through the afterwash shields and blown the engines.”

“So why didn't it?”

“I would have thought that was obvious,” he said. “They don't intend to destroy us.” He glanced at her and the valise in turn. “There's something aboard the *Midnight* they want.”

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She ignored the unspoken implication. On the screen, the battle was proceeding rapidly. The lights flickered again, followed by wave after wave of subtle nausea as the *Midnight* weaved for position. Two of the fighters vanished as they engaged the Dato; outnumbered by ten to one, the *Midnight's* contingent would not last long.

The Marauder, however, had not fired once. Under combined fire from the three Raiders – two were easily a match for the aged Frigate – the tiny single-ship fighters were little more than target practice. A steady stream of missiles battered the *Midnight's* disrupters and E-shields, gradually weakening them. It was only a matter of time before the shields failed entirely, leaving the Frigate open to direct assault – or a boarding party.

Klose was no master-tactician, but Roche doubted she could do any better herself. Besides, she had other priorities to consider.

The lights went out entirely for a split-second, then returned in emergency red. A tang of smoke filtered into the room, and the pit of her stomach rolled disturbingly. The last COE fighter fell with a flare of light. On the screen, the Dato Raiders swooped nearer, harrowing the beleaguered Frigate.

Roche came to a decision.

“Okay,” she said, swinging the valise into a more accessible position. Cane watched curiously from his position nearby, and she reverted to subvocals. <Box, we're in trouble, aren't we?>

<It would seem so. The *Midnight* is experiencing gravity fluctuations, which means the disrupters are failing. Quite soon now the shields will collapse entirely and we will be boarded – unless Captain Klose orders a self-destruct.>

<Klose won't do that,> she said. <He'd rather be killed than commit suicide.>

<Be that as it may. We probably only have a short time in which to act. Should Klose either surrender or otherwise allow the ship to be boarded, that would be tantamount to handing me over to the Dato Bloc,

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in direct contradiction to his orders – which are, of course, to prevent my capture at any cost. He should therefore allow the ship to be destroyed in the hope that the wreckage of the *Midnight* will conceal my remains. Fortunately, due to my structural resilience, I will not be harmed.>

<Great,> said Roche dryly. <But what about me?>

<Patience, Morgan. Remember your own orders.>

<I know my orders, Box,> she snapped impatiently. Then, more calmly, added: <Look, is there any way out of this?>

<Would I waste time like this if there wasn't?>

<I don't know. Would you?>

<Perhaps, if things were totally hopeless.> The Box seemed almost to be enjoying her discomfort. <I suppose I might attempt to take your mind off the situation. However, it is not. The solution, clearly, is to evacuate the ship.>

On the screen, one of the Dato Raiders loomed, partially occluding the image of Sciacca's World.

<A great plan, Box. Any ideas how?>

<In one of *Midnight's* landers would seem our best option.>

<But the launch controls are locked from the bridge.>

<With your approval I can over-ride the locks.>

<Do it.> She glanced at the screen as more missiles barraged the Frigate's struggling defences. <Just do whatever it takes to get us out of here.>

<Very well.> The Box fell silent, then returned a moment later, sounding faintly surprised. <It would seem that somebody else has thought along the same lines. The doors to Lander Bay Three are already open, and all approaches to it have been sealed off – except from the lower levels. The bay is two sectors away. I have opened the corridors between here and there.> After a further pause of a few seconds, the voice spoke again inside Roche's head: <Haste at this juncture would be prudent, Morgan.>

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“Right.” She stood to leave, the valise gripped tightly in her hand. Cane, forgotten during her exchange with the Box, startled her as she turned to face the door.

“You're leaving?”

She hesitated briefly. “I'm sorry,” she said. “I have no choice.”

<Take him with you, Morgan.> The Box's words broke across her thoughts like the voice of a guilty conscience.

“What? *Why?*” Startled by the Box's request, she spoke aloud. Cane frowned, but didn't speak.

<Remember your dispute with Captain Klose?>

“What about it?”

<The man standing before you is the subject of that dispute.>

“He is? How do you know that?”

<His name does not appear in the ship's log. Ergo he was not on board when we left Ivy Green Station. Ergo he must have been in the last life capsule we salvaged.>

“I – “ She stopped. It made sense – but explained nothing. If that was so, why was he here?

Confusion wrinkled Cane's brow. Roche belatedly realised that she'd been talking to the Box out loud, rather than by subvocalising. What he made of her side of the conversation, she couldn't even guess.

Torn between her mission, curiosity and basic Human compassion, she tried to decide what to do with him. If she left him behind, he would surely be captured by the Dato Bloc – at best – and she would never learn who he was, nor why Klose had not wanted her to see him. On the other hand, she knew too little about him to risk him coming along; having a total stranger in tow at a time such as this could prove a threat to her mission.

<Need I remind you, Morgan, that time is not what you might call an ally at this point.>

“Okay, okay.” Cane's stare hadn't faded, and she returned it with one of equal intensity. “My name is Commander Roche of COE Intelligence,”

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she said quickly, collecting as she did a handful of magazine charges for her pistol and slipping them into her belt. "I'm going to try to escape in one of the landers. You can tag along, but only on the understanding that I give the orders. Clear?"

"I understand." His smile was slight but genuine. "And I agree."

"Good. Because should you so much as cross me once, I swear I'll shoot you."

"That won't be necessary."

She wrapped the belt loosely about her waist and keyed the door with her palm. "Okay, then let's move it."

The ship lurched as they stepped out into the corridor. Roche swayed, steadying herself with the walls. Ahead of her, Cane hardly missed a step. For the second time she shrugged away his helping hand.

"That way," she said, gesturing with the pistol.

Nodding, he obeyed, and Roche followed a pace behind. His steady pace displayed no concern at the gun at his back, and neither did he stop to question her plans. That sudden – and unreciprocated – trust bothered her more than anything else about him. Whoever he was, he seemed quite content to place his fate in her hands. Perhaps, she thought, the only alternative open to him was worse than mere imprisonment by the Dato.

<You had better be right about this, Box.>

The Box might have chuckled softly at that, but she couldn't be certain.

<Aren't I always?>

2

COEA *Midnight*

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Lander Bay Three was one of two on the officers' deck, situated at the fore of the *Midnight*. Due to the frigate's unusual configuration, the ceiling of the uppermost decks comprised the outer shell of the hull; Roche's quarters, being the last on the officers' deck, were near the mid-way point. To reach the lander bay she and Cane had to follow one of the main access corridors along half the length of the ship – but at least they were not required to change levels.

The security station at the end of her corridor was empty, the crewman who had occupied it earlier obviously performing battle duties elsewhere. The main access corridor was likewise unoccupied. The occasional rolling boom echoed along its length as Dato weapons exploded near the hull of the Frigate. Perhaps it was Roche's imagination, but the explosions seemed to grow louder, and more frequent, as the minutes passed. If so, the disruption shields were failing, allowing the blink bombs to jump out of hyperspace and explode a little closer to the Frigate every time. It was only a matter of time before one snuck through entirely and detonated deep in the heart of the ship. Although small enough to defeat the constraints normally preventing

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matter from slow-jumping in a gravity well, just one contained sufficient explosive to cripple a vessel.

Gravity fluctuations kept their pace to a steady jog; any faster risked a fall, especially with the weight of the valise to upset her balance. Cane matched her stride easily, moving with the powerful grace of a trained athlete. The occasional lurch of the floor didn't even break his stride, and it was he who occasionally leant her a hand, never the other way around. Not bad, she thought, for someone who had just emerged from a life-support coma.

By the time they reached the end of the corridor, smoke had begun to filter in – a slowly-thickening blue haze coming from somewhere beyond the abandoned security point. She watched it carefully as they neared it, assessing the inflow. Her first impressions were correct: the build-up was gradual, probably isolated to the local ventilation system, and not a serious problem – yet.

Roche turned left at the end of the corridor, away from the source of the smoke. A series of dog-legs led to EVA control, a large self-contained chamber onto which the two lander bays opened.

<Lander Three has been breached,> the Box said as they took the first corner. <Whoever we are following has beaten us to it.>

<How many can the landers hold?>

<Full complement is five, although four is optimal.>

<What about Lander Two?>

There was a momentary hesitation as the AI assessed the available data. <The smoke you saw earlier is coming from burning insulation, caused by an overheating E-shield generator. The source of the fire is dangerously close to Lander Two, suggesting that the vessel may be damaged, or soon will be.>

<How long do we have?>

<That depends on Captain Klose. The disrupters are close to failing.>

<Not long, then. Certainly not enough time to try another bay. We'll have to make do with what we've got.> Turning to Cane, she explained

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the situation. “We need that lander. If whoever's got there ahead of us comprise more than three people, we may have to fight for it.”

Cane nodded calmly. The idea of combat didn't appear to faze him in any way. “Understood, Commander. You'll have my full support.”

“Good.” Although she half-heartedly listened for accent or anomalies of syntax, there were none. He spoke with the sort of generalised Standard that one heard all over the galaxy. “Not far now.”

They rounded the last corner slowly. Roche was up front, her pistol at the ready. The all-purpose magazine clipped in the long barrel allowed her a number of diverse selections; before turning the corner, she set it for scatter.

EVA control was empty. The outer airlock to Lander Three stood open. Beyond the airlock was the lander bay – a round antechamber roughly three times the size of her room – then a steep ramp that curved upwards to the lander, doubling back on itself once along the way. The manual controls for the outer airlock were next to the entrance to the ramp. Roche inched forward through the airlock, into the bay. It too was empty, so she kept moving.

Cane's hand gripped her forearm, bringing her to a sudden halt only metres from the ramp. Instinctively she tried to pull the arm free, but found she could not.

“What?” she hissed, uneasy in his firm grip.

His gaze was fixed on the open doorway, and for the first time she noticed that his head was cocked slightly. He was listening to sounds coming from within the lander.

“Someone's coming,” he said. “Down the ramp.”

“Are you sure?” She could hear nothing.

Instead of answering, he pulled her away from the entrance to the lander, back into EVA control. Moments later, the sound of soft footsteps padded towards them.

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Cane let go of her arm and put his mouth close to her ear. “Only one. Would you be able to shoot them from here if I went in and drew their fire?”

“Of course I would,” she said with some annoyance, although whether that annoyance came from him questioning her ability or from him suddenly taking charge of the situation, she wasn't sure. “But you're putting rather a lot of faith in your speed, aren't you?”

“No,” he said, the faint trace of a grin splitting his dark features. “I'm putting it in your ability to hit them before they hit me.”

She opened her mouth to voice her doubts, but got no further. An explosion shook the ship, the shock wave slamming through the bulkheads and snapping her head back into the wall. Cane maintained his balance and caught her with astonishing ease, held her until she regained her footing.

The tang of smoke in the air thickened almost immediately, and the lights dimmed.

<That was primary life-support,> said the Box. <The disrupters are failing. E-shields are down to five percent.>

As though he had heard the Box's words, Cane let her go and inched sideways to the entrance of the bay. “We haven't got time to play it safe, Commander,” he whispered back to her. “We have to go in now, while they're still reeling from that explosion.”

Raising the pistol to her chest, she nodded once. Cane immediately leapt through the door with a speed and agility she would not have believed possible – so fast that her own movements seemed belated and slow in comparison.

Following the small of his back with her eyes and swivelling her entire body to face the airlock, she covered the interior of the bay with one sweep, gun held at shoulder-height in her right hand.

The first thing she saw was the light: the flash of blue laser fire from somewhere to her left, slicing through the air towards Cane's back. Only his speed saved him, kept him ahead of the beam.

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Then she was through the door herself, the Box tucked up against her rib-cage, cushioned from the Armada-trained roll that she executed with a sureness her instructors would have been proud of. All the time her eyes were focussed left, her free hand and the pistol clear of the floor, tilted towards the expected target –

– a thin figure in a grey transportee uniform, definitely an exotic Caste, Eckandi perhaps, with white hair, gaunt face and an industrial laser held in a double-handed grip, arms swinging to follow Cane's progress across the open bay floor, the trigger held tightly down, blue light arcing lethally towards his retreating back –

Roche's scatter-fire took the transportee full in the chest. The man crumpled where he stood, then fell forward onto his face. The blue beam flickered out, but not before scoring an ugly black line across the floor of the bay, terminating in a rough interrogative just short of Roche's toes.

Cane's momentum carried him up the ramp and out of sight into the lander, his feet soundless on the metal deck. Roche lingered for a moment to ensure that the transportee had not been unduly harmed. An Eckandi prisoner on a COE ship was rare enough to be treated delicately under any circumstance. The elderly man – perhaps over a century in age, middle-aged, but not infirm – had fallen awkwardly onto his side. His respiration was even, if a little slow, and his staccato pulse regular. Although no expert in exotic physiognomy, she suspected he would recover before long.

With a grunt, she rose to her feet and went to run up the ramp to see what Cane was up to. Barely had she taken a step when something dark and cold thrust itself into her mind.

She stopped in her tracks, reeling with panic and confusion as the force squeezed her entire brain in an invisible psychic fist, sending a retching wave of sickness and self-hatred deep into her gut, where it blossomed into a bitter flower of bile.

The muscles in her hand relaxed involuntarily and the gun clattered to the floor.

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A reave.

She wasn't sure if she spoke the words or thought them. The mental intrusion had caught Roche unaware, not allowing her to employ the epsense resistance techniques she had been taught at Military College. She slipped to her knees, clutching first at her stomach, then her head, wanting desperately for the intrusion to cease. This was different from anything she had ever experienced before – much more intense.

Her vision greyed, became cluttered with images that confused her: the inside of the lander, and huddled within its shadows the reave – a Surin, not more than fifteen years old by the sheen of her fur. She was small of stature and, cowering, looked deceptively vulnerable. And frightened, Roche noted through her own suffocating anxiety. The girl was terribly frightened. Which perhaps explained the intensity of the intrusion.

And her face –

A narrow, stained bandage wrapped about the girl's head hid her eyes from view. Fully-developed reaves 'borrowed' the eyes and ears of the people around them rather than used their own senses, and communicated purely by thought. Roche sucked air sharply in sudden revulsion as she recalled that some fundamentalist factions of the Surin Agora actually forced their latent psychics to do so by a mutilation ceremony that accompanied the completion of their training. It was either that or go mad from sensory deprivation. This Surin girl, Roche guessed, was eyeless behind the bandage – probably declawed and a deaf-mute as well.

Despite her own discomfort, Roche couldn't help but feel pity for the girl. The ritual mutilation usually occurred in the very last stages of the transition from latent talent to fully-fledged epsense adept – a process that often took decades. Yet the Surin in the lander was less than half Roche's age. Power at such a price had to be a dubious gift.

“You're reading my mind,” said a familiar voice, disconcertingly nearby. It belonged to the reave's primary subject.

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Cane, Roche realised. The voice belonged to Cane!

<Stay back.> The reave's words reached Roche's mind as thoughts rather than sound. She could feel the creeping tendrils of the Surin girl deep within herself, holding her at bay, its very presence aching dully. Yet the will that had so incapacitated her hardly seemed to be affecting Cane.

"Why?" he said, taking a step closer, his eyes – and thus Roche's – fixed upon the girl. "You have no reason to be afraid of me. I have no wish to harm you."

<What about Veden? You killed Veden!>

Roche winced as the Surin's grief twisted at her mind.

"Your friend fired upon us first. My companion was merely defending herself." Roche felt the reave's tentacles tighten a little at that, searching for the truth, as Cane took another step forward. "Listen to me; we haven't much time. We need this ship to escape. If we can just work – "

<No! Stay back or I'll – > The Surin hesitated, and Roche realised that, despite the clarity of mind generally required to enable epsense transfer, the reave was close to panic. <If you come any closer, I'll kill your friend!>

Roche hissed through her teeth as the pain increased. She swore she wouldn't scream, no matter how bad the pain. Half-formed words blossomed in her throat, but were stifled by the reave.

She's bluffing! she wanted to scream. Reaves rarely killed someone they were riding. The personal consequences were too great.

Cane either suspected this or simply didn't care what happened to Roche. Taking another step forward, he came within arm's reach of the Surin, who turned her face away.

<I can't read you.> Roche sensed fear and timidity in the girl's words.

The view of the cockpit vanished as the reave switched from Cane's point of view to that of Roche's. The lander bay was filled with dense smoke, billowing through the airlock leading to EVA control. The fire

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had either worsened dramatically or spread to the corridor outside. Through the pain in her head, she could hear klaxons wailing.

The reave's voice superimposed itself over everything – pervasive and irresistible: <Can you pilot the lander?>

Cane's response was prompt and without concern: “No.”

Roche felt the pain in her head increase once more, slicing through her thoughts as though it were a red-hot scalpel.

<Morgan Roche.> The tone was cut with panic and confusion. <That case you carry – why do you believe it can fly the lander?>

Roche clenched her mouth shut, using every iota of Armada training to resist replying.

Even as she struggled, a series of small explosions, quite near, rumbled through the hull. Then, with a sudden high-pitched screaming noise, the smoke began to fly away from her back down the corridor.

The pressure from the reave suddenly vanished and full control of her body returned. Gasping, she fell forward onto the deck, scrabbling for the pistol. Her muscles felt spastic, jerky, as she struggled to her feet and staggered for the airlock controls. She thumped the SEAL prompts in quick succession, hoping that her training would overcome the fogginess in her head.

The outer door slammed shut. The sound of klaxons diminished.

<Morgan,> said the Box, <we have very little time. Klose has surrendered to the Dato Bloc.>

Fighting the haze, she tried to concentrate. “He's what?”

<He has given permission for one of the Raiders to dock. It may be a ruse, of course. Either way – >

“I understand.” Blinking to clear her vision, she stumbled for the ramp and the lander. Cane met her half-way, raised his arms in mock surrender as her pistol swung at him. Then he smiled. The calm with which he did that, his ability to instantly relax once a moment of tension passed, disturbed her. It was more than control. It was almost inhuman.

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His resistance to epsense was no less remarkable. Armada Cadets received a basic training in mental defence, but no-one she knew of, least of all herself, had the degree of control necessary to resist a reave as he had – and she hadn't – without actually being an epsense adept as well.

“Hull's punctured,” she said with a calmness she didn't feel. “Not far away. The airlock is sealed. We're here to stay.”

“Understood.” He steadied her with a hand on her arm, then continued down the ramp. Moments later he returned with the semiconscious Eckandi draped over his shoulder. “The mind-rider will need him when she regains consciousness,” he explained in response to her sharp look.

“Mind – ? Oh, the reave.” The outdated term threw her for a moment. He was making sense, though; the Surin would need someone to give her sensory input, preferably neither her nor Cane. “What did you do to her?”

“Nothing serious. She will awaken shortly.”

Roche wasn't sure how she felt about that, and couldn't fight the sensation that she was being backed into a corner: first Cane, and now two others. Her mission was in enough jeopardy without complicating things further. But without saying anything, she hurried the short distance to the lander itself. When Cane had ducked through the inner airlock, she keyed it closed and made sure the seals were tight.

A short companionway led to the cockpit and its standard, if slightly out of date, hemispherical layout: five acceleration couches, centrally placed in rows of two and three; main controls located ahead of the front row; pilot's position right and back-up to the left, auxiliary systems away to either side and rear. There were no viewports this far forward; heat-shields covered the nose completely.

Roche dropped into the pilot's couch, made the fundamental adjustments to suit her physique, and placed the valise on her knees. “Out of curiosity, Box, can you fly this thing?”

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<Of course, Morgan. Its interface is simple and will respond to my commands.>

“Good.” She turned in her seat to see what Cane was up to. He had strapped the Eckandi into the chair in the centre of the rear row and lifted the Surin from where she lay on the floor. The girl, limp and even smaller than Roche had guessed, went into the seat on the far side of the cockpit from Roche. “We have a reave on board, Box.”

<I know – >

“If she wakes up and takes me over, you have my permission to fly the ship on your own. I don't want us stuck in limbo again waiting for her to decide whether or not she should trust us.”

<A sensible precaution, Morgan.>

Cane strapped himself into the copilot's seat next to her, and Roche belatedly realised that she had been talking aloud.

“The briefcase,” he said. “It's some sort of computer, isn't it?”

“Yes.” She cursed the slip. “It's going to fly us out of here in – how long, Box?”

<Shortly.> The Box paused. <The *Midnight's* fuel reserve will self-destruct at any moment.>

“What! Klose gave the order to scuttle the ship?”

Before the Box could reply, Roche had to grasp at the arm rests as the Frigate's gravity stabilisers failed completely.

“Shouldn't we be launching, then?” If the stabilisers had gone, the main energy pile wouldn't be far behind. And if the Box was right about Klose's order to free the anti-matter reserve –

She was suddenly aware of perspiration beading her forehead.

<A little decorum, Morgan,> the voice lilted in her ear. <We have almost a full minute left to us.>

Roche forced herself to stay calm. “To hell with decorum, Box. Would you just get us out of here?”

<Morgan, must I explain the obvious? If we launch immediately, we will be picked up at once by Dato fighters – an easy target for their

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gunnery. There is a high probability they will take us for unimportant crew attempting to abandon ship, not the valued personnel we most certainly are, and destroy the lander. Do you agree?>

“Yes. So?”

<The magnetic bottle containing the anti-matter reserve will fail in twenty seconds.>

“Box!” It was an exclamation of disbelief, nothing more. She had passed beyond panic.

<Outer door sequence employed. Stay calm, Morgan. Put colloquially: by the time they react to the opening of the outer doors, the ship will be history.>

“Just don't cut it too fine – “

<Ignition sequence commenced, Morgan. Take position.>

“Brace yourself!” Roche shouted to Cane, remembering that she alone could hear the voice in her ear. “We're launching!”

<Three seconds,> intoned the Box. <Launch.>

Riding a wave of energy as mighty as that on the surface of a small sun, the lander ejected itself into space. Roche closed her eyes against the sudden pressure, and put her fate into the Box's hands.

3

DBMP *Ana Vereine*

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From his coffin in life-support, Captain Uri Kajic viewed the assault on the *Midnight* via his ship's various external sensors with interest.

The battlefield was complex. At its heart, the angry speck that represented the COE Frigate spun like a primitive atom in primordial soup. A ring of Dato fighters harried this defensive position, swooping closer with every pass, supported by the greater might of the three Raiders and, further back still, the Marauder itself: the *Ana Vereine*.

Occasional stray bolts spun free from the intense web of destruction woven by the Raiders about the blazing Frigate. Some were deflected from the *Midnight's* remaining shields; others might have originated from the Frigate itself. Although most dissipated harmlessly, the potential remained for an unlucky mishap. The narrow channel through Sciacca's World's asteroid field had been mapped in advance and was updated every millisecond by the Marauder's battle computers – but every new, unplanned explosion altered the orbits of nearby asteroids and increased the risk of collision.

When the *Midnight's* anti-matter reserve suddenly spilled free of its containment and annihilated the ordinary matter surrounding it, that risk increased tenfold.

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“Pull the fighters back!” Kajic ordered, sending the command hurtling down electromagnetic paths to the bridge in the Marauder's primary nacelle, where his holographic image appeared a moment later. “Prepare for impact!”

His second-in-command, Atalia Makaev, turned away to relay the order. The expanding bubble of energy reached the *Ana Vereine*, making it shudder. Kajic's image flickered slightly with the energy surge, but otherwise remained steadfast. The officers on the bridge gripped their stations as the disturbance washed over them, steadying themselves against the lurching motion. When it eased, and the ship's g-field restabilised, the normal bustle resumed.

“Report!” Kajic was unable to suppress his impatience. If the ship had been holed, he would have known immediately, but there were thousands of smaller ailments that might slip by unnoticed. The inevitable lag between his orders and their enactment was never as irritating as it was in battle.

“Telemetry reports ...” The ship shuddered again as the shields sustained another impact, draining power. Makaev waited for her superior's image to reconfigure itself properly before continuing. Not that it was necessary – Kajic could receive the information with or without the presence of his hologram – but it was considered polite. “Telemetry reports that the *Midnight* has broken into seven substantial fragments.” She paused again, adjusting the communication bud in her left ear. “Their trajectories have been noted and extrapolated.”

“Damage to the Raiders?” Although Kajic's primary concern was the *Ana Vereine*, the information available to him showed an alarming void where moments earlier a dozen fighters had been.

“*Paladin* has sustained minor damage. *Lansquenet* reports no incident. Awaiting word from Captain Hage regarding *Galloglass*.”

Kajic sighed, folding his simulated hands behind his back – using body-language consciously, as just another means of communication of the many in his repertoire – and did his best to radiate calm. On the

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bridge's main screen, the brilliant fireball that had once been the COEA *Midnight* boiled away into space, leaving a shower of particles and radioactive dust in its wake. The larger fragments that telemetry had noted were ringed in warning red to aid navigation: bullseyes where perhaps gravestones should have been.

Kajic knew from intelligence reports that every COE Frigate carried a crew of two hundred and fifty, each with families scattered throughout the Commonwealth of Empires; some of these people might conceivably have had ties with the Dato Bloc, no matter how distant. The *Midnight* had also been carrying a score of transportees ...

Gone, all of them, in a single blinding explosion as the *Midnight's* pile went critical.

Gone also – and more importantly – was his hope of executing his mission smoothly and without error.

“Captain?”

Atalia Makaev regarded him with a steely expression. It always felt to Kajic as though she were looking into his soul, seeing all of his personal doubts, searching out his weaknesses.

“Yes, Atalia?” he said.

“We have regained contact with Captain Hage. Communications are currently restricted to coherent transmissions. *Galloglass'* main communications nexus was overloaded by neutrino-flux at the peak of the explosion.”

He nodded. “As would be expected, given the *Galloglass'* close proximity to the *Midnight*. It was ready to dock the moment the Frigate's shields fell.”

“With all due respect, sir,” said Makaev. “The self-destruction of the *Midnight* should have been anticipated.”

Kajic noted her thin, almost imperceptible smile with some irritation. “It was not a consideration,” he said. “There was nothing within Captain Klose's professional or personal profiles to suggest that he would take such drastic action.”

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“Nevertheless, Captain,” said Makaev, “he did self-destruct.”

Kajic hesitated, fixing his stare squarely upon her for almost a full minute. He had his doubts about her true role aboard the ship, and how that role related to his own, but this wasn't the time to let suspicion interfere with duty.

“Bring us back to yellow alert,” he said eventually. “Stabilise our orbits and commence repairs. I want all fighters returned to the *Ana Vereine*. We must be ready to leave at a moment's notice.”

“Yes, sir.”

“What of the target? Has a sighting been confirmed?”

“Debris scanning is under way.”

He returned his attention to the data flowing from the sensors. “Replay the destruct sequence. Bring reserve computers on-line to plot the dispersal pattern and extend scan accordingly. It has to be out there somewhere,” he said. “I want it found.”

“Sir.” Makaev's left arm snapped a salute, then she turned away.

On the main screen the fiery death of the *Midnight* returned to haunt him. He could have accessed the data directly, but for the moment he preferred the luxury of viewing the information from a distance, allowing him a more ... human perspective.

The outcome of the battle had indeed taken him by surprise. A protracted engagement had always been a possibility; on that point the tacticians agreed, and Kajic had prepared himself for Dato Bloc losses – but not for this. Not for the complete annihilation of the Frigate and all its contents.

detain or disable COEA Midnight

His orders, hard-wired into his circuitry, sprang into his thoughts unbidden. With his mission suffering such a spectacular setback, he was not surprised that they had. They were intended as a prompt, to surface with any doubt or uncertainty over the success of his mission.

capture and return Commander Roche and AI JW111101000

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They continued – and would keep doing so until his thoughts were once again focussed upon his mission, and all reservations concerning its success were dispelled.

priority gold-one

He shrugged aside the mental prompts and concentrated upon the recent battle:

Operationally, the strategy had been a simple one, and had been well executed. With the DBMP *Lansquenet*, *Galloglass* and *Paladin* in support, the *Ana Vereine* had translated with extreme precision to the coordinates provided. The *Midnight* had been exactly where the Espionage Corps had reckoned it would be – too far in-System to make a run for the nearest anchor point, and foolishly vulnerable in Sciacca's World's orbital ring. Decelerating, outflanked and outgunned, the *Midnight* had, ultimately, no choice other than surrender – or so reason would have had it.

The destruction of an Armada Frigate in COE space, by its own hand or not, unplanned or not, had all the makings of a major diplomatic incident. A high cost, even if the mission ultimately proved to be successful – which was still by no means certain.

While the bridge bustled around him, Kajic accessed Klose's files and re-studied the Captain's profile. Klose's service record, stolen by Espionage Corps spies from COE Armada databanks, was long and unremarkable. CEO of an old Frigate, normally given unimportant duties, Klose had been marked as a conservative living off remembered glories, full of hubris, disrespectful of the 'new breed' of well-educated military administrators, stubborn and authoritarian – much like the Commonwealth he served. The possibility that Klose had also been unstable was something Kajic had not considered – had no reason to consider. There was nothing in the man's records to warrant it.

Klose had taken his own orders – to prevent the Dato Bloc from capturing the AI – to the absolute extreme. He had done so knowingly,

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choosing death before surrender, and had taken his crew with him, regardless of what their individual choices might have been.

Unexpected, yes. But if Kajic had not counted on Proctor Klose's reaction, then the opposite was also true: Klose could not have anticipated Kajic's own response to the situation. He had no intention of letting the destruction of the *Midnight* prevent him from fulfilling his mission. Nor would he permit any interference from the prison planet itself to stop him. Nothing was going to get in the way. Not even his often debilitating fear of failure.

priority gold-one

He forced the fear down, away from the surface. If there was one thing Kajic was, it was focussed on the mission.

His orders had been explicit, and ranked in order of priority. These three priorities had been stamped into the fine mesh of bio-implants infiltrating the tissues of his living brain to ensure that there could be no possibility of misunderstanding their significance. No matter how omnipotent he felt at times – with his mind roving the labyrinthine networks of the *Ana Vereine* – priorities A to C were a constant reminder of his limitations, of just how much he owed the machines in his coffin.

Life. Senses. Command. Duty:

- (a) capture the AI, at all costs;
- (b) capture Roche;
- (c) perform (a) and (b) with as much stealth and speed
as possible.

Focussed.

“Atalia?”

His second returned instantly to his side as though proximity to his image actually meant something. Microphones and cameras scattered throughout the *Marauder* provided him with the ability to communicate with anyone, anywhere, at any time he wished. She, of all the people on board, should have known that. Had she forgotten this, he wondered, or was it a deliberate action?

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But then, he reminded himself, this was one of the many things the experiment was designed to test. Was effective command dependant on genuine physical presence, or could it be simulated? Could a simulation breed resentment, even fear, among those it was supposed to deal with most effectively?

“Sir?” Makaev's voice was as controlled as it always was.

“Dispatch shuttles to examine the larger pieces in situ.”

She frowned. “If we do that, sir, we will we be unable to leave until the shuttles have returned.”

He manufactured a glower and turned its full force on her. “Are you questioning my orders?”

“Of course not, sir, but – “

“Then see that they are carried out immediately.”

Makaev turned away and relayed the order to a subordinate while Kajic watched the *Midnight* explode an uncounted time and let the anger percolate through him.

He would not allow this temporary set-back get on top of him. He would not allow himself to doubt that he was capable of fulfilling the expectations of those who had designed him. He would not, could not, afford to fail.

It was just a matter of time.