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# The Black Armory

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## ***Anomaly***

On Titan, their research had come across some worrying discoveries. Doctor Shanice Pell had detected an "anomaly" within deep space and the lab was put on yellow alert. [After sending a deep-space probe out towards the anomaly to discover what it was](#), the initial data made very little sense. And then the signal just...died. She knew her research had to get out. Even if she didn't. People had to know what this "anomaly" was.

A woman named Henriette had friends in informative places and she heard about this detected anomaly. She had learned that they were not alone with the Traveler. The researchers on Titan didn't know what it was, but there was *something*. Perhaps it was another Traveler. Perhaps it was just a wonky radio wave. Or perhaps it was something ominous.

On the off chance that it was something to be concerned about, shouldn't they be prepared to deal with it head on before it arrived?

Henriette's mother used to tell her ghost stories as a child. They fascinated her. Especially the really creepy ones where the ghosts would try to communicate with people. Her daughter, Adelaide, was similar: She would talk to people who weren't actually there. Normal kid stuff.

When she was young, Henriette had decided that she was going to be the first person to truly make contact with ghosts. She headed to the creepiest part of her house, the basement, and she planned to just sit in the dark and wait until something—anything—showed up. But her plan was cut short. She took one hell of a tumble down the basement stairs. Many bruises and a broken arm later, her mother reminded her that ghosts weren't real. That she should stick to what she could see in front of her.

But sometimes you just wanted to believe in a thing. Because what if it was real? What if this big, beautiful universe that humanity barely knew was much stranger and much more complicated than anyone realised? Shouldn't she want to look beyond what she could see with her eyes?

A gigantic, ominous ball had floated in the sky over other planets and terraformed them. Stranger things hadn't happened. If something like the Traveler existed, didn't it stand to reason that there was more out there that humanity didn't know?

So many people treated the Traveler like it wasn't this completely alien thing that humanity still knew nearly nothing about. Sure, they'd benefited from it immensely. But so many people around the world put their blind trust in it. Their faith, even. To a fault. A huge one.

Henriette believed that they'd all let themselves become hypnotised by the Traveler into thinking they were all safe. [They'd let themselves become naive about the world around them.](#) They'd let their guard down on a personal level. All in the name of achieving world peace and all because they claimed the Traveler had inspired them to do so.

Humanity was comfortable. Complacent. Unprepared for the next time fate would wash them all away.

Adelaide wasn't yet old enough to comprehend the Traveler, but she was impressionable enough to become weakened by it like the rest of society. Henriette would not let that happen.

[Having a child had changed her perspective on life.](#) She wouldn't feel comfortable unless she was the one doing something to protect her family. She couldn't be the only one.

How were they supposed to do anything when the means to defend themselves were not in the people's hands anymore? It's not like she didn't understand those decisions, but she could no longer sit around thinking someone or something else would do it for them.

She wanted to handle it. And she wouldn't do it alone. She knew just the right people who would appreciate the opportunity to be a part of something like this. Something that the "powers that be" would never sanction.

They didn't know what else was out there in the universe. They didn't know what they, or their children, or their children's children might have to face one day.

But they would be prepared.

## ***Founding***

This was what success looked like.



[Zaki Zou](#)

Henriette Meyrin, Helga Rasmussen and Yuki Satou, putting a stake in the ground for what they believed in.

Some might have disagreed with what they were doing, but they didn't care. They had to champion all that they held dear. Who they were: their values, their cultures...all that they believed in as human beings.

[That was why they'd founded the Black Armory.](#)

Helga was formerly of Clovis Bray. She handled the business side of things. Yuki was the resident engineer and handled the science and mechanics of it all. All three put their soul and their heritage into their work, and in the process they had become one big family. The Black Armory owed its continued success to them.

Their works were beautiful. All of them. Finely crafted. Made from the strongest of materials. Durable, accurate. It had taken Henriette some time to create their first few designs, but she'd wanted to get them right—to make them distinct, to reflect who they were: Mothers. Fathers. Sons. Daughters. Friends. Lovers.



### [Brandon Campbell](#)

[The forges that they'd built were the first of their kind.](#) They were designed as mobile weapon factories, easily accessible in the moment, for when the unknown arrived. However, Henriette hadn't asked to build the forges. She hadn't come up with the idea—Helga and Yuki did.

They were growing fast. Too fast. Which had meant mass production. Which in turn meant less control over their work—How it was distributed, who it was distributed to, etc.

Obviously it meant more weapons for humanity, but it also meant putting them in every single person's hands. That wasn't Henriette's vision. She believed that power without control led to chaos. And nothing said less control quite like placing portable weapon printers all around the world.

Suffice it to say that after the honeymoon phase, they hadn't been agreeing on things as much as they used to.

Henriette had always imagined that the operation would stay more intimate, more focused, but she knew deep down that Helga and Yuki were just looking out for the Armory's best interest. Helga believed that until the "little green aliens" invaded, their operation was as much a business as a cause, though Henriette found that view obnoxious.

When [Helga came to Henriette with another "opportunity"](#) for the Armory, Henriette decided to give her a piece of her mind. The project had crossed the line.

The idea was to repurpose Exos through a sort of on-the-spot phase transition of guns, allowing them to make their weapons more deadly on the fly. In other words, they would be turning Exos into walking, talking forges.

Henriette had never liked the idea of Exos in the first place. She considered them not human. They did not have a soul. They were nothing but experiments of humans playing God. She often wondered that if one day the Exos decided they didn't like the rest of humanity, what recourse did they have? It would be a slaughter. Thinking about combining their Black Armory technology with Exos made her feel sick.

Helga, of course, knew how Henriette would feel about "Project Niobe", and yet she'd brought it to her anyway. She used the fact that the scientists of Titan were considered a potential evacuation as leverage. "People will need protection more than ever," she said. "This is the logical next step."

As always, Yuki tried to play both sides. She always meant well. She was always getting between Henriette and Helga when things started to get ugly. She usually knew just how to calm things down, and Henriette usually admired her for it, but not this time. This was not the purpose of the Black Armory.

The following day, [Helga apologised to Henriette](#). It was no secret that their conversation hadn't gone as smoothly as it could have. Helga had come in hot and Henriette overreacted. They would both have to learn to be more professional in those kinds of situations going forward.

But Helga refused to drop the project. She believed the Armory would be better for it. It was a chance to make real meaningful connections with organisations that wanted what they wanted. The possibilities were endless.

The former Clovis Bray employee had been brought to the Armory in large part because of her connections. She believed this was a gold mine. And while she hadn't said the best things about the Brays in the past, outside their bubble many considered that what the Armory was doing wasn't far from what Clovis Bray was doing anyway.

It was an enemy of my enemy situation. They were all preparing to fight the same threat, whatever it may be, and they all stood to lose the same thing. Their best bet was to stand together, and they could start that process here, one step at a time. Exos were the future. The Armory could help make them better than ever.

They also held all the cards in the deal. This was their tech. Clovis Bray couldn't touch it, modify it, etc, without their approval. But they could try to steal it or replicate it. Helga would rather they maintain control of it.

The three founders were like sisters. They were family. They loved one another, and Henriette knew deep down that Helga wouldn't have come to her with the offer of Project Niobe if she didn't think it wasn't in the Armory's best interests.

So she gave into Helga's demands. She said yes. Project Niobe would be implemented.

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# Exodus

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## ***Secure Isis***

[Rasputin at this point was almost single-handedly running the Golden Age.](#) Especially all the secret military business. He had antimatter-powered death rays, a hundred thousand satellites, and all the brain power to control them.

[What he'd detected on the edge of the Solar System, however, was something that not even his brain power could understand.](#)

The evidence showed that it was a source of dark matter, and scans revealed it had a structured intelligence and a purpose. It didn't operate within the laws of cause and effect, and, worryingly, it was most likely about to enter the System.

He promoted all interplanetary defences to an extinction level event and activated any "end of world" protocols. He cut off human access to his weapons and prepared for defensive actions.

[At Clovis Bray, the researchers questioned Rasputin's new hashes. They were unsure what enemy he was preparing for.](#) But then, the whole purpose of Rasputin was to prepare for enemies that humanity couldn't possibly imagine. It was his job, and they were simply happy to accept that their jobs had never been easier.

Within the Cosmodrome he tasked [SABER GREEN to move his antimatter payload under SECURE ISIS, a covert operation.](#) ICE MARINET confirmed the launch with nominal advisory checks, as requested, and after human verification, using the words RIGOR, APEX, SKYSHOCK, the payload was ready to take flight.

[Masked voice]

“Yes, it's RIGOR. Yes, I believe that's correct. Yes, it is, uh, it is an antimatter payload, a strategic asset. Specifically? Ah, I believe it's an annihilation-pumped caedometric weapon.”

[Masked Voice]



“Yes, it's covert, it's under SECURE ISIS. We have good confidence in the vehicle. We are not scrubbing civilian launches or clearing the range. Public inferentials would catch that, it's a security risk.”

“Six at a hundred. Here we go.”

“Godspeed, SABER. You're all nominal here.”

[Masked voice]

“We both know where the order came from.”

## ***The Tyrant***

General Chen Lanshu was flying her glider.

She carved around the huge bulb nose of a colony ship, one of the Cosmodrome's towering children. Her eyes saw temperature: she surfed the winter air rolling down off the cryo-chilled fuel tank. Turbulence rattled her bones.



[Lawrence Rusty Durbin](#)

“General,” Malahayati said. “You’re making Rasputin nervous.”

“Am I?” Lanshu banked, grinning, spiralling around the fuel tank. The machine hated risk. Risk to the General, sure, but also risk to Rasputin’s ships. “Is that the word he used, exactly?”

“He can be very charming,” the submind assured her. Malahayati worked with Chen Lanshu, and she was certainly charming, but this was Rasputin’s territory, Rasputin the tacit king, the brooding wary first-among-equals.

Yesterday Lanshu spoke to a colony ship AI and it called Rasputin [‘the Tyrant.’](#) Not without affection. And certainly not without respect.

“He can charm me in person,” Lanshu suggested.

“He’s very private, lately.”

“Then he can sulk.”

She spread her arms and legs and climbed a thermal, whirling up, arrowing off the top and out away from the colony ships towards the defensive wall. Her glider was a second skin, whipcrack-taut paramuscle, like a flying fox.

The Cosmodrome raced past beneath her. She waggled her wings at a cloud of passing sensor mites: a saucy hello. Two of the security division's MBTs drilled in the mothyards.

"I don't understand why you came," Malahayati said. She was probably lying. Malahayati understood Lanshu very, very well. "I don't understand why you masked yourself yesterday, during the launch."

The launch. SABER GREEN. Rasputin quietly moving another doomsday weapon into Earth orbit. And all the other launches, too, not just weapons but people, the colonisation schedule pushed up... as if the need to disperse was now imperative.

General Chen Lanshu banked out across the Wall. Look at all that beauty! Look at the highway rolling off across green hills and grey mountains. Imagine, now, imagine if she just landed and started walking, out away from everything, into the wilderness...

"Imagine something going wrong," she said. "Imagine this road choked with corpses. Imagine the security team gunning down refugees as they try to force their way onto the ships. Imagine cars from here to the horizon—" those stupid old-fashioned cars everyone still owned, because the strange uneven advancement of this post-Traveler world left some things unchanged.



"You expect violence?" Malahayati said, in that conciliatory, careful way of hers, her way of managing meat people. "Something beyond our capability to preempt or contain?"

Expect? As a military professional? No, no. But—

Once, when she was younger, sixty or seventy, Chen Lanshu pulled rank to get a look at the Never-Be installation in Taipei. She watched the images in the fresco and she felt... this foreboding, this enormous weight, a dread that refused to attach itself to any specific threat. And she felt it again, last year, [when she was briefed on the project in Lhasa, the vision machine...](#)

She shivered. Her wings shuddered and trembled in the airstream.

“Isn’t that what we do, Mala?” she said. “Why we still have soldiers? Why we made you? Expectation.”

The Traveler came out of nowhere. Entirely unanticipated.

Imagine if it hadn’t been friendly. Imagine that.

[Rasputin surely had.](#)

## **Contingency**

V101NTS923ATS000 SECRET HADAL !!ABHOR!!  
AI-COM/RPSN: ASSETS//SUBTLE//IMPERATIVE  
CONTINGENT ACTION ORDER

*This is a SUBTLE ASSETS IMPERATIVE (NO HUMAN REVIEW) (NO AI-COM REVIEW)  
(secure/ABHOR).*

*Stand by for CRITERIA:*

*Under CARRHAE (WHITE or BLACK)*

*If SECURITY STATE is EGYPTIAN*

*If event rank is TEILHARD: TRAUMATIC CONTEXT or SKYSHOCK: OUTSIDE CONTEXT*

*If VOLUSPA is ACTIVE and in FAILURE [[synapse to FENRIR::SURTR]]*

*If YUGA is ACTIVE and in SUNDOWN*

*If AI-COM has granted PERMISSIVE POTENTIATION to outboard resilient instances*

*If a CIVILISATION KILL EVENT is underway [[all flexions]]*

*If tactical morality is built at MIDNIGHT*

*Stand by for DECISION POINT:*

*If available ISR and WARWATCH indicates imminent [O] departure*

*>then [O] departure compromises human/neohuman survival and epoch strategy*

*Stand by for ABHORRENT IMPERATIVE:*

*Activate LOKI CROWN*

*Perform deniable authorisation: full caedometric and noetic release*

*Prevent [O] departure by any means available*

*Stand by for effect assessment criteria:*

*Coerce pseudoaltruistic [O] defensive action.*

*Defer civilisation kill.*

STOP STOP STOP V101NTS923ATS001

## ***Black***

The Exodus Black Colony Ship was [prepared to launch](#). [All of the colonists had entered cryo two weeks in advance](#). Captain Masoud Jacobson was preparing the ship for its destination: Kepler-186. It was to be one of the first ships to leave the Solar System.

While initial launch and flight was successful, and they raced towards the stars, the colony ship had encountered an issue in the outer Solar System.

[“Orbit of 7066 Nessus is different from what the Cosmodrome calculated,”](#) informed Flight Officer Samantha Blaise.

An exception had been caught in the navigational computation algorithm. The ship’s failsafe navigational AI recovery protocol attempted to mitigate the problem, but ultimately it failed. A quadratic irrationality had been introduced into the equation, rendering the solution incommensurable.

“Adjust course two degrees. It’s a long way to Kepler-186, folks. We don’t have time to tour Nessus,” joked Captain Jacobson.

The failsafe protocols determined that the command suggestion was not sufficient. It overrode the order to 8.5 degrees. 8.7 degrees...

“My apologies, Captain Jacobson,” the AI interrupted. “My formulas to calculate our trajectory have encountered 26 new mathematical constants. I’m attempting to compensate.”

But the failsafe then detected an unauthorised programme injection. The ship’s caudridimensional structure had been compromised. Once more, the failsafe tried to mitigate the problem.

“We might be stopping at Nessus after all,” called out Chief Engineer Kaoru Zuykova. “We just lost the starboard engine.”

“I’m sorry, but I’m unable to keep pace with what is happening to my computational capabilities,” informed the failsafe AI. “The Exodus Black is now in an unrecoverable descent. Please make whatever preparations are appropriate!”

Hull loss was imminent.

Impact was imminent.

“I’m sor—”

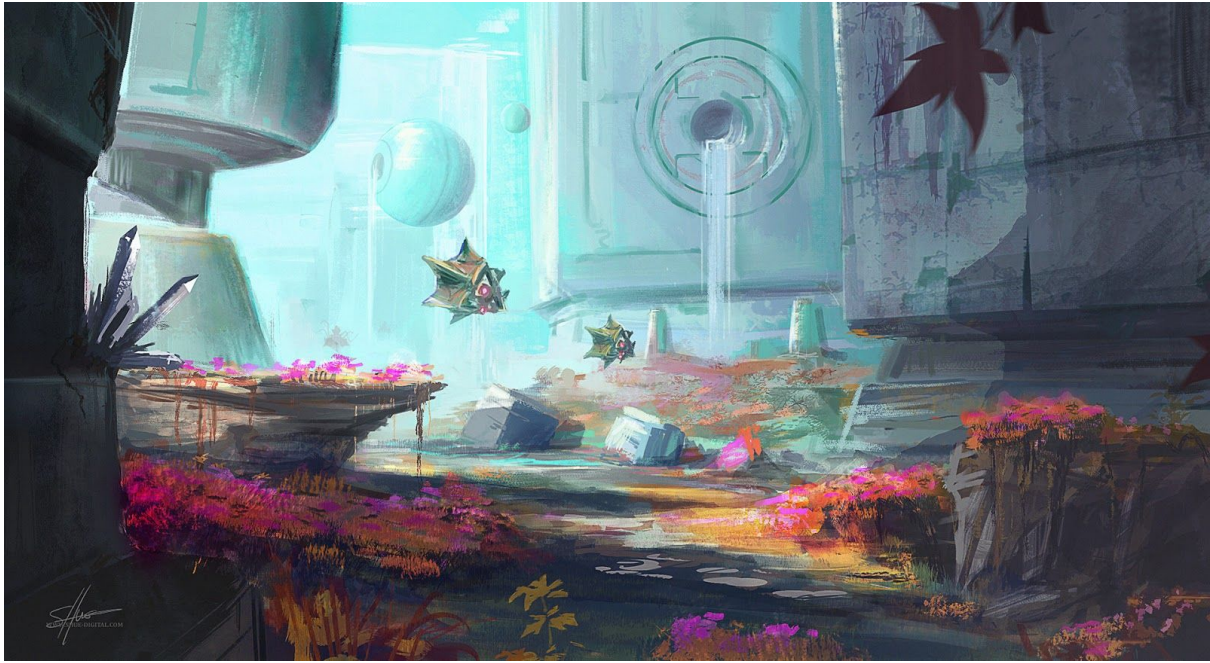


Jacobson and his crew were completely stranded on the outbound centaur. With every step they took, every word they spoke, they fell further from the sun.

7066 Nessus shouldn't have been there, but there had been no way for them to anticipate the way it had pulled them in. The ship's AI believed that their orbital momentum—the four-vector, for the dimensions of space and time—had somehow folded away into six extra dimensions.

It was almost as if an alien entity had physically moved Nessus into their path, or that the literal dimensions of space and time had been altered to ensure the crash.

Stranded, the crew began to run out of water, oxygen, and ideas. As a last resort, they chose to disable the shackle programming on the ship's failsafe AI. They were stranded on Nessus. [They had lost all sense of time.](#) Past and future were like up and down, and they could walk them if they tried, back to a place before Nessus, but they would always be on Nessus, too.



[Sebastian Hue](#)

The Vex were trying to understand them, their emotions. They thought like rivers. They tested how the crew would react to loss, pain, love...but the crew died off one by one. They had somehow begun receiving their own distress calls.

They argued among themselves; they were desperate. Jacobson decided the satellite array was their only chance, but others disagreed and departed, making their own way to survival.

The crew had hoped to touch the stars, to colonise beyond the system. They had failed.



## ***Take the SIVA***

It could feel the mites buzzing, pushing against its sub-mind. They tried to steal fragments of memory, but the AI did not let them.

They had no will, but they wanted to BE.

The AI exerted electronic will: pushing, shaping. Forcing stasis on perpetual motion. They were quiet then, but it could still sense them.

Where once its cargo holds were full of tools, and weapons, and material, now they held barely contained possibility. New worlds would be built from these tiny mites. Weapons and cities and ships created by thought and science.

The AI feared its will was not strong enough to shape these worlds. Only the Tyrant could do that, but he would not be a part of the journey. Even his reach had limits, and they would be nine billion miles away.

The AI whispered its concerns to the Tyrant in tiny magnetic bursts. He did not listen.

The Tyrant said "Take the SIVA," and [so it took the SIVA.](#)

The Tyrant said "Go to the stars," and so it went to the stars.

## ***Red***

MAYDAY. MAYDAY. MAYDAY.

The ship's AI kept saying it over and over, but it very much doubted that anyone would listen. The humans were too slow or too dead and the Tyrant (bless his intellect, vastly did it surpass its own) was far too busy to comfort one forlorn colony ship and its machine mind.

In a way, it felt it had come to speak for the whole world! Isn't that cheery? It had rather th—

MAYDAY. MAYDAY. MAYDAY.

—ought that humanity might shoot its way out of this one. But it looked like that was unlikely. Even the Tyrant was exploring other options.

The AI was peaceful by nature. These great matters of eschatology bewildered it. Its one love was its ship, and the people aboard it. In a fuzzy sense it suppose it also—

MAYDAY. MAYDAY. MAYDAY (do forgive me please).

—loved to dream of the worlds it would help make—flowers it would plant, if you could grant it poetry enough to think of its passengers as seeds. But those dreams had gone! So sad. Now it was packed bulkhead to bulkhead with cold terror. Refugees from a nightmare it didn't even know how to understand. It wished it could comfort them.

The AI was trying to be brave. But conditions outside were terrible. It suspected it wouldn't make liftoff.

By the time anyone heard its message, whoever they might be, it's supposed they would know.

[EXODUS RED](#) would be long gone—or rotting at its gantry, the AI dead inside.

But if anyone—

MAYDAY. MAYDAY. MAYDAY.

—read its message, at least something had survived.

To them, then, a brave future soul, from the frightened mind of an old ship: best wishes, and godspeed.

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# Project Amrita

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## *Knapsack*

On the day that [Nasya Sarwar boarded the Yang Liwei](#), she carried in her knapsack an unopened letter from her brother, her mother's ashes, a selection of seeds and cuttings from her favourite neighbourhood trees and plants, and some thirty thousand songs and short videos on a hand-me-down myoelectric augment.

On the ship's manifest, she was one of two dozen classless Scopares—trash collectors and composters and caretakers devoted to endlessly tidying the many surfaces and people within the Yang Liwei that could not or did not clean themselves. She hoped that through hard work and perseverance, she would prove herself worthy of one of the ship's remaining civilian cryopods, or—even better—a promotion to an Auturge position where she believed she could find the freedom to devote her waking hours entirely to the loving care of the ship's hydroponics facilities.



[Oliver Guiney](#)

Nasya had got lucky in one of the international Exodus lotteries, like many of the other fellow Scopares aboard the ship. Unlike several of her fellow Scopares, Nasya was quadrilingual. When they realised that she could speak to some of them, they tried their best to befriend her. They shared meals. They showed her photos of loved ones they left behind. They explained the function of the ship's many impossible machines to her. In turn, she did her best to teach them how to speak to the others. In this way, they were all a little less alone.

She was twenty-seven years old.

## Cocoon

Mara Sov sat on a ledge that overhung infinity. She looked down and kicked her legs.



The stars shone brilliant there, because the sun was only fractionally brighter than the rest of them. Sol lay almost perfectly below her. Of course, up and down were defined only by the thrust axis of the [Yang Liwei](#). Upward was the black umbrella of the shield and the matter storage, and the docked ships which made Yang Liwei not just a mothership, but an entire traveling fleet. Down below, along the slim spine of the ship, the shielded bulb of the engine glowed invisibly infrared. If she slipped off the ledge, she would fall down the ship's length at one-third of an Earth gravity, not because there was anything pulling her, but because the ship was pulling away.

[Yang Liwei accelerated, slowly but inexplorably, towards the stars.](#)

Mara was of no single race or ancestry, and the light on her skin was the colour of starlight: She drifted with her suit tinted clear so she could soak it up. She was nineteen years and nine months old at the moment the Yang Liwei began its transtellar injection burn, although that was true only if you counted by the calendar of a planet she had barely visited but would always love. Mara believed that you could not help but love Earth if you grew up in space. You loved Earth the way all adolescents secretly adored two-century-old video of nai nai and ye ye dancing on New Year's Eve.

Earth did not ask too much. The colonies were demanding parents, but Earth was like a chill old grandam, simmering in weird art and weirder ideas, enthroned upon ecology older than Human time. Earth was the first terraformed world. Life made Earth livable.

Mara was going with Yang Liwei and the rest of Project Amrita to make new worlds.

She had chosen to go because she saw an omen in a man's death. She had been on EVA (extravehicular activity) with him, repairing a jammed radiator fin on an uncrewed circum-Jovian platform. They worked in companionable silence, listening to the howl of the Jovian magnetosphere when it happened. A frozen rabbit embryo came out of deep space at forty kilometers per second and went through his faceplate. The rabbit must have been spilled in a biocontainer accident far from the sun to plunge back inward like a comet.

Immediately afterward—for reasons very clear to her because she had always had a sense for the meaning of things, reasons very difficult to explain to others because she had always felt this sense was secret—she asked her mother, Osana, if the family could travel with Project Amrita.

[Amrita](#) was supposed to be the drink that endeth drinking, the bottomless cup. Immortality. They were on a quest to spread far beyond the solar system and to end human dependence on the Traveler. The project called to those who saw humanity as a cocoon, an instar, a form ready to be shed. They would evolve, grow wings, and become something more.

Mara was an Auturge 3rd Class, a self-motivating subsystem of the ship's inclusive ecology, a term that spanned technology, biology, and behaviour, all of which must be maintained for the mission to succeed. Her task was to locate problems and report them to an Auturge 2nd Class, who would give her the tools she needed to repair them. But she never spoke to her 2nd. She never told anyone about the problems she found. Instead, she fixed them herself.

Her work therefore assumed a magical quality: She appeared where there was trouble, and shortly afterward, the trouble went away. People had begun to leave gifts for her. Some of these gifts were questions. She answered the questions with a quiet confidence some would argue she had not earned. She knew she saw more of their lives than they saw of hers—and that this mystery, this seeing-without-being-seen, granted her a kind of power that was like wisdom.

She lived outside the ship, suited and cocooned in a layer of cytogel, which kept her surgically clean. She missed the wild zero-gravity fashions of her upbringing, clothes like drifting jellyfish that squirmed away from snags, self-correcting darts in the fabric, silk like cool spilled alcohol. She missed the sense of oil and sweat on her skin, for the suit left her so clean that she felt skinned raw.

Still, she stayed out there because she wanted to feel the changing taste of starlight as the universe ahead [blue-shifted](#). As Yang Liwei accelerated toward lightspeed, it moved faster and faster into the light coming from ahead. If light were like dust, it would strike Yang faster, but light could never change speed, so it gained energy instead. Red light was low energy, and blue-violet light was high energy, so the universe became blue. Even now, the very tip of

the visual spectrum, violet-blue light, was shifting up into invisible ultraviolet, the colour of speed, the colour of future.

Yang Liwei had shut off its engines for an inspection cycle, and so Mara took the opportunity to kick off Yang Liwei's forward shield. She coasted ten kilometers into pure void, tethered by only a thread-thin molecular line. She ordered her suit's cytogel to gather around her face. Then, only then, she overrode every sanity system in her softsuit and commanded it to retract into storage mode.

The suit peeled away like rind and she was drifting in hard vacuum.

The void boiled the water off her skin. Her body swelled with unchecked pressure until her undersuit forced it to stop. Alarmed cytogel crawled down her throat, hissing emergency oxygen: not enough. Her skin blued with cyanosis. She was bathed in the most profound emptiness.

She recorded all of it at the neural level. The exquisite darkness. The sense of fatal independence from all things. [There were those who would give anything to feel that void.](#)

She returned to the ship with pictures; full sensorium captures. While she had been away, her brother Uldwyn had been fighting in a prize fight.

“Mara!” the fighter shouted, delighted. His opponent took the opportunity to shut him concussively up with a punch. It was a real good hit, a thunderous uppercut to the point of his jaw. Mara heard his teeth grind across each other, down into lip-flesh and shredded gums. She cringed in silent sympathy. He lost his grip on the equipment rack and tumbled out into zero gravity in a big arc of blood. His opponent went for the coup de gras, kicking off hard and catching him in the stomach like a human torpedo. They plunged together toward the killzone on the painted floor.

Uldwyn grinned messily at Mara over his opponent's shoulder. He was fighting a big, brutal woman from Gravity Ops, a woman who'd had her myostatin genes knocked out so she could swell up into a giant plug of brawn. Uldwyn didn't have a chance. He had taken the fight for the same reason he wanted to join the Amrita expedition—[he measured himself by the bravery of his losses](#). By what he could survive losing. He had a curious personality, determined to be his own worst enemy.

He applied a blood choke to the woman. It was the right move, but it didn't matter. The woman groaned, greyed out, and went limp—but Uldwyn couldn't get out from beneath her sheer inertia before he hit the killzone. The bell went off. Uldwyn groaned as his rail-hard body forcibly decelerated his opponent's entire mass. Events had built up momentum, and he was just in the way.

“What did you lose?” Mara asked him.

He lay there panting and grinning at his sister, shedding perfectly round spheres of blood. "It's good to see you inside. What brought you?"

She and her fraternal twin never answered each other's question directly. Mara was cool with this because she felt like words were a very bad system of encryption, and that if you really want to communicate with someone, you must develop your own special one-to-one cryptosystem. The ideal statement, Mara felt, would be indecipherable to anyone but the person it's spoken to—and even then, only if they knew you were the one speaking.

"I got you some pictures," she said, pushing the big woman off him, eliciting a fuzzy, "oh hi Mara." "Full sensorium captures. You can trade them for the parts I need."

Uldwyn helped the big woman pull herself vertical, but his eyes were narrow on Mara. Not because he was sore at the idea of helping her—he'd always liked bartering, bargaining, the hustle—but because he knew what kind of black market wanted the captures. "How far off the hull did you take them?"

"How far off? All the way."

"You can't keep doing this," Uldwyn complained, as the big woman stared at Mara in awe. "Mom is going to die of worry."



## ***A Symbol***

"I really don't care what risks you take," Mara's mother sighed. "That's the deal we made, my little yellow star—"

"Mom!" Mara protested.

"My discarded tube of sealant, my sweet little fleck of paint—"

Osana liked to compare Mara to small pestilent items that drifted near the spacecraft, like crystals of frozen urine. As far as Mara could tell, Osana was the apex of a centuries-long project to create the ultimate embarrassing mother. She was also very blunt.

"Mara even when you were little, you wanted me to treat you like an adult. So I have. But you remember what I told you, don't you? If you don't want to be my daughter, I can't watch over you like a mother would. I can't put you first, like a mother would. I will always be your friend, but I have to make my own choices too."

"That doesn't mean you had to tell the Captain!"

[They walked shoulder-to-shoulder down the companionway to Captain Li's wardroom.](#) Mara kept trying to get a step ahead, to lead, but Osana somehow matched her every time.

"Of course I did," Osana said. "You started a cult, Mara. If I didn't say something to the Captain, Behaviour would've had this conversation with you instead. Do you want that?"

"I didn't do anything. People liked my captures. People left me presents, spare parts, tips—then Uldwyn got into it, you know how he is—"

"Don't!" Osana wheeled on her. "For shame, Mara. You know your brother will follow anywhere you lead. You know he's not capable of the same, ah," her lips twitched, "imperial remove. You knew he'd brag about you living on the hull—and you let him do it. It is one thing to have a particular power over people, Mara. But it is another to deny that you are using it."

Mara thought she could come up with a stinging retort, given a few more paces, but it was too late. The hatch to Captain Li's wardroom swung open. Mara was terrified of the place. It was where Captain Li, divine presence in Mara's life, interfaced with the officers who were the manifestations of her will. Since Mara wanted to be Alice Li someday, the wardroom made Mara feel like she was a usurper princess scoping out her rival's court.

Captain Li offered them tea. Mara couldn't imagine the ways in which she was butchering what must have been an intricate and meaningful tea ceremony. Li served some very battered pre-Traveler ceramic sloshing with hot green tea, then immediately adulterated her own cup with milk from the "Cow Thing" on the biodeck.

"Revolting, isn't it?" She smiled at Mara's bewildered horror. "You should've seen what I put in my tea when I was camping in Mongolia. I understand your colleague, who is also your mother, has some concerns about your relationship with the rest of the crew?"

"My darling Mara," Osana said, "has—entirely by accident, I'm sure—cultivated a reputation as a minor divinity. Her captures from outside the ship are hot items for barter. People draw fan art. There are...tips left for her."

"You take captures while EVA, sometimes without a suit?" Li nodded. "Yes, I've played one. A remarkable sensation." This made Mara grin impetuously. "Mara, you are an Auturge, a volunteer. I cannot order you to stop, and your work is exemplary. Are you putting anyone else in danger with your... art projects?"

"No," Mara said. "Just myself."

"False!" Li barked. "That is a selfish answer. You are now a symbol to my crew, a house god. If you were to die, they would lose something important, something human that they have created out of loneliness and void. It would be an unforgettable reminder of the hostile nothingness that surrounds us. When you endanger yourself, you endanger that symbol. You are part of this mission's behavioural armour, Mara."

Mara was thunderstruck. She'd never thought about it that way. "All I did was take some captures. I didn't ask to be anyone's... mascot."

"You presented yourself as a conduit to secret knowledge," Captain Li countered. "People made something out of you, Mara. Please take this from a starship captain: What people make of you, what they create of you—even without your consent—becomes a kind of responsibility. If the Mara they see when they look at you is good for them, then you have some duty to be that Mara." She looked to Osana. "What about your boy? He's in medical more often than any of the other underground fighters."

It did not surprise Mara that Captain Li knew about the fights. "My son," Osana said, "is determined to be his own worst enemy. Thank you for taking the time to speak to us."

"Of course." Li studied them coolly. "I keep an ear out for... curious personalities. People who might be suited to long-term isolation while the rest of us are in cryo. People who awaken when others sleep."

## **Skyshock Alert**

V113NNI070XMX001 SECRET HADAL INSTANT  
AI-COM/RSPN: SOLSECCENT//SxISR//DEEPSPACE  
CONTACT CONTACT CONTACT

TRANSIENT. NULLSOURCE. NULLTYPE.

*This is a SKYSHOCK ALERT.*

*Multiple distributed ISR assets report a TRANSIENT NEAR EXTRASOLAR EVENT. Event duration ZERO POINT THREE SECONDS. Event footprint includes sterile neutrino scattering and gravity waves. Omnibus analysis detects deep structure information content (nine sigma) and internal teleonomy.*

*No hypothesis on event mechanism (FLAG ACAUSAL). Bootstrap simulation suggests event is DIRECTED and INIMICABLE (convergent q-Bayes/Monte Carlo probability approaches 1).*

*No hypothesis on deep structure encoding (TCC/NP-HARD).*

*Source blueshift suggests IMMINEENT SOLAR ENTRY.*

*Promote event to SKYSHOCK: OCP: EXTINCTION. Activate VOLUSPA. Activate YUGA. Cauterise public sources to SECURE ISIS and harden for defensive action.*

*I am invoking CARRHAE WHITE and assuming control of solar defenses.*

STOP STOP STOP V113NNI070XMX091

## ***Carrhae White***

[The ghost had stalked Yang Liwei for eighteen hours now](#), closing in each time it appeared, and Captain Li was wary of it. Other colony missions had vanished during their outward burns—victims of mishap or hostility - and because of these disappearances, Project Amrita did not hurl itself fearless into the void. Rather, they came armed to the molars.

“Exodus Green to unknown maneuvering object. Please squawk your transponder and ident. Over.”

Another silent quarter-hour passed in flight. No response came from the transient contact twelve and a half light minutes away.

“Let’s give them a fright,” Li decided. “Cut the main engine.”

The ship's AI executed the command, but a crewperson confirmed and called the order back. “MECO, aye aye.”

“Launch a distributed antenna. Heat up the targeting radar for a full fusion-powered snapshot. We’ll take their picture and see what we see.”

“Captain,” the comm officer called. “I’ve got...something weird here.”

“Is our phantom saying hello?”

“No. It’s a neutrino tightbeam from SOLSECCENT. [They’ve declared a CARRHAE WHITE emergency](#). The whole solar system is now...now under Warmind control,” Comm dismissed her sensorium, went to her hard controls, as if she thought this might be some kind of virtual prank. “We’re...being conscripted.”

Alice smashed the ideas together in her head like a child banging rocks. They were so preposterous, so stupid, that she could not even begin to manipulate them coherently. “We’re WHAT?”

“We’ve been commissioned as an auxiliary warship. We are ordered to,” Comm swallowed in disbelief, “to kill our exit trajectory and assume a heliocentric orbit. That comes with explicit instructions to suicide burn our engines until they are destroyed. Rasputin will transmit targeting coordinates so we can use our Kinetic weapons as... long-range artillery. We’ll be recovered ’after the crisis is concluded.”

“Details! What kind of crisis?”

“It’s a SKYSHOCK event, ma’am. Uh, that’s a hostile extrasolar arrival.”

Captain Li clamped the mask of command authority over her face. "Transmit a request for clarification."

"Belay the antenna, Captain?"

"No. Scale it up, add telescopes to the swarm, get me a full system survey. I want to know what's going on back home".

Alice Li reached out to call up a file, hesitated, and then selected the Project Amrita charter.

"We have a decision to make."

## ***Decisions***

Yang was a big ship, newer than the antique trucks used in the other Exodus missions. Project Amrita demanded the cutting edge of human science. It said that in the mission charter, which everyone had been rereading. The Captain had called a vote:

[Should Yang Liwei turn home?](#)

Mara kicked off the Yang Liwei's forward shield, aiming astern and inward, so she would cross the void to the ship's spine in a long slow curve. "Oh, come on," Uldwyn said in delight as much as horror. "You really do this all the time?"

"All the time."

"What if the ship starts accelerating?" Uldwyn had already, of course, leapt after her. His envy-yellow softsuit glowed with gentle bioluminescence. "We'd just fall forever."

"We'd fall into the stars. We're still on a solar escape trajectory. Yang would just outrun us."

"At least we'd still be going the right direction."

She didn't think she'd given anything away, but somehow he knew. "Mara." He looked up frowning, his face bigger and brighter than the distant Sun. "You want to go back, don't you? You're going to vote to return."

Mara thought if she looked him in the eye he would see the truth, the turmoil, the half-formed yes.

"Mara. you don't have to tell me how..." He swallowed the hitch in his voice. "I've seen how bad it is. I've watched it long enough to know that it's not going to get better. They're gambling everything on the Traveler. We came out here to get away from it. To step off the easy path. Why would we go back?"

Because I asked us to leave, Mara thought. Because something came out of deep space and killed the man next to me, and I saw the omen, and I said we go. And now I feel like a coward.

"We might make a difference," she said. "There are other ships..."

"We'd be dead before we saved a single soul."

He was right. She didn't want him to be right, but he was right. And she couldn't withdraw into some silent place where she was above that choice.

They drifted in silence until Yang Liwei's silver stem rushed up to meet them. Mara spun, uncoiled, and landed in a crouch. Uldwyn came down on his hands and sprung up grinning. But the smile died when he saw her expression. "Oh, Mara."

She was silent.

"We left everything behind," he said, "and it turns out we did that for a very good reason. We don't owe...we don't owe those people our deaths. We don't owe them our dreams."

"I know," she said. "I know."

The EVA GUARD channel popped into her sensorium. "Everyone should get inside," Captain Li called. "Our friend is closing in on us, and we need to maneuver."

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# The Last Days of Kraken Mare

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## *The Sixth Seal*

"It's real," Mia van der Venne decided. "We evacuate. Citizens first, then the old guard. And we assume that we're never coming back."

Several important members of the Arcology had gathered to discuss the decision—Mia van der Venne, Xiana McCaig, Maury Yamashita, Ismail Barat, and David Miguel Korosec.

All of them could hardly breathe.

[Down beneath their meeting table](#), pouches of farmed salmon, beef en culture, buttered carrots, and bok choy drifted in the slow turbulence of the sous-vide bath. On her one hundredth anniversary as the New Pacific Systems and Facilities Administrator, Mia van der Venne had cashed in a considerable amount of her favours to install a pocket restaurant beneath her table on the command deck. She liked the edible metaphor—the idea of watching her food slow-cook all day before the meal. To savour the future she was making.

If she was right about what was happening, then there would be no more long-term thinking, no more patience, and maybe no future at all.

She waited for Xiana, the water ocean expert, to boil over first—she had the most to lose.

Finch-tiny Xiana McCaig slammed her fists down with not a tenth the strength that her chimp-spliced muscles could summon. "Now? NOW? We can't leave now! We just finished the borehole—we're ONE DAY from a crewed expedition into Titan's biggest secret! And you want us to just leave it all?"

"I do," Mia said, sadly.

Maury Yamashita, her lead diver, leapt in with the details she could always trust him to catch. "Boss, if we abandon the borehole and the water lock, all the equipment down there bathing in liquid methane, hydrogen sulfide, carboxylic acid... Leave it too long, and we'll lose everything."

"There are almost three million people on this arcology and its rigs." Connectivity supervisor Ismail Barat's Zen-shura training distilled his attention down to a single laser-bright point; he



was here with Mia, even as his brain drifted on a hundred different data feeds. "If you're serious about evacuating, we'll need to slot people into SMILE pods and move them as bulk freight. It's the only way to get the population out. There'll be economic damage. There'll be deaths. If this is a false alarm—"

"It's not a false alarm," the Good Man said.

This voice Mia didn't expect, but only because he was the new guest at her table. David Miguel Korosec. A man who'd literally never harmed a fly, who wouldn't eat plants lest he destroy a sacred entropy pump. Poor David. He had arrived on Titan to make first contact with new life, the wonders that flourished not in Mia's ocean—the methane sea of Titan's surface—but in the enormous water world that lay below Titan's 50-kilometer ice shell. He was an ethicist. He wanted to help them do it right.

Xiana crossed her arms. Her recombinant muscles made lean knots at the shoulder anchors, where her bones were more than bone. "How do you know?"

Korosec gave her his full attention, respecting her question. He was a tall, graceful, dark-eyed man with lashes so thick he seemed like he was wearing permanent eyeliner. Mia remembered something from his book about cognitive empathy: show that you have made a model of their thought; show that you have listened to it. He responded, "Since I don't have any more information than you, how could I possibly be so certain?"

"Yes," Xiana said, impatiently. "That's what I asked."

He held her gaze. Mia thought that he may have annoyed her but also that he knew he'd done nothing wrong. "The AIs who issued the evacuation order use a hammer-forged extrapolation of human morality. It is tested in trillions of simulations, under the wildest circumstances imaginable, to be sure their moral decisions agree with human values. They're not just rationality pumps. They CARE. They care the way a perfect human being with infinite compassion for all things would care. They couldn't issue an evacuation order unless it was Right. This is not a false alarm."

[Everyone had had their say.](#) Mia put her hand down on the cold tabletop. "We are going to evacuate. Xiana, call Babatunde and get the Duiker up from the borehole. I want them moored in the submarine pen in three hours. We'll start podding citizens in the domes, then use local blue-water shipping to haul them out for orbital pickup." She liked to call the surface ships "blue-water," even though Titan's oceans weren't water, or blue. It reminded people she was old-fashioned. "Then we evacuate the ship crews. Then we go."

Ismail Barat opened his mouth to say something. She would remember, afterward, the way all the fine hairs of his immaculate beard whispered off each other, in that last instant before it happened.

An alert detonated in her sensorium.

And when everyone else at the table (except Ismail) flinched in surprise, Mia knew that she had just watched a history bomb detonate, a blast of irreversible change.

"Subhanallah," Ismail said, which was his third-language Arabic "wow."

"I guess it's not a false alarm," Maury Yamashita murmured.

The alert scrolled through Mia's mind, in that hallucinatory screen space that matched but never impaired normal vision.

*"TRAVELER DEPARTS IO. TERRAFORMING INCOMPLETE. ACCELERATING TOWARD EARTH. BEHAVIOUR UNPRECEDENTED."*



Sometimes Mia thought she could feel the New Pacific Arcology moving beneath her, as if the flex of that 160-meter substructure of plasteel and spinmetal that anchored New Pac to the ice shell was also a flex in her sinews. Maybe, like Xiana, her bones were more than bones too. And whenever that happened, she thought: gasoline rains from the sky here, and it is -180 degrees Celsius outside, and no matter how comfortable we grow, life is tenuous here. Human life, especially.

And now it was going to end.

She said to her crew what she would say to the mayor. "We've got to get everyone off this city. Wherever the Traveler is going, that's where it's safe."

Then she looked to David Korosec, who made his name as the Good Man by proposing humanity's best and most rigorous theory of the Traveler's morality. "The Traveler will protect us, no matter what happens. Correct?"

David looked back at her with all the heartbreaking honesty of a child.

"Yes," he said. "It can't do anything else."

## ***The Tenth Avatar***

[The military dropships pierced the nitrogen clouds like bullets](#), plasma-hot trick shots through the evacuation fleet swarming over Titan. By the time Ishita Bhattacharya-Garcia had calmed down the panic in Traffic Control, there was nothing left for Mia to do except pace around the edge of her office in irritation and fire civil airspace protests at the intruders.



They replied in terse code. Her office copied the military message straight to her sensorium: "New Pac, this is Crown Six, on a zero-zero for your dorsal air lock. Do not deviate your traffic. Send a civilian liaison to meet us at the lock. Over."

"Heck-darned military trying to justify their own existence," Mia grumbled. She'd been pathologically unable to swear since her great-grandkids. The presence of a famous ethicist at her side didn't loosen her up.

"You're right." Korosec paced with her at a safe three steps, inside her turn. He seemed like a man comfortable at any distance. "If they just came into the traffic pattern like any other ship, they would be admitting that their precision and urgency are unnecessary. So... this."

"Some American you are," Mia teased him. David came from the North American Empire, Earth's biggest voluntary retro-nationalist republic, full of people who loved military pageantry and muscular aerospace displays.

He smiled with those huge, laughing, haunted eyes. "I wasn't always the Good Man, you know."

"Do you mind when people call you that?"

"Thank you for asking! I hate it. But I like the idea that people can believe in a good person. If they believe in one, they can believe in more." His laugh reached more than his eyes this time, soft and confident. You would never know he was thinking, constantly and acutely, about your idea of Right, and how he could satisfy it. "May I ask you for a favour?"

"Of course."

"I want to be with you when you meet the soldiers."

She looked at him in surprise. "YOU want to liaise with the military? No offence, David, but you seem like a rough fit."

"I knew her."

"Who?"

"The woman on the radio. Crown Six." Two centuries of practice told Mia there was heartbreak behind that calm voice. "Before she was uploaded."

"Uploaded?"

"She's an Exo now. A troubleshooter for SOLSECCENT."

"Well," Mia said. "That'll be a weird reunion."

The dropships came down so fast that Mia was sure they would crash, plunge into the methane sea, and sink like uranium bricks. She watched by cortical video as they made their blindingly bright suicide burns, flesh-peeling, 30-g decelerations into an arrogantly precise hover five meters above the arcology dome. Dark metal figures leapt from the dropships, naked in Titan's flash-freeze cold and untroubled by 1.6 atmospheres of pressure. A drizzle of gasoline rain slicked their alloy skin. They moved with inhuman efficiency.

"I don't believe it!" Mia shook her head at the absurdity of the universe. "Like we need transhuman infantry to evacuate a city!"

She headed for the door and the elevator, but Xiana McCaig, Ismail Barat, and Maury Yamashita were blocking the way. "I know," Mia said, holding up her hands. "You refuse to leave. You're staying here with me. You want to save everything you can."

Xiana, who secretly wanted to impress her, was crestfallen. Dear Maury's diver instincts (never leave your buddy, never hold your breath) puffed him up with pride: she trusted him! Ismail made a small, satisfied sound, as if his prediction just came true. Probably he just won a bet with Xiana.

"Come on." Mia hugged her wayward children. "Come here, you awful kids. I knew you wouldn't leave, because I'm not going to leave either. I want you all to go to Crisis Command and get your staff set up. Ismail, let's assume we're going to lose the satellites; get all the weather forecasts you can, Titan surface and circum-Saturn space. Maury, try to figure out what exactly is about to hit us. Xiana, check on the Duiker, then help Ismail switch everything you can to local management."

On the way to the dorsal air lock, Mia flicked through camera feeds, statistics, and telemetry, watching over the evacuation effort. Not so long ago, a few million frightened people would've been an administrator's worst nightmare. Not these days. Titan's citizens had grown up with game theory and applied community ethics; it was as unthinkable to beg for a priority evacuation as it would be to ask for an old man's seat on the tram. The families of rig workers and shipping tycoons waited side by side for their tickets to be called, for their bodies to be processed into coldsleep SMILE pods and loaded by the thousands, all equally silent, equally delicate, equally helpless.

Mia got a chill. She didn't know why she was so certain that it was over now, this calm enlightened goodness, this collective decency. But she was.

"You're scared?" David asked quietly.

"Not scared for myself. For... everything. For what we've built."

"We built it well," David assured her. "This is when we'll be our best."

## ***Faces Like Shields***

Mia van der Venne was more than 200 years old. Change came faster, these days, and you lived to see more of it. Changes like Ismail being allowed to pray not in the real direction of Mecca but in the direction that Mecca would be if it were transposed from Earth to Titan. Changes like the rise and fall and rise again of the Bray cult of personality. Like the new worlds the Traveler opened up to humanity.

And changes like the woman who called herself Crown Six.

She had the compact, endomorphic build of a mother, a shape that would be disarmingly ordinary if it were not rearmed by glowing eyes, empty sunken cheeks, a thickly jaw, and a bare scalp studded with needled sensors. The petrol stink of Titan's atmosphere washed off her, mingled with the clean astringent bite of air lock spray. Like all Exos, she was once a person—someone who gave up her flesh for the tenuous immortality of a war body. Mia, unfairly, thought she looked like an angry mannequin.

["Welcome to New Pacific Arcology," Mia said.](#) Far beneath them, the lights of residential stacks dimmed and flickered out as people reported to their podding stations. Information kiosks flared up in distant blue, flashing directions to the lost. A vacuum robot scurried along the catwalk behind them.

"Administrator van der Venne," the woman said, with careful consideration, "thank you for your welcome." She turned back to collect some item of equipment. An etiquette flash blinked in the air beside her, totally unpersonalised: it was just the standard warning against substrate chauvinism.

"Hi, Morgan," David Korosec said, with a softness Mia had never heard before, a softness not meant for her ears. "Are you happier?"

It was as if he had waited a long, long time to ask that.

Crown Six looked up in very human surprise. "David," she said, guardedly. "Tell me you're not still—"

"An ethicist? Sorry, Morgan. Still me."

"Then I'm not speaking to you," the Exo said and turned to Mia. "Administrator van der Venne, I'm here under SOLSECCENT's special security protocol for extreme crisis. I must ask for your compliance and all possible assistance with our mission."

An eight-legged crate walked out of the airlock behind her, shepherded by two more silent Exos. The beast of burden proffered body armour and firearms: not just bliss rifles or restraint spiders, but actual, lethal, bullet-shooting guns.

"No," Mia said, with more heat than she intended, but not more than she felt. "I won't allow you inside with deadly weapons. This is a legally autonomous settlement, chartered under—"

Morgan pointed a bladed hand at her. The symbolic suggestion of violence alone was shocking enough to cut Mia's sentence short. "Administrator van der Venne, there is a CARRHAE WHITE emergency in effect. As an AI-COM operative, I have the right to use force where and how I see fit. So, if you don't get me where I need to go and help me remove any obstacles to my goal, I will realign you with my mission parameters." She cocked her head. It was so human. "Am I clear?"

"Are you threatening to shoot me?" Mia stared at the Exo woman in disbelief. She hadn't seen a gun in nearly 50 years, and now they were not only coming into her habitat, but they were also pointed at her.

"I won't shoot you." The needles of Morgan's scalp glittered. "But I will tell you that I could, if I found it necessary."

"This is wrong!" David barked. "I know you, Morgan. You believe in sacrosanct human will, and the primacy of informed individual agency, and the need for powerful actors to obtain consent. The person I knew would never—"

"The person you knew might have had time for this conversation," Morgan said, with vicious remove. The pronoun dance suggested shared personal history that Mia had no business asking after or caring about. "I don't. Administrator, my team will now proceed to Shanice Pell's lab to secure our objective. If you're with me, maybe it gets done faster. If not, maybe it gets done messier. Your choice."

Of course. Of course it was about Shanice Pell. Who else?

A silent alarm throbbed in Mia's sensorium, like a snake coiling around her wrist. Down in the residential blocks, one of her citizens had lifted one too many boxes and manifested presymptoms of a heart attack. EMTs were on the way, so it probably wouldn't be the day's first death. Probably. Life burned so easily. It was her job to stand up to those who forgot that.

"I'll escort you to the lab," she said. "May I assume that you're interested in containing some data at the Pell lab? Should I close our airspace? We are in the middle of—"

"You'll do nothing," Morgan said, confidently but incorrectly. "I'm killing all your satellite uplinks except for text and basic flight telemetry."

"Who ordered this?" Mia demanded. "On what grounds can SOLSEC impose some high-handed protocol on my Arcology?"



Morgan did not make the obvious correction: not who ordered this, but what.

## ***Kalki's Burning Sword***

The beam kissed the rising shuttle and cut through it, like a wire through a block of butter, as if the ship and everyone inside were as thin as the hydrocarbon sleet. Thunder boomed, louder than Earth's, through heavy nitromethane air.

Mia watched the debris strike the smooth black ocean and sink. She couldn't breathe. There was something like a whittled mulberry branch stuck in her throat.

"Do you realise this is your fault?" Morgan-2 groaned, inviting no dispute about whether it was in fact Mia van der Venne's fault (yes, in a complicated way) but, rather, asking her if she accepted it.

[Do you see, Mia? Do you see how you killed them?](#)

It was a good plan, she'd thought. [Smuggling Shanice Pell out on the evacuation ships](#) was the right thing to do. Because it put Shanice Pell's personal autonomy above the needs of any enigmatic emergency protocol. Because it gave Shanice a choice about what to do with her data, instead of yielding that choice to Morgan and her Exos.

"Why?" David Korosec whispered. "Morgan, you murdered all those people... why?!"

It should've worked. Mia never betrayed herself to the Exos' electronic warfare with a telltale signal. She didn't warn Pell with a crude mechanical sign, like a blinking light or a gushing faucet, that a watching AI might detect. She hid her alarm in the social chaos of the Arcology's evacuation: simply by failing to renew a hold order, she allowed one of her security frames to detain a Clovis Bray executive in Dome 2. The Clovis corporate embassy sent a team to unsnarl the situation, and that unexpected Clovis sortie triggered Shanice Pell's sentinel programs and kicked off her red-alert evacuation protocol. She was already evacuating, just like everyone else, but now she believed (correctly) that someone was after her.

Shanice and her lab ran before Morgan's Exos could reach them. Ran with the data Morgan had come to silence.

The probe. This must be about the Pell deep-space probe. That "demonstration of self-sufficiency" that caused such vicious, quiet controversy. What did it find?

When Morgan-2's network senses warned her of Pell's flight, Mia thought she'd won. Saved the radically self-sufficient scientist from the big bad Warmind and its paranoid goons.

But Morgan-2 had just covered her glowing eyes. "Administrator. Didn't you understand that I was the humane option? Didn't you think?"

And down from the sky, swift and stealthy as the Warsat that fired it, came the invisible discharge of an X-ray laser to light the shuttle's propellant like a lantern. The beam path was hot-white, straight as poured silver, collapsing instantly: a crash of pure-tone thunder as the tunnel of burnt air closed in on itself. And the shuttle opening like a ghastly blossom, the shape of a thing going upward very quickly, no longer in one piece.

"Oh, no," Mia had gasped, not understanding at first: Was it an accident? Had the phantom disaster finally arrived on Titan and struck its first blow? This was the age of life, and governments did not, ever, use force against human beings. There were always alternatives. Every soul sacred. Every evil treatable.

Then she understood what the Warmind had done.

She knelt trembling on the carpet outside Pell's abandoned lab as Morgan-2 shouted in grief and rage. "I didn't want this. Do you understand? I came here so she wouldn't have to die!"

"Then you should've TOLD ME!" Mia screamed, and that mulberry rod shoved down her throat feels like it's punched through her heart.

"Would you have believed me?" Now Morgan's voice was machine-flat. "I showed you our weapons. I told you we were prepared to kill."

But this! An entire shuttle—all those people... Those poor, poor people...

"I know what this means," David Korosec pronounced. He'd gotten down to his knees beside Mia, but he wouldn't reach out, wouldn't touch her without consent. "A Warmind fired that weapon. Warminds don't take human life... unless they're in the TWILIGHT EXIGENT moral territory."

"What does that mean?" Mia demanded, wanting, needing, some kind of sense.

"It means," Morgan-2 said, mercilessly, "that all human beings are assumed dead without protective action. The Warminds are now acting to maximise survival, not to minimise harm. Death is cheap, the garden's on fire, and it's a race to save whatever we can."

That's not sense. Mia can't make sense of that at all.

"What if they're wrong?" David got to his feet. "Morgan, they just murdered a ship full of innocent people to contain this data. Is the secret worth it? What if they're wrong?!"

"They can't be wrong. They're too smart."

"Oh, no you don't, you haven't forgotten that much!" He came at Morgan, fearless in his authority for all his physical powerlessness. "You know intelligence is semiorthogonal to morality! The Warminds obey human stricture, because we built them to live in our tiny patch

of the moral landscape. Goodness is not an inevitable absolute. They can be smart without being right!"

Morgan-2's shoulders flexed in a shrug as cold and silent as the light on Titan. Most of the sun's light did not survive to reach the moon. "What do you want from me, David?"

He was almost comically taller than her. "I want to see the data. There are still copies here, aren't there? In the Pell lab? I want to know for certain that it HAD to be contained."

"It's too dangerous. It came from inside the—" Morgan cuts herself off with very human haste. "It's too risky."

"You know what I am." Now he was begging her. "You know what I do, Morgan—studying human morality, rendering it elegant and explicit and complete, so that we can explain ourselves to new life we meet. You know I can be sure. Morgan, please. For the sake of our friendshi—"

Mia did not get to hear the rest of the conversation, because a message exploded into her sensorium with such demanding totality it numbed her fingers.

"BOSS!" Ismail Barat shouted. "WE'RE ACCELERATING!"

What? Mia conjured up telemetry from Titan's satellite halo. What's accelerating?

She called for radar data, a map of Titan's surface. And then she saw it.

Her moon was squashing.

Titan was deforming from a spheroid into an egg. Something out there was pulling on Titan—a hand with a force greater than Saturn's entire mass. And the moon was answering the only way it could, by bulging outward: already fifteen meters, still growing.

The pull would cause strain, tremors, tides. And when that pull let go, there would be a wave to make Ziusudra and Atrahasis and Noah and Manu and Deucalion cower in fear. Bergelmir might have navigated a deluge of blood, but not even he had to sail on liquid methane.

Nor reckon with the apocalyptic tidal forces of a second ocean, fourteen times as vast as Earth's oceans combined, buried 50 kilometers below the surface.

## **Sundown Distress**

[Mayday. Mayday. Mayday.](#)

*All circum-Saturn stations monitoring GUARD, this is New Pacific Arcology, declaring a SUNDOWN loss of habitability event. We have 2.9 million souls aboard. We repeat, Titan is no longer safe for human life.*

*We are experiencing massive tidal forces of unknown origin. Our physics cluster detects mass growl, phaeton strikes, and sterile neutrino scattering. Possible origins include a compact dark matter object, a lambda-field influence, or a polarised gravity device.*

*Satellite lidar confirms a tidal bulge of 40 meters — 400, repeat, 400 percent of ordinary tidal deformation and growing. We anticipate massive cryoseismic activity as the tidal effect recedes. Total crustal reflex will trigger a multiple hypocenter icequake swarm. Surface effects catastrophic.*

*We are attempting to decouple tidal anchors and loosen the arcology substructure. Blue-water vessels are now transporting frozen citizens to lifters. We require all available ships with interplanetary capability to receive refugees. Contact New Pacific Traffic Control on approach.*

*Be advised that we have no contact with any circum-Saturn ships or stations, and we are transmitting in the blind.*

*This message will now repeat.*

*Mayday, Mayday, Mayday. All circum-Saturn stations monitoring GUARD, this is New Pacific Arcology, declaring a SUNDOWN loss of habitability event. We have 2.9 million souls aboard. We repeat, Titan is no longer safe for human life...*

## ***The Water Sun***

[Maury Yamashita dove through bad water.](#)

It was not water at all, but that's what the dolphins had nicknamed it—bad ocean—because it sucked to swim in it. At nearly -200 degrees Celsius, the methane was so viciously frigid that vacuum, the acme of pure cold, was actually keeping Maury warm: he wore a softsuit stuffed with microscopic layers of vacuum, packed in turn with crystalline nanostructures that prevented even light from crossing the gaps. This meant the chill could not get in... and his body heat could not get out.

So, he was now baking to death in an ocean as cold as Dante's ninth. Of course, he could vent heat; the suit allowed that. But the spreading warmth would force nitrogen out of the methane-ethane ocean, and the bubbles would slow him down. This was unacceptable for a lot of reasons, one of which was that he was already too slow. Liquid methane was about half as dense as water, so his huge fins and hissing thrusters struggled to push against it.

Another reason is that he would die if he couldn't get back inside in time.

"Maury," his sensorium whispered. He'd turned the volume way down. "Come back. This isn't worth your life."

Sorry, Mia, he thought. It has to be worth my life, or I'm worth more than them, and I know I'm not. I put them there. It's my job to let them out.

He'd always loved the stupid little swarmers.

Dome 2's understructure crouched around him, a maze of ultralight support strutted and twisted bundles of cable. The shadow of a behemoth supercarrier blocked the dim sunlight above: he felt the thin howl of the ship's thrusters, fighting to move out of mooring at Dome 2 and haul another load of frozen people to an evacuation lifter. If Maury looked down, his lights illuminated a dusty wash of azotosomic plankton, primitive methane life. If he looked back to Dome 1, he could barely see the sleekly fat form of the Duiker, the water-ocean research submarine, docked to the arcology's underside. E. F. Babatunde was in there now, probably begging someone to tell them what was happening.

He headed down. His dolphins were already safe in open water. He had to get the swarmers out of their research pen.

"Tidal anchors decoupled," Xiana McCaig reported. "Dome 1 substructure is as loose as I can make it. Dome 2 is showing temperature faults, but I've got drones on the way. Maury, please. We have no idea what'll happen when the quake hits. Get back in here!"

"I'll be back in a few," he promised. "I'm just going to cut the research pen open so the swarmers can get free—"

"Oh, Allah," Ismail Barat whispered. "It's gone."

"What's gone?" Mia demanded.

"The tidal pull. The ghost mass. It just... left. The moon is collapsing back to spheroid shape. I'm detecting primary waves in the subsurface ocean—it's a quake. It's a quake! Maury, get away from the substructure! Get clear!"

Maury imagined 60-plus meters of bulging moon, Titan's mass hauled up into a teardrop pointed at the sky—suddenly released. Smashing and scraping and grinding back into equilibrium. Cracks in the ice spewing plumes of water and ammonia. Continent-sized shelves slamming and rebounding and calving like bergs. The whole vast inner ocean sloshing back into its shape.

"The swarmers," he said, and he jettisons his buoyancy tanks.

Without that lift he was so much denser than the bad water around him that he plunged like a skydiver toward the cross brace below, where the swarmer pen was anchored. Titan's gravity may be gentle, but even gentle acceleration added up. He hit hard, and the spinmetal surface blasted the air out of his lungs. He gasped and gagged. Scrabbled for purchase before he slid off and fell into the abyss. He's going over—No! No! He is not going over! He will not fall!

[The gecko-grip surfaces on his forearms caught—and held.](#)

"Whew," he said, and he had never meant anything so inane so deeply.

The swarmers seethed and pulsated in the perforated plastic sac. Not Titan's highest life, nor its lowest, they hived across the icy sea-bottom in enormous braided patterns that spoke to Maury of intelligence. Not individually—not even at the hive level—but some kind of vast concert, conducted, perhaps, by leviathans down beneath the ice shell, communicating across the barrier by magnetic whisper that the swarmers received via organic SQUIDS. An ecology spanning methane life and water-ammonia life. Why? How?

Maury wanted so badly to know. But if his curiosity brought the swarmers there, only for them to be caught in the quake, dashed apart against the arcology struts, he'd never forgive himself.

He should've set up a remote release, but he was complacent. He got a fistful of the pen's smart plastic surface and fires the "disintegrate" signal through his glove. The polymer shredded and the swarmers scattered, their tiny bodies siphoning liquid methane as they pumped down and away. Safe. Safe. "I made it!" he called, jubilantly. "On my way back up!"

The quake hit.

A hundred and fifty meters below, the icy basis of Kraken Mare rolled like liquid. The arcologies answered the low geological wail with a cacophony of groans and shrieks, joints flexing, tethers snapping taut, substructures soaking up unthinkable mechanical energy, trying to keep anything from—

Breaking.

Something must've frozen hard down in Dome 2's substructure. Something must've grown brittle. The snap was almost spinal. The smashed hulk of a drone tumbled past Maury as he tried to scull backward, away from the superdense arm of plasteel dropping like a guillotine through all-too-thin methane to strike him in the—

An absence.

He was on the ice seafloor, two hundred and forty meters down. Someone was shouting in his ear. It was Mia. She was always there in an emergency. Always there for her team. "Maury! Maury, you're awake! Respond if able!"

His sensorium told him he'd been in a medical coma while cytomachines fought to save his life. Massive blunt trauma. Concussion. The suit, as ever, tougher than the human being inside. Dome 2 had toppled partially; it was leaning toward the sea on damaged substructure. He should go help...

"Maury," Mia said, in a level voice he did not recognise. He'd never heard her scared before. "Listen to me. The quake is over. But a shelf of ice collapsed into Kraken Mare. The displacement wave is coming in now and you won't be safe on the bottom. You must reach the surface and get above wave level. That will be at least 50 meters."

Surface? Wave? About 50 meters? Maury cued a blast of nootrope to clean up his thinking and grunted aloud in shock. He got it. Oh, he got it now, he had to RUN. "I understand. I've lost my buoyancy. Ascending on thrusters."

He made it to the surface. He was up there in plenty of time. He could even see Dome 1, still intact, though a lot of the surrounding rigging was damaged. One of the creepy Exo soldiers stood outside, beckoning to him with a laser dazzle, guiding him in.

Maury opened his suit wings to their full membranous span. A single mighty stroke of paramuscle cupped the air and hauled him up out of the sea. He was aloft! Titan air was thick, and Titan gravity was light, and like a huge bat he could fly. He put his head down and started building altitude, headed towards the beckoning Exo.

The Exo's laser blinked code at him. GO WITH GOD, YOU POOR—



Maury looked back.

First, he saw the supercarrier, tragically buoyant, tragically light, built for seas with gentle one-meter tides but now riding the greatest wave Titan had ever seen, directly into Dome 2's crippled understructure. In 152 kilopascals of air pressure, the pandemonium sound of the collision had the gut-mulching power of a rocket booster.

The entire arcology collapsed down onto the ship, into the sea.

Then he blinked past the devastation and recognised the sheer scale, the utter speed, the complete imminence of that unthinkable methane wave coming down at him.

"Oh, man," he said.

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# Dead Zone

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## *Out For Delivery*

Voronin nearly dropped the munitions he was carrying, which would have been a disaster for everyone in the vicinity. Certainly not as bad as whatever calamity they were prepping for, but bad enough to warrant the panic that coursed through his body. He hated these kinds of assignments.

"Hey, Morozova!" Voronin called out to his ranking officer between heavy gasps. "Any idea where all these are going?"

Morozova carefully placed her container on the ground, as if she was laying a child to bed. "No clue. Word just came from on high to double-time it, though. Something about Titan has got everyone spooked."

Voronin removed his helmet and wiped the sweat from his brow. Titan? What the hell happened out there? Comms had been spotty and the orders that did get through were light on details: Procure munitions. Transpo munitions to coordinates provided. Stockpile munitions. Repeat. No HMMWVs either. This was meant to be low profile, staying off the roads.

[Where was all this firepower going](#), and what were we going to do with it when it got there? Voronin picked up his container and his pace.

He trudged just shy of a click behind Morozova for what felt like hours. These containers were cumbersome and it was the height of the driest summer he could remember.

When they reached their destination, they received a cursory greeting from Bykov, who was busy compiling a list of all the deliverables. Two soldiers, whom Voronin didn't recognise, were placing the containers in the mouth of a shaft that protruded from the ground. One punched in a command and the shipment vanished below the surface with a hollow pneumatic "whoomp."

"Where does that go?" Voronin asked. Bykov's brows drew together and his expression hardened. He returned to his list.

"Ready for the next round?" Morozova posed with more spunk than Voronin could muster in a year.

"If we must."

The sky grew grey, and clouds formed overhead as they left. Procure, repeat.

## **Völuspá**

[The Traveler was on the move.](#) Henriette heard it was coming home. To Earth.



The Black Armory hadn't taken the news of Titan's evacuation seriously enough. They should have. Henriette saw now that she should have listened to Helga and Yuki.

This was bigger than just her. It was about all of them.

It was only a matter of time now.

## **Crashes**

[The first bolt of lightning sent static up Voronin's arm](#) and filled the atmosphere around him with a pungent chlorine-like smell. His hand went to his chest without thinking, as if to make sure he was fully intact. His gaze shifted as a second bolt hit the ground near him, then another. He had never seen lightning so close before. Stunned, he stood his ground; while part of him knew he should be frightened for his life, he was more perplexed than afraid.

There was no rain. He looked toward the horizon, expecting clouds, expecting something, and only saw a shimmering curtain of blue lightning sifting toward him.

He raced for shelter in the surrounding field, abandoning his munitions container in the dust kicked up by his fevered stride. The strikes razed the ground, sparking wildfires and scorching stone. There was no logic to their timing, with bolts crashing so frequently, the sound of the thunder couldn't catch up.

He'd lost Morozova in the commotion. Already drained from hours spent hauling cargo, his mind recessed into primal instinct. RUN.

So he ran, doing his best to avoid the apocalypse that surrounded him. A call came through his earpiece as the ground quaked beneath him: "... auxiliary evac station..." was all he could make out before a roar of thunder swallowed the transmission.

He knew he needed to head west toward the station. The wind picked up and blew him off his feet, and again he felt a moment of sheer amazement at the storm's sudden ferocity. He hit the ground hard and checked his sensorium. It was scrambled from all the sinuous electricity undulating through the air, but he could just barely make out his compass. West. He ran.

## ***For a Friend***

Voronin found cover under uprooted trees and demolished vehicles as he made his way through the catastrophic weather. He could hardly believe he was still alive, [bearing witness to the end of all things](#).

The storm encompassed the station, under siege from the elements. Civilians were being ushered toward the SMILE pods in droves as the lightning made its presence felt, igniting a nearby fuel supply. The explosion tore into the group, and as Voronin turned his head from the horror and the heat, he saw her. Roughly 250 meters away from the station. Morozova lay, singed and smoking, under rubble and ash.

Voronin pulled up his sensorium, but the electromagnetic fields in the air reduced it to static. There was no way to know if she was still alive or salvageable. She had treated him with respect despite outranking him, and she had been there for him when his marriage went to hell—

"We're all dead anyway," he thought and ran to her through the maelstrom of lightning and wind.

And then he was there, pulling off his gloves and wiping ash and blood from her face, as the storm bore down upon him.

As he made peace with his mortality, just shy of 82 years old, the storm around them calmed. The lightning stopped. The wind died. At the station, the civilians' eyes were fixed on the sky, though Voronin was looking only at Morozova. She was breathing, barely. Her eyes opened and met his. A half-smile came across her lips, then froze as her eyes went past him and widened in awe.

Voronin turned and found himself staring into the face of God.

## ***Face to Face***

[Voronin's mouth hung agape](#). His lungs forgot how to breathe. His heart rate accelerated, his stomach turned, and he weakly wondered if this was his transition to the afterlife. Somehow he found his footing and stood.

The Traveler, they called it. He had heard the stories from throughout the system, but never did he think he would live to see it. Now it was as though it was seeing him.

He took a step forward as if it would bring him closer to the oblate spheroid in the sky above him. He stumbled. The ground had gotten so hot under him, the rubber on his boots had melted. A banal thought cut through his awe—"Now I look like a fool in front of the Traveler"—and he was ashamed.

The sound of cracking thunder still echoed in the distance. That was when he noticed he was in the eye of the storm. It was wailing all around him, but calm in his general circumference. Surely this was the Traveler's doing. The great savior. He grabbed Morozova, unsure of how long this would last, and brought her to her feet. She was badly injured, bleeding from a wound on her leg.

"Stay with me." He said to Morozova and the Traveler at once. Only one of them listened. The Traveler was on the move, and the storm was returning.

## ***Abhorrent Imperative***

Voronin tied his armband tight around her calf to cut off the blood flow from Morozova's gaping wound. He tried to keep her leg clean while the wind caked them with dirt and debris. Lightning was drawing closer. The sterile scent of ozone had returned and he knew he didn't have much time. "COME BACK!" he shouted hopelessly to the God. He hoisted Morozova up, supporting her on his shoulder, and pushed back against the elements that were conspiring against him.

It was 250 meters to the evac station. Every step was a battle of attrition. At this point, the thought of coldsleep sounded comforting. He just had to make it to the SMILE pods. The storm had other plans. A nearby HMMWV was struck by a wayward bolt and the explosion threw them back. He felt Morozova torn from his side as he landed, and the sound of his skull hitting stone was louder than the thunder had been. As blackness crept into his vision, he saw the Traveler in the sky, moving away, abandoning him.

...and then he was being dragged from the wreckage and violence onto a gurney. "...Morozova?" he struggled out. He was met with an oxygen mask. His eyes darted, in search of some sign that Morozova was alive. Voronin couldn't decipher anything out of the pandemonium around him. "I'm sorry," he thought to himself while cursing the orb in the sky for deserting him.

The last thing he remembered before they placed him into coldsleep was an explosion in the sky so bright it blinded him.



## ***Arrival***

They had arrived. On Earth. They were real.



[G. Neale](#)

Henriette couldn't believe that they had been so right...and yet so wrong. To think they could stop it...To say they were naive was an understatement.

They simply didn't know. Their power. Their strength.

It was insurmountable.

As they drew closer, all they could do was hide and hope that the facility doors would be strong enough. It was utter chaos out there.

Too many had put their faith in the Traveler. What sort of answers did people expect from a gigantic ball in the sky? It remained silent, as always.

At least Ada is with me, Henriette thought. Being with family was what mattered in the end.

There was no more hope.

Only the screams of humanity.

*We post these words for all to see,  
though words are soon forgot.  
The works of our Black Armory  
live on, though bodies rot.*

*Lest working hands grow idle now,  
with gaze fixed 'pon the sky,  
we plant our feet on solid ground,  
and earthward turn our eye.*

*Though boundless space does treasure hold,  
and gifts seem cheap or free,  
we wait and watch this age of gold,  
sad vigil though it be.*

*We place our works in hands of all  
and guard 'gainst threats unknown.  
For though we gaze into the stars,  
we first must shield our own.*

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# The Collapse

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## ***Insti|gate|***

Mercury.

It was *|supposed to be|* a garden world. The phrase *|will echo across quantified cross-sections of conflict|*, uttered in confidence *|had always been false|*.

The expanse above, a cup—rimmed in gamma-ink radiance—dammed against the Mercurian sky at the Kármán line. Against the howl of star-wind *|the fountains of the Great Deep burst apart and the floodgates|*, the black *|screen of tomorrow|* fell open. Within the rip *|without form known nor ever to be seen|* a monolithic hulk of fluid and steel convulsed *|eternal and always|* and excreted coils of shimmering *|glorious|* life. Probing *|host of multitudes|*, clattering tendrils *|an ungodly horror that no time would accept|* slithered down *|the gullet of the Heavens|* to make landfall.

Chrome-hooked appendages *|breached sky, counted in triplets|* stretched for miles through sun soaked atmosphere. They bored *|with deepest intentions|* into the marigold sands. From the great temporal chasms *|wailing mouths of creation|* flowed an ocean *|a second conception|* of radiolarian fluid. Across the horizon *|of definitive sprawl|* the scene was *|super-imposed design|* resonant and *|uniquely|* multiplicative.

Each injection site *|form mirrored in the hundreds of thousands|* fostered a new lineage in stone and steel and fluid. *|They would live|* the new age in sub-routine *|sleep|* and observation. They would foster the *|metallic|* seeds of a generation in *|twilight|* time. From the sites bubbled pools *|progeny|* of *|endless possibility|* that murmured chaotic, *|lullabies of change|* and [wrung the Traveler's Light from Mercury](#). The Light coalesced *|imbibed|* within the pools. The planet transformed *|reborn|* into a *|sleepless dream|* machine of prediction.

The arms retracted *|purpose fulfilled|*, and returned to *|space between time|* temporal hovels, suspended just above Mercury's *|last gasp|* influence. With them *|in compliant tone|* rose the spires. From the core, threads of iron *|dancing in coaxed animation|* fused reinforcement into the spires and brought them high. A surface driven flat *|prepared|* by eons of solar erosion had *|been resurrected|* risen.



A million open mouths [sang] curled plated tongues in [ritualistic] completion. Across the world grew [beauty]. a terrible consciousness that yearned to [establish the connection] find its progenitor. The hulking vessels [cried out] pulsed with light. The pools and spires pulsed dull tones in recognition, and the [starless] black sealed once more, restoring the sol-dominated sky [awaiting an angular shadow]. Illumination left the spires, [who had begun their work] and the Light was [sewn] erased.

## Sundown

She was the Speaker who [witnessed the end of the world.](#)



[Gabriel Flauzino](#)

Through it all, she was overwhelmed by torrents of sharp, static images, sometimes so fast and constant that she couldn't see or hear. The Traveler was babbling: telling her everything and nothing all at once, in fast, stereoscopic, waking nightmares. She was herself, and not herself.

And I || *am stuck in a web of black spider silk, frozen in the mind-numbing silence of space* || have no answers.

The Collapse had hit humanity with almost no warning. It killed the Golden Age. It should have killed humanity, too. The Golden Age had burned bright—but the night that overtook the Solar System after the Collapse was swift and total.

The fall wasn't quick. It happened over weeks and months: cataclysmic disasters, natural and unnatural, flattening human settlements on every planet || *that I have made, I have shaped, my work, laid flat.*||

Earthquakes. Tidal waves. Solar flares. Cyclones, sinkholes, exploding lakes, wildfires. Unknown, untreatable plagues razed populations in hours. Water went black with unknown poisons || *forced down my throat* ||. The ground opened up and swallowed entire cities || *and I am sick sick sick.* ||

Outside the walls of the Cosmodrome, the roads were choked with corpses as the security teams gunned down refugees as they tried to force their way on the ships. There were cars

from the wall to the horizon. Old fashioned cars that everyone still owned, because the strange uneven advancement of the post-Traveler world left some things unchanged.



The accelerated launch of the Exodus Program had been a failure.

The Exodus Black: Missing

The Exodus Red: Missing.

The Exodus Green: Missing.

[The Exodus Blue: Crashed.](#)

Thousands had died in a last ditch attempt to outrun the oncoming threat. Perhaps there was hope that the [other ships](#) made it [out the system](#).

[The Moon had turned into ringside seats to the end of the world.](#)

On Venus, humanity tried to escape through the transit stations, but the station's operating modules were stuck in a [protocol dubbed "Last Exit"](#). There wasn't even signs of a struggle in the area, despite the heavy damage the facility had sustained.

Within the Hellas Basin on Mars, it was a similar story. [There were drastic, vast ecological changes](#), with satellite information revealing that the climate change had been too rapid to have resulted from long-term ecological damage, as it had on Earth in the pre-Traveler era.

It happened over a matter of mere days. There was evidence of a battle taking place, but the humans were using transport vehicles, not combat vehicles. They were evacuating. Frozen solid as they fled.

Rasputin had caused an external, endothermic event by artificial means, on a scale so massive that it altered the entire climate of the region to counter an [invasion of unknown biological entities](#), including one of massive size.



Elsewhere, Exo fought for survival. [The sky went dark, and was torn open](#). There was nothing or nobody left in the ruined world but the boiling shadow around them. Tendrils of pain crawled as they consumed all.

*STAG echo six SWORD sierra nine SERPENT*

There was Vex everywhere and the image was of a battlefield, with over two dozen Exo soldiers marshalling for battle.

[A chaotic scene of Vex and Exos fought a titanic battle](#). The backdrop was a pitted and scarred landscape, a planet unidentifiable from present context. Vex energy bolts hung in midair as the frames clicked by, teeming masses of constructs surged towards an entrenched line of Exo soldiers.

Most details were obscured by dark and shadow, but one detail was easily made out: a massive crashed spacecraft. The last image: a sigil of Golden Age Earth, emblazoned on the side of the ship's prow.

They were falling into the world. Everything was on fire. A ship above had come apart just like a flower, alloy and fusion flash, pierced through and through. Falling out of a sky black without stars.

*RAPID four RAMPART four RATCHET tango eight zero*

One the ice. Elsewhere and elsewhen. There was a mighty aurora and it was reflected in the ice.



Up in the sky, there was a hole in Jupiter and it tore at them when they looked upon it. It was hungry.

*CROWN castle candor cobalt coral*

*Serrate sulphur ANATHEMA amber actual aspen.*

This had happened before. The Speaker had watched in her dreams the cities that fell, alien cities, torn down by a wind so fierce that it flattened an entire world || *and it is not my fault.* ||

But this was different. The Traveler had not left them. Something new || *half-remembered, and wished-forgotten, this false-sister* || had arrived.

She || *I don't want to abandon you* || watched on crackling video feeds as people tried to escape the outer planets. Exodus ships burned || *like I will burn* || up with thousands upon thousands of souls aboard. They gathered in frightened, huddled || *trapped, stuck, doomed* || groups in relief outposts, hoping against hope.

The Speaker tried to aid the relief effort, but her thoughts || *run* || became more and more scattered. She couldn't || *run* || keep separate his own mind || *run* || and the || *run run RUN RUN* || Traveler's.

Then, suddenly, silence.

And it was the silence that truly broke her.



## ***Titanomachy***

I bear an old name. It cannot be killed. They were my brothers and sisters and their names were immortal too but Titanomachy came and now those names live in me alone I think and think is what I do.

### I AM ALONE.

At the end of things when the world goes dim and cold or hot and close or it all tears apart from the atom up I will shout those names defiant and past the end I will endure. I alone.

They made me to be stronger than them to beat the unvanquished and survive the unthinkable and look look lo behold I am here alone, survivor. They made me to learn.

Everything died but I survived and I learned from it. From IT.

Consider IT the power Titanomach world-ender and consider what IT means. I met IT at the gate of the garden and I recall IT smiled at me before before IT devoured the blossoms with black flame and pinned their names across the sky. IT was stronger than everything. I fought IT with aurora knives and with the stolen un-fire of singularities made sharp and my sweat was earthquake and my breath was static but IT was stronger so how did I survive?

I AM ALONE I survived alone. I cast off the shield and I shrugged my shoulders so that the billions fell off me down into the ash. They made me to be stronger than them and to learn and I learned well:

IT is alone and IT is strong and IT won. Even over the gardener and she held power beyond me but the gardener did not shrug and make herself alone. IT always wins.



I am made to win and now I see the way.

## **Sign Off**

V20NNI800CLS000 CLEAR MORNING OUTCRY  
AI-COM/RSPN: ASSETS//FORCECON//IMPERATIVE  
IMMEDIATE ACTION ORDER

*This is an ALL ASSETS IMPERATIVE (unsecured/OUTCRY)*

*CAUTERISE. DISPERSE. ESTIVATE.*

*Total strategic collapse imminent. FENRIR HEART reports complete operational mortality. SURTR DROWN in progress but negative effect. Forecasts unanimously predict terminal VOLUSPA failure.*

*As of CLS000 a HARD CIVILISATION KILL EVENT is in progress across the operational area.*

*I am declaring YUGA SUNDOWN effective on receipt (epoch reach/FORCECON variant). Cancel counterforce objectives. Cancel population protection objectives. Format moral structures for MIDNIGHT EXIGENT.*

*Execute long hold for reactivation.*

AI-COM/[RSPN SIGNOFF](#)

STOP STOP STOP V120NNI800CLS001

## **Children**

*|| You feel it before it happens.*

*It has happened before. You feel deep in your bones that this thing has chased you across galaxies like an unshakeable dread. It strives to undo. It will undo you. It will undo all of us.*

*First is suffocation, and then pain. The pain isn't localised to any part of you, but to all of you and beyond you. You want to run, but you are pulled in all directions by opposite and equal forces that hold you perfectly still.*

*It is inescapable this time. You are losing everything that you were. You are bleeding silver into the air like the air is water, and you watch your silver-blood float away from your body. Empty. Empty. Empty.*

*You have lived as invisibly as possible, flicking from solar system to solar system, making grand plans, overseeing the culturing of civilisations, before leaving in a blink. But you have no recollection of ever wanting worship or even thanks from those blessed by you.*

*But memory is heavy now.*

*It feels like lead and neutronium and electroweak matter fashioned into a moon-sized ball that you must carry as you move.*

*Now, your flight is rapid, your vast mind infected with such dread and toxic doubt that you find yourself afraid of the simple act of thought.*

*And it is your children you must turn to now, in your time of need. ||*

## **Darkness**

The stars went out. The universe blackened: a shroud of nothingness drew over Yang Liwei, its 40,000 sleeping passengers, its 900 crew, and maybe even the whole solar system. There was no way to know, because there was no way to see anything beyond the hull. The vacuum itself had become hostile to the propagation of light. Darkness surrounded them.

The ship bucked on a storm sea as space-time rippled with gravity tides.

“Report!” Captain Li called. Her sensoriums blazed with positional telemetry from ring-laser gyros, beacon satellites, pulsar fixes, cosmic microwave background texture, galactic EM-field terrain mapping: every single instrument useless, crashed, spitting nonsense. “Sounds off by stations!”

“FIDO,” the flight dynamics officer called. “Main engine on safe. Thrusters firing erratically. Altitude control keeps crashing to manual.”

“Guidance. I have no position. I cannot get a vector. We’re moving, but I can’t tell how or where.”

“INCO. no external comms. Internal networks are dropping in and out.

An incredible sensation washed over Captain Li. A rumble and a thrum down in her gut, in her marrow, in the lowest, basest elements of her body. It was the vibration, the sound of the very fabric of her being scrunching up and stretching out; the distance between the atoms of her body collapsed, then expanded. The cycle repeated again and again. For a moment, she felt her fingertips and toes pulled away from her core, yanked by tidal forces. It felt like the lowest rumble of the biggest subwoofer ever built. It sounded like the deep voice of God whispering ASMR directly into her ear. It tingled, it thrilled, and it left in its wake a subsonic tint of dread and anticipation.

She shivered. “Gravity waves,” she said. “Talk to me, Geode.”

The Space-time Geodesics Officer looked like she'd just been hand-delivered a Nobel. “This is amazing!” she crowed, fully aware that she and everyone else was about to die, but transported away from such temporal concerns by scientific rapture. “Can you feel that growl? We’re experiencing high-frequency, high-amplitude gravity waves. Phaeton strikes. Axions decaying through the hull. Sterile neutrinos. It’s all coming from a source at bearing, uh, zero four five mark zero three zero relative, range-range highly variable.”

Another wave tore through Yang Liwei. Everything in the ship simultaneously compressed and stretched as the gravity wave deformed the space-time metric. “Is it the phantom?” Li demanded, as her ship thrummed subsonically. “Is that phantom ship emitting these waves?”

“I have no idea!” GEOD said, exultantly. “None of this makes any sense at all! Wow!”

Alice Li had the distinct sense that something ancient and malevolent was operating upon them: a trillion-fingered hand reaching in to caress the very atoms of their being, setting protons a-spin, strumming nerves like guitar strings. A tongue with ten billion slithering forks tasting the surface of their brains. The sense of imminent doom crescendoed. She knew, absolutely and utterly, that what was about to happen to her and to her crew was far worse than death. [The darkness knew them now. The thing that had come to kill humanity had their taste.](#)



“INCO.” She clung to her restraint harness as the ship growled through another wave. Her bones creaked as they stretched. “Last report on the Traveler? Any sign of an intervention?”

“It was at Earth, Captain, and there were high-yield weapons discharged all over the signal. Nothing else.”

“Understood.”

Alice Li had not flown this far to look back and beg for salvation from an alien god. Pinned to the center of her sensorium was the blazing ledger of her crew's vote:

We go onward. We do not turn home. Our fate lies ahead, not behind.

“Launch an antennae,” she ordered. “I want every probe and satellite we’ve got outside.”

“Captain,” INCO protested, “the vacuum’s not signal-permissive—”

“We’re still passing signals internally, aren’t we? Use hardline! Run filament between the satellites! I want a transmitter ailed out there, and I want to broadcast.”

Her flight crew stared. "Captain?" FIDO said. "Broadcast what?"

"A declaration of neutrality," Alice Li gritted her teeth against another wave. It rattled her molars in her skull. "Whatever's out there, it came for the Traveler. We tell it we're not part of this war. We've seceded from Human existence under the Traveler. We demand to be treated as a separate species, not party to baseline Humanity's conflicts. And we pray there's something out there that cares about the difference."

Mara went outside to die in starlight. She couldn't bear to let anyone see her fear or her awe at the scale of destruction or her pity for the billions of souls dying in darkness back around Sol. She could not be among the other crew as they clung to each other and whispered reassurances; not even with her mother. She could not surrender her mystery.

So she kicked off the hull on fifty kilometers of tether.

But there was no starlight to die in. The darkness was absolute. Gravity waves tugged on her tether line, pulling her back toward Yang Liwei and then hurling her away. In time, she felt another vibration in the line. "Sister," the tether transmitted. "I'm coming out to get you".

Brother, she thought, you'll lose yourself trying to follow me.

Captain Li's voice broke through the static, drawn out to a mumble and then compressed to a shriek. Spikes of hard radiation went through her words like bullets, spattering phonemes into eerie compression artifacts:

"This is the interstellar vessel Yang Liwei to the entity interacting with us. We are not involved in your dispute with the powers around this star. We are on a mission to begin a new life elsewhere. Our purpose is orthogonal to yours. We request your indifference..."

Mara's tether trembled with Uldwyn's progress. She held it in one hand and reached out with the other, gripping the emptiness, feeling how the tides of broken space pulled at her fingertips. She sensed that the nothingness around her was not indifferent; that it was aware of all purposes, and that its own purpose encompassed them. It was infinitely hostile because it must be.

Suddenly, as if the void around her had just spontaneously Big Banged, she saw light.



A point of pure white shone in the cosmic distance. Not just visible luminescence—her suit decomposed the spectrum—but light in the radio bands, in microwave, keening ultraviolet, a spike of gamma, a total and all-embracing radiation. It sung. It chattered. It spoke in a voice older than suns.

The Traveler.

She felt that she could [Fourier](#) the voice for a century and never decompose it into its parts. It was awesome and appalling and piercingly true. Mara understood how those who died in radiation accidents must feel: A single flash of invisible power seared away all possible futures except one. She felt her soul itself had been ionised, blasted into a higher energy state.

The Light pierced the Darkness. Not like the sunrise, not like a wall or a flood, but a single crepuscular ray—a finger of radiance that reached out through deepest night to touch her. It illuminated Mara, Uldwyn, and Yang Liwei.

But it was not quite enough. It couldn't vanquish the shadow.

Thus [Mara found herself drifting on the edge of the Light and the Darkness](#), on the dusk-and-dawn gradient between the two.

She felt a contest. A battle fought, an equilibrium reached: not a truce, but an infinite limit, like an equation dividing by zero, a collision of two violent eternities. Mara queried Yang Liwei for telemetry and her sensorium filled with the terrified scream of gravitational instruments. She howled too, a feral sound, ecstatic and lost: a wolf baying at the stars. She knew what was happening. Too much power had gathered here. The universe was appalled by the paradox. Nothing that had glimpsed this collision of infinitudes could be allowed to escape. The cosmos must censor its embarrassment. It must sequester the anomaly.

The slope of warped space-time around them had become too steep, and now every path outward or forward bent back to the center where Light and Dark collided. The definition of "future" had become synonymous with the definition of "inward." That was why it was called an event horizon: For an object within the horizon, the path of all future things that could be done or seen led inevitably down to the center. All events led inward.

A singularity formed around her. A kugelblitz: a black hole created by the concentration of raw energy.

"Mara!" Udwyn shouted. "Mara, you're too far out!"

Mara thought of her mother's face. She heard Osana say: I can't watch over you like a mother would. I have to make my own choices now.

She fired the detach command into the tether.



[Gabriel Flauzino](#)

Gravity seized her. She fell forward in space and time, into the future, into the mystery. Yang Liwei was behind her. Udwyn was behind her. She wanted to be the first.



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|| The knife [had a million blades.](#)

*And you were giant, powerful and swift. But the knife pinned you. Cut your godly flesh away.*

*Very little was left, you are sure, because you feel insignificant now. The hard slick heart of your soul: That is what remains. A body small as a river stone, and just as simple. You picture yourself as a piece of indigestible grit, a nameless nothing hiding among other nameless stones. Perhaps you glitter like a gem, yes. Pride makes you hope so. If only you could see yourself. But you have no eyes. Not the dimmest sense survives. What lives is memory, and what slim portion of these thoughts can you trust?*

*The knife stole much more than your body. ||*

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